

BEYOND THE SWELKIE

A Collection of Poems & Writings
Celebrating the Centenary of
George Mackay Brown (1921–1996)

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An Orkney Worlding: George Mackay Brown's Poetics as Waymarkers for Navigating the Anthropocene

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I have tried to make a kind of profile of Orkney, which is not a likeness of today only; it has been worked on for many centuries.¹

This chapter is an invitation to consider the continuing significance of aspects of George Mackay Brown's writing as resources for contemporary readers facing the challenges of this Anthropocene age.² Here, the proposal is that Brown's literary voice resonates with the concerns of present-day commentators, activists and scholars who argue that our own juncture in deep time is characterised by the inextricable entanglement of climate crisis with the persistent paradigm of growth-based progress. It is an opportunity to review the present-day significance of a writer who composed poetic connection between a ninth century 'tribe of fisher[s]...in flight from starvation, pestilence, turbulent neighbours' and a mythic dragon; incarnate as a 'black pentecostal' [sic] fire, the outcome and downfall of modernity.³ Brown's integrative

1 George Mackay Brown and Sylvia Wishart, *An Orkney Tapestry* (1969), p.11.

2 During the approximately 11,000 years referred to by scholars as the Holocene period, human ways of living have generated changes across landscapes, lifeways and expressions of languages-in-culture. For millennia, changes occurred at relatively slow rates allowing for periods of stability. Since the eighteenth century, the Anthropocene has been characterised by accelerated, unidirectional anthropogenic progress.

3 George Mackay Brown, *Fishermen With Ploughs* (1971), n.p.

imaginaries are augurs for our era of 'omnicide'⁴ threatened through myriad means including global conflict; food insecurity, and forced migrations. True, Brown's largely Orkney-centred works, if read from more metropolitan worldviews, may appear to have little, if any, bearing on these globalised cataclysms. Indeed, his work epitomises the distillation of a specific education in attention to his 'Own': Orkney's 'rhythms of land and sea'; its farmers and fishers, and 'the early epics and ballads' of his mother's Gaelic-speaking ancestors; emanations that he drew upon as if from 'the pure strong rock of [a] spring'.⁵ Such radical localism and his focus on the cyclical rhythms of tradition has attracted criticism characterising his repertoire as somewhat static.⁶ For some, Brown is too easily positioned as a writer who lived almost his entire life in his island birthplace – within metres from the first house he could remember, 'in a sea-close' between the North Atlantic and the North Sea.⁷ How could such a person participate in making the world's history, including its futures? Might someone who died a quarter of a century past – who told readers that his work had been to rescue the 'treasure'⁸ of the centuries preceding his birth – speak into our increasingly rapid compression of the dimensions of space and time?⁹ Could a writer whose historic 'poetic and ethical mission'

4 Levene and Conversi define 'omnicide' as a response to the scientific assessment that the "developed" world's ... economics, technologies, socio-cultural behaviour [and] fundamental value systems, can no longer be sustained as viable or beneficial' for any form of life on the planet. Mark Levene and Daniele Conversi, 'Subsistence societies, globalisation climate change and genocide: discourses of vulnerability and resilience', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 13, 8 (2014), p.282.

5 George Mackay Brown, *For the Islands I Sing* ([1997] 2008), pp.6, 30.

6 Roderick Watson, *The Literature of Scotland* (2007), pp.14, 132.

7 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.20.

8 George MacKay Brown *Northern Lights* (2013), p.4.

9 See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), pp.260ff, for an explanation >>

was to work 'for the benefit of his archipelagic homeland, for Scotland, and for humanity in general',¹⁰ still have meaning in an era when billionaires plan for the human abandonment of all our earth homes?¹¹ The following pages open a portal for us to look again at his intentions.

Brown saw himself both as an 'archivist' of the 'rich squandered cargo' of pasts,¹² and as a future-facing voice; viz his address 'To a Hamnavoe Poet of 2093'. It is this expansive and democratic archiving of pasts, and futures, set adrift through writing, that is available for us now; a commons, resources for imagining the world, both as it was and can be:

...a few marks
From an ancient forgotten time
A child may read

That not far from the stone
A well
Might open for wayfarers¹³

Understanding Brown's works in this way, as intentional, social actions that continue to have meaningful life through

>> of the geographer's concept of the truncation of space through globalised rapid communication systems, shrinking our experience of time to an all-pervasive present. For Harvey, this leaves humanity in the situation of having 'to learn to cope with an overwhelming sense of compression of our spatial and temporal worlds' (p.240). Doreen Massey, *A Global Sense of Place* (1991), p.24, refers back to the origin of this concept in Marx's writing about the annihilation of distance through the modern ordering of time.

10 Halszka Leleń, 'Experimenting with Historiographic Narrative and Guidebook Style' in *An Orkney Tapestry* by George Mackay Brown', *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, 67, 11 (2019), p.157.

