THE ROLE OF THE STORYTELLER IN THE WORKS OF GEORGE MACKAY BROWN

By

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

In George Mackay Brown's prose, oral storytelling traditions play as much of a role as does the written word. The storyteller cannot simply serve his own needs; he must act as a guardian of a greater cultural voice. To do this he must be a craftsman, highly skilled in storytelling techniques. He must also be willing to let his listeners take part in the telling of a story, so that what is created belongs to a community, rather than an individual.

In many senses, Brown is best viewed as a "modern day sagaman", preserving names, events and attitudes from Orkney's past and making them relevant to the present day. Brown, the storyteller, re-creates the heroic and ritualistic aspects of a medieval Norse storytelling event. The stories become fully alive when they are experienced in a group setting, with spoken word, music and song creating an atmosphere, depth and resonance that is beyond the scope of a single voice.

Chapter 1: The Voice of Orkney

George Mackay Brown has been called on more than one occasion "The Voice of Orkney".[i] In many ways, he is inextricable linked to the small group of islands, in the north of Scotland, where he lived. The poet, novelist, reporter and dramatist centered virtually all of his writing in Orkney. He was born in the town of Stromness, or "Hamnavoe" – its traditional Norse name, as he preferred to call it, on the southern side of the Orcadian mainland. He lived there until his death in 1996, at the age of 74.

Moreover, Brown's stories are, almost with out exception, *about* Orkney. He writes about Orkney in the twentieth century – of the calmness and simplicity of a pastoral way of life, recently threatened by the bustle and hurry of modern city living. He also writes about the region's (sometimes violent) history: countless Viking invasions, and the often bloody battles for leadership by Orkney's Norse rulers in medieval times. Some stories are set in prehistoric times, when the first settlers led a peaceful existence, ruled by the cyclical rhythms of nature. Speaking of his home town, Brown said: "Every doorway...has its own story. There's history every step of the way. To me it's like a tapestry."[ii]

More than recording Orkney's history, George Mackay Brown was a writer with a mission. He felt it was his place, as a writer, to preserve Orkney's heritage. Over and over again, Brown stated his opposition to the modernisation of the Orkney islands. In *An Orkney Tapestry*, he wrote:

> There is a new religion, Progress, in which we all devoutly believe and it is concerned only with material things in the present and in a vague, golden-handed future. It is a rootless utilitarian faith, without beauty or mystery; a kind of blind, unquestioning belief that men and their material circumstances will go on improving until some kind of nirvana is reached and everyone will be free, fulfilled, well-informed, masterful...It is difficult to picture this goddess of plenty other than as some huge

> computer-figure, that will give our children what they desire easily and endlessly – food, sex, excitement – a synthetic goddess vast and bland as Buddha, but without love or tenderness or compassion, activated only by a mania to create secondary objects that become shinier and shoddier and uglier." [iii]

The weapons against this "goddess of plenty" were traditional forms of art: music songs and stories, that tied their listeners to something greater – more complex and more valuable than easy pleasure and excitement. But the dying of these art forms was precisely what Brown saw happening in Orkney. In his story "The Bright Spade", Brown writes of an old fiddler, who dies leaving no progeny. As the fiddler's voice slowly fades, his fiddle "once a sweet brimming shell, hung at [the gravedigger] Jacob's door like a shrivelled chrysalis."[iv] In *An Orkney Tapestry*, part of the valley of Rackwick dies when "A gramaphon with a horn came to the valley, and the fiddle hung at the wall like a dry chrysalis." In "The Five Voyages of Arnor" the Earl of Orkney finalises his funeral arrangements on his death bed, requesting of Erling Saltfingers, his heir:

> Drop my harp
> Through a green wave, off Yesnaby,
> next time you row to the lobsters

Just as Orkney and its traditions were joined together, for Brown an artist and his work were very much one and the same thing – a song or a tune could not exist without a talented, dedicated singer or fiddle player. But not all of Brown's writing dealt with death and decay. Much of it celebrated the vitality of art as a living tradition, and showed his readers artists various and vibrant. Even death did not necessarily mean the end of an artist's voice – instead, an eternal pattern was left, that could be traced and retraced by those with the ear and eye to follow it. In a more

contemporary poem, "The Funeral of Ally Flett", life and music are inseparable and unceasing:

> Because his dance was gathered now
> And parish feet
> Went blundering their separate roads
> After the plough
> And after net and peat and harvest loads
> Yet from the cradle
> Their fated steps with a fixed passion beat,
> Tammas brought his Swedish fiddle.

For Brown, all art, writing included, must serve a practical purpose, and Tammas' fiddle binds the cycle of life together, continuing and completing the pattern. It is *useful:* Brown never thought of art or music as a trivial entertainment. Those who created and preserved stories or songs could resurrect the magic, beauty and majesty of Orkney's past, keeping it alive for all time.

One of the artists who, for Brown, was a guardian and a preserver of the past, was a Scottish writer born in Orkney: Edwin Muir. Muir was probably the one person who had the greatest influence on Brown's writing career. Throughout the 1940's, Brown had been in and out of hospital, ill with tuberculosis. The rest of the time he had spent living with his mother in Stromness, surviving on national assistance and by writing an occasional article for *The Orcadian,* the local newspaper. But in 1952, Brown enrolled in an educational course at Newbattle Abbey College, Dalkeith. At that time, Muir was the College Warden, giving advice and support to the students enrolled there.

In Brown's case, Muir had a more direct influence. Greatly impressed with the shy Orcadian's poems, Muir kept in touch with Brown for several years after they

had both left Newbattle. In 1958, Muir gathered together a collection of Brown's poems, and sent them to The Hogarth Press to be considered for publication. The book was published, as *Loaves and Fishes* in 1959; and thus began Brown's literary career.*

Moreover though, Muir helped to create the ideology that underlies all of Brown's writing. Brown's philosophy is that there does exist a Platonic ideal, and that earthly events are imperfect copies of an abstract perfection. This philosophy is filtered through Edwin Muir's ideas of the "Story" and the "Fable". In Muir's autobiographical work *The Story and the Fable*, Muir suggests that behind everyday events (the Story) lies an extension of these events (the Fable).

Muir felt, for example, that his idyllic childhood in Orkney, like many people's childhoods, represented the fabled Garden of Eden. However, when his family moved to Glasgow, he experienced a nightmare of poverty and a loss of innocence, as first his parents and then his two brothers died. The archetypal fable in this second period of life was, for Muir, the Expulsion from the Garden.

Muir's ideology means that everything, any commonplace event, can gain a greater intensity, power and significance, if only it is looked at in the right way. In *An Orkney Tapestry*, Brown writes:

> The facts of history – what Edwin Muir called the Story – are there to read and study: the Neolithic folk, Picts, Norsemen, Scots, the slow

* George Mackay Brown was first and foremost a poet; like Muir, it was through his poetry that he gained recognition and acclaim. But there are several reasons why I chose not to consider Brown's poetry in this thesis. First of all, Brown's poetic output could easily provide fodder for a dozen theses on its own. More importantly, modern poetry is a fairly specialised form of writing. It takes a fair degree of education to understand and appreciate the technical aspects of a successful poem, and it is seldom that a modern poem reaches the eyes of more than a few readers. David Jones wrote, of Brown's Orcadian readers: "They can grasp his stories with their local colouring, the plays about crafting and fishing, even the novel about a martyr-saint... They nod appreciatively at all his work but then add tentatively, not wishing to be thought Philistines, 'Yes but do you understand his poetry?'"[1]

Most of all, I agree with Alan Bold, that Brown's prose is somehow more full of vitality and "more genuinely poetic than his verse".[1] As Brown himself told Bold: "I'm better at stories than poetry: more original, fresh – there's more of myself in my imaginative prose."[1] It is Brown's prose work that reaches a larger audience, and speaks for a whole people.

> struggle of the people towards independence and prosperity. But it often seems that history is only the forging, out of terrible and kindly fires, of a mask. The mask is undeniably there; it is impressive and reassuring, it flatters us to wear it.
> Underneath the true face dreams on, and the Fable is repeated over and over again. [v]

In order to understand Brown's writing, it is essential to keep in mind Brown's philosophy: there is a universal Ideal that is always more important than our everyday lives; but it is only through looking (backwards, as it were) through the mask of everyday existence that we can grasp this transcendental ideal.

Brown's idealism has often proved a difficult foundation for literary critics to grapple with. In the forty-three years since *Loaves and Fishes* was first published, Brown has appeared in countless articles about modern Scottish writing, but larger critical works have been remarkable sparse. A few notable exceptions are John McGrath's unpublished Master's Thesis at the University of Strathclyde, "The Orkney Tapestry of George Mackay Brown". It is an excellent study of both Brown's search for a distinct Orcadian identity, and the influence of Brown's Catholicism on his work (although McGrath overlooks the fact that Brown's interpretation of Catholicism is often highly unconventional.) Rowena E.G. Murray's 1986 Doctoral Thesis, "Style as Voice: A Reappraisal of George Mackay Brown's Prose", concentrates on stylistic modernity (and occasional "post-modernity") in Brown's tellings of traditional tales.

The most influential study to date remains the first major critical study of George Mackay Brown's prose work: Alan Bold's short book, *George Mackay Brown*, published in 1978. In many ways, Bold's book set the tone for much of the critical writing that followed, concentrating on the degree to which Brown's writing

was shaped by Orcadian traditions and history, and celebrating the depth of Brown's imaginative response to that history. In a typical passage, Bold writes:

> Brown's work has been shaped, above all, by the experience of living a lifetime in Orkney. It is an archipelago whose contours were formed by the Ice Age and whose history stretches back to the Stone Age. The evidence of antiquity is everywhere in the undulations of Hoy and the spectacle of the prehistoric monoliths and megalithic tombs. He has spent a lifetime watching the corn rise and die then reappear as bread and ale: he has felt the rhythms of the waves as they smash against the Orkney coastline... It is this timelessness that gives Brown's writing such intimations of the eternal: the quintessential facts of life, love and death endure the passing of the years.[vi]

Bold was also the first critic to point out Brown's use of symbols in the construction of his work, in particular the number seven that can represent the seven deadly sins, seven days of the week, etc. Brown often began his work with a symbolic object or structure, which then became a centrepiece for his story or poem. A plough, for example, became a symbol of resurrection – it digs into the earth and brings forth life. So a story might centre about a plough, and tell of all of the things that it brings to light. Bold writes: "Brown likes to give a symbolic kiss of life to all things. Each substance casts its spiritual shadow."[vii]

As excellent as Bold's study is, he does place an overemphasis on Brown's *passivity* in the whole affair. Much of this is due to conversations between Bold and the author himself, where Brown, through modesty perhaps, overstates his own lack of ambition. Explaining Edwin Muir's role in publishing his early poems, Brown said: "myself, I'm quite sure I'd have done little or nothing in the way of getting them published."[viii] Discussing the years where Brown lived in Stromness on national assistance, Bold simply says that "he felt no particular ambition to do anything".[ix]

For Bold, this lack of drive extends from Brown's outward life, to his inward life, in his writing. Bold writes that Brown "takes the seed of an idea and lets it grow organically until it is fully developed." [x] It is almost as though Brown simply allows himself to be more "in touch" with his background and surroundings and the voice and the stories of the past will flow out of him, much like the voice of the dead emanating from a psychic medium. When Bold writes: "[Brown] is possessed by Orkney's pageant,"[xi] he means this in a very literal way. Brown himself is a tool, overshadowed by the power of Orkney's history.

Hilda D. Spear's essay, in *The Contribution to Literature of Orcadian Writer George Mackay Brown* (1991), is typical of the criticism that followed Bold. She too ascribes to Orkney itself an overlying energy, allowing Brown, the author, to disappear into the background. Spear writes: "To understand the work of George Mackay Brown it is necessary to understand the spirit of the islands from which he hails."[xii] For her, reading a George Mackay Brown story is much like reading a travelogue of the Orkney islands, where the people and places she encounters are often exotic in their quaint, old-fashioned island ways.

Spear is more interesting, however, in the extent to which she concentrates on the mathematical patterning to be found in Brown's work, taking Bold's suggestions in this area several steps further. As Spear points out, Brown often writes seven short sections, in a work, or twelve sections to correspond to the months of the year. These sections then follow the same sequence of images and ideas, but to different effects (the effects of different points of view, for example). The poem (or story) can convey simultaneous simplicity and complexity: simplicity in that life can be reduced to a few elemental images; and complexity in that so much endlessly stimulating potential is contained within that apparent simplicity. [xiii] Writing about Brown's

novels, Spear says, "the longer narrative is made up of smaller units, many of which are in themselves complete narratives and also, sometimes, yet further compounded of smaller units still... [yet] he is almost as powerfully drawn to make them cohere in larger groupings."[xiv] She makes the point that the Story, in Brown's novels, is just as important as the underlying Fable, making the Fable relevant to contemporary life and redeeming it from abstraction.[xv]

A more superficial work than either Bold or Spear's is David Annwyn's 1984 book, *Inhabited Voices: Myth and History in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney and George Mackay Brown.* For Annwyn, Brown's poetry parallels that of Hill and Heaney, in that all three writers look to history, legend and myth as sources of inspiration. Annwyn writes: "the result can sometimes seem like a series of cryptic images rather than a poem; there is a desire...to grasp for an alternative language 'rinsed' of shallow usage...the tension between the archetype and the individual, the symbol and the experience, relevance and formlessness, is crucial in [their] work."[xvi] Brown, in Annwyn's view, is constantly reaching for the brass ring, trying to re-grasp something (history, myth or legend) that is ephemeral and long gone.

Probably the most in-depth and interesting study of Brown's prose work to date is Berthold Schoene's *The Making of Orcadia: Narrative Identity in the Prose Work of George Mackay Brown*, published in 1995. Schoene reverses the approach taken by Annwyn (and to a great extent Bold as well), postulating that Brown's writings have *not* been shaped by the Orkney landscape; instead, Brown has created and shaped a unique Orcadian identity through his written work. In other words, when we think of Orkney, our thoughts, and those of Orcadians themselves, are shaped to a large degree by writers, and because he is the pre-eminent writer for

those islands, by George Mackay Brown in particular. It is the *writer* who constructs and maintains a communal identity.

The strongest part of Schoene's approach, in my opinion, is that he puts Brown back in the driver's seat. Brown is in control of his writing, not some vague spirit of the Orkney islands. He is not being moulded and shaped by vague forces and ancestral voices. And Schoene gives Brown an even greater power: the power to adapt and reimagine the very communal identity that he values so much.

Schoene's approach is largely based on Paul Ricoeur's concepts of narrative identity and historiography. A historical document is never an unbiased record of an event, because it is always tainted by the styles and fashions of that historical period. But nonetheless, according to the historiographic approach, the past is so elusive that, without being transcribed into text, it would vanish from our view altogether. Therefore, Ricouer suggested that outside narrative, the past does not exist, concluding that "the writing of history is not something added from outside to historical knowledge, but is one with it."[xvii]

Schoene's is a compelling argument, and he is at his strongest, I think, when discussing Brown's early work *An Orkney Tapestry.* According to Schoene, Brown's greatest interest in *An Orkney Tapestry* lies in "an imaginative portrayal of the Orkney identity."[xviii] *An Orkney Tapestry* is, without question, a highly biased and "fictionalised" history of the islands. Brown looks at the small valley of Rackwick, for example, an area on the island of Hoy, and gives it a sparkling importance, making it the focal point for Viking longships, droughts and famines, Scottish lairds, weddings and whaling ships. For Schoene, this "history" has very little to do with the actual place of Rackwick, or the actual events of the past. Schoene writes: "oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis

by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance. The identity of communities, both literate and preliterate, is based on narrative processes of forgetting and reinventing."[xix]

Interesting as Schoene's argument is, it somehow fails to capture the essence of Brown's writing. Brown's own emphasis is not on what is new. His intention is not to come up with a new identity. That would only be yet another mask. Brown does adapt old stories, making them more palatable to contemporary readers, but he certainly does not want to "forget" or get rid of old memories.

Brown repeats himself over and over again; using stories we have heard before, characters we have already met, and words and phrases that become familiar to us. He uses the same names over and over (although he doesn't necessarily attach them to identical people). Islanders and villagers become "types" rather than concrete characters. It doesn't matter if we know the ending of the story already. What matters is travelling back through time; or more exactly, opening a door so that time no longer matters. The events, whether they are past, present or future, become timeless in their resemblance to one another. This is not re-constructing history. What Brown wants is *Resurrection* (a word that becomes paramount in his writings).

To a large extent, I think that John McGrath comes closest in his assessment of George Mackay Brown's role, as a contemporary writer, when he suggests, in a small aside, that Brown might be seen as a **modern day "sagaman"**. Brown's writing, at its very best, gives one the sense of sitting near the fire, on a cold winter's night, where the shadows, warmth, sense of wellbeing and overall atmosphere of *community* contributes as much to the story as the words and events of the tale. McGrath writes:

> [the sagaman] was a chronicler of battles and other great occasions, recording history as it happened. He also reminded his society of its traditions and history, and worried of the danger of neglecting its ancestral past. Above all, he was an entertainer: he told and re-told tales of excitement and adventure for the delight of his audiences.[xx]

In medieval Norway, skalds and sagamen were highly respected and valued individuals. They were thought to carry the weight of their people's identity. It was an occupation that required great skill, education and imagination.

