Review Essay: The Whole Hogg

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Volumes reviewed:


GILLIAN HUGHES, ed., Altrive Tales: Collected among the Peasantry of Scotland and from Foreign Adventures by the Ettrick Shepherd, with illustrations by George Cruikshank. Vol. 13 (2003), pp. 293, cloth, $98.00.


James Hogg never suffered from want of admirers, even when he had only one. Perhaps he saw himself with few alternatives to “what an Edinburgh editor styles my good-natured egotism, which is sometimes anything but that” (Altrive Tales 11). His public persona, after all, had been out of his own control from the moment his publishers had adroitly marketed him in the preface to his best-known poem: “The Queen’s Wake is really and truly the production of James Hogg, a common Shepherd, bred among the mountains of Ettrick Forest, who went to service when only seven years of age; and since that period has never received any education whatever” (Queen’s Wake 394).

No matter how thick skinned, though, the autodidact “Ettrick Shepherd” might have found it harder to bear the oblivion that followed derision. In very short order after his death in 1835 (he was born in 1770), Hogg’s best-known work was butchered and bowdlerized, and much of his prose and verse simply vanished from print altogether.
That disappearance is far harder to account for than the outright condemnation, the snobbery and snubbing that thick-skinned Hogg took in his own lifetime. It is easy to imagine—and to infer from the jibes and jabs in *Noctes Ambrosianae*—the resentment and irritation Hogg managed to provoke even among those he considered his closest friends. Stories about a drunken pass at friend and patron Walter Scott’s wife—to cite one of the milder of the accusations—hint at the stormy relations with social betters who sometimes struck Hogg as aesthetic inferiors.

But how, even after wholesale Victorian pruning and prettifying, can readers have missed Hogg’s great fictive accomplishment, his brilliance at placing rival views of the world together without the author’s or the reader’s having to choose between them? Hogg produced texts with central mysteries that seem to court a variety of explanations—Satanic possession, individual madness, collective delusion, and the distorting lens of history might all seem to provide the answer—but that finally resist the triumph of any one explanatory schema over its alternatives. Hogg was both the inventor and prime nineteenth-century practitioner of what could be called (on the model of polyglossia) *polydoxy*, which stages the intersection of profoundly disjunctive belief systems within a single piece of fiction.

**Thanks Be to Gide**

The nature of Hogg’s accomplishment is now returning to view, thanks to the tremendous work that has gone into the Stirling/South Carolina edition of James Hogg, under the stewardship of Douglas S. Mack and Gillian Hughes and buttressed by the editorial contributions of roughly a score of other scholars—Ian Duncan, Hans De Groot, P. D. Garside, Janette Currie, Suzanne Gilbert, and Murray Pittock prominent among them. The recent publication of *The Mountain Bard*, *The Forest Minstrel*, and *Highland Journeys* brings this edition to twenty-two volumes, with another dozen or more projected. Even *Novel* readers committed exclusively to fiction now have a comfortable armful of books to explore, with an A-list that includes *Altrive Tales* and *Winter Evening Tales*. A handful of remarkable stories—such as “Mr. Adamson of Laverhope,” from *The Shepherd’s Calendar* (1829), “An Old Soldier’s Tale,” “Dreadful Story of MacPherson,” and “A Singular Dream,” from *Winter Evening Tales* (1820), and “The Pongos,” from *Altrive Tales* (1832)—should begin filling syllabi and reading lists in years to come.

The Hogg revival actually began, though, with Andre Gide’s glowing 1947 introduction to an unexpurgated edition of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Hogg’s 1824 masterwork. *Confessions* is the story of Robert Wringhim’s relationship to a mysterious “friend” who is either the product of his mental illness or an avatar of the Devil; it is replete not just with theological subtleties and moments of sublime terror but also with Edinburgh science’s latest insights about optical illusions.

To Gide, the novel brilliantly transforms diabolic power into an extension of “psychological nature . . . the exteriorized development of our own desires, of our pride, of our most secret thoughts.” In claiming Hogg as predecessor for the modern psychological novel, Gide made him appealing to an audience trained by Freud to read every conflict of belief or of perception as the expression of a quirk
or disorder in individual perception. However, Gide underestimates the depth of Hogg’s commitment to formal transgression, downplaying Hogg’s insertion of a disagreeable rustic named James Hogg at the novel’s end and ignoring the fact that the novel quotes extensively from a letter about a mysterious grave site that Hogg himself had published in Blackwood’s some months earlier. And Gide breezes right through the novel’s manifest interest in theology, its overt satire of the Calvinist doctrine of assured grace that deludes Wringhim into thinking his actions are exempt from this-worldly judgment. Without such contexts, Gide’s Hogg is just a half-baked John Barth, a premature postmodernist whose fiction is less memorable than, well, Andre Gide’s.

