

Avatars in Edinburgh: *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and the Second Life of Hogg's Ettrick Shepherd

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Abstract

In this essay, I deploy the contemporary technical term *avatar* to interpret the functions of “the Ettrick Shepherd,” a character associated with James Hogg that originated in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and appears subsequently in Hogg's novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). The notorious difficulty of *Sinner*, I argue, is due in part to the movement of the Shepherd, as an avatar, from one textual realm to another in a way that reveals the limits of meaning making in synthetic landscapes. I show how reading the Shepherd as an avatar furthers our understanding of the novel's engagement with *Blackwood's*, as well as the experience of readers in Romantic-era Edinburgh, whose literary culture thrived on dynamic representations of and relationships between people in print.

In the twelfth installment of “Noctes Ambrosiane,” the popular, dialogic serial that appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* between March 1822 and February 1835, the magazine's editors enjoy supper with “The English Opium-Eater.” All is going well until the Opium-Eater spills a few grains of opium onto a plate of kidneys, which are then consumed by “Mr. Mullion”:

The Opium-Eater. I must give this case, in a note, to a new edition of my Confessions. If Mr. Mullion did really eat all the kidneys, he must now have in his stomach that which is about equal to five hundred and seventy drops of laudanum.

The Shepherd. Eat a' the kidneys! –That he did, I'll swear.

The Opium-Eater. Most probably, Mr. Mullion will fall into a state of utter insensibility in a couple of hours. Convulsions may follow, and then—death.

The Shepherd. Deevil the fears. Mullion 'ill dee nane. I'll wauger he'll be eating twa eggs to his breakfast the morn, and a shave o' the red roun'; lurking frae him a' the time wi'een as sharp as darnin' needles, and paunin' in his cup for mair sugar. (492-493)

“The Shepherd” has a point; of course Mullion will be fine. For he, like the Shepherd and the Opium-Eater, is a character created for a textual world, embodied in print, not flesh. In subsequent issues of *Blackwood's*, Mullion will again wake, eat, shave, and interact with the other characters of “Noctes” in a unique dimension where the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred in the service of the magazine's cultural, literary, and political interests.

While Mullion seems to be an entirely fictional character invented by the writers of “Noctes,” other characters in the series importantly denote some of the individual authors that populated Romantic-era Edinburgh, that “literary metropolis” that, according to Ian Duncan, rivaled London in the early nineteenth century (x). The Opium-Eater refers to Thomas De Quincey, whose *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* appeared two years earlier, while the Ettrick Shepherd—the focus of my analysis—is inextricably tied to James Hogg.ⁱ The precise relationship between Hogg and the Shepherd is difficult to pin down; the latter has been identified as a “personality,” (Miller 119); a “literary persona” (Oost 93); an “alter ego” (Hughes 185); and a “complex embodiment of profoundly intuitive responses to experience, standing in a teasing and stimulating relationship with his original” (Alexander xiii). Hogg and the Shepherd share some key characteristics (geographic origin, occupations, politics, to name a few) but they are not identical. As several critics have shown, the relations between Hogg and the Shepherd are much more complex, and, as such, worthy of investigationⁱⁱ; until now, however, such studies

have not taken into account a key component of the Shepherd's existence: his synthetic environment. To fully understand the literary and cultural significance of the Shepherd, one needs to examine not only to *whom* the Shepherd refers, but *where* the Shepherd lives. To this end, I propose we interpret the Shepherd as an "avatar," in the traditional and modern senses.

The *OED* lists four definitions for "avatar" as a noun, each a variation of the term *manifestation*. A fifth, "draft" addition from 2008, offers a definition within the context of "computing and science fiction": "A graphical representation of a person or character in a computer-generated environment, *esp.* one which represents a user in an interactive game or other setting, and which can move about in its surroundings and interact with other characters." The Ettrick Shepherd is, in his most basic sense, a manifestation of Hogg, but like computer-generated avatars, he is an incarnation that resides in an interactive setting, moving about and associating with other avatars. Importantly, he functions as a "social representation" of Hogg in much the same way that present-day avatars function as social representations of computer users (Meadows 13). In his 1824 novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Hogg moves the Shepherd from his original periodical realm and into a different, hyper-virtual landscape, revealing the limits of meaning making in a literary culture that is highly invested in the rapid production and consumption of personalities in print.

While reading the Shepherd as an avatar may seem, on its surface, too anachronistic to be productive, the Shepherd functions as an antecedent of modern virtual phenomena that in fact offers a unique opportunity to gain traction in a markedly slippery field: the history of reading. As Robert Darnton noted at the turn of the twenty-first century, the experience of readers from other times and places is difficult to access, let alone assess: "Both familiar and foreign, [reading] is an activity that we share with our ancestors yet that never can be the same as what they experienced" (158). But while evidence of past experiences of reading can be both scarce and

contentious, the Shepherd's multiple appearances in *Blackwood's* offer one site where the familiar and the foreign converge. Analyzing the Shepherd as an avatar in our present sense has the potential to offer modern-day readers a unique, experiential knowledge of the context within which Romantic-era readers would have read *Sinner* (context being an essential component of any investigation of reading history).

