

“A harper went here and there with his songs”: Modern Reworking of Northern Narrative Tradition in *Vinland* by George Mackay Brown

Abstract:

Vinland, George Mackay Brown's fourth novel, is critically categorised as very traditional historic fiction and it is often overlooked, with more attention granted to his other novels *Magnus* and *Greenvoe*, which are perceived as more innovative. While the discussed text does reveal the influence of older narrative motifs and techniques (such as the saga or epic traditions), they are there not for their own sake. They are combined with some experimental techniques of rendering perception and activating cognition which are used to comment on and to illustrate the role of storytelling in constituting and disseminating identity. Brown achieves this through experimenting with the experiential and intersubjective patterns of narration that engage the reader in the process of textual discovery. This projects a different reading style compared to the one provoked by the novel's surface focus on juvenile adventure.

Keywords: George Mackay Brown, *Vinland*, intersubjectivity, experientiality, perspective and cognitive patterns

The experimental aspects in George Mackay Brown's fourth novel *Vinland*, first published in 1992, have not been noted so far. In criticism *Vinland* is often treated as a text with a clear-cut genre type that does not exceed the traditional technique. Roderick Watson says it takes “the form of epic historical saga” and skips it in his analysis, whilst giving more attention to experimental narration in *Magnus* (1973) and *Greenvoe* (1972)¹. Martin Arnold calls it “essentially a fictional biography recounting the life and times of an Orcadian farmer”². According to him it is focused on providing an “eyewitness account” of the discovery of the New Land³. Heather O'Donoghue describes the novel as “conventional in style”⁴. However, it can be noted that the novel's array of narrative

¹ Roderick Watson, *The Literature of Scotland: The Twentieth Century*, London: Macmillan 2007, pp. 132–133.

² Martin Arnold, “Imagining *Vinland*: George Mackay Brown and the Literature of the New World”, in: *Across the Sólundarhaf: Connections between Scotland and the Nordic World. Journal of the North Atlantic* 2013, special vol. 4, pp. 199–206.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁴ Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell 2004, p. 189.

devices reveals a much broader focus than just the adventurous account of the saga-sourced description of the first European journey to America or recording the breakthrough moments of Viking presence in the North Atlantic.

In the Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, David Herman ponders on the key functions of narrative and suggests that the role of stories is to “give accounts of what happened to particular people – and of what it was like for them to experience what happened – in particular circumstances and with specific consequences”⁵. He views narrative as contextual, time- and space-rooted, and given to negotiating the issues of “process and change”⁶. *Vinland* follows these precepts but also exceeds them in many ways. The first part of this article will focus on discussion, with the help of selected post-classical narratological concepts, of some experimental narrative techniques in *Vinland* while the second part will offer some detailed analysis of selected fragments of the novel so as to provide some samples of Brown’s complex, although seemingly plain, style.

While the discussed novel draws from the patterns of storytelling rooted in multiple northern genres and oral literature traditions, they are deployed in perception-focused, self-referential ways, serving to engage the reader in a particular process of reception. Monika Fludernik in *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* states that to give full justice to a narrative text’s quality it is necessary to account for its experientiality caused by (1) the fact that reading prototypically happens along the “cognitive (‘natural’) parameters” as well as by (2) the fact of “the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience” in such a text⁷. Adopting her narrative model of experientiality is particularly revealing in tracing what happens in Brown’s novel on the level of literary storytelling technique. Fludernik derives the concept from the notion of naturalisation, Jonathan Culler’s idea⁸ that relates to the reader’s acts of making sense of the textual patterns through relating them to the cognitive frames⁹. Despite the seemingly very traditional technique of chronological, third-person narration used to relate the multiple-journey story, Brown piles up cognition-oriented narrative structures¹⁰ focused on varied ways of perceiving and interpreting experience. The narrative is related through multiple cognitive frames that are, on the one hand, unobtrusively predictable but on the other hand they are constantly colliding and reinforced through the techniques of self-referentiality and reverberation.

⁵ See: David Herman, “Introduction”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. D. Herman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Monika Fludernik, *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology*, New York: Routledge 1996, https://books.google.pl/books?id=OPWHAgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=pl&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false [accessed 20 June 2018].

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The change of paradigm that emerges from Fludernik’s concept of experientiality privileges the cognitive approach – focused on the character’s reactions but also those of the addressee (or addressees) of the story – over the bare plot-focused approach. Ibid.

