

The catholicity of time in the work of George Mackay Brown

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Pacifica

2016, Vol. 29(1) 22–44

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DOI: 10.1177/1030570X17698507

journals.sagepub.com/home/paa



Abstract

This essay introduces and explores some explicitly theological concerns in the work of the Orcadian poet, novelist, and dramatist George Mackay Brown (1921–96). More specifically, its interest is with Brown’s presentation and treatment of the notion of time. Drawing on examples from a wide selection of his work, it is argued that Brown’s conversion to Roman Catholicism, and in particular his delight in the enchantment of the Mass, allowed him to exploit a distinctly Catholic sacramental theology and aesthetic of creation – its location, people, and history – appraised in light of the Eucharist.

Keywords

Eucharist, George Mackay Brown, Scottish Literature, Theology, Time

Between the appearance of his first collection of poetry, *The Storm and Other Poems* (published in June 1954 at the author’s expense), and his final collection, *Travellers*, in 2001, the Orcadian author George Mackay Brown (1921–1996) established himself as one of Scotland’s most gifted poets and writers of imaginative prose. In 1994, his final novel, *Beside the Ocean of Time*, was both nominated for the Booker Prize and the winner of the prestigious Saltire Award. His literary output includes over 40 published works, including over 15 collections of poetry and five novels, as well as short stories, children’s books, plays, an autobiography, and numerous essays and media articles. His work is the subject of a growing body of critical assessment and research, most of which thus far has focused on identifying his source material, examining his use of literary genres, and appraising his contributions within the larger context of the Scottish and indeed European literary critical traditions. All this is to be welcomed. The concern of this article, however, is otherwise: it is to introduce and to explore some explicitly theological concerns in Brown’s work, particularly his treatment of time.

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Employing ‘traditional stanza forms, sonnets, ballads, *vers libre*, prose poems, runes, choruses, etc.’, and drawing upon source material from ‘Norse sagas, Catholic rituals and ceremonies, [and] island lore’, Brown examined themes that were, in his own words, ‘mainly religious (birth, love, death, resurrection, ceremonies of fishing and agriculture)’.¹ The mention here of ‘Catholic rituals and ceremonies’ signals a fact apart from which Brown’s work is not duly appreciated; namely, his conversion from Scottish Presbyterianism to Roman Catholicism. This was, to be sure, no Damascus Road experience but rather a gradual migration that characterized his life between his adolescence and his final decision in 1961. As was the case with Muriel Spark, Compton Mackenzie, and Edwin Muir, Brown’s conversion allowed him to explore a distinctively Roman Catholic sacramental theology and aesthetic which was less puritanical than the Highland Presbyterianism into which he was born. In 1970, Brown, in his correspondence with David Morrison who founded the *Scotia Review* that same year, acknowledged the influence that the Roman Catholic Church, and particularly its liturgy, had upon his work and his reading of the world:

The religious element is strong. I believe myself it strengthens my work . . . At least it provides a solid groundwork; in this essential way, that without the explanation that Catholicism provides, I would not see any clear meaning in life at all.²

George Mackay Brown as poet of time

Brown was concerned by what he discerned to be the erosion of local communities – due particularly, he averred, to modernity’s enchantment with ‘the idea’, ‘God-damned lie’ and ‘worship of Progress’ which ‘drain[s] the life out of every island and lonely place’.³ He believed that the way of repairing such fragmentation – of

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- 1 Hugh MacDiarmid et al., *Seven Poets: Hugh MacDiarmid, Norman MacCaig, Iain Crichton Smith, George Mackay Brown, Robert Garioch, Sorley MacLean, Edwin Morgan* (Glasgow: Third Eye Centre, 1981), 59. On Brown’s use of various prose styles, see Rowena Murray, ‘Style as Voice: A Reappraisal of George Mackay Brown’s Prose’ (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1986). On the influence of Norse literature on Brown, see Berthold Schoene, *The Making of Orcadia: Narrative Identity in the Prose Work of George Mackay Brown* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995); Rowena Murray, ‘The Influence of Norse Literature on the Twentieth-Century Writer George Mackay Brown’, in *Aspects of Identity: The Contemporary Scottish Novel (1978–1981) as National Self-Expression*, ed. Manfred Malzahn (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1984), 547–557.
 - 2 George Mackay Brown to David Morrison, 10 January 1970, in The National Library of Scotland, Acc 6374, no. 1.
 - 3 George Mackay Brown, ‘The Tarn and the Rosary’, in *Hawkfall and Other Stories* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974), 187. See also George Mackay Brown, *Letters from Hammavoe* (London/Edinburgh: Steve Savage, 2002), 8, 22–26, 61, where Brown

repairing Modernity's impatience and 'hunger for novelty, progress, sophistication'⁴ – lay in a return to the older wisdoms that lay deep and still cocooned, but rapidly dying, in the stories and 'ancient benign rituals'⁵ and myths of place and memory. Indeed, he considered it his responsibility as a poet and storyteller to, in his own words, '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'.⁶ So, for example, reflecting on an exhibition, 'The Orkney Croft', held at the Stromness Museum during the Summer of 1972, he wrote:

It looks at life in Orkney, mainly agricultural life, nearly a century ago, before the great machines drove off the horses and broke to a large extent the ancient rhythms... The quiet faces that look back at us are near enough in time – they are our grandparents and great-grandparents – and yet they contemplate us across an enormous chasm. Time has accelerated since their day, and is still accelerating, and has taken us far from their region of poverty and simplicity.⁷

The half-Nordic islander is no luddite, however. He accepts that 'most of us have come so far away from that earth-rooted beautiful way of life that to go back would be more painful than to struggle on into the age of the Atom'.⁸ But his belief is that only by holding on to the older wisdoms might the debilitating amnesia that characterizes modernity be reversed: 'What is important is never to forget the unique place where we started'.⁹ His tales brim full with the energies and realities of joy and contingency, of loss and discovery, and of death and re-birth, that attend human life. 'I have a deep-rooted belief that what has once existed can never die: not even the frailest things, spindrift or clover-scent or glitter of star on a wet stone. All is gathered into the web of creation, that is apparently established and yet perhaps only a dream in the eternal mind; and yet, too, we work at the making of it with every word and thought and action of our lives'.¹⁰ It was with these words that he concluded his memoir for his mother, Mary Jane Mackay.

Words, thoughts, actions, and ceremony: such are the things which hold us to the past's places and do so in ways that make the present more habitable and the

laments the advent of concrete, plastic, portable transistor radios and what he describes as the 'menace of cars'.

4 George Mackay Brown, 'The Story Teller', in *A Time to Keep, and Other Stories* (London: Flamingo, 1996), 98.

5 George Mackay Brown, *Northern Lights: A Poet's Sources*, ed. Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (London: John Murray, 1999), 4.

