

**“In the dream he was awake”:
Ontological instability
in James Robertson’s *The Fanatic***

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Abstract

Set in the seventeenth and late twentieth centuries, James Robertson’s first novel *The Fanatic* (2000) is not only a powerful exploration of Scottish history and the interrelationships between past and present, but also an example of historical metafiction, concerned with the nature of historical and fictional reconstructions. As this article argues, the world model created in *The Fanatic* is characterized by inherent epistemological and ontological instability, visible at all levels of the text’s construction. The two plot lines, the seventeenth century past and the twentieth century present, initially set apart, increasingly blur and permeate each other until finally it is impossible to tell what is past and what is present, what is “real” and what re-constructed or imagined. The ontological status of the narrated events is equally unstable, as they often turn out to be false memories, hallucinations or delusions of the characters, while the fictionality of the characters is foregrounded by means of intertextual allusions. Finally, the status and reliability of the seemingly objective, heterodiegetic narrator becomes increasingly questionable as the story unfolds. Far from despairing of the possibility of offering a reliable historical reconstruction; however, the novel celebrates the very instability, which allows for constant imaginative reinterpretation and renewal of the past in the present, and of reality in fiction.

Keywords

Scottish history, Covenanters, Gothic convention, metahistory, metafiction

**„Śniło mu się, że nie spał”:
Ontologiczna niestabilność w powieści
Jamesa Robertsona *The Fanatic***

Abstrakt

Powieść *The Fanatic* Jamesa Robertsona, której akcja toczy się w Szkocji w XVII oraz XX wieku, należy uznać za przykład historycznej metafikcji, podejmującej problematykę związków między przeszłością a teraźniejszością oraz natury historycznych i fikcyjnych reprezentacji. Artykuł dowodzi, że model świata stworzony w powieści *The Fanatic* charakteryzuje ontologiczna i epistemologiczna niestabilność, widoczna na wszystkich poziomach konstrukcji tekstu. Dwa główne wątki, siedemnastowieczny i dwudziestowieczny, choć z początku wydają się niezależne od siebie, z biegiem akcji coraz częściej zaczynają się przenikać, co sprawia, że niemożliwe staje się ustalenie, co należy do przeszłości, a co do teraźniejszości, co jest „prawdziwe”, a co wyobrażone. Status ontologiczny opowiadanych wydarzeń również jest niestabilny, często bowiem okazuje się, że są to fałszywe wspomnienia, halucynacje lub złudzenia bohaterów. Status samych bohaterów także jest podważany przez aluzje intertekstualne, wskazujące na ich fikcjonalność. Wreszcie status i wiarygodność pozornie trzecioosobowego, heterodiegetycznego narratora w miarę upływu czasu z również okazują się coraz bardziej dyskusyjne. Powieść nie jest jednak wyrazem rozpaczki w obliczu niemożności zaoferowania wiarygodnej historycznej rekonstrukcji; wręcz przeciwnie, to właśnie owa niestabilność pozwala na ciągłą reinterpretację i odnawianie się przeszłości w teraźniejszości i rzeczywistości w fikcji.

Słowa kluczowe

historia Szkocji, kowenantery, konwencja gotycka, metahistoria, metafikcja

The second half of the 1990s abounded in important symbolic and political developments in Scotland. In 1996, the Stone of Scone made its way back to Edinburgh after sitting for seven hundred years in St Edward's Chair in Westminster. In 1997, the Labour Party's victory in the polls brought an end to Conservative rule (not too popular in Scotland) as well as a promise of a devolution referendum. The referendum duly took place, and in 1998 the Scotland Act established the Scottish Parliament and government, the first since the Act of Union of 1707. This was certainly a milestone in Scottish history and a tangible institutional expression of a distinctive Scottish identity.

Identities, however, are complex constructs rather than natural or organic givens (cf. Anderson 1991). As sociological surveys revealed growing levels of Scottish national feeling and scholars debated the state of the Union and a possible dissolution of Britishness, the nature of Scottish identity and Scotland's national aspirations also became a subject of scrutiny. Was it, as some scholars suggested, that "Britishness, as a largely instrumental device, [was] shed, revitalizing pre-Union identities" (Keating 365), in this case the Scottish one? Or was modern Scottishness a new construct, moulded by forces such as the welfare state, European integration, or opposition to centralisation and privatisation under the Conservative government? Or did the "contents" of identity – as well as its political implications, including the possibility of independence – perhaps differ from individual to individual? Were they in some cases based on culture and history, in some cases on modern institutions?

