ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Blurring Reality and Illusion in Hogg and Tiptree

Alfie Goodwin

January 2025

'[W]hen you wash your hands, do you feel the water is running on your brain? Of course not' (Tiptree 50).

James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and James Tiptree's *The Girl Who Was Plugged In* both bring into question the boundary between the real and the imagined. They do this to challenge their readership's metaphysical, but also political, complacency. Tiptree's speculative science fiction about a simulated reality, in a manner reminiscent of a Cartesian thought-experiment, questions the assumed boundary between real and imagined by suggesting that we may drastically underestimate the extent of the 'imagined' in our lives. Similarly, Hogg questions this boundary by imbuing his novel with indeterminacy, leaving what is real and what is imagined in his tale unsure, and his readers equally unsure of themselves. Regarding politics, Tiptree questions this boundary in the context of the cultural life of modern market economies to evoke a world where 'everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' (Debord §1), where the real and the simulated have become one, forming a 'hyperreal' (Baudrillard 1). Hogg, on the other hand, questions this boundary in the context of early modern Scotland to evoke the reification of the 'imagined' tenets of radical Calvinism.

Tiptree's novella questions the assumed boundary between real and imagined by suggesting that we may drastically underestimate the extent of the 'imagined' in our lives. Though Scott Bukatman claims that 'the body is figured as a pronounced limit point' (316) in Tiptree's story, P. Burke's condition actually demonstrates just how illusory the body could be. In his famous thought-experiment, Descartes, supposing he was bewitched by a 'deceiver of supreme power' (612), concluded that 'everything I see is spurious. [...] Body, shape, extension, movement, and place are chimaeras' (611)—only the mind was certain. Hence the dictum 'I think, therefore I am', for the mind is the only undoubtable piece of evidence for one's existence. In Tiptree's refashioning, the 'deceiver[s] of supreme power' are the corporate technocrats in the

'GTX boardroom' with their ultra-advanced 'GTX computer' (Tiptree 50, 47), and the victim is P. Burke, strapped into a 'body-waldo' (60), 'run[ning] her neural system by remote control' (50), 'no longer clearly recall[ing] that she exists apart from Delphi' (69)—her console-operated 'telematic body' (Bukatman 318). This speculative condition suggests that ordinary people, too, could be 'wired-up slave[s]' (71) living a simulated existence whilst their *real* bodies lie in an underground laboratory. Interestingly, such speculation suggests the possibility that P. Burke is living a twofold illusion: both of her life as Delphi *and* of P. Burke in the first place—an intimation of an infinite regress which could stretch on interminably, something Tiptree's story shares with Hogg's. This speculation thus radically questions the assumed boundary between real and imagined by implying that we may drastically underestimate the extent of the 'imagined' in our lives, thus undermining our metaphysical complacency.

By imbuing his novel with radical indeterminacy, Hogg renders the details of the 'fabula' (ie., the fundamental series of events which the 'story' and 'text' fashion) (Bal 5) ultimately uncertain, bringing into question the boundary between what is real and what is imagined in the story. Many critics have observed the 'aporia' (Esterhammer 7) and 'indeterminacy' (Redekop 162) in this text. The story begins and ends in indeterminacy, discarding the linear trajectory from mystery to understanding present in many Gothic novels, such as Ann Radcliffe's, in favour of bewildering circularity. The first two words of the novel are 'It appears' (29), immediately foregrounding the uncertainty of the account. It is based on records 'still extant' (29)—implying an incomplete evidentiary basis. A semantic field of uncertainty is legible, with phrases like 'about', 'at least', and 'supposed to have' (29) abounding, and, when the editor claims twice that 'it is certain' (29), as though attempting to reassure or justify himself, he clearly protests too much. Nor is any clarity provided by the end of the novel. Instead, the editor straightforwardly

claims ‘I do not understand it’, repeatedly venting his ‘doubt’ (241). As Redekop notes (159), even the syntax at the end is indeterminate, creating amphibology whereby the referent of ‘this writer’ (242) is ambiguous, possibly referring to Wringhim, the editor, or Hogg himself.

