

# That Rune Will Unlock Time's Labyrinth ... : Old Norse Themes and Motifs in George Mackay Brown's Poetry

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*Abstract:* George Mackay Brown (1921–1996), an Orcadian poet, author and dramatist, was undoubtedly one of the finest Scottish creative voices of the twentieth century. He was greatly influenced by Old Norse literature, and this is reflected in his writings in many ways. The present article aims to trace and discuss Old Norse themes and motifs in Brown's poetry. His rune poems, translations of the twelfth-century skaldic verse, experimentation with skaldic kennings, as well as choosing saga personalities, such as Saint Magnus, Earl Rognvald of Orkney and others, as protagonists of the poems show the poet's in-depth interest in the historical and literary legacy of his native Orkney and Old Norse culture in general.

One of the delights for a Nordic scholar in Scotland is finding many reflections of Old Norse literary heritage in Scottish literature of various periods. Scottish writers helped to spread Old Norse literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both as regards saga translations into English and in using Old Norse materials in their own writings. Old Norse influence is even more significant in the works of the major Scottish writers of the twentieth century: Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Neil M. Gunn, Naomi Mitchison, John Buchan, Eric Linklater, George Mackay Brown and others. These influences have been discussed in detail in Julian D'Arcy's book *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature* (D'Arcy, 1996). The twenty-first century, with Scottish writers taking an active stance in the political debate about the future of Scotland, in which the Nordic model is viewed as an attractive possibility for the independent Scottish nation, shows an unabated interest in the Nordic countries and their culture.

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Old Norse literature had a profound influence on the Orcadian poet, author and dramatist George Mackay Brown (1921–1996).<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly one of the finest Scottish poetic voices of the twentieth century, Brown was born in Orkney, its second-largest town Stromness (for him always Hamnavoe<sup>2</sup>), and lived there for most of his life, except for a few years away at Newbattle Abbey College in Midlothian and later at Edinburgh University where he acquired a degree in English literature (Brown, 1997, 91–104; Fergusson, 2006, 101–118). Having started his writing career as a Stromness correspondent for *The Orkney Herald* newspaper, George Mackay Brown became a prolific author and left a sizeable heritage of fifteen collections of poetry, nine short story collections, six novels, eight essay collections, short story collections for children, theatre plays and an autobiography. Three of his novels – *Magnus* (1973), *Vinland* (1992) and *Beside the Ocean of Time* (1994) – deal with Old Norse subjects, and so do many of his poems. The aim of this article is to trace and discuss Old Norse themes and motifs in Brown’s poetry. The main source for the study was the comprehensive volume *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown* compiled by Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (Brown, 2006), containing all the poetry collections published in the poet’s lifetime as well as selected poems from the posthumous publications.

Orkney and the Shetland Islands off the north coast of Scotland boast a particularly rich Nordic historic and cultural heritage. These islands, colonized by Viking settlers from Norway in the ninth century, had been part of the Norwegian realm until 1468, when they were given to Scotland as a result of the marriage treaty between James III of Scotland and Princess Margrethe of Denmark (Magnusson, 2001, 260–261).

One of the early sources of the history of Orkney is *The Orkneyinga saga*, written in the thirteenth century in Iceland. It tells the story of the earls of Orkney from the ninth to the thirteenth century but also touches on the history of other countries, Norway and Scotland in particular (Pálsson & Edwards, 1981, 9). The historical personalities of the saga have been popular in Orkney for centuries, particularly Saint Magnus

- 1 I am grateful to my friend, Scottish storyteller Ruth Frame, for introducing me to George Mackay Brown’s poetry and for many inspiring discussions about Scottish and Nordic literature, both ancient and modern.
- 2 Hamnavoe (from Old Norse *hafn-vágr* “haven inlet”) is the Viking name for the town of Stromness.

the Martyr and Earl Rognvald of Orkney (Saint Ronald), the founder of St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall. Orcadians and Shetlanders spoke a Nordic language, called Norn, which survived until the 1850s. Even today, Orcadian and Shetlandic dialects show a strong Norse influence. Continuity of the Nordic tradition manifests itself in personal names and toponymy of the islands, as well as ballads, folk tales and legends. Nevertheless, the history of the settlement of the islands goes back much further in time. The islands had been inhabited for millennia by Mesolithic and Neolithic peoples, the latter leaving a rich archaeological heritage: the burial chamber of Maeshowe, the stone-built settlement of Skara Brae (from roughly 3180 BC to about 2500 BC), the circles of standing stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar. Iron Age cultures are represented by unique stone structures, called "brochs" (600 BC–100 AD). The Nordic period, beside its architectural monuments, is also marked by a rich collection of runic inscriptions, one of the largest in Europe (Barnes, 1994).

Few have better described this rich multilayered historical heritage of Orkney than George Mackay Brown, who devoted many poems to Orcadians through the centuries:

*Island Faces*

Many masks merge here, in an island face –

Pict, Norseman, Scot

Face of a crofter, gnawed with loam

Face of fishermen, seamen –

Gray of the sea, eyes level as horizons.