In the case of Hogg, this context serves not simply as background to his texts but instead as a potent environment in and of itself—one that exists in a dynamic relationship with readers and with the texts they consumed. When readers encountered the Shepherd in an issue of *Blackwood's*, they would have interpreted him not as a figure confined to that issue of the magazine alone, but also someone associated with Hogg's person, with Hogg's other writing, with previous issues of *Blackwood's*, and with other periodicals of the same time and place. This sequence of interaction, made possible by readers' experiences with identities in life and in print, is similar to other, more familiar ways in which twenty-first century virtual worlds create proliferant identities specific to our time and place. In this essay, I will look forward in order to look backward, using what we have learned about avatars to more fully understand the ways in which readers would have understood (or not) the actions of the Shepherd in Hogg's novel. The notorious difficulty of *Sinner*, I will argue, is not due to the discord between readers and the text on a narrative level alone, but also to the ways in which the novel pushes the limits of the synthetic textual realms created by the media of Romantic-era Edinburgh. And thus, in turn, *Sinner* becomes a pivotal text for illuminating the dynamic interplay of virtual and real environments in Romantic media culture, as well as a lesson for current-day readers of Romanticism. In re-appropriating the Ettrick Shepherd and putting him in the pages of a novel, Hogg can be seen as a forward-thinking figure who attempted to manipulate a virtual world of

texts that, for all of its play with human identity, is still embedded in a material world—a phenomenon familiar to users of modern social media.

Present-day avatars exist across a range of software platforms, most conspicuously in social media and gaming, and take a wide variety of forms.ⁱⁱⁱ But whether an avatar consists of a photo, a drawing, or a graphical representation of a human, animal, or other fantastic creature, it is always interpreted as a user-generated amalgamation of somebody's real-life characteristics with an imagined identity for the purpose of group interaction: "Without a social environment—or one that at least mimics social interaction—the avatar can't exist" (Meadows 13). One of the most popular (but by no means lone) social environments within which avatars exist is Second Life, an Internet-based synthetic world launched by Linden Lab in 2002.^{iv} In Second Life, users create avatars (called "Residents") that engage in any and all imaginable activities in environments created by themselves or by other users. In this way, Second Life differs from games such as *Call of Duty* or *World of Warcraft*, as "there is often no goal except simply to live a virtual life" (Guest 11).

To live a virtual life is not, however, to live a life wholly divorced from the material world. As Steven E. Jones has argued, Second Life is no grim beacon of posthumanism, but instead a "metaverse" that is embedded within the larger framework of metadata that has become known as "Web 2.0": "Just as metadata are data about data, the metaverse is a universe of networked activities attached to—and encoded in meaningful correspondence with—the material universe of physical objects and social relations" (Jones 266). Platforms such as Second Life, or the even more popular Facebook, do not uncouple human subjectivity from bodily constraints so much as provide an additional layer of identification with which others may interact. This phenomenon is a highly technical manifestation, Jones argues, of the social-text theory of transmission, which "focuses not on static and isolated verbal objects but on dynamic discourse

fields composed of interacting verbal, graphic, bibliographic, cultural, ideological, and social forces” (268). An avatar is a visible manifestation of the “cumulative history” (Jones 268) of the data with which it is marked, and draws its cultural and economic force from the presumption of a “user-self” that is “directly connected to off line activities and relationships” (Rak 149).

The inseparability of this layer of metadata and actual persons is made apparent in Second Life in a number of ways. First, the manipulation of a mouse or keyboard is necessary in order to create and maneuver an avatar (Jones 265). In addition, Second Life’s economy is based on the “Linden,” a currency available for purchase in the real world (on sites such as eBay) to be used in the synthetic world for various materials and services.^v Third, the metadata created on platforms like Second Life can be used to create narratives that affect multiple modes of subjectivity, not just those that are identified with the virtual. For example, the Educational Support Management Group manufactures structures within Second Life designed specifically for use by writing tutors at colleges and universities. There, tutors’ avatars interact with students’ avatars in order to improve students’ writing in the actual world.^{vi} This kind of improvement falls under the umbrella of “mirrored flourishing,” a term coined by James Wagner Au to describe the phenomenon “where an avatar’s valuable contributions in-world lead directly to the betterment of his or her real life, as well” (49).

These are only a few examples of how the user-generated content that exists in Second Life and other Web 2.0 platforms enjoys a dialectical relationship with other social identities. The virtual is not “within” the real, nor is it excluded from it; it is instead a “possibility space in multiple dimensions, one whose objects are deliberately marked up or metatagged by human intelligence, which is certainly constrained but is also capable of recombinatory acts of meaning making” (Jones 272). Avatars account for some of these objects, which, given the nature of the Internet, enjoy a marked durability. Once an avatar is created, a user with access to that avatar’s

profile might mark it with new characteristics at any point, but the avatar lives apart from that user in a shared digital space, access to which is controlled by another entity. Even though the data that marks the avatar is ostensibly about the user, the owner of the Internet server upon which that avatar resides is the ultimate steward of that data and any of its derivatives.

Moreover, even if data associated with an avatar is no longer wanted by the user, caches of unmanaged data will frequently sit on servers until the servers' owners decide to remove it (as those who have attempted to delete their own Facebook profiles can attest). In this way, the alternate dimensions of existence offered by Web 2.0 derive power from its "mirroring" of the actual world, but this power cuts both ways. Not only do users relinquish some control of their avatars in digitized communities, different versions of these avatars are persistent, existing on networks that "recognize that every use of an object on the network represents a node in the history of the object, and the object itself is the totality of its history of uses" (Jones 267). These objects, in turn, interact with other objects within an ever-expanding synthetic landscape. It is important to recognize, however, the extent to which these virtual objects depend on some measure of material existence in order to be sustained. Computer servers must exist, somewhere, in material form in order to contain the data necessary for things like the Internet; and *Blackwood's* needed to exist in the form of a printed magazine in order to be circulated among the reading public.

