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Douglas Jones

Double Jeopardy and the Chameleon Art in  
James Hogg's *Justified Sinner*



Critics of James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* have often cited Coleman Parson's observation that, for Hogg, the supernatural is "a corridor leading to the ultimate strangeness, that the individual is both tempter and tempted."<sup>1</sup> The (critical) temptation which follows is that of treating Gil-Martin as Robert Wringhim's psychological double, and the text as a tension between supernatural and psychological explanations for the action. Such a reading is not implausible. But locating *Justified Sinner* within a Romantic/psychological doppelganger tradition is finally too *easy*--and to say that the story teeters on the edge of fantasy is to miss much of its suggestiveness. As Robert Kiely notes, "[Wringhim's] damnation and his intercourse with a diabolical double are not metaphors for his madness, they are its complements. To address oneself to the psychological aspects of Robert's Memoir is not a way of solving the mystery but a way of describing one of its manifestations."<sup>2</sup> The double--whether demon or projection--is finally an *emblem*, symptomatic of a more general (and disturbing) duplicity: his "chameleon art" raises fundamental questions about the problem of evil, the untruth of experience, and the central "Lie" of doctrine.<sup>3</sup> Gil-Martin is a door opening onto that strange corridor--in the end, perhaps, a revolving door. But the end of the corridor is

not in sight. As Kiely concludes, "the disturbing question remains: is Robert's version of things an appalling deviation from nature, or is it a reflection of an even more appalling, because general, truth?"<sup>4</sup>

Proponents for the psychoanalytic reading have included Andre Gide, who posits that the power which sets Gil-Martin in action "is always of a psychological nature . . . .Hence the profound teaching of this strange book, the fantastic part of which (except in the last pages) is always psychologically explicable, without having recourse to the supernatural."<sup>5</sup> He likens Hogg's accomplishment in this respect to Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*. Elsewhere Gide declares that Robert "is not mad," but "possessed." It amounts to the same thing; and Gide's final verdict on *The Turn of the Screw* leaves little doubt as to which interpretation he prefers for *Justified Sinner*:

. . . the whole portion of the tale in which the sense seems to incline towards a supernatural interpretation is, in reality, only the natural effect of the governess's derangement.

Indeed, Gide's only criticism of *Justified Sinner* is that, "regrettably," its last pages lapse into events "less naturally explicable."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Edith Birkhead calls *Justified Sinner* the "account of a man afflicted with religious mania"; Masao Miyoshi observes that Wringhim "is quite patently out of his mind"; and Ian Campbell, citing Robert's belief that Gil-Martin is the Czar in disguise, wryly suggests that "no further comment on Robert's intelligence is necessary." "It seems perfectly reasonable," Barbara Bloede concludes (in a paper given at the James Hogg Society's first conference), "to try to disengage the salient facts about the onset and development of Robert Wringhim's madness in the light of modern understanding of the etiology of mental illness."<sup>7</sup>

Pursuing the troublesome sense in which Robert may be "out" of his mind, David Eggenschwiller locates Gil-Martin firmly within a psychological doppelganger tradition: the "opposing halves" of Robert's psyche are "externalized into the religious stranger and the carnal brother," and Robert is "caught as a passive agent between his own flesh and his own spiritual devil." After killing George--the "emblem of the sinful, carnal self"--Robert inherits his father's estate and yields to "his repressed longings . . . [spending] months at a time in drunken, sensual debauches. Following these

periods he would return to his stringent, puritanical self, remembering nothing that had happened."<sup>8</sup> Like Edward Hyde (or "Mrs. Bates"), Robert's secret/predatory self slips out and commits crimes without his consciousness of them; like Henry Jekyll (or Norman), Robert must answer for these crimes when the authorities arrive. The "interpretive gamble" of the story, then, is the tension between Gil-Martin as a "Hyde"-like or "Mother"-like projection: i.e., a preternatural reality or a psychological construct.<sup>9</sup>

Other critics have offered biographical reasons for Hogg's interest in doubles. Louis Simpson cites a "James Hog" who figured prominently in an antinomian controversy at or near the time of *Justified Sinner's* setting; perhaps, he suggests, Hogg felt "personally confronted with . . . [this] antinomian spectre bearing his name, and was obliged to exorcise it."<sup>10</sup> John Carey cites Hogg's own *Hunt of Eildon*, in which a shepherd "finds himself turned into a pig (Hogg's nickname among the literati) and rushes about 'trying to escape from himself.'"<sup>11</sup> Certainly Hogg was haunted by a kind of *literary* doppelganger: in 1822, members of the *Blackwood's* group created an alter-ego for him, a buffoonish shepherd who began appearing in that magazine's *Noctes Ambrosianae* series.<sup>12</sup> Thus Hogg's appearance as a character in *Justified Sinner*, while no less effective, is rather less surprising; like Robert Wringhim, Hogg knew from experience what it was to "have been doing a thing and not doing it at the same time" (p. 160).<sup>13</sup>