In many places, throughout the industrialised world, folk traditions and storytellers have vanished or become devalued. In a sense, Orkney is more privileged – its folklore and stories have not disappeared entirely from the memories of those that live there. But like the rest of the planet, in Orkney stories are no longer commonly transmitted in a verbal and communal way. People are more likely to sit down with a book, or watch a film, than to turn to an older friend or relative for an afternoon's entertainment. Sitting in a pub on a Friday night, the conversation will most likely be about sports or politics, as it is anywhere – with the same opinions voiced, virtually across the planet, regurgitated verbatim from newscasts and television shows.

In order for his voice to be heard, Brown could not speak to his audience directly, one to one and eye to eye. To be a contemporary "sagaman", Brown had to use the storytelling tools of the modern age: novels, short stories and poems. But, I assert, Brown does not use these mediums in a conventional way. Brown tries to make the experience of reading his stories as close as possible to that of taking part in a storytelling event. He does not use archaic language (much), or resort to the cadences of the spoken word. Instead, Brown takes his readers through an experience much

like a ritual, allowing them to hear, if they so choose, a voice that is somehow older and wiser rising from the written page.

First, examining Brown's role as a short story teller, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which Brown intersperses devices from an oral storytelling tradition into his short stories, giving respect and renewed life to an art form that has been in danger of fading away. Carefully contoured, Brown's stories are crafted to resonate with words and phrases that echo in the minds of his readers (partly from recognition, partly from association) giving his prose work a depth and resonance missing from the flat prose of many writers.

Using his story "The Story Teller" as an example, I will show how important Brown himself feels the role of a Story Teller is to a community, and how great a role storytelling has played in maintaining Orkney's distinctive identity and voice. The magic a story can weave over its listeners allows them to forget the here-and-now, taking part, for a short while, in a greater whole. Brown also shows us how fragile a thing that storytelling tradition is: if the storyteller is no longer valued, his powers immediately start to fade, and with them goes a depth of those long-wrought resonances and invaluable meaning.

A more dynamic, but difficult, form of writing is found in Brown's plays. In Chapter Three of my thesis, I will look at Brown's experiments with dramatic writing. Theatre is the form of writing that is in many ways closest to the storytelling forms of the past. A written playscript on its own is incomplete. Like an oral story, it needs a live group of people, as performers and audience, interacting with one another to complete the piece.

Brown's plays are, I think, his most obscure but also his most lively works. From a technical standpoint, the plays are flawed: there is very little depth of

character; the stories are often non-sequential; and it is difficult to empathise with the persons onstage. I hope to prove that for Brown, this is a strength rather than a flaw. It offers his audience a chance to let go of personal concerns and become part of the bigger picture of the events onstage.

Much of Brown's dramatic writing was directly influenced by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, and is written with the same intention, to produce the same effect, as that described by Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Esslin writes:

> The study of human *nature* is thus replaced by that of human relations. Not the characters but the story in which they are involved becomes the concern of the epic, narrative, historical theatre. 'Everything depends on the *story*, it is the centrepiece of the performance.' The *story* (Brecht uses the German word *Fabel* with its didactic overtones) is the sequence of events that constitute the social experiment of the play, it provides the dialectic field for the interplay of social forces from which the lesson of the play will be seen to emerge.[xxi]

In Brown's drama, as in Brecht's, interaction *between* characters, and between actors and audience members, becomes more important than anyone's "inner lives". Those who selfishly refuse to share in this interaction, watching a piece of theatre remotely, as though it were a television program, become flies in the ointment, lessening the effectiveness of the piece for everyone involved.

A Spell for Green Corn, written in 1967 was Brown's first play. It documents the death of an island, and shows us the deadness of that island's inhabitants who have lost touch with their *Fable*. It concentrates on those who have gone deaf to their island's music, art and its shared voice. It also brings to life the magic that occurs when a group of people are brought back together in work, in love or even in a theatrical event, joined in a common cause of creation.

The third part of my thesis (Chapter Four) examines Brown's role as a novelist. The novel form itself encourages introspection and passivity in the reader, and in many ways, Brown's novels are further removed from storytelling traditions than are his stories or his plays. Brown himself said frequently that he wasn't comfortable writing novels, [xxii] but nonetheless, novels are the most widely-read medium, and the best vehicle for a writer, with a mission, to get his message across to a wide contemporary audience.

Brown uses his novels to explore the importance of shared stories and of a communal worldview through examining the many different viewpoints that can exist in any community. *Greenvoe* was Brown's first novel and retreads much of the same ground as his play *A Spell for Green Corn.* The Orkney island of Hellya is shown to us in a healthy and an unhealthy guise. The healthy aspects of Greenvoe are invariably tied to those people who can interact with one another, sharing a worldview and a common grounding. Their annual rituals remind them of their debt to their island, and the cycles of death and rebirth that occur every year in the islands harvests and in the lives of those who live there. The unhealthy side of Greenvoe is tied to those people who have forgotten these rituals. The more Brown shows us individuals who believe only in Progress, whose only concerns are to forward their own best interests, the more the island itself seems to splinter and fall apart.

Finally (Chapter Five), I will examine Brown's retellings of a story from a medieval saga, literally attempting to bring an underlying Fabel to life in the present age. The story of Saint Magnus, Earl of Orkney, is found in *The Orkneyinga Saga*, written in Iceland around the year 1220. It is thought to be a semi-fictionalised account of real events from eleventh-century Orkney. Brown's retelling of the story of Saint Magnus has its genesis as a short story in *An Orkney Tapestry.* It reappears

as the play *The Loom of Light*, is retold in the novel *Magnus*, and lastly presents itself in a second theatrical piece performed in 1987, *A Celebration for Magnus*. Whereas "The Story Teller", *A Spell for Green Corn* and *Greenvoe* all concentrated on the negative consequences that occur when a storytelling tradition fails, the story of Magnus is, for Brown, a celebration of Orkney's storytelling tradition, giving us a glimpse of the joy and fulfilment that can arise from a "living" tale.

Brown's Saint Magnus is far from a conventional historical hero – he is flat, two-dimensional, and often emotionless. Furthermore, the factual events of his life seem almost incidental to Brown's writing. Magnus exists as much through the stories that exist *around* him: what the farmers, tinkers and fishermen tell themselves about the Earl, as he does in and of himself. Magnus rarely has a speaking voice. In plays, story and novel, Magnus is a very fluid character, as much a figure of the twentieth century as he is of the eleventh. His legend springs up from gossip and memories. He is timeless, and it is the songs, stories and celebrations that collect around him – mainly after he has died – that make Magnus such a lively and meaningful figure.

Each of the three mediums - play, story and novel, reveal different aspects of Magnus's life, highlighting various facets of his legend. Each form of storytelling has its strengths and its weaknesses. But in all three, Brown uses Brechtian techniques of distancing the reader from the fictional flow of the narrative. We do not identify with Magnus, as we might identify with the romantic or heroic main character in a conventional novel or play. He is not allowed to belong to *us*, the reader, becoming a fixed figure with a certain meaning. Instead, Magnus remains a flexible, timeless personality, who is brought to life only through a common belief in his existence.

George Mackay Brown's writing asks us to look at a story, and then to look again, to see what lies beneath the written page. For Brown, as a writer, words are indeed the stuff of life. Nonetheless, it is not words in themselves that carry importance. Brown writes:

> It is a word blossoming as legend, poem, story, secret, that holds a community together and gives a meaning to its life. If words become functional ciphers merely, as they are in white papers and business letters, they lose their "ghosts" – the rich aura that has grown about them since the start, and grows infinitesimally richer each time they are spoken....No attempts to render the word effective will succeed if the ghost" of the word's evolution is not present.[xxiii]

Those "ghosts" become present when words are used in a ceremonial context, turning the forms of history and the workings of everyday life into something that is "wise and formal"[xxiv]

There is no doubt that George Mackay Brown loved the Orkney islands from which he hailed. His role was a protector, keeping safe the vestiges of poetry and stories, that are Orkney's great treasures. He affirms Orkney's voice, in its old legends and history, as something powerful, lively and always relevant.

As George Mackay Brown wrote, in *Rockpools and Daffodils*: "the discovery of the marvelousness of the ordinary is modern writing's greatest contribution to the sum of literature."[xxv] His gift, however, is ultimately not for Orkney alone, but is for all readers, in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. By opening our eyes to the possibilities that language holds, Brown invites us to see, to hear, and moreover to take part in the marvelousness that exists in all stories and in every aspect of our lives.

Chapter Two: Brown as Story Teller

For Brown, writing is as much a craft as is pottery or metalwork. Speaking of his poetry, Brown said:

> the prose-poem yearns towards the pure form of poetry, like a jar from wheel and kiln, and at the same time wants to have the free flow of a very brief story or parable...Think of the prose-poem not as an amphora or urn for a drawing room, but as the crude vessel beaten from earth and fire: the kind our ancestors might have used to hold water or grain.[xxvi]

For Brown, the form of a piece of writing is as important as its subject. And a story must be contoured and molded, or even "beaten" into shape, drawing from an inherited pool that leaves a tracery of ancestral features, details and echoes along the work's surface and through its core.

Many of the major characteristics of Brown's work can be observed in his 1969 short story collection *A Time to Keep*, and in particular in "The Story Teller". The story is a window into how Brown sees his own role, as a storyteller in the Orkney islands. Like all of his prose, it is characterised to some degree by carefully crafted verbal and structural patterns that make it akin to poetry-prose, rather than simple narration. In particular, in "The Story Teller", Brown relies on connotative words and phrases to create a response in his reader. Thus, the a card game becomes "knaves and aces" (92), fish are "sea fruit" (87), and spindrift, the spray thrown up from the surface of the sea is a "swarm of grey bees" (87).

The main character in the story is not given a name. Instead he is known as "the old man" (82), or in the title of the piece, the "Story Teller". The fact that Brown divides this word is significant and gives it additional meaning. The old man is not a "storyteller": someone who might merely tell tales in a

playful, frivolous manner. Instead he is given the added weight of a "teller": someone (like a "bank teller") who is given the responsibility of storing valued items, and paying them out again in a careful, moral and trustworthy way.

By using a title rather than a name, Brown gives his old man more weight and authority than could be entrusted to a named individual. If we think of him as a small digit, but part of a larger body, each small part must be doing an essential job if the body is to be healthy. The Story Teller is incapable of not contributing to the overall body or mass, because by his very definition he is playing an active role. Tom Scott, speaking of Brown's later novel, *Greenvoe*, discusses the effect this can have on the vitality of a community: "In a community, what a person does is more important than who he is: indeed is what he is. James the Butcher may die, but his shoes will be filled by another butcher...The generations die but the community lives on."[xxvii]

The Story Teller within the Story Teller's story is a Fiddler, rather than a verbal narrator. He uses music, rather than words to tell his tale. But Samuel of Marsh, The Fiddler, is equally in tune with his land and his heritage, and his name reflects an earthy quality of water and land and dormant marshy green ponds. Nobody thinks to call him by his formal name, Samuel Smith. As well, Samuel's name tells us exactly where he belongs: Marsh, in the region of Rackwick, on the island of Hoy, Orkney. He feels that the schoolmaster is "making a fool of him", (92) by calling him Orpheus, because this name has no connection to where he comes from, and no resonance within his family of islanders. The only people who understand its connotations are the schoolmaster, the minister and perhaps the laird - those who are elite and removed from the rest.

Brown writes:

> A blight on much modern art is an all-pervading snobbery and elitism, and the cult of personality - 'the famous poet', 'the world-renowned sculptor'. We should think rather of art being in Thomas Mann's words, 'anonymous and communal': a whole community contributes to the making of a poem, the poet is only the person who first utters the dance of words through a mask. So the ballad-men wandered through the towns and villages of Scotland, uttering their great stories, and no one in the enraptured crowd wanted to know their names, but all knew that they themselves were a part of the poem while the poem lasted...The poem was the expression of their highest thoughts and of their deepest joys and sufferings.[xxviii]

The men inside the bar are as much a part of the story as the Story Teller himself. It is evident that they have heard these tales time and time again, as they ask the old man to tell the story about women, or "that story about the sea now". (85) And there is a ritual that must be gone through before each story will begin, in which the men in the bar must perform a role. They "let on to ignore the old man" (86) each time he pauses saying he's "too dry" (91) to continue. They know full well that each new glass of beer and each refusal is merely a formality and a prescribed part of the order of things.

As readers, the familiarity that the drinkers have with the stories is heightened by the feeling that we too are on familiar ground. Brown gives us the sense that we know these people, and in a sense, we *have* been here before, in previous tales. Drew the barman and the bar on the Hamnavoe pier feature in some way or another in nearly all of the stories in *A Time to Keep*. Ronald Leask and Thorfinn Vik, the two crofters standing near the bar, are major characters in the first two stories in the collection: Leask in "Celia", and Vik in the title story. We recognise the men comfortably playing draughts in the corner, and feel we are at home in this place.

Yet despite the fact that the men have heard them all before, the stories manage to weave a spell of enchantment over the bar that is anything but stale. Nearly two hours pass in what seems mere minutes. (How has the clock on the wall turned so fast?) The men in the bar even forget the drinks they have rushed to get at last orders, until it is 20 minutes past closing time and Drew the barman breaks the spell: "For the love of God...The sergeant of police is coming up the pier." (99).

The sense that time can be lost in the thrall of a story is an important clue to Brown's priorities. Schoene says:

> According to Ricouer, all historical narratives combine two aspects, one chronological and the other configurational. The chronological aspect sets the facts and incidents of historical reality in a neat episodic sequence while the configurational aspect superimposes a plot on them, transforming the simple chronological succession of real-life events into a meaningful and consistent narrative whole - what we call a story.[xxix]

Brown's work repeatedly stresses the fact that the story is not found in a linear relationship of antecedent and consequent, but in that configurational aspect of an event. In the second of the Story Teller's stories, Samuel recounts his own epic battle with the sea. As the storm rages, he struggles to hold the rudder steady, wave follows wave follows wave in an exhausting, relentless attack, "an endless reel and onset" (88). But once again, near the end of the story, Brown points out the passage of time in a way that seems oddly out of joint. The storm is over in exactly half an hour. Yet it seemed to last a lifetime! What is important is not what has come before and what follows, but the here-and-now's relationship to a greater whole.

The Story Teller recounts three tales, that seemingly have little to do with one another. Nonetheless, they are related to one another in a

configurational manner. The imagery of the cow giving birth in Part Three echoes the Story Teller's fight against the sea in Part Two. Both depict a cow struggling against its bonds: "I leaned against the thwart to get leverage. The rudder tugged against me like a young bull at the end of a rope." (88) Colours repeat themselves throughout the narrative, with *red* being a threatening, dangerous shade and *white* representing peace and safety. In the first of the tales, Katie is a menacing figure and her "face was as *red* and cloven and harsh as the Sneuk" (88, all emphases mine). When the Story Teller is injured, the blood is like "heavy warm *red* coins" (84). But the new boat that Andrew builds after the "hard winter" (84) is a "cluster of beautiful *white* curves" (85).

In Parts Two and Three, the Story Teller pictures widows standing on ominous "round *red* rocks of the beach" (89) as the storm rages, Amos's wife Rachel a shrouded figure, her pregnancy echoed by Amos's "*red* cow " (91) in the throes of labour and "*red* eternal chaos" (91). Amos's cut hand is like "*red* sea-ware". But when they safely land, it is on a still, "*white* quiet beach" (90), just as the cow safely gives birth to her "little *white* bull calf" (91).

In a sense, each consecutive tale digs deeper into a common life story. The first of the stories is the funniest of the three. It is the Teller's account of his attempt to win a wife, that goes horribly wrong from the minute Katie becomes stuck while trying to dig out her dowry hidden in a stocking underneath the bed: "Her backside was wedged there like a great cheese in a press." (83) It is the story of a young man. Even though he loses his marriage prospects, his family and even his home, after a year or two it can all be brushed off, and life goes on. The second tale, when the Story Teller is a mature fisherman, has a more serious tone. Three boats are lost and five men

killed by the sea. Nonetheless, there are elements of lightheartedness in the Story Teller’s attitude towards Amos (‘Open”, said Amos to the sea, ‘open your everlasting doors.’ ‘For God’s sake,’ I said, ‘shut up and fish.’” (86-87)). There is hope and rebirth in the end with Rachel’s “round sweet belly” (90) and on a personal level and on a personal level the Story Teller is victorious. But the third story is one of loss rather than triumph. (“Next morning six of us carried the old magician among the hills. I wish I was lying there beside him now.” (99)) It is the story of an old man and ends in hopelessness and despair.

