

1992

The Ghost of Hamlet in The House with the Green Shutters

Nicholas Royle

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Royle, Nicholas (1992) "The Ghost of Hamlet in The House with the Green Shutters," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1. Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol27/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

Nicholas Royle

The Ghost of Hamlet in
The House with the Green Shutters

George Douglas Brown's reputation rests on *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901), the extraordinary novel published a year before his sudden death, at the age of thirty-three, from pneumonia.¹ One project which he left unfinished concerned *Hamlet*. Brown's notebooks have generally met with little admiration: Ian Campbell sounds the critical consensus when he asserts that they "are full of half-finished, desperately unfinished work."² The material on *Hamlet* has not escaped the tenor of such criticism. Walter Elliot, in the Foreword to James Veitch's biography, *George Douglas Brown* (1952), observes: "At the time of his death he was only working upon *Hamlet*; notes without any great inspiration or discovery."³ And Veitch himself, who devotes some pages to Brown's work on *Hamlet* (see *GDB*, pp. 173-80), concludes: "all that ever came to reality was the first draft of the essay and an untidy mass of notes" (*GDB*, p. 180). Finally and most posi-

¹The text used in this paper is *The House with the Green Shutters*, ed. with an Introduction and Notes by Dorothy Porter (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1985); hereafter *HGS*. References to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans *et al.* (Boston, 1974).

²Ian Campbell, "George Douglas Brown. A Study in Objectivity," in *Nineteenth-century Scottish Fiction*, ed. Ian Campbell (Manchester, 1979), p. 158.

³James Veitch, *George Douglas Brown*, with a Foreword by Walter Elliot (London, 1952), p. 8; hereafter *GDB*.

tively, in her Introduction to the Penguin edition of *The House with the Green Shutters*, Dorothy Porter refers briefly to the "unpublished study of *Hamlet*, over-earnest but not without interest" (*HGS*, p. 10). Broadly speaking, however, this area of Brown's work has not received a great deal of critical attention. The following pages attempt (i) to provide a brief descriptive and evaluative account of Brown's writings on *Hamlet*; (ii) to draw attention to certain direct verbal correspondences between Shakespeare's play and Brown's novel; and (iii) to consider other ways in which Brown's *Hamlet* project seems to relate to *The House with the Green Shutters*.

Brown's work on Shakespeare's play consists of at least three MSS. First there is the main bulk, a mass of notes collected in one marbled-covered notebook, the word "Hamlet" scratched across the cover with the apparent violence of a strange and equivocal appropriation: this is NLS, MS 8176. The notebook runs to more than eighty pages, some of them crammed with handwriting, some with scarcely a sentence, some completely blank. The title-page is inscribed "HAMLET: An Essay in Essential Criticism" by "George Douglas." Second, there is the shorter but identically-titled "HAMLET: AN ESSAY IN ESSENTIAL CRITICISM." This is MS 8180 and evidently a proof-copy of the text. There are a few minor corrections in Brown's (or, strictly, G.D.'s) hand. This text, however, was never published. For the most part taken (though with numerous modifications) from the main notebook, it has a print-pagination of 12-20. Finally, collated in the same volume and immediately following the essay-proofs, there is "Some Notes on Hamlet" (MS 8180, f. 67-80). I shall refer to these three texts as the notebook, the essay and "Some Notes" respectively.

At first sight it appears that there is little to excite us in these *Hamlet* texts. Their general idolatry of Shakespeare seems scarcely original. The notebook seeks to affirm that "when God made Shakespeare he remade the world" (p. 50). It is concerned with the "distinctive feature" of Shakespeare's style, namely "an imaginative greatness ennobling it" (p. 50). It stresses "The mystery of blank verse," and how Shakespeare's "vivid emotionalism" and "power of imaginative self transference made him give this, that, or tother character to the very life, made him feel their feelings, 'think' their thoughts, and utter their speech, yet he saw that each of them was but transitory" (p. 50). Without undue generosity we might speak of the notebook's enthusiasm for the "big imaginative grandeur of utterance" (p. 51) in Shakespeare as sub-Keatsian.

