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Borderline Experience

Madness, Mimicry and Scottish Gothic

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The madness of Scottish Gothic – it’s all the same difference. When you read Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, you can’t help seeing double. The haunting footfalls of this text of shadows can be heard behind other recent Scottish narratives that encounter the familiar face of an uncanny, second self. This essay will draw on Julia Kristeva’s concept of ‘borderline’ experience, a feature of psychotic discourse, to examine the representation of madness, split personality and sociopathic behaviour in Hogg and in one contemporary, muted form of Scottish Gothic, John Burnside’s *The Locust Room* (2001). For Kristeva, the borderline patient is split between the positions of actor and spectator, ‘a manipulator of seeming, a seducer who uses masks which remain more or less foreign to him’ and ‘a commentator, a theoretician, a commander of signs’.¹ Just as the borderline case shifts between the roles of actor and ‘impresario’, so the analyst must mimic, or inhabit, borderline experience, oscillating between detachment and involvement. The uncertain task for the analyst is ‘to propose theoretical fictions in order to . . . push back the frontiers of ghosts, visions, experiences of possession’.² For Kristeva, this work of fiction ‘relieves’ a metalanguage haunted by its counterpart, psychosis, which speaks a language that knows no outside. By imitating the borderline patient’s ‘latently aesthetic discourse’, the analyst/ writer/ reader can ‘play’ a role at the edge of madness without lapsing into the abyss.³ As John Lechte observes: ‘Writing . . . brings to the fore the very tenuousness of borderline subjectivity. For writing is simultaneously a gesture which objectifies and the act of an actor’.⁴ Kristeva’s articulation of borderline experience has suggestive and challenging implications for an understanding of literature that ‘presents’ us with madness, delusion or psychopathological disorder. We should look at borderline discourse neither as a clinical definition, nor a therapeutic response to cases of ‘possession’. Rather, it is a conceptual category that enables us to read how Gothic stages madness from the inside and the outside, in terms of a split between metalanguage and performance, conviction and uncertainty, remoteness and proximity.

Many of the main characteristics of borderline experience – a concern with authenticity and the proper name, fractured temporality and truth and delusion – are clearly evocative of Hogg's *Private Memoirs*. At every level, Hogg's text is riven by questions concerning legitimacy, coherence, and the distinctions between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the self. Like its main protagonist, the text is constructed from irreconcilable parts. First there is the dispute about authorship; 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); then there is Hogg's position in the Scottish literary establishment. As Ian Duncan points out, Hogg understood himself emerging from pre-modern, largely pre-literate rural folk culture, its authentic primitivism distinct from a politically aware rural working class of south-west Scotland associated with Burns. Hogg's concern with delirium, paranoia and obsession expresses his critical engagement with post-Enlightenment modernity and with rural traditions, his sense of being inside and outside both of these temporalities.⁵ For Hogg, psychopathology and modernity are interlinked. As such, *The Private Memoirs* charts an unsettled state in several senses. Robert Wringhim's theological fixation is 'removed from a living cultural tradition, which provokes his disastrous psychological splitting', and the novel narrates 'the futility of "union" as a state of collective or psychic being'.⁶ Set immediately prior to the Act of Union (1707), Hogg produces a borderline narrative of a Scotland that will not join, a union that will not quite take. As Duncan observes, the romance desire in Scottish Gothic 'evokes . . . demonic forces expelled from the modern order of nature, whose return threatens a reverse colonisation – rendering the present alien, unnatural, fatal, exposing its metaphysical emptiness'.⁷ It is upon this emptiness that I want to focus.

In a double sense, *The Private Memoirs* is possessed of the name: it involves not only legal, familial and sexual usurpation, but also demonic possession. The novel yearns for and yet maintains no faith in the name. We might think of the duplication of names across generations, and all the questions of legal entitlements this raises: a succession of George Colwans inherit the Dalcastle estate, yet it is Robert Wringhim, the namesake of his guardian/father Rev. Wringhim, who becomes the dubiously legitimate Laird. Lady Dalcastle refuses her marital name, and rejects her first born son George; George is abjected, a child of no maternal origin, but one who is nevertheless a legitimate heir. Rev. Wringhim and Lady Dalcastle are both 'children of adoption' – a phrase that suggests not only their elect status but also an orphaned state that is visited upon their next generation. Robert Wringhim is granted an official title, but for him this is a name that merely estranges and leaves him desolate. Kristeva's remarks on the relation of abjection to the borderline experience prove peculiarly apposite to Wringhim's predicament: 'the borderline patient, even though he may be a fortified castle, is nevertheless an empty castle'.⁸ We might term Wringhim an empty (Dal)castle. Though bearing the name of – perhaps – his biological father, Robert is denied a 'proper' paternal name, despite being subject to the Law. The Proper Name is a mark of plenitude and absence, a thing of nothing that 'opens up a cascade of signifieds': it constitutes the scar in

borderline discourse between unnameable meaning and the empty signifier.⁹ For Lacan, it is only when the subject realises that the *Nom-du-Père* is the *non-du-père*, a mirage, and acknowledges this split between the empty signifier and the cascade of signifieds, that there can be awareness of how he or she is situated in relation to the Symbolic Order. In contrast, psychosis constitutes the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father: there is an absolute faith in the sign, even if this faith rests on a hollow centre.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, then, Gil-Martin withholds his name and does not acknowledge his 'parent'.¹¹