Unlike the rest, the third story is not given a specific theme. It is not *about* women or about the sea. Instead it is the story *of* “The Fiddler” (91). In many ways, the Fiddler is the Story Teller’s alter ego. He holds the islanders’ melodies and voices within his care. Brown himself places a high value on music as a reservoir of cultural heritage. He says that Orcadians “were always good storytellers and fiddlers, and nothing binds a community together and gives a meaning like the art it practices.”[xxx] The Story Teller speaks of Samuel of Marsh with dignity and reverence. Nothing can be higher praise than his simple oath: “I swear to God Samuel was a beautiful fiddler.” (92) And right off the bat, he established the fact that the fiddle is more than a mere plaything. It is “a very *useful* instrument.” (91)

In the almost-mythical opening sequence of the Fiddler’s tale, Samuel of Marsh magics the building of Bill of Sheepay’s barn, almost as though the stones themselves are compelled to skip to his fiddle reels and jigs. He conjures away the demons that are haunting the laird with his dancing bow, and miraculously eases the torment of Amos’s cow.

But it soon becomes evident that there is a threat to this superpowerful instrument and its wielder. Wendy Steiner speaks of sound as the most universal tool of human communication, recognizing speech as the most primitive and fundamental artistic endeavour. Steiner says, "In our everyday experience, the discriminability of visual indexes is much higher, and their use much wider, than the discernments and utilization of auditory indexes. Likewise, auditory icons, ie., imitations of natural sounds, are poorly recognized and scarcely utilised."[xxxi] For Brown, this is a tragic loss. If music is lost, then the long-wrought magic is lost as well.

The antithesis and the enemy of Samuel of Marsh is Finlay Oman. Brown refers to him as a "magpie" (94) - a bird that collects any useless object that catches his eye. Like Samuel of Marsh, Finlay Oman's name is a vital indicator of his role in the story. It has no connection with the land. It is a lament: "O Man"; as well as a portent of evil things to come, or an "Omen".

Finlay is admired on the island for being the *first* registrar of births, marriages and deaths. He is also the first local man to own a cart with rubber wheels, and to take a month's holiday in Edinburgh. He is superficially attractive with his efficient, clean, wealth and precision. Everything about him adds up to a fine tally. He is called (mathematically speaking) "a *credit* to the island" (96, my emphasis).

Like Samuel of Marsh, Finlay Oman purports to be a musician. The best the Story Teller can say for Finlay's music is that it is novel: "Music the like of it had never before been heard in the island." (95) But for Brown, novelty and music are at opposite poles, as resistant to one another as oil and water. There is something that is old, deep and resonant, and if this is what he

struggles to find in his choice of words, it is something that music should touch base with, just as words should. Again,

> If words become functional ciphers merely, as they are in white papers and business letters, they lose their 'ghosts' - the rich aura that has grown about them since the start, and grows infinitesimally richer each time they are spoken.They lose more; they lose their 'kernel', the sheer sensuous relish of utterance.[xxxii]

Moreover, there is something distinctly threatening about Finlay's new accordion with its array of linear rods and buttons. There is a tang of death associated with Finlay's instrument of choice from the minute it arrives on the island, looking like "the coffin of a hunchbacked dwarf" (95). Ironically, the *accord*ion is the most *discord*ant of instruments.

The Martinmas concert at the Hoy school becomes the battleground for Finlay of Oman and Samuel of Marsh. Samuel begins with a piece straight out of the roots of Orkney's lore: "'Paulson's Escape from the Trows' - a lively reel, full of darkness, danger, pursuit, and in the end a wild surge of dawn and freedom." (97) The Trows are traditionally figures who degrade spiritual values by tricking people in a community, or bribing them with material goods.[xxxiii] For the few old men who understand the language of the strings and bow, it is a thrilling tale of victory. But most of his listeners fail to perceive Samuel's allegory. Their ability to recognise the meaning behind the musical notes has been lost, and they hear nothing but insignificant sound.

For the Story Teller, Samuel is very much a "white knight" fighting a dark force. When he plays "The Swans of Stenness Loch", even the movement of the bow and the vibrations of the strings echoes the soaring tumult of wings, so that Samuel himself becomes the glorious white birds. But his audience are strangers to him now. They are as "hard as stone" (98) and listen in "stony

silence" (97). The community of listeners that is necessary to give potency to his music and add magic to the spell, so that the swans can fly triumphantly and Paulson defeat the Trows, is missing except for the few old men who are quickly subdued.

Even then, Samuel doesn't go without a fight, he plays tune after tune, recreating stories of triumph, sea-salt, witches and whalers, in the face of a gathering darkness. From the moment he takes to the stage, Finlay Oman is represented more as a monster than a human being, dark and grim and encumbered by the instrument strapped to his chest of "huge, labouring lung and clicking teeth." (97). He is similar in figure to the deformed and trollike "Trows". Finlay Oman's music attracts the crowd, bringing them to life in a way that Samuel's did not. But everything about his playing is wrong. The music comes from London; it is cheap and sentimental; it is learned by rote. And the effect it has on the audience is depraved. Where Samuel formerly could teach stones to dance, and banish grief, turning badness into good, Finlay turns good to bad, making what was human bestial and savage.

The crowd becomes a pack of animals. As the Story Teller puts it, "they trampled like beasts on the proud heart of Samuel of Marsh." (92) The killing blow is dealt by the aptly named "Griselda of Trowieglen" (98) who shrieks and strikes grotesquely at Samuel before smashing the fiddle into a hundred pieces. When Samuel smiles at Griselda and leaves, he is followed by the howl of the crowd, a pack of cruel beasts.

If the fiddle music is all of life that has come before, it is also a fragile thing, that can be destroyed in only a short space of time. For George Mackay Brown, the need to keep this music alive is very real. If the Story Teller sees

himself in Samuel of Marsh, Brown sees himself in the Story Teller, and sees the threat of Finlay Oman all around him. His job, to preserve Orcadian voices and stories, can only be accomplished if his own voice remains new and vibrant to his listeners, at the same time as it is resonant and old.

Chapter Three: Brown as Dramatist

> This was the legend:
>
> The old sick sun goes in search of the well of renewal. All winter, withered and lost, he seeks it. He finds it at last. He drinks. Then one day he looks at the village across the rim of ice, a new bright child.
>
> The story-teller enchanted the people still with the old story.
>
> But in the past winter or two the young hunters had altered the central image of the legend. It had been a difficult time, many wounds one season in the snow - wolf-fang, bear-claw. Some hunters had taken their wounds back to the fires and died. Next winter were suffering and death of another kind - hunger, sickness, a slow squandering of the people's strength.
>
> Now, beyond the fire of the story-teller, the legend concerned blood, not water.
>
> It was blood that renewed the winter sun: blood of the creatures, blood of the hunters. The sick sun drank from that red horn. He returned to the people a young fierce god of spears and arrows.[xxxiv]

For Brown, as Story Teller, there was an anachronism in being a writer. How could one speak to his own community, or indeed guard against intrusive (trowlike) forces if the majority of his readers were not only from outside the Orkney Island, but included academic and serious-minded people who were intent on forcing their own interpretations and readings on his work, altering it and warping it (despite their own intentions). How could he be a guardian of his local idiom and culture, if he was not really heard by the people at the main root of that culture.

One way that Brown tried to resist what he saw as "outside" or "modern" corruption was by choosing other genres of storytelling that might reach a larger Orcadian audience. A play might reach the majority of his home town, whereas a short story would be unlikely to do so. Brown's plays were not aimed at an elite audience of London or Toronto theatregoers. They were aimed at the people he saw everyday in the streets, in the pubs, or at local

dances. In fact, all of Brown's dramatic works are retellings of traditional Orkney tales, composed with the express purpose of keeping the Orkney Story Telling tradition alive.

For Brown, the trows were an integral part of Orcadian lore. In Orkney tradition, they were much more than abstract dark, ugly energies - they were real being who could be seen (by people who had the gift), heard and could travel amongst the hills. In the middle of winter, the trows were particularly active, and if a person became sick for a long period of time he was known to be "trowie", or smitten by the trows.[xxxv] The greatest threat was to young children. If they were not protected it was easy for the trows to steal them, replacing them with their own offspring who grew up as "winter children"[xxxvi], sick and deformed. Special words and rituals had to be performed at midwinter, circling "sun-wise" around crofts, farm-implements and beds with a sanctified basin of water to provide a safe haven from these evil beings.[xxxvii]

But Brown suggests that there were "summer trows" as well as winter ones:

> ...possibly there were good helpful under-earth creatures too: they kept the wells pure and sweet, they sent up the corn into the ripening sun and rain and wind. They didn't of course do these kindnesses for nothing. What they loved most about human beings were the patterns they made, especially their sound-patterns: music. So they would linger, drunk with reels, at every barn door where there was a wedding reception or a harvest home.[xxxviii]

A story that surfaces several times in Brown's work is that of the Fiddler, Storm Kolson, who is stolen by the trows. It is recounted most succinctly perhaps, in the title story of his book for children, *The Two Fiddlers*.

In the story, Storm Kolson and his friend Gavin are walking home, after playing their fiddles most of the night at a wedding celebration. It is

midsummer's' night and there is an eerie quality to the twilit air, particularly as they pass the low green mounds, or "knowes" that are said to be inhabited by the trows. Suddenly Gavin loses his balance and stumbles. When he turns around, Storm is nowhere to be seen. As Gavin turns back to look for his friend, he hears familiar music coming from below the earth. It is Storm playing his fiddle. Gavin is terrified and runs home panic-stricken, as though "all the vengeful creatures of earth and air and water and fire [were] after him in full cry" (13). In the morning, Storm is nowhere to be found.

Thirty years later, Gavin is walking along the same road, a bitter, unwed and disappointed old man. He suddenly sees a young fellow, full of life and energy, standing near the low hills at the edge of his path - and somehow the figure is familiar. Storm Kolson has not aged a day since Gavin saw him last. And for Storm, less than a single night has passed in all that time. He tells of being taken into a magnificent hall, and playing for strange, sickly looking folk clad in green, who are revived and gladdened by an evening's dancing.

On the surface it is a simple enough tale. But it is a story that is strangely balanced between light and darkness, wrought with optimism but blackened at some points with despair. It is obviously a marvelous tale of renewal. A man long since given up for dead re-appears, and he is youthful and filled with happiness. And it is the renewal not only of Storm, but of Gavin too, suddenly seeing a radiant image after "all the rags and clutter of twenty-five years." (20) But Storm is "re-born" only after a young girl dies, down near the shore, her life consumed by "restlessness and yearnings" (18) for "honey and salt" (18) and "the wild flowers of summer" (18). It is a tragedy, or a sacrifice even, that is nearly overlooked in the light of Storm's resurfacing. Moreover,

when Storm disappears, the islanders soon forget the magical quality of his fiddle playing, and settle for the second-best music of Gavin although their dancing may never be quite the same again, and this is perhaps the greatest loss of all.

Brown himself sees the story as a tribute to the overwhelming power of good art, song and story:

> Perhaps...fertility is the root of the story. Was it in a summertime of poor corn that the fiddler was dragged down into the earth? Was his song meant to purify choked and polluted sources? The old story-teller may well have been upholding the dignity of all those who "make things beautiful and good". A tale or a statue or a song is not made to give a moments fleeting pleasure to superior cultured minds; they are absolutely necessary for the well-being and health of a community. Without good art - vision - a people perishes.[xxxix]

When Storm is brought to the hall beneath the hill, it is not he himself who is introduced but his function: "The music, lord, it is here" (14). The music is more than a source of pleasure for the trows (or the strange "hill folk") - they seem to desire it in the sense that they would crave food or water: "They fingered it delicately; they caressed it; one went so far as to pluck a string." (14) The trows grant Storm a boon for his evening's playing; they promise a good harvest. Then the whole island benefits from the music that is lively, good and joyous.

But Storm oversteps his bounds and asks for more: "I wish there was no poverty in the crofts, and less hard work..." (16) There is an element of folly associated with this request, as though Storm has asked for more than he has paid for. This wish also is granted by the trows, but Brown subtly suggests that there is a hidden cost; a debt unpaid and a delicate balance lost. There is no poverty, but Gavin's fiddle now hangs unused in his croft, "warped slowly on

the wall". Nowadays the islanders are healthier and they live longer lives but "Storm and his music have long since vanished" (20) and "They have love and birth and death and fruition explained to them in newspapers, coldly." (20) The celebrations, songs and dances that once marked weddings and even funerals, tying together fertility, birth and death have been forgotten.

Brown is interested in digging beneath those hills again, to bring to light these "old songs" one more time. It is the annual rite of fertility, music, art and renewal that Brown chose to make the subject of his best-known play, *A Spell for Green Corn*. The play takes place on the fictional island of Hellya during three distinct time periods: pre-Christian Orkney; the seventeenth-century Reformation; and the Modern Age (of 1967, when the play debuted). In each of the three periods, there is a gathering of the citizens of Hellya involving the sowing, growing and harvesting of the agricultural season. The three stages illustrate the different approaches the islanders have to their relationship with the land, their music and their yearly rituals of sacrifice and resurrection.[2]

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[2] Although Brown is not known primarily as a dramatist, plays and theatrical pieces constitute a large portion of his work. *A Spell for Green Corn* was Brown's first major play, produced by the University of Strathclyde Theatre Group in 1967, under the direction of Hugo Gifford. Since that time, Brown has been repeatedly drawn into dramatic ventures, contributing to televised versions of *Andrina* directed by Bill Forsythe in 1981, and three stories from *A Time to Keep* (1971) directed by James McTaggart. His play *The Loom of Light* (written as part of a fund-raiser to preserve St. Magnus Cathedral) was performed in Kirkwall in 1972, and *Edwin Muir and the Labyrinth*, performed by John Broom at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1987. He has inspired and collaborated with the composer Peter Maxwell Davies, to produce numerous operatic and dramatic works based on Brown's stories, and has worked closely with Stewart Conn in adapting many of his pieces for radio transmission on BBC radio and Radio Four, including a 1984 version of *The Voyage of Saint Brandon*. Most prodigiously, however, Brown was commisioned to write a number of works that were performed at Orkney's annual St Magnus Festival, including *The Well* (1981), *Island of the Saints* (1982), *Bessie Millie's Wind Shop* (1983) and *The Road to Colonus* (1991). Most recently, Stewart Conn has adapted Brown's novel

The first scene chronicles a time of change on the island: the islanders must turn from the sea to the land for sustenance if they are to survive. It is a season of famine, and as the citizens of Hellya watch from the shore, their best fisherman disappears beneath the waves of a storm. The only hope seems to come from a priest, Brother Cormac, who has come from Ireland, bringing with him a strange new faith (Christianity) as well as a strange new way of life: "Everyone who ploughs has a peaceful age and a quiet death." (11) He even seems to offer proof of this "Miracle" by changing stones to fishes before their eyes. For most of the islanders, giving way to the foreign priest means giving up not only their livelihood but their old beliefs, and behaving in a way that, to them, seems wrong: "We're fishermen, not pigs! Tear open the hill - that's what they do for dead people." (10)

Nonetheless, the scene is titled "Miracle" and the changes that quickly take place seem supernatural in their effect. But the miracle is not found in Brother Cormac alone, with his "magical" transfigurations. Even though the miracle has seemingly come from the Catholic priest, it is sustained because of the communal act it becomes. Brother Cormac does not ask that the islanders rely on faith alone, but "Take part in the good dance of agriculture." (11) and despite his promise, it is not a clean, easy sort of dance to learn. The strangeness that is present, even once the islanders accept their fate, turning their back on the shore, is dissipated only once they make the dance their own, incorporating death, hard work and finally celebration in the new dance of

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Greenvoe for radio in 1998, and Alan Plater wrote and directed a stage production of the novel, performed at the St. Magnus Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe in the year 2000.

agriculture that is performed at the end of the scene: "The Ballad of John Barleycorn".

Brown himself says clearly that the importance of the ballad cannot be underestimated:

> it is not what it seems...It has another meaning: it is part of a seamless fabric that has been there from the beginning, where all stories are gathered, a part of a great story. All ballad-makers suggest a beauty, a fuller significance, that can only be hinted at by giving the words a ritual quality, and lavishing on them the treasures of language.[xl]

Later in the play, when a young woman, Sigrid, is falsely accused of witchcraft, Storm Kolson (he of "The Two Fiddlers" who was stolen by the trows and played beneath the hills) tells her "Sigrid, if only they burn you with ceremony. The dance is everything."

"The Ballad of John Barleycorn" like the songs and dances of the Fiddler, is a ceremonious induction of resurrection, telling much the same story of "The Two Fiddlers" in the sense that it weaves together death, life and renewal into a complex fabric. Each new planting, each season of new life, each loaf of bread and mug of new ale is associated with a cruel sacrifice: "They laid him on a wooden cart, / Of all his summer glory shorn, / And threshers broke with stick and stave / The shining bones of Barleycorn." (14) Yet the ballad is not in the end a lament. It is a celebration of the merriment of love, life, eating, drinking and dancing at the end of a harvest.

