

“UNACCOUNTABLE BEING”: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF READING IN
HOGG’S *THE PRIVATE MEMOIRS AND CONFESSIONS OF A JUSTIFIED
SINNER* (1824).*

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Abstract: This study explores the hermeneutic complexity of Hogg’s important work, the Confessions. Should the novel be read as scriptural exegesis or a mode of “open poetics” embracing a fallen hermeneutics and eschewing narrative and theological closure? It examines the contemporary political and cultural factors in Enlightenment Edinburgh that may have influenced Hogg’s theological stance, including fanaticism, civil society and theories of fraternity and sympathy. Influence of the Enlightenment’s twin sister, Scottish Romanticism, is considered, with reference to the Calvinist Gothick, religious doubt and the sublime. Particular investigation is made of the Antinomian Predestinarian Calvinist sect (who constitute the novel’s subject), of their doctrine, soteriology and perilous Biblical nescience which undergo severe critique in Confessions. After examining Hogg’s complex use of narrative inexplicability, his thematic employment of the demonic and the doppelgänger, his exploitation of the subaltern voice, and “infernal” comic terrain, the study proposes three valid theological readings of Confessions.



Fig. 1 John Kay, *Thomas Hay and Sir James Stirling, arguing* (1796)

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Introduction

“There was good in the old Puritan idea of religious immobility. It has kept us strong and righteous-minded in many things, but it has not been without evil consequences.”¹

So observed the Rev. John Tulloch, Principal of St Andrews, looking back in 1885 across religious movements in Britain during the century in which Hogg’s novel was written. This had been, in Scotland, a century of church schism and secession, of trials for heresy. Such intransigence, Tulloch concluded, “has made us the hardest religious controversialists in the Christian world – severe upon one another – repellent where we ought to have been sympathetic, and uncharitable where we ought to have held each other by the hand.”² Hogg’s *Confessions* is a strange and chilling examination of the “religious immobility” to which Tulloch refers – the incapacity to countenance any changed articulation of religious truth. Of this novel, which explores the psychology of religious fanaticism within the then fashionable genre of Gothick literature, it has been claimed that it is “doubtful whether a more convincing representation of the power of evil exists in our literature.”³ However, Hogg’s novel fiercely resists any single interpretation. Traditionally viewed as a satirical attack on Calvinism, there is copious evidence of the author’s staunch adherence to the traditional doctrine of the Scottish Kirk and sincere devotion to its foundations in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The novel’s indeterminacy, and technique of “narrative inexplicability,” is compounded by its complex play with multiple narratives, unreliable narrators, discursive shifts and ludic elements, which render simple or straightforward theological readings problematic.⁴

How then might we meaningfully interpret the textual subtlety of *Confessions*, and which hermeneutic framings might prove generative in this endeavour? To address these issues this study is anchored in two research questions. Firstly, it seeks to clarify Hogg’s theological stance in the *Confessions*: is the novel to be read as scriptural exegesis or as a mode of “open poetics” which embraces a fallen hermeneutics that eschews both narrative and theological closure? Secondly, (to illuminate aspects of the first question), it asks what contemporary political and cultural factors may have influenced this stance.

¹ John Tulloch, *Movements of Religious Thought in Britain during the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1885), 334-35.

² *Ibid.*, 335.

³ Walter Allen, *The English Novel: A Short Critical History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 130.

⁴ Megan Joann Coyer, “The Ettrick Shepherd and the Modern Pythagorean: science and imagination in romantic Scotland,” (University of Glasgow: Unpublished PhD thesis, 2010), 184.

The through-line of this study is clarified as follows. The following chapter will provide a brief orientation and background via the novel's *dramatis personae* and plot development. The third chapter discusses key political and cultural developments in Enlightenment Edinburgh which bear on *Confessions*, including fanaticism, civil society and theories of fraternity and sympathy, whilst the fourth chapter similarly considers the influence on the novel of the Enlightenment's twin sister, Scottish Romanticism, with particular reference to the Calvinist Gothick, religious doubt and the religious sublime. Chapter 5 investigates the specific Calvinist sect, the Antinomian Predestinarians, who are the subject of the novel, whilst Chapter 6 examines the aspects of their doctrine and soteriology that undergo severe critique in *Confessions*. Hogg's use of Biblical allusion is studied in the seventh chapter with an exegetical reference to the Gospel of Luke and its parables, to reveal the perilous Biblical nescience of the antinomian protagonists. Using the incident of the Brocken Spectre as example, Chapter 8, conversely, discusses Hogg's complex use of narrative inexplicability in its employment of the demonic, sublimity and the doppelgänger. The concluding chapter, after examining Hogg's exploiting of the subaltern voice, and "infernal" comic terrain, suggests three valid theological readings of *Confessions*. From these approaches it is hoped further insight can be gained into the hermeneutic complexity of this important work.

Mise en Scène

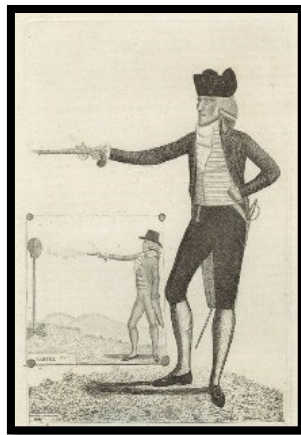


Fig. 2 John Kay, *James Macrae* (1790)

A brief overview of the novel's structure and plot development will help inform subsequent discussion of thematic elements within the text. The events of *Confessions* are narrated twice, first by an unnamed nineteenth-century "Editor" and then by the "sinner" of the novel's title, Robert Wringhim. The first section, "The Editor's Narrative," begins in 1687 with

an account of the unhappy marriage of the elderly and allegedly wealthy laird of Dalcastle, George Colwan, to a pious and much younger woman from Glasgow, Rabina Orde. Whilst the laird has a fondness for drinking and dancing, characterised as “a droll, careless chap,” with a very limited proportion of the fear of God in his heart, Miss Orde, in contrast, was reared in a strict Calvinist tradition by her tutor Reverend Robert Wringhim.⁵ The marriage fails from the start. Lady Dalcastle is unsuccessful in her attempts to convert her husband to her faith, declaring him a “limb of Antichrist,” whilst he mocks her “wire-drawn degrees of faith, hope and repentance” and dares to doubt her “great standard doctrine of absolute predestination.”⁶ The couple occupy different quarters in the Castle, and before long a Miss Arabella Logan, a “fat bouncing dame” and “an old and intimate acquaintance of the laird’s” takes up residence as “housekeeper” and “mistress-substitute of the mansion.”⁷ Nonetheless Lady Dalcastle bears two sons. The elder, George, is acknowledged and brought up by the Laird. The younger, Robert, is educated by his mother and her confidant and spiritual adviser, the Reverend Robert Wringhim, whose name he takes and who becomes his guardian, and with whom, in the eyes of the laird and others, lies his paternity, though this is never confirmed. Robert is brought up to abide by the precepts of antinomian predestinarianism.

The two brothers remain apart for sixteen years until they meet at a tennis match in Edinburgh, during which young Robert seeks to disrupt the game. George strikes him and declares Robert’s illegitimacy. From this point George is continually pursued and harassed by his “fiendish” brother until obliged to remain behind closed doors at his father’s lodgings.⁸

Things come to a head shortly afterwards when George, at dawn, climbs to the summit of Arthur’s Seat. He is alarmed to see a colossal apparition of his brother appear in the morning mist with a halo of glory surrounding him. Turning to flee, he careers into his brother and they struggle on the ground. George threatens Robert into promising not to harass him further, before offering to exchange forgiveness and remain friends. Robert rejects the offer and subsequently, aided by his guardian, brings charges of assault which lead to George’s arraignment by magistrates. He is subsequently acquitted, but after an evening of celebration with his male companions at a local bawdy house, is found murdered in the Old Town. The

⁵ James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner. Written by Himself. With a Detail of Curious Traditional Facts and Other Evidence by the Editor*, edited by P.D. Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2002) 3-4 (hereafter “*Confessions*”). This edition is currently the most faithful to the original 1824 edition, which was published anonymously, and is referenced throughout.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

court inquiry concludes he was killed in a duel by his companion the Hon. Thomas Drummond, who promptly flees. The distraught elderly laird dies broken-hearted whilst Wringhim Jnr inherits his estate and title. Meanwhile the laird's mistress, Arabella Logan, strongly suspecting Wringhim of complicity in the murder, is unable to offer proof until she encounters Bell Calvert, a single mother fallen on hard times and reduced to prostitution, who, as eye-witness to George's death, confirms Wringhim as the murderer, abetted by a mysterious companion, an apparent double of George's companion. The two women travel to Dalcastle, track him down and tie him up. But before he can be arrested Wringhim flees.

The second section of the novel, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Sinner*, is Robert's autobiographical account of events. The first part takes the form of a printed publication and the second a desperate handwritten account of his final days. The former part recalls his celebration on being admitted, by his guardian, to the number of God's Elect. Almost immediately he encounters a mesmerising and compelling character, Gil-Martin – a “singular and unaccountable being, who seemed to have more knowledge and information than all the persons I had ever known put together.”⁹ He becomes enthralled to this figure, who reassures him in his antinomian faith that the deeds of an elect person cannot affect their salvation. Gil-Martin persuades Robert first to murder a Church of Scotland minister, Reverend Blanchard, who challenges such views, and subsequently his brother George. Robert is accused of further crimes, including the seduction and murder of a local girl, and the murder of his own mother. Robert has no recollection of such crimes, believing they must constitute the actions of a criminal doppelgänger. He goes on the run, finding employment in an Edinburgh printing house, and then in increasingly menial farm jobs in the Scottish Borders, pursued by the authorities but also by the increasingly menacing Gil-Martin. His last hand-written notes record the daily terror and mental anguish he experiences, losing track of time, tormented by devils by night, his identity disintegrating until he falls into despair and decides to take his own life.

A third and concluding section of the novel returns to the Editor's Narrative with an account of the exhumation of the suicide's mummified corpse in 1823 by two local boys. The Editor, with his friend the writer J.G. Lockhart and other gentlemen, visit the Borders seeking to re-exhume the grave. They encounter Hogg himself, who derides their endeavour to re-open the grave. Another Shepherd assists them, and the memoirs are discovered in the grave.

⁹ Ibid, 82.

Having provided a short overview of the action of *Confessions*, the following section now seeks to identify significant contemporary cultural and political influences of Enlightenment Edinburgh upon the novel.

Hogg's Edinburgh: religious fanaticism, civil society and Enlightenment "sympathy" in the Confessions.



Fig. 3 John Kay, “*Philosophers*” (1787)

Hogg’s treatment of religious fanaticism in *Confessions* needs to be seen through the political, societal and historiographical lenses of his own day. Any visitor to the city of Edinburgh is soon aware of a duality, or ambivalence, not only in its urban design and architecture, but in its character and disposition. The wide boulevards and geometric sophistication of James Craig’s exquisitely ordered New Town – the Enlightenment in stone – contrast starkly with the twisting wynds, cramped dark closes and overhead bridges of the Old Town. Whereas the cool rationality of the former celebrates the Scottish Enlightenment (1770-1830), when the city flourished as one of Europe’s leading centres of learning, science, publishing and taste, the narrow and densely-housed cobbled labyrinth of the latter still conjures an older tradition of religious conflict, superstition, ghosts, poverty and crime.

