

MARTA REY-RADLIŃSKA
Instytut Filologii Germańskiej
Zakład Filologii Szwedzkiej
Uniwersytet Jagielloński

THE OLD-NORSE NARRATIVE *AUÐUNAR ÞÁTTR* *VESTFIRZKA* AS A PARABOLIC FICTION

Introduction

Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka (literally: *The þáttir of Auðun from the West Fjords*) is doubtless one of the prose masterpieces of the European Middle Ages. The story of a poor Icelander who travels to the old country to gain wealth and recognition is well known and has been translated to many languages. It has been considered as one of most classical examples of the Old-Norse short narratives, so-called *þættir*. The number of short narratives called today *þættir* varies depending on the criteria applied. As Elizabeth Ashman Rowe and Joseph Harris concluded in *A Companion to Old-Norse Icelandic Literature and Culture*:

Because such short narratives are not always clearly labelled, whether with ‘þáttir’ or another term, and because other criteria for their recognition can be subjective, their exact number will always be a matter of controversy. We feel, however, that a conservative estimate would recognize between 75 and 100 short narratives as *þættir*.¹

The research on this kind of narratives has a long history but is not yet exhaustive.² The modern lexical definition of a *þáttir* points out the two modern meanings of the term:

Þáttir m., (eig. “Tastrang, Kardeel”, Pl. *þættir*) ist ein literar. Begriff mit zwei versch. Bedeutungen: 1. ein Abschnitt einer längeren Saga (z.B. den *Kristni þáttir* der *Laxdæla*

¹ E.A. Rowe, J. Harris, “Short Prose Narrative (þáttir)”. *A Companion to Old-Norse Icelandic Literature and Culture*, R. McTurk (ed.), 2004, pp. 462–478.

² For detailed summary of the research on *þættir* see above mentioned *Companion*... and also: S. Würth, *Elemente des Erzählens: die thættir der Flateyjarbók*, Frankfurt am Main: Helbing Und Lichtenhahn 1991.

saga oder die Þættir der Karlamagnúss saga), 2. eine kurze, unabhängige Geschichte über Isländer (so in den Íslendingaþættir).³

Þættir can be considered as fully dependent, semi-independent or independent on the host-saga.⁴ The stories have been often published separately in anthologies and translated in isolation from their context⁵ which popularized the genre but resulted in the false belief about their total autonomy.

Although the *Lexicon* gives a quite concrete definition of the so-called *þátrr*, one must be aware of the risk of considering this kind of story to be a specific, homogenous genre. The primary meaning of the word “*þátrr*” is a “strand in a rope”⁶ but in a more metaphorical sense it means a “subsidiary part of something” – also, with reference to saga literature, as “narrative strand” or “episode” within a longer saga.⁷ With “longer saga” in most of cases is meant a king saga or a family saga. The meaning of the word gives, according to Lönnroth, “a good clue to the real nature and function of the short stories”, which is, inter alia, to illustrate vices or virtues of a particular king “by showing the king’s relationship to some particular type of visiting Iclander (the fool, the impetuous warrior, the skald, etc.)”.⁸ The so called *þættir* cannot, therefore, be studied and analyzed outside their context. Lars Lönnroth compares the custom of interpolating *þættir* into king sagas to the “general medieval tendency to interpolate *digressions* in the chronicles, often in the form of *exempla*”.⁹ The separation from the primary context and use of the term *þátrr* for individual tales began, according Lönnroth research, in the 15th century.

However, there is a large group of short narratives which were never presented as part of longer works, but those stories were not called *þættir* in the time when the sagas were recorded in the 13th century. Lönnroth suggest that the term *þátrr* should be reserved for the tales called so by the saga-writers and a new term should be found for the independent short stories.¹⁰

The generic identity of *þættir* is not the subject of this study, so I choose to use the term in modern common meaning. I agree with Lönnroth that the *þættir* which are interpolated in longer sagas should not be considered outside their context if we are seeking the intended sense. However, I assume that they could work as

³ R. Simek, H. Pálsson, *Lexikon der altnordischen Literatur*, Stuttgart 2007, p. 374.

⁴ *Morkinskinna. The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030–1157)*. Translated with Introduction and Notes by Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, Ithaca and London 2000, p. 13.

⁵ *Sex sögu-þættir*, J. Þorkelsson (ed.), Reykjavík 1855, *Fjörtíu Íslendingaþættir*, Þ. Jónsson (ed.), Reykjavík 1904, *Íslendingaþættir*, G. Jónsson (ed.), Reykjavík 1935, *Fornar smásögur úr Noregs konunga sögum*, E. Gardiner (ed.), Reykjavík 1949.

⁶ J. Lindow, *Old Icelandic Þátrr: Early Usage and Semantic History*, „Scripta Islandica” 29 (1978), pp. 3–44.

⁷ L. Lönnroth, *The Concept of Genre in Saga Literature*, „Scandinavian Studies” 47 (1975), pp. 419–426.

⁸ *Ibid.*, s. 423.

⁹ L. Lönnroth, *European Sources of Icelandic Saga-Writing*, dissertation at Stockholms Universitet, 1965, p. 8.

