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# "Though Hermes never taught thee": The Anti-Patriarchal Tendency of Charles Brockden Brown's Mercurial Outcast Carwin, the Biloquist<sup>1</sup>

Evert Jan van Leeuwen

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- 1 In writing about early American gothic fiction, Cathy N. Davidson has explained that "the struggling individual has, in the Gothic world, a remarkable potential for good but an equally powerful motivation (and opportunity) for corruption" (Davidson 215). Over the past decades, the reputation of Carwin's narrative function in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) and the subsequent "Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist" (1803) and often discussed as a figure with a supporting role only, one of mystery, trickery or evil. Norman S. Grabo, for example, has interpreted Carwin as "a most shabby villain" and "the agent of stupid mischief rather than the engineer of evil" (Grabo 10). David Punter describes Carwin as "a rationalist friend of the family who claims to have been trying to teach Wieland a lesson in religious credulity" (Punter 167). Bill Christopherson finds Carwin to be "more red herring than protagonist" (Christopherson 34). Peter Kafer argues that "Carwin is just a mischievous wanderer with a special talent for projecting voices." He concludes: "while Carwin may be some sort of villain, there is nothing heroic about him" (Kafer 129). In Carwin's case, then, the interpretive stress has often lain on his potential to do evil. In light of Davidson's argument about the inherent ambiguity of early American gothic, it is also possible to read Carwin as an outsider figure, unknown to the protagonists in the *Wieland*, and consequently mysterious, but with "a remarkable potential for good." Ref?
- 2 If Carwin is freed from his conceptual straightjacket as gothic villain and is placed in the context of alternative cultural schemata such as Hermetic philosophy, and utopian idealism, he becomes a figure of potential heroic dissidence, a radical individualist who

rejects not only the materialist tendency of his age but also the patriarchal foundations on which the social structure of the eighteenth-century American colonies was founded. The entrance of Carwin and his preternatural powers into the world of Mettingen sets up a contrast with the supposedly enlightened, Cicero-loving, Theodore Wieland. Carwin's presence reveals that behind Theodore's mask of enlightenment rationalism hides a staunch patriarch whose authority is founded on, and supported by, an age-old androcentric perspective on the nature of familial society and the power structures that operate it. Carwin's presence in the novel highlights that the supposedly rational and free figures of this seemingly idyllic Pennsylvania community are more concerned with material possessions than philosophical ideals. This theme is further highlighted by Brown's playfully subversive use of the concepts of possession and primogeniture: in the course of the novel, Theodore Wieland, under pressure from Carwin's machinations, turns from a rational individual in possession of his father's family estate to one possessed by the Father and obsessed by the possible loss of his material possessions, as well as his family, in the bodies of his wife and children.

#### 1. Charles Brockden Brown and the Cultural Schema of Utopianism

- 3 In his 1815 biography of Brown, William Dunlap commented that the writer had had a "love for Utopian systems" (Dunlap 169). As a young intellectual in the early American republic Brown not only read the radical and often visionary philosophy of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, but also channelled his interest in utopianism into his writing. For example, in *Alcuin* (1798), a philosophical dialogue about gender inequality, one of the speakers tells of a world he has visited in which men and women live on equal footing; where gender no longer functions as a power tool (see Fleischmann and/or Van Leeuwen for a detailed discussion of this text). Even though the speaker in Brown's *Alcuin* professes to have actually visited this place, the dialogic nature of the text suggests that this genderless world is the product of a visionary imagination.
- 4 Brown's early writings show a serious interest in the visionary imagination. Emory Elliott points out that in one of his earliest published pieces, "The Rhapsodist" (1789), Brown constructed the literary persona of "a hermit-explorer who has spent many months in the wilderness, meditating on human nature" (Elliott 220). Brown's friend Elihu Hubbard Smith lends credence to the idea that the rhapsodist was not just a fiction, but also a persona for Brown himself as a thinker. Smith describes Brown at one point as living in "a world of [his] own creation" (quoted in Watts 47). Like Brown's rhapsodist persona, Carwin reveals in his "Memoirs" that he suffered from an "unconquerable...curiosity" which led him to the acquirement of the preternatural power of throwing his voice (Brown 228). And like Brown's own rhapsodist persona, Carwin confesses that his thought was marked by a semi-utopian bent: "my fancy teemed with visions of the future, and my attention fastened upon everything mysterious or unknown" (Brown 227).
- 5 Importantly, in *Wieland*, Carwin's type of idealism is contrasted strongly to the utopianism of his mentor Ludloe, a practical radical reformer who seeks literally to change the entire structure of civilization. Francis Bacon's utopian text *New Atlantis* (1626) may well have influenced Brown in the creation of the figure of the radical Ludloe, who has a scheme of creating a secret island utopia from which the world will be invisibly guided towards a better state. This concept is very similar to Bacon's idea of an island of scientific utopians who venture out into the world to secretly and

invisibly influence and ensure its progress. Ludloe's possession of secret maps locating an island in the Pacific suggests that he is actually already a part of, or he may be looking for, the mythical island of Bensalem that Bacon described in *New Atlantis*. Significantly, in the "Memoirs," Carwin is attracted to but also continually resistant to Ludloe's schemes. He eventually breaks with Ludloe and by the time he enters the Pennsylvania community of Mettingen he is hunted by his former mentor.

