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Littoral Impressionism in *The Wreck of the Archangel* by George Mackay Brown

Abstract: George Mackay Brown's poetic renderings of the northern archipelagic world have never been considered in the context of the techniques of literary Impressionism as deployed to attain the aesthetic effect of reader engagement. It is possible to view the author's mature collection of poetry *The Wreck of the Archangel* as composed on the principle of littoral Impressionism that expands Joseph Conrad's idea of art as expressed in the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*. This article will examine Brown's ecosophy of community that emerges from his major aesthetic principles which he uses to give the reader a literary experience of a seatangled multiperspectivity. Brown's unique lyrical-narrative insights into the multiplicity of qualia and eco-poetic focus result in a particular aesthetic effect of phenomenological immediacy. Adopting such a perspective on the Orkney author might be an important point for a reassessment of his position in the history of Scottish and British literature.

Keywords: seatangled multiperspectivity, Conrad's idea of art, northern archipelagic world, qualia and eco-poetic focus, ecosophy of community

The Introduction to *Ireland, Literature, and the Coast: Seatangled* voices a need to "summon this liquid island in context of its waterborne narratives" (Allen 2021: 2). A Scottish major poet of the second half of the twentieth century, George Mackay Brown, is also to a large degree "seatangled" or terraqueous in his writing, endlessly considering how archipelagic communities have managed to survive the challenges of their Atlantic insular life. His poetic-narrative insights are construed through polysensory archipelagic¹ stories of how common people faced their liminal reality on the edge of water and land during different pre-industrial historic epochs, covering his contemporary times as well. He develops his vision through storytelling

¹ See also discussion of Brown's short story archipelagic patterns and their semiotics in Leleń (2015: 137–153).

based on littoral² sensescapes, composing the universal texts that target a general worldwide readership, expanding thus the restricted Orkney-oriented focus that he is frequently associated with.

In this article, I propose to explore the objectives behind the technique of littoral Impressionism in *The Wreck of the Archangel*, Brown's mature poetic collection published in 1989. I will illustrate the observations with close readings of some aspects of the title poem, *Fishermen in Winter*, *Henry Moore: Woman Seated in the Underground*, and *Ships of Julius Agricola Sail into the Pentland Firth*.

The volume for which Brown received the Saltire Book of the Year award for 1995 can serve to demonstrate the Orkney poet's ecosophic³ orientation on making a particular intersubjective⁴ effect on the reader. It also reveals that Brown's understanding of ecosophy is closely bound to his understanding of the archipelagic community, especially in: 1) insights into ecology-oriented mode of existence as a "conjugation" that is "an interchange of closely related elements" (Genosko 2009: 70), and 2) the Guttarian concept of subject understood "not [as] an individual, an individuated person, thinking and thus being" but as "an entangled assemblage of many components, a collective (heterogeneous, multiple) articulation of such components before and beyond the individual" (Genosko 2009: 76). Limiting our focus to one anthology of the author is determined by the constraints of article format as well as by the fact that the book condenses the major aesthetic techniques used by Brown to orchestrate subaltern and littoral multiperspectivity. This British author has never been subject to literary criticism in respect to these features, while some traces of relevant observations occur in dispersed form in some of the responses to his work. This article can be an introduction to Brown's ecopoetic engagements, but it cannot hope to exhaust this topic.

² I define littoral communities following distinctions made within the framework of Irish Literature Studies, see: Allen (2021: 2); see also: Pearson (2006: 354).

³ Ecosophy is understood here following the precepts of deep ecology (Madsen 2023) as well as the implications of the term's derivation from the Greek words *oikos* and *sophos* denoting one's *home* and the *wisdom* related to it (see: Bate 2001[2000]: 110). Arne Naess defines ecosophy against the concept of (personal) philosophy (involving a "code of values and a view of the world which guides one's own decisions"), stating that "when applied to questions involving ourselves and nature, we call this latter meaning of the word 'philosophy' and *ecosophy*" (Naess 1990: 36, emphasis in the text).

