

1993

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Recommended Citation

Glance, Jonathan C. (1993) "Ambiguity and the Dreams in James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol28/iss1/14>

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Jonathan C. Glance

Ambiguity and the Dreams in James Hogg's
*The Private Memoirs and Confessions of
a Justified Sinner*

Much recent critical attention to James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) has recognized as central to the novel its tone of radical ambiguity.¹ Critics tend to locate this ambiguity in two primary locations: the questionable reliability of the two inconsistent narratives, and the indeterminate existence of the mysterious character Gil-Martin. Yet another ambiguous element of the novel deserves attention—the various dreams and dream-like episodes which occur in the *Confessions* and which reinforce the fundamentally ambivalent dichotomy between rational and supernatural interpretations of the narratives. Hogg's use of literary dreams is particularly appropriate in light of the historical context of assumptions about dreams and the Gothic context of dream conventions in which he operates.

The ambivalence of the novel is appropriate to the nature of the country. Scotland in the early nineteenth century possessed in Edinburgh a cosmopolitan center for sophisticated literature and a home for rational, common-sense philosophy. Yet is also possessed a widespread popular belief, even at this time, in witchcraft and other supernatural phenomena. James Hogg exploits this split in the national character, and returns habitually to it

¹See, for example, David Groves, "Parallel Narratives in Hogg's *Justified Sinner*," *SLJ*, 9 (1983), 37-44; Douglas Gifford, *James Hogg* (Edinburgh, 1976); L. L. Lee, "The Devil's Figure: James Hogg's *Justified Sinner*," *SSL*, 3 (1966), 230-39; and David Oakleaf, "'Not the Truth': The Doubleness of Hogg's *Confessions* and Eighteenth-Century Tradition," *SSL*, 18 (1983), 59-74.

in his writings. The split between skeptical and superstitious Scotland runs through the *Confessions* in the incompatible accounts of the narrators, in the possible interpretations of Gil-Martin, and in the representations of literary dreams, which also exploit the gulf between the two poles.

The novel presents the story of Robert Wringhim, an Antinomian who is assured that because his salvation is predestined, none of his deeds in this world can harm his soul. The text consists of two roughly parallel but inconsistent narratives. The first is that of an ostensibly objective Editor, who relates the lives and circumstances of two half brothers, George Colwan and Robert Wringhim; he describes the rivalry between the two, and the strange death of George and the disappearance of Robert. The second narrative is the subjective Memoirs of Robert, the "justified sinner" himself. This half centers on his bizarre relationship with the enigmatic Gil-Martin, who is perhaps the Devil, or perhaps a figment of Robert's imagination. This narrative ends just before Robert's death, and the novel ends with closing remarks by the Editor, about the strange death of the sinner and the stranger preservation of his body and memoirs.

The objective, rational narrative of the Editor and the extraordinary, supernatural narrative of the Sinner coexist in a state of tension.² The reader feels the pull of each side, but there is no final reconciliation.³ We find in the two narrative voices a conflict between a superstitious faith in supernatural phenomena, on the one hand, and a faith in "enlightened" reason on the other.⁴ Each narrator is, as David Groves observes, "Equally circumscribed by opposite preconceptions" (p. 119). Their differences extend beyond their

²For arguments that the narrative technique establishes emphatically the air of unreconcilable ambiguity in the novel, see Elizabeth W. Harries, "Duplication and Duplicity: James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*," *Wordsworth Circle*, 10 (1979), 187-96; and Douglas S. Mack, "The Devil's Pilgrim: A Note on Wringhim's Private Memoir in Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*," *SLJ*, 2 (1975), 36-40.

³Douglas Gifford characterizes the two narratives in this way: "in part one the rational mind of reader and writer struggles to impose a logical explanation for the events therein; while in part two the reader tends, temporarily at least, to allow himself to be carried by the subjective account of supernatural events. Part three," he adds, "is a weighing-up of the two claims . . . which significantly comes to no final reconciliation of both or a decision for either," *James Hogg* (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 145.

