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IAN CRICHTON SMITH

The House with the Green Shutters

One of the things that George Douglas Brown does in *The House with the Green Shutters* is abolish Scottish history and concentrate on the present and the physical. There is a brief mention of a minister but little of importance is said about him. It is interesting that the relationship between Gourlay and his wife is analogous to that between Weir of Hermiston and his wife but where Weir's wife comforts herself with a warm evangelistic religion Gourlay's wife simply exists in a passive helplessness. There are no historical references. What Brown might lose in depth he gains in immediacy. It is true, however, that the section of the book which is set in Edinburgh is weak; he is the novelist par excellence of the small town and not the city.

Here is an example of his precision:

The freshness of the air, the smoke rising thin and far above the red chimneys, the sunshine glistening on the roofs and gables, the rosy clearness of everything beneath the dawn—above all, the quietness and the peace—made Barbie, usually so poor to see, a very pleasant place to look down at on a summer morning. At this hour there was an unfamiliar delicacy in the familiar scene, a freshness and purity of aspect—almost an unearthliness—as though you viewed it through a crystal dream. But it was not the beauty of the hour that kept Gourlay musing at his gate. He was dead to the fairness of the scene even while the fact of its presence before him wove most subtly with his mood. He smoked in silent enjoyment because in a morning such as this everything he saw was a delicate flattery to his pride. . . (Chapt. I).

Instead of describing a landscape for its own sake, Brown creates it only to dismiss it, or rather only to annex it into a specific human consciousness. He makes the observed detail do some work as, for instance, in the following: "The table was littered with unwashed dishes and in the corner of it next him was a great black sloppy ring showing where a red saucepan had been laid upon the bare board. The sun streamed through the window in yellow heat right on to a pat of melting butter," (Chapt. IV). This is a description of Mrs. Gourlay's kitchen but the details have been carefully selected. The last sentence is not poetic; it is telling us about Mrs. Gourlay and is an indirect evocation of her negligence. It is not a fact of landscape; it is a human fact.

Consider the following where a laurel is raised to the level of a symbol. Young Gourlay is going off to Edinburgh University for the last time. He has been home, having proudly lived off his reputation for having gained the Raeburn Prize though fundamentally he is very stupid:

A widening cone of light shone out from the leftward-lamp of the gig full on a glistening laurel which Simpson had growing by his porch. Each smooth leaf of the green bush gave back a separate gleam vivid to the eye in that pouring yellowness. Gourlay stared at the bright evergreen and forgot for a moment where he was. His lips parted and . . . his look grew dreamy and far away. (Chapt. XXII).

This is partly an indication of that special quality of sensitivity which won him the prize but also, since it is a laurel, it reminds us of the prize itself.

Later still there is the passage (after young Gourlay has murdered his father):

He passed through the kitchen and stood on the step of the back door looking out on the quiet little paved yard. Everything there was remarkably still and bright. It was an early spring that year and the hot March sun beat down on him, paining his bleared and puffy eyes. The contrast between his own lump of a body, drink-dazed, dull-throbbing, and the warm bright day came in on him with a sudden sinking of the heart, a sense of degradation and personal abasement . . . (Chapt. XXVI).

In other words, Brown has learned to make landscape a function of human psychology. He hardly ever writes about it for its own sake. The book is essentially about human beings, and that is a good thing.

* * *

How good is the novel? The most powerful character is, of course, Gourlay, a man of primitive strength and ambition. He is not, however, powerful mentally but he does give an impression of greatness. It is the greatness of an Ajax bewilderedly hacking at sheep. He suffers from the sin of hubris, for this book seems to be modelled on Greek tragedy. The stage full of deaths at the end suggests this. And if we follow this analogy through, we discover that, if there is a chorus in Greek tragedy, the chorus of people in this novel—the Deacon, the Provost and so on—are actively hostile to the hero. It is as if the Greek chorus had become, not commentator, but enemy. In Greek drama the chorus is there to pass average human judgment. It is usually neutral or at least not prejudiced against the hero. It works for the playwright since he himself cannot speak. It represents a moral centre.

Here we see Gourlay a lot of the time through a chorus that hates him. And the fact that Brown may be thinking in terms of the Greek hero—or at least a legendary primitive hero—is shown by a little incident which happens when Wilson, Gourlay's business rival (a little quick minor cut-price Ulysses), is engaged in attracting a potential customer away from Gourlay.

Then a strange thing happened. Gourlay had a curious stick of foreign wood (one of the trifles to feed his pride on) the crook of which curved back to the stem and inhaled, leaving room for the fingers. The wood was of wonderful toughness and Gourlay had been known to bet that no man could break the handle of his stick by a single grip over the crook and under it. Yet now, as he saw his bargain whisked away from him and listened to Wilson's jibe, the thing snapped in his grip like a rotten twig.

(Chapt. XI).

It is typical of Brown that he should signal a psychological setback by a physical gesture, for the power of the book is almost wholly physical: "He went down the street with grinding jaws, the letter crushed to a white pellet in his hand." (Chapt. XIII).