6 Brown, *Northern Lights*, 4.

7 Brown, *Letters from Hamnavoe*, 70.

8 Brown, *Letters from Hamnavoe*, 92.

9 Brown, *Letters from Hamnavoe*, 92.

10 George Mackay Brown, 'Mary Jane Mackay, 1891–1967 (A Memoir)', in *Northern Lights*, 142.

future more genuinely part of the Spirit's one great movement with time, a theme which, as one reviewer notes, 'in a way defines' Brown.¹¹ His work is testimony to his faith in what Dennis Sobolev, describing Hopkins' work, called 'the rhetoric of the immanent, . . . the flux of phenomena from the vantage point of non-existential "nowness," which aims to bridge the gap between the temporal and the eternal'.¹² As Brown would reflect on in a scene from his play *The Well* which suggests something of the tangling between cyclical and progressive notions of time:

Time here, in the island, is a single day, repeated over and over. The same people, dawn to sunset. The same things: birth, love, death. The old die, the children come dancing into time. Water shines on the new-born and the dead.

Now other ideas have drifted over, have rooted in the island. Time is no longer a single day rising and falling. Time is stretched out into the past. Time runs on into the future. And the island's past is seen as ignorance and savagery, dung and clay; the future is a golden road with treasures richer than gold at the end of it.

In the new school at the centre of the island, water is no longer a mysterious element, life-giver, brightener; it is H₂O.

The island is changing. The old ceremonies of the island are withering. There is no need for ceremony any more. Ceremony is the ignorant dance that holds us to the past. We must (they say) uproot ourselves, turn free faces to the future.

How shall the Keeper of the Well live in a place without ceremony? Can I stay and watch the withering of the well?¹³

In his study on Brown and community, Timothy Baker argues that for Brown 'community is founded in looking neither to the past nor to the future, but in finding symbolic resonance in the present'.¹⁴ Baker also underscores, helpfully I think, that time is, for Brown, experienced in thoroughly physical communities. What is less conspicuous is how this aligns with Baker's suggestion that Brown advances 'anti-foundationalist perspectives'.¹⁵ My argument here is that this claim cannot be defended, and that notions both of time and of community are in fact grounded in and sponsor, for Brown, a vision of creation deeply informed by a

11 Joseph J. Feeney, 'An Island World of Vastness: George Mackay Brown (1921–96)', *America* 175(3) (1996), p. 25.

12 Dennis Sobolev, 'Hopkins' Rhetoric: Between the Material and the Transcendent', *Language and Literature* 12(2) (2003), pp. 99, 100.

13 George Mackay Brown, *Three Plays: The Loom of Light, The Well and The Voyage of Saint Brandon* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), 72.

14 Timothy C. Baker, *George Mackay Brown and the Philosophy of Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 152.

15 Baker, *George Mackay Brown*, 23.

Christian vision of history; more specifically, a vision appraised in terms of the Eucharist:

I am the bread of life. All previous rituals had been a foreshadowing of this; all subsequent rituals a re-enactment. The fires at the centre of the earth, the sun above, all divine essences and ecstasies, come to this silence at last – a circle of bread and a cup of wine on an altar.¹⁶

It is the Eucharist, and the world appraised through its eyes, that forms a community in the ways that Brown imagines, and that counters the possibility of ‘finding symbolic resonance in the present’ apart from the community’s own history and its hopes for the future. It is the Eucharist that makes almost inevitable his conversion from the Table-shy ‘Presbyterianism of Stromness, through the pagan and Christian spirituality of the Norse sagas (with particular reference to St Magnus), on to the Nature-spirituality evoked by Rackwick, then the Christian mysticism of the Anglican Metaphysical Poets and the brilliance of the Catholic convert Gerard Manley Hopkins’.¹⁷ Brown imagines that ‘community’ and ‘communion’ – the communion of the living and of the dead and of the not-yet born – is a sharing not simply of linguistic morphology but, more importantly, of realities unoffended by time and free from the burdens of timelessness and of utopian erasure of discord that seek to mask the ‘dangers’ and dark undersides that mark time and, indeed, ‘faith’, such as he would bear witness to in *Magnus*:

Now that the seed was uttered upon the land the peasants waited for the sun and the rain to do their bit. What they had performed was an act of faith. They trusted that the seed they had buried would return from the grave, first the shoot, then the ear, then the stalk with a full burden of corn in the ear. But this yearly resurrection of the seed was encompassed with dangers. The rain might fall in black deluges on the hill all the month of June. The sun might shrivel the crop with unwonted ardency while it was still green. More terrible still, the black worm might bore into the root.

The peasants had done what they could. They had spread the dung and seaweed carefully on the black fields. The bishop had come and blessed the tilth. So far the weather had been good. Showers of rain fell, mainly during the night. The sun shone

16 George Mackay Brown, *Magnus* (Glasgow: Richard Drew, 1987), 169.

17 Ron Ferguson, *George Mackay Brown: The Wound and the Gift* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2011), 142. On the relationship between Brown and Hopkins, see Richard Rankin Russell, “‘There Lives the Dearest Freshness Deep Down Things’”: The Intertextual Relationship of George Mackay Brown’s *Greenvow* and Hopkins’s “‘God’s Grandeur’”, *Renascence* 66(1) (2014), 57–77; Sabine Schmid, ‘Keeping the Sources Pure’: *The Making of George Mackay Brown*, ed. Peter Collier, European Connections (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 121–215.

plentifully as the days got longer. The seed, sown in faith, had so far been well nourished and warmed.¹⁸

Brown's assumption of time's unbroken and cyclical quality, of its being an 'immortal golden thread... woven into us, not to be lost',¹⁹ is most-famously apparent in *Magnus*, and the transposition of Lilof, a character borrowed from the *Orkneyinga Saga*, into Herr Lilof, an unwitting – 'It had nothing to do with me'²⁰ – executioner of Flossenbürg Concentration Camp's most famous prisoner, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Likewise, there is the curious appearance of Melchisedec (sic). The presence of this ancient Hebrew priest recalls not only that 'thrilling moment in the history of mankind' when 'bread and wine... instead of a slain beast' were offered by the altar,²¹ but the offering itself both prefigures that made by Magnus in Orkney some four thousand years after, and is also of a piece with it. Here again is revealed Brown's conviction that 'one of the great discoveries' to be made is that sacrifice – which involves 'festival, a shared meal, a song of praise, a death and a renewal, a dancing together'²² – is as essential to the making of community as it is to making whole the otherwise-dispersed fragments of time. So read, the transitions in *Magnus* between 12th-century Orkney and 20th-century Bavaria and ancient Canaan in the second millenia BCE, alongside the contemporary activities of tearing 'long wounds in the earth' and the uttering of 'new wisdom', the words "'pity", "mercy", "love", "patience", "peace"',²³ find their synthesis and significance insofar as they are coterminous with the sacrifice of Christ. Brown's characters exist 'at the edge of legend, either coming or going. Myths are quickened with a current of living experience, and the living characters are enlarged with myths which they've not quite died into'.²⁴