⁴Andrew Hook notes that the Editor speaks in the tradition of "enlightened, secular, literary Edinburgh," (p. 26), and "with the voice of enlightened reason and moderation" (p. 30), although his persona of balanced objectivity only partially masks his biases against the Covenanters, Lady Dalcastle and Mr. Wringhim. "Hogg, Melville and the Scottish Enlightenment," *SLJ*, 4 (1977), 25-39.

biases, however, to the philosophical traditions behind their modes of narrative.⁵ Hogg's use of these two untrustworthy narrators, with their biased and inconsistent stories, throws upon the reader the task of interpreting the *Confessions*. The truth of the tale, if it is recoverable, lies buried somewhere in the equivocal Accounts. Compounding the problem further is the mysterious presence of Gil-Martin, who tempts and goads Robert into greater and greater crimes.⁶ The confusion (or perhaps the art) of the text lies in this radical ambiguity which undermines any certainty in our reading. It is not solely recent critics who have detected this essential quality of uncertainty. In a review of Hogg's novel in the *Westminster Review* of October 1824, the anonymous reviewer faults the novel for failing to be consistent on the matter of Gil-Martin. He states that in a unified novel "phantoms of that superstition must either have a real, external being; or they must exist solely in the diseased imagination of the supposed writer" (p. 561). The reviewer finds evidence for both possibilities in the *Confessions*, and expresses his annoyance at these "inconsistencies."

Those critics who analyze the ambiguity in this novel usually center their comments on either the narrators or on Gil-Martin. However, we can pursue the same questions of the problems of interpretation by examining the various literary dreams and dream-like episodes which appear. These episodes continue the basic theme of equivocation, and they illustrate how literary dreams exist on the border between a rational, realistic milieu and a supernatural, fantastic one.

This ambiguity occurs because literary dreams are modeled on both accepted theories about actual dreams and conventional representations of liter-

⁵Oakleaf argues that the account of each of the two narrators represents "the logical extreme development" of two conflicting, contemporary views: "man as an empirically observable social agent and man as self, or experiencing consciousness" (p. 59). By having each narrator represent and embody one of these views, this critic suggests, Hogg points out "the limitations of both the pedantically empirical Editor and his self-centered subject" (p. 59).

⁶Francis Russell Hart correctly argues that the question of Gil-Martin's existence is "a major issue of interpretation in the book . . . is the preternatural or the demonic to be consistently psychologized, naturalized, or is it to remain to some degree ontologically mysterious?" *The Scottish Novel from Smollet to Spark* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), p. 150. For an example of the first approach, see André Gide's well-known introduction to the *Confessions* (London, 1947). He dismisses the fantastic elements and claims that the novel "is always psychologically explicable, without having recourse to the supernatural" (p. xv). Hart, Mack, and Simpson in *James Hogg: A Critical Study* (New York, 1962), on the other hand, seek to retain the novel's air of supernatural mystery, and argue for an interpretation of Gil-Martin as a very real Devil.

ary dreams. For Romantic as well as for Victorian writers these contexts were particularly rich and varied. The nineteenth century was a time of great interest in the study of the mind and its workings, and this interest encouraged speculation on the mysterious nature and meaning of dreams. That speculation manifested itself in a variety of forms. The most reputable, if perhaps not the most popularly accepted, was the scientific study. Many of these studies appeared in the early nineteenth century, although few of them are familiar today. Dreams were also the subject of popular interest at this time, as evidenced by the existing works of oneirocriticism (or dream interpretation guides) and accounts of revelatory dreams in books and magazines. Both the scientific and the popular works shaped the historical context for literary dreams.

The predominant physio-psychological theory of the period both during and following that in which Hogg wrote was associationism. The roots of associationism are in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1700 edn.), but its most influential proponent was David Hartley. He asserts that our impressions of external and internal sensations form our more complex intellectual ideas according to associative principles, so that the later recurrence of one of the sensations mechanically will produce the intellectual ideas associated with it. In his *Observations on Man* (1749), he deduces three causes for dreams: the residue of daily impressions, the physical state of the dreamer's stomach and brain, and, most importantly, the associations of thoughts and images which always go on in the mind, but which are more vivid during sleep. He proceeds to explain various phenomena of dreams from these three originating principles.⁷ Hartley's associationist theory, which attempts to account for the train of thoughts in the waking mind and the illogical flow of images in dreams, greatly influenced subsequent scientific studies of dreams, and shaped the assumptions about the causes and contents of this phenomena. For example, in 1794 Erasmus Darwin speaks of "the perceptual flow of the train of ideas which constitute our dreams,"⁸ and Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart, in his *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1792), also centers his discussion of dreams on associational principles.