11 Luke Devlin, Mairi McFadyen, Mike Small *et al.* 'Going to the Moon', *Less*: 1 (1) (2020), p.2.

12 George Mackay Brown, *Northern Lights: A Poet's Sources* (2013), p.4.

13 George Mackay Brown, 'A Work for Poets' in Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (eds), *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown* ([1996] 2005).

the connections they inspire, contemporary readers can become allies in his process, putting people in place within the ongoing archive of story, valuing and sharing lived experiences. This is 'worlding'. It is what Brown's fellow archipelago dweller, and thinker, Martinique-born poet/philosopher Édouard Glissant suggests should be a poet's primary work: creating complex and ongoing 'connections between [our] place and the whole, and [diffusing] the whole throughout [our] place'.¹⁴ It is a way of seeing that Brown's friend and brother skald/bard Seamus Heaney understood, recognising it in Brown's ability to communicate 'everything' by passing it through the transformative 'eye of the needle of Orkney'.¹⁵ This making of a world through words: in the activities of writing; reading, and the inspirations that this relationship between writers and their readers kindles, is akin to philosopher Hannah Arendt's description of the ancient concept of poetics, both composed of *poiesis* (fabrication, craft-skill) and *praxis* (thought and speech into critical action).¹⁶ Arendt's view was that poetics, like all actions, are made in relation to other beings. This relationality makes poetic activities boundless; working in continuum, stimulating effects through people, all life, across spaces, and through times.¹⁷ Brown's many modalities of writing are radiant with this way of worlding – forming; being made by, and making connections:

14 Édouard Glissant, 'From the whole-world treatise', *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, 32, 58 (1999), p.32.

15 Seamus Heaney cited in Stromness Library Blogspot 'Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) – Saturday 31 August 2013'.

16 See Maurizio d'Entrevies, 'Hannah Arendt', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019).

17 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* ([1958] 1998), p.189.

Everything we do sets the whole web of creation trembling, with light or with darkness... a good word spoken might help a beggar in Calcutta or a burning child in Burundi; or conversely.¹⁸

The remainder of this essay introduces aspects of Brown's Orkney worlding: expressions of dwelling; empathy; 'co-becoming', and repair.¹⁹ They are highlighted as waymarkers, runes 'carved' for us, for our own way of perceiving and shaping the world through poetics, becoming as poets ourselves in our imagining and assembling of possible futures:²⁰

Language unstable as sand, but poets
Strike on hard rock, carving
Rune and hieroglyph...
Keep vigil. The tongues flow yet...²¹

Worlding as Dwelling in 'the intimacies of the home patch'²²

A *makar* of world imaginaries, Brown certainly appears to have imbibed the principles of one of his own literary heroes Bertolt Brecht,²³ whose own manifesto was that writing is, indeed, a

18 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.174.

19 See Bawaka Country et al, 'Gor Gurtha: Enacting response-abilities as situated co-becoming', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 37, 4 (2019), pp.682-702.

20 Brown uses this trope in several works to connote the role of the poet. It is an allusion to a 'skaldic' lineage of skill in knowing and carving/composing with the runes – the *poiesis* that accompanies the praxis/social actions and elicitive learning possible in poetry as a dialogue with readers (see Brown, *For the Islands*, pp.30-1, 139-40).

21 George Mackay Brown, 'To a Hamnavoe Poet of 2093' in Linda Andersson Burnett (ed), *Archipelagos: Poems from Writing the North* (2014).

22 McCullagh cited in Raghnaid Sandilands, 'Tobar an Dualchais: In praise of B-road studies', *West Highland Free Press*, 9 May 2020.

23 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.139.

'social action'; 'holding a mirror up' to society to promote critical thinking.²⁴ In his 'singing'²⁵ of the everyday of his community and environment, Brown offers situated vignettes viewed through microcosmic lenses,²⁶ enabling his readers to witness, with him, people negotiating particular responses to the complexities of modernity. Skilfully adopting the vagueness of symbolism,²⁷ Brown renovates the specific language of Orkney – people and place – into an idiom of universal relation²⁸; a translation of the specific through the fundamental cycles of human life.²⁹ For example, in *Greenvoe*, when Ivan Westray – at one end of, for him, an otherwise familiar journey – looks out into dense sea-fog and proclaims that he is lost, a whole generation is connoted.³⁰ Brown leads readers from this moment into a redding-up of the skipper's mythic genealogy, offering us the experience of the loss of a story of a people, and their environment, with and through Ivan. Brown's epic poem cycle *Fishermen with Ploughs* is also redolent with this theme, urgent with the significance for people and places of the loss of historicity and environmental integrity.³¹

24 John Willet and Ralph Manheim (eds), *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913-1956* ([1940] 1979) p.483.

25 After GMB 'Prologue' in George Mackay Brown, *The Storm and Other Poems* (1954), p.9.

26 In his autobiography, Brown discusses the importance of both realism and imagination in the writer's work and communicates his own understanding that his portrayals of Orkney – people and place – afford a microcosm through which both he and his readers can apprehend more global themes and concerns. Brown, *For the Islands*, p.168.

27 See Anthony P Cohen, 'Segmentary knowledge: a Whalsay sketch', in Mark Hobart (ed), *An anthropological critique of development: The growth of ignorance* (1993), p.21.

