

Fanaticism and Familicide from Wieland to The Shining

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In an isolated setting in rural America, a close-knit family group find their claustrophobic relationships disintegrating with alarming rapidity, as preternatural voices push the father of the family closer and closer to a murderous frenzy that, all too inevitably, erupts in the form of a violence that is devastating in its effects and sickeningly intimate in its choice of victims.

Due at least in part to its sheer cultural visibility, this brief description will, for many, immediately evoke *The Shining*, not merely Stephen King's 1977 novel, but also the texts it has spawned: Stanley Kubrick's iconic film from 1980 (often voted the scariest film of all time); the more "faithful" 1997 television mini-series directed by Mick Garris; and, arguably most successfully, *The Simpsons'* 1994 parody, *The Shinning* (in the Halloween special "Treehouse of Horror V").

What is perhaps less widely recognized, however, is the extent to which the basic plot outlined above pervades and persists within American culture, popular and otherwise; indeed, it can be traced back to before the nineteenth century and forward to the beginning of the twenty-first — with variations, of course, but largely unchanged in its central elements. America is — at least ostensibly — a country founded upon utopian democratic principles, where the family unit was encouraged to supply the gap in authority created by the rejection of monarchical or otherwise tyrannical systems of government.¹ It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that a recurrent trope in popular culture should revolve around the anxiety that the family itself might come to mirror

a tyrannical state, complete with despotic monarch in the form of the all-powerful father.²

What is surprising is the manner in which the texts that have extended and perpetuated this trope — specifically, Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland; or, the Transformation: An American Tale*, from 1798, one of the earliest American Gothic novels; John Neal's short story "Idiosyncrasies" (1843); King's *The Shining*; and Bill Paxton's film *Frailty* (2002) — repeatedly spectralize this violently patriarchal figure, a move which might appear to function as a means of figuratively reducing and containing his frightening and anti-democratic power. However, it is here that what is arguably the source text — Brown's *Wieland* — becomes most important, particularly its engagement with the tendency in eighteenth-century theology to malign the body in favor of the spirit. In *Wieland*, the first-person narrator, Clara Wieland, becomes increasingly spectralized and invisible to the narrative gaze that she herself wields as she narrates the horrific events that befall her extended family as a result of her brother's religious fanaticism. In the later manifestations of the trope, by contrast, father figures inflict potentially divinely, satanically or otherwise supernaturally inspired violence upon their immediate family groups, and first-person narrators or writer figures are transformed into haunting presences, but, significantly, the narrative positions of murderous authority and spectral author are occupied by the same character.³ Consequently, they ignore *Wieland's* critique of an essentially Calvinistic but enduring manifestation of the patriarchal gaze, one which seeks to reify both body and soul, and subsequently to destroy the former in order to reveal and release the latter. More troublingly, the power over representation (and from there, as I shall argue, over the destiny of others) and invulnerability that Clara wields is transferred to the very figures whose fatherly tyranny is most antithetical to America's alleged post-Enlightenment ideals, and authority is therefore placed back in the hands of those most determined to recreate monarchical abuses within the context of the nuclear family.

In many ways, *The Shining* — particularly King's novel — serves as the most typical illustrative example of this process. It focuses primarily on the actions and psychological processes of Jack Torrance, a writer of fiction and former alcoholic who functions both as the protagonist and, ultimately, the central human villain of the book. As the book opens, Jack has been fired from his position as a high-school English teacher for violence against a student, leaving him all but unable to support his young family, and struggling against both the overwhelming urge to drink and crippling writer's block. When he accepts a job as winter caretaker of the isolated mountain-top Overlook Hotel in Colorado. His wife and son have joined him in an effort to heal the growing rifts between them. Gradually, the supernatural presences that



Jack Nicholson as Jack Torrance in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980, Warner Bros.): The family man as demonic killer.

haunt the hotel persuade him that murdering his family will allow him to restore his eroded masculinity. As Jack's sanity crumbles, he's drawn further and further into the blood-soaked fantasy world that permeates the hotel, becoming increasingly convinced that the murders will gain him a promotion of some kind within the hotel's spectral "management" system. With his position as breadwinner and patriarchal head of the family under threat, violence against those over whom he no longer feels he has sufficient authority presents itself as a means of rectifying the situation.

Beyond this, what links *The Shining* to the other texts I will be discussing in this article is its conceptualization of human subjectivity and physicality. The catastrophic events of the novel are catalyzed by the presence of Jack's son Danny, who has considerable psychic gifts, mainly in the form of telepathy and precognition. Only once he is dead can the hotel absorb this power, taking Danny's psychic essence into itself to join the host of spirits already trapped there. What is more, Jack's own corporeal status is less than stable throughout the novel. This is first insinuated when his wife Wendy, recalling the events that led up to his dismissal from the teaching post, feels that, following a particularly heavy bout of drinking and an unnerving car accident, "he had been

replaced by some unearthly doppelgänger that she would never know or be quite sure of.”⁴ This figurative evocation of his uncanniness becomes rather more literal at the very end, when he dies in a conflagration that destroys the hotel (due to his neglect of his caretaker duties), and, it is to be assumed, is subsumed into the Overlook’s community of malign spectres. Kubrick’s film goes so far as to render this explicit, in which, following his death, his smiling face appears within a group photograph of hotel staff, a monument to his own violent obedience to the hotel’s ghostly urgings.⁵

This, as I shall argue, is not merely the once-off invention of a supernatural horror writer, but mirrors the denigration of the body and glorification of the soul that informed much eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Protestant thinking about death and the afterlife. Moreover, these three elements—patriarchal violence, the privileging of the spirit over the body, and the spectralization of writer figures—which are linked only by contiguity in *The Shining*, become inextricably bound up with one another in *Wieland*, “Idiosyncrasies,” and *Frailty*. Where Jack is simply a protagonist who writes fiction, the narrative power of the father figures in these texts is further emphasized by the fact that each features a first-person narrator who controls the shape of the storytelling process itself.

