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**The Gothic in James Hogg's  
*The Private Memoirs and  
Confessions of a Justified Sinner***

Although it was published in 1824, Hogg's most famous novel is one of the works of the Romantic period that became a classic only recently. It was detested and ridiculed when it was first published; later editions were distorted and the novel eventually fell into oblivion, only to be rediscovered and praised in the previous century (Kelly 215). It is no wonder that reactions of the public were such – the novel deals with religious fundamentalism and antinomianism<sup>1</sup>; it depicts a mental disorder which could also be interpreted as demonic possession and incorporates fratricide and suicide into the plot. The story revolves around Robert Wringhim, a young man deeply marked by his rigorous Calvinist<sup>2</sup> upbringing, who meets an enigmatic stranger named Gil-Martin. This curious new companion of his will lead him to commit a series of murders, convincing Wringhim that he is "among the elect" and therefore does not have to obey the Christian moral law. According to the theory of predestination, he assures him, his salvation is not affected by any sin. Even though Wringhim feels uneasy about the crimes which Gil-Martin commands him to do, the manipulative stranger uses his own eloquence and gallantry to cajole him and to interpret all these crimes as God-honouring deeds done in order to purge the Church of its ostensible enemies:

"Why, sir," said he, "by vending such an insinuation, you put discredit on the great atonement, in which you trust. Is there not enough of merit in the blood of Jesus to save thousands of worlds, if it was for these worlds that he died? Now, when you know, as you do (and as every one of the elect may know of himself) that this Saviour died for you, namely and particularly, dare you say that there is not enough of merit in His great atonement to annihilate all your sins, let them be as heinous and atrocious as they may? And, moreover, do you not acknowledge that God hath pre-ordained and decreed whatsoever comes to pass? Then, how is it that you should deem it in your power to eschew one action of your life, whether good or evil? Depend on it, the advice of the great preacher is genuine: 'What thine hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might, for none of us knows what a day may bring forth.' That is, none of us knows what is pre-ordained, but whatever it is pre-ordained we must do, and none of these things will be laid to our charge." (Hogg 91)

By speaking in such a solemn tone and using sophisticated, Biblical vocabulary, Gil-Martin leaves a lasting impression on pliable Wringhim and lures him into killing his own brother and carrying out other horrendous crimes. The young protagonist, unhinged and regretful, eventually commits suicide and leaves his memoirs behind him.

The most disturbing effect is achieved by the novel's open-endedness: the reader may suspect that Gil-Martin is Satan due to the perplexity of his appearance and character, but the structural framework of the novel leaves this question open: *Confessions* begin with the so-called "Editor's Narrative" which

aims to be factual and impartially represent the events leading up to Wringhim's death, taking into account other characters' viewpoints and testimonies. This narrative is followed by Wringhim's first-person memoirs. In the end, the Editor takes the word again by inserting an "authentic letter" (Hogg 175) published in *Blackwood Magazine*, "signed JAMES HOGG, and dated from Altrive Lake, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1823" (179). The sender writes of a suicide which happened a hundred years earlier and mentions the discovery of the body which was found incredibly well-preserved (this part is also an interesting cameo of the author himself and his literary alter-ego the Ettrick Shepherd). Finally, the novel is rounded off by the Editor's descriptions of the exhumation and uncovering of the bizarre manuscript, offering no explanations and leaving the reader bewildered. He confesses himself that he "dares not venture a judgment, for he does not understand it" (Hogg 186). What's more, irrational features are present in both the memoirs and in the supposedly objective narratives. These features mingle with rational elements: for instance, the letter at the end lets the reader know that Wringhim "had hung himself in the hay rope that was tying down the rick" (176), which is clearly impossible since hay rope is too fragile to be used as noose. The fact that the corpse did not decay is another supernatural peculiarity mentioned outside of Wringhim's narrative. Therefore, one cannot point to any of the novel's accounts and consider it completely believable. Tzvetan Todorov would classify this into "pure fantastic" because no ultimate explanations for the fantastic elements are offered, as Philmus explains:

