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“I dare not venture a judgement”: Spirituality and the Postsecular in Hogg’s *Confessions*

Conor Bruce Hilton

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“I dare not venture a judgement”: Spirituality and the Postsecular in Hogg’s *Confessions*

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Reading James Hogg’s 1824 novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* through a postsecular lens provides a new framework for spirituality. This framework establishes spirituality as a place of tension and uncertainty between the text’s main ideologies—Enlightenment rationality and religious, specifically Calvinist, fanaticism. The text explores this place of tension through its doubled narrative structure and by demonstrating the crisis of faith that the fictional Editor of the text undergoes. *Confessions* brings a compelling new paradigm to discussions of the postsecular that allows insight into the complex intersections of Enlightenment rationality and empiricism as well as religious zealotry and the supernatural.

Keywords: spirituality, postsecular, Romanticism, James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*

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Introduction

The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers.

—Erich Fromm

“With regard to the work itself, I dare not venture a judgment, for I do not understand it,” concludes the nameless Editor in James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. The feeling of uncertainty that the Editor conveys here during the novel’s final section stands in sharp contrast to the certitude that marks the Editor’s earlier declarations. Hogg’s enigmatic 1824 novel similarly takes the reader from a place of certainty to one of radical ambiguity.

Confessions tells the story of a young man, Robert Wringhim, and the consequences of his rigorous belief in justification as fed by his associations with his shadowy double, Gil-Martin. The text is doubled in structure, opening with a frame narrative by a presumably objective Editor, followed by Wringhim’s account in his own words, and closing with an editorial epilogue. Which voice has more credibility remains uncertain. Hogg’s novel has been received historically in ways that tend to focus on the text’s theological or ideological positions—reading it, for instance, through a Calvinist lens, or to understand its concern with the Enlightenment, or to unfold its characters through psychoanalysis. Criticism has also engaged with the novel’s genre—considering it in relation to the Gothic and otherwise interrogating the text’s genre conventions—as well as its Scottishness—connecting it to the cultural politics of nineteenth-century Scotland, the legacy of the text’s seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scotland, Scottish folklore, or related historical and contextual factors.

Crawford Gribben and Ian Duncan agree that a Calvinist epistemology is at the heart of Hogg's *Confessions* though they take that assertion in very different ways. Gribben argues that the "novel harnesses Calvin's epistemology to emphasise the 'fallen-ness' of hermeneutics, the unreliability of interpretive conclusions" (21), whereas Duncan points to the way that the Calvinist epistemology at the center of the text undermines a Romantic ideology (4). The focus on the Calvinist elements of the text masks the way that the text also engages the Scottish Enlightenment and its moderate religious philosophy. Richard Sher's work highlights the diversity of thought among Scottish Enlightenment thinkers and provides a rich background that illuminates elements of Hogg's text. This essay weaves elements of the scholarly claims from Gribben's, Duncan's, and Sher's work, and applies a fresh approach, understanding the novel in terms of Hogg's conception of modern, postsecular spirituality.

The complexities of Hogg's text can be illuminated by *novelistic theology*, a term borrowed from Mark Noll. Noll's work focuses on religious literature in America, particularly the fiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Novelistic theology is how Noll describes Stowe's development of a belief system in her novels that differed from the official theology of Calvinism, carving out a more nuanced, more personal, less zealous position. Noll writes that, for Stowe, "not only was it necessary to rescue theology by a fresh concentration on the person and work of Christ, but that rescue also involved an almost complete rejection...of the overwhelming compulsion of America's Reformed theologians...to figure everything out" (326). Noll here highlights the nature of novelistic theology as concerning the individual and the salvific work of Christ while simultaneously rejecting the need and practice of theologians contemporary with Stowe to arrive at a narrow and strict epistemological certainty. In other words, novelistic theology is less interested in certainty than practicality—it's an approach to spirituality and the study of God and religious belief that cares about complicated stories and in so doing cares about people and their lives, an emphasis strongly

reflected in Hogg's text. Essentially, novelistic theology is grounded in the personal and experiential, forcing it to include heterodoxy in ways that a more systematic theology refuses to do. Reading *Confessions* through the lens of novelistic theology highlights the way the text leans into the ambiguities of its competing ideologies to create what I will analyze as a sense of spirituality and wonder—related but dialectical categories in Hogg's novel. The spirituality of Hogg's text is the result of its complex and irreconcilable narratives and the questions of belief and disbelief that define it. Wonder is the affect, or emotional charge, of this spirituality; it is also the consequence of Hogg's refusal to define and answer the questions that provoke it.

The host of complexities presented by Hogg—competing narratives, irreconcilable details, unbelievable and supernatural occurrences—creates a difficult situation for the reader. Hogg offers a challenging critique of Enlightenment rationality *and* of theological, specifically Calvinist, dogmatism. This dual-pronged critique results in a somewhat ambiguous resolution that appears to reside outside of the two ideologies under scrutiny. Novelistic theology helps us understand that Hogg's "fully secular and fully religious" text opens us onto the kind of ambiguous terrain I describe above: spiritual in evoking a sense of the transcendent while remaining outside religion, and wondrous in failing to resolve the question of what that uncertain transcendence means (Wilkes 450). Spirituality here is the liminal space left over between Hogg's fierce critiques of secular and religious positions that normally oppose one another. Wonder emerges from this space. In describing wonder as the affect of this ambivalent spirituality, I draw on the scholarship of Marina Warner and Cristina Bacchilega, who point to the dualities inherent in wonder and its capacity to encompass a rich multitude of experiences—malevolence and benevolence, dread and desire, pleasure and fear.