A socio-cultural issue, a theological doctrine, and a figurative trope respectively, these textual motifs might seem to be strange bedfellows. In order to explain their rhythmically repetitious appearance together throughout American literature and popular culture over the course of two centuries and more, it is necessary to go back to an early example of American horror fiction—Brown’s *Wieland*, a succinct and disturbing work set in the early days of the American Republic—in which the narrator, Clara Wieland, is subjected to one source of emotional trauma after another. When her brother, Theodore Wieland—who has killed the rest of the family and has attempted to murder her—kills himself in front of her, she feels that she can take no more of horror or grief, and tells the reader,

The body of Wieland was removed from my presence, and they supposed that I would follow it; but no, my home is ascertained; here I have taken up my rest, and never will I go hence, till, like Wieland, I am borne to my grave.

Importunity was tried in vain: they threatened to remove me by violence—nay, violence was used; but my soul prizes too dearly this little roof to endure to be bereaved of it.[...]

They besought me—they remonstrated—they appealed to every duty that connected me with him that made me, and with my fellow-men—in vain. While I live I will not go hence.

[...]

I will eat—I will drink—I will lie down and rise up at your bidding—all I ask

is the choice of my abode.[...] Shortly will I be at peace. This is the spot which I have chosen in which to breathe my last sigh.⁶

The point at which she writes these words, in a letter to unnamed “friends” of which the novel claims to be a transcript, is the crisis of a book that is largely made up of crises, or at least of the succession of one bizarre and unsettling incident after another. For there is much of the bizarre in *Wieland*, from ventriloquism and elaborately engineered deception to spontaneous human combustion, religious fanaticism and the murder-suicide mentioned above. As so eclectic a list of fictional occurrences might suggest, and as critics have insisted almost since it was published, coherence and clarity are not the principles by which the text operates—far from it.⁷ The novel spends much time telling us that authority of any kind is a slippery thing, that totalizing interpretations are contingent at best and dangerous at worst, and that effects do not follow automatically from causes, actions, motives, or intentions.⁸ Rather, in the imaginative universe it sets up, chaos appears to rule all things, and no character—let alone the reader—is capable of predicting accurately what will be the outcome of his or her words, thoughts, desires or actions.⁹ Indeed, attempting to do so repeatedly has disastrous consequences, not only for those directly involved, but also for those connected to them by ties of affection and blood.

What the passage above articulates is an attempt on Clara’s part, however abortive, to transform herself into the one fixed or stable point in the whole narrative, effectively to haunt, while still alive, the place where the greatest disaster of her life has occurred. Moreover, this spectralization is in fact the culmination of her effective invisibility and bodilessness throughout the novel, made possible, I would argue, by her position as first-person narrator. This position allows her to complicate and obscure her status as narrative object, both in terms of her physical appearance (of which we know almost nothing) and her character itself—in other words, to employ the narrative gaze in a way that permits her to elude the narrativizing gazes of those around her. This in turn helps her to resist the dangerous operations of authority, and specifically the drive towards pinning her down both visually and epistemologically that consumes the men in her life. Doing so makes it possible for her to escape the very literal violence wreaked by her brother—who believes himself to be performing God’s will—upon almost every other living member of their second-generation American family.

What is more, Clara’s evasion of the gaze goes hand-in-hand with the novel’s sustained critique of the theological rejection of the physical form. It places far more narrative weight than does *The Shining* on the use of this doctrine as a means of legitimating, even advocating, violence against the physical body. By extension, the novel can be read as a critique of untrammelled male

power, unlike the later texts discussed here, which, by conflating the spectralized (and, therefore, invulnerable) narrator figure with murderous father figures, covertly upholds the very patriarchal, religiously (or supernaturally) motivated authority that they ostensibly denigrate and fear.

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Brown's *Wieland* revolves around an almost incestuously close family group who enjoy considerable privileged seclusion on an estate in rural Pennsylvania, and whose interpersonal affections are often depicted explicitly in terms of mutual idolatry, a blasphemous worship of the human, the physical, and the mundane. When, however, the apparent harmony of their domestic arrangements is broken by the intrusion of Francis Carwin, a mysterious, grotesque but strangely erudite figure with the gift of throwing his voice and mimicking those of others, this idolatry rapidly descends into an appalling and violent iconoclasm on the part of Clara's brother, Theodore. Misunderstandings caused by the misuse of Carwin's gift destroy the security of their relationships, and seem finally to spur Wieland into a religious frenzy of ultimate self-sacrifice that leaves all but the narrator Clara and her brother-in-law dead, though Wieland's murderous rampage could equally be interpreted as the result of either insanity or supernatural interference.

Theodore, at any rate, believes himself to be in direct communication with the divine, and the intimations regarding his idiosyncratic religious convictions give the reader some (but not much) prior warning of what is to come. To a certain extent, the reader is dissuaded from drawing too close an analogy between the sketchily drawn but devastatingly compulsive theological attitudes displayed by Theodore Wieland and those of seventeenth-century New England Puritans.¹⁰ Much space is devoted at the opening of the novel to explaining that he, and his father before him, practice a form of religious rigor which forbids them to follow any creed or doctrine other than that which the elder Wieland has imbibed from a "hasty" but strictly conceived reading of a Camissard tract, through which he then interprets the Bible itself. We are told that, based on his reading, he "allied himself with no sect, because he perfectly agreed with none" (Brown, 11). Nevertheless, the rigidly applied beliefs which seem to lead to the elder Wieland being burnt to death by some demonic or heavenly agent in the little temple he has built himself for solitary prayer, and which lead ultimately to the younger Wieland's slaughter of his family, do seem to be founded upon principles which bear some superficial resemblance to Calvinistic or Puritan thinking in general. They certainly bear a close resemblance to what Barbara Judson cautiously dubs "'Puritan' habits of agonized introspection."¹¹