28 Glissant, 'From the whole-world treatise', pp.33-4.

29 Leleñ, 'Experimenting with Historiographic Narrative and Guidebook Style', p.157.

30 George Mackay Brown, *Greenvoe* (1972), p.20.

31 'After Ullrich Kockel, "Reflexive traditions and heritage production"' in Ullrich Kockel and Máiréad Nic Criath (eds), *Cultural Heritages as Reflexive Traditions* (2007), p.39.

In these works, Brown's thesis comes close to what ethnologist Ullrich Kockel has characterised as 'the eviction of the folk from their rightful place in history... by the hegemony' through the non-democratic pursuit of top-down progress.³² For the folk of Brown's fictive Rackwick and imagined Greenvoe such progress makes them strangers in their own places. We see this theme nuanced in the poem 'The Drowning Brothers'.³³ Here, Brown uses the 'silver tongue' of the burn, as a metaphor for the constancy and dynamism of community and environment in synergy (a common motif in Brown's writing),³⁴ to signify sharp contrast with the distant, disengaged throb of a tractor.³⁵ It is the mechanics of disengagement that Brown decries; forms of progress that privilege dominant rather than connective relations between people, and between people and places. It is a tendency towards instrumentalism that he traces back even to Rackwick's earliest settlers instrumental deployment of 'oxen and millstones and bronze throats of agriculture'.³⁶ As readers, we feel the wrench as people's culture becomes estranged from their co-natural relations with the earth.

To effect this disruption, often Brown brings readers to meet his characters first amid the continuum of their everyday lives and relations:

Small gestures...

he would go to the crags

Each morning...

32 Ullrich Kockel, 'Putting the Folk in Their Place: Tradition, Ecology and the Public Role of Ethnology', *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 17, 1 (2008), p.8.

33 Brown, *Fishermen With Ploughs*, pp.73-4.

34 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.140.

35 Brown, *Fishermen With Ploughs*, p.73-4.

36 Brown, *Fishermen With Ploughs*, n.p.

For a clutch of eggs...
And she to the burn with her pail...
- On such a tranquil wheel their time
was spun...³⁷

In this way, he evokes the reflexive interplay of environments and people, co-forming each other, interweaving the imagery of traditions of what had been, while also intimating the traditions of 'what can be' through people's affective being.³⁸

No man is an island, and all that we ever say or
think or do – however seemingly unremarkable
– may set the whole web of existence trembling
and affect the living and the dead and the unborn.³⁹

Brown understands the both/and of community (relational, collaborative dwelling), and the significance of the individual; the way that each person 'may be touched...with the music of the spheres':⁴⁰

[T]he life of everyone is unique and
mysterious. Under all the
accumulation of custom, boredom
and drift lies somewhere the
'immortal diamond' ⁴¹

³⁷ Brown, 'Twins' (1971), p.44.

³⁸ After Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History* (2019). Azoulay argues that rejection of learning via the transmission of traditional knowledges and wisdom was 'made into an ideal of freedom' in 'the Imperial condition' of modernity (p.320). In this way tradition has been peripheralised and consigned to a finite past.

³⁹ George Mackay Brown, 'No man is an Island', *Weekend Scotsman*, 30 August (1986).

⁴⁰ Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, p.168.

⁴¹ Brown, *For the Islands*, p.19.

In his autobiography, Brown returns often to distilling and articulating the intention of his work. He clarifies that he believes it is to reveal what is under the 'mask' of history; to speak of a world in which 'the true face dreams on [as] The Fable [sic] is repeated over'.⁴² In this, his activity of worlding, Brown's uses of traditional symbolic tropes and themes are not simply unconscious regressions into romanticism. They are repudiations of the directional thrust of certain forms of history; of the reification both events that took place, and also *took place* from people. Contemporary readers might connect this aspect of his poetic praxis with current discourse that promotes ideas of assembling more sustainable and socially just futures through similarly refuting the imperial construction of directional time,⁴³ the idea that time's arrow flies only forwards.

Professor of culture and creative practitioner, Ariella Azoulay, characterises a more flexible approach to time (like Brown) seeing it as an opening towards 'potential history': 'a form of being with others, both living and dead, across time, against the separation of the past from the present'.⁴⁴ For Azoulay, potential history work supports global repair,⁴⁵ recovering actions and knowledges consigned to an historical past so that their wisdom remains available; a commons of plural ways of knowing how to dwell in the world.⁴⁶ Brown's writing denotes such 'dwelling', expressing cycles of tradition as participations in 'mystery [abiding] from silence into silence', and renewals

⁴² Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, p.11.

⁴³ See Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: How History Makes History* (2020), p.3, on the unintended consequences of modernity's project of progress 'the detritus of empire in the form of climate crisis, global inequalities...[of] modern imperialism...grounded in a vision of history understood as necessarily progress oriented'.

⁴⁴ Azoulay, *Potential History*, p.43.

⁴⁵ Azoulay, *Potential History*, pp.530ff.

