HOGG'S 'CONFESSIONS OF A JUSTIFIED SINNER'

Since its first publication in 1824, James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* has captured the imagination of an increasingly large reading public. Subtle, imaginative, well-ordered and brilliantly constructed, it is fiction if a high order of inventiveness, indeed was for some time denied to Hogg as being too good for the work of such an untutored genius. Such a judgement would not nowadays be considered fair; Hogg was himself a poet and novelist of ability, and sufficiently well-read and inventive to produce some of the finest parodies of his day. In the *Confessions* he undertook a major subject, the effects of the doctrine of predestination on the human mind. André Gide was captured by the book and the publication of the Cresset Press edition in 1947 with his enthusiastic introduction did much to make it known to the public. More recently has appeared John Carey's edition for the Oxford English Novels series, in 1969, fully introduced and annotated.

The book's popularity has brought with it a measure of misinterpretation. Like Burns's 'Holy Willie', this is a work which can be seen in more than one light, depending on the viewpoint of the reader. Many see the *Confessions* as a satire of the Church of Hogg's time, harsh, repressive, stressing damnation, destroying natural pleasure; hypocrisy seems natural to such a view of the Church, and Robert Wringhim a personification of the joyless doctrinal extremism of the time. This is not really what Hogg is attacking. Like Burns, Hogg suffered under the more rigorous aspects of Church life of the time, and lived in the very parish (Ettrick) where Thomas Boston was minister between 1707 and 1732. Boston had been the man who first drew *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* to the attention of James Hog (no relative of the novelist), and thus helped inaugurate the antinomian controversy which lies behind the plot of the *Confessions*. Hogg came from a pious family, and his brothers related that he had taken part in family worship and public church-going, and that he was personally acquainted with both Bible and Catechism. Hogg was thus well qualified to know the Church from within, if he wished to satirize it.

The intention of this paper, however, is not to take the *Confessions* as Church satire. Rather the *Confessions* should be seen as a satire of human weakness, and the imperfections of a human intellect, especially one labouring under the sin of pride, when seeking to interpret scripture and doctrine. This, after all, is the sin of Holy

Willie; to live the part of a saint in public, yet to be a hypocrite in private – to think in his pride that this double standard is quite acceptable to God, for Willie is of the elect. It is exactly this hypocrisy and blindness that Hogg is attacking in the *Confessions*. The Church itself, in the form of the moderate preacher Blanchard in Glasgow, survives the attack unscathed. So does the easy-going common-sense view of good Christian living expressed by Colwan at the opening of the book. The laird, on his wedding night, protests against interrupting his pleasure for family worship.

> 'It strikes me, my dear, that religious devotion would be somewhat out of place to-night,' said he. 'Allowing that it is ever so beautiful, and ever so beneficial, were we to ride on the rigging of it at all times, would we not be constantly making a farce of it: It would be like reading the Bible and the jest-book, verse about, and would render the life of man a medley of absurdity and confusion.'
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> But against the cant of the bigot or the hypocrite, no reasoning can aught avail. (Oxford ed., p. 5)

The common-sense view, while given fair prominence as worldly and self-indulgent, shows up much better than the practice of the Godly as typified by the Laird's wife, and Wringhim the minister.

> Wringhim had held in his doctrines that there were eight different kinds of FAITH, all perfectly distinct in their operations and effects. But the lady, in her secluded state, had discovered another five, – . . . the adjusting of the existence or fallacy of these five faiths served for a most enlightened discussion of nearly seventeen hours; in the course of which the two got warm in their arguments, always in proportion as they receded from nature, utility, and common sense. (p. 12)

Nature, utility, and common sense are not seen in this novel to characterize the 'godly' characters, who rather verge to extreme religious opinion, intolerance, and an unholy desire for the damnation of those who do not subscribe to their creeds.

