

THE LANGUAGE OF INTERLACE  
Notes on Composition in Saga and Romance

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There are found throughout saga literature a number of transitional or reorienting phrases which serve to suspend and retrieve lines of the story:

- 1) Nú skal þar til taka, sem fyrr var frá horfit.  
Oldest Saga (fragment 3)<sup>1</sup>
- 2) Sverris saga:  
Nu munum ver segia noccura parta þa er gerðuz i fundi þeira .ii. konunga, er nu hefir aðr verit noccut af sagt verþr nu þar til at taca, er aðr var fra horfit. at Birkibeinar reru ut fra landi...  
AM 427 4<sup>2</sup>  
Nv er at segia nokcura atburði þa er gerðuz i fundi þessa .ij. konunga. er þar til at taka at Berkibeinar reyru vt...  
Eirspennill
- 3) Trójumanna saga:<sup>4</sup>  
Nu er at segia fra Priamo konungi at hann sendi... 0  
J odrum stad er fra ad segia ad Priamus konungr senndi... S  
En i oðrum stað sendi Priamvs konvngr...  
Hauksbók
- 4) Nu er þar til sogo at taca er fyr var fra horfit. er þeir finnaz i Danmorc...  
Morkinskinna<sup>5</sup>
- 5) Nú ferr tvennum sögum fram, ok skal þar nú til taka, sem frá var horfit, er frá því var sagt, er Óláfr Haraldsson hafði frið gørt...  
Óláfs saga helga, Hkr<sup>6</sup>
- 6) Nú er at segja frá Þormóði, hvat hann hafðisk at, meðan Þorgeirr var í fõrum.  
Fóstbrœðra saga, ch. 9
- 7) Nú munu vér hvílask láta fyrst frásögn Þormóðar Kolbrúnarskálds ok segja nõkkut af Þorgeiri. (Ch 11) Nú er at segja frá Þorgeiri... (Fóstbrœðra saga, ch. 11)
- 8) Hermundr hét sonr hans Eyvindar ok Hrómundr inn halti, er síðar var getit. (Ch. 24) Látum þar nú fyrst liða um, en segjum nõkkut frá Hrolleifi... Vatnsdæla saga, ch. 23

- 9) Nú er fyrst frá horfit. (Ch. 28) Nú er þar til máls at taka um vórit, at Þorkr ferr til Þorskafjarðarþings... Gísla saga
- 10) Nú munu vér fyrst láta dveljask söguna of hrið ok segja heldr nakkvat frá þeim jarteignum háleitum...Orkneyinga saga, ch. 56
- 11) Nú víkr sögunni vestr til Breiðafjarðardala...Njáls saga, ch. 1.
- 12) Nú er þar til máls at taka, at þeir Grímr ok Helgi Njálssynir fóru af Íslandi þat sumar, sem þeir Þráinn fóru útan, ok váru á skipi með þeim Óláfi elðu Ketilssyni ok Bárði.  
Njáls saga, ch. 83
- 13) Þar er nú til at taka, er áðr var frá horfit, at Þorbjörn óxnamegin spurði víg Þorbjarnar ferðalangs, sem fyrr var sagt...  
Grettis saga, ch. 42
- 14) Víkr nú aftr sögunni þangat, er fyrr var frá horfit, því at eigi verðr af tveimr hlutum sagt í senn, þótt báðir hafi jafnfram orðit. (Ch. 24) Nú er frá því at segja, at þau fóru ór Garðaríki...  
Göngu-Hrólfs saga, ch. 24 "

Because of their formulaic nature and their evocation of a storyteller in action, such phrases tend to be ascribed automatically to oral tradition. Closer inspection, however, produces some facts which argue against that assumption, at least in unmodified form: 1) the extant texts give evidence not of an unaltered tradition taken over from oral prototypes, but of a distinct literary development in the use of such phrases; 2) the compositional form such phrases presuppose is itself generally held to be sophisticated or artificial, not oral; and 3) there are in romance tradition equivalent formulas, the rhetorical context and literary evolution of which offer a model against which to measure Norse practice. The object of this essay, then, is to trace, to the extent the documents permit, the parallel evolution of these formulas, first in the sagas, then in French romance tradition. Three roughly chronological stages can be distinguished:

on the Norse side, 1) the pre-classical texts in the historical (king's saga) tradition; 2) the Icelandic family sagas; and 3) the encyclopedic phenomenon represented in the Greatest Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason and Flateyjarbók; and on the French side, 1) the verse romances, particularly those of Chrétien de Troyes; 2) the prose romances, particularly those of the Vulgate Cycle; and 3) the encyclopedic phenomenon represented in Les Prophécies de Merlin. Since the study of transitional phrases is in effect a study of composition, the comparison raises larger questions about the exact relation of the sagas to romance tradition and to medieval narrative in general.

The main body of Flateyjarbók<sup>8</sup> consists of the adjacent biographies of the two Óláfrs, into which have been inserted numerous semi-independent tales. As the preface explains:

...þar næst fra Olaafi konungi Tryggua syni meðr  
ollum sinum þaattum. þui næst er saga Olafs  
konungs hins helga Haralldz sunar með ollum sinum  
þaattum ok þar meðr sögur Orkneyia jarla...