The potential tension between users, avatars, and those who control the objects which house the realms within which these avatars reside is akin to the struggles Hogg faced as he observed the Shepherd's life in the pages of *Blackwood's*, particularly in "Noctes Ambrosianae." J.H. Alexander divides "Noctes" into two parts: the first (numbers 1-18 and 20) composed chiefly by John Gibson Lockhart, John Wilson, and William Maginn, are short and heterogeneous in subject; the second (numbers 19, 21-71), composed chiefly by Wilson, are

“longer, more homogeneous, less riotous, heavier, [and] more substantial” (x). As a whole, the “Noctes” feature a large dramatic personae including—but not limited to—avatars linked to the writers listed above and, of course, to Hogg.^{vii} Importantly, the avatars in *Blackwood’s* were not under the control of any single author/user. Once created, “roles” like the Shepherd were available “to whoever [could] employ them properly” (Parker, Introduction, xii). Over the course of “Noctes,” the Shepherd would be deployed by Hogg and/or by his fellow editors in several guises, and in various circumstances, to perform deeds both virtuous and debauched, and to utter words both poetic and nonsensical. This diversity of characteristics—a set of discordant data with which the Shepherd was permanently tagged—is a phenomenon that was made possible by the synthetic social worlds of “Noctes,” and of *Blackwood’s* more generally. Put another way, *Blackwood’s* can be seen as operating like a server—an object that houses the virtual world of the Shepherd and his cohort until Hogg decides to expand the Shepherd’s realm by creating another object, his novel.

* * *

Romantic scholars are familiar with the ways in which *Blackwood’s* engaged with literary culture via defamatory criticism and vulgar parodies of major public figures, but the literal pages of “Maga” also exist as a tangible representation of the blurred boundaries between the synthetic world of the magazine and actual Edinburgh. Each issue featured lists of births, deaths, and military promotions; and the “Monthly Register” contained commercial and meteorological reports. *Blackwood’s* book reviews, for all their vitriol, included copious selections of text taken from the books verbatim, so that even amid “Z.”’s diatribes on the Cockney school, readers could still access large sections of original texts by Keats and his collaborators (texts which became, quite literally, part of *Blackwood’s*). Finally, whereas the early issues of the magazine adhered to a conventional organizational schema that utilized formal headings (“Select Extracts,” “Original

Poetry,” “Review of New Publications,” etc.), when Wilson took over, the magazine abandoned all such headings, with the exception of the concluding “Literary and Scientific Intelligence” and “Monthly Register.”

The composition of the rest of the magazine varied from month to month, and in any given issue, readers could find what Philip Flynn (referring to a poem in the March 1818 issue of the magazine) has identified as Maga’s “*dulce and utile*”:

(1) chatty, often cryptic notices “To Contributors” on the status of their submissions to the magazine, written to give the impression that every scribbler in Britain was trying to break into *Blackwood’s*; (2) serious essays on scientific, political, economic, legal, ecclesiastical, and antiquarian subjects, essays, shorter and less demanding of the reader than the essays in the quarterly reviews; (3) original, translated or reprinted poetry and prose fiction; (4) ferocious, personal, controversial criticisms of contemporary writers and other public figures; (5) assorted whimsies, hoaxes, and intertextual or pseudonymic bams.

(144)

This dynamic, contradictory, and sometimes unintelligible combination of elements is analogous, as Robert Morrison argues, to the character of Wilson himself; much in the same way Wilson crafted a career out of diverse styles and ideological paradoxes, *Blackwood’s* created an enterprise out of blending the assorted, amorphous categories of writing listed above. It was not just Wilson’s “extremes of inconsistencies of his personality” (Morrison), however, that were infused into the magazine; it was also the avatar that Wilson created for himself in “Christopher North.” If the blurring of boundaries described above created a distinct kind of textual space that we might compare to current synthetic worlds, North was its first resident.

One of the first appearances of North occurs in the brief “Christopher in the Tent” series, penned by Wilson and seen as an important precursor to “Noctes.” “Christopher in the Tent”

begins as a letter, which appeared in the August 1819 issue of the magazine under the heading, “The true and authentic Account of the Twelfth of August, 1819” (597). It then continues in the September 1819 issue, which consists of two sections: “The Tent” and “Last Day of the Tent.” Taken together, the issues establish the particular synthetic realm within which the editors’ avatars would interact, thereby creating a virtual dimension that both thrives on the existence of the magazine, but also provides the magazine its existence (that is, its literal content).

The two installments of the “Christopher in the Tent” feature the avatars in two virtual locations: their tent (erected during hunting expeditions in Braemar) and Ambrose’s Tavern in Edinburgh (an actual establishment located on Gabriel’s Road). When the editors come back from their hunting trip in “The Tent,” they realize how little time they have to put together the next issue of the magazine. Assembling at Ambrose’s, Wilson describes how they worked quickly to compile their contributions: “For three days—and we may almost add nights, . . . we boldly dashed at every thing, from Don Juan to Slack, the Pugilist; and flew in a moment from the Cape-of-Good-Hope to the Pyramids of Egypt” (627). This narrative of their labor, in which Wilson describes their writing as a tour of structures and places, in fact ends up constituting the entire issue (a convergence of literary and actual worlds) of *Blackwood’s* for September 1819. The pieces written by *Blackwood’s* contributors are worked into the narrative Wilson tells about how they put the magazine together; and it’s not always easy to tell where Wilson’s “Christopher in the Tent” leaves off and where the other contributions begin.