The "revitalization" hypothesis, in any case, poses quite a few problems in its own right. A "revitalize[d] pre-Union" Scottish identity would be primarily grounded in the history and culture of the seventeenth century, a particularly turbulent period of religious controversy and civil war in Scotland, with its bitter disputes between Covenanters, radical Presbyterians following their inner sense of election and opposed to royal interference

in the matters of Church organization, and Episcopalians, relying on the spiritual and political guidance of bishops appointed by the king. Thus at least two questions immediately present themselves: one concerning the way in which such a “pre-Union” identity might be accessed and (re-) constructed, the other about the meaning and relevance of such a legacy three hundred years later, in a modern and largely secular state.

These questions are addressed in James Robertson’s *The Fanatic*, published in 2000.¹ This was a novelistic debut for Robertson, holder of a doctorate from Edinburgh University on the subject of history in the novels of Sir Walter Scott, author of a short story collection *Close* and editor of a book of *Scottish Ghost Stories*, as well as a political activist involved in the Scottish national movement who soon went on to become the first Writer-in-Residence at the Scottish Parliament in 2004. The author’s creative and political background – with its intersection between the real and imaginative/metaphysical: Scottish history, politics, literature and Gothic ghosts – informs the construction of the fictional world in *The Fanatic* as well as the novel’s main thematic concerns.

For *The Fanatic* is a book tantalizingly poised between – between past and present, between history and fiction, and between literary tradition and (post)modernity. The novel follows two plots and two timelines, charting the seventeenth-century conflicts immediately prior to the Union, and the much more recent months preceding the 1997 general election, which for many constituted the first step towards the dissolution of the said Union. The seventeenth-century plot line follows the history of Major Thomas Weir, a Presbyterian “saint” executed in 1670 for incest and witchcraft, and of James Mitchel, his protégé, executed in 1678 for the attempted killing of Archbishop James Sharp. The twentieth-century sections of the book show its modern protagonist Andrew Carlin, who works as a ghost of

¹ For a discussion of Robertson’s novels in the context of Scottish identity, see Philip (2011: 171-188).

Major Weir in Edinburgh Old Town, researching Weir's (and Mitchel's) history in the hope of uncovering and understanding its hidden significance. Carlin is also a historian of his own past, trying to overcome personal traumas and arrive at a viable version of his own identity. Thus *The Fanatic* is both a powerful evocation of crucial moments in Scottish seventeenth- and twentieth-century history and an exploration of the inter-relationships between past and present (at both personal and national level) and of the nature of historical reconstructions and fictional representations. In what follows, I intend to examine these (meta)historical and (meta)fictional aspects of the novel,² suggesting that the world created in *The Fanatic* is characterized by unknowability and ontological instability visible at all levels of the text: from the paratextual epigraphs preceding the text proper, through the construction of the fictional world to its intertextual and thematic concerns.

The Fanatic opens with a series of epigraphs from seventeenth-century Scottish texts. These provide an introduction to the novel's spatial and temporal setting as well as several of the historical characters whose lives will cross on its pages. Thus, an excerpt from Sir John Lauder's *Journals* presents Major Thomas Weir, a Presbyterian "saint"-turned-fiend (and then one of the most famous of Edinburgh's numerous ghosts) and his sister and partner in witchcraft and incest, Jean. Lauder himself, a well-known Scottish lawyer and memoirist, is also an important figure in the book. A quotation from a sermon by Hugh Binning foreshadows the preoccupation with the Covenanters, while a snatch of a satirical poem introduces Archbishop James Sharp, a Covenanter-turned-Episcopalian, whose assassination provides a focal point for the seventeenth-century plot.

