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General Editor, *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*  
Department of Fine Arts  
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## **Performing the Holy Ghost: Revelations of the Reverend Edward Irving in 1830-31**

Written by  
**William Davies King**

Edward Irving was a British Presbyterian minister who died in 1834 at the age of 43. He was a powerful orator, a prolific writer, and a devout believer in Christian deliverance from worldly concerns. He faced his own day as a critical moment when all souls must be brought to Christ before the imminent arrival of the end-time, and he sought to carry out his role as evangelist to the last degree. He was not so strongly opinionated about theatres as his more strongly Calvinistic brethren, who believed that theatres were instruments of Satan, but he would surely resist any analogy between his church services and theatrical performances. Nevertheless, what happened in his church pressed the limits of performance in a way that deserves analysis as theatre, as well as comparison to public demonstrations of scientific phenomena. Seeking the larger context in which these episodes should be understood involves asking how something performed can undermine the power structure of the institution which sponsors the performance, and particularly how a "dark" phenomenon, such as an act which is thought to be driven by Satan, can expose the insubstantiality of the enlightened institution which is aimed at eliminating the possibility of such an act.

Around 1830, at just about the same time as the controversial Reform Bill of 1832 was being debated in Parliament, a parallel controversy was raging in the Established Church of Scotland. The Reform Bill would greatly increase the electorate and lessen the power of the nobility over the state, thus taking a significant step in the direction of re-centering the state's authority over the rights and duties of its citizens. Certain elements within the Scottish Presbyterian church had been seeking for nearly two centuries to reaffirm the church as the state religion by reconciling differences with the Episcopal Church of England. The Church of Scotland operated under the jurisdiction of the national courts until 1834, and the assignment of ministers to parishes was still done by noble patronage. Dissenting elements within the Presbyterian church agitated for Spiritual Independence, by which they meant a church that

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would have Christ alone as its sovereign and judge. The area of sharpest controversy was ministerial appointment.

The Presbyterian Church operates by means of the Presbytery, the assemblies and councils of elders who come from among the laity (the parishioners) as well as the clergy and who represent the body at regional and national meetings of the church. In contrast, the Catholic Church and the Church of England operate with a prelacy, an ecclesiastical hierarchy headed by the Pope (for Catholics) or the archbishop and a set of bishops for the Anglicans. The Presbytery ordains the minister of the Presbyterian Church. The bishops ordain the minister of the Episcopal Church. The bishops are considered the nobility, whether they were born noble, (which was still usually the case in this period,) or not, and who usually answers the "call" of the parish. That is, when a position becomes vacant, the presbyters seek a suitable minister, often from within the parish.

However, the heritage of most parish churches is that the sitting, i.e. manse (or parish house), the glebe (the parish land, which might be revenue-producing), and all the emoluments, might have been endowed by the local nobility who at one time had authority to appoint a minister. That authority was still reserved by the bishops of the Church of England and by the House of Lords, i.e. central state authority and ministerial authority. In some notable cases during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the choice of the parish (the laity) conflicted with the choice that came from the system of patronage. This led to considerable internal tension within the church.

Church and state were still deeply intertwined through this same period, and it is impossible to separate disagreements about the order of the Presbyterian Church from the political controversies of the day. Generally speaking, the Presbyterian Church administered its affairs by means of its ministers and presbyters, thus generally resembling the structure of government that had emerged in England in the eighteenth century, a structure of ministers and elected representatives. A modern scholar, Mehl, has characterized the presbyterian synodal system as

democratic and anti-episcopalian. It is democratic in the sense that it rests on the people, the members of the parishes, which originates all delegations and mandates. But it originates them only, for to the degree that a person rises in the hierarchy, the pressure from the base is diminished and the highest officials have a

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real independence *vis-à-vis* the parishes. Furthermore – and this is the anti-episcopalian principle – the presidents of the various executive councils are elected for terms, and are presidents only in their councils, which is to say that they do not have an intrinsic authority.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the political reforms of the period following the French Revolution were aimed at diffusing the remnants of noble patronage and royal prerogative within the government, and the Reform Bill of 1834 was a culminating moment in this trend. The Presbyterian Church was moderate among the Protestant sects in its understanding of the principle of the universal priesthood of the faithful – that is, the initially Catholic idea that personal devotion to Christ was the sole requirement for church membership and incorporation in its body. Martin Luther had adopted this idea from medieval Catholic doctrine and extended it to suggest that equal authority should be vested in all believers. Priesthood among Lutherans was often little more than an organizational convenience and principally conceived as the ministering of the word of God by someone who was well-informed of the Scriptures but of no special grace.

Among Presbyterians in the eighteenth century, the ministerial office was for many a similar convenience, the practical designation of one among the devout who could preach, baptize, administer the sacraments, and so on. For some the choice was a matter of the skills and moral character of the designated one, who, after all, might be a choice imposed upon the church by the patronage system. Given that the Biblical sense of the word which is translated as "ministry," the *diakonia*, meant "service," the association of the ministry with nobility and privilege might have seemed especially paradoxical.<sup>2</sup> For a growing segment of Presbyterians toward the end of the eighteenth century, and even more so in the early nineteenth century, the indispensable requirement for a minister was that he be a servant solely of Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit.

The ministry in the episcopal church derived its authority from the apostolic succession, that is, the unbroken chain of discipleship linking a present-day bishop to the original apostles. The image was of an inherited holiness, and ordination was the passing on of that tradition. The Evangelical Presbyterian minister, by contrast, derived his authority from the experience of

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<sup>1</sup>Roger Mehl, *The Sociology of Protestantism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970) 56.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jesus' command: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant [*diakonos*], and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44).

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being filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and demonstrated that power by his words and deeds, in accordance with the words and deeds of the original apostles. Ordination was a certification of that power.

The Presbyterian Evangelicals were largely inspired by the Great Awakening and the revivalist movements of the eighteenth century, but even the more extreme among them sought to retain the institutional strength of the church. David Bebbington has made a persuasive case that the values of the revivalists in the eighteenth century need not be seen as antithetical to the values of the ideologues of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason. Though there were some among the latter who disparaged the role of religion in an enlightened society and who questioned the very existence of God, the Evangelicals themselves promoted their new perspectives on religious experience in terms that were perfectly consistent with Enlightenment values. For them, attaining faith was akin to acquiring a new sense by which the world could be known. They framed this new experience in terms of empiricism, an experiment in the workings of God, and often directly in terms of light, progress, and liberation from superstition. The goal was to bring order and balance out of chaos, knowledge out of ignorance. In all these ways, the discourse of revivalism is consistent with the Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> The Scottish Presbyterian version of this Evangelical impulse, during the eighteenth century, was still more in line with the values of the Enlightenment than the Methodists and Independents. For the Presbyterians, the minister ought to be a man who had received a "call," who had personally experienced a conversion to true faith, who took Christ as the essential agent of salvation, who upheld the Bible as an absolute authority, and who sought to spread the gospel throughout the earth. But the minister was also an administrator, an officer of the church, and an upholder of its authority, which included the subservient role of the laity. It is in this context that Edward Irving came into the ministry.