The “Editor” figure of Hogg’s novel – a somewhat Scott-like educated Tory antiquarian – presents the author of the *Private Memoirs* as a “religious maniac,” a “deluded creature,” and his confessions as testimony to “the rage of fanaticism in former days.”¹⁰ Like the contrasting architecture of the city in which it is set, this novel counterposes the Enlightened civil society of urban Lowland Scotland, which had emerged from the troubled recent history of the Covenanting and Jacobite Wars and the Anglo-Scottish Treaty of Union, with an

¹⁰ Ibid, 175, 64.

uncompromising culture of extreme Calvinist evangelism. As Ian Duncan observes, “Hogg’s novel narrates the formation and dissolution of the fanatic, whose subject position, within the historical field of civil society yet ideologically outside it, assumes a relentless antagonism to its norms.”¹¹

However, tempting as it might be to portray religious extremism within the novel as an enduring atavistic moral impulse, it is perhaps more insightful to regard these tendencies as an inevitable counterpoise that characterises the birth of liberal modernity. “Far from originating in alien cultures,” suggests Duncan, “civil society and fanaticism grow up together, each unthinkable without the other.”¹² The civil society of eighteenth-century Lowland Scotland, secular and modern as in the theorised representations of David Hume or Adam Smith, had achieved “a public domain of economic and cultural values separate from the state, freed from political necessity, and thus entailing a reduction of politics to the practical management of things as they are.”¹³ In stark contradistinction, however, fanaticism appears as “the specter of an authentic politics, of political reason moved by ideology in its pure, absolute, metaphysical form – the form, in other words, of religion: a revenant by which modern thought keeps finding itself surprised.”¹⁴

The contemporary form of fanaticism had emerged in Hogg’s era through the French Revolution. Almost contemporary with Hogg’s novel was Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, portraying another destructive revenant, another monstrous character, with metaphorical roots originating in the latent power of Enlightenment science, or emerging perhaps from the unleashed power of the French Terror. “The sleep of reason,” as Goya observed in this period, “produces monsters.”¹⁵

John Locke and David Hume, reflecting from either side of the border on the transformation at the turn of the eighteenth century of a moderate (Glorious) revolution into a newly formed civil society, may have considered the enthusiasts of former days capable of recuperation and appropriation within the new dispensation – committed citizens of a renovated British social order. Kant and



Fig. 4 Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (1799)

¹¹ Ian Duncan, “Fanaticism and Civil Society: Hogg’s Justified Sinner,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 42, No. 2, Theories of the Novel Now, Part I (Summer 2009), 343.

¹² *Ibid.*, 344.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Francisco De Goya Y Lucientes, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, Etching 1797 – 1799, Museo Nacional del Prado.

Hegel, however, reflecting on the experience of the French Revolution, considered fanaticism far less redeemable. For them, suggests Duncan, fanaticism represented “the absolute claim of politics over all domains of human life,” disrupting and reducing the separation of social spheres considered essential to civil society (private/public, political/religious, legal/financial, aesthetic) to confusion and chaos.¹⁶ Hume, too, had reservations about the potentially volatile tendencies of (the relatively recent phenomenon of) political parties, noting that “Parties from principle, especially abstract speculative principle, are known only to modern times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable phaenomenon [*sic*], that has yet appeared in human affairs.”¹⁷ Early in *Confessions* Hogg has Wringhim Junior spark a quarrel between members of the Tory and Whig factions who are dining and drinking in taverns in near proximity to each other. Wringhim, characterised by the (Tory) Editor as an “unaccountable monster,” when refused entry to the Black Bull tavern where his brother George is gathered with fellow young Tory “sparks,” then “set to exciting the mob at the door to acts of violence.”¹⁸ Appeals are made to his guardian, Wringhim Senior, who is “at table, with a number of the leaders of the Whig faction,” and immediately denounces the opposing faction – “as party spirit was the order of the day, an attempt was made to lay the burden of it to that account.”¹⁹ The upshot is, within minutes, “deray” and “affray” ensuing in the High Street of Edinburgh and the town guard and Cameronian regiment brought in to quell disorder.²⁰ The violence is intense: “Each close vomited out its levies, and these better armed with missiles than when they sought it for a temporary retreat [...] shower after shower of the most abominable weapons of offence were rained in upon them.”²¹ The Burkean tone of alarm and disgust at the quality of mindlessness in this havoc is voiced ostensibly by the Editor but may well also reflect Hogg’s own Tory and rural sentiments.

A mob is like a spring tide in an eastern storm, that retires only to return with more overwhelming fury. The crowd was taken by surprise when such a strong and well-armed party issued from the house with so great fury, laying all prostrate that came in their way [...] and thousands were moved to an involuntary flight, they knew not why.²²

¹⁶ Duncan, *Fanaticism*, 344.

¹⁷ David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, Ed. Eugene F. Miller. (Indianapolis: Liberty, 1987), 60.

¹⁸ *Confessions*, 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

²² *Ibid.*, 21.

This is the mode of fanaticism also depicted in the *Confessions* in the guise of the Wringhims' Antinomian sect, which is a further example of fanaticism predicated on Hume's "abstract speculative principle."²³ Hume noted a fissile tendency within Christianity historically to create factions, and to employ the modern tools of a philosophical age – logic, rhetoric, disputation, publication – for purposes of self-justification and to gain cultural hegemony. Note that Robert later trains in the craft of printing technology in order to have the major part of his Antinomian *Memoirs* published: "I had an inward thirst and longing to distinguish myself in the great cause of religion, and I thought, if once I could print my own works, how I would astonish mankind, and confound their self-wisdom and their esteemed morality—blow up the idea of any dependence on good works, and morality, forsooth!"²⁴

The effect was increasing schism and doctrinal extremism. Hence Hogg's devil figure, Gil-Martin, seduces Robert Wringhim with his "sublime" exercise of philosophical reason. When Wringhim inquires of the orthodox Church of Scotland minister Reverend Blanchard whether he does not perceive "how clear and unhesitating he is on some of the most interesting points of divinity," the minister warns against the headiness of the sublime (often characterised in the Romantic period as the experiencing of something incommensurable, incalculable or disproportionate): "Religion is a sublime and glorious thing, the bonds of society on earth, and the connector of humanity with the Divine nature; but there is nothing so dangerous to man as the wresting of any of its principles, or forcing them beyond their due bounds: this is of all others the readiest way to destruction."²⁵

Duncan sees the enactment of such speculative abstraction in the *Confessions* as a form of "foundational violence."²⁶ Indeed, the Laird of Dalcastle rebukes Robert's father, the Reverend Wringhim as follows:

You are, Sir, a presumptuous, self-conceited pedagogue, a stirrer up of strife and commotion in church, in state, in families, and communities. You are one, Sir, whose righteousness consists in splitting the doctrines of Calvin into thousands of undistinguishable films, and in setting up a system of justifying-grace against all breaches of all laws, moral or divine. In short, Sir, you are a mildew—a canker-worm in the bosom of the Reformed Church, generating a disease of which she will never be purged, but by the shedding of blood.²⁷

²³ Hume, *Essays*, 60.

²⁴ *Confessions*, 152.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 90-1.

²⁶ Duncan, *Fanaticism*, 345.

²⁷ *Confessions*, 12.

A Scottish Enlightenment philosopher such as Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* envisions civil society as a collective comprising individuals, in which order and stability are maintained by the moral technology of *sympathy*, acting as a form of ethical discipline, propriety or homeostasis to regulate individualism.²⁸ Hume, however, in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, is more wary of the powerfully affective and infective nature of sympathy which transgresses the boundaries of self. The Edinburgh philosopher Dugald Stewart shares this dangerous view of the “inexplicable contagion of sympathetic imitation” resonating deep within “our bodily frame.”²⁹ This embodied response leads to “the contagious nature of convulsions, of hysteric disorders, of panics, and of all the different kinds of enthusiasm,” chief of which is “the infectious tendency of religious enthusiasm.”³⁰ Stewart shares the counter-revolutionary sympathies of Edmund Burke, and, like him, fears the “sublime” energy that characterises crowds.³¹ Both writers fear the loss of individual subjectivity and agency that fanaticism entails. “Sympathy,” Duncan suggests, “promising fraternity, brings terror.”³² Gil-Martin’s first words to Robert deceptively offer fraternity, feigning enthusiasm for antinomianism whilst subtly revealing his (Lucifer’s) unbearable loss of God’s redemption: “You think I am your brother,” said he; “or that I am your second self. I am indeed your brother, not according to the flesh, but in my belief of the same truths, and my assurance in the same mode of redemption, than which I hold nothing so great or so glorious on earth.”³³

Ultimately he brings terror and complete psychological disintegration to Robert. From their first meeting, Hogg indicates, it is conformity of thought that is the source of danger: “What was my astonishment on perceiving that he was the same being as myself! [...] this singular being read my thoughts in my looks, anticipating the very words that I was going to utter.”³⁴

Through the figure of Gil-Martin fanaticism and conformity of thought destroy individuality, by a process of appropriation, first of appearance, then of individual identity. Hogg symbolises this through Gil-Martin’s demonic powers of possession and imitation.

²⁸ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. (Oxford: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1976).

²⁹ Dugald Stewart, *Elements of Philosophy of the Human Mind*. Vol. 2. (Edinburgh: Ramsay, 1814), 208, 154.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 195-6, 203.

³¹ *Ibid*, 209; Edmund Burke (1757), *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

³² Duncan, *Fanaticism*, 347.

³³ *Confessions*, 80-81.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 80.

If I contemplate a man's features seriously, mine own gradually assume the very same appearance and character. And what is more, by contemplating a face minutely, I not only attain the same likeness but, with the likeness, I attain the very same ideas as well as the same mode of arranging them, so that, you see, by looking at a person attentively, I by degrees assume his likeness, and by assuming his likeness I attain to the possession of his most secret thoughts.³⁵

We have seen how in Hogg's time residual concerns from eighteenth century thought and post-revolutionary Europe regarding civil society, fanaticism and sublimity, alongside equivocal attitudes to "sympathy," all contributed to major themes within *Confessions*. In the next chapter we see how these themes were incorporated into the contemporary popular literary Gothick genre in distinctive fashion.

Calvinist Gothick: unaccountability, sublimity and "the fearful self."

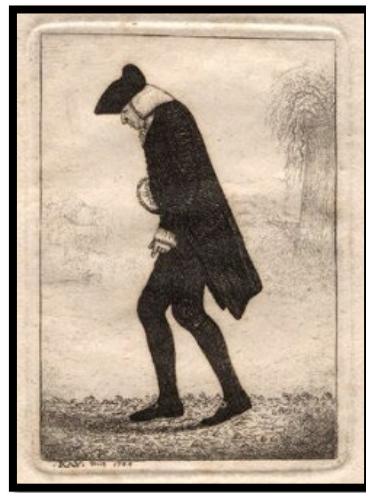


Fig. 5 John Kay, *William Cullen* (1784)

Consideration of the sublime brings into view another hermeneutic perspective on *Confessions*, which is its location within the sub-genre of what has come to be identified as Calvinist Gothick, a form Hogg exploits to underscore religious terror and the unknowability of God. This sub-genre was a literary inclination arising in eighteenth century Britain and pre-Revolutionary (Puritan) America, and including works such as Lewis's *The Monk*, Brockden Brown's *Wieland* and Maturin's *Melmoth*, leading later to the writings of Hawthorne and Poe. Where European Gothick tended to originate in the Catholic tradition, often entailing perverse family inheritances (as happens also in *Confessions*), the British and American tradition

³⁵ Ibid, 86.

focuses on the Puritan concern of being innately sinful – the Calvinist idea of “total depravity” – from which one cannot escape or seek divine pardon, this being the inherent state of humans in the world. Within Calvinist Gothick the guilt ensuing from inherent sinfulness proves unbearable, with consequences of madness, mania, schizophrenia, hearing of voices, manifestations of the uncanny, unfathomable moral quandaries and states of abject terror. Protagonists (such as the creature in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*) often face banishment and become social outcasts or wanderers in wild and isolated settings.