At the same time, all three passages are linked by the motif of doubleness and duplicity, of the unknowability of both human beings and the world as such. All of them are concerned

² My thinking about the nature of history as well as historiographic metafiction has been primarily influenced by the writings of Hayden White (1976, 1992, 2005, 2008) and Linda Hutcheon (1988).

with differences between reality and appearance, truth and deceit/delusion/illusion and the difficulty of ascertaining the truth. Things, as the epigraphs warn, are not what they seem. The quotation from Lauder's *Journals* is built of a set of contrasts between Weir's outward "show of godliness" and his inward moral corruption, and between the physical "frailty" of the body and the enormity of transgression. While Lauder is obviously shocked by this, he is still able to feel human sympathy towards both Weir and his sister. This kind of leniency, I suspect, would not go down well with Hugh Binning, the leading Covenanter minister who is the author of the next epigraph. Like Lauder, however, Binning is also concerned with the way outward appearance masks the ugly truth: "albeit [the world] seems a fine and beautiful thing in the eyes of them that know no better [...] yet the truth is [...] it is near the grave". Finally, deception, as already mentioned, is the explicit subject of a stanza from a satirical poem on Archbishop James Sharp. In other words, right from the start the reader is warned about the unknowability of the world and human motivations as well as the impossibility of arriving at incontestable truth.

What is more, the juxtaposition of the quotations, right at the beginning of the novel, requires that the reader engage in a complex process of comparing and contrasting sources, making judgments about their reliability and underlying world view, inferring character and mentality from the tone of voice, and the socio-cultural background from the language and themes taken up by the writers of the epigraphs. This foreshadows the preoccupations of many of the characters in the novel, who are all in their different ways busy interpreting texts in search of truth, whether it is the Covenanters, like Weir and Mitchel, endlessly analysing the Bible, or lawyers like Sir John Lauder, producing and scrutinising legal documents. In particular, the process by which the reader becomes engaged in the imaginative reconstruction of the past from available textual evidence foreshadows and parallels the research undertaken by Andrew Carlin, the protagonist of the modern plot. The reader, in other words,

becomes a historian, faced with authentic sources from the period, from which he/she tries to (re-)construct a coherent narrative, activating interpretative strategies associated with historical research. She/he is also invited to repeat the creative process of a writer of historical fiction, who interprets and then imaginatively transforms his/her sources. As such, even before the text proper begins, the reader is already faced with metaliterary and metahistorical questions about history and fiction, as well as the ontological status of both.

If the epigraphs already implicate the reader in a complex metaliterary and metahistorical game, the Prologue to the novel, subtitled "(Bass Rock, March 1677)" takes the questioning of the distinction between (historical) truth and fiction even further. In terms of the plot, the Prologue obviously functions as an exposition, introducing the time and place of the action, as well as one of the novel's main characters: James Mitchel, the titular fanatic. As Mitchel floats in and out of sleep, the main contours of his story (the assassination attempt, the interrogation, the torture) emerge from his memories and solidify into the actual situation of his imprisonment on Bass Rock. Yet, while the use of verifiable historical details gives the passage an air of authenticity and reliability, the uncertain, liminal quality of the experience (between night and day, dream and waking, past and present) throws doubt on its ontological status:

James Mitchel was dreaming. This kind of dream that mocks, constantly slipping in doubts: this is real, this is not real.

In the dream he was awake and lying in bed. The room was heavy and warm with the smell of woman. He lay there in the growing light and felt the sadness rise from the pit of his belly, a physical thing [...] The dawn squeezed into the room. He reached out for Lizzie, and felt cold stone. [...] He was lying in a tiny, damp cell that smelt of salt and urine. (*F* 1³)

³ Henceforth in the references the title will be abbreviated to *F*. All references are to: James Robertson, *The Fanatic*, London: Fourth Estate, 2001.