- 6 A story fragment unpublished in Brown's lifetime, but printed in Dunlap's biography, can shed more light on the nature of Brown's interests in visionary utopias, as well as on the construction of his mercurial figure Carwin. The fragment titled "Signor Adini" shows once again Brown's interest in solitary figures with mystical ideals and Hermetic leanings that enter seemingly idyllic societies to illuminate how they are in fact far from ideal. Adini is a mysterious old man who arrives in America in 1785 with a ten-year old girl, "a bewitching child" for whom "he displayed the most passionate fondness" (Dunlap 144). Like the wandering alchemists and Hermetic philosophers of yore, Adini is socially unclassifiable. He professes to come from Italy and while "his garb and aspect were that of a foreigner", his speech was characterized by "the accents of an Englishman" (Dunlap 141). Rumours of aristocratic descent surround Adini, but his aspect is one of "intelligent solemnity"; the narrator speculates that he "could be a voluntary exile from a land in which his religious or political opinions might render his continuance dangerous" (Dunlap 142), in an echo of persecuted alchemists of old. Like the alchemists, Adini never participates in the budding marketplace but somehow he is never short of cash: "he had no visitants...appeared to have no pecuniary dealings with others, but was exact and liberal in his payments" (Dunlap 143). Like the alchemists of old, who were thought to possess the elixir vitae, Adini is never ill, and "though with some marks of age upon him, he enjoyed perfect health", even though "his clothing was slight and varied not with the variations of temperance or seasons" and he was frugal to the extent that "he was unacquainted with a bed" and slept on "a mat or hair sofa" (Dunlap 144). For Adini, as for the legendary alchemists, "dry or wet, turbulent or calm, serene or gloomy, hot or cold, were differences with which his sensations appeared to have no concern" (Dunlap 167). While reserved in character, Adini "displayed in dubitable proofs of extensive knowledge and energies of mind" (Dunlap 149). While refusing to speak "of every topic that might lead to the mention of his own adventures," and angry at any mention of this topic by others, Adini would talk of how "the purposes of daily life, philosophy and reason, demand a reformation," of how "the whole mass, indeed, wants a thorough shifting." All the characteristics leave the narrator to conjecture that "if he possessed supernatural power, he would doubtless exercise it, to the production of natural or universal happiness" (Dunlap 151-2). Adini thus echoes the legends of alchemists and hermetic philosophers who lived quiet, frugal and meditative lives working their powers for the common good (see Marshall).
- 7 Adini refuses to speak to the rational merchant Mr. Ellen about the latter's adventures in the East, but shows his anti-capitalist leanings when he remarks polemically that it is curious how "Columbus...a desperate pursuer of wealth is adored as the benefactor of mankind" (Dunlap 153). Unsurprisingly, as a successful businessman, Mr. Ellen does not understand Adini's diagnosis of the ills of his times, and decides that it is Adini who is mad. Ironically, Ellen tries to find out what ails Adini so he can find a cure, even though the reader is cajoled by Adini's perspective. When Ellen's son finds a map of New Holland Adini tells him: "to thee it is a realm of barren and inhospitable turbulence, populous only in the mute and scaly kind. To the better informed it is a world of

intellectual beings, whose majesty is faintly reflected on the diminutive stage, and by the pigmy actors of Europe" (Dunlap 163). Adini finally reveals his reason for coming to America. He confesses to have "visited utopia" and to be in search for a successor. He claims to see in Mr. Ellen's adopted son a "destined heir of greatness," after which Ellen professes him truly mad (Dunlap 164). Although Brown never worked the story of Adini into a closed narrative, the figure of the outcast, with his utopian mindset and apparently mysterious alchemical powers clearly foreshadows to a large extent the figure of Carwin in *Wieland* and the "Memoirs."

- 8 Brown's imagination may also have been fuelled by legends of Johannes Kelpius' "renowned group of 'Saxon' radical pietists," who settled in Pennsylvania in the seventeenth century and dabbled in the mystical doctrines of Jacob Boehme, Jewish Cabbala and Rosicrucian philosophy. Kafer's research suggests that Brown's great-grandparents "almost certainly came into contact with the Hermits of the Wissahickon" (Kafer 114-115). In the context of the legends surrounding the hermetic order of Kelpius, Carwin's flight from home into the wilderness and his subsequent development of preternatural powers becomes much less a product of Brown's gothic imagination and more the product of a writer attuned to the historical legends of his native region. Kelpius and his group were religious millenarians, who settled in Pennsylvania with the conviction that it was there that the second-coming would take place and where a Christian Utopia on earth could be established. Carwin's curiosity for secret knowledge, his interest in the future and attraction to utopian schemes seem like the products of Brown's own visionary mind as well as the stories circulating in Brown's culture about Pennsylvania's immediate history.

## 2. Carwin: Gothic Trickster or Hermetic Philosopher?

- 9 Carwin's power of bilquism, being able to throw his voice, is not attributed directly to the legendary alchemists and Hermetic philosophers of old. Yet Brown includes enough allusions to the cultural schema of alchemy in his texts to link in Carwin. Carwin's acquisition of the power of bilquism is in many ways analogous to the way in which the Hermetic mystics would develop their alchemical art of transmutation. The Hermeticist's method is one of isolation and endless repetition of privately conducted experiments in which the inextricability of mind and matter is a crucial element (see Marshall). Kelpius, for instance, maintained a private cave outside the communities common buildings, in which to meditate (see Sachse). Carwin also seeks out a sequestered natural space in which he "proceeded to experiment," "repeated the effort, but failed," exerts himself "with indefatigable zeal to regain what had once, though for so short a space, been in [his] power" and by such trial and error "gradually...subjected these finer and more subtle motions to the command of [his] will" (Brown 232).
- 10 Most alchemists, whether misguided materialists or venerable Hermetic philosophers, became outsiders due to the very foundation of their undertakings. Consequently, many faced stigmatization or at worst persecution from the authorities (see Marshall). Brown also links Carwin's transgression of the established boundaries of human knowledge to the transgression of social boundaries. Carwin's acquisition of preternatural powers lead directly to social marginalization. Instead of being cast out, however, Carwin uses his powers to try to better his own social standing by undermining his father's patriarchal authority. Carwin intends to mimic the voice of his dead mother to order his father, who is "a confident believer in supernatural

tokens," to send him away from his paternal home to live with his aunt. However, "a thousand superstitious tales were current in the family" and Carwin is himself affected by his family's credulity when at the moment he intends to dupe his father, the barn is hit by a lightning blot and burns down (Brown 234). Because Carwin remains intent on running away if his father does not allow him to leave willingly, his father lets him go.

