

On A Narrative Device In Some *Íslendinga þættir*

After the studies of Joseph Harris, there is hardly any need to argue that the difference between a saga and a þáttir is not one of length only but is essentially based on distinctions of a generic nature.¹ But not much has yet been done to show that at least some of narrative characteristics of þættir may be conditioned by their brevity.

Let me start with a story related in *Halldórs þáttir Snorrasonar I*. Being at odds with King Haraldr harðráði, Halldórr leaves the royal court and moves to the estate of Einarr þambarskelfir (Paunch-shaker), a powerful Norwegian nobleman married to Bergljót, the daughter of Earl Hákon. There a new conflict breaks out. A distant relative of Einarr's, a malicious young man, mocks and lampoons Halldórr behind his back and finally is killed by the incensed Iclander. After having murdered the offender, Halldórr rejects the very idea of flight and prefers to surrender to Einarr's judgement. Einarr, however, defers his decision on the case. Later the same day he calls an assembly, but instead of announcing what Halldórr's penalty should be, he first tells a story "to entertain" (*skemmta*) the gathering with an anecdote from the old days when he sailed with King Óláfr Tryggvason on his ship the Long Serpent. Einarr recounts what happened to him after King Óláfr's defeat at the Battle of Svöldr. When the king disappeared in the waves with "the halo that shone over his head", Einarr and his two companions jumped off the Serpent, and were all captured by the Danes and brought to the slave market. In spite of a fairly high price all three of them were purchased by one and the same man, a large masked stranger dressed like a monk in a black cloak. Einarr asked his name, but the stranger refused to give it. This man led them into the forest, released them there and showed them the way to a ship which would take them back to Norway. Before parting from them he foretold their lives. To Einarr, who was only eighteen at that time, the stranger said that he would marry Bergljót and "surpass most other men in many ways". Since he would become the greatest of them all, the masked man required from him alone repayment for the gift of life and freedom. Einarr was obliged one day to do the same for one who would offend against him: even though it would be in his power to take the life of his enemy, he should instead grant him "no less freedom" than he had been granted by the stranger. In the end the hooded man lifted the mask from his face, so that they recognised Óláfr Tryggvason, but at the next moment the king was gone and they never saw him again. Afterwards they were rescued and their lives fell out according to his predictions. "Now I am obliged," said Einarr closing his speech, "to do what King Óláfr asked. It now seems most likely that he was talking about you Halldórr..."² Thus the incident was settled, and Einarr parted with Halldórr on friendly terms.³

Another story I would like to dwell on is *Þórarins þáttir Nefjólfssonar*. Þórarinn and his friend Þorsteinn Ragnhildarson came to stay with King Óláfr Haraldsson. Before that both of them had been visiting King Knútr. Soon after the friends joined the retinue, a man named Bjarni, a kinsman of Þórarinn's, came to the court and was also invited to stay with the king's men. Two of the king's followers, who felt they had been dishonoured by having to give way to the newcomers, slandered them out of jealousy before the king. They said that King Knútr had set up a conspiracy against King Óláfr and sent Þórarinn and his two companions to kill him. A witness to the truth of their accusation was a gold arm-ring Þórarinn had accepted for this purpose from Knútr and was secretly wearing on his left arm. After having found this evidence of betrayal hidden under Þórarinn's shirt-sleeve, the king could not believe there was no conspiracy on their part and gave orders for the supposed traitors to be thrown into a dungeon. Then, on the bishop's advice the case was tried by ordeal and Bjarni was chosen as the one who had to bear the glowing iron. When his hand was

examined there was a strange blister on it which perturbed the bishop. But Þorsteinn, who also saw the blister on Bjarni's hand, declared that this sign was familiar to him. The king consented to delay execution, and Þorsteinn was invited to tell his story.