⁴ Intersubjectivity is conceptualised in this article within the framework of cognitive poetics, as the model of "cognitive plurality" (Rembowska-Pluciennik 2012: 202–203).

1. Problems with Brown's reception

The discussed author is really often blamed for as well as marginalized or completely overlooked⁵ due to this local focus, with his archipelagic fascinations often named as a tendency for repetitive treatment of topics. An early reviewer identifies the prominent features in *The Wreck of the Archangel* as “the same preoccupations and images, the same motifs and sequence-structures” as in *Voyages*, the poetic collection that preceded it, stating that they also do not differ much from those to be found in *The Masked Fisherman*, a short story collection. The same commentator praises the focus on “Orkney landscapes and history” in the new publication, while for him the attractiveness of this collection is in both “the enriching, [and] the re-working of that accumulative project” (Freeman 1989: 59–60). Another review focuses on the “elemental rewards” that can be discovered in “these provincial tales and evocations”, noticing also some “clear images of historical and contemporary Orcadian life [...] pre industrial culture, preserved by a skilled poet’s fervent art in a variety of styles” (*The Wreck of the Archangel. Review* 1995). However, the poems of this most varied and extensive collection (Murray/Murray 2008 [2004]: 204), reveal a much more intricate if inconspicuous aesthetic⁶ focus on immersing the reader in littoral perspectives. These vistas are land- and water-bound to suggest the ecocentric core in the Anthropocene, opening the pathway to some deep ecological understanding of humanity. Brown uses island locations and events as a figurative way of commenting on culture and mankind in general so as to uncover some truths about the universal aspects of life⁷.

The poems in the anthology differ in focus: they range from accounts of the journeys, through descriptions of some archetypal community highlights, to universalized insights into transcendent moments of Orkney islanders’ lives, belying the sometimes expressed claim that it is only Brown’s novels that focus on the

⁵ Many histories of or companions to Scottish or British literature cover Brown just in passing, or overlook him completely (see: Carruthers/McIlvanney eds. 2012).

⁶ The elements of aesthetic organization of these poems that have been noticed in criticism are their refinement in terms of “structure and patterns” and their “fixation with numbers and patterns” (Ferguson 2011).

⁷ In *The Times* review released right after the book’s publication, Brown is praised for his ability to conjure the images that have a powerful effect: “This summary gives an idea of the narrowness of his range, but also the depth of his seriousness. Brown, when his imagination is at one with what it sees, uses not so much symbols as signs. In his finest writing, bones signify bones, nets signify nets, and the sea is always the see. He celebrates things as they are, and is engrossed by the mystery that entails. No one has written more about so little” (Nye 1989).

problems of the community⁸. All of them resort to the power of poetic embodiment to create the sense of immediacy. By following some archetypal members of archipelagic communities in their ordinary instances of life, they make the reader engage with them in the felt experience of life on the coastal edge, while also provoking contemplation of the human-elemental interactions from a variety of angles and distances.

2. Phenomenology and “the art of arts” of Conrad

It seems that in this mature volume of poetry Brown not only recovers but also unlocks the core of the littoral past of humanity, and not just of the Orkney Islands. He clearly has more universal ambitions which he realises following in the footsteps of phenomenologists⁹, transposing their insights into his unique technique. He does so not to comment on the local but to generalize about human beings observed in microscale. Deploying the sensory aspects of the everyday that demonstrate the insular subaltern engagements with the marine serves to explore the issue of (dis)connectivity with nature and with community. In such preoccupations Brown fits into more widely used patterns of liquidity in British literature. He also applies what various phenomenologists have argued about the human way of confronting the world. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, human contact with the world always happens firstly through the body and it cannot happen otherwise (Merleau-Ponty 2005 [1945/1962]: 277, 280; compare Husserl, E. 1970 [1900]: 565). The phenomenological approach asserts the predominance of the non-intellectual nature of human experience over the intellectual one. Knowing the world through the senses precedes access to the world available to the human mind, even if sometimes there is some uncertainty about it (Merleau-Ponty 2005 [1945/1962]: 360 n.22). In literary works, beginning from Old English literature¹⁰, there is “this semantic overlap between physical and mental vision [which creates]

⁸ Timothy Baker argues that “Brown’s engagement with the problems of community is best set in his prose works, especially in his novels, Although his poetry remains his best-known writing, it is in his novels that Brown engages most closely with lived experience; the longer prose form allows him not only to state and artistic or philosophical position, but to question it as well” (Baker 2009: 4).