Finally, of course, the story itself is obsessed with doubles. It is told twice. Robert conceives himself "to be two people" (p. 139). George suspects from the beginning that he is "haunted by some evil genius in the shape of his brother, as well as by that dark and mysterious wretch himself" (p. 43). Samuel Scrape tells Robert that "the deil's often seen gaun sidie for sidie w'ye . . . an' they say that he whiles takes your ain shape"; Mrs. Logan believes that Gil-Martin and George "are one and the same being . . . [or] the one [is] a prototype of the other"; and Gil-Martin himself proclaims that "we are all subjected to two distinct natures in the same person" (pp. 177, 83, 174). Other characters are doubled: Arabella Logan and Arabella Calvert are particularly suspect, and extras like "William Shiel and W. Sword" or "Mr. L--t" and "Mr. L--w" always travel in pairs. There is a playful language of "doubleness" throughout: Robert roars "with redoubled energy," receives a "double" reward (or is judged "doubly guilty"), and entangles himself in the "double warpings" of a loom (for which "the

weaver's wrath [is] doubled in proportion"); his clothes are stolen by his double, "though under double lock and key"; and he objects at length that Gil-Martin's counsels, "if not double . . . [are] amazingly crooked" (pp. 40,105,187,195-6,198,185). "I was as one beside himself," Robert exclaims at one point, apparently oblivious to the "double" sense of his confession; there is no reason to suppose Hogg incapable of the pun (p. 126).

But as Nelson Smith objects, explaining Gil-Martin as "the evil side of Robert's character," a "Jungian shadow," or the "external manifestation of Robert's guilt," is finally too *easy*: "effective as this psychological doubling is, there can be little doubt that Hogg does not wish to explain away Gil-Martin's physical reality."<sup>14</sup> "A great number of people now-a-days are beginning broadly to insinuate that there are no such things as ghosts, or spiritual beings," Hogg writes in "The Mysterious Bride"; "The bodies are daft." Simpson argues convincingly for Hogg's apparent belief in the supernatural; Robert's deterioration may be depicted with "startlingly 'modern' touches," he concludes, but Hogg "has no reason to pretend the Devil is unreal. We may prefer the Devil to be explained as an hallucination, but Hogg has no such preference."<sup>15</sup>

Preferences aside, a psychological interpretation fails to account adequately for Gil-Martin's *function* in the novel. It is not his "physical reality" so much as his diabolical capacity which is at stake. F.R. Hart makes the point forcefully:

Sometimes Hogg's sinner is sure that 'I have two souls, which take possession of my bodily frame by turns,' and the Devil confirms the doctrine. But that is the point: the doctrine is diabolic and by no means the whole truth . . . . It is crucial to diabolic possession in Hogg that possession is not mere "doubling"--that the self is possessed by an Other, that the story draws partly on the primitive fear of being bewitched, possessed . . . of being robbed of one's identity.

In this way Hogg's diabolism is "significantly different from the repressed, sadistic sublimity of the Miltonic or 'sensibility' Gothic." Hart goes on to argue that Hogg represents a distinctively *Scottish* Gothic, a mixture of a "terrible theological monomania with a grotesque folk diabolism" which owes as much to Hoffmann's "newly imported

macabre" as to the more familiar "psychologized" doubles of English Gothicism.<sup>16</sup>

Hogg's "grotesque" conflation of theology with folklore makes for horrific comedy. Yeats has written that folktales "are successions of pictures like those seen by children in the fire . . . Everything seems possible to [country folk], and because they can never be surprised, they imagine the most surprising things."<sup>17</sup> Thus when Mrs. Keeler screams that Robert Wringhim's friend is really his brother's spirit, the attorney replies, "Impossible! . . . At least, I hope not, else his signature is not worth a pin" (p. 162). Linton's announcement that the Devil has "inquired" about Robert at the office evokes an exchange which is part comedy, part genuine terror:

"Surely you are not such a fool," said [Robert], "as to believe that the Devil really was in the printing office?"

"Ooo, Gud bless you, sir! Saw him myself; gave him a nod, and good-day. Rather a gentlemanly personage-- Green Circasian hunting coat and turban--Like a foreigner--Has the power of vanishing in one moment though--Rather a suspicious circumstance that. Otherwise, his appearance was not much against him." (p. 202)

For Robert, the report has ominous implications. For Linton, Gil-Martin's vanishing act is a detail in a set of equivalences--"suspicious," perhaps, but not more remarkable than the green hunting coat.

Yet the collision behind such comedy is serious enough. The elder George warns his new wife that single-minded "religious devotion" is prone to caricature:

Allowing that it is ever so beautiful, and ever so beneficial, were we to ride on the rigging of it at all times, would we not be constantly making a farce of it: It would be like reading the Bible and the jest-book, verse about, and would render the life of man a medley of absurdity and confusion. (p. 6)

Robert acts on the principle, and spoils his brother's tennis match by repeating a player's comment--"That's a d--d fine blow, George!"--at every stroke, thereby "making such a ludicrous use of it that several of the onlookers were compelled to laugh . . . [and rendering] their game

ridiculous" (p. 22). Robert's ironic refrain is finally as inappropriate as Lady Dalcastle's endless devotions on her wedding night. "Hers were not the tenets of the great reformers," Hogg's fictional editor remarks, "but theirs mightily overstrained and deformed" (p. 4). Apparently deformity is the spirit of the times: thus Samuel Scrape's suspicion that the Devil is "often driven to the shift o' preaching [the gospel] himsel, for the purpose o' getting some wrang tenets introduced into it, and thereby turning it into blasphemy and ridicule" (p. 178).

