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‘Through the eye of the needle of Orkney’*: Landscape and Temporality in the Poetry of George Mackay Brown

It is a word, blossoming as legend, poem, story, secret, that holds a community together and gives meaning to its life.

George Mackay Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*

In a global world increasingly characterised by the extreme mobility of people, ideas, images, objects, messages and money across international borders, the immobility associated with islands assumes a rather anachronistic and perplexing dimension. The island has always had a powerful hold on the human imagination, symbolizing a haven, a place of withdrawal from high-pressured living, or, as Yi-Fu Tuan puts it, ‘a state of prelapsarian innocence and bliss, quarantined by the sea from the ills of the continent.’¹

The notion of ‘islandness’ brings to mind a distinct experience of place, time and dwelling. In this light, the thought of a small and remote island suggests the notion of limits, an intimate awareness of the sea, a fine sense of topography, a perception of community life and change as slow-moving, occurring over many generations. But, from the perspective of its dwellers, a small island may also be perceived as a site of excess or imbalance, where a sense of plenitude alternates with a sense of lack. If in a given small place cultural points of reference seem

* The expression is used by Seamus Heaney in an essay on Brown’s poetry, “Celtic Fringe, Viking Fringe”, *The Listener* (1 August, 1969), p. 254.

¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 118.

to cluster, the lack of cultural signs might also at times seem complete and all-pervasive: the infinitely large becomes the infinitely small, fostering feelings of unbearable confinement.²

Small islands are thus permeated by tensions and contrasts. First and foremost, the contrast between the larger world's view of insular marginality and the islanders' perception of their own centrality, of their being set apart. Perhaps due to the island's exposure to the elements, islanders feel closer to the beginning and ending of things, to the edges of human capacity and experience. The imagination of a small island is, to quote George Mackay Brown, 'haunted by time.'³ The precariousness of the present and the uncertainty of the future dispose islanders to anchor their existence in the past, which becomes the bedrock from which they derive their sense of identity. Hence the relationship with the present becomes problematic and finds expression whether in a desire to escape the narrow horizons of insular existence or in a resistance to change and progress.

The poetry of George Mackay Brown exemplarily embodies these conflicts and tensions. Brown (1921-1996) was born in Stromness on the Orkneys, a group of islands situated off the northern tip of Scotland where the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean meet. Despite his impressive literary output, which includes not only poetry, but also novels, short stories and plays, he rarely left Orkney and never ventured to the European continent. Orkney and the historical, geographical, mythical and literary background of the islands provided the major source of inspiration for Brown's work.

And it is no wonder that it was so. Anyone visiting Orkney cannot avoid the feeling that s/he is entering into a world where our conceptions of place and temporality are radically challenged. As Brown suggests, places in Orkney 'have no meaning if you try to describe them in terms of a newspaper article. They cannot be described that way.' His

² David Annwn, 'Island and Community in George Mackay Brown,' Hans-Werner and Lothar Fietz (eds.), *Poetry in the British Isles: Non-Metropolitan Perspectives* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995) p. 295.

³ George Mackay Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry* (1969; London: Quartet Books, 1973), p. 18.

numerous poetic accounts of the islands bear witness to this. We must thus, perforce, give way to the poet's voice:

The wind is rarely still. It shifts from airt to airt,** and everything – flowers, clouds, birds, animals, boats – are caught up in the invisible stream. In late summer afternoons the wind goes through the corn in deep resonant surges, but the evenings are marvellously tranquil, except for a broken thunder all along the west coast of Orkney – Noup, The Brough, Marwick, Yesnaby, Black Craig, Rora; the Atlantic glutting itself among the caves and rock-stacks. The sea remembers, like an ancient harp.