- 11 At his aunt's house, Carwin exchanges "detested labour" for "luxurious idleness" and spends "three tranquil years" in the city undertaking intellectual pursuits, as "each day added to [his] happiness, by adding to his knowledge." While Carwin confesses that his aim in cultivating his intellect "was not the happiness of others," he also states that he was "not destitute of pure intentions...delighted not in evil" and was "incapable of knowingly contributing to another's misery" (Brown 238). In contrast to the legends of the Bavarian Illuminati and other secret societies that in Brown's day were believed to work towards the secret subversion of the socio-political status quo, Carwin's plans are highly individualistic at first, aimed at personal illumination and entertainment and apolitical at the outset. Carwin's initiation into the secret world of the rationalist radical Ludloe, therefore, should not be read as a sign of initiation into an Illuminati style secret society, but as the consequence of his own curiosity for knowledge and intellectual interests.
- 12 Another significant textual detail in the "Memoirs" that links Carwin to the myth of Hermetic utopianism rather than Illuminati conspiracy, is his carefully delineated residence in Spain. Carwin is initially sent to Spain by Ludloe to be educated for some mysterious purpose. It is during his sojourn in Spain, however, that Carwin decides to break with the rationalist (Brown 252). This break seems to be brought about by the knowledge Carwin acquires from his learning. Peter Marshall explains that in the middle-ages Spain functioned as the gateway for Arabic alchemy into Europe. It is in this country that the Arabic alchemical texts were first translated into Latin. Toledo became "the fountain head" of the ensuing alchemical translation activities (Marshall 259). The medieval capital of Castile is also the residence of the mythical *Emerald Tablet*, the foundation text for Hermetic philosophy, which came to Europe from the east during the time of the crusades. According to Marshall this ancient alchemical text is "the most profound single work of spiritual alchemy to emerge from the whole hermetic tradition." It carries the descriptive English title "The words of the Secret Things of Hermes Trismegistus," and, according to Marshall, "it became the bible of the medieval alchemists in Europe" (Marshall 250). Significantly, Toledo is the setting of the final and most mysterious of Carwin's adventures in his "Memoirs." Even if Pleyel's story in *Wieland* suggests that Carwin is learning from Catholic scholars, and his links with Ludloe seem to suggest his initiation into a secret organisation, Carwin never actually joins any order, nor does he enter into a Jesuit training school, as Jane Tompkins has suggested (Tompkins 52). In his "Memoirs" Carwin states clearly that when he entered Spain he found a solitary cell in a convent in Castile where he studied "the treasures of Arabian literature" (Brown 254). Marshall explains that "European alchemy in the Middle-Ages was...entirely founded on the Islamic legacy which in turn was mainly based on ancient Egyptian sacred science", much of which, in turn, could be found at Toledo in Spain (Marshall 258). Carwin's tale of a sojourn in the heart of Spain, his self-induced confinement to a solitary cell and his reading of Arabic text, is hardly the stuff of Jesuit scholasticism or Illuminati political theory. It dovetails closely, however, with the legends of the alchemists and hermetic philosophers who sought individual illumination through the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, the mythical

father of hermetic alchemy, whose principal text resides at Toledo along with so many other Arabic alchemical texts. The legendary alchemist Nicolas Flamel, for instance, travelled from France to Spain in order to learn more about the Hermetic art, only to become a philanthropist of sorts after discovering the philosopher's stone with the help of his wife Perenelle (see Marshall 312-316). On his European journey, then, Carwin is treading in the footsteps left by legendary alchemists such as Flamel and foreshadows the journey of later literary alchemists such as Godwin's *St Leon* (1799), whose name echoes another Spanish town associated with the cultural schema of alchemy.

- 13 In *Wieland*, Henry Pleyel describes Carwin as fully immersed in the customs and habit of the Spanish population. Just as the mysterious stranger Adini evokes surprise by his perfect command of English, Pleyel is surprised to find that Carwin, in appearance and habit a Spaniard, spoke perfect English. Marshall observes that the Rosicrucian philosophers always "live[d] according to the manners of the countries in which they lived, only making themselves known by their seal and sign 'R.C.'" (Marshall 362). This mythical order of seventeenth-century Hermetic philosophers could not only blend seamlessly into whichever culture they resided; they also professed to have magical powers by which they could move invisibly and swiftly over the world. Carwin's curiosity to develop apparently supernatural powers, his action of entering into a Castilian convent and shutting himself up to read Arabian texts, his ability to fully disguise himself as a native wherever he goes and his command of languages all link his identity to that of the legendary hermetic philosophers, alchemists and Rosicrucians of old.
- 14 The final scene of the "Memoirs," at Toledo, dramatises the rift between the more rational and political utopian Ludloe and the more visionary hermetic Carwin. The reader finds out that, against the wishes of Ludloe, Carwin has been meeting a lady in the cathedral, with whom he has exchanged mysterious emblems. It is significant that his mysterious dealings are with a woman and not another male schemer. Ludloe's furious reaction to this event suggests that Carwin was acting contrary to the way in which he had planned his pupil's education. During their final confrontation over this incident, Ludloe asks Carwin to "recall all the incidents of that drama, and labour to conceive the means by which my sagacity had been able to reach events that took place so far off, and under so deep a covering" (Brown 287). Ludloe, who early in the "Memoirs," denies the supernatural, disclaiming immortality, alludes here, seemingly, to the presence of a great network of secret brothers that survey Carwin's every move. His accusation that Carwin may be in league with an evil spirit can in this context be read as his turn from rational utopianism to the mystical Hermetic philosophy practiced by alchemists and Rosicrucians. On Bacon's pacific island with its proto-freemasonry scientific utopia, the inhabitants (some of whom wear white turbans with a small red cross) make buildings of blue stone and call themselves the Society of Solomon's House, linking them to Freemasonry (Bacon 251-258). Solomon's temple features heavily in Masonic lore as well, and the presence of such details as blue houses and secret pacific islands in the "Memoirs" gives the impression that Ludloe's schemes are linked to this type of secret fraternity, while Carwin's obvious opposition to Ludloe's schemes and his refusal to reveal his own acquired secret powers suggest that he is an individualistic visionary, even if he is not a proper alchemist or mystical



