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## Hogg's Religion and The Confessions of a Justified Sinner

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## Hogg's Religion and *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner*

The *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* has usually been regarded as a satire on extreme Calvinism, comparable with *Holy Willie's Prayer*. This view is not shared by John Carey, who has recently edited the *Confessions* for the *Oxford English Novels* series. Dr. Carey shows that Hogg was a devout Presbyterian, and for this reason he rejects "the superficial classification of the book as a satire on Calvinism."<sup>1</sup> He then goes on to assert that the implications of the novel "are nearer to the Bunyanesque 'Then I saw that there was a way to Hell even from the Gates of Heaven,' than to the jocularity of *Holy Willie's Prayer*, with which it is so often compared."<sup>2</sup> In the present note I shall argue that Dr. Carey's analysis underestimates the satirical elements in the *Confessions*.

One part of Dr. Carey's argument cannot be seriously disputed—it is certain that Hogg was a devout Presbyterian.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless it seems clear that the *Confessions* is an attack on extreme predestinarian views of the kind held by Holy Willie. Robert Wringhim, the Justified Sinner, is brought up according to the strictest Calvinist principles, and, like Holy Willie, he becomes convinced that he is "an elect and justified person" unalterably predestined to salvation. On the day that Wringhim becomes convinced that he is one of the elect he is befriended by a mysterious stranger, Gil-Martin, who is in fact the Devil. Gil-Martin continually reminds Wringhim that the elect are above the moral law, and are incapable of falling from their justified state through any sinful act. He encourages his victim to commit a series of murders, and by the end of the book Wringhim's damnation is complete.

During the last nights before his death Wringhim is tormented and pursued by fiends of Hell. The fact that his damnation is a direct

<sup>1</sup> *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, edited with an Introduction by John Carey (Oxford English Novels, London 1969), p. xviii. Hereafter quoted as *Confessions*.

<sup>2</sup> *Confessions*, p. xviii.

<sup>3</sup> It has not been usual to think of Hogg as a religious man, but Dr. Carey convincingly demonstrates that he was a sincere Presbyterian. One piece of evidence which Dr. Carey does not mention is a letter written by Hogg in 1830 to the *Edinburgh Literary Journal* (vol. 3, pp. 162-3). This letter is a vigorous defence of the kirk's traditional metrical version of the Psalms, and it is probably Hogg's most explicit statement of his religious sympathies.

result of his theological views is underlined during the account of this final pursuit. Wringhim writes in his journal of Gil-Martin:

I perceived him still a little behind me; and my despair being then at its height, I cursed the time I first met with such a tormentor; though, on a little recollection it occurred, that it was at that blessed time when I was solemnly dedicated to the Lord, and assured of my final election, and confirmation, by an eternal decree never to be annulled. This being my sole and only comfort, I recalled my curse upon the time, and repented me of my rashness.<sup>4</sup>

The *Confessions*, then, is clearly an attack on Wringhim's predestinarian views. How is this to be reconciled with Hogg's undoubted Presbyterianism? Dr. Carey assumes that as a Presbyterian Hogg's "stern theology . . . is, after all, not very different from Wringhim's,"<sup>5</sup> and he also speaks of "Hogg's own involvement in Wringhim's religious dilemma."<sup>6</sup> When the *Justified Sinner* was published in 1824, however, the Moderate Party had been in a dominant position in the kirk for well over half a century. The Moderates were of course products of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and were characterised by their concern for reason and tolerance. They instinctively distrusted anything with a flavour of fanaticism or "enthusiasm," and it is obvious that they cannot be identified with Wringhim.

There is reason to suppose that Hogg was in sympathy with many of the ideas of the Moderates. For example, in a letter written to his wife in 1832 he describes a sermon which he heard in London as "the ravings of enthusiastic madness."<sup>7</sup> This is unmistakably a Moderate reaction, and it seems clear that Dr. Carey is wrong to reject David Craig's view that Hogg was "derisive of 'enthusiasm.'"<sup>8</sup>

In this context it is interesting to remember that a minister of Moderate views, Mr. Blanchard, appears in the *Confessions*. Blanchard, who bears every mark of Hogg's esteem, is selected by Gil-Martin as the first victim in Wringhim's series of murders. It is also significant that Gil-Martin, for all his awesome powers in the intricacies of theological argument, shrinks from defending Wringhim's theory of pre-

<sup>4</sup> *Confessions*, pp. 229-30.

<sup>5</sup> *Confessions*, p. xviii.

<sup>6</sup> *Confessions*, p. xviii.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Mrs. M. G. Garden, *Memorials of James Hogg*, Paisley 1903, p. 243. The sermon was preached by Edward Irving, an austere but eloquent Presbyterian minister who attracted large congregations in London and in Scotland for many years. Irving was decidedly out of sympathy with the Moderates.

<sup>8</sup> *Confessions*, p. xiv.



destination against Mr. Blanchard. Indeed, Blanchard's views disturb Gil-Martin profoundly, and the Fiend tells Wringhim that he has "agents in every city, and every land, exerting their powers to put them down."<sup>9</sup>

Mr. Blanchard's function in the novel is clearly to represent goodness, sanity and true religion. It is therefore safe to assume that he expresses Hogg's own opinion when he says to Wringhim of Gil-Martin:

He, indeed, pretends great strictness of orthodoxy regarding some of the points of doctrine embraced by the reformed church; but you do not seem to perceive, that both you and he are carrying these points to a dangerous extremity. Religion is a sublime and glorious thing, the bond of society on earth, and the connector of humanity with the Divine nature; but there is nothing so dangerous to man as the wresting of any of its principles, or forcing them beyond their due bounds: this is of all others the readiest way to destruction. Neither is there any thing so easily done. There is not an error into which a man can fall, which he may not press Scripture into his service as proof of the probity of, and though your boasted theologian shunned the full discussion of the subject before me, while you pressed it, I can easily see that both you and he are carrying your ideas of absolute predestination, and its concomitant appendages, to an extent that overthrows all religion and revelation together; or, at least, jumbles them into a chaos, out of which human capacity can never select what is good. Believe me, Mr. Robert, the less you associate with that illustrious stranger the better, for it appears to me that your creed and his carries damnation on the very front of it.<sup>10</sup>

On the second page of the *Justified Sinner* the "editor" writes that Wringhim's tenets "were not the tenets of the great reformers, but theirs mightily over-strained and deformed." This remark can be regarded as a concise statement of Hogg's opinion of Wringhim's theology. It would therefore appear that the *Confessions* is a satirical attack on a deformed version of Calvinism, written by a man close to the Calvinist Presbyterian tradition. This perhaps helps to explain the book's extraordinary power. For once Hogg was not writing with careless volubility on fashionable or remunerative subjects; he was writing with care on a subject about which he was passionately concerned, and on which he had no doubt meditated for many years. Equally, Hogg's closeness to the Presbyterian tradition helped him to produce a profound psychological study of Wringhim. Indeed, he writes with such understanding that the Sinner is at times capable of arousing our com-

<sup>9</sup> *Confessions*, p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> *Confessions*, pp. 131-2.

passion. In its psychological profundity, and in other ways, the *Confessions* goes beyond the usual limitations of satire. Nevertheless the evidence we have examined indicates that Walter Allen was right in his assertion, "it seems to me quite certain that Hogg conceived his novel as satire."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Ernest Allen, *The English Novel* (London, 1954), p. 125.