In the course of a single day you can see, in that immensity of sky, the dance of sun, cloud, sea-mist, thunder, rain: the endless ballet of the weather.⁴

Despite their relatively small geographical area, the islands convey a sense of vastness of space. The topography is low and undulating and, because of the permanent exposure to strong winds, the Orkneys are virtually treeless. Without trees or mountains to engage your eyes, and with the superabundance of light in the summer, you feel as if you are standing on top of the world. By contrast, the dark, long and wet winters often seem to dissolve the boundaries between sea and land. The weather on the Orkneys is indeed a constant 'ballet' of light and shadow.⁵

The vastness of space is matched by an awareness of a great sweep of time, stretching back to pre-history and to the recesses of legend and myth. 'Everywhere in Orkney,' writes Brown, 'there is the sense of age, the dark backward and abysm. The islands have been inhabited for a very long time, from before the day of the plough.'⁶ Indeed, the land is strewn with cairns, ceremonial stone circles and burial mounds, a cultural landscape which gives us a graphic description of life in the

** A Scots word. An 'airt' is a direction or point of the compass.

⁴ Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, p. 16.

⁵ I am drawing on my own visit to the Orkneys in the summer of 2003. I am also indebted to Maggie Fergusson's vivid description in her recent biography of George Mackay Brown. Maggie Fergusson, *George Mackay Brown: The Life* (London: John Murray, 2006), pp. 1-4.

⁶ Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, p. 17.

archipelago some five thousand years ago. It is not known when the Vikings made their first raids on the territory, but by the end of the ninth century the Orkneys were ruled by powerful Norse earls, under whom the islands enjoyed peace and prosperity. After Orkney passed to Scottish rule in 1468, and the islanders became little more than serfs under Stuart earls, Orcadians inevitably began to look back on Norse days as a golden age, and have clung to romantic notions of Viking descent ever since.

Viking presence is widespread in today's Orkney, in the vast majority of place names, in settlements and runic inscriptions in ancient sites like Maeshowe. It is even present in the musicality of contemporary speech: most Orcadians have a lilting, sing-song accent more Scandinavian than Scots in intonation.⁷ Orcadian culture is therefore a highly heterogeneous reality, a mixture of Native, Viking, Scottish, English, and various other influences. Far from being something which existed in a 'pure' state before visitors began to arrive, the island's heritage is in fact a story of contact and relations with numerous outsiders, a story of resilience, resistance and appropriation of external elements.

George Mackay Brown's work engages with and problematises all these dimensions of Orcadian existence. Concerned, above all, with the complex and often difficult relationship between the writer and his community, Brown's poetry is at once permeated by an intimate consciousness of belonging and by a desire to insulate himself from contemporary community life. 'For the islands I sing / and for a few friends,' he proclaims in the prologue to his first collection of poems, *The Storm* (1954). This verse condenses Brown's conflicting views of his own role as a poet. 'For the islands I sing' evokes a bardic dimension that very much defines the way in which he envisaged his enterprise. Brown had a particular taste for epic poetry and early on in his youth he had been profoundly influenced by the reading of the *Orkneyinga Saga*, an epic which tells the story of three centuries of the Orkney earldom under Norse rule. Constituting a distillation of poetry, stories and songs handed down from generation to generation over the centuries, the *Saga* seems to have been set down in Iceland in the thirteenth century,

⁷ Fergusson, p. 4.

although its authorship remains shrouded in mystery. The very idea of anonymity strongly appealed to Brown, and certainly reinforced his belief that poetry should be ‘anonymous and communal,’ as well as his nostalgia for an age of oral tradition when ‘everyone knew the poem, and nobody worried about the author, for in a deep sense they knew that they all had contributed to its making.’⁸

The *Orkneyinga* also had a profound influence on Brown’s language, which consistently evinces the saga-makers’ preference for a runic textual simplicity, devoid of extraneous detail and description. But this concern or even obsession with a purified language goes well beyond a mere question of influence. The combination of an unaffected poetic style with a nostalgic vision of the Orcadian past have often earned Brown the epithets of naïve primitivism and narrowness of vision. I shall contend, however, that his writing constitutes a unique response to concerns shared by many of his fellow modern poets, at least ever since Mallarmé proclaimed that poetry aims to give ‘a purer meaning to the words of the tribe.’ T. S. Eliot was to adapt the same phrase, reinforcing it with a sense of moral urgency, in his meditation on the poet’s craft in *The Four Quartets*: ‘Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us / To purify the dialect of the tribe.’⁹

George Mackay Brown, too, believed that the state of a language is the most important indicator of the health of a community: ‘decay of language is always the symptom of a more serious sickness.’¹⁰ In this regard, contemporary Orkney deeply disheartened him and was most often only the matter of elegy and lament, as he felt that the ‘new religion’ of progress and materialism had cut off Orcadians from community roots and sources and led them to feel ashamed of their own culture:

For example: there is a kind of shame nowadays in using the old words. And Orkney, only a generation ago, abounded in characters, surrealist folk walked our

⁸ Cited in Fergusson, p. 62.