Hogg also elicits a sense of indeterminacy between what is real and what is imagined in his novel through ‘mise en abyme’ textuality (Bal 62). ‘Mise en abyme’ textuality is where embedded texts resemble the primary narrative, as though they formed part of an ‘infinite regress’ (Bal 62). Derrida wrote that, ‘when one can read a book in the book, an origin in the origin, a centre in the centre, it is the abyss, is the bottomlessness of infinite redoubling’ (qtd. in Redekop, 177)—this is certainly the case in the *Confessions*. The story of George’s murder, for instance, is repeated three times, each with subtle variations: once by the editor (72), once by Arabella Calvert (87-94), and once by Robert Wringhim (171-2). The first suggests the murderer was Drummond (72), the second ‘some spirit, or demon, in his likeness’ (90), and the third the shape-shifting ‘Czar Peter of Russia’ (137). Such ‘mise en abyme’ textuality is also evident in the episode of the tennis match (46-49; 152-3) and the scuffle on Arthur’s Seat (61-65; 164).

‘Mise en abyme’ textuality is also evident in the characters, many of whom seem like uncanny doubles of each other. There is M’Gill (119), Bessy Gillies (83), and Gil-Martin, the latter of which *also* has an affinity with Rev. Wringhim (183), Robert Wringhim, Arabella Calvert’s ‘artful and consummate fiend’ of an ex-partner (87), and the Auchtermuchty devil (199). This ‘mise en abyme’ of characters further represents the dizzying array of different perspectives that the ‘infinite regress’ of texts elicits, evoking a radical indeterminacy that brings into question the boundary between what is real and what is imagined in the story. Such textual inscrutability reminds us of our human limitations and fallibility, our inability to parse between reality and illusion—an antidote to Wringhim-like metaphysical complacency.

Regarding politics, Tiptree brings into question the boundary between real and imagined in the context of the late 20th century cultural life of market economies. She does this to depict a world where reality and direct experience have receded into an 'imagined', simulated life of 'spectacles' (Debord §1), representations, and virtual realities, to such an extent that the boundary between them has become blurred—creating a 'hyperreal' condition (Baudrillard 1). Tiptree was writing during the heyday of glitter pop, when stars like David Bowie, perhaps resembling the 'gods' adored by the likes of P. Burke (44), were broadcast around the world on colour televisions (Bukatman 317). This novella therefore clearly reflects upon contemporary, and enduring, cultural developments. The world of the novella fits Debord and Baudrillard's diagnoses. 'Holocams' hover everywhere, 'display-screens' abound, 'basketball games in three-di' blur the boundary between what is real and what is imagined as 'holovision technology' further complicates the matter (45). 'Holocam total-environment shells' remove artificiality from acting sets, allowing reality TV to be broadcast into 'the viewer's home in complete three-di, so real you can look up their noses', 'pumping the sight and sound and flesh [...] of *reality* into the world's happy head' (61-2). There are 'no commercials. No ads' (46), as all product promotion is so effortlessly naturalised that the real and the pretend are indistinguishable from one another. Tiptree thus brings into question the boundary between real and imagined in this modern cultural context to depict a 'hyperreal' condition of 'the society of the spectacle' whereby reality and representation are elided.

P. Burke acts as a supreme symbol for this condition. Though her story ventures the possibility that all our life may be an illusion, conversely, the paradoxical *reality* of her condition characterises her as a 'hyperreal' entity. Such indeterminacy is reminiscent of Hogg, demonstrating how both authors use this effect to question the boundary between real and