The "turning" of gospel is the antinomian threat. In a sermon on Deism, Hogg warns that it is best "always to avoid any attempt to explain [Christian] mysteries. The necessity and belief of a mystery is one thing, but the explanation is another."<sup>18</sup> Antinomian doctrine concerns itself with such explanations, "splitting the doctrines of Calvin into thousands of indistinguishable films" and "making distinctions in religion where none existed" (pp. 15,17). As Mr. Blanchard warns Robert, "there is not an error into which a man can fall which he may not press Scripture into his service as a proof of the probity of" (p. 120). Gil-Martin persuades Robert to murder Mr. Blanchard by arguing that "if saved, he is only exchanging his situation for a better one; and if unworthy, it is better that he fall" (p. 122). This is the logic of dunking witches--what Douglas Gifford calls "the central 'Lie'" of the novel, an untruth "which lies at the heart of Christian theology, and allows for the whole fabric of 'justified' egotism and social evil to result."<sup>19</sup> The old Calvinist rhyme--that you are damned if you do, and damned if you don't--is perfectly equivocal: like Gil-Martin's "two-edged sword," a weapon which can cut either way.

Thus Robert plays Devil's advocate to Gil-Martin more literally than he knows, positing his own damnation to be reassured of justification. L.L. Lee points out that it is *Robert*, after all, "who dresses in black, becoming the Black Man, the traditional figure of the Devil"; in a sense, he resembles the Devil more than the Devil resembles himself--or as much as he resembles anyone else.<sup>20</sup>

The "doubleness" of Robert's instructor reflects the *duplicity* of doctrine: a conception of evil peculiarly intellectual, and perhaps (as Hart maintains) distinctively Scottish. In the Scotland of *Justified Sinner*, doctrine is *double talk*--like Macbeth's witches, Gil-Martin parleys "in a double sense"--and the lies Robert "frames" as a child are early exercises in self-justification (and the "framing" of

innocent bystanders). As a boy, Robert is taught to pray that the old laird (a man "all over spotted with the leprosy of sin") might be "cut off in the full flush of his iniquity, and be carried quick into hell"; and that young George "might also be taken from a world he disgraced, but that his sins might be pardoned, because he knew no better" (pp. 89,19). The laird's leprous condition recalls the "lazar-like" body of Hamlet's father, "cut off even in the blossoms of [his] sin"; the double standard echoes the same ghost's commission to young Hamlet, who may damn his adoptive father but must leave his mother "to Heaven."<sup>21</sup> Like Hamlet, Robert receives a supernatural license to kill; like Hamlet, he is instructed in equivocal terms. Like Hamlet, too, he comes to suspect that his instructor is not "spirit of health," but a "goblin damned." But of course this intelligence comes too late: only at the end does Robert object to Gil-Martin's counsels as "equivocal, and susceptible of being rendered in a meaning perfectly dreadful" (p. 215). Such has been the case all along; but Robert has finally recognized that Gil-Martin's words--like the weapons he sees "descending out of Heaven"--are turned against him.

Gil-Martin can "turn" Scripture to his advantage because antinomian reasoning is circular. Similarly, Robert is *possessed* "by turns." Indeed, there are probably more "turnings" in *Justified Sinner* than in *The Turn of the Screw*--some form of the word appears at least sixty eight times in the text--and the cumulative effect of these "many turnings" is to describe the novel's characteristic motion: that is, movement *in a circle*. Robert complains that his mind is kept "in a state of agitation resembling the motion of a whirlpool" (p. 108). As his world collapses, he writes: "[I was] revolving in my mind what I ought to do to be free . . . driven to my wits' end, I got up and strode furiously round an' round the room" (pp. 186-7). Similarly, the apparition of "Welldean Hall" reduces the doctor to "walking round and round the library"; the circular movement of *Justified Sinner* also recalls *The Three Perils of Women*, the pervasively circular (and rather inferior) novel Hogg wrote a year or so before *Justified Sinner*--the chapters are even called "Circles."<sup>22</sup>

Antinomianism is finally a trap, a kind of revolving endgame. Robert believes that he slays according to God's will, since those he slays are sinners. But the *turn* of this particular screw, of course, is that Robert may be *sinning* according to God's will, precisely because he is predestined to be *damned*. If doctrine is reversible, so is destiny; if



predestination is true, there is no end to causality. Robert would like to occupy a privileged position on the periphery of the system: he wants to serve God, but without being used; he wants to move freely through a kind of spiritual freeze frame. Maybe there is no other way to be "free" in such a system. But the last person to see him alive witnesses Robert's failure to escape from the wheel:

. . . when he first came into view, he could almost give his oath that he saw two people busily engaged at the hayrick going round and round it. (p. 219)

L.L. Lee concludes that the novel's meaning is summed up in that image of two revolving figures. Probably the novel doesn't have a meaning which can be summed up in an image. But the image is a powerful one. Christ has no part in the Christianity of Hogg's Scotland. Robert is never really offered a way *out* of the Calvinist trap: he is condemned to run round and round the hayrick, pursued and/or pursuing, damned and/or justified. We feel a kind of sympathy for him, rather like that we feel for Tony Perkins in *Psycho*--he too is a victim, trapped in his own psychodrama. David Eggenchwiler suggests that "Robert does not deserve our sympathy . . . but that may be exactly the point. 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."<sup>23</sup> Robert finds kindness--eventually--in the generosity of those who shelter him for a time; whether or not he finds forgiveness cannot be known, and is probably irrelevant to the theology which has produced him.

The problem of what *can* be known--like the "central lie" of doctrine--is a major concern of the text. Again, the scene at the hayrick is suggestive: what first appears to be two people running around it proves instead to be the hanged body of Robert Wringhim. It would seem difficult to mistake the one for the other. Perhaps the witness looked away for a moment; perhaps he is lying. The alternative--that he reports faithfully what he has seen--raises an epistemological question. What can we know, in a world where "untruth" includes the potential for demonism and deceit?