Calvinism, Cairns Craig emphasises, was the superordinate influence in the key institutions shaping Scottish identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries -- religion and education – and, “whether for or against Calvinism's conception of human destiny, no Scot could avoid involvement in the imaginative world that Calvinism projected.”³⁶ The Scottish community, and its imagination, he suggests, “was ruled in large measure by fear, and, equally, by a fearlessness which refused to submit to the fears of those who did not dare challenge the powers that ruled their universe.”³⁷ Craig points to the pre-eminent function, in this tradition, of intense fear of a whimsical, menacing God, which has the effect (as a defence mechanism) of transforming the protagonist “from a God-fearing into a fear-inspiring creature.”³⁸

Hogg’s novel dramatises precisely the dialectic of the fearful self: Robert Wringhim, repressed by a terrifying religion of almost inevitable damnation, transforms himself from victim of a fearful God into the fear-inspiring companion of the devil and terroriser of his own family and friends.³⁹

Richard Haslam refers to this state of terror as the “Calvinist sublime.”⁴⁰ Calvin, answering critics of the harshness of his doctrine of predestination cites Paul, where he argues for the essential *unknowability* of God: “O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor?” (Rom 9:20-21, KJV) He draws also on St Augustine to support his conviction that election precedes faith, and to deny that those who believe are necessarily chosen. The cause

³⁶ Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999), 37.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 37-38.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 38.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ Richard Haslam, “Maturin and the ‘Calvinist Sublime,’” in *Gothick Origins and Innovations*, ed. Allan Lloyd Smith and Victor Sage (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).

of such a condition, Calvin argues, remains “just but unknown.”⁴¹ Haslam argues for the origin of sublime terror in Job’s plea to a seemingly capricious and arbitrary God who humiliates and tortures him: “Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me. Why do ye persecute me as God, and are not satisfied with my flesh?”⁴²

According to Paul Fry, not only Schiller but the entire eighteenth century makes Job the *Ur-text* of the sublime.⁴³ The Voice of God in the Whirlwind, he suggests, is “so dynamic and sinister – so daemonic” in itself that it is able simultaneously to “take into itself and allow the repression of the true catalyst of Job’s patience and reward, ‘the Satan’.”⁴⁴ Decades before Schiller’s *On the Sublime* (1796), Burke had also identified the sublime as a mode of terror “that naturally arises from a force which nothing can withstand.” He continues “But whilst we contemplate so vast an object, under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him.”⁴⁵

Burke, who coined the term “sublime,” felt that it excited sensations of terror, our strongest emotion, and that such dread provoked feelings of our insignificance against the violence of nature. He considered the sublime a useful corrective which restored perspective to mundane routine. Religion, and cathedral architecture and music, had conventionally offered glimpses of sublime eternal grandeur. However, the Calvinist sublime, Haslam points out, is only effective “when some degree of religious doubt is at work.”⁴⁶ “Unalloyed belief or pure terror,” he argues, “disperse the Calvinist sublime; only when the parasite excavates an internal space can it coalesce.”⁴⁷

Calvin’s sense of divine unknowability, and hence religious doubt, is mirrored in the *Confessions* in experiences which Robert terms “unaccountable.” Gil-Martin is portrayed as an “unaccountable being” and the Brocken Spectre on Arthur’s Seat as an “unaccountable incident.” After inheriting Dalcastle estate, a neighbour, Mrs Keeler, arrives to accuse Robert of pursuing and sexually assaulting her daughter during a period of drunkenness and debauchery (lasting months) of which he has no recollection. Hearing of these events (either repressed by him or enacted by his doppelgänger Gil-Martin, who verifies them) Robert

⁴¹ Jean Calvin (1552), *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid. (London: James Clarke and Co. Ltd., 1961), 156.

⁴² Haslam, *Sublime*, 44, quoting Job 19:21-22 (KJV).

⁴³ Paul Fry, “The Possession of the Sublime,” *Studies in Romanticism* XXVI, no.2 (1987), 195.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Burke, *Enquiry*, 68.

⁴⁶ Haslam, *Calvinist Sublime*, 46.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*; See also Burke, *Enquiry*, 40, who argues similarly.

proclaims: “This is unaccountable [...] It is impossible that I can have been doing a thing, and not doing it at the same time. But indeed, honest woman, there have several incidents occurred to me in the course of my life which persuade me I have a second self; or that there is some other being who appears in my likeness.”⁴⁸

His brother George Colwan refers to Robert himself (or perhaps Gil-Martin in his chameleon nature) as an “unaccountable monster.”⁴⁹

The *Confessions*, moreover, is pervaded by a sense of sublimity linked to religious fear or spiritual elevation. The Rev. Blanchard warns that in Gil-Martin “There is a sublimity in his ideas, with which there is to me a mixture of terror; and, when he talks of religion, he does it as one that rather dreads its truths than reverences them.”⁵⁰ Robert begins to tire of Rev. Wringhim’s sermons which “were so inferior, in strength and sublimity, to the most common observations of my young friend.”⁵¹ His consorting with Gil-Martin has led, he feels, to an elevation of his own thought, such that his friends “all declared that, instead of being deranged in my intellect, they had never heard my conversation manifest so much energy or sublimity of conception.”⁵² Later in the narrative the peasant woman Lucky Shaw recounts a folktale of the demonic beguiling of the whole community of Auchtermuchty by a “sublime stranger” in preacher’s garb.⁵³ His preaching “was striking, sublime, and awful in the extreme.”⁵⁴ The inhabitants of Auchtermuchty “were electrified—they were charmed; they were actually raving mad about the grand and sublime truths” delivered to them by this “sublime preacher.”⁵⁵ For, Lucky adds wryly, “Nothing in the world delights a truly religious people so much as consigning them to eternal damnation.”⁵⁶ She continues, “they, in the height of their enthusiasm, perceived not the ruinous tendency of the tenets so sublimely inculcated,” claiming, “Oh, he is an angel sent from Heaven, to instruct this great city,” said another, “for no man ever uttered truths so sublime before.”⁵⁷

Hogg exploits further Gothick tropes to intensify the Calvinist sublime. He draws on his own Borders folk knowledge for supernatural tales of demonic possession, ghosts and apparitions, such as Robert’s visions of a “woman in white” and later, before his involvement

⁴⁸ *Confessions*, 122.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 90.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 89.

⁵² *Ibid*, 106.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 138.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 138-9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 138.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 138-9.

in murder, of “golden weapons.” Hogg also employs the device of the demonic double (*doppelgänger*). Of Gil-Martin he says, “to shake him was impossible – we were incorporated together – identified with one another [...] and the power was not in me to separate myself from him. I still knew nothing who he was.”⁵⁸ Gil-Martin, a figure with no Christian name, tells Robert: “I am wedded to you so closely that I feel as if I were the same person.”⁵⁹ He possesses, moreover, the disturbing “cameleon art” of adopting the appearance of others.⁶⁰ He tells Robert, “by looking at a person attentively, I by degrees assume his likeness, and by assuming his likeness I attain to the possession of his most secret thoughts.”⁶¹ As André Gide first observed, Hogg’s use of the Romantic double is also prescient of many aspects of what is now known as psychoanalytic repression, schizophrenia or Freudian projection.⁶² This topic rests outwith the scope of the present inquiry; suffice it that Robert observes, “I generally conceived myself to be two people. When I lay in bed, I deemed there were two of us in it; when I sat up, I always beheld another person [...] over the singular delusion that I was two persons, my reasoning faculties had no power.”⁶³

This section has shown how Hogg locates theological preoccupations within the popular contemporary genre of Gothick, helping to develop a specific Calvinist variant expressly suited to accommodate matters of religious terror, divine unknowability (“unaccountability”) and sublimity. The next chapter will examine more specifically what the theological preoccupations of *Confessions* were, focusing particularly on antinomianism, predestination, divine election and justification.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 126.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 158.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 86.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² André Gide, “Introduction,” in Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (New York: Grove, 1959).

⁶³ *Confessions*, 106.

“To the just, all things are just”: Antinomian Predestinarianism.

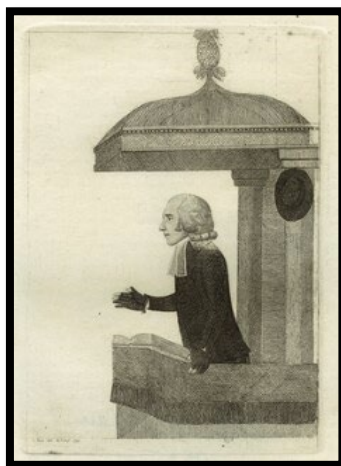


Fig. 6 John Kay, *James Peddie* (1791)

Hogg’s *Confessions*, written during the time both of the Scottish Enlightenment and of Scottish Romanticism, is concerned, principally, with Calvinist theological doctrine which had, since its introduction by John Knox almost four centuries earlier, continuously fashioned Scottish thought and behaviour. Three aspects of this doctrine, the conviction of the utter depravity of mankind, justification by faith (*sola fide*) and a belief in predestination, are subject to inquiry in Hogg’s novel through exploration of the practices of an extreme Calvinist sect, still operative in Hogg’s day, the Antinomian Predestinarians.⁶⁴ These dimensions of Calvinist thought originate in strands of Pauline theology in the Epistles, principally Romans, where the apostle asserts in general terms that those who believe in Christ are not subject to law – Roman or Mosaic, moral or ceremonial – but live, rather, under grace: “For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.” (Rom 6:14, KJV)

Law cannot be a remedy for sin, only grace (*sola gratia*). Moreover, both Jews and Gentiles can be “justified” – made just and free from sin in the sight of God, not by law but by faith in the redemptive nature of Christ’s sacrifice alone (*solus Christus*). As Paul notes in Rom 10:4, “Christ is the end of law unto righteousness for everyone who believes.” Ideas of justification, and predestination appear in Rom 8: 29-30: “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate [to be] conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.”

⁶⁴ From Greek νόμος, “law.”

The central precept of Antinomianism, that justification by faith countermands legal obligation, sits comfortably with belief in predestination – and what in Calvinist soteriology is termed “Effectual Calling” – which Paul also expounds in Romans to give assurance and security to the faithful at the final judgment:

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? (Rom 8: 28-31)

Here we observe in operation the five *solae* of the Protestant Reformation: *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus* and *solus Deo Gloria*. However, such doctrine gives rise to discomfiting dilemmas and a degree of salvific disquietude for those wishing to adhere to the faith. Predestination posits a deity who arbitrarily, and outwith time and history, selects individuals for salvation (the “elect”), regardless of personal merit, for purposes unknowable to man. “The main danger,” suggests Markéta Gregorová, “lies in the controversial divorce of religion and morality: presuming that man is innately hopelessly depraved, why should he attempt to be otherwise and seek to get along with himself and the society?”⁶⁵ Gregorová’s concern is, indeed, made flesh in the character of Robert who, in first entertaining the notion of publishing his memoirs, declares: “I thought if once I could print my own works, how I would astonish mankind, and confound their self wisdom and their esteemed morality – blow up the idea of any dependence on good works, and morality, forsooth!”⁶⁶

Furthermore, if, as with Robert, an individual is convinced of their personal unconditional election, what limits to the scope of personal liberty may pertain? Robert’s mother, and his spiritual mentor and namesake, the Reverend Mr Wringhim, both members of an antinomian predestinarian sect, entertain the possibilities of such licence. To the Rev. Wringhim’s assertion that “(t)o the wicked, all things are wicked; but to the just, all things are just and right, Lady Dalcastle responds, “Ah, that is a sweet and comfortable saying, Mr. Wringhim! How delightful to think that a justified person can do no wrong! Who would not envy the liberty wherewith we are made free?”⁶⁷

As will be demonstrated below, however, the Wringhims’ interpretation of scripture is often ironically portrayed as questionable, and their use of Biblical allusion as highly selective.