Brown's attention to time parallels his deepening recognition of the givenness, sacramentality, provisionality, and contingency that characterizes creation itself. There are, to be sure, echoes here of his Orcadian predecessor and former teacher Edwin Muir, that quintessential European modernist whose own preoccupation with time gave to Brown his own 'sense of purpose and direction',²⁵ and for whom:

Time's handiworks by time are haunted,
And nothing now can separate

18 Brown, *Magnus*, 93–94.

19 George Mackay Brown, *For the Islands I Sing* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2008), 94.

20 Brown, *Magnus*, 172.

21 Brown, *Magnus*, 168.

22 Brown, *Magnus*, 168.

23 Brown, *Magnus*, 168.

24 Christian Wiman, 'So Fierce and Sweet the Song: George Mackay Brown', *The Sewanee Review* 105(2) (1997), p. 259.

25 Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, 84.

The corn and tares compactly grown.²⁶

But what really made this recognition possible for Brown (as well as for Muir I suspect) was the Roman Catholic Church that he judged to be ‘utterly wonderful’ precisely because even with all of the institution’s ‘human faults’ it had endured steadily ‘for nearly two thousand years, while parties and factions and kingdoms had had their day and withered . . . Some mysterious power seemed to be preserving it against the assaults and erosions of time’.²⁷

In Brown’s work, the enduring faith of the Church is assiduously enfolded in Orcadian life. It is true that Brown sometimes paints a picture of that life in ways that are largely folkloric and timeless,²⁸ but this need not lead to the claim that ‘Brown’s poetry continues to place what he called “the lesser mysteries of art” within an anti-historic paradigm’.²⁹ Such a conclusion is an unfortunate misjudgement vis-à-vis Brown’s conception of time. It does, however, raise the matter of how Brown conceives of the relationship between history, religion, imagination and the writing process. In his autobiography, *For the Islands I Sing*, he describes his decision to have the 12th-century Magnus appear as the 20th-century Bonhoeffer, a decision resonant with Muir’s distrust of ‘cold documentation’.³⁰

I know little about the concentration camps other than what I have read casually in books and newspapers, or seen on film. I used to reproach myself with being too lazy to research a situation thoroughly before writing about it. But now I am sure that this is not how the creative energies work. All that is required is a suggestion, a flavour, a rhythm, an aroma. The imagination seizes on such intangibles and creates upon them living forms that are more real than a first-hand account by the best journalist – I was tempted to say, than history itself, but the reality of history and the reality of literature are quite different, each being one facet of the truth.

26 Edwin Muir, ‘One Foot in Eden’, in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 227. On Muir’s influence upon Brown, see Schmid, ‘*Keeping the Sources Pure*’, 43–120.

27 Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, 43.

28 One might here recall Brown’s own words: ‘History was the only subject in school that made the blood sing along my veins, but it was the romantic spindrift of history, not the great surges of tribes and economics and ideas that are the stuff of history. But I am grateful for what we got; it nourished the imagination’. Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, 24. Brown also confessed needing to guard against the romanticization of place. See Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, 74.

29 Baker, *George Mackay Brown*, 3.

30 George Mackay Brown, ‘Introduction’, in *Selected Prose, by Edwin Muir*, ed. George Mackay Brown (London: John Murray, 1987), 6. According to Muir, our contemporary world matters ‘simply because it is the world in which we live; but it takes on a deeper significance when we see it as rooted in a past whose extent we cannot measure’. Edwin Muir, *Essays on Literature and Society* (rev. ed.; London: The Hogarth Press, 1965), 234.

If ever I have attempted to research a background to some story I was getting ready to write, I have found that the spirit of the story was always crushed under accumulated facts and figures. I know it is not the fashion nowadays for novelists and playwrights to work in this way, with intangibles and the free play of the imagination. They must go and see for themselves, taste the salt of a strange sea or catch as well as they can the rhythms and intonations of an exotic dialogue. Something in the spirit of modern man demands this, the factual more emphasised than the imaginary. If so, laziness and timidity and distrust of 'the real' have left me stranded centuries back. I can only appeal, very humbly, to the great spirits of the past. Was Homer ever in Troy? Did he sail on a wine-dark sea? Nobody has ever discovered that Shakespeare was in Venice, or Elsinore, or Scotland. Was he 'pricked for a soldier', ever, or sailed westward into an unknown sea? Yet the very air of Scotland, it seems, saturates *Macbeth*. The salt and the splinterings of shipwreck are everywhere in the opening of *The Tempest*.

The fact that the historical characters in Shakespeare – Theseus, Julius Caesar, Richard II – wore contemporary Elizabethan dress, and spoke the language of the streets and the court, demonstrates an instinctive wisdom concerning the archetype and its repeated patterns through history; the Elizabethan writers did not have to reason these things out, they felt them in their bones. Realism is the enemy of the creative imagination.

A corollary is that any small community is a microcosm. It is not necessary to stray very far from your back yard. The whole world gathers about the parish pump. But stories from under the horizon ought always to be welcome – and so they have been, in Orkney, for centuries: but the stories are never utterly new.³¹

That 'All beyond time are made, / Star and poem, cornstalk and stone'³² is not a renunciation but a confession of creation's true sense of time – testimony to its being gift, contingent, indivisible, and eschatological. It is testimony too to Christian belief in history, and to the claim that history is not a nightmare from which we must try to awaken. The past is always being made contemporaneous in the action of living communities. Therefore, for Brown to 'pay attention to the world around him was to pay attention to the past; to endure its ordeals was to receive its myths'.³³ It was to believe also that time has a plot, a belief made possible – indeed, called for – by recognizing the priority of the divine economy when hermeneutical judgements are offered.

So understood, Brown's description in 'Celia' of a half-minute break in the conversation between Mr Spence the jeweller and Thomas the shoemaker – 'There was

31 Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, 166–168.

32 George Mackay Brown, 'Desert Rose', in *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, ed. Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (London: John Murray, 2006), 280.

