

Carwin's Dual Role:

Blurring the Lines between Orality and Textuality as They Relate to Authorship

According to Marshall McLuhan, over time society has experienced shifts between acting primarily as an oral culture and primarily as a literate/textual culture (48, 125). Each of these types of discourse includes unique roles, characteristics and effects for the author. For example, the author of an oral piece can be immediately refuted because the message is present directly to the audience. However, in a written work, the author cannot be refuted without delay. Furthermore, even if one were to refute that author, the text will continue to speak the same words in spite of this. Distinctions such as this exist between orality and textuality largely because of the difference in the mode of transmitting the message from author to audience. Yet in *Wieland, or The Transformation* Charles Brockden Brown presents the reader with a character that blurs the lines between orality and textuality through his manipulation of authorship. This person is Carwin the Biloquist, or ventriloquist. Throughout the novel, his ability to throw his voice as well as mimic the voices of those around him allow Carwin to use oral discourse yet attain many of the attributes, both positive and negative, usually reserved for texts.

On July 14, 1798, "An Act for the Punishment of Certain Crimes Against the United States" was approved. This act outlined severe restrictions on free speech, including:

That if any person shall write, print, utter, or publish...any false, scandalous, and malicious writing or writings against the government of the United State, or either house of Congress of the United States, or the President of the United

States...shall be punished by a fine not exceeding two thousand dollars, and by imprisonment not exceeding two years. (Lillian Goldman Law Library)

The tendency to become anonymous or pseudonymous in controversial writing emerged as a significant effect of this act (McAuley). The option of anonymity is something unachievable in almost all oral discourse, even if the speaker is concealed due to the possibility of voice recognition by the audience. But in *Wieland*, Carwin obtains anonymity through the practice of throwing and disguising his voice. He communicates orally but remains unseen from his audience. Even further, he plays with the idea of authorship by mimicking the voice of another prominent character in the novel, be it Clara (the main object of his obsessions), her sister-in-law Catherine, or an unknown assailant hiding in a closet. In effect, he transfers authorship from himself to another person, therefore avoiding (at least for a time) any punishment he may be subjected to. Because of his gift of eloquence, Carwin brings anonymity and pseudonymity from textuality into the realm of orality.

Roland Barthes claims that the “death of the author” accompanies writing, that is, the prominent place of the author in controlling his work and its message is lost. He supports this view with the example of Marcel Proust. Barthes writes that Proust:

...was visibly concerned with the task of inexorably blurring...the relation between the writer and his characters....By a radical reversal, instead of putting his life into his novel, as is so often maintained, he made of his very life a work for which his own book was the model. (278)

Essentially, textuality has the potential for directing the life of an author, for having a powerful impact on the path that author takes, and this occurs when the lines between the author and

his characters are diminished. In *Wieland*, the characters of Carwin's work are the people around him whom he imitates. In doing this, he seriously reduces (if not eliminates) the barriers between himself and his characters. His place as the author of an oral discourse would usually prevent the textual phenomenon of the death of the author. But because he manipulates his authorship role, he too is vulnerable to being directed by his own work. This in fact does occur in the novel. By constantly sowing the seeds of distrust between the other characters, he sets himself up to be distrusted by all. Even further, he both creates and plays characters in his work that are murderous. It is not surprising then, that by the end of the novel he is charged with devising (and therefore causing) the deaths of Catherine and her children. Perhaps most importantly, he is never vindicated of these crimes. The reader hears his claims otherwise, but can never be sure if his character is truthful. Once again, a characteristic of textuality is manifested in orality through the ventriloquist authorship of Carwin.

One quality of authorship that is often questioned and debated is that of the true intent of the author, the actual message s/he is trying to convey. D.F. McKenzie describes a phenomenon known as the "intentional fallacy" in which a reader presumes to know or be able to know the intent of the author (40). This is related to fact that readers engage with the text and therefore actively construct meaning. Each reader brings personal experience, socialization, and therefore bias, into contact with both textual and oral works. But in orality, this fallacy is much more avoidable because the author is immediately present. The audience can engage directly with the author, and not simply with the representation of the author's message given by the words of the text. Nonetheless, Carwin again defies the traditional notions of orality through invoking his powers of biloquism. Like texts, his message is

transmitted to his audience separate from himself – it is disembodied through the throwing of his voice. This leads to the committing of an intentional fallacy by Clara. Clara assumes that she understands why Carwin has intervened as he did – to further his romantic interest in her and to compel her brother Wieland to kill his own family. Yet one can never truly know Carwin's intent. He claims that it began as a means to avoid detection in places he would not have been allowed (such as the family's temple). He then expressed a desire to manipulate Pleyel (Clara's object of affection) but no intent to cause real damage. In reality, the reader is only given clues to the true nature of Carwin because Brockden Brown casts Clara as the story's narrator. There is no omnipresent voice dictating the story to the reader. The intentional fallacy then occurs because Carwin, as an author, is separated by time and space from both his audience and his work, despite the fact he is communicating orally. Therefore, he is left to wreak the kind of havoc derived from a misunderstanding usually found in texts.

Carwin the Biloquist acts as an author of oral works, yet achieves aspects of textuality by playing a dual-role in authorship. His propensity to throw his voice and mimic the voices of other characters in the novel causes this blurring of the divisions between orality and textuality. Carwin obtains both anonymity and pseudonymity, experiences the death of the author, and causes Clara to commit the intentional fallacy. Perhaps in this way, Brockden Brown's *Wieland* is a predecessor to the forces of media addressed by McLuhan and those who came after him. The television and the internet transmit both sound and text. They simultaneously bring authors immediately before audiences and separate them by great distances and lapses in time. They gain characteristics of textuality and orality through employing both forms of discourse in a single medium – a feat Carwin achieved through the gifted exercise of orality alone.

Works Cited

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