⁶⁵ Markéta Gregorová, “The Concept of Caledonian Antisyzygy,” in *Language, Literature and Culture: Contemporary Research Perspectives*, ed. Renáta Gregorová et al. (Kosice: SKASE, 2011), 101.

⁶⁶ *Confessions*, 152.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 11.

Hogg himself, a devout congregant of the Church of Scotland, would have been well aware of the injunction within the *Westminster Confession* that members of the elect, when justified, are only freed from the condemnation of the moral law.⁶⁸ Scottish Reformed orthodoxy insisted that “the moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof ... Neither doth Christ, in the Gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.”⁶⁹ John Bligh argues that Hogg’s work is “much more than a satire on an early eighteenth-century Scottish misunderstanding of Calvinism,” suggesting that “it reveals dangerous tendencies in Pauline Christianity itself.”⁷⁰ Indeed, later in the novel, Wringhim’s servant Penpunt wryly comments that Satan “had been often driven to the shift o’ preaching it [the gospel] himself, for the purpose o’ getting some wrang tenets introduced into it, and thereby turning it into blasphemy or ridicule.”⁷¹

Given all this, it is not surprising that the novel was often traditionally viewed as a prose equivalent of Burns jocular *Holy Willie’s Prayer*, placed perhaps at the more serious end of the satirical spectrum that attacks vice rather than folly. Douglas Mack, for example, sees the *Confessions* as an indictment of extreme Calvinism.⁷² Ian Campbell, similarly, contends that the novel “satirises not religion, not Calvinism, but excess: it satirises pride, closed-minded arrogance, timidity, stupidity.”⁷³ John Carey, however, challenges such views, arguing that, given Hogg’s devout Presbyterian practice, the *Confessions* cannot constitute a satirical attack on Calvinism. He speaks of “Hogg’s own involvement in Wringhim’s religious dilemma” and suggests that “the stern theology behind the *Confessions* is, after all, not very different from Wringhim’s.”⁷⁴ The import of the *Confessions* he suggests is, in tone and spirit closer to that of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, in which John Bunyan warns against self-deception when he sees the figure of Ignorance refused entry to the Celestial City: “Then I saw that there was a way to Hell even from the Gates of Heaven.”⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Crawford Gribben, “James Hogg, Scottish Calvinism and Literary Theory,” *Scottish Studies Review*, 2004, 5(2), 12.

⁶⁹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1881), 19:5-6.

⁷⁰ John Bligh, “The Doctrinal Premises of Hogg’s *Confessions* of a Justified Sinner,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, Volume 19, Issue 1, Article 12, 1984.

⁷¹ *Confessions*, 135.

⁷² Douglas S. Mack, “Hogg’s Religion and The *Confessions* of a Justified Sinner,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, Vol. 7: 4, (1969) 272–275.

⁷³ Ian Campbell, “Afterword,” in Hogg, *Confessions*, ed. P.D. Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2002) 190.

⁷⁴ John Carey, “Introduction,” in Hogg, *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), xviii.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

There is evidence from family records of Hogg's sincere Calvinist belief and fidelity to the *Westminster Confession* and the Shorter and Longer Catechism.⁷⁶ He even wrote prayers for his family's recital. A letter from Hogg in 1830 to the *Edinburgh Literary Journal* vigorously defends the Kirk's traditional metrical version of the Psalms, which he could recite by heart from childhood.⁷⁷

This notwithstanding, Iain Crichton Smith takes issue with Carey, concluding that the range of Hogg's critique embraces not only fanatical Calvinism but all its forms.⁷⁸ Divine Election, he maintains, is "a damnable thing because the theory is in its axioms devilish, for it states that a certain number are elected to be saved":

But the Devil in this particular book doesn't offer luxury or women. He offers in fact what God appears to offer – Divine Election. [...] God does the selection. The inexorable logic of the theory arises from the attempt to deny that good works are enough-for a man could do all sorts of good works and still be a heathen. There is a logic to the theory but it is the logic of madness since it leads unequivocally to the conclusion *that ideology is more important than humanity* [my italics].⁷⁹

Such deep abiding anxieties would seem to be one of the psychological areas that Hogg explores in *Confessions*, with the complex Gil-Martin figure functioning ambiguously as literal Devil and outward representation of repressed inner desires.

This section has shown how antinomian practice developed Pauline doctrine on predestination and grace into a more extreme ideology predicated on notions of justification by faith and divine election. The ways in which Hogg implies that protagonists in *Confessions* are both self-deceptive and imperilled in relation to the flawed soteriology of their creed is now examined in the following section.

⁷⁶ Garside, "Introduction," *Confessions*, xvi.

⁷⁷ Hogg, James. "A Letter From Yarrow. The Scottish Psalmody Defended." *Edinburgh Literary Journal* 3 (1830): 162-3

⁷⁸ Iain Crichton Smith, "A work of genius: James Hogg's Justified Sinner," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 28:1 (1993).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

“Stern and Factious Principles”: Calvinist Doctrine in Hogg’s Confessions



Fig. 7 John Kay, *William Cullen* (1787)

After the Covenanting wars against James II, Presbyterian church government had been effectively established in Scotland through the Revolution Settlement of 1689/90 and, subsequently, the Union Treaty of 1707, with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* ratified as its guiding doctrine. Only a decade after the Union, however, disquiet arose within the established Kirk itself amongst Evangelical ministers who mistrusted what they perceived as (an early Enlightenment) drift towards Deism or a more rationalistic Christianity. Dispute was sparked in 1711 when a divinity student, William Craig, a candidate for ordination under the Auchterarder Presbytery, was required for an examination to confirm his acceptance of the Auchterarder Creed, namely that “it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ, and instating us in covenant with God.”⁸⁰ Craig refused and referred his complaint to the General Assembly, which upheld his objection, condemning the Creed as “unsound and most detestable.”⁸¹

This incident posits a tension (central to the *Confessions*) between the Hebrew Bible’s Covenant(s) of Works and the New Testament’s Covenant of Grace, the latter considered as superseding the former by those who would see Christ’s atonement as offering a path to salvation through faith alone (*sola fide*). The Assembly appeared unsettled by the Creed’s seeming negation of good deeds and obligation of repentance. It reprimanded the Auchterarder Presbytery and condemned its creed as antinomian (above Law) for its denial of the need for

⁸⁰ Laurence A.B. Whitley, *A Great Grievance: Ecclesiastical Lay Patronage in Scotland until 1750* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 153.

⁸¹ Garside, *Introduction*, xxiv.

holiness and repentance in coming to Christ. It also warned of the dangers of “neo-nomianism,” namely the Gospel offering a new milder Law, whereby the old Mosaic Law’s requirement for perfect, perpetual obedience is superseded by faith, repentance, and genuine, if imperfect, obedience.⁸²

During the Assembly’s debate the Reverend Thomas Boston, Minister of Ettrick, Hogg’s own parish, republished an English theological text from the Civil War which, he considered, satisfied many of the points under discussion. This was Fisher’s *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), found in the house of one of his parishioners, allegedly left by a Cromwellian soldier.⁸³ The controversy raged through pamphlets, books and preaching for five years, as to whether the *Marrow* and its adherents were antinomian. Boston and his followers defended their position by maintaining that justification through faith does not preclude subsequent good works, that faith in Christ leads ineluctably to a holy life, and hence more believers are likely to be saved by following this path. However, James Hadow, Principal of St Mary’s College, St Andrews, and Head of the Committee, was convinced of their antinomianism, asserting that their beliefs “tend to weaken and loose the Believer’s Obligation unto Obedience, and to slacken his Diligence in the Study of Holiness and Good Works, as not necessary to Salvation.”⁸⁴ The Assembly allowed “the Marrow men” to return to their parishes but castigated them for their mistaken doctrine and any future preferment in the Kirk was denied them.

Though *Confessions* has been likened to a satire on Calvinism, akin to Burns’ light-hearted *Holy Willie’s Prayer*, it is, suggests Bligh, a far more serious examination of “strands of St. Paul’s thinking which have always appealed to men and women who have tried and failed to live up to the exacting demands of Christian morality.”⁸⁵ Such strands are a recurrent feature of Christian preaching, and, in Bligh’s view, reveal “dangerous tendencies” in Pauline theology itself.

St Paul’s preaching of the Christian Gospel proclamation of freedom from law can of course be interpreted in a wholesome sense (if read in the context of the whole New Testament

⁸² William Styles, *A Manual of Faith and Practice* (London: Robert Banks & Son, 1897).

⁸³ Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, rev. ed. (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2009).

⁸⁴ James Hadow, *The Antinomianism of the Marrow of Modern Divinity Detected* (1721) (Michigan: Gale ECCO, 2010). Quoted in David C. Lachman *The Marrow Controversy* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988), 395.

⁸⁵ Bligh, *Premises*, 149.

canon), but, as Hogg shows, when isolated and overemphasized, it lends itself with the greatest of ease to an interpretation which is subversive of morality and social order.⁸⁶

Douglas Gifford, similarly, suggests that Hogg's novel exposes an "intrinsic weakness of Christian dogma."⁸⁷ There is perhaps a risk here of bringing to bear a perspective predicated on a modern critical orthodoxy which pits Pauline soteriology against that of Jesus, intimating that salvation is to be gained through baptism, but also that it is capable of being lost. Gribben cautions against interpreting the Confessions "through theological canons that the Scottish Reformed tradition would reject as heterodox."⁸⁸ Marshall Walker, for example, typifies a still common perception of Hogg's novel as "one of the most penetrating and original novels in the Scottish tradition for its insight into the perversion of the Scottish psyche by Calvinism."⁸⁹ However, Campbell regards such "conventional description," as "self-evidently absurd, if Calvin's works are studied at all in relation to Hogg's arguments."⁹⁰ We should beware of relegating *Confessions* to a critique of the orthodox soteriology of the Scottish Kirk. Reformed orthodox doctrine, as practised by the "Moderates" element of the Kirk, with whom Hogg's affiliation lay, did not pair a believer's sinning with their falling from grace. Members of the elect, when justified, could continue to sin, but could not fall from grace, as the Westminster Confession made clear. They "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved."⁹¹

Nevertheless, there are aspects of the theological arguments put forward by both Wringhim Senior and Junior which, according to Peter Garside, "stray dangerously" both from Calvinist doctrine and the more practical and expedient interpretation of predestinarianism to be found in the Westminster Confession.⁹² "Ultimately," suggests Garside, "Hogg's concern in *Confessions* is not so much with the failings of Calvinism, or even antinomianism, as with the misuse of religion generally."⁹³ This is exemplified when the Laird of Dalcastle, having once been "a secret favourer" of The Covenanters and their doctrines, "after experiencing a specimen of their tenets and manner in his wife [...] grew alarmed at the prevalence of such stern and factious principles, now that there was no check or restraint upon them."⁹⁴ Lady

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Douglas Gifford, *James Hogg* (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head, 1976), 179.

⁸⁸ Gribben, *Hogg*, 23.

⁸⁹ Marshall Walker, *Scottish Literature Since 1707* (London: Longman, 1996), 13.

⁹⁰ Ian Campbell, "Hogg's Confessions and the Heart of Darkness," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 15 (1980): 195-6.

⁹¹ *Westminster Confession*, 17:1; cf. 3:6.

⁹² Garside, *Introduction*, xxix.

⁹³ Ibid, xxviii – xxix.

⁹⁴ *Confessions*, 15.