Certain general assumptions about dreams recur in these scientific studies. One often repeated point is that dreams only occur in imperfect sleep. W. Newnham states, "There are no dreams in natural sleep—that is, in sound and quiet sleep—the body being healthy, and the mind at ease." Dreams oc-

⁷*Observations on Man: His Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations*, 2 vols. (Gainesville, 1966), I, 384-9.

⁸*Zoonomia: or, the Laws of Organic Life* (New York, 1974), I, 199-200.

cur only in a "morbid" state, when the brain is disordered by certain irritants, such as strong emotions, prolonged study, approaching sickness or other states which impair sleeping.⁹ Robert Macnish states that in "perfect sleep" all the brain's organs are at rest; but if one or more of the organs remain awake while the others sleep, dreaming results.¹⁰ Thus these scientists seek physiological explanations for what Hartley referred to as the "great wildness and inconsistency in our dreams" (I, 385). The rationale seems to be that dreaming has to occur in an aberrant state of mind, because of the irrational nature of dreams.

Early nineteenth-century scientific studies also follow Hartley's lead in asserting that dreams originate in both previous mental associations and existing sensory impressions. Hartley asserts that during sleep, "the state of the body suggests such ideas, amongst those that have been lately impressed, as are most suitable to the various kinds and degrees of pleasant and painful vibrations excited in the stomach, brain, or some other part" (I, 385). Abercrombie cites among other causes for the content of particular dreams "trains of images brought up by association with bodily sensations,"¹¹ and Macnish discusses the importance of both prior thoughts, which are recombined and jumbled together (p. 49), and also "Impressions made upon the senses during sleep" (p. 54).

While the scientific studies of this period tended to dismiss dreams as meaningless natural phenomena, an antithetical view of dreams appeared in numerous popular works which claimed that dreams were meaningful, possibly supernatural revelations.¹² This view of dreams echoes the claim by Sir Thomas Browne, in his *Religio Medici*, that "we are somewhat more than

⁹W. Newnham, *Essay on Superstition: Being an Inquiry into the Effects of Physical Influence on the Mind, in the Production of Dreams, Visions, Ghosts, and Other Supernatural Appearances* (London, 1830), p. 163.

¹⁰Robert Macnish, *The Philosophy of Sleep* (New York, 1834), p. 43.

¹¹John Abercrombie, *Inquiries Concerning the Intellectual Powers and the Investigation of Truth*. 3rd edn. (Edinburgh, 1832), p. 260.

¹²Perhaps the best indicator of the prevalence of such mystical faith in dreams is the efforts various scientists make to refute them. Walter C. Dendy in *On the Phenomena of Dreams and Other Transient Illusions* (London, 1832), states that although the notion of revelatory dreams is "entertained generally," we no longer live in "days of special inspiration"; therefore, he cannot rationally accept "the visions of slumbers as revelations or prognostics" (p. 70). Macnish advances the same argument, and comments that the idea "is so singularly unphilosophical, that I would not have noticed it, were it not advocated even by persons of good sense and education" (p. 102).

ourselves in our sleeps, and the slumber of the body seems to be but the waking of the soul. It is the litigation of sense, but the liberty of reason; and our awakening conceptions do not match the fancies of our sleeps".¹³ Such mystical sentiments appear throughout the nineteenth century in dream books which catalogue narratives of portentous dreams or offer guidelines for interpreting one's own. For instance, Catherine Crowe's *The Night Side of Nature* (3rd edn. 1852) provides many anecdotal examples of presentiments and prophetic dreams, and explains that "The soul, which is designed as the mirror of a superior spiritual order (to which it belongs), still receives, in dreams, some rays from above, and enjoys a foretaste of its future condition."¹⁴ Crowe does not locate the origins of these visions in supernatural forces, however; she asserts that "the faculty of presentiment [is] a natural one, though only imperfectly and capriciously developed" (p. 47). Other dream works present their examples in a Christian context. Mrs. Blair's *Dreams and Dreaming* is comprised of narratives of premonitory dreams drawn from the Bible and contemporary accounts, and the author treats these dreams as divine revelations that God offers as moral directives.¹⁵ Dream interpreters also were widespread, combining popular folk beliefs about the meaning of certain dreams with plagiarized excerpts from previous books, stretching back to the *Oneirocriticon* of Artemidorus. An anonymous, undated example of the interpreter is *Nocturnal Revels: or, the Universal Interpreter*.¹⁶ This obscure text provides an encyclopedic list of dream images and their symbolic meaning.¹⁷