⁹ There is a tradition of phenomenological patterns in contemporary Scottish poetry, Brown would be an early example of this trend (see: Szuba 2021 [2019]: 4–6, 59, and elsewhere).

¹⁰ Brown was fascinated with Old English and Old Norse literature throughout his life, beginning from his studies at Newbattle Abbey and later at the University of Edinburgh (Murray/Murray 2008 [2004]: 65).

potential for confusion [as] sight is [sometimes] used as a metaphor for understanding (Hindley 2016: 23). In his poems, invariably endowed with some narrative quality¹¹, Brown reaches out to the Orkney communities at various stages of their existence through the ages so as to show some truths about life through how people make their corporeal and cognitive contact with the archipelagic world. He does so by clashing the subjective perspective of many different characters interacting with the environment through their cognitive powers, which results in the device of multisensory perception¹². In doing so Brown constantly brings attention to the “different modes of consciousness [...] by treating [the particular senses] as a fundamental way of knowing” (Classen 2023 [1993]). The texts gathered in the writer’s eighth collection of poems use the colliding frameworks of the sensory experience of characters to bring, in the poetic fragments, the archipelagic world to life.

In a way this is going in the footsteps of the artistic principles expressed by Joseph Conrad in his Preface (1897) to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*. Conrad writes about fiction but what he means is all verbal art appealing to the reader’s temperament through evocation of the senses that are linked to further artistic modalities: “Such an appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the senses [...] temperament, whether individual or collective, is not amenable to persuasion. All art, [...] must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music – which is the art of arts” (Conrad 2018 [2006/1897]). Brown clearly operates with aesthetically foregrounded sensory perception so as to make the reader interact with the text and thus benefit from the act of reading. He is not the only contemporary poet who wants to explore human sensorium to engage in implicit metacommunication about the poet’s role in society¹³, this technique being also recognized in some Irish writers, like his younger friend Seamus Heaney (Allen 2021: 130–131). Brown clearly

¹¹ There is no space to explore all the elements of Brown’s experimental use of the narrative mode in his poetic output in this article. For some detailed insights into this aspect of his creative merging of literary kinds see: Delmaire (2012).

¹² The function of multisensory perception in understanding the world that is part of the larger process of acquiring learning and wisdom so as to make sense of experience has been noted as central in Anglo-Saxon art (Kern-Stähler 2016: 1).

¹³ Brown rarely commented on the “value of poets and poetry in a society” in an open way, perhaps most clearly in his posthumously published *Autobiography*, discussing the contrast between average human perception and artistic insight. He notes the poet’s different treatment of difficult topics like the execution of Charles I on the scaffold: “The imagination of the artist encompasses everything; ‘He has’, said Keats, ‘as much delight in the creation of an Iago as of a Desdemona’” (Brown 1998 [1997]: 136).

follows Conrad's idea of inspiring the reader with some powerful sensory-rooted insights into the created world so as to produce a particular effect of engagement in reception, the artistic purpose expressed in the following quotation:

My task [...] is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*. [...] If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm – all you demand – and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask. To snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life, is only the beginning of the task (Conrad 2018 [2006/1897]).

What matters to Brown, as we shall see in some analyses below, are these minute phenomena that Conrad names as instances of “a passing phase of life” and that can also be named broadly as *qualia*, thus all the textual patterns related to hearing the phenomena of the world, viewing its visual properties, smelling its olfactory components, touching the aspects that can be cognized this way, tasting the gustatory properties (Day 2020: 3; see: Dawson/Medler 2010; compare Tye 2021).