¹⁰ L. Lönnroth, *The Concept of Genre in Saga...*, p. 424.

separate tales – at least some of them – as small masterpieces of the medieval narrative art. The reception is naturally different in both cases, but the one does not exclude the other.

It is difficult to determine the date when the *þættir* were created – probably some of them existed in the oral tradition for many decades prior to the recording on parchment; some of them were composed as paraphrases or translations of already existing works, others seem to be the original creation of the scribe. In the sixties, there was a popular theory suggesting the origin of family sagas in *þættir*.¹¹

Auðunar þáttir is included in three manuscripts: the probably oldest preserved version is found in the *Morkinskinna*¹² (M), a similar, but extended version in *Flateyjarbók*¹³ (F) and the third in *Hulda*¹⁴ (H). The M version has been regarded as the most genuine and preferred for translations. This *þáttir* has been recognized as an example of narratives in Icelandic literature's history. Professor Bjarni Guðnason wrote in *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid*:

Den episke tråd er enkel, begivenhedsforløbet er jævnt fremadskridende, personbeskrivelserne gode og samtalerne sikkert styrede. Genealogier og topografien, som tit er forsinkende momenter i islændingesagaer, er udeladt, og tilbage står beretningens tidløse præg.¹⁵

There are two well known studies of the *Auðunar þáttir* – one, based on the M, by Arnold R. Taylor, including a translation with short comment¹⁶ and the second by William Ian Miller, who has recently translated the tale using the F version, and written a brilliant commentary, in which he interprets the plot and its aspects.¹⁷ In the introduction to his book he argues against recognition of the M version as the closest to original. He chooses the F version for his translation, because it is more complete and not as pared down as the M.¹⁸ The *Auðunar þáttir* is also named and, to some extent, commented in other studies.¹⁹

In my article I use, first of all, the M version but, in some aspects, even the F version if it clarifies a particular issue. In this study, I would like to present

¹¹ C.J. Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas", *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Critical Guide*, C.J. Clover, J. Lindow (ed.), Toronto 2005, p. 291.

¹² *Morkinskinna* – "rotten parchment" – a manuscript containing the chronicle of the Norwegian rulers from 1030 to 1157 and some *þættir*; dated in 13th century.

¹³ *Flateyjarbók* – "book from the Flatey island" – a largest compilation of king's sagas and *þættir*, codex of 225 folia, dated in 14th century.

¹⁴ *Hulda* – "hidden" – another 13th century manuscript containing set of king's sagas and *þættir*.

¹⁵ *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid*, band 20, 2nd edition, column 405–410, J. Granlund (ed.), 22 vols. Viborg 1982, col. 408.

¹⁶ A.R. Taylor, "Auðun and the Bear", *Saga Book*, vol. XIII, 1946–1953, pp. 78–96.

¹⁷ W.I. Miller, *Auðun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law, and Largesse in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business*. Leiden and Boston 2008.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁹ To mention only a few: Marlene Ciklamini, "Exempla in an Old Norse Historiographic Mold", *Neophilologus* 81, 1 (1996), pp. 71–87; J. Harris, *Folktale and Þáttir: The Case of Rognvald and Raud*, *Folklore Forum* 13 (2/3), pp. 158–198; J. Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas. Iceland's Medieval Literature*, Reykjavík 1988, pp. 302–303 or dissertation of H. Gimmler, *Die þættir der Morkinskinna. Ein Beitrag zur Überlieferungsproblematik und zur Typologie der altnordischen Kurzerzählung*, 1976.

Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka from a new, communicative perspective, as an example of a special type of narrative fiction.

Four types of narrative fiction

The starting point for my analysis is the concept of the four main types of narrative fiction, as formulated by Michał Głowiński.²⁰ Głowiński begins with the well known quotation from Diderot's *Ceci n'est pas un conte*, where the author considers the role of the listener in the narratives: one of the listener's functions is to interrupt the storyteller and to ask questions. Diderot meant oral narratives, but according to Głowiński, the same concerns a written text. A reader interrogates the text, using his own experience, knowledge and attitude and also constitutes a part in a dialogue. The type of the narrative fiction is according to Głowiński a suggestion to the recipient, a clue which must be taken into account to understand the text properly. A type of fiction is considered as a component of the narrative structure, which presumes a specific kind of reception. The recipient is an implicit reader, whose role is defined by the text. The narrative fiction is a bearer of meanings but is not semantically autonomous because it needs a story to obtain its implications. In Głowiński's meaning the narrative fiction is an element of contact between the sender and recipient.

Głowiński uses two main categories in his study on narrative fiction: the communicative perspective mentioned above and a distance, understood also as a component of the communication. There are two types of distance: between narrator and the fiction created by him and between recipient and fiction. Both types of distance depend on each other. Głowiński refers to the conception of "distance to form" as formulated by Witold Gombrowicz and one of the main conceptions of his aesthetics. "Form" in this perception was all narrative transfer, its elements and the referring tradition. For Głowiński, the category of distance is part of a communication process which is the outcome of a literary composition.