At the same time, there are more striking moments of insight and even humor. There is, for example, a sharp ideological awareness of Shakespeare idolatry. Brown considers the qualities of Balzac and Dickens as writers, concluding "There are greater. Of the greatest Shakespeare is exempt from criticism by the British hypocrite who admires him as he admires his Em-

pire—because it belongs to him" (p. 54). Elsewhere we encounter certain haunting phrases and descriptions. In the essay, Brown evokes in passing Shakespeare's "full mind always running over and spilling bright thoughts upon the random air" (p. 18). In the notebook, in square brackets at the top of one page, as if unrelated to anything else, there is: "Illumination dawning on a man through the cracks in his understanding" (p. 35). And on a separate piece of paper, tipped in to the notebook, a very strange note proclaims that "There is a great Secret Society on Earth" and goes on to state that its members

know each other at a word. By a certain phrase a man recognizes his brother—he may [*sic*] a Hindoo dead these two thousand years or a German of to-day. There is a sweet & secret intimacy in all this great brotherhood. And 'tis part of their joy, perhaps, that they pass unknown among other men, though so known to each other. (p. 62)

Might there be grounds for supposing that Brown regarded Shakespeare and himself as belonging to such a "brotherhood," or that *Hamlet* and *The House with the Green Shutters* manifest at least a kind of textual fraternity or "intimacy"?

The final thesis of Brown's essay is not a patently devastating one: the reason why Hamlet failed to act was "because his too realistic vision of Time laid an eating blight upon his will" (p. 20). But things become more interesting when the work on *Hamlet* is brought into direct juxtaposition with Brown's novel. To begin with, there are a number of suggestive echoes or citations from Shakespeare's play. There is the occasion when young John Gourlay is hiding from his father up in the garret, trying or pretending to read: "But it was words, words, words that he read, the substance mattered not at all" (*HGS*, p. 82). This obviously recalls the brief exchange: "[*Polonius*:] What do you read, my lord? [*Hamlet*:] Words, words, words. [*Polonius*:] What is the matter, my lord?" (II, ii, 191-3), and so on. In Chapter XIII we are given a description of "Cunning Johnny" Gibson and his "fringe of sandy beard": "He was not florid, yet that grin of his seemed to intensify his reddishness (perhaps because it brought out and made prominent his sandy valance and the ruddy round of his cheeks) . . ." (*HGS*, p. 118). It seems clear that the word "valance" has been derived from *Hamlet* as well, when the Prince welcomes the arrival of the Players: "Welcome, good friends. O, old friend! why, thy face is valanc'd since I saw thee last; com'st thou to beard me in Denmark?" (II, ii, 422-4). The example is particularly interesting because Brown's "valance" literalizes what was in Shakespeare's text only metaphorical. For the figurative use of the word "valanced"—"fringed with hair"—*OED* cites *Hamlet* as the earliest instance. For "valance" itself *OED* gives several meanings—"A border of drapery,"

"A pendant border or edging of velvet, leather, or other material," and so on—but no reference to a metaphorical usage of the noun. Brown's cat-achresis intimates the depth and intensity of his engagement with the text of *Hamlet*. Another example of this engagement occurs in a description of young Gourelay and has been noted by Dorothy Porter: "Among his other follies, he assumed the pose of a man who could an he would, who had it in him to do great things, if he would only set about them" (*HGS*, p. 177). Porter (*HGS*, p. 255) cites *Hamlet*, I, v, 175-6: "Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase, / As 'Well, well, we know,' or 'We could, and if we would.'" We will return later to this allusion to young men who "could an they would."

The MSS, however, suggest that Shakespeare's drama is present in *The House with the Green Shutters* in more pervasive and profound respects. The notebook demonstrates a reiterated fascination with the question of impersonality: "Why does the creative writer reveal so little of himself" (49), asks Brown. He notes that "there is something inhuman uncanny [*sic*] in the greatest artist" (p. 12). And the essay compares the artist's work with that of a magician. The artist's establishment of a "tragic flaw" is "in the nature of a scaffolding" which can no longer be seen: "As you should see a trick in mid-air and not as it flashes from the conjurer's [G. D. has emended "conjuror's"] hand, so you should see a work of art soaring in the empyrean, and not as it flutters from the earth" (p. 13). This concern with impersonality is in keeping with Brown's celebrated characterization of the "novelist" as "an aloof individual"⁴ and is provokingly linked to the notion of "callousness." The notebook speaks of "the callousness of the great" (p. 14), relating this to Hamlet's view of the fates of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; the essay specifies "the callousness of the truly great, impassive as Napoleon" (p. 15). This opens up "callousness" as an important principle for *The House with the Green Shutters*, not only in terms of characters (and perhaps, for all their cruelty or lack of feeling, no one in Brown's novel attains "greatness" in this respect), but in terms of the "great artist."