Like Einarr's speech in *Halldórs þáttir I*, Þorsteinn's tale was concerned with past events. As a young man he went travelling and was baptised in Jerusalem. Having returned from his journeys, Þorsteinn carried the glowing iron "according to the examples of Christian men" in order to convince his mother, a woman of noble birth, to accept the true faith. His hand was to be examined after three nights. On the third night he dreamed that a man with a shining face came to him and said that he would be rewarded for his efforts to convert his mother. The man promised to Þorsteinn that when his hand was unbandaged it would be "more beautiful than when it was whole", and ordered him to wear a glove on that hand and not praise his glory. In addition the man revealed to Þorsteinn that one day he would suffer slander from the king, and told him to show the hand if his life were at stake. Concluding his reminiscence Þorsteinn said:

"And when the hand was unbandaged, it looked as though there was a gold coin lying in the palm on the place where the iron had rested, with a red thread around it, and the flesh was raised higher there than elsewhere. My mother and all our friends accepted Christianity as a result of this sign. And I have never shown my hand." (I, 390)

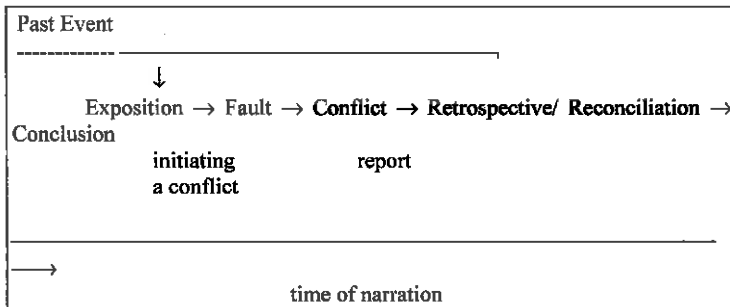
Then he took off the glove and showed the sign on his hand. Thus the truth had finally come out. The king was reconciled with Þórarinn and his companions and punished instead the insidious slanderers.

Despite all the differences between their plots, one cannot but be struck by the similarity between the two þættir. In consequence of a real or alleged fault, the hero comes in conflict with a mighty person who has power over him. Reconciliation is achieved when the offender is put on trial, in the course of which one of the parties gives a detailed account of a past event not previously mentioned, which turns out in the most unexpected way to be bound up with the immediate situation of the main character of the þáttir. The theme of such a retrospective story within a story is a superhuman interference in the character's fate by a saint or a divine assistant, who among other things endows him with a sign (or some other proof of their extraordinary encounter) and requires him to behave in a certain way in a future situation he foretells for him. Hence a wondrous intervention in the distant past is actualised in the present, bringing about a favourable change in the hero's destiny, a conflict with a powerful opponent being settled to his advantage and reconciliation taking place. Thus in both þættir the function of a first person retrospective narrative is the same – introducing into the story some important factual information concerning the past which causes a sharp turn in the action. And it is obvious that this goal was attained in the most dramatically effective manner, for in each case the necessary motivation for the quarrelling parties to find a mutually acceptable way out is provided at the moment of highest tension, when the fate of the hero is at stake. The form in which this decisive information is presented is equally effective: it is not related by the narrator, but put into the mouth of a character who, to the complete surprise of everyone else, reveals something that is known to him alone.

Retrospective reports of this kind, as well as the tale-within-a-tale structure in general, would not surprise the experienced modern reader.⁴ For this reason the narrative construction as such can hardly attract our attention. However when found in þættir this narrative device should not be left unnoticed, at least for the simple reason that it is "at direct odds with classical saga practice".⁵ As it is well known, the guiding principle for the composition of the dominant Icelandic prose form was the rule expressed in a saying: *það verður að segja svá hverja sögu sem hún gengr* "every saga must be told as it happened". Consequently, all events that took place earlier in time were to be related prior to the events that took place later. Of

course the necessity of following two or more lines of action and of rendering simultaneous events could not but complicate the task for a story-teller and involve some temporal backtracking, but it never undermined the basic principle of narrating the saga "as it happened".

Strictly speaking in the case of our two þættir there are no grounds for suspicion that their retrospective narratives entailed deviations from a linear story either, for the past events presented in a character's report belong not to the time of the main story but to a prior time and thus exceed the temporal limits of the action. In diagrammatic form:



But the technique of retrospective narrative in the þættir does not always operate without backward jumps in time. Another story, *Hrafn's þáttir Guðrúnarsonar*, demonstrates the use of what Thaddeus Zielinski calls the "nachträgliche reproduciend-combinatorische" method⁶, by which a character's report is generally intended to represent events which happen at the same time. In our case, however, the function of a story put into the mouth of one of the heroes of the þáttir is far from being confined to the necessity of rendering two simultaneous actions.

