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The Devil's Figure: James Hogg's *Justified Sinner*

One cannot doubt that the Mephistophilis of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* is a real devil, but the Satan of Mann's *Dr. Faustus* is, to say the least, a puzzlement. Perhaps one must argue that the difference between the two figures lies in their times: for Marlowe's contemporaries, if not for Marlowe, the Devil walked up and down in the earth, but who now can take the incarnate Devil seriously? As an instance, no one (except maybe Lewis himself) pretends that the devils of C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* are really there; they are merely comic sticks for beating non-believers. In other words, the twentieth century writer cannot present the veritable Demon except as ambiguous; he may indeed be only a projection of the darkness within ourselves, or, if he is real, he dissolves under the hard critical stare of our modern eye — at best he can manifest himself only as the man in the gray flannel suit, certainly not as a hoofed demon with a pitchfork nor, even, as a dark man in black tights.

But the true Prince of Darkness has always been a gentleman, that is, a fallen and subtle angel. And it is just this figure of him that makes for the power, and the modernity, of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* by James Hogg.¹ One might add that the book, first published in 1824, also serves as a kind of watershed between two novelistic, perhaps artistic, attitudes towards the Devil. The devils of the Gothic novel, even the Mephistophcles of Goethe, will no longer suffice — for example, Charles Maturin in that last of the Gothics, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), cannot let us see the actual Devil; and the demonic human figures such as Heathcliff or the "psychological" Satans such as Dostoyevsky's or Mann's are yet to come.

Now, on the surface Hogg's book is an attack on Calvinism. But the apparent purpose of the novel is not what it does, for it is rather one of the great realizations of the demonic than an assault on a

¹ James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Introduction by Andre Gide (New York, 1959). Future references in the text are to this edition.

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religious system, although the criticism of Calvinism is a necessary element in the work. And so it is with the demonic that we must be directly concerned.

But as usual there is little agreement among the critics as to what Hogg's demon really is. We cannot neatly dispose of him by saying, as Edith Birkhead does, that the novel is the "account of a man afflicted with religious mania, who believes himself urged into crime by a mysterious being."² In such a reading, there is no devil, there is nothing but a sick man. And, in response to André Gide's suggestion that the Devil in the novel might be only "the exteriorized development of our own desires, of our pride, of our most secret thoughts,"³ Louis Simpson argues, with seemingly good evidence, that the Devil is an actual person within the realm of the novel.⁴ But one must argue, in return, that Gide's reading cannot be ignored; for the Devil, or Gil-Martin as Hogg names him, remains an elusive, subtle figure.

And neither is it quite sufficient, as Kurt Wittig proposes, to find an explanation for Gil-Martin in the Scottish imagination, the divided imagination of a divided culture.⁵ Walter Allen, reflecting the same attitude, says that the *Justified Sinner* could have been written by no one but a Scot.⁶ All this is true, certainly, but it leads us away from Gil-Martin himself.

In short, we cannot fully experience Gil-Martin by looking only within ourself nor by looking only outward at the structure that produced Hogg. Of course, as readers we may be fascinated by that mysterious personage who seems to be the archetypal shadow of the Jungians, but this fascination does not explain the function nor the purpose of Gil-Martin in the novel—we are fascinated by all shapes of the Devil, whether they appear as actual or as symbolic. It is C. O. Parsons who offers us the best insight into the novel when he says

² Edith Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror* (New York, 1963), p. 192.

³ André Gide, "Introduction" to James Hogg's *Justified Sinner* (see footnote 1), p. xv. All following references to Gide's introduction are noted in the text with small Roman numerals.

⁴ Louis Simpson, *James Hogg: A Critical Study* (New York, 1962), pp. 187-188.

⁵ Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh and London, 1958), pp. 249-250.

⁶ Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (New York, 1958), p. 141.

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"that the individual is both tempter and tempted."⁷ But we must modify that statement: *perhaps* the individual is both tempter and tempted. For Gil-Martin is first a creature of the art work, of the novel, and of a novel that, I argue, is deliberately ambiguous. And it is only by examining the novel—structure, characters, style, tone, and fable—that we can truly discover that this ambiguity is essential to Hogg's vision of evil, of evil that is the more frightening because it is ambiguous.