Hogg's characters employ a variety of epistemological methods. The old laird, waking from a dream, is temporarily confused; but "at length, by tracing out a regular chain of events, [he] came to be sensible of his real situation" (p. 8). Mrs. Logan exercises a similarly straightforward reasoning process: "she had hopes of having discovered a

clue, which, if she could keep hold of the thread, would lead her through darkness to the light of truth" (p. 53). The two are empirical detectives: good scientists, seeking to isolate the strands of experience which *mean*.

Other characters are more intuitive, utilizing a kind of holistic folk-wisdom. Thus when Reverend Wringhim (ready for a good bout of "hair-splitting") demands to know which "part" of his conduct has led his servant John to a derogatory conclusion, John counters by changing the rules: "nae particular pairt, sir; I draw a' my conclusions frae the haill o' a man's character, an' I'm no that aften far wrang" (p. 95). Similarly, Bessie Gillie subverts the court with her common sense. Hogg's fiction is filled with such Scots characters, who display an intuitive grasp of the truth behind appearances. Robin Ruthven, in the Auchtermuchty episode, has "rather mae wits than his ain" because the fairies have made "a' kinds o' spirits . . . visible to his een"--thus he sees past the stranger's disguise and, "with the greatest readiness and simplicity," reveals the Devil's cloven foot (pp. 180,183). Bell Calvert, too, relies upon "impressions," arguing that "we have nothing on earth but our senses to depend on; if these deceive us, what are we to do?" (p. 73).

She has anticipated the problem. Appearances deceive, and intuition is perhaps the better means for recognizing evil--but like reason, intuition is subject to enthusiasm, and is as potentially contagious as the religious madness at Auchtermuchty. Bell Logan and Bell Calvert's "heated imaginations" contain the germ of mob mentality. Thus the landlady, entering the room, catches "the infection":

"It *is* he!" cried Mrs. Logan, hysterical.

"Yes, yes, it *is* he!" cried the landlady, in unison.

"It is who?" said Mrs. Calvert. "Whom do you mean, mistress?"

"Oh, I don't know! I don't know! I was affrighted."

"Hold your peace then till you recover your senses, and tell me, if you can, who that young gentleman is who keeps company with the new Laird of Dalcastle?"

"Oh, it is he! It is he!" screamed Mrs. Logan, wringing her hands.

"Oh, it is he! It is he!" cried the landlady, wringing hers. (p. 77)

Impressionism leads to impressionableness in a manner which recalls the "temporary madness" (and mistaken identities) of the Black Bull riot: already the women are "wringing" their hands in anticipation of what they will do to *Wringhim*. "The thing cannot be," Mrs. Calvert says, backpedalling briefly: "it is a phantasy of our disturbed imaginations." But her own words return to haunt her: "As you said," Mrs. Logan counters, "we have nothing but our senses to depend on . . . [and] whose word, or whose reasoning can convince us against our own senses?" (p. 78). What is "sensible" or "reasonable" is no longer clear; and for the rest of the night "their conversation was wholly about the dead, who seemed to be alive, and their minds were wandering and groping in a chaos of mystery" (p. 77). Mrs. Logan has fallen rather considerably from her high intention of following "a clue . . . through darkness to the light of truth."

The more rigorously scientific methods fail as well. Reverend Wringhim claims to have discovered "eight different kinds of faith, all perfectly distinct . . . but [Rabina Colwan] had discovered other five, making twelve in all" (p. 13). There is no need to apologize for Hogg's math: the point is that Wringhim's sort of "hair-splitting" *fails to add up*; "overstrained" reasoning produces "pairs" unequal to the "hail." Robert himself is "possessed of strong and brilliant parts" (p. 190). If impressionism leads to mobs, scientific method leads to executions, and to the cold, partial logic of Robert's calling.

Of course, these are examples of methods "mightily overstrained, and deformed." But Bell Calvert's concern--"if [our senses] deceive us, what are we to do?"--suggests that there may be more levels of untruth, or "unknowing," than there are means for knowing. At the most rudimentary level of perception, we may be unable to see what happens--thus Robert complains, "I had a full view of part of what passed, though not all" (p. 128). Or we may be unsure what we have seen, or unable to understand it. Bell Calvert's account of George's murder is filled with such uncertainty, and her confusion is echoed syntactically:

Young Dalcastle either had a decided advantage over his adversary, or else *the other* thought proper to let him have it; for he shifted, and wore, and flitted from Dalcastle's thrusts like a shadow, uttering ofttimes a sarcastic laugh, that seemed to provoke *the other*. (p. 71, my underlining)

The designation of "other" has "shifted" almost imperceptibly from Gil-Martin to George--a *syntactical* turning.

Or we may be unable even to remember what we know. "I think it was said to me," the editor begins at one point; elsewhere, Samuel Scrape's advice to Robert involves a similar failure: "There is a gouden rule whereby to detect [evil], an' that never, never fails. The auld witch didna gie me the rule, an' though I hae heard tell o't often an' often, shame fa' an I ken what it is" (pp. 50, 184). Perhaps the rule is as good as he says--but not if he can't remember it.

