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VOL 42 PART 1

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Scandinavica

An International Journal of Scandinavian Studies

Vol 42 No 1 May 2003

Edited by Janet Garton

1. *Scandinavica* is designed and distributed from the University of East Anglia, Norwich and printed by Page Bros, Norwich.

2. *Scandinavica* is published with support from Statens humanistiske forskningsråd (Denmark), Norges almenvitenskaplige forskningsråd, Humanistisksamhällsvetenskapliga forskningsråd (Sweden), the Nordic Board for Periodicals in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOP-HS) and the British Academy.

3. The cover design is based on a drawing by Egil Bakka (University of Bergen), of a Viking ornament in gold foil, paper thin, with impressed figures (size 16 x 21 mm). It was found in 1897 at Hauge, Klepp, Rogalund, and is now in the collection of the Historisk museum, University of Bergen (inv. no. 9392). It depicts a love scene, possibly (according to Magnus Olsen) between the fertility god Freyr and the maiden Gerðr; the large penannular brooch of the man's cloak dates the work as being most likely 10th century.

4. Copyright © 2003 by the Editor, *Scandinavica*, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England. Volume 42 (2003): Inland £18.50 (individuals), £32.00 (institutions) inclusive of postage; abroad US\$50.00 (individuals), US\$65.00 (institutions) inclusive of postage. Subscription orders should be placed either with your usual bookseller/agent or else sent direct to *Scandinavica*, Subscriptions Dept (LLT), University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, England.

e-mail: Norvik.Press@uea.ac.uk

ISSN 0036-5653

Special Issue

The Silent Music of The Clouds

100 Years with
Halldór Laxness

Guest Editors:
Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir
and Daisy Neijmann

Contents

OBITUARIES

- Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson 7
Hermann Pálsson 9

ARTICLES

- Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir and Daisy Neijmann: Introduction 11
Magnus Magnusson: The Fish Can Sing: Translation and Reception
of Halldór Laxness in the UK and USA 13
Halldór Guðmundsson: In Search of the Most Precious Pearl:
On the Life and Works of Halldór Laxness 29
Ástráður Eysteinnsson: Halldór Laxness and the Narrative of the
Icelandic Novel 47
Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir: Penny for Your Thoughts: Art and Reward
in Halldór Laxness' *Brekkukotsannáll* (*The Fish Can Sing*) 67
Rory McTurk: From Finland Station to Atom Station: A Possible
Case of Influence 79
Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir: Becoming a Writer: Halldór Laxness
and the Memoir 95
Joe Allard: The Shadow of Laxness – A Personal View 109
Halldór Laxness: A Bibliography 123

REVIEW ARTICLE

- Marie Wells: Atle Kittang: *Ibsens heroisme. Frå 'Brand' til 'Når vi døde vågner'*. Anne Marie Rekdal: *Frihetens dilemma; Ibsen lest med Lacan*. Lisbeth Pettersen Wærp: *Overgangens figurasjoner. En studie i Henrik Ibsens 'Kejser og Galilæer' og 'Når vi døde vågner'* 127

sagas as a subject of university study. It was voted an unqualified success, and became the forerunner to a triennial series of International Saga Conferences held in various countries.

Hermann's most significant work was on the vast medieval literature of Iceland and its relationship to European humanism. He published several books in which he explored this fertile field: he showed that the sagas were not a uniquely indigenous flowering of native genius sprouting from the virgin soil of Iceland, but had benefited immensely from influences from abroad – not just from Ireland but also from mainstream European thinking and literature. He published studies on many of the major prose sagas and Eddaic poems, as well as several books and articles on the origins and context of saga writing (and reading) in medieval Iceland, for which he coined the term *sagnaskemmtun* ('saga entertainment').

For my own part, I would highlight his huge contribution to introducing the Icelandic sagas to the English-speaking world with a series of ground-breaking translations. He translated all of the 'Big Five' of the saga canon (two of them with me, for the Penguin Classics series): *Njáls saga*, *Egils saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. He also translated *Orkneyinga saga*, *Hrafnkels saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Gísla saga* and many others, as well as volumes of the later 'Legendary Sagas' and the important *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements), Iceland's equivalent of the *Domesday Book* – a twelfth-century compilation of the 440 original Norse settlers of Iceland and their descendants.

Hermann's last publication, which came out shortly before he died, was an edition of the thirteenth-century religious poem *Sólarljóð* (Song of the Sun), a remarkable epic ecstasy by an unnamed visionary monk. Since his death another pioneering book has been published: *Grettissaga og íslensk siðmenning* (*Grettis saga* and Icelandic culture), a study of the cultural influences from abroad which helped to inspire that great classical Icelandic saga.

With Hermann's death, the academic world of Icelandic studies has lost one of its most distinguished practitioners. His myriad friends have lost a steadfast comrade, always ready to help others in their work, and an endlessly entertaining and stimulating companion. For myself, I treasure the privilege of having had the opportunity of working with a scholar who wore his immense erudition so lightly.

MAGNUS MAGNUSSON KBE

Introduction

Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir
and
Daisy Neijmann

University College London

The year 2002 saw the centenary of the birth of the Icelandic author Halldór Laxness (1902-1998). Many events were organised across Europe and North America in honour of the occasion. It seemed a particularly opportune moment to draw attention to this author in Britain, considering the renewed interest in publishing the works of Laxness in English. As a result, a conference on Halldór Laxness was held at the Department of Scandinavian Studies, University College London in September 2002 entitled 'The Silent Music of the Clouds: 100 Years of Halldór Laxness', with the financial assistance of the Egill Skallagrímsson Fund and the support of the Icelandic Embassy in London. We invited speakers from Iceland and Britain, asking them to focus on the impact, interpretation and translation of Laxness in the English-speaking world.

The interest proved overwhelming. People from across Britain, as well as Icelanders, from all ages and backgrounds, took part, indicating the attraction of modern Icelandic literature in Britain today.

We were keen to follow up on this new wave of enthusiasm for Laxness' works by making the papers available in print. We were therefore delighted to find *Scandinavica* shared our view and offered to devote a special issue to this. It seemed an attractive opportunity as

Scandinavica had earlier published a special Laxness issue in honour of the author's 70th birthday in May 1972. That volume was edited by Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson, who sadly passed away last year.

In editing this collection it has been our intention to introduce Laxness to a wider audience, as the conference demonstrated that the interest in Laxness transcends the academic world.

The first three papers in this collection approach the works of Laxness as a whole, providing an introduction to the author and his oeuvre. Magnus Magnusson's address explains Laxness' entrance into and reception in the English-speaking world; Halldór Guðmundsson's article provides an overview of the author's life and work; and Ástráður Eysteinnsson examines Laxness' position in the Icelandic literary canon. The next group of papers is devoted to close readings of individual works. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir focuses on *The Fish Can Sing*; Rory McTurk investigates *The Atom Station*; and Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir – whose paper is based on a lecture given at the Nordic Literature Group at University College London in December 2002 – explores Laxness' autobiographical works. The final paper, by Joe Allard, speculates on the heritage of Laxness in contemporary Icelandic literature as it appears to an outsider.

We also include a bibliography both of Laxness' many works in Icelandic and of Laxness in English. It is particularly encouraging to see that the last five years alone have seen five translations reissued, while several more are in the pipeline, including works never previously published in English.

Finally we would like to extend our gratitude to all those who have made this initiative a success, including the speakers and participants at the conference, and the Icelandic Embassy in London, in particular the then Ambassador Þorsteinn Pálsson and Reverend Jón A. Baldvinsson.

The Fish Can Sing: Translation and Reception of Halldór Laxness in the UK and USA

Magnus Magnusson KBE

Glasgow

Fiskurinn hefur fögur hljóð,
finnst hann oft á heiðum,
ærnar renna eina slóð
eftir sjónum breiðum.

Ladies and gentlemen:

That is a seventeenth-century Icelandic *öfugmæli*, or riddling rhyme. It is a paradox which baffles explanation but paradoxically needs none, either – although a translation might come in useful:

The fish can sing just like a bird,
grazing on the moorland scree,
while cattle in a lowing herd
roam the rolling sea.

That type of rhyming paradox was much in vogue in earlier times in Iceland, because Icelanders have always loved playing with words, manipulating words, making words dance to new melodies. The rhyme was quoted by Halldór Laxness in *Brekkukotsannáll* (1957) – which

means, literally, The Annals of Brekkukot. When I translated *Brekkukotsannáll* more than 30 years ago, that is what I wanted to call it – *The Annals of Brekkukot* – so that it would be recognisably similar to the original; but the publishers felt that this title would be too off-putting for English-speaking readers, and plucked from the novel the enigmatic and inspired alternative of *The Fish Can Sing* (1966/2000).

Fiskurinn hefur fögur hljóð: The fish can sing, eh? The more I thought about it, the more I liked it and soon became entirely reconciled to the idea of a title so radically different from the original. It seemed to me to epitomise so much about the novel, so much about Halldór Laxness, indeed so much about Iceland itself. Most people associate Iceland exclusively with fish (if they associate Iceland with anything) – dried fish and wet fish, flat fish and white fish, stockfish and klippfisk – and, of course, Cod Wars; but the song of Iceland – ‘the Silent Music of the Clouds’ – is something much more special and particular. The paradox of the title also chimes with the paradox of the nature and character of Halldór himself, both as a person and as a writer.

Brekkukotsannáll is one of Halldór’s most endearing and many-faceted novels. As a translator I shouldn’t have favourites, but *Brekkukotsannáll* ranks very high in my heart. The story is deceptively simple, but not simply told, and it always delights me to return to it. What a wonderful evocation it gives of a period of peri-urban life on the outskirts of Reykjavík early in the twentieth century, told through the eyes and ears of Álfrímur, whose itinerant mother gave birth to him in the turf-roofed cottage of Björn of Brekkukot, the lumpfish-fisherman. It is the history of his boyhood and youth, absorbing the gentle, Sermon-on-the-Mount morality of an earlier time, as he grows up in his adoptive grandparents’ home. It is a poor but hospitable place, where dignified understatement is the norm and everything from a lumpfish to a bible has a fixed price which never changes. As Álfrímur recalls: ‘In Brekkukot, words were too precious to use – because they meant something; our conversation was like pristine money before inflation’ (*The Fish Can Sing*, p.117).¹

Strangers are always welcome at Brekkukot, and a procession of lodgers of hilarious individuality takes root over the years in the mid-

loft, where Álfrímur learns about Taoism and much else besides. It is an entrancing, lyrical reminiscence of a lost age, of the genuine and unassuming way of life in an old-fashioned, self-sufficient homestead.

The contrast comes when Álfrímur goes to school and begins to learn Latin and music and to sing ‘Allt eins og blómstrið eina’ (Just as the One True Flower)² at paupers’ funerals; now he comes into contact with a very different, commercially-orientated world in which words are no longer the gold standard and the concept of ‘renown’, however fraudulent, is over-riding. The reigning spirit in this new world is the Icelandic opera-singer Garðar Hólm, whose fabled world success has become a source of pride to all his countrymen – and especially to the Danish-born merchant Gúðmúsen, whose shop sponsored Garðar Hólm’s training at music college in Copenhagen. ‘The fish can sing!’ carols Gúðmúsen at a banquet for the home-coming hero. ‘It is high time that we here in Iceland started to have singing fish’ (p.204).

But can the fish sing? The adolescent Álfrímur, his voice already showing immense promise, encounters his idol, Garðar Hólm, but his meetings only serve to make the man and his fame even more mysterious.

The riddle of renown and the perception of purity of note, lie at the heart of this ironic and reflective chronicle. ‘I am not very good at singing,’ says the age-old Pastor Jóhann who invites the boy to sing at the lonely funerals of anonymous vagrants and ne’er-do-wells, ‘but I know that there is one note, and it is pure’ (p.62).