Rosicrucian philosopher, like William Godwin's *St Leon* (1799) or George Lippard's Hermetic revolutionary *Paul Ardenheim* (1848)

### 3. Carwin's Anarchic Voice in *Wieland*

- 15 After fleeing from Ludloe's angry grasp at the end of the "Memoirs", and entering the scene of Mettingen in *Wieland*, one of Carwin's first utterances to Clara's maid is: "thou knowest as well as I, though Hermes never taught thee, that though every dairy be a house, every house be not a dairy" (Brown 47). While the nonsensical wisdom of Carwin's address undermines the importance of its utterance, the reader is presented with yet another key element of the cultural schema of alchemy significant in the construction of the figure of Carwin. One identity of Hermes is that of trickster God in classical mythology, but this Hermes is not a teacher. The other Hermes, however, the mythical father of alchemy, became the most important teacher of alchemical wisdom in the West. This tablet supposedly is to be found where Carwin resided: Toledo. Carwin's reference to Hermes as his teacher, and his residence at the very centre where eastern alchemy was translated into Latin for the European philosophers, implies Hermes Trismegistus, not just Hermes the trickster figure or messenger. Significantly, his entrance into the world of the novel *Wieland* brings about the dissolution of a seemingly utopian domestic community. Carwin unmasks this community revealing the old-world bulwarks of patriarchy: primogeniture, intellectual male superiority and a domestic ideology that ensures women's inferior status.
- 16 According to Hermetic philosophy, individuals are microcosms of the earth, which is in turn a microcosm of the cosmos. The idea that all is one, and one is all, is one of the central Hermetic maxims of alchemy. Carwin's lack of identity gives him the protean quality to fuse with others and change them from within, to change their world view. The figure of Carwin, in possession of esoteric knowledge with which he can alter the status quo, reveals one of the major faultlines hidden by Clara Wieland's idyllic representation of utopian community at the eve of the American Revolution: its harmonious appearance is reliant on old-world patriarchal institutions that privilege androcentric culture above a utopian egalitarianism. Carwin is unclassifiable from the point of view of the two families at Mettingen, the Wielands and the Pleyels, whose rural community represents a microcosm of American society, which is still founded for its integrity on the acknowledgement of European, and in *Wieland*'s case, even noble ancestry (Brown 6). At Mettingen, "the law of male primogeniture" (Brown 34), the institution of marriage, the rights to property, "mercantile servitude," all have come to overshadow the family's history in religious radicalism (Brown 7). Francis D. Cogliano explains that in the decades leading up to the revolution "the family was the essential economic unit, as well as social unit" and even functioned "as a political institution," therefore a microcosm of the state (Cogliano 11, 21). Carwin's preternatural powers unmask the apparent idyllic community on the banks of the Schuylkill River as a community founded on repressed animosities not only between various faction within American socio-political life, but also within the family unit, in which the law of the father prevailed. Paradoxically, Cogliano explains, while revolutionary rhetoric foregrounded the concepts of liberty and equality, most Americans also "accepted that they lived in a society which was unequal and hierarchical," (Cogliano 15) on both the macro and microcosmic level. Shirley Samuels argues that *Wieland* "emphasizes the violence within the family while ascribing that violence to the intrusion of a violent force, but that very force seems immanent rather



than intrusive and the efforts to name it as 'alien' only emphasize its immanence" (Samuels 49).

- 17 Carwin is of course not an alien. He is an American, but also a drifter who returns home after a sojourn abroad. What he has learnt while abroad has made him unrecognisable, however. On his return to Pennsylvania, Carwin has fully developed the special power of biloquism, which he had used initially to free himself from the authority of his father and his family. Now that he returns, more in control of his powers, and wiser, he functions more as an emblem for the (potentially destructive) domestic forces at play on the eve of the revolutionary struggle. Carwin's biloquial powers can be said to embody the potentially dangerous revolutionary mentality that Benjamin Rush identified in his essay on the "Influence of the American Revolution" (1789). Rush wrote that "the minds of the citizens of the United States were wholly unprepared for their new situation. The excess of the passion for liberty," according to Rush brought on "a species of insanity" called "Anarchia" (Rush 333). Carwin's voice is clearly anarchic as he has the power to mimic and throw any voice in any direction he wishes, causing chaos and confusion wherever he goes and whenever he wishes. As such, he can be considered a solitary version of institutions such as The Sons of Liberty, who "operated as a semi-secret political organisation" fighting what they believed was the tyranny of British rule, and inspiring "more general" radical opposition "throughout the colonies" (Cogliano 35).
- 18 Importantly, while the confessional narrative strategy of the later memoirs would give Carwin his own voice, in *Wieland*, Carwin is represented to the reader through the androcentric lens of Clara Wieland's first-person narrative. Carwin's fluid identity and ability to speak both literally and ideologically from all positions are represented by Clara as a threat to the integrity of the social structure of Mettingen, but they simultaneously reveal that an alternative mode of existence is possible. Even if Carwin's machinations, from the viewpoint of Clara, bring about the fall of the house of Wieland, this fall, in the larger scheme of things, is the first step in a longer process towards a more egalitarian future beyond the Jeffersonian and Federalist partisanship that marked the 1790s, allowing the integrity of the individual subject to be constituted not by ideologically prescribed social roles, buttressed by an ideology of gender polarization, but by a more inclusive sense of self that allows for multiple possibilities of individual identity.
- 19 In Hermetic philosophy, concretised in alchemical experiments, the utopian ideal, the perfect matter, the philosopher's stone, is created by fusing opposite forces and transmuting them into something that is more than the sum of its parts. These forces are always gendered male and female, and it is only through the dissolution of these opposites that perfection can be achieved. Structurally, Carwin's presence at Mettingen brings about several male/female confrontations in the novel that work to destroy patriarchal dominance. The first confrontation is significantly between Carwin himself and the narrator of the novel, Clara Wieland. In this confrontation, the seemingly independent Clara is unmasked as viewing Carwin through an androcentric lens, which supports specifically her brother Theodore's authority and generally the socio-political status quo at Mettingen. Her reaction to Carwin's presence and words, however, imbibe Clara with visions of an alternative mode of life, revealing the artificiality of this ideological position. The second confrontation is between Clara and her lover Pleyel. Pleyel's suspicion of Clara's infidelity triggers in him a hysterical reaction as he defends