Essentially, these habits become entrenched because an individual who

adheres to extreme Calvinistic Protestantism “is called upon to make clear choices in his life but at the same time he is forbidden to regard these acts as self-induced. They are attributed either to the grace of God or else to the temptations of Satan,” and the adherent must continually scrutinize his or her thoughts and actions in the hope that it is the former, and the fear that it might be the latter.¹² Consequently, “the Puritan consciousness not only suffered from insecurity but [...] actively cultivated insecurity, being acutely aware that its inner light could prove delusive, its conviction of virtue a symptom of the heart’s perversion.”¹³ Since what is at stake is no less than the future of one’s immortal soul, and the status of one’s innermost self, vigilance over the self, and over others, who may either be lost to sin or have been awarded honors which one can never attain for oneself, becomes constant, urgent, and anxiety-driven. Carol Margaret Davidson asserts that the result is “a sense of division that engenders acute anxiety, paranoia and persecution” as the world becomes “an ever-shifting, sign-filled domain of uncertainty where God the Father is unpredictable and an ineluctably mysterious withhold-er of truth.”¹⁴

At the same time, as *Wieland* highlights grimly, the possibility always remains that the opposite effect may occur — that when an individual becomes convinced that he or she has somehow gained access to this ultimate truth, the result can be enormous arrogance and a sense of supreme authority. Indeed, the entire system encourages individuals to assume simultaneously that they know nothing and everything about themselves. As John Calvin himself put it, because “Simple knowledge may exist in man, as it were shut up,” and hidden both from the world at large and from one’s own conscious self, the conscience “is set over him as a kind of sentinel to observe and spy out all his secrets, that nothing may remain buried in darkness.”¹⁵ The individual is therefore at once utterly ignorant and enjoined to seek to be omniscient, not only about him — or herself but about others in the immediate community. It is this that later Unitarian and Universalist theologians saw as one of the most dangerous elements of Puritanism and creeds like it. Denouncing as a form of madness and melancholy a belief that one has been divinely inspired, spoken to and admitted to the holy presence, Charles Chauncy cautioned that those under the influence of religious enthusiasm are capable of wild and dangerous acts, and are extremely unpredictable. Worse still, they tend to “disregard [...] the Dictates of *reason*,” considering their special status to place them “above the force of argument.”¹⁶

As an extension of this, as Michael J. Colacurcio argues, Puritanism was “a sect which reified the private self by advertising its vices most unremittingly[...].”¹⁷ In other words, it elevated the “inside” of the self to such giddy heights of spiritual importance that it sought to bring it “outside,” to render

the flesh invisible and the soul available for all to see, either in its purity or its depravity. In *Wieland*, the sense of self-importance, of power over both one's own spiritual standing and that of others that this form of Protestantism encourages, causes precisely this erosion of the perceived ontological status of the flesh. Most devastatingly, this juxtaposition — the elevation of the soul and the vilification of the body — erupts as physical violence. In particular, the men in the family seem to have internalized the doctrine that denigrated bodily existence as an unhealthy clinging to the mortal trappings of this world, and as an implicit rejection of the promised glory of the next, an attitude that pervaded Puritan (and generally Protestant) thinking in eighteenth-century America. Drawing upon 2 Corinthians 5:6–8, which states that, “while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord,”¹⁸ Robert Bolton, an English Puritan, wrote in 1635 of how we should not forget that

thy body, when the soule is gone, will be an horreur to all that behold it; a most loathesome and abhorred spectacle. Those that loved it most, cannot now finde in their hearts to looke on't, by reason of the grievly deformedness which death will put upon it. Down it must into a pit of carioins and confusion, covered with wormes, not able to wag so much as a little finger, to remoove the vermine that feed and gnaw upon its flesh; and so moulder away into rottennesse and dust[...]. [W]hen the soule departs this life, it carries nothing away with it, but grace, Gods favour, and a good conscience.¹⁹

That this sentiment was transported largely undamaged across the Atlantic by the Founding Fathers and took firm root in American soil is testified to by John Collins' assertion in 1721 that “Death is only sweetened to us as we can look upon it our priviledge; as an out-let from sin and misery, and an in-let to *Glory* both in Holiness and Happiness.”²⁰ Specifically, to leave the world was not merely to abandon a hopelessly godless locale, but to free oneself finally from the “meaningless husk” of a body in which each of us is entombed during our lifetime.²¹ Even in the latter half of the nineteenth century, little had changed in terms of such attitudes, apart from an increased emphasis upon the sentimental longing for the dear departed, and the complete absence of any enthusiasm for the gorier aspects of death.²² As Thomas Baldwin Thayer remarked in the consolatory text, *Over the River*, in 1864,

the body is the tabernacle, or tent, in which the spirit takes up its abode while on its journey to the promised land; and when this mortal habitation is dissolved, when the *tent* is struck by Death, then the soul is clothed upon with the immortal, and enters into its heavenly *house*, the building of God, where, its pilgrimage ended, it will dwell rejoicingly forevermore!

[...] Here everything is transient, changing, temporary — there everything is permanent, fixed and final.²³

Essentially, this form of dichotomous thinking, which rigidly divides not only life from death, but eternal soul from decaying, obscuring and imprisoning body, underpins much American early religious belief, and forms the basis for the Wieland patriarchs' attitudes towards those most dear to them. Although it could not be said that the family, whose large farm has been made possible by slave labor and commercial success, spurn material luxuries, it is evident that both men value the rewards of heaven far above earthly ones, and are haunted by a conviction that they should subordinate all mundane objects, passions and even people to their efforts to remain on a positive footing with the celestial realm.