The duality inherent in wonder can be found in the structure of *Confessions* itself. Hogg's novel depends on a dual narrative structure—that is, it generally reports events twice, first from the

perspective of its fictional editor and then from the point of view of its zealous protagonist. Using new scholarly paradigms for spirituality, including novelistic theology, Hogg's *Confessions* can be read as a fiction of wonder or a fiction of spirituality, two intimately related categories. Reading *Confessions* as a fiction of wonder argues that we need spirituality and that by necessity spirituality dwells within the tension of two poles, in this case the Enlightenment rationality of the Editor and the zealous Calvinism of Robert Wringhim. Novelistic theology draws attention to the ways in which the text interrogates both of these ideologies and pushes the reader into the resulting ambiguity. Hogg argues that these tensions will not resolve, nor should we await their resolution. Instead, Hogg promotes an alternative to certainty—residing in the uncertain middle, inhabiting spirituality somewhere between Enlightenment rationality and Calvinist zealotry. Thus, *Confessions* is not simply critiquing Calvinism or the Enlightenment, but rather advances that critique with the intent of promoting an alternative approach—an embrace of the wonder that accompanies radical uncertainty. Embracing this wonder that results from the tensions of Hogg's text places it in scholarly conversations surrounding the postsecular.

The postsecular in its broadest sense is concerned with the variety of ways that the secular and religious interact with one another, and more narrowly for our purposes concerns the intersections of spirituality and literature. Lori Branch articulates the place of the postsecular as a “wedging between faith and knowledge,” a kind of “ground zero for the convergence between religion and literature and for postsecular studies in the humanities more generally” (6-7). Elsewhere, Branch argues for scholarship that engages the connections between spiritual and literary studies. She writes, “antireductionist scholarship insists on reading one and one's narrative, belief, language, relation, and freedom into and not out of its account of reality at every turn. Without dismissing all belief as delusion and false consciousness, it opens up questions about the literary structures of narratives and their negotiation of belief and meaning-making” (15). The

postsecular embraces the possibility of belief and insists upon reading that possibility into appropriate accounts of reality.

Within *Confessions*, this possibility of belief within a world that largely rejects it, or at least the supernatural and uncanny iteration of it that Wringhim and Gil-Martin represent, is precisely the point. Hogg zeroes in on the tensions created in an Enlightened (secular) world that has rejected the supernatural, when elements from this older world persist and, animated by zealously religious paradigms, collide with the Enlightened sectors. This was Hogg's world, in nineteenth-century Scotland and, in many respects, this is our world. Talal Asad,¹ in his 2013 essay "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," describes some of these same competing ideologies at play in responses to the Danish cartoon controversy. Asad argues that the postsecular is the tension of explicitly religious and secular ideologies that collide. Blasphemy is Asad's vehicle to access the layers of tension that exist when a religious, often described as zealous, community is dropped into the midst of a largely secular, Enlightenment-principle-following world. Asad's work highlights these tensions, but seems to leave swaths of the public untouched that embody elements of both of these worldviews. What *Confessions* gives us is a new paradigm for the postsecular, one that acknowledges the ways in which these communities and worlds are in tension, but that that tension creates something new, in tension with both poles. That something is spirituality. Spirituality as a postsecular paradigm unlocks the possibility for more refined analyses and insights into the

¹ Asad writes of his purpose as "an attempt to think about the place of blasphemy—a religious concept—in a secular liberal society" (15). Blasphemy is not as much my focus, but Asad's work highlights the tensions of the postsecular that view the world largely as religious or secular. Asad continues, writing, "In what follows I want to think about blasphemy from various angles and treat it as the crystallization of some moral and philosophical problems in liberal Europe" (15). Again, Asad is using blasphemy, particularly in relation to the Danish cartoon controversy, as a means of accessing fundamental moral differences among various groups in liberal Europe. These differences are primarily about the religious worldview of many Muslims and the secular, Enlightenment-inflected worldview of many western Europeans. In essence, Asad demarcates a strong divide between the religious and secular and splits the world into these two camps.

intersections of the secular and the religious. Spirituality creates wonder, and together they define the condition of radical uncertainty that Hogg's novel creates, and that many of us find in the world around us.

Spirituality and Wonder

This condition of radical uncertainty is what I am calling spirituality. Spirituality conventionally refers to some kind of devotional life or self-transcendence; however, I'm interested in something slightly different. Spirituality, as I see it in Hogg, is a striving toward something, while being pulled towards the novel's opposite poles. The tension of the two poles of Hogg's text echoes and complicates the tension of the immanent and transcendent, as explored in Charles Taylor's 2007 watershed tome, *A Secular Age*. Taylor asserts that "defining religion in terms of the distinction immanent/transcendent is a move tailor-made for our culture" (16). He acknowledges the vagueness and slipperiness of both immanence and transcendence, but particularly transcendence. These two categories engage with one another throughout religious history, and for Taylor, at least one aspect of secularization is the increasing denial of the transcendent in favor of the immanent. Yet, in Hogg, we see consequences when transcendence refuses to be denied and forces itself into immanence. It is that state of existence, the tenuous acknowledgement of transcendence, of *something* beyond, that is spirituality.

William James offers a reading of spirituality that avoids the transcendent almost entirely, locating the crux of spirituality within individuals. James describes spirituality as "[t]he unreasoned and immediate assurance" and "the deep thing in us" where "[i]nstance leads" and "intelligence does but follow" (63). James grounds spirituality inside individuals as a sense of peace, almost arrived at unconsciously, or at least without full consciousness. Jamesian spirituality is easily compatible with the Enlightenment rationality worldview of the Editor in *Confessions*. This

rational spirituality is reflected in Robert's spiritual experiences immediately following the Reverend's pronouncement that he is indeed among the justified—the feelings of being “renewed,” “buoyant with new life,” able to fly and leap from the ground, all mirror the deep “unreasoned and immediate assurance” that James describes (Hogg 88). However, this Jamesian sense of spirituality does not encompass Robert's dark, supernatural experiences or the uneasy state that the Editor arrives at in the novel's conclusion. James's understanding of spirituality eschews the supernatural and the radical or transcendent experiences that mark much of Hogg's text.

Sir Alister Hardy draws attention to the links between transcendence² and spirituality for which Taylor defined a framework, while opening up to neutral or negative spiritual experiences. He says that “this transcendental element...is fundamental” (132). Transcendence is the key for Hardy—the existence of a reality beyond ourselves, or rather the feeling or impression that there is such a reality, which is not assigned a positive or negative value. Hardy's spirituality is seen throughout Hogg, where George and Robert experience giants towering in the sky, much of Gil-Martin's experience, and the Editor's encounter with, presumably, Robert's corpse.