Their creeds centre, most obviously, round the doctrine of predestination, carried to its extreme lengths. The justified, those chosen and justified by God (in the sense employed by Paul in Romans 4 and 5), are saved, regardless of their deeds on earth. Faith, not Works, is effective in their salvation. The others are doomed and damned, and even the normal pastoral care of preaching for them becomes repugnant; the Justified Sinner talks of

> . . . finding it more congenial to my nature to be cutting sinners off with the sword, than to be haranguing them from the pulpit, striving to produce an effect, which God, by his act of absolute predestination, had for ever rendered impracticable. (pp. 122-3)

In this frame of mind, the justified can argue themselves into any position. Wringhim and Mrs. Colwan seem to see nothing wrong in having between them produced an illegitimate son, the hero of the book. A mysterious stranger appears, obviously the Devil; by using the very words and arguments of the justified, he easily deludes them to do his bidding, even when this should include murder. He knows he is safe, for he has reached this position by argument. When Wringhim senior asks his son about the mysterious stranger who has begun to instruct him, his first care is to ask if he had adhered to the religious principles of the family.

> 'Yes, to every one of them, in their fullest latitude', said I.
> 'Then he was no agent of the wicked one with whom you held converse,' said he, 'for that is the doctrine that was made to overturn the principalities and powers, the might and dominion of the kingdom of darkness. – Let us pray.' (p. 121)

The devilish deception is effortless, for it follows certain simple rules. The justified can be brought to any state of mind by logical argument, if the argument accepts their own premises. The point is made again and again as the novel proceeds. The Sinner himself claims,

> 'I fear no accusation of man . . . as long as I can justify my cause in the sight of Heaven; and that I can do this I am well aware.' (p. 187)

The Devil uses this presumption easily. 'I was obliged to admit the force of his reasoning', says Wringhim after being persuaded to murder Blanchard, 'for though I cannot from memory repeat his words, his eloquence was of that overpowering nature, that the subtility of other men sunk before it' (p. 134). Indeed the whole point of the interlude in Auchtermuchty, when the Devil deludes the inhabitants of the town by preaching a sublime sermon, is that people who are too argumentative can be gulled into any frame of mind. The people were 'electrified – they were charmed; they were actually racing mad about the grand and sublime truths delivered to them, by this eloquent and impressive preacher of Christianity' (pp. 200-1).

The point is quite central to the whole novel. The 'justification' of the Sinner is a theological point, based on the book of Romans; in the modern sense he is not 'justified' in any of his actions. He is mean, narrow, hypocritical, self-indulgent, weak, despicable. His pride and intolerance make him intolerable to modern audiences. But the horrifying thing is *not* his Church, but the exclusive niche he and his family have carved out for themselves in the Christian world, using no other evidence than their own intellect. To lay this position at the door of Calvin, as many critics would by satirising the 'Calivinistic' viewpoint attacked by Hogg and his contemporaries,

is no answer. In a universe like Calvin's dominated and absolutely controlled by an Immanent God, such as monstrous abrogation of the subordinate position of man by the Wringhim family would be unthinkable. The Wringhims are neither Calvinist nor Christian; they are victims of a particularly monstrous version of human pride, allied by sufficient intellect, Biblical training and rhetorical ability to make their world-picture appear sanctioned by the Bible and the Church. Hogg's contemporaries would not have been deceived; no more should the modern reader be.

Hogg's satirical method is at its most successful at the initial stages of the book. The *Confessions* are twice told, once by objective narration, and then a second time by the diary of the Sinner himself, discovered by the author (according to a widespread convention of the time) and presented to his public. Hogg would have as a model Henry Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*, a very popular late eighteenth-century Scottish novel which has a similar form, in part, and which would condition his readers to accept this convention.

In the 'Editor's Narrative', the first part of the book, Hogg tells his audience quite plainly what sort of people the Wringhims are, through the person of the Laird.

> You are, Sir, (says the Laird), 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. (p. 15)

This powerful condemnation is put into the mouth of a sensible layman, and the reader clearly sees that Hogg means it seriously. Wringhim, of course, disdains it, and it has no effect. Yet it prepares the reader for the corresponding section in the second part of the narrative. Like all members of the community of the just, Wringhim junior has to cross the hurdle of somehow being convinced that he is one of the community. Fortunately he has his father to help him.