The "þáttir" here come in two forms: wholesale (in single units) and piecemeal (subdivided and interspersed in the longer narrative). To the former group belong Nornagests þáttir, Sqrla þáttir, Rauðúlfs þáttir, etc. To the latter group belong the histories of the skald Hallfreðr (told in seven segments), Kjartan Ólafsson (five segments), the Jómsvikings (two segments), Stefnir Þorgilsson (three segments), the Vinland voyages (two segments), and the political histories of the Faroes and the Orkneys (five and four segments respectively). The fact that the preface does not differentiate between these types of insertion is of some interest, for it suggests that the two were equated in the contempo-

rary mind and, moreover, that as expansion procedures they were sufficiently familiar to require no further explanation. The verbal connectives are, in both cases, transitional formulas. Particularly telling is the case of Hallfreðar saga, which exists in an integral version (preserved in Möðruvallabók) derived from the same original. A comparison of the fourteen narrative seams of the version intercalated in seven parts into the Greatest Saga (O) with the corresponding passages in M gives an insight into the mechanics of plot-braiding:

M

Þat sumar fór Hallfreðr til Svíþjóðar ok kom á fund konungs ok kvaddi hann.  
(Ch. 9)

Ok um várit, er hann fór norðr, þá rak á fyrir þeim hrið. (Ch. 10)

O

Nv er þar til at taka er Hallfreýðr vandræða skalld var austr æ Gautlandi .ij. uetr. ok hafði gengit at eiga heiðna konu. hann fór æ fund Olafs Suía konungs ok flutti honum drapu er hann hafði ort vm hann.<sup>9</sup> (Ch. 219)

Nv skal þar til taka sem fyrr var fra horfit at Hallfreðr vandræða skalld sigldi ut til Islandz vm svmarit aðr en barðagiN varð æ Ormínum. kom Hallfreðr vt fyrir norþan land ok reið suðr vm heiði sem aðr er sagt. (Ch. 264)

It is clear that the O formulas are not original but are generated by the interspersing process. The most artificial of compositional procedures, in other words, is effected by the most standard of verbal clichés. What Phase 3 documents, therefore, is the practical mechanics of narrative stranding in conjunction with the larger esthetic of copiousness and discontinuity.

It is useful to see the Flateyjarbók phenomenon not as a thing apart from classical saga composition (Phase 2), but as its logical extension: the exaggerated and mechanical realization of

a story not as a single, progressive line, but as a number of lines or threads which the narrator plays out alternately either at shorter intervals (e.g., in ambush passages) or longer ones (e.g., when major characters part ways). The former, the shifting of focus between the colliding parties before a climax, is a familiar feature and requires no further explanation;<sup>10</sup> the intervals are sufficiently short that transitional formulas per se are optional. As an example of the latter, chs. 75-89 of Njáls saga may be cited, where no fewer than five parallel stories are charted for a three-year period. The passage begins with the departure from Iceland of Þráinn (strand 1), Grímr and Helgi (strand 2), the decision of Gunnarr to stay (strand 3), the departure of Kolskeggr (4), and the arrival of Kolbeinn, whose story eventually merges with that of Hrappr (strand 5). It ends with the rearrival in Iceland of four of these men (Þráinn, Hrappr, Grímr, and Helgi) plus a fifth, Kári Sölmundarson, who will eventually move to the saga's center stage. These strands are developed in the following order:

- 1: Þráinn leaves.
- 2: Grímr and Helgi leave.
- 3: Gunnarr decides to stay.
- 4: Kolskeggr leaves
- 3: Gunnarr spends an uneventful winter and declines a spring invitation from Óláfr pá. At the Alþing, plans are laid for his attack, and he is killed in the autumn. His revenant puts in an appearance. Skarpheðinn and Hogni slay Tjörvi in revenge. Njáll negotiates a settlement.
- 4: Kolskeggr arrives in Norway and winters with Hákon. He kills Kolr. He accompanies Hákon to Sweden, spends the following winter with him, hears of Gunnarr's death in the spring, and delays his return to Iceland on that account.

- 2: Grímr and Helgi are caught in a storm at sea. They fight with vikings, and engage in a later battle in Scotland. They stay the winter, spring, and part of the summer in the Orkneys. They go raiding with Kári the following summer. They spend a second winter in the Orkneys and leave for Norway in the spring.
- 5: Kolbeinn, having arrived in Iceland, stays the winter in Breiðdalr. He takes Hrappr to Norway the following summer. Hrappr is outlawed after the Guðrún episode.
- 2: Grímr and Helgi arrive in Norway and begin trading.
- 1: Þráinn prepares for his return to Iceland.
- 5: Hrappr burns the temple and tries to arrange passage to Iceland.
- 1+5: Þráinn takes Hrappr aboard. The two of them escape and live on Þráinn's farm.
- 2: Grímr and Helgi flee Norway with Hákon in pursuit. They stay with Eiríkr, sail to the Orkneys, winter with Sigurðr, go raiding in the spring, and return with Kári to Iceland in the summer.

These strands stand in the same relation to Njáls saga as the component "battir" do to Flateyjarbók. They comprise substories which, however miniature, trace whole plots and are temporally complete (every season is accounted for in each of the five stories). They are incorporated both wholesale and piecemeal: Gunnarr's and Kolskeggr's stories are related consecutively, but the other three are broken apart and interbraided in such a way as to bring out certain contrivances of destiny--the three-plot convergence in Norway in the summer of the second year, for example, or the synchronic idea that while Gunnarr is being attacked in his house, Hrappr is in Norway involved in a liaison with Guðrún, Þráinn is in Sweden, Kolskeggr is in Russia, and Grímr and Helgi are raiding off the Orkney coast.