¹⁰ These structures semiotically represent some fundamental, core patterns of human being in the world and/or ways of interacting with this world. See: Fludernik, op. cit.

The central character's vantage point is presented as a dynamic and changing phenomenon. It is organised through the principle of parallelism and contrast to other points of view, but also, as the action progresses, it is contrasted with his own previously related perspectives. This technique focusses on evoking a particular reader's process of semiosis that is textually organised as a dynamic process. Thus the text necessitates the readerly voyage through the collage of denotatively and connotatively evoked senses.

Using the timeless northern storytelling techniques of saga and epic origin, the text activates in the implied reader the recognition of the cognitive frames (and the resulting narrative paradigms) that have determined the development of the traditional northern genres. *Vinland* is oriented on promoting the kind of reception focused on the experiential quality of the reading process that encourages the reader to resonate with the perceptive and spiritual growth of the central character, Randal Sigmundson, as a wise man. This involves the effort of understanding the vantage point of other characters with whom he makes some meaningful contact, as well as following the meta-reflection on how narratives work. This latter aspect draws attention to the communication with the implied author of the text.

The cognition of the individuals that serves to render the experiences of themselves or others in an engaging way for the addressee (and the reader) is foregrounded in many ways using ever changing techniques. In *Vinland* Brown creates many figures of self-conscious storytellers and their addressees. As the action progresses, there is constant telling or reacting to the multi-strand stories or fragments of narratives that get told. The central character Randal Sigmundson constantly listens to other people's narratives: his mother's and his father's, Leif Ericson's, the stories of the West Seeker poet and Fiord's, to name but a few. He also has his own stories which are adjusted to the context of telling them in many places: in the court of Bergen, in Orkney high council Tingvøe, at his home, in his old-age hermitage. Apart from the fact that he tells stories (or withholds them at times, while the narrative structures imply the story that is not told), he is also exposed to some artists' and wanderers' stories that frequently relate parts of his experience. This necessitates the reader's cognition of the differences of perspectives¹¹. This clash is further complicated by Randal being in the complex role of the inner story's context and addressee. The autothematic aspect of the novel provides a commentary on the way storytelling, narration and interpretation work for an individual and for the community. In this Brown also contrives to alter how the novel works for the reader. He projects a very special kind of contact that manipulates – sequentially diminishes and increases – the distance in reception. Brown constantly provokes the reader to experiment with taking the dynamic cultural, ethical and ontological view of the multiple stories so as to activate the reader's hermeneutic reflection on how stories are disseminated,

¹¹ In this Brown applies the abrupt shifts between the "focal characters", artistically exploiting what Gérard Genette identifies as the focalization technique that denotes "a restriction of 'field' [...] a selection of narrative information with respect to what was traditionally called omniscience". Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. by J. E. Lewin, Ithaca: Cornell UP 1988. https://books.google.pl/books/about/Narrative_Discourse_Revisited.html?id=RBK2NOMAbasC&redir_esc=y [accessed 20 October 2018].

and how they work for the constitution of the self. This focus is activated only gradually and very inconspicuously in the novel.

The opening part of *Vinland* is very unobtrusive, seemingly focused on telling a typical coming-of-age story. It strongly foregrounds the topos of Ranald-the-boy's leaving the archetypal safe space, represented by home where the child is protected by his mother, which is the precondition for learning about the world and oneself. As in juvenile fiction (or in traditional folktale and its descendent genres), the young one needs to set off on some quest to fulfil a mission that involves the risk of death and undergoing several trials, which ultimately reveal some hidden truth about the hero¹². Overcoming some harrowing difficulties in the course of plot development allows Ranald to renounce his initially dependent self and to gain experience (reach wisdom).

The story of Ranald's life, represented as a life-cycle journey, is told through several rites-of-passage moments¹³ that are viewed on an individual level but ultimately serve to give insight into the formation of North European cultural identity. The basic plot is that of the grand voyage through the whole geographic and cultural (social) northern world, which opportunes Ranald's taking part in its seminal, transformative events. He participates in the discovery of a new continent – Vinland, and he witnesses the political tensions of Orkney and the Northern Atlantic. As the central character takes part in the clashes of the Norwegian, Scottish and local forces in Orkney as well as in the history-defining battle of Clontarf in Ireland, he can see the advent of Christianity and the renouncement of the pagan Viking mentality of his people¹⁴. All this large-scale narrative, epic in scope, is told through the story of an ordinary boy's liminal life-cycle that entails: an escape from harmful paternal influence, seeking for more sustaining role models, and making contact with multiple figures of the Other (the skraeling boy, the rulers of the Northern world, various storytellers, and diverse leader figures).