what he believes is his natural right: to Clara's unquestionable devotion and his possession of her property. The final confrontation is between Clara and her brother Theodore, husband to Pleyel's sister Catherine and the patriarch of the family and landlord of his estate. Wieland reacts with equal hysterics to Carwin's machinations as he calls on the ultimate source of patriarchal authority, an omnipotent deity, to buttress the authority that his identity as heir and patriarch had given him, but which Carwin's presence undermines: "God is the object of my supreme passion...I have thirsted for the knowledge of his will.. I have burnt in ardour to approve my faith and my obedience" (Brown 151). His apparently benevolent function as enlightened landlord and head of his family is reversed when under Carwin's machinations Theodore becomes the tyrannical Lord of the land, destroying all who fail to comply with his creed.

- 20 *Wieland* opens with Clara's account of her family history. Clara recounts how her father came to America as a disciple of the Albigensians and tried to convert the natives; how he became increasingly insular in his faith and eventually self-combusted in his temple; how his children, having inherited his estate, were given a classical education by their uncle – they worship a bust of Cicero – and managed to construct a "normal" enlightened life for themselves, turning their father's temple into a house of culture and idealising the domestic family unit in a rural setting as the pinnacle of civilization. From their fanatical origin, this family, as Nancy Ruttenburg explains, has become "a family of complacent rationalists" (Ruttenburg 185). Significantly, Clara reveals that she views her past through an androcentric lens by writing that "we females were busy at the needle, while my brother and Pleyel were bandying quotations and syllogisms" (Brown 28). Clara's uncritical account of traditional gender roles underscores Lori Merish's argument that "in the binary logic of eighteenth-century Anglo-American gender formulations, women were private and consuming, not public and political, creatures" (Merish 30). Indeed, Clara views her world often from secluded private positions.
- 21 Looking through the window at Carwin's physical appearance and dress, as he lingers on the edge of their family estate, Clara writes,

There was nothing remarkable in these appearances; they were frequently to be met with on the road or in the harvest-field. I cannot tell why I gazed upon them, on this occasion, with more than ordinary attention, unless it were, that such figures were seldom seen by me except on the road or field. This lawn was only traversed by men whose views were directed to the pleasures of the walk, or the grandeur of the scenery. (Brown 46-7)
- 22 In keeping with her comment on the gender division of leisurely pursuits, Clara identifies identity with socio-political standing. Because the landscape of Mettingen that surrounds her own house is a lawn, a landscape garden, any citizen who traverses it should naturally be a gentleman of leisure. Clara confesses here that she failed to recognize Carwin as such a gentleman. His very physical presence clashes with her expectations. Carwin, however, ignores the social customs of the day and boldly proceeds not merely to enter their genteel domain of Mettingen, but walks straight up to the house Clara occupies and which is separated from the patriarchal mansion in which Theodore and his family reside.
- 23 The striking description of Carwin's entrance into Clara's world is worth quoting in full:

On a sunny afternoon, I was standing in the door of my house, when I marked a person passing close to the edge of the bank that was in front. His pace was a

careless and lingering one, and had none of that gracefulness and ease which distinguish a person with certain advantages of education from a clown. His gait was rustic and awkward. His form was ungainly and disproportioned. Shoulders broad and square, breast sunken, his head drooping, his body of uniform breadth, supported by long and lank legs, were the ingredients of his frame. His garb was not ill adapted to such a figure. A slouched hat, tarnished by the weather, a coat of thick gray cloth, cut and wrought, as it seemed, by a country tailor, blue worsted stockings, and shoes fastened by thongs, and deeply discoloured by dust, which brush had never disturbed, constituted his dress. (Brown 46)

- 24 This portrait of Carwin is complemented by Clara's later words:

And yet his forehead, so far as shaggy locks would allow it to be seen, his eyes lustrously black, and possessing, in the midst of haggardness, a radiance inexpressibly serene and potent, and something in the rest of his features, which it would be in vain to describe, but which served to betoken a mind of the highest order, were essential ingredients in the portrait. (Brown 49).