This kind of metanarrative of the magazine’s production would continue in “Noctes,” with the Shepherd identified as much by his location in Edinburgh literary culture as by his location at the table in Ambrose’s tavern. In the nineteenth installment of the series, the Shepherd is identified in the dramatic persona as “The Ettrick Shepherd,” then as “James, of Kilmeny, and Hynde, and the Chaldee manuscript” by Christopher North (366). With this

address, North tags the Shepherd with data relating to “James” Hogg, the person, as well as the author of two poems (Hogg’s “Kilmeny” and “Queen Hynde”) and a satire (“The Chaldee Manuscript,” a satirical parody that appeared in *Blackwood’s* in October 1817 and skewered, among others, the magazine’s original editors, Thomas Pringle and James Cleghorn). In one short address, Hogg’s avatar takes on characteristics associated with multiple dimensions that are real, imaginary, literary, political, and social. These characteristics, moreover, are layered on top of the Shepherd’s identity as it was cultivated in “Noctes” up until this point. The avatar in this installment, along with North’s familiarity and the conversation that ensues, is an iteration of the version that appeared in the eighteenth installment, while that derived from the seventeenth, and so on, in issues that persisted as tangible objects.^{viii}

Number nineteen of “Noctes” opens with the following question from North, addressed to the Shepherd: “Pray, are you a great dreamer, James? Your poetry is so very imaginative that I should opine your sleep to be haunted by many visions, dismal and delightful” (366). The Shepherd replies that he does not dream when he sleeps but enjoys visions of poetic genius while awake:

Oh, happy days that I have lain on the green hillside, with my plaid around me, best
 mantle of inspiration, my faithful Hector sitting like a very Christian by my side,
 glowering far aff into the glens after the sheep, or albins lifting up his ee to the gled
 hovering close aneath the marbled roof of clouds,--bonny St Mary’s Loch lying like a
 smile below, and a softened sun, scarcely warmer than the moon herself, adorning without
 dazzling the day, over the heavens and the earth,--a beuk o’ auld ballants, as yellow as the
 cowslips, in my hand or my bosom, and maybe, sir, my ink-horn dangling at a buttonhole,
 a bit stump o’ pen, nae bigger than an auld wife’s pipe, in my mouth; and a piece o’ paper,

torn out o' the hinder-end of a volume, crinkling on my knee,--on such a couch, Mr North, hath your Shepherd seen visions and dreamed dreams; (366)

The Shepherd's description of the circumstances of his reverie draws on some of the multiple dimensions of meaning made possible in the environment of "Noctes." On the one hand, while the premise of his reply is to address his propensity to imaginative activity, his first, and extended, impulse is to describe the actual circumstances within which that activity takes place. His description is governed by detailed verisimilitude that speaks to his identity as a Scotsman, shepherd, hunter, and writer. This scene also replicates the environment of "Noctes" insofar as it describes the "real" circumstances of literary production within that very production itself. Yet the scene is marked by so many bits of data that refer back to Hogg, his writing, and the actual terrain of Scotland that even though it is an imagined scene within an imagined realm, its meaning is bound to what readers would have known about Hogg and his identity in the material world: chiefly, his nationality and his occupations as shepherd and poet.

As a whole, readers of "Noctes" would have found copious real-world referents waiting to be teased out of the editors' exchanges, whether those referents are personal, textual, or even geographical. In this way, the conversations in "Noctes" are communicable by virtue of collaboration, not just between the editors but also between the magazine and its readers. In this collaboration, it would have been essential that readers consider simultaneously the actual world and *Blackwood's* synthetic world when reading the periodical. That is, the hermeneutics of "Noctes" demand that readers integrate various modes of actual and imagined identity, without replacing one for the other. This mode of reading is similar to the ways in which avatars garner interest via their users' off-line activities as well as how they function as repositories for different, but always persistent, layers of metadata that exist concurrently.

When we read *Blackwood's* as a pre- or proto-technological moment in the history of virtual identity, we see more clearly the real-world stakes of such an enterprise for Hogg and the other figures who found themselves represented in the magazine. Like the periodical itself, which relies on the circulation of printed text, the construction of avatars creates the potential for conflicts that are invested in material attachment—such as when the persons to whom avatars are attached are uncomfortable with their virtual representation. As several scholars have demonstrated, the Shepherd was the source of such conflict between Hogg and Wilson, and *Sinner* has been read as both a repudiation of the Shepherd's portrayal in *Blackwood's* and a periodic send-up of the “Blackwoodian novel” (Garside 14). But in addition, it seems appropriate to read *Sinner* as a unique, responsive literary form designed to cultivate a new relation to the virtual realm for real-world *readers* as well. That is, the novel functions not only as an artifact of Hogg's skirmish with *Blackwood's* over his own identity, but as a moment in reading history when a novel demanded that its readers traverse the real and virtual worlds simultaneously in unfamiliar ways.