While it is strongly hinted that the spontaneous combustion of the elder Wieland one night while alone in his temple is divine punishment for his refusal to do precisely that — to sacrifice his family's lives in order to prove the worthiness of his own immortal soul — his son is far more willing to put his inherited theological convictions into practice. Indeed, he does so with a zeal and efficiency that is chilling in its assumption that death is preferable to life, even (or rather particularly) for those who he loves unconditionally and upon whose happiness his own is dependent. Systematically killing first his wife Catharine, and then his four children and teenage ward Louisa Conway, before trying to kill Clara, he believes himself to be following the irresistible dictates of a divine voice — the very same, it is intimated, that was heard by his deceased father, and possibly also by a grandfather, who ended his life by throwing himself off a cliff in England in response to what seemed to be the demands of an unseen interlocutor. The very model of Chauncy's dangerous religious enthusiast, both by his actions and his words, Wieland shows himself to be in agreement with the doctrine of despising the flesh. Indeed, he is convinced that he has proven himself to be liberated from any selfish desire to keep them alive, rather than sacrificing them for the sake of demonstrating his "faith and [his] obedience" to the divine, which he has "burnt with ardour to approve[...]" (Brown, 151).

In the transcript of his trial that Clara reads during her recovery from the illness into which the horrific experiences plunge her, Wieland recounts hearing what he believes to be the voice of the Almighty commanding him to kill his wife. He rejoices that the opportunity of just such a proof has finally been given to him. When the deed is done, it becomes clear to him (whether through further divine revelation or his own faulty reasoning we are left to guess) that to fail to do the same for the rest of his family would be to fail outright in his demonstration of faith. In the wake of the murders, having been thwarted by Carwin's timely intercession in his desire to add his sister to the list of his victims, he kills himself, possibly because it seems, briefly, as if Carwin himself is the all too human origin of the voices he heard. Due

to the text's failure — or refusal — to provide clear motivating factors, explanations or psychological insights, however, it remains equally possible to read Theodore's suicide as motivated by his certainty that he will be following his loved ones into the great beyond, thus demonstrating once and for all his carelessness for life — even his own.

When one considers the Calvinist attitude towards not only the body but also visual images more generally, this perilous slippage from belief to violence becomes more than the mere product of a disordered psyche. Using the war against the Pequot tribe and the persecution of the rebellious Puritan Anne Hutchinson as examples, Ann Kibbey asserts that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America was marked by a "profound synthesis of religion and prejudice in the perception of material shapes." She argues that "the Puritan belief in the necessity and righteousness of deliberate physical harm was deeply indebted to the ideology of Protestant iconoclasm in Renaissance Europe" to the extent that the "violent destruction of artistic images of people developed into a mandate for sacrosanct violence of human beings[...]."²⁴ This commitment to iconoclasm, as practiced by the Wieland patriarchs, can be seen not only as partaking of this violence against the physical, the visual, and the material, but as implying that to be the object of idolatry is to be placed in mortal danger. In other words, a rejection of the material, and specifically the worship of images created by human hands, has its logical extension in a direct repudiation and destruction of those images, and from there slides all too easily into literal violence against the materiality of the body itself.

What also becomes clear, however, is the extent to which the descriptive act itself, and particularly idolatrous descriptions mobilizing images of worship and the divinity of human beings, is represented by the novel as a form of conceptual violence. This is made particularly evident through the figure of Henry Pleyel, the brother of Theodore's wife, a "champion of intellectual liberty, [who] rejected all guidance but that of his reason" (23), and whose hyper-rational skepticism is directly opposed to, but as rigid and as stringently applied as, the younger Wieland's religious fanaticism. He too is subjected to censure by the text, harshly critical as it is of attempts to impose artificial order upon the chaotic world it conjures up.²⁵ Pleyel's advocacy of the accuracy of sensory data, and sensory data alone, leads him to misinterpret the apparently supernatural voices which Carwin produces. The dangerous limitations of Pleyel's devotion to empiricism becomes all too clear when Carwin, delighted to have the opportunity to fool someone of such intellectual stature, mimics Clara's voice, leading her brother-in-law and future husband to believe that she has given herself sexually to the evidently lower-class and potentially criminal stranger. Confronting her, unable to imagine that his

senses may have deceived him, he exclaims, “O wretch!—thus exquisitely fashioned—on whom nature seemed to have exhausted all her graces; with charms so awful and so pure! how art thou fallen! From what height fallen!” (94).

It is here that the similarity—even the identity—emerges between Pleyel’s attitude towards Clara and her brother’s, in that both are predicated upon a conviction that she will continue to conform to their carefully constructed mental image of her as a quasi-divine being. Indeed, theirs is merely a slightly more extreme version of a habit that pervades the entire microcosmic community that inhabits the novel. Clara’s sister-in-law Catherine, is, Clara tells us, Wieland’s “angel.” Wieland himself is described by his uncle as delivering his confession with “a tranquility of majesty, which denoted less of humanity than of godhead” (149). Even Clara’s servant Judith explicitly admits that she cannot help but “worship” her practically “divine” mistress, who her brother apostrophizes as “Thou angel whom I was wont to worship!” (205). Unified and strongly held as these opinions might appear, in every case, the worship of the heavenly in human shape is transformed with little difficulty into a horror of the demonic, in a dichotomy inextricable from Puritan thinking. Both the jury in his trial and Clara herself see Wieland as being possessed by or himself a devil or fiend. Carwin, whose voice and manner initially bewitch and fascinate Clara, is loaded with the same epithets on numerous occasions, and she admits towards the end to being incapable of ascertaining whether he is “black as hell or bright as angel [...]” (212). Pleyel, however, is troubled by no such inability to decide, and laments that having committed “so consummate, so frightful a depravity,” she has fallen prey to a “ruin so complete—so unheard of” that there is now a “cursed stain” on her previously spotless character (94).

