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Marco Zagnoli

**Story and Fable in the Purgatorial Ghost Stories
of George Mackay Brown**



In his book *An Orkney Tapestry*, George Mackay Brown uses the concepts of "story" and "fable"¹ to identify two different levels or aspects of human behaviour. He takes the two concepts from Edwin Muir who in his autobiography affirms that "the life of every man (the story) is an endlessly repeated performance of the life of Man (the fable)."²

As Brown is primarily concerned with the "fable" (true reality) which is constantly repeated underneath the external face of the "story," we understand why his use of the supernatural almost always implies some kind of expiation. The purgatorial dimension present in his short stories of the supernatural can be explained as the ghost's means of freeing himself from obsessions by experiencing them again and again in order to attain a higher state of reality.

Brown's ghosts are allowed, or compelled, to do what Muir thinks every man should do: live his life twice, putting himself in a position (a moment liberated from the order of time) where he can see life timelessly.

The traditional Christian explanation of reality and illusion as outlined by Frye is that "God created a real and perfect world and that man fell out of it into his present world, which is subject to the illusion generated by sins and death. The only progress towards reality that man is capable of is the progress from this world up to the original world that was intended to be his home. This is a purgatorial

ascent, the means being obedience to law, virtue, morality and the sacraments of religion."³

Clearly the human level of nature is not that of the animal and vegetable worlds; man lives in a context of "natura naturata," which is to say a specific human level of nature. How can we then define the boundaries of the conceptual opposition "natural-unnatural" if we lack a clear definition of the concept of nature itself?

There is no easy answer to this question, the message we draw from Brown's works is that it is within the difficult balance of natural needs ("natura naturans" in this case) and divine aspirations that the place of man in creation can be understood. It is primarily an excess or a perversion of love which seems to be at the root of the ghosts' plight in Brown's short stories of the supernatural.

In *The Pirate's Ghost*,⁴ love is an illicit and forbidden passion in which "the coals of procreation, that were ordained for the kindly warming and fostering of the seed, are kindled selfishly." In *The Drowned Rose*, the passion is equally consuming and oblivious to conventional morality, but the lonely narrator is filled with happiness and envy at the sight of the ghosts of the two lovers. The image of the "ever-springing fountain" which occurs to him is clearly related to the bountiful force of nature. The rose of the title is another symbol of love and fecundity. This time we are left to ponder whether it is the lovers' behaviour which is unnatural or the community's condemnation of it.

With *Soldier from the Wars Returning*,⁵ we move from the destructive to the reproductive and constructive force of love. The soldier's ghost comes home to marry his sweetheart and to breed out of her a new generation of Thorberstons. When he finds his betrothed lying with another man, although pained, he realizes that it cannot be otherwise. It is the "ancient wisdom that country folk absorb from the feel of the earth" that makes him realize that reproduction must come before everything else.

In *The Interrogator* it is the man (Theodore) who refuses to accept his natural responsibilities towards his lover (Vera) as a result of his morbid attachment to his mother. There is nothing illicit or forbidden in Vera's love, she fully accepts her role of life-giver and rightly tries to make him overcome his irrational fears:

"She will die," he said, leaning his brow against the cold stonework. "She will die. O God, my mother will die."

"She will," I said. "That is natural. It is right that you should mourn for her. But afterwards there will be another life in Northvoe. There will be a new and more wholesome kind of love in this place."

He gave me a look I will never forget. And then he turned away from me⁶

We realize that the term "illicit" is not to be understood in relation to social conventions but to a morality rooted in nature. Thus, Theodore's love for his mother is as illicit as the passion of Thora and John (the lovers in *The Pirate's Ghost*) because they both go against the natural order of things.

In *Brig-O-Dread* we move into the realm of the inflated ego. The protagonist's arrogance and narcissism crumble when a series of painful events brings him face to face with his true self, which in this context means his "natural" self.

Thus the last stage of his pilgrimage before entering the apocalyptic world is a reconciliation with the natural kingdom which takes place on a beach where the elements of the air, earth and water mingle together and where the ghost finds himself after the purgatorial flames. A reconciliation which is sealed by the verses of the poets Whitman and Coleridge:

. . . Whitman's song came on the wind:
"I think I could turn and live with animals,
They are so placid and self-contained"
A line of Coleridge flowered:
"he blessed them in his heart"

Brown is a writer who questions, not to say challenges, the usual positivist attitude of the modern reader. Since the 18th century our prose tradition has been, to use a definition by Frye "low mimetic,"⁷ in the sense that we expect prose to be a faithful description of what we think the external world is.

By adopting an explicitly antinaturalistic approach to the description of reality, Brown challenges this mental habit: in general he gives his characters' behaviour a significance which goes far beyond the narrow range of their limited lives, while in his stories of the supernatural his characters' freedom of action is even emancipated from the external limits of time and space.

