THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

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Edited with an introduction by
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Oxford New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland
and associated companies in
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City Nicosia

Oxford is a trade mark of Oxford University Press

First published in the Oxford English Novels Series by
Oxford University Press 1969
First issued as a World's Classics paperback 1981
Reprinted 1983, 1985

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Hogg, James
The private memoirs and confessions of a justified sinner—
(The world's classics)
I. Title. II. Carey, John
823'.7 80–41897
ISBN 0–19–281556–3

Printed in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Limited
Aylesbury, Bucks

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I AM grateful to the General Editor of *Oxford English Novels*, Professor James Kinsley, for his helpful suggestions. Others who have placed me in their debt are Miss Edith Batho, and Professor A. L. Strout of Eastern Montana College, who were prompt in answering queries, Mr. J. C. Maxwell of Balliol College, who first suggested to me the connection between Hogg's novel and Hoffmann, Mr. D. H. Merry of the Bodleian Library, who aided me in my search for the putative 1895 reissue of the *Confessions*, and the Rev. Fr. M. Jarrett-Kerr, C.R., of Leeds University, and Mr. James O'Neale of University College, Oxford, who brought to my notice contemporary reviews. I should like to record my thanks to each of them.

INTRODUCTION

THE events of the *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* are narrated twice, first by the 'editor', then by the 'sinner' himself. The editor's narrative begins in 1687 with the marriage of the old laird of Dalcastle to a pious girl who owes her strict Calvinism to the tuition of a minister, Robert Wringhim. The marriage soon breaks up, the laird and his wife occupying different parts of the house, and a Miss Arabella Logan comes to live with the laird as 'housekeeper'. Lady Dalcastle, however, produces two sons. The elder, George Colwan, turns out an upstanding youth and is brought up by the laird; Robert, the younger, is educated by his mother and Wringhim, whose name he takes and who, in the laird's opinion, is his real father. The brothers first meet in Edinburgh when George is playing tennis. Young Wringhim interferes, George knocks him down and publicly denies his legitimacy. From that hour George is haunted by his 'fiendish' brother wherever he goes until one morning, climbing Arthur's Seat, he is startled to see a giant apparition of his brother in the mist, and a 'halo of glory' round his own head. Turning, he collides with his brother crouching behind him, and eventually forces him to promise to follow him no longer. Shortly after, George is found dead. The inquiry decides that he was killed in a duel with one of his companions, the Hon. Thomas Drummond. The old laird dies heartbroken, and young

Wringhim inherits Dalcastle. Miss Logan, convinced he is the murderer, cannot prove it until she meets a prostitute, Bell Calvert, who was an eye-witness of the crime, and confirms that Wringhim and a mysterious companion were the culprits. The two women go to Dalcastle, find Wringhim, and tie him up. They hurry to Edinburgh to inform the authorities, and officers are dispatched, but Wringhim has disappeared.

Wringhim's own memoir follows. It recounts his joyful admittance by his stepfather into the number of God's elect, and his meeting with an uncanny stranger, under whose influence he murders George. The stranger, who calls himself Gil-Martin, but whom the reader soon recognizes as Satan, assures Wringhim that no sin can affect the salvation of an elect person: this concurs with his stepfather's teaching. Wringhim comes to believe that he has a criminal *doppelgänger*, since he finds himself accused of crimes, including the seduction and murder of a girl, and the murder of his own mother, of which he has no recollection. He runs away from Dalcastle, finds various jobs, and has his memoir printed; but he cannot shake off his terrible confederate.

The last part of the novel tells of the exhumation of Wringhim's mummified corpse by two local youths in 1823. This was first made public, the editor says, in a letter from James Hogg to *Blackwood's*. (Hogg's letter really was published in the magazine a year before his novel came out.) The editor, his friend J. G. Lockhart, and other gentlemen, plan to exhume the body a second time. Hogg, whom they come across at the Thirlestane ewe fair, dourly refuses to act as guide, but another shepherd obliges, and Wringhim's memoir is discovered in the grave.

