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David Groves

James Hogg and "Mr. W.W.": A New Parody of Wordsworth



A poem entitled "Examination of the School of Southside, By Mr. W. W." appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in December 1824. It is a parody of Wordsworth's *Excursion*, and uses many of the same satirical techniques which Hogg had employed in his *Poetic Mirror* eight years earlier, and in his *New Poetic Mirror* which began five years later. Although unsigned, the "Examination" is clearly one of James Hogg's many parodies. This is confirmed in a contemporary letter to William Blackwood from Hogg's friend D. M. Moir. Moir's letter, which mentions most of the articles in the December issue of *Blackwood's*, begins by saying that

I have just got through Maga and hasten to give you a few hurried specimens of my observations thereon
Hoggs Examination, though whimsical and outre, is on the whole very good--but if it is intended for personal satire, it is too obscure for my optics, though I occasionally see visions of Duddingstone and David Bridges.¹

The poem in question is subscribed "ALTRIVE, *December 1st*, 1824." Altrive was of course the small farmhouse in which Hogg lived from 1815 to 1820, and again from 1829 to

1835. Although he and his wife had moved into the larger house at Mount Benger, which was adjacent to Altrive, in 1820, James Hogg was still officially the tenant of Altrive Cottage, and most of his correspondence from the years 1823-25 gives "Altrive" or "Altrive Lake" as his address.²

In the "Examination of the School of Southside," the satirist takes aim at Wordsworth's interest in writing about children, as well as his tendency to moralise and his strong religious orthodoxy. The phrase "By Mr. W. W." beneath the title of the parody recalls Hogg's later satire "Ode to a Highland Bee,"³ where Hogg uses the same abbreviation to pretend that the piece had been composed by "Mr. W. W." In the "Examination" poem, the teacher's ludicrous rhapsody about mathematics (--"that eternal base / On which so many fabrics have been rear'd, / Reaching to heaven"--) is very similar to a passage in Hogg's 1829 parody, "Andrew the Packman," where the pseudo-Wordsworth compares religion to a wooden hat-stand: "Will you unblushingly," demands the pompous "Wordsworth" of that later satire,

Stretch your weak hand to sap the might fabric,
On which hang millions all proleptical
Of everlasting life? That glorious structure,
Rear'd at the fount of Mercy . . . ?⁴

In the "Examination" the teacher's statement that "man must first begin/ With trivial things, and move up by degrees,/ And only reach to the sublimest last," seems to anticipate a passage in the "Ode to a Highland Bee," where a mock- Wordsworth declares solemnly that "the high poetic mind" is able "step by step" to "ascend on high,/ From dunghill to the yielding sky." Hogg often satirised Wordsworth's habit of moving from mundane observations to religious mysticism; this complaint is voiced more directly by the minister of the "Examination," when he tells the school teacher that

thou fliest off at a tangent, like
A schoolboy's rocket--whizz away to heaven--
Crack! pluff!--then down to earth thou comest again
In trivial flitters.

That James Hogg was the author of the "Examination of the School of Southside" is also strongly implied by the teacher's eulogy about the multiplication table, in that poem. "Two two make four!" cries Mr. Strap with professional glee,

two fours make eight, and so forth;
 But what a force springs there! O science! science!
 How small is thy beginning! But how vast
 Are thy attainments!--Pray now, note but this:
 Two ones make two--two threes make half a dozen.
 Ye gods, how beautifully simple 'tis!

A similar burlesque of the lake poet's interest in arithmetic (---perhaps recalling his poem "We are Seven"---) can be found in Hogg's "Andrew the Packman," where a garrulous "Wordsworth" suddenly pauses to realise that the unfortunate pedlar he is haranguing has begun to show unmistakable signs of boredom:

He look'd three ways at once, then other three,
 Which did make six; and three, and three, and three,
 (Which, as I reckon, make fifteen in all,)
 So many ways did that o'er-master'd pedlar
 Look in one moment's space.