The four main types of narrative fiction described by Głowiński are mythical, parabolic, mimetic and grotesque fiction, but there are also many intermediate forms on the borderland of those four. The most relevant difference between these four is both semantic composition and the type of distance on the sender's and receiver's part.

The mythical fiction excludes the distance: it presumes a complete and blind identification and disallows the possibility of challenging its elements. It refers to the sphere of beliefs and commonly accepted values so it should be generally understandable and that there is no need to explain its sense.

The parabolic fiction does not contain the final meanings itself, but is subordinated a higher sense. A story appeals to some other – parallel, hidden – meaning, which can be discovered through thorough interpretation. This kind of fiction as-

²⁰ M. Głowiński, "Cztery typy fikcji narracyjnej", *Dzieło wobec odbiorcy. Szkice z komunikacji literackiej*, Kraków 1998, pp. 207–218.

sumes a great distance toward a dependent, undetailed story which without its context does not have a final sense. The plot is not necessarily guided by the category of probability; it directs the reader towards some different, possible understanding. This kind of fiction is focused on a wide range of conceivable interpretations. The parabolic text can be read on diverse levels, from a narrative whole to an allegory, and its understanding depends on the relationship between the reader and the text.²¹

The mimetic fiction assumes the existence of some common conviction of what is and what is not real. It expects the reader to accept as reality whatever is treated as reality within its framework but it allows many points of view and all kinds of distance: from complete identification to an ironic questioning.

The last type of fiction is the grotesque fiction – with an assumption that the reader recognizes its polemical nature towards conventional structures, beliefs, and values.

Medieval Icelandic *þættir* can be seen as examples of parabolic fiction, where the narrative structure of the text designs an implicit reader/listener and proposes possible interpretations. In my article I will not immerse myself in the genre problematic of those narratives²² but I will concentrate on manifestation of the parabolic fiction in *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka* and its implications.

The plot

The plot of the story can be located in the second half of the eleventh century, as both kings who appear in the tale are historical figures. The tale is probably written after 1190 – this is the year of the death of Þorsteinn Gyðusson, mentioned in the last words of the *þáttur*: “Fra þessom manni Avþvni var kominn Þorsteinn Gyðusson” – and as Guðni Jónsson concludes – the descendent must have been dead when the tale was written, otherwise the scribe would have used the form *er kominn*.²³

Auðun represents the poorer part of Icelandic society. He gains the gratitude of skipper Þórir – a man who can help him to leave Iceland and go to the continent. In the Viking Age it was a common custom that the sons of farmers in Iceland traveled to Europe to gain fame and experience, and explore the world – hence the frequently repeated in the sagas motif of departure – *útanferð*. In previous years, the journey to Norway was often combined with Viking raids. Young men could demonstrate, highly recognized at that time, courage and bravado and win valuable prizes. But the most important objectives of such an educational trip was to

²¹ D.P. Parris, “Imitating the Parables: Allegory, Narrative and the Role of Mimesis”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25.1 (2002), 33–53, p. 33.

²² See T. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*: Cambridge, Mass. 1967; J. Harris, “Genre and Narrative Structure in Some Íslendingaþættir” 44 (1972), pp. 1–27; L. Lönnroth, “The Concept of Genre in Saga Literature”, *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975), pp. 419–426; J. Harris, “Genre in the Saga Literature: A Squib”, *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975), pp. 427–436.

²³ *Íslensk fornrit VI. bindi*, foreword by G. Jónsson, p. CVI f., Reykjavík 1943.

establish contacts with relatives who remained in Norway, sometimes to receive a heritage, often to join the *hird* at a jarl or king's court.

Auðun goes abroad with Þórir and comes to Greenland where he buys a polar bear – a great treasure – which he intends to give to King Sveinn of Denmark. It is a precious, regal gift for which he paid with all his fortune²⁴:

Then they left for abroad and had a good journey and Auðunn stayed with skipper Þórir, who owned a farm in Mærr. The following summer they sailed for Greenland, and spent the next winter there.

Now it is said that Auðunn bought a bear in Greenland; it was of great value and Auðunn paid for it everything he had.²⁵

On his way south Auðun comes to a place where the stern and awesome King of Norway – Haraldr harðráði (Harald “hard-ruler”) is stationing. King Harald is curious about the foreigner who came with such a treasure and calls him to the court:

The King sent for him immediately; and when Auðunn stood before the King he greeted him well. The King returned his greeting and then asked: “Have you a bear of great value?” He answered saying that he had an animal with him. The King said: “Would you be willing to sell us the animal for the price that you paid for it?” He answered “No, sire, I would not”. “Would you like me to give twice the price?” said the King, “and indeed that would be fairer since you gave everything that you had for it”. “I would not, sire” he said. The King said “Will you give it to me then?” He answered “No, sire”. The King said “What do you want to do with it then?” He answered “Go to Denmark” he said “and give it to King Sveyn”.²⁶