The world in *The Fanatic* is itself “a kind of dream that mocks, constantly slipping in doubts: this is real, this is not real”. Indeed, as has already been suggested, the question “what is real” is the central problem in the novel. However, as is the case with Mitchel’s dream in which he was awake, both the characters’, and the reader’s, assumptions about the nature of the world are constantly undercut. For the novel not only projects an unknowable world of shifting appearances, where nothing is what it seems. It also progressively undermines the very basis on which we might with any certainty build our notions of (fictional) “fact” or “truth”. In other words, the world model created in *The Fanatic* is characterized by inherent epistemological and ontological instability. This instability is visible in the construction of the fictional world: its characters, plot, and setting. It is reflected in the narrative technique, with the status and reliability of the seemingly objective third person narrator becoming increasingly questionable as the story unfolds – not least because the narrated events turn out to be false memories, hallucinations or delusions. Finally, it is visible in the compositional arrangement of the two plot lines, the past and the present. Initially kept neatly apart in their respective sections under headings such as “Bass Rock, March 1677”, “Rotterdam, January 1667”, or “Edinburgh 1997”, they begin to blur and permeate each other until finally the reader no longer knows what is past and what is present, what is “real” and what imagined.

Instability seems to be an inherent feature of the world presented in the historical parts of the novel. Seventeenth-century Scotland in *The Fanatic* is a country torn apart by conflicts between people who are ready to lay down their lives, or, alternatively, kill, for their convictions.⁴ However, underneath fanaticism one senses that the level of violence manifesting itself in battles, rebellions, witch hunts, assassinations and public

⁴ For a general introduction to this period in Scottish history, see, for example, Lynch (1992: 247-299) or Mitchison (2002: 153-222). For a more extensive discussion of the depiction of the Covenanters in *The Fanatic* see Vijeja (2010: 133-134).

executions is directly proportional to the underlying uncertainty about the nature of reality. On the religious and political level, society is divided into Covenanters and Episcopalians. Each faction professes a different version of Christianity, from technicalities of prayer and church organization to the most vital questions of salvation, and each posits a different vision of social order. As they fight out their differences on battlefields and in courts, the heads of the executed, rotting above Edinburgh's Tolbooth, mark the temporary victories of one or the other side. Yet neither of the sides, for obvious reasons, can prove the ultimate truth of their convictions: the very existence of opponents throws doubt on one's own beliefs. At the same time, on the margins, a new, secular and atheist vision begins to emerge, questioning the very idea of God and the truth and value of religion.

It is not only a world in which the split of public opinion makes it impossible to arrive at a uniform interpretation of reality and a reliable moral or political judgment. Despite the vehemence of religious convictions, it is also a world of unpredictable changes of allegiance. Thus people's true character and motivations are a mystery, and no one can be trusted to be who they appear to be. Again, on the political plane, the most spectacular of such swings of persuasion is the case of James Graham, Marquis of Montrose, signing the Covenant in 1638 and defending its cause on the battlefield, only to turn royalist, leading an army of Catholic Highlanders and "Irishes" against the Covenanter forces. Mitchel's arch-enemy and the target of his assassination attempt, Archbishop James Sharp, is also a turncoat: a Covenanter sent to England to fight against bishops, only to return an archbishop himself. The same kind of uncertainty as to people's real character, and the lack of grounds on which to make reliable judgments, stands behind the witch hunts reported in the novel. Thus, one by one, ordinary, respectable wives and mothers are accused, tortured, and found guilty of witchcraft. The accusations are levelled by Jonet Douglas, herself a highly mysterious character, a girl who at first is mute yet

apparently understands five languages, then mysteriously regains the power of speech. Here, too, the true motivations remain elusive, while a profound suspicion of outward appearances erupts in violence.

But the supreme example of people's ultimate unknowability is provided, obviously, by Major Thomas Weir, one of the central characters in the novel, a Presbyterian "saint", a respected member of the "godly" party, an inspirational preacher, a pillar of the community. As it turns out, however, this façade hides not just plain physical brutality, but all kinds of sexual excesses, including incestuous relationships with his sister and stepdaughter, as well as "carnal dealings with a mare and a cow" (*F* 185). Yet Weir is not simply a hypocrite, but a man misled as to his own nature and the nature of his religion. A justified sinner, he experiences a spiritual awakening in the best Calvinist tradition, and trusts he can do no wrong. In a chilling moment of revelation, however, he realizes that a beautiful woman in his bed is not a body, but a spirit, not a she, but a he, not a bride from the Song of Songs but the devil himself, and that he has been chosen not for salvation, but for damnation. Weir's example has deeply unsettling implications for the whole world in which he lives, both in the political and religious sphere. It also becomes a constant source of anxiety for Mitchel, already deeply unsure about the reality of his election and the exact nature of his calling.