He is in early adolescence acutely aware of his many sins; they crowd on his thoughts (p. 113), they give him no peace. Yet he hopes for Divine Grace, to wash away this filth. His father one day welcomes him with good tidings; his prayers for grace are accepted, he is welcomed into the community of the Just.

> Then each of them [his father and mother] took me by a hand, and my reverend father explained to me how he had wrestled with

> God, as the patriarch of old had done, not for a night, but for days and years, and that in bitterness and anguish of spirit, on my account; but that *he* had at last prevailed, and had now gained the long and earnestly desired assurance of my acceptance with the Almighty, in and through the merits and sufferings of his Son. That I was now a justified person, adopted among the number of God's children – my name written in the Lamb's book of life, and that no bypast transgression, nor any future act of my own, or of other men, could be instrumental in altering the decree. (p. 115)

Wringhim's father, in other words, is the sole authority Wringhim has for his conviction that he is justified. For this divine knowledge he is dependent on human communication, and the communication takes place through a man we have, as audience, been conditioned to view as a conceited pedagogue and dangerous, intolerant pedant. This impression is not helped by his reference to wrestling with the angel (Gen. 32:24); unlike Jacob, he does not merely hold his opponent to a drawn contest, he actually overcomes, and his adversary is God himself. Whether the audience would be more startled by the irreverence of the idea, or the monstrous pride implicit in it, is difficult to say. But it casts serious doubt on the veracity of the statement made to Wringhim junior, who, desperate to hear the good news, accepts it gladly from such a man as his father. The audience, more critical, sees how slender an authority Wringhim has for his belief in his own savation, and for all the deeds he bases on that belief.

If confirmation were required of the dubious nature of this revelation, it is immediately followed by Wringhim's first contact with the mysterious Devil-stranger. He is in just the right frame of mind for the Devil to strike; he is uplifted by a wholly spurious quasi-religious exultation. In brief, he bases religious faith on human pride and human intellect. The foundation is a weak one, and that weaknesss, and its terrible effects, is the theme of the whole of the *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Not a contribution to the literature of the antinomian heresy, not a piece of anti-Church propaganda, Hogg's *Confessions* is a brilliant fictional exploration of the human mind in abnormal conditions. Discounting the intervention of the supernatural (Mr. Carey questions in his introduction whether the Devil exists, or whether he is a projection of Wringhim's diseased intellect), the mainspring of this book is human pride, and human misinterpretation of a Christian world.

Wringhim suffers terribly for his pride. Haunted by devils, pursued finally in a scene reminiscent of Marlowe's *Faust* (a play Hogg probably knew), he succumbs finally, and is carried to Hell. His body is miraculously preserved, and with it the diary which Hogg produces

as the 'Confessions'. If Wringhim the better for his sufferings? He dies, like Faust, in abject panic. Equivocal to the end, Hogg is too clever to make his hero/villain repent on his deathbed. But two things stand out in a reading of the last page of the diary. One is the farewell to 'woman, whom I have despised and shunned; and man, whom I have hated; whom, nevertheless, I desire to leave in charity!' (p. 239). The charity is scant, but it is there. Perhaps the charity, too, dictates the frantic desire to print and leave behind some account of his sufferings and mistakes. Perhaps like Dives and Lazarus (Matt. 15:27), he saw his life as a possible exemplar to those left on earth, a terrible warning that they might avoid his terrible damnation if they amended their ways. At any rate, the frantic desire to leave a diary for posterity may be thus charitably motivated.

Apart from the desire to leave his brother man in charity, there is little to commend Wringhim or any of his family. This is a worrying tale of human perversion; better, however, to see it thus than to misinterpret it as a satire of the Church. Wringhim dies with a curse to who will alter or amend his work, but a prayer to God (p. 240) on his lips. This is a fair comment on the book.

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