The above-cited part is one of the most interesting in this tale: the dialogue between the powerful and cruel King Harald and the poor, unknown Icelander. The narrator successfully manages to gradually increase the tension: the king, hoping that the bear is meant for him, in turn offers the equivalent of the animal and, when Auðun refuses, twice its value. He is denied again, which certainly raised his curiosity, and, perhaps, respect for the courage of the man standing before him, as King Haraldr harðráði is accustomed to the fact that people fear him. Then he offers a solution: offering a bear as a gift to the king. In this way, the ruler would have to repay the gift with a gift, and since the bear cost Auðun all his fortune, the king would be obliged to reciprocate with an exceptionally generous gift. However, Auðun once again refuses. Asked by the ruler about his plans, the Icelander answers that the animal is intended for King Sveinn, the ruler of a country at war with Norway. Harald is confused about his decision:

Are you so foolish that you are unaware of the state of war between us and Denmark, or is it that you think your luck so great that you can manage to get there with your precious gift when others, who have more pressing business cannot make it unharmed?²⁷

²⁴ The similar motif can be found in the manuscript *Hungrvaka*: in the year 1055 the first bishop in Skálholt, Ísleifr Gizurarson gave a white bear to the German Emperor. The bear was described as *gørsimi mikil* – “great treasure”, exactly with the same words which are used in *Auðunar þáttur*. See Taylor, op. cit., p. 95.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 81. All excerpts from M version in translation of Arnold R. Taylor.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 82.

²⁷ Ibid.

But the Icelander is stubborn, he says: “Sir, it all lies in your power, but I cannot agree to anything except what I have formerly planned”.²⁸ The King lets Auðun go in peace but he asks him to come back to the Norwegian court before going home to Iceland, and recount his meeting with the King of Denmark.

Auðun goes south, but during the long journey to Denmark his small resources run out. Before he reaches King Sveinn of Denmark he must beg for food and shelter for himself and the bear. He meets the King’s steward, Áki. But Áki in return for some food and a roof over Auðun’s head wants to get half of the Icelander’s reward. When the King gets to know about his steward’s doings, he punishes him. Instead of half of the reward for the animal, he is sentenced to banishment for disloyalty to his master.

Auðun gains the friendship and gratitude of King Sveinn, who agrees to equip him for a pilgrimage to Rome. After coming back from the journey to Rome, Auðun gives up the honours offered to him by the Danish king, and decides to return to Iceland, where his poor mother waits for him. The King understands the noble desire to take care of one’s mother and lets Auðun go, but first he wants to show him his gratitude for the bear. Auðun receives a ship with a cargo, a leather pouch full of silver and a gold ring. The ring is a special gift, for the king says:

Do not give away the ring unless you think that you owe so much to some noble man – than give him the ring, for it in an honour for distinguished men to take gifts.²⁹

On his way home, Auðun visits King Harald as had been agreed. The King welcomes him and asks, inquisitively, what he had been given as a reward for the bear. Auðun responds succinctly and the King replies that some money for a pilgrimage and a ship with a cargo were not so remarkable a reward, and that he himself could have rewarded him in the same way. But he appreciates the honourable offer to be King Sveins’ cup-bearer and when Auðun tells him about the silver, which he received in case he lost the ship, Harold recognizes that it was “excellently done” and that he himself “would not have done” anything like that as he “should have thought [himself] quit” after giving him the ship. Then the King asks whether there were any other rewards and Auðun tells him about the ring.

In the end, Auðun gives the King the most precious gift: the gold ring he received from King Sveinn. He says:

And now I have found that man, for you had the chance of taking both from me, the bear and also my life, but you allowed me to go in peace where no one else could go.³⁰

After that, Auðun receives generous gifts in return and goes home to Island. He returns to his homeland endowed by both rulers, surrounded by respect and appreciation.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

The type of fiction in *Auðunar þáttur*

In *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka* I am going to examine the structure of the tale to see whether it is possible to trace any stylistic artifice that may have been used to give rise to the multiplicity of meanings. I will use the concept of parabolic fiction formulated by Michał Głowiński and the idea of “transfer signals” in parables formulated by Rüdiger Zymner:

Eine Parabel hat mindestens ein Transfersignal, das anzeigt, daß es sich bei dem Text um einen global uneigentlichen Text handelt, und eben dadurch dazu auffordert, eine andere, vom Wortlaut abweichende Textsemantik zu entwerfen, also eine ‘Richtungsänderung des Bedeutens’ vorzunehmen.³¹

The “Transfersignale“ in Zymner’s model can be explicit or implicit:

Explizite oder Implizite Transfersignale kennzeichnen den Erzähltext *ausdrücklich* als mehr sinnig und fordern dadurch dazu auf, im Rahmen des Bedeutungsspielraums des Erzähltextes eine oder mehrere (aber keineswegs fixierte) neu globale Kohärenzbeziehungen zwischen den Elementen der Erzählung herzustellen.³²

The formal structure, the plot structure, occurrence of symbols, and diverse “transfer signals” suggest that this medieval narrative can be considered on different planes.