There should be little doubt, then, that the "Examination" was written by the Ettrick Shepherd. In passing, the poem refers to the agricultural essayist Lord Napier, and the Edinburgh philosopher David Brewster, both of whom were acquaintances of Hogg's. The allusions to Timothy Tickler refer to a series of reviews of contemporary periodicals which appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in the form of "Letters of Timothy Tickler," and which supposedly originated from the village of Southside. It seems therefore that in the "Examination" poem the satirist is partly trying to convey what he imagined would have been William Wordsworth's response to the Tickler reviews and to *Blackwood's Magazine* in general.

EXAMINATION OF THE SCHOOL OF SOUTHSIDE

By Mr. W. W.⁵

Minister. Now, Mr. Strap, I well approve the mode,
 In which your pupils have been taught the first
 Fair rudiments of science. 'Tis a task
 Of weighty import, thus to train the minds
 Of all the youth o' the parish, Mr. Strap:
 Of weighty import, sir, not unfulfill'd.

Still, there is one small item yet omitted,
Which I, as ghostly pastor, long to prove.
What progress have they made in sacred lore?
Know they aught of the leading principles
Of our religion?--Not one word of that
Hath been this day put to them, Mr. Strap!

Strap. Sire, I'm a diffident and modest man,
And wish not to encroach on the department
Of such respected neighbour--well aware
How much adapted to the grateful task
Is his capacious mind. That part belongs
Unto yourself--not me. Besides, I lay
It down as maxim not to be controll'd,
As plain as that the A, B, C, must come
Before that great and fundamental rule
Call'd "The Cat's Lesson," or the glorious square
Of file and column--that eternal base
On which so many fabrics have been rear'd,
Reaching to heaven, struggling with the stars
And planets in their courses--nay, have dared,
As with a line and plummet, to mete out
Seas, orbs, and the most wondrous works of God--
Multiplication table!--that I mean.
Simple it is--nay, almost laughable--
Two twos make four! two fours make eight, and so forth;
But what a force springs there! O science! science!
How small is thy beginning! But how vast
Are thy attainments!--Pray now, note but this:
Two ones make two--two threes make half a dozen.
Ye gods, how beautifully simple 'tis!
Think of it, sire--and of the heights sublime
A Newton gain'd. Yet he began with this--
Two ones make two!--Then of a Napier think,
A David Brewster!

Minister. Prithee, Mr. Strap,
Where art thou going? Whereto tends this speech?
I ask of thee to hear a specimen
Of the religion taught within thy school;
And lo! thou fliest off at a tangent, like
A schoolboy's rocket--whizz away to heaven--
Crack! pluff!--then down to earth thou comest again
In trivial flitters. Prithee, Mr. Strap,
Where is this speech to end?

Strap. Where it began,
If so you please, most reverend worthy sir.
I say, I lay it down as maxim clear,

Nor subject to perversion, that, as in
 The science of numbers, man must first begin
 With trivial things, and move up by degrees,
 And only reach to the sublimest last;
 So is it with religion--'Tis the highest,
 The most sublime of all celestial things
 Which God hath yet reveal'd to mortal man;
 Therefore, it ought to be the last instill'd
 Into his mind, when that hath reach'd the goal
 Of its capacity.

Minister.

Ah, Mr. Strap!

Wrong, wrong--Sir, thou art grievously wrong.
 Hast thou ne'er heard me preach? or has thy mind
 Been hunting tropes and figures at the time?
 Religion ought to be administer'd
 To youthful minds as an emollient;
 A seasoning to every mess with which
 Their spirits are dilated, that it may
 Grow with their growth, and strengthen with their
 strength.

In a young scion grafted, then its roots
 Spread in the earth, its tendrils in the heavens;
 But in an old and crabbed stock it dies,
 And withers ere it bloom. Strap, thou hast laid
 A false foundation on a dangerous base,
 And all in poor excuse; because, forsooth,
 Thou teachest no religion in thy school.
 Go send thy pupils to me, one by one,
 That there be no collusion. I have long
 Suspected thee a sceptic, Mr. Strap;
 If I can prove it on thee, I shall rend
 The Southside school from out thy dangerous grasp.