33 Wiman, 'So Fierce and Sweet the Song', 257.

silence in the room for a half-minute³⁴ – or, in the same story, of the ‘ten minutes’ Ronald and Celia ‘neither moved nor spoke’,³⁵ is born of a deeper conviction that in ‘The Word’ there is no such thing as empty time, or ‘dead’ time, and that the perceived gap between ‘beyond time’ and ‘cornstalk and stone’ is just that, a perception only. Brown’s was a world, therefore, in which ‘sworded pitiless Angels wait’,³⁶ in which ‘the Word that spanned all history with meaning’³⁷ also ‘spanned all creation, as it did in the paradise before Adam delved and Eve span’.³⁸

Reflecting with Brown upon the nature of nature itself, the nature of which we remain inescapably a part, is to take up his own invitation to consider the most fundamental realities of creation itself; namely, the inextricable relationship that exists, both conceptually and ontologically, between temporal and spatial order. To be sure, we are not here concerned to attend in detail to what is, philosophically speaking, the most difficult of terrains to navigate. However, the recurrence in Brown’s thought to the somewhat abstract notions of time and space invite a deeper – and more explicitly theological – account of such. It is not as though Brown himself was operating out of an explicit theological consciousness. He is not, as it were, concerned to reconstruct reality in terms familiar to systematic theologians. However, there is clear evidence throughout his oeuvre of a kind of theological instinct at work, some attention to which will deepen our appreciation for his writings and, conversely, of some of the problems which attend to our considerations of temporality and spatiality.

Certainly, Brown appears to possess an intuitive sense of a brand of chronometry that does not neglect commitment to causal lines being traced between human action and a sense of temporal direction. Himself fascinated by priestly ministry, he also exercises something of such ministry insofar as he determines to keep alive the sacred stories. In *Time in a Red Coat* (one of the most penetrating anti-war novels to appear in the English language), Brown portrays life – not only that of an individual but also that of ‘the whole tribe . . . the totality of the human race, and needed of all creation’ – by way of a ‘worn metaphor’ of ‘a river issuing from high mountain snows, with cataracts and torrents, down to a fertile plain and then, with many windings and turnings, finding its way to the vastness of the sea’. Life’s *telos*, he suggests, is when ‘at last it empties itself into the bitter immensity of death, the ocean of the end . . . the most beautiful water of all’.³⁹ But on the way to the ocean

34 Brown, ‘Celia’, in *A Time to Keep, and Other Stories*, p. 4.

35 Brown, ‘Celia’, 12.

36 Brown, ‘The Exile’, in *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, p. 4.

37 George Mackay Brown, ‘The Eye of the Hurricane’, in *A Time to Keep, and Other Stories* (London: Flamingo, 1996), 163.

38 Brown, ‘A Treading of Grapes’, in *A Time to Keep, and Other Stories*, p. 73.

39 George Mackay Brown, *Time in a Red Coat* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 31, 35. In the subsequent chapter, he describes life as ‘an inn, a hostelry where we stay for a few nights, warming us at the fire with mulled wine, sitting at the broad table with strangers that one will never see again’ (p. 42). There are hints here, and elsewhere in *Time in a Red Coat* (see especially p. 104) of Victor Shklovsky’s conviction that the

of the end, the river 'born' in 'a cloud on the mountain tops' loses its original 'snowflake' purity and becomes 'stained with blood', 'diffused' and even 'lost' in the 'irresistible surge' of violence and war that characterize history. None are exempt; not even the archetypal figure of purity in 'the girl dressed in a white gown' who, 'utterly absorbed in the behaviour of the river', wanders through time in her otherwise perfect dress which has 'here and there stains of travel on it, flower and butterfly juices, and even a little thorn tear on an upper sleeve... Time passes'.⁴⁰ The christological allusions here are not lost on Brown.

Communities of time

'You imagine you've stepped out of society. You haven't and you can't',⁴¹ says Axel in Iris Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Axel's claim here is reminiscent of much that Brown contends for in his novels and short stories, which brim with a deep commitment to the location and practices that characterize and define local community, especially the towns and villages of Orkney – Hamnavoe and Birsay and the fictitious island of Norday, and elsewhere. So Iain Crichton Smith:

Local, though not parochial, [George Mackay Brown] has remained. Orkney is his world, and a curt, terse lapidary Norse background can be seen behind it... He has, as [William] Faulkner did, created a fictional universe which feels authentic... He has not gone abroad for renewal of the imagination or for fresh stories... He has never been seized by the fatigue of the familiar, which appears to him to be sacred.⁴²

Seamus Heaney observed that Brown could 'transform everything by passing it through the eye of the needle of Orkney',⁴³ and Baker rightly suggests that it is through Brown's 'life-long exploration of community that [he] comes to address not only life as it is lived in contemporary Orkney, but that nature of Being itself'.⁴⁴ Certainly, Brown's presentations appear to function in his work as part of a deliberate anti-Nietzschean strategy to counter modernity's fragmentation of the self vis-à-vis the wider community. The ideal community, according to the Sheriff (a villain and religious zealot) in Brown's story 'Witch', exists 'under God' and 'a changeless social order'. While Brown himself does not in any way endorse the hierarchical shape of such an order that the Javert-like Sheriff describes – in fact, his work in many ways represents a reversal of such – he does appear to agree

etymology of words signals a return to the reality from which over time they have become estranged. See Victor Shklovsky, 'The Resurrection of the Word', in *Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation*, ed. Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973), 41.

40 Brown, *Time in a Red Coat*, 33, 34, 35.

41 Iris Murdoch, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (London: Vintage, 2001), 129.

42 Cited in Ferguson, *George Mackay Brown*, 195.

43 Cited in Feeney, 'An Island World of Vastness', 25.

44 Baker, *George Mackay Brown*, 128.

with the Sheriff insofar as a society worth building is a society that ‘appears as an organism, a harmony, with each man performing his pre-ordained task to the glory of God and the health of the whole community’.⁴⁵

For Brown, community – understood geographically, religiously, and chronogrammatically – is an environment in which alone freedom is possible and apart from which knowledge of self and moral judgements are finally groundless. As illustrated perhaps most starkly in Brown’s first novel *Greenvoe*, whose six chapters vivify a different day in the life of the inhabitants of the imagined island of Hellya, the life of the community provides the context in which alone individual identities are made meaningful, and responsible moral judgements made possible. This is not to make an idol of community, however; for, as Baker reminds us, ‘Throughout his fiction, Brown documents neither a singular, unified community nor a world made solely by individuals, but instead focuses on the tension between the two, and on the possibilities that remain for community when community – in its strongest Durkheimian sense – is no longer thought to be possible’.⁴⁶ In *Greenvoe*, as in *Magnus*, Brown depicts a community unified – albeit in a fragmentary and occasional sense – not through a common history or geography, but through ritual. Indeed, in *Magnus* it is ritual understood in profoundly sacrificial (and Girardian-like) terms that not only unifies the warring factions of the community but also, through the costly undoing of the mechanisms of violence, makes their future as community possible.