As Kristeva observes, the sacred, like the proper name, is 'constructed over a void': this is a terrifying, abyssal but ineluctable possibility for a creed that valorises self-possession and absolute conviction.¹² The antinomianism that the Rev. Wringhim preaches constitutes a 'closed' system, one that absents the Elect from moral law. Yet this system leads Robert to damnation, since he cannot stand outside it and can only fulfil its remorseless logic. Predestination becomes the counterpart of madness. Gil-Martin first appears to Robert when he has been declared Elect. Gil-Martin is 'cast' in Robert's way: a verb with theatrical associations, but which also suggests a lure, a mould, a twist of the eye. Gil-Martin's sideways glances always implicate the observer in a scene of criminality or evil. No one stands outside his influence, and everyone accepts his role as dissembler, demon familiar, a figure of magnetic attraction and insidious sympathy. One hardly needs to recount the multiple instances of doubling in the novel to show how Gil-Martin functions as the ghost in Wringhim's machine. As Mr Blanchard, a 'pious divine but of the moral cast', warns Wringhim, predestination jumbles religion and revelation into chaos. Even Wringhim comments that Gil-Martin's equivocal, crooked counsels suggest a 'great mind led astray by enthusiasm, or some overpowering passion' (204) – an unwitting moment of self-analysis. In the main, however, it is Wringhim's inability to read signs that ensures his downfall. He hatches his plans with Gil-Martin amid clouds, hazes and visions, laments at one point that 'I was a being incomprehensible to myself' (182), and fails to decipher the 'strange script' (124) of Gil-Martin's book. His diabolical tutor holds out the promise of a secret truth at once open to, and withheld from, the initiate. Revelation and radical uncertainty are the twin poles of Wringhim's borderline condition, a condition that reproduces Wringhim's own demonic pursuit of his brother George, who feels himself the victim of nameless, motiveless vengeance and judgement. Indecipherability haunts the antinomian creed; the elder George Colwan observes that Rev. Wringhim splits 'the doctrines of Calvin into thousands of undistinguishable films' (15). When Wringhim is trapped in the weaver's looms, it is the perfect figure for his madness; he is trapped in a device for separating and connecting threads.

In its poised tone, structural coherence and intricate observation, Burnside's novel *The Locust Room* appears an unlikely counterpart of Hogg's classic persecutory romance. However, it shares a strange affinity with *The Private Memoirs*. Indeed, the strange affinity of these two novels, separated by nearly 180 years, lies in their affinity with strange affinity. *The Locust Room's* main protagonist is Scottish, it too has its doubles, comes into close contact with madness and criminality,

features a number of isolated, self-contained figures, and like Hogg's novel it involves dissimulation, and the uncertainty or unreadability of signs. The novel centres on Paul, a photography student in Cambridge, and charts the progressive failure of his relationships with family and friends, through the course of a summer in 1975 when the city is held in thrall by an increasingly violent series of rapes. Several chapters are narrated from the rapist's perspective, another from Paul's psychologically disturbed flatmate Steve, and one recalls a significant episode from Paul's dead father's past. These marginal narratives keep in touch with voices that have lost touch.

Through a meditation on solitude, crime, psychological disturbance and sociopathic behaviour, the novel offers various models of separation, self-containment and connection. The rapist who terrorises Cambridge inhabits a 'world of borderlines and spaces', his behaviour displaying a disturbing proximity to Paul's nocturnal photographic activities.¹³ In the solitude and stillness of the night, Paul feels a 'shadowy, nervous kinship' with the rapist's desire to become an invisible presence. At one stage he catches a fleeting, hallucinatory glimpse of the rapist, whom he mistakes initially for a woman. When this figure turns, he sees only 'a hideous disfigurement, a mask of a face' (87), yet he is strangely attracted by this monstrous disguise. Such ambivalence exemplifies the discomfiting fraternal bond forged by the male characters and the rapist in a climate of ubiquitous suspicion and denial: as one woman observes, the rapist could be any man in the area. In different ways, the rapist haunts women and men in the novel. And yet, in a prison cell after his capture, the rapist describes his own shadowing by another self, and in this he is linked with those other monsters, Wringhim and Gil-Martin:

Because he had been in danger, always: side-streets, city; night; a man walking in the rain, watching, listening, choosing. It wasn't the danger you saw on television, or read about in a book. This was something else, something to do with a different sense of loss, of the moment when he too would become conscious, not only of himself walking those dark, deserted streets, but also of that invisible assembly of movement and steps and even breathing that matched him in every way, but was not himself – like that invisible presence the Arctic explorers described when they came home from being lost, walking for hours or days in the snow and the dark with a single, unseen companion. It would be impossible to talk about this to anyone else and make himself understood, but he had known all along that this other was always waiting to arrive. (148–9)

The rapist is another justified sinner, yet unlike Wringhim this other does not shake the certainty of his system, this danger does not threaten his baleful power. An amalgam of the impresario who is conscious of the split and the sadistic dissembler, he waits to perform his vanishing trick once more and re-enter the lives of the women he has abused.

The novel discovers another scene of madness in the breakdown of Paul's mysterious flatmate, Steve, who leaves a menagerie of dying animals in his bedroom. When Paul puts the wretched cast of this theatre of cruelty out its misery, he reflects on the blamelessness and hopeless innocence of the creatures (146). Steve's

own narrative follows, in which he refers to himself in the third person and describes what appears to be a preordained decline into madness: his role is that of persecuted victim and justified sinner. Steve tells himself a story – one that does not ‘come out right’ – involving a boy looking in a mirror who sees ‘a small hole in nature, an emptiness, a loose stitch which, if pulled, might unravel the universe and show its underlying blackness, a blackness like decay, or like the small local darkness that falls each and every time an animal dies’ (158). Here is a subject transfixed by the empty signifier, the fading of meaning, and bereft of a metalanguage that could face the irreducible absence at the heart of things.

It is through his dead father, a familiar second self, that Paul approaches such a metalanguage. Paul too tends towards asocial retreat: ‘He was capable . . . of a kind of absence, a self-abandonment that led to visions, streams of words, images, ideas that almost translated themselves into something meaningful, something he could see or name. Yet these private hours were less satisfying when he thought someone else might be in the house’ (24–5). He views photography as ‘a continual re-estrangement from the given’ (176), a picture of the world stripped of ‘invested memory’, and he seeks an art of revelation that he terms magic or alchemy. Tony, the lab scientist at the field station where Paul takes up casual work, and which houses the eponymous locust room, is just such a shy, remote man who resembles ‘an old-time alchemist, assisting in the rituals of decomposition and transformation’ (254–5). Like the novel as a whole, Paul’s theory of the photographic encounter is structured around an irresolvable tension between essence and illusion:

you had to go beyond the social, you had to refuse the given role, in order to perform a kind of alchemy that would be at once a disappearance and a way of remaining utterly still. As a photographer . . . Paul had fallen in love with the idea of an impossibility, half-knowing all along that the beauty of the impossible would cast its shadow over everything else, every possible fact, showing it up as the temporal, contingent thing it really was. (29)

Yet it is Paul’s pursuit of impossibility and invisibility at the ‘borderline of habitation’ (207) that enables him to remain both spectator and actor, a manipulator of seeming who nonetheless recognises an outside. Only the one who no longer recognises the split between inside and outside, such as the drug addict Aqualung, can appear to glimpse ‘the secret at the heart of things’ (260). His recently dead father hovers ‘at the edge of some region of unlikeness’, his solitude a ‘dwelling, a refuge’ (211). For Paul, his father possessed the ‘solitude of a craftsman, the isolation of someone who had traded the social, traded the human, for something else, something he couldn’t explain or share’ (231). This is a retreat into a psychological space voided of clamour, sited on the split traversed by borderline discourse: ‘It was familiar and strange, empty and full, private and, at the same time, wholly impersonal’ (178). Paul discerns that such estrangement is the necessary prelude to invisibility.

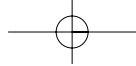
In *The Private Memoirs*, Wringhim is harried to perdition, and cannot escape his sacred enthusiasm; given a similar passion for ‘the secret at the heart of things’, a similar withdrawal from the social and a withdrawal of affect, why does the central protagonist of *The Locust Room* not lapse like other characters into psychosis?