"Haiku: for The Holy Places" (Brown, 2006, 461)

The poet was fascinated by these ancient cultures and their encounters. As told in *The Orkneyinga saga*, one such happened around 1150 AD when Earl Harald Maddadarson<sup>3</sup> attempted to take over Orkney from Earl Rognvald, who was on the crusade to the Holy Land. The Vikings sought shelter from a violent snowstorm in an ancient burial mound they knew as *Orkahaugr* (the Norse name for Maeshowe). While waiting for the storm to subside, they cut runes into the stone walls of the

3 All Nordic names are used in the transcribed form as they occur in Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards' edition of *The Orkneyinga saga* (Pálsson & Edwards, 1981) and in George Mackay Brown's poems.

chamber (Pálsson & Edwards, 1981, 188). Another episode is thought to have involved Earl Rognvald of Orkney and his men who also broke into the mound and left their mark on the walls. Brown reflects on these events in the poem “Crusaders in Orkahowe” (the collection *Following a Lark*, 1996) and “Two Maeshowe Poems” (*Northern Lights*, 1999). In the poem below, the lines in capital letters are paraphrased runic inscriptions:

The first island poems  
 Cuttings in stone  
 Among the tombs of very ancient dead,  
 Young men’s lyrics  
 Struck with chisels among thronging ghosts  
 INGIBIORG IS THE LOVELIEST GIRL  
 HERMUND WITH A HARD AXE CARVED RUNES  
 A GREAT TREASURE IS BURIED NEARBY  
 JERUSALEM-FARERS BROKE IN HERE  
 DRAGON, GUARD THE BONES AND THE VERSES  
 The young seamen climbed out of Maeshowe,  
 Their nostrils wide to the salt wind.

“Two Maeshowe Poems” (Brown, 2006, 420–421)

### “Carve the runes...”

Imitating the compact, laconic form of the runic inscriptions Brown composed several cycles of short haiku-style poems, which he called “Runes”: “Runes from the Holy Island”, “Runes from the Island of Horses” in *Poems New and Selected* (1971), “Sea Runes” and “Hill Runes” in *Fishermen with Ploughs* (1971). There are several similar cycles under various other titles: “Weather Bestiary” in *The Year of the Whale* (1965), “The Lesser Mysteries of Art” in *Winterfold* (1976) and “Haiku: for The Holy Places” in the posthumous collection *Travellers* (2001). According to Rowena and Brian Murray, “The short runes neatly provide cameos of experience and attitude, giving substance to the longer poems and being interesting variants of them” (Murray & Murray, 2008, 152), while Michael Stachura argues that Brown’s rune poems show the influence of the Imagist movement and Ezra Pound in particular (Stachura, 2011).

Brown’s rune cycles consist of a varying number of three-line poems, which in a few brushstrokes portray the very cornerstones of Orcadian

life: some quintessential landscapes, such as the Holy Island Eynhallow<sup>4</sup> (ON *Eyinhelga*) and the Island of Horses (ON *Hrossey*, now Orkney Mainland), moments from the past and present, the island community, as well as philosophical meditations on the nature of time and human existence. Fourteen short verses of "Runes from the Holy Island" (like 14 Stations of the Cross – a recurrent symbol in Brown's poetry, cf. Murray & Murray, 2006, 93) deal with the concrete and abstract, the mundane and sacred: an early monastic settlement, sparse island population, precarious existence through centuries, circle of life and death, advance of modern times:

*Hierarchy*

A claret laird,  
Seven fishermen with ploughs,  
Women, beasts, corn, fish, stones.

*Saint*

A starved island, Cormack  
With crossed hands,  
Stones become haddock and loaf.

*Circle*

Cod, give needles and oil.  
Winter hands.  
Must sew shrouds by lamplight.

*Books*

No more ballads in Eynhallow.  
The schoolmaster  
Opens a box of grammars.  
(Brown, 2006, 78–79)

The poems are minimalistic; the prevailing nominative phrases create static images as if preserved for eternity; sparingly used verbs mark crucial points of human life: expectation of a miracle ("Stones become haddock and loaf"), inevitability of death ("Must sew shrouds

4 One of the smallest islands in Orkney, now uninhabited Eynhallow had since the twelfth century a church and a monastery.

by lamplight”), advance of modernity (“The schoolmaster opens a box of grammars”). These verses share some structural and functional similarities with Old Norse *ljóðahátt* poems; like those, these too encode human wisdom.<sup>5</sup> The poet uses intricately woven patterns of alliteration and assonance: “Haul west, fishermen, / With flushed violent mouths” (*Easter*, “Runes from the Holy Island”), “Among scattered Christ stones / Devoutly leave / Torn nets, toothache, winter wombs” (*Ruined Chapel*, “Runes from the Holy Island”), “Three winter bright-nesses – / Bridesheet, boy in snow, / Kirkyard spade” (*Winter*, “Runes from the Island of Horses”), “Our isle is oyster gray...” (*Fish and Corn*, “Runes from the Holy Island”). Powerful metaphors encode crucial images: bridesheet symbolizes marriage, winter wombs – birth, and possibly miscarriages, kirkyard spade, shrouds, wilderness of skulls – death.

The collection *Fishermen with Ploughs* (1971) contains another two short-poem cycles: “Sea Runes” and “Hill Runes”. These concentrate on two main aspects of Orcadian life through the centuries: fishery and agriculture, which have become inseparable. In order to survive, Orcadians had to become “fishermen with ploughs”, exchanging oars and nets for ploughs while on land. “Golden corn” and “silver brothers” (fish) are among the poet’s beloved images. Several parallelisms and kenning-type metaphors emphasize the intertwining of these two ancient occupations: sea waves are like furrows, a fishing boat and nets are called “sea plough” or “fish-plough”, a catch of herring is paralleled to a harvest of corn. A fisherman reads the salt book (sea), wave after wave, while a crofter reads the clay book (soil), furrow by furrow.

#### *Elder*

Charlag who has read the prophets  
A score of times  
Has thumbed the salt book also, wave after wave.

#### *Crofter-Fisherman*

Sea-plough, fish-plough, provider  
Make orderly furrows.

