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Michael York Mason

The Three Burials in Hogg's *Justified Sinner*



By 1824, the year in which James Hogg published *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, there were many precedents in recent fiction for the device whereby the main narrative of a novel is supposed to be authentic material, transmitted in some oral or written form to the author (or "editor," for this is all he now professes to be). The device had been ubiquitous in the Gothic novel, from its beginnings. But I know of no case at this date where the pseudo-editorial activity is supposed to be as complicated, or where it is described as thoroughly, as it is in Hogg's novel. Much more important, I think Hogg had good reasons for developing this component so elaborately. In order to know what to make of the two transmitted, allegedly authentic narratives that constitute the main body of the novel we must bear in mind the editor's activity and, in particular, what is said about his discovery of these narratives in the opening paragraph and in the last section. In a word, Hogg makes the device of the editorial author functional in this novel.

Justified Sinner is an unfairly neglected work, and only a few of those critics who do admire it have had anything to say about the pseudo-editorial component. L. L. Lee, in his good article "The Devil's Figure: James Hogg's *Justified Sinner*,"¹ mentions some of the discrepancies in the editor's chronology, but does not seem to be confident that they are deliberately inserted by Hogg. John Carey, in his remarks on "the editor's limitations and separateness from Hogg," is another exception, but he does not press this line of thought very far.² Although he reproduces the first edition's "Fac Simile" of one

of the handwritten entries in the *Confessions of a Sinner* pamphlet with its punctuation discrepant from that of the printed version, he only offers the comment: "since the handwriting is not Hogg's the discrepancy does not reflect on the authenticity of the first edition's punctuation." Even as a bibliographical comment this is odd: what sort of evidence would the discrepancy be if the facsimile *were* in Hogg's hand, since it is evidently not his working MS? and why is it not useful evidence, if it could be evidence at all, whoever the scribe was, since he must have been copying *something*? The discrepancy can have no bibliographical point, but it does have a critical point, as one of a considerable body of discrepancies associated with the editor's evidence. I hope this essay will not leave it in doubt that this body of discrepancies is both planned and significant.

The pseudo-editorial part of *Justified Sinner* contains at least one element as singular as anything in the narrative proper, and which might have been expected to draw more attention, namely the appearance of Hogg himself as a character, and one with unexpected traits at that. He appears first as the author of the letter to *Blackwoods* of August 1823 (a letter that, by another extraordinary touch, Hogg did really publish in *Blackwoods*) describing the exhumation of a suicide's grave in the Borders. On this showing he is not incompatible with the author of *Justified Sinner*. But when the editor and his friends encounter Hogg at Thirlestane Green sheepmarket the loquacious amateur antiquarian of the letter has become a dour, unhelpful Border shepherd intent on selling his flock.

What is the effect of these two appearances of the author-as-character? Partly they simply constitute a surprising joke that is in keeping with the wit at play throughout this novel. This wit contributes largely to a general sense of roundedness and intelligence, where we might expect obsession and sensationalism, that greatly enhances the horror and poignancy of this tale of possession. But Hogg's appearances as a character have the more important function of forcing us back on the editor and his investigations, of trapping us, as it were, at the editorial level. In making himself as a character just one of several sources of information for the editor--and an unpromising one at that--Hogg seems to be insisting that there is no authoritative view over and above whatever the editor can convincingly deduce. The place to which we would naturally turn for authority, the author's utterance, is not privileged.

This might suggest that one problem the reader faces in *Justified Sinner* is that of the reliability of the editor, but on the whole, although the editor is given something of a distinct character and his handling of the "traditionary

facts" of the Dalcastle family is cavalier, I do not think his reliability is nearly as much in question as is the reliability of his evidence. Hogg has trapped us not so much in the editor's view of things as in the limitations of his data, the facts still available in the here-and-now of 1823: the barest historical records of the Dalcastles, some oral traditions of south-west Scotland, the Borders and Edinburgh, a story in a *Blackwoods* letter, a grave and its contents, and, among these, an extraordinary pamphlet. These are the only facts. Their investigation is the only narrative we can be at all confident of. That is why it is given, at least in its early stages, in such detail, with real-life participants like Lockhart, and a real letter to a real magazine. And the closing pages not only describe, they can also brilliantly induce a sense in the reader of intense but tantalised investigation. There is an urge to note, to scan with cryptographical intensity, every detail in this last section--even down to the markings on Hogg's sheep--but then the inscrutable triviality of, say, many items in the grave, or the fact that some of the evidence has irrevocably deteriorated even since the *Blackwoods* letter, enforces the tantalising recognition of how hard it is to get beyond these data of the here-and-now.