For Brown, in fact, the ballad works much in the way of a primitive cave painting, that shows a successful hunt as a kind of sympathetic magic to bring about the complex event that is depicted in simple figures. "'Art must be of use' says Storm Kolson, the old blind Orkney fiddler - 'a coercive rhyme, to

strand a whale on the rock, a scratch on stone to make the corn grow. What are all these statues and violins and calf-bound editions for?'"[xli]

In a sense its power is found in the ballad's simplicity - it is a simple, metrical (four beats, four lines) rhyming verse. Only once you start looking closer, there is layer upon layer of meaning. It is the story of a girl looking for her lover; then it is the tale of the life of John Barleycorn; then a metaphor for the sowing and harvesting of corn; then a psychological parable of sacrifice and forgiveness. Joseph Campbell suggests that it is through recognising something as "bigger" than it initially appears that we really appreciate music or art:

> you put a frame around it and see it first as one thing, and that, in seeing it as one thing, you then become aware of the relationship of part to part, and each part to the whole, and the whole to each of its parts. This is the essential, aesthetic factor - rhythm, the harmonious rhythm of relationships. And when a fortunate rhythm has been struck by the artist, you experience a radiance. You are held in aesthetic arrest.[xlii]

The use of the ballad is to take away the strangeness and bring ceremony and rightness to what seemed foreign and wrong. The ballad is used in the play as a transitional piece. In the time that it is performed, many generations are born, live their lives, and disappear once again. Agricultural rites go from being very new to familiar and old. But somehow it all takes place in what is really only a few moments. To use a phrase from Heidegger (a philosopher whom Brown greatly admired) innovative forces of progress are always inextricably linked to a communal act of "Wielderholm" (or "repetition"). This term is defined by Paul Ricouer as "'the retrieval' of our most fundamental potentialities, as they are inherited from our past, in terms of a personal and a common destiny."[xliii] Thus, when a person, or a community reaches forward to

what is new by building on top of what is already there, what they create is the fulfillment of a destiny, and everything "is what it has always already potentially been."[xliv]

A Spell for Green Corn chronicles not only this process of *Wielderholm*, or seeing the familiar, but depicts what happens when things go wrong and these patterns become lost. When the next scene starts, it is the seventeenth-century on the island of Hellya, or as Brown puts it, the "time of witches and ploughs and kirk sessions" (16). The annual midsummer ritual of a bonfire on the summit of the hill of Kierfea is threatened by the church officials, who see it as a "relic of papistry and superstition" (51). For Storm Kolson, the island's fiddle player, there is a "terrible sound" (57) in the fields, the island is sick, and the corn is decayed and dying.

Storm can only complete his role or function when Sigrid joins forces with him. Sigrid, throughout the scene, searches for a sacrifice she can make, to bring life to the midsummer fire: "I want to give something. I want to give the best thing I have...Especially this summer when the corn's dying." (22) She pleads with the church officials to give her something valuable to burn. Eventually she even steals Storm's fiddle and tries to burn it on the fire. In the end she realises that these are the wrong sacrifices, and to save the island she must give *herself*. She follows Storm over the hills and makes love to him in the middle of the laird's corn field. After this act, and by the end of the midsummer's night, Storm is able to play his new reel "A Spell for Water" that brings the farmers to their feet, almost against their will; "A Rune for Ripeness" that causes them to dance in the prescribed manner; and "A Prayer

for Good Ale" that completes their dance, bringing the sound to its peak so that "The whole island of Hellya, the sky over it and the sea round it and the roots and skulls at the heart of it are saturated with sound." (32) The music derives its power from the influence it has on its listeners - and Storm disappears, into the hills, and is seen no more that summer.

In a sense, Brown structures the play like a large dance, or song, so that in each scene there are echoes of earlier situations, or earlier times. Storm Kolson appears and disappears, and reappears again. Sigrid is played by the same actor as Freya in the first scene (becoming Freya again near the end); and Isaac and Sarah (or "Ikey and Sal") maintain a constant, unchanging presence throughout the ages. Most of all the fiddle itself ties the various episodes of the play together, repeating tunes and snatches of melodies that recall previous events.

Sigrid's sacrifice continues, in Scene Five of the play, when she is accused of being a witch, and is tortured and brought to the Market Cross in front of St Magnus church, to be hanged and her body burned. It is, in a way, a continuation of "The Ballad of John Barleycorn" - the harvest has taken place, and the crofts are filled with the golden heads of new corn, but all of that new life must be balanced with an equivalent death, and the fields must be burned to clear away the old stubble and start anew. Or, in another sense, it is a re-creation of the girl who wasted away in "The Two Fiddlers", unremarked and alone. As Sigrid dies, a bearded musician, carrying a fiddle and wearing a coat with yellow and green patches, arrives and "looks at the scene with remote interest." (48) Even when Sigrid calls out "Storm!" (49) the musician does not show any emotion, or make any obvious move to help her. He merely says that

"There should be music for a ceremony like this." (49) He recognises the death as a *ceremony*, rather than a senseless murder. But on a human level, watching a man look on as his lover dies before his eyes, his passive attitude seems absolutely maddening.

According to Brown, *A Spell for Green Corn* was directly influenced by reading Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and there are many signs of Brecht's dramatic methods in the play. Brown has been accused of creating characters that are two-dimensional, or cardboard,[xlv] that seem inert and do not alter or change, or even go through a dramatic journey with the events depicted on stage. Storm does not change because he is defined by his function towards his community, not by his individual wants and needs. This is an attitude almost certainly influenced by Brown's reading of Brecht. Martin Esslin writes of the German playwright: "The inner life of the characters is irrelevant to him except in so far as it is expressed in their outward attitudes and actions"[xlvi] ...or as Brecht said "For the smallest social unit is not one human body, but two human beings."[xlvii]

Furthermore, Brown distances his audience from the characters by constantly altering our perspective of them. They are always present, but always seen from a slightly new angle. It is almost as though we could slice up the play into episodes, shuffling them around, and it would make little difference to the meaning of the play because that meaning is not found through character development at all. Esslin continues:

> By inhibiting the process of identification between the spectator and the characters, by creating a distance between them and enabling the audience to look at the action in a detached and critical spirit, familiar things, attitudes and situations appear in a new and strange light and create, through astonishment and wonder, a new understanding of the human situation.[xlviii]

Brown's intention is to keep individuals from feeling as though they are in charge of their own viewing experience. Storm Kolson says: "Printing was nearly the worst invention of all. Once men cut their music and poems on stone, mere hints and suggestions. The imagination of the listener was compelled to the service of art." A book is a device that encourages introspection and individuality. A reader gets caught up in her own personal interpretations. However, someone listening to a Story Teller, or watching a ("Brechtian" or "Epic") play is constantly reminded that she is part of a larger group, and is not entirely in control. Then the activity, or the "art" has a greater power than the individual.

Brown's main problem, for many critics, is that he fails to draw in his audience. It is often quite difficult to tune in completely to what he is saying. I believe, for the most part, this exclusion is intentional. It echoes the exclusion of the majority of the crofters in Scene Five of *A Spell for Green Corn*.

What was once a cohesive group that relied upon shared beliefs for survival has split apart into factions, and those factions into individuals. Everyone is more concerned with their own petty wants and needs: exchanging gossip; buying and selling ale; most of all getting a good view of the spectacle presented to them. Few of them want to *think* about what they are really seeing. Like Samuel of Marsh was, Sigrid is a white figure in the midst of a dark, bloodthirsty crowd, looking in her shroud like "the white flame in a kiln" (47). The fifth scene of the play is the first that does not end in music or song. Instead, the stage grows dark and "dappled with the red of torches" (53) and

the crowd, transformed to "beasts" (52) chant in unison: "BURN THE WITCH BURN THE WITCH BURN THE WITCH" (53).

It is a disintegration that is difficult to repair. In the final scene of the play, Freya, Sal, Ikey and the Blind Fiddler are completely removed from the rest of the islanders. In fact, apart from the nameless, suspicious figure of the Clerk in the Social Security tent, and the occasional disembodied voice that calls across the fairground, they are the *only* people that we see. It is as though the farmers have disappeared and Hellya has become an island of machines. The parade of mechanical devices, or "The Pageant of the Machines" (66) seems relentless and unstoppable: "Here they come now. The Wheel. The Pulley. The Inclined Plane. Steam Engine. Gramophone. Telephone. Roentgen Ray. Tractor. Radar. Sputnik. Computer. Love Machine. Poetry Machine. God Machine." (66)

The Old Fiddler, Freya, Sal and Ikey seem like a sorry crew to fight this monstrous barrage, and in a sense they are rightly unfit for the job. When the Blind Fiddler draws his fiddle and his bow to fight the machines, he produces nothing more than a piercing shriek before the final string snaps. But he remains, a ghostly figure, waiting to resurface...and he finally recognises Sigrid in Freya, remembering the beautiful girl with the golden hair who loved everything on Hellya, even the sick corn stalks.

The title of the last scene is "Resurrection", and there is hope that a new sound will be found, bring old ghosts to the surface again, fulfilling Storm Kolson's prophecy: "the word that the fiddle found was more than BIRTH, it was altogether different, it was the merging of all those words in the complete dance, a new and holy mystery." (63)

Perhaps Donald Campbell is correct in summing up both the scope and the limitations of Brown's play when he says: "it reads as if it had been written for an ambitious community project, involving the entire population of Orkney."[xlix] As a piece of art, viewed from an outsider's perspective, it is a flawed work. It is not a piece of high art. It does not draw us in. It does not follow Aristotelian rules. And it does not invite us to take part in an imaginative journey. But for those who can give themselves over to Brown's circle of understanding, it is a celebration and a dance; a "community project" that recreates its own community, asking its members to give of themselves, and re-state stories and songs that need to be continually rediscovered and renewed.

Chapter Four: Brown as Novelist

Greenvoe, George Mackay Brown's first, and probably best-known novel, tells of a week in the life of a small Orkney community. Tom Scott writes that *Greenvoe* shows us a community that has preserved its way of life for centuries. It is [Scott says], a celebration of community spirit:

> It is a unique factor of the book that unlike the usual novel it has no central character, no 'hero' or heroine...The community is the hero. The work weaves among the handful of characters who make up the small community, linking them not only to each other but to their history...[1]

In Brown's play *A Spell for Green Corn*, we were given very little insight into the character's inner lives. We were shown masks, but very little of the people beneath those masks. *Greenvoe* reverses that approach: Brown tells us exactly what each member of the community is thinking - shopkeeper, schoolchildren and fishermen - as they perform their daily tasks.

But in fact, *Greenvoe* is not so much about the unification of voices, but is an exposition of separation and atrophication. Unlike the cohesive community that Scott suggests, Brown's town of Greenvoe is very much removed from traditional values and beliefs. He shows us characters who are unable to identify with each other; who are very often distanced, detached and cold. When the women of the island gather together in the local shop, they are "stone women, statues" (103). Inwardly, Ellen Kerston rants about her husband, Alice Voar relives her latest love affair, and Rachel Whaness prays to have a baby. But all of this dialogue, much of it urgent, funny or poignant, takes place in the isolation of each woman's head. However much they potentially have to share, "mostly they existed within a huge horizon of

silence." (134) The only sound is that of the bluebottle flies, as they "bounced and droned" (8) against the shop windows, much as they would gather around an old, decaying corpse.

In many ways, Greenvoe is a retelling of the final and darkest Act of *A Spell for Green Corn*. It is set in the same place, the fictional island of Hellya. It too tells of the invasion of the island by "the Machines". In the last two chapters of the book, a huge nuclear company moves into Hellya, with massive cranes and mining equipment, literally tearing the island apart. It is the portrait of a community split apart into factions, and those factions into disparate individuals. The displacement of the residents of Greenvoe has as much to do with their own silence, as with any outside forces.

Brown's novel differs from his play in that we are given many different perspectives, as events unfold. It is a more accessible work, to those of us who do not actually live in Orkney. If Brown's dramatic piece showed him to be somewhat insular, his novel demonstrates a multiplicity of voices that often see the truth of a way of life, within the Orkney islands, better than any one person who makes up that community. But what to make of these views is left to the reader. The characters in Brown's novel might very well be viewed as representing different paths Brown might have taken in his own life, or the routes his friends and neighbours have followed. There are many decisions to be made, for each character, and many courses their lives might follow.

The novel gives us many more choices than does Brown's play. But in many ways, the universal human spirit is much harder to find. In a sense, the reader must work even harder than the viewer of the play. The Fable beneath the Story is revealed to us at many points in *Greenvoe*, but most specifically at

the points where Brown's novel *most* resembles his dramatic work. The truth is never located in a single voice. Nor is it found in any one outlook or philosophy. It is found at the point where an outlook becomes shared, or intersects or repeats itself; with another person, or ideally, a group of people. In the words of Jorge Luis Borges, fundamental humanity is found: "[not in] words and categories that lack all life and place, but are rooted in a ceremonial space, overburdened with complex figures, with tangled paths, strange places, secret passages, and unexpected communications."[li]

Perhaps the character who sees the community of Greenvoe most clearly of all is the one who would initially appear to be the most removed from the voice of the Scottish island. Dewas Singh, known on Hellya as "Johnny", is introduced in the first chapter of the novel. He is an Indian travelling salesman who visits Hellya on an annual basis, bringing a suitcase full of silk clothes and finery. Johnny's foreignness is emphasized by the stilted language of his dialogue ("This silk scarf, I say, is value two pounds." (65)); his wares of silk pyjamas, scarves and satin undergarments that have no practical use for the islanders dressed in wool sweaters and rubber boots; and the racial slurs of many of those he encounters, like the school children who greet him with a chorus of: "Chin chin Chinaman / Slanty eyes / Come out of your wash house / I'll give you a surprise. " (77-78)

Yet in many ways Johnny fits in with the community of Greenvoe as readily as any of its native personalities. Timmy Folster, though he hasn't a penny to spend on Johnny's finery, invites Johnny into his house for a half-

hour's talk and companionship. He quotes Robert Burns (a bit tritely) : "Man to man, the warld o'er / Shall brithers be, far a' that." (66) Johnny is welcomed at the farms and in the cottages of the older families of the island, almost as though his arrival is the annual visit of a distant relative. Indeed, Johnny's welcome serves as a sort of litmus test for the individuals of Hellya, their response to his visit echoing the degree to which they care-for and embrace the world around them, or do not.

At the farms of Glebe, the Bu and Skaill, he is greeted with unreserved laughter, smiles, food and ale. The bargaining, as he brings out his wares, is rendered into a happy social event. Johnny says to himself "I am at peace with all the world." (92) He visits many friends, from Alice Voar to Ellen Kerston. Some, such as the Skarf, do not engage in trade, but still regard him as an equal. Johnny is happy to listen to the Skarf's story, though he says it has "as much resemblance to the truth as a cinder to a diamond." (77)

On the other hand, Mrs Joseph Evie, the shopkeeper, attacks the wares in Johnny's case like a harriden, greedy for a bargain, blind to the person behind the brightly-coloured articles. Rachel Whaness refuses to even look at the temptations in Johnny's bag, although she treats him kindly (on a superficial level at least – her talk means nothing to Johnny and he scatters her religious pamphlets to the wind.) The minister, Reverend Simon McKee, does not see Johnny, or hear his greeting as they pass by on the road. And at the laird's hall, he is chased unceremoniously down the driveway by a deerhound, without setting eyes on anything more human than a "weary wisp of a face at the top window." (93)

As we become more and more aware of the many different personalities inhabiting Greenvoe, it becomes clear that there is such diversity living in the small island that perhaps Johnny is no more alien than anyone else. The Skarf, the socialist, lives next door to the Kerstons, religious fundamentalists, who live and work next to Bert Kerston, an anti-pious alcoholic. Alice Voar has seven different children by seven different men. These children are as much a part of village and schoolyard life as anyone else. It would seem that there is nothing and nobody that could not be included in this multivariate fold. Alice welcomes Johnny into her bed in an act of unabashed lovemaking that leaves no barrier between them at all: "It was like taking the sun into a winter bed. We were soaked in honey all night long. Yes we were." (104) To Johnny, there is nothing cheap or loose about Alice. She is an "enchantment" (77), beautiful and "the much-loved one" (97).

Yet Johnny does suggest that there is another reason why he fits in so well with Greenvoe. There is a common thread that ties him to the islanders, and the islanders to one another. It is an aspect, or maybe a shared failing, within their Weltenschauung or world-conception: they belong to the past, and to a past way of life, as much as they belong to the present. They are carrying on an existence that is out of date and fated. As Johnny himself says: "I am a ghost. The island is full of ghosts." (88)

Johnny (as Brown portrays him) belongs to a dying culture, and is one of its last reserves of wisdom. But Johnny is not from Greenvoe. It is not his place to show those in Greenvoe the path to take, or how to come to terms with the present world. Ben Budge, who knows exactly where he belongs ("The Biggings, Greenvoe, Isle of Hellya, Orkney" (17)), narrates another section of

Greenvoe. Like Johnny, Ben Budge has a strong sense of self-awareness, and a great deal of insight into the workings of Greenvoe. But also like Johnny, Ben is an outsider, having spent much of his life as a sailor. His voice is "a voice that belonged to the brotherhood of the sea." (8)

Where then is the "living" voice of Orkney to be found? In the schoolyard, the children are easily able to transcend their local identity. Ola Corrigal is chosen as "It" in a game, and immediately an often repeated Fable is re-enacted:

> At once she was invested as queen, but queen of a rebellious and broken kingdom. Her faithless handmaidens led her to the wall and left her there with her face hidden in her forearm, a grieving statue. Yet the lips fluttered as they began to count rapidly and secretly up to a hundred, as if she was summoning her scattered troops to restore order and harmony. (20)

A simple game of hide-and-seek easily takes on a mythical importance.