Hogg's narrative instructs repeatedly that all experience is subjective--that a dozen witness to the same event will narrate it a dozen different ways. (Thus, "several people happened to mention [him] . . . but at the same time they all described him differently" p. 117.) This is bad enough. It is further complicated by a second, *conceptive* level of untruth, where psychology, deceit, and repression come into play. We may lie to others; we may be duped by them; we may lie to ourselves. Lee notes, for example, that it is apparently "a psychological necessity for Robert not to remember that he has stabbed his brother in the back," while Bell Calvert admits George's advantage over his adversary might not be what it seems.<sup>24</sup> A similar uncertainty strings Robert along to his damnation.

But the problem of knowing is infinitely complicated by a third level of untruth: the existence of *demonism*, and a "Prince" of *lies*. All the common sense and folk wisdom and intuition in the world are not enough to combat a Devil whose "chameleon art" enables him to shift his shape at will. Robin Ruthven may have glimpsed his cloven hoof; but the Devil seems to have learned from that experience, and when Robert examines Gil-Martin's foot he confesses that it is "the foot of a gentleman in every respect, so far as appearances" go (p. 185). In the end, perhaps only Bessie Gillie is cautious enough: when asked to identify items resembling those stolen from his mistress, she objects that "Like is an ill mark . . . I wadna swear to my ain forefinger, if it had been so lang out o' my sight an' brought in an' laid on that table" (p. 62).

Perhaps what is most fascinating about *Justified Sinner* is the failure of its multiple narratives to add up to a whole. Even the novel's earliest critics noted (and complained) that the frame is perversely complex. Robert doesn't understand much of his own story. The author himself is only a disinterested character, and the created "editor"

throws up his hands at the end--"With regard to the work itself," he concludes, "I dare not venture a judgment, for I do not understand it" (p. 229). He *does* venture a few judgments, of course--but we know better than to consider them authoritative. Hogg's interlocking narratives create an illusion of authenticity, but very little *authority*. The author's appearance at the end is rather like Robert's intrusion at the tennis match, and like that intrusion it changes the rules of the game--but Hogg doesn't give us the *new* rules. The narrative itself is a kind of final untruth.

Some critics claim that, in the end, "only the reader can perceive all the facts of the story."<sup>25</sup> But surely even this is overstating the case. Smollett is closer to the "truth" when he writes in *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* that "the violent passions that agitate the human mind . . . are all false perspectives, which though they magnify, yet perplex and render indistinct every object which they represent."<sup>26</sup> Every perspective in *Justified Sinner* is as problematic as Ambrose Bierce's "Moonlit Road," in which the same story is told *three* times--Bierce's last character narrates from beyond the grave, but even her report is fragmentary and inconclusive. We are left in the position of Hogg's editor at the beginning, with a mass of conflicting traditions and testimonies. There is an ironic sense in which Robert himself is finally no more than bits and pieces: "fragments" of cloth distributed among the curious, "some teeth, and part of a pocket-book" (p. 225).

Michael York Mason suggests in a carefully argued essay that "we cannot by any arrangement match the four main kinds of evidence: the traditionary tales . . . the account of an exhumation in Hogg's letter, what the editor finds at the gravesite, and the story in the *Confessions of a Sinner* pamphlet."<sup>27</sup> Like Kiely, Mason argues that in the end "we still do not know if Robert Wringhim killed George Colwan, or even whether the corpse the editor exhumes is that of Robert"; nor can we be sure, Kiely adds, whether George Colwan is dead. Mason proceeds to a fascinating conclusion--that there are in fact *three* graves, and we have no way of knowing who is buried in any of them. The tradition for each is elaborate, and the way "these three versions meet and diverge is as puzzling as the question of the separateness or identity of Robert Wringhim, Gil-Martin, and George Colwan."<sup>28</sup>

That "mysterious central trinity" is a puzzle in its own right.<sup>29</sup> Robert haunts George, then comes to believe he *is* George; Gil-Martin haunts George as Robert, then haunts

Robert as George. Michael Kearns points out that the descriptions of George's "evil genius" (who always appears at his right) and of Robert's "second self" (to his left) place Gil-Martin somewhere between the two; he triangulates them.<sup>30</sup> At Arthur's Seat the configuration changes, or *turns*: now George is at the center, fleeing from one apparition (before him) and colliding with the other (behind). Clearly Robert's possession is more than mere doubling: there are *at least* two of him, and sometimes three. He believes that he is "two people," but writes that "the most perverse part [of that belief] is that I rarely conceived myself to be any of the two . . . I thought for the most part that my companion was one of them, and my brother the other" (p. 140). Thus Robert moves to the center position. Later he complains that "one-half, or two-thirds of my time, seemed to me to be totally lost" (p. 165). Increasingly, his identity is up for grabs: like Reverend Wringhim's calculations, or the story's multiple narratives and graves, Robert's "parts" don't quite add up to "Robert." He calls Gil-Martin that companion "out of whose eye I had now no life"--if we allow the pun, the comment is illustrative, since Robert retains very little "I" of his own (p. 126). Possession by an Other is a kind of dissemination of the self; whether Gil-Martin is double or Devil, it is finally Robert's *identity* which is in jeopardy. "I have three of your letters," Robert's attorney tells him, "and three of your signatures"; presumably he means the same signature in triplicate, but the comment is suggestive (p. 162). Robert's fragmentation is a matter of creating divisions "where none existed"; perhaps, like the doctrine which informs him, he is on the way to "splitting" into a thousand "indistinguishable films."