Enter a Scholar.

Come hither, little fellow. Thou'rt acute
 In all the branching elements of lore.
 Now, dost thou know who made thee?

Boy. Yes.

Minister. Who was it then?

Boy. My parents.

Minister. O heavens! I knew it. These brave boys are

lost

Lost! lost! for lack of learning the great truths
 Of primitive religion!--My brave boy,
 Thou err'st exceedingly. Dost thou not know

'Twas God who made thee, and all things beside?

Boy. That I deny most promptly. True, he made
Adam and Eve, and the first parent pairs
Of every living thing. But since that time
He's left all creatures to make one another,
As best they may. Heaven mend thy wits, good sir,
Think'st thou that God makes all the little brats,
Bastards, and blackamoors; foals, calves, and kids;
The lion's growling whelps; the fox's litter;
The infant whales; the little grovelling moles;
And all the unlick'd cubs throughout the world?
I hold such thoughts as blasphemy.

Minister. Alack the day!--alack the day!--Strap,
Strap!

Thou art a heathen--a rank renagado
From gospel light!--Still as the old cock crows,
So learns the young!--I have him on the hip!
He leaves the Southside school!--Thou chattering rogue,
So like thy master, hast thou ever read
A plain old-fashion'd book yclept the Bible?

Boy. Yes; often.

Minister. So? And how dost thou esteem it?

Boy. A good old book--a very worthy book.

Minister. Ay! say'st thou so? which may your wisdom
deem The best book in the world?

Boy. Blackwood's Magazine.

Minister. O hideous, hideous! Most deplorable!
This is the very summit of misrule,
And horrid miscreance. Incongruous elf,
Wherefore this answer? Who taught thee to give
That mass of vile scurrility the preference
To works of sacred worth? Base sciolist,
Your reasons?--Come, most sage philosopher?

Boy. Because I deem that little lightsome work
The greatest bulwark in our native land,
Around its holy faith, its sacred rights,
Its principles of loyalty and truth,
And all that cherishes content and peace
Among a bold, a free, and happy people.

Minister. Ay, ay, brave sir--'Tis very well with thee!
Thou'rt in the high way to preferment, master.
Thou'st seen a certain stage of great regard,
Right opposite our good friend David's corner?
Thither thy steps are tending. Fare thee well.
God speed thee to thy venerable goal.
Shake hands, and part we friends. Whom dost thou deem

The worthiest man of the parish?

Boy. O! Mr. Tickler, beyond all compare!

The sage, the gay, the proud, the loyal Tickler!

Minister. Ay, ay! All of a piece! All of a piece!

Like Mr. Pringle's butler of the Yair.

Beshrew me, but I smell a vicinal rat!

What is thy name, brave boy?

Boy. My name, sir, forms no portion of my creed;
On that alone am I examined here.

Minister. Thou art a dapper fellow--somewhat tall
Too for thy years. Wast thou brought up at home,
Or in a certain cottage at the end
Of a large town, call'd Duddingston? Eh? What?
Have I discovered thee?

Boy. Bid thee, good sir;

Most reverend sir, good day; and thank you, sir.

Min. (Solus) Ah me! What will this wicked world
become!

I've heard a foolish burden of a song

That runs to the following purport:--

"An' eh what a parish! an' O what a parish!

And eh sic a parish as Little Dunkeld!

They stickit the minister, hang'd the precentor,

Dang down the kirk steeple, an' drank the bell!"

I cannot get that foolish rhyme cancelled

From out my heart, for O what a parish

Is Little Southside!

Enter a Young Lady.

Come hither, pretty maiden, full score I dread

To ask at so much innocence and beauty,

Of that which most concerns her welfare here,

And happiness hereafter, knowing well

The base pestiferous stuff early instill'd

Into thy plastic mind.

Girl. You may or may not, sir,

As fits your inclination. 'Tis the same.