This new edition of Hogg restores such contexts in vivid detail, enabling not just Confessions but a host of other works to fly their true colors as fictional experiments that are as much a part of their time as were Laurence Sterne’s or Miguel de Cervantes’s. Rather than being buried by footnotes and textual notes, the novels and stories in the Stirling/South Carolina edition actually emerge stronger, and stranger, than ever.

For too long, Hogg has been like Levy’s rye bread: you don’t have to be Scottish to love Hogg . . . but it helps. No longer. It is one of the great virtues of this new edition of Hogg’s varied corpus that one need not be deeply versed in the Scottish folktale tradition or the Edinburgh scene to recognize Hogg’s originality. Since 1990, the annual journal Studies in Hogg and His World, published by the James Hogg Society, has trod new ground, and this collected edition reflects sustained and scrupulous attention—by Susan Manning, Nigel Leask, Ian Duncan, Penny Fielding, Robert Crawford, and others—to the role of Edinburgh’s intellectual scene in the swerve (or, some would say, sea change) from Scottish Enlightenment to Romanticism full blown.

There is also a vital added benefit to the “thick description” of the Scottish scene that characterizes the Stirling/South Carolina edition. This edition’s nuanced account of all the various divisions that permeate the Scottish realm of letters in the early nineteenth century sets the stage perfectly for Hogg’s experiments in undecidability. He grew up with these conundrums: if Hogg is to be believed, his own mother, Margaret Laidlaw, rebuked Scott for transcribing her ballad performance, saying “ye hae broken the charm now, an’ they’ll never be sung mair” (Anecdotes of Scott 38). And the stark battle lines that, during the heyday of the Edinburgh literary scene, characterized journal divisions, political ones, even questions of linguistic fidelity to the Scots dialect may well have been what taught Hogg to conceptualize fiction as a site where profoundly divergent worldviews are suspended next to one another.

Polydoxy

This polydoxy sets Hogg apart from his peers—even if, like many other innovations, that polydoxy’s success is partly evidenced by its recurrence in later ages. Hogg’s commitment to linguistic variety doesn’t primarily consist of the sorts of nuanced sociological variations that Bakhtin charted in Dostoyevsky. In Hogg’s fiction, divergence in belief does not solely or inevitably occur at the level of speech.
itself but may also be found at the level of incident, plot, character, or motive—in
the question of what makes a given occurrence into a “story” at all. In “An Old
Soldier’s Tale,” rival interpretive communities (Highland rebels and Lowland loy-
alists to the king) can occupy the same space without acknowledging one another’s
existence—or they can decide to duel about what sorts of tales will survive from a
particular period of war. And a fascinating tale from the imperial periphery, “The
Pongos: A Letter from Southern Africa,” features Scots settlers, Native African
“Kousies,” and a kidnapping tribe of “orang-outangs” all struggling to bring about
their own version of the family romance: Kousies try to buy wives; orangutans
kidnap humans to be their chiefs; but Scots settlers use guns to restore children
and women to a nuclear family unit—a unit that can then pack up and leave South
Africa for Sydney.

It is understandable that Gide took the multiplication of possible interpretive
frameworks in Hogg as a forerunner of the split between subjective and objective
frameworks for cognition in works such as Dostoyevsky’s “The Double” or Henry
James’s “In the Cage.” But to reduce the rival narrative authority claims in Hogg
to a simple binary between a deluded individual and his environs is to under-
estimate the thoroughgoing suspension of belief that Hogg demands. There can,
for example, be no single reliable footing for the various occurrences that doom
Wringhim in Confessions. No simple explanation can locate Wringhim’s “friend”
in his own imagination (other characters witness his actions too) or in the diabolic
realm (unless a seemingly omnipotent Devil sometimes requires a mentally dis-
eased individual to wreak his will).

The same impossibility of resolving the shared ground on which a story rests
holds true for even some of the shortest of Hogg’s tales and sketches. In “An Old
Soldier’s Tale,” for instance, a Lowland Scots soldier who claims to have done great
duty for the English forces at Culloden is roundly outsung, “drowned,” and “over-
powered” (Winter Evening Tales 99) by a Jacobite loyalist who gives him hospi-
tality for the night. Yet when his hostess (modeled on Hogg’s mother) has outsung
him, as compensation for his defeat she lets him embark on a gory and largely
incredible tale: how he was besieged, bungled his use of civilian hostages, and
then used a heroic handcuffed backflip to throttle his would-be executioner and
win the admiration of his enemies. And that plot, convoluted as it may sound, is
far easier to follow than the stylistic and linguistic gyrations of the story itself,
which features Lowland Scots, Highlanders speaking garbled English, Lowland-
ers speaking garbled Scots Gaelic, and a not-quite translation of diverse Scottish
speech into “proper” English.

