Making it New: Imagism and George Mackay Brown's Runic Poetry

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> I am really quite modern, you know,
> despite my affecting the ancients
>   Ezra Pound, 'Redondillas'
>
> I can so carve and colour the runes
>   'Sayings of the High One', *The Poetic Edda*

Ezra Pound believed that in order to 'make it new', one had 'to resuscitate / The dead art of poetry'.[1] With an even bolder sense of paradox, the battle cries of Hugh MacDiarmid – 'back to Dunbar' and 'Not Traditions—Precedents' – locate the possibility of renewal in the remote past. Very much a product of the Scottish Renaissance, George Mackay Brown also looked to the dead for inspiration, drawing on ancient texts such as *Njáls saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Orkneyinga saga*, translations of skaldic poetry (structurally complex court poetry from the Viking Age), and Scotland's rich ballad and song culture in order to re-inspire what he saw as an Orkney community beginning to suffer from an inhibiting case of cultural and historical amnesia. Although Brown did not try his hand at the most demanding skaldic meter known as *dróttkvætt*, due to his belief in its being 'impossibly difficult' to reproduce in English, he tried to 'wrench skaldic verse into a shape acceptable to modern readers', which, as we will see, meant reproducing A.B. Taylor's translations of skaldic poetry from his 1937 edition of *Orkneyinga Saga* into a distinctly modern, minimalist style.[2] As Julian D'Arcy argues in *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen* (1996), Brown created this minimalist style in his work by blending 'the laconic and aphoristic diction of his Norse inheritance with traditional folklore structures.'[3]

This paper explores Brown's experiments with ancient runic poetry and kennings (skaldic metaphors). Although runic inscriptions – messages or spells from the early Germanic alphabet that were chiselled into rock or bone by the Scandinavians and Anglo-Saxons – can be found in such places as Maeshowe and the Unstan cairn on Orkney, it is more probable given the

structure of his own rune poems that Brown found inspiration in the ancient Anglo-Saxon, Icelandic, and Norwegian *Rune Poems* gathered together and reprinted by Bruce Dickins in *Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples* (1915). The outcome, whether conscious or not, was a collection of brief, static poems realising similar effects as those of the early Imagist movement. By using the well-defined structure of parataxis found in the Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon *Rune Poems*, a number of Brown's rune poems adhere to Pound's definition of the interpretive metaphor, which is the fundamental structural component of the archetypal Imagist poem 'In a Station of the Metro'.

This paper examines Brown's kennings and links them to Pound's use of the ideogram, also central to Pound's Imagist philosophy. Brown's inclusion of runic and haiku-like poems in *The Year of the Whale* (1965) and his poetry collections of the 1970s can be seen as a contribution to similar experiments in terse poetics of this period, such as Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Glasgow Beasts, an a Burd* (1961). Brown also studied the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins as a postgraduate at Edinburgh University and may have been inspired by Hopkins' experiments with Germanic poetic forms and conventions, such as the diction and alliterative phonic values of Anglo-Saxon poetry and Old Norse rhyme schemes. As well as poems identified by Brown as being imitations of runic poetry in *Poems New and Selected* (1971) and *Fishermen with Ploughs* (1971), I will look at a number of miscellaneous poems that, although not so identified as imitations, do correspond to the formal structure of the original *Rune Poems* and Brown's own runic poetry. Like Pound's early Imagist verse, Brown's runic poetry displays a concern with filtering language down to a fundamental economy of expression. Adhering to the Imagist principle of 'direct treatment', Brown created poems that present 'an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' via 'direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective'.[4]

As Réné Taupin observed in his 1929 doctoral thesis, the originality of Imagism came in 'seizing at a single blow, in the fullest vitality, the image, the fusion of reality in words.'[5] As Taupin's English translators explain,

> Imagist poetry aimed at complete objectivity, leaving out all rational and moral comment, for behind was the belief that only the image communicates meaning. The sparer, starker, more strict the image, the better the poem.[6]