The *Confessions* makes Hogg's other fiction look so

amateurish that George Saintsbury decided Lockhart must have helped. This notion, seconded by Andrew Lang, was indignantly countered by Hogg's daughter with the inconclusive argument that the manuscript, in her possession, was 'clearly and neatly written' by Hogg throughout. The picture of the Ettrick Shepherd calling on a classically educated friend to have his masterpiece knocked into shape lingered. When Earle Welby revived the *Confessions* in 1924, he assured his readers that the Lockhart-debt could 'hardly be disputed'. The best antidote to Saintsbury's theory is Lockhart's own novels. Their pedestrian plotting, with nothing more important in view than flimsy melodrama, and their confusion of evil with ungentlemanliness, put an end to any serious association of their author with a work which Walter Allen has proposed as the most convincing representation of the power of evil in our literature, and which succeeds largely because of its subtle structure and relentlessly prosaic tone.

Hogg boasted, untruthfully, that he avoided books, so as to preserve his originality, and he perhaps evolved the novel's double-account scheme for himself; but it had been common in epistolary novels since Richardson, and when he reworked elements from the *Confessions* in his *Strange Letter of a Lunatic*, Hogg, too, adopted the letter-form. The scheme as Hogg employs it is not simple, though to imagine, with Marius Bewley, that the editor's narrative presents 'an objective account of the facts of Colwan's life' would be to make it so. For one thing the editor is a bluff Tory, Lockhart's college-friend. His hero, seen through other eyes, is a young rowdy who slanders his mother in public and goes to church to spy on girls. The editor's complacency about the superior reactions of a 'man of science' in the halo-of-glory scene, and his perplexity over evidence 'not consistent with reason' in the summing-up,

reveal him as a victim of Hogg's wit. Neither he nor Lockhart comes well out of the grave-robbing episode, which Hogg, in the novel, will not be a party to and had, it turns out, taken steps to forestall by giving a false location in his *Blackwood's* letter. Attracted by the editor's tone, David Craig has imagined Hogg himself to be 'an eighteenth-century man of sense, derisive of "enthusiasm" ', but Hogg, the believer in fairies and fervent admirer of the Covenanters, will not wear this label. The editor's limitations and separateness from Hogg receive early advertisement when a girl's desperate evasion of her disgusting old bridegroom strikes him as comic and wrong. Bell Calvert's home truths, later, about Miss Logan's 'old unnatural master' straighten Colwan-*père*'s account, and it is worth remembering that he and Gil-Martin are the only figures in the novel who refuse to pray. The balance of the work requires that the editor's prejudices should be, in their way, as warping as Wringhim's, and indeed Wringhim's cool self-exposure, as in 'My heart was greatly cheered by this remark; and I sighed very deeply', has a surer appeal than anything at the editor's disposal.

Further, the editor does not supply 'the facts'. He repeats traditions which, he admits, may go no further back than the printers of Wringhim's memoir. Consequently the novel remains indecisive about whether the devil was a delusion or an objective figure. The external evidence for the whole affair is unsettlingly flawed: the old laird marries after succeeding to Dalcastle in 1687, but his second son is seventeen on 25 March 1704; Colwans and Wringhims go to Edinburgh in 1704 to attend a session of parliament that took place in 1703; Mrs. Calvert sees Drummond's claymore glittering in the moon, and the surgeons testify that this sword fits George's

wounds, whereas Wringhim, by his own and Mrs. Calvert's account, carried a rapier; George's body is found on a 'little washing green', but Mrs. Calvert remembers it as 'not a very small one'; she thinks she sees him 'pierced through his body' twice, but examination reveals only one fatal wound; Wringhim sees his mother's body being carried to the house, but in the traditional account she is lost without trace. The landlady, hysterically repeating Miss Logan's 'It *is* he', does her bit to discredit traditional evidence. Meanwhile intimations that Gil-Martin is a part of Wringhim are plentiful. He says himself, 'I feel as if I were the same person', and grows haggard along with his victim. Wringhim's anxiety about 'the red-letter side of the book of life' produces a devil whose 'bible' is 'intersected with red lines, and verses'. At first Gil-Martin asserts only what Wringhim needs to believe: that his state is 'to be envied', that he should possess Dalcastle, that he killed his brother fairly. And the crimes Wringhim later commits—murdering his mother and the girl he has seduced—seem, like his vision of a 'pure' woman at moments of stress, outgrowths of his own repression—('I brought myself to despise, if not abhor, the beauty of women'). On the other hand, Gil-Martin becomes an independent figure by virtue of his sense of humour, which constantly escapes Wringhim (as when he assures him that he does not expect acceptance with God on account of good works), and his grisly promises of advancement, so calmly received by this innocent Faust ('I bowed again, lifting my hat').