But I can answer all the pretty questions

Of sound morality, and truth, and love.

Minister. Eh? Love? What love? I shall go mad!

Girl. I hope not now, sir? Nor on my account?

First try me ere you turn outrageous,

I'll warrant you shall note me for a tickler.

Minister. A what! I what! there are some words and
terms

That make me nervish! But let us proceed.
Which do you deem the best book of the world?

Girl. The Bible, sir. The holy blessed Bible.
What book on earth can e'er compare with that?

Minister. Bless thee, thou lovely one! for thou hast
caught

A spark divine amid a hive of sin.
Dost thou believe in all the truth supreme
Within that blessed book?

Girl.

O yes, I bow

To them with reverence, and never let
My heart doubt one of them. And I believe
In that compendium made by holy men,
My little Catechism. Next unto
The Holy Scriptures, I approve of that.
Pray am I right, good sir?

Minister. Right? Yes. Thou art a gem of the first
water

In God's own sanctuary. Whom dost thou deem
The worthiest and best man of the parish?

Girl. Whom should I deem the best, but him
commission'd

By one who cannot err, to teach his word,
And Keep a watch for my immortal soul?

Minister. Heaven bless thee, pretty maid, and o'er
thee watch

For everlasting good! Forgive these tears,
The tears of an old man. Here is a purse
To buy thee a new Bible. Let it be
A gilded one, gilded with gold all over,
And I'll put down thy name above the donor's.
Pry'thee, what is thy name?

Girl. I've said it, sir.

Minister. Not that I did remark.

Girl. Maids do not always choose to tell their names.

Minister. Where wast thou bred? sure thou may'st tell
me that.

Girl. I've heard it said that I was bred with care
And caution, at a place call'd Duddingston.

Minister. God grant me grace! Art thou a Tickler too?
Now I remind thou said'st thou wert a Tickler.

Girl. Ay, so are all the scholars of Southside,
But half of them will not tell thee their names.
Good morrow, reverend sir, and pray accept
A little maiden's thanks.

Minister, (solus.)

"An' eh what a parish! an' O what a parish!
"An' eh sic a parish as little Dunkeld!"

Strap *shall not* flit. That is decisive now,
And all for sake of that sweet maiden's wit;
That very lovely and ingenious thing.
Strap shall not flit; for if he train the maids
In any path whatever, right or wrong,
They most assuredly shall train the men
Right onward after them. Strap shall not flit.

(Calling in at the window as passing.)

Good morrow, Mr. Strap. Farewell, good sir,
To thee and to thy *Ticklers*. Take good care
Of them and their religious principles.
Take care of their religion, Mr. Strap.
Exit.

ALTRIVE, *December 1st, 1824.*

Only James Hogg, of all the *Blackwood's* contributors, and of all the Scottish poets at the time, is known to have written Wordsworthian parodies of this calibre. The phrase "one who cannot err" occurs in a similar religious sense in Hogg's novel *The Three Perils of Woman*.⁶ The young boy's reference to "grovelling moles" in the poem repeats one of Hogg's favourite images, which may also be found for example in his *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.⁷ Both the "Examination" poem, and Hogg's earlier poem "Superstition," use the distinctive word "plastic" in the sense of meaning "changing" or "impressionable."⁸ Finally, the phrase "sound morality" occurs in a few of Hogg's writings, and especially in the title of his story "Sound Morality," which appeared in *Blackwood's* in 1829.

The Ettrick Shepherd was definitely interested in Lord Napier's work, since in 1823 he had published an essay on "The Hon. Captain Napier and Ettrick Forest" in *Blackwood's*. The reference in the poem to "Mr. Pringle's butler of the Yair" is probably inexplicable from this distance in time, but Hogg certainly was acquainted with Mr. Pringle, a gentleman who lived on the estate of Yair in Ettrick Forest. In a letter to his wife in 1828 James Hogg writes, "I went to Yair," where at a banquet he met "Lord Napier" and "Capt. Pringle."⁹

