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Iain Crichton Smith

Thoughts on J. MacDougall Hay's *Gillespie*

It is very hard to read *Gillespie* and not think of *The House with the Green Shutters*. They are both very intense not to say pessimistic books. They both end with a houseful of dead bodies. In both a house dominates the book. In *Gillespie* it is the house of the parents, once an inn, and the scene of the death of a murdered Jew. Both books speak of a determination towards power, both speak of the rise of the merchant class. Both have sons briefly at university, both have depressed useless wives. Both the authors of the books died young, George Douglas Brown at thirty-three and J. MacDougall Hay at thirty-eight.

Yet of course they do not fit as exactly as that. In *The House with the Green Shutters* it is not Gourlay who is the successful modern merchant; it is Wilson. It is not Gillespie's house that dominates the action; it is that of his parents. And though the sons at university in both books are highly imaginative, in other ways they are different.

The House with the Green Shutters is a much shorter, more concentrated, more artistically worked book than *Gillespie*. Brown had a First Class Honors Degree in Classics and therefore was aware of Greek drama with its doomed hero and attendant chorus. Hay may have been aware of these plays as well—he has gossips at the town pump but they do not so clearly comment on the action—but there is more a sense of sprawl than in Brown's book.

Brown's book is also more realistic than Hay's. Hay's hectic imagination seems at times to take control of him so that we have passages like the firing of the boats and the tremendous heatwave. We have also deaths by water. The elements are used by Hay in a dramatic manner, so that the action takes place

against a melodramatic gleam. And melodrama is simply an excess, an extremism, like for instance the murder by razor at the end of the book.

And yet it is not so easy to distinguish melodrama from tragedy. *Hamlet* too ends with a stageful of bodies, but we cannot call the play a melodrama. It deals with people who matter on the level of the state. And these people are clearly imagined as some of Hay's characters aren't.

Gillespie himself emerges fully fashioned as the unimaginative being who will cause destruction. This has partly something to do with the house wherein he was born, partly it has to do with the imaginative stories to which his mother has had access. And there are the references to the Bible which are often important. For instance after Gillespie drives her husband to his death, Mrs. Galbraith leaves her house and puts up a notice: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7).¹

Gillespie seems a force of nature but one which has been deliberately created by his parents. He has no other motivation or justification than himself. He is like a Tamburlaine who proceeds from excess to excess. He cheats people relentlessly, even his own father. He plays macabre tricks as in the incident with the dead body. He remains calm in the middle of crisis. However he is a physical coward unlike Gourlay. Merchants do not need physical courage; what they need is a certain supple unwinking intelligence.

Gillespie extends his power remorselessly but he is willing to work very hard for this power. His work extends to both land and sea but latterly his big ventures are connected with the sea. At the beginning he traps animals in the wood, but also fishes. Later he becomes a fishing entrepreneur on a scale never before seen in the little port in which he lives. He never takes any real risks; everything has been clearly prepared beforehand. Sometimes he has a sense of the theatrical confounding people who are not so daring in business as he himself is. No ordinary human emotions seem to trouble the purity of his love of business. Even his marriage to Morag is part of his business. According to the book, "He could treat Morag only on the basis of a commercial agreement" (p. 27). He doesn't give his wife any money for proper clothes or even for food. He counts the number of slices in a loaf. He forces people to work for him to clear off their debts.

One of the troubles with Gillespie is that it is hard to think of any virtues that he has. There is a sleekit souple man. Can one make such a man the hero of a book? There is no question that there is a certain power and fascination in the novel. To what limits will Gillespie go? On the other hand the author is forced to create huge and fantastic backgrounds against which his hero acts. Thus there is the period of intense heat followed by the plague. There is no

¹J[ohn] MacDougall Hay, *Gillespie*, with Preface by Robert Kemp (Edinburgh, 1963), p. 82. Further references will be to this edition.

one large and powerful enough to confront Gillespie so the elements have to be called in to make the action hugely significant. In *The House with the Green Shutters* Gourlay met his Wilson, and was destroyed by him. What destroys Gillespie is the realization that he cannot pass on his wealth; his son doesn't want it. He says:

"If you want me to work along with you pay back the money you have plundered."