The stability of, and in, the fictional world is further undercut by the unchronological arrangement of the plot and by the narrative technique, which makes heavy use of flashbacks. This is sometimes reflected in section titles such as "Bass Rock, June 1677/ Edinburgh, April 1670". In other words, the narrative is frequently not an account of the past, but an account of memories of the past: memories which can already be distorted by the processes of forgetting, embellishing or plain self-deception. What is more, as the opening passage has already implied, memories share the same dubious ontological status as dreams. This equivalence is strengthened by frequent suggestions that

the events described are hallucinations, as the characters are shown to doubt their memories or even their present experience. For example, Weir comes to doubt the truth of his spiritual awakening; Mitchel is uncertain whether he really received a visit from his wife in the prison on Bass Rock; while Jean Weir questions if she hears real or imaginary voices. Scenes like this throw doubt not only on what "really" happened, but also on the reliability of the narrator.

The past/memory/dream equivalence acquires a further dimension by the juxtaposition of the seventeenth-century plot with the storyline set in the present. In this way, the past/dream association becomes a matter not just of the characters' personal history, but of Scottish national history. And, as has been amply demonstrated by metahistorical reflection undertaken by both historians and literary critics, the ontological status of the past and the study of the past is notoriously dubious: historians are perhaps alone in studying what literally does not exist. However, if the ontological status of the seventeenth-century fictional world is further destabilized by the introduction of the present plot, it is equally true that the ghosts of the past haunt and destabilize the present.

And some people make money on it. Hugh Hardie, who meets Jackie Halkit in the first modern section of the novel, desperately needs a ghost for his business: he runs ghost tours of Edinburgh and his last ghost has just walked out on him. In contrast to the historical sections of the novel, the names and details of Hardie's and Halkit's meeting seem at first glance mimetic enough. In fact, however, both figures are intertextual ghosts straight from Walter Scott's *Heart of Midlothian*, where characters bearing the same names famously complain about the fictional plots of novels: "The inventor of fictitious narratives has to rack his brains for means to diversify his tale, and after all can hardly hit upon characters or incidents which have not been used again and again, until they are familiar to the eye of the reader" (Scott 1818: ch. 1). Meanwhile, real stories of prisoners of the Edinburgh Tolbooth, stories "of guilt, crime,

imposture, folly, unheard-of misfortunes, and unlooked-for change of fortune [...] with examples sufficient to gorge even the public's all-devouring appetite for the wonderful and horrible" (Scott 1818: ch. 1), remain untold. The stories of Major Weir and James Mitchel – both prisoners of the Old Tolbooth – are precisely the kind of story that the stones of the Tolbooth might tell. It is thus entirely fitting that Hardie should employ Andrew Carlin and give him all the details that he needs to start on his quest to uncover a forgotten story of the Tolbooth in a pub called *The Heart of Midlothian*. At the same time, however, the ontological status of the present sections of the novel is immediately undermined by these intertextual allusions, and the novel exposes its own (meta)fictionality.

If Hugh Hardie and Jackie Halkit are intertextual ghosts, Andrew Carlin is a character haunted and haunting in a Gothic manner.⁵ Carlin not only plays a ghost for tourists, but is remarkably like a ghost himself. In fact, he is introduced into the novel as "a ghost out of [Jackie Halkit's] past" (*F* 14), and he immediately impresses Hugh Hardie with his spectral appearance. Over six foot tall, his complexion floury white, he is a sinister presence, filling people with inexplicable unease, and he has a habit of mysteriously appearing and disappearing. The Gothic tradition is also evoked in his regular conversations with a mirror, carrying overtones of a split personality, and suggesting that his stories may be confabulations rather than accounts of real experiences. A product of a dysfunctional marriage between a bullying father and emotionally unstable mother, Carlin is a lonely character, a social misfit, alienated and rejected by his peers, and haunted by guilt associated with the incident where he becomes involved in the death of a drug addict.