Hogg's purpose in insisting in this way on the gap between the few puzzling data recoverable in September 1823 and the historical truth is not to give his reader the pleasure proper to reading a detective novel, the pleasure of finding a solution, of making a successful deduction from clues. We are certainly invited to treat the data as clues (it is strange that no one, as far as I know, has done this at all carefully), but we must not expect a solution. The jigsaw of evidence is so designed that no complete fit is possible. We cannot by any arrangement match the four main kinds of evidence: the traditional stories (those about the Dalcastles and those about the suicide's grave reported by Hogg-as-letter-writer and the editor's guide), the account of an exhumation in Hogg's letter, what the editor finds at the grave-site, and the story in the *Confessions of a Sinner* pamphlet.

The contradictions between the various bits of evidence range from those which could be resolved by supposing some fairly plausible additional fact for which there is no express support, to stronger cases where the only reasonable course is to reject one of two conflicting bits of evidence as false. The strongest contradictions, which I consider last, seem to centre on the suicide's grave at Thirlestane Green. There are, for instance, only a few, not insuperable contradictions between the two parts of the main narrative. Tradition has it that Robert stops dogging George in Edinburgh during his mysterious illness (38), but the pamphlet claims as well-

known fact that the "persecution" continued in this period (155). The author of the pamphlet claims that his dead mother's body was borne into the castle (208) (though there is a characteristic *frisson* of uncertainty here), while tradition has it that she vanished without trace (92). There is not much overlap, and hence not much opportunity for conflict, between the lore about the Dalcastles and any of the rest of the evidence in the third section (i.e. the tradition of the grave and the descriptions of it by Hogg and the editor). But it is worth noting that the body Hogg describes had fair hair, which at least consorts surprisingly with the "dark" aspect of Robert Wringhim so stressed in the first section (though only his eyes and clothes are explicitly said to be black). Also, the tradition Hogg reports in his letter seems to attribute a strong dialect to the suicide, a trait incompatible with Wringhim's origins.

The trait would be equally incompatible with the evidence of the pamphlet, which brings us to a cluster of contradictions almost as striking as those concerning the grave alone: contradictions between the final hand-written entries in the pamphlet and the local evidence in the Borders, both traditional and archaeological. Local tradition holds that the suicide "had been a considerable time in the place" (241), and that he killed himself on a Sunday (248), whereas the author of the pamphlet claims to arrive on August 24, 1712 (236), and makes his last entry, pretty clearly announcing suicide, on September 18, 1712 (which was a Thursday). Traditionally, there was "nothing against his character" (241) whereas the diarist in the pamphlet believes the locals "are whispering that I am a murderer, and haunted by the spirits of my victims" (237), and he was a petty thief, driven to despair by the detection of property stolen from his master (not contradicted, but certainly not warranted by the pamphlet). Among the objects the editor digs up are "a small neat square board" and "several samples of cloth of different kinds, rolled neatly up with one another" (251), but what can these have to do with the life the diarist is meant to be leading--as a cowherd--or with that of "the poor homely shepherd" he changes clothes with (236)?

But the plainest contradictions, as I said, do not involve either the Dalcastle tradition or the pamphlet, but simply the various accounts of the suicide's grave. Each of the three lots of evidence about this burial (the editor's exhumation, the exhumation described in Hogg's letter, and the local tradition given in Hogg's letter and enlarged on by the guide) conflict with the other two in at least one important detail. I shall quickly sum up the contradictory matter. The editor exhumes from a grave on Faw-Law hill a corpse with "darkish dusk"

hair and a skull missing one temple but only damaged by a spade, and buried with what turns out to be, when recovered, a "Highland bonnet" (Expressly not "a broad bonnet") (249-51). Hogg reports the discovery in a grave on Cowan's Croft of a corpse with "fine yellow hair" and a "broad blue bonnet" (243-4). Local tradition has it that the suicide was buried on Faw-Law, and that one of his buriers "tramped down his head into the grave with his iron-heeled shoe, until his nose and skull crashed again" (248).