¹³Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, ed. R. H. A. Robbins (Oxford, 1972), p. 80

¹⁴Catherine Crowe, *The Night Side of Nature: Or, Ghosts and Ghost Seers*, 3rd edn. (London, 1852), p. 47.

¹⁵Mrs. Blair, *Dreams and Dreaming, Philosophically and Scripturally Considered; Illustrated by Several Remarkable Instances, all Well Authenticated* (London, 1843). In support of her position, Blair raises the question, "Does it not savour of Infidelity to Say, that the Divine being has Neither the Will nor the Ability to Instruct his Creatures Asleep as Well as Awake?" (p. 114).

¹⁶*Nocturnal Revels: Or, the Universal Interpreter* (London [1805?]).

¹⁷Such books could be the subject of mocking derision by the rationalists. For example, an article in *All the Year Round* of 31 August, 1861, entitled "Dictionary Dreams," contains a joking discussion of one such work, *The Ladies' Own Dreambook*, and ridicules popular oneirocriticism (pp. 549-52). The author of the article reads "To dream of cucumbers denotes recovery to the sick, and you will fall speedily in love; . . . also moderate success in trade." He then sarcastically conjectures whether it would not be

The shared assumptions about the nature, origin and meaning of dreams affected the fictional representation of dreams, as writers referred to these assumptions in order to make their episodes seem more dream-like. The tension between a suspicion of and a faith in the revelatory power of dreams is, of course, quite ancient,¹⁸ but the ambivalence continues throughout the nineteenth century and directly shapes the nineteenth-century portrayal and function of literary dreams. But the historical assumptions about actual dreams formed only one context for the literary dreams; also important was the context of previous literary representations. Romantic and Victorian novelists inherited certain conventions for the use and representation of dreams from both ancient sources¹⁹ and more contemporary ones.²⁰ Literary dreams almost invariably contain true premonitions, whether or not the dreamer recognizes the warning. Thus while the dream episode may suggest the psychological state of a character, its primary function is usually to further the plot or to anticipate later events. Those British nineteenth-century novelists who do employ literary dreams demonstrate their familiarity with both the historical and literary contexts of dreams: when the authors delineate those waking thoughts of a character which reappear in his dream, they are employing associationist assumptions about actual dreams; when the authors allow that dream episode to foretell in a symbolic manner future events in the plot, they are following an age-old convention for the use of literary dreams.

For example, Robert relates a dream he had shortly after Gil-Martin proposed murdering the benevolent, moderate clergyman, Mr. Blanchard. Robert initially balks at this action, but then mentions this marvelous ability of Gil-Martin:

the most singular instance of this wonderful man's power over my mind was that he had as complete influence over me by night as by day. All my dreams corre-

possible to cultivate such an auspicious dream by contemplating and then devouring an enormous cucumber before bedtime (p. 551).

¹⁸See Cicero's presentation of both sides in his dialogue *De Divinatione* (trans. William Armistead Falconer [Cambridge, MA, 1923], XX, 222-539), which Sir Walter Scott echoes in his discussion of dreams in *The Antiquary*, and also the question in Homer's *Odyssey*, Book 19, whether a certain dream comes from the gate of horn or of ivory.

¹⁹Most prominently, the Bible, classical epics and dramas, Shakespeare and Milton.

²⁰Examples from prominent novels would include Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Richardson's *Clarissa*, Lewis' *The Monk*, Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Italian*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Premonitory dreams also occur in a host of miscellaneous Gothic and Romantic works of prose and poetry.

sponded exactly with his suggestions; and when he was absent from me, still his arguments sunk deeper in my heart than even when he was present. I dreamed that night of a great triumph obtained, and though the whole scene was but dimly and confusedly defined in my vision, yet the overthrow and death of Mr. Blanchard was the first step by which I obtained the eminent station I occupied. Thus, by dreaming of the event by night, and discoursing of it by day, it soon became so familiar to my mind, that I almost conceived it as done.²¹

This episode allows for two possible means of explanation, which correlate to the predominant assumptions about dreams prevalent during the early nineteenth century.