Having killed his offender, an officer of Magnús góði, Hrafn was outlawed and had to hide in the woods. His conflict with the king was seriously aggravated by their chance meeting in the forest which the Icelander managed to take advantage of by tricking his opponent. After that King Magnús declared it would be useless for anyone to beg mercy for Hrafn and offered a good reward for his head. Later Hrafn tried to receive backing from his uncle Sighvatr, the former skald of King Óláfr, who in his turn sought support from other chieftains; but nobody was prepared to risk his position for a man the king was angry with. So, having lost all hope of reconciliation with the king, Hrafn decided to bring things to a conclusion and rush to his death instead of getting away. Sighvatr failed to dissuade him from going straight to the king, but before they boarded the king's ship (Magnús góði was waiting for a wind to sail with his fleet to Denmark) the skald prayed for support to his patron, the holy King Óláfr. Further events in the þáttir went as follows:

"King Magnús had fallen asleep on the steering deck and awoke at the same time as Sighvatr and Hrafn came amidships. He sprang up with a start and shouted, 'Up, all my men. We have a wind, and victory is assured when we reach Denmark.'

Then everyone prepared his ship and they sailed as soon as they were ready. And when they reached Denmark, the whole force went ashore from the ships. A great army of Danes confronted them and a tremendous battle took place. King Magnús was in the foremost division, but Hrafn Guðrúnarson went ahead of the king and fought most daringly; yet no one said a word to him. In the battle several men saw the holy King Óláfr with King Magnús's troops, and he won a glorious victory that day." (III, 453)

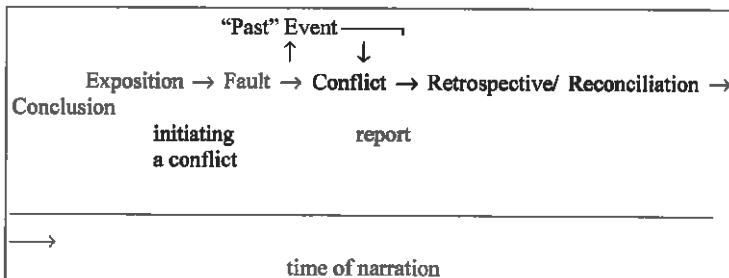
The king's behaviour towards Hrafn from the moment the Icelander appears onboard the ship gives rise to questions. Not long before, King Magnús had spared no effort to find and punish his offender, and his indifference to Hrafn when the latter is finally within reach is astonishing indeed. The reader surely must puzzle over the fact that, instead of putting the man he had outlawed in the stocks, the king takes no heed at all of his presence. The supposition that Magnús has more important concerns than his quarrel with Hrafn, being so absorbed with his hostilities against the Danes that their conflict for a time has been pushed into the background, is hardly satisfactory, for it is an invariable characteristic of *útanferðar þættir* to give priority to the personal story of an Icelander over all historical events, including the history of a king himself. The principal concern of any Norwegian king as a character of a þátt is always his relations with the Icelander. Hence an episode demonstrating a puzzling deviation from this rule cannot but give the reader a hint that the strange behaviour of the king will certainly be clarified sooner or later in an appropriate place. These expectations are not disappointed, for the first desire of the king after he has won the victory is to decide the fate of the Icelander.

In the evening, when the Norwegians had returned to the ships and thanked God for their victory, King Magnús ordered Hrafn to come forward. Sighvatr and other chieftains begged the king to grant him safety for his daring conduct in battle, but the king refused to promise anything before finding out all the circumstances. Then Hrafn went before the king and answered all his inquiries. After having examined his whole case the king said:

"and now the part that concerns me shall be told. When I had fallen asleep on the ship, my father King Óláfr came to me, and said sharply. 'There you lie, King Magnús, and pay more attention to killing my poet's kinsman for little cause than to winning a noble victory over the Danes, your enemies, for a fair wind is blowing. Accept gladly everyone who is now on the ship, or else the punishment of this world will fall on you so that you will not succeed.' And as soon as I woke I saw the two of them amidships – Sighvatr and Hrafn – and I was much too afraid of my father's threats to dwell on the slaying of Ketill or on Hrafn's other crimes. Now, Hrafn, you shall be welcome to stay here with us. This is my father's wish." (III, 454)

Thus the king's reconciliation with Hrafn was motivated not by hearing the case (although King Magnús, taking into consideration all extenuating circumstances, had good reason to conclude that it was not the Icelander's fault that he was provoked into killing his man), but first and foremost through the interference of a superior force. The conflict has been settled at the command of an angry saint, who was prompting mercy with threats.