Robert's multiple possession is a variation on Gil-Martin's "chameleon art of changing [his] appearance," a shape-shifting talent which also characterizes the subjectivity of experience and the splitting of antinomian hairs. "Should any man ever read this scroll," Robert writes, "he will wonder at this confession, and deem it savage and strange. So it appeared to me at first, *but a constant thinking of an event changes every one of its features*" (p. 133, my underlining). Theology, like experience, depends on how you look at it; the chameleon art determines how it looks. Robert discovers something like the art as a child, drawing in M'Gill's account book: "I conceived that I had hit the very features of Mr. Wilson" (p. 100). His mother may have the talent, too--Reverend Wringhim explains that resemblances like that between Robert and

himself "depend much on the thoughts and affections of the mother," going on to share an anecdote about a woman "delivered of a blackamoor child" because she was startled by a negro servant (p. 97).<sup>31</sup> Such an "art" is the nature--or the strategy--or *evil*.

What is finally most uncanny (and perhaps most frightening) about Hogg's Devil is his tendency to reduplicate. Otherness leads to *other* Others: not only can Gil-Martin change his face, he can occupy more than one place (or face) at a time. How many Gil-Martins are there? Every character is suspect: as Gifford notes, "once we are in tune with Hogg's idiom here it is easy to appreciate the sinister implications of that 'stranger' who told George about Robert's presence at the tennis match. Such 'strangers' and 'someones' are key clues in Hogg's supernatural method."<sup>32</sup> Who is the "someone or other," for example, who starts the riot that might have killed George Colwan? Or the unnamed "young spark" who "imprudently" suggests that George and company retire to the brothel where George is later murdered? Or the "man" (later an "artful and consummate fiend") who joins Bell Calvert just in time to witness the duel? Ironically, we are told (two or three times, lest we miss the point) that this fellow's special talent is his inability to forget a face. Bell herself is suspicious: "my head is giddy," she complains, "and I feel as if I were surrounded with fiends. Who are you, sir?" (p. 69). Her "impression" adumbrates Robert's situation at the end.

Even characters whose names we know may not be what they seem: if Gil-Martin can impersonate George or Robert or Blanchard or Drummond, surely he might pass for "young Kilpatrick"--the name is suggestive--or "Adam Gordon," in whom George finds a friend "who entered into all his feelings, and had seen and knew everything" (p. 44).<sup>33</sup> No wonder he can anticipate George's every move: George generally tells *someone* where he's going, and Gil-Martin may be that "someone" at any given moment. *Justified Sinner* really can't be read as a detective novel--there would be no getting all of the suspects into the drawing room. Gil-Martin can split hairs--or Robert's psyche--or himself, infinitely. Bell Calvert sees George killed by a rapier; court testimony gives that it was a "two-edged sword." *Precisely*: Gil-Martin's sword cuts either way, or *both ways at once*. Thus his "low whisper" at the door of the brothel is simultaneously a demand "sharp" enough for Bell to overhear it, across the street and two floors up.

Bell herself may be a devil, or a kind of devil. Her first scene with Mrs. Logan is charged with diabolical hints. Like Gil-Martin, she has been "invisible; a being to be heard of, not seen" (p. 57); like Gil-Martin, she resembles her companion more and more. Mrs. Logan may call her "Miss, mistress, or widow, as you choose, for *I have been all three . . . aye, and something beyond all these*" (p. 56, my emphasis). The claim recalls that "mysterious central trinity." Mrs. Logan asks Bell where she was the night of the murder; "Where the Devil would, I was!" Bell replies, adding, "Ah, it was a vile action! A night to be remembered that was!" She almost seems to be gloating. Later she tells Mrs. Logan, "You must accompany me to the other world" (p. 57). Mrs. Logan at length confesses, "since ever we met, I have been so busy thinking about who you might be that I do not know what you have been proposing" (p. 58). Gil-Martin seduces Robert in much the same way.

And Bell Calvert resembles Robert. She has a special fear of "being hung up," made "a spectacle" of--again, prefiguring what happens to Robert in the weaver's house. Later, when she sees Robert, she makes an unusual confession: "if a demon could inherit flesh and blood, that youth is precisely such a being as I could conceive that demon to be" (p. 82). The temptation is strong to end the sentence with "I could conceive"--even as it reads, the line is pregnant with possibilities. Their names, too, are strangely linked: "Calvert" is Scots Gaelic for "calf-herd"; before he dies, Robert is hired "to herd a stock of young cattle."<sup>34</sup>

This is not to say that Bell Calvert is the Devil, but rather to show the infinite, "chameleon" suggestiveness of the text. Names are telling emblems throughout, beginning with the narrator's opening remarks:

It appears from tradition . . . that the lands of Dalcastle (or Dalchastel, as it is often spelled) were possessed by a family of the name of Colwan . . . That family was supposed to have been a branch of the ancient family of Colquhoun, and it is certain that from it spring the Cowans.(p. 3)

Already we have five variously interchangeable names, and the motif of possession. The interest in the naming process is a result of Hogg's mixture of theology and folklore. Gil-Martin's name may also derive from folklore--elsewhere Hogg uses "Gil-Moules" and "Gil-Mouly" as folk names for the



Devil--and his own naming process is as self-conscious as Pip's:

. . . If you cannot converse without naming me, you may call me Gil for the present . . . and if I think proper to take another name at any future period, it shall be with your approbation . . . Very well, you may call me Gil-Martin. It is not my *Christian* name, but it *is* a name which may serve your turn. (p. 118)

"Gil-Martin" derives from "McGilmartin," or "'son of devotee' Scots Gaelic 'of (Saint) Martin,'" and echoes the name of Robert's childhood adversary, M'Gill--from "McGill," or "son of Gill" (or *Gil*).<sup>35</sup> Thus Robert's is not the only genealogy which is problematic. Robert's mother is "Rab," or "Raby," both diminutives of "Robert"; Thomas Drummond, whose "double" slays George Colwan, is named after the apostle--"Thomas, called the twin." Names are a magical category, and a matter of endless punning: thus "Gil" carries a "gilded" sword, and Robert longs to "look his brother in the face at Gilgal" (p. 137: appropriately, Gilgal = "a circle").