"To wha?"

"To the fishermen; to my grandfather; to my mother" (p. 383).

Later he says: "The heap of your gold is the heap of your iniquity. Remember when you come to die that I told you so" (p. 383).

Apart however from this revenge that has come to him from his son, there is no large opposition to him. And to create an atmosphere of great issues, Hay turns to apocalyptic imagery which comes from the Bible. There come both heat and plague:

The tamer animals went back to a wilder nature. Pigs and dogs went rooting about, and the sheep fainted on the moor, which was whitened with the skeletons of birds, or lay down, a prey to flies and ravens, in the parched fields.... The land was dumb save for that sound and the burden of the grasshopper, which spun the heat into a maddening noise as of wires.

The sea slouched in its oily calm, silent and glassy... (p. 208).

After that comes the plague left by a "tall mysterious ship." The language is sometimes affected by *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

The wind will blow again and the keels toss upwards to the stars, and the cordage be broken in the tempest. To-day the ships alone have security, and the undertaker passes on to meet the Black Death. Nothing can withstand him (p. 213).

And so on; these are the rhythms of the Old Testament.

Hay is not writing a realistic novel. Morag is not a realistic prostitute though she has a passionate nature as is shown by her early meetings with Gillespie. The firing of the boats by their owners is not a realistic act. The headless body with the fish wriggling inside it is more apocalyptic than realistic. Some characters, like the new schoolmaster, are treated briefly and without much interest; one does not believe in him and Morag as lovers. Nor do we actually see them as such. This novel is pitched high in order to escape from the ordinariness of real life as it might be lived in Tarbert. The author perhaps felt the need for such imagery as Gillespie is too big for the small town. And because of the prophetic nature of the book and the sinister swaying of the sign with the dagger there is a sense in which the book is manipulated. And indeed at times the author tells us in advance what will happen.

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It is not in the characters of the people that the strength of the book really lies. Their characters are often treated in a cursory manner. Thus we are told, for instance, that Mrs. Galbraith is a reader and a thinker. She, like Eoghan, is probably meant to contrast with Gillespie because they read books. Against the remorseless greed of materialism we may fear that the artist will not survive. All this however is told us and not acted out.

Mrs. Galbraith was a woman of ideas, not of action. She had been trained at the Normal College in the Cowcaddens, Glasgow....

She was accomplished—played the piano well, had a cultured taste in poetry, read Wordsworth among the woods, was fond of philosophy....

Every Sunday she devoutly read a portion of *The Imitation of Christ*, and of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*" (p. 31).

These are advertisements for Mrs. Galbraith; she isn't a really extended character into which such information is interwoven.

It is not therefore in the characterization that the book's strength lies. It is in the power of the imagery, in the poetry, in the flashes of terrifying pictures. The author is not an artist in the sense that Brown is; Brown has learned from the incised brevity of the Greeks. Gillespie's imagery is romantic and often does not contribute to the novel at all. Thus for instance since Gillespie is not poetic or imaginative the author has to supply his imagery for him as in the following:

Clear beneath the moon the summits seemed to be floating out of a turbulent sea. They took on a myriad shapes—now the battlements of ivory palaces; now the craters of smoking volcanoes; and again the black turrets of a giant marble castle (p. 26).