Carlin's ghostly, liminal status is established early on in the novel, when he is described as "the kind of man that might slip between worlds, if such a thing were possible. He inhabited his

⁵ For a general introduction to Scottish Gothic see, for example, Ducan (2012). For a thorough analysis of the use of Gothic conventions in *The Fanatic* see Morace (2011: 22-36).

days like a man in a dream, or like a man in other people's dreams" (F 22). He also has an ability to "reach out and touch things that were long gone. [...] It was like having second sight in reverse" (F 24). Thus Carlin habitually lives in two worlds: the world of his memories, revealed through frequent flashbacks, and the world of the present, over which he increasingly loses control. His habit of seeing through the present into the past turns modern Edinburgh around him into a "dreamscape", with layers of the past and present superimposed on one another. When he undertakes his research into Major Weir, he begins to see not just images from his own past, but a whole ghostly seventeenth-century city underneath the modern façade, and remember not just his experiences, but experiences of other people. These have a frightening immediacy: as Carlin says "Real stuff disna feel real and the dwammy stuff does" (F 52).

Thus, as the "dwammy stuff" – the seventeenth-century part of the novel – becomes more real, the ontological status of the "real" twentieth century one grows increasingly problematic. It is not only that Carlin's memories are revealed to be unreliable: in a conversation with his mirror he recalls an incident from his student days, which, on the evidence provided by other people involved, could not have happened. It is also the present events: Carlin's research into Weir and Mitchel – that may be entirely a product of his imagination. This obviously affects the reader's trust in the reliability of the seemingly objective third person narration. The narrator thus presents Carlin's visit to the library, where he is served by a Mr MacDonald. MacDonald not only gives Carlin a number of books on Major Weir and seventeenth-century history, but also leads him to make a connection between the history of Weir and that of James Mitchel. In addition, he produces a copy of *Ane Secret Book*, a private supplement to Sir John Lauder's more public (and fully historical) *Journals*. This Gothic "found manuscript" supplies fascinating details omitted from official documents, giving insight into the hidden, private side of both Weir and Mitchel (and Lauder), and becomes the main source of Carlin's seventeenth-century-

obsessed dreams. However, as the mirror tells Carlin, he never went to the library – he spent his days sick in bed. While one cannot entirely trust talking mirrors, a later visit to the library related by the third person narrator reveals that there is no record of any secret book in the catalogue, nor has the library ever employed a man by the name of MacDonald.

If this suspends the present storyline in dreamy regions of ontological uncertainty, between memory and dream, it also further problematizes and destabilizes the relationship between the past and present plots of the novel. Although the sections set in the past precede the sections set in the present, and at first seem to have an existence independent of the present plot, as the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly obvious that they are inextricably connected, and that the connection is much deeper and more complex than the possible patterns of contrast or correspondence we might at first expect. Thus, as Carlin begins to read Lauder's *Ane Secret Book*, itself a document of dubious existence, the present section trails off and we move to "Edinburgh, April 1677" to witness the meeting between Lauder and his father-in-law, described in the past tense by the third person narrator who so far has seemed quite reliable. Is this, then, a heterodiegetic objective and omniscient narrator, situated outside the fictional world? Or is it all Carlin's imagination?

Such doubts as to the reliability of the past account multiply: soon the section titles are "Edinburgh, April 1997/July 1668", collapsing the past and present. While Carlin duly performs his haunting duties in the Old Town, he first begins to hear Lauder's voice in his head, then sees the district as it was in the seventeenth century, and finally, the crucial moments of Mitchel's life stand before his eyes, and are narrated in the present tense: his association with Weir, his jobs as a teacher, the years when he lives, yes, "like a spectre" (*F* 135) in Edinburgh, up to the formation and botched execution of his design to assassinate Archbishop Sharp, and finally his apprehension. Is the present tense of the account *praesens historicum*, or is it

literally present, as Carlin is making up Mitchel's story from scraps of information he found in historical books in the library, filling in the missing details with his imagination? Or, perhaps, can the past be a constant living presence, really haunting Carlin? In a novel full of talking mirrors, secret manuscripts and disappearing librarians, one cannot rule out the possibility of such ghostly intrusion. What is more, after this, it is impossible to trust the reliability of even those sections of the past narrative which have no such obvious connection with Carlin and his research, and are compositionally separate from the present storyline.