Irving took strong interest in the role of the minister from his childhood years in Annan, Scotland. As a boy he read Richard Hooker's formidable classic of Anglican theology and apostolic practice, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. A sixteenth scholar, Hooker argues for the reasonableness of the episcopacy based on apostolic succession, but maintains that the church of

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<sup>3</sup> David Bebbington, "Revival and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England," *Modern Christian Revivals*, ed. Edith L. Blumhofer and Randall Balmer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 17, 4.

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the present day must respond to the needs and situation of the polity. Shaw, a modern scholar, summarizes Hooker's opinion:

The Christian Society, the Church, has power to legislate for her well-being and order and to appoint ceremonies, her authority being final in this respect. All, therefore, who are born within the borders of a State Church must give their obedience to her laws while they operate, though they may be changed as circumstances may demand. . . . The Church of England was one aspect of the State which, in virtue of this establishment, gave its acknowledgment of God; and just as one born within the realm is a subject of the king, so he is by birth a member of the church.<sup>4</sup>

The Presbyterian Church was born in dissent against the Established Church of England, and so these ideas posed a challenge to the young Edward Irving. He proposed that the Presbyterian Church was itself an adaptation of the ancient order to the fresh circumstances of the present. He took to heart Hooker's declaration that the priest is the person who receives God's power, which "translateth out of darkness into glory".<sup>5</sup> Thus, by means of the evangelical experience, the Presbyterian minister receives the apostolic succession and by the power of his ministry passes it along. Irving, too, like Hooker, maintains the political authority of the church, in this case the Presbyterian Church, and its power to maintain order by means of laws. The apostolic succession which gave rise to the Episcopal Church was, in his view, a corruption of the tradition. What was needed to maintain the holiness of the church was not bishops but ministers of God, which Irving took to mean men who had been filled with the Holy Spirit as the original apostles had been on the day of Pentecost.

Irving studied the role of minister as a young man, rehearsed it in a country parish, understudied with the time's eminent Dr. Chalmers in Glasgow, then played it in full in London, until controversy and then death brought his performance to an end. He applied himself with ferocious energy, executing his parish duties with unfailing diligence, and preaching and writing with passion. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle both considered him one of the remarkable men of the age, a genius, a hero, and (without using the term) a romantic actor.

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<sup>4</sup> P.E. Shaw, *The Catholic Apostolic Church, Sometimes Called Irvingite: A Historical Study* (Morningside Heights, NY: King's Crown Press, 1946) 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Shaw 13.

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Carlyle, whose wife, Jane, had once been the object of Irving's passion, (although Irving ultimately married another woman,) addressed the theatricality of Irving's performance:

We enjoyed the broad potency of his delineations, exhortations, and free flowing eloquences. . . . From the first Irving read his discourses, but not in a servile manner; of attitude, gesture, elocution there was no neglect. His voice was very fine; melodious depth, strength, clearness, its chief characteristics. . . . He affected the Miltonic or old English Puritan style, and strove visibly to imitate it more and more till almost the end of his career, when indeed it had become his own, and was the language he used in utmost heat of business for expressing his meaning. At this time and for years afterwards there was something of preconceived intention visible in it, in fact of real affectation.<sup>6</sup>

Coleridge considered Irving more of an embodiment of the spirit of Luther and the Reformers than any man living, "yea, than any man of this and the last century. I see in Edward Irving, a minister of Christ after the order of Paul".<sup>7</sup> Chalmers observed that between Irving and Coleridge lay a "secret and, to me, unintelligible communion of spirit . . . on the ground of a certain German mystical and transcendental poetry".<sup>8</sup> These unusual powers brought Irving in from the provinces at an early age, and his influence came to a climax in a new church in Regent Square in 1827. His performance as a preacher was frequently compared to that of a leading player, such as in the following excerpt from a satirical poem from 1823, initially published in the *Times*:

The Chapel's like a playhouse quite,  
When thronged on Mr. *Liston's* night;  
The boxes, gall'ries, bursting tight,

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<sup>6</sup> Rev. G. Carlyle, ed. *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving*, Vol. V. (London: Alexander Strahan, 1865) 94-95. Some held a much lower opinion of Irving's performance as minister, such as William Orme in 1825: "Irving, you may depend upon it, is a pure humbug. He has about three good attitudes, and the lower notes of his voice are superb, with a fine manly tremulation that sets women mad as the roar of a noble bull does a field of kine; but beyond this he is nothing, really nothing. He has no sort of real earnestness; feeble, pumped up, boisterous, overlaid stuff is his stable" (quoted in Mackie, 140).

<sup>7</sup> Mackie, 144.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement: The Life of Edward Irving* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983) 60.

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Besides a very full pit.  
And there they crowd to hear their DOOM  
From one who talks like DOCTOR HUME,  
And works and jerks like LAWYER BROUGHAM,  
Exalted in a pulpit.<sup>9</sup>

During these years he was devoting himself to exposition of the prophetic literature in the Bible and adopting the prophetic voice in his preaching. An attorney named Robert Baxter, who will figure large in this essay, described Irving's preaching in terms that echo the conservative reaction to romantic acting:

His mind is so imaginative as almost to scorn precision of ideas, and his views will thus continuously vary, without himself being aware of it. His energy and activity, swelling into impetuosity, leave him peculiarly open to error, in all subjects which require deep thought and patient and continued investigation.

With the brightest talents, no man was ever perhaps less qualified to investigate and unfold the deeper mysteries of religion, which not only require precision of thought, but a continued watchfulness and patient correction of terms in their statement.<sup>10</sup>

These quotations show that a minister's performance was evaluated in terms of truth or authenticity, based on degrees of effectiveness which could be analyzed in material terms – gesture, voice, carriage – exactly like a stage actor, except that in the minister's case the performer stands in for the word of God. The tension between the material and the spiritual was heightened in Irving's case because his performance carried (for most) such authority, held such power, that audiences at time lost sight of his merely human quality. The theological substance of his preaching only increased this stress.

Two issues came to dominate Irving's preaching during his sudden rise to fame in the early 1820s. First, he sought to resolve some of the questions surrounding Christ's incarnation.

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<sup>9</sup> *Trial of the Rev. Edward Irving, M.A.: A Cento of Criticism* (London: E. Brain, 1823) 55.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Baxter, *Narrative of Facts, Characterizing the Supernatural Manifestations in Members of Mr. Irving's Congregation, and Other Individuals in England and Scotland, and Formerly in the Writer Himself* (London: James Nesbet, 1833) 129.