- 25 Like Adini, Carwin is portrayed as an oxymoronic figure incorporating the seemingly irreconcilable characteristics of noble sage and wandering beggar. His very oxymoronic physical appearance undermines the ideologies that prescribe social identities in the word of the novel. Ruttenburg adds extra weight to the reading of Carwin as an intermediate, dissident androgynous being when she argues that "all binary signifying systems, such as those that deduce essence from appearance, are undermined" when Carwin enters Clara's world (Ruttenburg 185). Immediately after Carwin's introduction, and Clara's moment of mutual recognition with the hermetic stranger, her seemingly enlightened and stable world starts to disintegrate from within.
- 26 On hearing Carwin pronounce his Hermetic riddle to her maid, Clara immediately becomes infatuated with his voice, by the "degree in which force and sweetness were blended in them" (Brown 48). Her "heart overflowed with sympathy and [her] eyes with unbidden tears" (Brown 48). As her mind builds a picture around this voice she finds out that "this person was, in all visible respects, the reverse of this phantom." The coarse and grotesquely proportioned Carwin pierces through the expectations raised by his own voice. The shock of misrecognition that leaves Clara in a state of bewildering awe about Carwin's identity is the first obvious crack in the patriarchal ideology that underscores the social surface of Mettingen, which is shown to be upheld through a continual performance of expected role patterns. When Clara sees him she confesses that "with a confused sense of impropriety...his face was as glowingly suffused as my own" (Brown 49). Not bent on performing an orthodox masculine role in either public or private domains, not a gentleman but neither an ordinary field hand, Carwin's dissident androgynous presence turns him into an empty signifier allowing both men and women to project their identity onto his fluid identity.
- 27 Carwin is attractive to Clara because he embodies an alternative identity to that of the other men in her life, her supposed lover Pleyel and her brother Theodore, or even her own sense of self as an independent woman. In the course of the narrative, Carwin's becomes a dissident figure because his unmanly posture, yet wiser-than-thou attitude undermines Theodore's and Pleyel's traditional masculinity, underscored by patriarchal ideology. Significantly, it is exactly the oxymoronic nature of Carwin's identity, as a vagabond with great, almost mesmeric, intellectual presence and a "magical and thrilling" voice which allows Clara, standing on the threshold of her own house, to alter her ideological perspective for a moment (Brown 64). Just looking at this deformed vagabond and hearing him speak gives her ideas about the possible

reformation of the established socio-economic structure. She reflects on "the alliance which commonly subsists between ignorance and the practice of agriculture" and she "indulged [her]self in airy speculations as to the influence of progressive knowledge in dissolving this alliance and embodying the dreams of the poets." She "asked" herself "why the plough and the hoe might not become the trade of every human being, and how this trade might be made conducive to, or at least, consistent with acquisition of wisdom and eloquence" (Brown 47). While Clara's tone of lament for the loss of the rural estate of Mettingen throughout her confession seems to underscore her androcentric worldview, she here, for a moment ruminates on a utopian ideal of shared labour which would leave all the necessary time to cultivate the intellect. The poets are likely to be the kind of utopians Brown was interested in at the time, or figures such as Brown's Adini. The momentary nature of this vision of social utopia, however, shows how much Clara has made the gender role allotted to her by the patriarchal society of Mettingen part of her individual identity. She writes, "weary of these reflections, I returned to the kitchen to perform some household office" (Brown 47). Under pressure to conform, Clara reverts to the performance of domestic duties to take her mind off Carwin and the visions his presence induce.

- 28 Merish explains that "the new bourgeois ideal [of womanhood] stressed woman's moral value, her spiritual depth rather than polite surface, and typically extolled 'the passive virtues' of modesty, humility, and discretion coupled with the more practical skills of frugality and industriousness" (Merish 61). Clara reverts to this prescribed role to deny Carwin, whose power has already effected a momentary change in the way she views herself and her position within society. What is revealed in the moment that Clara identifies with Carwin's identity, however, is that as a woman she is restricted in her sense of self because she is reliant on her brother's authority as landlord and family patriarch. While she seems independent at first, she occupies her own house only at the discretion of Theodore who owns the property and who occupies the paternal mansion. Clara's description of Pleyel's sister, the almost literally invisible Catherine, highlights how much her pseudo-independent lifestyle has not altered her tendency to view women's social position through an androcentric lens. In fact, her transparent portrait of Catherine makes visible the androcentric point of view adopted by all members of the Wieland community. She describes Pleyel's sister as "clay, moulded by the circumstances in which she happened to be placed" (Brown 71). Catherine indeed only materialises in the novel as Pleyel's sister and later as Theodore's wife, the mother of his children and the victim of his paranoid delusions. In these socially prescribed female roles, Clara illustrates to what extent she has adopted as natural the ideology of gender polarization that through the institutions of marriage, property and primogeniture structure Mettingen. That Theodore marries Catherine and Clara is supposed to marry Pleyel underscores the force of the ideology of gender polarization and the illusion of male/female complementarity. . This interfamilial exchange of wives between Theodore and Pleyel is the perfect homosocial move to ensure both their family lineage and fortune.

#### 4. Carwin as Anti-Patriarchal Dissident in *Wieland*

- 29 While Carwin pierces through Clara's androcentric worldview momentarily at the outset of the story, without challenging its dominant position, his antics threaten both Pleyel and Theodore's sense of self as naturally privileged men. In contrast to Clara's portrait of them as rational and scientifically oriented individuals, both men react

hysterically to Carwin's presence and his use of biloquism. Somewhere between the fictional timeframe of the "Memoirs" and *Wieland*, Pleyel had met Carwin in Spain. The rationalist Pleyel is blind to the esoteric nature of Carwin's studies. The American is visiting Spain to see the ruins of the Roman Empire, a neo-classical pilgrimage of homage to masculine valour and patriarchal power that contrasts directly to Carwin's hermit existence and individual studies of Arabian texts in a cloister cell. Unsurprisingly, Pleyel recounts, "on topics of religion and of his own history, previous to his *transformation* into a Spaniard, [Carwin] was invariably silent" (Brown 63). From Pleyel's point of view this seems indeed curious, but with the knowledge gained from Carwin's "Memoirs," it is clear that his professed study of the Catholic faith was a cover-up, and that he is an American who has been able to don the mask of Irishman, Spaniard, and Briton, and has thus become invisible to his own people. Pleyel's "suspicion that his belief was counterfeited for some political purpose" fits exactly what will be revealed in the course of the novel as his hysterical masculinity, while it also unmasks him as a federalist in the grip of conspiracy fears that challenge his sense of innate superiority (Brown 63).

- 30 Like the mysterious Adini, Carwin "studiously avoided all mention of his past or present situation...even the place of his abode in the city," once he is again in Pleyel's company (Brown 66). Like Adini, he is a stranger with "intellectual endowments" which are "indisputably great," a behaviour modelled on "uncommon standard" and in possession of "a mind alive to every generous and heroic feeling" (Brown 65). In trying to place Carwin within the ideological parameters that give individuals a recognisable identity in her world, Clara confesses that, to all of the inhabitants of Mettingen, Carwin "afforded no ground on which to build even a plausible conjecture" about his identity, leaving them immediately worried whether, "his powers had been exerted to evil or to good" (Brown 66). This last phrase shows how much both she and her family are formed by world view that defines the world according to binary oppositions. They cannot accept an open verdict on his social identity and past but need to position him either on the right side or the wrong side of the laws that validate their lifestyle and social relations.