More important is the short dramatic piece, strangely placed at the end of every chapter. It is one of the most unusual aspects of Brown's novel. In the first instance, we are told that this small drama is the "first of six initiation rites into the Ancient Mystery of The Horsemen". The rites seem, at first, totally removed, both in style and in content, from the action of the main body of the novel. Martin Schoene suggests that the separation of the ritual from the rest of the novel is an indicator of the deterioration of its importance within the flow of everyday life. "It appears tacked on to what is relevant and worthy of narrating about the community", [lii] Schoene writes.

For some in the island community, the ritual is still alive and well. Old Mansie Anderson conducts the ceremony, and the young man being indoctrinated, learning the timeless "Spell for Green Corn", is Mansie's son

Hector. The whole Anderson family seems healthy and strong. Hamish Anderson, Hector's younger brother, sits in the village school playing with a handful of dry oats. He says to himself "I'm the richest man in the world." (48), and as he watches the grains pass through his hands there is no dissatisfaction with his lot. Hidden in the interior farmlands of Hellya is a rich and healthy core.

But most of the islanders seem completely unaware that the "Ritual of the Horsemen" is going on, hidden away, in the dead of night. People like Mansie Anderson are not important figures in the village of Greenvoe. "The Ritual of the Horsemen" has very little to do with the actions of everyday life. For the reader too, that act of accepting the Ritual of the Horsemen, not as something merely tacked on, but of integral importance to the action and events of Greenvoe's downfall is a difficult one. The language of Brown's ritual seems, in many ways, vague and obscure. We can't form a clear picture of what is going on. There is a harvest, a death and a burial, but to what extent this is literally enacted is imprecise. Even the purpose and goal of the initiation is unclear. We are told the young novice: "was looking for a word. Unless he found the word we ourselves are locked in the stone. We belong to the kingdom of death." (248)

Brown places his readers in much the same situation as the residents of Greenvoe. It is a personal choice whether we will give much attention to this ritual, or not. A straightforward narrative proceeds in a linear direction, describing events as they happen. The easy thing is for the reader to ignore this strange interlude, thinking that the more important thing is what happens next.

A ritual, however, proceeds in a non-linear direction. It consists of many layers, and it asks what events *mean* – on a larger scale what is the Fable that lies behind the story we have been recounting. And it asks its participants to forget their sense of a self-important local certainty and become a small part of something vastly larger than themselves. Schoene writes: "Rituals ask us to believe, trust and accept rather than inquire and strive to know for certain."”[liii] But admitting uncertainty is a sign of weakness in a world that is ruled by facts, figures and the overruling bottom line. Again and again, we are told the power to save ourselves lies in "the mysterious omnipotent life-giving word." (87) But what exactly is this "word"? The maddening thing is that Brown seems completely unwilling, or unable (for the time being) to tell us.

As we know from *A Spell for Green Corn*, in Brown's view once the Word is consigned to a written document, it becomes a dead thing. During the Reformation, as Schoene writes, the Word was "consigned…to a book where it was hoarded and treasured, gradually ossifying into a rhetorically eloquent, doctrinal phraseology."[liv] Then it means nothing. It did however have meaning when and where it was first spoken, in the circumstance and with the people who gave it a marvellous significance. But without that added, unwritten significance, a word is no better than a number, and a written page has no more meaning than a numerical figure.

The Andersons really are pursuing a dead faith, if the number of people who share the understanding of its magic has dwindled to an ineffectual few. But in Greenvoe, there is a second threat. A dead figure literally appears, in a sense "brought to life" – like a zombie bent on possession, corruption and death. The second sort of ghost that Johnny encounters is dead not in the sense

that his power has declined. The second ghost is The Guest, who appears one day at the Greenvoe hotel.

Like the agents of destruction in Brown's previous works, he is nameless and faceless, and indeed bears more resemblance to a machine than a human being. When Bill Scorradale asks him to sign the guest-book, what he writes is "not a name, it was more a strange involuted squiggle, a sign or a hieroglyph out of the remote past or the remote future." (43) Johnny the travelling salesman accidentally stumbles across The Guest in his hotel room, but is literally unable to see his face. He sits with his back to Johnny, a "statue" rather than a man, and the only sound he seems able to make is by striking his typewriter, the keys "chattering like a machine gun". When he finally does turn his head, he is even more frightening and monstrous, with his "axe-like profile" and sieving abstracted eyes" (86). Johnny asks himself: "What are we, a ghost and a man? Who is the ghost? Who is the man?" (86). This second ghost is dead in the sense that he has no soul.

Many are unable to see The Guest for what he really is, and the residents of Greenvoe are divided in their "ghostly" alliances (some with the past, and some with The Guest.) Bill Scorradale speaks of him with veneration, ("`The guest', said Bill Scorradale reverently" (210)) though Scorradale has no clear picture of what The Guest is up to. He is always described in the vaguest terms, a figure who "moves in the fog…a purplish clot." (210) Yet he seems to promise orderliness and a powerful new future. "He rules the world with a card index file." (86) Joseph Evie, perhaps the most powerful resident of Greenvoe, also seems allied with The Guest and with this vision of order. He seldom interacts with the rest of the village but looks to secure his future through

acquiring numbers and titles: "Mr Joseph Evie, postmaster, merchant, county councillor, justice of the peace..." (8)

For George Mackay Brown, The Guest represents nothing less than total, unmitigated destruction. If a life force is in the Word, The Guest represents the stony deadness of writing. Even the way he attacks his writing suggests an act of rape: "[He]...wrote, deleted, wrote...The guest's pen sank deep in the soft white paper."(211) Moreover, his goal is a "sought number", mathematical and exact. Johnny sees The Guest as a "deaf-mute"; someone who has no language.

If the Word was merely lost, there would still be hope. There is always a chance that it could somehow, someday be found again. Foucault writes, in *Raymond Roussel*:

> We live in a word in which things have been said. These spoken words in reality are not, as people tend to think, a wind that passes without leaving a trace, but in fact, diverse as are the traces, they do remain. We live in a world completely marked by, all laced with, discourse, that is to say, utterances which have been spoken, of things said, of affirmations, interrogations, of discourses which have directly occurred. To that extent, the historical in which we live cannot be dissociated from all the elements of discourse which have inhabited this world and continue to live in it such as the economic process, the demographic, etc. Thus spoken language, as language that is already present, in one way or another determines what can be said afterward either independent of or within the general framework of language.[lv]

Language then, gives us a tie with the eternal Fable by its very nature. It links us to the past. But if spoken language is lost altogether, and all we really are is the exactitudes of numeracy, then there is no connection with the past or the historical. We lose the traces of discourse that have created the resonances in our language and in our lives. The Guest is a greater threat than any seen

before because he threatens to destroy all connection with the past, essentially leaving us with a hollow effigy devoid of human flesh.

One of the most interesting aspects of Brown's novel is that it focuses not only on Greenvoe's struggle with these two "ghosts", but demonstrates the attractions and repulsions that pull and re-direct different individuals within the community. Miss Inverary, the schoolteacher, forces her pupils to recite times-tables by rote one day, then lets them wander freely about the island on a nature hunt the next. Correspondingly, she herself tries to choose between two paths in her life. She can choose to remain a virgin and spinster (a path that Johnny sees as leading to "fruitfall, bruising, rottenness" (95-96)) or choose to give way to passion and have a love affair, that may lead to disrepute among the island and school authorities.

Miss Inverary, in her more "mechanical" mood, tells her students that numbers and figures are the future but does not seem to notice that the effects of her dictatorship are immediate and depraved. After studying arithmetic all day at school, deprived of singing and playing, the students at Greenvoe school turn on the weakest, slowest pupil, Gino Manson, much in the way the Story Teller's listeners became a pack of savage beasts: "They were like young animals…they circled and gathered together, like a pack looking for some victim to glut their anger on" (48). Pushing Gino into a muddy puddle, "A black star filthied his cheek" (48).

Ivan Westray, the focus of Miss Inverary's attentions, does not specifically ally himself with The Guest, but contributes to the destruction of his community through simple indifference. Ivan, the ferryman, looks down on the other islanders with an arrogant moodiness. He seldom speaks except to ask

for fares, and undertakes virtually any job, as long as he is paid at the end of the day. He would be virtually the last person to take part in The Ritual of the Horsemen. However, Brown suggests that he is as much tied to Greenvoe as anyone else.

Ivan is portrayed as a modern-day Viking, standing at the prow of his boat "very handsome in his yellow oilskin." (205) Inga Fortin-Bell, the laird's granddaughter, modern in every sense, is attracted to the ferryman, but these two are incompatible in many ways. Inga is disappointed when Ivan doesn't behave like the heroes of the contemporary novels she is reading: "He did not behave like a D.H.Lawrence peasant at all. There was something cruel and cold and calculating about him." (110) The books that Ivan keeps on the shelves in the cabin of his boat are long out-of-date: *The Orkneyinga Saga* and *On Love Carnal and Divine.* These two books are windows into his character: proud, violent, independent, sensual and self-serving. Ivan is driven on a restless and often angry path between different women, just as he daily travels back and forth between the Mainland and Hellya. But Vikings haven't visited Hellya for hundreds of years. Ivan is unsuited for the modern world, as certainly as he is disdainful of the people he sees around him blindly obedient to social mores.

Ivan is as contemptuous of The Guest as he is everything else – he sees nothing and nobody that he can believe in absolutely. (It is not until too late that Ivan begins to fight to preserve Greenvoe: "Ivan Westray hit an Aberdeen navvy and toppled him into the sea because the man asked him, sneeringly, where the palais-de-danse and the casino were. Too late he began to love his island." (217)) Therefore he is already dead. Brown writes: "Ivan Westray

walked out, was transfigured to a ghost, was dissolved utterly in the pearly air…"(145)

Others on the island share in its downfall because they have become so involved with selfish or petty concerns that they lose sight of their place in a larger whole. Bert Kerston and Samuel Whaness are superficially at opposite poles. Kerston is devoted to nothing but drink, often leaving his fishing nets abandoned to spend his day in the pub; while Whaness is a religious teetotaller, in his boat and performing his duties every day from the crack of dawn. Bert Kerston has more children than he cares to remember, his gregarious wife Ellen constantly bloated with another baby on the way. Samuel Whaness' wife Rachel remains barren no matter how much she prays for a child. Both men are described in rather lifeless terms: Kerston is introduced as a "small dark knotted man" (7) while the Whaness couple are called "whited sepulchres". (18)

The two men are equally set in their ways, and incapable of dealing with the changing circumstances around them. They are tied to their community, but incapable of doing anything to save it. Kerston constantly leaves his wife to solve the problem of feeding his family, hiding away in the pub on the day that Ellen gives birth to a stillborn child. Samuel Whaness faces a life and death struggle, when he becomes obsessed with the idea that somebody is stealing fish from his nets. He is nearly drowned, checking his lobster creels on a stormy day. His battle is described in mock-heroic terms: the tiny figure in his white boat *Siloam* battling on the (devilish) face of the "Red Head", telling himself "by faith alone a man is justified." (197)

In a parody of the second tale in "The Story Teller", Whaness' epic battle is constantly undermined by minutiae. The only reason Whaness heads out to the dangerous crags is to jealously guard his catch from Bert Kerston. He steers his boat too close to the cliffs to pull in his last creel, though the only thing in it is a small lobster, "a half-pounder" (185). There is no fight to keep his boat from hitting the rocks. Instead, Whaness is paralysed as the grim events unfold, concentrating on "a clump of seapinks in an interstice of the crag," (155) and "the bones of a sheep" (155) on the cliff above him. He doesn't even drop the lobster he is holding. He is incapable of rescuing himself, having to be hauled aboard Kerston's fishing boat.

Kerston saves Whaness, giving Whaness the "kiss of life". Whaness is brought back to the temporal realm with spectacular vividness: "the kiss transformed everything; for the body seemed to mingle with his, to rise up and through him, to stand high above him" (198) and for a brief few seconds both men are brought together, joined in a common moment that is beyond discourse and beyond differences. But their experiences change the lives of neither man. Bert is forgiven by Ellen (after a week spent recovering from a beating in the attic of the hotel at Sutbreck), and he and Ellen carry on much as they did before. Samuel promises Rachel that he will never go fishing again, moving to her brother's farm on the island of Hoy. But after a few weeks spent feeling useless and awkward around the farm, he buys a new fishing boat, the *Sion*, and resume a life of fishing, much as before. Both men go back to their old ways, with no more understanding of a shared, deeper discourse than they previously had.

If a community is like a body, whose parts need to work together, then Samuel Whaness and Bert Kerston indicate how removed from one another the entities of Greenvoe are, and how diseased that body has become. The Skarf, the third fisherman in the village of Greenvoe, is very different from the previous two. Like Ivan Westray, the Skarf lives in the past more than in the present. He writes and rewrites the history of Hellya, trying to find some underlying truths beneath the simple facts, names and events of history. Figures long lost in the mists of time, Thorvald Harvest-Happy and his beautiful daughter Ingibiorg, are not ghosts to the Skarf. They are "an immense jovial man" (52) and a smiling graceful girl, who are more vibrant and real than the figures of everyday life.

In fact, the Skarf seems to be in many ways Brown's self-portrait at that time, writing every day at his kitchen table "A woollen muffler…wrapped round his neck." (137) He is an idealist – reading his stories to whoever will listen, retelling and re-creating the history of Hellya.

In many ways though, the Skarf does not live in the present world at all. The Skarf chose not to go to University, staying on Hellya, even though it seemingly offers him no future in a financial or practical sense. For the most part he lives on social assistance, seldom even making the pretence of going out on his leaky old fishing boat. He eats bread and margarine, and writes in an old cashbook borrowed from the shopkeeper, Mr. Evie. He lives for the fact that he writes and rewrites beautiful stories, transforming the past into a living thing, making everything he writes "A war on paper" (211) and "every sheet a scarred and clotted battlefield" (211). The Skarf lives a passionate, but isolated existence.

Oddly, the Skarf seems perfectly willing to accept the modernization of the island. He is one of the first to be employed by Black Star, becoming a clerk in the offices, and wearing "a blue suit and a grey tie" (229). He tells his boss that progress is inevitable: "Industrial man, bureaucratic man, was a superior creature to agricultural man, he could bear a greater infusion of the light…Hellya was a microcosm; this was how it must happen, inevitably, all over the universe." (228)

The Skarf seems quite happy, as long as he has an audience to talk to. But this is where he truly differs from George Mackay Brown, for whom stories are not important in and of themselves, but because of the *purpose* they serve in day-to-day Orkney life. The Skarf is not able to relate his stories to the present world. He is unable to see the Fable that exists within his own surroundings. For him, the Truth exists *only* in words – not in any real and tangible sense.

The Skarf is as unaware that the real, living ceremony of the Ritual of the Horsemen is underway as are Bert Kerston and Samuel Whaness. When he loses his job, his illusions of an idealistic future are shattered, and the Skarf drowns himself in the sea. Like Kerston and Whaness, he is unable to *share* any common values or beliefs, He is, eventually, caught up in isolation and despair. He is able to sacrifice himself, lost in dreams of a wondrous past, but doesn't seem able at all to believe in the possibility of a rebirth.

The last major figure in Brown's panoramic view of Hellya is, like Johnny, an outsider to the island. But like the Skarf, Mrs McKee is another individual who is lost in her own world. In fact Mrs McKee has been *driven* into her world, by her strict Presbyterian upbringing. She is a symbol, in

Brown's novel, of what *may* become, if we do not have the courage to speak with a fundamental and true artistic voice.

Instead of being oblivious to the universal joys and marvels that have presented themselves, Mrs McKee is all too aware of these aspects within her day-to-day life. However, for Mrs McKee, these joys are a bad thing. In her annual "season of assize" (15) she forces herself to face them, repress them, and push them away once more.

For Mrs McKee, her true self is shameful and ugly, and the carefully-built façade or mask that she presents to the world must always be held up and maintained:

> She knew this: as soon as she involved herself actively in the season of trials that was mounted against her again and again, that would be the hour of her shame, she would be exposed to the whole world as a wicked woman. Then her substance would crumble into shadow; but not like those dear dead ones a fragrant shadow; no, a cursed shadow that could only be lifted from the gate with the candles and waters of exorcism. (16)

Mrs McKee remembers the times in her life when she betrayed her strict Protestant moral code and rules. Every time she has disobeyed, she tells herself, it has resulted in the direst consequences: going up Arthur's Seat "on a lark" with her best friend Millicent, on a cold, frosty May 1st morning, was the direct cause of Millicent's later illnesses and death; giving her young son Simon a glass of wine to combat a lingering illness brought on his lifelong alcoholism.