If this passage is a somewhat elaborate example of narrative

stranding during the classical period, it is by no means an unrepresentative one. There is some variation, but on the whole one is struck less by the differences than by the persistence of the practice in certain standard forms over the full range of texts: short as well as long (Þorsteins saga hvíta, Njáls saga), biography as well as district chronicle (Grettis saga, Eyrbyggja saga), and early as well as late (Heiðarvíga saga, Víglundar saga). The formulas in these sagas are frequent and for the most part functional and impersonal (see examples 5, 6, 9, 11, 12, and 13). Such first-person formulas as exist (see examples 7, 8, and 10) tend to be in earlier sagas or in earlier manuscripts of the same saga--a fact which suggests that the epic-dramatic stance is an acquired habit and not a venerable feature of the tradition.<sup>11</sup>

No such claim for uniformity can be made for those pre-classical vernacular works in the historical tradition which comprise Phase 1. Ágrip, Íslendingabók, and Landnámabók all lack transitional formulas per se (although they make use of the related cross-referencing phrases er fyrr var getit, sem áður er ritat, sem enn mun sagt verða, etc.). Hryggjarstykki may be ascertained (on the evidence of Fagrskinna, Morkinskinna, and Heimskringla) to have been two-ply in parts, but without clear transitional formulas.<sup>12</sup> Fagrskinna in general lacks such phrases (despite a tendency toward stranded composition). The more clearly stranded Morkinskinna, on the other hand, contains several striking examples of suspension and retrieval phrases (see ex. 4). The Legendary Saga is for the most part single-ply, but on those occasions when the narrative divides (e.g., between the king and

Dala-Guðbrandr in chs. 34-36) there are found phrases of the type Frá því er nú at segja. Parts of Sverris saga exhibit stranding patterns and language to a remarkable degree; example 2 indicates the regular tendency of Eirspennill to have impersonal formulations where AM 427 4° has personal ones.<sup>13</sup> The "articles" attributed to Styrmir (preserved in Flateyjarbók) give no evidence of multi-ply composition or transitional formulas, although the reconstruction of his saga suggests ample use of both (the famous example 5 may have originated in Styrmir's version of the Óláfr biography).<sup>14</sup>

Of particular interest are Oddr Snorrason's and Gunnlaugr Leifsson's biographies of Óláfr Tryggvason, written originally in Latin but surviving only in translations (and even then, in Gunnlaugr's case, in the form of piecemeal inserts in the Greatest Saga and Flateyjarbók). Oddr's saga<sup>15</sup> can be assumed with some degree of certainty to have consisted of a combination of single-ply and multi-ply narration, depending on whether the focus is on the king himself or on the political matrix. But the MSS differ somewhat on the use of formulas. At some junctures the correspondence is word for word, but the general rule seems to be that the longest and oldest version contains more and longer formulas and uses the first person where later versions prefer impersonal constructions (thus þat vilíom ver oc rita in A becomes þat er sagt in S).<sup>16</sup>

Gunnlaugr's version of the Óláfr biography<sup>17</sup> appears--to the extent it can be ascertained at all--to be both more complete and more systematic than Oddr's version in its pursuit of multiple parallel lines. Contained in the passages of Greatest Saga



ascribed to Gunnlaugr are such phrases as:

Nv er þar til at taka er þeir Olafur konungr ok Þang-  
brandr skildu með vinattu sem fyrr er ritat... ch. 81

Nv er þar til at taka sem fyrr var fra horffit at  
Olafur konungr Trygva son hafði uerit .ii. uetr  
í Noregi... ch. 188

Also attributed to Gunnlaugr is the following comment:

Nv þo at margar ræður ok fra sagnir se skrifadar  
í þessu mali. þar er eigi þickia miök til heyra sögu  
Olafs konungs Trygva sonar þa þarf þat eigi at vndraz.  
þviat sua sem rennandi vötn fliota af ymissvm vpp  
sprettum. ok koma oll j einn stað niðr. til þeirar  
sömu líkingar hafa þessar fra sagnir af ymisligv vpp  
hafi eitt endimark at ryðia til at burða sem Olafur  
konungr verdr við staddir eðr menn hans. sva sem enn  
man synaz í því er eptir fer. ch.177

This defense of multiplicity is of considerable interest, for although its immediate referent in this context is the Greatest Saga (or Flateyjarbók), its original referent--assuming that it is correctly attributed to Gunnlaugr--is Gunnlaugr's own Latin version of Óláfr's biography. This is not to say that Gunnlaugr meant by the "network of streams" metaphor what the encyclopedists chose for it to mean, but we may judge from its tone and from the fact of its inclusion that it indicates a procedure more copious than was considered customary by the esthetic standards of the late twelfth century.

The problems of transmission and attribution in these early texts are such that the work of the author is hard to separate from the work of later copyists. But it is reasonable to suppose in this case that the transitional formulas are as old as the sort of composition they facilitate, for they are punctuation marks without which the story would be all but incomprehensible. Their outer form may have undergone mutation, but their existence would

seem to be guaranteed at an early stage by their compositional function. It is furthermore unlikely on the face of it that such formulas sprang into prolific and fully functional existence in classical saga narrative without some prehistory in the pre-classical period (nor is it likely that every such formula in the early texts is a scribal flourish). If we therefore assume for the moment that our picture of the verbal apparatus in this period is a roughly true one, we observe 1) that the transitional formulas are fewer in number and less varied in kind than in the classical texts; 2) that their appearance is sporadic--they are used fluently in some texts but not at all in others; 3) that they appear to exist in texts translated from Latin; and 4) that first-person examples comprise a substantial minority. In other words, the regular and patterned use of impersonal transitional formulas we take for granted in classical saga prose is not reflected in the early period. The impression is one of a practice in its formative stages and, moreover, one with bookish, not oral, origins. If such verbal tags as svá er sagt are in fact oral remnants, they amount in this context to a kind of camouflage, for the longer formulas in which they are contained are the concomitants of a specifically literary form of composition which itself appears to have been in the process of evolution in the pre-classical period.

The Latin prototype is that figure which Quintilian labelled an aphodos--a phrase by which an excursus or digression is joined to the main topic ("longius evectus sum, sed redeo ad propositum").<sup>18</sup> Aphodoi appear frequently in medieval Latin

historical writings. In Jordanes' Getica,<sup>19</sup> for example, chapters are regularly concluded and begun with such phrases as these:

Et quia de eius continuatione pauca libabimus, ad Amazonas, unde diuertimus, redeamus. (VII)

Now that we have devoted a few words to describing its extent, let us return to the subject of the Amazons from which we have digressed.