⁴⁶ Azoulay, *Potential History*, p.320.

of these as stirrings in that silence: 'every person's attempt to make a meaning of life and time'.⁴⁷ These worlding poetics also sit well alongside anthropologist David Graeber's thesis that 'the ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently'.⁴⁸

To invite readers into the 'richness and uniqueness'⁴⁹ of his distinct portraits of people-places through times; the universally 'immortal diamond'.⁵⁰ Brown cultivated his writing as a dialogue both with community and environment.⁵¹ For him, writing was no insular act.⁵² Rather, in cherishing the intimacies of his home patch, tilling that miniscule portion of land,⁵³ he drew on a treasury of familiar, indeed *familial*, sources (Norse mythology, Gaelic traditions and biblical texts) to elicit themes that he himself owned were rarely new.⁵⁴ In attending to county and parochial concerns, Brown's writing resembles that of his near contemporary, Irish author Patrick Kavanagh. Each, writing individually, established their works as praxes of sowing and nurturing the ground of *commonplace* being as the

47 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.168.

48 David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (2015), p.39.

49 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.140.

50 Brown borrows this phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose poetry he admired.

51 I am grateful to Stromnessian academic Rebecca Ford for sharing her thoughts on Brown's writing as an exemplum of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism in which 'the word' given 'in language is half someone else's'. *Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), p.293 cited in Rebecca Ford, 'Weaving Words: a dialogical approach to creativity and community discourse in Orkney', unpublished presentation (2016).

52 Brown, *For the Islands*, pp.26-7, 166, including the writer's conviction that his story of Magnus, twelfth century earl and saint, must have resonance in the twentieth century. He likens Magnus to theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed for his opposition to Adolf Hitler.

53 See Watson *The Literature of Scotland* (2007), p.132.

54 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.168.

place in which the universal may also thrive. Each expressed their local ecologies as vital for the radiance of the greater cosmology. We hear this in Kavanagh's announcement with 'bravado [of] the notion that the potato-patch is the ultimate'.⁵⁵

To know fully even one field or one land is a lifetime's experience. In the world of poetic experience, it is depth that counts, not width.⁵⁶

Brown's own cultivation within and for a people and place often characterised as being peripheral; at the 'utmost corners of the world',⁵⁷ shows equal, if more quietly radical, boldness. He persisted in working the ground of each page towards forming narrative and poetic planes where 'famers and fishing-folk, and their work',⁵⁸ shared significance with monarchs and mythic heroes. His was an aesthetic and ethics founded in those principles that Kavanagh recognised as the 'right kind of sensitive courage and...sensitive humility' needed to see the universal in the particular, including in the fundamentals of the parish:⁵⁹

[A]ny small community is a microcosm. It is not necessary to stray very far from your back yard. The whole world gathers about the parish pump.⁶⁰

55 Patrick Kavanagh, "'The Parish and the Universe" in *Collected Pruse* (1967) - extract' in Mark Storey (ed), *Poetry and Ireland since 1800: A Source Book* ([1967], 1988), p.205.

56 Patrick Kavanagh, 'The Parish and the Universe' cited in Robert Macfarlane, "'My Eyes are In My Feet": Introduction' in Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* ([1977] 2011), p.9.

57 From William Fowler's (1560-1612) 'Sonet. In Orknay' in John MacQueen and Tom Scott (eds), *The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse* ([1966] 1989), p.260, l.1.

58 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.26.

59 Kavanagh, 'The Parish and the Universe', p.205.

60 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.168.

Brown's ability both to be in the particular and be worldly is evident in his dexterity with, as Seamus Heaney put it, widening 'the cosmological lens', bringing readers 'beyond the usual' *and* assuring them 'that the terra [is] still firma'.⁶¹ George Mackay Brown found and wove the cosmic mystery of a 'thread too bright for the eye' in the everyday yarns of 'green corn', 'blue fish', and the red of 'rut and rieving and wrath'.⁶²

Empathy and *ecocritical* awareness

Such ability in strengthening and expanding the connective tissue between people and places, bound through times in patterns that extend across space – viz *Time in a Red Coat* – is exemplified in what Édouard Glissant conceptualised as the 'poetics of relation'.⁶³ For Glissant, writing constituted the social action of 'speak[ing]: the world'.⁶⁴ Just as Arendt had linked speech to action through their being mutually realised in 'spaces of appearance' – where people disclose their identities in 'reciprocity and solidarity'.⁶⁵ Glissant knew that writing a world from one's own ground could also ground one in worldly relations:

We discover that the place where we live, from which we speak, can no longer be abstracted by us from that mass of energy that hails us from afar. We can no longer grasp...its infinite... sufferings, and pleasures, unless we lash it to... the world's totality.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Seamus Heaney speaking in 2004, cited in Maggie Fergusson, *George Mackay Brown: The Life* (2006), p.x.

⁶² Brown, *Fishermen with Ploughs*, p.29 .

⁶³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (1997).

⁶⁴ Glissant, *The Treatise of the Whole World*, p.32.

⁶⁵ d'Entreves, "Hannah Arendt"; see also Arendt *The Human Condition*, pp.199ff.