Wesley Wildman highlights the expansiveness of spiritual experiences, building on and complicating Hardy's assertion that spirituality is tied to some form of transcendence outside of us. Wildman describes “vivid experiences,” which include what he terms “anomalous” and “ultimacy” experiences. These categories can and do overlap but are marked by distinctions: “anomalous

² Sandra Schneiders offers a more detailed definition of spirituality that works through some of the different understandings of transcendence. She states that “Spirituality is the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence” (16). Schneiders ties spirituality to actualization, which centers action at the heart of the definition. She links this action to a striving toward transcendence, something that exists beyond ourselves. Schneiders's work bears echoes of Charles Taylor's understanding of transcendence. In addition to articulating transcendence as what is “beyond,” Taylor also argued that transcendence is essentially believing that the best life involves “our seeking, or acknowledging, or serving a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of human flourishing” (16). Schneiders points us towards this understanding, particularly as she continues. She continues her definition of spirituality by writing that it is “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value one perceives” (16). Again, action is privileged. Spirituality is conscious work to integrate your life with the transcendence that you believe in.

experiences are defined by objective strangeness, ultimacy experiences ... by subjective judgments of ultimate significance” (Wildman 84). The strangeness of the anomalous is found throughout Robert’s memoir and refuses to be contained within that section, manifesting in the editorial epilogue and peeking through the Editor’s Narrative that opens *Confessions*. These experiences often also serve as ultimacy experiences—to use Wildman’s term—for Robert, where they continue to bear remarkable significance. Anomalous experiences “apparently violate the operations of the world as understood in normal life” (Wildman 82). These are the experiences that color Robert’s behavior, beginning with the arrival of Gil-Martin and continuing and escalating throughout the text, until Robert’s final moments. The anomalous experiences that define and determine the direction of Robert’s life, in several instances, collide with others that generally deny the existence or significance of such experiences. The Editor’s second-hand encounters with the anomalous through Robert’s memoir is one example, as is George’s encounter on Arthur’s Seat with the apparition. Throughout *Confessions*, the anomalous forces itself upon the ultimacy and the boundaries between the two are collapsed. The rigid resistance to anomalous experiences is challenged again and again, until they are accepted as a possibility.

Spirituality is the tension resulting from the continued and persistent presence of anomalous experiences—experiences that involve an individual interacting with transcendent forces, consciously or unconsciously, that exist, or appear to exist, beyond the self—within cultural spaces that have written off their existence. Within *Confessions*, this tension is primarily the result of the text’s two great ideologies competing—Enlightenment rationality and Calvinist fanaticism. Hogg critiques both and holds up the tension created by those multi-faceted critiques as the solution, not a resolution in a traditional sense, but a resolution that refuses resolution and remains caught between the two poles that shape Hogg’s text.

It is precisely this tension between poles into which novelistic theology provides an insight. Literary texts foster an exploration of clashes of ideology, and novelistic theology grants us access to the complexities of *Confessions* and a lens to use to interpret the tensions of the Enlightenment and Calvinism and work through the text's ideological tensions that result in spirituality. Hogg's text is steeped in these clashes and creates an ambiguous result. *Confessions* refuses to allow the rigors of Calvinist theology or Enlightenment rationality to restrain the ground that it covers. As *Confessions* wrestles with its competing ideologies, and the text offers up a state of uncertainty as the outcome, the tension creates an affect—a feeling, a mood, a particular state of experience—of wonder.

Cristina Bacchilega's work on wonder, while largely focused on fairy tales and folklore, crystalizes the duality and complexity of wonder. She writes that "wonder involves both awe and curiosity" (5). This dual nature is further explored in Marina Warner's notes on wonder that Bacchilega cites. Warner says, "Wonder has no opposite; it springs already doubled in itself, compounded of dread and desire at once, attraction and recoils, producing a thrill, the shudder of pleasure and of fear" (3). Warner's ideas here line up well with the complexity of spirituality that I am exploring—wonder is already doubled, mirroring in some way perhaps the two poles that create the conditions of its arrival. Wonder is the result of experiencing a state of spirituality, and it continues the complexity of the tensions that produce it.

Richard Holmes offers a related angle in his 2008 *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*. Holmes seems to push beyond the doubling of Warner and Bacchilega in a way that differently complements the narrative of *Confessions*. Indeed, Holmes suggests that "The old, rigid debates and boundaries—science versus religion, science versus the arts, sciences versus traditional ethics—are no longer enough. We should be impatient with them. We need a wider, more generous, more imaginative perspective"

(469). Holmes continues to talk of the ways in which science offers some of this broader vision, but *Confessions* argues for impatience with “old, rigid debates” in the way it weaves Enlightenment rationality and Calvinist zealotry together. *Confessions* demands that we leave these binaries behind and that we recognize that they are always wrapped up with one another—that the anomalous and the zealous will refuse to be distinct from the rational and that to think they are separate from one another is to miss the point. The supernatural and the uncanny are here, right now, in the midst of the natural and rational that seek to deny them.

Wonder draws us into uncertainty through the action it asks of us. For wonder is not only a condition we inhabit, but an act in which we engage—not only a noun, but also a verb. The Editor by the novel’s end “dare[s] not venture a judgment” but has been propelled to investigate thoroughly the claims of the strange manuscript that he has found. If the Editor did not wonder, then it is unlikely he would have found himself in a semi-permanent state of wonder—that is, of awe and curiosity, belief and skepticism, dread and desire all at once. This complex state is where *Confessions* leaves us—unsure what is truth and fiction, unable to parse the doubling that is present throughout Hogg’s text.