This emphasis on detachment, sparseness, and a heightened visual intensity is the essential feature of Brown's runic poetry as well as his 'translations' of skaldic verse. His ability to describe an image with curt objectivity is most beautifully displayed within a few of the poetic segments of 'Haiku: For the Holy Places'. Here is 'Fishing Bird':

Fishing Bird

It waits, rock-fast, wind-flung
Wing – wind – enthirling

One flash from the sea's hoard.[7]

Although this poem is obviously a haiku, it is worth noting that its structure – the identification of an objective image followed by a laconic poetic description – closely resembles the structure of the original *Rune Poems* and Brown's own runic poetry. This poem, along with many of Brown's rune poems such as 'Fish and Corn' from 'Runes from Holy Island' and 'Barn Dance' from 'Runes from the Island of Horses', is an example of Brown's ability to render an image in stark language and stands comparison with H.D.'s exemplary Imagist poem 'Oread':

Whirl up, sea –
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us,

cover us with your pools of fir.[8]

Both poems are Imagist in the general sense that they are short, direct, and vivid. But both of them are also, as Pound would say, 'endowed with energy'.[9] H.D.'s poem generates its energy by its use of forceful verbs: 'whirl', 'splash', 'hurl', and 'cover'. An imperative mood is created by having each of these verbs establish a forceful trochaic opening at the beginning of the majority of its lines, culminating each time in crescendo that, in true Imagistic form, suggests simultaneously the whip and sway of the tops of forests in the wind and a surging, crashing sea. A similar use of sound and stress is used in Brown's poem to evoke the rise and sudden plunge of a fishing bird. The stress placed on the repetition of the consonant 'w' in 'wind' and 'wing' in the first and second lines, separated by dashes that cause us to sound each word with extra force, evokes the wind being pushed under the bird's outstretched wings as it gradually ascends and hangs in the sky before the verb 'enthirling', with its amphibrach stress, evokes the sudden dip of the bird as it twirls and plunges towards the sea.

As well as the first Imagist principle of 'direct treatment', the above-mentioned poem, as well as the majority of Brown's rune poems, adhere to the second Imagist principle: 'To use absolutely no word that did not contribute towards the presentation' ('A Retrospect', 4). This concern with honing language down to a colder, minimalist style is apparent throughout Brown's work. As well as the curt fragments of runic verse, Brown took inspiration for his prose and poetic writing from

the larger rhetorical style of the sagas and the short, stabbing lines of skaldic poetry. 'It is good, for certain types of writing,' Brown states in his 1997 autobiography, 'to use as few words as possible. The structure and form of the saga stories is magnificent. I think I have learned from them the importance of pure shape.'[10] His own versions of Taylor's translations of the skaldic poems in *Orkneyinga Saga* exemplify this minimalist style. Here, for example, is Taylor:

> We watch o'er the sea-steed
> When o'er the stout gunwhale
> The billow breaks wildly.
> The duty is done.
> While the lazy land-lubber
> Sleeps by some maiden
> Soft-skinned and kind,
> Over my shoulder
> I gaze towards Crete.

And Brown:

> Night. Sheets of salt.
> Armond on watch.
> A heave and wash of lights
> From the island.
> The lads of Crete
> Toss in hot tumbled linen.
> This poet on watch
> Cold, burning, unkissed. (*An Orkney Tapestry*, 2-3)

Brown's minimalist style and use of imagery transforms Taylor's rather archaic translation into something far more fresh and striking. If he was looking for a medium that would concentrate his language down to its most essential features, runic poetry gave him that structure. Indeed, he explains the essential function of runic poetry in one of his rune poems from 'The Stations of the Cross':

> *Rune*
> Obliterator
> of a thousand questing mouths
> and sevenfold silence still. (*Collected Poems*, 189)

'A poem exists in its purity', says Brown. 'Silence is best: poetry is forever striving for the unattainable perfection of silence.'[11] If Brown was looking for the perfect poetic form to present this idea, the axe poems of the Vikings, carved as they were into rock, gave the impression of

something enduring, true, and eternal. In short, they are those 'words cut oot i' the stane' that MacDiarmid's speaker in 'The Eemis Stane' cannot comprehend due to the interfering and erosive forces of 'the fug o' fame / An' history's hazelraw'.[12]