"Timothy Tickler" was a fictional character which also appeared in the *Noctes Ambrosianae* and was loosely based on the real-life personality of Robert Sym.¹⁰ Sym himself was not a writer, however, and his numerous "Letters" were composed by John Lockhart, William Maginn, and other regular *Blackwood's* contributors. In the *Noctes Ambrosianae* for November 1824, in the issue of *Blackwood's Magazine* immediately preceding the "Examination of the School of Southside," one of the characters reads a letter from a disgruntled subscriber which sheds some light on the original circumstances in which that parody was written. The subscriber complains (with considerable justification) that *Blackwood's* in 1824 has become increasingly "filled up with abuse of the [other] periodical publications." "Whoever writes," continues the subscriber, "under the name of T. Tickler,--of course, a fictitious name,--has been so offensive in this way, that the magazines containing his vapid lucubrations have been ejected from at least three of by far the most decent libraries hereabouts."¹¹ The most recent "Letter of Timothy Tickler," in the September issue, had been a virulent and opinionated attack on the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review*, together with a very self-righteous defense of *Blackwood's*. It is highly appropriate, then, that in the "Examination" the boy whose last name apparently is Tickler declares that his favourite book is *Blackwood's Magazine*. Through these interviews between the minister and the boy and girl, the satirist seems to be implying some criticism of *Blackwood's* fondness for puffing itself, as well as its reliance on a small coterie of anonymous reviewers who would be able to praise each other's works, and damn those of outsiders, all under the protective pseudonym of "Tickler." The boy and the girl are probably intended to represent two very different authors who write under the name "Tickler," and who prudently refuse to divulge their own actual identities.

Yet although some criticism of *Blackwood's Magazine* is implied in the satire, most of its barbed wit is directed against Wordsworth. Just as the two children represent two sides of the "Tickler" *persona*, so the minister and teacher correspond to different sides of Wordsworth's character as a poet--his religious orthodoxy and his pedagogical earnestness. In the prosaic, sententious, and pompous speeches of the two adults, the satirist conveys something of the didactic strain and the self-inflated qualities which may be found in Wordsworth's long poem *The Excursion*. It is this poem (--"his ponderous 'Excursion'" as Hogg calls it in his

*Memoir*¹²-) which the Ettrick Shepherd singled out from the rest of Wordsworth's poems for special ridicule in his other five satires of the lake poet. Towards the end of *The Excursion*, a character named the Pastor delivers several "weighty" speeches on the subject of education to his interlocutors the Pedlar and the Solitary. Several of these discussions take place after interviews with young children.

A single example from Book Nine of *The Excursion* will show some of the flatness, serious-mindedness, and heavy-handed moralising of that poem:

He paused, as if revolving in his soul
Some weighty matter; then, with fervent voice
And an impassioned majesty, exclaimed--
"O for the coming of that glorious time
When, prizing knowledge as her noblest wealth
And best protection, the imperial Realm,
While she exacts allegiance, shall admit
An obligation, on her part, to teach
Them who are born to serve her and obey;
Binding herself by statute to secure
For all the children whom her soil maintains
The rudiments of letters, and inform
The mind with moral and religious truth,
Both understood and practised,--so that none,
However destitute, be left to droop
By timely culture unsustained; or run
Into a wild disorder; or be forced
To drudge through a weary life without the help
Of intellectual implements and tools"13

This speech by Wordsworth's Pedlar is not too far removed from the solemn and self-important moralities spouted by the clergyman in the "Examination" parody. Of course James Hogg had no quarrel with the idea of universal education which the Pedlar and Parson set forth at great length in Wordsworth's *Excursion*; during his years at Altrive, Hogg in fact provided a school for the local children, and free lodging for the schoolteacher. But all the same the Ettrick Shepherd found an irresistible target for satire in the solemn, moral ponderousness of *The Excursion*.