After helping to launch the magazine in 1817, Hogg's relationship with *Blackwood's* deteriorated in the years leading up to the publication of *Sinner*. As several critics of the novel have noted, Wilson took responsibility for the Shepherd's dialogue in “Noctes” (with mixed results) in 1822, a time when Hogg was estranged from the magazine.^{ix} The series was, as Hughes notes, “undoubtedly good publicity for [Hogg's] work throughout the British empire” (185), a sentiment echoed by the Shepherd in the seventh installment of “Noctes”: “An author's eye commended when he's kept before the public. That's what gars me pit up with the jokes of some of you chields” (380). But Hogg became increasingly troubled by his treatment at the hands of the magazine; in addition to a stinging review of his *Three Perils of Woman* in October 1823, the Shepherd was often made to speak “contrary to [Hogg's] interests” in ways that, as

Garside argues, “must have made him feel that his identity was threatened and in danger of being controlled by others” (“Blackwoodian Novel” 14). In these years the Shepherd became “a kind of Caliban, boozing, brawling, and bragging” (Groves 88)—an identity that would persist for some time to come.^x All the while, Hogg was attempting to negotiate with Blackwood for the publication of his poetry and prose under dire economic pressure, creating a discord that serves as an important context for the Shepherd’s appearance in a new synthetic realm: the novel (Hughes 216-217).

The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner opens with “The Editor’s Narrative,” which describes the plot of the novel as a story about real people that the Editor has gleaned from “tradition,” “handed down to the world in unlimited abundance” (1). The Editor then tells a version of the life of the novel’s main character, Robert Wringhim, Laird of Dalcastle, revealing that “parish registers” confirm that the lands of Dalcastle were possessed by the Colwan family, “about one hundred and fifty years ago,” the time of Wringhim’s life (1). Thus the Editor casts himself as a historian who has researched the plight of the Colwan family and who is offering us an alternate (and ostensibly more authoritative version) of the events that will be described by Wringhim, the author of the manuscript that follows.

The Editor recounts Wringhim’s upbringing, his strict adherence to Calvinist doctrine, as well as his heinous deeds, including the murders of his brother and mother. Occasionally the Editor’s voice breaks in to alert readers to particular sources of information (court records, interviews, etc.), but in general the narrative describes Wringhim’s life in the third-person. The second portion of the book, titled “Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Sinner, written by himself,” purports to be the real manuscript penned by Wringhim, discovered by the Editor in Wringhim’s grave, and it offers readers a second, first-person account of the events already articulated by the Editor. Here, we learn that Wringhim’s deeds were done in consultation with

and, sometimes, at the bidding of a companion, Gil-Martin. The precise nature of Gil-Martin as a character is unclear. He could be read as the Devil himself, or as a powerful figment of Wringhim's imagination, or as an entirely fictive scapegoat invented by Wringhim in order to make him appear less like a vindictive murderer and more like an innocent victim in his "Confessions."

The book closes with a second Editor's narrative that recounts how he came into possession of Wringhim's manuscript. Here, we learn that the Editor read a letter in the August 1823 issue of *Blackwood's*, signed by "James Hogg."^{xi} In this letter Hogg describes a grave "on top of a wild height called Cowan croft," and the local lore surrounding its contents ("A Scots Mummy" 198). Hogg discloses a young shepherd's discovery of Wringhim's body nearly a hundred years ago and describes the recent exhumation of his corpse:

One of the young men seized the rope and pulled by it, but the old enchantment of the devil remained,—it would not break; and so he pulled and pulled at it, till behold the body came up into a sitting posture, with a broad blue bonnet on its head, and its plain around it, as fresh as the day it was laid in! I never heard of preservation so wonderful, if it be true as was related to me, for still I have not had the curiosity to go and view the body myself. ("A Scots Mummy" 190)

The novel's "Editor," however, does have the curiosity that Hogg professes to lack, and the concluding pages of the book describe his trip from London to the Scottish Borderlands (where he meets the Shepherd), his own exhumation of the body and the discovery of Wringhim's manuscript.

The Editorial gestures in *Sinner*, its framed narrative, as well as its cameo of the Ettrick Shepherd link it to *Blackwood's* on both formal and thematic levels.^{xii} And it does seem clear that Hogg's use of the Shepherd in the novel functions as a reprisal for his treatment at the hands

of the magazine, especially Hogg's exclusion from the magazine's "satirical interchange" (Garside "Introduction" xli). When Hogg is denied access to the synthetic world of the magazine, he creates a synthetic world in a novel and, via his letter to the Editor, creates the means by which the Shepherd may be transported. This transport is not entirely successful, however, because, as we have seen, an avatar is not so much a singular entity as a series of iterations. As an avatar, the Shepherd operates as a set of metadata that functions as a marker of James Hogg's identity; when the Shepherd changes locales, the new qualities associated with him in that place do not replace the old version but are instead added to it, creating a palimpsest that, to borrow a term from social-text theory, functions as a "dynamic discourse field" (Jones 268).

Thus, when Hogg writes the Shepherd into his novel, he does not steal him from *Blackwood's* but instead replicates him, creating a new version of the Shepherd that, by virtue of his new environment, necessarily differs from the version in "Noctes." The Shepherd that appears in *Sinner* is a user-generated version of the avatar that inhabits a world that, unlike *Blackwood's*, is created and controlled by Hogg. In this way, the Shepherd of *Sinner* rivals the Shepherd generated by Wilson in *Blackwood's*, but fiction ultimately proves to be an inhospitable medium for the Shepherd, at least with regard to any effort on Hogg's part to modify readers' perception of himself via their engagement with *Sinner's* Shepherd. As the final portion of this essay will show, the Shepherd in *Sinner* does not replace the Shepherd of *Blackwood's* but instead creates a version of him that lives in a synthetic realm that is so far removed from Edinburgh periodical culture, both virtually and materially, as to be incomprehensible .

