

directed against another person, can be used to malign and destroy. This is what makes Freud and Augustine such ambiguous figures. What is great in them is inextricably bound up with that which is repulsive.

The comparison with Augustine points towards the true status of Freud. He is not a scientist, nor is he – as Lesley Chamberlain suggests in her intriguing new book – a “secret artist”. He is the last of the great theologians. If Marx provided the 20th century with a secular millennialism, Freud provided it with a secular Gnosticism. These secular myths give us something that the special sciences cannot, by their very nature, give us – a symbolic system in which we “live, and move, and have our being”. This is why we cannot do without them. Despite the refutation of almost all of Freud’s scientific claims, our understanding of the mind is still more Freudian than it is pre-Freudian. And we will continue to live under his shadow until a new theologian displaces him.

Edward Skidelsky writes regularly for the books pages

**MAGNUS MAGNUSSON** celebrates the work of the great Icelandic Nobel laureate Halldor Laxness

## Seeing the truth



**A**rthur Christiansen, the legendary editor of the *Daily Express*, once said: “It isn’t easy to be simple. You have to be very clever to be simple.” The same goes for “guileless”: you have to be full of guile to be “guileless”, to beguile your readers in the best sense of the word.

I was reminded of these aphorisms by an old and valued friend from my days with the Scottish *Daily Express* in the 1950s – Jack Campbell, who was then the managing editor. He had to go into hospital, and he asked me to send him some “light reading”. I sent him a newly reissued copy of my translation of *The Fish Can Sing*, by Halldor Laxness, Iceland’s 1955 Nobel Prizewinner. And he was hooked, overwhelmed by the deceptive simplicity of style of this endearing and multifaceted novel, underscored by irony and lyricism.

He is not the only one. Halldor Laxness (1902-98), one of the great European novelists of the 20th century, is making a comeback. In the past two years, two of his novels have been republished in Britain by the Harvill Press – *The Fish Can Sing* (first published in Britain in 1966) and, last year, *Independent People* (translated by J A Thompson and first published in 1945); another two, I understand, are on the stocks. He is revered in Iceland, but in Britain he never sustained the reputation that he achieved with his first translated novel, *Independent People*. It was a Book of the Month Club choice in America in 1946, and sold 500,000 copies. Brad Leithauser of the *New York Review of Books* wrote of it that there “are good books and there are great books and there may even be a book that is something still more: it is the book of your life”.

*Independent People* (*Sjalfstaett folk*), which Laxness published as a two-volume epic in 1934-35, is the furiously bitter story of an obstinate and indomitable crofter in early 20th-century Iceland and his heroically unavailing struggle against the harsh forces of

both man and nature. With his social realism and uncompromisingly sardonic but compassionate depiction of the squalor of rural life, Laxness was hailed as Iceland’s John Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis and Upton Sinclair combined: a significant new voice in world literature.

But the *succès d’estime* that attended his American debut soon faded, perhaps because its sentiments were considered too radical for the anti-communist mood of cold-war America. He came to be considered anti-American – especially with his 1948 satire on postwar Icelandic politics, *The Atom Station* (*Atomstodin*). Politicians in Iceland were conspiring to “sell” their country to the Americans for a Nato airbase at Keflavik; the narrator is a wonderfully sane young girl from the north who comes to the capital to work as a housemaid in the Reykjavik home of her MP, the worldly cabinet minister Bui Arland. I translated it in 1961 – my first Laxness translation. It was not, to my mind, a political novel at all: it was a novel of national pride, as well as a sustained attack on the chicanery and rootlessness of the new urban culture of the intellectual society of the capital. Also in *The Atom Station*, Laxness introduced the first of the quiet, unselfish, undogmatic philosophers (the organist) who would create a centre of stillness and gravity in many of his subsequent novels.