Nunc autem ad id, unde digressum fecimus, redeamus doceamusque, quomodo ordo gentis, unde agimus, cursus sui metam explevit. (XIV)

But let us now return to the point whence we made our digression and tell how the stock of this people of whom I speak reached the end of its course.

Ceterum causa exegit, ad id, unde digressimus, ordine redeamus. (XV)

But our subject requires us to return in due order to the point whence we digressed.

Ad propositum vero, unde nos digressimus, iubante domino redeamus. (XII)

But let us now with the Lord's help return to the subject from which we have digressed.

Adam of Bremen<sup>20</sup> employs the figure in a more general way to link and synchronize component parts of the same story:

Nunc ad cetera, unde incepimus, regrediamur. (I:17)

Now let us return to the other matters with which we began.

De cuius fortitudine vel potentia, quam super barbaros habuit, postea dicemus. Et haec quidem forinsecus dum varia sorte gesta sunt, in Bremis status rerum labefactari cepit. (II:79-80)

Of his valor and the power he had over the barbarians we shall speak presently. While, indeed, these things were with varying fortunes taking place abroad, the state of affairs in Bremen began to slip.

Nunc per hystoriae ordinem redeamus ad ecclesiae legationem... (II:50)

Now let us return in the order of our history to the mission of the Church...

Aphodoi are well represented in both senses (to link digressions proper to the propositum and to coordinate component parts) in Scandinavian sources as well. From the Historia Norwegiae<sup>21</sup> (for which Adam of Bremen's history stood as one source) come

several phrases of the type Revertentes a maritimis transferamur ad montana (But let us leave the coastal regions and turn to the mountains). From the Latin of Theodoricus,<sup>22</sup> who professes acquaintance with Jordanes' work, come many aphodoi of the type Sed revertamur (regrediamur, persequamur, etc.) ad nostra (in Norwagiam, etc.) as well as such phrases as

Sed quia longum est singulis  
immorari, transeamus ad  
caetera. (XXIV)

But since it is time-consuming  
to linger over individual  
items, let us shift to other  
matters.

From the De Profectione Danorum in Hierosolyman.<sup>23</sup>

Nunc autem ad ea, que in Dacia  
super hoc lachrymabili negotio  
gesta nouimus, uertamus  
articulum. (III)

But now let us turn the "arti-  
cle" (portion of the narrative)  
to those matters that we know  
transpired in Denmark concern-  
ing these lamentable dealings.

...sed ad narranda, que  
restant, reuocetur oratio. (VI)

...let the discourse return  
to those things which remain  
to be narrated.

Vt enim ea, que narrare gestio,  
luculentiori stilo ualeam  
indagare, superiori reincipiendum  
est exordio. (XIII)

So that I may be able to explore  
more clearly those matters I  
desire to relate, it is neces-  
sary to return to my previous  
point of departure.

Ad illos iterum reuertamur,  
quorum mentionem supra factam  
lector inueniet. (XXII)

Let us turn back to those people  
of whom the reader will find  
mention above.

The First Grammarian surely had some such Latin phrase in mind  
when he wrote:

Nú lýk ek hér umræðu raddar-  
stafanna, en ek leita viðr, ef  
guð lofar, at ræða nökkut um  
samhljóðendr.

Here I close my consideration  
of the vowels, and, God willing,  
I shall try to say something  
about the consonants.<sup>24</sup>

The correspondence between such Latin phrases as Nunc ad cetera, unde incepimus, regrediamur or sed ad narranda, que restant, reuocetur oratio and such Norse phrases as Nú er þar til at taka, er áðr var frá horfit is likewise such that we may consider the saga formulas to be vernacular aphodoi--characteristically depersonalized, and of the sort used to join parts of the same story.

If this use of aphodos seems to stretch its classical definition as a figure used to terminate a digression and return to the propositum, it should be recalled that the idea of digression itself underwent a corresponding reconception during the period in question. One of the chief differences between classical and medieval treatises on the art of poetry is the insistence of the latter on amplification. Of the various devices to that end, digressio was the one advocated repeatedly, enthusiastically, and in remarkably broad terms by the medieval rhetoricians. Geoffrey of Vinsauf recommended digression in two forms: ad aliud extra materiam (introducing outside matter--a digression proper) and ad aliam partem materiae (moving to another part of the same matter). The second, he explains further, involves omitting the part of the matter that follows directly and jumping instead to a later part of the matter.<sup>26</sup> This "intramural digression" of Geoffrey's is of some interest to literary historians, for it codifies in theoretical terms a literary practice of such proportions and duration that it may be regarded as a defining characteristic of medieval narrative. The digression ad aliam partem materiae amounts to a description of what Ferdinand Lot, writing of the prose Lancelot, termed entrelacement<sup>27</sup>--a form

of literary composition by which a story is told in two or more lines with the narrator moving from one action to another, interrupting an episode from one sequence to launch into the matter of another, and again breaking off to return to the suspended narrative line: 123, 123, 123 rather than 111, 222, 333. The precise origins of narrative interlace are not clear, though it is conveniently associated with the interweavings both of northern and Romanesque art<sup>28</sup> and with polyphony in music (C.S. Lewis, writing independently of Lot, called the same practice in Spenser "narrative polyphony").<sup>29</sup> Interlace tendencies have been discerned in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Latin poetry,<sup>30</sup> but the technique is associated above all with romance tradition, where it is considered to have its formal beginnings in the works of Chrétien de Troyes, particularly in those instances (e.g., Perceval) where the parting of ways of major characters necessitates the forking of the plot, and where the narrator alternates focus between lines of action which are understood to be simultaneous. The synchronic impulse, Vinaver argues, is centrally implicated in the emergence of interlace composition as the dominant form in the prose romances of the thirteenth century:

The next and possibly the decisive step towards a proper understanding of cyclic romance is the realization that since it is always possible, and often even necessary, for several themes to be pursued simultaneously, they have to alternate like threads in a woven fabric, one theme interrupting another and again another, and yet all remaining constantly present in the author's and the reader's mind.<sup>31</sup>

This describes the procedure in, e.g., the Prose Tristan, the Suite du Merlin, the Livre d'Artus, Amadis de Gaula, and the

Vulgate Cycle (these alone amount to some 7,000 pages). Narrative interlace in all these works is both the point of departure for their genesis and development and the basic principle of their construction. Isolated examples of the technique can be found in earlier literature, but it is principally a medieval phenomenon, whose gratuitously developed and extended use in prose romance "may well derive its status as a legitimate artistic procedure from the authority of the rhetoric manuals."<sup>32</sup> It has been called "one of the fundamental esthetic issues of the thirteenth century,"<sup>33</sup> but its popularity survived in some sectors for three centuries beyond that. When Tasso, championing the classical precepts of epic unity, attacked the compositional esthetic of multiplicity in the work of Boiardo and Ariosto, he was in effect attacking the entire medieval system of narration.<sup>34</sup>

But let us return to the topic from which we have digressed: the language of interlace. In the verse romances (Phase 1), transitional phrases are few, largely first person, and used for digressions in both of Geoffrey of Vinsauf's senses. Examples include:

Meis n'i vüel feire demorance  
 A parler de chascune chose.  
 A Thessala qui ni repose  
 de poisons feire et atanprer,  
 Vuel ma parole retorner.<sup>35</sup>  
Cligés, vv. 3245-50

But I do not wish to stop to  
 describe all this in detail.  
 To Thessala, who does not  
 pause in preparing and  
 tempering her potions, my  
 story wishes to return.

De monseignor Gavain se taist  
 Ichi li contes a estal,  
 Si commenche de Percheval.  
 Pérchevax, cè nos dist l'astoire,  
 Ot si perdu là miemoire  
 Que de Dieu ni li sovient mais.  
Perceval, vv. 6214-19<sup>36</sup>

The story is silent about  
 Sir Gawain at this point.  
 Perceval, as the story tells  
 us, had so lost his memory that  
 he had forgotten God.

Alle ir unmuoze  
die lâzen wir nu sîn  
und sagen wie vrou Kriemhilt  
unt ouch ir magedîn  
gegen Rîne fuoren  
von Nibelunge lant.

Das Nibelungenlied, st. 778<sup>37</sup>

Or reviendrai al pedre et la medre,  
Et la espose qui sole fut remese:  
Quant il ço sovrent qued il fuiz s'en eret,  
Ço fut granz dols qued il en demenerent,  
Et granz deplainz par tote la contrede.

La Vie de Saint Alexis, st. 21<sup>38</sup>

Let us leave their bustle and  
tell how Kriemhild and her  
maidens journeyed on towards  
the Rhine from the land of  
the Nibelungs.

Now I shall return to the  
father and the mother, and  
to the spouse who had re-  
mained alone; when they  
knew that he had fled, they  
mourned greatly, and great  
was the lamenting throughout  
the country.

It is, predictably, in the prose romances (Phase 2) that aphodoi appear with mechanical regularity. They are mostly of the "intramural" type, impersonal, and standard in form. Phrases like this one from La Queste del Saint Graal occur throughout the Grail cycle:

Mais atant laisse ore li contes  
a parler daus tous. & retourne a  
parler de galaad por ce qu'il  
estoit li souerains & commenche-  
ment de la queste. Or dist li  
contes que quant galaas se fu  
partis des ses compaignons.

La Queste del Saint Graal<sup>39</sup>

But here the tale leaves them  
and tells of Galahad, for he  
it was who and instigated this  
Quest. Now the story relates  
that when Galahad had parted  
from his companions...

The equivalent cliché in the Amadís de Gaula is:<sup>40</sup>

Do los quales dexará la hystoria  
de hablar, y contará de don Gal-  
aor...(I:20)

The story will cease to talk  
of them, and tell of Don  
Galaor...

Phase 3, as in the Norse case, is not so much a phase as a specific application of the technique for purposes of encyclopedic expansion. The French counterpart of Flateyjarbók is Les Prôphécies de Merlin<sup>41</sup> (ca. 1275), a catalogue of political



prophecies into which are interspersed nineteen semi-independent stories of a more romantic nature. Thus the story of the Saxon invasion is related in ten parts; the story of Morgain la Fee in three parts; the story of Perceval in three parts; the story of Alixandre d'Orphelin in five parts, and so forth. The Alixandre history<sup>42</sup> stands in the same relation to the Prophécies as the Hallfreðr history does to Greatest Saga. In each case, a free-standing biography of considerable dimensions has been laced onto a host narrative (itself little more than a compilation of such strands); in each case, the parts of the substory, removed from the host text and set together single file, form a continuous and complete biographical history; and in each case, the interspersing process generates transitional formulas. Two examples of these formulas in the Prophécies are:

Mes atant s'en test ore li  
contes et parole d'une autre  
aventure. (I:87)

But at this point the story  
is silent on this matter and  
speaks of another adventure.

Mais je retournerai apres a vos  
pour conter de ce que j'ai  
comencie. Ici fenest nostre  
matiere et retourne a l'autre.  
(I:116)

But I will return to you  
later to tell what I have  
begun. Here our matter  
concludes and returns to  
something else.