- 5 The *ljóðahátt* half-stanza consists of two short lines bound by alliterations and the third longer line that often contains a maxim or a summarizing statement. It is the metre of Old Norse gnomic poetry, or wisdom verse, the best known example being *Hávamál* (“Sayings of the High One”, i.e. Odin) of the *Poetic Edda*; one section of the poem, *Rúnatal*, tells how Odin acquired runes.

The herring will jostle like August corn.

“Sea Runes” (Brown, 2006, 121)

*Elder*

Andrew who has read the gospel

Two or three times

Has quizzed the clay book also, furrow by furrow.

“Hill Runes” (Brown, 2006, 127)

The poet views these two professions with reverence and endows them with Biblical symbolism:

The beauty of Christ's parables was irresistible. How could they fail to be, when so many of them concern ploughing and seedtime and harvest, and his listeners were most of them fishermen? [...] Now I looked with another eye at those providers of our bread and fish; and when I came at last to work as a writer, it was those heroic and primeval occupations that provided the richest imagery, the most exciting symbolism. (Brown, 1997, 54)

In another example, the poet muses on the impact of modern times and technology on the traditional way of life: “... alehouse, merchant and tractors obstruct the fishermen's return with their catch and make the horsemen's traditional skills redundant...” (Murray & Murray, 2008, 152). The poet again creates a juxtaposition while using a parallelism with a witty kenning for a tractor:

*Tractor*

The horsemen are red in the stable

With whisky and wrath.

The petrol-drinker is in the hills.

“Hill Runes” (Brown, 2006, 128)

Runes in Brown's poetry are not only the laconic poetic form but also one of his beloved poetic images, with a plethora of meanings. Traditionally, runes are the letters of the Old Germanic runic alphabet and inscriptions in those on stone, metal, bone or wood from the Viking era. This usage is quite common in Brown's poems: a dying Viking bequeaths to his son among other things “worn runes over the lintel” and asks the skald to cut “a deep rune for Sigrid” (“Viking testament”, Brown,

2006, 64–66), “They carried torches and the sword with runes on it, to a ship” (“Solstice”, Brown, 2006, 276), “Sire, the Trondheim carvers / Have rimmed the hull with tree runes” (“February”, Brown, 2006, 351). The poet extends the image to our times: the “rune” can be an epitaph on a gravestone: “Now read the rune of the stone / ROBERT BURNS POET” (“Homage to Burns”, Brown, 2006, 346).

The image can also acquire a more general meaning and comes to symbolize lore, cultural heritage, even that of the Christian culture: “How should we read the runes of a new kingdom?” (“Bethlehem”, Brown, 2006, 149).

Crucially, the “rune” is a symbol of the poet’s craft and mission, be it an ancient skald or a modern poet, and of the poetic diction and poetry in general: “Here is a work for poets – / Carve the runes / Then be content with silence” (“A Work for Poets”, Brown, 2006, 378).<sup>6</sup> The symbolic meaning of the “rune” goes even deeper. In “The Lesser Mysteries of Art” it is described as follows:

*Rune*

Obliterator

of a thousand questing mouths,  
and sevenfold silence still.

(Brown, 2006, 189)

Thus, runes for the poet, like the Viking runes on the walls of Maeshowe, symbolize writing preserved for eternity when other sounds of human life vanish into silence. Poets should strive to achieve immortality by carving their own runes. To quote M. Stachura, “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” (Stachura, 2011, 37–38).

### Dragon and Dove

*Fishermen with Ploughs: A Poem Cycle* (1971) is a sequence of poems based on the history of Orkney. In the prose introduction, the four parts of the cycle are explained. The first two tell an imaginary story about a tribe of “fisher people” from Norway who in the ninth century sailed

<sup>6</sup> The last two lines of this poem are carved as an epitaph on the poet’s gravestone in Stromness cemetery.

west on a ship called *Dove* and settled in the fertile Rackwick Valley on the island of Hoy:

Their god, the beautiful Balder, is dead. They are in flight from starvation, pestilence, turbulent neighbours (what the poet calls, in the shorthand of myth, the Dragon). But also they are compelled west by the promise of a new way of life: agriculture. The cargo in their hold is a jar of seed corn. Fate, blind and all-wise, has woven their myth about them. Now the same Fate sits at the helm. (Brown, 2006, 89)

Part I *Dragon and Dove* consists of nine poems that are particularly rich in Norse imagery. The first poem, "Building the Ship", starts with the tribe receiving a prophecy: "A dove must fold your seed from dragon flame.' / That blind rune stabbed the sea tribe". The prophecy is uttered by Norn, a blind woman, Fate personified.<sup>7</sup> The tribe starts building a ship, which they name *Dove*:

Saws shrieked, sputtered, were sharpened, sang.  
Dunes were pale with strewnment of boards.  
Seaward a keel was set.  
Sprang from that spine a vibrant cluster of ribs.  
(Brown, 2006, 90)

The cycle abounds in alliterations, and in the example above the ample use of sibilants together with the stylistic device of enumeration helps create a vivid picture of shipbuilding.