⁶⁶ Glissant, *The Treatise of the Whole World*, p.32.

As already intimated, Brown's aesthetic was itself a conscious turning to such otherwise looking. As with Glissant's work, including his evocations of 'archipelago thinking'⁶⁷, Brown's writing also expresses an integrative and empathetic world-view, embracing the paradox of insularity amid multiple archipelagic connections. In Brown's islands, edges both are defined and infinitely open; mirrored materially and poetically in the opposite rhythms of land and sea, which for Brown were a continuous meeting of diverse forms in patterned 'harmony'.⁶⁸ George Mackay Brown's was a vision of being emplaced in the world whilst also refuting the idea of exceptionalism; both able to:

...rent and till a narrow patch
Not much bigger than my coat⁶⁹

and to mobilise the connectivity of land and ocean

From the black furrow, a fecund
Whisper of dust,
From the gray furrow, a sudden
Gleam and thrust,
Crossings of net and ploughshare,
Fishbone and crust.⁷⁰

This is the view of the 'Beachcomber', who, in Brown's eponymous poem, encounters the multiplicity of the world's materials brought to his shore.⁷¹ In this poem, as in his life,

⁶⁷ Michael Wiedorn *Think Like an Archipelago: Paradox in the Work of Édouard Glissant* (2017).

⁶⁸ Brown, *Fishermen with Ploughs*, p.38.

⁶⁹ George Mackay Brown, 'Eynhallow: Crofter and Monastery' (2005), p.171.

⁷⁰ Brown 'Black Furrow, Gray Furrow' (1971), p.38.

⁷¹ Brown, *Fishermen with Ploughs*, p.63.

Brown situates himself at the ebb, ready to welcome stories from 'under the horizon'.⁷² Just as the beachcomber's mirror poet, Derek Walcott – a St Lucia-born, and archipelago dwelling descendent of Empire-entangled forebears – wrote it. Brown knew 'that the sea is history'.⁷³ This connective perspective is key for contemporary living. We are still navigating the legacies of that globalisation, which was announced for Brown's 'Beachcomber' with the arrival of 'barrel[s] of sodden oranges' from Spanish shipwrecks by The Kame.⁷⁴ For contemporary shore watchers the metaphor and the experience extends to the plastics made in China that spill onto the beach at Eathie. Brown's exemplification of the connective *and* connecting perspective of beachcombing, at a sifting rather than impenetrable edge, continues to waymark a condition of worldly empathy. Like Walcott, Brown was also a child of the Empire,⁷⁵ imbibed with an early learning of how the sea embodies relational potential; its dissolution of edges remained with him as a geo-poetical metaphor for his own and other's complex identities, including hybridity.

In his archipelago, and in the world, Brown owned this plurality. He experienced it in the ancestral flows of Lowland Scots' and Highland Gaels' legacies of economics and migrations that were united in his parents.⁷⁶ It is this perspective that gave criticality to his reading of those authorised, epic versions of history; promotions of forms of progress that would induce 'states of most depressing quiescence' in their

72 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.168.

73 Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems: 1948-1984x*, (1986), p.364.

74 Brown, *Fishermen with Ploughs*, p.63.

75 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.23.

76 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.9ff.

effects.⁷⁷ Reaching through times and across spaces, he forged creative and intellectual links based on the constant centrality of lived experiences. He proposed an imagined resonance in the work of being and making a world between the oral tradition bearers who stored and shared the Border ballads and Nobel Laureate Thomas Mann; between poets and plumbers.⁷⁸ Interrupting and connecting, Brown's poetic inclination to synergy between particulars, evident in the many threads elucidated in his poem 'Shroud'⁷⁹ or the adaptive, anticipatory, collective weaving of the settling community in 'The Net',⁸⁰ connotes the necessary multiplicity of skills, experiences, and identities that compose the 'orchestra' of community.⁸¹

Engaging with Brown's representations of populated environments offers contemporary readers an opportunity to experience his poetics as ecocritical engagements.⁸² Following Brown's model of observing and interpreting people's interactions and perceptions in context – both with and in their environments and cultures – readers may be inspired not only to recognise, but also reflect and interact critically and creatively with their own anticipations and responses to our present-day ecological crises. 'This lively possibility is afforded because Brown's ecological engagement is holistic. His writing mobilises people's historicities along with their

77 Brown, 'In Days to Come', *Island Diary*, *Orkney Herald*, 9 September 1952.

78 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.31.

79 Brown, *Fishermen with Ploughs*, p.29.

80 Brown, *Fishermen with Ploughs*, p.9.

81 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.11.