When Johnny meets Mrs McKee, he recognizes the torment she is undergoing, telling her "One should not summon the dead...The present world is full of such beautiful things." (83) But for Mrs McKee, there is something compelling in this trial. One of the figures that appears and reappears in Mrs

McKee's memories is her niece Winnifred, the black sheep of the family who had a child out of wedlock and (even worse to "Aunt Flora's" eyes), converted to Catholicism. As Winnifred is brought to trial, judge and jury condemn her. Every incident in her life is recounted and painted with a thick black brush.

But what Mrs McKee sees, as she recalls the times when Winnifred came to stay with her, is a child with a vivid and irrepressible imagination. Mrs McKee, although she is wracked with guilt for her own behaviour, does not see a monster in Winnifred. She sees a girl with an independent spirit and a certain gift. In a review of one of Winnifred's novels, Mrs McKee once read: "What the novelist wants us to realise is that all men, besides being harried and destitute, are heirs to a kingdom: *homo sapiens* is both immensely poor and immensely rich." (131)

Mrs McKee allows the tribunal and the courtroom to consume her days. And as the island of Hellya begins to die, Mrs McKee too succumbs to illness and despair. Winnifred herself comes to visit her Aunt, but Mrs McKee scarcely sees or hears her, hardly aware of her surroundings through the fog that has enveloped her mind: "She felt as if the stone was entering into her...She was very old...The shadows came about her." (225) It is as though she has been stolen by the trows, buried beneath the earth, almost forgetting the world she has left behind.

Mrs McKee resurfaces from this fog, at the point where it has nearly destroyed her, quickly and unexpectedly. Like the Skarf, she gives herself wholly to the shadows of the past, feeling weak, helpless and full of despair. But opening her eyes one day and looking around her, Mrs McKee is struck by the richness of her present world: the sun is shining; her son Simon still loves

her. She has returned to her home town of Edinburgh. In the end, Mrs McKee escapes from her trials, and her voices of condemnation, choosing not to spend the rest of her days sitting "in a fallen house, an old bereaved exiled loveless woman, crouched over a cold hearth, in a white air of winter." (227) Only then is she able to look at the world once more with true appreciation and wonder, and a "feeling of reprieve that was so rare and evanescent that it came and vanished like a silent tumble of butterflies." (227)

The Black Star that besets the island of Hellya has much the same deadening effect as Mrs McKee's Inquisitors. It is compelling, but nobody is quite able to define why it is able to rule them so easily and so completely. In fact, nobody is quite able to say what Black Star really is: "It went from mouth to mouth in the following days, whispered, as if it were a piece of magic, a very secret codeword." (215) In many ways Hellya is powerless and inadequate in the face of this darkening force. The houses themselves are inadequate to stand before the coming bulldozers: "They collapsed before clashing jaws and blank battering foreheads." (217)

There is only one family who refuses to bend to the will of Black Star, and that is the Anderson family. At their farm, "The Bu", a small group of people stand against an overwhelming array of *titles:* just Mansie Anderson, his wife, their nine children, two farmworkers and a dog named Rover, against the demolition team with their wrecking machines, the "controller" (242), Mr Evie B.E.M., and the sheriff's officers. For three days they hold them off, until they too are finally overcome by sheer brute force, their home defaced and marred: "The Bu, built by Thorkeld Harvest-Happy in the year 1006, was a cavity and a scatter on the side of the hill." (247)

It would seem pointless to even try to stand against the destructive forces of modernization. For the Andersons though, this is not the end. Their legacy is incomplete but is not dead. The Ritual of the Horsemen, hidden away from the eyes of most of Greenvoe, lived, in every sense, for those that took part. And the final stage of the ceremony, cut off short by the events surrounding the intrusion of Black Star into Hellya, remains unfinished.

Ten years after Hellya was evacuated and destroyed, Mansie Anderson returns home to the island with a group of young men to complete the rite. Young Skarf, whose father sacrificed himself in the waters around Greenvoe, losing himself in the "Kingdom of Death", returns to complete the Station of the Stones. His task is to find a way out of these stones and out of the Kingdom of the Dead. He must first lose himself in the sowing, the harvest and the long winter. His companions hide behind masks of authority (The Harvest Lord, The Ploughmen, The Sowers…) – forcing him to the floor, mocking him, cutting him with a sickle. In his search for a way out it seems as though everyone is against him. He must surrender everything: his identity, his body and his voice. Finally, he finds a glimmer of light. He utters a new word: *Ressurrection.*

Like Brown's play, *A Spell for Green Corn*, *Greenvoe* does not show us the rebirth of a community. It is unclear whether Orcadians could return to live on the island of Hellya again. The novel, does, however, end with a glimmer of hope. Mansie Anderson, the "Lord of the Harvest" (248), completes the ritual: "We have brought light and blessing to the kingdom of winter…however long it endures, that kingdom, a night or a season or a thousand ages. The word has been found. Now we will eat and drink together and be glad." (249)

Chapter Five: Brown as Sagaman

If many Orcadians have "Viking blood", not only in the biological sense, but in the sense of a fierce character and an independent spirit (as exemplified by Ivan Westray in *Greenvoe*) then Brown himself is also a part of that Viking crew. He is anything but passive in his writing. When asked to explain his role as a writer, George Mackay Brown wrote:

> Sometimes I see my task, as poet and storyteller, to rescue the centuries' treasure before it is too late: It is as though the past is a great ship that has gone ashore, and archivist and writer must gather as much of the rich squandered cargo as they can.[lvi]

His novel *Greenvoe* is bleak and despairing. It shows us what happens when all of the glimmering cargo, the islands' heritage, is nearly lost. But there is a brighter side to Brown's writing. He tells us of this vast treasure, waiting beyond the surf for those willing to wade through the sea, a difficult task requiring a great deal of courage, to take it, before it sinks too far below the surface.

In a poem about his home town, "Hamnavoe", Brown describes himself in terms very much like a Viking warrior:

> And because, under equality's sun,
> All things now wear to a common soiling,
>   In the fire of images
>   Gladly I put in my hand
>   To save that day

Like Orkneymen from centuries beforehand, Brown identifies himself in terms of ship and shore. There are invaders threatening but also potentially enriching the landscape. For Orkney, many of the great ships that appeared on the horizon were from larger northern countries, particularly Norway. Orkney's southern neighbours in Britain and beyond had little reason for passing through the cold and often

dangerous Orcadian waters. So too was Orkney connected to Iceland, and the Icelandic sagas. Although it is seldom mentioned in contemporary histories of Europe, except as an obscure outpost, Orkney is a major focal point in the stories and legends of Icelandic songs, histories and stories. *The Orkneyinga Saga* was written in Iceland around the year 1220, by an unknown author, and it recounts the history of the Earls of Orkney from 874 to 1214. It is a combination of prose and poetry, gathering together eighty-three skaldic poems by eighteen different skalds, and was composed to be recited in Icelandic halls, during long winter evenings, for the education and entertainment of lords and landowners.

The Orkneyinga Saga is a source that Brown repeatedly turns to in his writing. In *Winterfold*, for example, Brown retells, in modern idiom, eight of the poems from the Saga composed by Orkney's Earl Rognvald Kolson, Earl Magnus's nephew. The story of Magnus in particular, Brown returns to again and again, often incorporating ideas of twentieth-century thinkers such as Brecht to make the life of Magnus become relevant and new. It appears in many of Brown's poems and short stories, "Stone Poems" and "The Three Islands" in *A Calendar of Love* to name two. It is the main basis for four of Brown's major works: the chapter "Martyr" in *An Orkney Tapestry* (1969); the play *The Loom of Light* (1972); the novel *Magnus* (1973); and the performance piece *A Celebration for Magnus* (1987).

Why exactly Brown finds the story of Magnus so compelling is difficult to fully understand. For Brown, the character of Magnus seems to possess a magic that is at the core of all of his writing; a figure who exemplifies strength and a spiritual voice unique to Orkney. Yet he lived a thousand years ago. Brown himself said that "The Orcadians, if they thought about Magnus Erlendson, considered him to be a queer fish, one of those medieval figures, clustered about with penances and

miracles, that has no real place in our enlightened progressive society."[lvii] Perhaps it is not only Magnus himself that had such a strong hold on Brown's imagination, but the role that the sagas, as a whole, had on Icelandic culture.

Jennie Hall, in her 1902 book of *Viking Tales*, describes the tremendous importance sagas and sagatellers had, in medieval Icelandic society. According to Hall, the Sagas were created to fight off the boredom and gossip that occurred on long winter nights when whole families were forced to stay in the home for hours and hours on end, in dark rooms lit only by a fire in the middle of the dirt floor. Hall writes: "Fathers looked at their children and thought: 'they are not learning much. What will make them wise and brave? What will lead them to love their country and old Norway? Will not the stories of battles, of brave deeds, of mighty men, do this?'"[lviii]

These Icelandic sagas were told over and over again, until everyone in Iceland knew them and loved them. They were greatly enriched by the talents of the "skalds" – storytellers who could also sing and play music, who were in turn honoured guests in the homes of noblemen, and were given the best seats at a feast and the finest gifts.

The stories preserved many aspects of the past. They recorded the names, deeds and words of important figures, but they also revealed, to some extent, the character traits, images and phrases that were valued in the twelfth century. Most of all, they gave a sense that knowledge of the past is of great worth. In retelling Orcadian sagas it was perhaps this sense of importance, for storytellers and stories of old, but also for Orcadian heroes such as Magnus that Brown hoped to ressurect.

Despite its main purpose as an entertainment piece, *The Orkneyinga Saga* is thought to be remarkable in its historical accuracy.[lix] The story of Magnus in *The*

Orkneyinga Saga tells of two cousins: Magnus and Hakon, who have jointly inherited the Earldom of Orkney. The two men are opposites in many respects, Hakon a warleader and Magnus a pacifist. Nonetheless, they manage to rule Orkney peaceably for several years before their supporters, desiring a greater proportion of the lands and estates of Orkney for themselves, lead the two Earls to declare war on one another.

As the two armies ravage the countryside, trampling the harvests and stealing from the peasants, Magnus sets himself apart from the other figures in the story. Strangely removed from the fighting, his main focus seems to be an inward spiritual battle he wages against himself. The Saga recounts five temptations Magnus must undergo in order to fulfil his preordained role.

Meanwhile, the battle between the supporters of Magnus and those of Hakon continues unabated for seven years. The climax of the story comes when Magnus and Hakon meet on the island of Egilsay for a peace conference arranged by the landowners of Orkney. Hakon arrives on the island with eight ships rather than the two he and Magnus had agreed upon. Magnus realises that his cousin, Hakon, with a group of supporters and henchmen, intends to kill him and take sole control of Orkney. Magnus offers Hakon three alternatives to this cold-blooded murder: he offers to go into exile; to be imprisoned for life; or to be maimed in a way that he could no longer perform any duties as Earl. All three alternatives are refused. Magnus's final request is that he be killed by a blow to the head, with the dignity befitting a nobleman, rather than beheaded the way that a criminal would be executed.

After Magnus's murder is carried out, events in Orkney strangely take a turn for the better. Hakon repents his part in Magnus's murder, and goes on a pilgrimage

to Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the sick and infirm discover that miraculous cures can occur when they pray over Magnus's grave. Magnus is declared a saint, and Hakon's successor, Rognvald Kolson, vows that if he is made Earl of Orkney, he will build a magnificent Church in Kirkwall "the wonder and glory of all the north" (*ACFM*, 20) in honour of Saint Magnus. Throughout the lifetime of Rognvald Kolson, Orkney enjoys a peace and prosperity unlike anything it has known before.

Brown's first attempt to retell the story of Magnus is the chapter "Martyr" in *An Orkney Tapestry.* Even there, he seems unable to settle on one particular writing form that will capture the full significance of the tale. The chapter is a patchwork blending history, fiction, poetry and drama. Brown retells the story from *The Orkneyinga Saga*, adding much from his own imagination to flesh out the bare bones of the story. The killing of Magnus is recreated as a short story in its own right. And the final section of the chapter is a short drama, with two tinkers, Jock and Blind Mary, telling of "an unrecorded cure at the tomb of Magnus" (*OT,* 87) shortly after the Earl has died. At that time, Brown himself evidently thought that he had not been fully able to capture Magnus's tale. Brown writes: "The story of Magnus and Hakon unfolds like a dance. Some day a play will be written about it."(*OT*, 87)

The Loom of Light, the play, and *Magnus*, the novel, written within a year of one another, are virtually identical in terms of storyline, with chapters in the book corresponding to scenes in the play. *Magnus*, the later work, is far more fleshed out than the play, but all of the essential elements and dramatic moments are contained in the earlier work. Because it is the densest work, I will concentrate on Brown's novel *Magnus* to examine Brown's interpretation of the story of Saint Magnus. But *A Celebration for Magnus* begins where these two works leave off, telling of events following Magnus's death, including his sainthood and the building of the

magnificent St. Magnus Cathedral on the Orkney mainland, and brings the story to life in a very different way.

Magnus opens very much like a fairy tale. To start with, Magnus himself is very much still the strange figure from a medieval saga. Orkney's gentry and landowners and merchants are seen only from a distance. They are very long-ago and far away. It is the day of Magnus's conception, and of his parents' marriage. Like a fabled prince, Magnus will belong to the royalty of Orkney. His father and grandfather were Earls of Orkney before him, and his childhood will be spent in the great halls, living a grand lifestyle far removed from the majority of Orkney's population.

Contrasted with this, we are given a second viewpoint: that of two peasants, Mans and Hild. This second viewpoint gives us a very different sense of the story. Life in the eleventh century is seen as being very much like many working class lives today, having much the same problems and the same stress factors. Mans complains constantly about the upper class robbing him of his hard-earned income, but feels helpless to change his situation in life. Hild worries about Mans going to the ale-house and getting drunk, much as a modern day woman (or man) might worry if her partner disappeared to the pub for the evening. In a sense, we are allied with Mans and Hild. Their story seems unspectacular, compared with that of Magnus, but highly realistic and believeable.

Mans and Hild's lives are greatly oppressed by the lairds of Orkney. Each year, they must come up with an allotted amount of grain to give to the church and the state. Because his Ox is lame, Mans has been told by the factor to yoke his wife Hild to the plough, and till a new field. They labour all day under the hot sun until Hild's back is aching "as though she had lain a winter on a bed of

boulders."(*Magnus,* 8) Regardless of this oppression, they have a kind of freedom that the gentry does not have. Mans shouts his disapproval across the fields, and jokes with the others working in fields nearby with "a flash of teeth, a gust of lewd confident laughter." (*Magnus*, 3)

At these points, in the first chapter, *Magnus* seems to be a straightforward modernist realist novel, recreating the lives of those living in the eleventh century. It is tempting, like Mans, to see the islands' landowners as the enemy, with the Earl at their head. On the other hand, Hild, the more thoughtful of the two farmworkers, looks across to the gentry celebrating a magnificent wedding on the Birsay Brough, not with resentment but with admiration and longing.

Intertwined with the realism of the dialogue between Mans and Hild are passages of prose that point to something far different, vast, unfamiliar and strange, suggesting that peasants and gentry are not so much removed from one another as either would like to believe. Brown creates a third voice, echoing beneath that of the "long-ago" storyteller, and the straightforward realist, that seems to be a voice of unquestionable weight and authority. It is created through symbols that resonate outside of the story itself. In this case they are biblical symbols. In a 1976 article about the writing process, Brown stated that the image of laying the grain into the furrows of broken earth is a deliberate reconstruction of Christ's parable of the sower and the seed:

> that image seemed to illuminate the whole of life for me. It made everything from the most primitive breaking of the soil to Christ himself with his parables of agriculture and the majestic symbolism of his passion and death, and resurrection. "I am the bread of life." "This is my body that is broken for you." That image has a universal meaning for me, especially when I can stand among ripening fields all summer. You will find it at the heart of many of my stories and poems.[lx]

The introduction of this "third voice" seems, initially, like an intrusion. It is easy to see why Brown wishes to tie Magnus and Christ together (making his martyrdom and sainthood an imitation of Christ's). But on a superficial level, the parable is hard to follow, and it is difficult to see how the sanctity of biblical authority can be reconciled with the earthiness and lewdness of Mans.

As the chapter proceeds, the symbolism becomes less remote. The imagery of this biblical allegory is also that of John Barleycorn, traditionally a Scottish drinking song, not majestic and remote but familiar and near-at-hand. In many ways Mans, the peasant, is Magnus's opposite, but is as well his alter ego.

Magnus is remote and other-worldly – part of the gentry on the other side of the water that cannot be breached – while Mans is earthy and speaks his mind. Alan Bold suggests that Magnus and Mans represent twin aspects of mankind: "the saint and the sower of the seed"[lxi] Magnus will resurrect Orkney, in the end, through his martyrdom, but Mans is in a sense performing his own miracle of resurrection by sowing the seeds that will eventually blossom as ears of corn to feed peasants, earls and priests alike. Reluctant and crude as he is, Mans is an integral, working cog in the great wheel that keeps life on the island functioning.

