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Charles Brockden Brown's Biloquial Nation: National Culture and White Settler Colonialism in *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*

David Kazanjian

Toward the beginning of Charles Brockden Brown's uncompleted novel, *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, the protagonist relates "events . . . which ascertained my future destiny." Rushing home one day with the news that his father's cows have escaped their field, he takes a shortcut through an unfamiliar rocky pass; in its dark enclosure, he confronts "terrors" and "violent apprehensions" of "goblins and spectres." His response is to "hallow . . . as loud as organs of unusual compass and vigour would enable me . . . the words which chanced to occur to me, . . . repeat[ing] in the shrill tones of a Mohock savage . . . 'Cow! cow! come home! home!'"¹ As the echoes of these tones in the rocky passage suggest to Carwin the possibility of becoming a "biloquist," Brown's word for a ventriloquist, *Memoirs of Carwin* proceeds to tell the story of the escapades into which biloquism leads him. Serialized in the *Literary Magazine* from 1803 to 1805, *Memoirs of Carwin* is the prequel for Brown's first published novel, *Wieland; or, the Transformation: An American Tale* (1798), providing the story of Carwin's life before he appears as a crucial character in *Wieland*. Since the scene in the rocky passage contains the only appearance of "a Mohock savage" in either text, the figure appears to be incidental; however, "a Mohock savage" is in fact foundational to the plots of both texts, since its "shrill tones" and their echoes produce Carwin's biloquism, which in turn motivates his life-long misadventures. It is a tenuous foundation, however, since the "Mohock savage" appears not as a character but as the echo of ventriloquized "tones" that only "chanced to occur" and could never have been understood [End Page 459] by their bovine addressee. As I will suggest, "a Mohock savage" can be read as a tenuous foundation for more than these two plots.

Throughout his life, Brown sought to represent himself as a founder of the proper national literary aesthetic. Literary critics and historians have obliged him for two hundred years, often representing *Wieland* as the first American novel. But this hold on foundational status that Brown and *Wieland* have long maintained is as tenuous as it is persistent. The familiar critical narrative that positions Brown as the founder of American literature overlooks not only William Brown Hill, whose novel *The Power of Sympathy* was published in 1789, nine years before *Wieland*, but also a lengthy list of literary predecessors who raise the very question of what "American" and "literature" might mean: Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Samson Occom, to name just a few of the most well known. *Wieland's* foundational status as the first American novel can be challenged not only by *The Power of Sympathy* and a host of proto- and quasi-novels but also by the ambiguous status of *Memoirs of Carwin*, which tells of events prior to those of *Wieland* and, although it was published after *Wieland*, seems to have been written before or during *Wieland's* composition.² Indeed, Brown seems to have intended *Memoirs of Carwin* to be part of *Wieland* itself, until Carwin's story "became too unwieldy for inclusion" and so was abandoned and reconceived ("I," xlii–xliii).³

In "a Mohock savage," then, we have not only a tenuous foundation for the plot of *Memoirs of Carwin* but also a figure for the tenuousness of an American literary aesthetic itself. A reading of this figure, in turn, opens up a constitutive relationship between aesthetics and politics—in particular, the politics of white settler colonialism at the turn of the nineteenth century. Thus, I will read Brown's "Mohock savage" in *Memoirs of Carwin* as a necessary, and necessarily tenuous, condition of possibility for American literary aesthetics. First, I will show how early scholarship on Charles Brockden Brown, starting with his own representations of himself, labors...

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