3. Qualia and making “the senses legible”

The concept of qualia is linked to the concept of universals, as in definition proposed by Clarence Irving Lewis in *Mind and the World Order* which draws attention to the subjective property of qualia:

There *are* recognizable qualitative characters of the given, which may be repeated in different experiences, and are thus a sort of universals; I call these “qualia.” But although such qualia are universals, in the sense of being recognized from one to another experience, they must be distinguished from the properties of objects. [...] The quale is directly intuited, given, and is not the subject of any possible error because it is purely subjective. The property of an object is objective; the ascription of it is a judgment (Lewis 1929: 121, emphasis in the text).

Brown's writing through the technique of qualia is always shaped as though language was the sixth human sense – facilitating the reader's perception of how culture operates through community members' engagements with their environment and the Anthropocene. In doing so, he follows in the footsteps of Gerard Manley Hopkins, expanding and transposing his predecessor's ideas about precision of expression. He definitely cares a lot about deployment of words to “transcend ordinary reality, create presence and evoke things and states of minds that one cannot normally

grasp with conventional, referential language” (Schmid 2003: 146). In a way it is development of the modernist ambition for making “the senses legible” and poetic expansion of the persuasion shared by many modernist writers “that it was [...] possible to encode sensory experiences in language, and to share those experiences with other minds without any loss” (Day 2020: 2–3). On the other hand, Brown is not too dependent on the perceptions of particular individuals – instead he is constantly clashing the impressions from various cognitive centres. His technique of colliding distinct sensory experiences of various people and human groups raises the issues of the cognitive-epistemological stance in the world, reinforced by his use of fragmentation as the device of (de)stabilising the world vision.

This awareness is attested in Brown’s own comments on his work. In the Introduction to *The Wreck of the Archangel* from 1989, the author writes about the possible dual perspective on poetry: “Is poetry [...] a fraud? Or is it a quest for ‘real things’ beyond the sea-glitters and shadows on the cave wall?” (Brown 1989b: 4)¹⁴. This is a kind of subversive double take wavering between undermining the stance of poetry and reinforcing it through the evocation of Plato’s theory of ideas. The resolution to his dilemma is unequivocal, as Brown identifies the search for the “real things” as what he hopes poetry does. The phenomenological thinking about coming into contact with the world through the human and quasi-human sensorium is constantly present in this collection. On the other hand, there is constant focus on sparse and forceful use of language stripped down to the most essential images¹⁵ that can render the situation directly to the reader’s intersubjective sensitivity.

Very often rooted in particular landscapes and locations, frequently grasped at some particular time of seasonal or daily change, the poetic stories unfolding in this collection bring the reader the experience of the moment which is multiplied and opalescent through the use of multiperspectivity¹⁶. This is done through the technique close to that of Old English genres of poetic incantation¹⁷ that reveal affinity with the historic senses of the word *incantation* connected to verbal rituals

¹⁴ In the first version of the manuscript of this *Introduction*, Brown explains this concept through a different pair of ideas: “This follows: that either poetry is a fraud, or it is the ‘charmed magic casements opening on the foam of perilous seas’ [...]”. The quotation Brown uses here is a figurative fragment from John Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale* that argues the Romantic vision of poetry’s near supernatural power to unlock and set free perception (Brown 1989a).

¹⁵ About Brown’s fascination with the Imagists, the poetic movement inspired by Ezra Pound, see: Stachura (2011).

¹⁶ For the theoretical discussion of the concept of multiperspectivity, see: Hartner (2014 [2012]).

¹⁷ See also: Freeman (1989: 59).

aimed to evoke a certain practical effect¹⁸, it here being the reader's immersion and engagement. The poem locations are recognizable in their geographical, northern-European and insular references.