After *The Atom Station*, there was no stopping me. Laxness, I confess, had long been worrying me – not the man himself, I hasten to say, but the very idea of Laxness in translation. Despite the 1955 Nobel Prize, he was still virtually unknown to English-speaking readers. Why? I had developed a theory that English-speaking readers were interested only in Great Power literature – American, French, German, Russian and, as a recent development, Japanese.

Laxness obsessed me. I fell upon *Paradise Reclaimed* (*Paradis-arheimt*, 1960), which I translated in 1962. It is the story of a crofter-farmer in late 19th-century Iceland. He is a conscientious farmer, a man of integrity who loves his family and wants, above all, to create an earthly paradise for his two young children; and yet, the more he tries to protect them from the harsh realities of the world, the more suffering he unwittingly brings on them. In his quest, he leaves Iceland to seek the blessings of an earthly paradise with the Mormons in Utah, but finds only disillusionment. When he returns home to his former paradise, a sadder and wiser man, he finds that his family has been scattered to the cold winds and he can only start to recultivate his ruined farm.

Then came *The Fish Can Sing* (1966), followed by Laxness’s perhaps most majestic work, *World Light* (1969), and finally *Christianity at Glacier* (1973). Looking back on my “Laxness period” (1961-73), I am slightly appalled at my rashness in attempting to translate him at all. Translation is perhaps the most demanding of literary disciplines. When I was intent on translating the greatest of the classical Icelandic sagas, *Njals Saga*, for Penguin Classics back in the 1960s, I was given some wise advice by E V Rieu, the then editor of the series, offering me more time for completion: “Do your translation – but do it *con amor* not *con labore*.”

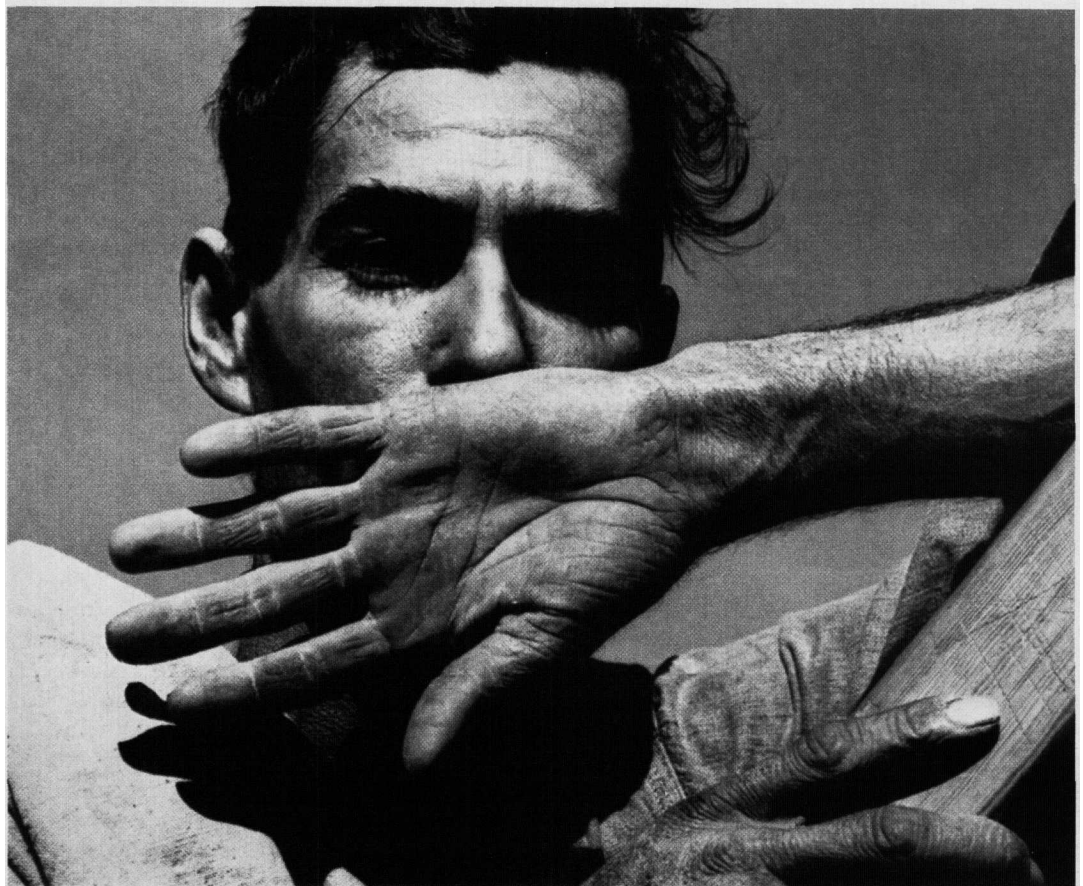
Gustave Flaubert wrote in his *Carnets*: “Human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the time we are longing to move the stars with pity” (translation by Graham Greene, *A Sort of Life*, 1971).