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To what degree had He taken on the reality of human nature? In particular, to what degree had he known or incorporated the original sin to which humans are subject? To this question he would return repeatedly over the next decade. Second, he became convinced that the world had already experienced virtually all that the Bible foretold in its prophetic literature, and that therefore the apocalypse must be imminent. The lack of faith in the modern world necessitated its doom as a second Babylon. Since the world was facing its end, the "signs and wonders" foretold by the Bible must also be nigh, all manifestations of the "outpouring of the Holy Spirit." Many had interpreted the rise of Napoleon in terms of the appearance of the Antichrist, and millennial predictions were frequently voiced, though less commonly among the Presbyterian clergy. Many religious leaders, including Irving, felt a sense of urgency at this moment (a time of surging imperialism) to spread the Gospel to as many people as possible throughout the world and bring them to salvation before the end-time.

In 1828, Irving went on a speaking tour of Scotland and there sparked controversy by his preaching on the subject of Christ's incarnation, at once expressing an opinion more Calvinistic than most Presbyterians of the day in its emphasis on sin, but also more hopeful than most Calvinists in that he suggested that one could become purified in the flesh by the power of God. Certain theologians, including officers of the Church of Scotland declared heretical Irving's opinions about the presence of sin in the incarnated Christ, and Irving replied in the pulpit and in print. Over the next few years this controversy would lead to trial and conviction. In the meanwhile, however, Irving found himself fascinated by the case of a beautiful but sickly young Scottish woman, Mary Campbell, the sister of a saintly woman who had died recently of tuberculosis. Irving visited the Campbell house and found young Mary to be an inspiring, ecstatic figure, deeply enthusiastic about communicating the word of God to the heathen. Irving himself had just a few years earlier lost a child and had become convinced that disease signified the presence of Satan, and only by faith could health be restored. By the force of her own holy determination, Mary Campbell became convinced that she herself could be healed and would soon receive the apostolic gifts, including the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues. It seemed obvious to the young woman that the gift of tongues would resolve the problem faced by the would-be missionaries, namely how to communicate with the heathen. Early in 1830, when Irving was back in London, Mary Campbell did feel the Holy Ghost come upon her and compel her to speak in a foreign language, which she subsequently declared was the language

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of the Pelew Islanders. Later she claimed to have added Turkish and Chinese. Irving's first comprehensive biographer, Mrs. Oliphant, analyzes the "dubious cradle" of circumstances from which came this astonishing event:

The first speaker with tongues was precisely the individual whom, under the supposition that they were no more supernatural than other utterances of passion or fervour, one would naturally fix upon as the probable initiator of such a system. An amount of genius and singular adaptability which seems to have fitted her for taking a place in society far above that to which she had been accustomed; a faculty of representing her own proceedings so as, whether wrong or right, to exculpate herself, and interest even those who were opposed to her; a conviction, founded perhaps upon her sister's well-known character, and the prominent position she herself was consequently placed in, that something notable was expected from her; and the joint stimulus of admiration and scoffing – all mingled with a sincere desire to serve God and advance His glory, were powerful agencies in one young, enthusiastic, and inexperienced spirit. And when to all these kindling elements came that fire of suggestion, at first rejected, afterwards warmly received, and blazing forth at last in so wonderfully literal an answer, it is impossible to feel how many earthly predisposing causes there were which corresponded with, even if they did not actually produce, the result.<sup>11</sup>

Mrs. Oliphant cannot help but admire this humble young woman's seizure of the rare opportunity to become the focal point of discussion, a figure of wonderful power. Word spread of this remarkable event, and soon there were other cases of healing and speaking in tongues. The very report of one of these incidents led Mary Campbell to rise up from her sickbed and declare herself healed.

At this time, the controversy over Irving's opinions about Christ's incarnation was coming to a head in the ecclesiastical courts where also several other manifestations of the evangelical movement were being addressed.. Irving began to meet daily with his staunchest supporters in an early morning prayer meeting, which was a means of consolidating his power within the church but which also had the effect of emphasizing the schism. The crowds drawn

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<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Oliphant, *The Life of Edward Irving* (London: Hurst and Blackett, n.d.) 287-288.

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to these meetings and all of his services were very large, indeed frequently overflowing the church, but numerous, too, were his opponents. Mrs. Oliphant emphasizes that at this time Irving's preaching had gone out of fashion with his noble and influential congregants, but in their place came a popular audience who were swept away by the intensity of Irving's preaching and the overwhelming sense of holiness in the atmosphere.<sup>12</sup> It was on the basis of these swelling numbers that Irving founded his hope that Christianity was on the verge of becoming, once again, a living force in society and not a mere form. And yet, the growing reaction to what was coming to be called Irvingism could hardly be ignored, and by the late 1820s even his old friend Carlyle had come to regard Irving as dangerously outside the spectrum of enlightened opinion and aware of his failure:

The thought that the Christian religion was again to dominate all minds, and the world to become an Eden by [Irving's] thrice-blessed means, was fatally declaring itself to have been a dream; and he would not consent to believe it such: never he! That was the secret of his inward quasi-desperate resolutions; out into the wild struggles and clutchings toward the unattainable, the unregainable, which were more and more conspicuous in the sequel.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that Irving was losing the confidence of more noble and distinguished figures in London society might be seen as an anti-democratic reaction, or it might be seen as a reaction against the authority and prestige which Irving wielded as a leader, his exertion of power over an unthinking mob. Carlyle recalled that Irving "objected clearly to my Reform Bill notions, found *Democracy* a thing forbidden, leading down to outer darkness; I, a thing inevitable, and obliged to lead whithersoever it could".<sup>14</sup> And yet, in this instance, Irving faced the question of literally how to place the power of the Holy Ghost, channeled through these humble parishioners within the power structure of the church.

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<sup>12</sup> Oliphant, 311-313. Carlyle saw the Irving sensation during the mid-1820s in a less favorable light: "The doors were crowded long before opening, and you got in by ticket; but the first sublime rush of what once seemed more than popularity, and had been nothing more – Lady Jersey 'sitting on the pulpit steps.' Canning, Brougham, Mackintosh, etc. rushing day after day – was now quite over, and there remained only a popularity of 'the people,' not of the *plebs* at all, but never higher than of the well-dressed *populus* henceforth, which was a sad change to the sanguine man" (Carlyle 185-86).

<sup>13</sup> Carlyle, 221.

<sup>14</sup> Carlyle, 244.