The narrative structure of *Hrafns þáttur Guðrúnarsonar* differs from Halldórr's tale and Þórarinn Nefjólfsson's tale in only one respect. Here the past event presented in a character's report belongs not to a distant time, but to the time of the main story itself. Hence we have a deviation from the linear composition:



An event which will subsequently decide the fate of the main character has taken place at a late stage in the development of the conflict and was a direct outcome of the alienation between the king and the Icelander, but an account of this event has been deliberately postponed by the story-teller and thus transformed into retrospective report. A clear hint of a future turning point is given: from the moment the Icelander appears on board the ship, the king behaves in a way inexplicable in terms of his previous actions. The fact that the author of the þáttir has constructed the narrative in this way provides evidence that he probably intends to intrigue and puzzle his audience.

Is it possible to interpret a retrospective report put in the mouth of a character as a special literary device used as a means of achieving an unexpected turn in the action? Or is it rather an integral structural component of a certain sub-group of þættir, namely of those in which the Alienation / Reconciliation pattern common to a large group of *útanferðar þættir* is realised in the following fixed sequence of structural elements? A real (or false) fault of the hero → his conflict with a powerful opponent → settlement attained by means of a judgement at an assembly in the course of which one of the parties gives an account of a past event which has taken place with the participation of a supernatural helper who has foretold and/or predetermined a favourable outcome to a future conflict between the opponents. If retrospective tales mark turning-points in the action only within this particular type of narrative, there is hardly any question of regarding such first person reports as deliberately employed artistic devices aimed at achieving a specific compositional effect, since in each case the function of a retrospective report is inseparably linked to the situation it belongs to. Therefore it would be possible to consider retrospective reports in þættir as a literary device associated with the elaboration of a turn in the story only if other texts were found, demonstrating the same function of reminiscence of past events, though not within the structural-thematic entity described above.

A clear proof that retrospective reports in þættir were really applied as a literary device intended to mark a turning-point in the action is provided by *Odds þáttir Ofeigssonar*. In contrast to the stories discussed above, this þáttir is devoid of Christian meaning, and there is no question of supernatural forces intervening in the fate of its characters.

Oddr and his men went on a trading expedition to Norway and spent a winter in Finnmark. When they sailed from the north in spring, Oddr discovered that his crew had exchanged goods with the Finns, although no one was allowed to trade with these people except with the king's permission. Hence, preparing themselves for the meeting with the king's landholder Einarr fluga, who was the first to search the ship, and then with King Haraldr, Oddr and his companions had to take care that none of the forbidden cargo could be found on board. Most of the story is devoted to the description of repeated efforts on Oddr's part to conceal the Lapps' goods and thus to clear his crew of the charge of unauthorised trading, and to persistent attempts on King Haraldr's part to find the hidden cargo and to punish Oddr and his men. With the help of Oddr's friend Þorsteinn, a follower of the king, who had warned Oddr of the king's visits, and on whose advice the Icelander had been acting every time there was any need to hide the Finns' tribute in a new place, the traders succeeded in tricking King Haraldr and finally escaped. Consequently, instead of a traditional final reconciliation between the opponents, the main character of the þáttir leaves the stage when the action is reaching a climax. Since the conflict remains unsettled the story continues after its hero has got away.

When he was out of reach in the open sea Oddr addressed his crew:

"Now I will tell you how things have gone and what my reasons were for everything. I told you not to buy more from the Finns than was legal, but you wouldn't take this advice. And then we met Einarr and I told you to treat him with respect, yet drag out your conversation with him and do what you could to slow him down; because I knew you were guilty..." (V, 312)

Then he dwelled on some details of the incident they all had taken part in and said that their escape was largely owing to the assistance of his friend Þorsteinn. It is obvious that Oddr's retrospective report would have been of little (if any) interest either to his companions or to the audience of the þátttr, for the former were active participants in the event he was recounting, and the latter were spectators of the whole drama. Unsurprisingly, the fact that Oddr's speech was eliminated from the later versions of the þátttr (in *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna*) had no consequences at all for the coherence of the narrative. Redundant as far as the plot is concerned, the retrospective report here is most likely introduced into the story for the sole purpose of bringing onto the stage a dubbing actor and making him the successor of the hero. Having thus stressed the role of Þorsteinn in Oddr's dealings with the king, the story-teller assigns to him the part of the main character in the last episode of the þátttr, in which the conflict between Oddr and King Haraldr has been transformed into the conflict between Þorsteinn and the king. As we learn from this concluding part of the story, the following summer Oddr sent Þorsteinn an excellent stud of sorrel horses with white manes, in reward for having saved his life. Expecting problems with the king as a result of accepting this present, Þorsteinn makes an attempt to conceal the truth about his having taken part in the incident and shows the horses to his patron pretending that Oddr has sent them to King Haraldr as a gift. However, the king easily guesses who was meant to receive the horses ("I don't deserve any gifts from Oddr; he has sent them to you rather than to me") and orders his men to kill Þorsteinn; but nobody is eager to do as he says, so Þorsteinn leaves the king's retinue.

