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The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner: Approaches

Penny Fielding

'And to what I am now reduced, let the reflecting reader judge',¹ declares Robert Wringhim a few days before his suicide. These words have proved prophetic, as different approaches to this most multifarious of novels have found their own reflections within it. Like Gil-Martin, master of 'the cameleon art of changing [his] appearance' (p.86), *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* seems to adapt itself to whomever is looking at it at the time, although the reflections are often unstable. One does not have to read far in the novel to realise that the conventional terms of literary analysis--'author', 'reader', 'narrator', 'plot', 'history'--are not going to be helpful in any straightforward sense. Attempts to reconcile the conflicting evidence of the novel's narrators under the controlling intelligence of 'James Hogg' have proved difficult in the case of a figure who jumps in and out of his authorial and fictional status with abandon. Readers are given conflicting information, versions of the plot do not add up, historical references tantalise rather than confirm. As Susan Manning neatly puts it: 'Every exegetical attempt leads straight into a cul-de-sac'.² All this, needless to say, has proved both fecund and frustrating for readers: the novel does much to show us how literature works, but no context in which we read it can exhaust its meanings.

After the French novelist André Gide's rediscovery of *Confessions* in the 1940s, literary criticism alighted early on the novel's Gothic qualities and the ways in which these could be understood through psychoanalysis, particularly through the figure of the double.³ As infants, we have to learn how to see ourselves, a process fraught with

potential anxiety. Freud argues that doubles are part of the difficult growth of the psyche in childhood that returns to haunt us in later life in a process that he calls ‘the Uncanny’ (in German *das Unheimliche*). As infants we see ourselves in imaginary doubles, in a form of narcissistic identification that seems to ensure our continued existence. But the double also can become a projection of our conscience (Freud’s ‘superego’) which we suppose to be censoring or criticising us. ‘[T]hat man is capable of self-observation’, writes Freud, ‘renders it possible to invest the old idea of a “double” with a new meaning and to ascribe a number of things to it – above all, those things which seem to self-criticism to belong to the old surmounted narcissism of earliest times.’⁴ We can detect both these forms of the double in Robert’s relation to Gil-Martin. At first Robert experiences thrilling, pleasurable sensations on meeting his double. Yet soon he finds himself directed and dominated by him in ways that he cannot understand: ‘he either forced me to acquiesce in his measures, and assent to the truth of his positions, or he put me so completely down, that I had not a word left to advance against them’ (p.88).

Some readers have identified in Robert the conditions of a modern pathological diagnosis, such as paranoia or schizophrenia. Others point out that the early nineteenth century was not short of interest in abnormal psychology or in ‘double consciousness’. Psychoanalytic criticism, however, can do more than analyse the imagined psyche of fictional characters, and some of the most interesting readings of *Confessions* show how the novel’s complex psychologies are part of wider social and historical patterns. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick looks at the ‘homosocial’, a term that cannot be separated from misogyny and homophobia. Interpersonal subjectivity tends to fall into gendered triangles in which men negotiate power by using women as tokens of exchange (most obviously in the marriage ceremony where one man ‘gives away’ a woman to another). Sedgwick suggests that this is an unstable arrangement in which the mutual respect and

confirmation of male power-structures depends upon the repression and demonization of same-sex desire. Sedgwick uses this idea to show how the psychic entanglements of *Confessions* express fluid social identities: ‘the proliferation of faces, identities, paranoias, families, overlapping but subtly different plots [...] requires a move away from the focus on intrapsychic psychology, and back towards a view of the social fabric’.⁵ She traces this shifting set of relationships to show how such forms of sexualised and gendered power work not as essential identities but as subject positions. George conducts a strapping homosocial lifestyle with his male friends, sharing, it is implied, women in their visits to the bagnio. Robert finds it much harder to triangulate his desire in this patriarchal society, feminises himself (in social terms) as an abject figure to gain the attention of the dominant male group, and is then seduced by the dominant figure of Gil-Martin, whom he both loves (as another male) and fears (as a more powerful male), resulting in ‘an uncrystallizable, infusory flux of identification and desire.’⁶