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In his morning meetings Irving called upon God to elevate "the present low state of the Church" and specifically to bring

apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, anointed with the Holy Ghost . . . and the Lord was not long in answering our prayers. He sealed first one, and then another, and then another, and then another; and gave them first enlargement of spirit in their own devotions, when their souls were lifted up to God and they closed with him in nearness; He then lifted them up to pray in a tongue which the apostle Paul says he did more than they all. . . . I say as it was with Paul at the proper time, at the fit time, namely, in their private devotions, when they were rapt up nearest to God, the Spirit took them and made them speak in a tongue, sometimes singing in a tongue, sometimes speaking words in a tongue; and by degrees, according as they sought more and more unto God, this gift was perfected until they were moved to speak in a tongue, even in the presence of others. But while it was in this stage I suffered it not in the church, acting according to the canon of the apostle; and even in private, in my own presence, I permitted it not; but I heard that it had been done. I would not have rebuked it, I would have sympathized tenderly with the person who was carried in the Spirit and lifted up; but in the church I would not have permitted it. Then, in process of time, perhaps at the end of a fortnight, the gift perfected itself, so that they were made to speak in a tongue and to prophesy: that is, to set forth in English words for exhortation, for edification, and comfort, for that is the proper definition of prophesying, as was testified by one of the witnesses. Now, when we had received this into the church in answer to our prayers, it became me, as the minister of the church, to try that which we had received.<sup>15</sup>

Having witnessed the extraordinary signs and wonders, and having found them to be, in his judgment, evidences of the power of the Holy Ghost working through these parishioners, Irving pondered this displacement of ministerial power. Canon law makes it clear that the role of the laity was strictly limited in the service. Irving himself did not at this time, or ever, to his dismay, speak in tongues or experience supernatural power except perhaps in the performance

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<sup>15</sup> Oliphant, 318.

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of his ministerial duties. He could preach for two straight hours or more, with impressive power, but after all there was no miracle in that, merely a remarkable effort. But here, before him, were living exemplars of the prophetic and apostolic tradition.

On Sunday, October 16, 1831, one of the inspired, Miss Hall, was unable to restrain herself and burst forth with her utterances during the service. Soon another did the same. Irving then demanded that the empowered speakers leave, and spontaneously changed his sermon to an exposition of the fourteenth chapter of Corinthians, which describes the Pentecostal events. During the service, though, Miss Hall walked into the vestry and, after erupting first in an unknown tongue, shouted, "How dare ye suppress the voice of the Lord?"<sup>16</sup> Irving keenly felt the contradiction between his call for increased holiness among the people and his restraint of these inspired expostulations. A newspaper account of a service in which a man "commenced a violent harangue in the unknown tongue" reports that the whole congregation of more than 2000 rose to its feet in fear, ladies screamed.<sup>17</sup> The disorderly scene continued for some minutes: "Many were so alarmed, and others so disgusted, that they did not return again into the church, and discussed the propriety of the reverend gentleman suffering the exhibition, and altogether a sensation was produced which will not be soon forgotten by those who were present".<sup>18</sup> Thus, the ones who valued the orderliness and hierarchy of the church resented Irving for not restraining the unruly elements, and the prophets resented him for the fact that he did not empower them more. Mrs. Oliphant interprets this moment as a tragic turning point for Irving:

He foresaw, looking steadfastly forward into that gloom which he was about to enter, that now, at last, this bond of loyal love [from a united congregation of loyal followers] was about to be broken, this last guard dispersed from about his heart. He saw it with anguish and prophetic desolation, his last link to the old world of hereditary faith and dutiful affection. But though his heart broke, he

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<sup>16</sup> Mackie 168.

<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Oliphant disputes the newspaper's phrase: "The actual utterances, as they were thus introduced to the full congregation, were short exhortations, warnings, or commands, in English, preceded by some sentences or exclamations in the 'tongue,' which was not the primary message, being unintelligible, but only the sign of inspiration – so that a 'violent harangue in the tongue' was an untrue and ridiculous statement" (Oliphant 327).

<sup>18</sup> Oliphant 325-326.

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could not choose. The warning and reproving voices which interrupted his prayers and exhortations in private meetings, had by this time risen to their full mastery over the heart which, entirely believing that they came from God, had no choice left but to obey them.<sup>19</sup>

So he declared that everyone who had received the gift of the Holy Ghost should have liberty to speak in the church, and at this announcement certain of the prophets spoke words which expressed the sanction of God for this decision.

The *Times* soon fomented the controversy, charging Irving with a violation of the church laws and encouraging the disaffected congregants:

The great body of Mr Irving's adherents would probably have remained by him if, in his headlong course of enthusiasm, he could have found a resting-place. They might pardon his nonsense about the time and circumstances of the millennium. They might smile at unintelligible disquisitions about 'heads' and 'horns,' and 'trumpets,' and 'candlesticks,' and 'white and black horses,' in Revelations. These things might offend the judgment, but did not affect the nerves. But have we the same excuse for the recent exhibitions with which the metropolis has been scandalized? Are we to listen to the screaming of hysterical women, and the ravings of frantic men? Is bawling to be added to absurdity, and the disturber of a congregation to escape the police and treadmill, because the person who occupies the pulpit vouches for his inspiration?<sup>20</sup>

More than merely vouching for their inspiration, Irving fervently believed the prophets to be operating in the power of the Holy Ghost, speaking the word of God as true apostles, while he, a mere minister who could not attest to that power himself, merely gave them the opportunity. Virtually all the elders of the church walked out on these demonstrations. When one of them asked to be allowed to read from the Scriptures a passage giving his reason for leaving the church, never to return, Irving refused permission. The conflict mounted to a civil war, with the Presbyterian orthodoxy, proper churchmen, generally standing in opposition while, taking their place in the still constantly overflowing services, a group of ever more enthusiastic

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<sup>19</sup> Oliphant, 321.

<sup>20</sup> Oliphant 330.

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believers exulted in the overthrow of the old institution. Carlyle characterized the latter as "the rearward of mankind" and "the crazed and weakest of [Irving's] wholly rather dim and weakly flock".<sup>21</sup> Repeatedly, Irving's critics denounced the inspired ones because of their low class, limited education, and weakness. Another highly critical contemporary observer, William Jones, emphasized that Irving had been "prostrating his masculine understanding before the gabble of two silly women".<sup>22</sup> The image lurking behind all of this is of an insurrection against a patriarchally defined power structure, and Irving, who came to prominence as an expression of the latter, was seen as one who now turned traitor and enabled the rebels. An obituary of Irving, published in 1835, traced the downward course of his leadership:

By a fatal chance, Fashion cast her eye on him, as on some impersonation of Novel-Cameronianism [referring to a radical splinter group in the early history of Presbyterianism], some wild product of nature from the wild mountains; Fashion crowded round him, with her meteor lights and Bacchic dances; breathed her foul incense on him; intoxicating, poisoning. One may say, it was his own nobleness that forwarded such ruin: the excess of his sociability and sympathy, of his value for the suffrages and sympathies of men. Syren songs, as of a new Moral Reformation . . . sound in the inexperienced ear and heart. Most seductive, most delusive!<sup>23</sup>

The spectacle of the upstarts overthrowing the stale forms of yesterday's church was indeed a remarkable one, especially for those who did not have much experience of the contemporary theatre and the Romantic actor. Irving himself had often been described in terms that evoked the heroic actor, seen in his voice, his demeanor, his purity. William Hazlitt had in 1825 accounted Irving an exemplar of *The Spirit of the Age*, a patchwork of sacred and profane, radical and quaint ideas dressed up in extravagant fashion, a theatrical figure comparable to

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<sup>21</sup> Carlyle 254, 251.