4. The poetics of disjunction and observer patterns

In *The Wreck of the Archangel*, the title poem of the volume, the principle of disjunction and fragmentation works as an incentive for the reader's engagement. It is represented by the incipient suggestion of broken ability to decide about directions of movement and perception. The focus on cognition through the senses is a textual focus as its opening emphasizes a lack of the observing party "Who saw a rudderless hulk, broken loom of cordage / that nightfall? None. In the dregs of sun / Westraymen had drawn high the yawls" (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 223). The use of the island name Westray is the verisimilar detail Brown incorporates to allow identification of the described episode of Orkney history with the wreck of a Russian ship in the 1730s, on whose salvaged stern the word Archangel was discerned (Fergusson 2006: 269). However, Brown uses it only as a prototypical shipwreck narrative (following the long literary tradition of deployment of this motif to speak about the human condition and civilisation). The further evocation of the "rudderless hulk" is not a description of this particular shipwreck but a device introduced to universalise the message about the human disaster. It turns out to be part of the soothing musical storytelling done by the older generation in the safety of their homes, unaware of the sea drama happening at the shore "The old ones chanted again / Mighty tempests of foretime". The textual scheme of sensory contrast is developed apparently without any central focalizer. There is a very filmic operating with camera-like, seemingly chaotic point of view. Perception moves around the community space, and the poet checks the degree of their (un) awareness of the shipwreck, with most people being busy with their immediate domestic concerns. The text focuses equally on the sea turmoil as on the safety of children "tumbling gently into sleep" (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 223). However, the subversive element of this poetics is the ambiguous choice of wording as the participle used to denote the transition into slumber is *tumbling*, reverberating with suggestions of a helpless fall and losing one's equilibrium, more proper to the

¹⁸ The word *incantation* can be derived from the Latin stem *incantare* that shows affinity with the English word *enchantment* as well as being connected to the Latin word *cantare* evoking the senses of music, see: *Incantation* at Merriam Webster Dictionary.

imagery of shipwreck than sleeping. Thus on the semantic level, as well as on the sensory, falling asleep becomes congruent with the image of the ship plunging headlong into a storm, the topos developed in more detail in stanza three.

While there is still no particular point of view introduced in stanza three, the way of describing the maritime catastrophe is very acoustic and at the same time loaded with emotions. It appeals to the reader's phonoaesthetic sensitivity, but also to their intersubjective perception of affective aspects of the situation – the effect created by nouns and expressions referring to sounds or sound production, as well as the created mood: phrases such as “lamentation”, “the great sea harp”, “scattered cries”, and “vibrant crag” (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 223). In this context the present-participle forms of verbs “splintering”, “plucking”, and “peeling” also acquire some sort of auditory semantic sphere of reference. Their acoustic impact is reinforced by the central visual-aural impact of the used kenning: the powerful waves rendered as “lamentation of the great sea harp” are breaking “the vibrant crag” on the shore rocks (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 223). The description of all this commotion suggests the natural world is both compassionate and unrelenting. This also highlights inconsistent human attitudes: while the local people engage in scavenging the coast rather than searching for people to rescue, the reader is made into the figure of uninvolved onlooker, his/her position determined by sequential fragmentation necessitating a distanced view.

The images of looking for commodities problematize the reader's search for meaning. The unifying idea is that of (lack of) light as the shore is “thronged [...] with lanterns”. Brown constantly leaves many clues but combines them in varied, mystifying and revealing patterns. Some of the clues are aural, also suggesting feelings of wonder, awe, and grief; like in the expressions “broken loom of cordage” and sea-harp “lamentation”. The patterns of closely interwoven and broken sounds accumulate till the opening line of stanza four “Cliff^{top} and shore thronged soon with lanterns” brings repetition of /o/ and /ə/ sounds in long and short variations. The repetition of “with” in the second line creates parallelism between the diverse “strewn” elements: the collapsed vertical parts of the ship – “spars” that should work as the support for the wind-fuelled sails, and the now collapsed elements of the ship, the drowned faces of men, the vessel devoid of life. The lack of emotions strikes one particularly in the description of the submerged countenances which are textually estranged from the bodies by the line break “drowned / Foreign faces” (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 223).

