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Michael S. Kearns

Intuition and Narration in James Hogg's *Confessions*



In the third part of James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, the editor admits to some confusion about the suicide's bonnet; he is unable to reconcile the article in his possession, "neither a broad bonnet, nor a Border bonnet," with the description in "Hogg's" letter to *Blackwood's*, yet he says this letter "bears the stamp of authenticity in every line."¹ He also fails to comment on the other obvious discrepancies between the letter and physical reality as he has observed it: the grave located at Faw Law, not Cowan's Croft, and the corpse's hair of "darkish dusk" rather than "fine yellow." These discrepancies, and the shifts in the editor's attitude toward his material which they underscore, are elements of a coherent, complex narrative structure centered around the question of how to recognize evil. The editor's professed and real confusions, no less than Robert Wringhim's torments, result from his refusal to accept both the existence of extra-natural phenomena and the validity of intuition as a mode of perception.

As Wayne Booth has so clearly shown, a narrator's judgments force a consideration of his criteria; actions in fiction cannot be separated from the rhetoric of their presentation.² Certainly it is necessary to see the *Confessions* in its various literary and historical contexts, as a demonology, a romantic novel, a religious satire, to name a few recent ap-

proaches.³ But with the possible exception of John Joseph Haggerty,⁴ no one has looked closely enough at how the narrative voices control the reader's response. Louis Simpson's *James Hogg: A Critical Study*, which might be expected to treat narrative technique, simply offers a plot summary.⁵ And even David Eggenschwiler's extremely useful article suffers occasionally by de-emphasizing the editor's presence as a biased narrator. To be sure, in one sense "it does not matter" whether the apparition appearing to George on Arthur's Seat can be "accounted for scientifically,"⁶ but it is imperative that the reader recognize the editor's desire to so explain the phenomenon. The point is not whether Gil-Martin is a visitor from hell, a tangible projection of Robert's subconscious, or both, but how his evil nature can be recognized and resisted.⁷ Inasmuch as he represents the concrete power of evil, Gil-Martin is more than one man's delusion.

Not only the editor but all of the novel's narrative voices reveal or test certain criteria for recognition of evil. Roughly divided into four levels according to the duration of their parts of the story, the voices are: Robert Colwan, the editor, Mrs. Logan and Bell Calvert, and minor characters (Bessy, John Barnet, Samuel Scrape). These minor characters are narrative voices because their words pass through but do not seem to be altered by another consciousness (the editor's or Robert's) and because their judgments are neither questioned nor verbally undercut. Moreover, they all speak Scots and are shown superior to forms of English-speaking authority which the reader can recognize as incompetent or untrustworthy.⁸ Since "Hogg" also speaks in Scots and is in a similar position with respect to the editor, having "ither matters to mend" than digging up "hunder-year-auld banes" (p. 247), the Scots voices are perhaps intended to be taken as reliable indicators of right actions and attitudes; certainly any identification with them on the reader's part will not be out of order. Conversely, the laird of Dalcastle and George are not separate narrative voices because of the editor's close identification with them. From the standpoint of the novel's suggested way of knowing evil, they are only what Scholes and Kellogg call "esthetic types . . . [which are] shaped by the purely esthetic exigencies which require the tale to adopt a form capable of satisfying the reader's purely emotional expectations."⁹ These two Colwans serve as the emotional background against which Robert will be viewed, at least in the editor's narrative and the first part of Robert's own, but they do not further the development of the novel's generalized, intellectual meaning.¹⁰

The most important aspect of this meaning is the deceptiveness of visual appearances. Bessy is so scrupulous about her

oath and conscience that she "wad hardly swear to ony thing" being exactly what it seems to be (pp. 67-68). In the eyes of this court, just as for the court which convicts the innocent minister of Rev. Blanchards' murder, similarity is mistakenly equated with identity, while Bessy maintains an inviolable distinction between the two. In matters of life and death appearances must be most carefully questioned, although Bessy does not completely negate the usefulness of appearance. Because she is a comic character in a comic scene, her statement of course cannot be granted much importance except when supported by the rest of the novel. On the other hand, the comedy does not negate the content of her answers to the court; in literature, at least, fools are often wiser than their masters.