<sup>22</sup> William Jones, *Biographical Sketch of the Rev. Edward Irving ... with Extracts from, and Remarks on his Principal Publications* (London: John Bennett, 1835) 340.

<sup>23</sup> Jones 373.

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Kean.<sup>24</sup> As the Romantic actor was seen often to perform in ways offensive to people of ordinary sensibility, and to bring forward dark material into the enlightened world, so Irving was widely regarded as one who had exceeded the bounds of good taste and rationality and who had touched a deep chord of spirituality, but one that might be confused with cant or dissimulation. William Jones could not but acknowledge the remarkable "command of human sympathy" wielded by Irving, by which he "rivetted the affections of his audience".<sup>25</sup> However, Jones also observed: "to act the indecorous part and give it stage effect, it would be difficult to find a person better qualified".<sup>26</sup>

However theatrical Irving might have seemed, the inspired ones presented a still more astonishing aspect and stood in contrast to Irving, as different as Kean and Kemble. The sound of the speaking in tongues during this period (and at many other times, too) has been repeatedly described as otherworldly, indeed sublime, and also a little mad. The terms that are used to describe the divinely inspired utterances consistently parallel those used to comprehend the work of the stage actor, as in the following account: "It is the result of the working of the indwelling Spirit, impelling the subject of it, not without his consciousness, but without any intention or plan of his own, to utter words which may be for the edifying of the Church. It seems to proceed from the Spirit working deeper than a person's own consciousness, and

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<sup>24</sup> William Hazlitt, "Pulpit Oratory – Dr. Chalmers and Mr. Irving," *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. By P. P. Howe. Vol. 20 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1932) 11, 39. William Hazlitt, "Rev. Mr. Irving," *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. By P. P. Howe, Vol. 11. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1932) 20, 114. "The more serious part of his congregation indeed complain, though not bitterly, that their pastor has converted their meeting-house into a play-house: but when a lady of quality, introducing herself and her three daughters to the preacher, assures him that they have been to all the most fashionable places of resort, the opera, the theatre, the assemblies, Miss Macauley's readings, and Exeter-Change, and have only been equally entertained no where else, we apprehend that no remonstrances of a committee of ruling elders will be able to bring him to his senses again, or make him forego such sweet, but ill-assorted praise. What we mean to insist upon is, that Mr. Irving owes his triumphant success, not to any one quality for which he has been extolled, but to a combination of qualities, the more striking in their immediate effect, in proportion as they are unlooked-for and heterogeneous, like the violent opposition of light and shade in a picture" (Hazlitt 11, 39-40).

<sup>25</sup> Jones 372.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, 371. Robert Baxter supplies many passages to associate Irving with a Romantic actor, such as: "His fervid imagination bodied forth his ideas in brilliant, and oft-times gorgeous apparel; and the whole energies of the man were so much swayed by the imaginative faculty, that he scorned the limits of precision, and dashed his speculations through every barrier, until they were enthroned amidst the glorious realities of our heavenly hopes" (Robert Baxter, *Irvingism in its Rise, Progress, and Present State* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1836) 6-7).



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bringing forth that which is in him, using him at the same time according to his own nature, so that peculiarities of expression, of idiom, and of pronunciation are preserved".<sup>27</sup> Thus, the inspired words of the Playwright or Character (in this case, God) are spoken by the actor, or through the actor, but in such a way that the materiality of the performer, or even the style, would be preserved. Mrs. Oliphant recalls: "To some, the ecstatic exclamations, with their rolling syllables and mighty voice, were imposing and awful; to others it was merely gibberish shouted from stentorian lungs; to others an uneasy wonder, which it was a relief to find passing into English, even though the height and strain of sound was undiminished".<sup>28</sup> As an example of "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth's definition of good poetry), these inspired performances typified a certain sort of Romantic expression. Irving was himself deeply impressed by the power and artfulness of these performances:

The whole utterance, from the beginning to the ending of it, is with a power, and strength, and fulness, and sometimes rapidity of voice, altogether different from that of the person's ordinary utterance in any mood; and I would say, both in its form and in its effects upon a simple mind, quite supernatural. There is a power in the voice to thrill the heart and overawe the spirit after a manner which I have never felt. There is a march, and a majesty, and a sustained grandeur in the voice, especially of those who prophesy, which I have never heard even a resemblance to, except now and then in the sublimest and most impassioned moods of Mrs Siddons and Miss O'Neil. It is a mere abandonment of all truth to call it screaming or crying; it is the most majestic and divine utterance which I have ever heard, some parts of which I have never heard equalled, and no part of it surpassed, by the finest execution of genius and art exhibited at the oratorios in the concerts of ancient music. . . . So far from being unmeaning gibberish, as the thoughtless and heedless sons of Belial have said, it is regularly formed, well-proportioned, deeply-felt discourse, which evidently wanteth 'only the ear of him whose native tongue it is,' to make it a very masterpiece of

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<sup>27</sup> Davenport, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Oliphant 328.

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powerful speech.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, whereas the Romantic's transcendence often comes from a sense of connection to an organic wholeness, the apostle's transcendence derives from a mystical connection. Indeed, the process was a direct forerunner of spiritualistic mediumship, though in this case the channeled voice was God's, as the following account attests:

These persons, while uttering the unknown sounds, as also while speaking in the Spirit in their own language, have every appearance of being under supernatural direction. The manner and voice are (speaking generally) different from what they are at other times, and on ordinary occasions. This difference does not consist merely in the peculiar solemnity and fervour of manner (which they possess), but their whole deportment gives an impression, not to be conveyed in words, that their organs are made use of by supernatural power. In addition to the outward appearances, their own declarations, as the declarations of honest, pious, and sober individuals, may with propriety be taken in evidence. They declare that their organs of speech are made use of by the Spirit of God; and that they utter that which is given to them, and not the expressions of their own conceptions, or their own intention.<sup>30</sup>

Once Irving had accepted these utterances into his services, he became again the minister, interpreting the words as an elaboration of Scripture and offering his guidance in the interpretation, but the apostolic effects were quite apart from the powers he proclaimed. He provided the authority and tranquility to translate their inspiration into poetry. His decision to give priority to this spoken "Scripture" and in the process defer his own preordained authority to speak on behalf of the written Scripture might be deconstructed as an attempt to re-found representation upon presence at a moment when Being itself seemed at an end with the imminent arrival of the end-time.