⁹ Both cited in Michael A. Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 7.

¹⁰ Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, p. 23.

roads and streets, Dickensian figures with earth and salt in them.

Nowadays there is a distinct trimming and levelling-up; a man is ashamed to be different from his neighbour. The old stories have vanished with the horses and the tinkers. [...]

Word and name are drained of their ancient power. Number, statistic, graph are everything.

We have come a long way in a few years.

It is a word, blossoming as legend, poem, story, secret, that holds a community together and gives meaning to its life. If words become functional ciphers only [...] they lose their 'ghosts' [...]. They lose more. They lose their 'kernel', the sheer sensuous relish of utterance. Poetry is a fine interpretation of ghost and kernel. We are in danger of contenting ourselves with husks.¹¹

Brown's great concern was to get back to those roots and sources, by drawing on the community's vast repository of old stories, folklore, legend, myth, and transmuting them into literature. 'I sought continually / The one syllable that might / lock purity in the / ultimate crystal,' he writes in 'Water,' one of his final poems. Yet, Brown was at the same time fully aware of the difficulty and unfashionable character of the whole enterprise. As a consequence, an attitude of self-mockery emerges now and then in his poems, most famously in 'The Poet':

Therefore he no more troubled the pool of silence
But put on mask and cloak,
Strung a guitar
And moved among the folk.
Dancing they cried,
'Ah, how our sober islands
Are gay again, since this blind lyrical tramp
Invaded the Fair!'

Under the last dead lamp
When all the dancers and masks had gone inside

¹¹ Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, pp. 21-22.

His cold stare

Returned to its true task, the interrogation of silence.¹²

‘Silence’ is a recurrent word in Brown’s poetry. This stems, in part, from the poet’s above-mentioned paradoxical commitment to his islands: if on the one hand he sees himself as close to and dependent on his community, on the other hand he realises that his major task is the interrogation of the non-human, of the elemental – of existence unmediated by human culture and language.

Indeed, Brown is very often compelled to step outside the circles of closeness, familiarity, or identity, and to explore what lies beyond its confines: nature, death, the perception of place and time. But even when the poet portrays community and islanders, he privileges archetypal views. The island appears as a microcosm, an autonomous signifying space, a universe of meaning itself of which individuals are just an expression. The islanders are thus represented as clearly delineated figures, characterized by their occupations or trades and symbolizing Everyman within the community. For example, in a poem on a seaweed gatherer on the Holm of Aikerness, one of the many islets of Orkney, Brown writes:

The rich web of trades in Orkney
– Farmer, sailor, fisherman,
Shepherd, blacksmith,
Boat-builder, stone-mason,
Ferryman, merchant, mechanic –
All woven in one community.¹³

It is significant that Brown should use the metaphor of ‘weaving’ in this poem, as it constitutes another recurrent image in his work. The metaphor often appears connected with the representation of landscape,

¹² *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, eds. Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (London: John Murray, 2005), pp. 45-46.

¹³ Gunnie Moberg and George Mackay Brown, *Orkney: Pictures and Poems* (Moray, Scotland: Colin Baxter Photography, 1996), p. 74.

as the title of one of Brown's most celebrated books on Orkney suggests. *An Orkney Tapestry* constitutes a sort of personal topography and evinces one of the most fundamental characteristics of Brown's poetry: a tendency for clear outline and definition, the low appearance of the landscape simultaneously enhancing and simplifying.¹⁴ It is worth quoting a passage:

But I think it is [...] the look of the islands that suggests heraldic stillness and a hoarded symbolism – quarterings on the hill, pasture and meadow and cornfield, a slow change throughout the year; and, older still, the great shield of the sky swarming with azure and gule, and clouds like fabulous beasts rampant.¹⁵