Dalcastle, we are told, “was the most severe and gloomy of all bigots to the principles of the Reformation.”⁹⁵ Though these words, of course, are narrated by the Editor, a fellow Tory and Royalist, we may glimpse here already on the second page of the book something of Hogg’s misgivings concerning extremist religious stances when he notes, “Hers were not the tenets of the great reformers, but theirs mightily overstrained and deformed. Theirs was an unguent hard to be swallowed; but hers was that unguent embittered and overheated until nature could no longer bear it.”⁹⁶

According to Garside there appear to be four erroneous and dangerous assumptions made by the Messrs. Wringhims.⁹⁷ The first is to presume that effectual calling followed by justification overrides all past sense of sin. Though Calvin undoubtedly gave pre-eminence to faith over good works as the route to salvation he stressed the close affiliation of faith with repentance as dual Christian responsibilities. This is laid down in his Geneva Catechism (1541) where he emphasises that “the doctrine of the Gospel is comprehended in these two points, faith and repentance.”⁹⁸

The second assumption is that assurance of election can be given by another person, and as an act of will. The Rev. Wringhim, after wrestling with God, has no hesitation in offering Robert assurance of his election. Robert’s “exaltation of spirit” smacks of an Icarus-like spiritual pride, destined for a fall: “An exaltation of spirit lifted me, as it were, far above the earth and the sinful creatures crawling on its surface; and I deemed myself as an eagle among the children of men, soaring on high, and looking down with pity and contempt on the grovelling creatures below.”⁹⁹

Tellingly, however, it is immediately after this moment that Robert, in the full flush of his assurance, encounters Gil-Martin to whom he will subsequently lose his soul. This appears the instant of Robert’s damnation; in his seeming moment of assurance, he falls from grace. The Westminster Confession nowhere endorses the notion that election can be conferred through the agency of another human being, insisting, to the contrary, that this comes solely through the spirit of God working within the individual, and pointing up the need for continuing active virtue.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ See Garside, *Introduction*, xxix-xxx for further elaboration.

⁹⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1959), p.25.

⁹⁹ *Confessions*, 80.

¹⁰⁰ Westminster Confession, 44.

To hold that salvation is only available to an exclusive group is the third erroneous supposition. The conviction that Christ died only for the Elect seems, according to Robert Kendall, more likely to have derived from Theodore Beza, who succeeded Calvin in Geneva, rather than Calvin himself.¹⁰¹ The Westminster Confession, moreover, remains circumspect on this matter, and, though undoubtedly holding to the notion that election is predetermined, “avoids giving any discouraging sense of limitation.”¹⁰² The Confession cautions that “this high Mystery of Predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care.”¹⁰³

To believe that it is impossible to sin or fall from grace once justified is the fourth dangerous self-deception. Both Calvin’s doctrine and the Westminster Confession assert that grace, once bestowed, cannot entirely be withdrawn. Calvin confirms that grace takes precedence over the old moral law. Yet neither suggests that the Elect are at liberty to sin. The *Confession* states that the Justified may still “fall under God’s fatherly displeasure,” incurring the necessity for renewed repentance.¹⁰⁴ Calvin, in the Geneva Catechism, sees faith as the “root” from which good works grow.¹⁰⁵ Gordon Marshall has shown in his study of the Scots Calvinist Ethic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that good works as the outcome of faith were regarded as a prerequisite for salvation.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, within the action of the novel, Robert breaks all ten commandments after his assumed election, offering the strongest indication that he is not, in fact, saved. The intention of his final suicidal act, to draw down Gil-Martin to hell with him, would appear a self-acknowledgement of his damnation. He himself says as much when he admits that “there is some miserable comfort in the idea that my tormentor shall fall with me.”¹⁰⁷

This section has illustrated Hogg’s view that the Wringhims’ creed entails a dangerous straying through four erroneous presuppositions, namely that: effectual calling and justification override all past sense of sin; assurance of election may be bestowed by another’s act of will; salvation is available only to an exclusive group; once justified, it remains impossible to sin or fall from grace. These caveats and misconceptions are reinforced in the following section through exegetical allusion to the Gospel of Luke, revealing the Wringhims’ fundamental and perilous Biblical nescience.

¹⁰¹ R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 15, 29.

¹⁰² Garside, *Introduction*, xxix-xxx.

¹⁰³ Westminster Confession, 14.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰⁵ Torrance, *The School of Faith*, 25.

¹⁰⁶ Gordon Marshall, *Presbyteries and Profits: Calvinism and the Development of Capitalism in Scotland, 1560-1707* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 62, 74-75.

¹⁰⁷ *Confessions*, 165.

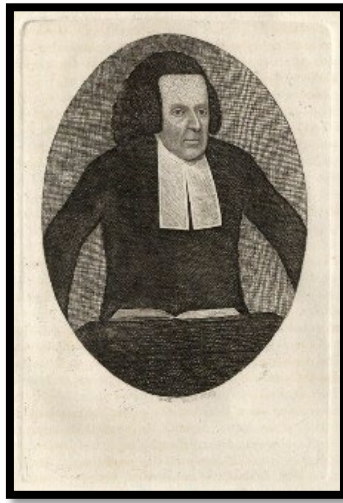
“To save that which was lost”: Hogg’s Confessions and the Gospel of Luke

Fig. 8 John Kay, *Rev. Dr John Erskine*

A further indication of the erroneous doctrine of the Wringhims is their miscomprehension, or inappropriate deployment, of Biblical allusion. Garside argues that there is a conspicuous and telling (“almost total”) absence of reference in their discourse to the main New Testament Gospels, suggesting that, instead, the Rev. Wringhim concocts “a specially unwholesome mixture out of Old Testament savagery and exclusivist spirituality selected from the Pauline epistles.”¹⁰⁸ There would seem, however, to be strongly satiric *implicit* allusion to the Gospels, particularly to the Gospel of Luke. Hogg had an exceptional knowledge and memorisation of the Bible and would have expected Reformed orthodox readers of his day readily to have perceived the misinterpretations of the Wringhims.¹⁰⁹ For example when the Rev. Wringhim’s old serving man John Barnet compares the former to the Pharisee in the Lukan parable of the Pharisee and Publican, his master is flattered but deluded by the comparison, failing to realise that it is the publican – who recognises that he is a sinner and trusts to the mercy of God with no certainty of salvation – who is the justified one. Old Barnet feels that the complacent Wringhim, like the self-righteous Pharisee, categorises him, *de haut en bas*, as the publican, as heading for damnation, but he answers his master with a stinging retort before angrily quitting his employ, warning: “But, d’ye hear, maister. Here stands the poor sinner, John Barnet, your beadle an’ servant-man, wha wadna change chances wi’ you in the neist world, nor consciences in this, for ten times a’ that you possess—your justification by

¹⁰⁸ Garside, *Introduction*, xxx.

¹⁰⁹ Campbell, *Darkness*, 189.

faith an' awthegither.”¹¹⁰ Clearly Old John is unconvinced by Wringhim’s claims of justification and considers him to be imperilling his soul through his antinomian belief and behaviour.

“Exaltation, allied with justification,” suggests Alison Jack, “comes to those who are humble before God, making no judgements on others [...] the clear message of Luke’s Gospel exposes the lack of breadth of Wringhim’s reading of scripture.”¹¹¹ She argues that at many points in its unfolding, the *Confessions* functions as “a narrative exegesis of Luke’s Gospel.”¹¹² Seen in this light, the temptation narrative of Jesus and Satan in the wilderness is re-enacted in Gil-Martin’s cunning temptation of Robert. (It is worth noting that “Gil-Martin” comes from an old Gaelic name for a fox, or “Old Foxy”).¹¹³ Satan approaches Jesus shortly after “a voice came from heaven, which said, ‘Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased’.” (Luke 3:22, KJV) This affirmation is mirrored in Robert’s assurance of election by *his* spiritual father, the Rev. Wringhim, and his encounter with Gil-Martin ensues forthwith. To the Biblically cognisant there is a veiled warning in that the parable of the Pharisee and Publican is immediately preceded in Luke by that of the Unjust Judge. Luke tells us that Jesus “spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.”¹¹⁴ This parable, by comparing God with the Unjust Judge, introduces a note of uncertainty, warning that even those elected may lose faith over time and hence fail the returning Son of Man. This is hardly a ringing endorsement of Robert’s newfound security in election.

Both tempters engage their companion in theological disputation. Satan tempts Christ thus: “If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from hence: for it is written, ‘He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.’”¹¹⁵ Jesus responds with further citation: “It is said, ‘Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God,’” whereupon we are told “when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season.”¹¹⁶ Jesus bluntly counters Satan’s sophisticated scriptural argument and appeals to power – “Get thee behind me Satan” – whereas

¹¹⁰ *Confessions*, 72.

¹¹¹ Alison M. Jack, *Scottish Fiction as Gospel Exegesis: Four Case Studies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 50.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 63.

¹¹³ Christopher MacLachlan, “The Name “Gil-Martin””, *Newsletter of the James Hogg Society*, 4 (May 1985): 32.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 18:9.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 4:9-11.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 4:12-13.

Robert, conversely, is easily flattered and elevated. He does however, later express confusion about the providential or diabolic nature of this meeting, saying: "Whether it behoves me to bless God for the events of that day, or to deplore them, has been hid from my discernment, though I have inquired into it with fear and trembling."¹¹⁷

Hogg thus points to the shallowness of Robert's biblical knowledge and hence the untethered nature and naivety of his beliefs. Jack argues that "Gil-Martin is presented as the embodiment of Robert's belief system taken to extremes. There is no control offered to temper these beliefs, and no mention of the Bible being used as the starting point of the discussion."¹¹⁸ Indeed, when Robert attempts to observe the book from which Gil-Martin reads we encounter one of several warnings in the novel of the meretricious and dangerous nature of texts: "It seemed a Bible, having columns, chapters, and verses; but it was in a language of which I was wholly ignorant, and all intersected with red lines and verses. A sensation resembling a stroke of electricity came over me, on first casting my eyes on that mysterious book, and I stood motionless."¹¹⁹

Asked if the text is a Bible, Gil-Martin replies: "It is *my* Bible, sir."¹²⁰ Hogg indicates here the slipperiness of language, even Biblical discourse, in certain hands. We compare the insincere Biblical citation of the Wringhims with the authentic simplicity and wisdom of common folk such as Barnet, who warns his master, in plain Lowland Scots, that "it isna aye the maist thankfu' heart that maks the greatest fraze wi' the tongue."¹²¹ This warning, of course, is made manifest with the later duplicitous and deceptive use of Biblical language by Gil-Martin, who frequently subverts the language and meaning of the parables, such as his inversion of the parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke 15 to enforce his murderous intent: "If the man Blanchard is worthy, he is only changing his situation for a better one; and, if unworthy, it is better that one fall than that a thousand souls perish."¹²² Again, he distorts Jesus's advice to the disciples in Luke 6.31 to love their enemies when, in encouraging Robert to the further murder of his brother, he exhorts him to "Go thou then and do likewise."¹²³ There is a similar dark malevolence in his perversion of the Annunciation in Luke 1:28 when he tells Robert: "Rouse up all the energies of thy exalted mind, for thou art an highly favoured one; and doubt

¹¹⁷ *Confessions*, 82.

¹¹⁸ Jack, *Exegesis*, 52-53.