The country people are alert to the chameleon quality of names. When Robert rather ineptly passes himself off as "Cowan," the weaver gives his wife "a look that spoke a knowledge of something alarming or mysterious:

"Ha! Cowan?" said he. "That's most extraordinair!  
Not Colwan, I hope?" (p. 192)

Like Robin Ruthven, he has seen through the disguise. As Gifford notes, "truth presents itself in such a form that the burden of interpretation rests with the beholder, who makes as it were a moral choice in the selection of his version."<sup>36</sup> Thus the people of Auchtumuchty misjudge the Devil to be "an angel" in disguise, and Robert believes that Gil-Martin is the Czar of Russia (p. 181).

Whether he hides behind a name, a face, or an argument, the Devil is always in disguise; evil is "the more frightening because it is ambiguous," and we "can never be sure of its form."<sup>37</sup> Thus epistemology is inextricably bound with the problem of evil: how can we know anything when the universe lies to us? A character in "Welldean Hall" elaborates on a familiar position:

A man has nothing but his external senses to depend on in this world. If these may be supposed to be

fallacious, what is to be considered as real that we either hear or see? I conceive, that if a man *believes* that he *does* see an object standing before him, and knows all its features and lineaments, why, he *does* see it, let casuists say what they will. If he hear it pronounce words audibly, who *dare* challenge the senses that God has given him, and maintain that he heard no such word pronounced? I would account the man a presumptuous fool who would say so . . . knowing in whose hand the universe is balanced.<sup>38</sup>

Knowing in whose hand the universe is balanced is precisely the problem; in *Justified Sinner*, the hand is Gil-Martin's. Todorov has suggested that "supernatural beings compensate for a deficient causality."<sup>39</sup> A deficiency is in evidence: the old laird dies waiting for "Heaven [to] bring to light the truth concerning the untimely death of his son"; Bell Calvert calls upon God to "subvert the order of nature" (pp. 52, 83). Some such subversion surely occurs. But the causality behind it is demonic. "How grand is the conviction," Gilbert continues in "Welldean Hall," that "there is a Being *on your right hand and your left*, that sees the actions of all his creatures" (my emphasis).<sup>40</sup> Robert comes to share the conviction, but not its grandeur. Even the "justice" which Arabella Logan and Calvert accomplish is a result of Gil-Martin's manipulations. He incriminates Robert so broadly that the women begin to have "some hopes that this extraordinary being was on a mission of the same sort as themselves"; even Robert realizes that his companion intends to deal the last hand against him (p. 80). Similarly, the Devil sets up Bell Calvert to witness George's murder, *winking* at her all the while. But has she been set up to see Drummond murder George, or to see Drummond leaving before the murder--i.e., as a witness for or against him? Near the end, Robert notes his companion's mounting despair and believes Gil-Martin will perish with him. But we have no reason to believe it: Gil-Martin is only maneuvering Robert to the point of his own self-destruction.

Subversion and manipulation will not be contained by the "frame" of the story. It is finally not enough to say that any character's version of whatever it is that happens in *Justified Sinner* is unreliable: the text itself is "characterized" by a general distrust of literary creation itself. Robert's blundering into the loom is emblematic--in one way or another, everyone is entangled in the creative process. The author is a character in his own book. The

editor, too, becomes a shady participant (and remains damnably *jocular* about the whole affair). And Robert takes an unexpected interest in publishing, printing his *Confessions* before he has finished writing them. The story is obsessed with its own fictionality. What if we're all wrong, and the "editor" is right? That is, suppose Robert Wringhim *was* writing a religious parable, and believed none of his story? Why should the corpse in any of the three graves be his? Who *wrote* the *Confessions*? Hogg, of course--but are we to pretend Wringhim is the "author," or did the (fictional) "Hogg" plant the manuscript when he dug up the suicide's grave the first time? As the editor warns, "Hogg has imposed as ingenious lies on the public ere now" (p. 222).

"One has the impression," writes Kiely, "upon completing the book, of having witnessed and imaginatively participated in an event, though by no means of having 'grasped' it."<sup>41</sup> The more we try to grasp, the more we are reduced to splitting hairs--like M'Gill, finally unable to account for what he finds in his "account book" (p. 100). He has been framed. So has the story, one way or another; but every effort to "account" for it involves opening another grave. There's a *ghoulishness* to the whole affair. Robert can't seem to stay buried: his book comes from the grave, and his own remains are dug up several times and redistributed. One of the ghouls theorizes at the end that the book (like the corpse) has been preserved by God, and may "reveal some mystery that mankind disna ken naething about yet" (p. 228). But God only knows. Linton has spied the Devil in the printing press; his cloven foot could be anywhere.

