

The Gothic Temple: Epistemology and Revolution in Charles Brockden Brown's  
*Wieland*

In his novel *Wieland: Or A Transformation* Charles Brockden Brown inaugurates the American Gothic genre in resounding terms. The novel features multiple Gothic motifs and atmospheres, the vast majority of which involve eerie voices that haunt the characters until Theodore Wieland slaughters his wife and children and attempts to murder his sister Clara, the narrator, at the behest of ethereal voices he believes to be divine. Yet this series of episodes does not constitute the entire Gothic structures and imagery in the novel. An eminently Gothic incident occurs at the outset of Brown's novel even before disembodied voices begin to haunt the text: a temple constructed by the family patriarch as his site of isolated worship transforms into a locus of violence and mystery resulting in the patriarch's demise. The temple is crucial to understanding the concerns that Brown infuses into the narrative. Initially a space of religious zealotry and isolation, the newly established temple transforms into a Gothic locus of danger and mystery, prompting his children to attempt to transform the temple into a site of Enlightenment-esque education and art. Through these dueling transformations and re-transformations of the temple, Brown comments on the dual impulses that contributed to the establishment of the United States, religious zeal and rational skepticism; these currents remained relevant in his own time and the unresolved tension between them he foresaw as potentially threatening to the new nation's future. Brown's image of the temple demonstrates the transformation of the American paradigm into a Gothic site of violence and extremism that remain unexplained in rationalist terms. The Gothic violence at the temple that produces the novel's subsequent tragedies reveals his worry about the nation's ability to negotiate the extreme religious and intellectual forces that

contributed to America's founding and the inability for either to adequately provide an epistemology for guiding the nation's uncertain future.

### **‘Sufficient Vindication’: Brown’s Enlightened Contextualizing**

Questions of epistemological authority occur almost immediately when readers open the pages of *Wieland* in the prefatory Advertisement. Brown associates epistemological positions with national and literary traditions, clearly delineating between America and its ancestors. In the prefatory materials to his first two novels, written either contemporaneously or in rapid succession, Brown explains his desire to establish a new literary tradition separate from European literature. He rejects the ‘Puerile superstition and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras’ (3) of European Gothic tales. This denunciation suggests not a dismissal of the Gothic genre in its entirety, but rather his desire to reconstitute the genre within an American framework while capitalizing on the existing audience’s appetite for sensationalism. Moreover, Brown’s attitude towards the European Gothic’s standard tropes of ‘superstition’ and ‘Gothic castles’ discloses the epistemic implications he ascribes to European Gothic literature. Roland Hagenbüchle succinctly encapsulates Brown’s intentions: ‘It is, therefore, to Brown that we shall now turn for an understanding of what is called here the *epistemological crisis* in nineteenth-century American thought’ (122). The epistemological crisis Brown taps into is this tension between Enlightenment rationality and religious faith.

In order to reveal the distorted landscape and the potential danger in the revolutionary caldron boiling on both sides of the Atlantic, Brown saw in the Gothic the tools and opportunity to present, as Teresa Goddu puts it, “a nightmarish vision of the American experiment gone awry” (186). The importance of the temple and its transformation into a Gothic space thus lies in establishing epistemic uncertainty within the text; even as the temple is Gothicized and

subsequently undergoes an attempted sanitation through Enlightenment policies and practices, so too does Brown anticipate America transforming into a Gothicized landscape. His own attempts to re-transform these two realms along rationalistic lines is reflected in the text, revealing the uncertainty he feels about the success of the endeavor.

### **Religious Combustion in the Temple's Construction and Destruction**

The temple's construction and destructive violence transform it into a Gothic site that provides an epistemological key for revealing Brown's concerns about American religious extremism. This extremism finds expression in themes of insularity expressed in the family patriarch's religious and geographic journey. Clara begins by relating her father's story, and she takes pains to explain the religious fervor that propelled his immigration to America. In describing her father's conversion, she interjects a curious comment about his interpretation of the Bible. After stumbling upon a Christian sect's commentary, Wieland reads the words "Seek and ye shall find" and throws himself into his studies, which produce an unfortunate effect:

His understanding had received a particular direction. All his reveries were fashioned in the same mould...Every fact and sentiment in this book were viewed through a medium which the writings of the Camissard apostle had suggested. His constructions of the text were hasty, and formed on a narrow scale. Every thing was viewed in a disconnected position. One action and one precept were not employed to illustrate and restrict the meaning of another. (8-9)

A fascinating picture of Wieland's hermeneutics and epistemology emerges from this brief passage. The particular lens through which he read Scriptures results in a hermeneutical posture of isolation, preventing the comparison of multiple texts to illuminate each other. This posture translates to his religious practices. Rather than join more mainstream expressions of European

Christianity, Wieland willfully resists conformity and restricts his religious practices to a highly individualized and isolated form. The desire for religious liberty ultimately energizes Wieland to immigrate to the New World, like the typical American colonist searching for religious freedom.