In summary: the aphodos is a concomitant of digressio represented with some frequency in Latin writings in the North as well as on the Continent; digressio was, together with other forms of amplification, advocated in the broadest of terms by the medieval rhetoricians; the reciprocal development in the literary sphere was narrative interlace, a compositional technique evident in varying degrees in both romance in saga; the transi-

tional formulas of both literatures--in some cases remarkably similar--may be regarded as derivatives of the aphodoi; in both cases these vernacular aphodoi underwent, in their new literary environments, a rapid generalization in use, particularly in prose works, and a depersonalization in form; and, finally, they are used in the later stages to effect encyclopedic compilations which are themselves hypertrophied expressions of the interlace technique.<sup>43</sup>

It is finally less the form than the function of such phrases that identifies them as aphodoi. That the kind of composition on which they are predicated is not oral, but literary, is a point on which scholars from Bääth on are generally agreed.<sup>44</sup> Olrik's eighth "law" remains the most forceful statement on the subject:

Moderne dichtung...liebt die verschiedenen fäden der handlung in einander zu verwickeln. Die volkspoesie hält den einzelnen strang fest, sie ist immer einsträngig. Sie geht nicht zurück, um fehlende voraussetzungen nachzuholen....Wenn in den isländischen geschichtswerken sätze wie dieser vorkommen: 'jetzt gehn geschichten neben einander' [Nú ferr tvennum sögum fram--see ex. 5], dann ist die stufe der volkspoesie verlassen, es ist litteratur. Die volkssage hat nur eine geschichte auf einmal.<sup>45</sup>

Following Olrik, W.H. Vogt detected multi-ply narration in the first half of Egils saga and judged it to be "literary" on that account; conversely, he regarded the single-ply second half to be indicative of oral tradition.<sup>46</sup> He tried on similar grounds to distinguish the traditional from the literary layer in Bjarnar saga hitdælakappa.<sup>47</sup> Reinhard Prinz, using more or less the same scheme, found instances of stranded composition, and

hence a literary sensibility, in Gísla saga.<sup>48</sup> Liestól found some cases of simple stranding in folktales and for this reason preferred, like Heusler, to reduce Olrik's "law" to a "tendency", but he nevertheless affirmed the underlying principle.<sup>49</sup> Heusler considered to be clear signs of literary structure (buchmässiger Aufbau) the sagas' copiousness, polycentricity, and broken chronology:

Snorris Saga von Olaf dem Heiligen flicht mannigfaltige, polyzentrische Stoffmassen ineinander zu einem chronologisch vorrückenden Ganzen, so dass oft ein Faden abbricht und viele Seiten später wiederaufgenommen wird. Dieses kunstvolle Verfahren liegt weit ausserhalb des Könnens der unliterarischen Sagamänner. Auch die äussere Stoffbegrenzung, der Umfang des Werks, überschreitet das dem mündlichen Vortrag Zuzutruende.<sup>50</sup>

M. van den Toorn arrived at much the same conclusion by using the tools of modern narrative theory (Lämmert, G. Müller, Jolles, etc.).<sup>51</sup> Ian Maxwell perceived the non-Aristotelian nature of saga composition: "These were different stories, with rules of their own; and although some made complex and beautiful wholes, their form is not what I should have expected in epic or novel."<sup>52</sup> Einar Ólafur Sveinsson refers to the composition of Njáls saga as a "web" or "network of events" and distinguishes it from the more straightforward patterns of biography or chronicle.<sup>53</sup> What Anne Heinrichs has recently termed "intertexture" in the sagas<sup>54</sup> is remarkably like Lot's "principle of inseparability"<sup>55</sup>--the and "system of forecasts, concordances" which binds together the narrative mass of the prose romances.<sup>56</sup> Lee Hollander, in an ingenious essay on the "exceedingly multifarious" composition of Eyrbyggja saga, compared its interbraiding with the practice of

sentence intercalation in skaldic poetry, and concluded that they were manifestations of the same esthetic.<sup>57</sup> Andersson focuses on the macrostructure of the Icelandic family sagas but notes in passing some puzzling instances of "unnecessarily complicated" plot organization.<sup>58</sup> He speculates that the author of Eyrbyggja saga "had chronological sources that called for the interspersing of these episodes"<sup>59</sup> and agrees with Hollander that since the interweaving of plots in this saga could easily be eliminated, it must be deliberate.

What all these commentaries describe, without naming it as such or relating it to its Continental counterpart, is interlace composition. For their style, structure, and subject matter, the sagas are indebted in varying degrees to folktales, heroic poetry, romance, and learned traditions; but as formal constructions they resemble nothing so much as the French cyclic romances. The specific patterns differ: romances pursue fewer lines at greater length and focus on remarkable chronological coincidences, whereas the sagas intertwine a larger number of shorter strands in the interest of tracing subtle webs of acts and consequences in the broader social fabric. But in their copiousness, their interweaving of synchronic plot lines, and their obvious delight in the esthetic of multiplicity and recurrence, the sagas and the prose romances are sufficiently alike to be considered manifestations of the same phenomenon. The romance model is most immediately helpful in understanding the rapid evolution of the saga from shorter and clearer plots to the voluminous amalgams that we find in the latest period of saga writing.

This history of phrases has suggested that romance interlace and saga interlace represent, at least in the first stages, responses to a common medieval esthetic. Whether such a general drift suffices to explain the parallel evolution in both traditions is of course open to question. To the extent that there was direct influence--the only sure point of contact is the translation into Norse of the verse romances--it would have served to reinforce existing habits and perhaps to contribute certain technical refinements (e.g., the use of suspended animation at transition points). The precise relation, on the compositional level, of sagas to romances and to late medieval narrative in general is a chapter of Norse literary history that remains to be written; what this essay has tried to show is that it is a chapter worth writing. From the point of view of medieval esthetics it is of some interest that interlace literature has a substantial representation in the north. From the point of view of Scandinavian cultural history it is correspondingly important to understand that the sagas are, in the central aspect of their composition, not so anomalous as they are often taken to be, but are full partners in the European literary community.

<sup>1</sup>Gustav Storm, ed., Otte Brudstykker af den Ældste Saga om Olaf den Hellige (Christiania: Grøndahl, 1893).