Many of Brown’s characters demonstrate a yearning to be part of a drama beyond that of their immediate lives and communities. For example, in *Greenvoe*, Brown tells of six men and a boy who gather at Old Mansie Anderson’s farm, The Bu, for ‘the first of six initiation rites into the Ancient Mystery of The Horsemen’.⁴⁷ In this novel, The Bu seems to occupy a separate time and space from the other events depicted therein, evincing a sense of being both related to but unbound by time and space. It gestures towards a sacramental geography, as it were, and by doing so is vulnerable to promoting a kind of community accessible only to nostalgia. So Baker: ‘The individual’s desire to understand himself primarily as part of a unified – and often intangible – community comes at the expense of his engagement in the present physical community around him. It is the desire for something greater than lived experience that dooms the community, and it is each individual’s attempt to place himself within grand narratives that isolates him’.⁴⁸ To be sure, it is not difficult to harness examples in Brown’s corpus where such is the case. But there appears to be more going on here than Baker credits Brown for. For throughout his writing Brown bears witness to an ontology of spirit that both pervades and superintends the materiality and

45 George Mackay Brown, ‘Witch’, in *A Calendar of Love: And Other Stories* (Hammersmith: Flamingo, 1996), 116.

46 Baker, *George Mackay Brown*, 30.

47 George Mackay Brown, *Greenvoe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 29.

48 Baker, *George Mackay Brown*, 33.

spatiality of the present, charging it with meaning and yet calling it on, as it were, to a deeper level of being for which it appears to be entirely suited. Brown is, theologically speaking, a writer whose corpus brims with intimations of incarnation, 'the entwining of the ordinary with the eternal and divine'.⁴⁹ This does not mean that there are not characteristics of Brown's work in this area that raise some levels of dissatisfaction for the theologian. The depiction of the return to the island of the 'eternal and divine', for example, is presented in such a way that 'such a return can only occur in the absence of the ordinary community'.⁵⁰ Such a move seems at first to be somewhat at odds with the depths of sacramental promise presented in Brown's eucharistic theology. Read against the background of Brown's lament over the presbyterianization of his beloved Orkney, however, such a reading makes better sense. For Brown is convinced that the arrival of the Protestant religion had practically and formally signalled the departure of God. His essay on Rackwick outlines his belief that whereas once through the Mass 'into the crofter's sackcloth the life of Christ wove richness and beauty',⁵¹ Calvinism brought about the death of such weaving, replacing it with a secular belief in fate. The fragmentation of real community as such gave way to an ugly individualism and – perhaps most importantly for Brown – the abandoning of any real basic story that may have sustained the community.

Scotland, he believed, is now a 'Knox-ruined nation'.⁵² Where once

Above the ebb, that gray uprooted wall
Was arch and chancel, choir and sanctuary,
A solid round of stone and ritual.

49 Schoene, *The Making of Orcadia*, 185.

50 Baker, *George Mackay Brown*, 52.

51 George Mackay Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry* (London: Quartet Books, 1973), 31.

52 Brown, 'Prologue', in *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, p. 1. See also Edwin Muir, 'The Incarnate One', in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 228–229. There are, indeed, very strong echoes of Muir's work here. Recalling his time in Rome as director of the British Institute, Muir wrote: 'During the time when as a boy I attended the United Presbyterian Church in Orkney, I was aware of religion chiefly as the sacred Word, and the church itself, severe and decent, with its touching bareness and austerity, seemed to cut off religion from the rest of life and from all the week-day world, as if it were a quite specific thing shut within itself, almost jealously, by its white washed walls, furnished with its bare brown benches unlike any others in the whole world, and filled with the odour of ancient Bibles'. In Italy, however, the image of Christ 'was to be seen everywhere, not only in churches, cut on the walls of houses, at cross-roads in the suburbs, in wayside shrines in the parks, and in private rooms... A religion that dared to show forth such a mystery for everyone to see would have shocked the congregations of the north, would have seemed a sort of blasphemy, perhaps even an indecency. But here it was publicly shown, as Christ had showed himself on the earth'. Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1954), 273, 275.

Knox brought all down in his wild hogmanay.⁵³

With Knox and Melville and their lot, Brown argues, ‘the old heraldry began to crack, . . . the idea of “progress” took root in men’s minds. What was broken, irremediably, in the 16th century was the fullness of life of a community, its single interwoven identity’.⁵⁴ What provided cohesion to the pre-Reformation communities, what made possible – indeed what created – that ‘single interwoven identity’, Brown suggests, was the Mass, the dramatized narrative in which the entire human story is recapitulated, and God becomes bread – *Hoc est corpus*. Whether or not Brown has ‘wrenched history too far out of its frame’,⁵⁵ as he confessed to doing with his account of Magnus, is hardly the point here. The fact is that Brown associated the steady erosion and fragmentation of community life in Scotland not only with a perfunctory love affair with technology, but also with the advent of the near-death of Catholicism whose ubiety counteracted a devitalizing amnesia vis-à-vis the wisdoms that had sustained communities for near-two millennia. This sense of loss is unmistakable in Brown’s story of the Orkney cleric ‘Master Halcrow’, that ‘obstinate uprooted man’⁵⁶ responsible for Masses in Stromness in 1561, one year after the Scottish Parliament renounced the authority of the papacy and ‘the old kirk is put away’ for ‘there is a new kirk in the land’.⁵⁷

My age is near what the psalmist celebrated, seventy, that sweet secret number that opens the door into eternity. My kirk, St. Peter’s, is built above the rocks at the shore. My people are fishermen and crofters. A few women come to my Mass each morning, and when I confess to God at the altar, to these also I confess – I fish too long at the rock, I pray only a little, I drink too much of the dark ale that they brew on the hill.⁵⁸

His colleagues are likewise characters in love with life:

Magnus Anderson, curate in Sandwick, lives and eats and sleeps with a huge woman called Angela – much laughter and lewd winks and silence in the parishes on that account. Jerome Clements in Hoy (this I know for truth) has not said Mass since the Feast of the Assumption in August. In Stenness John Coghill gabbles his Latin like a

53 Brown, ‘Chapel between Cornfield and Shore’, in *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, 35.

54 George Mackay Brown, ‘The Broken Heraldry’, in *Memoirs of a Broken Scotland*, ed. Karl Miller (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 145.

55 Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, 158.

56 Brown, ‘Master Halcrow’, in *A Calendar of Love*, 124.

57 Brown, ‘Master Halcrow’, 127. So p. 127: ‘The Government of Scotland has passed a law. The Pope’s authority is put down. All bishops and priests are abolished, and also the Mass. Relic and image and altar must be removed at once from our kirks. The word of God is become the sole guide. Every man will discover the truth that his own soul requires in holy scripture. Henceforth every man is his own priest’.

58 Brown, ‘Master Halcrow’, 124.

duck, yet because he is bastard son to the prebend's cousin, a place therefore had needs be found for him.⁵⁹

Not the most assiduous bunch of priests perhaps, but still Master Halcrow prays:

Saint Peter the fisherman, pray for the Church. Our Lady of the sea, pray for the Church, that it does not shipwreck in this age. Who am I to accuse, a priest that fishes and drinks too much! (and even so I hope for a great host of cuithe to be at the rock tonight – my line is ready with six hooks and bits of whitemaa feather for lure)... Saint Magnus, pray for the Church. Pray for an old man whose throat is dry, though not with praying. And pray also for the good and worthy priests that are everywhere in the islands, true guardians of the Word.⁶⁰

Master Halcrow's lament is also Brown's, men familiar with the grief and loss that marks all time.