The dichotomy between conceptual abstraction and subjective intuition – between Positivism and the Bergsonian 'hidden realm of mental life' that flows in a flux of sensations underneath the accepted grid of surface understanding (4) – had a productive effect on the poetry and prose of the early Modernists. In his superb poem 'Erat Hora', for example, Pound beautifully captures and expresses an idiosyncratic moment of intensity from as ordinary an image as a woman turning her head:

> And then she turned.
> And, as the ray of sun on hanging flowers
> Fades when the wind hath lifted them aside,
> Went swiftly from me. (*Selected Poems*, 14)

Brown also possessed an ability to capture 'moments' of still life and evoke their intensity through the juxtaposition of images. His description of the moon, for example, in 'Childsong' as 'a clown / Tumbling through clouds' (*Collected Poems*, 23) has the same laconic detachment and suggestiveness as Hulme's description of the moon in 'Above the Dock' as 'a child's balloon, / Forgotten after play.'[13] His images are always intriguing and often refreshingly original. In 'Whales', Brown describes the setting sun as a 'gold whale' sinking 'in welters of blood', and in 'Haddock Fishermen', 'Sunset drives a butcher's blade / In the day's throat' (*Collected Poems*, 97, 120). When we examine a selection of Brown's runic poetry we will notice a similar creative interplay, or 'comparison', as Pound would say, between objective image or abstract concept and a more subjective or intuitive interpretation. It is therefore important to discuss certain threads within the philosophies of Bergson and Nietzsche and how they came to influence Hulme and Pound's preoccupation with 'surface' and 'depth'.

In his own opposition to what Nietzsche called the 'anthropomorphic error', that is, the error of identifying intellectual constructs as essential 'reality', Bergson proposed his theory of *durée réelle* – 'real duration'. Underneath the codified appearance of the seemingly unchanging 'reality' of our surface consciousness, our inner, subjective self, which is suppressed by the rationalising processes of the intellect and established systems of language, resides in a 'perpetual state of becoming'.[14] Instead of continually perceiving the world through solidified impressions, our deeper consciousness of immediate experience, which is in a continual state of flux, never experiences the same thing twice. As Sanford Schwartz explains:

> What we perceive is inseparable from how we perceive it. Things are permeated with

values, the objects of present sensation with the coloring of all that we have experienced in the past. But we usually attend to the selfsame object rather than its ever-changing appearances, and therefore lose sight of an important dimension of experience.[15]

While champions of Positivism believed that the whole of 'reality' and human nature could be reduced to a system of determinate laws, Bergson argued that beneath the surface of perceived 'reality', or the 'objective aspect' that is part of 'public property', lie hidden idiosyncratic 'depths' of ever-changing immediate experience (162). These depths, Bergson argued, are essential to our understanding of a greater reality, of experience, and can release us from the deterministic mechanisms of perception and understanding and bring us back to some form of 'vital' humanity. As well as the intellect, Bergson believed that fixed modes of language suppress the validity of our subjective experiences by trying to order them into a very limited number of words:

> In short, the word with well-defined outlines, the rough and ready word, which stores up the stable, common, and consequently impersonal element in the impressions of mankind, overwhelms or at least covers over the delicate and fugitive impressions of our individual consciousness. (131-132)

Bergson therefore placed great importance on the writer, who is able to use words in such creative ways as to present the fluctuations of consciousness, if not directly, expressively. Such works became a reality, of course, in 'steam-of-consciousness' novels such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and poetry such as MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). Bergson's philosophy had a great impact on the early Imagists. Both Hulme and Pound drew from Bergson's concept of 'real duration' in an attempt to justify the use of images as a means of penetrating a more individual immediate experience. As Hulme states in *Speculations* (1924), 'Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of an intuitive language.'[16]