Taking into consideration the low informative value of the retrospective report in *Odds þátttr* there is no mistaking that the content of Oddr's speech is less important than the mere fact of its presence in the text. This "manoeuvre", intended to transfer the narrative to the new protagonist, obviously has a conspicuous formal function in the structure of the þátttr.

As in Halldór Snorrason's and Þórarinn Nefjólsson's tales, the retrospective report here marks the final stage in the action (cf. *auflösende Rückwendung* in Lämmert's terms)⁷, although this time it does not facilitate reconciliation between the Icelander and the king. However, there is evidence that this literary device is not necessarily connected with the denouement of a story. Thus in one of the anecdotes about Sneglu-Halli, retrospective narrative is employed as an effective means of initiating the conflict (*aufbauende Rückwendung*). In this episode (*Sneglu-Halla þátttr*, ch. 7) we again meet Einarr fluga, King Haraldr's landholder, charged with collecting the Finns' tribute in the north of the country. Moreover the exposition of the story, telling of another of Halli's tricks, as that is narrated in the retrospective tale, is nothing but the description of the fate awaiting Oddr and his companions if they fail to deceive the king's envoy.

At the beginning of the anecdote we learn that Einarr was expected for Yule, and Halli was discussing the disagreeable visitor with his bench-mate Sigurðr. After having heard that Einarr paid no compensation for his killings or robberies and people were so afraid of this man that no one dared to say a word against him, Halli bet Sigurðr his head that he would surely be able to stand up for himself if Einarr did him wrong and could force him to pay a compensation for his injury. It goes without saying that he did not wait long. Einarr arrived at the feast, and at the Yule banquet King Haraldr asked him to entertain them with a story about his travels. So Einarr gave an account of a summer incident with a ship from Iceland which he and his men confronted when it was sailing down from Finnmark. He charged the Icelanders with having traded with the Lapps without permission, but they denied it. As they refused to allow him to inspect the wares, he attacked them and killed them all. There was an Icelander whom they called Einarr who defended himself so well that, as Einarr fluga had admitted, he

had never encountered his equal. If everyone on board had been like him they would never have overcome the ship. Halli reacted immediately to Einarr's story:

"Halli <...> threw his knife down on the table and stopped eating. Sigurðr asked if he were ill. He said that was not so, but said this was worse than sickness – 'Einarr Fly announced the death of Einarr, my brother, whom he said he killed on the trading vessel last summer, and it can be that now it is appropriate to seek compensation from this Einarr' " (I, 351).

Thus the past event reported by one of the characters reveals an unexpected connection between the Icelander and the king's landholder, giving impetus to their quarrel. And again, as in other þættir which employ the same device, retrospective narrative entails an evident turning-point in the story. Furthermore, the final settlement is reached in a similar manner, as a result of an abrupt turn in the action which has to include a past event as well. After making sure that Einarr had no intention of paying any compensation for his brother, Halli nevertheless finds means of gaining his end. He pretended to have had a dream which he told the king in Einarr's presence. He said he dreamt that he was Þorleifr jarlaskáld, whereas Einarr fluga seemed to him to be Earl Hákon, and he thought he composed a *níð* about him and remembered some of this slanderous poem when he awoke. To confirm his statement he mumbled something, "but people were not able to catch any of the words". King Haraldr grasped Halli's message without effort and compelled Einarr to satisfy him, for what he had been expounding was not a dream but a veiled threat ("And it will go with the two of you as it did with Hákon Hlaðajarl and the poet Þórleifr"). Hence a mere hint of a past event, so famous that it "will be remembered as long as the northern countries are inhabited", acts here as a full-scale retrospective narrative and is sufficient to produce a sudden characteristic effect, namely the Icelander's triumph over his powerful opponent. And no less unexpectedly, at the end of the episode, the story-teller makes us cast a backward look on its very start and revalue the entire situation, for only now does it emerge that Halli was not at all related to a man Einarr fluga had killed and therefore had no reasons to demand anything from him.