In this story and others, Highland and Lowland Scots fail (and pretend to fail,
and fail to pretend, and even fail to pretend to fail) to understand one another’s
words. Meanwhile, bemused or smugly obtuse outsiders, English tourists or
stuffed shirts, keep popping up, presenting themselves as authoritative voices
explaining rural phenomena that natives have long given up on understanding.
So it comes about that paranormal and dryly scientific accounts of lightning strikes
may coexist and that a community’s shared understanding of why a given event
occurred may be regarded by a narrator (who is also endowed with his or her
own set of foibles) as both impossible and irrefutable. One result of this appall-
ing and yet appealing congeries of belief is that demonic intervention is often the only explanation left standing that seems to cover all the facts. Accordingly, such explanations are often offered to the reader with a shrug of disbelief, because the most reasonable interlocutors within the stories are dissatisfied with their veracity but can find no alternative ground from which to deny them. A line describing the Devil’s presence at the death by lightning of "Mr. Adamson of Laverhope"—"It was asserted and pretended to have been proved" (Shepherd’s Calendar 54)—might be taken as the key to all Hogg’s mythologies. The “assertion” and the “pretended proof” never differ greatly from one another because for Hogg everything resolves to the level of narrative: if a convincing song, ballad, or story cannot be made out of an event, its reality is questionable.

Conclusions in Which Nothing Is Concluded

The solution to this perpetual war of interpretations within Hogg’s fiction might seem to be violence, which pervades his stories. After all, a death by lightning or the drowning of sheep by a flash flood, or even a swordfight ending in death, would seem to remove all uncertainty. Yet far from doing so, each violent blow, each fire, each death only generates more images, and more stories.

Consider the reiteration of violence in “Mr. Adamson of Laverhope,” which requires that the story not end with Adamson’s death by lightning but instead detour fifty-one years forward to another death by lightning, that of Adam Copland of Minnigess. Though this second death occupies only about a twentieth of the story as a whole, the narrator’s explanation for that second death—no moral element at all, simply a common man in the wrong place at the wrong time, when electrical fire seemingly came out of the ground itself—initially appears to be definitive and objective, thus undermining the suggestion that it was the Devil who used lightning to slay Mr. Adamson. But that calm and linguistically neutral (even drab) account is itself immediately undermined in a variety of subtle ways. The one witness present cannot remember the actual moment of strike; even the narrative cannot provide the words (some sort of moral exhortation) to be found on Copland’s tomb; and so on.

Why would Hogg attach this odd demi-quaver of a tale to the vivid account of how Adamson’s sins against his neighbors—recollected and mustered with crystal clarity seventy years after the death occurred—brought about his doom? He is striving, I think, for a sort of epistemological degree zero, where various possible explanations hang in equipoise with one another. Thus this story, like other such balancing acts as “An Old Soldier’s Tale,” ends with some seemingly unrelated detail (the unrecollected epitaph in one case, a poem about dinner in the other) that serves to embed the entire tale within in a universe where stories, poems, and inscriptions, each equally unlikely, are forced to compete for the same scarce conversational space.

Such turns toward irrelevancies mean that even the events, persons, causes, and effects involved in any story—i.e., the very components that allow it to appear to be a story at all—are perpetually at issue within Hogg’s fiction. It is often unclear why a given piece of prose ends where it does—whether the last few pages were
an afterthought, the motive for the whole piece, or simply the gateway to another tale told from a different perspective: even such a seemingly self-contained tale as “The Pongos” ends with the writer’s plea that the story be published everywhere but in Sydney. The sort of in media res that Hogg pursues, rather than gesturing at Auerbachian epic totality, lends to his stories the feel of deliberate fragments, made to be appreciated precisely for their fractured, and fractal, quality. One of Friedrich Schlegel’s “Athenaeum Fragments” (1798) may be relevant: “Many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many modern works are fragments as soon as they are written” (fragment 24, 164).

Given the remarkable and idiosyncratic character of Hogg’s fiction, how are we to make sense of his 175-year absence from the literary canon? It is true that the turn from Romanticism’s prose experiments toward the Victorian novel’s keystone status as the genre for social mimesis may explain some of Hogg’s decline—just as his increasing visibility as a crucial part of British literary history nowadays is partly due to the postmodern turn toward experiments with multiple perspectives on the never fully agreed-upon “Real.” Still, something quite vital seemingly died out in mainstream British fiction when Hogg’s commitment to a mad and maddening diversity of viewpoints fell by the wayside. What difference might a Hogg unmodified have made to the novels of the twentieth century?

There is nothing more idle than speculation about books that did not get written. Yet one accomplishment of this splendid act of recovery is that it sparks reflections about all the other shepherds, factory hands, seamstresses, and colonial subjects who set out with ambitions similar to Hogg’s. “The holes of oblivion do not exist. . . . One man will always be left alive to tell the story,” writes Hannah Arendt, and it is pretty to think so (232–33). But the surprising resurrection of Hogg’s work also brings thoughts of all those other mute inglorious Hoggs, unresurrected and unmourned.

Works Cited

