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Ian Campbell and Brian Vogel

The House with the Green Shutters
and the Seeing Eye

"I am glad you liked old Gourlay," wrote George Douglas Brown to Ernest Barker after the publication of *The House with the Green Shutters*. "I had such an impression of the strength of the man that I used to feel him in the room with me as I wrote of him."¹ The immediacy of the writing in *The House with the Green Shutters* has rarely been denied; whether pleasant or unpleasant, the effect of the novel is to give the impression of reader involvement, or sharp apprehension of the place Barbie, the characters, the events. What has been neglected, rather than denied, is Brown's power in subtle manipulation of reader response—particularly the position and nature of the seeing eye in *The House with the Green Shutters*. For a novel frequently regarded as crude and immature, Brown's masterpiece displays astonishing finesse in manipulation that seeing eye, and analysis of individual effects opens a wider and wider perspective on the novel's method and its "message."

In *The Unspeakable Scot*, a journalist squib of 1902. T. W. H. Crosland set out to guy the Scots of the time, their pretensions to literature, their view of themselves. In particular he had fun with Barbie, and Brown's "bodies."

Nowhere in letters does there exist such an unsophisticated revelation of the minds and habits of a savage and barbarous people as is to be found in this book. It is

¹Quoted from James Veitch, *George Douglas Brown* (London, 1952), p. 165. Hereafter *Veitch*.

fiction, of course; but it is that kind of fiction which has been written from close observation, and it amounts to an authentic document."²

There is some sense in this, as there is sense in much of Crosland's barbed work. Written from close observation *The House with the Green Shutters* certainly is; its resemblances to real-life Ochiltree are too close for coincidence (despite the author's denials)—and we know from Veitch's biography of Brown the correlation between incidents in the novel and those in the author's life. The editor of the recent Penguin edition has also convincingly related the topography of Barbie and its neighborhood to the localities of Brown's childhood.³

After the success of his novel Brown was glad to be honored in his native locality, and to state publicly that "I am a son of Ochiltree . . . I am proud of being a Scotsman, and I am still prouder of being a native of Ochiltree."⁴ But his pride found strange and oblique ways of working, and his affection for his native countryside found artistic, as distinct from autobiographical, form in often repellent ways. He described his work as "more complimentary to Scotland, I think, than the sentimental slop of Barrie, and Crockett, and Maclaren,"⁵ and the compliment was phrased and delivered in ways which were a necessary reply to the work of such kailyarders as these. These three successful writers, and a host of lesser imitators, had painted a particular picture of their country; Brown's "complimentary" picture was to be based not on a different locality or set of characters and situations, but on a curious perversion of the "kailyard" cliché, and on the subtlest reworking of the kailyard point of view.⁶

Certainly Brown saw his Barbie with an insider's venom and an insider's vividness.

1. Every clachan of Scotland is a hot-bed of scandal and malevolence. I had a letter the other day from a Scot previously unknown to me, in which he says that

²T. W. H. Crosland, *The Unspeakable Scot* (London, 1902), p. 88.

³*The House with the Green Shutters*, ed. Dorothy Porter (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp. 25-26. Parenthetical page references in the text are to this edition. See also David Angus, "The Real 'Barbie'?", *Scots Magazine* 118 (1982), 277-84.

⁴Quoted in Veitch, p. 162.

⁵Letter to Ernest Barker 24 October 1901, quoted in Veitch, p. 153.

⁶For further discussion see "George Douglas Brown's Kailyard Novel," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, XII, 1 (July, 1974), 62-73 and Ian Campbell, *Kailyard: A New Assessment* (Edinburgh, 1981), especially pp. 7-17.

the picture of Barbie is absolutely true to the petty burgh where he himself resides . . .

2. Few critics have taken into account the power a character like old Gourlay has, to poison the mind of a community. I knew of a Gourlay (though I didn't know him personally), and I saw the exultation that greeted his downfall. It was hellish.
3. Mrs Gourlay is not the only likeable character in the book—to me she is pitiable only, not likeable at all. But the baker and his wife, Tam Wylie and his son, Johnny Coe and Peter Riney, the old professor and Tarmillan—even Logan and Jock Allen—all these are made of the stuff of our common humanity. Whether the Gourlays are "human" or not is a matter of opinion. Some folk we know of think they are.⁷

This firmly places the author in the position of involvement through knowledge and through strong feeling. If these worthies are "made of the stuff of our common humanity," and convincingly portrayed as "real" characters, then author and reader share a position of knowledge and involvement. Reader and author are involved by the choice of something very like the narrative stance taken by the kailyard writers against whom Brown set his face. These writers gave the impression, through small narrative devices, of belonging to the community described for reasons which would make the community, and its narrative description, more appealing. Such descriptions as the following (the weekly rail journey back by train from market-town to kailyard village) indicate how a kailyard community was depicted.