The people of the tribe bear Nordic names: Thorkeld, a blacksmith, their leader; Norn, the seeress; Nial, Thorkeld's son; Gudrun, his bride; Armod, a skald; Balder, their god. Thorkeld soon dies of wounds inflicted by the Dragon and is given a Viking funeral: "An oarsman slid a silver coin for ferry / Under the cold flame of the tongue. / Skald wove deathsong in the loom of his mouth". Here also a broad epic *Beowulf*-style narrative is enhanced by alliteration and assonance: "Steel came unclouded from stiffening mouth. / The oarsmen could not tell tears from spindrift", "The ancient kings asleep under the aurora", "Norn turned down her tranquil mouth. / Throats of the heroes throbbed", "At once the blind tongue blossomed with bodings, biddings" ("The Death of

7 Norns (ON *Nornir*) are goddesses of destiny in Old Norse mythology.

Thorkeld”, Brown, 2006, 91–92). The poet uses skaldic-style poetic synonyms and kennings: sea is called “salt”, plough – the “earthship, ... breaking frail furrows across / The slow surge of the hills”, but the “earthship” is also a coffin “under the hill drowned”; a timbered barn is called “earth-ark” (“The Blind Helmsman to the Shipwright”, Brown, 2006, 94–95). A woman is a “crude workday winter vessel”, “sweet grain jar” (“Gudrun”, Brown, 2006, 96–97). Whales are “threshing lumps”, “blue hills, cartloads of thunder”, “floating feast-halls”, their open mouths off the coast of Hoy recall the giant wolf Fenrir’s gaping jaws: “Sky jaw from sea jaw split, gigantic laughter!” (“Whales”, Brown, 2006, 97–98).

The following sections of the cycle tell of the descendants of the tribe through the centuries, how their lives changed with the arrival of Reformation, annexation to Scotland, wars, advance of modern times. The beautiful Rackwick Valley becomes deserted, the “dwellers in islands are drawn to the new altars” (Brown, 2006, 89). The cycle ends in a long prose sequence “The Return of the Women”, which is set after the fateful events of the past are repeated, only on a massive scale. The Dragon manifests itself as “The Black Flame”, “the black circle of Mephistopheles”, i.e. atomic or nuclear war that wipes out civilization. Survivors of the disaster return to Rackwick, bringing with them the precious seeds of corn. To enhance the dramatic effect, the poet uses alliterative prose: “... we were among black islands – bone and rottenness everywhere, even on these western beaches” (Brown, 2006, 132). The egalitarian group of survivors – people from different walks of life – gradually turns again into a traditional stratified community: the laird, crofters-fishermen, a shepherd, tinkers, beachcomber, women – “the sea-watchers”.

The poet was fascinated by the traditional island way of life (though acknowledging that it was hard) and apprehensive of calamities that could be brought by technological progress. In the poem dedicated to his friend Sylvia Wishart he wrote: “I see a thousand cities broken, / Science / Hounded like Cain through the marches of atom and planet, / And quiet people / Returning north with ox and plough. / They will offer it again to the light, a chalice” (“To Sylvia Wishart”, Brown, 2006, 383).

### **“Where the saga sails forever...”**

As pointed out above, Brown admired Old Norse-Icelandic sagas and skaldic poetry and was greatly influenced by them. In his autobiography *For the Islands I Sing* he wrote:

I think that, in the writing of narrative, I learned a great deal from *Burnt Njal*, *Grettir*, *Orkneyinga saga*. It is good, for certain kinds of writing, 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. But from my mother's side, the Celtic, I delight too in decoration. Look at the intricacies of early Gaelic art. Whether it is desirable to marry 'pure narrative' with elaborate decoration is not for me to say. I write as I must. (Brown, 1997, 65)

The sagas had not only influenced Brown's style but also served as an inexhaustible source of themes, plots and characters for his writings. Among them, *The Orkneyinga saga* stands out. Its central characters became protagonists of his novels, stories, plays and poems. The main character in his works and a continuous object of admiration was undoubtedly Saint Magnus of Orkney: "For me, Magnus was at once a solid convincing flesh-and-blood man, from whom pure spirit flashed from time to time – and never more brightly than at the hour of his death by an axe-stroke, in Egilsay island on Easter Monday, 1117" (Brown, 1997, 52).

The life of Magnus Erlendsson, Earl of Orkney (1106–1115), is known from *The Orkneyinga saga* and two other sagas,<sup>8</sup> the story of his life seemingly modelled on early Norse hagiographies. Magnus was a joint earl of Orkney together with his cousin Hakon Paulsson and was murdered by Hakon after the power struggle in the islands. He was buried on the spot where he was killed on Egilsay and soon miracles began to happen at his grave, with some blind people regaining sight and the infirm being cured. He was canonized as a saint in 1136 and soon his relics were transferred to the newly built Kirkwall Cathedral. In 1919, during the Cathedral restoration, a box containing bones and a cleft skull was discovered in one of the columns (Towrie, 2019).

Brown dwelt on the story of St Magnus in numerous works: the essay collection *An Orkney Tapestry* (1969), the novel *Magnus* (1973), the play *The Loom of Light* (1984), and many stories and poems. To quote Timothy C. Baker, Brown "uses the framework of Magnus' life further to explore the relationship between individuals and the community, the value of sacrifice and the meaning of death" (Baker, 2009, 58). Brown's poems

<sup>8</sup> *Magnús saga skemmri* and *Magnús saga lengri*. There is also a Latin account of his life, *Legenda de santo Magno* (Antonsson, 2007, 10–14).

about St Magnus were composed for various occasions, especially for St Magnus Day, April 16th. Several of his longer narrative poems depict Magnus's life and martyrdom. In the poetic sequence "Songs for St Magnus Day" (Brown, 2006, 230–231) Magnus is shown as a bearer of peace: "We have brought unwanted cargo, jar of peace'..." He refuses to fight in battles and sails to the fateful tryst on Egilsay with only two warships, as agreed, while Hakon has eight. On the way, Magnus's ship is struck by a great wave in a calm sea. Magnus sees it as a bad omen and foretells his own death: "A thistle will thrust daggers through that clay / On the trysted shore". He spends a night in a church praying, comes out and stands among his enemies: "The skipper steps out of the stone ship / With a blank bill-of-lading" ("the stone ship" is a kenning for "church"). Hakon's men are unwilling to execute a peaceful man, so the earl summons his cook Lifolf ("life-wolf") and orders him to kill Magnus. Soon after Magnus's death miracles begin to happen at his tomb and people come there hoping to be healed. In the poem "Saint Magnus on Egilsay", a peasant finds Magnus's body and buries it: "Hands from the plough carried the broken saint / Under the arch. Below, the praying sea / Knelt on the stones" (Brown, 2006, 32). Magnus is humbled by the role of a martyr destined for him: "A red martyr coat? / *Domine, non sum dignus*". Lifolf's axe to him is "...the key / For the unlocking of the door into light" ("St Magnus", Brown, 2006, 402).