It involves, in Lacanian terms, a different relation to the Thing and the sign. Paul's pursuit of essence, of *quidditas*, acknowledges failure and absence at its outset. Indeed, the novel portrays how the surface of things – a recurrent preoccupation of Burnside's poetry – involves the uncanny, loss, the transformation of perception and a haunted recognition of something irreducibly other. As Richard Boothby argues, the relation to reality for the human subject is only possible 'when perception is destabilized by the influence of the signifier'. For Lacan, the Real is the unknowable, impossible kernel of the Thing:¹⁴ the real, the original object cause of desire, is absent, elsewhere, a lack whose mark is the *objet a*. The virtual object is akin to a black hole, unobservable directly but discernible in its effects on other objects.¹⁵ Thus, in order to comprehend the real in its absence, one must relate oneself to what is not there: 'The non-psychotic orientation to the world . . . has a firm sense of reality *precisely because it doesn't have absolute certainty*'.¹⁶ In contrast, as Boothby puts it, '[w]hat the psychotic lacks is the lack itself'.¹⁷ A psychotic like Schreber has an unshakeable sense of certainty, even if he has lost touch with reality; and absolute certainty without contact with reality is a definition of paranoia, a staple feature in Gothic portrayals of madness.¹⁸ In order for there to be a cause of desire, and to ground the experience of reality, there must be something essentially missing. 'There must be a constitutive blindspot, an empty space . . . in which the sense of uncertainty can be continuously regenerated'.¹⁹ Through this relation to the *objet a*, the subject becomes aware of the 'more than me', the otherness of the world that cannot be incorporated. Wringhim does not comprehend that which is 'more than me' – hence his inability to escape his 'illustrious', dreaded friend. Contrastingly, Burnside's central character yearns for his father's sense of stillness, separation and comfort with things (170); the attraction of detachment is not the disastrous passion of Wringhim. Kristeva argues that any metalanguage – delusion, psychoanalysis, literary criticism, philosophical or religious conviction – must inhabit the split between actor/ impresario, objective outsider/ enthralled participant: this privileged space of intense connection and detachment is 'haunted by the father, by one without transcendence'.²⁰ Whereas Wringhim is tortured on the rack of the Law in *The Private Memoirs*, the ethical retreat in *The Locust Room* is haunted by precisely such a father.

In conclusion, we might propose the borderline condition as a pronounced feature of Scottish Gothic: we can immediately think of the combination of isolation and conviction, particularly when mediated through madness, criminality and the sociopathic, in texts ranging from *Jekyll and Hyde* to Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory*. These texts are shadowed by an other who is remote yet intimately close, in a relation of what Lacan terms extimacy. More generally, the theoretical fictions that Gothic offers us, and which we produce as critics, treats madness as our counterpart, rather than as a haunting transcendence or a purely rhetorical figure.

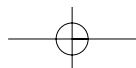
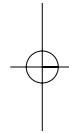
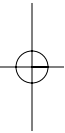
Notes

- 1 Julia Kristeva, 'Nom de mort ou de vie' ('Name of Death or of Life') [1981], trans. John Lechte, in John Lechte, ed., *Writing and Psychoanalysis: A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 110.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 4 Lechte, *Writing and Psychoanalysis*, p. 104.
- 5 Ian Duncan, 'Walter Scott, James Hogg and Scottish Gothic', in David Punter ed., *A Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 77.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- 8 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 49.
- 9 Kristeva, 'Name of Death', p. 111.
- 10 On the foreclosure of the paternal function in Gothic, see Ed Cameron, 'Psychopathology and the Gothic Supernatural', *Gothic Studies*, 5/1 (2003), 11–42. In his brief discussion of *The Private Memoirs*, Cameron comments that '[w]hile the father function is literally foreclosed in young Wringhim's universe, it returns as the reified word of God'. Rejected by his father, Wringhim is never separated from the Other's desire, and 'he is constantly bombarded by the Other's enjoyment in the form of the discourse of predestination', p. 36. Yet it is the recurrent *yearning* for the return of the paternal function – in the form of Rev. Wringhim, Gil-Martin, God, the Word – rather than its total absence, that produces the fatal split in the text. As my argument suggests, Wringhim cannot understand, but is compelled to interpret, a field of enigmatic signs that mimic his divided consciousness. On the relation between reason and revelation in *The Private Memoirs*, see J. Faflak, "'The clearest light of reason": Making Sense of Hogg's Body of Evidence', *Gothic Studies*, 5/1 (2003), 94–110. Faflak notes that, in the novel's 'crisis of comprehension', the 'failure of philosophical contemplation' gives way to psychoanalysis, which is in turn 'haunted by its own indeterminacy', p. 100.
- 11 James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* [1824], ed. John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 129. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in parentheses in the body of the text.
- 12 Kristeva, 'Name of Death', p. 115.
- 13 John Burnside, *The Locust Room* (London: Cape, 2001), p. 2. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in parentheses in the body of the text.
- 14 Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology after Lacan* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), p. 279.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 277.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 279.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 280.
- 18 For an examination of the relation between interpretation, paranoia and madness in Gothic, see Scott Brewster, 'Seeing Things: Gothic and the Madness of Interpretation', in David Punter ed., *A Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 281–92.
- 19 Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher*, p. 280.
- 20 Kristeva, 'Name of Death', p. 107.



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