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James Robertson, *The Fanatic* (2000)

In a very real sense, James Robertson's first four novels, *The Fanatic* (2000), *Joseph Knight* (2003), *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006), and *And the Land Lay Still* (2010), read like companion pieces, perhaps even corollaries, to the editorial projects which have re-energised critical engagement with James Hogg, Walter Scott, and Robert Louis Stevenson over the last decades: the Stirling/South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg, the Edinburgh Editions of, respectively, the Waverley Novels and Walter Scott's Poetry, and the New Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Thus, it is already in *The Fanatic* that, above and beyond the numerous intertextual references to, for example, *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, *Redgauntlet*, or *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, four themes which are central to these works are revisited:

First, there is the claim that, while the past shapes—and its unresolved conflicts haunt—the present, our perception of the past is, conversely, shaped by present issues and concerns. Second, as one way of accessing this past is through the documents it produced, it behoves us to reflect on how and for which purposes these documents were written and transmitted—or else lost in transmission—and whether our conceptual tools for reading them are adequate. Third, we need to be sensitive to how the past is inscribed in our physical environment, that is, how landscapes or cityscapes are scarred by the traumatic events which happened there, “pressing in” upon their modern inhabitants “like heat from a furnace” (*The Fanatic*, 132). Fourth, and although one of the voices in the novel complains, tongue-in-cheek, that “we don't need mair doubles, our hail fuckin culture's littered we them” (25), this voice, ironically, is that of the protagonist's, Andrew Carlin's, mirror image in the contemporary story line. Additionally, Carlin's double in the 17th century plotline, James Mitchell, is a prime example of one of the “holy terror” whose presence in Scottish history the mirror also deplores: “Holy Willies and holy terrors, you name it Scotland's fuckin had it.” And: “Are we never gaun tae fuckin sort oorsels oot?” (*ibid.*)

However, the three (very brief) final chapters of *The Fanatic*, while continuing to acknowledge the influence of the past, re-direct readers' attention to the future. They begin as follows:

This happens later. In a few days, after everything else is over. We don't really see this, it is beyond the last page, but then again, it would be a pity to miss it (295).

By blurring the boundaries between what does, and what does not, appear to belong to the narrative proper, this comment links these chapters both to the paratextual material of the novel's three epigraphs, and to its first chapter, "Prologue." Importantly, the third of these epigraphs, "Lines from a satirical poem on Archbishop Sharp," and the first sentence of "Prologue," are themselves connected. In the poem, it is the "wild heads of the tyme" that "dream," in the "Prologue" the dreamer is Mitchell, imprisoned on Bass Rock (1). When crossing the line between what has happened so far, and what "happens later," do we then, as readers, awaken from a dream, and if so, what kind of reality do we awaken to?

The chapters in question present three vignettes: In the first, local resistance against the commodification of Scotland's uncanny heritage takes the time-honoured form of a "bucket-shaped quantity of wetness" (298) descending upon a ghost-tour operator. In the second, two of the props this operator has given Carlin for his nightly appearance in the role of Major Weir, a cloak and a staff, have been appropriated by a young woman, who, in her Puss-in-Boots stride down the Leith Walk, passes well-known landmarks to arrive on the (pre-gentrified) shore of the Forth—as does, a few miles down the Firth, Andrew Carlin, in the third vignette: recovering from a debilitating illness, he has found some kind of equilibrium, however fragile, and "the people, the houses, the cars, the city and the long walk back into it, for a while at least they would be what was real" (308). The titles of the three last chapters of *The Fanatic*, incidentally, are "Edinburgh, May 1997," "Edinburgh, May 2, 1997," and "Edinburgh, May 2, 1997."

Postscript: On the evening of Thursday, May 1, 1997, I got on a night-train from Cracow, where I had been lecturing on the Scottish Renaissance, back to Germany. Once at home, I heard the news: a landslide victory for Labour, and thus, for Scotland, the first step on the road to devolution, and perhaps independence. For a while at least *that* would be what seemed real.

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