As well as exemplifying psychic processes, the novel’s Gothic qualities express the structural conditions of Scottish cultural history. Ian Duncan has argued that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Scotland, even as it generated the terms for a modern, enlightened society regulated by science, law, and urban living, was at the same time imagining and defining itself against another version of Scottish national experience—one that it viewed as ‘organic’, irrational, and rural. This structuring of national identity is analogous to Freud’s Uncanny, where a developmental stage that should have been superseded irrupts into the rational order of adult life. ‘Primitive’, wild, superstitious, this Scotland refused to remain isolated in its designated past. Attuned to the burgeoning contemporary interest in folk tradition, romance revival, and the ethnography of ‘the peasantry’, Hogg’s work shows with exceptional vividness how a Gothic premodernity bubbles up through the Edinburgh New Town pavements that

invented it in the first place. Many readers have noted that the ‘Editor’ of *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* is as prejudiced as the ‘fanatics’ he condemns. In the closing section of the book he describes the exhumation of Robert’s memoir along with his corpse, in a parody of the antiquarian project of ‘[resurrecting] a buried and dismembered national culture, associated with a textual corpus [...], [so as] to replenish the ruined imaginative life of modernity.’⁷ In another use of psychoanalytic theory to interpret cultural phenomena, Scott Mackenzie develops a line of argument first identified by Duncan, according to which Hogg’s text represents a type of incomplete, obstructed or insufficient mourning, called ‘incorporation’ by the psychoanalytic theorists Maria Torok and Nicholas Abraham. In the normal or healthy work of mourning, the psyche works through loss by expressing the lost object symbolically through language and thus ‘introjecting’ it, or locating it as an object outside oneself that can be addressed and understood. But in the case of incorporation, loss is concealed within the psyche as if in a crypt, kept artificially alive but not accessible through language or representation.⁸ Mackenzie reads in Robert Wringhim’s unceremonious death and burial the allegory of a Scottish culture that is unable to come to terms with its own past: ‘Secret nationality for Hogg equates to buried histories of dispossession and suppressed tales of expulsion from home. [...] Scottish space will not function here as a coherent field of aesthetic experience.’⁹ So far from the Editor’s initial confidence that the events of the story can be recovered from history and tradition and made available to the reading public, the novel refuses to mourn Robert by refusing to provide a unified story that makes sense of his life and death. He remains unassimilated by the national psyche, outcast from society and its norms, a monster or freak that cannot be accounted for.

This does not mean, of course, that the novel is impervious to historicist approaches. Douglas Mack draws attention to the ‘subaltern’, socially marginalised

voices within the text—the prostitute Bell Calvert, the servant Samuel Scrape—who challenge the dominant voices both of the seemingly enlightened Editor and of Calvinist orthodoxy.¹⁰ Murray Pittock goes further in seeking to retrieve the traces of an authentic, pre-Union Scotland in the Scots-speaking characters. He reads *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* as a threnody for ‘[t]he death of Scotland at the hands of extremist Presbyterianism.’¹¹ The novel also strikes some very contemporaneous resonances. It was written immediately after a period of radical activity and a government crack-down which gave rise to a widespread fear of spies, causing the newly-founded *Scotsman* newspaper to denounce the culture of espionage: ‘does not the mere acknowledgment of employing spies generate a feeling of distrust and insecurity? This may be limited at first; but in the end it will spread through the whole of society.’¹² *Confessions* is shot through with references to spying: Gil-Martin acts as an *agent provocateur*, and Robert believes that he is being secretly watched and followed: ‘It seems, that about this time, I was haunted by some spies connected with my late father and brother’ (p.141). In an attempt to find out what people know about his crimes, Robert assumes the role of spy as he ‘[mixes] with the mob to hear what they were saying’ (p.144).