Preliminaries were disposed of in the run to Kildrummie, and as the little company made their way through the pine-woods, and down one side of the Glen, and over the Tochtly bridge, and up the other slope to the parting of the ways, Robert was straitly questioned about the magnitude of the work he did in Glasgow, and the customs of the people, and the well-being of every single Drumtochtly person in that city, and chiefly as to sermons he had heard, their texts and treatment. On Sabbath the group at the kirk door would open up at Robert's approach, but he would only nod in shamefaced way to his friends and pass on; for it was our etiquette that instead of remaining to gossip, a son should on such occasions go in with his mother and sit beside her in the pew, who on her part would mistake the psalm so that he might find it for her, and pay such elaborate attention to the sermon that everyone knew she was thinking only of her son.⁸

Not only the close knowledge of a class and a country area are implied; note also the *our* in "our etiquette," suggesting a curious double standard. On the one hand, the kailyard narrator is a product of the same society, a countryman, someone through long acquaintance intimately familiar with

⁷Brown to a critic who had written his publishers; quoted in Veitch, p. 156.

⁸Ian Maclaren, *The Days of Auld Lang Syne* (London, 1895), p. 213.

what is, in every way, a closed society. Yet the same insider is writing for a wider audience, for entertainment and sometimes for amusement: sometimes explaining at length the mores of the rural Scots, sometimes glossing Scottish words in the dialogue helpfully.⁹ The assumption is thus of a former insider, someone who now interprets Scotland for a wider public. For the reader, the assumptions are more those of someone in a superior position—with vision of a wider context not available to the people trapped in the kailyard village.

Further examples from the kailyard emphasize this double standard.

Of the schoolmasters who were at times members of the club, Mr Dickie was the ripest scholar, but my predecessor at the school-house had a way of sneering at him that was as good as sarcasm. When they were on their legs at the same time, asking each other passionately to be calm, and rolling out lines from Homer, that made the innkeeper look fearfully to the fastenings of the door, their heads very nearly came together although the table was between them. The old dominie had an advantage in being the shorter man, for he could hammer on the table as he spoke, while gaunt Mr. Dickie had to stoop to it.¹⁰

"My predecessor": the schoolmaster in the glen is a favorite narrative viewpoint for kailyarders, educated out of the working class in which he probably had his family roots, yet poor enough to be a welcome figure in community festivals and so an ideal narrator. Not that he is a neutral narrator: like the minister and the doctor, he is predisposed to help the helpless, to favor those who require some assistance or some tolerance. A kindly and benevolent figure, his implied character slants the narrative so long as he remains in charge of it.

The Church is another favorite kailyard observation point; classless, free of the normal interactions of a predominantly hard-working and reticent lifestyle, the Church offers the ideal way in which to observe emotion and characteristic feeling of the rural Scot. Again, with the reservations above, it is not quite neutral, and the dispassionate reader will note the extraordinary assumptions of the "normality" in the community described here, the projection of the author's values into the characters described.

During a pause in the sermon I glanced up the church, and saw the same spell held the people. Donald Menzies had long ago been caught into the third heaven, and was now hearing words which it is not lawful to utter. Campbell in his watch-tower at the back had closed his eyes and was praying. The women were weeping quietly, and the rugged faces of our men were subdued and softened as when the evening sun plays on the granite stone.

⁹See Campbell, *Kailyard*, pp. 65-79 for further discussion.

¹⁰J. M. Barrie, *Auld Licht Idylls*, 6th edn (London, 1891), pp. 243-4.

But what will stand out forever before my mind was the sight of Margaret Howe. Her face was as white as death, and her wonderful grey eyes were shining through a mist of tears, so that I caught the light in the Manse pew. She was thinking of George, and had taken the minister to her heart.

The elders, one by one, gripped the minister's hand in the vestry, and, though plain, homely men, they were the godliest in the glen . . .¹¹

The success of the kailyard was greatly enhanced by this impression of involvement; the urban reader particularly, distanced by perhaps only a generation from this life, found the devices which framed this narrative (and reduced distance) pleasant ones, and obviously non-Scots (or exiled Scots) enjoyed the opportunity to see a life plain, Godly, simple, often admirable. For both sets of readers, distance was reduced, ignorance removed.