"It is in accordance primarily with his demand for an autonomous basis of generic classification that Todorov locates "the fantastic" between the logical poles of the natural and the supernatural. As "that hesitation experienced by a person [*un être*] who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (p. 25), "the fantastic" endures so long as the extraordinary occurrence remains, so to speak, inexplicably inexplicable. Once it has been determined to be supernatural (i.e., simply inexplicable in terms of natural law), the fiction enters the realm of "the marvellous." (72) In this kind of incongruous structural framework one can recognize typical Romantic heterogeneity; a singular mixture of genres and perspectives is noticeable. As Corinna Russell puts it, "*Confessions* parodies the narrative heteroglossia of many Romantic-period novels, without providing the satisfaction for the reader of a master-narrative in which to resolve the conflicting voices" (380). In other words, Hogg builds levels of fictional "truthfulness" throughout the novel; he lays out different sorts of inconsistent "documents" which make the novel seem like a significant amount of evidence on a particular mysterious case. This disparateness creates a literary game which blurs the lines between reality and fiction, aiming to deceive the reader into believing the narrator, only to eventually leave all his questions unanswered. Hogg is aware that nothing makes a story more eerie than making it truly seem like real-life events, especially when different witnesses-narrators are introduced; the effect of allegedly documentary evidence being assorted into a peculiar novel like this is similar to the effect of the words "based on a true

story" appearing before a contemporary horror movie. Of course, the average reader in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was much more susceptible to tactical manipulation than today's audience.

All these features can clearly be connected with the Gothic, but *Confessions* is far from classic Gothic setting in many aspects. Abrams defines the Gothic novel as "s a type of prose fiction which was inaugurated by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764)—the subtitle denotes its setting in the Middle Ages—and flourished through the early nineteenth century" (152). As David S. Miall states, Gothic fiction experienced a "rapid increase in production" in the 1790s Romantic period (373). The term Gothic itself "originally referred to the Goths, an early Germanic tribe, then came to signify 'germanic,' then 'medieval'", now it refers mostly to a type of architecture (Abrams 152). The main goal of such novels, claims Abrams, "was to evoke chilling terror by exploiting mystery and a variety of horrors", as will be discussed later. Some distinguished works of Gothic fiction are Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1790) and Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) (152).

Miall compares Hogg's book to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. As it has already been mentioned, *The Castle of Otranto* is the work that paved the way for subsequent fictions of the same kind. It is exactly the kind of novel Jane Austen mocks in her *Northanger Abbey* and therefore a useful read for grasping the most common Gothic literary conventions: set in a dark, ominous castle full of subterranean corridors and secret doors, the story revolves around a pitiless tyrant who pursues a young damsel-in-distress. The plot, which is even inconsistent at times, is based on an ancestral curse and infused with superstitious and supernatural elements. Characters are one-dimensional; the male ones are dominant, while the female ones are passive, obedient and faint-hearted. According to Miall, such components (e.g. the castle and the Gothic villain) reappear oftentimes in the later Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, but do not occur in other crucial works such as *Frankenstein* and *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Thus, Miall concludes, "the Gothic cannot be defined simply as a certain type of setting or character" (345). There is something about the feeling of angst it evokes, something not so easily construed, something that can be engendered in numerous ways - not only by setting the plot in gloomy castles.

This implies that the genre is a goldmine for philosophical and psychoanalytic analysis. Miall invokes the notion of "the sublime": this term is analysed in Immanuel Kant's monumental 1790 work, *Critique of Judgement*. He divides aesthetic judgement into experiences of beauty and experiences of sublimity; on the one hand, beauty is marked by form and structure, it brings pleasure to one's senses and is easily digestible to human mind. On the other hand, the sublime is the "absolutely great" (86), it invokes feelings that may range from awe to terror and is usually encountered when faced with something enormous

or incomprehensible to the limited human intellect (82). Kant calls the ambiguous feeling which is aroused by such sights or situations "negative pleasure" (83), a distinct satisfaction found when experiencing something that surpasses human capacity of understanding and rationalizing. The pleasure stems both from the experience and the one's ability to understand and acknowledge that human mind cannot fathom it.

The term "sublime" is often used to describe Gothic architecture (the literary genre itself was named after it because its works were usually set in such grim, enormous buildings). Such architecture conjures "the forces of vastness, power, obscurity and terror" (which was already described in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry*, a significant treatment of the sublime); it provides a source for clarifying "mental states of passions for which only figurative expression was possible" (346). The sublime in the conventional Gothic is also latently related to male domination: the typical damsel-in-distress is trapped within a castle owned by lecherous evildoer; she cannot escape him in the same way she cannot find a way out of his immense mansion, which stands as a symbol of his power over her. However, using this type of setting evidently soon became hackneyed, which contributed to the already low reputation of Gothic literature among critics. The more admirable works of the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, like *Frankenstein* or *Confessions*, Miall emphasizes, "require no ruined abbeys or dungeons: they find equivalent or perhaps more subtle means for intimating the hidden architecture of the mind" (346).