Gourlay reveals himself continually through the physical. "Gourlay's jaw clamped. 'Noathing, Peter,' he said sullenly." And later, "'No, no, Peter' and Gourlay gripped him by the shoulder as he turned back to his work." (Chapt. XXII).

The book, of course, falls apart at the end. Everyone in the house has to die and there is some unconvincing business with a hammer where Gourlay, I think in an act which sounds psychologically wrong, sets about improving his house. Similarly, in order that the postman—the small town Mercury—may discover the dead bodies, he has to have some reason for entering the house and the pretext supplied by the author is that a letter addressed to Gourlay is insufficiently stamped.

These incidents are perhaps not serious flaws—and we all know how careless even Shakespeare was—but they reveal a negligence which threw away, though it did not demolish, the book.

* * *

One is also interested in another question with regard to the novel. Who is telling the story? It is told mostly in the third person and yet near the end an inexplicable "I" narrator emerges briefly. Is this "I" the author?

What, however, is important—indeed crucial—is the fact that the author has not sufficiently withdrawn himself from the events. His own hatred of the society is involved and this muffles the impact of the

book, and gives it in places a shrill hectic tone. One feels this partisanship on the very first page where he is describing the chambermaid of the Red Lion (called, significantly enough, Blowsalinda): "Halfway she met the hostler with whom she stopped in amorous dalliance. He said something to her and she laughed loudly and vacantly. The silly tee-hee echoed up the street." The single word "silly" betrays the author.

We find the same thing in another comment: "The genus 'bodie' is divided into two species, the 'Harmless bodies' and the 'nesty bodies.' The bodies of Barbie belonged to the second variety." (Chapt. V).

It is rather a pity that the author should have injected his own emotion and dislike into the book since, in other ways, the society is meticulously and accurately described as if the inhabitants of Barbie were, in fact, an insect species which has learned to use intelligence in the service of a blind instinct of hate. The book would have been much more powerful if the image, scientifically conceived, had been allowed to do its own work. And yet . . . there is no doubt too that the anger of Brown animates the whole structure.

There is also no doubt that there is a terrifying truth in the book, a truth which he has brought to the boil in a small venomous hothouse. And how much healthier it is than the sentimental kailyardism against which he was rebelling!

He describes the Deacon as an "artist in evil." And this also is true. In a sense these people are doing what he himself is doing, that is, meticulously observing and making a story from their observations. They are in truth artists. But the accusation that can be made against them is that they are obsessively one-sided. It is a pity that the same observation can be made against the author. If he had shown the magnanimity which could have insulated himself against their venom he could have written a masterpiece for he had the passion and the equipment to do so.

* * *

I consider that the final damaging weakness of a potentially great book is this. If history and religion are abolished in this arena where Gourlay is baited like a bull, where is the moral centre from which judgment is passed? Has the author created one character who stands for what we can admire and who can yet survive as a human being in such an environment?

There is none. The baker shows decency but he is not big enough to affect events. Oedipus recognises the judgment of the gods. But there are no gods for Gourlay to recognise. What we have is a kind

of squalid natural history into which no judgment can be inserted. Consequently, at the end, Brown is driven into melodrama and his cruel Mercury postie who discovers the deaths.

The trouble is not so much that events are exaggerated but that there is no resonant depth such that we can know that Gourlay's hubris is wrong. If his hubris is only a reaction against this town who would not excuse him? Gourlay is only doing what is natural in isolating himself from these people. They represent no values either human or divine. He himself represents no values except the courage of a flawed but ultimately barren spirit. If the novel is a kind of Darwinism in action can Darwinism ultimately be the stage on which a tragedy can be played? Certainly not in *Lear* where—in spite of the continuous animal imagery—the King and Gloucester are partially defined by another order—a religious one. There is no order to which Gourlay looks or on which the author can rely.

Nevertheless, when all this has been said, Brown has set down a powerful image of Scottish small town society. We feel it to be true though perhaps exaggerated.

If Wilson is a devious small town Ulysses and Gourlay an inarticulate Ajax they are nevertheless divorced from the anger or concern of the gods. We, the readers, cannot find a place to be at. We hate to see what happens to Gourlay but only as we hate to see a lack of fair play in life. Is this enough for tragedy? Wouldn't true tragedy be more cathartic than this? The enraged Ajax slashing at the sheep is not tragic. It is painful but not ultimately meaningful.

And yet. And yet . . . how close Brown got here to a masterpiece when the writing is about Barbie and its inhabitants! When the book is placed beside Turgenev's *A Lear of the Steppes* we can see what is gained by a distancing and coolness on the part of the author. The image of the Russian Lear tearing apart rafter after rafter of his house shows what happens when a writer follows the logic of his story through and does not step aside in the service of melodrama.

On the other hand, it might be better to end with Brown in his full strength, to show what he is capable of. Here are two passages which are beautifully done. In the first, Gourlay's pony is dead and he can no longer ride out solo but must use the communal brake.