Such images contribute nothing to the book apart from a rather decadent Romanticism, and of course they are the author's, not Gillespie's. We must remember that this is the novel of an inexperienced writer. The characters are not so strongly made as in *The House with the Green Shutters*. Gillespie himself seems to have little contact with ordinary humanity. And yet the book has power. It has the power of the morality play, it has the power of its imagery, it has the power of the pictorial. It does not, however, have the power of a developing psychology. Time and time again we have some lovely passages such as this one which describes Mrs. Galbraith's love of the land:

The plum-like bloom of autumn was mellow on the fields. A riot of bracken flamed on the hem of the wood; beyond, diamonds of dew hung on every bell of the heather; the hedges were ablaze with hips and haws; where the sun slanted through the leaves they looked like yellow flame; and overhead the sky was a blue lake of light. Dark bars of cloud in the south-west completed the image. They were fantastically shaped islands asleep in that vast hyacinth sea (p. 156).

Again we find this fine imaginative writing in passages like the following about storms:

A savage nihilism of storms beat upon the town. They leapt off the hills upon the Harbour with the rushing sound of a great saw cutting wood. They were mingled with hail, and when the gust roared past it left the hills white to the sea, as if a mighty smearing hand had passed across their face. The water was hard, and black like iron; but at every snarl when the wind veered into the north-west it suddenly whitened, as iron in a furnace.... The gables rushed up black in the rain, giving the town a naked appearance, and every window in Harbour Street was white with salt (p. 219).

These elemental set pieces are where Hay is at his strongest. He is probably a better poet than he is a novelist. And where he is describing, for instance, the career of Gillespie's wife the language will tend to be at its weakest because the events are melodramatic. Also Eoghan thinking about his mother says:

Did these hounds not know that his poor mother was insane? Wide-eyed, open-mouthed with horror, he clung to the railing. His faintness had left him; a river of fire was in his veins; and he saw in the air streaks like blood. A great stone seemed to hang suspended aloft (p. 412).

In such areas Hay's imagination is not fully engaged. Where it is engaged it issues in writing which has the quality of that of Revelations in the Bible. Thus for instance he describes the burning of the boats in apocalyptic imagery of great power:

It was in this direction the fire travelled. In the added glare the town was strung around the bay in naked outline, like a town built at the foot of the mountains of the moon, whose windows were molten gold. There was a blinding glare in the sky. The atmosphere was choking with a burning smell. It was at this point, when the fleet was ablaze and the shepherds and moorsmen beyond Beinn an Oir were disturbed by the glow in the heavens, that Gillespie fell in Harbour Street as he stood watching a splendid ladder of flame in the heart of the fleet. It had a rhythmic movement which fascinated the eye. Its flat, jagged head oscillated backwards and forwards slowly, like the head of a snake.... The anchor chains were red hot; spars crackled like musketry and hissed in the sea (p. 253).

(I wondered as I read this passage whether his son George Campbell Hay was partially thinking of it when he wrote his wonderful poem *Bizerta* about a city on fire. At the center of that poem is the image of the pulsing heart but also the movement of Evil.)

Throughout the book we find passages of wonderful writing, none better than the killing of the cow which the imaginative Eoghan witnesses and which

makes him throw the hammer which had been used into the harbor (his father makes him pay for the hammer). I think this is a very fine piece of writing:

Big Jumbo the butcher was standing in the midst of the yard lighting a blackened cutty, his hairy arms naked and rusty with gore. Having lit his pipe he led out from the shed a famished beast, brick-red, with fallen flanks, and broken-kneed. Its coat was muddy, its tail worn, its horns stumps—"one of Gillespie's beasts".... Suddenly it cried. It was not a bellow, not a bleat, but a half-human cry, as if knowledge of its doom had come upon it. It was trailed forward with its fore-knees raking the ground. The bovine wail reached the heart of the boy, who in that moment recalling what he had read in the Bible—"He can send legions of angels"—prayed silently for these angels of flame to come and blast this devil, who, coolly smoking, was trussing up the beast's feet. It lay on its flanks, its cheek flat on the straw, the weight of its head pressing on the stubbed horn. The great brown eyes, the boy imagined, were looking into his with a liquid sob of fear.... The muddied flank, with the hollow in the side, so pitifully shrunken, was heaving and falling with deep pants, and the tail whisking feebly, like the hand of a little child beating gently as it falls asleep (p. 259).