<sup>2</sup>Gustav Indrebø, ed., Sverris saga (Kristiania: Dybwad, 1920), ch. 91.

<sup>3</sup>Finnur Jónsson, ed., Eirspennill (Kristiania: Thømté, 1916), ch. 81.

- <sup>4</sup>Jonna Louis-Jensen, ed., Trójumanna saga, Editiones Arnarnagnæna, Series A, vol. 8 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963), p. 63.
- <sup>5</sup>Finnur Jónsson, ed., Morkinskinna (København: Jørgensen, 1932), p. 56.
- <sup>6</sup>All citations from the Icelandic family sagas, Orkneyinga saga, and Heimskringla are from the Íslensk fornrit editions (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933-).
- <sup>7</sup>Guðni Jónsson, ed., Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1959), vol. 3.
- <sup>8</sup>Guðbrandr Vigfusson and C.R. Unger, eds., Flateyjarbók, 3 vols. (Christiania: Malling, 1860-68).
- <sup>9</sup>Ólafur Halldórsson, ed., Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta, vols. 1 and 2, Editiones Arnarnagnæna, Series A (København: Munksgaard, 1958 and 1961).
- <sup>10</sup>See Theodore M. Andersson, The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 28 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1967), esp. pp. 57-60.
- <sup>11</sup>This accords with the findings of Paul Schach, "Some Forms of Writer Intrusion," Scandinavian Studies, 42 (1970), 128-36.
- <sup>12</sup>**in the Íslendingasögur**  
<sup>12</sup>For a recent discussion of Hryggjarstykki, see Bjarni Guðnason, Fyrsta sagan, Studia Islandica, 37 (Reykjavík: Bókautgáfa menningarsjóðs, 1978).
- <sup>13</sup>Ludvig Holm-Olsen notes the personal/impersonal alternation in his Studier i Sverris saga, Avhandlingar utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo (hereafter Avhandlingar/Oslo), 1952, II. Historisk-filosofisk klasse, pp. 11-104, esp. 68-71.
- <sup>14</sup>Oscar Albert Johnsen and Jón Helgason, eds., Den store saga om Olav den hellige, 2 vols. (Oslo: Dypwad, 1930).
- <sup>15</sup>Finnur Jónsson, ed., Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar af Oddr Snorrason munk (København: Gad, 1932).
- <sup>16</sup>A=AM 31C 4° and S=Stn. 18 mbr. 4°
- <sup>17</sup>I have followed Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Om de norske kongers sagaer, Avhandlingar/Oslo, (1936), pp. 1-236.
- <sup>18</sup>H.E. Butler, ed., The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian, 4 vols., Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, and New York: Putnam, 1921), vol. 3, IX:3.87. See also Heinrich Lausberg, Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik (München: Hueber, 1960), vol. 1, 187.

- <sup>19</sup>Theodor Mommsen, ed., Jordanis Romana et Getica, Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1882).
- <sup>20</sup>Bernhard Schmeidler, ed., Adam von Bremen, Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte, Scriptorum Rerum Germanicarum, 3rd ed. (Hannover and Leipzig: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1917).
- <sup>21</sup>Gustav Storm, ed., Historia Norvegiæ in Monumenta Historica Norvegiæ (Christiania: A.W. Brøgger, 1880).
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup>M.C. Gertz, ed., De Profectione Danorum in Hierosolymam in Scriptorum minores historiae Daniæ mediæ ævi, 2 vols. (København: Gad, 1918-20).
- <sup>24</sup>Einar Haugen, ed., The First Grammatical Treatise, Language Monograph No. 25 of the Linguistic Society of America, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1972), pp. 22-23.
- <sup>25</sup>This is the theme of the documents contained in Edmond Faral's Les Arts poétiques du XII<sup>e</sup> et du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle (Paris: Champion, 1958). Faral remarks that "L'amplification est la grande chose; elle est la principale fonction de l'écrivain" (p. 61). The relationship between amplification and narrative interlace is treated at some length by Eugène Vinaver, The Rise of Romance (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), esp. pp. 73-76 and William W. Ryding, Structure in Medieval Narrative (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971), esp. pp. 66-73.
- <sup>26</sup>From Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi in Faral, Les Arts poétiques, p. 274: "A materia ad aliam partem materiae, quando omittimus illam partem materiae quae proxima est et aliam quae sequitur primam assumimus."
- <sup>27</sup>Ferdinand Lot, Étude sur le Lancelot en prose (Paris: Champion, 1918), esp. the chapter "Le Principe de l'entrelacement."
- <sup>28</sup>See, in particular, Vinaver, Rise of Romance (pp. 77-81); John Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of Beowulf," University of Toronto Quarterly, 37 (Oct., 1967), 1-17. The analogy between the patterns of viking art and skaldic poetry has been pursued by Axel Olrik, Nordisk aandsliv i vikingetid og tidlig middelalder (København: Gyldendal, 1907), esp. p. 101; Andreas Heusler, Die altgermanische Dichtung, 2nd ed. (Potsdam: Athenaion, 1945), esp. pp. 140-42; Hallvard Lie, "Skaldestil Studier," Maal og Minne (1952), pp. 1-92; and the same author's "Natur og Unatur i skaldekunsten (Avhandlinger/Oslo, 1957).
- <sup>29</sup>C.S. Lewis, introduction to selections from Spenser in George Bagshaw Harrison, Major British Writers, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954), vol. 1, 97-98.