The tale of Auðun is very well structured with a remarkable awareness of composition. The complex, chiasmic structure constitutes a skeleton for the whole story, based on the number three. It can be illustrated using a chart:

- 1 Travel from Iceland
 - 2 Encounter with king Harald
 - 3 Encounter with king Sveinn
 - X Pilgrimage to Rome
 - 3 Encounter with king Sveinn
 - 2 Encounter with king Harald
- 1 Travel to Iceland

The number three occurs in this tale in several places, which suggest the purposeful use: the main character’s journey was planned for three years and money for his mother’s living should last three years. There is a clear gradation in the dialogues between Auðun and the kings based on number three. Three stages of the journey out (Norway, Denmark, Rome) and three stages of the journey in. The Icelander receives three gifts from the Danish king. He meets also three kings – and here again we can observe a distinct three-step gradation of a king’s figure. This thread I discuss later on in my article.

³¹ R. Zymner, “Der Stein wan ein Opal...”: Eine versteckte Kunst-Apotheose in Lessings morgenländischer ‘Ringparabel’?” *Lessing Yearbook/Jahrbuch XXIV*, Michigan 1993, p. 78.

³² R. Zymner, *Uneigentlichkeit. Studien zu Semantik und Geschichte der Parabel*, Paderborn 1991, p. 100.

Although the plot is outwardly constructed to represent the historical outside reality – the historical figures, theoretically probable situations – it is quite easy to recognize that the mimetic function in this case is misleading. The narrator scrupulously avoids every opportunity to describe Iceland, Greenland, Norway and Denmark, and those countries are only mentioned in general terms as places for the events. The main story line – Auðun’s journey through the feuding countries, with a treasure – is rather implausible, having in mind the distance covered, and how many difficulties the main figure must overcome. The schematic plot and, at first sight, the uncomplicated characters, some well known motifs – e.g. evil steward who demands half of the reward for his help – or a mixture of Christian and pagan ethics, suggest already at the first reading that there are some other ways to understand the story.

The technique used for presenting the main characters, revealed by their own actions without any interference or comment from the author, is quite common in medieval Icelandic narratives, but in the case of the *Auðunar þáttir* it is maximized. Under the mantle of a brief description of the course of events, decorated with laconic dialogues, we have a sense of much more complicated emotions, undertones and implicit messages.

In my analysis I concentrate on various “transfer signals” which allow a further elucidation. I present some of the results of my investigation in a form of comprehensive and more in-depth interpretations.

Auðunar þáttir as an example of parabolic fiction

The parabolic fiction in *Auðunar þáttir* does not enforce one interpretation or one way of understanding the text; it does not either decide the type of subordination or kind of distance. The story is much more complicated and allows different approaches.

The presence of the parabolic fiction can be traced at several points, as was mentioned above: first I want to focus on one of the most evident transfer signals: the use of the number three, which implies further connotations. It is already visible in the structure of the tale and in several passages in the text. The number three already appears in the first paragraph of the story:

But before he went on board Auðunn laid aside the greater portion of his wealth for his mother, and it was reckoned sufficient to last for three winters.³³

Auðun’s trip was planned for three years. King Harald asks him thrice whether the bear is meant for him and what he wants in return. King Sven gives Auðun three generous gifts: a ship with a cargo, a leather pouch full of silver and a gold ring. The number three has a very special meaning. This symbol appears in all cultures as a holy number, it embodies an implication of an idea of universality. The world consists of three components – heaven, earth and underworld, and the

³³ A.R. Taylor, op. cit., p. 81.

number three unites the beginning, the middle and the end. Three is the number of the Trinity, a symbol of holiness, harmony and perfection.³⁴ Following this trace we can observe other Christian inspirations, such as a clear influence of Christian ethics coupled with the ethos of a proud and free inhabitant of Iceland. Among the traits given to the main character the most important are still honor and pride, but the violence of fathers is gradually supplanted by Christian charity and concern for the salvation of the soul. As King Sveinn concludes, when the emaciated, fatigued Auðun comes back to Denmark after the pilgrimage to Rome and ridiculed by King's retainers:

There is no need for you to laugh at him, for he has provided for his soul better than you.³⁵

In this story the Christian ethics are intertwined with the rights contained in the second poem of *Poetic Edda – Hávamál – The Ballad of the High One*³⁶ where the highest god in the pagan mythology utters words of wisdom:

*40. None so free with gifts | or food have I found
That gladly he took not a gift,
Nor one who so widely | scattered his wealth
That of recompense hatred he had.*

*41. Friends shall gladden each other | with arms and garments,
As each for himself can see;
Gift-givers' friendships | are longest found,
If fair their fates may be.*

*42. To his friend a man | a friend shall prove,
And gifts with gifts requite;
But men shall mocking | with mockery answer,
And fraud with falsehood meet.*

The Norwegian King Harald symbolizes this ancient law, which is clearly visible in both of his audiences with Auðun. He concentrates on gift-exchange and estimates value of his enemy based on the value of the presents given to the Icelander. The heathen principle is combined with the Christian idea of mutual gifts even through the visible evolution of the main hero towards Christianity. By accepting a gift, we conclude an alliance and renounce hostilities. Giving gifts means goodwill and nobility. Giving gifts to the poor is also a kind of mutual gift: the donor can expect something in exchange either from the poor person, who may in the future have a chance for requital, or from God himself.³⁷ Auðun gives King Sveinn everything he possesses. In exchange he gets a possibility to "provide for his soul". After Auðun's return to Denmark, the King bestows on him

³⁴ M. Lurker, *Słownik obrazów i symboli biblijnych*, transl. K. Romaniuk, Poznań: Pallotinum, 1989, p. 252f.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³⁶ Transl. Henry Adams Bellows, 1936.