Pleyel’s unjust deprecations help to draw attention to the highly problematic, even dangerous nature of the pervasive double trope of election and perdition, divinity and diabolism, particularly when employed as a means of determining or seeking to establish the ontological status or spiritual character of another. Some time after his initial outburst, he tells Clara, “The image that I once adored existed only in my fancy” (107), going on to reiterate that previously he had considered her to be an ideal “image,” a “picture which [...] was devoid of imperfection[.]” (113). As Andrew Scheiber puts it, “implicit in [Pleyel’s] description is the idea that her essence is [...] that of an angel, or, more precisely, of an art work. She is in his paradigm [...] an unearthly muse, an inspiration and object of cultural consciousness rather than author or agent.”²⁶ In other words, his representation of her evacuates her of subjectivity, transforming her into a reified image of angelic beauty and virtue that she can only escape, in his imaginative economy, by reversing

it and becoming demonic, depraved and irrevocably lost. Moreover, while this is a method of interpretation that saturates the world she inhabits, it finds its most strident and powerful advocates in the men with the greatest power over her life.

It is, after all, in matters of life and death that the Puritan body/ soul binarism most comes into its own. Laura M. Stevens illustrates how Puritanism demands that its devotees

see death as an emotionally evocative text that should be read for spiritual signs. The Protestant Reformation had introduced the notion that the moment of death was a template, an event offering diagnostic possibilities for enhanced understanding. Protestants scoffed at deathbed conversions, but they remained wary of assuming salvation until the moment of death. A good death, following a good life, offered the best assurance of preservation from a descent into hell.²⁷

Consequently, Protestant death in the eighteenth century was seen, not as a loss of life but as a clarification of the inner self and, as Stevens elaborates, functioned again as a convenient means for the deaths of others to be reinterpreted, not as a violent wrenching away from a beloved existence, but as a moment of religious truth and revelation of one's status as elect or reprobate. In other words, death is when our selfhood is most visible to—and definable by—both ourselves and those around us. To some extent, this view of death waned somewhat towards the end of the eighteenth century; with the rise of sentimentalism and the increased importance placed on family bonds, grief at the passing of loved ones took precedence over religious orthodoxy. Poised between two centuries, what *Wieland* illustrates graphically is a horrific juxtaposition of just these two, allegedly opposing means of viewing death, by combining in the figure of Wieland an image of paternal love and religiously inspired patriarchal despotism. It is this juxtaposition that leads to Wieland murdering his adored family precisely because his vision of love incorporates the view that the body is merely a hindrance to the spectacle of the spiritual truth of their essential selves.

Paul Lewis argues that “In this distorted re-enactment of the story of Abraham and Isaac, *Wieland*’s victims cease (in the murderer’s mind) to be individual people with independent value and become only lambs he brings to the altar.”²⁸ This is particularly evident at the death of his wife, Catharine. In his confession, he describes being overwhelmed by a numinous “‘effulgence’” that temporarily blinds him. From out of the dazzling light, he hears a voice and turns to look, but tells the jury that, “‘It is forbidden to describe what I saw: Words, indeed, would be wanting to the task. The lineaments of that being, whose veil was now lifted, and whose visage beamed upon my sight, no hues of pencil or of language can portray’” (153). The divine is for

Wieland all-powerful and sacred precisely because it is unavailable to representational or actual violence, and he himself has no desire whatsoever even to attempt to subject it to epistemological freezing through language. By contrast, however, he lavishes considerable descriptive energy upon the dead body of his wife. As she lies, strangled by him, on Clara's bed, Wieland becomes transfixed by the physical spectacle his violence has made of her. He tells the jury how Catharine's "eye-balls started from their sockets. Grimness and distortion took place of all that used to bewitch me into transport, and subdue me into reverence." His former idol becomes, in death, "[h]aggard, and pale, and lifeless," which he takes as a sign that she has "ceasedst to contend with [her] destiny" (157). The use of the word "destiny" is particularly resonant. Now that she has become the "meaningless husk" that contemporary religious thinking declared the body to be, now that the repulsive physicality of life has been made all too evident because the soul no longer animates it, she has achieved her "destiny," simultaneously released to the eternal reward (or punishment) of the hereafter and reduced to the abject horror of livid, lifeless corporeality. Wieland's strict division between body and soul positions him as the proprietor of both, in that he violently brings the former to the end of its earthly existence in order to release the latter.

What is more, precisely because the visual and visible body excites, even demands violence within this Calvinistic framework, while Clara may be continually menaced throughout the novel, Wieland never succeeds in causing her physical harm, and neither does anyone else. Even the murderers who she believes to be hiding in her closet and following her on her solitary midnight walks are only the invention of Carwin's ventriloquism, intended to prevent her from discovering that he has been hanging around the grounds of their house. Clara's ability to survive the disasters that overtake her brother and his family can, I would argue, be traced back to her relative invisibility within the text — an invisibility which figuratively prepares us for her insistence on haunting, ghostlike, her already memory-haunted abode. As first-person narrator, she is herself immune from visualizing representation. She cannot be turned into an "idol" or a graven image reflecting another's conception of her, since the power of representation is literally in her hands, and the narrative gaze is turned outwards, towards others. For much of the start of the novel, she barely even appears to have a self, since the "I" of Clara's narration is all but absorbed into the "we" of the group with which she so strongly identifies. Barring the author's "Advertisement" that precedes her narrative, it is not until half way through Chapter IV that the information that Clara is female is supplied to the reader and her name mentioned, while she only names *herself* "Clara Wieland" in Chapter XII.