The elusive and ambiguous reality of that one pure note is the leitmotif of this subtle and sophisticated novel, sparkling with sly wit and shot through with glinting irony. It was a joy to translate – and it was praised to the skies by discriminating reviewers in Britain at the time:

To read Laxness is to discover an extra taste bud. He creates a world which belongs in another dimension, like the landscape of his country – familiar, strange, seen as in a dream. His is an endearing and unforgettable voice. (Nicholas Shakespeare)

Laxness is a poet who writes to the edge of the pages, a visionary who allows us a plot. He takes a Tolstoyan overview, he weaves in an Evelyn Waugh-like humour. (Fay Weldon)

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the burden of my address this afternoon: how Halldór Laxness has fared in the English-speaking world. What I want to do is to track Halldór's reputation, or the perception of Halldór's stature, in the English-speaking world down the years. Let me take you back to when Halldór deliberately set out to conquer the world as a young man: when he went to Canada and California in the late 1920s.

He had first declared himself as a precocious talent at the age of seventeen in 1919 with his first novel, *Barn náttúrunnar* (Child of Nature), which was privately published. It was a rural love story, strongly influenced by the work of the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun (who won the Nobel Prize for Literature the following year). It was followed by a collection of short stories in 1923 (*Nokkrar sögur*) and his second novel in 1924: *Undir Helgahnúk* (At the Holy Mountain). Neither of these two early novels has been translated into English.

His first major novel followed in 1927 – *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver from Kashmir), a powerful if somewhat chaotic philosophical novel from what is called his 'Catholic' period. It sounded a completely new note in contemporary Icelandic literature: radical, avant-garde, even surrealist in places. It is the semi-autobiographical story of an idealistic young man, the son of well-to-do Reykjavík parents, who abandons the prospects of a secure life in the family fishery company to embark on a quest for the higher values of life. He goes abroad on a spiritual odyssey, journeys across Europe by train, endlessly debating and arguing over the new philosophies and ideologies he comes across. Ultimately he rejects his homeland, his family, the love of his childhood sweetheart – all the earthly, mundane, human things he had held dear – in order to become a monk and serve God. Nothing remotely like it had ever been written in Icelandic, and it was both strongly praised and violently denounced in Iceland when it was published.

This novel was translated into English – but never published. The translation was by Halldór Laxness himself, in collaboration with his friend, the Icelandic artist Magnús Á. Árnason (1894-1978; husband of the English-born artist Barbara Anderson). Halldór and Magnús

translated *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* when they were together in Los Angeles in 1928, but it was returned by all the publishers to whom they submitted it; Halldór's later and rather acid comment was that 'they were not interested in the Pope!' The manuscript of this translation, which had been thought to have been lost, has now been found in the National Library of Iceland (Landsbókasafnið).

When he made his first visit across the broad Atlantic he had set his eyes on becoming a Hollywood scriptwriter – the Eldorado of so many ambitious young writers at the time. He had gone to California in 1927 with 50 dollars and a film script in his pocket; but the script was rejected. Back in Iceland he would transform it into *Salka Valka* (1931-1932; *Salka Valka*, 1936), that magnificently realistic evocation of embryonic class struggle in an isolated fishing village, dominated by the forceful, passionate, generous-hearted young heroine, the eponymous Salka Valka, torn between idealistic left-wing ambition and love and loyalty. *Salka Valka* was the first Laxness novel to be published in English translation, in 1936 – rather a lacklustre version by F. H. Lyon, I am sorry to say, translated not from the Icelandic original but from Danish.

A few years later came *Sjálfstætt fólk* (1934-1935; *Independent People*, 1945/1997), that furiously bitter story of an obstinate and indomitable crofter in early twentieth-century Iceland and his heroically unavailing struggle against the harsh forces both of humanity and of nature. It was translated by James Anderson Thompson and published by Allen & Unwin in London in 1945.

James ('Jim') Anderson Thompson, the first Laxness translator from the original, was a remarkable man who had an equally remarkable career. He was born in Berwick-upon-Tweed in 1910 and studied English and Old Norse at Leeds University, where the Professor of Old English was the redoubtable E. V. Gordon (author of the classic textbook for English-speaking students, *An Introduction to Old Norse*); Thompson graduated in 1931 and planned to embark on a doctoral thesis on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but since *Ulysses* was then banned in Britain he abandoned the project. Instead, through an Icelander he had met at Leeds University, he got a job in Iceland for a year as a schoolteacher in the Menntaskóli (Grammar School) in

Akureyri. On his first visit to the library in Akureyri he found a copy of the forbidden book!

During his year in Akureyri, Thompson became proficient in Icelandic. After he returned from Iceland in 1932 he went back to Leeds University, where he went on to take a Diploma in Education in 1933. Thereafter he married a cousin from Berwick-upon-Tweed who brought to the marriage as a dowry a young son and a tiny licensed hotel in London. There he began working on his translation of *Sjálfstætt fólk*, which was published after eight years of quiet labour. A few years after the war, Thompson and his wife took over a hotel in Leeds, where Thompson also worked as a school-teacher. Thompson was a tall, dark-haired man with a small military moustache – very personable, by all accounts. But he was not a particularly assiduous hotel-keeper – he preferred reading Homer to dealing with customers. I get the impression that his hotel was a sort of embryonic Fawley Towers.

Early in the 1970s he had a nervous breakdown and separated from his wife; he moved to Newcastle upon Tyne, where he lived in a bed-sitter in the Jesmond district near the city centre and got a job as a petrol station attendant. Here he met and made friends with an Icelander who was completing his doctoral thesis at Newcastle upon Tyne – Gísli Már Gíslason, now the Professor of Limnology and Dean of Science at the University of Iceland. Gísli Már remembers him as an entertainingly eccentric drinking-companion whom he met once a week in the Lonsdale pub in Jesmond.

In 1976 Thompson moved back to Leeds and worked as a part-time evening porter in the university's sports hall (he resigned due to ill-health in 1979). Here he used to frequent 'The Original Oaks' pub, where he occasionally met enthusiastic young students like Rory McTurk (now Reader in Icelandic Studies at Leeds University). Gísli Már Gíslason corresponded with him regularly for several years, but in 1984 his letters were returned unopened, and we must presume that Thompson died around then; there were no children of the marriage.

In his volume of autobiographical essays, *Skáldatími* (1963; A Poet's Time), Laxness mentioned meeting Thompson in London soon

after the war 'scrubbing stairs in a fifth-rate hotel'; he went on to say that the poor man had been so exhausted and stressed by his labours on *Independent People* that he never opened a book again! This, I may say, was a typically impish bit of Laxness artistic licence, re-casting Thompson (with hindsight) as the philosopher lavatory-attendant in *The Fish Can Sing!*

But I digress. When Thompson's translation of *Independent People* was published in New York by Alfred Knopf in 1946 it took America by storm. It was promoted by the Book of the Month club and sold half a million copies. Brad Leithauser of the *New York Review of Books* wrote of it: 'There are good books and there are great books, and there may even be a book which is something still more: it is the book of your life.' With his social realism and his uncompromisingly sardonic but compassionate depiction of the degrading squalor of rural life, Laxness was hailed as Iceland's John Steinbeck, Iceland's Sinclair Lewis and Upton Sinclair combined: a significant new voice in world literature.

But the *succès d'estime* which attended his American debut soon faded, perhaps because the book's sentiments were considered too radical for the anti-Communist mood of post-war, Cold-War America. He came to be considered anti-American in a big way – especially with his 1948 satire on post-war Icelandic politics, *Atómstöðin* (*The Atom Station*, 1961/2003). But more of that anon.

The third Laxness novel to be translated into English was *Gerpla* (1952; *The Happy Warriors*), which came out in 1958. It was a curious choice. When Laxness was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955, his waning reputation in the English-speaking world was given a welcome boost. The London publishing house of Methuen & Company must have seen it as an opportunity to jump on to what they doubtless hoped would be a lucrative bandwagon; but which novel to choose? And who would translate it? James Anderson Thompson was presumably no longer interested. Methuen decided on the last novel Laxness had published before being awarded the Nobel Prize – *Gerpla*, which had been published in 1952. They could not find a translator to tackle the Icelandic original, so they chose someone to translate it from a recent *Swedish* version: Catherine John.

Gerpla is a Laxness innovative one-off, you might say: a retelling of *Fóstbræðra Saga* (The Saga of the Blood-Brothers). Its style is a remarkable combination of archaic Old Icelandic and neo-Laxness. Even the title – *Gerpla* – was a neologism, derived from the words *garpr* (hero, champion) and *gerpi* (rogue, scoundrel) to create a word which echoed familiar Icelandic diminutives for specific sagas like *Njála*, *Grettla* and *Egla*. Even translating the title would be a problem – something like *Heroica*, perhaps. *Heroica* would have been a suitably ironic title; because *Gerpla* itself is uncompromisingly anti-heroic. It deflated all the heroic Saga pretensions of pride and violence and contrasted them with the dignified and self-sufficient life of the Inuit in Greenland and the ordinary Icelander in the medieval Saga Age. It was as shocking as an onslaught on the ideology and achievements of the Samurai of medieval Japan. I think Catherine John made a gallant attempt at it, but it failed to make much of a mark.

That was the state of play at the end of the fifties as far as Laxness was concerned: a Nobel Prize-winner with only three of his novels published in English. (In the by-going, I should perhaps mention that in 1959 one of Laxness' long short stories, 'The Honour of the House' (*Ungfrúin góða og húsið*) – a novella, I suppose it could be called – was translated by Kenneth G. Chapman and published in Iceland by Helgafell, Halldór's publisher.)

It was at this stage that I decided to try my own hand at translating Halldór Laxness. I had just completed a translation of *Njála's Saga* with my old friend and mentor, the late Hermann Pálsson, who died so tragically in a holiday accident in Bulgaria this summer. It was time to tackle the modern giant of Icelandic letters. I wrote to Methuen, suggesting that *Atómstöðin* (The Atom Station) would be rather more digestible fare for the English-speaking world. Methuen agreed.

Translating *Atómstöðin* was a revelation. I had not fully appreciated just what a subtle and ironic and compassionate work it was. In the novel, politicians in Reykjavík are portrayed as conspiring to 'sell' their country to the Americans for a NATO air base at Keflavík. It was not, in my view, 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. In *The*

Atom Station, too, 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, ending with the apotheosis of Jón Prímus in *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (1968; *Christianity at Glacier*, 1972). He also introduced, as the narrator, one of his wonderfully sane and down-to-earth women, Ugla, a young girl from the north who comes to the capital to work as a housemaid in the Reykjavík home of her MP, the worldly, world-weary cabinet minister Búi Árland.

I have to confess that I had fallen in love with Ugla, the owl, Athene's bird of wisdom – who hasn't? I admired the weary, worldly Búi Árland who thought he found in her his own belated salvation; above all, I was in love with the quiet organist who accepted the world as it was but ultimately made his contribution to changing it for the one person whose genuineness he admired – Ugla.

The translation was well received and was also published in the USA. Methuen were pleased with it and pressed me to do another. My choice fell upon *Paradísarheimt* (*Paradise Reclaimed*, 1962/2002) which Laxness had recently published, in 1960. It recounts the adventures of a real-life peasant farmer in the south of Iceland in the late nineteenth century, Steinar of Steinahlíðar. He is a careful and conscientious farmer, a man of integrity who loves his family dearly and wants above all else 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 upon them. First, to gain royal favour, he gives away their fairy-tale white pony, Krapi, to the king of Denmark during a royal visit to Iceland in 1874. When he goes to Denmark in return he meets an itinerant Mormon bishop and is converted to Mormonism; Steinar is persuaded by the bishop to leave Iceland to seek the tangible blessings of an earthly paradise in Utah. He abandons his family to the not-so-tender mercies of a rich and unscrupulous neighbour, Björn of Leirur, and sets off on his travels. In the Mormon Promised Land of Salt Lake City, however, he finds only disillusionment; his family is scattered to the cold winds, and eventually he returns home to what he now sees as his former paradise, a sadder but wiser man, to re-cultivate his ruined farm.

Paradísarheimt personified man's unending search for the absolute and eternal in human life. It was a universal tale, and I felt that the 'American section' might help to add interest for English-speaking readers. I assiduously cultivated the friendship of two earnest young American Mormon missionaries who called at our house and were doubtless gratified at the intense interest I showed in the Church of the Latter-Day Saints and my insatiable appetite for printed literature on the subject!