In his remorseless clear gaze at this animal Hay spoils it a little by putting into the boy's mind a quotation from the Bible which he had probably never heard of, and there is later a little bit of moralizing of which Hay can of course be guilty. Indeed moralizing is one of the weaknesses of the book where the end is so controlled. As with *Tamburlaine* though in a smaller area we follow the sometimes monotonous piling of inhumane action upon inhumane action by Gillespie; the book is saved by passages such as these, as indeed it is the poetry that saves Marlowe's play.

Gillespie has a lot of dead bodies in it, the one that Topsail Janet finds, the headless corpse, the dead body of Iain, the dying body of Jock of the Patch, and of course others at the end of the novel. In the vicinity of these dead bodies the writing can be imaginatively brilliant, especially when the body of Iain is drawn up from the water in the sight of Eoghan:

Out of the dreamland beyond Time and Space that face was growing again into his vision—the mouth was slackly gaping; wavelets playing over the forehead and stirring the thick dark hair; the eyes utterly dead, their light quenched, their smile gone. They had a strange callous stare; they looked like balls of granite, on which the brine streamed like tears. The flesh was sodden and of a greenish-yellow. An arm clothed in rags was piteously stretched out to him (p. 320).

And later on, they "lifted the dripping body out of the water, tenderly as if it were gossamer" (p. 321). The kiss which Eoghan plants on his brother's dead lips does not appear melodramatic in this clear remorseless atmosphere which Hay at times achieves and which goes beyond the "fine writing" which we sometimes find in the book.

The novel often refers to angels and devils and quotes a great deal from the Bible, but there is another element in it which points to a closeness between it and *The House with the Green Shutters*. Both books often compare human characters to animals in an almost Darwinian manner. I counted at least sixty such comparisons in *Gillespie* before giving up. Thus Gillespie is compared to a vulture, a fox, a weasel, a lynx, a hawk, a snake, a rat, a leech, a wolf, an eel, a braxy beast, a cat, etc. Other characters more helpless than Gillespie may be compared with mice, birds or lambs. While reminding us of the raw struggle in Nature, this use of animal comparisons may be like a shorthand in order to disengage the writer from the necessity of showing psychological development. Why does Gillespie do what he does? Why is he the kind of being he is? All we can say is that that is the way he is; he is fated to be like this in order to fulfill a prophecy. And of course the death at the inn is not a sufficient engine in modern eyes, at any rate, to set off this implacable being.

The world of the animal and that of doom are united in the words of the older Mrs. Strang:

"We are driven by something deep within us that we have got from our ancestors, to do strange things that were allowed in their age, but are unlawful now," she said. "Honk! Honk!" vibrant and clear as a bell it rang out high over the snow in response—the bugling of birds borne along by the "something deep" within them—and was heard by these frigate-birds, a man and a woman, sitting facing one another in the pitiable belief that they, alone of all God's creatures, can stem the call of destiny" (p. 5).

It is this destiny that permits Hay to be sometimes skimpy and sometimes careless about some of his characters. Thus with regard to Morag, who does not really convince one as a prostitute, we are told that "This girl had been better bred than the village girls" (p. 28). Her father Lonend had been heard to boast that he had "gien a twa-hunner pun' eddication" (p. 28) to his daughter. Again this information seems external to the character and there is a later reference to her having seen a play about Sappho that does not convince.

However time and time again we are brought up short by poetic passages of great power, not so much by the insight into character that a novelist has. These passages are often interrupted by moralizing which is perhaps present because Hay not unnaturally has a minister's way of thinking. Statements of a moralizing nature sometimes accompany a description. Thus "The good cannot humiliate us" (p. 35); "Men have ability to sin; not every man has enough to conceal guilt. This is because man is an ethical animal. Guilt was plain on Lonend's face" (p. 95). Or more questionably, "War has its tremendous sanity, being a moral earthquake in humanity." (It is interesting that the novel itself was published in 1914).