To be a narrative object in *Wieland* is to be textually "real" and vulnerable

to violence; her position behind the narrative gaze can be seen as mitigating this effect. Pleyel and Wieland attempt to transform her, either into an angel whose bodily form merely obscures her true beauty, or a demon lurking within her “exquisite” but deceptive exterior. For Wieland, therefore, whichever is the case, to destroy that physicality is in no way to harm her. In response to the attempts by both men to evacuate her of subjectivity, reifying both body and soul to the point that she becomes a mere function of their representative processes, she disappears into textuality. Becoming the author of her own text rather than the subject of others’ therefore essentially decorporealizes her while demonstrating, through her emotional and intellectual vicissitudes, reversals, and uncertainties, that her selfhood is complex in the extreme, disparate and often contradictory, irreducible to the binary system into which Pleyel and Wieland seek to insert her.²⁹ Rejecting her externally imposed status as a solid, fixed, strictly coded image, she becomes instead fractured and all but invisible. She is, in this sense, allied to Wieland’s vision of the truly divine (rather than the divine in human form) as unrepresentable and indescribable. Vitally, however, the text itself never associates her with any specifically religious form of the supernatural. Outside of any theological framework, she is a numinous being, but not one that can be bound within a religious structure of interpretation, as to do so would be to re-establish the form of ultimate authority that the text sees as spurious and dangerous.³⁰

Indeed, she draws explicit attention to the fact that her “narrative [is] invaded by inaccuracy and confusion, asking rhetorically, “What but ambiguities, abruptnesses, and dark transitions, can be expected from the historian who is, at the same time, the sufferer of these disasters?” She goes on to say, “now know I what it is to entertain incommunicable sentiments” (135), highlighting her position beyond representation, even when it is wielded by herself. Unlike the sharply Manichean stories about the people around them that Wieland and Pleyel have been writing in their heads, Clara embraces the chaos of her tale. Her refusal of her position as authority also constitutes a refusal on her part to impose artificial systems of cause and effect onto the events that she has narrated. She makes some attempt to provide a moral at the very end, but even this serves to divide responsibility up between villain and victim. Drawing in the apparently tangential story of the Conway family and the disasters that befell them due to marital infidelity, she states that, “the evils of which Carwin and Maxwell were the authors, owed their existence to the errors of the sufferers. All efforts would have been ineffectual to subvert the happiness or shorten the existence of the [victims], if their own frailty had not seconded these efforts” (223), and she includes herself in this criticism. This becomes more significant when read in the context of her earlier assertion, “Let that man who shall purpose to assign motives to the actions of

another, blush at his folly and forbear. Not more presumptuous would it be to attempt the classification of all nature, and the scanning of supreme intelligence" (134).

She is not, unlike *Wieland* or Pleyel, attempting to explain definitively the actions and motives of her family members; instead she is yielding up the authority inherent in her narratorial position, embracing the chaotic and the arbitrary rather than seeking to reduce or control it. To do so would be to perpetuate her brother's violence since, as Irving Malin says of the American Gothic hero/ villain, "Love for him is an attempt to create order out of chaos, strength out of weakness; however, it simply creates monsters."³¹ It is precisely this disturbing overlap between villain and protagonist that the texts which come after *Wieland* exploit to its fullest, in the process, I would argue, repeating its thematic concerns but not its commitment to problematizing this particular form of epistemological authoritarianism. To a certain extent, it is possible to see Brown's novel as supporting and extending the increasingly influential late-eighteenth century Universalist and Unitarian rejection of Calvinistic doctrine on the basis that it seems to imply that God is somehow responsible for sin and has wantonly doomed the majority of his creation to eternal hell-fires.³² As Scheiber puts it, "to believe in Theodore's claim of divine authority for his acts is to accuse the God whose decrees he has supposedly executed — a theory which leads to the conclusion that the gods themselves are hostile, if not actually insane[...]."³³ More than this, it implies that belief in a cruel and demanding God can transform the believer into an exact replica of his or her image of the divine — and specifically the negative aspects of that image. In other words, belief renders the believer tyrannical, authoritarian and capable of acts of unspeakable violence towards those who he loves most. (Significantly, in *Wieland* and its cultural afterlife, it is always a man who acts in this manner.) By extension, the novel functions as a strident critique of the surveillance fostered by Puritanism, of the sense that all must be scrutinized in order to uncover the moral "truth" lurking beneath the deceptive surface of good works and outward propriety — and it is both this and the claims to ultimate authority that Clara's problematized narratorial status allow her to side-step.³⁴

However, as the example of Pleyel demonstrates, while the novel can therefore be aligned with the Universalist denunciation of the Puritan vision of God, as a whole, any system of belief and any form of authority is rejected by the novel as not merely specious but dangerous.³⁵ In particular, censure falls upon the very sentimentalization of family bonds and the increased sense throughout the eighteenth century in American culture that death tore families apart and separated the living from those dearest to them — the cultural shift which itself gave rise to the Universalist and Unitarian movements.

Wieland shows how such thinking fetishized the family group to the point where that paternal power became all but absolute and unquestionable.³⁶ As Rowe and Marietta argue, the emerging nation's loose (and often, in rural areas, non-existent) authoritative structures placed excessive pressure on the family to supply the absence, and to take upon itself all of the disciplinary and pedagogical functions that in Europe were carried out by established systems.³⁷ The result was a startling incidence of domestic violence and intimate murder in the early Republic. At the same time, the inviolable and self-sufficient nature of the American family allowed for, even enforced, the cultural invisibility of that violence. Consequently, "Lawmakers and judges designed public policy and legal procedures to support male power by giving men tremendous discretion within households. For the most part, what happened in homes was private, and appointed judges were to arbitrate the most serious disputes that escaped their sacrosanct walls."³⁸

Clara's narrative frames *Wieland's* confession and ultimately moves away from focusing exclusively upon the tragic events that have befallen her family, as she devotes considerable space to the story of the Conway family, her emigration to Europe, and Pleyel's relationship with Teresa, which ends in that lady's death and Clara's marriage to her brother-in-law. The novel therefore refuses to grant narrative primacy to *Wieland* and the devastation that he has wrought, a point given added weight by the fact that Clara's initial decision to haunt the house that was the scene of that devastation is reversed in the final pages. Though this may be the culmination of the spectralization that is itself a function of her position as first-person narrator, to allow it to stand as the ending of the novel would be to endorse *Wieland's* assumption of near-divine authority, and to acknowledge that his actions and their consequences should and do define the fictional space conjured up by the novel. However, it is precisely this endorsement that characterizes the later texts that draw on the basic material of *Wieland*.