¹¹⁹ *Confessions*, 85.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 92.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 102.

thou not that He whom thou servest, will be ever at thy right and left hand, to direct and assist thee,” as Gil-Martin proves ever to be.¹²⁴

Hogg also takes from Luke frequent reference to weapons, threats of violence and vengeance, such as Jesus’s call to the disciples in Gethsemane to fetch swords. Gil-Martin provides Robert with a “golden pistol” to kill Blanchard, a “small dagger” to attack George on Arthur’s seat and “two gilded rapiers” to murder him in the Old Town.¹²⁵ Before the murder of Blanchard, Robert experiences a vision of a “cloudy veil that covered us and thought I beheld golden weapons of every description let down in it, but all with their points towards me.”¹²⁶ In the darkly comic scene of violence in the weaver’s cottage Robert is beaten by the weaver who takes vengeance on him for having become entangled in the weaving loom. The weaver’s wife, however, shows compassion, on the grounds that he may be “a Christian.”¹²⁷ She offers a different interpretation of faith, based on trust and acceptance and generosity. Hers is a loving rather than a violent and intolerant God, exacting punishment on the disobedient. Both Gods are represented in Luke, but, whereas Robert finds the Lukan God of vengeance attractive, he, tragically, appears unable to comprehend the other Lukan God of infinite Grace. Gil-Martin steps into and subverts that space. The uniquely Lukan parables of the Lost Sheep, the Golden Coin and the Prodigal Son all emphasise a God who goes to extraordinary lengths to save the straying sinner. As Jesus emphasises in Luke 19.10, “the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.” Indeed, the Prodigal Son parable permeates the entirety of the *Confessions*, with its theme of a loving father who never gives up hope of his son returning, and who rejoices at his homecoming. The father figures in Robert’s life – Lord Dalcastle, Rev. Wringhim and Gil-Martin – in turn abandon, mislead or betray him. His relationship with his mother is also irreparably problematic, with accusations in the novel that he murdered her. Robert seems to be denied the endless possibility of the relation of a parent to a child. The prostitute Bell Calvert’s daughter, “a poor girl in tattered apparel,” pleads mercy for her mother from Arabella Logan promising that “the God of the fatherless will reward you.”¹²⁸ In the parable of the Prodigal Son, there remains always a way back to the father, but not, seemingly, for Robert. Ironically, the “ever-vigilant parent figure” of Gil-Martin subverts this possibility through his own offer of “consociation,” which inevitably will entail Gil-Martin’s carrying

¹²⁴ Ibid, 95.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 96, 108, 115.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 95.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 41.

Robert down to hell:¹²⁹ “Sooner shall you make the mother abandon the child of her bosom; nay, sooner cause the shadow to relinquish the substance, than separate me from your side. Our beings are amalgamated, as it were, and consociated in one, and never shall I depart from this country until I can carry you in triumph with me.”¹³⁰

As Jack notes, “Gil-Martin’s commitment to Robert is terrifying and total, their descents into depravity somehow linked in a warped image of the father/prodigal son relationship.”¹³¹ After Robert follows through on Gil-Martin’s temptation into suicide, his cruciform corpse splayed on the haystack reminds us that he, too, is a social outcast deserving pity, following the well documented psychological path of victim-turned-aggressor. Theologically – for the Christian reader – true Christian forgiveness entails and obliges forgiving even *him*.¹³²

This section has demonstrated, by examining *Confessions* through an exegetical use of the Gospel of Luke, both the serious shortcomings and misconceptions in the Wringhims’ Biblical literacy, as well as indicating Robert’s attraction to the Lukan God of vengeance and tragic incomprehension of the Lukan God of infinite Grace. In the next section, a specific incident in the novel is examined, that of the Brocken spectre, to indicate Hogg’s complex fusing of Enlightenment and Scottish Romantic themes, employing aspects of the demonic, sublimity the doppelgänger and contemporary science in an approach that might be characterised as narrative inexplicability.

¹²⁹ Jack, *Exegesis*, 61.

¹³⁰ *Confessions*, 130.

¹³¹ Jack, *Exegesis*, 61-62.

¹³² See Gregorová, *Antisyzygy*, 102 on the idea of victim-as-aggressor.

“The Unaccountable Incident”: the Brocken Spectre, rationality and the supernatural.



Fig. 9 John Beugo, *Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crags, Edinburgh, from the South West* (date unknown)

Confessions is the product of both Enlightenment and Romanticist Scotland. It presents a multi-layered interpretability which has recourse to Romantic sublimity, supernaturalism and the uncanny, whilst also reflecting contemporary philosophic and scientific interest in matters such as optics, historiography and phrenological theories of madness and possession. For example, Hogg satirises the Editor's antiquarian and Enlightenment zeal by wryly hinting that the phrenological protuberances on Wringhim's skull might be demonic horns: "I am no phrenologist [...] but I thought the skull of that wretched man no study. If it was particular for anything, it was for a smooth, almost perfect rotundity, with only a little protuberance above the vent of the ear."¹³³ Indeed, rather than considering Scottish Enlightenment and Romanticism as opposing tendencies, Murray Pittock regards "both these diverse and mighty intellectual and cultural achievements as interrelated to the point of being aspects of a single phenomenon."¹³⁴

A nice illustration of this interrelationship is found early in the Editor's Narrative in the strange incident that occurs on the summit of Arthur's Seat. The sympathetic characterisation of George in this event by the Editor is conveyed first through a Romantic association with the innocence of the natural world: "The grass and the flowers were loaden with dew; and on taking off his hat to wipe his forehead, he perceived that the black glossy fur of which his chaperon was wrought, was all covered with a tissue of the most delicate silver – a fairy web."¹³⁵ As George climbs higher into the "blue haze" of the early morning mist wreathed around the crags

¹³³ *Confessions*, 172.

¹³⁴ Murray Pittock, "Introduction: What is Scottish Romanticism?" in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, ed. Murray Pittock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 9.

¹³⁵ *Confessions*, 28-9.

the Editor seems intent to cast a religious symbolism over him. The refracted sunlight creates “a bright halo in the cloud of haze, that rose in a semi-circle over his head like a pale rainbow.”¹³⁶ The associations with God’s sign to Noah are self-evident as George, “struck motionless at the view of the lovely vision” admires “this sublunary rainbow, this terrestrial glory” which reflects “a slight and brilliant shade of all the colours of the heavenly bow.”¹³⁷ The Romantic sublimity, however, gives way immediately to bathos as the Editor, a self-consciously enlightened member of the Edinburgh literati, dispels the momentary charm of the moment with a disenchantingly prosaic account of the scientific causes of the effect: “But he soon perceived the cause of the phenomenon, and that it proceeded from the rays of the sun from a pure unclouded morning sky striking upon this dense vapour which refracted them. But the better all the works of nature are understood, the more they will ever be admired.”¹³⁸

We begin to note also at this early point in the narrative the distinctive social (Tory) and hermeneutical (rationalist) stance adopted by the Editor, as our suspicions of his unreliability and partiality as a narrator begin to surface. “That was a scene,” he remarks, “that would have entranced the man of science with delight, but which the uninitiated and sordid man would have regarded less than the mole rearing up his hill in silence and in darkness.”¹³⁹ We note here the hauteur and complacency of the Enlightenment *litteratus*, which Hogg disdained but perhaps also feared, but, given the Narrator’s frequent misjudgements, we also detect an unsafe capacity for self-deception within the rationalist comparable to that of the religious fanatic. There is an interesting counterpart here with Robert’s own aggrandising self-regard at the moment of his apparent election: “I deemed myself as an eagle among the children of men, soaring on high, and looking down with pity and contempt on the grovelling creatures below.”¹⁴⁰

The particular natural phenomenon under discussion at this point, the “Brocken Spectre,” was a matter of contemporary interest with the principal scientific exposition of the effect being brought before anglophone audiences for the first time by Sir David Brewster, Hogg’s neighbour and acquaintance.¹⁴¹ The Spectre is occasioned by the sun horizontally projecting an iridescent shadow of the observer on an opposite bank of cloud or mist. The

¹³⁶ Ibid, 29.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 80.

¹⁴¹ Sir David Brewster, *Letters on Natural Magic Addressed to Sir Walter Scott Bart* (London: John Murray, 1834). See also Robert Greenler, *Rainbows, Halos, and Glories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

projected shadow can produce a disquieting effect. Owing to the difficulty in such conditions of accurately estimating distance and perspective the shadow can appear gigantic. Sebastian Mitchell describes the eerie effect this creates, which also suits Hogg's dramatic purpose in this scene:

The shadow can be unnerving, because of its size and the remote places in which it is observed, but two other factors also contribute to its ghostly, unsettling appearance. If the shadow is projected onto fog, then the fineness of the water droplets allows the shadow to penetrate the surface, and gives the image an eerie three-dimensional appearance. If the shadow is projected onto a bank of swirling cloud, then the umbra appears to move independently of its source.¹⁴²

The Brocken Spectre has come to be closely associated with the Romantic sensibility and aspects of the Sublime.¹⁴³ The German Brocken region itself had long-established diabolic associations and folkloric traditions, with its granite outcrops bearing such names as Devil's Pulpit (*Teufelskanzel*) and Witches' Altar (*Hexenaltar*). In his Romantic tragedy *Faust*, Goethe has his witches dance on its densely forested slopes on Walpurgisnacht. Hogg's contemporaries, the Romantic authors Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey each made literary use of the Spectre, the former to explore aspects of imagination and idealisation, and the latter (in a precursor to Freud) visionary dreams as a representation of subconscious anxiety and desire.¹⁴⁴ The uncanniness of this phenomenon stems from the eerie sense that the amplified Spectre is somehow disconnected from the observer who both casts and perceives the shadow.¹⁴⁵

Hogg, too, employs the Brocken Spectre as a device to conjure a Romantic sublimity. The atmospheric (cloud) and optical (light) conditions for production of the Brocken effect are solitude at high altitude, preferably at dawn or sunrise. These are also found to favour experience of the Sublime. Hogg's dawn setting on Arthur's Seat goes further, however, to conjure an episode of (genuinely chilling) Gothick terror. George's reverie is disrupted as the

¹⁴² Sebastian Mitchell, "Dark Interpreter: Literary Uses of the Brocken Spectre from Coleridge to Pynchon," *Dalhousie Review* 87: no. 2 (2007): 168.

¹⁴³ See C.J. Wright, "The 'Spectre' of Science: The Study of Optical Phenomena and the Romantic Imagination," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 43 (1980):186-200; Marina Warner, "Spirit Visions: Faces in the Clouds, or Figuring the Invisible," *Raritan* 21 (2002): 264-301; Anne C. McCarthy, *Awful Parenthesis: Suspension and the Sublime in Romantic and Victorian Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

¹⁴⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Constancy to an Ideal Object," in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Poetical Works (in 2 parts)*, Ed. J.C.C. Mays (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2001) Part 2, 777-78; Thomas De Quincey, "Suspiria de Profundis: Being a Sequel to the Confessions of an English Opium Eater," in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey, Part III vol 15*. Articles from *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 1844-6, by Grevel Lindop and Barry Symonds. Ed. Frederick Burwick (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003).