Hogg’s text is formally built on doubling; as noted above, it contains two narratives placed side by side that are irreconcilable, mimicking the doubling of wonder. Moreover, it destabilizes (by multiplying) the concept of authorship. As Scott Brewster argues, “the text is constructed from irreconcilable parts. First there is the dispute about authorship” (80). The text’s different narratives provide competing ideas about their authorship and the text was originally published as a found manuscript, not a work of fiction. Brewster continues, “then there are its narrative frames (the found manuscript, the editorial insertions, the refusal of the Ettrick Shepherd to participate as character/producer of narrative)” (80). The narrative frames of the text compound questions of authorship and present competing and contradictory accounts of the same events, presenting an

intentionally irreconcilable set of narratives. The fact of the irreconcilable parts of Hogg's text are as much a key to understanding what Hogg is doing as the content of those parts.

Crawford Gribben elaborates on this point, remarking that "The fact that the narrative is largely told twice indicates to the reader that the focus of the novel is not merely on the content of the story, and the significance of the differences between the narratives, but is also on the manner in which they are presented" (18). The manner of presentation echoes the ideological and epistemological frameworks that Hogg is critiquing—the Editor presents evidence that has been compiled, whereas Robert narrates and records his own subjective experience. The sequence of events remains largely unaltered between the two versions of the narrative, though the particulars differ strongly. The sense of wonder provoked depends on the irreconcilable nature of the two narratives. Hogg draws attention to where the narratives overlap and refuse to synthesize, and he amplifies the confusion resulting from the narrative doubling in the relationship of Robert and Gil-Martin.

Robert and Gil-Martin serve as doubles of one another, embodying the complexity of wonder. The moment that we are introduced to Gil-Martin highlights the origins of the doubling that will take place throughout the text. Robert reports, "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" (89). The overt supernatural here is made more potent by the text's endorsement of it and the fact that moments prior we have Robert experiencing the related spirituality of flying and leaping and renewal (88). There is a connection between the two events. At this moment in the text, the spiritual experience that Robert is having refuses to play to the binaries that we generally construct. Yet, Robert seems clearly to be experiencing a "spiritual

reality” that is “beyond the conscious self,” and as we will see is about to have “communion in one way or another” (Hardy 132). Robert is engaged in a move towards communion with Gil-Martin and is being compelled to participate. This scene lays the foundation for what happens to Robert throughout the text, where he is acted upon and unable or unwilling to react. The spiritual reality that transcends his own compels him toward Gil-Martin and the destruction that follows.

The sense of transcendent and anomalous spirituality builds in *Confessions* toward the sorts of “incredible experiences” that Wildman discusses (71). There is nothing inherently sinister or evil (yet) about what has happened, though it is eerie. Robert writes in the memoir that “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” (89). The sense of spirituality here foreshadows what is to come, almost behaving as prophecy. Robert writes that there was something that he felt, these “strange sensations,” and that they “thrilled through [his] whole frame at that impressive moment.” Moments prior Robert described his state of being as “renewed” and “buoyant with new life” and suddenly he is “thrilled through” with “strange sensations” that he could “never describe” (89). The entire spiritual landscape has shifted. Robert is still engaging with something beyond himself, but suddenly the pleasure that he was experiencing is replaced with apprehension. Robert is experiencing wonder “doubled in itself” (Warner 3), the mixture of dread and desire all at once. Robert feels these negative and warning emotions yet is drawn towards Gil-Martin and is unable to resist. The wonder that was initially present with Robert’s feelings of flight and leaping has shifted to a dread-wonder of “strange sensations” and feeling “fraught.” Because wonder is already doubled, the shift in those emotions does not concern Robert overmuch. He is simply caught up in the mingled dread and desire created by this spiritual encounter.

Once Robert sees Gil-Martin, the doubling of wonder that has been boiling underneath the surface of the text is made literal. Robert finally describes the stranger and gets to what is perhaps unsettling about the encounter: “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 from viewing my own features in a glass, the features too were the very same” (89). Here we are reminded of one of the central ideas of the text: doubles. As the narrative is doubled on itself, we also have Robert doubled on himself with Gil-Martin. They bleed into one another and inhabit a murky and inextricable place in the text, where it can never be definitively determined who is where and when.

Confessions's refusal to reconcile the narratives that it tells and the characters of Robert and Gil-Martin evokes the dread and desire of wonder by creating a spiritual sense of awe at the ambiguity of the text's resolution. As David Sandner describes the result, “Hogg's work proves ambiguous, presenting the fantastic with both skepticism and faith, as somehow both literary device and embodied belief” (81). This ambiguity stems from the double critique that Hogg is performing. Hogg is not only invested in undermining the authority of the supernatural narrative, he also wants to undermine and complicate the natural, realist, empirical narrative presented by the Editor. The modern and the superstitious are equal targets of Hogg's critique. The reader, like the Editor, cannot wholly dismiss the claims that the Sinner's memoir makes. The text believes and doubts everything that it presents, forcing the reader to acknowledge that neither narrative can be completely true, but both must contain at least some truth. Sandner pushes this claim further, suggesting that “The undermining of the Editor's position and the lack of any ‘final reconciliation’ leaves Hogg's work in the radical position of demanding that a supernatural reading coexist with a rational, psychological reading” (79). My reading describes this state of ambiguity as one of spirituality—giving a positive connotation and understanding that the specific nature of Hogg's text

brings the reader into contact with the transcendent. Hogg demands that the reader hold these two readings together. *Confessions* pushes the reader into the realm of spirituality, into the world where novelistic theology complicates the religious zealotry of Robert and undermines the Enlightenment rationality of the Editor, refusing the rigor of both ideologies. The reader is left with wonder, left wondering what to make of this text, pushed into the postsecular, unable to embrace full-fledged belief and equally unable to embrace wholehearted secularity.