But Laxness did not have one voice. He had several. He was ► 91

► the most protean of novelists. In his great, untranslated (to my shame) novel, *Iceland's Bell*, one of the characters remarks on how mountains in Iceland have different names, depending on which side of them you live: "There is a mountain in the north of Iceland which is called Bakrangi when it is seen from the east, Ogaungufjall if one looks at it from the west, but Galti when seen from the sea, to the north."

It is a striking observation as a metaphor for "truth" – and for Laxness himself, with his capacity to encourage us to see "the truth" from many angles and points of view, from above or below, from north or south, from left or right. But I also see it as a metaphor for the gigantic literary stature of the great European novelist who saw, and expressed, life in the round – from every side.

## Documenting Depression



Wizened by work: a migratory cotton-picker, Eloy, Arizona, 1940. From *Dorothea Lange: photographs of a lifetime* (Aperture, £33). In the historic decade of the 1930s, Lange was a motivator of the national conscience

PHILIPPA BOSTON

## Black and white

**FRIENDS AND ENEMIES: OUR NEED TO LOVE AND HATE**

Dorothy Rowe *HarperCollins*, 551pp, £19.99

£15.99 at [www.newstatesman.co.uk](http://www.newstatesman.co.uk) (+£1 p&p)

**F**riends have never been more important. We live in an age when the definition of family is becoming ever more inclusive. It is no coincidence that a television sitcom about six close friends who all live within a web of each other's lives leads the viewing ratings. Friends are the new family. My "brother" does not necessarily share my blood.

The *Friends* formula – for those of you who have been on the moon or watching only BBC for the past five years – is not only to play on emotions within the group, but also to introduce an outsider – a stranger – and watch the drama play itself out. Friends and enemies. We've all been there.

If only it were that simple. The psychologist Dorothy Rowe begins her new book with a quotation: "You don't make friends, you recognise them." True. But, as Rowe found once she started to ask

are people. Having taken the reader through the gamut of human nature, from tribal roots to the civilised state we believe ourselves to have achieved today, Rowe also shows us that the definition of enemy is far more simple: an enemy is born, rather than made.

Rowe's suppositions are based on a belief in a "meaning structure", through which we translate our interactions with others. Our membership of a group, or tribe, is dependent on the extent to which our meaning structure relates to that of the other members of the tribe. So he is my enemy because he is white while I am black, or he is Christian while I am Jewish, he is Catholic while I am Protestant, he is Serb while I am Kosovan Albanian, and so on. Rowe ranges across continents, religions and political movements in search of what she calls "primitive pride" – something that both demands and supports the blind faith that allows one man to wreak the most atrocious crimes on his neighbour. "It seems that 7,500 years has not been enough for most people to learn how to separate the ideas of 'stranger' and 'kill'," she writes.

It is a relief, therefore, to come upon a chapter, at the end of the book, called "The End of Enmity". Citing the work of Senator George Mitchell in Northern Ireland and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Rowe argues that, although supremely difficult, forgiveness and change are possible. Yes, but for how long?