An astonishing and, for the present purposes, crucial account of this situation comes from Robert Baxter's *Narrative of Facts, Characterizing the Supernatural Manifestations in Members of Mr. Irving's Congregation, and Other Individuals in England, Scotland, and Formerly in the Writer*

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<sup>29</sup> Oliphant 328-329.

<sup>30</sup> Mackie 164.

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*Himself*, published in 1833. Baxter was a senior partner in a prominent law firm, a well-educated man with an inquiring mind, who paid close attention to questions of Presbyterian church doctrine. He recalls his feelings of awe and reverence as he listened to two of the inspired speakers at one of the prayer-meetings and his perfect amazement when he felt himself seized by the power. Suddenly he heard issuing from his own mouth a voice rebuking him for not prophesying that the second coming of Christ was near and that the messengers of the Lord should go immediately to the ends of the earth, testifying to the power of God. Baxter owns that he had earlier felt guilt for not declaring these ideas, which had lurked within his thoughts but had been repressed. At once, the inspired ones declared the truth and holiness of what he had said. Baxter soon became a leading figure among the apostles, speaking mostly prophetically, once for over two hours, declaring such things as the coming of baptism by fire and the imminence of the moment – in 1260 days – when the saints would be taken up to Heaven, as prophesied in Revelations 11. His report of the experience of speaking prophetically was without will or pretext, an embodiment of presence: "The things I was made to utter, flashed in upon my mind without forethought, without expectation, and without any plan or arrangement: all was the work of the moment, and I was the passive instrument of the power which used me".<sup>31</sup>

In light of the first public backlash against the utterances, Irving and the others considered Baxter a specially important case because he was male, intellectual, and of a higher class than the others. Also, his prophecies were lengthier, more theologically grounded, and not (except on one or two occasions) confused with utterances in tongues. From the beginning Irving declared (following Paul – Corinthians 14:19) that speaking in tongues was the least valuable of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the *charismata*, which also included prophecy, healing, and the baptism by fire. In Irving's view, the tongues were merely a harbinger of these greater gifts which would be bestowed upon true apostles. The disciples of Paul at Corinth spoke in tongues, but these had been incoherent utterances, which Paul interpreted as merely a sign of greater things to come, as it later happened, at the Pentecost. Irving, too, wondered at the speaking in tongues, which some with linguistic facility analyzed as a mere pastiche of mixed-up

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<sup>31</sup> Baxter, *Narrative* 14.

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foreign words and sounds.<sup>32</sup> Other manifestations during these early days also raised question, such as the day when two twin boys, about eight or nine, began speaking in the power and, in the midst of their speaking suddenly declared that marriage should be forbidden. When they were questioned, one of them said, "Ye may try the spirits in men, but ye may not try the spirits in children." This event was accounted by Irving and his followers to be an intervention of an evil spirit. When Baxter began speaking in the power, though, prophesying upon a sound theological basis, he commanded a different sort of attention. Baxter was speaking words that corresponded to Irving's preaching and to Paul's teachings about the higher charismatic gifts, and doing so in a way that many, including Baxter himself, regarded as awe-inspiring.

Still, there was something that gave Irving pause at the point when he was considering having Baxter speak before the whole congregation. Baxter recalls that some of his utterances in the power were addressed to Irving himself, "in a commanding tone," and some of these produced in Irving a suspicion that Baxter's utterances might not be of God but "of the enemy".<sup>33</sup> When Irving, who himself was impressed by the "great authority" of Baxter's words, then denied Baxter permission to speak in the service, the power suddenly came on Baxter, and he rebuked Irving.<sup>34</sup> Others among the inspired vouched for the words spoken by Baxter, and Irving was forced to relent. The next day, Baxter writes, he "was . . . in the power, in the most fearful terms, made to enjoin the most perfect submission to the utterances".<sup>35</sup> Soon, this clash of powers deepened, with Baxter prophesying about "the darkness of the visible church, referring to the king as the head of the Church of England, and to the Chancellor as the keeper of the conscience of the king".<sup>36</sup> Church and state were "accursed . . . the abomination of iniquity".<sup>37</sup> Baxter proposed a radical redefinition of ministry in the form of a prophecy which a

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<sup>32</sup> George Pilkington published a thorough analysis of the utterances in 1831, entitled *The Unknown Tongues Discovered to be English, Spanish and Latin and the Reverend Edward Irving Proved Erroneous in Attributing These Utterances to the Influence of the Holy Spirit* (London: Field and Bull, 1831).

<sup>33</sup> Baxter, *Narrative* 14.

<sup>34</sup> Oliphant 343.

<sup>35</sup> Baxter, *Narrative* 20.

<sup>36</sup> Baxter, *Narrative* 24.

<sup>37</sup> Oliphant 344.

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few years later he recalled: "that God had abandoned the ordinance of ordination by apostolic succession. That the abomination of desolation was set up, and that those who were partakers of the gift of utterance were from that day forward the lawful ministers of the gospel of Christ".<sup>38</sup> Baxter inevitably came to regard Irving as dubious, at best, because, after all, Irving could demonstrate no charismatic gifts and made it clear that he was dubious of the powers of Baxter himself, if not others. Furthermore, Irving espoused risky points of theology, such as the matter of Christ's incarnation. This point, above all others, ultimately led Baxter to speak publicly in denunciatory terms of Irving as an instrument of Satan.

Meanwhile, Irving's ministry was also being challenged by the church authorities over the issue of Irving's giving the inspired ones permission to speak in the service, and in fact they concluded that he should be removed from the church. Irving found himself caught in between, filled with faith that he had been selected by God to minister the bringing forth of these wonders and the fulfillment of prophecy, yet recoiling from the more extreme expressions which suggested a Satanic presence even in himself, and at the same time resisting the repressive efforts of the structure of legal authority upon which his ministry was founded. To the church authorities he wrote in his characteristically archaic style: "I do you solemnly to wit, men and brethren, before Almighty God, the heart-searcher, that whosoever lifteth a finger against the work which is proceeding in the Church of Christ under my pastoral care, is rising up against the Holy Ghost; and I warn him, even with tears, to beware and stand back, for he will assuredly bring upon himself the wrath and indignation of God of the heaven and earth, if he dare to go forward".<sup>39</sup> However, in the same admonitory letter, Irving acknowledged "the attempt of Satan, by mimicry of the work, and thrusting in upon it of seduction and devil-possessed persons to mar it".<sup>40</sup> The apostle Paul had warned his disciples about the seductive and delusional power of Satan, saying, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12). The question was whether the darkness was to be found among the church authorities, among the putative apostles, or in Irving himself.