³⁷ *Słownik teologii biblijnej*, ed. X. L. Dufour, transl. K. Romaniuk, Poznań: Pallotinum, 1990, p. 199ff.

honours and splendid rewards. The increase in the value of the gifts can suggest that at the end of this exchange awaits the most valuable prize – heavenly prize.

A new Christian era becomes visible in the motif of Auðun's pilgrimage. In *Auðunar þáttir* we can observe a modification of the *útanferð* motif: fame and fortune are more a side-effect of his adventures, in the foreground Christian qualities stand out. When, on the way back, Auðun falls ill and loses the rest of the money that he received from the King and emaciated and weak, returns to Denmark along with other beggars, the King recognizes and rewards him. The greater his humiliation, the greater the prize that awaits him. The motif of illness, poverty and the beggar's stick, and then rewarding the hero with the highest honor at the royal court, may illustrate the message of the Sermon on the Mount: the pilgrimage to the See of Peter and the subsequent sufferings, disease, poverty and humiliation of a beggar, predispose him to receive rewards at the royal court, which symbolizes heaven.

Christian influence can be traced also in the construction of the characters in the story. Maybe clearest and most evident is the contrast between King Sveinn and his steward Áki. The evil character of Áki is emphasized by his behavior:

And when he [Auðun] arrived there [to Denmark] he had used up every penny of his money, and was forced to beg food both for himself and the animal. He visited King Sweyn's steward, who was called Áki, and asked him for victuals for both himself and his bear, and said: "I am going to give the animal to King Sweyn." Áki offered to sell him victuals if he wished. Auðun told him that he had no money to pay for them "though" he said, "I should very much like to be able to make the King a present of the bear." "I will give you all the food and lodging that you require until you meet the King, but in return I want a half share in the animal. Think of it this way, that otherwise the animal would die on your hands – for you need a lot of provisions and your money is all spent – and then you can expect to get nothing out of your bear".³⁸

The steward Áki is an embodiment of two deadly sins: envy and greed, and could be an illustration of one of the taunting woes in the book of the prophet Habakkuk: "Disaster to anyone who amasses goods not his (for how long?) and to anyone who weighs himself down with goods taken in pledge!"³⁹ His greed and lust for privileges is contrasted with the just and noble King of Denmark.

King Sveinn's outrage because of Áki's behavior is reinforced by Auðun's account about the circumstances of Harald's decision⁴⁰:

And did you think, after I had made a great man of you, that it was the right thing to do, to place difficulties and hindrances in the way when some was trying to present me with valuables for which he had given all that he possessed? And even King Harold, who is our enemy, thought fit to let him go in peace.⁴¹

³⁸ A.R. Taylor, op. cit., p. 82f.

³⁹ New Jerusalem Bible, Habakkuk 2:6.

⁴⁰ In the F version the scene of the talk with Sveinn is extended – the hero recounts: *I had intended to present you this bear that I bought with everything I had. I met King Harald and he gave me permission to travel as I wished, even though he failed in his attempt to buy it from me.* (All excerpts from F version in translation of William Ian Miller.)

⁴¹ A.R. Taylor, op. cit., p. 83.

He shows, however, his magnanimity – he states that the steward's offence should be punished with death, but he decides to show him mercy and only banishes the disloyal servant. Another of the King's traits in this *þáttir* is his willingness to support Christian pilgrims and his piety. He is twice shown in his way to and from the church. The King of Denmark is presented as a *rex justus*, generous, merciful and just, God's representative on earth, but the character lacks the psychological depth and rather represents a type of monarch than a portrayal of a real king.

Áki is banished, Auðun rewarded with both spiritual and material goods. In this meaning *Auðunar þáttir*'s function is didactic – to spread the moral: Christian values do pay. But to reduce this masterpiece of narrative art to a simple didactic story would be to deprive it of much of its attractiveness.

* * *

As mentioned above, the representations of the outside reality ostensibly encourages one to read the story as a mimetic fiction. Ostensibly – because the composition of this tale, its narrative structure and the presence of some transfer signals, which suggest complexity, lead to a wider range of interpretations.

In the *konungasögur* – the king sagas – Harald is presented primarily as the opposite of Magnus the Good, the holy King Olav's son. He is depicted as a violent and fiery man. John Douglas Shafer noted, that the picture of King Harald in *Morkinskinna* emphasizes his greediness. We can observe it in another *þáttir* – *Brands þáttir örva*, which is located just two chapters after *Auðunar þáttir* in the *Morkinskinna*, where the King demands from his guest all his belongings. Shafer states: "Haraldr's excessive concern in comparing the generosity of his and the Danish king Sveinn's gifts in *Auðunar þáttir* (...) may also relate to Haraldr's avaricious portrayal".⁴² In the case of Sveinn, because of his dealings with the heathen Slavs, and because he fought against the holy king's son, Magnus, he also appears in an unfavorable light in the king sagas.