Time of death

We move from silence into silence, and there is a brief stir between, every person's attempt to make a meaning of life and time. Death is certain; it may be that the dust of good men and women lies more richly in the earth than that of the unjust; between the silences they may be touched, however briefly, with the music of the spheres.⁶¹

So Brown confessed in *For the Islands I Sing*. While Brown did not emulate fully Edith Sitwell's habit of beginning each writing session by lying in an empty coffin thereby recalling the impermanence of the human condition, the coffin was 'certainly part of [Brown's] internal furniture'.⁶² Ron Ferguson suggests that Brown's 'adolescent familiarity with the gravestones at Warbeth and his Keatsian dance with the Grim Reaper in Eastbank Sanatorium gave him an awareness of human transience that remained until he himself joined the silent conquering army at Warbeth cemetery'.⁶³ Attention to death, its dust and skulls and its being a sign of life's vicissitudes, weaves its way also into Brown's work which serves, in this way, as a mode of *Ars moriendi*. So Brown's sixth small song for the beginning of Lent:

A hundred Lents from now
Who will remember us?

59 Brown, 'Master Halcrow', 125.

60 Brown, 'Master Halcrow', 125.

61 Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, 168.

62 Ferguson, *George Mackay Brown*, 197. See also Russell Fraser, 'George Mackay Brown and the Orkney Islands', *Sewanee Review* 109(4) (2001), 569–573.

63 Ferguson, *George Mackay Brown*, 197.

What is a carved name, some numbers?

Sand sifts through the skulls.

Who shall know the skull of a singer?

Silence is best. Song
Should be rounded with silence.

Another tongue of dust will rejoice
A hundred springs from now.⁶⁴

Ferguson, who once served as a minister of St Magnus Cathedral on Orkney, observes that in a rural and still-largely agricultural community like Orkney, ‘death, whether of livestock or human beings, is seen as being part of the natural order. Of course there is distress over an untimely human death – the fishing industry has traditionally had a relatively high death rate – but evidence of mortality tends to be treated with stoical acceptance rather than with Dylan Thomas’s raging against the dying of the light’. Ferguson also notes that ‘acceptance is not the same as passive resignation; it is a stronger notion, perhaps informed in the Northern Isles by the Norse concept of “fate”’.⁶⁵

There is no doubt that Brown’s understanding of death was informed by both the Calvinist recasting of a Socratic call to live an examined life and by the Roman Catholic prayer *Ave Maria*, both ways of inducing attention to human mortality. To this we might add his being introduced, during his student days at Edinburgh University, to Bede’s *Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. In this important work, Bede recounts the words of one royal counsellor trying to persuade King Edwin of Northumbria to convert to Christianity:

The present life of man, O king, seems to me, in comparison of that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant.⁶⁶

64 Brown, ‘Chinoiseries’, 500.

65 Ferguson, *George Mackay Brown*, 198.

66 The Venerable Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (London/New York, NY: J. M. Dent & Sons/E. P. Dutton & Co., 1910), 91.

That this story fascinated Brown for arguably over 20 years is plainly evident in his poem 'Bird in the Lighted Hall', published in his 1983 collection, *Voyages*:

The old poet to his lute:
 'Bright door, black door,
 Beak-and-wing hurtling through,
 This is life.

(Childhood lucent as dew,
 The opening rose of love,
 Labour at plough and oar,
 The yellow leaf,
 The last blank of snow.)
 Hail and farewell. Too soon
 The song is mute,
 The spirit free and flown.
 But you, ivory bird, cry on and on
 To guest and ghost
 From the first stone
 To the sag and fall of the roof'.⁶⁷

Ferguson suggests that we conceive of the 'spiritual vision' at the centre of Brown's work as 'an extended meditation, in a variety of forms, on the image of Bede's bird's swift flight through the banqueting hall'.⁶⁸ Such an assessment provides a helpful lens through which to interpret much of Brown's work: where the song is not made mute, the spirit is free in the great ballads, words, paintings and spirituality of the dead, and the bird makes such available to the living in ways undetermined and unoffended by time.⁶⁹

Brown's efforts to communicate this through the constants of island life are evident throughout his work. In 'The Island of the Women', for example, where Odivere seeks to retell to the people of Rousay the tales of that mysterious island which few have seen but which the elders used to speak about, and which 'sometimes broke the horizon' but would melt 'like a dream' whenever the old men tried to row towards it, recalls the ways that we never seem to be able to fully escape the past, even when the past is pure myth.⁷⁰ The approach to such an event itself requires attention to time. Doing things well means taking the time to make ready. On this, Brown is a genius at play, an Orcadian equivalent to Nuri Bilge

67 Brown, 'Bird in the Lighted Hall', in *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, 201–202.

68 Ferguson, *George Mackay Brown*, 200.

69 See Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, 30–32.

70 George Mackay Brown, *The Island of the Women and Other Stories* (London: John Murray, 1998), 52.

Ceylan. The opening scene of 'Hawkfall', which recounts the occasion of the death of a king and high priest, is a further case in point:

He was dead. The spirit of The Beloved One had gone on alone into the hall of death. His body was left to them for seven days yet so that they might give it a fitting farewell. Now it was time for it too to be sent after. The priests washed his old frail blueish body with water that had been drawn at sunrise. They arrayed him in his ceremonial vestments: the dyed woollen kirtle [tunic], the great gray cloak of wolfskin, the sealskin slippers. Across his breast they laid his whalebone bow, and seven arrows of larch. In his right hand they put the long oaken spear. The old mouth began to smile in its scant silken beard, perhaps because everything was being done well and according to the first writings.

Now it was time. All was ready.

A young man blew a horn on the hillside. The six bearers of the dead lifted the body and set out with it from the Temple of the Sun. They crossed between the two lochs, over a stone causeway. They walked solemnly, keeping step, towards the House of the Dead a mile away. Women walked alongside, wailing and lamenting, but in a ritual fashion, not as they would weep over the cruelty of a lover or the loss of a bronze ring.⁷¹

The relationship between time and the fragility of human life is also movingly documented in Brown's novel *The Golden Bird*. Throughout, we are reminded that babies and lambs, crofters and fisherman and cornstalks, are not only bound up in the same movement of life but that they are also subject to the forces and accidents of nature – eagles and cliff faces, disease and drownings, and to the hellish and dehumanizing forces of unchecked progress. Such reminders seem to be among Brown's many invitations to think again about the cycles and nature of time and the mysteries of transitory existence.