The story is given in three sections: first, the "editor's" reconstruction of the Colwan family history—the senior George Colwan is married to Rabina Orde; Mrs. Colwan gives birth to two sons, the second of which old Colwan refuses to accept; the sons grow apart, meet only to come into conflict (a conflict set against the struggle between the extreme Scottish Presbyterians and the rather more liberal, and aristocratic, "Episcopalians"); until at last the elder brother is murdered and the younger disappears after suspicion of the murder falls on him. Second, we are given the actual memoirs of Robert Wringhim, so named although he is the younger of the Colwan brothers; Wringhim more or less retells the first part from a different point of view and continues his own story. Last, there is the editor's explanation of how he came into possession of the manuscript of Wringhim's memoirs, along with a tale of how Wringhim died.

The editor's story is a rather realistic presentation of the apparent facts, although the tone is in large part satirical—indeed, Walter Allen holds it certain that Hogg "conceived his novel as satire."⁸ But the humor of the novel is not a blemish—it is, rather, a bitter humor, not just comic relief but something that corresponds to the knocking on the gate in *Macbeth*; the tone, the humor, adds to the contrast between the first and second parts, adds, in truth, power to the second part.

Too, it is in this first section that Hogg presents most clearly and completely those persons of whom he obviously approves, especially the junior and senior George Colwans. They are both in love with life, free, happy, perhaps irresponsible but basically decent and kind, men capable of love; one is immediately reminded of the character of Tom Jones (cf. Gide, p. xii). Perhaps an eighteenth century tone is appropriate for eighteenth century men. Therefore, when the Wringhim

⁷ Coleman O. Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott's Fiction: With Chapters on the Supernatural in Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh and London, 1964), p. 296.

⁸ Allen, *The English Novel*, p. 142.

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set—Mrs. Colwan, her son Robert, and her spiritual guide (the minister, Robert Wringhim, who gives his name and possibly existence to the son Robert)—are shown, they must be shown in contrast to the Colwans. The Wringhims are fanatic, envious, puritanical, hypocritical, life-hating; they are fit objects of satire, at least here. When the tone darkens in the second section, the Wringhims and Gil-Martin become even more frightening because we have seen them in the daytime—and we realize how ineffectual satire is against real evil.

This reconstruction by the editor is the product of the common-sense mind, of the man who doesn't quite believe in ghosts or devils and who wishes only to say to his readers that Wringhim's narrative is that of a mad man: "In short, we must either conceive him [Wringhim] not only the greatest fool, but the greatest wretch, on whom was ever stamped the form of humanity; or, that he was a religious maniac, who wrote and wrote about a deluded creature . . ." (pp. 229-230). It is the editor's position that Miss Birkhead, of course, rather naively accepts as the true one.

We must note, however, that the so-called editor is writing his narrative in 1823-24, whereas the events of the story take place approximately between 1687 and 1712.⁹ In brief, the factual relations of the editor are perhaps not factual: they are the traditions of the place and must be regarded as such. The editor admits that it is to "tradition I must appeal for the remainder [which comprises the actual story] of the motley adventures of that house" of the Colwans. (p. 3).

Therefore, when Simpson argues that the actual presence of the Devil is proved by the reports of certain people who saw him, one must answer that Hogg is being more artful than that. Caught up by the immediate context, we too see Gil-Martin at the moment that Miss Logan, the ancient mistress of the senior George Colwan, and Mrs. Calvert, the woman who has witnessed Robert stab his brother in the back, observe Gil-Martin and Robert walking together. We do indeed

⁹ Either through carelessness or design, Hogg has confused the time sequences of his novel. For example, George Colwan the senior comes into possession of the Dalcastle lands in 1687; his marriage obviously takes place *after* he is master of Dalcastle; and yet his younger son Robert, born a year after the elder, is eighteen in 1704. Too, Robert flees Dalcastle in an unstated year, but surely no later than 1708; yet he commits suicide in 1712, after a flight that in his memoirs seems to last no longer than a few months. However, when Hogg has the "editor" attempt to determine the exact date of the suicide, he (Hogg) is very careful with his figures so that the date is 1712. I suggest, then, that Hogg's apparent carelessness is simply one more demonstration of the deliberate ambiguity of the novel.