In "Tryst on Egilsay" (Brown, 2006, 291–297), the fateful meeting of the earls is shown through the eyes of its participants. Earl Hakon muses: "This can never be good, a cloven earldom, / Bad governance, the folk / Fallen into faction, insolence, orisons". The helmsman of Magnus's ship, having travelled as far as Africa, Russia, Byzantium and Greenland, asks himself: "What am I doing, rowing gentry / Through a sea of glass *ad insulam ecclesiae*?" and is taken aback by a great wave that strikes the ship on the calm sea. The killers wearing "masks / Of wolf and of raven" (beasts of battle in ON poetry) complain about the cloven earldom but are reluctant to kill the innocent man. Magnus himself, facing the enemies, acknowledges troubles in the islands and is ready to sacrifice himself: "Quick – let the silver cord be loosed". Men of Egilsay wonder: "Why should the lords choose Egilsay / For their corn dance? Why Not? / [...] / Look – the shape of Ingi against the sunset! / [...] / *Return to us, Magnus, laden with cornstalks*". Here, Brown not only portrays Magnus as a Christian martyr and saint but also endows him with features of a cultural hero, the Corn King of the early Irish and Scottish belief (cf. Murray

& Murray, 2008, 76, 84). The pagan ritual is implied by mentioning Ingi (Ingi-Freyr), Old Norse god of fertility.<sup>9</sup>

St Magnus became a unifying force of the Orcadian community, the source of consolation and hope through centuries of hardships. On St Magnus Day, April 16th, the whole community comes to celebrate their saint bearing him gifts. Shepherds bring a fleece, tinkers – a new bright can that “Their hammers beat all night”, a fishless fisherman brought his torn net, the farm boys “offered / A sweetness, gaiety, chasteness / Of hymning mouths”, the women came “With woven things / And salt butter for the poor of the island”, and the poor “Came with their hungers” (“April the Sixteenth”, Brown, 2006, 154–155). Some poems contain skaldic-style kennings: the laird is a “keeper of corn / and peathill and jetsam, lord of the longship”, ships are “seahorses”, “they that send out seahorses to trample the waves” are shipbuilders and sailors; “fish-seekers” are fishing boats, “stone-ship” – a church, “earth-workers” – ploughmen, farmers (“St Magnus Day in the Island”, Brown, 2006, 231–233).

The poet, being a devout Catholic, depicts the saint with great warmth and affection. According to Maggie Fergusson, “Magnus was becoming such an ally in George’s mind that he had begun to address poetry directly to him, beseeching him to breathe new life into Orkney” (Fergusson, 2006, 81). In “Song for St Magnus: 16 April” the poet speaks to the saint directly: “Magnus, friend, ...” and beseeches him to extend his blessings not only to the Orcadian community but also to those suffering from wars and other disasters in various parts of the world: “Keeper of the red stone, remember well / Sufferers today, [...] / Be present at the fires / Of women in Bosnia and Somalia / Kneeding dough smaller than fists. / [...] / Magnus, give welcome to strangers. / Their children / Will sing with new voices, in April, / The words from the Iceland parchment” (Brown, 2006, 402–404). Not incidentally, Brown’s autobiography ends with the line: “I say, once a day at least, ‘Saint Magnus, pray for us ...’” (Brown, 1997, 187).

Another of Brown’s favourite characters in *The Orkneyinga saga* was Earl Rognvald Kali Kolsson, later St Ronald of Orkney (1103–1158).

<sup>9</sup> The ritual killing and rebirth of a king is described in the poem “Winter and Summer”: “The old scant-silver King, / Ice axes / Have hewn him down. / Give him to the ocean. / Lay in the ship his long bones. / [...] / The world’s winter. / Twelve old folk / have followed their king / But into an earth-wave, a howe. / [...] / Midsummer. The ascended King / Stores the island / With honey and green corn” (Brown, 2006, 335–336).

He was the son of the Norwegian lendmann Kol Kalisson and Gunnhild Erlendsdottir, the sister of St Magnus of Orkney. He grew up in Norway and was known there as Kali Kolsson. When he became earl he was given the name Rognvald. He was an outstanding personality of his age: a talented skald,<sup>10</sup> adventurer, crusader and a pilgrim to Jerusalem, one of Orkney's most popular rulers, the founder of Kirkwall Cathedral, martyr and saint. Brown dedicated several poems to Earl Rognvald, mostly concentrating on his voyage to the Holy Land, but also on his other deeds, such as building Kirkwall Cathedral. Brown also embarked on an interesting experiment, which involved rendering Rognvald's numerous *lausavísur* into English.