The valley turned about the sun, in the slow year-long wheel harvest burnish and brimming sea silver and hungry cats and gulls.

From plough to quernstone and fire, the time of corn is reckoned in days. And therewith men nourish themselves for the longer rhythms of childhood, labour, love, and the wisdom of age (but often enough it is babbling folly.) From cradle to coffin the time of a man or a woman is reckoned in a few years – seventy, according to the psalmist.

The time of man is not very much longer than the time of cornstalks. For each, equally, a reaper waits with a scythe.

And sickness and death can come to a child as well as to a person weighed down with years. 'He's well by with it,' an old crippled man might mutter from his open door,

71 George Mackay Brown, 'Hawkfall', in *Hawkfall and Other Stories* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974), 9.

looking at a small white coffin being carried along the road that winds to the kirkyard on the other side of the hill. ‘Why is a bright bairn taken, and an old thing like me left lingering in misery?’⁷²

But sickness, mourning, and death are never the final word. There remains always the hope that, in words spoken ‘quietly’ during the Roman Mass, ‘what has been given to us in time may be our healing for eternity’.⁷³

Time, hope, and eucharist

Brown’s attention to hope is characterized by a persistent sense that any future will not be amputated from the past. His poem ‘Runes from a Holy Island’ reads, as one commentator observed, ‘like brief blade-strokes chiseled into old stone, sketches like fragments, some of which could just as easily be modern as ancient, coming at you “Down the huge convex of time” (“When You Are Old”)’.⁷⁴ But neither is the past made possible without the hope-filled orientation that calls it into being. So, for example, Brown’s poem ‘The Journey’:

The spirit summons out of chaos
Galaxies
And sun moon stars
Then a tree with an apple and a bird,
A river with a fish,
A place of grass for lions and gazelles.

At last a man, a woman, a son and a daughter.

All danced together,
The planets, mountains, forests, waters, islands, beasts, folk . . .

‘On the far side of the hill
A boy will come with a lantern.
He will take us to the inn, father’ . . .
A table was set with bread and bottle and lamp.
He danced there, old man, on sun-scarred feet.⁷⁵

72 George Mackay Brown, *The Golden Bird: Two Orkney Stories* (London: Grafton Books, 1989), 61.

73 *The Roman Missal* (3rd typical ed.; Chicago, IL: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2011), 670 (§137).

74 Chris Bell, ‘Seapink and Spindrifft: The Language of George Mackay Brown’ [accessed 2 April 2013]. Online: www.wordsshiftminds.co.nz/2011/03/seapink-spindrifft-magical-words-george-mackay-brown/.

75 Brown, ‘The Journey’, in *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, 323, 324.

Conceiving of hope thus is commensurate with Brown's eucharistically-informed vision of creation and its time, and births soteriological consequences that are almost as far reaching as imaginable. As he would write in his story 'The Cinquefoil':

All loves and affections become meaningful only in relation to Love itself. The love of a young man and girl in a small island is cluttered always with jealousy, lewdness, gossiping in the village store. But the mystics insist that Love itself 'moves the stars'. They say that, in spite of the terror and pain inseparable from it, 'all shall be well' – in the isolate soul, and in the island, and in the universe.

The meanest one in the community feels this occasionally; he could not suffer the awful weight of time and chance and mortality if he didn't; a sweetness and a longing are infused into him, a caring for something or someone outside his shuttered self.⁷⁶

One of the recurring ways in which Brown's characters make meaning of their world and of their relation to it is through reading. This is perhaps most obvious in the novel *Greenvoe*, whose entire community, it seems, is inhabited with readers. There is Inga Fortin-Bell, the laird's granddaughter, who is introduced while holding a copy of *Women in Love*; and Ivan Westray who both consoles and tortures himself with the *Orkneyinga Saga* and a book of sermons titled *In Love Carnal and Divine*; and there is the Whaness family who in their evening readings turn to *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, *Meditations Among the Tombs*, and Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*; and there is Timmy Folster, the impecunious meth addict who tirelessly quotes from Burns and from cheap romance novels; and there is the Sikh peddler Johnny who takes great pleasure in reading the dark sonnets of Hopkins.

There is another way that Brown's characters author and receive meaning from their world, for which I have been arguing in this article: namely, through the Eucharist. The Eucharist is, for Brown, the chord that drones in and out of its characters and communities and provides a cohesion of meaning and a compass for community life against all forms of 'the fatal blessing of prosperity'⁷⁷ and progress that would threaten its undoing or collapse. It is not as if the Eucharist represents, for Brown, some kind of sentimental desperation to hold on to a world displaced and no longer possible. Nor is it that the Eucharist particularly represents a promise that the future will necessarily be more palatable than the present. Rather, in the broken and disastrous middle (to borrow words from Gillian Rose) which characterizes the world, the Eucharist speaks the 'shaping divinity [that] takes over from our rough-hewings'.⁷⁸ It is the 'foolishness' of resurrection, foolishness which alone is the creation of the community and the redemption of time, creations which alone

76 Brown, 'The Cinquefoil', in *Hawkfall and Other Stories*, p. 107.

77 Brown, 'The Broken Heraldry', in *Memoirs of a Broken Scotland*, 144.

78 Brown, *For the Islands I Sing*, 173.

make it possible that persons and communities might live meaningfully in the time of the 'brutal circle', in time wherein those 'hungry for God' might be 'fed like angels' and rejoice in 'the circles of ceremony'.⁷⁹ When nothing else is possible, we can still 'kneel at the Mass of Corpus Christi'. Critics, of course, may well charge Brown here with simply championing a 'nostalgia for the absolute' (to borrow George Steiner's phrase); however, such a judgement would be both premature and gratuitous, for the chasm between desire and certainty is properly left unresolved throughout Brown's work. Resurrection remains the impossible possibility whose dawning light reaches back in time but is by no means a *fait accompli*. Moreover, it is – like the Eucharist itself – not an event subject to the limitations of history. But neither is it cut off from history, for in the Host himself historical and earthly existence is taken up, confirmed, and sustained in its concrete factuality by being integrated into his own resurrected life, which is the controlling ground of all that has been, is and, for all we know, will be.

The notion that the Eucharist represents 'the interruption of a timeless myth into the world that cannot sustain it'⁸⁰ is powerfully articulated in the closing scene of *Greenvoe* when, after the Harvester is killed, one of the Master Horsemen recalls the foolish utterance of the dust – 'Resurrection'.⁸¹ The novel concludes with these words:

The Lord of the Harvest raised his hands. 'We have brought light and blessing to the kingdom of winter', he said, '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'.