What are we to make of all these discrepancies which Hogg has so carefully, we cannot doubt, insinuated into his novel? One point that Hogg seems to be drawing our attention to, and not simply in the contradictions I have mentioned, is the extreme unreliability of tradition, even very recent tradition. For we can account for all the discrepant claims in the *Blackwoods* letter if we remember that Hogg-as-letter-writer has not, as he admits, seen the grave or any of its contents (except for some fragments of clothing). Then the discrepancies could either be due to distortions of the facts of the first exhumation arising very early in the oral transmission of a local wonder and passed on in the letter, or to Hogg's himself unconsciously mis-transmitting the tradition (as he appears to do in saying that his discrepant site for the grave is part of the tradition).

As if to stress the unreliability of tradition the Hogg of the letter is presented as himself doubtful of some of the lore he has picked up about the suicide. He recognizes that the grave does not entirely confirm the legend (the stolen property alleged to be buried with the thief is missing), that there can be multiple traditions (only "one person" reports that the suicide's theft was discovered) and, most important, that there can be conflicting traditions (and the difficulty of sorting these out is indicated elsewhere by the fact that one version of the legend has a year for the burial that tallies with the pamphlet, and another has a month that tallies but is six years out). And yet, by a clear irony, we are shown that this caution of Hogg's is not sufficient to protect *him* from contributing to the business of progressive distortion. As I said, he attributes the wrong grave-site to "tradition," emphasizing in the very next sentence that this is part of the story "no one ever disputed one jot." But it is precisely this detail in his letter that *is* disputed firmly in the first local information the editor gets.

It is clear enough, I think, that we must read this lesson back into the rest of the novel. The editor's justification of his confidence in the reliability of the "tradition" of the Dalcastles in the opening paragraph starts to seem brittle, even desperate:

It has been handed down to the world in unlimited abundance; and I am certain, that in recording the hideous events which follow, I am only relating to the greater part of the inhabitants of at least four counties of Scotland, matters of which they were before perfectly well informed.

Even the opening four words of the novel ("It appears from tradition...") acquire a monitory flavour once we have mulled over the complexities of the suicide's grave. And it hardly needs to be stressed that the "tradition" the editor goes on to relate goes in its detail and intimacy well beyond anything that could have been reliably passed through any single line of oral transmission for 150 years, let alone uniformly known to "the greater part of the inhabitants of at least four counties of Scotland." In fact in his closing paragraph the editor not only admits that there are "numerous distorted traditions" about the murder of George Colwan by his brother, but even proposes a plausible but damaging explanation of the story's wide dissemination (previously invoked to guarantee its reliability), namely: "the work [the pamphlet] having been printed and burnt, and of course the story known to all the printers, with their families and gossips." And finally there are the contradictions *within* the "traditionary facts" about date and about the details of the murder that John Carey mentions; even on its own showing not all the tradition can be true.

This discrediting of oral tradition--and especially the oral tradition underlying the first part of the novel--has the obvious utility of enabling the reader to set aside any obtrusive questions about plausibility. In particular, Hogg has cast so much doubt on the authenticity of the events recorded in the first section that there is no longer any need to worry about how much reality should be attributed to Gil-Martin. Several critics have wanted to explain away the concrete reality of this figure, but, with the exception of L. L. Lee in the paper already cited, they do not seem to have realized just how easy Hogg has made this task. We do not have to think of ways in which, say, the evidence of Bel Calvert could be substantially retained and yet reconciled with the hypothesis of a phantasmal Gil-Martin; the question of what Bel Calvert even claimed to see is irretrievably muddled from the start. But beyond sidestepping the issue of the objectivity of the supernatural (and thus generally making it easy for the reader to surrender unreservedly to his poignant and frightening conception) I do not think Hogg means to go with his encouragement to us to be sceptical of certain facts. After all some puzzles remain however freely we interpret the tradition-

any evidence. We still do not know if Robert Wringhim killed George Colwan, or even whether the corpse the editor exhumes is that of Robert; and the curious items in the grave, samples of cloth, a neat square board--tangible facts, these, and not folk rumour--take us no nearer a solution to these problems.