Given a comfortable staring point with the realism of Mans and Hild, Brown leads his readers by the hand, so to speak, to the brink of the unfamiliar. Not only is there something deeper going on, as Mans and Hild ready the field to sow the seeds in the earth; there are parallels going on across the inlet, where the wedding ceremony continues. Bridesmaids and groomsmen prepare the wedding chamber, with proper ceremony, carefully laying the sheets and lining the bridal gown with flowers and scented oils. After their work is finished, as Mans and Hild go home to their cottage, and bridesmaids and groomsmen shut the door on the bridal couple,

Thora and Erlend, a kind of magic seems to occur in the fertile land and bridal chamber alike: "a great sacrificial host surged between the loins of bridegroom and bride, and among them a particular chosen seed, a summoned one, the sole ultimate survivor of that joyous holocaust." (*Magnus*, 18) Brown, seemingly at a loss for words, returns to the gentle, fabled and mysterious voice of long-ago: "From here on the voice of the storyteller must be still, or at best it can only say, *After the wedding, when the dance and the winecups were still going round, Thora was carried to Erlend's chamber, and they lay together, and she conceived that night.*" (*Magnus*, 18)

The chapter ends with a strange interlude, much like that which ended the first scene of "A Spell for Green Corn". It is a subtle clue to what is to occur in the novel as a whole. "Three Bridal Songs", like "The Ballad of John Barleycorn", is a poem that works as a kind of dance, weaving together the disparate threads we have been given, and inviting all the disparate individuals we have seen to take part. The imagery of the "Bridal Songs" is first and foremost that of conception and new life; of a new bride, on the first night in her bridal suite, in her white gown. Equally though, the poem is about sacrifice and death; specifically the pain of Christ's death: "I am wounded. I have taken a wound / in my flesh. The lips of it will never / come together." (*Magnus*, 20) The poem is also explicitly, loudly and plainly about agriculture and the tilling of the earth and sowing of new seed: "IT IS THE SUN. IT IS THE PLOUGH / AND THE SOWER." (*Magnus*, 20) These three elements are not only bound together by words, but by *song*, which (as I have already mentioned in relation to *A Spell for Green Corn*) Brown sees as the key which can lend to language a greater, universal meaning: "a beauty, a fuller significance, that can only be hinted at by giving the words a ritual quality".[lxii]

The first chapter of Brown's novel suggests a unity that will arrive. But for the time being, that unity is still very far away, and we return to the time of long ago. When Magnus himself is introduced, in the second chapter of the book, he remains a vague and undefined figure. Seven boys are standing on the shores of Birsay, waiting for the tide to ebb enough for them to cross over to their school at the monastery on the Brough of Birsay. Magnus could be any one of the seven boys. Each is given equal attention: one has freckles and carries a harp; another is tall, red-headed and confident.

Magnus only distinguishes himself from the other boys when he is missing from the group that enters the church. Magnus is the small, dark-haired boy, who stays outside in the sunlight, trying to rescue an injured seal on the rocks. When called inside, he responds: "It's too dark in there... I won't come inside today." (*Magnus*, 37)

Despite the fact that he is behaving in a compassionate way, by helping the seal, very little effort is given to endear Magnus to the reader. He seems to be a very strange and odd young man. There doesn't appear to be anything wrong with the other boys, or any reason why Magnus should shun their company. They appear variously nervous, or thoughtful as they enter their new school for the first time. Magnus sets himself apart by hiding away – we don't know whether he shares the anxiety of his fellow pupils or not.

The poem that ends the chapter again gives us a hint of events to come, but is very different from the "Bridal Songs" of Chapter One. It is recited by Magnus himself, and takes the form of a blunt statement ("My name is Magnus" (*Magnus*, 40)). It also contains a foreshadowing of Magnus's death in the seal's injury: "There's a wound in your head." (*Magnus*, 40) It is as though Magnus only really

exists as a name, and in the deed that he will perform, when he surrenders his life. The vulnerability and complex emotions of the other boys are missing in him.

The next two chapters, "Song of Battle" and "The Temptations" concentrate on the main body of Magnus's life, and the five temptations that he faces. The first of these temptations occurs when Magnus is invited to join the King of Norway on an invasion of the Menai Strait. Magnus is given the great honour of being cup-bearer to the King. Again, Magnus distinguishes himself from his companions by behaving in a way that seems not so much virtuous, as odd.

Magnus refuses to bear arms against the Welsh. Alone among the whole northern army, Magnus goes into battle armed only with a religious book – a psalter. He stands in the bow of the ship, as arrows pass over his head, or glance off his armour, loudly reading passages of scripture. His courage is undoubtedly admirable and grand. But from a modern day, twenty-first century perspective, Magnus surely could have been a better pacifist by staying at home. His reasons for reading scripture are unclear, and his preaching does not seem to alter the course of the either army, or affect the battle or the soldiers in any obvious way.

Moreover, we are never given any sense of personal conflict from Magnus. He is like a statue to us. Instead all of our emotional alliance in the chapter rests, as it did in the first chapter, with the peasant Mans. Recruited as an oarsman in the Norse army, Mans sits in the bottom of the boat, sweating, bewildered and petrified. We are told exactly what Mans is thinking: "Mans thought of Hild, and his few acres and Prem's loom and ale-kirn." (*Magnus*, 43) He is horrified when he sees arrows flying above, and the strange king with his silver mask, shouting in a foreign tongue. A lot of what is happening, literally as well as figuratively, goes straight over his head.

Like Mans, we feel as though something is going on that we don't quite comprehend. With all of the ceremonial talk, fighting and deaths occurring above him, we remain firmly grounded with Mans, whose behaviour we can understand and even laugh at. When most of the fighting is over, and Mans finally decides to join in the affray, the result is comic rather than heroic: "He gave a wild yell and leapt into the Welsh ship with his axe raised. He slipped in a pool of blood. He fell on his backside among a strewment of corpses." (*Magnus*, 50)

The next chapter, "The Temptations" is far more complex. As readers, we are suddenly at sea, much in the sense that Mans was in the last chapter, but at the same time, there is the sense that we are being taught something "wise and formal". (*OT*, 19) Our grounding, with Mans and Hild and the familiar figures of Birsay, is taken away. We are left with Magnus, who up until now has been very much a stranger to us, literally on foreign ground, in the palaces and Cathedrals of Norway, "as cold and green and silent as the heart of an iceberg." (*Magnus*, 65)

It is as though the entertainment is over, and the time for serious contemplation has begun. The second and third temptations of Magnus have to do with feelings of physical desire. First, he must not allow lust to rule his behaviour; if it proves too much of a temptation he must go into a church, dip his fingers in holy water, and pray. Secondly, he must not consummate his marriage to Ingerth. He must remain a virgin all his life. Brown's language seems foreign and imprecise. Where Mans spoke of sexual lust openly and with gusto ("Damn you, Sven, I'm not as randy as that." (*Magnus*, 3)) Magnus's desires are veiled and formalised: "the body of Magnus took a first kindling, blurrings of warmth and light. A slow flush went over his body." (*Magnus*, 67)

The path that Magnus must follow is, to a modern reader, bizarre to say the least. For a start, the human race would die out, if we all emulated Magnus and remained celibate throughout our lives. More than that, in following these edicts, Magnus does not seem attractive. He seems prudish and antisocial. Magnus's best friend, Hold Ragnarson, tries to break down the barrier that is created by Magnus's dedication to these rules, but Magnus himself is unable to explain clearly why he must remain celibate: "Hold Ragnarson smiled at the deep sincerity of his friend…He smiled with simulated understanding, but in truth he was more perplexed than ever." (*Magnus*, 65)

As the chapter proceeds, the voice of the storyteller slowly changes. Magnus becomes less of a two-dimensional, fairy tale character, and is a much more complex figure, with friends, fears, doubts and frustrations. Ironically, as we gradually come to realise, what Magnus is trying to achieve is not to be a complex human being at all. What he must become is a symbol – a representation of a state of being that is simple, idealised and perfect. Brown writes:

> Poetry, art, music thrive on these constants. They gather into themselves a huge scattered diversity of experience and reduce them to patterns; so that, for example, in a poem all voyages – past, present, and future – become The Voyage, and all battles The Battle, and all feasts The Feast…The symbol becomes a jewel enduring and flaming throughout history…Men handle the jewel and know themselves enriched. (*Magnus*, 130)

What does become apparent at this point in the novel, which makes Magnus imminently more likeable as a fictional character, is that this state of being is remarkably difficult for Magnus to achieve. In a moment of self-doubt, Magnus says: "Men are imprisoned in their names…I do not like my name. It means 'great, powerful'. I don't want to be great and powerful." (*Magnus*, 38)

What exactly Magnus must achieve is revealed to us through a figure, envisioned by Magnus, called The Keeper of the Loom. This figure speaks with Brown's "third voice" – the authoritative voice whose words and symbols carry layer upon layer of meaning. There are three different coats, The Keeper of the Loom says, that apply to Orkney. The first is the coat of "diurnal hand-to-mouth existence" (*OT*, 77) that was stitched together by all the people of Orkney. Everyone – peasant, earl and bishop – applies an equal stitch: "The simplest bit of social discourse – a conversation at a crossroads, the selling of a pig, a kiss in the darkness – puts in another stitch, does its bit in holding the tribe together and ensuring its survival." (*OT*, 76) Ideally, if everything runs smoothly, and every stitch is carefully and correctly sewn, the coat will provide adequate shelter for every person on the islands. In reality: "It is at best a frayed and improvised thing, always coming unstuck, that never adequately covers the whole commonwealth." (*OT*, 76)

The second is the coat-of-state, that is worn by the Earl of Orkney. It is called a "storied garment" (*OT*, 101) brightly coloured, whose every detail and jewel tells of the people of Orkney. It is a great, but also a very heavy coat to wear, and would be very inconvenient to wear every day. But on special occasions – feast days and visits by neighbouring royalty – it can be worn proudly, to show off the splendour and grandeur of Orkney. There is only one of these coats. So with two Earls striving to fit into it at once, it risks being torn straight down the middle, ruined and of no use to anyone.

The third coat is pure white, representing the immaculate Seamless Garment that sanctifies its wearer. It is this coat, the Keeper tells Magnus, that the two of them need to weave. One stitch wrongly placed or coloured could ruin the whole of the fabric. But by keeping the thread white, this coat could be a truly remarkable,

exceptional garment. There is the sense that, with this coat completed, the other two coats – the coat-of-state and the coat-of-the-people – would themselves be renewed and made whole once more.

When Magnus refused to carry an axe, on the war-cruise to Wales, the Keeper of the Loom tells him: "The first white threads are in the loom now, Magnus. Your prayers, prayers uttered on your behalf, right actions, blessings put upon you, holy observances, penances, pilgrimages, all will be woven into the immaculate garment." (*Magnus*, 60) Looked at through the perspective of The Keeper of the Loom, Magnus's ambition carries unquestionable authority, grace and power. The temptations Magnus has had to face seemed odd, antiquated, and irrelevant. But looked at with belief in the words of The Keeper of the Loom, they now seem to carry a purpose, that is still beyond our understanding, but is important and compelling nonetheless.

The fourth temptation Magnus faces is easy to resist. He refuses the offer from the King of Norway to help him overpower Hakon and become sole Earl of Orkney. Magnus will not become a murderer. Once again Magnus succeeds by being passive and pure. The last temptation is much harder. He is offered a chance to become a monk on the island of Eynhallow, and spend the rest of his life in solitude and contemplation. On the face of it, it is difficult to see why Magnus should refuse this offer. He seems perfectly suited to the sparse monastic lifestyle. He could remain unblemished and avoid temptations altogether. Orkney's civil war would end, if Magnus retired from the battlefield. And in many ways, Orkney would be better off without Magnus as Earl. Several times, Hakon has proved a more able ruler than Magnus, decisively settling legal disputes that Magnus shows no interest in.

The life of an Earl is often at odds with that of a spiritual Saint. An Earl must ensure that the peasants pay their laird a fixed amount of rent, and make sure that harsh penalties are invoked if workers try to get out of their payment. An Earl must produce an heir, not practise celebacy. Magnus seems to be drawn to two worlds at the same time. Working to piece together the immaculate garment is a full-time, life-long commitment, and cannot be neglected. But if Magnus turns his back on his duties as Earl, he may damage the people and the structure of Orkney to an extent where even an "immaculate garment", an idealised symbol, cannot draw all of the threads of state and of daily existence back together.

The devastation that occurs, as Magnus remains uncertain about his course of action, avoiding the game of statesmanship, is revealed in the next chapter of the novel, "Scarecrow". Once again, the storytelling mileu switches back to that of Mans and Hild, but this time the familiarity and safety is gone. Man's and Hild's pasture has been trampled by the warring horsemen, the remaining peasants have been driven into their houses with windows barred and shuttered, and the mill has been burned to the ground. Because Mans and Hild's lives have been portrayed so realistically, and so much like our own lives, we can easily share in their feelings of helplessness and anger.

A scarecrow stands watching over the fields, but, like Magnus, he seems indifferent. As much as Mans rails against the soldiers to the scarecrow, the wooden figure remains stiff, ineffectual and silent. A pair of gypsies pass by and take the tattered sack coat from the Scarecrow's back, where at least it might serve some use to wrap a few cans. In his passivity, Magnus has done Orkney no service. Like the scarecrow, his coat (the now-tattered coat-of-state) has symbolically been taken from him, as he does not use it himself.

If we have become more understanding of Magnus's position, through getting a glimpse of his humanity and his ambitions, clearly Mans and Hild have not. Instead of increased unity, there appears to be more division than ever before, between the warring armies, between peasants and gentry, and between idealistic fairy tale and harsh reality. Clearly some action must be taken, to reconcile these divergent views. A peace conference is arranged on the island of Egilsay, where the two Earls will meet face to face for the first time in several years.

Even this attempt at communication is sabotaged from the outset. Magnus suspects that Hakon intends to kill him, and this knowledge is confirmed when Hakon brings eight ships to the meeting, rather than the prearranged two.

Magnus decides not to flee the island, but to face Hakon, at the prearranged time, alone and unarmed. Preparing for his own death, Magnus is again very much in a symbolic realm. The symbolism is taken from a biblical source: Christ's parable of the marriage feast in *Matthew 22*. As Magnus meditates in the Egilsay Church, an old priest recounts the parable where "Christ compares the celestial kingdom to a marriage feast, and how it is good for a guest to wear to the feast his wedding garment lest, having some inferior garment on, he is shamed and put out into the darkness." (*Magnus*, 126-7)

As Alan Bold has pointed out, Magnus's decision can be problematic, from a non-Catholic standpoint. If we agree with the idea that Magnus's death is a creative act, we are essentially giving support to a large part of Catholic belief. Bold writes: "I cannot see anything particularly saintly in a man being murdered – and that is what happens in the novel for a non-Catholic reader."[lxiii]

On the other hand, I think it is entirely possible to see Magnus solely within the world created by the story itself, and look at his actions solely from the effect

they have within that storytelling realm. Brown repeatedly tells us "Art must be of *use*." (*OT*, 130) It is not Magnus's death that is creative; it is the effect that death has on the other characters, on the reader, and in the case of the dramatic renditions of the story, on the audience. At this point in the novel, I believe, Magnus steps away from the realistic character, that we glimpsed in the earlier "Temptations" chapter of Magnus. Brown's writing does suggest that a death has taken place: "the two candles on the altar hollowed out the man's cheeks and temples, and made pits of his eyes, and dissolved in light the russet fringe that circled his face, so that it seemed that man had left his life and was already gone halfway along the road of the skull." (*Magnus*, 126) But that death is not a tragic one. Something indefinable remains. From a rational, realistic point-of-view, Magnus's behaviour and attitude is impossible to understand.

The tale of Magnus is a fairy tale of renewal, as much as was the children's story *The Two Fiddlers*, where Storm Kolson was stolen away by the mystical trows. When he walks out for his final confrontation with Hakon, Magnus is "as merry as though he had been bidden to a feast." (*ACFM*, 8) We are forced to accept Magnus as someone not just human, but a figure out of an Orcadian myth and saga, and a Fable with a greater, universal significance.

Having established that the act is superhuman, and beyond the realm of everyday experience, Brown suddenly switches tone entirely, recording the arrival of Magnus and Hakon on Egilsay through the voice of a twentieth century journalist, interviewing the islanders in the form of a news report from the island of Egilsay. There is very little understanding from these islanders about what is actually going on. Everything is superficial and sensationalistic: "They [the boats] must have cost a fine lot of money." (*Magnus,* 121) says one crofter. "I thought I recognised one of

the men from seeing his photo in the papers, Magnus Erlendson, but I couldn't be sure." (*Magnus*, 122) reports another woman. Most of the crofters and fishermen are concerned only with the effect these visitors might have on their own lives. It is as though we are back on the island of Hellya, in *Greenvoe*, in the final days of its decline.