The Two Great Categories of *Confessions*

In this state of wonder, Hogg's readers have debated the meaning of *Confessions* since its release. Peter Garside in his "Introduction" to the Stirling/South Carolina Edition of *Confessions* describes the text's journey from relative obscurity to initially being recognized as important for its theological commentary and relation to the Gothic novel before reaching its current position as a canonical Romantic text (xii). Crawford Gribben is somewhat dismayed with the theological treatment of the text through 2004, arguing that "Despite the wealth of this ecclesiastical context, scholars have generally failed to grapple with the theological system at the heart of Hogg's novel" (10). Gribben believes that scholars have generally misread the text as a critique of Scottish Calvinism and that the text clearly and intentionally misrepresents traditional Calvinist beliefs to make a broader and different point (11-14). For Gribben, the text contains at its center the "articulation of a robustly Calvinistic epistemology" (18). This Calvinistic epistemology for Gribben is rooted in the structure of the text and the ways in which *Confessions* repeatedly and continuously undermines itself and the very idea of language (18). Gribben ultimately reaches the conclusion that "Hogg's powerful novel harnesses Calvin's epistemology to emphasise the 'fallenness' of hermeneutics, the unreliability of interpretive conclusions" (21). Gribben is quite right:

Confessions undermines the ideals of the Enlightenment by means of the very Calvinist epistemology the novel is said to be satirizing.

The theological aspects of the novel challenge what scholars, after Jerome McGann, have called the “romantic ideology,” drawing on the title and thesis of McGann’s 1983 work *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. Ian Duncan articulates this clearly in “‘A great, a transcendent sinner’: Hogg and the Fables of Romanticism,” but in a slightly different direction. Duncan argues that “Hogg discloses the Calvinist infrastructure underlying the ‘Romantic ideology,’ for all its commitment to the autonomy of the imagination—since it seems only a select few may enjoy that autonomy” (4). Duncan’s argument convincingly suggests that Romanticism’s commitment to imagination, specifically the expression of that “autonomy of the imagination” in a few select, chosen poets, echoes the Calvinist teachings of justification. Duncan points to the Calvinist infrastructure present throughout *Confessions* but interprets that as a critique of the ideals of a Romantic ideology, rather than as a Calvinist epistemology triumphing over the Enlightenment rationality.

Duncan elsewhere, in his introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of *Confessions*, highlights something that links his earlier observations to Gribben’s: “The Editor’s Narrative and the sinner’s memoir are clenched in a struggle that tears the book in two” (x). Duncan draws attention here to the structure of the text, again, pointing to the text’s dual narrative. Here Duncan argues that these two narratives are “clenched in a struggle,” evoking imagery of them linked together and intertwined. The intertwined nature of the narratives partially explains why both Duncan and Gribben ground their analyses in privileging elements of one narrative over the other—Gribben is drawn to the Calvinist epistemology at the heart of *Confessions*, and Duncan notices the ways in which the text reflects that Calvinism onto the Enlightenment and Romantic ideals of the Editor’s Narrative, undermining them. Duncan rightly suggests that this struggle “tears

the book in two,” yet it is that gap that creates the condition of spirituality. The uncertainty created by the tension of these two narratives propels us toward something beyond ourselves.

Discussion of Hogg’s own religious views colors some of the scholarship surrounding *Confessions* and presents evidence that complicates the arguments advanced by Duncan and Gribben. Douglas Mack in his 1969 short article, “Hogg’s Religion and The Confessions of a Justified Sinner,” responds to earlier comments from John Carey in his then-recent edition of the Oxford World Classics *Confessions*. Carey persuasively describes the devout Presbyterianism of Hogg, drawing attention to the ways in which it seems unlikely that he would write a straightforward satire of Calvinism. Carey instead believes that *Confessions* is Bunyanesque in advancing a possible demonstration of how an individual could go to Hell. Mack graciously grants the first part of Carey’s claim, namely Hogg’s own affiliation with Presbyterianism, even while disputing the second. Mack firmly believes that Hogg uses his religious affiliation to inform the critique that he offers and also to guide the point of the critique home, which is not a direct repudiation of Calvinism generally, but rather a critique of a specific brand of Calvinist thought. Mack provides detail on some of the political and religious background of when Hogg was writing. Mack writes, “the Moderate Party had been in a dominant position in the kirk for well over half a century. The Moderates were of course products of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and were characterized by their concern for reason and tolerance. They instinctively distrusted anything with a flavor of fanaticism or ‘enthusiasm,’ ...they cannot be identified with Wringhim” (273). *Confessions* is heavily influenced by these contextual factors. Mack’s argument is compelling and suggests that for Hogg, what we see as Calvinism would have been something else—a sort of intentional religious extremism to demonstrate the flaws in certain lines of logic and help convert individuals to the moderate approach to religion that he embodied.

Mack, Duncan, Gribben, and others point to pieces of what is happening in Hogg's text, but miss the spirituality that I find as the result of this struggle. *Confessions* produces this experience of spirituality through a thorough understanding of Calvinism and the Enlightenment, particularly as Mack argues, the moderate and Scottish strain of Enlightenment thought, defined and explored by Richard Sher. Sher, in his 1985 monograph *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh*, lays out a basic framework for understanding the Scottish Enlightenment that clarifies the precision of Hogg's critique. Sher argues that the Scottish Enlightenment was characterized by "a faith in reason and science," "a distrust of religious enthusiasm and superstition," and "a commitment to religious tolerance and freedom of expression" (8). These first two traits are strongly present throughout the Editor's Narrative and the different ways in which the Editor embodies this sense of a moderate sensibility. The Editor is driven by an empirical search for facts and truth, rooted in a belief in reason. Throughout the Editor's Narrative, the "distrust of religious enthusiasm" is evident and manifests in a variety of ways, including ironic comments. While these principles are generally held by the figures that make up the Scottish Enlightenment, Sher also highlights that the movement was diverse and filled with competing schools of thought that interpreted and privileged these ideals in different ways depending on the circumstances. The implicit and sometimes explicit tensions of these differing interpretations color my reading of Hogg's text and the exploration of how these different strains of Scottish Enlightenment thought wrestle with themselves and with the zealous Calvinism of later sections.

One such strand is the belief of the moderate literati that Sher describes as "moral science." Sher elaborates on this point by summarizing a distinction made by Adam Ferguson: "'physical science' was defined as the knowledge of natural uniformities or matters of fact, 'moral science' as 'the knowledge of what is right and proper in the actions and characters of men'" (167).