Incidentally, the American edition of *Paradise Reclaimed* was sold out in a suspiciously short time. Indeed, Halldór Laxness, who always took a rather cynical view of his publishers abroad, was convinced that furious Mormons in New York had bought up every copy and prevented any further reprints!

The task of translation went well and reasonably successfully, I like to think. But I recall with a salutary shudder a major problem I faced (and almost failed to solve) in one of the chapters. It concerned a scene in an emigrant ship to the New World in the 1870s. Laxness had translated into Icelandic a little ditty from another time and from across the water. The challenge was to re-translate it back into the original. This is how Laxness had translated it into dancing Icelandic dactyls:

Lángt fyrir utan ystu skóga,
árið sem að gullið fanst,
einn bjó smiður úti móa,
og hans dóttir, sem þú manst.

How I slaved over those four lines! After much head-scratching, because I could not identify the original, the best I could manage was something very literal, like this:

Far beyond the farthest forests
in the year that gold was found,
there lived a smith who shared his dwelling
with his daughter, I'll be bound.

It was fair to middling doggerel, I must admit, but at least it scanned and rhymed! It was not until I was preparing to post my typescript to

the impatient publisher (publishers are always impatient) that I noticed that the chapter had been entitled 'Klementínudans'; and then it dawned on me, like a thunderclap, what the original had been. It was something very, very familiar, from the days of the 1849 Gold Rush – 'Oh, my darling Clementine':

In a cavern, in a canyon,
excavating for a mine,
dwelt a miner, 'forty-niner,
and his daughter, Clementine...

Sometimes, when one is translating, the obvious is all *too* obvious.

The third Laxness I tackled was *Brekkukotsannáll* – my beloved *The Fish Can Sing*, which came out in 1966. *The Fish Can Sing* was the last Laxness which Methuen felt inclined to publish. They were disappointed, I think, that the translations had not exactly set the literary heather on fire in Britain, although they had earned some exceptionally glowing reviews. When I offered to translate the monumental four-volume *Heimsljós* (1937-1940; *World Light*, 1969/2002) they politely and regretfully declined. But I was determined to see *Heimsljós* published in English; it was the mightiest (and certainly the longest and largest) of the Laxness canon, and therefore had to be translated. So I started searching for another imprint, and good fortune soon attended my efforts: bolstered by the promise of a grant from the Nordic Council, the University of Wisconsin Press (which had an office in London) undertook to publish it.

As I worked on the translation, I kept thinking of the marvellous *aperçu* by Gustave Flaubert in his *Carnets* (translated by T. S. Eliot): '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, I fear, can offer only a meagre equivalent, at best only an echo of the majesty of the original. Like a painting, a translation depends for its effect upon very minute touches. It is a work of infinite pains, to be returned to in many moods and viewed in many different lights. Translation is a constant compromise between the effort to be literal and the effort to be idiomatic. As Voltaire once said, 'A faithful translation, like a faithful woman, is very seldom beautiful.'

Perhaps the Flaubert apothegm had been in Halldór's mind, too, when he was writing the narrative of the poverty-stricken life and lonely death of Ólafur Kárason of Ljósavík, who had been brutally abandoned as a child. His story is loosely based on the life-story of an Icelandic folk poet at the turn of the previous century named Magnús Hjaltason Magnússon (1873-1916). Today Magnús would be called a social drop-out: he was considered in every sense a 'failure', both as a poet and as a person. He contained within himself many stock aspects of the poet-figure in society: the weirdness, the alienation, the improvidence, the sense of divinely-inspired mission, the fecklessness. He had all the ardent pantheism of the English Romantic poets, the disastrously erotic romanticism of Robert Burns, the preposterous poetic zeal of William McGonagall. He was not (and this is central to Laxness' treatment of the theme) a good poet abused and misunderstood, but a mediocre poet perceived by society as a wastrel and a menace to himself as much as to others. And yet in his prose writing – in his diaries and in his autobiography – he expressed with lyrical passion the yearning of mankind for enlightenment, for culture, for beauty in the midst of squalor.

The genius of Laxness was to invest this man Magnús Hjaltason Magnússon and his puny, awkward life with a haunting nobility of stature despite his fecklessness, a heroic quality despite the paltriness of some of his actions. Laxness used Magnús Hjaltason Magnússon's prose writings as a quarry from which he mined the personality of his 'Ólafur Kárason', a living, suffering expression of universal values and yearning aspirations. *World Light* is a Portrait of an Artist, drawn in strong and exaggerated colours; what emerges at the end is a marvellous compassion for mankind itself, a compassion which is heightened by Laxness' rippling irony which plays on every character he draws. It is both *apologia* and paean, an evaluation and a vindication of a tatterdemalion culture which represents the age-old aspiration of base metal to transmute itself into gold.

At the end of the novel, Ólafur Kárason discovers (in the fragile innocence of a young girl whom he awakens to love) the beauty he has been seeking all his life; but by discovering it, by seducing the girl, he destroys that dream of beauty. There is nothing left for him but to

wander in dazed exaltation to his own death up on the shimmering glacier of Snæfellsjökull where the spirit of beauty dwells supreme, icy and ever unattainable.

World Light was published in 1969. Unlike Laxness' impish caricature of James Anderson Thompson, I had not been so exhausted by the monumental labour of translating *Heimsljós* that I never wanted to open another book. I was still raring to go. And the opportunity came soon enough when Laxness' publisher in Iceland, Helgafell, invited me to translate Halldór's last major work of fiction, *Kristnihald undir Jökli*.

Kristnihald undir Jökli (which I translated as *Christianity at Glacier*, 1972) had been published in 1968; it was one of the most entertaining and brilliantly inventive of his works, a timeless fable of modern times which presented once again the complex antithesis between the simple, innocent, self-sufficient individual and the self-seeking world of the capitalist entrepreneur. The main protagonist is pastor Jón Prímus, the incumbent in the parish of *undir Jökli* at the roots of Snæfellsjökull, who is under investigation for some strange goings-on there which have reached the ears of his bishop. Pastor Jón is an extraordinary example of the eccentric philosopher who appears so often in Laxness' later novels. He is the parish jack-of-all-trades who repairs broken machinery and cars and primus stoves, and shoes horses for all comers instead of curing souls. His philosophy is based not on theology but on respect for all forms of life. Into his parish comes an old school-friend and fellow-theological student, Guðmundur Sigmundsson, who has been in California and become 'Dr Goodman Syngmann' – guru, cosmopolitan engineer, super-businessman and cosmobiologist extraordinary. He and a retinue of surreal Californian hippies want to make use of the great glacier as a living ice-box in which to practise cryogenics as a means of reincarnation.

Here we meet the last and most enigmatic of Laxness' great gallery of enchanting and enchanted heroines, the mysterious Úa. In her, the real and the unreal come perilously close. Who, exactly, *is* Úa? The pastor's bride who had run off on her wedding night with Guðmundur Sigmundsson? A former nun? The erstwhile madam of a brothel in

Buenos Aires? An old-fashioned witch? A ghost? The Earth Goddess, Gaea, herself? One of Dr Godman Syngmann's scientifically produced reincarnations from the deep-freeze of the glacier? Or is she all of these things? For some time she is very much a real woman in the story; and then, at the end, she vanishes, mockingly, with the elusiveness of life itself.

So often it is women who hold the stage in Laxness: Salka Valka, Snæfríður Íslandssól (Sun of Iceland) in *Íslandsklukkan* (1943-1946; *Iceland's Bell*, 2003), Ugla in *The Atom Station* and finally Úa – has anyone produced such a collection of compelling and unforgettable women in world literature?

That was the last Laxness I tackled, apart from a delightful short story entitled 'Sagan af bráuðinu dýra' which I translated as *The Bread of Life* for Vaka-Helgafell in Iceland in 1987.

Halldór Laxness, to my mind – and I have spoken it often enough – is one of the great European novelists of the twentieth century. He is revered in Iceland, of course; he was recently named as one of the 100 best novelists of all time by a poll of Scandinavian writers. But he has never sustained the reputation in the English-speaking world which I believe he merits.

It is impossible to categorise Laxness as a novelist. He did not have one voice. He had several. He is the most protean of novelists. In chapter 9 of *Hið Ljósa Man* (The Fair Maiden), the second of the *Íslandsklukkan* trilogy, Arnas Arnæus comments on the fact that mountains in Iceland can have different names, depending on which side of them you live: 'There is a mountain in the north of Iceland which is called Bakrángi when it is seen from the east, Ógaungufjall if one looks at it from the west, but Galti when seen from the sea to the north' (*Íslandsklukkan*, pp. 147-148, my translation). Halldór Laxness was using this apothegm as a metaphor for 'truth' – it all depends on how you look at things. But I like to think of it also as a metaphor for Laxness himself: for his capacity to encourage us to see 'the truth' from many different angles and points of view, from above or below, from north or south, from left or right. It is also a metaphor for the towering literary stature of a great novelist who saw, and expressed, life in the round – from every direction.

Ladies and gentleman: in *Íslandsklukkan*, Halldór wrote that 'there is no sight more splendid than that of Iceland rising from the sea' (p. 320). And I am delighted to be able to report that Halldór's works, too, are rising from the sea.

The Harvill Press republished *Independent People* in 1999, and my translation of *The Fish Can Sing* in a revised edition in 2000 and again in 2001. Earlier this year a revised version of my translation of *Paradise Reclaimed* was republished in the USA by Random House, which even now is reissuing a revised version of my translation of *Heimsljós*. Next summer, the Harvill Press (which has just been bought by Random House) is to republish my translation of *Atómstöðin*.

But one Laxness novel has not yet been published in English: his great historical trilogy *Íslandsklukkan*, which he published in 1943-46. The title refers an old bronze bell in the church at Þingvellir, which was removed by the Danish authorities to be melted down for the rebuilding of war-stricken Copenhagen. The novel is set in Iceland and Denmark in the decades around 1700 and involves three major characters: firstly Jón Hreggviðsson, an Icelandic peasant who is convicted of murdering a Danish official, and fled abroad, where he has an extraordinary series of picaresque adventures; Jón is the eternally oppressed but endlessly resilient peasant who responds to all adversity with a quip and a sardonic verse. The second is Árni Arnason (otherwise known as Arnas Arnæus), a character loosely based on the cultured humanist and cosmopolitan scholar-statesman Árni Magnússon (1663-1730) who devoted his life to preserving Iceland's age-old culture. The third is Snæfríður Íslandssól, the romantic love of Árni Arnason's life, proud and wilful, luminously intelligent and endlessly fascinating, symbolising the vision of all the injured splendour of Iceland's past and present. For many people, it is Halldór's most memorable and resonant work, written in a form of eighteenth century Icelandic which catches all the ambivalent subtleties of that period. Certainly, in Iceland, it has proved the most popular of his novels, in terms of book-sales.

Íslandsklukkan has already been translated into 22 languages. It simply had to be translated into English. It was a challenge waiting to be undertaken by someone brave enough to pick up the gauntlet: I say

'brave enough', because it is a work of many multi-faceted levels, symbolic and significant, written in exquisitely period Icelandic – a daunting prospect. And I confess to you that, even though I had promised Laxness that I would translate it one day, I had quailed at the prospect.

And now comes the news – the best news of all – that *Íslandskvikkan* has at long last found a translator – a young American scholar named Philip Roughton, of the University of Colorado, who spent five years in Iceland researching medieval Icelandic literature at the Árni Magnússon Institute. He started translating *Íslandskvikkan* in 1995; last autumn he won the American-Scandinavian Foundation's Translation Prize for four sample chapters of *Iceland's Bell*.

Phil Roughton's translation now completes, for the English-speaking world, the extraordinary range of literary achievement which is Halldór Laxness. I understand that Random House has agreed to publish it. When his translation is published (as soon as possible, I trust), it will add the final grace note to the 'silent music of the clouds' which Laxness produced for us all.