The definition of "ghost-story" elaborated by Penzoldt and Sullivan, and Todorov's concept of "fantastic,"⁸ take for

granted a narrative which is set in the "low mimetic" mode. As our modern Western life does not contemplate intrusions by supernatural forces we tend to identify this level with that of common sense. "Ghost-stories" belong to the "low mimetic" mode because they refer to this common opinion (which is, as Todorov reminds us, the same as a rule of genre). They adopt an underlying ideology that can be called positivist which, although it can be challenged in the course of the narration in a more or less subtle or elusive way, is never really questioned or replaced (it is not by chance that the blossoming of the ghost-story genre coincides with that of naturalism).

On the contrary, in Brown's short stories the supernatural *is* explicitly contemplated and if there is a challenge it is directed against the positivist dominating ideology of the Western world.

According to Brown, the artist's task is to describe "the vision by which people live,"⁹ which means that he has to be the spokesman of his community. This obviously implies the fact that the artist is qualified as a master of life in the same way as the ancient bards were, who, by describing events and examples of life, indirectly showed the right way in a society where well-defined ideals of behaviour were almost unanimously shared.

Even though Brown himself aspires to this role, he realizes that it cannot now be achieved. This explains both his *negative reaction* to the ideology at the basis of contemporary Western civilization (the middle-class culture where the logic of profit, production and social competition are paramount) and to the mass-media which are its mouthpiece, and his positive reaction in trying to give meaning to human activity by reverting to the age-old authority of the Catholic Church and to the all-embracing explanation it gives.

Brown's stories of the supernatural, on the one hand, condemn certain ideological and behavioural attitudes of contemporary society and, on the other, point out what, in the artist's view, are the valuable goals of human endeavour. Only apparently does Brown use the external pattern of the traditional ghost-story, as he almost entirely leaves out the original "fantastic" dimension (in the Todorovian sense¹⁰) and replaces it with another meaning which comes from the theological apparatus of the Catholic religion.

As Brown's literary world is so much influenced by the transcendental dimension, after the attempt to clarify its social meaning, it becomes necessary to evaluate its

mythopoeic aspect. According to Frye, this aspect belongs to the anagogic phase of literature and has as its *goal* the achievement of some imaginative truth and as its *means* the language which, even if it does not itself represent any truth, provides the vehicle to express it. At this interpretative level, literature is no longer an imitation of life or reality but an autonomous language which leads to the creation of a hypothetical world starting from a number of postulates.¹¹ At this point, we no longer have to consider Brown's literary world as an "ethical instrument participating in the work of civilization"¹² but as a "self-contained literary universe"¹³ where the limits of the "naturally" possible can be completely transcended.

From this point of view, the short story *Brig-O-Dread* is particularly illuminating. The tale narrates the experience of a soul after death. The journey of this soul in the hereafter (which is not very different from Dante's) is a valid aid to the understanding of the two concepts of "story" and "fable." After a long period in the Moors (a kind of Limbo), Arkol Andersvik, in order to enter Heaven, which in the tale is represented by an ideal village of farmers and fishermen, has to write his autobiography, but in doing so he must be completely sincere, going beyond any form of self-satisfaction and self-delusion.

His first draft is refused by the court of the village as not sincere enough: "You can't eat or drink with us, until you have paid your debt to truth." Thus, Arkol begins to write his personal *story* turning it into the *fable* of the life of Man:

Arkol wrote. Phrases with some beauty and truth in them began to come, with difficulty. He longed to sit among the villagers, and share their meal. But the feast was eternal. He hoped that he might be able, before it was over, to present to the elders the poem of his life.¹⁴

These sentences represent a summing up of the conceptual meaning of the tale and enable us to outline the paradigmatic opposites on which the structure of the text is organized. We find two macrostructural elements: the autobiography (the poem of his life) and the feast (the sacramental meal of religion) and each has its conceptual corollary which is respectively beauty and truth, community and eternity. Their opposites are also present in the tale, and more generally in G.M. Brown's work, which should therefore be organized on the following paradigmatic pairs: beauty--ugliness, truth--lie,

eternity--death, community--isolation. As the first elements of the couples are associated with the apocalyptic world, the second elements should then belong to its demonic counterpart.

A quest for truth is at the basis of the plight of the ghosts in almost all of Brown's tales where the attainment of the ultimate reality of God is prevented either by attachment to the things of this world (seen as the shadows of a superior reality) or, graver still, by a sort of spiritual blindness mainly identified with self-delusion. It is suggested that while the first simply delays the beginning of the process of purgation, the second may even prevent it from taking place at all.