¹⁴⁵ McCarthy, *Parenthesis*, 56.

colossally enlarged countenance of his brother suddenly appears projected on to the mountain mist before him:

Gracious Heaven! What an apparition was there presented to his view! He saw, delineated in the cloud, the shoulders, arms, and features of a human being of the most dreadful aspect. The face was the face of his brother, but dilated to twenty times the natural size. Its dark eyes gleamed on him through the mist, while every furrow of its hideous brow frowned deep as the ravines on the brow of the hill. George started, and his hair stood up in bristles as he gazed on this horrible monster.¹⁴⁶

The "giant apparition" has the manner of "some carnivorous animal fixed on its prey," its eyes full of "murderous malice."¹⁴⁷ Struggling to account for his experience, George concludes it must have a supernatural, indeed diabolic provenance: "George conceived it to be a spirit. He could conceive it to be nothing else; and he took it for some horrid demon by which he was haunted, that had assumed the features of his brother in every lineament..."¹⁴⁸ His assumption is reinforced by his realisation "that it approached him across the front of a precipice, where there was not footing for thing of mortal frame" and later that "None else," save the devil, "could possibly know of my being here."¹⁴⁹

Though initially transfixed with fear, as the apparition advances to within what seems a couple of yards of him, "setting itself to make a violent spring on him," George, still casting a backward glance, turns to flee.¹⁵⁰ A second descent into bathos occurs, this time of almost Chaplinesque slapstick, as George turns to run headlong into his brother who had been creeping up on him with intent to push him over the cliff: "But the very first bolt that he made in his flight he came into contact with a *real* body of flesh and blood, and that with such violence that both went down among some cragged rocks, and George rolled over the other. The being called out 'Murder'; and, rising, fled precipitately."¹⁵¹

This abrupt shift in tone, and dislocation of literary mode, far from writerly incompetence, appears part of Hogg's broader, theological strategy within this complex text. The comedic function here, and the banal carnality of its nature, seriously parodies deeper aspects of incarnate being, both in relation to Christ's entering human form in order to understand suffering and salvation, but also in relation to a devil incarnate, who enters human

¹⁴⁶ *Confessions*, 30.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 30, 32.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 30 - 31

form the better to understand and practise temptation. As George catches up with his brother Robert he proposes a reconciliation, offering to “exchange forgiveness” and “to part and remain friends.”¹⁵² George asks: “Is it not consistent with every precept of the Gospel?”¹⁵³ His offer is spurned however, leading George to retort by observing that: “If thou art not a limb of Satan, I never saw one.”¹⁵⁴ George is not aware, indeed any more than it appears the Editor is, of the increasing suspicion prevailing upon us as readers, that the devil, as often avowed in Scots vernacular folk tradition, has the capability to mimic human appearance and manner. The Brocken Spectre incident is one of many in the novel where we remain unclear of what constitutes Robert’s agency and what Gil-Martin’s. Mitchell suggests that it exemplifies:

the novel's capacity to place incompatible interpretative modes next to one another. A full understanding of the Spectre's significance requires that rational and supernatural explanations are grasped in the same moment, and the literary description and examination of the apparition allows both explanations equal weight and probability.¹⁵⁵

George reflects upon “the unaccountable incident that had befallen to him that morning.”¹⁵⁶ He attempts a rational explanation of his experience but is “confounded between the shadow and the substance.”¹⁵⁷ His conclusion is a fusion of the rational and the supernatural. He holds to the idea of his being haunted but assumes the demon has made a miscalculation in the scale of the projection (“had miscalculated dreadfully on the size”).¹⁵⁸ Mr Adam Gordon, a family friend, offers a Brewsterian Brocken-like scientific explanation “that at all events there could be nothing supernatural in the circumstances; and that the vision he had seen on the rock, among the thick mist, was the shadow of his brother approaching behind him.”¹⁵⁹ George however, “could not swallow this,” as he had been aware of his own shadow on the cloud, which instead of being a representation of himself, was, in keeping with the religious symbolism infusing this episode, “a halo of glory round a point of the cloud, that was whiter and purer than the rest.”¹⁶⁰ It is worth noting that Hogg, in an autobiographical piece written a decade later, claimed to have witnessed the Brocken effect himself as a nineteen-year-old shepherd in the Scottish Borders. His reaction to his own colossal shadow moving in front

¹⁵² Ibid, 32.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 33.

¹⁵⁵ Mitchell, *Dark Interpreter*, 176.

¹⁵⁶ *Confessions*, 33.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 31.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 30.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 33-34.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 34.

of him was initially one of terror, changing to fascination, followed by amusement. He refers to Brewster's natural explanation, "by some law of dioptical refraction, which I did not understand," intimating that the scientific account of the phantom is as unfathomable a mystery as the supernatural.¹⁶¹ George's father settles for the latter, citing traditional folkloric belief. Querying why George didn't "kick the dog out of his presence" when he had proved disagreeable, and receiving the reply that "he seemed to have some demon for a familiar," Old Dal responds that: "he did not wonder a bit at that, for the young spark was the third in a direct line who had all been children of adultery; and it was well known that all such were born half deils themselves, and nothing was more likely than that they should hold intercourse with their fellows."¹⁶²

Mitchell views the episode as "psychologically revelatory."¹⁶³ He suggests that "For Hogg, the Spectre's meaning lies in the interplay of the different discursive forms which are brought to bear upon it, in that momentary conjunction of different modes of being, and the patterns of constructive and destructive interference which they establish."¹⁶⁴ He concludes that "The Brocken Spectre, then, has a significant interpretive function in [...] Hogg's novel. But its interpretative role remains implicit. Readers have to draw for themselves the connections between this phantom and the work's wider themes."¹⁶⁵ Mitchell further observes that the Brocken episode "is also exemplary of the novel's capacity to place incompatible interpretative modes next to one another," and that "a full understanding of the Spectre's significance requires that rational and supernatural explanations are grasped in the same moment, and the literary description and examination of the apparition allows both explanations equal weight and probability."¹⁶⁶ The incident thus intensifies the novel's psychological dynamic but also indicates its discursive complexity by meshing incompatible scientific and supernatural accounts of events and exploring their convergence on its central theological theme.

This section has shown how the Brocken incident serves an interpretive function. Through its intermeshing of different discursive forms and incompatible interpretative modes it points to a problem of divine unknowability and complexity, and eschews theological closure. In the conclusion, Hogg's use of ludic elements and the subaltern voice are examined

¹⁶¹ James Hogg, "Nature's Magic Lantern," *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* (28 September 1833): 274.

¹⁶² *Confessions*, 33.

¹⁶³ Mitchell, *Dark Interpreter*, 176.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

to inform a final assessment of what theology of reading might be most appropriate for *Confessions*.

Conclusion: Infernal comedy, humanity and the subaltern voice



Fig. 10 John Kay, *Thomas Neil as "The Old Wife"* (c.1784-1799)

In *Confessions* Hogg takes the Gothick genre in a new and unfamiliar direction. In his day theological issues tended to be treated in doctrinal mode. Hogg's particular approach is to render the Gothick literary form capable of serious religious exegesis. *Confessions* is characterised by a deep vein of moral seriousness not found in earlier Gothick production. Hogg sees possibilities in the somewhat tawdry and formulaic genre -- the "trash of the circulating libraries" -- transforming it into a vehicle for serious epistemological and existential enquiry, akin to Shakespeare's elevation of the Revenge tragedy.¹⁶⁷ He invests the stylised Gothick tropes of the supernatural, sublimity and terror with an intensity that conjures the heights and depths of human experience represented within Gothic cathedral architecture. In his hands the Gothick novel becomes a medium sufficiently dignified to interrogate dispossession and damnation, and query where we might set our limits to seeing Christ in others. It plays with the confessional mode, drawing on the theological gravity of Augustine's *Confessiones* (400 CE), the vertiginous psychology of De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) and the humour of its contemporary parody *The Confessions of an English Glutton* (1823).¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Dale Townshend, "An introduction to Ann Radcliffe." (British Library: *Discovering Literature: Romantics & Victorians*, 2014), <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-ann-radcliffe#>. Accessed 11.03.2020.

¹⁶⁸ Garside, *Introduction*, xlv-xlvi.

The novel contains many discontinuities. It operates a double time frame, with an unidentified early nineteenth-century “Editor” of Hogg’s own time purporting to disclose a literally unearthed and uncannily recovered autobiographical memoir from the early eighteenth-century which in turn relates events from the late seventeenth century. The discrepancies between the two texts, the seeming unreliabilities of both narrators, set against a counterpoint of many other, often adverse voices as the action plays out, establishes a mood of unsettling dissonance, and what Coyer terms Hogg’s characteristic device of “narrative inexplicability.”¹⁶⁹ We observe Hogg seeming to establish a narrative openness, in conflict with the explanatory tendency of Enlightenment science and historiography. As Campbell observes:

The relation of reader to text, to Editor, to assumed author is deliberately made almost impossibly confusing. Evidence – false evidence, even true evidence like the Blackwood’s letter (pp.165-169) – abounds, none of it conclusive. The narrative framework is frequently confused, sometimes disfigured by conspicuous silence of gaps.¹⁷⁰

The novel’s apparently deliberate complexity, inconsistency and ambiguity render problematic attempts to establish a clear angle of repose, any authoritative reading or even internal validity. In many respects it would seem prescient of the postmodern approaches of more recent times.¹⁷¹ All of which, unsurprisingly, led to confusion in Hogg’s own time, to the work’s poor initial critical reception and to subsequent bowdlerisation of the original text (including removal of theological content) until late in the twentieth century.¹⁷² In the light of these factors, and to return to one of our initial research questions, how might the twenty-first-century reader receive this text from a theological perspective?

We might, firstly, embrace the notion that Hogg is working through a form of “open poetics.” The notion of *opera aperta*, introduced by Umberto Eco, posits that whilst there are no “closed” texts, certain literary works in reacting to conflicts of cultural history seek to retain a sense of fundamental ambiguity and are keen to thwart any definitive readings. Though the literary work may be constructed within a conventional form (e.g. Gothick) it nonetheless, suggests Guy de Mallac, “remains liable to be interpreted according to a virtually infinite series of readings.”¹⁷³ Such works lean more towards *plurivocality* (semantic polyvalence) in the

¹⁶⁹ Coyer, “Ettrick Shepherd,” 184.

¹⁷⁰ Campbell, *Afterword*, 191.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 190.

¹⁷² Garside, *Introduction*, lxxvi.

¹⁷³ Guy De Mallac, “The Poetics of the Open Form,” *Books Abroad* 45” no. 1 (1971): 31-36.

manner, say, of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, rather than the *univocality* (semantic monovalence) of *Pilgrim's Progress*, and are likely to be more ludic with, or disruptive of, regular structures and identifiable formal conventions. Hogg's employment of an editorial narrative to top-and-tail the Sinner's fragmented confessions permits the building of overlapping layers of interpretation. These layers, Garside argues, are "invaded and destabilised from within."¹⁷⁴ The Editor's narrative serves "as an Enlightenment commentary upon Wringhim's story, while the authorial voice comments ironically upon both."¹⁷⁵ In this way the *Confessions* can be seen as "a kind of premature post-modernist novel," as Redekop calls it, resisting closure or definitive readings, celebrating, almost, an unfinished-ness.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, Hogg mischievously inserts both an actual letter he had posted to *Blackwood's* prior to publication, and himself as a character in his own narrative. This persona professes more interest in selling his sheep stock than in any historical authenticity – "I hae mair ado than I can manage the day, foreby ganging to houk up hunder-year-auld-banes" – and providing misleading information in what seems a deliberate intent to subvert authorial omniscience or privilege any specific interpretation above another:

I read to our guide Mr. Hogg's description, asking him if he thought it correct? He said there was hardly a bit o't correct, for the grave was not on the hill of Cowan's-Croft [...] He added that it was a wonder how the poet could be mistaken there, who once herded the very ground where the grave is, and saw both hills from his own window. Mr. L—w testified great surprise at such a singular blunder ...¹⁷⁷

We might, with Gribben, pursue this line of argument, to link an open poetics with a fallen hermeneutics. He argues that the mode of narrative inexplicability employed by Hogg "insists we read by faith, not by sight."¹⁷⁸ In such an approach the *act of reading itself* enacts and reinforces the theological assumption that an unknowable and infinite God cannot explain to finite human beings the totality of His existence. "Underlying this aesthetic," Gribben argues, "is the literary application of the maxim at the heart of Calvinism's attack upon idolatry, the doctrine that *finitum non est capax infiniti*, "the finite cannot contain the infinite."¹⁷⁹ In the light of an open poetic, all texts and images are potentially idolatrous for the human reader who, in a fallen state, seeks to attain some clarity or certainty regarding the nature of their transcendent God. The same also applies to those, such as Enlightenment historiographers,

¹⁷⁴ Peter Garside, "Printing *Confessions*," *Studies in Hogg and his World*, 9 (1998), 16.

¹⁷⁵ Gribben, *Hogg*, 18.

¹⁷⁶ Magdalene Redekop, "Beyond Closure: Buried Alive with Hogg's Justified Sinner," *English Literary History*, 52 (1985), 162.

¹⁷⁷ *Confessions*, 170-1.