The same holds true for John Barnet, whose barbed answers to Rev. Wringhim's interrogation emphasize the difference between reality and appearance. Barnet can draw correct conclusions about a man's worth from the whole of his character rather than from specific aspects of his conduct, and he utilizes this perspicacity and a bit of scripture to expose the selfishness behind the righteous facades of Rev. Wringhim and Robert (pp. 104-105). To be sure, because a man's thoughts "come unasked, and gang away without a dismissal, an' he canna' help them," Barnet admits that the resemblance between Rev. Wringhim and Robert does not prove consanguinity (p. 106), but he still insists on his right to say what he feels: "Auld John may dee a beggar in a hay barn, or at the back of a dike, but he sall aye be master o' his ain thoughts, an' gie them vent or no, as he likes" (p. 107).

Bessy restricts the role of visual certitude; John Barnet says what he feels and not just what he sees. Samuel Scrape reiterates both of these points, the deceptive nature of appearances and the recognition of evil by intuition, and adds a third element to the ideal way of knowing: the danger of "enthusiasm." Robin Ruthven was able to recognize the devilish crows, understand their speech, and finally save the town because he "had been in the hands o' the fairies when he was young," but for the "lean crazy souls" of Auchtermuchty only the visual fact of the cloven hoof could counter their "enthusiasm." This traditional method of recognition unfortunately is no longer viable, but the gentlemanly aspect of Gil-Martin's foot does not prevent Samuel from fleeing when Gil-Martin actually crosses the threshold of Robert's chamber for the first time (p. 207). Samuel's diction shifts from Scots to literary English as he narrates the townspeople's reaction to Robin's first warnings; the contrast further emphasizes their inability and unwillingness to perceive, as Robin could, "the ruinous tendency of the tenets so sublimely inculcated" (p.

202). Robert senses the similarities between the residents of Auchtermuchty and himself but is not about to take "a fool's idle tale as a counterbalance to divine revelation"; Gil-Martin is not "intentionally bad" but has been "led astray by enthusiasm, or some overpowering passion" (pp. 203-204).

Impressions, however confusing, are important; both Mrs. Logan and Bell Calvert emphasize their absolute dependence on their senses (pp. 80, 85), and they hope to have Robert convicted by the testimony of one who can never forget a face. Bell realizes that the witness's infallible visual memory could also be used against Drummond, but she knows that the fiend accompanying Robert could not have been Drummond. Despite their identical appearance, her "impression of the moment" was that she "looked upon some spirit, or demon, in his likeness" (p. 74). Neither woman is able to make sense out of the contradictory visual facts, although they accept without hesitation the importance of the strange "impressions" they feel upon perceiving Robert Colwan's companion. They finally attribute the event to God's subversion of "the order of nature" (p. 90); they cannot imagine actual situations in which intuition is more to be trusted than visual impressions, but they will not deny that such situations can exist.

Unlike these two women, whose voices operate only within the novel, the editor is consciously addressing his readers; his expressed confusion and apparent unreliability therefore do not just affect the facts of the story but can stimulate in the reader an awareness of the novel's emphasis on intuition as a means of knowing evil. Indeed, John Carey notes that "the balance of the work requires that the editor's prejudices should be, in their way, as warping as Wringhim's"; we are not to equate Hogg with the editor.¹¹

The editor's final attitude toward the factuality of the story is worth quoting at length:

I believe no person, man or woman, will ever peruse it with the same attention that I have done, and yet I confess that I do not comprehend the writer's drift. It is certainly impossible that these scenes could ever have occurred . . . the numerous distorted traditions, etc., which remain of that event may be attributable to the work having been printed and burnt, and of course the story known to all the printers, with their families and gossips. . . . Were the relation at all consistent with reason, it corresponds so minutely with traditionary facts that it could scarcely have missed to have been received as authentic; but in this day, and with the present generation, it will not go down that a man should be daily tempted by the Devil, in the semblance

of a fellow-creature . . . (pp. 253-254).