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see the man, then, that Wringhim's memoirs will by indirection tell us is the Demon. But we are *seeing* at a number of removes: the editor may accept tradition as fact, but Hogg has reminded us that the tale is based on tradition, a notoriously inaccurate reporter of factual truth. One must also add that Hogg emphasizes the impossibility of arriving at exact truth by having himself make an "error" concerning the location of the suicide's grave in the letter which he, as the Ettrick Shepherd, wrote to *Blackwood's Magazine* and which he uses in the third part of the novel.¹⁰

But even if we grant that Gil-Martin is really perceived by the various persons in the editor's tale, we must also observe that he is never identified as the Devil. Mrs. Calvert does say of him, "If a demon could inherit flesh and blood, that youth is precisely such a being as I could conceive that demon to be," and Miss Logan refers to him as an "extraordinary being." (pp. 82-83). But neither can make the full leap; the reader does so truly only by virtue of hindsight after he has read the second part. For beyond Mr. Calvert's description of the murder and the time when the two women watch Robert and Gil-Martin together, Gil-Martin is barely on the edge of the story; he is a briefly glimpsed figure only, the Prince of Darkness as he is seen in the light of day.

There is, then, a kind of tension between the seemingly realistic narration and the source of the material that makes the person of Gil-Martin all the more extraordinary. He is there but he is not explained. It is in the second part of the novel, Wringhim's memoirs, that Gil-Martin comes into the center of the action. But he is no more explained, for we cannot fully trust Wringhim's words.

It is not just that Robert is a liar, which he is and which he confesses that he is, but that he himself is not always certain of what has happened to him—and it seems obvious that Hogg intends us to believe Robert's assertions of his ignorance. When Robert retells the story of murdering his brother, he presents it as a fair fight, although he adds, "I will not deny that my own immediate impressions of this affair in some degree differed from" the description he has just given; "But this is precisely as my illustrious friend [Gil-Martin] described it to be afterwards . . . and my senses [were] all in a state of agitation, and he could have no motive for saying what was not the positive truth" (p. 155). Gil-Martin, the Father of Lies, has plenty of motive,

¹⁰ Cf. Edith C. Batho, *The Ettrick Shepherd* (Cambridge, 1927), p. 124.

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in truth, and so does Robert, but it is almost a psychological necessity for Robert not to remember that he has stabbed his brother in the back.

The reader cannot, therefore, be quite certain when it comes to matters of greater import. Robert is convinced that he is "justified," saved from all eternity by God, and that "a justified person could do nothing wrong" (p. 148). It seems plain then that Robert has not created Gil-Martin as an excuse for his actions—there would be much simpler ways—but one can indeed ask if Robert is "exteriorizing" his own desires or if there truly is that strange figure that Robert first takes to be Peter the Great in disguise but who, in his green frock coat, buff belt, and "sort of turban that he always wore on his head, somewhat resembling a bishop's mitre," (p. 188) may be another kind of Prince.

This second part of the novel, the memoir, then, is designedly subtle. Written after the whole, or most of the whole, of Robert's life, it carries us along in such a manner that we "live" the life, *not* look *back* at it. The reader learns as Robert learns—Robert does not say, "I now know," but rather "I am learning." For instance, he first meets Gil-Martin on March 25, 1704, the day that he has been told by the elder Robert Wringhim that he, the younger Robert, is one of "the just made perfect," and "assured of my freedom from all sin, and of the impossibility of my ever again falling away from my new state" (p. 105). Gil-Martin fascinates Robert not just because he is a fatally charming person but also because he is physically the same as Robert: "What was my astonishment on perceiving that he was the same being as myself!" (p. 106). Yet Robert, neither at the time nor at the moment he is writing his memoir, ever seeks a meaningful explanation of this extraordinary resemblance; he is too filled with the conviction, even to the end, that he is one of the elect. Are the two not also spiritually the same being, for is not the Devil the true sign of the selfish? Hogg, I suggest, deliberately would not answer such a question.

And Robert never discovers nor tries to discover anything more concrete about Gil-Martin. He accepts Gil-Martin's obvious magic powers almost without comment. Nor is he, any more than Miss Logan and Mrs. Calvert, ever able to say that Gil-Martin is the Demon, although from the first meeting he feels that Gil-Martin is uncanny: "When I left him I felt a deliverance, but at the same time a certain consciousness that I was not thus to get free of him . . ." (p. 108). On his last day, Robert cries out in his diary, "Unable to resist any longer, I pledged myself to my devoted friend that on this day we should die together. . . ." His "devoted friend" and also his "tormentor" (p.216)!