First, we can find explicable, rational reasons for this particular dream. Just prior to it, Gil-Martin had exhorted Robert to become "'a champion in the cause of Christ and the Church," a leader of an army of Christian soldiers. He also had hinted that killing Blanchard could lead to that glorious position, saying "'no man can calculate to what an illustrious eminence small beginnings may lead'" (p. 134). Furthermore, Robert believes his companion to be none other than Czar Peter of Russia, from whom he expects great rewards. If a rationalist follower of David Hartley or Erasmus Darwin were presented with these pieces of evidence, he would no doubt attribute to them the corresponding images in Robert's dream, while remarking on the mind's increased powers of association which occur in the absence of our waking volition.²² A more modern rationalist might explain the dream along psychological lines, arguing the Gil-Martin has no existence outside of the disturbed mind of this narrator, and that it is thus understandable that the self-originating idea would recur in both waking and sleeping states, until it becomes an obsession.

An opposite line of interpretation, however, is equally supported by textual evidence. This is a supernatural explanation, that the Devil has sent this dream in order to break down the dreamer's resistance to murder. The devils of Gothic literature, as presented in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (and other, similar novels such as Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* and Percy Shelley's *St. Irvyne*) have the power to create and send dreams to further their ends. There are analogues, in fact, between Robert Wringhim and the monk Ambrosio. Both are self-righteous men, proud of their superior piety, who are

²¹James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. John Carey (London, 1969), pp. 134-5. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

²²Darwin specifically asserts in *Zoonomia* that "The absence of the stimuli of external bodies, and of volition, in our dreams renders the organs of sense liable to be more strongly affected by the powers of sensation, and of association" (I, 205).

tempted to commit the murder of mother and sibling, among other crimes, by a devil who at last carries away their souls. Robert's dream contains a diabolical irony, in that the "triumph" toward which the murder of Blanchard impels him is the Devil's triumph in winning the soul of this religious fanatic. The dimness and confusion of the vision perhaps suggest its infernal origins.

Following closely upon this dream episode is a similarly enigmatic and dream-like event. Gil-Martin is still pressing hard upon Robert, asserting the necessity of murdering Blanchard to prevent the reverend from "misleading" his pious parishioners. Robert agrees to the deed in theory, but shirks from committing the act himself. The sophistical reasoning of his friend finally overcomes all his reservations, but as a last resort Robert looks to Heaven for direction. He seeks a sign that the murder follows the will of God. At that instant, Robert relates, "there was a dimness came over my eyes that I could not see. The appearance was as if there had been a veil drawn over me, so high that I put up my hand to feel it" (p. 137). When Gil-Martin asks what he is reaching at, he answers, "I have no weapons, not one; nor know I where any are to be found." His companion answers, "'The God whom thou servest will provide these . . . if thou provest worthy of the trust committed to thee'" (p. 138). It is at this precise moment that Robert has a vision:

I looked again up into the cloudy veil that covered us, and thought I beheld golden weapons of every description let down in it, but all with their points toward me. I kneeled, and was going to stretch out my hand to take one, when my patron seized me . . . and dragged me away . . . saying with a joyful and elevated voice,—'Come, my friend, let us depart; thou art dreaming—thou art dreaming. Rouse up all the energies of thy exalted mind, for thou art an highly-favoured one; doubt thou not, that he whom *thou* servest, will be ever at thy right and left hand, to direct and assist thee.' (p. 138)

Not only these words, Robert relates, "but particularly the vision I had seen, of the golden weapons descending out of Heaven, inflamed my zeal to the point that I was as one beside himself" (p. 138).