82 See Marjan Shokouhi, 'Towards a poetics of dwelling: Patrick Kavanagh's countryside', *Estudios Irlandeses*, 14(1) (2020), p.14, for a detailed discussion on ecocriticism in literary theory.

everyday culture as lenses for viewing the impact of imposed progress on their ways of being in the world. He evokes his own empathy and invokes ours:

I'm so desperately involved with all the weak things, lonely things, suffering things I see about me. I can't bear the pity I feel for them... The world's a torture chamber... It seems most folk can live with that kind of thing. Not me – I get all caught up in it.⁸³

In 'Celia', one of the stories assembled in *A Time to Keep*, Brown, the very writer who composed the exquisite, romantic poesy of 'the buttered bannock of the moon',⁸⁴ a flame in that 'fire of images'⁸⁵ recited, since, by at least two generations of Orcadian's 'singing' their islands in his words,⁸⁶ lays open a harrowing seam of pain. The 'blood everywhere' that Celia decries in the suffering things around her is a notable flow throughout Brown's oeuvre. Just as he galvanises the lyricality of the intertwining 'deep marvellous rhythms of sea and land, darkness and light',⁸⁷ Brown's metaphysical representations of nature's possibility, rendered in motifs such as the ever changing music of a Highland burn,⁸⁸ are also interleaved with

83 George Mackay Brown, *A Time to Keep and Other Stories*, (1969), p.15-16.

84 George Mackay Brown, 'Hamnavoe' in Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (eds), *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown* ([1996] 2005), p.25.

85 Brown, 'Hamnavoe'.

86 See Brown, *For the Islands*, p.17, where he alludes to the intimacy between song and poetry, which he believed he had imbibed through the relict legacy of his mother's ancestors: an antiquity of the Gaelic oral tradition and its 'legends and songs as old as Homer perhaps' (p.15). Brown extends this appreciation of musicality and language in tradition to his reading of the complexities of being in a community, comparing it to playing in an orchestra (p.11).

87 George Mackay Brown, *Letters from Hamnavoe*, (1975), p.67.

88 See Brown, *For the Islands*, p.140, for the poet's description of the Highland Burn as a metaphor for culture in flow, outwith perimeters of time or space.

his acknowledgement of the 'common soiling of the world', its 'sewer of pain'.⁸⁹ His own cultural hybridity may have increased his sensitivity to such apparent paradoxes. It is, of course, also an intimation of his closeness to the fundamentals of being;⁹⁰ ultimately, the generative source for his plaintive mediations of environmental pain.

Scholar of sustainability studies, Glenn Albrecht, has recently refined his own theoretical concept for explaining why it is that he thinks people, like Brown, express such environmental, and cultural sensitivity, even to the point of embodying the pain they perceive. To help describe the phenomenon he has identified and observed, he has coined the term 'solastalgia'.⁹¹ For Albrecht, solastalgia is composed of 'the distress that is produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment'.⁹² It is pain induced through lack of solace. Unlike its close relation, nostalgia, solastalgia is not an experience borne out of separation from home, including the imagination of a better home that is past. It is a 'negative earth emotion' situated in everyday relations in and towards home, while also not feeling at home in the world.⁹³ For Albrecht, accepting that solastalgia is a legitimate response to the precarity caused by the abrasions of the Anthropocene is key to understanding the 'emotional and cultural dimensions of the human relationship

89 Brown, 'Hamnavoe'.

90 Halszka Leleń, 'Orcadian Poetics of Hope: Lyrical Dimensions and (Ex)tensions of the Topos in the Poetry of George Mackay Brown', *Ethos*, 32(4), (2019), p.157.

91 Glenn Albrecht, 'Negating Solastalgia: An Emotional Revolution from the Anthropocene to the Symbiocene', *American Imago*, 77 (1), (2020), p.9.

92 Albrecht, 'Negating Solastalgia', p.9.

93 Albrecht, 'Negating Solastalgia', p.9.

to land'.⁹⁴ It is also a necessary condition for attending to changes and losses in the waymarkers, signs and symbols, for 'a healthy ecosystem and place'.⁹⁵ Albrecht praises those writers whom he sees as having expressed early warnings 'about the biophysical and emotional implications' of ecological distress.⁹⁶ Making the condition of solastalgia known is an important step towards countering its causes.⁹⁷ Through the writings of authors who stay committed to both environment and neighbours, Albrecht suggests, a common emotional and political purpose is inspired. Repair becomes possible through accepting their mirroring of 'the love of the totality of our place relationships, and a willingness to accept the political responsibility for protecting and conserving them at all scales'.⁹⁸

Certainly, contemporary readers of Brown's works will have little difficulty in finding both the symptoms and the creative possibilities of solastalgia in his words. Brown spent a lifetime close to the elements that Orkney's northern climate embraces.⁹⁹ He understood the depths of those winters of 'death ... dank and cold' rendered in fellow Orcadian, Robert Rendall's *Renewal*; a sonnet that he claimed was 'one of the most perfect' he knew.¹⁰⁰ He also lived alongside crofters engaged in the challenging yearly cycles of 'burnishing... seed from snow',¹⁰¹ and fishers who were 'up to the thwart in

94 Albrecht, 'Negating Solastalgia', p.13.

95 Albrecht, 'Negating Solastalgia', p.14.

96 Albrecht, 'Negating Solastalgia', p.17.

97 Albrecht, 'Negating Solastalgia', p.20.

98 Albrecht, 'Negating Solastalgia', p.20.

99 For example, see Brown, *Letters from Hamnavoe*, pp.76-7.

100 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.67.