As one would expect there is much about the Bible (for instance Morag is often compared to Mary Magdalene) but, generally speaking, it is the passages in which the author escapes from the temptations of the ethical and relies on

the aesthetic that are the most powerful. There was perhaps a struggle within the author between categorizing his characters as moral exemplars and allowing them free rein. However, he does not allow them much freedom.

Thus it is in the poetic passages that we look for the power in the book. And these are often connected with the sea:

They rounded the foreland across which Eoghan had crawled, and an imposing spectacle met their gaze. In the soft light all things looked far away, floating up out of a dream country. In the south-east sky bars of purple were changing rapidly to violet, to pink, to cinnabar; here and there were nooks of delicate sea-shell tints and trceries of gold. In the deepest sky was a fret-work of flame, which changed to cloud cataracts of golden fire. Stark against those swaying, gorgeous sky-flowers was the black mast of the broken ship, pricked out in unrelieved desolation, and the bow rearing up impotent and sombre against the magic and splendour of multitudinous pools and lines of fire (p. 318).

The criticism that can be made of the book is that it is depressing, that it has little humor, that there is too much of death in it, that there is not enough of the authentic vibration of the individual. In effect this is the book of a minister, though a minister who can write about passion. There is more passion in this book than there is in *The House with the Green Shutters*; this passion of course that I am talking about is between Gillespie and Morag at the beginning, certainly on Morag's side. There seems also to have been an affair between her and the schoolmaster but we are not shown it. Was it because of her frustrated passion or her need for money that she prostituted herself? There is a paragraph showing Morag's passion for the normally passionless Gillespie:

"Gillespie! Gillespie!" He felt her arms round his neck. They were bringing his face slowly downwards. Something soft and moist lay on his lips; her teeth met and clicked against his own. Her eyes were shining like diamonds. She was curling about him like a soft flame. He ceased to wonder at men getting married. He had never dreamt of this softness and warmth. Her hair tickled his face. She was standing on his boots, reaching upwards to his mouth. His neck was aching with her weight upon it, but he felt he could endure the strain for ever. Suddenly she flung her head back. He slipped his arm up beneath the nape of her neck. Her face was upturned to his; the eyes were closed; the mouth half open, showing the low sharp edge of the upper row of teeth (p. 29).

The vivid detail of this enacts real passion and not one borrowed from novellettes. Of course this passion between them doesn't last.

The ministerial side of Hay issues in ways not suitable or fruitful for the novel. Thus there is much moralizing throughout the book as I have mentioned, as in "The good cannot humiliate us." Sometimes the moral can be involved in verbiage as in the following:

The stillness of the death-chamber is intensified by contrast with the noise of a falling house around its solemnity; its awful impassivity becomes the more marmoreal because of the babblings to which its august calm has given birth; and its sanctity is desecrated by the importunate ghosts of affairs which gibber at its threshold (p. 38).

Here is another moral describing Mary Bunch's and Mary Tosh's dislike of Gillespie: "From the ages unto the ages shall obscure foes, no less than Herod and Pilate, fraternise over a common enemy" (p. 51). This is from the Bible, as one might expect, but Hay spoils his moral by bringing in a reference to the Sphinx and the Indian pipe of peace in the next sentence. Another moral, this time in connection with Gillespie himself, is this one: "He was beginning to learn that Death is a more powerful lever than Life" (p. 65). Again we have "The avaricious are held in some measure of esteem so long as they are not ruthless; for the most part of humanity is engaged in laying up goods" (p. 255). And so on. The effect of this moralizing is to draw the attention away from the particular to the general and to sidestep living detail. It is not that Hay is incapable of describing living detail; it is simply that he allows himself to overwrite and to let at times his theological training interfere with the literary and the aesthetic.