Indeed, Hogg's *Confessions* are much closer to Sigmund Freud's notion of "the uncanny", first explained in his 1919 essay of the same name. Freud defines the uncanny as "the species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (124). The uncanny, Freud states, stems either from childhood complexes (certain wishes, fears, repressed memories) or from "animistic" or "primitive convictions" (155), i.e. fears and beliefs of our ancient predecessors, although these two factors may be intertwined and complementary in numerous cases. The uncanny effect may arise when "the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary" (150). In literature, fantastic and odd events are recognized as uncanny if the author has clearly demonstrated in his or her writing that the diegetic universe of the story is based on realistic happenings, on episodes that emulate real-life events. In case of fairy tales, the diegetic universe is always based on the unreal and its elements. Majority of the readers possess a certain knowledge repertoire about the genre, they will expect fantastic and odd events in the storyline and therefore they will not sense the uncanny effect while reading. But Hogg's world is no fairy tale, it is clearly set in a world that is initially familiar to the readers, and therefore the blurring of lines between real and the unreal produces the uncanny effect. Deirdre Shepherd explains Freud's term in the following way:

It should be noted that Freud stresses the importance of the opposite meaning of the term. His essay begins by describing and analysing what is meant by 'unheimlich' or 'unhomely / unfamiliar / uncanny' and argues that the significance of 'heimlich' or 'homely / familiar' should not be overlooked. Freud writes that 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' ("Uncanny" 220) and therefore derives its horror not from something unexpectedly new or unfamiliar but through distortion of what is otherwise experienced as recognisable and unremarkable. (12)

This distortion of known entities and phenomena plays the key role in exerting the unsettling effect of Hogg's *Confessions*. Unlike Walpole, who uses the ancestral curse caused by events in the past as the story's backbone, Hogg's narrative is based on obscurities and mutilations of the familiar and the everyday. No matter whether one identifies Gil-Martin as the devil or just as a product of Wringhim's twisted mind, this vile character is deeply disturbing because he seems both natural and supernatural at the same time or too human, yet not human enough. His origin is unknown, he appears out of nowhere, yet he seems to know all about Wringhim and therefore easily makes a bond with him. The sensation of strange familiarity is obvious in the depiction of Wringhim's first encounter with Gil-Martin. The protagonist first feels a presentiment of something thrilling and terrifying that is going to happen:

As I thus wended my way, I beheld a young man of a mysterious appearance coming towards me. I tried to shun him, being bent on my own contemplations; but he cast himself in my way, so that I could not well avoid him; and, more than that, I felt a sort of invisible power that drew me towards him, something like the force of enchantment, which I could not resist. As we approached each other, our eyes met and I can never describe the strange sensations that thrilled through my whole frame at that impressive moment; a moment to me fraught with the most tremendous consequences; the beginning of a series of adventures which has puzzled myself, and will puzzle the world when I am no more in it. (Hogg 84)

There is some kind of inexplicable energy drawing him to the stranger. Wringhim immediately has a vague, but palpable sense of knowledge about what is coming. And then, even more surprisingly, he realizes that the newcomer looks exactly like him:

What was my astonishment on perceiving that he was the same being as myself! The clothes were the same to the smallest item. The form was the same; the apparent age; the colour of the hair; the eyes; and, as far as recollection could serve me from viewing my own features in a glass, the features too were the very same. I conceived at first that I saw a vision,

and that my guardian angel had appeared to me at this important era of my life; but this singular being read my thoughts in my looks, anticipating the very words that I was going to utter. (Hogg 84)

This kind of duplication is essential in delineating the unnerving character of Gil-Martin. Hogg needs neither devil's horns nor sharp teeth to create an intimidating image of a villain – rather, he attributes a strongly familiar element to a strongly unknown entity. Later throughout the novel, the reader finds out that Gil-Martin is capable of altering his appearance and picking up people's features :

My countenance changes with my studies and sensations," said he. "It is a natural peculiarity in me, over which I have not full control. 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. (Hogg 90)

Thus, Gil-Martin's evil power reaches the point where he can merge with one's everyday life and mislead humans. He is elusive and unidentifiable; his monstrous appearance is based on having no monstrous appearance - on being a kaleidoscope of familiar faces and minds while actually being none of them. What makes him outstanding, though, is the fact that he exploits piety, i.e. makes use of a distorted theology to beguile Wringhim and eventually cause his self-destruction. Religion, something well-known and commonplace to Wringhim, becomes deformed by constant discussions between two companions in which Gil-Martin cunningly talks him into wrongdoing. He therefore becomes Wringhim's twisted mirror image and proceeds to slowly creep into his personality, so that the young protagonist feels exceedingly split at times:

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, and always in the same position from the place where I sat or stood, which was about three paces off me towards my left side. It mattered not how many or how few were present: this my second self was sure to be present in his place, and this occasioned a confusion in all my words and ideas that utterly astounded my friends, who all declared that, instead of being deranged in my intellect, they had never heard my conversation manifest so much energy or sublimity of conception; but, for all that, over the singular delusion that I was two persons my reasoning faculties had no power. The most perverse part of it was that I rarely conceived myself to be any of the two persons. I thought for the most part that my companion was one of them, and my brother the other;

and I found that, to be obliged to speak and answer in the character of another man, was a most awkward business at the long run. (Hogg 112)

The Doppelgängers are key in producing the effect of the uncanny. These are not only Wringhim and Gil-Martin as possible doubles. One can perceive various elements of the novel as Doppelgängers, e.g. two religious doctrines the lofty aim of true Calvinism and the distorted concept of extremist antinomianism described by Hogg. The book itself is split into two different narratives. Even Hogg inserts himself as some kind of a double involved in the story at the end. But, as it was already mentioned, there are no clarifications offered. The doubling is not explained either as a psychological or a supernatural process, which leaves the sense of anguish lingering. Earlier Gothic novels are strongly based on binary oppositions; they are template narratives in which a set of structures often appear together, it is clear which characters are heroes and which ones are evildoers. Elizabeth W. Harries notes that Hogg "reverses the usual Gothic order of things", especially because he puts the "objective" Editor's narrative first and then introduces Wringhim's memoirs. "The usual sequence", writes Harries, "would be the subjective and supernatural account, then explained or rationalized away by an objective observer" (189). Additionally, the distinction between male authoritative lust and female passive virginity is also strongly underscored in typical Gothic fiction, while *Confessions* refrain from exploring any kind of sexual relationship. Wringhim even confesses that he "disapproves of the love of women, and all intimacies and connections with the sex" (Hogg 132). In Hogg, all binaries and their boundaries are made hazy.

But there are some plot elements in novels like *The Castle of Otranto* that are akin to the later, more mature Gothic works such as Hogg's. The concept of pursuit and persecution appears in the majority of Gothic literature. In earlier novels the chase usually comes down to the villain running after the petrified maiden. In Shelley and Hogg, the hunt becomes more intricate; the protagonists are followed by their fiendish creatures that have the ability to appear and disappear at their own will. This makes the complete situation more frightening: protagonists are not physically confined anymore; they can move wherever and whenever they want, but so can the beings that bedevil them. The space of the pursuit is unlimited; it annexes the realm of thoughts and dreams to its ghastly territory. Gil-Martin follows Wringhim, but in the Editor's Narrative the reader finds out that Wringhim also used to inexplicably follow his brother George Colwan wherever he went. George suspects that the relationship between his brother and Gil-Martin represents "an inextricable state of dependency and a binding duality" (O'Halloran 200). He also senses that, even when Robert shows up alone, "he is haunted by some evil genius in the shape of his brother, as well as by that dark and mysterious wretch himself" (Hogg 35). One could then link the previously elaborated "uncanny" with this anxious state of being followed around to get a better grasp of Hogg's peculiar sinister ambience.



Taking into account many visual stimuli and optical transformations that play a role in creating this malignant atmosphere, O'Halloran calls *Confessions* "a kaleidoscopic novel" which "carries the possibility of a disturbing change as well as an epiphany" at every turn (200). She relates some of the imagery to Gothic tradition; for instance, there is a part in the Editor's Narrative in which George wanders off to a hill-top in order to move away from the town, in which every corner seems to be haunted by the image of his strange brother, and after a while sees the face of Robert in the sky:

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. (Hogg 31)

O'Halloran claims that this dreadful magnification through the Brocken Spectre "carries associations with Walpurgis Night and the legend of Faust in German Romanticism, which connects both brothers with a Gothic tradition of overreachers, as exemplified by Goethe's *Faust* (Part One, 1808) and Byron's *Manfred* (1817)" (200). This shows that the Gothic takes some inspiration from the literary canon and folk tales and myths. Indeed, Hogg includes folkloric and traditional elements in the plot, introducing low-ranking characters as ones who are inherently superstitious, but truthful and honest. Hogg, who was born in a rural part of Scotland and worked as shepherd in his youth, was clearly influenced by his origin. Through the words of Wringhim's servant Samuel Scrape, the writer tells the folk tale of the devil of Auchtermuchty, which deeply upsets his master, for it reminds him of Gil-Martin this is yet another element of the uncanny. Also, to make characters such as Scrape more credible, Hogg writes down their sentences in the original Scottish dialect (this is also a way to distance such characters from Wringhim and Gil-Martin who are marked by ornate language imbued with pathos and Biblical references):