George Douglas Brown had some reason to admire the type of life implied in this kind of kailyard fiction; he had been of it in his youth. He had known the village community, the strong local school system (he owed his success to it, and dedicated *The House with the Green Shutters* to the headmaster who had made his career possible). His mother, to whom he was an only child, an illegitimate child, had surrounded him with the fiercest and most loyal of loving care; his friends in Ochiltree and Coylton, to whom he remained dedicated throughout his life, obviously meant a great deal to him even after he settled in Oxford and London. Indeed he might have found, on the face of it, reasons to admire and be proud of the Scotland projected in the kailyard stories.

How then could he call *The House with the Green Shutters* more complimentary to Scotland than a kailyard fiction which extolled these virtues of strong local community life which Brown knew to be true?

The answer lies in recognizing and analyzing Brown's ironic manipulation of the narrative point of view which had been established as "normal" by successful kailyard convention. For that narrative point of view, while apparently naturalistic, both popularized and maintained some curious conventions. The class of the narrator, for instance, was (as has been suggested) curiously neutral, relying on the Scottish social respect for education or the ministry or medicine as still "within" the community, distanced by respect but not by money. The doctor, the minister, the dominie are far from rich—the point is made over and over again in kailyard—but their work makes them admirable. And they are always welcome; hence their narrative stance is ideal for community observation. Given as it is to a fondness for motifs in which the educated classes are involved—weddings and funerals,

¹¹Ian Maclaren, *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush*, 8th edn. (London, 1895), p. 98.

scholastic success of promising young men from the village, deathbeds and serious illness—the kailyard involved the professions heavily. Barrie in *A Window in Thrums* cleverly used the device of a schoolmaster boarding with a poor weaving family to allow the narrator to see the family life of the poor at only one remove.

Our dinner-hour was twelve o'clock and Hendry, for a not incomprehensible reason, called this meal his brose. Frequently however, while I was there to share the expense, broth was put on the table, with beef to follow in clean plates, much to Hendry's distress, for the comfortable and usual practice was to eat the beef from the broth-plates. Jess, however, having three whole white plates and two cracked ones, insisted on the meals being taken genteelly, and her husband, with a look at me, gave way.¹²

Like the story "Preparing to receive company" from the same collection, such prose allows Barrie to give the audience a peephole into the life of the poor, into their complex social rules and social pretensions. Many who are uneasy with this kind of literature feel that Barrie is inviting audience amusement and superiority at the pathetic attempts to live above Jess's income. Barrie would point to the often-repeated *apologia* in his fiction as to the moral worth of Jess and her family, more than counterbalancing the social pretensions; but the fact remains that Barrie grew up in much the same circles, and was writing from a distance to an audience largely removed from first-hand knowledge of Thrums, an audience to whom such pretensions would be comic. The decision to adopt and to write from the point of view utilized in *A Window in Thrums* is made with a view to audience knowledge and assumptions: it involves compromise between naturalism, sympathy, condescension, laughter, mockery and admiration. Barrie's great strength as an author was to be *aware* of these compromises, and to remain within an acceptable framework widening his audience without alienating those who recognized the limits of his naturalism.

Barrie's narrator, superior in class to his subjects but not by far, is certainly a sympathetic narrator—but one from whom it is difficult to derive a critical standpoint. He is too forgiving—as the most cursory of comparisons with the narrator of *The House with the Green Shutters* would demonstrate.

To those who have the artist's eye, the picture, which hangs in my schoolhouse now, does not show a handsome lad, Jamie being short and dapper, with straw-coloured hair, and a chin that ran away into his neck. That is how I once regarded him, but I have little heart for criticism for those I like, and despite his madness

¹²J. M. Barrie, *A Window in Thrums* (London, 1889), p. 95.

for a season, of which alas I shall have to tell, I am always Jamie's friend. Even to hear anyone disparaging the appearance of Jess's son is to me a pain.¹³

Critics of the time, it is interesting to note, would not have shared modern distaste with this sentimental prose, and found the narrative stance far from disagreeable.

But no book could be more deeply instinct with the poetry of real feeling . . . Mr Barrie is a proof that a little circle of weavers, speaking the broadest Scotch, too broad for our individual taste, can be made universally interesting; and that their homely life, with all its fun and pathos and tenderness, is as well adapted for the uses of genius as any in the world.¹⁴

Here is Brown responding to his reviews.