The story of Auðun gives a quite different picture of those two monarchs. King Harald, in other depictions violent and greedy, is presented here as noble, human and able to recognize "the inherent nobility of the man".⁴³ The same applies to King Svein – a *rex justus*, generous, merciful and just, God's representative on earth. Let us trace how those characters are presented in the tale of Auðun. First we meet King Harald who, in an indirect way, reveals his qualities in the discourse with the Icelander. What we see is a confrontation of two men – a powerful, greedy king and an insignificant stranger who possesses a great treasure, and who acts as an equal. The treasure constitutes the Icelander's value and strength. Without any comment or description, with just a taciturn, concentrated to the maximum dialogue, the narrative becomes a scene intensely loaded with emotions. The meeting between those two could possibly end in two ways and, hence, the increasing suspense: either the king could appreciate the Icelander's pride and

⁴² J.D. Shafer, *Saga-Accounts of Norse Far-Travellers*, Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD, University of Durham, Department of English Studies, 2009, s. 100.

⁴³ A.R. Taylor, op. cit., p. 89.

courage and his obstinacy and let him go or he could be angry and deprive him of both the bear and his life. Auðun is risking the king's wrath, but at the same time there is a possibility that the king would be curious to see how his opponent – King Sveinn – is going to reward this Icelander for such a valuable gift. Apart from a humorous element in this situation, one may notice that this passage reveals the pride of the Icelander – here a typical saga-hero – who is not subject to any king but a free man who answers the ruler with respect, but does not intend to depart from his original plan.

The element of rivalry between the two kings manifests itself most clearly in three dialogues: the first, the opening audience with King Harald, then the first meeting with King Sveinn, where he points out that permission given to Auðun by Harald multiplies the value of the gift, and in one of the climactic points of the story – the final conversation between Harald and Auðun, where the king admits his defeat in the competition, which raises him even higher on the throne of nobility than before.⁴⁴ Nobility as a royal virtue could be thus named as one of the main subjects of this interpretation.

King Sveinn is closest to the concept of ideal king. In the scenes at the Danish court, he is recognized as a man of honor. The Christian values and piety of King Sveinn are emphasized by his willingness to help pilgrims in their undertakings.

As I already mentioned above, there are actually three kings in the story. Gradation of leading qualities points the third, implicated king. The first, most human and most pagan, is King Harald. In his behavior, although noble and just, we can trace the heathen moral: *gifts with gifts requite* as it is told in the *Hávamál*. The second is King Sveinn – *rex justus*, supporting Christians. The third, although not mentioned with his name, is God symbolized by the See of Peter – Rome – the last stage of Auðun's pilgrimage. The treasure, which Auðun takes with him is his soul.

As we can see, the kings in this story have little to do with the historical figures. The names and places are components of the presented world, which place the story in historical reality. At the same time, treated as a model-situation, they put the story in widely understood contemporaneity in order to create a parabolic tale about an ideal king. A King meant as an embodiment of qualities, such as justice, nobility, wisdom, piety, generosity and honesty, a resultant of the values and virtues of the kings depicted in the story. The *rex justus*, who can recognize a noble man among beggars and poor foreigners, the righteous judge, who rewards good and punishes evil, who acts according to the code of honor. This set of the possible meanings of the story of Auðun uses the plot as just a pretext for portraying an ideal king. The location of the story in the middle of the Harald's saga, its dependence and schematic composition support this interpretation.

* * *

There are, thus, two treasures. The first gift – the polar bear – is symbolizing the barbarian culture, and the second – Auðun's soul – is symbolizing the Christian

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 89.

era. The treasure – regardless of whether it is spiritual or material – constitutes the Icelander's value. He acts as an equal to a king when he meets Harald for the first time, aware of the value of his treasure. During the second encounter, after the pilgrimage to Rome and – what we can suppose – conversion to Christianity – he shows yet more nobility and self-esteem.

King Sveinn serves as a intermediary between paganism and Christianity. Auðun gives him his greatest treasure and, in fact, everything he possess and in exchange he gets a possibility to take care of his soul – the journey to the third “court“, an allegory of God. The way back symbolizes the process of recognition of the new values and realization of one's virtues. The initial humiliation of Auðun – he comes back from Rome with beggars, baldheaded and “down-and-out” and ridiculed – can bring to mind the primary unwillingness of the Northmen to give up the old, proud and warlike pagan gods in favour of a weak God who accepted a painful and dishonoring death. But for Auðun, after humiliation comes an almost heavenly reward – riches and honors. The hero – and all new Christians – must learn his new worth and importance and regain his pride. When he comes back to Norway, he is treated as an equal by the king, and then when he goes back to Iceland – it is in aura of fame and glory.