Sigmundson's passage through several trials of fate consists in resolving the universal human conflicts. This is connected with becoming accepted by different social groups in foreign communities; seeking love; struggling to return to the homeland; reclaiming his inheritance, establishing and renewing the domestic structures; managing a farm; becoming a parent of difficult (in many different ways) children; and finally preparing for death conceived as a final journey. In the course of his experience, the community values are debated and tested. He emerges from the narrative as an epic hero who is basically noble and who is formed in the course of the undertaken struggles, voyages and warfare. Ranald's life story works to represent through the standard cognitive frames

¹² The pattern used by Brown also complies with what David Herman identifies as the prototypical structure of narrative: (1) "a structured time-course of particularized events", (2) elements of "disruption or disequilibrium", (3) the sense of "what it's like to live through that disruption", Herman, op. cit., p. 9.

¹³ This sub-plot can be identified in literature using the anthropological way of thinking about individual development (which is universal across cultures), as defined in the seminal theory of Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee, London: Routledge 2004.

¹⁴ See further discussion in: Rowena Murray and Brian Murray, *Interrogation of Silence: The Writings of George Mackay Brown*, London and Edinburgh: Steve Sage 2008, pp. 238–239.

the universal, archetypal, identity-related topics that the reader is intended to recognise but also to question.

As the novel follows Randal Sigmundson through the seas and social realms of the world, a truly epic vast setting, it simultaneously traces the stages of human life cycle, as well as the patterns of community and culture development. Not only does he become transformed as a person but his experience works to define the emerging northern identity and to question its constitutive elements. Such a scheme occasions the use of the story for reflection on the formation of the individual self and the narrative foundations of one's worldview seen against the culturally prominent perspective. The dynamically changing multiple vantage points combine to question the northern values and worldview. In this, Brown anticipates intuitively the contemporary concept of narrative identity, with its relevant issues of the unity of stories and the seeking for purpose in life narratives. This theory is represented in psychology by, for example, Dan P. McAdams¹⁵. Narrative selfhood that *Vinland* debates upon through its composition also brings to mind some central issues in contemporary Scottish philosophy discussed by Alasdair MacIntyre. The philosopher points to the importance of the journey or quest motif in the post-medieval worldview which serves to highlight the "narrative structure or structures of human life"¹⁶. For him the crucial element are the virtues that life entails, which allow the task, or the journey, to be completed. These are precisely the issues touched upon by Brown through the life narrative of Randal. The techniques that are used for this end are connected with the diversely used motif of perception that is ultimately experiential in effect.

The narrative ways of rendering cognition are the key aspect of Brown's experiment with storytelling in *Vinland*. The basic story-organising motif is that of gaining wisdom and understanding, which starts working on the level of reception. The central character crosses various psychological and social borders as he progresses towards independence, self-awareness and spiritual cognition so as to become a mature man. This pattern in plot organisation coincides with tracing the northern society's progression through the history-rooted moments of community formation. The surface focus on adventure involved in the discovery of the new continent of Vinland is not realised in the text in the way characteristic for popular literature, especially not in its juvenile variant evoked by the fact that the character is initially a young man¹⁷. The part devoted to the discovery of Vinland is relatively short and it does not seem to be the most significant element of the text. The novel is strongly oriented on developing an aesthetic and philosophical

¹⁵ D. P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories", *Review of General Psychology*, June 2001, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 100–122.

¹⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed., Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press 2007, pp. 174–175.

¹⁷ There is extra-textual evidence of the book being first conceived as a historical fiction for juvenile readership, a scheme which did not satisfy Brown and led to him postponing writing it for many years until he developed a new concept for the novel. See: George Mackay Brown, *Rockpools and Daffodils: An Orcadian Diary 1979–1991*, Edinburgh: Gordon Wright Publishing 1992, p. 248.

way to show the progression of a man as a person – and of a community as a historical, geographical and cultural entity – through many transitional moments, so as to grasp the changing nature of the northern experience and the values of the northern way of life.