Oo, I trow it's a' stuff—folk shouldna heed what's said by auld crazy kimmers. But there are some o' them weel kend for witches, too; an' they say, 'Lord have a care o' us!' They say the deil's often seen gaun sidie for sidie w' ye, whiles in ae shape, an' whiles in another. An' they say that he whiles takes your ain shape, or else enters into you, and then you turn a deil yoursel. (Hogg 143)

The incorporation of Scottish dialect and traditional heritage in a Gothic novel is highly relevant. It means that the writer set the story in a space and time familiar to the reader (disregarding the fact that the events from the memoirs take place a hundred years earlier – novels such as Walpole's were

set in the Middle Ages). As for other early Gothic writers, Abrams states that "some followed Walpole's example by setting their story in the medieval period; others set them in a Catholic country, especially Italy or Spain" (111). They were prone to exoticizing, as if they did not want to scare the reader too much, so they located their events in distant lands which would not remind the reading public of their everyday life ambient. In the preface of *The Castle of Otranto*, Walpole claims that "the principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest ages of Christianity; but the language and conduct have nothing that savours of barbarism" (39). This statement implies that the author approaches the topic with a sense of superiority stemming from his aristocratic English origin. He attempts to entertain the readers with depictions of supernatural events, but perceives them as "barbaric" at the same time, so they have to be set in a distant space. Setting such experiences in an ambient and time closer to the reading public might be offensive, if not dangerous.

Walpole even goes so far as to admit having copied "that great master of nature, Shakespeare" (44). One of aspects in which Walpole is influenced by Shakespeare is the role of servants. Similarly to Hogg's low characters, they are genuine and good-natured, but Walpole uses them only as a slightly comic element in a story that is supposed to be tragic. The only low-ranking character that plays a significant role, Theodore, appears to be a peasant at first, but is unmasked as a nobleman later. Walpole does not share Hogg's warmth for the peasantry and the natives; he is more prone to praising aristocratic characters. This is why Miall classifies his work under "conservative Gothic":

But whereas Enlightenment thinking had begun to question the political systems of the time (thus preparing the ground for the French Revolution), Walpole, the son of a Prime Minister, clearly has no such intention. The function of the ghosts and portents in the novel is to restore the violated property rights of the 'true' owners of the province of Otranto. (347)

Miall then classifies *Confessions* under "radical Gothic", in which there is "a more specific and intense focus on investigating mental states of terror, supported by a greater effort to situate such states circumstantially" (351). And Hogg situated them exactly in his homeland, among people whose social positions and ways of life were more familiar to the reading public, and whose nature he had known ever since his childhood. Benedict distinguishes these peculiarities of Hogg's Gothic:

Notable are the frequent use by Hogg's characters of Scots dialect, in contrast to the more genteel language of "Gothic" romances; a reliance upon prosaic and homely details to enhance the sense of horror; a less inhibited employment of explicit details of physically hideous and morally shocking occurrences; and, above all, a firm and frequently demonstrated conviction that ordinary men and women constantly

experience the intervention of the supernatural in their everyday lives. (Benedict 250)

Due to these features, Ian Duncan names Hogg's way of writing "the Scottish Gothic" and relates the uncanniness of *Confessions* to specific historical events of the time. He mentions that the novel is set in the time of The Act of Union and "narrates the futility of 'union' as a state of collective or psychic being". Therefore, the animosity and opposition between two brothers, together with Robert's mental disintegration, "at once mirror and exceed the religious and political division of Scottish society" (131).

In conclusion, one can say that Hogg's Gothic is truly far from the Gothic conventions introduced in early works of the genre, but this is why it delves much deeper into the psychology of horror. The effect of uncanniness and uneasiness is achieved by the novel's open ending and a variation of different genres incorporated into the book. Conflicting voices, doubling and mirror images, as well as the thin line between the supernatural and the psychological make *Confessions* a unique piece of 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature which definitely paved the way for the genre we today recognize as 'psychological horror'. Another act by which Hogg improved Gothic fiction is the localization of the story and inclusion of Scottish folk tales and characters, which gives the work a specific national flavour these are only some of many reasons why *Confessions* are still highly relevant and compelling in today's reader society.

## End Notes

- 1 According to Oxford Reference, antinomianism is "the belief held by various sects, but particularly by radical protestant movements of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, that certain chosen Christians are by faith or by predestination unable to sin and are hence set free from the requirement to obey any moral law".
- 2 According to Oxford Reference, Calvinism is "the Protestant theological system of the French Protestant theologian and reformer John Calvin (1509–64) and his successors, which develops Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone into an emphasis on the grace of God and centres on the doctrine of predestination."

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