How "aloof" or "callous" is the creator of *The House with the Green Shutters*? The position of this author-narrator has been a longstanding source of critical bafflement. As Ian Crichton Smith has observed: "We, the readers, cannot find a place to be at."⁵ Dorothy Porter's essay provides a good resumé: sometimes we are presented with the "violent arm's length" (*HGS*,

⁴Letter to Ernest Barker, January 1901; cited by Veitch, *GDB*, p. 153.

⁵Iain Crichton Smith, "The House with the Green Shutters," in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 7 (1969), 7.

p. 17) of an "outsider narrator," sometimes with a narrator who appears to be "wholly implicated" (*HGS*, p. 18) in what is being described.

Brown's notebook highlights a clear correlation between the contentious "impersonality" of *The House with the Green Shutters* and that of the play which T. S. Eliot notoriously described as "most certainly an artistic failure."⁶ In the notebook the putative relationship between Shakespeare and Hamlet parallels that between Brown and young Gourlay. This is suggested in terms of the manifest "weakness" of the characters of Hamlet and young John.

Of Shakespeare's alleged "Hamletism," Brown observes: "The artist, the more he is an artist, is non-human in the artistic contemplation of his own weakness" (p. 48). There is no claim to his being as great an artist as Shakespeare, but Brown's notebook underlines certain obvious similarities between their character-creations. This is particularly the case in relation to "visualization." Brown may share young Gourlay's capacity for "visualization"; it is something over which Shakespeare evidently has greater control.⁷ The notebook suggests that "morbid vividness" (p. 10) is absent or avoided when "the creative mind . . . hath linked itself on to the creative purpose of the world!" (p. 11). In a section of the notebook entitled "Visualization in Shakespeare" (p. 21), Brown asserts that Shakespeare "sees all informed by the Idea. A thing doesn't strike him by itself and therefore with monstrous vividness—it strikes him in its relations & therefore in due subordination" (p. 21).

There is something more morbid, however, in Hamlet himself. As Brown's essay concludes, Hamlet's "too realistic vision of Time" is a "vision of Eternity" which supervenes on everyday perception: "the dead past lived and moved in his visualizing brain, and he saw its hordes about their fatuous toil, each futile as a tiny midge against an awful sunset of the early world, glistening on the high ramparts of Babylon" (p. 20). This clearly corresponds with young Gourlay's tendency towards "morbid perception" (*HGS*, p. 163). However aesthetically or philosophically superior in its verbalization, Hamlet's capacity for seeing things, as he puts it, "In my mind's eye"

⁶T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet," in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London, 1975), p. 47.

⁷Veitch quotes Brown's *The Novelist*, in which the (fictive?) writer explains how he "fall[s] back on [his] morbid gift of seeing and remembering and visualizing physical things." Veitch stresses the importance of seeing Brown as identifying with both young Gourlay and his father: see *GDB*, p. 142. He also notes that "Brown identified himself with Hamlet" (*GDB*, p. 177). For the correspondence between Brown and young Gourlay in terms of "visualization," see also Campbell, p. 158.

(I, ii, 185), directly parallels what Gourlay describes as his own "uncanny gift of visualization": it is, he says, "a power of seeing things vividly inside your mind" (*HGS*, p. 154). Both, it would seem, are fundamentally weakened by their very different capacities for what Wordsworth called "see[ing] too clearly."⁸

The notebook indicates a further similarity between these two "weak" characters. In a discussion of "self-respect" and the "courage to assert yourself," Brown writes of Hamlet: "Zounds he could do such deeds! His imaginings outrun by far his nature and Capacity. 'Now could he drink hot blood'" (p. 41). On the one hand, Brown gives what is arguably an exaggerated emphasis of characterization here: the notebook has a proposed section-heading on the "Ballooning violence proper to the weak man" (p. 60) and insistently focuses on the importance of Hamlet as a man "weakened by his own ballooning" (p. 20). On the other hand, this aspect of Hamlet's character is clearly marked in young John, displaying itself especially under the influence of the appropriate amount of whisky. Thus, after being ridiculed by Armstrong, that night Gourlay "lay in brooding anger, and his mind was fluent in wrathful harangues in some imaginary encounter of the future, in which he was a glorious victor" (*HGS*, p. 193). Or, most dramatically, just before murdering his father, "A rush of fiery blood seemed to drench all his body, as he thought of what had passed between them. 'But, by Heaven,' he swore, as he threw away his empty bottle, 'he won't use me like that another time: I have blood in me now'" (*HGS*, p. 223).