John Neal's "Idiosyncrasies," published just under half a century after *Wieland*, also features a father figure who claims to be divinely inspired — indeed, the unnamed man who narrates most of the story seems to have been a famous preacher whose words were heard by thousands of devoted followers prior to the central events of the tale. His conviction of the utter rightness of his own every thought and action leads, with sickening inevitability, to a terrible accident on a snow-covered mountain which results, some time later, in the death of his son and seriously endangers his darling daughter. The son dies "perhaps of fright, perhaps of something else," and he goes on to add, "but however that may be — I never could bring myself to forgive his mother."³⁹ Through a logic that is clearly comprehensible only to himself, he blames his wife, Jenny, whose many beauties and virtues he delineates at

length, for the accident. One day, as they are walking near a waterfall, he tells her that he believes that either of his children would have willingly hurled themselves into the snowy abyss that day had he demanded it of them, and that he could expect “such obedience” from “no other living creature,” though to find such a one would render him far “happier.” To prove him wrong, in an act of ultimate obedience, or possibly just so that she can escape from this perverse tyrant, she throws herself into the “whirlpool” crying “*Be happier then!*”⁴⁰

Having recounted his wife’s death, the narrator asks rhetorically, “what business had she to drown herself without my leave! what a fool to do so at the bidding of a husband! and such a husband!” before going on to detail his indignation at his daughter’s forthcoming marriage. Like *Wieland*, he views his family as possessions to be disposed of at his will, and expects nothing more from them than total subjection. While the contradictions inherent in his opinions ironically undercut his narrative, and while the visitor to whom he tells the story is given the last word, the text ultimately enshrines him as the voice of authority precisely because he is telling the story from inside an insane asylum, having been institutionalized following his wife’s death, for which he was tried for his life. The interlocutor leaves him in his cell, informing us that he “now spends most of his time making speeches to the jury, and telling over the story you have just read, to every stranger that falls his way.” The narrator therefore occupies for all textual eternity the position of figurative ghost that Clara eventually rejects, a narrator invisible to his own narrative gaze and perpetually engaged in a narrative act in which he is *the* voice of authority.⁴¹

The word “frailty” is used twice prominently in *Wieland*, and in both cases in relation to obedience to external authority. With startling similarity to its precursor texts, Paxton’s *Frailty* centers upon yet another father figure, who becomes convinced that he has been ordered by an angel to rid the world of demons in human shape. In an evident allusion to *Wieland*, the unnamed Dad (played by Paxton) believes that when he lays his hand on those he has been told are demons, he can see *through* their external bodily form to the demon within. In other words, he commands the ultimate Puritan power, the ability to see people’s souls and spiritual destiny, and it is this ability that legitimates what is, by any other standard, serial murder — again, since it is the soul, and not the body, that is important in his system of belief. Rather like the elder *Wieland*, who’s doctrinal legacy is inherited by Theodore (and, indeed, like Jack Torrance, who seems to possess a lesser version of Danny’s “shining”), he passes on this special sight, and the burden of carrying out “God’s work” to his two sons, Adam and Fenton — though the latter is far from willing. Several years later, Adam once again begins the killings, and it

is here that the film opens, as Fenton (played by Matthew McConaughey) walks into an FBI office in order to explain to an agent that his brother is the famous “Hand of God” killer.

The rest of the film vacillates between showing Fenton engaged in the narrative act and flashbacks narrated by him, the latter accounting for the majority of the film. Where all of this begins to become significant, however, is when we gradually realize that the narrator is in fact Adam, the killer and fanatic. At the same time, in what amounts to a literalization of Clara’s textual spectralization, it emerges that no-one in the office can quite remember what he looks like, and that he fails to show up on CCTV cameras, his face being obscured in every frame. He is, therefore, immune to external representation, because he claims the power of representation for himself. The film ends by intimating that Adam’s legacy will live on; he is now a sheriff in a small town, still going under his now dead brother’s name, and his wife is pregnant with what we can only assume is to be a son. (Adam had killed his brother because he became convinced that Fenton is also a demon — something their father had long suspected.) Again, his very literal position of authority may be heavily ironized, the viewer’s desire to cheer his cunning escape from the law being undercut by his status as villain. The fact remains, however, that the film, in seeking to frighten us with a pessimistic ending, permits this authority to continue into the imaged future, never wresting control over representation — both of his own past and over the bodies and souls of others — away from the quasi-ghostly, and therefore invulnerable, Adam. Even when they die, as Jack Torrance does, these men remain immune to the violence, both literal and epistemological, that they themselves mete out to others, and are granted what amounts to eternal life by the texts they inhabit. Consequently, the texts covertly endorse — or at least perpetuate — the systems of representation that legitimate violent fanaticism and familicide.