After his attempts at converting the indigenous people fails, Wieland retires to the lonely homestead where he constructs his temple, a religious site that might naturally suggest the more traditional forms of the Gothic genre. However, its construction distinguishes the temple from European examples of Gothic architecture. While religious sites were one of the earliest European Gothic tropes, typically the abbeys, convents, or cathedrals were already imbued with the ominous and gloomy atmosphere that stems from ancient violence or mysticism. But, consistent with Wieland's hermeneutics, this spiritual crossroads eludes all the trappings and associations of Old World religious practices:

At the distance of three hundred yards from his house, on the top of a rock whose sides were steep, rugged... he built what to a common eye would have seemed a summer-house....The edifice was slight and airy. It was no more than a circular area, twelve feet in diameter, whose flooring was the rock, cleared of moss and shrubs, and exactly levelled, edged by twelve Tuscan columns, and covered by an undulating dome. (*W*, 11)

Instantly several expressions of Wieland's theology and aesthetic emerge, first in the mere location of the temple. Unlike centralized European churches and cathedrals, this American temple is situated in a rural, isolated location. Furthermore, despite the austere ambiance, the temple is hardly a brooding edifice of towering spires, rich artwork, and dark corners evocative of European cathedrals and castles; Clara's first analogy compares it to 'a summer-house' and the scenic overlook coupled with the airy and open layout contributes to the children's eventual

conversion of the temple into a ‘place of resort’ (22). However, in spite of his intentions, Wieland’s edifice fails to elude the classical architecture of the past in the columns that encircle the rock. Lastly, as the descriptions make evident, access to the temple is limited by its physical surroundings and its creator; while he lived, Wieland allowed no other human to approach the temple, which had but one path leading to it. Other scholars have noted the allusion to Matthew 7:7, ‘Seek and ye shall find’ in Wieland’s discovery of the Camissard text (*Wieland*, 8), but six verses later Jesus announces, ‘Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it’ (Matthew 7:13-14). Wieland has taken this pronouncement literally, making the path to salvation a difficult and perhaps even treacherous one that only one seeker has found. The clear analogy to America’s isolation from its European progenitors as well as the religious energy that led to its early settlers and immigrants situates the elder Wieland as emblematic of America’s founding; but the failure to completely eradicate the past sets the stage for the violent conclusion to this episode.

The idyllic picture of establishing a new religious and social context cannot last, and Wieland comes under a gloomy cloud after refusing to obey some perceived divine command received during his worship at the temple. The penalty for Wieland’s suppression of religious energy erupts in violence and establishes irrevocably Brown’s Gothic tone. One night, despite his escalating anxiety, Wieland dutifully takes his pilgrimage to the temple for evening devotions, during which time his wife and his brother witness an unearthly glow around the temple. Upon hearing wild cries his brother hastens over and is confronted with “a cloud impregnated with light. It had the brightness of flame, but was without its upward motion. It did not occupy the whole area, and rose but a few feet above the floor” (16). Clara’s uncle finds

Wieland the apparent victim of spontaneous combustion or some supernatural agent; his clothes have been burned off and he expires a short time later (16-17). Before dying, Wieland conveys an ‘imperfect account’ of seeing a light from behind him and being struck in the arm and his clothes set aflame (17).

Contrary to Brown’s stated Enlightened posture, the bizarre cloud of light, the blow on the arm, and the combustion never receive a rational explanation. Brown includes a footnote referencing several other incidents of spontaneous combustion that he presumably intended as confirmation of the scientific veracity of this phenomenon. Lee Croft’s investigation into the instances of spontaneous human combustion in Brown and other literature examines the other examples Brown cites (339). However, in those other examples where the victim appears to burn from the inside out, no ‘impregnated’ cloud of light is mentioned. Brown may have attempted to base his novel in experiential phenomena, but he cannot resist adding the supernatural flair that cannot readily be explained by natural causes. Clearly, though he purports to rationalize the Gothic, his aesthetic or religious views dictated this embellishment, and its implications suggest a deeper motive that coincides with the ambiguity surrounding this strange incident.

### **Enlightenment Rationalism and the Threat of Intergenerational Violence**

In seeking an explanation for the explosion of energy that seemed to consume her father from the inside, Clara and her brother Theodore are at a loss; their loss becomes quite literal, in fact, for soon after their mother dies, leaving them orphans. They have no choice but to continue living their lives, lives of relative comfort due to their father’s fortune, but lonely lives nonetheless, cut off from their heritage and tasked with defining their own destinies and worldviews in the untamed wilderness. Their treatment of the temple is instructive to discovering their own reaction to epistemic uncertainty and their father’s religious energy. Although Brown

appears to endorse rational explanations for all experiential phenomena, ultimately the novel depicts an Enlightenment worldview's failure to conquer the religious energy that contributed to America's founding.