As we see, the author of the anecdote resorts to retrospection every time he approaches the focal points of the story. A report on an event from the recent past, which entails the need to overstep the temporal limits of the action, thus initiates the plot of the entire narrative. When the story reaches its climax, an example from the distant past, projected onto the potential outcome of the present conflict, leads to reconciliation of the main characters. Finally the story is crowned with an internal retrospection, arising from the need to withdraw a false declaration made at an early stage of the action and to show the whole incident in its true light at last. Thus the retrospective speeches of the main characters serve as key supports for the entire narrative structure.

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It would be natural enough to raise now a question about the origins of retrospective narratives in the þættir. The very fact that this device is not characteristic of classical Icelandic prose first of all prompts a search for its sources, with a view to the possibility of foreign influence. Of course it is hardly imaginable, especially in medieval Iceland, that a compositional pattern of any kind could have been adopted as such and not as an integral component of some translated or adapted text that later would set an example for imitation. Since normally it is not abstract structural patterns that are borrowed but particular compositions in which they are used, the search has to be directed towards hypothetical mediators, that is, tales which would have been capable of disseminating such an influence. The only known composition, whose undoubtedly "international" roots endowed it with exactly the qualities which, under some conditions, could have enabled it to perform this role, is *Hróa þáttir heimiska*, a story that also contains a tale of past events told by one of the characters (the second deceiver).⁸ This text, however, hardly sheds light on the problem of

origins of the narrative device under discussion, for, as I have tried to argue elsewhere,⁹ *Hróa þátrr* is a borrowing which most likely appeared in Iceland after the retrospective tale achieved its rightful place in the composition of þættir. But even if we manage to find any texts which might have been able to mediate foreign influence, it is still doubtful whether we could ever find sufficient evidence that they actually had performed this function.

However that may be, the hypothesis of foreign influence cannot spare us the necessity of explaining why a narrative device readily accepted by the þátrr remained alien to the Icelandic family saga. I suppose the reason for this should be sought partly in the generic features that distinguish þættir from sagas, and partly in some general distinctions between long and short prose forms.

First of all, as it was already stated above, in all these stories, the introduction of a retrospective narrative entails an entirely unexpected, sudden sharp turn in the action provoked by new information about some past events. But nothing of the kind can ever happen in a family saga. The latter avoids any first person revelations of this kind, which may take both the other actors of the story and its audience by surprise. The saga authors as a whole are not inclined to withhold temporarily any details or important facts, in order to reveal them at the very moment when they wish to make use of them in their narratives. In sagas we normally find a quite opposite narrative strategy. Circumstances or details which are going to play a significant part in the future are introduced into the story prematurely, usually much earlier than the story-teller actually uses them in the composition, and when their time comes they are recollected or recognised by the audience. It is obvious that this strategy, primarily intended to link as tightly as possible widely separated episodes of a story, is effectual only in a large narrative form. On the contrary, the compositional turning-point, which in all our þættir is achieved entirely by public revelation of previously unknown past events, is a strategy of story-telling typical of short narrative forms such as anecdote and its literary heir, the novella.

Moreover the turning-point of a story as such is a device peculiar to narratives representing a drastic change in the fortunes of the protagonist. Hence it is no wonder that we find it not in the family sagas, where heroes, most often by the intrinsic logic of the entire action, gradually bring about their tragic end, but in the *útanferðar þættir*, where as a rule the whole course of events, however badly it might begin and develop, ultimately turns out well for the hero. After falling out with the king or his powerful substitute and undergoing a series of dangerous trials, the Icelander, a central character of a þátrr, finally wins his opponent's favour and enhances his own social status. Unlike the sagas of Icelanders, *Íslendinga þættir* are usually stories that end well.