As several critics of the novel have noted, *Sinner* is a difficult read.^{xiii} Its narrators are unreliable; its structure is confusing; and its plot is full of inconsistencies. As Ian Campbell remarks, the novel "uniquely and brilliantly, exists on its own terms and refuses to conform to critical analysis" (191). Yet rather than read this difficulty as a function of Hogg's "ambivalence

toward his readers” (Oost 87), or his “championship of Scottish identity and tradition” (Harnish 40), we might read it as a function of the avatar’s relationship to his synthetic worlds. For like *Blackwood’s* mixing of textual elements (in which origins and authorship are elided or distorted), *Sinner* blurs boundaries in order to create a habitable (that is, hybrid) realm for its avatars. For example, in the first part of the novel, the “Editor” of Robert Wringhim’s manuscript immediately distorts the borders of subjective experience and communal history by combining local lore with the “confessions” he claims to have discovered. “I am certain,” he tells us, “that in recording the hideous events which follow, I am only relating to the greater part of the inhabitants of at least four counties of Scotland, matters of which they were before perfectly well informed” (3). The events described in the book have a presence not only in the world of the text, but also in the real world as “history, judiciary records, and tradition” (64). Like *Blackwood’s*, which combined heterogeneous materials without consistent markers, Hogg’s novel combines these sources into one “Editor’s Narrative,” creating a synthetic realm in which it is difficult to discern reality from fiction.

It is at this point, however, that the novel and periodical part ways. For if “Noctes” creates a synthetic world once removed from the actual people, places, and events of Edinburgh, the novel’s synthetic world is removed by a factor of two, underscoring the tension between material and immaterial aspects of identity. The events of the novel’s first part are predicated upon the “actual” history the Editor describes, but this is a fictional version of the actual, asking readers to consciously suspend their disbelief in a way unnecessary for periodical consumption (in which readers are asked to take seriously any claims to authenticity). Readers of the novel are instead confined to a virtual realm with no grounding, no persistence in real life; the only ostensible grounding comes from the Editor’s claims to “history” and “records,” but he proves to be an inconsistent, suspect, and unreliable narrator. For not only does he fail to distinguish

between Wringhim's subjective experience and "tradition," both of these sources are fabrications, embedded in the larger fabrication of Hogg's fictional work (of which the Editor is a fictional character). In his evasion of genre, put upon him by the material constraints of *Blackwood's*, Hogg creates a unique kind of novel that elides interpretive authority.

In the second section of the novel, Wringhim creates an additional, but no more decipherable, world, beginning with his identification via Calvinist doctrine. Because he believes he is justified, he commits all acts of sin in the name of God's vengeance: "I was . . . 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" (79). Like *Blackwood's*, the action described in the novel by both the Editor and by Wringhim exists in two related realms that these narrators classify as real and virtual, but whose boundaries are difficult to draw. Wringhim makes claims about (1) his (actual) life, as well as (2) the (textual) "Lamb's book of life." He may be able to ground one in the other, but from the reader's perspective, both of these realms exist in the same place—Hogg's novel—as two parallel synthetic fields of meaning wholly divorced from the real.

When Gil-Martin is introduced into the narrative, Hogg's audience is thrust into another fabricated version of reality, built on the ones constructed (unreliably) by the Editor and by Wringhim. Under the influence of Gil-Martin, Wringhim morphs into a monster:

There was scarcely an hour in the day on which my resolves were not animated by my great friend [Gil-Martin], till I at length I began to have a longing desire to kill my brother, in particular. Should any man ever read this scroll, he will wonder at this confession, and deem it savage and unnatural. So it appeared to me at first, but a constant thinking of an event changes every one of its features. (101)

Because this kind of “constant thinking” happens in the interchange between two entities—a subject (Wringhim) and a (possibly) imagined manifestation of this subject (Gil-Martin)—it is tempting to read the latter as an avatar for Wringhim. But Gil-Martin does not live in a virtual realm associated with Wringhim’s “real” life, but instead the same, fictional world created by Hogg. In fact, Wringhim is at great pains to tell us that Gil-Martin was at his side, persuading him to perform his heinous deeds, every step of the way—“I have performed no great or interesting action in which he had not a principal share” (94). Of course, readers are not meant to actually excuse Wringhim in this case. The Editor, after all, has already apprised us of the “facts” of Wringhim’s life, as re-told in certain circles nearly 100 years later, and, in his own exercise of self-delusion, has already cast judgment:

I have now the pleasure of presenting my readers with an original document of a most singular nature, and preserved for their perusal in a still more singular manner. I offer no remarks on it, and make as few additions to it, leaving every one to judge for himself. We have heard much of the rage of fanaticism in former days, but nothing to this. (64)

Readers should judge the work for themselves, the Editor tells us, but at the same time the author is a raging fanatic whose text is now sandwiched between the Editor’s two original, subjective, compositions.