The patterns of perception are always deployed in relation to some moments of cognising the Other, who (1) becomes the object or perception or (2) is suggested to be the agent. There are multiple cases where a character observes some other characters engaging in viewing something, suggesting thus the problems of trying to comprehend the point of view of the Other. This involves the issue of storytelling, with its autothematic effect. Within the novel there are stories told and retold of the character's experience. They get (re)told by some other storyteller characters, while the reactions of the audience are shown. The narration is thus constantly focused on showing the changes and contrasts in perception, at the same time highlighting what happens with perception when the experience is changed into a story. Randal often remembers and reflects on his previous stages of life¹⁸. Alternatively, his past exploits are brought back to him as some ballad or a series of stories. There are repetitive patterns used to draw the reader's attention to the various ways of understanding or cognising the same motif or fictional world constituent, representing the process of understanding (and reading) as the process of story creation.

Apart from the afore-mentioned idea of experientiality proposed by M. Fludernik another notion which helps to identify what Brown does in his cognitively-oriented narrative is the concept of intersubjectivity applied to literary studies by Magdalena Rembowska-Pluciennik¹⁹. In literary narrative, as she suggests, this phenomenon can be found in the way a text uses multiple points of view and different ways of cognising the world²⁰. Brown's *Vinland* is very much focused on exploring how the central character's consciousness is repetitively orientated on the presence of some figure of the Other. Notably, apart from meeting various strangers, Randal himself becomes

¹⁸ In this Brown incorporates the crucial time-related aspect of the pattern of experientiality identified by Fludernik: the moments when the story focuses on the reactions of the character to the previous experience. In *Vinland* one may find a lot of evidence for what she stresses as essential for "the sequential model of narrative": "All experience is therefore stored as emotionally charged remembrance, and it is reproduced in narrative form because it was memorable, funny, scary, or exciting". Fludernik, op. cit.

¹⁹ Magdalena Rembowska-Pluciennik, "Intersubiektywność i literatura", *Teksty Drugie* 2009, no. 1–2, p. 215–227.

²⁰ The difference of approach proposed by Rembowska-Pluciennik is taking into account the reader's and the author's perspectives that are respectively shaped or reflected by the cognitive strategies of the text as well as they are influenced by the cognitive patterns inherent to human perception as such. Introducing the term "intersubjectivity" Rembowska-Pluciennik argues the need of the model of "cognitive plurality" in studying narrative: "In the narrative, the storyteller and those about whom the narrator speaks are constructed (on the grounds of linguistic and textual solutions), both by the author and by the reader, as existents – anthropomorphic beings whose mental representation (the author's and the reader's) constitutes a system of interrelated subjective perspectives". Further on she says: "This is why narration (and in a multiplied way – literary narration) is inalienably intersubjective. It comprises various mental spaces assigned to fictional beings and produced by non-textual participants of the narrative communication thanks to their ability to identify and share mental acts of the other. In my view, this element of narration is the core of the problem of consciousness in literary narration". Magdalena Rembowska-Pluciennik, "Narrative Models of Intersubjectivity", trans. M. Skotnicka, *Teksty Drugie* 2012, no. 2, pp. 202–215, http://rcin.org.pl/Content/52167/WA248_71485_P1-2524_rembow-narrative.pdf [accessed 20 October 2018].

the Other in people's eyes as well as finding himself mirrored through the lens of the secondary stories. Thus Brown constantly experiments with the various possibilities of the literary medium for the representation of the intersections of "self-awareness and the experience of the Other"²¹. In *Vinland*, these confrontations fulfil the paradigm of intersubjective writing as they exceed the levels of convention, genre or theme. The narration does not only tell about multiple journeys, it becomes "a sequence of movements in space-time and in the mental space (of the author and the reader / narrator and character / character and the reader)"²². For this reason Brown's literary narration in *Vinland* can be viewed as the realisation of a model of literary cognitive multiplicity, one where "the literary narrative occurs as a construct originated by the intersubjective cooperation between the author and the reader"²³. The issue of the possibility of cognising the man and the world through the literary narrative is strongly thematised through self-referential elements.

Thus, the use of storytelling as a theme and an autothematic motif in *Vinland* is, very complex and deserves more attention. In Brown's text all the levels of movement in spatio-temporal and mental spaces are linked to the topos of narrating some stories, which in turn is linked to the symbolically used location of Vinland. The primary story told about the new land is that of its discovery, but then the setting starts functioning as the vortex of the individual's memories, dreams, desires and plans of return. Brown's Vinland then becomes not just a quasi-geographical place, but an impossible daydream. Additionally it functions as an intertextual element evoking the northern storytelling tradition: 1) Vinland of old Icelandic sagas (*Saga of Eric the Red* and *Saga of the Greenlanders*), 2) St Brandon's mythical land of happiness, 3) Valhalla of the Norse myths of Valkyries and 4) Tir-nan-og of the Celtic myths. This last association is textually suggested on the meta-narrative level, with Tir-nan-og appearing as the title of the last section of the novel. This final part of the novel is focused on the last phase of Ranald's life and it ends with his death. It also provides a plot-framing device through the repeated motif of a ship journey to Vinland. The ultimately successful but also disillusioned, and possibly mentally delusional Ranald orders the building of a ship to sail back to the land discovered in his youth. This does not happen, what happens instead is that he passes away and the final Mass is held for him in a chapel that has the shape of a ship.