'Til er einn tónn og hann er hreinn' (There is one note and it is pure), says old Pastor Jóhann in *The Fish Can Sing* in the churchyard above Sudurgata in Reykjavík. Halldór Laxness has taught us that there is no finer sound than that of the Icelandic fish which can sing; and it was Halldór who taught our fish to sing 'the silent music of the clouds'. He taught it to sing the song of life and of eternity. He taught it the one note which transcends all languages and all translations – and it is pure.

Notes

1. Page numbers refer to the revised edition (London: Harvill, 2000).
2. A hymn by the seventeenth-century poet Hallgrímur Pétursson.
3. Brad Leithauser, 'A Small Country's Great Book', *The New York Review of Books*, May 11, 1995, pp. 41-45.

In Search of the Most Precious Pearl: On the Life and Works of Halldór Laxness

Halldór Guðmundsson

Edda Publishing, Reykjavík

'The fact is that it is much more difficult to be a poet and write poetry about the world than it is to be a man and live out in the world', says the main character in Halldór Laxness' epic novel *Heimstíðis*, published during the years 1937-1940 (*World Light*, 1969/2002: p.344). Ólafur Káráson, a poet who lives in extreme poverty on the outermost edge of the world, utters these words in his only speech in the book. Ólafur is one of Laxness' memorable characters in which he combines elements of himself with a fictional person, using his novelist's insight to investigate an aspect of the human condition – in this instance the question of how it is possible to be a poet, and yet live in the world. Ólafur Káráson's life ends in defeat because he is not able to distinguish between the two; as a poet and a man he has only one profound desire, the desire for beauty. He seeks it in human society, in poetry and in love. Yet his search is unsuccessful, and finally he follows the sun up on to one of Iceland's high, white ice caps: 'Where the glacier meets the sky, the land ceases to be earthly, and the earth becomes one with the heavens; no sorrows live there any more, and therefore joy is not necessary; beauty alone reigns here, beyond all

demands' (p. 453). Ólafur Káráson vanishes on the glacier because 'he was not bad enough for this world', to quote the famous words from Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. For Halldór Laxness, these words held a special significance.

It is perhaps no surprise that a sensitive poet should resort to fleeing from the world in terrible circumstances. Fortunately, this was not to be the choice of Laxness himself, although he tried all his life to be a poet and write about the world, and at the same time to be a man living in the world, even when the gulf between the two at times seemed unbridgeable. Laxness played both roles with the incredible energy that characterized his entire life – he wrote 60 books, yet also travelled all over the world, and participated in political conflicts and in the battles of his own nation; he married twice and fathered four children; he wrote innumerable newspaper articles and essays, translated and published books – and all this during the twentieth century, a time that has been called the Age of Extremes – extremes which certainly left their marks on the life of Laxness.

Halldór Laxness was the most famous modern Icelandic author; when he died, aged 95, on February 8, 1998, the last national poet in the West died with him. He was not a national poet in the sense that his works were loved and admired by all when he was at the height of his career, but rather in the sense that what he wrote was of profound importance to his countrymen. His views were sought on all the main issues of the day, and he gave his opinions freely, even when not consulted. This was at a time when literature was central to the nation's sense of identity, which many felt was in the process of being formed.

The concept of 'national poet' in the West was a typically nineteenth-century phenomenon, dating back to an era when the novel still played a key role in people's imagination. In most of the Western world, the institution of national poet gradually disappeared around 1900, surviving perhaps longest in the Nordic countries – the last national poet or author in Scandinavia (apart from Iceland) was Norway's Knut Hamsun, whose fall from grace during the Second World War was of historic proportions. The phenomenon of national poet or writer was to survive longer in the Third World, and perhaps also in Eastern Europe where the written word could still conceal the

explosive seeds of subversion. The fact that Halldór Laxness held the position in Iceland until well into the latter half of the twentieth century was not because he was a nineteenth-century man by nature; on the contrary, he was decidedly modern in all his views. Rather it was due to the fact that, first, the modern age was so late in making its inroads into Iceland. Icelandic literature, along with society as a whole, underwent 200 to 300 years' worth of development during the twentieth century. And, second, Laxness fulfilled the criteria of 'national poet' by being both a writer who wrote about the world and at the same time a man who took sides in the struggles of the world.

Halldór Laxness was born in Reykjavík in 1902. People who live in cities such as London, where history is visible in countless magnificent buildings, will probably find it difficult to imagine what sort of place Reykjavík was at that time. Iceland was then still a Danish colony; 5,000 souls scraped together a living in the capital, lorded over by Danish officials. Twenty years previously the first street lighting had been introduced in the form of two lamp-posts which were immediately knocked down by street boys; and the streets themselves were the haunt of dogs and flies, according to a contemporary witness. The literary scene was on a very small scale, though people still had a great appetite for the ancient sagas. The biggest social events were funerals. The town could boast only a single prostitute, and she was fond of the bottle and no longer in the first blossom of youth. Meanwhile, political parties continued to struggle over issues which had ceased to have any relevance.

However, a young man who lived in this town during the second decade of the twentieth century would nevertheless sense that something was brewing: all the young men were busy writing poetry; everyone knew that independence was near at hand (sovereignty was granted in 1918); industrialisation had begun in the form of trawler fishing; there was a whiff of impatience in the air. This was an atmosphere which spurred people on to greater things, and indeed Icelanders have long been proud of the so-called 'turn-of-the-century' generation. Halldór Laxness did not miss out on his share of this atmosphere. He seems to have been seized by an unremitting compulsion to write from his earliest years and published his first book

at the age of 17. Laxness' earliest writings can be said to prove that it is not necessarily talent which distinguishes the great artist, as has been claimed, but rather the relentless desire for expression.

Laxness did not hang around for long in his home town, any more than he did at school. Aged 17, he set off alone for foreign shores, and spent most of the next 20 years or so travelling. Laxness' first journeys have an air of adventure; they illustrate both his rock-like determination to be an author, come what may, and his earnest quest for an outlook on life and a sense of certainty. He began his travels in Copenhagen, as every Icelander did, but, unlike a number of his predecessors, decided against becoming an author in Danish. He sold Denmark's top newspaper several short stories composed in Danish, however, as if to prove that he easily could have been had he wished.

These years were a period of education and travel for the young author. He went to Sweden and spent weeks pouring over the works of August Strindberg, which were to have a profound influence on his early writings. He travelled through Germany and read the works of the eccentric philosopher Otto Weininger, whose writings on sexuality had been all the rage at the turn of the century, though they were largely forgotten after the First World War. Laxness also read Nietzsche and Freud and Oswald Spengler, who wrote of the fall of the West. His increasingly desperate search for an outlook on life led him into contact with Catholicism in his 21st year. He retreated for a while into a Benedictine monastery in Luxembourg and converted to the Catholic faith. He used his time in the monastery, as always, to read and write, which gradually began to take precedence over all his other interests.

Although Halldór Laxness spent much time away from the island of his birth in the remote North, he was far from indifferent to its fate. The fierce debates among the young intellectuals about the future of their country in the 1920s were dominated by two factions. On the one hand, there were those who had built up a romanticized image of Icelandic tradition and the farming community, in effect supporting a policy of isolationism – in the belief that Iceland could navigate a way around the rocks of twentieth-century politics by building on tradition and leaving aside foreign 'isms', as they were called. And, on the other

hand, there were those who felt that the modern age, in the form of Western culture, could not begin its invasion of Iceland soon enough: only modernisation could save the country. Halldór Laxness, who wrote numerous articles in the Icelandic papers and journals during these years, was not only a member of the latter group, he was their chief spokesman. He hated all 'this harping on about the glories of the Icelandic farming community', as he wrote in one article, highlighting instead the advantages of Reykjavík, which now had a population of 25,000 and was at last developing into a city, for it had 'in one fell swoop gained all that a cosmopolitan town requires; not just a university and a cinema, but also football and homosexuality'.¹ The citizens of Reykjavík, most of whom had only recently migrated from the countryside and were experiencing several centuries worth of progress in one leap, can be forgiven for scratching their heads over the writings of this young fire-brand.

As an author, Laxness had chosen a subject consistent with his interests. He meant to write about modern man: 'What could be a more satisfying subject? What enigma could be more ludicrous than this chameleon, this gorgeous monster?' he asks in an article from this time.² And so, in the summer of 1925, Laxness was holed up in Taormina in Sicily, writing his book about modern man called *Vegarinn mikli frá Kasnir* (The Great Weaver from Kashmir), a book which was to mark the beginning of a modern Icelandic literature. This huge novel is probably the least known of his works abroad. On its publication in 1927, the critic Kristján Albertsson had the wit to realise what had happened and opened his review with the words: 'Finally, finally, a grand novel, which towers like a cliff above the flatlands of contemporary Icelandic poetry and fiction! Iceland has gained a new literary giant – it is our duty to celebrate the fact with joy.'³ The opening words of this review have long been the most famous quotation in Icelandic literary criticism.⁴

Two aspects in particular lend *Vegarinn mikli frá Kasnir* its significance. In the first place, the work is a singular witness to its age. The protagonist is, like the author himself, a young man caught up in the 'cultural chaos' which reigned in Europe following the First World War. He yearns for perfection, genius, for something enduring, a

magnificent truth. And with this quest the author broke down all the barriers of Icelandic isolationism and ruralism. The other main reason for the book's significance is its use of language and imagery. Icelandic prose writers of the time generally navigated the safe waters of tasteful dullness, practising a comfortable form of late naturalism. Laxness, on the other hand, amused himself by mixing his imagery, elevating the mundane to sublime levels and reducing the sublime to the ridiculous. In the process, he expanded the spectrum of the written language. The book saw the emergence of the authorial qualities which have characterized all his later works: never taking the obvious route when expressing something, if another way can be found; avoiding overused clichés; and viewing almost everything from a new angle.

It was inevitable that any creative artist embarking on a fearless exploration of modern culture would sooner or later head for what seemed to be its Mecca at that time, and so in 1927, Halldór Laxness set off for Hollywood. He wrote a screenplay and tried unsuccessfully to get it accepted, claiming later that one film producer had liked his script but had shortly afterwards thrown himself out of a window – and hoping that the two facts were not related. In the end, Laxness had to make a living giving lectures about Iceland at afternoon receptions in the homes of Los Angeles' fine ladies. I do not know whether his failure in Hollywood had any effect on the development of the film industry, but it was an absolute godsend for Icelandic literature. And one thing is certain: America had a lasting effect on Laxness' art. For one thing, he became well acquainted with the American social novel, which moulded his own understanding of fiction and, for another, one film maker above all earned his respect. In an article written during these years, Laxness said that he saw only one genius among 'all this contemptible movie rabble': Charlie Chaplin. 'Their art has more in common than first meets the eye. Both had a strong social conscience and an undivided sympathy for the underdog and outsiders, and both were unafraid of spicing their stories with sentiment and humour, sometimes treading a narrow path between the two. This combination is a striking feature of all of Halldór Laxness' novels, sometimes even within a single paragraph.

Laxness came home in 1930, in more ways than one. He married, a son was born and he set up home in Iceland, and he brought back

with him ideas for many great novels, stories which would all be set in Iceland and would be based on his view of the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm. It was his ambition to write about the fishermen, farmers and forgotten poets of Iceland in such a way that the stories would contain an element of truth about fishermen, farmers and poets all over the world, turning his books about isolated little backwaters in Iceland into world literature. The 1930s were a hugely fertile period for Laxness, in which he completed his three greatest social novels. In *Salka Valka* (1931-32), *Salka Valka*, 1936), he focussed on the fate of the inhabitants of a small fishing village, which reflected the fate of Iceland as a whole. In the process he created one of his most memorable heroines. Indeed, many of his books feature strong female characters, often with an air of the mystical, even incomprehensible, about them, who are generally set against rather ambiguous and weak-spirited male intellectuals. *Salka Valka* is more epic in scope than *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasnir*, and in that sense more conventional, but the Halldór Laxness who desecrated holy shrines with childish glee is still much in evidence, and the entire spectrum of the language comes into play here. Icelandic prose could not remain unchanged by his works – nothing was beyond its capacity any longer, and its power of expression had been greatly enriched.