How can the editor's claim of close attention to the narrative be reconciled with the obvious factual inconsistencies between narrative and tradition?¹² It is begging the question to assume, as Robert Adams does, that these contradictions are the result of authorial "untidiness" and therefore need not be accounted for by a critical study.¹³ In fact the editor's explanation that the agreement between pamphlet and tradition resulted from gossip handed down for over one hundred years cannot stand up against one point, the spatial position, of the fiend, which is too exact to be anything other than truth. George wonders how the "evil genius in the shape of his brother" not only predicts his motions but always appears "in the same habit, form, and demeanour, and precise point of distance," at his right side a few yards away (pp. 36-37). At the same time, during his month-long illness Robert always conceives himself to be two other persons, Gil-Martin and his brother, one of whom is in a constant position with regard to him, three paces away on his left side (p. 154). Together the two descriptions imply that the fiend is not just the spiritual point of contact between the brothers but is physically associated with them in some unexplained way. The concurrence between the recently unearthed pamphlet and the detail (whether traditional or derived from documents of the time) of the fiend's position at George's right side argues most convincingly for the existence of a level of extra-rational experience of which the editor cannot or will not conceive.

The editor's conclusion, then, with its references to "impossible" scenes and distorted traditions, its failure to note discrepancies, and its emphasis on factual agreement, lays bare his didactic intent, an intent which has been present since the first page of his narrative. On the surface he is a historian or reporter, referring to sources and witnesses, but his character descriptions carefully establish Robert Colwan as the antinomian most to be hated. Lady Dalcastle is portrayed with cutting but not vicious satire; she is little more than a fool, with no power for evil. With Rev. Wringhim, a greater force for evil because involved in national politics, the editor's dislike is more pronounced, revealing itself in exaggeration ("the great divine," p. 47) and metaphorical demeaning (Wringhim as a yelping terrier, p. 20). With Robert the editor forgets the pity which he seemed to feel for him as a child (pp. 18-19) and loses all restraint and sense of humor, resorting to name-calling and to expressions of moral outrage. These effects begin to occur when Robert disrupts the tennis game and makes a "spurn at [George] with his foot, which, if it had hit to its aim, would undoubtedly have finished the

course of the young laird of Dalcastle and Balgrennan" (p. 23).

But could this kick, the "obstreperous interloper's" first overtly evil action in the editor's narrative, be potentially more "deadly" than George's answering blow with his racket? The editor is willing to forgive any act of George, no matter how bloody, especially when the hero manfully begs his victim's pardon, while anything Robert does is the act of an "unaccountable monster." If, as the editor concludes, Robert did not murder his brother or his mother, the suicide's memoir is pure delusion, but even delusion can be dangerously convincing. The only way to account for the editor's hatred of a dead man, however despicable his life was, is to regard the attitude as a pose. The editor could not just offer the pamphlet without comment to his readers; no reasonable man would believe that Robert was deceived and controlled by a demon calling himself Gil-Martin, but not all men are reasonable. Thus the editor introduces the suicide's pamphlet with a narrative which shows Robert in the worst possible light and which counteracts any subversive sympathy the reader might feel for the wretch as he is finally driven to take his own life. Biasing the first part of his narrative so that the reader will react with the proper outrage to the suicide's memoirs and the religious fanaticism in general, the editor can conclude by disavowing the tale's factuality, having made his point without cost to his pose as a reasonable man. While Mrs. Calvert and Mrs. Logan can only explain apparent violations of the natural order by attributing the events to divine intervention, the editor avoids accepting a force outside the perceivable world which could have entangled Robert in such heinous crimes.¹⁴

Thus, unless we assume that the editor changes his mind about his material, the only way to reconcile his concluding position with his statement that Robert's narrative is "of higher value than anything that can be retailed out of the stores of tradition and old registers" (p. 45) is to realize that the value referred to is didactic rather than factual; "it was judged expedient to give the account as thus publicly handed down to us" (p. 48). The editor's emphasis on facts and his "predominantly logical and direct" prose¹⁵ are only intended to disguise his guidance of the reader to the proper awareness of Robert's perverted beliefs. Only to this extent is the novel a satire on antinomianism, Donald Mack's assertion notwithstanding.¹⁶