All of this points to the importance of seeing both *Hamlet* and Brown's novel in terms of a narrative constituted not only by the deferral of the "courage to assert yourself" but rather, more generally, by delay. Delay is only dramatic, only impressive, if we are given some sense of what is coming: this means the text's capacity to instill movement and inevitability, both of these being terms stressed in the *Hamlet* MSS. One of the first assertions in the notebook reads: "inevitable and necessary movement is the first requisite of drama" (p. 7). And this becomes the basis of a definition of great literature: "Hence the great novel or the great play writes itself. It is sequential. It moves grandly to its appointed end and the immutable law of its own being is implicit in its beginning" (p. 12).

One way in which Brown establishes movement in *The House with the Green Shutters* is through the "bodies," as in the following, crucial passage, a third of the way through the novel:

⁸William Wordsworth, "The Excursion," IV, 174-5. Wordsworth refers to "the innocent Sufferer" who "sees / Too clearly; feels too vividly; and longs / To realize the vision."

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 his downfall; they became also, merely by their maddening tattle, a villain of the piece and an active cause of the catastrophe (*HGS*, p. 105).

The allusion to Greek tragedy in the reference to "chorus" may be misleading. In his *Rules for Writing*, Brown writes of "The Value of The Chorus": "In its composite character it is an actor contributing to the final result."⁹ Again, the *Hamlet* material provides illumination. For "Some Notes" clearly suggests an equivalent for the "bodies" or "chorus" in Shakespeare's play, namely Polonius (or, as Brown calls him, "Poloney"). Thus "Some Notes" emphasizes how Shakespeare "must show him a senile intriguer, and proud of his intrigue" (p. 70). And there is another indication of this parallel, on the basis of the important passage of the novel cited above. It is the word "buzzing," which inevitably recalls the arrival of the Players once again: "[*Polonius*:] My lord, I have news to tell you. [*Hamlet*:] My lord, I have news to tell you. When Roscius was an actor in Rome— [*Polonius*:] The actors are come hither, my lord. [*Hamlet*:] Buzz, buzz!" (II, ii, 389-93)

Directly or otherwise Brown's work on Shakespeare offers a number of perspectives from which the tragic texts of *Hamlet* and *The House with the Green Shutters* can be seen to stand in close proximity: in terms of the impersonality of the artist; in terms of callousness, greatness and weakness; Shakespeare-Hamlet and Brown-young Gourlay; visualization, Hamlet and young Gourlay; Polonius and "the bodies": and "inevitable and necessary movement." To adduce further evidence for a strange intimacy between the two texts one might consider several other correspondences: for instance, the evident "weakness" or "frailty" of the female characters, especially Janet and Ophelia; the strength of the mother-son relationship, as well as the presiding symbolic power of the father (present or absent, alive or dead) epitomized in his appearance as a ghost; young Gourlay-young Wilson, and Hamlet-Laertes, Edinburgh or Wittenberg-or-England; and Mrs. Gourlay and Gertrude remaining impressively quiet about a murder in the family, and both finally dying from drinking poison. But if there is one perspective which stands out above all the others, it is that of "inevitable and necessary movement." We might conclude by suggesting that, on the one hand, what *Hamlet* and *The House with the Green Shutters* have in common is precisely a failure to come to terms with the demands of movement and inevitability. Both texts can seem at once too fast and too slow. On the other hand, they

⁹Cited by Veitch, *GDB*, p. 167.

share, in a very singular manner, an extraordinary dramatic culmination in which, suddenly, all the major characters and all universal meanings seem to be apocalyptically consigned to oblivion—to be (in the words of Brown's essay) mere "atoms of dust, blown about the desert air" (p. 20). And in each case, however "monstrous" (*HGS*, p. 247), "the rest is silence."¹⁰

University of Stirling

Motifs Ecosais

The Presses Universitaires de Grenoble launched a series of French translations of modern Scottish fiction in the Autumn of 1992. The aim of the series is to give the French reading public, which until now has had little access to Scottish writing in translation, some idea of the breadth and diversity of fiction writing in Scotland in the twentieth century. The first two titles are William McIlvanney's *Docherty* and Neil Gunn's *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* (*Verts Abîmes*) which have been translated respectively by Professor Christian Civardi of the University of Strasbourg and Professor Pierre Morère of the University of Grenoble. The project has received assistance from the Scottish Arts Council.

Any inquiries should be addressed to the Series Editor:

Dr. Keith Dixon
Presses Universitaires de Grenoble
Boîte Postale 47 X
38040 Grenoble Cédex

¹⁰I would like to express my gratitude to the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland for kind permission to quote from the G. D. Brown MSS with which I deal in this essay.