But Hogg warns us to tread carefully in the historical field. John MacQueen has pointed out that the events in the novel seem to be dated very precisely, as if tempting us to anchor it in ‘actual’ historical occurrences. On closer inspection, however, the dates turn out to be inconsistent both against each other and with recorded history.¹³ Hogg poses the question: ‘what is history?’ Cairns Craig argues that the Editor and Robert are not merely different narrators but competing versions of historiographic authority, which the novel inextricably links. The Editor represents the progressive history of the Scottish Enlightenment in which society gradually improves from irrational fanaticism to rational objectivity. Yet this narrative is overtaken by the cyclical time of Robert’s memoir,

bound by ‘the eternal conflict of God and Devil’.¹⁴ More recently, Ina Ferris looks at the novel’s establishment and dissolution of an opposition between conjectural history, which adduces a coherent narrative of the past from ideas of what is likely to have happened, and antiquarianism, which stitches together a past that *did* happen from the material evidence that survives in the present (in this case Robert’s book and his corpse):

On the one hand [...] the novel undermines the mediating concepts through which a modern mind makes sense of and surmounts the past to produce the kind of synthesis exhibited most famously in the period by Scott’s *Waverley* novels. On the other [...] it places in question the antiquary’s conviction that [...] the past can be authentically approached through the concreteness and intimacy of its fragmentary ‘remains’.¹⁵

Ferris situates the novel in the early nineteenth-century debate about what should constitute historical evidence.

Confessions’ remarkable attention to its own status as a text has attracted a variety of readings attentive to the ways in which a book is both literally and figuratively bound up with its own processes of writing and publication. Peter Garside’s edition and numerous articles, by Garside, Gillian Hughes, Douglas Mack and others in the journal *Studies in Hogg and his World*, have documented the novel’s coming into being in the bibliographical milieu of the 1820s.¹⁶ Its elaborate fictionalization of its own production has made *Confessions* a rich source for historical criticism that explores the social implications of literary work. The sociological thinker Pierre Bourdieu gives us a way of seeing the literary (or any other) text as a symbolic object in a network of cultural practices, exchanges, and competitions:

The public meaning of a work [...] originates in the process of circulation and consumption dominated by the objective relations between the institutions and

agents implicated in the process. The social relations which produce this public meaning are determined by the relative position these agents occupy in the structure of the field of restricted production. These relations, e.g. between author and publisher, publisher and critic, author and critic, are revealed as the ensemble of relations attendant on the ‘publication’ of the work, that is, its becoming a public object.¹⁷

Hogg is an especially striking example of an author who reflects upon his position at the intersection of these relations. His own self-performance as the faux-naïf ‘Ettrick Shepherd’, his relations with the judgmental *Blackwood’s* set, his struggle to adapt to the changes in the literary field forged by Scott’s Waverley Novels, and his continual experimentation with different genres—all of these inform *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and have stimulated some of the most important work on Hogg. Rather than simply being produced by these forces, as any work must be, *Confessions* conspicuously announces its own engagement with them in the competitive world of Edinburgh publishing. David Groves makes the point that a ‘justified’ sinner is one who has gone through the typographical process of ‘justification’,¹⁸ set within the confines of a printed text, while Mark Schoenfield has shown how ‘Hogg dissolves the margins of his fiction by marshaling procedures usually *about* a novel, including its typesetting, advertisement, and review, as part *of* the novel.’¹⁹ Many critics have been drawn to the way the novel leaps in and out of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, with its reproduction of Hogg’s letter about the suicide’s grave first published in the August 1823 number of *Blackwood’s Magazine*, or the various social significances of the different literary forms which compete for the status of ‘last word’: letter, editorial commentary, manuscript diary, privately-printed memoirs and confessions, published novel.