In Robert Colwan's narrative the limitations of a way of knowing which does not allow intuition are shown in their most damning extreme. According to Ian Campbell, "the author's relationship to his readers is made precise and controllable by his ability to forecast their reaction to [the] technically precise Biblical and doctrinal points imbedded in the narration

of the *Confessions*.¹⁷ Campbell refers specifically to the contrast of Robert's "low and mean interest with the sublime New Testament ideas he is echoing," especially those of Revelations 4 and 5 and Acts 11:4-10.¹⁸ Readers will recognize that Rev. Wringhim's utterance, "Woman, hold thy peace! . . . thou pretendest to teach what thou knowest not" (p. 121), is inverted; "we, the audience, know the minister to be wrong . . . the fabric of authority, conveyed by words and use of pulpit language, is undermined by the author."¹⁹ The undermining is continued in Gil-Martin's words, since he can use "religious speech . . . to convey the opposite meaning to the truthful one, without in any way departing from the truth."²⁰

Less specific but just as important are the repetitions of words and recurrence of images. It is of great thematic significance that Gil-Martin speaks only of a god of wrath and never of Christ, the spirit of forgiveness.²¹ Further, a reader sensitized to multiple levels of meaning by Robert's constant inversion of good and evil will not only recognize the allegorical quality of Robert's entrapment in the weaver's web and his rescue by a compassionate woman (p. 216) but will note the echoes of this event in the journal entry of 8 September 1712, in which he writes of being hung over a real chasm, tormented, and set at "liberty" when he utters the "tremendous Prayer" taught him by his friend (p. 239). The words seem "equivocal, and susceptible of being rendered in a meaning perfectly dreadful," but as usual he yields to Gil-Martin's reasoning (p. 238). With this prayer Robert surrenders the last of his free will and seals his damnation.

Robert is not completely evil, but his human instincts are thwarted by his worldly desires and religious beliefs. He is guided by rhetoric rather than reason, but to him this rhetoric is reasonable, first because it is based on what seems a tangible fact, that no past or future act can erase his name from "the Lamb's book of life" (p. 115), and second because it agrees with his desire for power and position in his life on earth. He follows Gil-Martin's suggestions because he has convinced himself the stranger is "none other than the Czar Peter of Russia" and has "great and mighty hopes of high preferment . . . under the influence of this great potentate" (p. 130). Like the editor, he substitutes rationalization for the critical faculty of reason. Because his subjective view of the world has this air of reason, he repeatedly misjudges evil while ignoring his intuition. The source of this extrarational faculty is never made clear but is certainly not the metaphorical "heart," which is usually referred to in the context of hatred or fear and most often with a prepositional phrase: "from that moment [when George strikes him with his racket] I vowed his destruction in my heart" (p. 149). Intu-

ition is a mysterious force and can never be localized even metaphorically; Robert is "several times seized with an involuntary inclination to escape from [Gil-Martin's] presence" (p. 118).

Robert's particular failing is that he can only move in one direction, against social, legal, and human laws; he cannot accept his intuition as viable, because it contradicts the apparent fact of his justification. He makes the mistake cautioned against by Bessy when he allows Rev. Wringhim to make it plain to his "senses of perception" that Laird Colwan and George are "beings given up of God . . . and that *whosoever* should slay them, would do God good service" (p. 151); perceptions are not to be entrusted with moral judgments of such an absolute nature. He asks too much of his weakened reason: "I tried to ascertain, to my own satisfaction, whether or not I had been commissioned of God to perpetrate these crimes in his behalf" (p. 157). Gil-Martin's rhetoric overcomes both intuition and reason, turning Robert from the right-sounding admonishment of the lady in white who appears during this moment of struggle, and Robert is able to subdue his first reaction to his "savage and unnatural" fratricide by "constant thinking" of the act and by the promptings of one who knows "right and wrong" much better than he (pp. 146-147). Robert is the final and most exhaustive test of the method of knowing evil suggested by the novel; his fall proves the weakness of reason, which can be subverted by appearances, biases, and faulty or non-existent self-examination. The best way to recognize evil is by trusting to intuition.