The novel's intricacy is increased by a mirroring technique, most obvious in the repeated confrontations of Scots- and English-speaking characters (the Scots habitually coarse but splendid)—Lady Dalcastle with her father, the elder Wringhim with John Barnet, the younger with

Samuel Scrape, and so on—which back up James Hogg's rout of the gentry at Thirlestane. Among these exchanges, Bessy Gillies's 'flippant and fearless' vindication of a legal scruple against the Crown prosecutor reflects and redeems Robert's assertion of his 'right and the rights of his fellow-citizens' to the common field. Comparably, Mrs. Calvert's growth from supplication to obstinacy in the prison scene reproduces Robert's treatment of George on the mountain (the link is spelt out: Robert, 'the unaccountable monster'; Mrs. Calvert, 'the unaccountable culprit'), just as what we hear of her life, wrecked by a 'lordly fiend', suggests his.

Hogg's fiction is mostly expendable because of his belief in 'the fire and rapidity of true genius'. He never (so he said) knew when he wrote one line of a novel what the next would be, and he disagreed with revision on principle. But among the sweepings, elements which generate power in the *Confessions* can be picked out. He was always concerned with outcasts, from the winsome vagabond Duncan Campbell to Baron Guillaume de Iskar in his underground casino, and he rightly considered himself one. His ambitions necessarily isolated him from his peasant background. When he and other young shepherds started a literary society, for example, it was suspected of devil-raising, and blamed for the great storm of 1794. Returning to Ettrick in 1809, after failure as a tenant-farmer, he found himself friendless—'even those whom I had loved, and trusted most, disowned me'. He remained sensitive to cold shoulders: 'I know I have always been looked on by the learned part of the community as an intruder.' In the *Confessions*, Robert is 'born an outcast in the world', disowned by his father, saddled with a 'sternness of demeanour from which other boys shrunk', and eventually beaten from every door; George is hissed and pointed at in the Edinburgh

streets; Bell Calvert is whipped, banished, and driven to prostitution. Gil-Martin, the primal outcast, expounds a theology which thrives on the fear of exclusion.

Also near to the book's core is the complex of repulsion and attraction which colours Robert's relationship with Gil-Martin and with George. It features again in *The Brownie of the Black Haggs* and *The Marvellous Doctor*. *The Hunt of Eildon* has a shepherd who finds himself turned into a pig (Hogg's nickname among the *literati*), and rushes about 'trying to escape from himself'. Later he is trussed, screaming and struggling, ready for slaughter, his girl-friend lending her garters to strengthen his bonds. This refinement combines with Hogg's everlasting phobia about old women to produce the binding of Wringhim with garters by Miss Logan and Mrs. Calvert, and the similar tableau in *A Strange Secret* with MacTavish bound hand and foot and two murderous crones 'laughing immoderately at my terrors'. The scene where Wringhim hangs upside down, unclothed, and is beaten in front of the weaver's wife, suggests a similar sexual deviation. A complementary interest in a young bride's subjection to an elderly husband informs both the *Confessions* and *The Bridal of Polmood* (written when Hogg was about to marry a girl twenty years younger). The preservation of dead bodies is another aberration Hogg found endlessly fascinating. In *The Baron St. Gio*, the detail of long-dead flesh dimpling when handled reappears, and the body half-destroyed and half-intact is twice returned to in *The Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon*.

Apart from these obsessive topics, particular narrative counters recur. The hatred of a dark, studious youth for his fair, athletic brother is the groundwork of *The Laird of Cassway*. The 'halo of glory' and giant apparition which startle George were seen by Hogg himself when he was

nineteen, and he recalls, in *Nature's Magic Lantern*, that the shadow 'appeared to my affrighted imagination as the enemy of mankind'. The details of the duel—the green place, the moonlight, a supernatural voice calling out the living, two wounds (one slight, one deadly), are repeated in *Adam Bell* and *The Cameronian Preacher's Tale*.