Such consciousness of the symbolic nature of the landscape – its 'heraldic stillness' – both hones down and enhances its power. It is as if the geographical condition determined a poetic tendency and formed part of the insular poet's self-definition. To paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, we can say that the Orkney landscape becomes not so much the object as the homeland of Brown's thoughts.¹⁶

In his book *The Perception of the Environment*, the anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that, from a 'dwelling' perspective, the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it and, in so doing, have left there something of themselves. For the native dweller, the landscape is itself a story; to perceive it is to carry out an act of remembrance, of re-telling. And remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past. By the same token, (re)telling a story is not like weaving or unfurling a tapestry to *cover up* the world or clothe it with meaning – it is rather a way of guiding the attention of listeners or readers *into* it, conducting them along the

¹⁴ Annwn, p. 285.

¹⁵ Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, p. 19.

¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 24.

same paths as the teller's.¹⁷ In traditional communities, songs, stories and designs direct the performers into the world, deeper and deeper from outward appearances to an ever more intense poetic involvement: 'at its most intense, the boundaries between person and place, between the self and the landscape, dissolve altogether. It is at this point that, as the people say, they become their ancestors, and discover the real meaning of things.'¹⁸

In this regard, and proceeding with the metaphor of weaving, we could say that the landscape is woven like a tapestry *from* the lives of its inhabitants. These lives can be traced in the textures of the land, which is much more than a mere stage for the enactment of history or a surface upon which it is inscribed as history 'congealed.' Reverting to George Mackay Brown, we can clearly find this dimension in his poetry, which thrives with the communities of the islands and becomes alive with their paths, stories and voices. Brown is moved by a desire to capture the peoples of the Orkneys in all their diversity, to celebrate and preserve, in a place where the condition of humankind stands out in stark relief.¹⁹

In his later poetry, however, George Mackay Brown increasingly begins to explore what the land would be like outside community life, away from the societal forces that 'bind the breath,' as he puts it, to a local habitation. The impulse stems, in part, from the poet's growing disaffection with contemporary Orkney and its cult of progress and consumerism, a cult which has severed the relationship between land and dwellers, between words and communal memory. Brown's disaffection is most eloquently expressed in the poem 'Horse Mill':

The work horses are gone from 'the island of horses'
(They are banished
With the language and songs of the people.)

¹⁷ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 189-90.

¹⁸ Ingold, p. 56.

¹⁹ Annwn, p. 285.

Beams sag in mills where once
The great stones thundered out
The bread of the people.
(Therefore they are diminished,
The language and the music of the folk.)

How does the blood not surge
When a tractor crosses the hill, ploughing?
All is not well
When an ancient stable where horses stood
Becomes a holiday home.

Technical skills grow; precious
Gifts of mind and spirit wilt.
The tongues have forgot to celebrate.

See here a symbol: the strict
Circle of labour and dance
From broken earth
To the bread and ale set out on the winter table.
Technology has no tongue for praise.²⁰

The poet's distaste for change configures a romantic primitivism that impinges on his conception of time. Brown's late poems usually privilege a ponderous, slow-moving temporality wholly distinct from both clock and instantaneous time. Within it, change is envisaged as occurring over many generations, and generations are, in Brown's words, 'turnings of the stone pages of time' ('Waterfront, Hamnavoe').²¹ It is a time-set attuned to the enormously long 'timescapes' of the physical and geological world. 'Glacial time,' as John Urry calls it, becomes in Brown a form of resistance to the placelessness and excess of instantaneous time – the accelerated temporality of our 'super-modernity' – and aims at conveying the weight of history and memory,

²⁰ Moberg and Brown, *Orkney: Pictures and Poems*, p. 29.

²¹ Moberg and Brown, *Orkney: Pictures and Poems*, p. 77.

ensuring that places will still be there in their essence in many generations' time.²² In this respect, it is worth while to quote a poem from one of the books in which Brown more clearly explores such temporality, with the invaluable aid of Gunnie Moberg's photographs:

The eye of the camera seeks patterns
On shore, on hill, in fields and lochs,
 And at all seasons. The swans
 Rejoice in their ice prisons,

The sheep, sea music all round their jail,
Have inbuilt faith that dew and green croppings
 Wait their release.
 Even children among beach waves

Are incarcerated in the sweetness of bone.
(The shackles lie, under Warbeth stones.)
 And what of the seamen
 In their wooden cells

Daring, over centuries, the rocks of Orkney
And wrecked despite the web of warning
 From Rinansay to Swona
 The flaming winter beacons?