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#### NOTES

1. C.O. Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott's Fiction* (Edinburgh & London, 1964), p. 296; cited by Ian Campbell, "Hogg's *Confessions* and *The Heart of Darkness*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 15 (1980), 194.
2. Robert Kiely, *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge, MA, 1972), p. 227.
3. Douglas Gifford, *James Hogg* (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 179.

4. Kiely, p. 228.
5. André Gide, in his afterword to *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (New York, 1970), p. 237.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Edith Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror* (New York, 1963), p. 192; Masao Miyoshi, *The Divided Self* (New York, 1969), p. 93; Campbell, p. 192; Barbara Bloede, "The Confessions of a Justified Sinner: The Paranoid Nucleus," in *Papers Given at The First Conference of the James Hogg Society* (1983), 15.
8. David Eggenschwiller, "James Hogg's *Confessions* and the Fall into Nature," *SSL*, 9 (July 1971), 26, 35-6.
9. The term is Martin Swale's.
10. Louis Simpson, *James Hogg: A Critical Study* (New York, 1962), pp. 171-3.
11. John Carey, in his introduction to *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (London, 1969), p. xvii. "It is well known what a ridiculous figure a hog makes," Hogg writes in *The Hunt of Eildon*, "there is not anything so much calculated to make one laugh." He also refers to the unfortunate shepherd as an "unearthly boar"; probably he was conscious of the pun. (Hogg, *The Hunt of Eildon*, in *The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd* [New York, 1973], p. 225).
12. Carey, pp. xix-xx; Gifford, p. 143. Simpson also cites the historical case of Nicol Muschet, who believed the Devil had led him to murder his wife, and whose *Confession* (printed in 1818 at Edinburgh) Hogg may have seen (p. 190).
13. Page references in parentheses are to the Norton edition, ed. R. Adams (New York, 1970).
14. Nelson Smith, *James Hogg* (Boston, 1980), p. 155.
15. Simpson, p. 188; Hogg, "The Mysterious Bride," in *The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, p. 453.
16. F.R. Hart, *The Scottish Novel* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), pp. 22-4.

17. From a conversation between Yeats and Joyce, quoted in Richard Ellman's *The Identity of Yeats* (New York, 1954), pp. 86-9; cited by Kiely, pp. 210-1.
18. Cited by Kiely, p. 213.
19. Gifford, p. 179.
20. L.L. Lee, "The Devil's Figure: James Hogg's *Justified Sinner*," *SSL*, 3 (1965), 237.
21. *Hamlet* I, v: 72-86.
22. Hogg, "Welldean Hall," in *The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, p. 164.
23. Eggenschwiller, p. 38.
24. Lee, p. 235.
25. Smith, p. 148.
26. Smollett, *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom*, ed. D. Grant (London, 1971), p. 141; cited by Hart, p. 16.
27. Michael York Mason, "The Three Burials in Hogg's *Justified Sinner*," *SSL*, 13 (1978), 17.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 21; Kiely, p. 214. Mason's evidence is worth excerpting:

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 *Blackwood's* 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 . . . also in the grave was a leather tobacco

pouch, containing the pamphlet *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.

See also the new evidence about the graves in *The Newsletter of the James Hogg Society* 1 (1982).

29. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

30. Michael Kearns, "Intuition and Narration in James Hogg's *Confessions*," *SSL* 13 (1978), 85.

31. Robert's mother is a particularly suspicious character. Her body is never recovered. Robert loathes her; Mrs. Logan suspects she is the "evil genius" behind the murder. Certainly a case could be made against her, as a case can be made against Mrs. Grose (as Quint's murderer)--or indeed against anyone who appears, even briefly, anywhere in the novel.

32. Gifford, p. 153.

33. "Kilpatrick" from "McGilpatrick," as "Gil-Martin" is from "McGilmartin."

34. Basil Cottle, *The Penguin Dictionary of Surnames* (New York, 1984), p. 81: "Calvert" from "Calverd: O 'calf-herd' OE."

35. Gifford, p. 170; Cottle, pp. 156, 245.

36. Gifford, p. 168.

37. Lee, pp. 232, 239.

38. Hogg, "Welldean Hall," p. 160.

39. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* (Ithaca, 1980), p. 110.

40. "Welldean Hall," p. 160. The concern for a deficient causality recurs elsewhere in Hogg's fiction. In "The Wife of Lochmaben," for example, a widow's "confidence in the mercy of Heaven [is] shaken, and she [begins] to doubt of its justice" (in *The Works of the Ettrick Shepherd*, p. 158). Hogg has recycled his plot as well: "The Wife of Lochmaben" features a pair of "devout friends," a "profligate" husband with a female companion "under the same roof," and a

"suicide" (actually murdered) whose corpse--when exhumed--has a broken skull.

41. Kiely, p. 228.

The Friends of the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* was launched in 1984 under the Presidency of the Countess of Strathmore. As many readers of this journal are aware, *DOST* is a large-scale, quotation-illustrated dictionary modelled on the *Oxford English Dictionary* and covers the history of Lowland Scots from the 1100s down to 1700. The first six volumes, encompassing A to Quh, have received lavish praise from reviewers and users. More recently two further fascicles have appeared—Qui-Recognosce, and Recognosing-Relaps(e)—comprising almost half of volume seven. If *DOST*'s recent excellent progress towards completion is to be maintained in this era of enforced reductions in expenditure on major projects of research in the humanities, substantial additional funding must be secured. It is to this end that the Friends has been launched. Donations or requests for further details should be sent to Dr. A. Fenton, c/o The Royal Museum of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh, EH2 1JD.

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