This passage presents a good example of the problems of interpretation which are central to this novel. We might rationalize the episode as the hallucination of a zealot, who imagines divine messages. We might say, with Gil-Martin, that Robert is merely dreaming (although the word of a supposed figment of Robert's imagination may not constitute particularly solid support). Most critics who mention this episode, however, seem to accept it as not only an actual vision, but a sign of divine warning.²³ These critics inter-

²³Examples include Ian Campbell's "Author and Audience in Hogg's *Confessions*,"

pret the incident as an example of a struggle by real, supernatural forces for the soul of Robert Wringhim. There is some support for locating the origin of the vision in Heaven: Robert is looking there for guidance at that moment, and Gil-Martin first seems not to see the "veil," and then drags Robert away from the vision. Moreover, the vision appears to warn that Robert's weapon will turn against him. But there is also textual support for an infernal source. Gil-Martin does drag Robert away, but as he does so his voice is "joyful and elevated," rather than fearful or troubled. The effect of the vision, moreover, is not to inhibit the will of the dreamer to murder, but rather to strengthen it, because it makes Robert feel sanctified in his action. Finally, the next day when Gil-Martin produces the murder weapons—"two pistols of pure beaten gold"—Robert recognizes them as "two of the very weapons that were let down from Heaven in the cloudy veil, the dim tapestry of the firmament," and he says to himself, "'Surely this is the will of the Lord'" (p. 139). It is impossible to judge whether the vision, with its ambivalent message, is a divine warning against or an infernal incitement to murder. In any case its effect is sinister, for it makes Robert feel "greatly strengthened and encouraged" (p. 138). Hogg produces in this episode a critical moment of interpretation for both the reader and the narrator, but he surrounds it with such equivocal evidence that our interpretation cannot be certain.

There is a final episode in the *Confessions* which is significant for our topic. This passage occurs later in the novel, when Robert is running from the authorities; he is wanted for numerous crimes, which were committed either by him or by Gil-Martin in his guise. Robert spends a night in the house of a weaver and his wife, the former suspicious that his guest is the devil or in league with him. They lock Robert in a room filled with looms for the night. Here he falls asleep, and recalls that "a more troubled and tormenting sleep never enchained a mortal frame. I had such dreams that they will not bear repetition, and early in the morning I awakened, feverish and parched with thirst" (p. 214). This narrative reticence in telling his dream is surprising, since the moment seems an appropriate one for the conventional, ominous nightmare of a guilty conscience. Hogg has a more subtle purpose in mind, however. The word "enchained" is significant, and foreshadows what is to occur next. Robert finds that the disguise he had borrowed from Gil-Martin has disappeared, replaced by his own clothes. He states, "At first

Scottish Literary News, 2 (1972), in which he states that "the vision can be seen as Heaven offering Wringhim a chance to repent, then atone for his sins by fighting against the Devil at his elbow" (p. 70). Douglas Mack concurs, calling the vision "one of a series of warnings sent to Wringhim by Heaven" (p. 37). Julie Fenwick comments that "heaven goes to the trouble of sending him an ominous vision which he misinterprets" in "Psychological and Narrative Determinancy in James Hogg's . . . *Confessions* . . .," *SLJ*, 15 (1988), 62.

I thought I was in a dream, and felt the weaver's beam, web, and treadle-strings with my hands, to convince myself that I was awake" (p. 215). Next he examines his clothes by the dim light of the window, and realizes that they truly are his own: "I trembled with astonishment," he recalls, "and on my return from the small window, went doiting in among the weaver's looms, till I entangled myself, and could not get out again" (p. 215). His calls for help produce the ill-tempered weaver, who calls him "Mr. Satan" and beats him with a loom pole. He then tells his wife he had been "'dreamin' a' the night that I had the deil i' my house, an' that he was clapper-clawin' me ayont the loom'" (p. 217). At first this dream seems incidental, but when Robert shows the weaver his altered clothes, the latter twice cries "' My dream has been true!'" and forces Wringhim out of the house (p. 218).

This scene functions as a touchstone in the narrative, by its combination of contrary qualities. Robert Keily notes its "mixture of absurdity and sense, humor and pathos, symbolic potential and concrete reality."²⁴ It is also a nexus of dream and reality, of shadow and substance. Robert is "enchained" in his terrible dreams, and then entangled in the threads of the loom. The fascination of the episode increases with its strange mirrorings: the weaver dreams that the devil was beating him against his loom, and he subsequently beats Robert; he jokes that he "'should hae weaved a net to catch the deil'" (p. 217), but in fact the Devil has been weaving a net throughout to catch the soul of Wringhim. The terrified cries of the weaver that his dream is true only underline the ironic revelations contained here. The Devil has been in the house, exchanging garments and imparting dreams, and closing his snare on the fleeing narrator. The slapstick comedy in the scene plays against its supernatural underpinnings, but the oddly meaningful dreams serve to point out the seriousness of the situation. Parsons notes, "While the supernatural is being tied to reality by naturalness and humor, its weirdness is preserved by a subtle indeterminateness."²⁵ That "indeterminateness," best captured in dreams, is a crucial concern of the novel.