Laxness' next epic work was *Sjúfsstær folk* (1934-35; *Independent People*, 1946/1997), which has probably reached a larger audience worldwide than any of his other books. It centres around a farmer who lives on a remote moor, a character who has come to occupy such an important place in the Icelandic imagination that he has broken free of the bounds of the novel, and people talk about him as if he had really existed, like a distant relative. This talent for characterization played a large part in Laxness' status as national poet. It also makes him part of a powerful Icelandic tradition, for of the two main properties of the novel, characterization and plot, characterization has always played a greater role in Icelandic prose.

The farmer in *Sjúfsstær folk* is examined in the context of Icelandic rural life, without any prettifying or romanticization. On the contrary, Laxness deliberately sets out to parody one of the most popular European novels of the inter-war years, *Markens grøde* by Knut

Hamsun (1917; *Growth of the Soil*, 1920). Bjartur of Summerhouses, the main protagonist, is contemptible and pitiable but also a hero who rises above his circumstances. It is noteworthy that Laxness commented at this time on the advantage of creating characters against a background which is still not completely civilised, saying that larger-than-life characters have their paradise in semi-civilised countries:

In countries where civilisation is both widespread and fairly equally distributed, often at the cost of culture itself, people begin to resemble one another, and larger-than-life personalities become rare, so that the public begins automatically to fear such characters and regard them as fit for the asylum. Civilisation has no room for the clamorous, fanatical emphasis which individuals in relatively uncivilised societies place on their own persons, words and action.⁵

Thus the standard-bearer of modern culture had recognized the advantages of the primitive, at least as a tool for the novelist.

Although the figure of Bjartur towers above the monotony of everyday existence, it also becomes a symbol of the nation which Laxness wanted both to reprimand, educate and wake up to the present, and at the same time immortalize in his works. *Sjálfstærri fólk* is the story of a farmer on Iceland's remotest moor, but it is also a study of the deception, love and grief among all of humanity. In one place Bjartur says to his son who wants to emigrate to America:

What is the world? This is the world, the world is here, Summerhouses, my land, my farm is the world. And though you propose to swallow the sun in a fit of momentary madness because you've seen a couple of blue bank-notes from America, which are obviously false the same as any other large sum of money that falls into the hands of the individual unless he has worked for it himself, sooner or later you will find out that Summerhouses is the world and then you will have cause to remember what I have said (1997, p.393).

Ever afterwards this theme was to echo in Halldór Laxness' works: the young man who ventures out into the wide world in pursuit of his desire for art, beauty or a better existence, but feels that he is at the same time letting down his people, betraying his childhood home. One

review of *Salka Valka* said that it was clear from the book that two men existed in Laxness, an Icelander and a cosmopolitan, who were still at odds with one another. 'I believe this observation is correct and could be applied to Laxness during his whole life. No doubt this conflict put a strain on him personally, but it made him a productive artist, and perhaps it is present in many great authors from small linguistic communities: people who by their nature are writing for the world but also constantly wrestling with the difficult framework of a small, sometimes narrow-minded population, while wishing to remain true to their origins.'

The fate of a poet born into hardship was Laxness' subject in his third great novel from this period, *Heimsíjós*. It is based on the actual life of a poverty-stricken poet who lived in the remotest quarter of Iceland, yet wrote thousands of pages of poetry, diaries, folk wisdom and a short autobiography. The poet lived around the turn of the century, but Laxness moved his story forward in time, successfully conjuring up the contemporary world in his parable of the poet who never fully belongs to the world of men; a contemporary world of rising Fascism and the threat of war. The story tells of a quest for beauty and its conclusion is expressed thus: 'Beauty and human life are two lovers who are never allowed to meet' (2002, p.198). It is also a tale of sympathy for others, for Ólafur Káráson is in some ways a personification of Jesus. Here, Laxness is in similar territory as in *Sjálfstærri fólk*, where he wrote: 'For the understanding of the soul's defencelessness, of the conflict between the two poles, is not the source of the greatest song. The source of the greatest song is sympathy' (1997, p.351). This may sound like a polemic against the dominant Marxist theories of the time, and I do not rule out the possibility of its being intended thus, but then this is one of Laxness' paradoxes: during these years he had become a dedicated supporter of the Soviet Union, and although he did not join the Icelandic Communist Party, many of his chosen companions were members. He wrote controversial political articles in the spirit of the party, as well as two utterly uncritical accounts of his visits to the Soviet Union. The latter was written at exactly the same time as the second volume of *Heimsíjós*, and it is hard to grasp how the same man who

writes of the outcast poet Ólafur Káráson with such delicacy, can turn out dozens of pages in defence of the Moscow purges.

One could say that in practice, Laxness was drawn to the theory later put into words by Milan Kundera, that just as the novel has the right to ask all questions, it also has the right to refuse to answer them. Laxness' novels were certainly the forum for strong political criticism, but also the refuge of scepticism and humanity. This is why they continue to stand unshaken, long after Laxness turned his back on his writings about the Soviet Union. Perhaps the fact that none of Laxness' books were published in the Soviet Union during Stalin's reign can be taken as another sign of their unorthodoxy.

A new age was dawning in Iceland, however, and the author was absorbed by new concerns. The British occupied Iceland shortly after the beginning of the Second World War, and Laxness turned his attention to more nationalist subject matter. He began to explore the medieval *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of the Icelanders), which he had had little time for in his youth, and also sought material in folk tales. His great work of the war years was called *Íslandsklikkann* (1943-46; *Iceland's Bell*, 2003), a historical novel which takes place around 1700. One of the main characters is based on Árni Magnússon who, during this period of the Danish Empire, earned immortal renown by travelling all over Iceland and collecting manuscripts which contained our ancient writings. The paradox is that he saved the manuscripts by taking them to the hated colonial oppressors in Denmark. The novel's protagonist is Jón Hreggviðsson, an unforgettable portrait of an oppressed man who never lets himself be entirely conquered, and who clings to life with sarcasm as his only weapon, even when all seems lost.

Íslandsklikkann is a complex work, and reveals a change in narrative style. The language is exceptionally rich and powerful, but the style is more concise. The author has deliberately moved closer to the old style of the Icelandic sagas, and the novel is far more symbolic than Laxness' earlier works. It is further removed from social realism, and the author permits himself to magnify and exaggerate as the mood takes him. He has shifted closer to those very Icelandic traditionalists for whom he had reserved his harshest criticism as a youth; the

Icelander has triumphed over the man of the world for the moment, and none of his other books have achieved the same popularity in his homeland as *Íslandsklikkann*. The subject matter must, of course, also be understood in the context of the occupation of Iceland, for the Americans succeeded the British and continued to maintain a military presence in Iceland after the end of the war, a fact which never ceased to be a thorn in Laxness' side. He no longer thought it was vital to introduce modern culture from abroad as fast as possible. Instead, he wanted to help the Icelanders in their search for their own identity.

It should not be concluded from this description of Laxness' change in subject matter that he had become an uncritical nationalist, far from it. His next great novel, *Geypla* from 1952 (*The Happy Warriors*, 1958), shows that he was not afraid to turn a critical eye on the Icelandic heritage, in the form of the Sagas of the Icelanders, which ever since the Romantic period had provided Icelandic national identity with the foundation which it lacked in great buildings or in other visible works of genius. In *Geypla*, Laxness took on a task which had proved beyond the powers of most other Icelandic authors: to write a new Icelandic saga. He achieved this on the one hand through a magnificent stylistic effort, in which he managed to combine the language of the Middle Ages with a modern sense of irony, and, on the other hand, by savagely parodying the medieval concept of heroism, writing in the process a sort of *Don Quixote* of the genre. The heroic ideal which motivates the protagonists becomes ever more ridiculous and absurd, the more it contradicts the reality with which they are faced. As with Cervantes' deluded knight, their ideals are not so bad in themselves, but become ridiculous due to the gap which separates them from reality.

In this sense, *Geypla* is the first of the novels of disillusion which Laxness now began to write. One may well wonder why this should have been. The 1950s were a prosperous period for Laxness personally, he had built himself a beautiful house, married again and had two daughters with his new wife and, last but not least, in 1955 he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature. Politically, however, the Cold War was a difficult period for him, as it was for many of his comrades. He had gradually lost his faith in the Soviet Union, first because of the authorities' attitude to modern art and writers, and later

on because of the disclosures of Krushchev and the invasion of Hungary. He continued to regard himself as a socialist of a sort, and did not wish to join the ranks of the Right, but it was not easy for men like him to find a political refuge during these years. Another contributing factor was artistic: this was the period when progressive writers in France and in other countries, whom Laxness had long looked up to, gave up on the novel, which was seen as an obsolete, dying literary genre. The theatre of the absurd, the new novel and hermetic poetry were the last resort of authors who wanted to be taken seriously.

This period hit Laxness hard as an author. He had always been a cosmopolitan figure who was keen to know whatever was best and in the forefront of literary innovation, but he had also always written with the general reader in mind, and he had been understood by those readers, whether they agreed with his views or not. This makes it all the more remarkable that he should have published at this time the novel which is perhaps his most classical in form and best structured: *Brekkukotsannáll* (1957; *The Fish Can Sing*, 1966/2000). The theme of the novel speaks louder than words: it tells of a singer from a poor family who goes out into the world and becomes a fairy-tale figure in his homeland, where stories are constantly told of his achievements and triumphs on the stage. But when the narrator gets to know the international singer, it gradually becomes clear that his fame consists of nothing but lies, maintained with help from the leading citizens of the town, which become ever more ridiculous the further he progresses down the path of deception. At the same time, the story is an incredibly tender ode to the world of childhood (and in this Laxness draws to a great extent on his own youth), an ode to what Laxness called "the hidden people" – the ordinary, unspoiled people [...] this book is to be a hymn of praise to them, proof that it is precisely these people, the ordinary folk, who foster all peaceful human virtues'.⁷

The political reference is even clearer in his next novel, *Paráðsarheimt* (1960; *Paradise Reclaimed*, 1962/2002). It is the tale of a poor farmer who abandons his land and family in pursuit of a dream of happiness, which he chases all the way to the Mormon communities in Utah. In the end he returns home, convinced not only

that all his efforts have been in vain, but that he has lost the most important things in his life. The story itself is more complex than this, just as the main character is more complex than he seems. But Laxness' tone has seldom been darker than in this work about the quest for paradise. This book was to be Laxness' last novel for a long while. In his essays from these years it emerges that he was assailed by major doubts about the value of the novel as a genre, not least as he had begun to doubt the role of the narrator, that 'gatecrasher with no name and an uncertain passport who is always present like some peeping Tom wherever you open the novel'.⁸ Here, Laxness' scepticism has reached its height: to his political disillusion has been added a gnawing doubt about the value of narrative art, which had always been the sounding board of his work, for no narrative can exist without a narrator of some kind.

Over the next few years Laxness concentrated on writing plays, some of them not far removed from the absurdist school, but never managing to be fully convincing from an artistic standpoint, despite some good moments. Then there were essays and an autobiographical work, called *Skáldatími* (1963; *A Poet's Time*), in which he turned his back once and for all on Soviet socialism and the various other ideologies which had crossed his path. At the same time, it is an entertaining record of how many of his books came to be written, and contains lively descriptions of many of his contemporaries, including Bertolt Brecht.

The novel would not release its hold on Laxness, however, and in 1968 he produced a work which shows his extraordinary power of reinvention as an author: *Kristnihald undir jökli* (*Christianity at Glacier*, 1972/1996). In this work, Laxness avoids the problem of the narrator to a certain extent by using the techniques of the dramatist. The narrator, who is an emissary of the bishop of Iceland sent to examine the practice of Christianity in a remote rural district, is made to carry a tape recorder, record conversations and conscientiously note down whatever he sees. Naturally, the result is far more complex and mysterious than any mere tape recording, not least thanks to the main character, the local pastor Rev. Jón Prímus. He is one of the characters in Laxness' later novels who have been associated with Taoism.