Rather idiotic review in the *Scotsman*, but they put it first in their list of fiction, gave it the longest notice of any book, and voted it "Disagreeably powerful." Goodish review in the *Glasgow Herald*; 'true to the verge of being merciless;" "If we smile, it is at the cruel point of some stinging jest'" "brilliant vigour and undesirable power;" "shows with a vengeance too—the reverse of the Drumtochty shield;" "overdrawn, but grimly true and full of promise."

So far nobody but the *Glasgow Herald* even has seen that I am shewing up the Scot malignant—which you and I thought, in a way, the *raison d'être* of the book. Scotsman fellow says, it is brutally coarse. Coarse!¹⁵

Here Brown helps a later critic reach the core of the subject. For "coarseness" is the jibe that stings: "coarseness" in a book which was designed to be "complimentary" to a Scotland Brown knew, knew from living in, knew from remembering with pain, knew from imagining keenly. Thrums and Drumtochty were remembered, to be sure; yet they were remembered in *couleurs de rose*, from the minister's viewpoint in Ian Macclaren's case (and after a lapse of years), and from a far-off hardworking professional short story writer's in Barrie's case, Barrie crafting excellent short fiction from his own memories and from stories demanded from his mother in letter after letter.

¹³A *Window in Thrums*, p. 144.

¹⁴Mrs. Oliphant in *Blackwood's Magazine* (quoted in the publisher's material to *Auld Licht Idylls*, 6th edn (1891)). While her first-hand knowledge of the subject would be small, Mrs. Oliphant of course spoke for a very large reading public.

¹⁵Veitch, pp. 148-9.

The kailyarders were shaping memory to a perceived market; Brown was writing from pain, at his own memories and at what he saw being done to the "real Scotland" from which he was physically distanced. He depicts in *Barbie* a Scotland dragged uncaringly into an industrial revolution for which it is unprepared, a rural society demolished almost overnight for the personal profit of a few immoral entrepreneurs. He saw a community life (which he had himself known) destroyed by that change, its positive strengths diminished and its provincial narrownesses emphasized by the hopeless decline of the local community. He came from an Ochiltree where poverty and exploitation were everyday facts—yet he had, with the love of mother and the devotion of teachers, escaped to a wider vision of his native Scotland. To be *true* to that Scotland was the aim of his book, even if it involved (and plainly he had talked it over with his friends) the "Scot malignant." Obviously the malignant existed, and the emphasis placed on malignancy in *Barbie* is equally obviously the excess of "black for the white" which Brown himself diagnosed as the book's fault, yet refused to alter. It was an honest attempt to respond to perceived change, and to ally that change to a view of life as tragic, and as demanding, as Hardy's. To be called "coarse" for such honesty was clearly something which stung, as bitterly as the crudity of reviewers' misunderstanding of *Jude the Obscure* stung Hardy. Such criticism, to Brown, presupposed blindness to the subtlety and complexity of the narrational technique, to his seeing eye.

There is much in the texture of *Barbie* life which is coarse. Nowhere is this more true, nor under more artistic control, than in the circles which move around the principal characters, and which permit the narrational stance to flex to the demands of the expanding community which is *Barbie*. The bodies, the lounging gossips of *The House with the Green Shutters*, are Brown's much-praised device by which he catches the kailyard habit of passing village affairs through the council of leisured men, working men of a small affluence with time to waste in gossip. In Maclaren and in *Barrie* these men would be kindly, intelligent, the backbone of a decent community, quick to help when needed and offering a strong resistance to undesired change. Their place is the churchyard and the weekly market, their role indispensable in a well-run community.

Among the many kailyard features copied, then subverted in *The House with the Green Shutters*, the "bodies" are among the most brilliantly successful. From bystanders, they move to a central influential role in the novel.

From that day Wilson and Gourlay were a pair of gladiators for whom the people of *Barbie* made a ring. They pitted the protagonists against each other and hounded them on to rivalry by their comments and remarks, taking the side of the newcomer, less from partiality to him than from hatred of their ancient enemy. It was strange that a thing so impalpable as gossip should influence so strong a man

as John Gourlay to his ruin, but it did. The bodies of Barbie became not only the chorus to Gourlay's tragedy, buzzing it abroad and discussing this downfall; they became also, merely by their maddening tattle, a villain of the piece and an active cause of the catastrophe. Their gossip seemed to materialise into a single entity, a something propelling that spurred Gourlay on to the schemes that ruined him (p. 105).