The inability of Enlightenment rationalism to extinguish the fear and uncertainty of religious superstition centers on the temple. Recognizing the potential danger of religious energy, Theodore turns to an opposing paradigm in order to control such revolutionary force. After their parents' deaths the children inherit the estate and divide it between them, continuing their education into adulthood. They begin to reclaim the temple for a different purpose:

The temple was no longer assigned to its ancient use....This was the place of resort in the evenings of summer. Here we sung, and talked, and read, and occasionally banqueted.... Here my brother's children received the rudiments of their education; here a thousand conversations, pregnant with delight and improvement, took place; and here the social affections were accustomed to expand, and the tear of delicious sympathy to be shed. (22)

No longer a site of mysticism and isolation, the temple has become a scenic porch for relaxation and conversation. Music, art, philosophy, education, and the enjoyment of nature all converge at this formerly Gothic space. In this effort to reclaim the newly constructed edifice from the terrible history it has acquired, to sanitize the temple of the Gothic, we see the merging of the rationalist aesthetic and the analogy for the reclamation of a New World heritage, both surrounding this Gothicized space of religious zeal. This rejection of the superstitious past and the violent energy perpetrated in its name explains why Theodore, and perhaps even Brown, wish to distance themselves from such extremism.

It is therefore singularly instructive and fascinating to witness Brown's treatment of these themes throughout the remainder of his story, because the attempt to transform the Gothicized temple into a site of calm Enlightened rationality fails as disembodied voices begin haunt the location and remind the children of their patriarch's uncanny destruction. After the first instance of the spectral voices, Clara observes: 'His father's death was always regarded by him as flowing from a direct and supernatural decree. . . . The traces which it left were more gloomy and permanent. This new incident had a visible effect in augmenting his gravity. He was less disposed than formerly to converse and reading' (33). Theodore, once he fails to replace religious extremism with the rationality of liberal education at the temple, loses his taste for the intellectual improvement intended to expunge his sordid family history. This event seems to initiate Theodore's regression from an educated and rational family man into a religious fanatic who hears supernatural voices; if so, the presence of the temple in this transformation creates a connection between the father's religious energy and the son's devout massacres.

The questions of the rational vs. supernatural, and the intergenerational nature of violence all coalesce in the climactic moments of the novel. Theodore, having murdered his family and escaped from prison to murder Clara, invades her bedroom where Carwin has been confessing to producing the disembodied voices that haunted the Wielands. Carwin denies responsibility for the voices Theodore heard commanding his holy homicides, and some critics argue a psychological defect in Theodore is to blame. Brown, however, imbricates the scenario with enough ambiguity that a rational explanation is precluded leaving Clara and the reader to wallow in uncertainty: is Theodore insane or deceived by Carwin? Or did Theodore truly hear a voice (divine or demonic) commanding him to murder his family?



The ambiguity surrounding Theodore's voices should remind us of Brown's intention to sanitize Gothic literature of wild tales of the supernatural in favor of more realistic stories depicting human experience. The uncertainty of rationality vs. the supernatural continues to haunt the novel in the form of the temple. Theodore's divine mandate *can* be explained empirically, though by no means definitively, but the temple and Wieland's death remain shrouded in mystery by the cloud of light, a choice that cannot but be intentional by Brown. In this way, Brown reveals that, like Theodore and Clara, he too sought to transform the Gothic genre inherited from his European progenitors away from supernaturalism into rational explanations, but ultimately found himself unable to accomplish this task in his first novel, leaving an epistemic ambiguity to haunt his text. He distrusts the religious energy partly responsible for America's founding, but recognizes that rationalism fails to completely eclipse religious epistemology.

The recent atrocities committed in the French Revolution revealed to Brown the inherent danger of long-suppressed energy that becomes more destructive than redemptive despite its liberating origins. Combined with his living memories of the American Revolution and its roots in religious devotion, Brown understandably distrusts those whose passion overwhelms their intellect. Yet both revolutions proved partially beneficent and rightly challenged ossified institutions that oppressed and dehumanized their subjects. Moreover, the secular principles inherited from Enlightenment figures like Rousseau and Adam Smith informed the revolutionary movements on both continents. Yet despite their Enlightenment heritage, the explosive revolutions still contained a danger of chaotic violence. The temple, then, becomes symbolic of Brown's fears of the revolutionary spirit that formed his nation spilling over into future generations and exploding into violence that could destabilize American society. The

epistemological conflict between reason and supernaturalism mirrors the clashing forces striving to determine America's future, a conflict Brown infuses into his exceptional Gothic novel.