Laxness became acquainted with Tao, the *Book of the Way* by Laotse, in his youth, which was to have an influence on his path ever afterwards, not as a religion, but in the sense that Laxness was always aware of Taoism as an alternative way to his own. On the one hand, he always took delight in work, possessed a personal as well as a political will to fight, and a ruthless ambition which found a glamorous outlet. On the other hand, he was aware of the Chinese wisdom about the lowly and gentle, the rejection of toil and ambition, and the victory of the meek. Characters who represent the latter are evident in his later books, in *Brekkukotsannáll* and *Paradísarheimt*.

Jón Þrímur in *Kristnihald undir jökli* is formed in this mould, and is perhaps its most memorable character. As before, Laxness used the form of the novel to speak out against various things that he himself might be preaching in his essays, in this instance particularly the faith in science and technology, and a simplistic form of empiricism. Thus he makes Jón Þrímur say at one point: 'The difference between a novelist and a historian is this, that the former tells lies deliberately and for the fun of it; the historian tells lies in his simplicity and imagines he is telling the truth' (1996, p.88). Against this, Jón Þrímur offers up the birds of the air and their language: 'It's a pity we don't whistle at one another, like birds. Words are misleading' (p.86). Laxness always employed birds as a symbol of the most beautiful endeavours on earth, and also as an image of all that is best in art. In *Atómstöðin*, a novel from 1948, he describes a bird as follows:

For a bird is first and foremost movement; the sky is part of a bird, or rather, the air and the bird are one; a long journey in a straight line into space, that is a bird; and heat, for a bird is warmer than a man and has a quicker heart-beat, and is happier besides, as one can hear from its call - for there is no sound like the chirp of a bird and it is not a bird at all if it does not chirp (The Atom Station 1961, p.43).

In *Kristnihald undir jökli*, this image brings together doubts about the dominant belief in technology and the belief in an absolute truth, a scepticism which reaches its height in Jón Þrímur: 'It is pleasant to listen to the birds chirping. But it would be anything but pleasant if the birds were always chirping the truth' (p. 241).

Kristnihald undir jökli proved to Laxness that the novel had the power of survival and in his final interviews he was not afraid to argue the value of narrative and defend the attempt to tell tales about the wonders that have occurred on earth, and to speak clearly. This is how he answers a Swedish journalist in 1981 who asked him about the art of writing: 'It is difficult to write. What matters is to write playfully, amusingly and intelligently. A simple and clear style. That is the most difficult thing there is'.⁹

Halldór Laxness' final books were autobiographical rather than fictional for the most part. He ended his authorial career with four books published between 1975 and 1980. These books contain accounts of his youth and upbringing and his first travels, up to about the age of twenty, as well as essays and the meditations of a mature and ageing author about everything between heaven and earth, not least literature and writers. Laxness called these works 'essay-novels', a genre which gave him a great deal of freedom. The books show how a poet is created, and it is particularly interesting to see how Laxness brings together his knowledge of narrative methods. He says in one place about the difficulty of writing a good text: 'A well-written sentence "sits" like a flower which grows in the soil, it fits. It is easy for the latecomer to invent the bang when others have already invented the gunpowder'.¹⁰ In another place he expresses the same thought as follows: 'The problem of fiction, both prose and poetry, is like that of dance: no effort must be visible, everything must seem to come naturally'.¹¹

This aesthetic view demands that the least prominence should be given to the main themes in the narrative, which should only be revealed to the reader through secondary events, and also demands that the author realise that sometimes he must be silent: 'The art of writing is contained in being silent about many things'.¹² Nowhere is this better demonstrated in these works than when they deal with death, for example the death of Laxness' father, or with love, about which the author is very circumspect in these late works. There is only one love story in the four books, in which Laxness accompanies a girl home in the rain, and this story only consists of four paragraphs: 'We couldn't say anything, and we couldn't stop holding hands in the rain. I'm sure

our hearts were pounding more than a little, both together. It rained on our hot, entwined fingers. But soon it was over'.¹³ Seldom has Laxness come closer to what he said in an earlier essay about the value of using words sparingly in fiction: 'When composing a novel it is healthy to have the list of telephone rates to the Falkland Islands as one's guide. The fear of having to pay for every word according to the rates would save many an author from long-windedness'.¹⁴

The most memorable descriptions in the books are of Laxness, the farm near Reykjavík where Laxness grew up and from which he took his name, along with the descriptions of his parents and relatives, his own 'hidden people', one could say. The extremes of the age have passed, the ideological struggle is only a sign on the wall, Laxness has found his own Tao. In an oriental tale which Laxness refers to in one of his last books, there is an account of a master in a bamboo hut who sends his disciple down to the river to fetch water in a jar. By the river the disciple sees a young girl combing her hair. He falls in love, builds a hut with her and they have sons. Then war and countless troubles befall them and everything is destroyed until finally the disciple stands alone, poor and destitute, and then remembers his master and goes in search of him. Laxness tells it thus: 'The master looked at him for a while, then smiled mildly and said: friend, where is the water which I asked you to fetch?'¹⁵ Here the cosmopolitan has at last returned home and made his peace with the Icelander, just as the poet who writes about the world has come to terms with the man who lived in it and can at last write about him, his upbringing and home and his dream of singing for the world.

It is remarkable that Laxness seems to have foreseen in his youth the course of his whole career, as the storyteller and poet of his nation, social activist and author of world literature. In an autobiographical manuscript which he wrote aged 23 but did not publish until much later, he has one character describe the career of man: 'to declare war on the views of the world and theories of the age, to call all lies true and all truth lies, and then look out over the world from the glamorous viewpoint of a superman for a few years – before we dive down to the bottom of the sea in search of the most precious pearl'.¹⁶

Notes

1. Halldór Laxness, 'Af íslenzku menningarástandi', a series of articles published in the paper *Vörður*, 28 November and 11 July 1925.
2. Halldór Laxness, *Af menningarástandi* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1986), p.66 (first publ. *Morgunblaðið* 1924).
3. Kristján Albertsson, Review of *Vefarinn mikli of Kasmír. Vaka*, 1.3 (1927).
4. Halldór Laxness, *Alþýðubókin* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1956), p.133 (first publ. 1929).
5. Halldór Laxness, *Gerska ævintýrið* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1986), p.163 (first publ. 1938).
6. Kristinn E. Andrésson, Review of *Salka Valka. Iðunn*, 1-2 (1932).
7. Laxness notebook, 'Drög að skáldsögu – Minnisbók I' (unpublished ms. held at Gljúfrasteinn Archive).
8. Halldór Laxness, 'Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit', in *Upphaf mannúðarstefnu* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1965) (written in 1962).
9. Harald Gustafsson, Interview with Laxness, *Bonniers Litterära Magasin*, November 1981 [my translation].
10. Halldór Laxness, *Grikklandsárið* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1980), p.191.
11. Halldór Laxness, *Í túninu heima* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1975), p.152.
12. Halldór Laxness, *Úngur eg var* (Reykjavík, Helgafell, 1976), p.93.
13. Halldór Laxness, *Sjömeistarásagan* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1978), p.82.
14. Laxness, 'Persónulegar minnisgreinar', p.76.
15. Laxness, *Úngur eg var*, p.46.
16. Halldór Laxness, *Heiman eg fór* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1952), p.90 (written in 1924).

Translated by Victoria Cribb

Halldór Laxness and the Narrative of the Icelandic Novel

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1

Literary history is not – no more than any other kind of history – an innocent or ‘natural’ endeavour, or perhaps natural only to the extent that storytelling is a natural urge. For history, excuse the banality, is a story, a tale told by a storyteller, and even the most learned and objective-minded scholars are thrown headlong into a narrative construction when sorting out bits and pieces from the multifarious outpouring of literary productivity.

The writing of history has long tended to have its base in the orchestration of events and individuals. While there has been some resistance to this method of scoring, or storylining, such as the French ‘Annalist’ emphasis on the fabric of social history, the general conditions of public life, and the public mindset, the tradition seems to be as alive and kicking as ever. In literary history the equivalent points of emphasis would be *works* and *authors*. Styles, themes and other qualities of literary discourse tend to rank subserviently, except in so far as they are taken to characterize certain movements or periods.

Periods in literary history, however, have frequently functioned as mirrors of social, especially national history.

But literary history is not documented solely in works of literary historiography. Every piece of literary criticism that discusses literary works and authors contributes to the mainstreams, outlines, or sometimes margins of a literary history in public evidence. The same could be said of almost every other discourse about literature, literary 'registrations', which are, in one way or another, acts of canonization. The prominence of certain writers gets reflected in countless ways, the reassessment of works and oeuvres is constantly taking place; literary history gets told, mediated, disseminated – even in the absence of actual volumes of literary history.

It is important to emphasize this because Iceland, while it possesses a long-standing and relatively rich literary culture, does not have a strong tradition of literary historiography, in which one literary historian picks up from another, correcting, amending, adding, deleting. The main exceptions to this general rule are studies in the canonized genres of medieval Icelandic literature, mainly the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), eddic and scaldic poetry, the *Sturlunga Saga* collection, and the writings attributed to Snorri Sturluson (1179?-1241), i.e. the *Snorra Edda* (on Nordic mythology and poetry) and *Heimskringla* (history of the Norwegian kings).

There is no doubt that in terms of relevance for Icelandic national/historical identity, the anonymous family sagas have been of crucial importance, and not being able to locate and name the authors or writers of these heroic epics has been a source of grief for many. Much has been written about the possible or likely figures that put to calfskin sagas like *Njals Saga*, *Laxdæla Saga*, and *The Saga of Grettir*. Several scholars have conjectured that Snorri Sturluson may be the author of *Egil's Saga*, but it was not until last year that this saga was actually published under Snorri's name.¹ There has already been some debate about the legitimacy of this act, and indeed about what 'author' means in this context, where, for instance, no original manuscripts have survived.² The act of attributing one of the most important sagas to the most renowned writer of the thirteenth century may be seen as an attempt to lend the family sagas new 'authority' as original literary creations.

It would appear, then, that in Iceland one has seriously dodged the 'death of the author'. And while a saga writer returns from the dead to be acknowledged as the author of the saga of Egil Skallagrímsson, who is a great poet in his own right (that is, if he actually composed the poetry allotted to him in the saga), the nation celebrated the centenary of another writer who seems especially commanding in the history of twentieth-century Icelandic literature, holding as he does a pre-eminent, central position in the literary field in general, and especially in the domain of the novel. Having supplied his countrymen with many a bone of contention during his early and mid-career, Halldór Laxness (1902-1998) became a national icon after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1955. If only because of Halldór Laxness, it will prove difficult to pull the history of modern Icelandic literature away from its focus on the author.

My interest in this essay – as a storyteller, albeit a reluctant one – is twofold, as is borne out by my title. I shall focus on the story of the Icelandic novel, i.e. the historical and narrative representation of the genre, but I shall also look to the narrative aesthetics and methods evident in the Icelandic novel as a form and practice of writing. Halldór Laxness is important in the first instance because he manages to create a space for himself as a 'guide' to the qualities and values of novelistic and national narratives – and because he does so not only by writing significant novels.

2

It is important to note in this context that the issue of narrative is also salient when unravelling the careers of individual writers, and this is often especially true of novelists. What are the terms through which one outlines such careers? What narrative context does one read the novels into?

- 1) The writer's life?
- 2) Social and cultural history (especially since the novel is so often seen as socially based)?
- 3) The history and practice of fiction and the novel, domestic and/or foreign?

4) Other historical dimensions – e.g. the history of ideas?

As far as this last category is concerned, Halldór Laxness has often been described as moving in and out of grand narratives in the course of his life: from an early acquaintance with Taoism (or does this count as a grand narrative in the West?) through Catholicism to Marxism, and ultimately perhaps back to some sort of resignation in the spirit of Tao. He repeatedly repudiated Freudianism, although it is tempting to speculate whether this was because he was immersed in it, for his novels manifest deep and complicated Freudian insights. And the Eternal Feminine that Laxness consciously foregrounds in some of his texts – notably in conjunction with Freudian allusions in *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (1968; *Christianity at Glacier*, 1972/1996) – is this, too, possibly a form of grand narrative? Finally, the narrative of Icelandic nationhood is one that Laxness concerns himself with in various ways throughout most of his writing career.