Hogg's own involvement in Wringhim's religious dilemma is borne out by his treatment of elements from the *Confessions* in other stories. The superficial classification of the book as a satire on Calvinism, sponsored by Ernest Baker, suffers from a reading of, say, *The Prodigal Son*, where a saintly old minister, bearing every mark of Hogg's esteem, expresses the same scorn for 'moral harangues' as Wringhim, or of *The Wife of Lochmaber*, where the story of the pious wife with a devout friend, and the profligate husband who brings a 'buxom quean' to live under the same roof, is retold very much to the wife's advantage: she returns obligingly from the dead to report 'all that we believe of a Saviour and future state of existence is true'. The stern theology behind the *Confessions* is, after all, not very different from Wringhim's, except that he is the reprobate, not George. Hogg himself was punctilious about religious observances: on the one occasion he was away from his family in London, he wrote a book of prayers specially for their use. The implications of his novel are nearer to the Bunyanesque 'Then I saw that there was a way to Hell even from the Gates of Heaven', than to the jocularity of *Holy Willie's Prayer*, with which it is often compared.

The book's style can also be recognized in Hogg's lesser works. The attractive shamelessness of Wringhim's disclosures had been perfected in *The Adventures of Basil Lee*, and mimicry of the King James version (which spills over from Wringhim's part into the editor's with turns of

phrase like 'But he mocked at them, and said' or 'The face was the face of his brother') had been in his repertoire since the *Chaldee Manuscript*.

Turning from the question of how Hogg managed to write the *Confessions* to why he wrote it in 1824, brings us up against his relations with the *Blackwood's* group, a crucial factor in his life from 1817 onwards. Early in the 1820s it dawned on him that the magazine which had at first welcomed and profited from his help was easing him out: 'no wonder I begin to feel a cold side to a work which holds such an avowed one to me', he wrote to Blackwood. His articles were rejected and, worse, articles he had never written, associating him with *Blackwood's* policy, appeared instead. He tried to guard against this by signing all contributions, but Wilson and Lockhart 'signed my name as fast as I did'. Hogg found himself seconding the magazine's snobbish abuse of Keats, and other exhibitions of muscular Toryism. The Whig papers, the *Scotsman* and the *London Magazine*, protested at this misuse of Hogg's name: a 'true national poet' was being made to involve himself in 'the guilt and filth of all the most odious articles that have appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*. . . . He is made to enlarge upon the sympathy he cherishes with the assassin's blow, the mercenary outrage. And this is done, in his name, by the very assassin himself.' The battle went beyond words: John Scott, the *London Magazine*'s brilliant young editor, was killed in a duel by Lockhart's friend, Christie, within two months of this protest. Hogg, like Wringhim, was used to finding 'acts of cruelty, injustice, defamation, and deceit' attributed to him, of which he was wholly ignorant. The explanation which occurs to Wringhim, that he has a second self, became, too, a reality for Hogg in December 1822, when he began to figure in the *Noctes Ambrosianae*. At first these were

composite productions, and Hogg took a hand, but by August 1823 Wilson was making up the shepherd's speeches and turning him, as Lockhart put it, into a 'boozing buffoon'. Mrs. Hogg, understandably, came to dread each new number, and readers of the *Noctes* who, like William Howitt, met the actual James Hogg later, were astonished to find him 'smooth, well-looking and gentlemanly'.

Wringhim's divided attitude to his 'elevated and dreaded friend' can, without much imagination, be paralleled in Hogg's relationship with Professor Wilson. Bogus and unstable, Wilson treated Hogg as he had Wordsworth, pretending affection and then (over the signature 'An Old Friend with a New Face') reviewing him so viciously in *Blackwood's* of August 1821 that Ballantyne, the printer, at first refused to set it up. Hogg was staggered when he found that the author of this 'beastly depravity' was a friend 'in whose heart I never, before at least, believed that any malice or evil intent dwelt', and vowed not to forgive him; but the friendship recommenced, and in October 1823 Wilson betrayed it again with a piece on Hogg's *Three Perils of Woman* which even Blackwood sent back to be watered down. 'I have a strange indefinable sensation with regard to him', Hogg confided to Blackwood in January 1825, 'made up of a mixture of terror, admiration and jealousy—just such a sentiment as one devil might be supposed to have for another.' In another letter Wilson and Lockhart are 'two devils' who 'have banished me their too much loved society'. Wilson, apparently, was flattered, and made his puppet-shepherd accuse him of 'Mephistopheles tricks' in the *Noctes*: 'I aften think you're an evil speerit in disguise, and that your greatest delight is in confounding truth and falsehood.'