Now if we read the great novels what we are aware of in them is that the psychology of the individual is more important than the plot or rather that the plot issues from the psychology of the individual. Tolstoy attacked Shakespeare on these grounds, saying that the original story of King Lear is better and psychologically more convincing than what Shakespeare made of it. He of course attacked particularly Lear's disinheriting of Cordelia and the grounds on which this was done. Gillespie doesn't have much inward development of character. We know very little of what Gillespie is actually thinking when he carries out his actions which seem so extreme. Why is he what he is? Then we are told that he is what he is in order to fulfill a prophecy. A murder has taken place in his parents' house, formerly an inn. Also his mother has been raised on supernatural stories. Gillespie therefore from childhood is kept away from the imaginative and becomes what he becomes, a ruthless businessman and miser immersed completely in the material world.

This is flimsy in itself. And if we go back and look at the events of the murder this is what we find. Two men had come up from the sea in the dusk and put in for the night at the inn. When the innkeeper went to rouse the men he found one of them dead. The slain man, one-eyed, with a broad black beard was a Jew. The inn was thereafter named, "The Ghost". Above it was a sign with a painted dagger on it. This sign is referred to throughout the book as being an omen of disaster. Gillespie's father bought the inn and so the doom was on his son, though why this should be so it is hard to disentangle.

However, if a novelist who is truly a novelist were to take hold of this story he wouldn't leave it so inwardly disconnected from the events which follow. For instance, we might ask why is the man a Jew? And look in the book

for this ethnicity to be interwoven into the story. True, there is the Jew with whom Topsail Janet deals. True, it may be that Gillespie becomes a Jew in the common sense of being a miser. But I don't think that for a novelist this is enough. On the other hand the character of Gillespie, such as it is, is reared on this story. He becomes an elemental force not a human being with failings. I have compared him with Tamburlaine because one miserly extreme is added to another one, in the same way as conquest is added to conquest in Marlowe's play.

Because of this story which generates the events in the book, the novelist is constrained to keep his characters on a certain course so that sometimes he even tells us of incidents in advance of their happening. This predestination may be part of Hay's theological belief but it is not good for the novel, which ought to begin with character and not with plot. Gillespie therefore cannot be allowed any fundamental change in nature. We cannot see characters altering or acting in a living manner. They must do as they do in obedience to the story, so that it might be fulfilled. It is possible, as I have said, that this may be a theological belief; in effect the events of Christian religion are predicted; some would suggest that Christ's every act comes to fulfill a prophecy foreshadowed in the Old Testament.

But as I have shown already there is a power in this book, and Hay can write without moral compulsion, and quite beautifully at times when he allows himself to. This writing is seen not so much in delineation of character as in incidental things, drowned bodies, landscape, and so on. However, because he is dealing with a totally unimaginative being who is buried in the material world these passages are extraneous to character. Indeed the author himself has to accompany Gillespie with imaginative language, language which Gillespie himself would hardly understand. When his book is disintegrating at the end Hay's language disintegrates as well. But at times, for instance when describing nature, he can be very assured, only spoiling his work a little as in the following:

The grass was green as emerald. The pale light of primroses haunted the burn. A wild cherry-tree there was white as snow. The clay of the deeply-rutted cart-road shone like gold. Hillock and mound swelled away like waves of the sea, full of inlets, nooks, and glades right up to the Planting. She had watched that wood in all seasons. Sometimes it had appeared to her in leafless winter like an army with spears watching upon the hill over against the sea; when stiff with frost it was a giant foreland, upon whose forehead had frozen the foam of the ocean (p. 78).

And after this Hay spoils it a little by a sentence like, "In summer Pan drove stallions through it, shaking multitudinous bells" (pp. 78-9).