It is at this point that the influence of Brecht on Brown's writing is most apparent. Knowing the story of Magnus (and most of the population of Orkney, where Saint Magnus's Cathedral lies, does know that story, or at least its basic outlines) we know that he will be killed, by Hakon's cook Lilolf, with an axe blow to the head. Our identification with Magnus, or with any of the characters, is riven as we are forced to look at them from an outside perspective.

In the words of Martin Esslin, what had seemed a familiar story, is now revealed to us "in a new and strange light"[lxiv] We are forced to look at the situation from a different, unfamiliar perspective. Alan Bold writes: "Brown does not want to involve the reader cathartically in the drama of the killing as make him reflect on the matter, make him consider it analytically as an event of timeless significance."[lxv]

In a second sudden switch, the death of Magnus is related to a very specific event, but one that is far removed from the main storyline in eleventh century Orkney. Brown transfers the actual killing of Magnus to one occurring in a Second World War concentration camp. The man being killed is no longer Magnus, but is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who was hanged by the Nazis for preaching pacifism and sheltering Jews and Gypsies in his church.[lxvi] The camp cook, Lilolf, who bears no personal resentment against the priest, is forced by a group of drunken Nazi officers to perform the killing. Bonhoeffer is hanged from a butcher's hook, as though he were nothing more than a carcass of beef. With the events of Nazism more

"real in our minds (perhaps even more so in 1971 than today) than those of medieval Orkney, the killing acquires layer upon layer of cultural significance and personal associations. The horrors of the action become suddenly more pertinent, and the killing far more horrific and sickening.

But once again, Brown refuses to pin down the killing to any one specific place and time. Magnus himself sees the event as a timeless one, as he walks toward the hill where his death will occur:

> Two images came unbidden into [Magnus's] mind. He saw himself in the mask of a beast dragged to a primitive stone. A more desolate image followed, from some far reach of time: he saw a man walking the length of a bare white ringing corridor to a small cube-shaped interior full of hard light; in that hideous clarity the man would die. The recurrence of pattern-within-flux touched him, momentarily, with wonder. (*Magnus*, 131)

It is perhaps at this point where *Magnus*, Brown's novel, reveals its limitations. On the written page, it seems as though none of the participants is really aware of the magnitude of the act they are performing. It can be read coldly and analytically.

This is why, I believe, Brown felt compelled to turn to drama, on three separate occasions, to express the significance of Magnus's death. Watching the killing of Magnus occurring onstage is very different from hearing about it, from a written account. It means understanding the event personally, rather than from a distance. As an audience, we share in the murder, and the horror of that act becomes a communal, ritual event. Everyone within the theatre, a large group of people, is suddenly taking in the same feeling of horror and anticipation.

The masks we normally wear to keep people at a distance are removed. At the same time, the mask of the story itself, that made it *only* about medieval Orkney, is torn away. The different voices – the realist, the long-ago storyteller, and the symbolic teacher – all come together, or rather, their differences suddenly become

irrelevant. The story itself suddenly reveals that we are tied together, and all essentially the same. The killing does not belong only to the peasants, or the noblemen of Orkney. We are all responsible for the death of Magnus. And we can all perhaps be made a little bit wiser by the experience.

In *The Loom of Light*, Brown's first play about Magnus, the effect of the dissolving of barriers is not imaginary but has a very immediate, profound effect on daily events. The war comes to an end. The Earl is able to concentrate on governing the islands, and the peasants including Mans and Hild gather in an abundant harvest. From the moment of Magnus's death, the coat-of-state and the coat-of-the-people are repaired, just as The Keeper of the Loom has promised. Brown writes: "And something happened from the moment of the axe-stroke: what T.S.Eliot calls 'the intersection of the timeless with time' ... It is as if a bond between Earl Magnus (soon to be canonised) and Earl Hakon – a kind of peace and good governance – was created by the martyrdom. The axe-stroke had made the fabric whole." (*ACFM*, 9)

This moment of timelessness is both universal and particular. The final scene of *Magnus* is taken virtually word for word from "Martyr" and *The Loom of Light*. It is about two old tinkers: Jock and Blind Mary. The tinkers are always present, always on the move, and always dispassionately observing the world around them. They could very well be the same two tinkers, Ikey and Sal, that travel through the centuries in *A Spell for Green Corn*. They are a permanent part of the landscape. For Brown, they are also one of the elements that make the story of Magnus specifically Orcadian.

Brown is not writing for the same audience as a twelfth century Icelandic sagaman. He is writing for a twentieth century Orcadian audience. And, he says,

"No saga-man would have written about folk like Jock and Mary, two vagrants who wander about the shores and burns" (*OT*, 87)

At the point where *Magnus* ends (as does *The Loom of Light*) Brown's fourth reworking of the story of Magnus, *A Celebration for Magnus*, begins. Though first left in the hillside by the murderers to rot, Magnus's body is taken ceremoniously into the Church of Egilsay, and the women of the island bring candles to honour the dead Earl. Not long afterward, Magnus's body is brought to the Brough of Birsay, to be buried with due ceremony among the former lords of Orkney. As more and more people begin to believe in his sainthood, Magnus grows and grows in importance, becoming a legendary figure. Finally, the building of the great St. Magnus Cathedral commences, in the prospering Orkney village of Kirkwall, and Magnus's remains are buried within the cathedral walls

Moreso than any of the previous stories, *A Celebration for Magnus*, is written for a specific group of people, in a specific place and time. The performers are the people of Orkney and the original performance took place in St Magnus Cathedral 850 years after the original dedication of Magnus had taken place. As its title suggests, *A Celebration for Magnus* is very much a *celebration.* It is not primarily about death and martyrdom, but is about the feast of life. It consists of songs, dances and music. And it allowed its participants to be, temporarily, larger than life, taking part in a torchlit procession through St. Magnus's Church, and becoming a living, breathing part of the story itself.

In many ways, *A Celebration for Magnus* could be considered a minor artistic work. Its lyrics are simple and direct – its storyline is very straightforward. Brown's short stories, such as "The Story Teller", are in many ways far more thought-provoking. They illustrate how valuable, irreplaceable, complex and fragile the voice

of a storyteller can be, in the past and in the present. His novels, such as *Greenvoe*, beautifully show us the diversity of voices found in a small island community, demonstrating the destruction that occurs when we all become lost in our own small worlds. Plays such as *A Spell for Green Corn* allow Brown's audience to take part, temporarily, in a shared creation. But that creation is all too ethereal. Again, Brown's writing leaves us with a great deal to think about. *A Celebration for Magnus* is not about introspection in any sense. Like a Viking Saga of old, it is heroic and grand. It allows those taking part to love their islands, to feel proud, and to be a part of a living, powerful voice.

In the same way that Magnus himself grows in stature as the performance proceeds, the *Celebration* begins small, with a few specific groups, (the "Chorus of Eynhallow Monks" and "Chorus of the Women of Egilsay"), then grows to encompass more and more of the populace of Orkney: the "Chorus of the Sick and Infirm", the "Chorus of the Labourers". Each group gives something of themselves to the new saint. The final song is the "Chorus of the Children". Even the smallest, least significant members of Orkney's population join in the dedication to Magnus, (I'm Ragna, a girl. I bring a few marigolds./ I'm Sigurd, a boy. I have a little boat / From a piece of driftwood." (69)) bringing the whole of Orkney together, restating the unity that Brown has found in the medieval tale.

In the end, the storyteller, George Mackay Brown, succeeds because he allows his voice to belong, not to himself alone, but to all the people of Orkney. Schoene writes that one of the most important functions, for a writer, is to:

> remould popular myths from the past with which people are already familiar and thus find it easy to identify... Idiosyncratic or esoteric works of art are bound to fail as communal identifiers because they have abandoned tradition for the sake of visionary, aesthetic ideals, mistaking innovation for initiative.[lxvii]

Brown's storytelling voice belongs specifically to Orkney, rooted directly in that region's history. It is a community piece, but by revealing also the universality that lies beneath the mask of a specific locale, the Fable that lies beneath the Story is just as relevant and marvellous to all people, anywhere. The *Celebration* does not shut out non-Orcadians – it just tells, and shows us how glorious the voice of Orkney truly is.

By being so specifically Orcadian, Brown's writing allows Orkney's past to come alive, preserving a story from long ago, and giving it life, beauty and relevance in the present day. As James Ritchie writes, Brown's writing is very much like the childhood games played by the schoolchildren in *Greenvoe*, unlimited in scope, but allowing those children to become a part of one another's particular worlds. When it is at its most successful, his writing recalls the storytelling forms of many centuries, when those stories served to bind a community together, not serve an individual, enclosed in his own thoughts and desires:

> They are, first and foremost, rituals. Nowadays, in the name of freedom, we suspect anything to do with ritual. Yet it is ritual that releases every man out of the lonely prison of himself. The joyous dancing rituals of childhood…first teach the child that he is a member of a community, part of an order of existence, part of a deeper meaning, and that all is a dance.[lxviii]

George Mackay Brown was not only a writer, he was a storyteller, and equally important, a member of the community of Orkney. Storytelling was a way of life for him – not an abstract ideal. Recognising the importance of preserving his area's art forms, Brown was one of the founders of Orkney's annual St. Magnus Festival, that celebrates its 25th anniversary this year.

The first piece performed at the festival, in St. Magnus's church, was *The Martyrdom of Saint Magnus*, a chamber opera by the renowned composer Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, based on Brown's writings about Magnus. It came about after Davies met and befriended Brown on a visit to Orkney. Shortly thereafter, Davies left his home in London and settled in a remote croft in the valley of Rackwick, Hoy, inspired by reading about the valley in *An Orkney Tapestry*. The festival became an annual event. In the words of Davies, it was created with "the idea of returning some of the good Orkney had done for me."[lxix]

Since the first festival, Davies and Brown have collaborated on numerous performance pieces that celebrated the culture and storytelling traditions of Orkney, (Davies also contributed the music for *A Celebration for Magnus* in 1986) and Davies has continued to look to Brown's work for inspiration since the author's death in 1996.

The St. Magnus Festival, comprising visual art, drama, literature and music, is now an annual event in Orkney every midsummer, and attracts many of Davies' respected peers: composers, musicians, singers, writers and dancers from around the world. Orchestras such as the Royal Philharmonic and the Scottish Symphony Orchestra are regular visitors, and guest instrumentalists have included Isaac Stern and Vladimir Ashkenasy. Some of the works performed are about Orkney, and some are not – some are reworkings of traditional stories, and some are entirely new. Brown's personal involvement with St Magnus has included chosing and inviting all of the festivel poets. Those who have made the trek to Orkney, to read in the tiny Piers Arts Centre in Stromness, include Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Norman MacCaig, Liz Lochhead and Iain Crichton Smith.

What makes the St Magnus Festival very different from many "highbrow" arts festivals is the community involvement, not only behind the scenes, but on stage

alongside internationally acclaimed performers. Local music groups have performed – alone and in collaboration with professional orchestras; "A Johnmas Foy", the part of the festival that celebrates Orkney's storytelling heritage through spoken word performances, is an integral part of the festival; and Davies has composed a dozen musical works specifically to be performed by Orcadian children.

Since the festival's inception, George Mackay Brown has been its dominant literary presence (although Brown himself has never appeared on stage, hating to perform in public). His works have permeated dozens of events. In addition to composing and compiling pieces for "A Johnmas Foy", Brown has composed numerous plays specifically for the festival: *Jock and Blind Mary*, *Island of the Saints* and *Witch*, to name a few. Following his death, the author's voice continues to infuse the midsummer celebration. In 2000, for example, Alan Plater's community production of Brown's *Greenvoe*, after debuting at St Magnus, went on to appear at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. With its amateur cast of Orcadian adults and children, it became one of the most acclaimed plays of the Fringe (the only performance to receive "five stars" in *The Scotsman* that year.)

In fact, the reason that the St Magnus Festival conveys such vitality is perhaps because it shares the same dedication to Orkney's past as Brown's writing. For Hugh Macdonald, director of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, part of the reason the Festival has become so successful is precisely because of its emphasis on a specific locale:

> Are the words 'community' and 'international' a contradiction in terms when applied to an arts festival? Not in Orkney. We love it for its refusal to underestimate its audience...We love it because it reminds us in the most fundamental way how *music* can connect with *people*, and how absolutely essential that is to all of our lives.[lxx]

Brown's legacy to his community is an impressive array of printed material: books, poems, stories, novels... But Brown himself said, it is not words, books and figures that are important, but the event of bringing them to life, for one person or for many. It is "a word blossoming as legend, poem, story, secret, that holds a community together and gives a meaning to its life."[lxxi] Ron Ferguson, former minister of St Magnus Cathedral, describes the effect of the St Magnus Festival in terms that Brown would have hoped for:

> The St Magnus Festival rightly emphasises the fact that culture is not some separate thing out there, disjoined from the experience of ordinary people. At least it shouldn't be. The arts are about the celebration of life itself, about inspiration, about new ways of seeing. For a child to perform – sometimes with his or her own parents – alongside actors or musicians of the highest calibre, in venues ranging from the street to the cathedral, is a wondrous thing.[lxxii]

Alan Plater, director of *Greenvoe*, similarly feels that the lesson of the St Magnus Festival is that it shows us the importance of cultural heroes, stories and songs, reminding us that they must remain a part of day to day life. Plater says: "The St Magnus Festival reminds us that Art isn't a side show but is central to our lives: that in the long run, the people who matter are the singers of songs and the tellers of tales."[lxxiii]

In Orkney, I think, George Mackay Brown will be remembered as much more than a writer. In books, poems, performances and songs, he is a storyteller who made Orkney's cultural traditions more alive, perhaps, than ever before. Orkney itself, within the past few decades, has become a focal point for artists, as a place to visit, and for many, to live. For many Orcadians, Brown has resurrected an interest in their islands' heritage. Hand in hand with traditional stories, that artistic voice of Orkney speaks to those who live there, but also to those who visit, in person or through Brown's poems and tales. Events such as Brown's *Celebration for Magnus,* and the St Magnus Festival, have allowed many renewed voices to emerge from the root

source of Orkney's history. And they prove that the Voice of Orkney, old and wise, is yet contemporary, vibrant and alive.

Notes:

Chapter One:
[i] Fleming, 612.
[ii] Fleming, 617.
[iii] Brown, *OT*, 2.
[iv] Brown, *ATK,* 133.
[v] Brown, *OT,* 2
[vi] Bold, 6-7.
[vii] Bold, 8.
[viii] Brown, in Bold, 5.
[ix] Bold, 3.
[x] Bold, 15.
[xi] Bold, 9.
[xii] Yamada, et al., 1.
[xiii] Yamada, 16
[xiv] Yamada, 21.
[xv] Yamada, 18.
[xvi] Annwyn, 156.
[xvii] Ricouer, in Schoene, 24.
[xviii] Schoene, 64.
[xix] Schoene, 32.
[xx] McGrath, 69.
[xxi] Esslin, 140.
[xxii] Brown, in Bold, 110.
[xxiii] Annwyn, 155.
[xxiv] Brown, *OT*, 19.
[xxv] Brown, *R&D*, 29.

Chapter Two:
[xxvi] Brown, *APS,* 12.
[xxvii] Scott, 32.
[xxviii] Brown, *APS,* 270-71.
[xxix] Schoene, 18.
[xxx] Schoene, 8.
[xxxi] Steiner, 22.
[xxxii] Brown, in Annwyn, 155.
[xxxiii] Welham, 14.
[xxxiv] Brown, *Andrina*, 32.
[xxxv] Brown, *APO*, 110-11.
[xxxvi] Brown, *OT*, 136.
[xxxvii] Brown, *OT*, 136-38.

Chapter Three:
[xxxviii] Brown, *APO,* 110-11.
[xxxix] Brown, *APO*, 112.
[xl] Brown, in Pacey, 67.
[xli] Brown, *OT,* 130.
[xlii] Joseph Campbell, 220.
[xliii] Ricouer, in Schoene, 27.
[xliv] Ricouer, in Schoene, 27.
[xlv] Conn, 12
[xlvi] Esslin, 131.
[xlvii] Esslin, 131.
[xlviii] Esslin, 136.
[xlix] Donald, Campbell, 3.

Chapter Four:
[l] Scott, 32-33.

[li] Borges, in Foucault, 117.
[lii] Schoene, 232.
[liii] Schoene, 236.
[liv] Schoene, 146.
[lv] Foucault, 177.

Chapter Five:
[lvi] Brown, *APS,* 4.
[lvii] Brown, "The Way of Literature", 585.
[lviii] Hall, 12.
[lix] Bold, 120.
[lx] Brown, *Chapman*, 23.
[lxi] Bold, 102.
[lxii] Brown, in Pacey, 67.
[lxiii] Bold, 106.
[lxiv] Esslin, 136.
[lxv] Bold, 106.
[lxvi] Bold, 108.
[lxvii] Schoene, 290.
[lxviii] Ritchie, 42.
[lxix] Davies, in Beasant, ii.
[lxx] Macdonald, in Beasant, 242.
[lxxi] Brown, in Annwyn, 155.

[lxxii] Ferguson, in Beasant, 234.
[lxxiii] Plater, in Beasant, 243.

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