These three examples of how Hogg uses dreams and dream-like phenomena in the *Confessions* illustrate and reinforce the novel's central theme of ambivalence. In each case the author provides sufficient evidence for a rational dismissal of the episode, such as the ostensibly scrupulous Editor would propose; but at the same time he includes textual evidence for the reality of supernatural forces, too. Two passages in the novel are telling on

²⁴The *Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge, MA, 1972), p. 229.

²⁵Coleman O. Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott's Fiction* (Edinburgh, 1964), p. 296.

this point. In the first, Bell Calvert, a witness to George Colwan's murder, states, "'We have nothing on earth but our senses to depend upon: if those deceive us, what are we to do'" (p. 80). She phrases this not as a question, but almost as a declaration of powerlessness, for she utters it in reference to a mysterious similarity between one figure and another. The second passage occurs while Robert describes his vision of the golden weapons. He says, "there are strange things, and unaccountable agencies in nature: He only who dwells between the Cherubim can unriddle them" (p. 138). Hogg creates in this novel a world in which not only the characters but we, as readers, have only our senses to depend upon, but those senses fail us when we come across the "strange things, and unaccountable agencies."

The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner is a novel in which, as Thomas Crawford comments, "uncertainty, ambivalence, and mystification prevail throughout."²⁶ Magdalene Redekop derides the "arbitrary intrusions from a supernatural or visionary level" which cause the reader to meet "recurring failure" while interpreting the novel; she calls the supernatural incidents "stumbling blocks, strategically placed by the author to frustrate us."²⁷ Her metaphor is not quite apt, however, if we acknowledge Hogg's professed understanding of dreams. We find a tale of a prophetic dream in an entry in "The Shepherd's Calendar" entitled "Dreams and Apparitions," which appears in the May 1827 *Blackwood's*. While the story itself resembles a folktale—a coachman, George Dobson, dreams he drives some riders to Hell, and the next day he and his fares actually die—the introductory statements express a serious regard of dreams as supernatural phenomena. After attacking the scientific theories of dreams as "nonsense," Hogg allows his narrative persona of the Ettrick Shepherd to praise dreams themselves, "because they prove to the unlettered and contemplative mind, in a very forcible manner, a distinct existence of the soul, and its lively and rapid intelligence with external nature, as well as with the world of spirits."²⁸ Presented in this light, the messages in dreams are not stumbling blocks, but rather stepping stones out of a constrainedly rational view of the world. The dream episodes in the *Confessions* acknowledge the contemporary rational theories that dreams are meaningless products of associated images and memories, but at the same time the episodes exist as supernatural

²⁶"James Hogg: The Play of Region and Nation," *The History of Scottish Literature*, ed. Douglas Gifford (Aberdeen, 1987), III, 100.

²⁷"Beyond Closure: Buried Alive with Hogg's *Justified Sinner*," *ELH*, 52 (1985), 170.

²⁸"Dreams and Apparitions," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 21 (May 1827), 549.

world. The dream episodes in the *Confessions* acknowledge the contemporary rational theories that dreams are meaningless products of associated images and memories, but at the same time the episodes exist as supernatural revelations and premonitions. Hogg's skill in combining and manipulating the rational and mystical assumptions about dreams furthers the power of this teasing text.

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Advance Notice

The 8th International Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Language and Literature will be held at St. Hilda's College, Oxford from 17 to 21 August 1996. The organizers are seeking to arrange a number of sessions around particular subjects (MS Arch. Selden B 24, or the disputed authorship of *The Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour*, for instance). In order to allow time for planning we are inviting now suggestions of subjects for sessions of 2-3 papers and prospective speakers in them. Proposals should be sent to:

Dr. Sally Mapstone
St. Hilda's College,
Oxford, OX4 1DY

Tel: (0) 865 276860
Fax: (0) 865 276816

A call for papers of the conventional sort will follow.