In this way Brown improves on a device from a novel which plainly influenced him—*The Mayor of Casterbridge*—in which Hardy occasionally brings the existence of an independent Casterbridge (the skimmity ride, the fairground, the magistrates' court) to bear on the tragically concentrated plot of Henchard himself. Barbie has its independent existence throughout *The House with the Green Shutters*, and indeed that existence rather pointedly survives the major characters who are, heroes and anti-heroes alike, destroyed at the end. The last people we meet in the novel are the bodies, hearing of the death of all the Gourlays; the narrative which began with them belongs ultimately *with* them, not with the inhabitants of the House with the Green Shutters who all meet death by violence or by suicide.

Brown, so often accused of heavy-handedness, introduces the narratorial stance in a number of devices so deft as almost to pass unnoticed. When Wilson announces his plans for a new general store in a bombastic printed notice offering everything from a needle to an anchor, Brown records the community response in an insolent parody of the kind of response we might expect from a kailyard narrator.

Such was the poster with which 'Barbie and the surrounding neighbourhood were besprinkled within a week of 'J.W.'s' appearance on the scene. He was known as 'J.W.' ever after. To be known by your initials is sometimes a mark of affection, and sometimes a mark of disrespect. It was not a mark of affection in the case of our 'J.W.'. When Donald Scott slapped him on the back and cried 'Hullo, J.W., how are the anchors selling?' Barbie had found a cue which it was not slow to make use of. Wilson even received letters addressed to 'J.W., Anchor Merchant, No. 1, The Cross'. Ours is a nippy locality (p. 92).

The same trick draws the narrator into the community, and the reader in after the narrator; *our* J.W., *Ours* is a nippy locality. The narrator plainly is of Barbie, in Barbie, and sharing its point of view. When he tells us of the effects of the buzzing of the Bodies at the Cross, he speaks from the position of having been there. Knowing Barbie before the plot, he is there to narrate the end of the plot. When the bodies discuss Gourlay's rone-pipes, "and then their eyes, diminished in mirth, twinkled at each other from out their ruddy wrinkles, as if wit had volleyed between them" (p. 50), the narrator is aware of the provincial narrowness of their interests, their intolerable obsession

with Gourlay. He is aware of their obsession without sharing it: he is aware of the nature of Barbie and Gourlay's world—hostile, implacable.

Remembering their first encounter the grocer tried to outstare him, but Gourlay hardened his glower and the grocer blinked. When the two passed, 'I declare!' said the bodies, 'did ye see yon?—they're not on speaking terms!' And they hotched with glee to think that Gourlay had another enemy (p. 102).

The narrator knows a wider world; hence the ironic tone adopted when Barbie is all agog with railway news. "Such was the talk in pot-house and parlour, at kirk and mart and tryst and fair, and wherever potentates did gather and abound" (p. 109) To the kailyard writer, these would be the natural places where the worthy men of the village would gather. Brown's narrator has an implied knowledge from city life and newspaper reading, from wider experience and a wider sympathy. The narrator, for instance, knows enough of wider canons of taste to appreciate the ghastliness of the Wilsons' "best room,"

Out of the flowerpot rose gauntly a three-sticked frame, up which two lonely stalks of a climbing plant tried to scramble, but failed miserably to reach the top. The round little rickety table with the family album on one corner (placed at what Mrs Wilson considered a beautiful artistic angle to the window), the tawdry cloth, the green mat, the shiny horsehair sofa, and the stuffy atmosphere, were all in a perfect harmony of ugliness. A sampler on the wall informed the world that there was no place like home (p. 119).

Parodic writing of this kind implies a wider knowledge, the sort the author had achieved by leaving Ochiltree for Ayr, Ayr for Glasgow, Glasgow for Oxford. Mrs. Wilson, her world bounded by money and the daily duties of shopkeeping in Aberdeen and Barbie, would not share that knowledge with the narrator—but the reader would.

In this way Brown achieves in *The House with the Green Shutters* the narrator transitional to a distanced world of rural values (the kailyard village, re-written into expanding Barbie) and the predominantly wider-world urban values of the reader. Barbie repels the narrator, too: yet the seeing eye and the reader return, fascinated, to the story.