Thus, the poetic perception of the space of the shipwreck is problematized on the ethical plane through the topic of searching the beach-strewn remains of the ship.

This activity is justified as a means of community sustenance. Rather than focusing on the rescue operation, the people are disappointed by the absence of some elements that get listed as not being found: “the wine casks or baled Baltic furs”. In the reader’s reception they are made prominent by their phonetic pattern. The foregone expectations of scavengers reappear in the parenthetical stanza six. It comments on the practical usefulness of the sea-washed wood, textually emphasized by a repetition of the sibilant consonant /s/ in combination with plosives /k/ and /p/ and vowel /ʌ/ in the first line “No, **but spars and planks enough to keep**” (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 223). The orchestration of the sibilant effect is all the stronger as the preceding stanza four uses plenty of words with alliterating /s/: “strewment”, “skipper”, “seaflock scattered”. It come in words that seem to be scattered in the text in a haphazard way. All this serves to build an aural context, also palpable for the reader, for a shocking discernment of an almost inaudibly sound made by the sole survival of the shipwreck. The mentioning of a living baby’s “thin cry” which allows for the saving of the infant is in this context presented as the ultimate miracle benefiting the community in later times.

The story told in the poem does not stop here but it goes into a kind of *Nachgeschichte* mode telling us how the man lived up to old age in the islands, always afraid of “the bounteous terrible harp” of the sea, though his life is rendered through “ploughtimes, creeltimes, / Harvests of fish and corn” (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 224). With all these images Brown highlights the network of a close ecosophic connectivity of human life and littoral archipelagic environment.

5. Ecocentric perception and intersubjective understanding

There are other poems in the collection that process the same imagery for a slightly different effect of connectivity between the human and the non-human. In *Fishermen in Winter*, there are images rendering the weather and its impact on people in a way that invites the reader to partake in perception through the use of the first-person plural poetic persona:

Such sudden storm and drifts
 We could see nothing, the boat
 Fluttering in a net
 Of reefs and crags (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 225).

In the above passage, the boat is represented in an ecocentric way, like a helpless fish being caught in the net of a tumultuous seascape that has the vertical as well as horizontal dimensions distorted. Brown's ecosophy is not directly argued but demonstrated through intersubjective entanglements. The poem's development expands upon metaphorical transpositions. The islands are identified by comparing them to large sea-creatures. Hinting at their diminished sensory powers works to justify the transformation of the perception of the first-person plural focalizer from visual into aural: "The islands, blind whales / Blundered about us. We heard" (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 225). What happens here can be named as redefining the archipelagic detail in terms of terraqueous semiotics that merges human and marine dimensions (see: Oppermann 2019: 443, 446). The heterogeneity of the Anthropocene and of the aquatic-terrestrial reality is unified in the poetic perception of the world, with the poetic storytelling (and its language in particular) changed into the unifying device that shapes innovative cognition. The senses of seeing, proprioception and hearing are constantly evoked and redefined, appealing to the reader's intersubjective understanding of the upheaval experienced in the problems with the landing of the much tossed boat: "The surge and plunge / And the keening, all around" (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 225). The vessel is perceived not only by the affected human passengers but also from the outside, as though from the point of view of the waves. At the same time, the language draws attention to itself. The use of the word *keening* in the above-quoted passage does not just reinforce the focus on the aural properties of the sea, but also plays with all the connotations of *keen* in its adjectival form, with its suggestion of sharpness and acuteness of sensory perception.

In this poem and elsewhere in Brown's collection, there is a synesthetic perception of space, with hearing taking the role of sight and proprioceptive experience rendered as visual experience. Right after this aquatic tossing experienced by the men fighting the elements, the feminine and land-bound perspective is introduced. Women try to guide men back home by placing feeble light sources on the ledges of their houses. Yet for some reason it is not a fully functional community as the local lamps operator fails to do his job: "The village lamplighter, / He had not thrown / Over the village his glimmering net." (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 226). The "net" in this image is highly self-referential, especially in the context of the previous use of this word in the poem, suggesting the network of qualia and the ideas that they evoke. The seemingly random system of associations becomes orchestrated through the figurative representation of the human reality. The village is described as though it was also part of the marine domain (see: Oppermann 2019: 443, 446).