101 Brown, *Letters from Hamnavoe*, p.50.

haddocks';¹⁰² dual roles taken on by individuals active in Orkney's subsistence economies for millennia. It is this belonging both to place and people that imbues Brown's literary exposures of ecological pain with the complex synergies both of cultural and natural stress.¹⁰³

Repair – dwelling in co-becoming

For contemporary commentators, accepting the indivisibility of culture and nature is a necessary critique of the dominant paradigm in which 'scientific' and 'social' wisdom are different; an imposed duality used to construct knowledge systems useful for modernity.¹⁰⁴ Brown's poetics anticipated such a retournement to more holistic ways of knowing, nurtured in our intimate interrelationship with the 'whole web of creation', cognisant that every action sets the web 'trembling'.¹⁰⁵ This 'poetics of hope' a synergy of lyrical juxtapositions and understatement encouraging readers to seek waymarkers of optimism scattered through his tales of individuals facing adversities.¹⁰⁶ Brown attributed his aesthetic and ethos to his Roman Catholicism.¹⁰⁷ It was also contextualised by his formation in the intermingling genealogies of his Scots-

102 Brown, *Letters from Hamnavoe*, p.41.

103 In *Fishermen with Ploughs*, Brown sets forth an imagined millennium of settlement, displacement and recursive migration in, from and to Rackwick, in the island of Hoy, an island he visited regularly, and through which he connected to the universality of people-place experiences (see Brown, *For the Islands*, p.73.) Brown filled *Fishermen with Ploughs* with motifs that both connote the adaptivity and the pains undertaken by people experiencing displacement by the 'dead[ening] fires' of an unchecked, processual modernity (see Brown, *For the Islands*, pp.163-4).

104 See Rodney Harrison, 'Beyond "Natural" and "Cultural" Heritage: Toward an Ontological Politics of Heritage in the Age of Anthropocene', *Heritage and Society*, 8 (1), (2015), pp.24-42.

105 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.174.

106 Leleñ, 'Orkadian Poetics of Hope', p.157.

107 For example see Brown, *For the Islands*, pp.172-3.

Orcadian and Gael heritages, and attuned through 'the eye of the needle of Orkney'.

This complex ontology – Brown's knowledges for ways of being – composed of spiritual and traditional wisdoms, and Brown's emplaced awareness, resembles articulations of indigenous knowledge systems elsewhere in the world. It is close to the concepts of 'co-becoming', an holistic worldview of the Goj Gurtha in the continent named by Europeans as Australia.¹⁰⁸ Goj Gurtha, Indigenous people of Yolju (Northeast Arnhem Land) describe their worldly co-becoming as a kinship network with all life; 'dwelling' in 'complex and uncertain places. Paying attention and listening to more-than-human worlds' and 're-learning...in relation with others – whose essence – we cannot know'.¹⁰⁹ For Goj Gurtha, as it was often for Brown, this way of being is transmitted in music. Brown, brought such musicality into the dialogue of his writing, expressing the 'music of the spheres', 'the Highland burn', and the 'low contented croon' of his maternal home.¹¹⁰ For Goj Gurtha, this dialogue is expressed and experienced through song spirals 'rich and multi-layered articulations, passed down through the generations and sung...to make and remake the lifegiving connections between people and place'.¹¹¹ In Brown's poem 'Hamnavoe', (both an elegy both for his father and his birthplace home), the fluidity of his facility for singing such music across the indivisibility of nature and culture is subtle and rich:

The kirk, in a gale of psalms, went heaving through
A tumult of roofs, freighted for heaven.

108 Bawaka Country *et al*, 'Goj Gurtha: Enacting response-abilities'

109 Bawaka Country *et al*, 'Goj Gurtha: Enacting response-abilities', p.693.

110 Brown, *For the Islands*, pp.168, 140, 27.

111 Bawaka Country *et al*, 'Goj Gurtha: Enacting response-abilities', p.683.

And lovers unblessed by steeples, lay under
The buttered bannock of the moon.¹¹²

This is indeed writing drawn out of the 'strong rock of the spring...somehow akin to the blood in our veins and to the ebbings and floods of the sea'¹¹³. Brown's poetics of relational 'co-becoming', set alongside contemporary writing concerning the significance of traditional wisdoms and indigenous worldviews – long occluded by metropolitan and imperialist positioning – offers a new frame through which contemporary readers can view him. Brown's panegyrics to Orkney's 'magic'¹¹⁴ and his expressions of 'negative earth emotions' – legitimate responses to a complex Anthropocene – attain radical significance as disclosures not only of his identity, but of his intention: poesis and praxis as waymarkers towards worldly repair and future assembling. Central to his writing is this deep understanding of the constancy of renewal; a far from regressive cycle of renovation both through change and also through sustainment:

The birds return...
The waters rise...
Come, dancer, go
Step by circle
The reel endures.¹¹⁵

In reviewing Brown's writing, exploring aspects of his relational empathy for the people-place in the world that he was given to share his 'co-becoming' with, we can begin to