- <sup>30</sup>See Leyerle, "Interlace Structure in Beowulf," and Peter Dale Scott, "Alcuin as Poet: Rhetoric and Belief in his Latin Verse," University of Toronto Quarterly, 33 (1964), 233-57.
- <sup>31</sup>Vinaver, Rise of Romance, p. 76.
- <sup>32</sup>Ryding, Structure in Medieval Narrative, p. 71.
- <sup>33</sup>Eugène Vinaver, "The Prose Tristan," in Roger Sherman Loomis, ed., Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), p. 345. The reader is directed to pp. 295-357 of that work for a brief overview of the prose romance literature. For a distinction between English and Continental habits of composition, see Larry D. Benson, Malory's Morte Darthur (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1976), esp. pp. 51-99.
- <sup>34</sup>Torquato Tasso, Discorsi dell'Arte Poetica e del Poema Eroico, ed. Luigi Poma (Bari: Laterza, 1964); Eng. tr. by Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel, Discourses on the Heroic Poem (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973).
- <sup>35</sup>Chrétien de Troyes, Cligés, ed. Wendelin Foerster (Halle: Niemeyer, 1884).
- <sup>36</sup>Chrétien de Troyes, Le Roman de Perceval, ed. William Roach (Genève: Droz, and Paris: Minard, 1959). The corresponding transition in Parcevals saga is: En nú er at ségja frá Perceval, at... (ch. 18).
- <sup>37</sup>Karl Bartsch and Helmut de Boor, eds., Das Nibelungenlied, 20th ed. (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1972).
- <sup>38</sup>Gaston Paris and Léopold Pannier, eds., La Vie de Saint Alexis: Poème du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle (Paris: Franck, 1872). Translation from Ryding, Structure in Medieval Narrative, p. 70.
- <sup>39</sup>H. Oscar Sommer, The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances, 7 vols. fol. + index (Washington: Carnegie Institute, 1909-16), vol. 4, 20.
- <sup>40</sup>Edwin B. Place, Amadís de Gaula, 4 vols. (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1959-69), vol. 1, 20.
- <sup>41</sup>Lucy Allen Paton, Les Prophéties de Merlin, 2 vols. (New York: D.C. Heath, and London: Oxford UP, 1926).
- <sup>42</sup>On Alixandre, see Cedric E. Pickford, "Miscellaneous French Prose Romances" in Loomis, Arthurian Literature esp. pp. 353-54.
- <sup>43</sup>It is also worth noting that aphodoi in all three cases-- Norse, Latin, and French texts--tend to coincide with marked chapters or capital letters in the manuscripts.



- <sup>44</sup>A.U. Bääth, Studier öfver kompositionen i några isländska ättsagor (Lund: Gleerup, 1885).
- <sup>45</sup>Axel Olrik, "Epische Gesetze der Volksdichtung," ZDA, 51 (1909), 8.
- <sup>46</sup>Walther Heinrich Vogt, Zur Komposition der Egils saga (Görlitz: Tzschaschel, 1909). On Vogt's observations, Ole Widding wrote: "Måske er skellet ikke så skarpt som foreslået af Vogt, men afsnittene i højere grad vævet ind i hinanden, --helt efter de middelalderlige regler for litterære lån." Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Thorkil Damsgaard Olsen, and Ole Widding, Norrøn Fortællekunst (Copenhagen: Akademisk forlag, 1965), p. 85.
- <sup>47</sup>Walther Heinrich Vogt, "Die Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa," ANF, 37 (1920), 27-79.
- <sup>48</sup>Reinhard Prinz, Die Schöpfung der Gísla saga Súrssonar (Breslau: Ferdinand Hirt, 1935).
- <sup>49</sup>Knut Liestøl, Upphavet til den islenske ættesaga (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1929), pp. 101-2.
- <sup>50</sup>Andreas Heusler, Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga, Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse, 9 (1913), paragraph 31; rpt. in Kleine Schriften, 2 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969), vol. 2, 440-41.
- <sup>51</sup>Maarten Z. van den Toorn, "Zur Struktur der Saga," ANF, 73 (1958), 140-68; and "Zeit und Tempus in der Saga," ANF, 76 (1961), 134-52.
- <sup>52</sup>Ian Maxwell, "Pattern in Njáls saga," Saga-Book of the Viking Society, 15 (1957-61), 17.
- <sup>53</sup>Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Á Njálsbúð. Bók um mikið listaverk (Reykjavík, 1943), esp. pp. 39-41; Eng. adaptation by Paul Schach, Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1971), pp. 53-55.
- <sup>54</sup>Anne Heinrichs, "'Intertexture' and its Functions in Early Written Sagas: A Stylistic Observation of Heiðarvíga saga, Reykðæla saga and the Legendary Olafssaga," Scandinavian Studies, 48 (1976), 127-45.
- <sup>55</sup>Lot, Étude sur le Lancelot en prose, esp. p. 28; see also Vinaver, Rise of Romance, pp. 81-84.
- <sup>56</sup>Jean Frappier, "The Vulgate Cycle," in Loomis, Arthurian Literature, pp. 22-23.
- <sup>57</sup>Lee M. Hollander, "The Structure of Eyrbyggja saga," JEGP, 58 (1959), 222-27. Hollander orders the strands by number and

concludes: "Unless thus schematized, all these involutions would be hard for us to follow. The modern reader, with a neatly printed text before him, can, to be sure, leaf back at his leisure to disentangle the skein of interbraided events...I believe we must come to the conclusion that the interbraiding, like the intercalation of sentences in Skaldic poetry, is hardly fortuitous; rather it shows conscious planning on the part of an author who has in mind an audience that is constantly on the qui vive and able to follow this method of presentation. He does not merely string along the traditions of his countryside artlessly--popular tradition does just that--but arranges them to suit his purpose." (pp. 226-27). Vinaver makes a similar point: "The assumption [of interlace technique] is not only that the reader's memory is infallible, but that the exercise of such a memory is in itself a pleasurable pursuit which carries with it its own reward" (Rise of Romance, p. 83).

<sup>58</sup>Andersson, The Icelandic Family Saga, esp. pp. 148-52, 160-62, and 208-10.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 162.