I suppose that one of the things Hay was trying to do in the book was to contrast Mrs. Galbraith's feeling for nature and her love of books with Gillespie's all-consuming materialism. Her cry of vengeance against Gillespie is, however, drawn from the Bible. Naturally Gillespie himself doesn't speak

with much imagination. Often there is a joviality about him, and he might use little proverbs or statements approximating to proverbs. Lonend, whom he cheats when talking about Mrs. Galbraith's deserted house, says imaginatively:

"There's somethin' gars my banes grue about thon"—he nodded towards the house—"it only wants the corbies sittin' on the riggin'."

"Nonsense," said Gillespie, breathing a little rapidly; "the hoose is a' richt. I wush everything was as weel."

Lonend strode through the wooden gate, his wiry, alert form moving as on springs.

"Look at the windas," he muttered.

"What's wrong wi' the windas; needin' cleanin'?"

"They're deid," replied Lonend sharply, "deid an' blin' lik' the eyes o' a corp" (p. 81).

And when later on Lonend turns on him, "Gillespie backed away with upraised hands, 'Ye daurna; that wad be the jyle for ye, man; it's no' the time o' year for the jyle wi' the neeps to sow'" (p. 92). Lonend replies, "Ay! by Goäd! in twa shakes o' a lamb's tail I'll gie ye a gutsfull that'll put neeps oot o' your heid for the next fortnicht" (p. 92).

This would perhaps be a fruitful way to study this book, its use of language. Does the world of business ultimately destroy the arts and thereafter language itself? It is, I suppose, a contemporary issue; Mrs. Thatcher for instance wasn't a picturesque or poetic speaker. The world of the yuppie is not the world of the artist. This could have been a fine theme if it had been done in a controlled and less sprawling way. Certainly Gillespie's language at the end of the book does not match the slaughter house around him.

Hay himself tells us at the end what we should think of Gillespie. This is another example of his moralizing in which he will not allow intelligence or perception to the reader; he must be guiding him:

He was in the pitiable position of a man whose life has been one long crime to make a fortune of which, now that he is childless and friendless, he does not know how to dispose.... Did he think of it, we can fancy him smiling now at his career of scheming, chicanery, and lubricity—but what a smile. He had trimmed his sail to every wind, and found a lee-shore. His fate deserves some pity. He stumbled upon it reluctantly, in the height of his ambition, when he was about to satisfy his pride by wreaking vengeance.... He had been great in his activities, and in another sphere would have played a large part, and affected much more than the destinies of a little town. But in such a theatre his fall could not have been greater (p. 437).

There is undoubtedly a tremendous energy about Gillespie. He works on both sea and land; he has an unresting intelligence in particular about how he will outwit Lonend. He opens his warehouse with a flourish to show the barrels he has gathered for the fish, a coup de theatre of the first order which leaves his critics astonished. Then greed absorbs him. He will give nothing to

the destitute. He will blackmail the poor into giving up what little property they have. There is a relentless unsleeping power in him.

And so as the novelist turns critic on his own book and tells us what we should think of Gillespie we perhaps tend to forget that the novelist himself has manipulated Gillespie into being this remorseless character, and all to accomplish a purpose of prophecy. His parents will make him unimaginative so that he will not be doomed. In a sense this is what happens to Oedipus but, on the other hand, there are more twists and turns in that play than there are in this book.

It might be interesting for a while to turn to the endings of this book and *The House with the Green Shutters*. Both conclude with an avalanche of deaths. In *The House with the Green Shutters* young Gourlay kills his father with a poker. In his drunken guilt and delirium he begins to have hallucinations. A letter arrives saying that the mortgage on the house is not being paid. Young Gourlay goes to Glasgow to see the lawyers. When he comes back drunk he tells his mother that indeed the house is in danger of being taken away from them. He buys a lethal mixture of whisky and poison and kills himself. His mother and sister also commit suicide with the remains of the poison. The bodies are discovered by the postman who enters the house in order to get payment for an unstamped letter. The last sentence refers to the House with the Green Shutters sitting there "dark and terrible" while the indifferent dawn rises.