The sun rose. The stones were warm. They broke the bread.⁸²

One of the striking things about this passage is that while it is set in a specific time and place – 'One midsummer evening, ten years after Hellya had been finally evacuated'⁸³ – it is finally undetermined by the events that take place in time. This is consistent with Brown's oeuvre overall which brings the experience of the transitory into indivisible proximity with 'the eye of an angel' who would see 'the whole history of men' with 'the brevity and beauty of this dance at the altar'.⁸⁴ Nowhere perhaps is this more stark than in *Beside the Ocean of Time* and in *Time in a Red Coat*, remarkable novels that resist the temptation to distinguish between major and minor acts precisely because nothing is to be regarded as being lost for

79 Brown, 'Corpus Christi', in *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, pp. 313, 315, 316.

80 Baker, *George Mackay Brown*, 44.

81 Brown, *Greenvoe*, 249.

82 Brown, *Greenvoe*, 249.

83 Brown, *Greenvoe*, 246.

84 Brown, *Magnus*, 139.

history. For Brown, such work is analogous to the Eucharist, an event ‘so perdurable that the world-girgling fire or flood [is] nothing in comparison’.⁸⁵ It is the invitation to behold, to taste, and to reimagine the fullness of time itself, where ‘the pain of all history might be touched with healing by a right action in the present’.⁸⁶ One further example of this appears in ‘A Treading of Grapes’, wherein Olaf the fisherman, Jock the crofter, and Merran the hen-wife recount their own wedding banquets in light of one more ubiquitous:

What wedding? You ask, we know of no wedding. I answer, The marriage of Christ with His Church. And where will this marriage be? you ask. Everywhere, I answer, but in particular, lords and princes, in this small kirk beside the sea where you sit. And when is it to be, this wedding? you ask me. Always, I answer, but in particular within this hour, now, at the very moment when I bow over this bread of your offering, the food, princes and lords, that you have won with such hard toil from the furrows, at once when I utter upon it five words HIC EST ENIM CORPUS MEUM. Then is Christ the King come once again to his people, as truly as he was present at the marriage in Cana, and the Church his bride abides his coming, and this altar with the few hosts on it and the cup is a rich repast indeed, a mingling of the treasures of earth and heaven, and the joy of them in Cana is nothing to the continual merriment of the children of God. Sanctus sanctus sanctus, they cry forever and ever, Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.

‘Dance ye then, princes and ladies, in your homespun, there is no end to this marriage, it goes on at every altar of the world, world without end. This Bread that I will raise above your kneeling, It is entire Christ – Annunciation, Nativity, Transfiguration, Passion, Death, Resurrection, Ascension, Majesty, gathered up into one perfect offering, the Divine Love itself, whereof you are witnesses.

‘And not only you, princes, all creation rejoices in the marriage of Christ and His Church, animals, fish, plants, yea, the water, the wind, the earth, the fire, stars, the very smallest grains of dust that blow about your cornfields and your Kirkyards’.

In Nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.⁸⁷

This supper represents the ecumenism of time, the promised actuality that the past is never over; that it isn’t even past. It is the gift which discloses that the liberation we need is not from time, from history, and from tradition, but precisely from the Hellenistic myth of a deity unfamiliar with time. It is testimony to God’s overcoming for us the burden of our timelessness – only death is timeless. It is also the invitation to resist the temptation to wedge the divine life into our histories, and to embrace instead the possibility that God has included creation in God’s own

85 Brown, *Time in a Red Coat*, 178.

86 Brown, *Magnus*, 141.

87 Brown, ‘A Treading of Grapes’, 74–75.

history and time. Thus is the experienced fear of time and change overcome. There are strong echoes of this also in *Magnus*:

All time was gathered up into that ritual half-hour, the entire history of mankind, as well the events that have not yet happened as the things recorded in chronicles and sagas. That is to say, history both repeats itself and does not repeat itself.⁸⁸

Like the novel itself, the Eucharist too re-presents the compression of the ‘unimaginably complex events of time into the ritual words and movements of a half-hour’.⁸⁹ It is also a summons to conceive of time and history itself in ways that take as determinative the event of divine incarnation into creaturely history, time, and space – ‘the Word that was to flood the whole universe with meaning’.⁹⁰ One implication of this, it seems, is that the truth of who God is in God’s self cannot be known unhistorically, as if there were some God behind or beyond this One who is made available to us in space and time, in history and action. This does not mean, however, that the event of God’s becoming incarnate can be understood as simply another event in history, and so verifiable via the normal tools and laws of historical enquiry. Yes, it is an event that truly belongs in a series of events whose historicity is inseparable from the histories of Israel and Rome, of Mary, Lazarus, and Pilate, etc., but the *sui generis* nature of the free movement of God in becoming flesh in time and space requires that any creaturely assessment grant priority to the self-witness of the event itself within the concatenations of the other events in which it is located. So Brown:

For the generations, and even the hills and seas, come and go, and only the Word stands, which was there – all wisdom, beauty, truth, love – before the fires of creation, and will still be there inviolate among the ashes of the world’s end.⁹¹

But this Word does not stand, and is not known, apart from ‘the generations, . . . hills and seas’, bodies and crops, etc. While Brown’s (indirect) indebtedness here to Augustine’s *Confessions* – ‘Lord, eternity is yours’⁹² – means that he leaves too undeveloped the radical particularly and paradoxical scandal of the meeting of eternity and creation in Jesus of Nazareth, his instinct that the horizon that exists between the two is not untraversable is correct. In Christ, past and future are always fully present, not only because of the act of God’s becoming incarnate but also because creation is from and for God, and because God makes space for creation in God’s own time. Important here is the claim not only that the

88 Brown, *Magnus*, 139.

89 Brown, *Magnus*, 139.

90 Brown, *Time in a Red Coat*, 48.

91 Brown, *Magnus*, 138.

92 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 222 (xi.1.1).

incarnation – and particularly the scandal of the cross – is the ground of our understanding of our being in time, but also that the Word himself is entirely who he is in the continuity of God’s own evangelical history. Easter’s doorway, therefore, is the doorway to all history. The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the rock-hewn tomb of Joseph of Arimathea during the reign of Pontius Pilate is the axis of history, the redemption of time itself, the divine promise that history – and so creation – will not succumb finally to the despair of the past or to the self-preserving strategies of the present.

In Brown’s ‘Lord of the Harvest’, grace is inseparable from nature, eternity conjoined with the particularity of thoroughly contingent lives. In such a world, re-mem-bering, celebrating, and leaning forward with ‘a loaf and a bottle’⁹³ – not of wine, mind you, but of whisky, as the closing scene from *Greenvoe* depicts – is not only possible, it is as unescapable as time, ‘the great given, the medium of all gain and all loss, the medium within which change is possible and inevitable and constancy persists through endless transformations, the medium of act, accident, and thought, disruption and coherency’.⁹⁴

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93 Brown, *Greenvoe*, 249.

94 Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things: Essays* (London: Virago Press, 2015), 89.