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<sup>38</sup> Baxter, *Irvingism* 22.

<sup>39</sup> Oliphant 353.

<sup>40</sup> Oliphant 353.

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Baxter was meanwhile becoming more and more bold with his power, exorcizing demons, attempting healing, and making strong pronouncements about what he deemed Satanic. At one point he resolved to leave his family and set out on a world-wide evangelical mission. (It was at this point that his wife lost confidence in her husband's inspiration.) Still, there were, for Baxter, some strange moments that he could not quite reconcile with the notion that he and the others were speaking in the power of the Holy Ghost. Why should there be inconsistencies, even disagreements, among the holy utterances? At one point, Baxter felt himself compelled to go to the court of the Chancellor to bear his testimony to the wicked state, but once there he found that the power mysteriously did not come upon him. Why would the spirit fail him? Baxter vividly depicts the crisis of conscience which he faced at this time in his *Narrative*, but the upshot dumbfounded all who were around him. With the same suddenness and intensity with which he acquired his power, he now recanted and proclaimed that his supernatural powers were gifts not of the Holy Ghost but of Satan and that the whole phenomenon happening in Irving's church (and elsewhere too by that time) was a gross delusion. He accused Irving of abetting this evil travesty of the Pentecost, and Irving recoiled in horror. From the bar of the Presbytery Irving faced doubt about the presence of the Holy Spirit among the inspired, and from the leading figure among the inspired (and afterward some others) he faced the accusation that what had seemed the work of the Holy Spirit might in fact be the work of Satan.

Even after the publication of Baxter's *Narrative*, many of the inspired ones continued to uphold Baxter's prophecies as true, deeming his recantation itself to be a delusion. However, the notion that the foundation of their belief might be unstable introduced an internal division within the power structure. Mrs. Oliphant summarizes:

And so it came to pass, that those utterances which had only been expository and exhortative before Baxter's time, after his revelation changed their nature, and gradually mingling details of Church ceremonies and ordinances with their previous devotional and hortatory character, became ere long the oracles of the community – fluctuating sometimes in gusts of painful uncertainty when one prophet rebuked the utterances of another, and reversed his directions, or when conclusions too summary were drawn which had inevitably to be departed from. This new development introduced, instead of the steady certainty of an

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established law, the unsettled and variable condition naturally resulting from dependence upon a mysterious spiritual authority, which might at any time command an entire change in their proceedings, and was besides liable to be intruded upon by equally mysterious diabolical agencies, which could with difficulty be distinguished from the real influence of the Spirit.<sup>41</sup>

Church authorities were still more disturbed to hear rumors of Satanic influence in Irving's church and even in Irving himself. They continued to act against his writings even after he had been removed from office. Meanwhile, his position in his own church was more and more decentered by the uprising and proliferation of the inspired among the laity, who eventually acted against him to delimit his powers. Thus, his position as minister was hedged in both from within and from without, and in the final years of his life, before he succumbed to tuberculosis, he felt this squeeze more and more.

Irving became a fully tragic figure in this moment, driven by what Mrs. Oliphant calls "a primitive heroic faith" to an inevitable downfall. The kernel of that faith and the key to his doom is that a person could fully stand in for the Holy Ghost and effect that miracle of transcending humanity by becoming an expression of the divine. Performing the Holy Ghost was the experiment Irving attempted, but he was too good a scientist to claim that any one case, especially his own, might prove a rule. He turned instead to the numerous cases that seemed to demonstrate the phenomenon and confirm the hypothesis in the Scripture. The established church resisted the new data and new conclusions because they clashed with existing law and challenged belief in new ways. Mrs. Oliphant portrays Irving at this late stage of his life in a way that integrates his rationality and his mysticism:

And, granting this miraculous postulate [Irving's utter faith that he could be an embodiment of holiness], there is, in everything Irving does thereafter, a certain lofty reasonableness which does but still more and more bewilder the minds of his auditors. The region into which he had entered appeared so entirely one beyond reason, that the outside observers expected to find nothing that was not wild and irregular, according to all the traditions of enthusiasm and spiritual excitement, there. But Irving, with his exalted heart, to which no miracle seems

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<sup>41</sup> Oliphant 379-380.

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too wonderful, keeps, in the midst of all that wild agitation, the limits of God's word and man's nature in utter distinction from such a rash enthusiast as the prophet Baxter, whom even at the height of his inspiration the pastor interposes to calm and moderate. . . . Throughout his pleadings before the Presbytery of London, and in the letters I have just quoted, nothing seems so remarkable as this reasonableness, only allowing the truth of the first grand assumption, that the "work" was the work of God. But this reason, governing the actions of a man on such a sublimated level of existence, does only perplex and confuse the more those curious, anxious, interested spectators who might have ventured to hope it was merely temporary delusion, had everything about it been equally wild and irregular – but who were struck dumb by this visionary application, to such a matter, of those rules of trial and experiment common, in the ordinary affairs, to all sane and vigorous minds.<sup>42</sup>

A tall man, initially a high churchman, a man of lofty diction, his eyes raised to Heaven, his thoughts an epitome of Enlightenment revivalism, his *hamartia* a certain pride, he came to a low and pathetic end because of a conflict of historical forces – on the one hand, an increasingly rigid institutional bureaucracy, on the other, the emergence of newly empowered individual voices. A minister is a servant, offering services, but also an embodiment of the divine, a man of the Lord. A minister conveys the pre-existent word of Scripture, but also speaks in the present. To the degree that the minister is an embodiment of Christ or of the Apostles and a locus of the Holy Spirit, he is also, as Irving's writings argue, a figure of flesh who contains the capacity to sin. To the degree that the minister is a man, born to sin, if only by excessive pride, he is also an embodiment of the Satanic, the fallen angel Lucifer's fatal act of sitting on the throne of God.

The events that took place in Irving's church during these years can be interpreted as expressions of the Marxian dialectic. As Irving's followers foresaw the end of time with the fulfillment of all prophecy, so Marx forecast an end of history, when the Hegelian dialectic would cease its relentless operation and realize the utopia of full human empowerment. The initial revolutionary gesture might be seen as Irving's insistence that Christ had, in his incarnation, realized humanity to a degree that had not been credited before. The Lord had

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<sup>42</sup> Oliphant 389.