Moral science was colored by the same belief in empiricism and rationality that undergirded the general thrust of the Enlightenment, but it dealt with matters of practical ethics, not merely with the establishment of facts. This particular strand of Scottish Enlightenment thought seems to be relevant to the discussion of Hogg given the subject matter of the text and the ways in which *Confessions* disrupts the moral science of the Scottish moderate literati or at least complicates it.

A closer examination of how some of the Editor's biases play out illuminates this impending conflict. The text opens and closes with the Editor's voice. The Editor introduces us to the characters and the story, and the Editor's biases are present throughout the narrative, demonstrating from near the beginning that he is as much of a character as any other. Early in the narrative, after the marriage of the Laird and Lady Dalcastle (Robert's mother), we gain insight into the Editor's perspective on religion. Speaking of the laird's unsympathetic response to his bride's extreme piety, he observes, "He [Dalcastle] had better have held his peace. There was such a torrent of profound divinity poured out upon him, that the laird became ashamed, both of himself and his new-made spouse, and wist not what to say: but the brandy helped him out" (7). There is a strong sense of the irony present in many of the Editor's interactions here with the phrase "torrent of profound divinity." The Editor reflects the suspicion of religious enthusiasm characteristic of the Moderate strains of the Scottish Enlightenment with the ironic employ of this phrase. The "torrent of profound divinity" poured out upon the laird comes in the form of glib, theologically-inflected chastisement from Lady Dalcastle. She is both a zealot and a nag. The Editor trivializes her words by ironizing their religious character and observing that the laird deals with them by drinking. In short, the laird shares the Editor's Enlightenment belief that religious enthusiasm and the supernatural should be met with suspicion and dismissal—effectively, the literary equivalent of an exhausted eye-roll.

Hogg uses the Editor and his commentary here to represent an aspect of secularization. The Editor's irony spreads to Lady Dalcastle, who is by far the more religious of the two, enraptured with the Reverend Wringhim and his doctrines of justification. Hogg opens the text with the Editor's ironizing comments about spirituality and religion to ease the reader into the postsecular critique of Enlightenment rationality *and* religious fanaticism that he will advance. The existence of spirituality is not necessarily in question here, but rather the Editor is ironizing the religious enthusiasm of Lady Dalcastle. Enthusiasm differs from the brand of spirituality the text advocates—one that insists on uncertainty in place of the certainty that generally animates such religious enthusiasm.

Robert opens his account with a striking framing of his own religious experiences, tinged with the supernatural. The lens that colors Robert's "Private Memoirs and Confessions" could not create a sharper contrast with the worldview that determines the Editor's Narrative. Robert begins with a description of his life, writing that "My life has been a life of trouble and turmoil; of change and vicissitude; of anger and exultation; of sorrow and of vengeance. My sorrows have all been for a slighted gospel, and my vengeance has been wreaked on its adversaries" (75). The religious zealotry that frames this entire narrative is present from the very beginning—even found in the over-the-top biblical register that Robert prefers to use throughout the memoir—and as Robert continues, it becomes only more apparent where he stands. He writes, "Therefore, in the midst of heaven I will sit down and write: I will let the wicked of this world know what I have done in the faith of the promises, and justification by grace, that they may read and tremble, and bless their gods of silver and of gold, that the minister of heaven was removed from their sphere before their blood was mingled with their sacrifice" (75). Where the Editor immediately distances himself from a belief in any sort of supernatural power, Robert grounds his entire memoir in the reality of such experiences. Robert is writing "in the midst of heaven," and his "subjective experience of

secularity” lacks the secular (Coleman 521). Heaven is present for Robert and is a sign of the divine assent to his actions. Robert’s certainty is particularly shocking because we know some of the actions that he has committed “in the faith of the promises, and justification by grace,” and they are difficult to swallow as of divine origin.

The irony that the Editor uses towards religion prompts us to dismiss the spiritual experiences to which Robert testifies in his opening paragraph. Even from the opening section, the competing views of the world and of the events that take place in it are at odds. The seeds of where Hogg will take us are being planted. The Editor’s Enlightenment rationality is being challenged—perhaps not successfully at this stage, but emphatically, so there is clear clash between the experiences that are being described. David Sandner argues that “The fabulous past in Hogg’s work continues to haunt and disrupt the present, questioning the integrity of modern subjectivity and reality as built on a skeptical rejection of the supernatural” (74). Sandner’s argument buys into the very Enlightenment narrative that Hogg’s text critiques. Rather than the past haunting and disrupting the present, the Editor’s Narrative and the Sinner’s Memoir clash because the supernatural proves to be an inextricable part of the *present* itself. The Editor believes himself to be setting up a rational and empirical history, but Robert’s memoirs demonstrate the subjectivity inherent in the Editor’s allegedly objective and empirical work. As we move through the Sinner’s Memoir we are confronted repeatedly with ways in which the supernatural is a part of the present that refuses to be completely disproven. Throughout *Confessions*, the past does not haunt the present per se, but the past *is* present and cannot be ignored. Indeed, as Adrian Hunter argues in his introduction to the Broadview edition of *Confessions*, “In its peculiar structure, the *Confessions* shows an awareness of history as always an imaginative expression or interpretation of events” (8). Understanding history as “imaginative expression” and always an “interpretation of events” lays the groundwork for how the text plays with these ideas. Both the Editor and Robert

are presented as creating and interpreting events in ways that align with their worldviews and according to what Coleman describes as the “subjective experience of secularity” (521). The novel is built on competing versions of history and the intentional clash of those competing visions.