- 31 Unsurprisingly, Carwin is hounded by the authorities. Ludloe, Carwin's one-time mentor in the "Memoirs," but now his foe, has chased his former ward across the Atlantic and traced him to Philadelphia, where he brands him

The most incomprehensible and formidable among men; as engaged in schemes, reasonably suspected to be, in the highest degree, criminal, but such as no human intelligence is able to unravel: that his ends are pursued by means which leave it in doubt whether he be not in league with some infernal spirit: that his crimes have hitherto been perpetrated with the aid of some unknown but desperate accomplices: that he wages perpetual war against the happiness of mankind, and sets his engines of destruction at work against every object that presents itself. (Brown 121)

- 32 Once Carwin returns to America from a mysterious sojourn in Europe, he is pictured as a superhuman villain intent on attacking all that mankind holds dear. In *Wieland* the mercurial stranger with secret magical powers stands on the wrong side of the law – from the law's perspective that is. In a world ruled by rationalist creeds, any individual pertaining to know more than the law allows becomes a threat to its integrity and must be repressed. Carwin occupies this abjected position.

- 33 Carwin's appearance turns the rationalist and classical scholar Pleyel into a patriarchal tyrant. Pleyel, Fritz Fleischmann rightly points out, is "a patriarch of the first order" and "is neither nice nor reasonable" (Fleischmann 46). Cunning as a seducer, he attempts to move into the socio-political vacuum he perceives has opened up in the Wieland family due to Theodore's hesitancy to take up his prescribed role as patriarch. Fleischmann also argues that "Pleyel's attitudes toward women accord with his monarchist and feudal inclinations" (Fleischmann 47). Pleyel, described by Clara as "the champion of intellectual liberty," who "rejected all guidance but that of his reason," is also clearly a representation of the dominant ideology in which men like Pleyel pull the strings (Brown 23). Pleyel, hysterically trying to ensure the stability of Mettingen for his own benefit, establishes himself in Clara's formerly independent household as her guardian. He had already urged Theodore, "by the law of primogeniture," to claim his ancestral patrimony in Germany, to ensure the stability of the Wieland family, a stability he needs to be able to marry Clara (Brown 34). When Theodore is unwilling to perform what Pleyel believes is his prerogative as the head of the household and when Carwin's machinations, moreover, show a fissure appearing in the patriarchal foundations of the house, Pleyel aggressively defends his supposed right to be the possessor of Clara.
- 34 Carwin's machinations are a trick aimed at Pleyel's character, as much as they are aimed at Theodore's religious credulity. It is Pleyel who Carwin knows best and who immediately condemns Clara, and not Carwin, for her supposed liaisons with the mysterious stranger. While Clara's confessional narrative and tone of lament foreground the disastrous effects of Carwin's dissident androgynous presence and anarchic voice, the actions she recounts show up the posturing of the dominant males at Mettingen who hysterically defend their masculine privilege against Carwin's dissident intrusion.
- 35 Clara's androcentric viewpoint is also underscored by her lament that her "golden vision" of Pleyel's silent devotion to her "melted into air" (Brown 74). By now hysterical, Pleyel becomes the stalker of Clara and Carwin. Thinking that he has unmasked their illicit liaison, Pleyel unsurprisingly condemns Clara to "a ruin so complete – so unheard of..." that even he cannot express its exact nature (Brown 95). For Pleyel, Clara's integrity as a woman is defined by her chastity and her adherence to Theodore's patriarchal will and her reliance on Pleyel's protection. As Samuels explains,
- in *Wieland*, the family is initially presented as a retreat, or "sweet and tranquil asylum"...from the intrusions of the outside world, but the distinction between home and world, radically personified by the figure of the intruding Carwin, gets blurred as the destruction seen to lurk without is discovered within...for the family to keep its identity as an 'asylum,' the outside world must be posited as a threat. (Samuels 56)
- 36 Clara's association with Carwin, who clearly stands outside of Pleyel's patriarchal powers, reveals the independence of which she is capable, marking her, to Pleyel, as "the most specious, and most profligate of women" (Brown 96). Carwin uses his powers to play at once the role of adversary and saviour, allowing Clara to find her own independent desire, loose from the shackles of social custom which would have seen her safely married off to Pleyel. That she marries Pleyel at the end of the novel, just as St Leon vindicates his son's adoption of an aristocratic masculinity, says more about



her continuing reliance on an androcentric worldview and patriarchal ideology for individual integrity than about the evil nature of Carwin.