112 Brown, 'Hamnavoe', p.171.

113 Brown, *For the Islands*, p.30.

114 George Mackay Brown, *Let's See the Orkney Islands*, (1948), p.47.

115 Brown, 'Old Man' (1971), p.66

appreciate his work as an active ethnology. As a detailed and comparative study of people and culture, Brown's writing denotes both his observation and analysis of the granular and the universally resonant; connective tissue that roots people in expansive relations from their own homes into the world. Interpreting what people around him were doing, in the contexts of their environments and historicities,¹¹⁶ Brown placed himself both in and apart; the between both of the hybrid and also, according to philosopher Merleau-Ponty, of the 'Own' ethnologist.¹¹⁷ For Merleau-Ponty, this is the position of someone open to the experience of transforming their thinking:

We become ethnologists of our own society if we distance ourselves from it. . . [This is] a way of thinking that demands that we transform ourselves.¹¹⁸

In considering our contemporary reading of Brown, this is an important point. As already intimated in this chapter, far from being narrowly tethered – limited spatially and temporally – George Mackay Brown's 'Orkney worlding' was, and continues to be a social act of proposing ways of living that have been possible and, through our ongoing co-becoming through times, with all being and, across space, of what can be possible; 'birds return', and the 'reel endures'. It is a way of seeing that requires transformation, a stepping aside from one's 'Own' in order to see it closely, and in close relation to the world. For Brown, he chose to exercise this empathetic ethnology

¹¹⁶ After Ullrich Kockel, 'Reflexive Traditions and Heritage Production', in Ullrich Kockel and Mairead Nic Craith (eds) *Cultural Heritages as Reflexive Traditions*. (2007), p.39.

¹¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (1964) p.120.

¹¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, p.120.

creatively, in a poetics of relation: as poet, playwright, journalist, novelist and essayist. Yet, he saw no separation between these activities, his ways of worlding, and those of fishers, farmers, and plumbers.¹¹⁹ This expansive aspect of his world view, resonates with philosopher Antonio Gramsci's belief that when we think critically we are becoming philosophers, continues in Orkney today.¹²⁰ The recent coming together of boat builders, songwriters, farmers, museum curators, artists and others in the practice research-based *New Connections Across the Northern Isles* project is one iteration of this. Joining across their islands to co-curate their maritime cultures in films and new writing,¹²¹ and to reflect together on how to sustain archipelago lives and livings, these 'new connectors' shared their own 'creative ethnologies'¹²²; drawing on the resources of their historical cultures and traditions, of land and sea to continue co-becoming towards the traditions of what can be.¹²³

While it is not possible to draw a direct line from Brown's works to these expressions of renovation, renewal, and relationality, traces of his poesis resonate in these new creative ethnologies of people living in Orkney today. Here, for example, are the words of Sarah Jane Gibbon, Orcadian, historian, archaeologist, song collector and composer of her

¹¹⁹ Brown, *For the Islands*, p.31.

¹²⁰ Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds), *Antonio Gramsci. Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (1971), p.330.

¹²¹ New Connections 'New Connections Across the Northern Isles' (2019) online: <https://irc.hw.ac.uk/new-connections.html>

¹²² For a discussion of the emergent field of 'creative ethnologies', originating in Scotland, see Ullrich Kockel, and Mairi McFadyen, 'On the carrying stream into the European mountain: Roots and routes of creative (Scottish) ethnology', *Anuac*, 8(2) (2019), pp.189-211.

¹²³ See Azoulay, *Potential History*, p.320.

people and place, as shared in one of the *New Connections* project's short films:

I always store within my head that idea of the footsteps of the folk that have gone before us, and how many different people have walked here and lived here; fished from here, how many other people will have died on this coast...it's much, much more than a single event...we have a Norse farmstead just along the coast. We have a chapel. We have a broch. We have stories of giants. They're all there, just at this piece of coast... we're looking out on that waves and minding that folk mak a living on the sea. They're all using this piece of coast, and they all have different perceptions of it.¹²⁴

Brown understood that in the metaphorical rune-carving of his work he was stepping for some time from silence into the music of the spheres; joining in co-becoming, part of a collaborative orchestra of being, in order to contribute his marks to making the way for all living in the world. Sarah Jane's ebb-rooted and world-facing creative ethnology may well be one of the plurality of emanations transmitted, heard, and reflected upon 'not far from the stone' at which Brown carved his words. She too is a child of Orkney, and in her childhood had access to the 'well' of wisdom and sustainment that Brown kept 'open for wayfarers'.¹²⁵ We might imagine them both co-becoming in this particular *and* connected continuum of relations. For all of us stepping into the Highland

124 New Connections (2019) 'Songs of People, Sea and Place' online: <https://vimeo.com/showcase/5946154/video/326204661>

125 Brown, 'A Work for Poets' (2005), p.378.

burn, reading George Mackay Brown, today, the indices of his waymarking – with and for people, emplaced around this world – can offer a way for our own rooting, cultivating, anticipating, and worlding empathetic futures; the potential histories of what and who we can become together.