It is no wonder that Robert Kiely argues that, in *Sinner*, the reader “is encouraged to weigh and to compare but discouraged from drawing conclusions. He senses early in the narrative that to adopt one system or one vocabulary . . . is to ignore or annihilate the others” (218). This hesitance to make any suppositions, I would add, is a result of Hogg’s importation of a *Blackwood’s* convention—the creation of a synthetic Scotland in print—into a novel. For readers of the periodical would have known to look for meaning in the interaction between real and virtual worlds; it is only when the virtual becomes so highly removed from the real in the

genre of fiction that the impulse to “adopt one system or one vocabulary” might arise. *Sinner* asks to be read like a periodical, but it closes off this possibility by over-constructing its virtual worlds. Instead of creating a space within which readers might create meaning—“a possibility space of multiple dimensions” (Jones 272)—the novel exists on a horizontal plane of parallel synthetic worlds whose elements have no clear embodied corollaries in reality. Like the sprawling landscapes of *Second Life*, in which swaths of virtual land are sometimes abandoned by the avatars who created or purchased them, Hogg’s novel leaves readers suspended in a realm where interaction is impossible.

* * *

The generic conventions that worked well for *Blackwood’s* in terms of the magazine’s literary and commercial success result in confusion and inscrutability for Hogg’s readers. It is a generic dilemma that the Editor himself seems aware of at the end of the novel, when he describes his encounter with the Shepherd. The Editor tells us that, when he first read Hogg’s letter in the August 1823 issue of *Blackwood’s*, he took a half-hearted interest: “So often had I been hoaxed by the ingenious fancies displayed in that Magazine, that when this relation met my eye, I did not believe it; but from the moment I pursued it, I half formed the resolution of investigating these wonderful remains personally, if any such existed” (169). He casts his pursuance of the matter as an afterthought, a “half formed” notion, but also as a “resolution.” Later, he protests a bit too much when he casts his search for the grave as a feat of happenstance: “having some business in Edinburgh in September last, and being obliged to wait a few days for the arrival of a friend from London, I took that opportunity to pay a visit to my townsman and fellow collegian,” John Gibson Lockhart (169).^{xiv} They discuss the letter and Lockhart (or, more precisely, his avatar) tells the Editor, “For my part I never doubted the [letter], . . . But God

knows! Hogg has imposed as ingenious lies on the public ere now” (169). At the Editor’s bidding, Lockhart makes arrangements for them to visit the grave.

On the way, they encounter the Shepherd, who is selling sheep at a market in Thirlestane Fair, in Ettrick valley. This is Hogg’s version of the Shepherd, but like all avatars his identity is a direct function of his social interaction in a virtual realm. In this particular interaction, Lockhart opens with a lie, telling the Shepherd that the Editor is a “wool-stapler” interested in purchasing some sheep (170). The Shepherd, however, is incredulous and, when asked to take them to the grave mentioned in his letter he refuses, saying “I hae ither matters to mind,” namely his sheep:

I hae a’ thae paulies to sell, an’ a’ yon Highland stotts doen on the green every ane; an’ then I hae ten scores ‘ yowes to buy after, and’ if I canna first sell my ain stock, I canna buy nae ither body’s. I hae mair ado than I can manage the day, foreby ganging to houk up hunder-year-auld banes. (170)

In this iteration of the Shepherd, his choice is determined solely by his occupation and the economic interests therein, as opposed to his literary or urban identities. But because these other identities are not destroyed but instead just momentarily elided, it is not long until they emerge. Even though Lockhart and the Editor are forced to search for the grave without the Shepherd, they discover just one page later that the original location described in the *Blackwood’s* letter is false. At this point, the sole element of Hogg’s novel that might link the virtual with the real (however tenuously), the Shepherd’s letter, is revealed to be a fabrication. Moreover, readers are reminded of the Shepherd’s association with the magazine.

Lockhart and the Editor eventually find the grave and, upon exhuming the body and taking Wringhim’s manuscript (along with other relics, including body parts and clothing), the Editor takes up the labor of publishing Wringhim’s memoir, even though he purports not to “understand” it (174). This episode marks another place where the real and virtual collide, as the

manuscript's placement on the body of Wringhim's corpse underscores the presence of the material conditions that are always necessary in order for the virtual to function. Revising the manuscript is a vulgar enterprise that belies the Editor's self-presentation as a disinterested, amateur ethnographer, particularly in the first Editor's narrative, but publication might also sever the ghastly relationship he has established with Wringhim's text, releasing it into the public domain in the same way Wringhim's suicide released him from Gil-Martin. The Editor tells us that "in order to escape from an ideal tormentor, [Wringhim] committed that act for which, according to the tenets he embraced, there was no remission, and which consigned his memory and his name to everlasting detestation" (175). But "Everlasting detestation" is exactly what Wringhim hopes to avoid by writing his version of the story. By exhuming Wringhim's narrative, then framing it with his own texts, the Editor takes control of Wringhim's legacy and marks it with data from tradition, records, local lore, and his own competing account of his life.

Meanwhile, Hogg, like Wringhim, has also lost control of his identity in print. In *Sinner*, Hogg attempts to regain some control by stealing back the Shepherd, putting him in a novel, and turning him against *Blackwood's* by refusing to help finish the story that Hogg began there in August 1823. But the Shepherd persists in all his manifestations—not just those under Hogg's control—including the second Editor's narrative, which intersects with the Shepherd's identity and interactions in *Blackwood's*. The novel expands the Shepherd's synthetic realm, then, but it cannot eradicate the Shepherd or his previous iterations; the Shepherd will always exist in some form, somewhere, under somebody's control. However, by placing the Shepherd in fiction Hogg does put him out of reach, at least temporarily, by placing him in a synthetic Scottish countryside that, while still subject to *Blackwood's*, is distanced from the magazine and its synthetic world in several key ways.