While Hulme drew heavily from Bergson's philosophy, he also made it his own through selective misreading. Instead of trying to penetrate the flow of consciousness, that is, 'real duration', he tried to negotiate past 'stock types' by presenting more precisely the 'individuality of objects'. As Hulme states, 'we never really perceive the real shape and individuality of objects [...]. We tend to see not *the* table but only *a* table' (159). With clear similarities to Bergson's mistrust of 'the rough and ready word[s]' of language, Hulme wanted to bypass the 'counter' language of abstraction through the employment of a 'visual' language of poetry. For Hulme, poetry 'is not a counter language, but a visual concrete one. It is a compromise for a language of intuition which would hand over sensations bodily' (134). Hulme therefore also seems to have drawn from Nietzsche. Like Nietzsche, Hulme believed that the abstract 'counters' of today's language were once fresh metaphors that have grown hard, stale, and are now erroneously perceived as signifiers of essential reality. Nietzsche, although also of the mind that we must get back to some sort of

immediate experience, did not believe, like Bergson, that we can delve underneath surface reality to find a pure and pristine level of consciousness – whatever that may be. Instead, Nietzsche believed that man's protean vitality, or 'will-to-power', comes from his ability to stamp new forms of perception onto the 'chaos of sensations'.

Fresh metaphors, similes, or any other kind of comparison that can create new and sudden combinations, can establish new ways of understanding the world and bring us back to an awareness of immediate experience. We have already seen this in Brown's juxtaposition of sunsets with disturbing images of butchery, and, as we shall see, a selection of his runic poetry strongly evokes Pound's interpretive metaphor. His use of Norse kennings, like Pound's ideogrammic method, create new relations between previously unconnected particulars and therefore reveal new associations and heightened visual impressions of the object. As Brown states in 'To a Hamnavoe Poet of 2093',

> Language, unstable as sand, but poets
> Strike on the hard rock, carving
> Rune and hieroglyph, to celebrate
>
> Breath's sweet brevity.
>
> Swan-path, whale-acre. Do you honour
>
> The sea with images? (*Complete Poems*, 326)

What Brown perhaps saw in the *Rune Poems* and kennings of the Norsemen was what Nietzsche saw as mankind's 'fundamental human drive':

> The drive towards the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive [...]. This drive continuously confuses the conceptual categories and cells by bringing forwards new transferences, metaphors, and metonymies. It continually manifests an ardent desire to refashion the world which presents itself to waking man, so that it will be as colourful, irregular, lacking in results and coherence, charming, and eternally new as the world of dreams.[17]

Pound's 'ideogrammic method' and 'interpretive metaphor' are two such ways of 'bringing forwards new transferences'. As Schwartz makes clear, there is a subtle difference between these two concepts: 'While the ideogram exhibits both the unifying concept and its constituent particulars, the precise interpretive metaphor displays both the "interpretive" pattern and the natural object it interprets' (86). Both of these modes have striking resemblances to Brown's poetry: his use of Norse kennings dissolves abstract objects or concepts into atoms of concrete

particulars, and the structure of his rune poems, which resemble the structure of the Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic *Rune Poems*, uses a form of parataxis by juxtaposing an abstract object or concept with a more personal or imaginative description. Pound's idea of the ideogram came from reading Ernest Fenollosa's tract *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* around 1914. Very much of the same mind as Bergson and Nietzsche, Fenollosa argued that abstract concepts are granted priority over the concrete particulars they connect. What Fenollosa found in the ideogram was a way of combating the 'anthropomorphic error': by presenting a picture of its compound elements, the ideogram demonstrates the formation of an abstract concept through the combination of its constituent letters. Pound gives a brief account of this process in his *ABC of Reading* (1934) by describing a method that shows how the abstract concept 'red' might be evoked through the juxtaposition of 'rose', 'cherry', 'iron rust', and 'flamingo'.[18] As Schwartz states,

> The ideogram […] anchors the term in immediate experience: it performs the function of abstraction without allowing us to hypostatize the concept into an autonomous entity. We are able to see simultaneously the unifying form and its constituent particulars. (88)

The kenning, a vital feature of Old Norse skaldic poetry, is a form of imagery whereby two unrelated words are juxtaposed to create a more poetic name for an abstract object or concept. In the second part of Snorri Sturluson's *The Prose Edda*, the poetic guidebook called *Skáldskaparmál*, the Norse god of poetry, Bragi, instructs Ægir, the Norse god of the sea, about the language of skaldic verse, which includes a list of examples concerning the use of kennings. '"How should the sea be referred to?"' asks Ægir.