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been subjected to the low condition of mortality and sin. As a radical expression of new doctrine, this theological point represented an attack on the established church, and Irving was, as a consequence, punished. His revolutionary impulse was echoed by the inspired ones, who felt the power come upon them, and determined to speak out in the service, thus usurping the place of the minister. They spoke in the voice of the Lord, and ultimately they denounced even the man who had allowed them authority in the church, thus effecting a revolution..

The trial scene of Irving by the Presbytery of Annan was a grim one, indeed. Irving stood firm in his conviction that the inspired ones spoke in the voice of the Holy Ghost and adhered to his beliefs about the incarnation of Christ. Long speeches were made by the disaffected elders and other church authorities who were convinced of the heresy of Irving's preaching. All this took place in a church illuminated by a single candle. At the point when judgment was about to be proclaimed, there came a voice from out of the shadows, "Arise, depart! Arise, depart! Flee ye out, flee ye out of here! Ye cannot pray! How can ye pray to Christ whom ye deny? Ye cannot pray. Depart, depart! flee, flee!"<sup>43</sup> It took a while in the dim light to discern that these words were said by another minister, a supporter of Irving. The report continues by saying that the assembly, which "had acted in the most becoming manner, now became confused," and Irving, much moved by this performance, shouted out, "What! Will ye not obey the voice of the Holy Ghost? As many as will obey the voice of the Holy Ghost, let them depart".<sup>44</sup> Mrs. Oliphant comments on this moment: "Clouds and coming night were now upon the path to which he went forth, commanded by the Holy Ghost: no longer triumph and victory, no second spring of hope – only the reproach that broke his heart – the desertion – the sin, as he held it, of his brethren, for whom he would have given his life".<sup>45</sup> Left behind in the dark church, the presbytery and some two thousand amazed spectators deposed Irving from his ministry.

The immediate upshot of this extraordinary scene, however, when he returned to London to his church on Newman Street, was that the inspired ones quickly spoke out, "in the power," and declared that he should not exercise any priestly functions or assume any authority

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<sup>43</sup> Oliphant 395.

<sup>44</sup> Oliphant 395.

<sup>45</sup> Oliphant 395.

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beyond the province of a deacon. This extreme limitation of Irving's powers lasted only for a short while, but never again did he exert the authority over his church that he had in past years. Irving held services in public meeting halls, or outdoors, until a new sanctuary could be found, and the newly reconstituted church took form with an entirely unprecedented hierarchy, based on Biblical prophecy. Irving was given the title Angel in this new order, though he was but one among seven. (Of this new position and title Mrs. Oliphant says, "he did not understand [his function] to be 'anything more than a Presbyterian minister'".<sup>46</sup>) A platform in the place of the pulpit held fifty or sixty persons, arranged in ranks as angels, prophets, and deacons, each rank with a chief at its center: "The angel ordered the service, and the preaching and expounding was generally by the elders in order. The prophets speaking as utterance came upon them".<sup>47</sup>

An American, Dr. Addison Alexander, happened to visit the church during this period and commented that the church "was extremely well contrived for scenic effect." His newspaper story of the experience exemplifies the attitude of mocking incredulity with which these performances were met. Mrs. Oliphant comments on Alexander's report:

This was the tone assumed, not by travelling Americans alone, but by all the general public, which imagined itself too enlightened to be deceived by any spiritual manifestations. It was a juggle which was supposed to be going on before those keen observers; and the heroic sufferer [Irving], who stood upon that platform before them, with the heart breaking in his generous and tender breast, was the chief trickster of the company, and was supposed to cast jealous eyes upon any curious stranger who might "gaze" too "steadfastly," and, perhaps, find out the secret of the imposture. In sight of such amazing misconception, miracles themselves lose their wonder; nothing is so wonderful as the blindness of those human eyes which, "gazing steadfastly" do but demonstrate their own incapacity to see.<sup>48</sup>

This passage articulates the core metaphors and concepts that make this strange episode in the history of Christianity relevant to larger trends in nineteenth-century performance and the

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<sup>46</sup> Oliphant 402.

<sup>47</sup> Baxter, *Irvingism* 11.

<sup>48</sup> Oliphant 400.

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portrayal of darkness. [My book will continue this exploration by examining other areas where the trickster's dark art cannot be clearly separated from the project of enlightenment.]

The dark is known as the place in which things cannot be seen. Of this simple proposition, the odd corollary is that which cannot be seen can be known only in the dark. That which cannot be seen includes that which it is not possible to see, but it also incorporates that which one ought not to see. The dark thus delineates a space of transgressive possibilities as well as human impossibility or limitation. The dark is also a place of violation, where power or strength (which is the root sense of "violation") meets weakness. In Irving's view, the Holy Ghost had been a real presence in his midst, and, though he himself had not had power to summon this presence, he believed in the transcendent capacity of his parishioners' art. The violation of church doctrine that enabled the Holy Ghost to become present by human means was, in his view, a necessity. That the violation might be seen as his all-too-human failing did not trouble him, because he believed in an overarching, pre-emptive authority, but when those very same parishioners who had given him grounds for belief in a miracle had identified him as a power of darkness, then he was put in an ultimate double bind. Either discount their inspired word (and cast doubt on the whole of his preaching from Scripture) or discount his own complicity in the event (because why would an agent of Satan enable the speaking forth of the Holy Ghost). Irving could not win. In either case, the human capacity to sin, which Irving could manage in his preaching, would become too much a real presence in holiness.

A recent article in the *New Yorker* describes a new and profitable trend in movie-making, sponsored by Christian organizations, which are essentially film adaptations of the Book of Revelation. Contemporary stories of Apocalypse, the Antichrist, Rapture, Satanic presence, and end time, all envisioned with thriller-movie effects, bring to audiences a sense of the dire need to come to redemption now: "It's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* with a Christian spin: the horror comes not from outer space but from our own corrupted souls".<sup>49</sup> The article recounts how a large number of people who would otherwise have kept Hollywood and their fundamentalist beliefs in utterly separate categories (if they acknowledged Hollywood movies at all) have created a market for these movies. The power of those movies is that they recast their beliefs in terms of the powerful effects of dramatization and cinematography. At the same time, the risk

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<sup>49</sup> Scott Spencer, "Lights! Camera! Rapture!: The Christian Thriller Heads for the Cineplex," *New Yorker* (10 September 2001) 107.

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the filmmakers run is operating in a business that is otherwise known for its secular expression, its vivid depiction of evil, and even the occasional open blasphemy, such as *The Last Temptation of Christ*. For the audience of Edward Irving's church, the effect of the Holy Ghost seeming to perform daily must have had a comparable effect. The revelation of holiness in the midst of enlightened religion could not help but produce dark shadows in which the Satanic might be seen to lurk.

William Davies King  
Department of Dramatic Art  
University of California Santa Barbara  
Santa Barbara, California 93106

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