The next feature of the þættir is not peculiar to this genre only but rather a well-known typological property of short narrative forms. Unlike the family saga, which often gives a full-length life of the central character or at least a considerable part of it, the þátrr as a rule narrates only a fragment of a life, either an episode or a limited sequence of related episodes focusing on a moment of crisis that changes the hero's life forever.¹⁰ At the same time the exposition of a þátrr rarely contains details of the previous history either of the main hero of the story or of its other *dramatis personae*. The story-teller on the whole limits any preliminary information and concentrates wholly on events relevant to the subject matter of the given episode. Such a restriction or even omission of information about the past of the characters from the exposition of þættir in itself creates the prerequisite for subsequent introduction of this information into the action at the later stages of its unravelling. Thus the emergence of retrospective tales follows the logic of narrative potentiality inherent in the poetics of þættir owing to their "episodic" nature and is ultimately a consequence of their brevity.

Finally, as in the novella, brevity in a þátr “correlates with concentration on a single event and with structural intensity”¹¹. Manifestations of the latter, such as the above-mentioned technique of thrusting the past into the present and the creation of the tale-within-the-tale structure (and other attempts to construct a more complicated composition), perhaps evince specific pursuit of aesthetic ends, i.e. are intended to increase the narrative value of the story. Whereas the saga with its simultaneous and hence inevitably interweaving threads of plot, its constant shift of focus from strand to strand and its great number of characters, was a highly complex narrative structure, the simplicity of short stories, entailed by inevitable limitation to a single event or situation and to few characters, could stimulate authors to search for structural innovations, including some which were not firmly based on the aesthetics of saga composition.

References

- ¹ See esp. Joseph Harris, “Genre and Narrative Structure in Some *Íslendinga Þættir*.” In: *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 44 (1972), 1–27; Idem. “Genre in the Saga Literature: A Squib.” In: *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 47 (1975), 419–426; Idem. “Theme and Genre in Some *Íslendinga Þættir*.” In: *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 48 (1976), 1–28.
- ² Trans. from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (Vol.1–5), Vol. 5, p. 223. All subsequent references to this collection are given in the text.
- ³ See a study of this þátr: Joseph Harris, “Christian Form and Christian Meaning in *Halldórs þátr 1*.” In: *The Learned and the Lewd: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*. Ed. L.D.Benson. Harvard English Studies, Vol. 5 (1974), 249–264.
- ⁴ On *Rückwendung* in narrative see E.Lämmert, *Bayformen des Erzählens*. 2. Aufl. Stuttgart, 1967, S. 100–139.
- ⁵ Carol J. Clover, *The Medieval Saga*. Ithaca & London, 1982, p.112 note. Also see M. van den Toorn, “Zur Struktur der Saga.” In: *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, bd. 73 (1958), s. 160. As far as I know the only attempt to evaluate the employment of retrospection in þættir has been made so far by Heinrich Gimmler in his dissertation *Die Thættir der Morkinskinna. Ein Beitrag zur Überlieferungsproblematik und zur Typologie der altnordischen Kurzerzählung*. Frankfurt a. M., 1976. S. 102–109, esp. 104 f. However, Gimmler merely states the fact of its use and seems not to be interested in explaining the possible reasons for this difference between saga and þátr.
- ⁶ Thaddaeus Zielinski, “Die Behandlung gleichzeitiger Ereignisse im antiken Epos.” 1. Theil. In: *Philologus. Zeitschrift für das classische Alterthum. Supplementband*, VIII. Leipzig, 1899–1901, 407–449.
- ⁷ Cf. Gimmler, Op. cit., S. 104.
- ⁸ *Fornar smásögur úr Noregs konunga sögum*. E. Gardiner gaf út. Reykjavík, 1949, 29–41. On *Hróa þátr heimiska* see Dag Strömbäck, “En orientalisk saga i fornordisk drákt”. In: Dag Strömbäck, *Folklore och Filologi*. Valda uppsatser utgivna av Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien 13. 8. 1970. Uppsala, 1970, 70–105.
- ⁹ Elena Gurevich, “V poiskah istokov retrospektivnogo rasskaza v pryad’ah: drevneislandskaya versiya sujeta o kupce i slepom starce” (In search of the origins of the retrospective tale in the þættir. The Old Norse version of the tale about a merchant and a blind old man). In: *Skandinavskie yazyki*. Moscow, 2001, 68–89.
- ¹⁰ Cf. M.L. Pratt, “The Short Story: The Long And The Short Of It”. In: *Poetics*, Vol. 10. No. 2/3 (1981), 175–194, p. 182 f.
- ¹¹ E.M. Meletinsky, *Istoricheskaya poetika novelly* (The Historical Poetics of Novella). Moscow, 1990, p. 4.