It is hard to resist seeing George, 'always ready to

oblige', and Wringhim with his 'ardent and ungovernable passions', as the two sections of Hogg's personality. He was eager to be liked, but suspicious and truculent. Goaded by the need for money, he alternates between *bonhomie* and insult in his letters to Blackwood, Murray, and Scott, following up his outbursts with muddled, pathetic apologies—'you may guess how grieved I was at all this anger and jealousy'. Typically, when Wilson loosed his broadside in 1821, Hogg wrote furiously to Scott, threatening to knock out the reviewer's brains, and, the same day, to Grieve, protesting 'it appears to me to be a joke'. And though he was sucked into the gentlemanly swaggerings of the Edinburgh set, another part of him defected. On one occasion he went with Blackwood to cudgel a Glasgow Whig, Douglas, who had horsewhipped the publisher, but, when Douglas's seconds called on him, sent a servant-girl for the police.

In June 1824, the month the *Confessions* appeared, Blackwood published an anonymous English translation of Hoffmann's *Die Elixiere des Teufels*, which is arguably related to Hogg's novel. The translator was R. P. Gillies, whose acquaintance with Hogg was, by his own account, 'kept up uninterruptedly and cordially from 1813, till my departure from Edinburgh for London in 1827'. Hoffmann's Medardus recalls, 'I began to look upon myself as the one elect,—the pre-eminently chosen of heaven.' He is haunted by an ambiguous 'tall haggard figure' in 'strange foreign garb', who has 'an unearthly glare in his large black staring eyes' and 'an expression of bitter scorn, of disdain mixed almost with hatred'. He believes this figure to be the Devil, and it incites him with talk of predestination: 'The work to which thou wert chosen, must, for thine own weal and salvation, be fulfilled. . . . The attempt to resist the eternal decrees of Omnipotence

is not only sinful, but hopeless presumption.' His *doppelgänger*, for whose crimes he is blamed, has himself the 'fixed delusion' that his personality is 'split into two hostile and contending powers', and Medardus's reaction on encountering him ('methought I was, as if by an electrical shock, roused up') corresponds to Wringhim's ('A sensation resembling a stroke of electricity came over me'). Hoffmann's hero hears warning female voices at crises and, like Wringhim, comes upon his brother perched unsuspectingly over a ravine. As his brother falls: 'his mangled form must have dashed from point to point of the rocks in his descent. I heard one piercing yell of agony' (compare Wringhim, who thinks of George 'being dashed to pieces on the protruding rocks, and of hearing his shrieks as he descended the cloud'). Though he has committed murder, Medardus is persuaded that what 'had many times appeared to me as an unpardonable crime was but the fulfilment of an unalterable decree'. Later, when he believes himself unarmed:

> I felt a painful pressure on my breast, which seemed to proceed from some hard substance in my waistcoat pocket. I grappled with it accordingly, and drew out, to my surprise, a small stiletto. It must, of necessity, be the same which had been held up to me by my mysterious double. I recognized the glittering heft.

Wringhim believes himself weaponless in the weaver's house, but the man points to

> something on the inside of the breast of my frock-coat. I looked at it, and there certainly was the gilded haft of a poniard, the same weapon I had seen and handled before, and which I knew my illustrious companion always carried about with him.

'Antinomianism' (the belief that the elect are not subject to the moral law) 'is not merely possible,' announced the *Eclectic Review* in December 1824, 'it lives, and walks

the earth, and is exerting its deadly influence on society.' The writer was siphoning most of his alarm from Joseph Cottle's *Strictures on the Plymouth Antinomians*, which had come out in 1823. Cottle's subjects, like Hogg's, are a father and son: Dr. Hawker, the Vicar of Charles, and the Revd. John, 'who surpasses even his sire in all that is extravagant, acrimonious, and antichristian'. Cottle busies himself driving his opponents to blasphemous extremes. Dr. Hawker, he reports, 'declares that from the first moment his statement of the gospel is received, the proselyte is . . . at once rendered independent of the Shafts of Satan, though perchance wearing his livery, and acting as his slave'. Like Hogg, Cottle calls antinomianism a 'mildew', and demonstrates, as Robert does, that preaching is inconsistent with it. He recommends the same 'divine test' to the Hawkers—'By their fruits shall ye know them'—as Scrape does to Wringhim. Of course, this is mostly commonplace, and antinomian scares were a chronic disease of high Calvinism. But whether Hogg (who might well have heard about Cottle from Southey) came across the *Strictures* or not, the convictions he represents with such power were not historical oddities (Louis Simpson has pointed to the early eighteenth-century antinomian controversy which involved the Ettrick minister Thomas Boston), but sources of current concern in the year he wrote.