- 37 Carwin reveals himself to Clara in her room and Clara now is sure he holds "supernatural power." Carwin explains, in a solemn and earnest voice, which grows more passionate as he continues, that Clara's belief that she is in his power and on the brink of ruin are "groundless fears." Carwin expresses his idea that a sexual union between them "would sanctify my deed" and would not be the "injury" that Clara believes it would be because of her interpellation into the dominant ideology that bars women an independent sexuality. This suggests that his intention was to free Clara from perceiving herself through an androcentric lens by appealing to her inner most desires. Carwin tells Clara, however, that if "this chimera" – the significance of chastity to a woman's identity – is "still worshipped" by her (meaning that she still submits to Theodore and Pleyel's masculine will to power), he would "do nothing to pollute it" as he "cannot lift a finger to hurt" her. He says, "the power that protects you would crumble my sinews, and reduce me to a heap of ashes in a moment." This power is the coercive nature of an ideology of gender polarization that causes hysterical men like Theodore and Pleyel to aggressively protect Clara from dissident figures such as Carwin. Carwin's point seems to be that Clara needs to start to think independently, to take off her androcentric glasses and look at the world as an independent individual, with her own desires (Brown 83-86).
- 38 Carwin's oxymoronic identity, which gives him a dissident presence within the patriarchal community of Mettingen, triggers in Theodore (as it had done with Pleyel) a hysterical response, which takes shape as an antinomian religious fanaticism greater in its delusion than his father's Albigensian faith. Clara's confession reveals that Theodore initially had republican inclinations. Clara explains that, in reaction to Pleyel's urge that he should claim his patrimony, Theodore had wondered: "was it laudable to grasp at wealth and power even when they were within our reach," and wonders: "were not these two great sources of depravity?" Theodore initially refuses to play the masculine role allotted to him by the dominant ideology and by his family tradition. His father, whose unorthodox religious creed made him refuse any authoritative posture, functioned as a model for Theodore's own unorthodox behaviour at the outset of the novel. Clara explains that Theodore believed "power and riches were chiefly to be dreaded on account of their tendency to deprave the possessor. He held them in abhorrence, not only of instruments of misery to others, but to him on whom they were conferred. Besides, riches were comparative, and was he not rich already?" (Brown 35).
- 39 Viewed through Clara's androcentric narrative perspective, Theodore is presented to the reader as reluctant to don the mask of either commercial businessman or feudal aristocrat. It is the pressure that the more dominant Pleyel exerts on Wieland to conform to the expectations laid on him by an increasingly liberal-capitalist society that leads Theodore to increasingly rely on that other source of tyrannical masculine authority: an omnipotent deity. As Watts argues, "if crumbling patriarchal domination created a vacuum in *Wieland*, the force of religious fanaticism filled it with unfortunate effect" (Watts 83). Clearly, Carwin's dissident presence and his anarchic voice trigger in Theodore not a move towards the very ideal social vision he seems, like Clara, to harbour, but a hysterical turn to religious fanaticism as a means to empower himself, as well as a means to try to repress Carwin's dissident androgynous presence and more powerful yet anarchic voice.



- 40 Theodore's brutal massacre of his whole family is clearly representative of the aggression and masculine will to power that lay hidden underneath the idealistic veil of liberal capitalist ideology with its bifurcated ideal identities of Franklinesque men and Republican mothers. The evil that Carwin's machinations bring about, as Clara by the end of her tale has to confess, "owed their existence to the errors of the sufferers" (Brown 223). The novel's plot, like the plot of *St Leon*, is not driven by Carwin's apparent supernatural powers as such, but by the hysterical reactions of the figures who are confronted with the androgynous presence and anarchic voice of the mercurial figure. Theodore Wieland's massacre of his family, as narrated by Clara, becomes a travesty of the type of authoritative manhood that the early American social structure vindicated because of its grounding in patriarchal ideology and reliance on an androcentric worldview. His obsession with extreme authoritarianism and his Manichean outlook on good and evil leads him towards a grotesque gnosis that turns him into the ultimate despotic Lord of the Land.
- 41 Even though the novel ends with the complete demise of the estate of Mettingen that Theodore had "ruled," Brown's novel is not so "shocking and uncharacteristically negative" as Jane Tompkins has argued (Tompkins 44). Brown introduced into the world of the Wielands and Pleyels his mercurial figure Carwin, who refuses to perform the prescribed roles available to men and women, and who willingly adopts male and female voices and social positions, so as to unveil the artificiality of the hegemonic patriarchal order. Christopherson argues that "by the end of the novel America has been abandoned" (Christopherson 8). He is only partly right. In *Wieland*, the protagonists who survive Theodore Wieland's killing spree, indeed abandon America. Clara recovers from the illness brought on by her brother's insane killing spree, and subsequently marries Pleyel and retreats to France. This ending, articulated the reconstitution of her androcentric point of view and the couple's reliance on the traditional old-world patriarchal structure that Carwin's presence had caused to crumble. Their return is a return to the past, geographically as well as ideologically.
- 42 Even though Clara's voice is dominant in the novel, her story contains an alternative point of view through the continuing story of Carwin. He is the only one who remains in Pennsylvania after the fall of the house of Wieland. Curiously, Clara does not ruminate on any further mischief he might cause but conjectures that he is "probably engaged in the harmless pursuit of agriculture" (Brown 219). While the novel ends with the narrator's celebration of a patriarchal marriage and a lament for a lost idyll, Carwin's fate expresses a potential celebration of eternal fluidity and continuous change. Carwin's interference in the new-world microcosm has in fact made possible an alternative vision. *Wieland* contains a utopian vision of the future since Carwin has managed to purify Pennsylvania from the old-world ideologies that still structured the society that inhabited the region, and in doing so has re-established the utopian potential of the geographical space.

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- Gothic, Alchemy, Hermetic Philosophy, Visionary Utopianism, Patriarchal Ideology  
Charles Brockden Brown, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Francis Bacon,  
Benjamin Rush

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## NOTES

1. This article is a revised and updated version of part two of chapter four of my unpublished PhD dissertation: "Anarchic Alchemists: Dissident Androgyny in Anglo-American Gothic Fiction from Godwin to Melville". The dissertation was successfully defended at Leiden University, the Netherlands on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2006 (my PhD supervisor was prof.dr. Theo D'Haen, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium; the external examiner was prof.dr. Paul Giles, Oxford University, UK).

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## ABSTRACTS

This article traces the allusions to the utopian cultural schemas of alchemy and hermetic philosophy in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* and "Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist" in order to show that the mysterious anti-hero Carwin does not have to be cast in the role of gothic villain but instead can play the part of marginalised utopian idealist, whose dissident presence in the novel reveals that the seemingly enlightened community of Mettingen is in fact reliant on old-world patriarchal ideology to ensure its stability.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Gothic, Alchemy, Hermetic Philosophy, Visionary Utopianism, Patriarchal Ideology, Charles Brockden Brown, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Francis Bacon, Benjamin Rush

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