The framing of Robert's narrative by the editor allows the reader to experience as well as to perceive this truth. In a useful insight into the novel's conclusion, Eggenschwiler observes that Robert may get the reader's sympathy, even though he does not deserve it, because in the end he is a "real man among demons. . . . The way out of that nightmare world of psychosis and hatred may begin with a forgiveness that cannot be deserved, that can only be given."²² The editor's concluding scorn of the sinner underlines the necessity for reconciliation and forgiveness.²³

Likewise, the editor's unhealthy, almost Gothic interest in facts and curiosities, as revealed in his detailed discussion of the exhumation, stands in stark contrast to Robert's highly emotional final state. Remember that after Robert flees Dalcastle there is no prior information against which to judge his narrative. From this point on, as the reader recognizes each inversion of good and evil he is himself operating on a pseudo-intuition, an increasingly automatic, reflex-like awareness of the multiple meanings in Robert's and Gil-Martin's statements. The reader's experience parallels that of Robert

by inverting each of the latter's judgments and thus establishes by implication the system of values and perceptions suggested by the two lesser narrative-voice levels and violated by the editor. When Robert at last sees his true fate, the reader's expectation of this fate is fulfilled, and the primacy of intuition as a means of knowing evil is confirmed. "The hour of repentance is past," but for the first time in his narrative Robert uses "repentance" to mean turning to God rather than from Him to Gil-Martin's damning tenets (p. 240). Although to the end he fails to recognize who the Prince is, Robert has finally recognized the evil of his "illustrious friend"; his inversion of good and evil is righted.

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NOTES

1. James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. John Carey (London, 1969), pp. 251, 245. This edition will be cited throughout.

2. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), especially the "Preface."

3. See L. L. Lee, "The Devil's Figure: James Hogg's Justified Sinner," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 3 (1966), 230-39; Teut Riese, "James Hogg und der Roman der englischen Romantik," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 3 (1961), 145-64; Donald Mack, "Hogg's Religion and *The Confessions*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 7 (1970), 272-75.

4. "James Hogg's *Private Memoirs*, . . . Background, Text, and Analysis," *Dissertations Abstracts International*, 31 (1970), 758A (University of Illinois, 1969). Haggerty discusses the authorship of the *Private Memoirs*, the history of antinomianism, the editions and revisions of the novel, and Hogg's use of the *Doppelgänger* motif. He reclassifies the novel as an "anti-romance" after an analysis of the treatment of evil, use of structure, prose style, characterizations, and narrative.

5. *James Hogg: A Critical Study* (N. Y., 1962). Simpson's statement that "it is by the development of the Sinner's principles in action that he himself is developed" (p. 186) is

hardly sufficient justification for such an approach.

6. David Eggenschwiler, "James Hogg's *Confessions* and the Fall into Division," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 9 (1971), 31.

7. Lee, pp. 233-34, 238. Lee sees the *Private Memoirs* as a "watershed between two novelistic, perhaps artistic attitudes toward the Devil," Gothic demon against "demonic human" (p. 230); the novel's ambiguity of attitude is "essential to Hogg's vision of evil" (p. 231). See also Williston Russell Benedict, "A Study of the 'Second Self' in James Hogg's Fiction, with Reference to its Employment in German Romantic Literature," *Dissertations Abstracts International*, 34 (1973), 2606A (Columbia, 1973).

8. John Carey, "Introduction" to the *Confessions*, pp. xv-xvi.

9. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (N. Y., 1966), pp. 99-100.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

11. Carey, p. xiv. It is useful here to remember Hogg's difficulties with *Blackwood's*; he had good reason to portray editors as liars and forgers. See Carey, pp. xix-xx.

12. Carey, pp. xiv-xv; Lee, p. 233, n. 9.

13. "Introduction," *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. Robert M. Adams (N. Y., 1970), pp. xiii-xiv.

14. Riese, pp. 149, 153.

15. Frederick Burwick, "Associationist Rhetoric and Scottish Prose Style," *Speech Monographs*, 34 (1967), 31.

16. Mack, p. 274.

17. "Author and Audience in Hogg's *Confessions* . . .," *Scottish Literary News*, 4 (1972), 76.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-73.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

21. Lee, p. 247.
22. Eggenschwiler, p. 38.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.