Now in *Gillespie* one of Gillespie's sons, Iain, is drowned because his father has not supplied enough fuel for the boat, and the harbor cannot be made in a storm. "He opened his eyes to see if the world were real, and across the gunwale saw through a cleft on the foreland in the scud of the moon the tall, harled gables of the pallid 'Ghost' as of a thing he had never beheld before" (p. 303). The "Ghost" is, as we know, actually the former inn in which the Jew had been killed.

At the end of the book we have a similar carnage to that of *The House with the Green Shutters*. Gillespie's alcoholic wife cuts the throat of Eoghan, the second of her two sons, with a razor. She herself dies. The grandfather, Gillespie's father, dies. And so does Gillespie himself from a piece of broken glass in the sole of his foot.

These are really endings such as we find in Elizabethan plays, even in *Hamlet* itself. However *Gillespie* leaves us with a picture of a man ploughing as if the author were implying the continuity of things in Nature at any rate: "nothing was left but the earth, about to renew life at the hands of another transitory ploughman" (p. 446). I think this ending is rather shallow. Unlike *The House with the Green Shutters* which has the undeviating logic of the Greek play, *Gillespie* hovers between the moral law as it appears in Christianity, a sort of pagan fate, and superstitious stories, and does not have the logic of the other novel. On the other hand, it has a wider sweep and there can be no doubt that at times it has a wonderful power. But as a novel it can at times be cur-

sory. What of the romance between Gillespie's wife and the schoolmaster, introduced without much conviction? Do we have a clear picture in our minds of Gillespie's wife? Gillespie certainly dominates the book with his extraordinary energy. In *The House with the Green Shutters* the second half of the book is dominated by the new merchant Wilson, harbinger of novel ideas. There is suspense as he and Gourlay fight out their differences on the level of the mercantile world. Here there is no one who can oppose Gillespie on any level. It is possibly this lack of dramatic opposition which weakens the book. There are, as we have seen, wonderful set-pieces which are of a higher quality of poetic imagination than anything in *The House with the Green Shutters*.

I should like to end with a passage from what we might call the *Plague of Heat* which shows Hay at his imaginative best:

Dawn by dawn the sun flamed forth like a sword; the sky was a white-hot sheet of steel, raining down blistering fire. At night the big stars throbbed in the dark-blue vault, and reeled in their courses.

At last a lean blue gap of mud stretched across the head of West Loch Briston, where the Briston river used to run. The land shrunk; dust rose into the sun in the faint puffs of veering wind, till the crude glare was of brass. A furnace boiled in the sky at noon, as if the veil of the atmosphere had been rent away. The very shadows on the Briston streets fled, as if seeking shelter from that dizzy glare.

Men, thin, white-faced, bleached, with swollen and cracked lips, scanned the heavens by day and searched the clear stars by night, when the tortured earth gave back its heat to the parched air. In the houses the children panted and moaned, and the women forbore at length, from weakness, to rub the sweat from their infants' faces.

The hills began swinging to the drone of the grasshoppers. The islands of the Loch rose up and floated in the air, cool with a long ecstasy of rippling water. Children began to die; women raved in the low-roofed houses of the Back Street; the men took turns at the Pump, standing in line waiting with the empty stoups sheltering their heads. In the adamant of the hills dwelt an unearthly silence, beneath the dry summer lightning which flickered from peak to peak. The thunder ran moaning and rumbling out to sea, and died away like the whimper of far trumpets (pp. 208-9).

It would be nice to know more about Hay. What books did he read? How much of this book relies on reminiscences of events and seasons perhaps raised to a higher power? What sort of minister was he—did these powerful passages correspond to sermons of a similar power? And so on. As it is, we may say that the ethical interfered with the aesthetic in the novel, but that there remains in it a spasmodic unsustained power.

Tigh na Fuaran
Taynuilt, Argyll