> 'By calling it the blood of Ymir, the visitor to the gods, the husband of Ran, the father of the daughters of Ægir […], by calling it the land of Ran, and of the daughters of Ægir, and of ships or of the names of sea-going vessels, and of the keel, and of the prow, and of planks and seams, and of fish and of ice, and calling it the way and routes taken by sea kings, likewise the ring of the islands, house of sands and seaweed and rocky islets, or the land of fishing gear, sea birds and the following wind.'[19]

As D'Arcy states, kennings are 'endemic' in the poetry and prose of Brown (243). Examples include: 'whale road' (the sea), 'salt furrow' (a boat ploughing through the sea), 'hawkfall' (death), 'earth-gold' (harvest), 'blue hills' (whales), and 'mouthing silver' (fish). In 'The Sea: Four Elegies', Brown describes there being a 'vast ancient terror' locked within the abstract shell of the word 'sea'. Therefore, in order to get past this abstraction, he displays a number of kennings that, in Nietzsche's words, will keep the sea 'eternally new':

> THE SEA

The word 'sea' is small and easily uttered.
They utter it lightly who know least about it.
A vast ancient terror is locked in the name
Like energy in an atom.
Sailors, explorers, fishermen know this.
Women who stand on headlands, they know it.
The maritime tribes knew it well.
Their artists strove at harp and loom
To cover the terror with beautiful names.
She is the Great Sweet Mother.
She is the Swan's Path.
She is the Whale's Acre.
She is the Garden of White Roses.
She is the Keeper of Horses.
(The Loom also, and the Harp with a thousand voices.)
She is the Giver of Salt and Pearls.
The Vikings, her closest children, hated the sea.
She summoned them, twice a year, from plough and lovebed.
They called her, with cold mouths, the Widow Maker. (*Collected Poems*, 168)

Brown was therefore just as aware of and concerned with the limits of language as the early Modernists, and he tried to counter these restrictions through the employment of Norse kennings and experiments with runic poetry.

Pound's interpretive metaphor juxtaposes an objective or 'natural' image with an imaginative image. As Schwartz explains, 'The precise interpretive metaphor stands, therefore, between ornamental and exemplary metaphor. Neither mere fancy nor scientific fact, it projects as experiential reality rather than conceptual certainty a particular way of apprehending experience' (94). Indeed, the interpretive metaphor was central to Pound's explanation of Imagism. According to Pound, the poet must be detached and objective while remaining able to participate in personal expression. Archie Bevan and Brian Murray quote a passage from fellow Orcadian writer Eric Linklater's *Orkney and Shetland* (1971) in their introduction to *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown* (2006) that captures exactly this characteristic in Brown's writing:

> The poet watches, in imagination, the passers-by at a wedding, a funeral, a country fair – solemn or riotous, but apprehended with a visionary understanding. (xiv)

In Imagistic terms, the poet coldly, 'objectively' broods over an ordinary object or concept, like a 'flounced edge of skirt', and then looks inside himself to find a more expressive way of moving past this abstraction: 'The flounced edge of skirt, / recoiling like waves off a cliff' (Hulme, 'Images', *Selected Writing*, 15). The poet therefore expresses subjectivity by presenting the objects and forms that appear before him in heightened states of visual perception. Pound's famous

description of how he came to write 'In a Station of the Metro' highlights this process. Explaining his frustration at not being able to capture in words the experience he felt at seeing a number of beautiful faces immediately after stepping off a metro train in Paris, he recalls the precise form of parataxis in the Japanese haiku. After a year's editing, he produces his two-line masterpiece which records 'the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective':

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.[20]

Through the imaginative vision of the poet, the tangible object of perception – 'faces in the crowd' – is transformed into a more subjective expression of immediate experience that defamiliarises established notions and fixed impressions. Before showing how a number of Brown's rune poems correpsond to this effect, it is important to highlight how the Teutonic *Rune Poems*, like the Japanese haiku for Pound, gave Brown an accommodating structure in which to accomplish similar effects.