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In brief, he cannot acknowledge the truth, cannot perceive the irony, even as he goes to death, for he does not quite know the truth—or, rather, is unwilling to know it.

We can see this ambiguity, and subtlety, in Hogg's realization of the temptation and the fall; there is no crude Devil, no magic spells, no familiars, no pact, not even a temptation, at least not a clear temptation. Ruteboeuf's Theophilus of Adana is tempted and signs, Marlowe's Faustus signs, Goethe's Faust signs, Monk Lewis' Ambrosio signs, even Mann's Adrian Leverkühn, in a sense, signs. They all sign in awareness and with a promise of the things of this earth as a reward. But Robert Wringhim, from the first a cold and rigid personality not to be tempted by love, by sex, by a wish to create, but only by the promise of heaven (although one must admit that the desire for worldly power does affect him), does not sign. He is not even aware that he has been tempted. His fall is an act of Reason, but it is a distorted Reason; nor is his fall the act of the moment, but rather a series of casuistical arguments with Gil-Martin. And Gil-Martin corresponds to Robert; the Devil is always an intellectual, no doubt, but seldom quite so chilling a one as Hogg's Devil is. For here the Prince of Darkness, that great lawyer, is also a too-logical Calvinist divine.

But to call Gil-Martin a Calvinist divine is not quite accurate. Gide points out that Robert Wringhim is an "antinomian," a follower of the doctrines of Johannes Agricola (Gide, pp. xi-xii), although Robert cannot admit to what extreme his own doctrines, the doctrines of his foster father, and the doctrines of Gil-Martin have brought him: "a justified person could nothing wrong." With such a doctrine, everything is lawful — the same position at which Ivan Karamazov arrives, from the other side, by denying God (Ivan too has his vision of the Devil). Gil-Martin, though, is aware, and it is his devilish playing on this one theme that enables him to bring about Robert's fall. In the name of this belief, Robert perjures himself, destroys lives, commits at least two murders, and finally takes his own life; in the name of Godliness, not atheism, he plunges into hell.

Robert, then, fails to understand himself, and there are times when the reader may almost feel pity for him but not as one would feel it for Ivan. For Robert's failure of self-understanding is a failure of the moral sense, a chosen failure on his part, not just a failure in belief or a weakness imposed upon him by God or society. And Hogg emphasizes the moral failure by his many ironies: the elder

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Robert Wringhim, calling down God's wrath upon the Colwans, sings a versified form of the 109th Psalm, asking

Set thou the wicked over him,
And upon his right hand
Give thou his greatest enemy,
Even Satan, leave to stand. (p. 31)

Robert is pleased with the psalm, of course, but neither the old man nor Robert knows that Satan has been standing at Robert's right hand for some time — already he is Robert's bosom companion. Still, Robert has *chosen* to be friendless except for this one friend; he has spurned his brother George's overtures as well as all other people's. He will end by despising even his mother and old Wringhim.

And too, if Gil-Martin speaks much of God but always ironically, so also all of Robert's references to God are ironic. He cannot perhaps be held accountable if he does not recognize the irony in Gil-Martin's remarks, but he is responsible for his own very real, if unrecognized, hypocrisy. And we should not fail to notice that, although God is often mentioned, Jesus Christ almost never is: to Gil-Martin, the atonement, the sacrifice of the God-man for men, is the very opposite of his nature; to Robert the atonement is only an element in his own election, not the expression of God's love.

In other words, the ironies emphasize Robert's delusions, perhaps illusions, but all of them chosen. And his greatest delusion is Gil-Martin the Demon. In murdering Mr. Blanchard and George Colwan, he does what the Devil does — he attempts to be God. It is Robert, by the way, who dresses in black, becoming the Black Man, that traditional figure of the Devil. And it is Robert who as a "devilish-looking youth" pursues George Colwan "as constantly as his shadow" and whose eye is "deep and malignant" (p.21).