"Damn it, I have enough to thole," Gourlay muttered, "surely there was no need for this to happen." And when he looked in the mirror to fasten his stock, and saw the dark, strong, clean-shaven face, he stared at it for a moment with a curious compassion for the man before him as for one who was being hardly used. The hard lips could never have framed the words but the

vague feeling in his heart as he looked at the dark vision was: "It's a pity to you, sir." (Chapt. XV).

The next passage — in the course of which the bankrupt Gourlay has to dismiss his old servant Peter — reads as follows:

Gourlay watched him for a long time without speaking. Once or twice he moistened his lips and cleared his throat and frowned as one who would broach unpleasant news. It was not like him to hesitate. But the old man, encased in senility, was ill to disturb: he was intent on nothing but the work before him: it was mechanical and soothing and occupied his whole mind. Gourlay, so often the trampling brute, felt it brutal to wound the faithful old creature dreaming at his toil. He would have found it much easier to discharge a younger and keener man.

"Stop, Peter," he said at last, "I dont need you ainy more." Peter rose stiffly from his knees and shook the mould with a pitiful gesture from his hands. His mouth was fallen slack and showed a few yellow tusks.

"Eh?" he asked vaguely. The thought that he must leave the Gourlays could not penetrate his mind.

"I don't need you ainy more," said Gourlay again and met his eye steadily.

"I'm gey auld," said Peter, still shaking his hands with that pitiful gesture, "but I only need a bit and a sup. Man, I'm willin' to tak onything."

"It's no that," said Gourlay sourly, "it's no that. But I'm giving up the business."

Peter said nothing but gazed away down the garden, his sunken mouth forgetting to munch its straw which dangled by his chin. "I'm an auld servant," he said at last, "and mind ye," he flashed in pride, "I'm a true ane."

"Oh, you're a' that," Gourlay grunted, "you have been a good servant."

"It'll be the poorhouse it's like," mused Peter. "Man, have ye noathing for us to do?" he asked pleadingly.

Gourlay's jaw clamped: "Noathing, Peter," he said sullenly. "Noathing," and slipped some money into Peter's heedless palm.

Peter stared stupidly down at the coins. He seemed dazed. "Aweel," he said, "I'll feenish the tatties at ony rate. . ." (Chapt. XXII).

All one can do is point to this scene, beautifully handled both in dialogue and delicacy of perception. It is here that we find Brown at his strongest. Only a novelist of great talent could have created that scene. It is interesting to notice that it shows the true Scottish democratic intimacy between master and man which we even find in the confrontation between Whingham and his servant John Barnet when the

latter is being dismissed. By itself, of course, the scene in Brown's book does not save the book, but it is an indication of his isolated power and accuracy.

The good qualities of *The House with the Green Shutters* can be seen more clearly when compared with a book obviously based on it, the best-selling *Hatter's Castle*. Brodie—like Gourlay—is an intensely proud, physically strong, inarticulate man with one son and two daughters one of whom has a child by a young man who is killed in the Tay Bridge disaster while the other, competing for scholastic honours, fails under pressure from her father and kills herself. Brodie—like Gourlay—has a house of which he is proud and a business as a hatter which is destroyed by an incoming rival business as happens in *The House with the Green Shutters*. *Hatter's Castle* seems, in fact, to be a pastiche of the earlier novel. It would take too long to detail all the resemblances but one of them might be mentioned. Where Gourlay in *The House with the Green Shutters* breaks his stick in a moment of frustration and rage, Brodie breaks his pipe:

A sharp crack split the attentive silence as with the onset of a pang of sudden bitterness his teeth compressed themselves with such a vicious final force upon his pipe that the stem snapped through. As though in a trance he looked at the riven pipe in his hand for a long second, then spat out the broken end coarsely upon the floor, looked again stupidly at the ruined meerschaum and muttered to himself, unconscious that they heard him:

"I liked that pipe—liked it well. It was my favourite."

(Book II, Chapt. IV)

This, I think, measures the distance that Cronin has declined from the Homeric. That Brodie should be a hatter is I suppose also significant of that decline unless that title has a double meaning.

Where, however, *Hatter's Castle* fails especially to convince is in its language which is always softer and weaker than Brown's. It is the language of a man who is not a real writer and who has not understood that language and imagery have also moral connotations. The quality of the book can be gauged from its ending. After Brodie has destroyed practically every member of his family the book moves toward its end:

But he [ie. Brodie] did not reply and still gazed stonily out of the window where the warm summer wind moved gently amongst the thin leaves of the straggling bushes that fringed his garden. The breeze freshened, disporting itself amongst the shoots of the currant bushes, then, circling it, it touched the leaves of the three tall serene silver trees flickering them dark and light with

a soft caress when, suddenly striking the house, it chilled and passed quickly onwards to the beauty of the Winton Hills beyond.

(Book III, Chapt. X)

It is true that the ending of the *House with the Green Shutters* is by no means the best part of the book but it is not bad in this way. Brown's novel isn't finally a great one but it has a hard obdurate honesty which saves it from the emotional cheapness of the instant best seller. One feels that Brown is committed to the indictment in his novel; Cronin isn't.

Oban