The *Rune Poems* were a recitation of letters of the Scandinavian *fuþark* and Anglo-Saxon *futhorc* runic alphabets while at the same time providing an explanatory stanza for each letter. As Bruce Dickins explains, their main purpose was as mnemonic devices to help people remember the order and names of each of the runic characters. They fall under the category of the Anglo-Saxon, Norwegian, and Icelandic *Rune Poems*. The Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic *Rune Poems* create their mnemonic poems by first of all quoting a word that has the first letter of the runic character they are describing and then dedicate a stanza afterward to a more poetic description of that word. Here, for example, is the Anglo-Saxon rune poem describing 'ice' which starts with the runic character 'I':

> *Is byþ oferceald,   ungemetum slidor,*
> *glisnaþ glæhluttur   gimmum gelicust,*
> *flor forste geworuht,   fæger ansyne.*

> (ice) is very cold and immeasurably slippery; it glistens
> as clear as glass and most like to gems; it is a floor
> wrought by the frost, fair to look upon.[21]

This is identical to the structure of the Icelandic *Rune Poem* and Brown's own runic poetry. Here, for example, is Brown's rune poem describing 'thirst' in 'Hill Runes':

Thirst

> Horse at trough, thrush in quernstone,
> The five ploughmen
> Much taken up with pewter. (*Collected Poems*, 127)

What makes the Icelandic *Rune Poem* distinctive is that 'In each of these stanzas are contained three *kenningar* – the elaborate periphrases which bulked so large in the technique of the Icelandic skaldic poems' (Dickins, 7). Here is the Icelandic stanza describing 'Ice', which consists of the runic character '*Í*':

> *Íss er árbörkr*
> *Ok unnar þak*
> *Ok feigra manna fár*
> *Glacies jöfurr.*
> Ice = bark of rivers
> And roof of the wave
> And destruction of the doomed.

And here is the stanza describing 'sun', which contains the runic character 'S':

> *Sól er skýja skjöldr*
> *Ok skínandi röðull*
> *Ok ísa aldrtregi*
> *Rota siklingr.*
> Sun = shield of the clouds
> And shining ray
> And destroyer of ice. (Dickins, 31)

Both stanzas have obvious similarities with Pound's interpretive metaphor: an object or abstract concept is identified followed by a few lines of a more descriptive quality which give it a more personal or intuitive association which, in Nietzsche's words, bring forth 'new transferences'.

Turning again to Brown, we can see the structural process of the original *Rune Poems* in his own runic poetry. Here is his rune describing 'fog' in 'The Weather Bestiary':

> FOG
> The sun-dipped isle was suddenly a sheep
> Lost and stupid, a dense wet tremulous fleece. (*Collected Poems*, 51)

D'Arcy concurs that this is a 'perfect Imagistic [cameo]' (243). The simple and abstract word 'fog' is suddenly given a more imaginative connotation through its juxtaposition with a sodden, baffled

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sheep (perhaps 'sun-dipped' also alludes to the process of sheep dipping) which successfully evokes the estranging effects the famous Scottish fog or 'haar' can have on one's senses. The unsettling effects of this phenomenon have been commented upon by other Scottish writers such as Nan Shepherd, who, in *The Living Mountain* (1977), states that such effects 'drive home the truth that our habitual vision of things is not necessarily right: it is only one of an infinite number, and to glimpse an unfamiliar one for even a moment, unmakes us, but steadies us again.'[22] This statement is quite apt in conjunction with a poem that explodes the abstract counter 'fog' into something far more intense, personal, and evocative. Furthermore, it is interesting that it is an 'isle' – presumably one of the Orkney isles – which is 'lost and stupid', generating a faint suspicion that Brown is commenting on Orkney's fragile Scottish-Scandinavian identity. In *For the Islands I Sing*, Brown uses the forceful adjective 'sundered' to describe Orkney's geographical relationship with the Scottish mainland and describes his fellow Orcadians as 'half-Nordic islanders' (1, 37).