Robert’s religiosity is on full display later, when after years of uncertainty, the Reverend reveals that he, Robert, is indeed among the justified. Robert has spent years devoted to the extreme Calvinist teachings of his adoptive father the Reverend Wringhim but has spent the entirety of that time unsure about the fate of his own soul. He describes the elation that he feels thus:

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. ‘All the powers of darkness,’ added he, ‘shall never be able to pluck you again out of your Redeemer’s hand. And now, my son, be strong and stedfast in the truth.’ [88]

Robert now is counted among the faithful, the saved. Thanks to irresistible grace—a Calvinist doctrine that God’s grace will inevitably cause the elect He has chosen to come unto Him—there is nothing that he or another can do to separate him from the divine. Robert has finally found the home that he has been seeking; it has been confirmed that he belongs and that he, along with his mother and spiritual father (Reverend Wringhim), is among the justified. After being deserted by the laird and more or less disowned, he has cemented his relationship with his elected family and, most importantly, with God. Robert then rejoices and runs fully to embrace the religious experience that he is having. He describes that religious experience as follows:

I wept for joy to be thus assured of my freedom from all sin, and of the impossibility of my ever again falling away from my new state. I bounded away into the fields and the woods, to pour out my spirit in prayer before the Almighty for his kindness to me: my whole frame

seemed to be renewed; every nerve was buoyant with new life; I felt as if I could have flown in the air, or leaped over the tops of the trees. [88]

The spirituality present here contrasts starkly with the spirituality Robert demonstrates at the opening of his memoirs, though both align with Wildman's typology of ultimacy and anomalous experiences. Robert's language is positive and open, as he says his frame is "renewed" and his nerves "buoyant with new life," fitting this experience within Wildman's ultimacy category. He talks about flying and leaping. Contrast these light and elevated images with the language that Robert uses to open his memoir, talking about "the wicked of this world" and how they will "read and tremble," thanking their gods that he was "removed from their sphere before their blood was mingled with their sacrifice" (75). This contrast highlights the different ways that spirituality can manifest itself. Robert's experience of secularity encompasses these opposite representations of spirituality, both highlighting contrasting ideals to the Editor's Enlightenment rationality. As the reader moves through the memoir, the Enlightenment rationality ideology is broken down by the continued clash with the religious zealotry of Robert.

The Editor seems to undergo something of a crisis of faith in the Moderate philosophy found in the Scottish Enlightenment that he carefully constructs and uses throughout the opening of the text. Perhaps some of this is due to George's death and the way in which it defies the moral science that marked the moderate religious thought of the Scottish Enlightenment. Adam Smith exemplifies this belief in his 1759 work "Of the influence and authority of the general Rules of Morality, and that they are justly regarded as the Laws of the Deity." Smith argues that "every virtue naturally meets with its proper reward, with the recompense which is most fit to encourage and promote it; and this too so surely that it requires a very extraordinary concurrence of circumstances entirely to disappoint it" (293). George is presented throughout the Editor's Narrative as an upstanding and innocent—and thoroughly rational—person. According to Smith's ideas, George

should have met with great rewards, not the grisly and tragic death that was his fate. Smith does allow for “a very extraordinary concurrence of circumstances” to thwart this natural awarding of blessings on the morally upright, but his views do not comprehend supernatural circumstances such as those that mar George’s life in Hogg’s text. The Editor wrestles with George’s fate, and its refusal to reconcile with the moral science of his Enlightenment ideology brings him to a point of crisis. By the time we reach the end of the novel, after reading the entire Editor’s Narrative and the titular sinner’s own confession, we arrive at an epilogue of sorts from the Editor. Here, the editor claims that he “dare not venture a judgment” on precisely how George Colwan dies (184).

The Editor’s doubt surrounding the death of Colwan reflects Scottish Enlightenment suspicion of miracles and the supernatural generally, as articulated memorably in David Hume’s 1748 work “Of Miracles.” Hume argues that “there is no testimony for any, even those which have not been expressly detected, that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses; so that not only the miracle destroys the credit of testimony, but the testimony destroys itself” (309). Hume’s argument is based in the belief that empirical evidence is of primary importance and that a testimony of a miracle is nothing more than one individual’s experience presented as a refutation of your own lived experience. Essentially, Hume argues that if you had never observed miracles in the culmination of your lived experiences, any testimony of a miracle is thus in conflict with the meaning of your experience, regardless of if you were present for the particular event in question or not. In this way, the Editor never experienced the miraculous directly, but read the testimony of someone that did, which contradicts the Editor’s own lived experience and gathered empirical evidence, so the Editor must reject the miraculous claim because empiricism demands it.

The Editor then seems to reject all of the accounts and reach a state of radical doubt and suspicion, writing, “I think it *may be* possible that [Wringhim] had some hand in the death of his brother, and yet I am disposed greatly to doubt it” (188), partially because to believe it requires the

rejection of lived experience. The Editor's state of doubt mimics the experience of the reader of *Confessions*. Readers, and the Editor, are brought to this state of radical doubt in part by a wrestle with what George Campbell articulates in his 1762 challenge to Hume's argument on miracles and how his ideas manifest in *Confessions*: "Miracles are capable of proof from testimony, and Religious Miracles are not less capable of this evidence than others" (319). Campbell attacks Hume's underlying assumptions, and his critique boils down to two points: experience always creates general conclusions, and testimony demands particular conclusions (327). Campbell argues that testimony is never about general beliefs, but about particular circumstances. This tension with Hume is played out in the Editor's large dismissal of supernatural circumstances, yet refusal to outright deny them by the end of the text. The Editor finds the supernatural generally worthy of suspicion, yet the tension of empiricism brings him to the point where he must find a new ideology. The reader is confronted with this same collection of complexities exemplified by the case of the death of George Colwan, which all build on and intensify and intertwine with one another. The critique Hogg is writing results in a somewhat ambiguous resolution that resides in the tension between these two ideologies and draws our attention to the ways in which these ideologies conflict and even overlap. The spirituality the text propels the reader into and its accompanying affect of wonder exemplify a postsecular approach to reconciling these and similar tensions in other circumstances.