Wordsworth often wrote about children in his poems. A well-known passage in his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (which was first published in 1807) describes a six-year-old as "Thou best Philosopher." In the "Examination" parody, that phrase seems

to be echoed by the minister when he addresses the boy as a "most sage philosopher." Through the clergyman's sarcastic, condescending, and manipulative treatment of the two young people in the "Examination of the School of the Southside," James Hogg implies that William Wordsworth had little real understanding of children, or respect for their freedom.

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NOTES

1. David Macbeth Moir, letter to Blackwood, 20 Dec. 1824 (National Library of Scotland MS 4724, ff. 66-7). Quoted by kind permission of the Trustees of NLS. Moir, known to readers through his pseudonym "Delta," was a frequent contributor to *Blackwood's*; his numerous letters to William Blackwood during 1824 show that he also acted in an editorial capacity for the publisher at that time. David Bridges (mentioned in Moir's letter) was an Edinburgh bookseller.
2. In a letter to Blackwood in June 1824, James Hogg mentions that his wife's parents had moved to the area to be near their daughter in her pregnancy. As a result, Margaret's parents were "occupying my elegant cottage" while James himself was "now living in my old thatched house . . . in which I am likely to remain for some time . . . and this is the first prose I have written in it" (See Norah Parr, *James Hogg at Home; Being the Domestic Life and Letters of the Ettrick Shepherd* [Dollar, 1980], p. 35). This may suggest that during 1824 the Shepherd did much of his writing in the smaller house while his wife and her parents remained in the larger house across the stream.
3. "A New Poetic Mirror; By the Ettrick Shepherd; No. I -- Mr. W. W.; Ode to a Highland Bee," *Edinburgh Literary Journal*, 5 Sept. 1829, p. 199; rpt. in my article, "James Hogg, Burns, and 'The Great W.'," *Scottish Literary Journal* (Nov. 1985), p. 19-22.
4. "Andrew the Packman; After the manner of Wordsworth, By the Ettrick Shepherd," *Edinburgh Literary Journal* (20 Mar. 1830), pp. 179-80, rpt. in my edition of *James Hogg: Selected Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp. 163-67.

5. *Blackwood's* (Dec. 1824), pp. 653-57. In his *Bibliography of Articles in Blackwood's Magazine 1817-1824* (Lubbock, Texas, 1959, p. 126), A.L. Strout suggested very tentatively that this poem "corresponds to [R.F.] St. Barbe's dramatic skits" which had appeared in two previous issues of *Maga*. Strout's hypothesis was only an educated guess, and is not substantiated by any factual evidence. The only point of similarity is that both the "Examination" and the skits by St. Barbe are in dramatic verse.

6. *The Three Perils of Woman; or, Love, Leasing, and Jealousy*, 3 vols. (London, 1823), II, 241.

7. Ed. John Carey (London, 1969), p. 40.

8. "Superstition," appended to James Hogg, *The Pilgrims of the Sun* (London, 1815), p. 146; rptd. in *James Hogg: Selected Poems and Songs*, p. 94.

9. Letter to Margaret Hogg, 24 Apr. 1828, printed in *James Hogg at Home*, p. 55.

10. For information on Robert Sym and Timothy Tickler, see James Hogg, *Memoir of the Author's Life* (1832), M. Clive Hildyard, *Lockhart Literary Criticism* (Oxford, 1931), and Ralph M. Wardle, "Timothy Tickler's Irish Blood," *Review of English Studies* (Oct. 1942), pp. 486-90. Robert Sym was more than six feet in height; this fact is reflected in the minister's statement, in the "Examination," that the schoolboy is "somewhat tall . . . for thy years."

11. Letter from "A.B.," read by Mordecai Mullion, in "Noctes Ambrosianae," *Blackwood's Magazine* (Nov. 1824), p. 587.

12. In *James Hogg: Memoir of the Author's Life and Familiar Anecdotes of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Douglas S. Mack (Edinburgh and London, 1972), p. 69.

13. Wordsworth, *The Excursion* (1814; rptd. in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest De Selincourt (London, 1904), p. 888). In most of his parodies of Wordsworth, James Hogg refers to *The Excursion* by its alternate title of *The Recluse*.