In course of its development *Vinland* stops being a story of a particular individual and it becomes a story of everyman. It is made clear in the final stage of Ranald's life, in the conversation on the spiritual topics with the monk. As Ranald shares his insights into his own and his land's development, Abbot Peter – represented as the insightful one – generalises upon human freedom, transposing the patterns of Ranald's previous experience and his current old-age reflections into a philosophical commentary on the values of human existence, whatever one's stance in life:

²¹ Rembowska-Płuciennik, "Intersubiektywność ...", op. cit., p. 217 [translation mine].

²² Ibid., p. 217 [translation mine].

²³ Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik, *Poetyka intersubiektywności: Kognitywistyczna teoria narracji a proza XX wieku*, Toruń: UMK 2012, p. 15 [translation mine].

But **every man born is aware now and then** in the course of his life, of what you have just called a wild sweet freedom when all seems to be possible and good. **No matter what mask** he wears, **this Everyman – earl or beggar** – he finds himself, **mind and spirit and body**, possessed with a joy that he cannot explain or comprehend – sometimes only once or twice in his life, sometimes often, and I have known men who seem to have that pure light on their faces always²⁴.

The commentary thus relates to Ranald's choices and ideals in life. It indirectly comments on his moments of insight and joy, and on his freedom in making choices. The concept of the mask mentioned in the fragment is one of the crucial signs repetitively used in the novel to denote some characters' instability or shocking change. This also relates to *Vinland* as a whole. Significantly, the crucial feature of the novel is also its lack of unity. The style of the ending does not seem to fulfil the horizon of expectations created by its opening and middle parts. For example, as Rowena Murray and Brian Murray point out, the abbot's speech is reminiscent of a sermon – it continues for three pages in continuous prose, with no paragraph divisions. They hesitate to say whether this is the moment of some textual flaw but they find it redeemed by the text's focus, the persuasive quality of the voice and the "range of imagery"²⁵. However, it needs to be noted that the monologue proceeds from the previous conversation and as such it seems to be an intersubjective element, foregrounding the unity of the two speakers' minds through the merging of worldviews between friends. Such a fusion of voices between characters (or characters and the narrator) is a frequent device in Brown. All the textual devices and techniques work to highlight the multiple intersubjective property of narrative which is true of narratives in general but is not always thematised, as in Brown's novel.

There are multiple techniques used in *Vinland* to inscribe the individual life into the context of the historic tensions, commenting thus on the cultural identity of large pan-national areas of Northern European culture. In the middle of the novel there is a meagre poet who comes to Ranald's household to recite some poems. The fragments of the texts that he presents turn out to have been composed by another artist, described as a grand court poet, known as Arnor, whom he heard some time previously and, as it is explicitly stated, can only poorly imitate. One of the songs is about a terrible place and the other about the place of plenty. The two stories turn out to retell Ranald's earlier experiences of the *Vinland* and *Clontarf* conflicts. A further identity-related complication is provided by the fact that Arnor is an artistic name. It conceals the identity of Ranald's unruly son who earlier in the novel is presented as a good-for-nothing boy. Notably, he escaped from home to avoid conflict with his father, which repeats, with a change, the paradigm of young Ranald's behaviour.

A central issue in the text is that of discovering the meaning of experience, understanding one's life and facing memories. While Ranald initially openly declares that

²⁴ George Mackay Brown, *Vinland*, London: Flamingo 1995, p. 186 [emphasis mine].

²⁵ Murray and Murray, op. cit., p. 241.

he wants to confront his memories with the new stories presented, the storyteller criticises this perspective, suggesting one needs to disassociate the events from the character:

'I know that you were at Clontarf,' said the poet, 'But for all you knew about it, about the true essential meaning of the event, you might as well have been at the horse-fair in Dounby. You are as ignorant of the meaning of war as old Sverr the smith who stayed at home beside the forge and anvil'²⁶.