It hasn't changed much since Skarabrae
Folk plucked fleeces and ears of corn
 And set out in skin boats
 For lobsters, under Yesnaby,

²² John Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 157-60. See also Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 7-41.

And women heard anxiously a sudden wind-growl.
The patterns were there, for withering eyes
 To stook and store
 In granaries of story and legend.

A century or more since, the recording
Eye of the camera looked on the chaos
 Of history and the psalmist's
 Brief seventy years; and now

We may note, page by page, the new
And the old works of time; how all
 Fall into ruins, or go dancing
 Towards green April harps.
 Forever, somewhere, are joy and dancing.²³

Interestingly, women assume in the poem the role of carers and custodians of the 'granaries of story and legend.' This seems to convey the idea that women, because of their role in the activities of procreation, childbirth and childbearing – they are not only *in* time, but also have to *give* time – develop 'shadow' temporalities, alternatives to clock-time, and are thus more receptive to 'glacial' temporality, as well as more likely to be tied into time as inter-generational.²⁴

The same idea is also present in one of George Mackay Brown's more ambitious works, *Fishermen with Ploughs* (1971), a poem cycle which tells the story – prehistory and history – of a people who settled in a valley called Rackwick on the Orkney island of Hoy. It is an extremely ambitious poetic sequence, as it constitutes Brown's first attempt to show a community whole, from its early beginnings, sailing west out of Norway in the ninth century, through Reformation and annexation to Scotland.²⁵ As the poet writes in the prologue:

²³ Moberg and Brown, *Orkney: Pictures and Poems*, p. 9.

²⁴ Urry, pp. 159-60.

²⁵ Annwn, p. 299.

The same people appear and reappear through many generations – the laird, the crofter-fisherman, the shepherd, the tinker, the beachcomber, and the women who watch the sea with stony patience; all are caught up in ‘the wheel of bread’ that is at once brutal and holy.²⁶

The poem-cycle shows the painful struggle of people for material improvement over the centuries. And yet, Brown concludes that ‘perhaps [...] the quality of life grows poorer as Progress multiplies its gifts on a simple community,’ drawing island dwellers to ‘the new altars,’ draining the land of its people, and leaving only ruins and the detritus of modern commodities in its wake.

In the final section of the sequence, significantly entitled ‘Return of the Women,’ the hubris of progress and materialism leads to nuclear holocaust. The few people who survive the disaster return to the valley and become farmers and fishermen: ‘The women return, unchanged yet terribly changed. [...] The great song must begin all over again, very far back, beyond the oxen and millstones and bronze throats of agriculture.’²⁷ It is a seemingly disturbing conclusion that only through environmental apocalypse and a return to elemental life patterns can the human race survive. It is nonetheless at such moments that the poet seems to come to terms with Orkney, transforming the island into a metaphor for whatever place and time human beings can get to in order to rebuild their lives, relationships and communities.

George Mackay Brown always had difficulty in finding a place in his own island community and in a world in which he saw no work or lifestyle for himself.²⁸ Could it be then that for Brown the island is also a metaphor for poetry itself and for the difficult role of the poet in a disenchanted world little interested in preserving expressions of communal memory and place, and deeply suspicious of any holistic strivings or visions of wholeness? In any event, Brown’s answer seems

²⁶ *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, p. 89.

²⁷ *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, pp. 89-90.

²⁸ Rowena Murray and Brian Murray, *Interrogation of Silence: The Writings of George Mackay Brown* (London: John Murray, 2004), p. 264.

to be one of hope, even if of *utopian* hope, for, in his words, ‘it could happen that the atom-and-planet horror at the heart of our civilisation will scatter people again to the quiet beautiful fertile places of the world.’²⁹

²⁹ Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, p. 51.