Portrayals of such ideological mobility or migratory urge do not, however, reflect a tendency to see his career so much as a product of his society and culture (cf. item 2 above). In fact, the flow is often seen as going in the opposite direction, Laxness being viewed as a cultural agent in a radical sense of the word, very often, in fact, as a cultural hero who shaped his environment. In an essay published 30 years ago, Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson notes that the Icelandic nation would be justified in saying to Laxness the words that pass from Diljá to Steinn Elliði in Laxness's novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (1927; *The Great Weaver of Kashmir*): 'I am the clay between your hands'. Without Laxness, Höskuldsson says, Icelanders would be nothing but 'monkeys in the marshland'.³ This hyperbolic eulogy brings to mind Hans-Georg Gadamer's comment that 'a social culture that has fallen away from its religious traditions expects more from art than is in accordance with aesthetic consciousness [...]. The romantic support for a new mythology [...] gives the artist and his task in the world the consciousness of a new consecration. He is something like a "secular savior" [...].'⁴ There is little doubt that Icelanders have sought cultural legitimation in Laxness to a considerable extent. I shall later discuss how he himself worked his way toward such legitimation, having become fully aware that it could happen only through an investment in tradition.

Small wonder, then, that Laxness' career as a novelist has been seen as a kind of 'grand narrative of the Icelandic novel' over several decades. Exactly how this happens remains to be traced in detail. Let me note a few footprints here. In 1949, when Kristinn E. Andrésson brought out his important survey of Icelandic literature from 1918 to 1948 (*Íslenzkar nútímabókmenntir 1918-1948*), he certainly acknowledged Laxness' stature, but it was still relativized by a broad literary context, where several writers played important roles, and where poetry was still at least on an equal footing with the novel in terms of significance in the literary field. But even as Andrésson was writing his book, this field was rapidly changing. Laxness' sun was rising, and the novel was steadily becoming a more important genre in Iceland. This is reflected in the number of books of fiction published. As far as original fiction is concerned, there was an increase from 142 books in the 1930s to 244 in the 1940s. The change is more dramatic in translated literature, where we go from 277 books in the 1930s to 760 in the 1940s (most of these being translated fiction).⁵

While translated fiction may be the best indication of changes in Icelandic reading culture,⁶ the increasing respect enjoyed by the novel was due in no small part to the efforts of Halldór Laxness. He also 'took' the lion's share of that respect. I cannot here scrutinize and map in detail the general response to Laxness as a writer and public figure, although this may seem a pressing issue given the weakness of Icelandic literary scholarship – as far as *modern* literature is concerned – during the formative period of Laxness' career. The first major studies of Laxness were written by the Swedish scholar Peter Hallberg in the mid-1950s, and later translated into Icelandic. Neither Laxness nor any other twentieth-century Icelandic writer would receive such thorough critical attention from Icelandic scholars for a long time to come. But obviously there are several documents that attest to the vivid reception of Laxness' work and the way in which he was embraced by a strong national sentiment, especially after he was awarded the Nobel Prize. There is little doubt that he came to be seen by many as a 'secular savior'.

As far as broadly conceived works of modern literary history are concerned, we have little to go by from Andrésson's book of 1949 until 1978, when Heimir Pálsson published his survey of Icelandic literature

from 1550 to the present. It is a relatively short historical overview, mainly intended for school use, but as such it is likely to have been quite formative, for instance as regards public awareness of canonicity. Observing Pálsson's presentation and discussion of Icelandic prose literature from 1920 to 1965 (excluding children's literature) in the third edition of his book, I estimate that about half the space is given to Halldór Laxness. The limited size of the book calls for broad strokes, of course, but these proportions are jolting to say the least, and the result is that very few other writers receive the kind of attention and analysis necessary to demonstrate their historical significance. The history of prose literature in this period is thus cut to Laxness' figure.⁷ Pálsson is quite conscious of this and states that it is 'hardly too much said that one Icelandic author towers above all others during the period 1930-50 – and in fact longer'. 'Besides being the most prolific author,' Pálsson says, Laxness was 'also the one who "struck the note" for other writers during this time', and he finds it therefore 'natural to look mainly to his works for examples to explain the development of literature during this period'.⁸ These words do not just express a personal opinion, for Pálsson is pronouncing a critical paradigm in which the novel has become the dominant mode of prose literature and one particular novelist reigns supreme.

3

How did Halldór Laxness become a writer of such significance? Let us say that I refuse to accept the argument that he was a genius (at least in the romantic sense of the word). How do writers in general become so prominent? What has to happen in addition to their writing literary works of merit? How does one even, to begin with, secure the necessary attention? We can, roughly speaking, set up a bipolar spectrum, based on the presence and activities of the writer on the one hand, and the functioning of the literary establishment on the other. Of course, sometimes the two cannot be separated, for instance when a writer is interviewed by the media following a promotional push by his or her publisher. But when Winston Churchill was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953, he was clearly backed by his reputation as a political leader more than the reception of his published writings in

literary circles. The literary persona of someone like Franz Kafka, on the other hand, strong and idiosyncratic as it may seem, was channelled to the public almost exclusively through the 'institution of literature', and not just because he died young, for during his lifetime he was very reluctant to be prominently active in public cultural life.

Halldór Laxness was certainly not a reluctant participant in Icelandic cultural and literary life. Alongside his novels, the first of which appeared when he was seventeen, he was from early on an avid writer of essays and newspaper articles, commenting on the various aspects of culture, from Karen Blixen (attacking her) to toothbrushing (recommending it), from electricity for the countryside (supporting it) to the medieval literary heritage of Iceland (which he, at that time, saw as a burden). But the basis of his central status in Icelandic letters was solidified during World War II. He had already written important novels before that: the modernist *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, and the three novels that are among the highlights of modern realism in Icelandic fiction: *Salka Valka* (1931-1932; *Salka Valka*, 1936), *Sjálfstætt fólk* (1934-1936; *Independent People*, 1946/1997), and *Heimsljós* (1937-1940; *World Light*, 1969/2002). The 1930s are the decade of Laxness on the rise, but first and foremost as a novelist. In the 1940s he becomes a cultural cannonball in Iceland. His productivity, especially during the first half of the decade, is staggering: he writes the novel trilogy *Íslandsklukkan* (1943-1946; *Iceland's Bell*, 2003), breaks new ground by editing five medieval sagas in modern spelling (1942-1946), brings out two large collections of essays: *Vettvángur dagsins* (1942; *The Contemporary Scene*) and *Sjálfsgödir hlutir* (1946; *Obvious Things*), and translates several literary works, including Voltaire's *Candide* (1945), Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1941) and Gunnar Gunnarsson's (1889-1975) five-volume novel (originally written in Danish), *Fjallkirkjan* (1941-1943; *Church on the Mountain*).

Laxness' whole activity during this period constitutes a multilayered contemporary dialogue with Icelandic tradition. Or perhaps one should say that Laxness grasps hold of the horns of tradition, having learnt to be its master, rather than be collected up by it. *Íslandsklukkan* concerns itself with the heritage of the sanctified literature that was handed down to us thanks in large part to the manuscript collector Árni Magnússon (1663-

1730), reshaped in the character Arnas Arnæus in the trilogy. Through his fiercely debated modern-spelling editions of the sagas (which some felt were sacrilegious and the Icelandic Parliament tried to ban), Laxness himself becomes a key player in the contemporary dissemination of the sagas, which he wanted to make more readily available to the general reading public.⁹ There was also considerable opposition to the way in which he adapted *A Farewell to Arms* to his own idiosyncratic style and spelling, although there were also those who felt he had manifested the parallels reputedly to be seen between the terseness of Hemingway and that of the sagas. The translation of *Fjallkirkjan*, on the other hand, demonstrated how masterfully Laxness could recreate, within the frame of its 'original' linguistic and geographic location, the close relationship between childhood and the Icelandic nature and countryside, which Gunnarsson had described in Danish.

Looking at this productivity as a whole, one cannot help but think that Laxness is a *rewriter*. He is involved in a heavily charged historical enterprise, in which events and works of the past are being re-presented and in which the national and the narrative become almost co-terminous; and the narrative urge is a national urge.

As a young writer in his twenties and thirties, Laxness had already aroused a good deal of attention in Iceland, and some of his writings had met with a harsh response, especially his portrayal of the Icelandic farmer in *Sjálfstætt fólk*. But he had not been at the centre of public literary interest, or rather, he was not felt to be the one giving the nation a voice. This was what many felt Davíð Stefánsson (1895-1964) had achieved in his poetry. In 1932, when the scholar and publisher Kristinn E. Andrússon wrote about Laxness' novel *Salka Valka*, he compared the two writers, saying that Laxness was not a writer who appealed to the general public ('alþýðuskáld') like Stefánsson, who 'belonged' to the people, lending it voice and taste. Laxness is more of an artist, Andrússon says, one who had studied his art intently and with a great sense of social responsibility, but also had the courage to break new ground.¹⁰ When Stefánsson brought out his first and only novel, *Sólon Islandus*, in 1940, the literary scholar Sigurður Nordal compared it to Laxness' *Heimsljós*, finding that Stefánsson had confirmed his place in Icelandic literature, whereas – and this may seem a surprising

statement, given that Laxness' works and views had at times been hotly debated – Laxness' books had still not received proper attention, and Icelandic literary life suffered from a lack of energy to deal with this dynamic shapeshifter.¹¹

By the late 1940s, a number of young writers, with voices very different to that of Stefánsson, were effecting a modernist breakthrough in poetry. But the literary field was also changing in other ways, probably in no small measure because of Laxness' cultural engineering, and the literary focus was shifting from poetry toward narrative interests. This is not to say that Laxness, like Stefánsson earlier on, had become the nation's literary darling (this was to happen later), but rather that he had vigorously worked his way to the heart of the nation's cultural concerns. In fact, he was deeply involved in defining these concerns during a period of world crisis which hastened the nation's full independence, declared in June 1944 when Iceland was still occupied by the American forces. During and following the Second World War, Iceland modernized rapidly, both in industrial and economic terms, but at the same time there was a great concern with traditions that were seen as sanctifying and providing the cultural 'content' of the independence. In his writings, his cultural involvements, and his socialist political stance, Laxness assumed a key position vis-à-vis tradition; an attitude at once radical and conservative. He had once written about the nineteenth-century romantic Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845) that he was a 'poet of Icelandic consciousness' with deep roots in nature, history, the nation, and the language.¹² Like the romantics in the previous century, Laxness had come to see the literary heritage as a national challenge, but whereas for them poetry had been the privileged literary genre, for Laxness the novel became the modern form par excellence, one that through its epic machinery could embrace history, tradition, and ultimately even the domain of the venerated medieval sagas.

Íslandsklukkan admonishes Icelanders of the need to commit the nation's history (including its long history as a Danish colony) to memory in order to have recourse to it in the future. There is little doubt that the novel itself means to bring a historical lesson to bear on the contemporary situation, when the new republic was hosting a new foreign power. Laxness's next novel, *Atómstöðin* (1948; *The Atom*

Station, 1961), contains a fierce critique of the deal struck between the governments of Iceland and the United States, allowing the latter to retain a military stronghold in Iceland. It was a work that indicated Laxness would remain a highly controversial figure. But even as he brought out this tale of contemporary events, he was looking back in time, preparing the one work that more than any other would show his allegiance to the Icelandic literary heritage, and at the same time his independence in rewriting this heritage. *Gerpla* (1952; *The Happy Warriors*, 1958) is a satiric novel retelling, reshaping, and augmenting narrative strands from two major sagas, *Fóstbræðra saga* (Saga of the Sworn Brothers) and Snorri Sturluson's *Ólafs saga helga* (Saint Olaf's Saga; a part of his *Heimskringla*). Laxness manages to give a grotesque twist to the heroic codes of the saga world, even as he celebrates the epic realm they emerged from, and the language of his novel hovers somehow in a medium state between the sagas and modern discourse.