Further on, before the poet starts his recitation, he says that he intends to use the battle as an example of any conflict ever. His commentary creates a distanced perspective to the events presented in his dramatic ballads as well as in the earlier parts of *Vinland*. However, the reader cannot fail to compare these two poems (of new land of discovery and of the battle) to the earlier episodes of Ranald's experience of the journey and of Clontarf. These fragments are intended to dynamically reformulate the reader's intersubjective experience of narrative as made of stories that are represented through particular acts of storytelling.

Looking into the stylistic features of the description of the battle of Clontarf it turns out that it is also focused on a distanced perception. In the very heat of the battle Ranald's position is represented more as an observer than as the participant in the action (just as it was the case in the *Vinland* episode). In the scenes set in Ireland, despite his vigorous fighting he is characterised through the quality of spectatorship. The text highlights this fact through the used similes and metaphors:

Still the swords of the Orkneymen and the Icelanders rose and fell, in what **seemed to Ranald** to be a steady **regular rhythm, like shining ebb waves against three rocks**. It **seemed to Ranald** that he was **a spectator, observing a ritual, coldly**. Then **he was aware that** his own sword was rising and falling between the swords of Hrafn and Asmund the Icelanders – and that, now and then, here and there, an enemy soldier was crumpling in front of him.

The faces about him were all **distorted, like hideous masks**. And **he knew that** his own face was twisted with rage and blood-lust and a kind of terrible joy.

The raven fluttered over the host. **Then the raven was down in a flurry**, among the scrummage of men²⁷.

The fragment reveals the dense use of motifs that reoccur in *Vinland*, such as ebb, wave, rocks and masks. In this conflict description, as elsewhere, they are linked to the culturally significant concepts of ritual, ceremony and cycle. What distinguishes Ranald is being there in the double role of a spectator and an agent of the ceremonial action. The reader is placed in a similar role of the one who observes the textual signs,

²⁶ Brown, *Vinland*, op. cit., p. 114.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103 [emphasis mine].

and their ebb-like return and modification. The conflict scene is represented through the symbolic use of the motifs introduced earlier.

The raven motif, which appears in the above quote as the embroidered army banner, is a totemic sign indicating victory or failure. It is textually established as such but it also works to point to previous oral and written literary tradition. The motif of the raven banner made by the mother of Sigurd is taken from the *Orkneyinga Saga*. In Brown's novel it is first used in an unobtrusive way in the Vinland discovery scene, where a starving raven is released from a cage to indicate land. Before flying away, it climbs the mast and becomes a heraldic sign pointing, strangely, to the ship but also to the new land. The raven is an important symbol in Norse mythology. In the discussed text, both upon its first usage and in the battle scene it is applied in the way that foregrounds the topic of identity and identity testing. The raven is in the Clontarf scene a meaningful sign of a defeat of the Orkney army. It works as a prophecy (thus a story) on the level of characters, and additionally as a device foregrounding realisation of a particular anticipated plot on the level of reception.

Throughout the novel the reader is constantly induced to trace the senses, confronting them on the one hand with their previous (and later applications) and on the other hand with the cultural connotations. The text uses the northern cultural context to engage the reader in the dynamically evolving network of symbolic representation, where the initially unobtrusive signs gradually gain figurative importance, thus activating the focus on reception. Many central textual signs, such as ship, journey, story, poem, Vinland, raven and mask are used in such an interrelated polysemic way²⁸, which necessitates the reader's perception of the textual patterns and provokes the tracing of the evoked semantic relations. The reader is provoked in multiple subtle ways through projecting his active role by means of experiential and intersubjective techniques of narration that prove far more experimental than they initially seem.

A common motif is also the presence of the auto-referential motif, the harper, singer or a poet in many crucial scenes. The poet reciting the battle poem in Ranald's house is a man with a small harp who organises his story poetically and aesthetically (or rather anti-aesthetically) in the way that necessitates deciphering its meaning within the mythical cognitive frames:

Bloodied heroes on horseback,
Many corpses, a multitude.
The Valkyries unstrung

²⁸ This use of polysemy is typical not just for literary works but applies the general rules of how this device functions in the system of a language. Charles J. Fillmore and B. T. S. Atkins describe a prototypical polysemic situation, drawing attention to the activity of "trac[ing] back [the polysemic senses] to the same word", and the emergence of "a network-like description [with] adjacent senses". "Metaphoric mapping" is frequently part of the process, just as emergence of a "cognitive asymmetry". Ch. J. Fillmore and B. T. S. Atkins, "Describing Polysemy: The Case of 'Crawl'", in: *Polysemy: Theoretical and Computational Approaches*, eds. Y. Ravin and C. Leacock, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, p. 100.