Confessions in the Age of the Postsecular

As Wilkes has put it, the reader is now "fully secular and fully religious" (450), or we could say postsecular. This state of postsecularity calls for inhabiting the world differently than we have previously. *Confessions* demands that we hold the irreconcilable worlds of secularity and religiosity together at once, and therefore pushes the reader into spirituality. Adrian Hunter adds a different

dimension to this call to inhabit the postsecular. He writes, “Above all else, the *Confessions* demands that we be generous readers of history, science, faith, and the mind. For such readers as we are, this is a book of many mysteries” (39). For Hunter, the text requires an extensive generosity of readership that echoes Branch’s calls to read “one’s narrative, belief, language, relation, and freedom into and not out of” texts (15). This generosity of reading calls us to pay attention to the ways in which literature reinforces, undermines, and complicates a variety of theological, or ideological, positions and how we situate ourselves in relation to those positions.

The destabilization that results demands an answer, a theology of reading, of sorts. Gribben argues that “Hogg’s narratives destabilise the processes of reading, and insist that we read by faith, not by sight” (21). Yet, Hogg’s destabilization equally erodes the accuracy of reading purely by faith, as Robert’s trajectory throughout *Confessions* attests. Evidence is accumulated throughout the novel—Robert’s memoir, face-to-face meetings with witnesses, and culminating with the unearthing of the corpse in the climax. The accumulation of evidence challenges notions of what evidence is reliable and what should be dismissed, further destabilizing the process of reading. Indeed, it seems that Hogg’s narrative insists that we read by faith *and* read by sight. Indeed, this is the message of the Editor’s eventual crisis of faith.

By the end of the *Confessions*, the Editor has not been fully converted to the spiritual and supernatural worldview that Robert presents, but seems shaken by it and unable to condemn it as fantasy. The Editor writes, “With regard to the work itself, I dare not venture a judgment, for I do not understand it. I believe no person, man or woman, will ever peruse it with the same attention that I have done, and yet I confess that I do not comprehend the writer’s drift. It is certainly impossible that these scenes could ever have occurred, that he describes as having himself transacted” (188). The Editor refuses a final position and is shaken by what has happened—unable to completely dismiss Robert as mad, given the evidence that supports his account and other

elements that he cannot reconcile. There's a lack of commitment to his previous ironizing of religious enthusiasm that opens the text—gone are links between “torrents of profound divinity” and female beratement. The Editor tries to maintain the impossibility of the record, but also admits his own inability to comprehend it, paving the way for a postsecular reconciliation of what has passed. There is no way to reconcile the narrative elements of the Editor's Narrative and the Sinner's Memoir, but more importantly, the form of the text moves the reader to an epistemic humility that allows for the existence of the spiritual, or at least the refusal to outright deny it—to see and read by faith and by sight. The reader, along with the Editor, is initially largely unaware of the ways that their biases play into the text, but as the text progresses and the Sinner's Memoir is presented, doubt begins to creep in as the narratives refuse to give way to one another.

The text is inherently and intentionally embroiled in contradictions. Returning to Coleman's thoughts on the intersections of spirituality and literature is useful here: “The contradictory spiritual ideas coiled within literary texts mean that literary scholarship can parse the struggles and ironies of spirituality as other forms of knowledge production cannot” (525). The structure of *Confessions* highlights “contradictory spiritual ideas coiled within” itself as it doubles back on narrative moments with slight differences or sharp ones. The ways in which the Scottish Enlightenment overlays a sense of rationality on top of religion and the supernatural, as we explored with the discussion of moderate religion, also illustrate some of the contradictory ideas coiled within *Confessions*. Literary studies is able to pay attention to these moments and work to draw attention to the coils of ideas and what effect (and affect) is created by such coils. It is only in the embrace of the ambiguity with which *Confessions* leaves us that the resulting spirituality and wonder are found.

The spirituality of *Confessions* is complicated. It embraces Warner's exploration of how fear and pleasure are bound together within the duality of wonder, as wonder is “compounded of

dread and desire at once, attraction and recoils, producing a thrill, the shudder of pleasure and of fear” (3). The ambiguity that results from the clash of the Editor’s steadfast belief in Enlightenment rationality and Robert’s firm conviction in the reality of being justified allows the reader to explore new worlds. The ambiguity and uncertainty of spirituality are essential to understanding what happens throughout *Confessions* and the result—both the Editor and Robert are undone by their certainty. Robert’s certainty that he is one of the justified immediately precedes his joining with Gil-Martin and the beginnings of his tragic downfall. The Editor’s sense of certainty is challenged and eroded by his inability to rationally explain the final events of the text and the ways in which Robert’s memoir cannot be reconciled with the other information that he discovered and what he once believed were the rules that govern the universe. Hogg presents us with the impossibility of the rational and the religious and demands that we hold that impossibility together in our minds. Hogg presents an opportunity to complicate the religious and secular binary—the spiritual. *Confessions* presents a way to reconcile the tensions of the religious and the secular, or rather a way to live in those tensions.

The Editor may “dare not venture a judgment” on this wild, strange, unruly text, but I will. It is a bold, challenging text that calls the reader to be “fully secular and fully religious” and to read by faith and by sight. *Confessions* is filled with tensions and paradoxes and contradictions. Hogg’s text embodies novelistic theology as it refuses to reconcile these tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions and instead demands that the tension and the uncertainty—the sense of spirituality and wonder—is where we should reside. Reading *Confessions* as a fiction of spirituality or fiction of wonder highlights these tensions and the lack of resolution that they create. As we read *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* in this way, we find ourselves reevaluating interpretations of Hogg that have come before, which opens up new avenues for future scholarship to explore Hogg’s other works that deal with similar themes as *Confessions*. We reject as

oversimplified the various competing interpretations of the text as critiquing either Enlightenment rationality or Calvinist zealotry. We also perceive ways to bridge psychoanalytic approaches of the novel with the frame of spirituality—blending social science and neuroscience approaches to spirituality, exemplified by Wesley Wildman’s research, opens up interpretations that ground the elements of these psychoanalytic approaches in spirituality. Indeed, reading *Confessions* as a fiction of spirituality or a fiction of wonder provides a framework for reading many texts, literary or otherwise, that bring the contradictory ideologies of secularity and religion into tension with one another. Spirituality, as illustrated throughout *Confessions*, challenges narratives of secularity and religion and provides a postsecular way forward for our modern world that experiences iterations of the same tensions that animate Hogg’s profound work.

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