The same ontological instability pertains to the scene of Mitchel's trial, which is the climax of both the past and the present plot. In the section entitled, again, "Edinburgh, 1 May 1997/ January 1678", Jackie Halkit visits Carlin, to find his flat in a state of absolute disorder. The reason, as Carlin explains, is that "They pit him on trial" (F 257), evidently suggesting that the court proceedings against Mitchel took place in his humble abode. Then he relates the trial in the same objective, omniscient style which we have come to associate with the historical sections of the novel. Yet, even there, the growing certainty that the past account is just a product of Carlin's imagination is undercut. For right after Carlin complains about not having finished *Ane Secret Book*, and being left with loose ends, the loose ends are, to a certain extent, tied up. "Edinburgh 10, 11, January 1678", through the third person narration, closely allied with, but not solely restricted to, Lauder's point of view, revisits and draws together all the principal characters in the historical part of the novel, including Jean Weir the hanged witch and Jonet Douglas the malicious witchhunter, John Eleis the staunch lawyer and George Mackenzie the corrupt one. George Hickes, Archbishop Sharp's chaplain, is already busy concocting an account of Mitchel's trial, presenting him as the devil incarnate and an associate of the beastly Thomas Weir, while Mitchel himself is perfecting his dying speech by means of which he wants to be remembered by posterity. Finally, there is also

Lizzie Mitchel, listening to the breathing of her baby daughter, the identity of whose father she will never know (the father may equally well be her husband, or her husband's jailer on Bass Rock). Between them, all those characters represent the legacy that seventeenth-century, pre-Union Scotland bequeaths to the Scotland of the twentieth century: the private and the public, fanaticism and rationality, cruelty and compassion, law and inner light. Still, as in the case of all the previous historical sections of the novel, the ontological status of this Scotland, whether, again, this is Carlin's imagination, or a *bone fide* fictional representation of historical reality, remains elusive and uncertain.

However Gothic, uncertain and weird Carlin seems to be, his brush with seventeenth-century Scotland seems to bring some kind of acceptance of his life, if not quite a psychological integration. The account of Mitchel's trial is shared by Jackie Halkit, and is the first instance of full and real communication between Carlin and other characters in the novel. He smashes the mirror and concludes his research, feeling that "he had set them both [Weir and Mitchel] free and that they didn't need somebody going around play-acting on their behalf" (F 293). In a symbolic gesture, he leaves his Weir costume to a homeless girl, giving up his ghostly job if not the role of a medium between the past and the present. In the section set "after everything else is over [...], beyond the last page" (F 295), Carlin muses on both the inevitable gaps in our knowledge of the past and the human commitment to remember despite the past's ultimate uncertainty and unknowability:

It might be a feeble, helpless, tiny gesture, but it was something. An acknowledgement, a sign that you had once existed. [...] There was a kind of comfort in the way he was. He saw the worlds shifting and sliding over one another. You could slip between them. You could feel them moving through you. It was an amazing, miraculous feeling, if you only had the time for it. That was what you had to have: time. (F 306-307)

In the last analysis, then, both timelines appear equally ontologically unstable, equally problematic, as *The Fanatic* reveals the past to be a construct of the present, the present to be constructed by the past. From a metafictional point of view, this ontological instability is hardly surprising, for after all, all novelistic worlds are fictional, no matter how mimetic or how fantastic they are, no matter when their plots are set. Far from despairing of the fact, however, the novel celebrates the very instability, which allows for constant imaginative reinterpretation and renewal of the past in the present, of reality in fiction. As the past flows into the present, informing it and being transformed by it, to finally open up to the uncertain future, the history of Mitchel and Weir, told anew, becomes a message to 1997 Scotland facing the devolution referendum and the possibility of future independence. In the last paragraph of the novel

When he put the last coin down the last chute he would find he'd hardly spend a thing. For a while, it would be as though time had slowed to the pace it had had when he was a child. When he stepped back out into the afternoon, he would have to be grateful for that and then let it go. And outside, the people, the houses, the cars, the city and the long walk back into it, for a while at least they would be what was real. (*F* 308)

Where the beginning of *The Fanatic* was suspended between past and present, dream and reality, its last words are suspended between the present and the uncertain future, "real", in this context, being perhaps the most richly ambiguous of all the ambiguities in the novel.

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