Each soldier, laid in their loom
The guts hot with gore,
Slimed with death-silver²⁹.

Through the way Ranald's Vinland story is told, Brown seems to examine the patterns of history and storytelling on many levels: on the individual level (one's participation in history and their life story) and community level (community history and changes in culture) as well as on the generalised, abstracted level (allegorical representation of history). *Vinland* combines these perspectives for exploring how stories and storytelling work for the constitution and dissemination of narrative identity. Some scholars have already sensed the importance of such a thematised problem of the stories in this novel, however, without noting the importance of this technique for the process of reception. Timothy C. Baker draws attention to the fact that in *Vinland* "community is presented as a place of origin, accessible only through stories, to which the individual is finally unable to return"³⁰. He later voices a claim that in this novel "one story gains enormous explanatory power"³¹. Brown is endlessly interested in the related constituents of existence, identification and integrity crucial for the individual and for their spiritual development, but also for the reader's cognition of how identity is formed on individual and community levels.

The novel, despite criticism for repetitive formulaic use of some narrative patterns³², reveals also the functional use of style that corresponds to the psychological accuracy of character in situational and life-cycle contexts. The stylistic features of the text change dynamically to represent the character's transformation. This is something Brown applies after the modernists, for example James Joyce who used this technique in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Brown's realisation of the concept of stylistic markers of the story of cognitive and psychological development can be illustrated by the opening of the novel. The novel's initial paragraph is deliberately plain to reflect the child's (the focaliser's) way of thinking and feeling through the undeveloped narrative structures:

There **was a boy** who lived in a hamlet in Orkney called Hamnavoe. The **boy's name was Ranald. Ranald's father had** a small ship **called** Snowgoose. **Ranald's father** – his **name was** Sigmund Firemouth – **did not like** the land **or** anything to do with it, such as ploughs **or** horses **or** barns³³.

²⁹ Brown, *Vinland*, op. cit., p. 115.

³⁰ Timothy C. Baker, *George Mackay Brown and the Philosophy of Community*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2009, p. 113.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

³² J. Meldon D'Arcy speaks of Brown's repetitive use of some narrative elements voicing also a direct claim of the author's "imprecise narrative technique" and deploring the resulting impression that "the novel is not a convincing work of art". J. Meldon D'Arcy, *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature*, East Linton: Tuckwell Press 1996, p. 274.

³³ Brown, *Vinland*, op. cit., p. 1 [emphasis mine].

The opening passage encodes a child-like simplified cognition of major identity codifying concepts such as: names (acquired after the father or denoting one's features), geographical origin (a particular small place), cultural belonging (rural or seafaring community) and difficult legacy (father's behaviour patterns). This is conveyed in oral-like style marked by: parallel syntax, short sentences, and the repetitive use of simple words and personal references. The sequence of action is related through plain information-oriented language.

However, the style in *Vinland* can also be very intricate, sometimes using the principles of intermedia quasi-cinematic technique, for example in the scene narrating colonial violence that happens when the Viking sailors make first contact with the skraeling tribe in Vinland. The scene of celebrating mutual exchange of gifts and civilities is changed into a scene of watching a dance performed by the indigenous tribe. The European characters' lack of understanding of the signs and codes used in the ceremony develops into the plot of colonial disturbance and violence, confirming the change of Vinland from a *locus amoenus* into a *locus horridus*. This transformation results from a man's fall – a very Biblical motif, typical of Brown – but this fall is a different act of consumption. Because of drinking too much, the crew poet fails to produce the promised ballad, necessary for the sailors to make sense of their experience. The Europeans then are the lost in their cognition. The narrative describes the transformation in the way that foregrounds the issues of perception and interpretation. One of the gestures of a ceremonial war dance is mistaken by Wolf, the crew cook³⁴, as an act of violence. The Viking then kills the dancer despite the fact that a moment earlier he himself uttered a warning that things might be getting out of control (this warning also works as a proleptic plot indication for the reader). The situation is rendered in the quasi-cinematic technique of a sequential close-up that frames the details of the figures so tightly that it disturbs the clear perception. The scene is additionally enhanced in effect through a focus on multi-sensory description of sounds and movement:

One of the warriors turned in his wild whirling and found himself face to face with Wolf. He raised his spear and thrust his painted **face close against the cook's**.