Human can only conquer the elements through cooperating with them, looking after each other, and sourcing from the environment that is the provider of sustenance. The poem resolves its patterns through a Christmas figuration – “a poor island with one croft” is identified thanks to one star, which allows for the gift of “two fish from the basket”. Such a resolution of the poem works as the scene of the epiphany from the Christian cultural code, introducing the transcendental sphere into the elemental archipelagic reality, something very typical of Brown (see: Leleń 2020: 59–60).

6. From literary to littoral Impressionism

The spiritual aspect can also be frequently found. There are poems about ordinary people but there are also lyrics focused on grand figures like St Magnus, an Orkney saint whose depictions do not come in isolation but are among the unnamed sailors, whalers, fishermen, housewives, schoolchildren and the like. All of them form a gallery of recurring Brown portraits. However, transcendence is also evoked otherwise, through appealing to universal images taken from the treasure of culture and art. The local characters merge with figures of the Mediterranean and more generally northern-hemisphere world, like the Troy, Carthage, and Warsaw woman in *Henry Moore: Woman Seated in the Underground* (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 249). What unites these images the particular, poetically curtailed insight into the timeless schemata of the struggles humans undergo throughout their lives. The experience is grasped through the universal impact of the senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. In the above-mentioned poem, this archetypal woman of many places and epochs is like a time traveller enduring the impact of the elements as well as of the human conflicts of all historic epochs represented through the modern British and ancient Greek cultural spheres: “London is burning and breaking above her. / Persephone, wait on your throne” (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 249). This couplet constitutes the resolution of the poem and it directly appeals to the reader’s knowledge of Henry Moore’s artistic, visual representation of an abstracted woman in a war shelter in his gouache, ink, watercolour, crayon-on-paper work titled *Woman Seated in the Underground* that comments on the atrocities of World War II (Moore 1941). Brown’s poem constitutes an ekphrastic reinterpretation of Moore’s “timeless symbols of fear, vulnerability and endurance” (*Henry Moore OM, CH* 2004). Human suffering is thus represented through intermedial, intertextual reference as belonging to the sphere of timeless human condition.

The texts from the discussed collection are mostly focused on telling some stories, being very narrative and, on a smaller, poetic scale, epic in character. Theirs are fragmentary plots and dramatic scenes made of an uncommon mixture: some everyday routine events of Orkney inhabitants who strive to ensure the wellbeing of the community mingle with important historic or quasi-historic one-time events. Thus one of the pieces describes an expedition coming to Scotland and to Orkney from the Mediterranean world. The story of a Roman exploration of Orkney is poetically rendered in the poem with a story-telling title, *Ships of Julius Agricola Sail into the Pentland Firth*. It achieves the immediacy of the reported situation through the images of bodily strain and sensory impressions involved in exploring the new lands in the north. The Roman soldiers' physical toil is rendered from the proprioceptively focalized perspective. At the same time, the rowing sailors are counted, thus somehow made particular in their advent into the unknown and remote geographical sphere: "Then, six sailors / Wading ashore, flashed bronze coins / Under a round tower" (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 229). The observation of the new land by the Mediterranean visitors merges in the second line with the perception of the frightened local people who perceive the invasion from their hiding place and try to defend themselves. The limitations and disturbances of perception are rendered both from the point of view of the archipelagic defenders and of the southern conquerors (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 229).