Another of Brown's equally suggestive rune poems comes from 'The Weather Bestiary'. In this rune the lifeless word 'snow' is given a predatory feel as advancing winter weather begins its patient stalking of a colourful if sickly Autumn:

> SNOW
> Autumn, a moulted parrot, eyes with terror
> This weird white cat. It drifts the rose bush under. (*Collected Poems*, 51)

Just as Eliot describes the lingering, curling movement of 'yellow fog' in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' in the terms of a sly, seductive, opportunistic cat that 'rubs its back upon the window panes' and slips by terraces[23], the 'weird white cat' of Brown's poem successfully evokes the image of winter as it surreptitiously covers Autumn with frost and snow.

In 'Runes from the Island of Horses' Brown once again evokes an idea of 'Winter' with simple images in a rune poem that has a touch of William Carlos Williams:

> *Winter*
> Three winter brightnesses –
> Bridesheet, boy in snow,
> Kirkyard spade. (*Collected Poems*, 79)

As well as exploding 'winter' into something far more personal and intuitive through the use of three strikingly evocative and independent images, Brown subtly weaves the theme of the cycle of life and death through its lines as we move from consummation (the wedding), to birth (the young boy), and finally to death (the kirkyard spade). But the instant success of this poem

remains in its juxtaposition of the lifeless word 'winter' with personal images that, in Pound's words, 'gives that sudden sense of liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth [...]' ('A Retrospect', 4).

The final rune poem I will examine is 'Circle' from 'Runes from a Holy Island'. Although not as eerie or linguistically suggestive as the early Imagist lyrics of MacDiarmid, we can see similarities in both poets' attempts to capture or juxtapose the universal with the local. Just as MacDiarmid captures the universal concept of death in the 'chitterin' licht' of a flickering, indistinct rainbow in 'The Watergaw' (17), Brown is able to concretise the grand and universal concept of the life cycle in an earthly and vivid depiction of a fishing community:

> *Circle*
> Cod, give needles and oil.
> Winter hands
> Must sew shrouds by lamplight. (*Collected Poems*, 79)

Although the fishermen have caught the cod to feed the community and the oil from the fish is being used to keep the lamps burning and the community healthy, the fish bones are being used to sew funeral shrouds, possibly for fishermen who died trying to catch the cod in the first place or even the sewers themselves whose 'winter hands' connote approaching death.[24] In Eliot's *Preludes*, the speaker states that 'I am moved by fancies that are curled / Around these images and cling'. Although Eliot's speaker does not seem to find anything useful or appealing in the images of the city life he depicts – 'Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh; | The worlds revolve like ancient women | Gathering fuel in vacant lots' (23) – Brown's image of old, cold hands sewing shrouds poignantly encapsulates without any signs of emotional or moral commentary the grand concept of the essential revolutions and interconnectedness of life and death.

Brown has for the most part been deemed the most 'provincial' among twentieth-century writers. As Douglas Dunn states, 'Brown, as a poet of remote island communities and unindustrial, non-urban landscapes, is at odds with the tradition of modern poetry'.[25] Berthold Schoene's review of Brian and Rowena Murray's *Interrogation of Silence: The Writings of George Mackay Brown* highlighted the 'scholarly neglect and even impending erasure' that threatened Brown's critical reception, and called for a 'theoretically up-to-date scholarly investigation'.[26] Timothy C. Baker's *George Mackay Brown and the Philosophy of Community* (2009) has since successfully analysed the idea of community in Brown's work alongside the philosophical theories of giants such as Hegel, Heidegger, and Adorno. This paper intends to complement these new investigations, positioning Brown within a world-literary and world-philosophical context. Until recent re-examinations of his work, Brown was commonly viewed as a stuffy traditionalist, introspective in