First, Hogg locates the Shepherd in a rural setting nearly thirty miles south of Edinburgh, out of the urban context within which *Blackwood's* held most of its power.^{xv} Second, in *Sinner*, the Shepherd resides in a novel published not by William Blackwood but by Longman & Co (a London firm). Third, readers of the novel encounter the Shepherd in a narrative whose claim to authenticity resides in 1) an untrustworthy Editor's narrative and 2) an untrustworthy letter that places the Editor (and readers) off course. And, finally, in the novel the Shepherd not only refuses to assist the Editor and Lockhart in "the unseemly business of exhuming the traditions of his countryside for public amusement" (Duncan 173), he chooses instead to tend to his sheep (another repudiation of the urbanites' labor and a tacit nod, perhaps, to Hogg's earlier pastoral poetry). If Hogg cannot wrest from Wilson control of the *Blackwood's* synthetic realm (and by extension all the metadata that tags the avatars that populate that realm), he can put the Shepherd out of Wilson's reach in a competing space.

If Hogg's novel is a partial success in his skirmish with *Blackwood's*—one that can't entirely deflect or repossess his avatar—that partial success proves instructive for those of us interested in Romantic readership. For in the end, Hogg's success *is* the reader's frustration, as he derails a Blackwoodian version of media culture in a manner that not only seems way ahead of his time, but also teaches us more about our current understanding of virtual worlds. In his creation of an alternative virtual realm that subverts narrative expectations, Hogg asks his audience to read with the recognition of a significant difference between materiality and the immaterial identities made possible by virtual media. In our current consumption of such media, the connection between the two is often what garners interest; an anonymous blogger, game player, or user of social media becomes more interesting to bigger segments of the culture at large when it is revealed to be an avatar of a politician, celebrity, or intellectual figure. This interest, Hogg warns us, can be misleading and destructive, as it ignores issues of media control

and the extent to which avatars do not just exist but instead *live* in virtual realms; as they function, they perform actions and acquire persistent metadata from a variety of sources that complicate any relationship they might share with the identities of real-world referents. As we attempt to comprehend the context of periodical culture in Romantic-era Edinburgh—one marked heavily by personality, reputation, and alternate modes of existence that resonate in our own age of social media—Hogg’s avatar reminds us of the ways in which Romanticism can be surprisingly virtual, and our own world more surprisingly material, than we might think.

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ⁱ The Shepherd is, indeed, so entwined with the real-life Hogg that he is sometimes identified as “Hogg” in “Noctes” and called “James” by other characters. For the sake of clarity, in this essay I will use the name “Hogg” to refer to the person James Hogg and “the Shepherd” when referring to Hogg’s avatar in print.

ⁱⁱ See especially Alexander, Garside, Duncan, Hughes, Oost.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Meadows for a concise history of the computer avatar, as well as an account of his experience using avatars in various contexts.

^{iv} I am adapting Castronova’s definition of *synthetic worlds*: “crafted places inside computers that are designed to accommodate large numbers of people” (2). Although I recognize that “synthetic” is a critically loaded term, I find Castronova’s use of it helpful insofar as it acknowledges the simultaneously material and immaterial aspects of identity embedded in the avatar. Even though avatars are not actual people, they exist *inside* actual objects in the form of circuits, wires, and silicon.

^v In 2005, Edward Castronova, Professor of Telecommunications at Indiana University, estimated that the “commerce flow generated by people buying and selling money and other virtual items (that is, magic wands, spaceships, armor) amounts to at least \$30 million annually in the United States, and \$100 million globally” (Castronova 2).

^{vi} See Carpenter and Griffin for an account of teaching within ESMG's virtual writing center space.

^{vii} See Alexander, Parker for a comprehensive discussion of these characters and their real-world counterparts.

^{viii} In a broader sense, all magazines, newspapers and other sequential publications are affected by context, including (but not limited to) the issues that came before. For a thorough account of the context of *Blackwood's* and other literary magazines, see Parker, *Literary Magazines and British Romanticism*.

^{ix} See Garside, Hughes, Oost on the history of Hogg's relationship with the magazine. In particular, Garside argues that the process of creating a non-intellectual, "gargoyle-like 'Hogg' persona" can be traced back to August 1821 and Wilson's scathing review of Hogg's memoir ("Introduction" xxxix).

^x Lockhart's infamous characterization of Hogg as a "boozing buffoon" would appear years later in the *Quarterly Review* (82).

^{xi} There is a critical consensus that, despite his difficulties with the magazine, Hogg did in fact compose the letter that constitutes "The Scots Mummy" in the August 1823 issue of the magazine.

^{xii} Garside discusses *Sinner's* engagement with "salient features" of what he calls the "Blackwoodian novel": western provinciality; innovative narrative modes; anonymity; single-volume publication. These features mark the novels published by William Blackwood in the 1820s and serve as a touchstone for Garside's analysis of *Sinner* and the ways in which it functions as an "anti-Blackwoodian novel" ("Blackwoodian Novel" 13).

^{xiii} See Campbell for a cogent and comprehensive overview of the novel's critical reception.

^{xiv} In another layer of metafiction that I do not have room to discuss here, Garside argues that the presence of an editor and “editor’s narrative” is meant to mock the structure of novels by Lockhart, Wilson, and John Galt—all published by Blackwood (“Blackwoodian Novel” 14).

^{xv} See Garside’s “Historical and Geographical Note” for a discussion of several historical events and significant locations throughout the text.

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