imagined. Bukatman calls P. Burke's experience in Delphi 'virtual' (318). Delphi is little more than a 'waldo' (55) Burke remotely controls, and a conduit for sense-data. As we are constantly reminded, 'it is really P. Burke down under Carbondale who's doing it' (62), and seldom is there a deictic used without Tiptree correcting it with Burke's 'real' location (53). That said, Burke-as-Delphi *is* remarkably real. Her sense-input is representative of reality, and her localisation thereof is no different to what ordinary humans do already through 'eccentric projection': for, as the narrator pithily remarks, 'when you wash your hands, do you feel the water is running on your brain? Of course not' (50). She travels; she falls in love, and loves with a passion deep and *real* (66). Indeed, Burke's experience as Delphi seems to constitute a tacit assent to Umberto Eco's claim that 'technology can give us more reality than nature can' (qtd. in Bennett and Royle, 252). Her condition, then, by bringing into question the boundary between real and imagined, symbolises the modern 'hyperreal' condition whereby our lives have receded so far into spectacles and simulations that such a distinction no longer makes any sense: reality and representation are one. This, for Tiptree, demonstrates the topsy-turvyness of modern market economies, for, as Debord argued, 'within a world *really on its head*, the true is a moment of the false' (Debord §9).

Similar to P. Burke, Hogg's Gil-Martin is portrayed as both real *and* imagined, questioning the boundary between the two in order to express the reification of the 'imagined' radical, antinomian Calvinist ideology that he personifies, that is, the making real of what is actually imagined. That Gil-Martin personifies radical Calvinism is clear: he is constantly embroiled in Calvinist disputations with Robert, making his influence on the latter practically identical to the influence of radical Calvinist ideology. Indeed, his 'argumentative powers' and obsession with 'the infallibility of the elect' characterise him as a sort of walking Calvinist tract

(133). Gil-Martin, however, is of indeterminate metaphysical status. On Arthur's Seat he is directly juxtaposed with the visual illusion of 'the little wee ghost of the rainbow' (62), implying that he too is of an illusory nature. The similarity of his name to that of Robert's childhood adversary, M'Gill, as well as the similarity of his doctrines to those of Robert's father, Rev. Wringhim, further suggests him to be a tortured hallucination of Robert's, influenced by his childhood experiences. Additionally, he compares himself to a 'shadow' (187), a telling symbol given the amorphous, insubstantial, and illusory quality. However, he is also strangely real, with both Arabella Calvert and Mrs Logan attesting to his existence (90-3, 98). Gil-Martin, then, both real and imagined, represents the reified illusions of radical Calvinism: imagined ideas with real consequences. These consequences include numerous murders, and the savage immiseration of Wringhim—clearly communicating the perils of reified ideology.

Both authors, then, though ostensibly distinct in terms of genre and period, bring into question the boundary between the real and the imagined in order to challenge their readership's metaphysical and political complacency. Tiptree brings into question the assumed boundary between real and imagined by suggesting that we may drastically underestimate the extent of the 'imagined' in our lives. Hogg, by imbuing his novel with indeterminacy, offers his readers an experience of textual inscrutability whereby the boundary between real and imagined is uncertain. This suggests the reader's human fallibility—an antidote to Wringhim-like metaphysical complacency. In terms of politics, Tiptree questions the boundary between real and imagined to evoke the elision of reality and representation in 'hyperreal' 'societies of the spectacle'. Hogg, on the other hand, questions this boundary in the context of early modern Scotland to evoke the reification of the 'imagined' ideology of radical Calvinism. Both novels demonstrate how seemingly unrelated texts can participate in one of the most fundamental

inquiries in Western thought and literature, stretching at least as far back as Plato's allegory of the cave: that is, the interrogation of what is real and what is imagined.

Works Cited

Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. Third Edition.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Bennett, Andrew, and Royle, Nicholas. *Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory. Third Edition*. Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2004.

Bukatman, Scott. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red, 1970.

Descartes, René. Selection from 'Meditations on First Philosophy', in *Metaphysics: a guide and anthology*. Edited by Crane, Tim, and Farkas, Katalin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Esterhammer, Angela. 'Identity Crises and Unaccountable Acts: More Contexts for Hogg's *Justified Sinner*'. *Studies in Hogg and his World* 25 (2015): 3-20. https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=126863946&site=ehost-live.

Hogg, James. *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner.* Introduced by John Wain. London: Penguin Books, 1983.

Redekop, Magdalene. 'Beyond Closure: Buried Alive with Hogg's Justified Sinner'. *ELH* 52, no. 1 (Spring, 1985): 159-184. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2872832.

Tiptree, James. *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever*. London: Gollancz, 2014.