All the criticism of *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* arrives at the apparently unavoidable conclusion that meaning itself is elusive in Hogg's text. Points of view compete for the reader's faith without offering confirmation, evidence remains incomplete, and language itself slips between punning or contradictory meanings. The novel abounds with examples, but the most audacious is perhaps Robert's complaint of 'the singular delusion that I was two persons' (p.106). We have already seen how the work generates multiple meanings for itself as a literary text. In addition to Robert's and the Editor's narratives, there is another book in *Confessions*: Gil-Martin's own mysterious Bible, upon seeing which Robert experiences something like 'a stroke of electricity' (p.85). It is as though he views the material fact of the book itself, underlying and undermining the literary text and all the cultural meanings that might be found in it, as Ian Duncan has suggested:

Illegibility is the point, the effect of writing viewed from outside itself. The electric shock Wringhim feels is the charge of an abstract textuality, a printed sign system unattached to human hand or voice. The Devil's book is a text for one reader only—it does not circulate in an economy, it does not constitute a culture.²⁰

The theorist who has most closely examined this way of thinking about language is Jacques Derrida, who shares one of Hogg's most abiding interests: the problem of singularity. 'Singular' appears in the novel nineteen times, in which its meaning of 'unaccountable' (another of Hogg's favourite terms) or 'strange' comes up against its meaning of 'unique'. Derrida shows us that there is nothing more unaccountable than the singular. He addresses the same question that confronts Robert Wringhim in *Confessions*: how do I truthfully tell the unique account of what happened to me in a specific time and place? Derrida writes: 'In essence a testimony is always autobiographical: it tells, in the first person, the sharable and unsharable secret of what

happened to me, to me alone, the absolute secret of what I was in a position to live, see, hear, touch, sense, and feel.’²¹ Testimony is sharable, since it must be communicated and repeated; an experience that only made sense in the moment in which it happened would, perversely, be nonsense. But the great pressure that comes to bear on someone making a testimony is that its ‘truth’ must be guaranteed by the fact that it *did* only happen to the testifier, and in this sense it is ‘unsharable’. Once the experience is recounted in other contexts, as it must be to be intelligible, it is torn away from its originary moment.

Hogg’s novel dramatises this problem. Despite the increasing urgency and desperation with which Robert seeks to relate *exactly* what happened to him, right down to his curse on any future reader ‘who trieth to alter or amend’ (p.165), his text will always be interpreted differently, in different cultural contexts, from the Editor, through the novel’s first reviewers, to the modern theoretical approaches I am discussing here.

Robert’s testimony is also a ‘Confession’, both a religious and a legal concept. The form of Calvinism represented in the novel is sometimes called ‘antinomianism’, meaning ‘opposition to the law’, or the belief that religious salvation comes from divine grace rather than from adherence to the moral law.²² Looking outwards from doctrinal to general principles of law, the novel traces a violent collision between two forms of compulsion: a modern, legal, civic order versus a religious conviction that takes no heed of historical variation. (These two forms do not, of course, fit neatly into the novel’s two narratives.) *Confessions* addresses the problem of right action. Should we act from inner conviction? From precedent? Or according to an agreed code? These ideas had been much discussed as political questions in Britain following the French Revolution, and had more recently surfaced again in Scotland in the trials for sedition from 1815-20. Radical thinkers like Tom Paine insisted that a government cannot be trusted to rely on precedent, but should follow a set of modern constitutional rights, to be negotiated and agreed upon

by the people as a body. This seemed a very dangerous idea to those who believed that the hierarchal laws of society had settled organically over time, in a process that seemed to lie almost outside history itself: in Edmund Burke's use of a well-worn phrase, in 'time out of mind'. Resisting direct political analogies, Hogg's novel complicates the general question of how we are subject to law, and whether a society should work out a set of agreed laws applicable to everyone or whether, as Robert comes to believe, right is the issue of an incalculable, barely describable state of affairs that pre-exists any decision in the present. Ian Duncan argues that the division of narratives in the novel maps the conceptual antagonism between civil society and fanaticism upon which the liberal political imagination is founded. The Scottish Enlightenment philosophers did not always acknowledge the ideological idealism that underlay their own discussions of civil society and the ways in which it might be structured and managed. *Confessions* imagines the return of this repressed absolutism in the mode of fanaticism, or 'political reason moved by ideology in its pure, absolute, metaphysical form—the form, in other words, of religion: a revenant by which modern thought keeps finding itself surprised.'²³