The point can be developed much further than the simple-minded attitudes of the narrator to events. The professions, too, have their importance in Barbie. There are, for instance, two ministers (one a fat fool, the other a botanizing weakling), a dominie (an uncaring amateur) and a doctor (who quarrels with Gourlay and is written out of the story). It is notable that Brown feels he can insolently include the kailyard obsession with the professions in a Scottish village, yet invert their role as mediators, kindly forwarders of the poor and needy, guardians of traditional values and rewarders

of good. The members of the traditional professions in *Barbie*, almost without exception, are examples of personal disaster. They exemplify the sickness of the community they fail to serve.

The interesting exception to this process, insistently followed through by Brown, is MacCandlish the schoolmaster in Skeighan, little described other than in terms of weakling inefficiency beside the stark power of Gourlay.

"But what can I do?" bleated MacCandlish, with a white spread of deprecating hands. The stronger man took the grit from his limbs.

"Do? Do? Damn it, sir, am *I* to be *your* dominie? . . . Flog him, flog him, flog him" (p. 133).

In a deleted passage from earlier drafts of the novel¹⁶ Brown had given MacCandlish a much larger and more sympathetic role, but in the novel's final form MacCandlish's inspiration—William Maybin, rector at Ayr Academy and Brown's friend and ally—had to be content with a minor parodic part in the book and the dedication at the front. The schoolmaster at Coynton, Brown's other lifelong friend, had also to be content to be written out of the story with a parodic scene.

"The fault of young Gourlay," quoth he, "is a sensory perceptiveness in gross excess of his intellectuality."

They blinked and tried to understand.

"Aye man, dominie! said Sandy Toddle. "That means he's an infernal cuddy, dominie! Does it na, dominie?"

But Bleach-the-boys had said enough. "Aye," de said drily, "there's a wheen gey cuddies in *Barbie!*"—and he went back to his stuffy little room to study *The Wealth of Nations* (p. 142).

Interestingly, the dominie in *Barbie* shares the speech levels of the bodies when he wishes, and transcends them when he wishes to make fun of them. The clear inference is that he is *of* *Barbie*, or of the area. Distanced by education, he still descends to the level of the bodies for occasional companionship when Adam Smith palls.

Like the baker, the dominie is a basically superior person who fails to distance himself from the bodies, and is guilty by association. He plainly does nothing to warn off Gourlay from ruining young John by forcing on him a grotesquely inappropriate education. Like Tom Tulliver in *The Mill*

¹⁶National Library of Scotland, MS 8172.

on the *Floss*, John Gourlay has nothing to gain from "an education" in the kailyard sense, any more than Jimmy Wilson has. Yet the kailyard obsessively saw its young men "get on" through education, so Brown has his youngsters from Barbie follow the pattern—and no clear benefit results. The dominie is a prime example of the seeing eye—close to the reader's normality, close to Brown's own background—and a failure in his moral weakness, his obsessive inclusion in a community he despises. Brown's ambivalence towards Barbie is a keen demonstration of his own obsession with his past and the Scots malignant who populated it. Through the dominie, and the uneasy half-defined and half-suggested relationship between such people and the narrator of Brown's fiction, the reader experiences the ambivalences of Barbie most acutely.

The fuss made over the Raeburn is part of the pattern of Brown's manipulation of his readers. After all Barbie is keen enough to have the credit when Barbie men win the prize—but the narrator's own description suggests a wider perspective which the reader would probably share:

The Raeburn was a poor enough prize, a few books for an "essay in the picturesque" (p. 159).

This is the tone of someone who has familiarity with the system, who has probably been through University. The narrator of the University section in the book is plainly someone who inferentially knows it from the student side, from the Howff, the tramp to lectures, the animal noises from the student benches, the drinking, the depression, the pressure of examinations and essays. The world of Tam the professor and his weakling assistant is glimpsed only from the student point of view. It seems fair to suggest the narrator, like Brown himself, is describing the University experience from the point of view of the Scottish student who has been through the system. Unlike the kailyard's villagers who regard "an education" with bated breath as the highest aspiration for the family's eldest son, *The House with the Green Shutters* has the jaundiced view of the survivor who sees through such uncritical praise. Struthers the minister is seen as the fool complete. Johnny Coe, "who could think at times," is given the pertinent observation that "a little ability's a dangerous thing."

To be safe you should be a genius winged and flying, or a crawling thing that never leaves the earth. It's the half-and-half that hell gapes for. And owre they flap (p. 176).¹⁷

¹⁷For a fuller discussion, with particular reference to Hardy, see B. J. Vogel, "The Half-and-Half that Hell Gapes For': George Douglas Brown, Thomas Hardy, and the Question of Artistic Integrity" (unpublished MSc dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1989).