The poems "Pilgrimage" from the collection *The Wreck of the Archangel* (1989; Brown, 2006, 234) and "St Rognvald's Journey to Jerusalem" from *Travellers* (2001; Brown, 2006, 451–452) tell the story of the Earl's journey to the Holy Land. The latter is a short poem, comprised of 14 stations, marking the main events of Rognvald's journey. It is supposed to present Rognvald's pilgrimage as Stations of the Cross except that the voyage reminds one more of a plundering crusade than of a religious feat. Jerusalem-farers set sail from Norway in 15 ships, are shipwrecked in Shetland and spend a winter in Orkney. After a storm in Biscay they land on the coast of Spain and burn a Spanish castle. In Narbonne, Rognvald falls in love with the beautiful Countess Ermengarde and composes poems to praise her. In the Holy Land, they take a Moslem dromond, "the torrent of molten gold", his favourite skald Thorbjorn Black dies of disease in Acre and is buried "under sun-bright stones". They reach Jerusalem, on their way back visit Byzantium, a "golden city", and eventually make their return home to "dry sails in the lofts of St Magnus".

The poetic cycle "Kestrel Roseleaf Chalice. Twelfth Century Norse Lyrics" (*Winterfold*, 1976) contains Brown's translations of skaldic verses by Earl Rognvald and some of his skalds. Brown did not read the saga in the original. He was using A. B. Taylor's translations of skaldic poetry from his 1937 edition of *The Orkneyinga saga* (D'Arcy, 1996, 258). As demonstrated by Hans Ulrich Schmid, the technique Brown employed ranges from close reworking to free adaptation (Schmid, 2015). Brown did not aim to recreate either *dróttkvætt* stanzas or the precise

10 To him and the Icelandic skald Hall Thorarinsson is attributed the poem *Háttalykill*: "Together they composed *The Old Key of Metres*, using five verses to illustrate each metre: but in these days only two are used as the poem was thought too long" (*Orkneyinga saga*; Pálsson & Edwards, 1981, 149).

content of the verse. In most cases he uses a laconic, distinctly modern form, discarding overembellishments of skaldic style. Here are a few examples of Earl Rognvald's *lausavisur* recreated by Brown:

In a princely coat, stiff with runes and dragons,  
 I leapt from the wreck.  
 Cold now, sea-insulted,  
 I shiver at a Shetland fire.  
 With tattered sealskin  
 The women cancel my nakedness.  
 "A Shipwreck in Shetland" (Brown, 2006, 158)

Verse is a golden ring, a gathered silence.  
 Nobility a cloak, quartered.  
 Heroism a rune, cold cuttings on stone.  
 Today in the claw of frenzy  
 I fluttered, a naked soul.  
 Masks and songs were no longer a comfort to me.  
 "The Earl attacked by a Madman" (Brown, 2006, 160)

Rognvald's love of Ermengarde of Narbonne is described in a set of laconic comparisons (no verbs!) and a contrast of two colours – white and red, which can symbolize both love and war:

White as snow  
 White as silver  
 The lady,  
 A beauty all whiteness,  
 A kindness  
 Red as wine.  
 Another redness, fire  
 About the castle  
 A sharp whiteness, swords.  
 "Love and War" (Brown, 2006, 162)

These examples show that Brown's reworkings of the skaldic verse are very different from the formal, metrically strict *dróttkvætt*, often overembellished with poetic synonyms (*heiti*) and complex kennings. Due to its excessive formalism, skaldic verse was in most cases devoid

of the personal and the intimate, while Brown's renderings, in contrast, bring the characters closer to the modern reader, showing their feelings, disclosing their intimate side and vulnerability. Rognvald, his warriors and skalds stand on the crossroads of two cultures – paganism, discarded not long ago, and the recently accepted Christianity, and Brown chooses to expose this inner conflict between a Viking warrior involved in plundering, killing and rape on the one hand, and a penitent Christian on the other. This is how the poet has reworked Rognvald's original quatrain from *The Orkneyinga saga*: "A cross on this bard's / breast, on his back / a palm-branch: peacefully / we pace the hillside" (Pálsson & Edwards, 1981, 179):

We stand here, shriven,  
 A hundred warmen lustred with penance,  
 In each hand  
 Assoiled from murders, whoredoms, thievings now  
 A leaf of palm.  
 Footsteps, free and fated, turn  
 To the fourteen redemptive lingerings  
 And the hill marked † with this sign.  
                   "Jerusalem" (Brown, 2006, 164)

The poet's critical view of the Viking age is even more pronounced when he chooses to speak not about kings and earls but about ordinary men, Orcadian fishermen and peasants, involved in earls' warmongering campaigns, and as a result suffering a tragic fate (cf. D'Arcy, 1996, 280). The poem "Orkney men at Clontarf, AD 1014" (*Voyages*, 1983) is based on the episode in *The Orkneyinga saga* (Pálsson & Edwards, 1981, 37–38) about the participation of Orcadians in the Battle of Clontarf in Ireland in 1014 AD. The troops, led by Earl Sigurd Hlodvisson the Stout, came to the aid of the Viking ruler of Dublin Sigtrygg Silk-Beard but were hopelessly defeated by the Irish army under the leadership of King Brian. Earl Sigurd and many of his warriors were killed. The poem's protagonist, an Orcadian peasant Finn, one of Earl Sigurd's men, lies mortally wounded in a ditch on the battlefield, lamenting the fallen comrades and his wretched fate. He longingly remembers his home in Westray: "Today, Good Friday, the ox in Stronsay / Tears sweet grass / Beside an idle plough, the women / Go between kirk and bread-board". The Viking heroic ethos is debunked here as in many other poems: "Brave

boasting there – / Battles, blood, wall-breaching, booty. / Now the glory is come / There is no ditch anywhere / I would not creep into, / Sharing a mushroom with tramp and slut” (Brown, 2006, 215–217). In the poem “Voyager” (*Voyages*, 1983), a Norwegian Viking, now an old man, was left behind in an Irish village and is wondering whether he will ever come back to Norway: “I am a gray humped man. / I had to learn new speech long ago. / I tend horses in a field. / After ten thousand mornings / Of rain, frost, larksong / How should I find a way back / To the waterfront of Trondheim?” (Brown, 2006, 208). In “One Summer in Gairsay Isle” (*Following a Lark*, 1996), a Viking, Ivor, left his “good arm in Ireland” during an assault on a keep but thinks himself lucky compared with “The ghosts who do not come back / At Lindisfarne fallen, or under a cliff in Brittany” (Brown, 2006, 321).