These were also questions that informed moral philosophy in the late Enlightenment. Kant's famous 'categorical imperative' argues that moral action should be unconditional and should apply to all circumstances. In deciding on right action we should not make a calculation of likely outcomes but should follow our innate reason. Utilitarian philosophers, most famously Jeremy Bentham, argue to the contrary that it is precisely this sort of calculation that should construct a set of moral laws all subjects can follow. Meredith Evans has shown how *Confessions* makes these distinctions very difficult to understand in terms of coherent moral action. Robert rejects external or given laws, and believes that his actions are right, or 'justified' in themselves. For him virtue is not describable as a set of principles but is simply given. Yet from what, Hogg asks, does

this 'justification' proceed? From God? From Gil-Martin (whose own agency is both internal and external)? From conscience? Robert asks himself a question to which the novel does not provide an answer: 'I tried to ascertain, to my own satisfaction, whether or not I really had been commissioned of God to perpetrate these crimes in his behalf, for in the eyes, and by the laws of men, they were great and crying transgressions' (p.108). As Evans notes, the novel dramatises in Robert the collapse of 'the modern distinction between law and morality'.²⁴

Confessions of a Justified Sinner was difficult for readers to gauge on its first publication. But it has proved a remarkably resonant text for later generations, one on which critics have plotted ideas about internal psychic life, social organisation, political ideology and language. All of these testify not only to the novel's complexity but also to its importance for modernity, with its recognition of repression, its atomised subjects, and its fractured historicism. Among the editor's last observations is that the novel's import is both 'scarcely tangible' and of 'great weight' (p.175): a paradox that suggests that interpretation of the novel, at once frustrating, fascinating, and inexhaustible, is not over yet.

¹ James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of A Justified Sinner*, ed. Peter Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p.164. Further references appear in the text.

² Susan Manning, *The Puritan-Provincial Vision: Scottish and American Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.83.

³ For helpful accounts of doubling in the novel see Barbara Bloedé, 'James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*: The Genesis of the Double', *Etudes Anglaises* 26:2 (1973), 174-186; Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of*

Subversion (London: Methuen, 1981) pp.49-51 and 106-07; Karl Miller, *Doubles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.1-20.

⁴ Penguin Freud Library, Vol 14: *Art and Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p.357.

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p.106.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.213.

⁸ Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, trans. Nicholas Rand (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).

⁹ Scott MacKenzie, 'Confessions of a Gentrified Sinner: Secrets in Scott and Hogg', *Studies in Romanticism* 41:1 (2002), 3-32 (p.25).

¹⁰ Douglas S. Mack, *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp.159-66.

¹¹ Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008), p.217.

¹² *The Scotsman* 24 (July 5, 1817).

¹³ John MacQueen, *The Enlightenment and Scottish Literature*, vol. 2, *The Rise of the Historical Novel* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1989), pp.245-51.

¹⁴ Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p.76

¹⁵ Ina Ferris, 'Scholarly Revivals: Gothic Fiction, Secret History, and Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*', in *Recognizing the Romantic Novel: New*

Histories of British Fiction, 1780-1830, ed. Jillian Heydt-Stevenson and Charlotte Sussman (Liverpool, 2008), 267-84 (pp.280-1).

¹⁶ For example see Peter Garside, 'Printing *Confessions*', *Studies in Hogg and his World* 9 (1988), 16–31.

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1993), pp.118-19.

¹⁸ David Groves, *James Hogg: The Growth of a Writer* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), p.127.

¹⁹ Mark L. Schoenfield, 'Butchering James Hogg: Romantic Identity in the Magazine Market', in Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson, (eds.) *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist, and Materialist Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp.207-24 (p.211).

²⁰ Duncan, *Scott's Shadow*, p.285.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.43.

²² For Calvinism in the novel see Manning, *Puritan-Provincial*, pp. 80-4, and Crawford Gribben, 'James Hogg, Scottish Calvinism and literary theory,' *Scottish Studies Review* 5:2 (2004), 9-26.

²³ Ian Duncan, 'Fanaticism and Civil Society: Hogg's Justified Sinner', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42: 2 (2009), 343-48 (p. 344).

²⁴ Meredith Evans. 'Persons Fall Apart: James Hogg's Transcendent Sinner', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 36: 2 (2003), 198-218 (p.199).