To Gourlay the minister has "plenty of money and little to do—a grand easy life o't" (p. 140)—an observation so true (from an oblique perspective) as to involve the outside reader in the ironic savoring of it. Likewise it is hard for any reader to feel strongly for the Deacon—yet the Deacon, who is far from stupid, sees through Davie Aird's pseudo-Edinburgh affectations with deadly accuracy even as Davie is patronizing him as a provincial bumpkin. Few comic scenes in the book have more bite.

Then pursing his chin down, with a fastidious and critical regard, he picked a long fair hair off his left coat-sleeve. He held it high as he had seen them do on the stage of the Theatre Royal. "Sweet souvenir!" he cried, and kissed it, "most dear remembrancer."

The Deacon fed on the sight. The richness of his satiric perception was too great to permit of speech. He could only gloat and be dumb (p. 185).

In another example the Baker, rescued by his wife from making a fool of himself before the Bodies in a drunken moment, is well aware of the narrowness of the circle he chooses to mix in, and his wife is equally aware—though from mutual affection they choose to protect the other. "He glanced up at her with comic shrewdness from where he sat on his hunkers—for fine he saw through her—and 'Ou aye,' said he, 'ye great muckle fat hotch o' a dacent bodie, ye—I'll gang in and have a dish o' tea wi' ye.' And away went the fine fuddled fellow" (p. 183). Here the reader, the narrator, and the characters share in a complex and curiously attractive scene a wider awareness, of a world where love and tenderness exist, even though in Barbie they seem almost extinct—even inconceivable. While the professions may survive, and obviously children will continue to appear, love is curiously, aching absent. The complexity of the narratorial stance in describing the baker's wife is one of the few concessions Brown makes in this book to love.

Clearly there are no easy rules in Brown's narration.

The person telling the story is given the flexibility to mix with the bodies at one moment, and to sit in on the professor's lectures on metaphysics the next—and to see through the college professor as dispassionately as he sees through Barbie's bodies. The narrator spends considerable parts of the story in Edinburgh, during which Barbie ceases to all intents and purposes to exist—as it would have done had the narrator in his "real" life attended University. Brown also chooses to ignore considerable parts of life within the confines of Barbie—as the narrator would have done in "real" life had he, for instance, been a dominie or doctor. The pretense is that adopted by the kailyard narrator, an educated man who returns to his native country to serve

it as doctor or dominie or minister; the *application* of the narratorial convention is (it has been argued) inverted.

So Brown tries to fulfil the target he set for himself in his "rules for writing," which Veitch quotes in his life of Brown—rules for objectivity in writing a novel which plainly involved both his feelings and his *first-hand experience*. What *The House with the Green Shutters* achieves is a mode, a mechanism for handling first-hand experience without, if possible, allowing it to intrude to the detriment of the tragedy being constructed.

The artist must feel intensely the situation of each one of his characters, so as to give it with the full value of truth and emotion. *But he must not hold a brief for any one of them:* not only because by doing so he'd become prosy and didactic, but, more especially, because he would be false to true art. He should present his characters having their explanation in themselves, as Nature does. He must visit violations of the right line of human progress with the ruthless impartiality of Nature herself. He may be as emotional as is consistent with good sense in the vivid presentation of a suffering character, say, but he must never be overbalanced by his sympathy: *saeva necessitas* must be in him. In his whole scheme he must be somewhat callous in short—'tis the weakling-artist who invites his lachrymose readers to a petty whine over the merited sorrows of the human race. Like Nature's own so his work must move to its appointed end by the immutable law of its own being, calm, majestic, awe-inspiring.¹⁸

To select his own words, he assumes "callousness" to avoid the "petty whine." small wonder that to be called "coarse" was an especial insult. "Ours is a nippy locality": indeed Barbie is, and Brown is letting us know this not to invite warm audience admiration of the suffering of a godly peasantry, nor the pleasant escapism of a pastoral interlude for an urban readership tired of the new cities and the new slums. Barbie is terribly alive, and its life is transmitted by a narrative force flexible enough and all-encompassing enough to be at the Cross and in the House, at the University and in Skeighan. The narrator must respond, with aloof disgust, to the rottenness of characters like the Deacon and Wilson, and he must have the capacity to respond to the rare but welcome flashes of humanity in the texture of the life being recorded.