Auðunar þáttur can be, therefore, read both as a representation of the conversion process in micro- and macro scale and as a conception of an ideal king shown in parabolic form.

* * *

The main character of the *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka* is, perhaps, most difficult to interpret. It is quite obvious that he is not a “simple, honest fellow”, as Taylor suggests⁴⁵ in his analysis of this story, although the character construction is schematic and without psychological depth. His complexity consist of the ambiguous meanings which he brings in to the story.

How could it be that Auðun – an insignificant, poor person from the countryside – became a rich man of the world, friend of kings who fought with each other, but who favored him and generously presented him with gifts? He managed to become a subject of competition in generosity between two powerful rulers. He accumulates all the characteristics of a positive saga hero: he is brave, risks a lot by putting at stake both his life and fortune, however, he is lucky. The statement about his luck is a recurrent refrain in this story. He strives to reach his goal, and when something is in his way, he manages to turn the difficult situation into his favor.

If we ignore the shallow layer and think of other possible interpretations, we can reach quite surprising conclusions. There are some passages, some transfer signals, which induce the reader to search other meanings.

Auðun's choices seem sometimes odd. He is not trying to avoid dangerous encounters and he seems to act as if he was able to predict the reactions of his op-

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 88.

ponents. He is a “lucky-one”, who manages to do what others could not. Already those things support the idea of the non-realistic and implausible character of his undertakings and weaken the mimetic interpretation.

The most significant thread in *Auðunar þáttir* is the travel pattern. *Auðun*’s travel starts in Iceland, where he is leaving his mother, and begins as a typical *útanferð*. The journey continues through the royal courtes, and reaches its climax in Rome. The whole *útanferð* motif can be understood as an allegory of pilgrimage and in result as evolution of the inner man. From the poverty of Iceland, through a fortuitous encounter with King Harald, and then the meeting with the noble and just King Sveinn who equips him for the journey to Rome, the character of Auðun is quite stable. Proud, stubborn and honest, suddenly he goes through a metamorphosis. He “dare not let himself be seen and hid in the corner of the church“, he “fells at the feet of the King”.⁴⁶ He changes – as King Sveinn says: “You have greatly changed (...) since we last met”.⁴⁷ The humility, servitude and acknowledgment of one’s own vanity – qualities so desirable in the Middle Ages – replace the old saga-hero’s features. This image can also symbolize the process of conversion of Nordic countries.

There are some other possible, but sometimes conflicting, interpretations of this character: one conceivable interpretation could be that he is not significant for the story and his function can be reduced to an axis of the plot, an “event causer”, or maybe that he is an allegory of a harbinger, bringing enlightenment to Nordic countries. Between those two ways of understanding this figure fit many other interpretations such as that Auðun as an instrument of communication for both kings, aware of this fact or not, a bearer of hidden messages. On the one hand he carries implicit information from one ruler to another; on the other hand he is an apostle who brings new, Christian values to the North.

Nevertheless, this figure – simple and schematic in construction – through the transfer signals is elevated on the dimension of various interpretations. There are numerous possible readings inscribed in text but – which is in accordance with Głowiński’s idea of parabolic fiction – none of them is ultimate or foregone.

Conclusion

The idea of parabolic fiction applied on the medieval short narrative about Auðun from West Fjords opens multiple possibilities for the reading of this famous Old-Norse text. The parabolisation is accomplished by reduction and moderation. The story is not self-sufficient, it indicates a need of further interpretation. It is schematic and the question of probability is not so important here – the slightly implausible events induce the reader to other than mimetic reading of the story, whereas putting it in the historical context ensures a serious reception. It suggests that it is not just a tale for entertainment, but that there is a deeper meaning which

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 84.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

must be uncovered. The narrative structure implies distance by lack of details, recurring statements, folk-tale motifs, composition based on the number three. There is no ultimate meaning – the narrative implies a huge number of meanings from micro- to macro scale. At the same time it does not prejudge the type of subordination to a higher sense, or the type of distance.

There are several “transfer signals” which do not allow focus on the outer layer of the story, and which suggest the existence of parabolic fiction. They direct the reader’s attention to other spheres of possible interpretations, opening the tale for more universal senses.

The proposed interpretations do not deplete the subject. However they show the utility of the idea of parabolic fiction, which can be even applied on other medieval narratives.

Streszczenie

Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka jako fikcja paraboliczna

Średniowieczna opowieść o Auðunie z Zachodnich Fiordów to przykład staronordyckiego opowiadania z grupy *þættir*. Jest historią ubogiego Islandczyka, który wyrusza w podróż, w wyniku której zdobywa sławę i bogactwo. Kompozycja utworu jest skoncentrowana wokół podróży i spotkań bohatera z królami Norwegii i Danii, a motywem przewodnim jest pragnienie przekazania kosztownego daru jednemu z nich. Struktura narracyjna zbliża to opowiadanie do fikcji parabolicznej w rozumieniu Michała Głowińskiego, otwierając możliwości interpretacji. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiam je w nowej, komunikacyjnej perspektywie, prezentując ten utwór jako przykład szczególnego rodzaju fikcji narracyjnej.