Notably, there are some intertextual allusions in *Ships of Julius Agricola Sail into the Pentland Firth* that point to the universal sphere of meanings and result in the opalescent effect of viewing one text in terms of another. The time of twilight, the rendering of the Roman colonisation of the British territory, the motif of setting anchor "[n]ear the mouth of a small river" (Brown 2006 [2005/1989]: 229) are clearly reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's opening of *The Heart of Darkness* that recounts the Roman perspective on their advent to the hostile territory that later became London. The Orkney Islands are thus mapped against the Mediterranean world of classical antiquity as well as the aesthetic world of British literature. When the helmsman recognizes the archipelago as the "whale islands", he also alludes to the specifically northern interrelation with marine life and to the topographic distinctness of the mountain-like island of Hoy.

Archipelagic Scotland is constantly seen in a way that transcends time. As in Conrad, insight into the contemporary aspect of the country is vital for construing the universal message. Brown makes an allusion to the modern industrial structures in the Pentland Firth waters. The phrases "silver orb" and "forbidden fires" suggest that Agricola's ship crew experience a vision of the nuclear establishments

in Dounreay, Caithness, Scotland (see: Murray/Murray 2008 [2004]: 203). One can even find a tentative poetic suggestion there might be more of suchlike developments coming in the future in the recurrence of “orb” in “**forbidden**” as well as in the echoing of other phoneme clusters. The issue of presence and absence is thus considered on the plane of transcending time.

In his use of qualia and applications of the above-mentioned “passing phase[s] of life” (Conrad 2018 [2006/1897]), Brown expands the techniques of literary Impressionism as it was understood and practiced by Conrad, who experimented with ways of showing human interactions with their phenomenal world and the unique nature of particular “perceptual events” (Peters 2004[2001]: 4). Brown is likewise very much oriented towards the temporal aspects of his poetic worlds. He engages in all sorts of poetic-narrative attempts at shaping the immediacy of the depicted situations. The poems achieve this through blending the character’s personal as well as community stance, counteracting the effect of distancing of the past through showing individual circumstances. The Orkney writer’s insights into the archipelagic moments of individual experience creatively transpose the technique of rendering perception described in Conrad: “[...] perceiver, perceived, and surrounding circumstances blur to produce an experience that is unique to each perceptual instance” (Peters 2004 [2001]: 4).

7. Conclusion

The analyzed poems deploy the combined auditory, visual and tactile perception to describe the coastal communities as well as their entanglements and engagements with the sea. The images of peaceful life constantly mingle with images of disaster happening in some particular moments in time but generalized into more universal images. Both scenarios are intricately interwoven into the aesthetically prominent vignettes of terraqueous existence.

All of the poems in the discussed collection are composed in a way that transposes the textual effect of the narrowly rendered world model, with their combined language-image-impression devices brought to the foreground as a way of inducing reader involvement. The demonstrated littoral-impressionistic patterns complement, enliven and enlarge Brown’s standard contemplative, meditative and transcendent orientation. At the same time, they serve to keep the focus very much down to earth, with the environment shown as an inescapable part of the Anthropocene. These elements of multisensory and multiperspectival focus make Brown’s *The Wreck*

of the Archangel a poetic volume focused on a cognitive orchestration of impressions, probing the human connections and disconnections in place and space grasped in particular but also generalised time. With his poetic technique, Brown somehow fits into the contemporary concept of the fluidity of culture¹⁹, but this, however is perhaps a topic for more extensive studies to come. He also definitely complies with various contemporary ecocentric and ecosophic reconsiderations of the Anthropocene, being thus ahead of his postmodern generation of writers questioning values and the possibility to communicate them. The Orkney poet explores the opportunities offered by the condensed and rigorous lyrical mode to comment on the Anthropocene as inescapably connected to the natural environment. Brown intuitively uses artistic and textual phenomenology to demonstrate the ecosophy of the Anthropocene, not arguing this central concept on the rational level but making the reader intersubjectively experience it through the techniques focused on the polysensory impact of poetically rendered experience. Brown deploys this to point to ecosophy as a way of understanding culture and the human position in the world.

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¹⁹ *The Fluid Humanities* was the title of a 2019 Virginia Humanities Conference held at Virginia Wesleyan University, VA, USA. The concept of fluidity is used in literary studies, see: Purdy (2022).

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