They went to the window. The fronting heavens were a black purple. The thunder, which had been growling in the distance, swept forward and roared above the town. The crash no longer rolled afar, but cracked close to the ear, hard, crepitant. Quick lightning stabbed the world in vicious and repeated hate. A blue-black moistness lay heavy on the cowering earth. The rain came—a few drops at first, sullen, as if loath to come, that splashed on a pavement wide as a crown-

¹⁸Quoted from Veitch, p. 166 (Rules for Writing).

piece—then a white rush of slanting spears. A great blob shot in through the window, open at the top, and spat wide on Gourlay's cheek. It was lukewarm. He started violently—that warmth on his cheek brought the terror so near.

The heavens were rent with a crash and the earth seemed on fire. Gourlay screamed in terror.

The Baker put his arm round him in kindly protection.

"Tuts, man, dinna be feared," he said. "You're John Gourlay's son, you know. You ought to be a hardy man."

"Aye, but I'm no," chattered John the truth coming out in his fear. "I just let on to be."

But the worst was soon over. Lightning, both sheeted and forked, was vivid as ever, but the thunder slunk growling away (pp. 130-1).

The voice which describes this scene has first-hand experience; it has astonishing powers of stylistic description denied to someone whose life has been spent at the Cross; has insight into the vast emptiness of affection which comprises John Gourlay's family life; has insight into the real character of the Baker, a closed book to most of the Bodies. The voice can act, in short, as a transitional voice between the world of Barbie and the world of the reader. This is the voice which, near the end of the novel, damns the repulsive Deacon Allardyce in the unlikely form of Tam Wylie.

"Deacon Allardyce, your heart's black-rotten," he said at last.

The Deacon blinked and was silent. Tam had summed him up. There was no appeal (p. 233).

This passage has been pointed to as "moral" and out of place in a book so ostensibly amoral; yet nothing, as it now emerges, could be further from the truth. The voice which relays this incident has been both at the level of the gossiping bodies, and in the wider world where the truth of Tam Wylie's summing-up would be evident. No better voice could be found to build a bridge between the "real" Scotland of the Ochiltree experience Brown knew from first hand, and the experience of his readers who would many of them be conditioned by the expectations of the kailyard. The collapse of Barbie is complete, Gourlay's Barbie, the decent Christian Barbie that kailyard readers might expect, the smug little country village which existed in the early chapters, even the sustaining community Barbie which baker and dominie and even Johnny Coe might suggest in the tangential ways that have been pointed out. Barbie—barbarous—is reduced to mean gossip, amoral satisfaction at

the fall of a hated tyrant (who did nothing to build his community), ironically counterpointed with the radiant arch of the dawn.

Brown in *The House with the Green Shutters* has savagely reinterpreted reality. He has created a Barbie and narrowed the focus of his seeing eye to an obsessive vision almost as obsessive as the characters in Barbie itself. His narrator, wider in experience though he be, has focussed on the tragedy which accelerates to engulf the house of Gourlay. Like Brown himself, the narrator is absorbed in a cruel, revolting, narrow, often despicable Scotland: like Brown the narrator implies in a variety of stances and devices a distance from Barbie. Yet like Brown the narrator cannot escape, fundamentally does not seem to wish completely to escape. The narrator is guilty, he too, of the "half-and-half" which ties him to remembered reality. Barbie, terribly, is reality, Brown's reality, and (on the evidence of this novel) his *created* reality.

To interpret this reality and make it convincing, while building an absorbing plot, to give an insight into the *complexity* of contemporary Scottish experience in the 1860s rather than simplifying it to a series of clichés, is indeed a compliment to a Scotland Brown had left behind in his own career. He could revisit Barbie for holidays, and he did with pleasure; but artistically, he did far more by revisiting it in the complex narrative stance he adopted for *The House with the Green Shutters*, and through his anti-hero John Gourlay.

To be there, to *feel* life as this book feels it, to harness that vision to the overlapping intentions of this astonishing novel, is the secret of the narrator's success in *The House with the Green Shutters*, and ultimately it is the secret of George Douglas Brown's success. He could pay few compliments to his native Scotland more telling than this: that his remembered Barbie compels the reader to see in it something larger, something terribly suggestive of a world view which the novel implies but spells out no more exactly than Hardy's contemporary tragedies. Like Hardy, Brown saw a world where evil was much closer than it seemed in the pastoral security of the kailyard. His seeing eye lifts the reader to a partial vision of that evil: the rest is the responsibility of the reader's imagination.

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