I want to suggest that Hogg has used his system of contradictions in the closing section not only to discredit oral tradition, but also for a thematic purpose--as a final enigmatic echo of the book's central psychological interest. The editor's aim, to find the grave that he has read about in *Blackwoods* and interpret its strange contents with the help of oral lore, inclines us to try and harmonize all the facts into an account of one man, his suicide, and exhumation; but if we abandon this literal task we can surrender to another tension that the evidence of the closing section insistently registers, namely, that there are three graves. It is not simply that all versions of the suicide's grave contradict each other in some respect; rather they each list a long and specific set of characteristics of the grave almost none of which are confirmed, even if only a few are made impossible, by the other versions. The three versions are as follows: (1) a grave on Faw-Law of a morose peasant cowherd who hung himself with a hay rope on a Sunday in September in the second decade of the 18th century after being detected as a thief, whose gains--a silver knife and fork--were buried with him, and whose skull was crushed (the traditional grave); (2) a grave dug up by two peat-cutters in the summer of 1823 on Cowan's Croft, containing an old blanket, a hay rope, a broad blue bonnet, and a well-preserved fair-haired corpse, with three old coins in its pockets (the *Blackwoods* grave); (3) a grave on Faw-Law already half-opened, and reopened by the editor in September 1823, containing a dark-haired corpse, half decomposed, with an unusually round skull damaged by a spade, and a layer of fresh cow-dung on the sole of one foot; it was dressed in massive old-fashioned clothes, in the pockets of which were a sharp claspknife, possibly silver, a comb, gimlet, vial, square board, plated knee-buckles, and samples of cloth; also in the grave was a leather tobacco pouch, containing the pamphlet *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.

The way these three versions meet and diverge so tantalisingly is as puzzling as the question of the separateness or identity of Robert Wringhim, Gil-Martin and George Colwan. Robert is peculiarly united with Gil-Martin in the closing entries in the pamphlet, for Gil-Martin puzzlingly, even pathetically, deteriorates step-by-step with Robert, and Robert's death will be the end of Gil-Martin also: "my tormentor shall fall with me" (239). But in the brilliantly conceived first encounter of the two this identity makes Gil-

Martin also Robert's "brother":

What was my astonishment on perceiving that he was the same being as myself! ... this singular being read my thoughts in my looks, anticipating the very words that I was going to utter.

'You think I am your brother,' said he; 'or that I am your second self. I am indeed your brother, not according to the flesh'. (116-7)

And the identity with George implied here (also uncertainly related to Robert "according to the flesh") is not misleading; George's is the appearance Gil-Martin most consistently adopts, and Mrs. Logan expressed her sense of the identity of the two with extraordinary emphasis:

'The likeness to my late hapless young master is so striking, that I can hardly believe it to be a chance model ... Do you know that he is so like in every lineament, look, and gesture, that against the clearest light of reason, I cannot in my mind separate the one from the other, and have a certain indefinable impression on my mind, that they are one and the same being, or that the one was the prototype of the other.' (90)

These uncertainties of identity are expressed as a whole in the very revealing fantasy of Robert's delirium in Edinburgh, concluding with a characteristic touch of humour:

I generally conceived myself to be two people ... The most perverse part of it was, that I rarely conceived *myself* to be any of the two persons. I thought for the most part that my companion was one of them, and my brother the other; and I found that to be obliged to speak and answer in the character of another man, was a most awkward business in the long run. (154)³

So even in the here-and-now investigation of the suicide's grave Hogg has not allowed us to forget, nor has he explained, his mysterious central trinity. Because the facts so densely recorded in the closing pages have this literary aspect, as well as a literal one, it is on Hogg the artist that our attention is finally brought to rest. Once we have discerned his elaborate system of discrepancies and its purport his gesture of withdrawal, of leaving us with the editor and his facts, becomes a purely token withdrawal. He cannot evade our attention any more than he can enter these final pages unnoticed under the guise of a surly sheep-drover, an amateur

antiquarian, or, if we are sharp-sighted enough, a singing shepherd above Hawick. His cunning is as pervasive as his presence is ubiquitous.

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NOTES

1. *Studies in Scottish Literature*, III (1966), 230-239.
2. See the preface to his edition of the novel (Oxford University Press, 1969). All page-references are to this edition.
3. Further hints of the identity of the three main protagonists are listed by C. O. Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott's Fiction* (1964), pp. 294-5.