his local isolation, and naive in his reverence for a golden past of folklore, archetype, the spinning of yarns and good-humoured Shakespearean tinkers — a world that had now been subsumed by the forces of modernity. There is, of course, much truth in these claims. But this shouldn't be held as the dominant line regarding Brown's work. As this article has shown, Brown could infuse those traditional elements with a modern, minimalist tongue and deep philosophical imagination. Just as Pound and MacDiarmid had turned to traditional forms and texts such as the Japanese haiku, Scottish ballads, Homer's *Odyssey* and the poetry of Henryson and Dunbar in order to make a new, modern poetry, Brown turned to the traditional forms and texts of Orkney's Scandinavian cultural inheritance such as skaldic poetry and *Orkneyinga Saga* and revitalised them as sources for his own modern experimentation and cultural expression. Furthermore, in turning to Orkney's Scandinavian connection, Brown enlarges Scotland's perceptions of its culture. He may be deemed 'provincial' by critics such as Dunn who see modern writing as having to focus on the urban and industrial, but he is certainly not introspective. Instead, Brown's use of Nordic culture opens his enclosed island mentality into a larger cultural world. In short, not only does Brown revivify tradition through modern experimentation, the use and reinvention of those traditional Scandinavian forms and texts generate a more expansive, international cultural imagination.

NOTES

[1] Ezra Pound, 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley', in *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. 61. For this source and all others, page numbers are given subsequently in the text.

[2] George Mackay Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry* (London: Quartet Books, 1973), p. 2.

[3] Julian D'Arcy, *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1996), p. 247.

[4] Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T.S. Eliot (Norfolk: New Directions, 1954), pp. 3-4.

[5] Réné Taupin, *The Influence of French Symbolism on Modern American Poetry*, trans. by William and Mary Pratt (New York: AMS Press, 1985), p. 96.

[6] William Pratt, *The Imagist Poem: Modern Poetry in Miniature* (Ashland: Story Line Press), pp. 29-30.

[7] George Mackay Brown, *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, ed. by. Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (London: John Murray, 2006), p. 461.

[8] H.D., *Collected Poems, 1912-1944*, ed. by Louis Martz (New York: New Directions, 1983), p. 55.

[9] Ezra Pound, 'Affirmations—As for Imagisme', *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, ed. by William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 375.

[10] George Mackay Brown, *For the Islands I Sing* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2008), p. 56.

[11] George Mackay Brown, *Northern Lights: A Poet's Sources* (London: Trafalgar Square Publishing, 1999), p. 316.

[12] Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid*, eds. Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken, Volume 1 (2) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 27.

[13] T.E. Hulme, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Patrick McGuiness (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 2. [14] Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Date of Consciousness*, trans by F.L. Pogson (London: Elibron Classics, 2005), p. 130.

[15] Sanford Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth-century Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 22.

[16] T.E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1936), p. 135.

[17] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral sense', in *The Nietzsche Reader*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 121.

[18] Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 22.

[19] Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. by Jesse L. Byock (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 112.

[20] Ezra Pound, 'Vorticism' (1914), reprinted in *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916; New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 89.

[21] Bruce Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915; New York: Kraus, 1968), pp. 14-15.

[22] Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (1977), reprinted in *The Grampian Quartet*, ed. by Roderick Watson (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996), pp. 77-78.

[23] T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Book Club Associates, 1977), p. 13.

[24] This rune poem differs in Brown's *Selected Poems: 1954-1992* (London: John Murray, 1996). Instead of cod, Brown's poem runs thus: 'Whale, give needles and oil.' Whale oil makes more sense in terms of being used as fuel for burning in lamps.

[25] Douglas Dunn, ''Finished Fragrance': The Poems of George Mackay Brown', *Poetry Nation*, 2 (1974) http://poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=3506 [accessed 10 August 2011] (para. 17 of 35).

[26] Berthold Schoene, 'Interrogation of Silence. The Writings of George Mackay Brown', *Scottish Studies Review*, 6 (2005), 131-133 (pp. 131, 133).