Such statements reinforce Parsons' belief that Robert and Gil-Martin may truly be one being. Wittig too hints at such an interpretation when he speaks of the themes of "duality, split personality," in Scottish literature.¹¹ And indeed there are plenty of examples of duality in the novel: there are two George Colwans, two Robert Wringhims; there is Robert's feverish vision of himself as two people, and "the most perverse part of it was that I rarely conceived *myself* to be any of the two persons." He sees himself instead as Gil-Martin and as his own brother (pp.139-140) (and here one

¹¹ Wittig, *Scottish Tradition*, p. 249.

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must take note of Parsons' suggestion that "Hogg's Cain and Abel are strangely one."¹²) Gil-Martin has the ability to take the form of anyone else, but the two forms he takes that are important to the novel are those of Robert and his brother George. Gil-Martin states that this ability to take on the likeness of another enables him to enter into the mind of that person (p.114) — certainly he knows the most hidden depths of Robert's mind. And when Robert says that, if it is true that he has "two souls, which take possession of my bodily frame by turns," then he is not guilty of murdering his mother and the girl he is supposed to have seduced, Gil-Martin responds with "We are all subjected to two distinct natures in the same person," (p.174) implying that we should be fully conscious that we have two such natures.

These elements of the novel may also illustrate Wittig's assertion that there is "a strangely subjective vision of reality" in modern Scottish literature.¹³ But it is not just as a problem in epistemology that we must view Hogg's novel; the world is true enough, but the real question is: how do we recognize evil? For all of the above examples relate directly to Gil-Martin. And when a man can say, as the elder Robert Wringhim says (and as the younger believes), that "to the wicked, all things are wicked; but to the just, all things are just and right," (p. 14) he has already confused good and evil and the Demon has his opportunity.

The point of all this may be clarified by Charles Williams who, speaking of the appearance of the Devil to St. Anthony, holds that the Demon "is not only and entirely the individual Devil; he is also the exhibition of Anthony's own inner evil nature," and adds that those people "whose minds cannot otherwise be turned aside, those who are beyond the trial of sensual indulgence, are ruined more subtly."¹⁴ In short, Robert, not recognizing his own evil, does not recognize the tempter.

There are two images in the latter part of the novel that clearly symbolize Robert's predicament and the Devil's ambiguity. Caught in the weaver's web, Robert hangs upside down, naked, a comic but terrible figure; and yet, attempting to determine what clothing he has in his hands, his or Gil-Martin's, he has *chosen* to wander

¹² Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology*, p. 294.

¹³ Wittig, *Scottish Tradition*, p. 250.

¹⁴ Charles Williams, *Witchcraft* (New York, 1959), p. 41.

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blindly through the weaver's work, falling thereby into a literal snare. And, in the third section, the letter tells the story of Wringhim's suicide: a drover believes he sees two people going around and around the hay-rick, but when he arrives there he finds only the hanged man (p. 219).¹⁵ These two people are obviously Robert and Gil-Martin; yet Gil-Martin's final disappearance is not just proof of the Devil's powers but of his intimate connection with the living Robert—he is part of us as well as being himself.

There is a weird irony in this: when Robert commits suicide, he does in a manner destroy Gil-Martin. In his last diary note, Robert says that Gil-Martin "is raging with despair at his fallen and decayed majesty, and there is some miserable comfort in the idea that my tormentor shall fall with me" (p.216). Satan certainly is not dead, but we must remember that when the last sinner will have been condemned, Satan too will be finished. And even now it would seem that each time Satan gains a soul he re-enacts his own fall.

My last statement is, of course, not the "message" of the novel. Instead, the novel's meaning is summed up in that final image of the two men going round and round the hay-rick. The drover thinks they are "dressing it," although the real image would seem to be that of one figure pursuing the other. But the book is ambiguous to the last: we do not know who is pursuing whom nor, even, if there are two men at all. Or, finally, the novel insists that evil exists but we can never be sure of its form.

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¹⁵ Simpson speaks of the "figures 'going round' the hanged man" and says that we may be seeing a medieval picture of hell-fire and punishment (see Simpson, *Hogg*, p. 190). But there are two figures and *no* hanged man when the drover first looks — only when the drover comes up to the hay-rick does he see the hanged man, and the letter suggests that "the unfortunate young man had hanged himself after the man with the lambs came into view." Rather than a picture of hell-fire, we are given a picture of the evil in the living human being.