Then the **sun flashed** on a steel blade. There was a **smashing of bone** and the **thud of a body** on the sand, then from the head of the fallen dancer **blood gushed** into the sand.

The dance stopped.

Leif said, 'I think it is time for us to be getting back to the ship now'³⁵.

The passage is fragmentary, evasive and elliptical. It is saga-like, being focused on people's gestures and effects of actions rendered in an emotionless way, which

³⁴ A further interpretative challenge for the reader of this novel and implicitly of all Brown's output is the fact that attributing this character with such a profession Brown makes him reminiscent of the figure of Hakon's cook Lifolf who murdered St Magnus, an Orkney saint. The writer used this plot earlier in his novel *Magnus*, retelling the story from the medieval *Orkneyinga Saga*.

³⁵ Brown, *Vinland*, op. cit., p. 15 [emphasis mine].

makes the situation very dynamic. Its detached formula also results in the questioning of the clear-cut judgments in the issues of power. Brown manages to eliminate assessment and yet to foreground the ethical issues. This is done through the immediacy of presentation with experiential and intersubjective effect in reception, augmented through sensory perception and the principle of selection.

The fragment is featured with the sparse, unadorned facts that require interpretation. The dramatic quality of the scene is enhanced by the fact that it is not immediately clear who dies in the conflict. The way the text is composed leads the reader to conjecture that Wolf might be a victim, which is not the case. The text makes the reader take the effort to reconceptualise certain assumptions in the act of reception.

The last example of Brown's varied, experimental use of style that I want to use to illustrate the experiential and intersubjective quality of narration in *Vinland* can be found in another fragment describing the suspension of social rules. Prior to the description of the battle of Clontarf, which Ranald participates in, there comes a striking carnivalesque scene described in much circumstantial detail. This scene renders cognition as an interplay of many different constituents that involve the perception of characters in their predictable roles, with their mini-stories and their points of view entailed in the description. The passage quoted below is focused on depicting the direct and indirect participation in the battle, showing people engaged in the action, spectatorship and storytelling that takes place on the edge of the battlefield:

On the outskirts of the battlefield cooks were busy with pots and hunks of meat and fires, and blacksmiths' hammers rang and stammered, and a few hucksters had even set up their booths to sell fish and cheese and religious trinkets. [...]

Crowds had come in from the city and the countryside **to see the battle**, and in **hopes to pick up scraps of booty** here and there, after the **last horns of retreat had sounded** out under the **first stars**, and before the **blood-smelling wolves** began to stir in the forest³⁶.

It is immediately after this fragment that the harper figure is mentioned and the spectatorship of the people involved is foregrounded:

A harper went here and there with his songs, among the spectators.

Clontarf was a noisy place that morning. Ranald had never known such babble and outcry and clangings, not along the waterfront of Bergen or at the horse-racing in Greenland³⁷.

The text thus provokes receiving the events as a sort of spectacle and relating them to the previously related moments of spectatorship (the Bergen cognition-oriented phase of the story, and the Greenland fragment focused on spectatorship). The topos of perception and storytelling is thematised in the novel in many ways, problematising

³⁶ Ibid., p. 98 [emphasis mine].

³⁷ Ibid., p. 98 [emphasis mine].

the characters' and the addressee's (spectators') perception. Such techniques counter the very traditional ways of narrating the story that are also present. The first narrative of the battle initially provokes the principle of identification, being rendered in terms of the character's immediate sensory perception of sounds, sights and smells, particularly at the stage of battle preparations. The composition of this part of the text points to some of the techniques used by Brown to activate the multi-perspective, intersubjective reception of the fictional world in the reading process. The text necessitates the cognitive alertness of the reader, ensuring their strong participatory and experiential orientation. The technique can be described as the pro-narrative use of characters who do not just function as figures in the background, or participants of the events, but who facilitate varied focalization that brings in each case a different story (a mini narrative of hopes and conflicts in battlefield that are enabled by common activities like cooking, ironwork, trade, spectatorship, looting, scavenging, harping or remembering one's past). All this is part of the larger story that contributes to the intersubjective effect in reading.

The textually represented figure of the anonymous harper who „went here and there in his songs“ reveals in a symbolic way a particular technique of Brown's novel which is based on its sequential and fragmentary composition. The endlessly echoing organisation of the multi-narrative story material ultimately aims to problematise the issues of storytelling, spectatorship and cognition.

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