While *Wieland* skitters away from ending on a note that immortalizes Clara’s function as a living memorial to domestic violence and rationalism’s failure, the later texts do not. Instead, we are presented with images of ultimate male authority — authority over representation, over memory, and over the lives and deaths of those under their immediate care and protection. In these later texts, what comes to the fore is the patriarchal nature of the nuclear family, and the manner in which the sentimental emphasis on family ties causes and permits violence.⁴² Where Carwin’s influence and the possibility of supernatural interference mean we can never fully blame Theodore for what happens, the later manifestations locate the source of fear in a single, patriarchal individual and, in doing so, accord him a far greater degree of power than ever occurs in *Wieland*. They, therefore, retrospectively draw attention to *Wieland*’s own potential status as patriarchal psychopath but,

equally, to the text's refusal to establish him firmly as such.⁴³ However, by placing the violent male protagonists both in the role of storyteller and of eventual ghost, that very patriarchal power is buttressed, legitimated and perpetuated, even as it appears to be denigrated, critiqued and reviled. However, somewhat predictably, it is this narrative, rather than Brown's arguably more subtle evocation of Clara's resistance to that power, that has sunk deepest into the American culture psyche. And I would not presume to assert what that tells us about the state of that psyche. Perhaps Jack Torrance puts it best when he defines "cabin fever" as

"a slang term for the claustrophobic reaction that can occur when people are shut in together over long periods of time. The feeling of claustrophobia is externalized as dislike for the people you happen to be shut in with. In extreme cases it can result in hallucinations and violence — murder has been done over such minor things as a burned meal or an argument over whose turn it is to do the dishes."⁴⁴

Perhaps this trope's failure to die out in American popular culture indicates that better communications and a stronger network of legal structures have not exorcised the fear that normal family life has all too much in common with the experience of cabin fever. While Jack may be mocking his place of employment when he calls it the "bloody sacred Overlook," his bad language serves to draw attention to the frighteningly sacrosanct nature of the domestic setting and, even in a post-feminist world, to the godlike arrogance of the men who assume that the women who cook and clean for them are theirs to dispose of as they will.⁴⁵

Notes

1. For a discussion of the burden placed on familial authority in the new Republic, see Barnes, 26.

2. Downes argues at length that democracy blurs uncomfortably with and repeats the operations of monarchy.

3. See Schmidt, 38ff; Kafer, 21ff; and Michaud, 55, for discussions of various individual hearing divine (or possibly satanic) voices in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America.

4. King, 56.

5. Kafer, xvi, explicitly links *Wieland* with King's *The Shining*.

6. Brown, *Wieland*, 212–13. All future references to this work will be cited using parenthetical page numbers in the body of the essay.

7. See, for example, Bradshaw's comments (370) about "Wieland's lack of consistency, undeveloped plots and characters, and amazing coincidences"; Tompkins, xii, 42–43; and the contemporary reviews in the Charles Brockden Brown Archive and Scholarly Edition (brockdenbrown.ucf.edu).

8. See Michaud, 110, 113, for a discussion of the failure of cause and effect in early American Gothic texts.

9. See Tompkins, 51; and Barnes, 53, for a discussion of the indeterminate nature of the message or even the events of *Wieland*.

10. For an outline of earlier scholarship linking *Wieland* to both religious (specifically Calvinist) doctrine, see Hedges, 112.

11. Judson, 26. "Puritan" here is a somewhat tentative designation, considering its overlap with Calvinism in many central points and within a number of the critical frameworks offered as ways of explaining what happens in Brown's puzzling text. The terms will be used here more or less interchangeably, but with an awareness that a total conflation is neither desirable nor possible.

12. Hagenbüchle, 123. For examples of those who believe that they have been spoken to by Satan rather than God, who are given visions of hell-fire and damnation, or who were believed to be possessed by a or the devil, see Schmidt, 58f.

13. Judson, 26.

14. C.M. Davidson, 169–170.

15. Calvin, 297.

16. Chauncy, 4–5. See also Robinson, 12f; and Colacurcio, 36f.

17. Colacurcio, 3.

18. See Stannard, 76.

19. Bolton, 82–83.

20. Collins, 4–5. See Colacurcio, 70ff., for a discussion of the Puritan doctrine of relinquishing the material world in order better to know and understand the divine.

21. Stannard, 100.

22. Bressler, 13, details the theological battles and the rise of sentimentalism which resulted in the view of a vengeful, arbitrary God gradually fading from the American consciousness in the eighteenth century in particular.

23. Thayer, 91–92.

24. Kibbey, 2.

25. See C.M. Davidson (171) for a reading of *Wieland* as promoting a balance between and decrying all excesses of spirituality and rationality. Tompkins, 54, by contrast, sees it as a novel in which any attempt to decide on the primacy of one or the other is rendered impossible by the removal of authority effected by the Revolution.

26. Scheiber, 179.

27. Stevens, 27. See also Reis, 163, 165; and Schmidt, 39.

28. Lewis, 173.

29. See Wolfe, 431ff and Downes, 39, 129ff for discussions of inter-relationship between power, storytelling, the voice, the body and subject formation in Brown's writing and contemporary literature.

30. For an example of the critical tendency to conflate the supernatural and the religious, see Hedges, 119f.

31. Malin, 5.

32. See Bressler, 18, 56; Robinson, 11; and Tompkins, 55, for discussions of the Universalist view that the Calvinist God was "tyrannical" and "depraved." C.M. Davidson, 171, describes the Antinomian God as an "arbitrary sadist."

33. Scheiber, 183.

34. See C.M. Davidson, 167.

35. For discussions of the Universalist view that all doctrinal systems were tyrannical, see Bressler, 35–36, and Robinson, 18.

36. See Barnes, 10.

37. Rowe and Marietta, 37.

38. Cole, 162.

39. Neal, 45.

40. Ibid., 45–46.

41. Ibid., 46–47.

42. For a discussion of the status of Brown's novel as a violent re-appropriation of the tropes of sympathy, familial bonds and seduction/ eroticized death, see Stern, 117f.

43. See C.N. Davidson, 316, for a discussion of the overlaps between hero and villain in early Republican novels. Similarly, Barnes, 9–10, discusses the early Republic's conflation of patriarchy and tyranny.

44. King, 9.

45. Ibid., 204.

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