In his writings, Brown was often drawing upon episodes and characters from other Old Norse-Icelandic sagas. Among his favourites was the story of the discovery of Vinland by Icelander Leif Eriksson. This resulted in the novel *Vinland* (1992), which tells a story of an Orcadian man, Ranald Sigmundson, who as a boy travelled with Leif to Vinland, later fought in the Battle of Clontarf and was involved in many other adventures before returning to Orkney and settling as a peaceful farmer. Leif Eriksson and Vinland are mentioned time and again in Brown's poems, but Leif is a more distant persona than Magnus or Rognvald and his voyages are usually shown through the eyes of Orcadians who had sailed with him. In the poem “The Abbot”, the abbot at Innertun monastery enumerates his monks; one of them, Sigurd, “sailed to Iceland, a boy, / And lost an arm there. / He was with Leif on the Greenland voyage” (Brown, 2006, 43). In “Tryst on Egilsay”, the helmsman of St Magnus's ship talks about his voyages, one of them as far as Greenland: “I think there may be land further west. / [...] / An Icelander, Leif / Plucked grapes on that shore. / The old sailors in Shetland say / Leif had too much of his own treading / The day he stained his mouth with Vinland juice” (Brown, 2006, 292).

The poem “Vinland” (*Winterfold*, 1976) describes Leif's voyage “On the bleak / Unbroken circles of sea”. The sailors carry a hungry raven in the basket to show them the way and hope on a stone in the west to cut “Such runes – / ICELANDERS / HUNTED THE GOLDEN WHALE / BEYOND HESPER”. The poet admires the bravery of the men who ventured into the unknown and sees them as pioneers, breakers of the new frontiers and new times:

Too late for the rudder's turning  
 Back into history,  
 The old worn web,  
 King, lawman, merchant, serf.  
 The prow breaks thin ice  
 Into a new time.

“Vinland” (Brown, 2006, 212–213)

**“I must give my strength to the welding  
 of rune and kenning”**

Skalds are often mentioned in Brown's poems. The poet, as said above, knew skaldic poetry through translations of the sagas. Besides Earl Rognvald Kolsson, some other skalds appear as protagonists of his poems. In “The Five Voyages of Arnor” (*Poems New and Selected*, 1971), the skald Arnor<sup>11</sup> speaks of his travels and poetic achievements: he went to Ireland to fight in a battle (“Rounding Cape Wrath, I made my first poem”), to Norway to vow the girl Ragnhild who became his wife (“She was uglier than I expected, still / I made five poems about her”), to Iceland to settle his brother Sweyn's killing (“In Unst two nights, coming home, / We drank the ale and discussed new metres”), to Jerusalem (“With fifteen ships in a brawling company / Of poets, warriors, and holy men”). Sick with black cough at home in Hamnavoe, he is preparing for his last voyage and makes a final request: “... *Drop my harp / Through a green wave, off Yesnaby, / Next time you row to the lobsters*” (Brown, 2006, 63–64).

The poet now and again speaks of skalds playing the harp: “Arkol the skald mingled these / words with harp strokes / at the Earl's Hall at / Orphir in Orkney in the / Yuletide of 1015” (“Sea Jarl”, Brown, 2006, 69). We know that lyres or harps were played in the Viking period, yet neither sagas nor Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* mention skalds reciting poems to the accompaniment of harps. In Brown's romantic image of the skald, the harp seems to be more a symbol rather than a real instrument. In the poem “Greenpeace”, the harp as a symbol of the poet's craft is handed down through generations, from Pictish bards to modern poets “of machine and atom” (Brown, 2006, 253).

Skalds were court poets, and their mission was to praise the deeds of the rulers they served. Norwegian kings and earls used to have several

11 Arnor jarlaskald Thordarson (ca 1012–1070s).

skalds at the same time; they would accompany their lord to battles, on voyages and pilgrimages. Some rulers, like Earl Rognvald Kali Kolsson, who himself was an accomplished poet, attracted many skalds to his court. One of them was Thorbjorn the Black<sup>12</sup> who went with the Earl to the Holy Land and died of sickness in Acre. He is the protagonist of the poem "Black Thorbjorn" and starts his monologue boasting that "The best poets live in Iceland"; although he later admits: "But men say, behind their hands / 'Thorbjorn with the black beard / Is the worst farmer in Broadfirth'". He has no time to waste on farming as he must give all his strength "To the welding of rune and kenning". He responds to Rognvald's summons to join the crusade because the Earl wants poets for his ships. According to Thorbjorn, "Good skalds are voyagers, / Drinkers of gale and battle'..." His goodbye to his wife includes two beautiful kennings: "... Ragnhild, honey-bee, expect your wordman / In five years, or six, or whenever" (Brown, 2006, 332–335).