The most obvious image of the second condition is in *Brig-O-Dread* where it is represented by the Moor (the maze of labyrinth of self-deception) where Arkol spends some time. The Moor is the demonic counterpart of the village and it is the condition most closely related to Hell that we find in the tales. However, Hell is not like Dante's Inferno, a place of endless torment, but primarily a place of false images and thoughts:

The remembrance was all pleasant, a flattering unction. He began the cycle of his life again - Freya and love and the garden, Thord and promise. Wistan and irresponsibility, the shop and sealskins and money, the council and honour, the temple of culture where he was a regular devoted worshipper . . . The second round of meditation was if anything sweeter than the first . . . This delight, he thought, might go on for a long time. He very much hoped that it would.¹⁵

The isolation of the moor-dwellers is a further element which opposes them to the sense of community of the villagers, who share everything with each other and who are not afraid to speak their minds, a fact which, incidentally, makes us realize that faith may not be incompatible with democracy.

The eternal feast of the village is not opposed to the duration of earthly life but, more profoundly, to the absence of time on the Moor, where the souls are caught in a trap of intersections and turnings where they repeat with cyclical madness the events of their lives. The souls are completely oblivious to time because nothing new can happen to them as they live within the circle of their past experiences. We are reminded of Muir's poem "The Labyrinth":

Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.
 From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
 Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
 Where you must move in measure, like a dancer"(140-148).

As already pointed out, the reconciliation with the natural world is accompanied by quotations from Whitman and Coleridge. The judges who decide about his admission to the village are more or less clearly identified with Jane Austen, Van Gogh, Shelley and Chopin, artists who are all cited in connection with Arkol's cultural interests in his former life. Finally Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," itself a poem about a work of art, is at the basis of the apocalyptic world which concludes Arkol's "Pilgrim's Progress":

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what great altar, O mysterious priest,
 Leadst thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
 What little town by river or sea-shore,
 Or mountain--built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

The day began with streams of blood. All the village followed the white-robed priest and the heifer whose horns were hidden under wreaths and clusters of blossom. Children danced and shouted. The throng of people disappeared beyond the last house of the village.¹⁸

The message we draw from this fabric of interlocking literary references is that artistic beauty is bound to lead to the realm of the divine, as, in the definition of the scholastic philosophers, God is identified with "summa pulchritudo." Brown points out that the category of beauty is strictly connected with the category of truth ("beauty is truth, truth beauty"), as Keats wrote, but the connection between art and truth is something which escapes the simple referential relationship between reality and its artistic representation, as the illusion of art may be more truthful than reality itself.¹⁹ In *Brig-O-Dread* we see in its most undisplaced form the reversal of the low mimetic relationship between reality and illusion,²⁰ a reversal which is the natural outcome of the Story-Fable dichotomy when applied to artistic creation.

Here literature has become a self-contained universe (a fable) where the world of social action and events (history

or story), the world of art (beauty) and the world of individual thought and ideas (truth) are eventually reconciled. Thus, a great synthesis is achieved. Religion offers the imaginative support to it, but it is totally realized within the literary dimension where, as Frye rightly points out, events and characters "neither exist nor do not exist,"²¹ but, we must add, still take on life by the process of reading.

Bologna

NOTES

1. George Mackay Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry* (London, 1969), p. 2.
2. Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (London, 1954), p. 49.
3. Northrop Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, (Brighton, 1983), p. 82.
4. *The Drowned Rose* and *The Interrogator* are included in the collection *Hawkfall* (London, 1974); *The Pirate's Ghost*, *Brig-O-Dread* and *Soldiers from the Wars Returning* are included in the collection *The Sun's Net* (London, 1976).
5. The title may have been taken from a poem by A.E. Housman. (See *The Collected Poems of A.E. Housman* (London, 1948), p. 106.
6. Brown, *Hawkfall*, p. 218.
7. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, (Princeton, 1957), p. 366.
8. P. Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (New York, 1965); J. Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares* (Athens, OH, 1980); T. Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. R. Howard (Cleveland, 1973).
9. Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, p. 1.
10. According to T. Todorov what distinguishes fantastic literature from other literary genres is the disconcerting effect it arouses in the reader about the nature of the

events presented in the course of the narration. In other words, as Eric S. Rabkin says, "Todorov locates the effect of the fantastic in the 'reader's' hesitation in determining whether a narrated event must be taken as merely metaphoric (moving the text into a genre he calls the marvellous) or actual (moving the text into a genre he calls the uncanny). The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty." Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton, 1976), p. 118.

11. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 115-8.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

14. Brown, *The Sun's Net*, p. 115.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-9.

16. *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 148.

17. *The Sun's Net*, p. 102.

18. *The Sun's Net*, p. 110.

19. Brown, "The Way of Literature" in *The Tablet* (12 June 1982), p. 585.

20. Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance*, pp. 69-70.

21. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 351.