¹⁷⁸ Gribben, *Hogg*, 21.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

seeking to define historical reality itself. The Editor, for example, purports to be presenting a history of events, as, of course, does Robert Wringhim. Craig makes a similar case, outlining the extent to which Scottish literature traditionally has been shaped through Calvinist distrust and fear of any narrative certainty:

Calvinism becomes a prescient metaphor for commitment to any absolutism based on the assertion of the individual ego, however rational its apparent justifications: all those modern philosophies and ideologies that claim a special insight into the nature of truth repeat, in secular form, the same traumas that Wringhim suffers — a transcendence of fear achieved by a pact with the devil that will produce an even more fearful outcome.¹⁸⁰

In such an approach the slipperiness of the biblical language deployed, the complex double structure of the text, plus the unreliability of both principal narrators all lead to a loading of the onus of interpretation onto the reader. Hence from the perspective of a fallen hermeneutics this novel, in terms of a theology of reading, seems to pass interpretative responsibility to the reader alone, and at the same time satirically punctures the possibility of writing definitive history.

A second, somewhat different interpretative approach would be to regard the *Confessions* as not entirely open in its poetics, and using the Bible, and particularly Luke's Gospel as we have seen earlier, to establish what Jack terms "narrative and exegetical foundations."¹⁸¹ She goes so far as to say that "[i]n many places, the *Confessions* functions as a narrative exegesis of Luke's Gospel."¹⁸² She maintains that Hogg's concerns here are not those of doubts about the historical accuracy of Biblical texts, in the manner of the Higher Critics – his rationalist European contemporaries – but rather "the dangers of taking the Gospel out of context, of applying it without thought based on experience or in a limited and selective way."¹⁸³ The Rev. Blanchard makes this point forcefully to Robert when he warns him of Gil-Martin's dangerous theology:

He, indeed, pretends great strictness of orthodoxy regarding some of the points of doctrine embraced by the reformed church; but you do not seem to perceive that both you and he are carrying these points to a dangerous extremity. [...] I can easily see that both you and he are carrying your ideas of absolute predestination, and its concomitant appendages, to an extent that overthrows all religion and revelation together; or, at least, jumbles them into a chaos, out of which human capacity can never select what is good. Believe me, Mr. Robert,

¹⁸⁰ Craig, *Scottish Novel*, 39.

¹⁸¹ Jack, *Exegesis*, 63.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

the less you associate with that illustrious stranger the better, for it appears to me that your creed and his carries damnation on the very front of it.¹⁸⁴

A third and final analytic lens to bring to bear is that of the subaltern voice. The characters in *Confessions* who give voice to thought based on experience are often, significantly, those from lower social classes. The observations of John Barnet the servant, Bell Calvert the prostitute, Arabella Logan's serving maid Bessy, Samuel Scrape the rural peasant ("Penpunt") and the poor weaver's wife, all act as a moral sheet anchor in the novel. As Barnet caustically remarks when leaving Wringhim's employ: "Auld John may dee a beggar in a hay barn, or at the back of a dike, but he sail aye be master o' his ain thoughts an' gie them vent or no, as he likes."¹⁸⁵ Crichton Smith sees a particular significance in this use of the integrity of the subaltern voice, noting that "It represents the assertion of human freedom against abstract repression true for all ages and all times. It is life rebelling against the ideological."¹⁸⁶ A nice example of this occurs in the court scene when Bessy Gillies protects Bell Calvert from execution by refusing to identify objects in court as having been stolen from her mistress.

"Look over these things and see if there is any one article among them which you can fix on as the property of your mistress."

"No ane o' them, sir, no ane o' them. An oath is an awfu' thing, especially when it is for life or death. Gie the poor woman her things again, an' let my mistress pick up the next she finds: that's my advice."¹⁸⁷

Notably the subaltern voice is often expressed in Lowland Scots. This is the culture and tradition of the rural Borders peasantry, the lowly social classes comprising small farmers and tenants, farmhands (or "hinds" in Scots), other agricultural labourers or the artisans of cottage industries such as weaving. These were Hogg's "ane folk," whose daily lives were regulated through Bible teaching, ancient superstition, pragmatism, and, as we find in the novel, egregious common sense. Hogg once recounted to the Irish poet Tom Moore that he hailed from "the dregs of the people."¹⁸⁸ Though Hogg held Tory and monarchist sympathies he also experienced humiliation from his literary colleagues at *Blackwood's Magazine* for their depiction of him as an unsophisticated rural misfit in Edinburgh elite society.¹⁸⁹ Though David Craig has criticized novelists of the Scottish Romantic period because they "responded so little"

¹⁸⁴ *Confessions*, 90-91.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 97-8.

¹⁸⁶ Crichton Smith, *Genius*, 9.

¹⁸⁷ *Confessions*, 48.

¹⁸⁸ Karl Miller, *Electric Shepherd: A Likeness of James Hogg* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 254.

¹⁸⁹ Miller, *Electric Shepherd*.

to the social changes that were transforming the country, we may detect in Hogg's use of the subaltern voice a Christian sympathy with outcasts, the marginalised and downtrodden, those suffering from the effects of industrialisation and urban crowding which had led in his time to increased poverty, prostitution and squalor in Edinburgh.¹⁹⁰ It is Bell Calvert, a prostitute, who is a reliable narrator, and speaks truth in court regarding George Colwan's murder, and the "auld wife" Lucky Shaw in Penpunt's cautionary tale about the devil in Auchtermuchty who warns that the "cloven hoof" will "keek out frae aneath the parson's gown, the lawyer's wig, and the Cameronian's [*i.e. Covenanter's*] blue bannet."¹⁹¹ Moreover Bessy Gillies, when pressured in court by the depute-advocate to incriminate Bell Calvert for theft, recognises that Bell's life merits more than a thousand marks (with the obvious allusion to Judas's thirty pieces of silver), and, in her response, puts humanity above ideology and authority:

"Perhaps you are not aware, girl, that this scrupulousness of yours is likely to thwart the purposes of justice, and bereave your mistress of property to the amount of a thousand merks." (*From the Judge.*)

"I canna help that, my lord: that's her look-out. For my part, I am resolved to keep a clear conscience, till I be married, at any rate."¹⁹²

"The maid has a sense of proportion," suggests Crichton Smith. "What in effect the Scots language does is to keep things in proportion. It is [...] a marvellous instrument for deflation, though it can also be cruel." The subaltern voice also acts as a subtle corrective to the normalised literary attribution of "good English" to "good" characters. This is frequently subverted in *Confessions*. The Editor's unqualified Tory approbation of the members of the landed gentry, George Colwan Snr and Jnr, is chastened by Bell Calvert's cool assessment of the old Laird, which suggests she has prior knowledge of his lax (sexual) morality:

"Did you know my late master?"

"Ay, that I did, and never for any good," said she.¹⁹³

This calls us to re-assess Old Dalcastle's behaviour on his wedding night, which, despite the antic humour of the account, remains, effectively, an instance of domestic rape. His son, also, is shown to frequent brothels and drinking dens, with a nature "hasty and passionate: it is a fault in my nature."¹⁹⁴ The Editor himself, despite his polished prose, is shown to lie to

¹⁹⁰ David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People, 1680-1830* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961).

¹⁹¹ *Confessions*, 140.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, 48.

¹⁹³ *Confessions*, 43

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 32.

the “fine old shepherd named W__m B___e, a great original” and to breach his promise of “strict secrecy” in not mentioning the opening of the Sinner’s grave.¹⁹⁵ As we have seen John Barnet, in his rough vernacular, berates Robert Wringhim for the hypocrisy and error of his religious discourse. It is worth noting too that Gil-Martin speaks impeccable English.

A further instrument of deflation, as witnessed in Bessy’s testimony, is the role of dark comedy in Hogg’s writing. Hogg seems to intersperse antic elements in the narrative – such as the farcical brawl on Arthur’s Seat – to mirror and parody darker theological and psychological conflict elsewhere in the narrative. For example, the comic entrapment of Robert enmeshed in the weaver’s loom, a literal web, darkly parodies the mortal ensnarement of his soul by Gil-Martin, whose fiends are howling outside the window. The enraged weaver asks, “What now, Mr. Satan? What for art ye roaring that gate? Are you fawn inna little hell, instead o’ the big muckil ane?” and taunts him crying, “May aw the pearls o’ damnation light on your silly snout.”¹⁹⁶ This is the terrain of what Cowan terms “infernal comedy [...] a state in which grace is utterly absent and where selfishness and malice prevail.”¹⁹⁷ It is a “doleful” Dantesque fallen state, characterised by lovelessness and isolation, where “hypocrisy and self-serving may give the appearance of friendship.”¹⁹⁸ Cowan elaborates further, noting that “the intellect is supreme in its own self-love. The body is debased, ill, deformed, or totally ignored in favour of abstract and over-systematic rationality.”¹⁹⁹

Such bodily debasement and deformation run thematically through the overt or implied violence, murder, rape, prostitution and debauchery found in *Confessions*. The corporality of the novel presents, in Cowan’s terms, an infernal mirror of the humiliated suffering body of the incarnate Christ. Hogg blends carnal farce with Gothic horror and damnation, as when the superstitious grave diggers hurrying to inter Wringhim’s corpse before sunrise find the grave too short for the stiff body: “Anderson [...] set his foot on the suicide’s brow, and tramped down his head into the grave with his iron-heeled shoe, until the nose and skull crashed again, and at the same time uttered a terrible curse on the wretch.”²⁰⁰

Though Hogg certainly seems keen to thwart any definitive readings, in the spirit of an open poetics, there does, nonetheless, appear to be a discernible moral direction to *Confessions*,

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 170.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 148.

¹⁹⁷ Louise Cowan, “Introduction: The Comic Terrain,” in Louise Cowan (Ed.), *The Terrain of Comedy* (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1984), 11.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ *Confessions*, 171.

which Crichton Smith outlines: "What then does this book teach us? It teaches us that to go beyond the bounds of humanity is to lose oneself so utterly that one cannot tell God from the Devil."²⁰¹ He queries how Hogg, "a minor poet and minor prose writer in his other work," was capable of such a "transcendental leap," attributing this to an "instantaneous grasp of genius."²⁰² Mack, however, offers an answer premised less on vision and more on Hogg's religious sincerity:

It would [...] appear that the *Confessions* is a satirical attack on a deformed version of Calvinism, written by a man close to the Calvinist Presbyterian tradition. This perhaps helps to explain the book's extraordinary power. For once Hogg was not writing with careless volubility on fashionable or remunerative subjects; he was writing with care on a subject about which he was passionately concerned, and on which he had no doubt meditated for many years.²⁰³

Mack's emphasis on Hogg's proximity to Presbyterian Moderation also points to how this informed the psychological profundity of *Confessions*.

To revisit the research questions posed at the outset of this study, it has been demonstrated that, in terms of theological readings of *Confessions*, an exegetical reading is possible which exposes and warns against the soteriological misconceptions inherent in antinomian faith. At the same time Hogg's extraordinarily pioneering use of an interpretive mode employing open poetics, narrative inexplicability and a degree of hermeneutic suspicion, allows him to retain, within his Calvinist stance, a second theological reading premised on the unknowability of God and eschewing theological closure – a fallen hermeneutics. A third analytical lens, however, indicates that the subaltern voice remains a barometer or gauge of sound morality.

This study manifests Hogg's adept and complex fusing of Enlightenment and Gothick cultural and political themes with Biblical allusion, plurality of voice and dark ludic elements. It is hoped it will contribute both to an enhanced understanding of the theological density of *Confessions*, and, more widely, to an appreciation of the stature of this novel in the field of Religion and Literature.

²⁰¹ Crichton Smith, *Genius*, 10

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰³ Mack, "Hogg's Religion," 274.

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Fig. 11 John Kay, *George Smith; William Brodie* (1788)