As shown in the examples above, Brown made a conscious effort to use Old Norse poetic techniques, such as alliteration and skaldic fixed metaphors, called "kennings". Alliteration and assonance are intrinsic features of Brown's poetry, endowing his verse and prose poems with a specific rhythmical pattern, giving them forcefulness, vividness and adding depth by emphasizing significant words. The poet was fond of coining skaldic-style kennings, which he first learned about while studying Old English at Edinburgh University: "His course included Old English, and in his copy of C. L. Wrenn's edition of *Beowulf* he listed stylistic devices, such as the condensed metaphors, known as kennings that were to feature so frequently in his poems" (Murray & Murray, 2008, 65).

Most of Brown's kennings are scattered throughout his poems dealing both with Old Norse subjects and others. To mention but a few of the most expressive ones: "eye-salt" are tears ("Chinaman", Brown, 2006, 153), "earth-wave" is a howe (burial mound) ("Winter and Summer", Brown, 2006, 335), "little silver brothers" ("Our Lady of the Waves", Brown, 2006, 44), "Silent seekers through wave and wrack" ("Fiddlers at the Harvest Home", Brown, 2006, 156) are fish, "earth-key" is a plough, "sea-opener" – a net and sinker ("Haiku: for The Holy Places", Brown, 2006, 461), "earth-ore", "sun-gold" – corn ("The Harp in the Glebe", Brown, 2006, 454), "sea-reel", "a grey stallion" – a ship, "a death-dealer" – a hand, "cut-throats" – warriors, "leaf-fall" – autumn, "salt furrows" – waves ("Kestrel Roseleaf

12 Thorbjorn Svarti (d. 1152).

Chalice”, Brown, 2006, 157–165). A church, as seen by the Vikings, is “a cave of wax and perfumes” (“The Stone Cross”, Brown, 2006, 181), it is also called a “stone ship”, “stone poem”, while the “maker of scattered stone ships”, “shipwright in stone” is a stonemason (i.e. Master Roger of Durham, the builder of Kirkwall Cathedral), the Cathedral itself being called the “great red psalm in the islands” (“Earl Rognvald Kolson of Orkney to an Itinerant Builder of Churches”, Brown, 2006, 449–451).

A few poems contain lists of skaldic-style metaphors. The poem “Fiddlers at the Harvest Home” enumerates poetic expressions encoding the cornerstones of Orcadian life: the quarry (for stone), corn, sheep, fish, dance, wheels (circles). It is reminiscent of the lists of kennings in the Eddaic poem *Alvíssmál*<sup>13</sup> and some other Old Norse poems. Here is an example from Brown’s poem:

*Corn*

The green and the yellow upstarts  
 A wind dancer  
 Keeper of the secrets of dust and sun and seed  
 Spume at the scarecrow’s thigh  
 The oat for the oven  
 Malt for the kirn  
 A crust kirk-broken  
 A brightness across the jaw of the winter mouse.  
 (Brown, 2006, 155)

The poetic sequence “The Sea: Four Elegies” (*Winterfold*, 1976) contains a list of expressive kennings describing one of the key elements of the Viking world – the sea:

The sea 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, the Harp with a thousand voices.)

13 The poem *Alvíssmál* (“Talk of All-Wise”) is a conversation between Thor and the dwarf Alvis who while answering Thor’s questions produces lists of poetic names for various things and phenomena.

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.  
(Brown, 2006, 168)

Dealing with language as the poet's legacy is "To a Hamnavoe Poet of 2093" (*Following a Lark*, 1996). It is a testament to future poets, urging them to preserve the language they inherited from the past generations through millennia of Orkney settlement. Here, Brown dwells again on the poet's mission as keeper, guardian of the language, traditional images and the poetic legacy of previous generations, thereby ensuring the continuity of the cultural tradition.

Language unstable as sand, but poets  
Strike on hard rock, carving  
Rune and hieroglyph, to celebrate  
Breath's sweet brevity.

Swan-path, whale-acre. Do you honour  
The sea with good images?  
[...]

I hoard, before time's waste  
Old country images: plough-horse,  
Skylark, grass-growth,  
Corn-surge, dewfall, anvil;  
[...]

Creel-scattering gales; Thor's  
Hammer, studdering on Hoy.  
Do your folk laugh and cry  
With the gentle ups-and-downs

Not so different, I think  
From talk in Skarabrae doors,  
Celtic shepherds at Gurness,  
Sweyn's boatmen off Gairsay?  
(Brown, 2006, 326)

## Conclusions

Old Norse themes, motifs and characters are an integral part of George Mackay Brown's writings. His rune poems were inspired by the runic inscriptions of the Viking age: he tried to imitate their brevity and sparse language, often endowing his poems with deep metaphorical and symbolic meaning. In his prose and poetry, Brown was largely drawing upon episodes from *The Orkneyinga saga* and other Old Norse-Icelandic sagas and attempted to render skaldic verses into modern English, while also experimenting with Old Norse poetic techniques, such as alliteration and kennings. As we know, sagas seldom concern themselves with depictions of the feelings and psychological states of the characters. Old Norse skaldic poetry is very formalistic, rarely allowing a deeper glimpse into the heroes' inner world. In tackling Old Norse material Brown succeeded in bringing those characters closer to modern readers, making them alive and timeless, opening their inner worlds, showing their feelings and experiences, joys and tragedies in life. Among them, Saint Magnus stands out, transcending the boundaries of the saga, viewed as the guardian of the Orcadian community through the centuries, as well as the poet's spiritual guide. Poetic devices, such as alliteration, assonance and kennings, widely used in the poems, enrich the verse, creating specific rhythms and sound repetitions, binding the lines together, putting a specific stamp on Brown's poetic diction and creating a feeling of continuity with the Old Norse poetic tradition.

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