There were of course some who felt that Laxness' treatment of the literary heritage was scandalous, but many more felt that it constituted the ultimate proof that Iceland now had a writer who could bridge the gap between modern narrative and the epic achievements of Iceland's 'Golden Age'. The Swedish Academy acknowledged as much when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for revitalizing the epic tradition in Icelandic literature. With the success of *Gerpla*, Laxness clinched his status as a modern writer on a par with the medieval Nordic bards; in fact, he enjoyed the benefit of being at once an heir and a new creator in relation to their work, capable of 'reauthoring' their material with a difference all his own. Even Snorri Sturluson had to accept having a work of his 'rewritten' by Halldór Laxness.¹³ It should not be hard to understand how this also gave Laxness supreme authority in the realm of the novel – and not just the contemporary Icelandic novel, but the novel as it came to be viewed as a genre in Iceland.

4

What happened in the 1940s and into the 1950s was not necessarily an erasure of the leftist ideology in Laxness' work – the politics of *Atómstöðin* should preclude any such overhasty assumptions. But in much

of his writing during this period, this ideology was eclipsed by the very narrative of Icelandic history and tradition which began to preoccupy the author and would later form a salient part of the representation of his career, ultimately making him a 'þjóðskáld' (a 'national' poet or writer, a term of honour previously used only about writers of poetry). Laxness manages to grab a hold of the hermeneutic circle formed by Jónas Hallgrímsson and his fellow romantics – a circle or a loop allowing for a seemingly direct contact between the achievements of medieval Iceland and the struggle to regain independence and bring new life to Icelandic culture and society¹⁴ – and he adapts this circle to his own purposes. Through his intelligent and poetic staging of *history* and (re)creation of meaningful *places*, his cross-historical trajectory of *language*, and not least his creation of humorous, dramatic and memorable *characters*, he managed to get himself into a key position with regard to tradition and nationality. Ultimately, he became the heir to Icelandic literary greatness – the one who renovated and legitimized the pride his compatriots could feel about their tradition. It is futile to wonder whether this would have happened had the greatest and 'ultimate' recognition not come from abroad, in the form of the world's best known literary prize. The fact is that the Icelandic public more or less accepted the Swedish academy's link between the medieval epic heritage and Laxness' achievements.

This link, or circle, has since solidified and can be seen in a number of contexts. When Laxness died in 1998, the American novelist Brad Leithauser wrote an article celebrating the writer and his work. This is part of the context he sets up:

Laxness drew strength from his country's literary traditions, particularly its improbably 'Golden Age' (roughly 1230-1280 AD), when anonymous scribes, toiling over calfskin, recorded those Sagas that have earned Iceland a permanent place in world literature. The Sagas lend credibility to what was, on the face of it, a pretty shaky enterprise: Laxness' decision, in the first quarter of this century, to build an international career based in Modern Icelandic.

Leithauser goes on to say that Laxness' ambition was to become 'a major, truly modern writer – a legitimate heir to Ibsen and Hamsun and Strindberg – rooted in Viking culture'.¹⁵

5

The 'Viking' attribute may be a little on the ornamental side, but many would agree with Leithauser, perhaps with the qualification that such strength is drawn more from a tradition of ideas and narratives, through which such a culture is re-imagined. In any case, Halldór Laxness became actively involved in such a recreation of Icelandic culture, and he lent it modern relevance even as he undermined its traditional images of heroism. In the process, he himself was of course on his way to becoming a literary and cultural hero. This is not to be separated from what I called his cultural engineering – and he certainly fought battles along the way. When he, against strong institutional disapproval, brought out his modern-spelling editions of the sagas, he assimilated and refashioned some of their authority and cultural capital.

But Laxness' growing authority can also be seen in the many articles he wrote about other writers, about various literary topics, and about many other cultural and social affairs in the late 1930s and 1940s (published in the two collections previously mentioned). His youthful, aggressive flair is still to be felt here, but mixed now with a voice of such cultural weight and experience that it is easy to forget that their source is only in his thirties and early forties. He writes as someone who has already mapped out the territory, he makes critical and laudatory comments on poets and other artists that have been prominent in the first half of the twentieth century, but the two longest essays reach further back in time by far, manifesting how adamant Laxness was in seeking an aesthetic foothold in an Icelandic tradition. The first is about Halldór Pétursson's *Passíudímar* (Passion Hymns), a seventeenth-century key work and historically a vital stepping stone between Old Icelandic literature and the nineteenth century renaissance. Laxness' detailed analysis of the hymns demonstrates both his poetic insight and his scholarly skills.¹⁶ The other long essay is about Old Icelandic sagas. It opens with a disclaimer: Laxness says he has done no independent research in this area, his chief 'excuse' for writing his 'notes' being the fact that 'an Icelandic writer cannot live without constantly thinking of the old books'.¹⁷ The essay does contain both considerably authoritative statements on Old Icelandic literature, and an eye-opening commentary on its relation to the craft of a modern novelist.

Laxness' novels, especially *Íslandsklikkann* and *Gerpía*, are themselves a meeting place of tradition and modernity. And this is where the historical-hermeneutic circle links up with a different 'circle', i.e. the modern literary system, especially the field of the novel which, as I have already pointed out, was becoming pivotal within the literary field. With *Íslandsklikkann*, if not earlier, Laxness had secured his place at the centre of the sphere of the Icelandic novel. This sphere resembles a 'structure', as Jacques Derrida has described it, in that the centre lends order to the structure and keeps its play in check, while the centre is immune to whatever changes do take place in the structure. It is therefore, according to classical thought, 'paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it'.¹⁸ This is an apt description of Laxness' sovereign status in the realm of the Icelandic novel for an extended period in the twentieth century, i.e. from a post-1950s perspective. No other novelist has proven to have a secure status in this field in historical assessments of the period from the 1930s into the 1960s; all others are subject to the contingency of the non-centric structure and are in some sense interchangeable or expendable without serious damage to the structure.¹⁹

No wonder, then, that there has been perennial talk of 'the shadow of Laxness'. To this day, Icelandic authors are regularly asked whether they are writing in the shadow of Laxness, and of course most of them go through the polite motions of saying that this really isn't a shadow, that Laxness' great achievement is a positive challenge, a proof of how high one can aim even as a writer in a 'small' language. The shadow has most often been mentioned in relation to realist novelists of the generation after Laxness, writers such as Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson (1918-1988) and Guðmundur Danielsson (1910-1990).

I want to argue that the shadow is more fruitfully seen as an element that shapes the vision and response of critics, scholars, and others that participate in the literary debate. Thus, the attention given to the converging factors of the novel as genre and the pressing issue of a national culture, and Laxness' epic mastery in uniting these two, lead to the occlusion, to a surprising degree, of two other very important,

supposedly 'canonical', prose writers: Gunnar Gunnarsson and Þórbergur Þórðarson (1889-1974). The latter did not write novels in the accepted sense of that term; his works seem to belong in the less respected fields of biography and autobiography, even though he received great praise for his 'style'. The former lived for a long time in Denmark and wrote his novels in the language of Iceland's long-time colonizer. Although these books were translated and Gunnarsson started writing in Icelandic after his return to the country in 1939, the literary system has taken a long time to accommodate his bicultural status. There are some recent signs, brought along by a widening understanding of the novel genre, that these writers will be getting more critical attention in times to come.

The shadow also works in other, somewhat devious, ways. Few would disagree that the most prevalent theme in Icelandic fiction from the 1930s into the 1960s was the massive migration from the countryside to urban areas, especially to the capital, Reykjavík. Laxness wrote only one novel that incorporates this important historical theme, *Atómstöðin*. It can certainly be argued that younger writers wishing to come to terms with this theme or generally wanting to portray the new urban life of Iceland's capital did indeed look to *Atómstöðin*. It is also true, however, that while this single novel has often been the focus of critical debate, not enough attention has been given to the various ways in which this theme has manifested itself in narrative fiction, sometimes in a more complex and nuanced manner than in *Atómstöðin*, for instance in Stefán Jónsson's (1905-1966) novel, *Vegurinn að brúnni* (1962; *The Road to the Bridge*).

But the shadow of Laxness – again, in the sense of critical awareness – also eclipsed activity at the margins of the field of fiction, activity that sometimes ran counter to the dominant mimetic aesthetic, even allowing this aesthetic a wide spectrum from the social-realistic to the national-romantic, a spectrum that Laxness embraces generously in his novels of the 1930s and 1940s. Previously, in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, Laxness had sought to make a modernist breakthrough in Icelandic fiction, and the nontraditional aspects of this novel seemed to link it to a few other, often quite different, innovations in Icelandic prose, especially Þórbergur Þórðarson's *Bréf til Láru* (1924; *Letter to*

Laura). The social and national concerns of the 1930s, however, were not propitious to the formation of a modernist literary paradigm, and Laxness made a decisive turn away from modernism.²⁰ This is amply exemplified in his novels, but also in his shift from his experimental and playful early poetry to traditional verse, and in his dismissive remarks about lyric modernism.

6

Around 1950 a thorough modernist breakthrough finally occurred in Icelandic poetry,²¹ and in the 1950s a few writers followed suit in short fiction. But the few modernist experiments in the 'circle' of the novel received minimal consideration, the responses swinging from a refusal to recognize such works as novels, to dismissive comments about how this had all been done already, presumably for the most part abroad. Too much fiddling with the narrative of the novel was not tolerated. While Laxness' *Gerpla* (1952) can certainly be seen as an experiment in form and language, a radical act of 'making it new', Laxness himself continued to act as a spokesman for the epic tradition in his critical writings and commentary. As late as 1959 he attacked modern fiction which, in its 'sickening' and 'subjectivist' obsessions, refused to tell of 'remarkable events that have taken place in the world'.²² But at this time he was already having doubts about such epic monumentalism, as we see in his novels *Brekkukotsannáll* (1957; *The Fish Can Sing* 1966/2000) and *Paradísarheimt* (1960; *Paradise Reclaimed* 1962/2002), and quite clearly in an article of 1962 where he takes his leave of the novel, indicating his wish to write for the theatre.²³ This he does, and here his experimentalism is let loose without narrative restraints.

Ironically, however, even as he charges into his own version of the theatre of the absurd, he cannot help continuing his defence of the local terrain of the epic novel that was still so strongly associated with his great achievements. A non-Icelandic reader of the previous discussion may already have asked a silent question: What about translations of modernist novels, that after all had been quite prominent, at least in English, German, French and American fiction, since the 1920s? But while translated fiction comprised the largest sector of literary

publication in Icelandic, very few conspicuously modernist works were translated. One could even claim that Hemingway was as far as the system would go – the Hemingway of *A Farewell to Arms*, translated by Halldór Laxness. Hardly any signs of Faulkner, Proust, Kafka, Woolf, or Joyce.²⁴ While many of Laxness' dismissive remarks on modernism are general comments, such as the one from 1959 quoted above, he occasionally discusses individual canonical modernists. In 1954 he claims to have great respect for the gigantic experiment of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which he sees as a prototype of most aspects of the 'form-cultivating formlessness' characteristic of a great deal of surrealist and generally avant-garde literature. But the fashionable experiment of surrealism dates back to the 1920s, he says, and they were carried out by figures who could be the grandfathers of young writers of the present.²⁵

A similar rhetorical ploy, bypassing or short-circuiting the challenge of foreign modernism for Icelandic literature, becomes even more prominent in Laxness's book *Skáladámi* (A Poet's Time) in 1963. Here, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* are described in terms that make them seem at once admirable and monstrous. Each of these works is one of a kind, says Laxness, they were written a long time ago and they are not models of what young writers should be doing nowadays.²⁶

I should perhaps stress that I am not trying to portray Halldór Laxness as a culprit. All of this has to do with complicated questions of narrative paradigms, literary politics, the handling of cultural capital, and the legacy of a prodigious authorship. Also, it is worthwhile reminding oneself again that Laxness's critical voice sounded through decades when modern literary scholarship was still weak in Iceland – at least in so far as modern literature was concerned. There was little sustained critical inquiry into any twentieth-century literature, domestic or foreign, and this is especially true of fiction. This gave a well-read, vocal, and majestic writer like Laxness all the more critical authority.²⁷ But whatever authority Laxness may have sought to throw into his comments about novelists who had travelled through territories he himself had long ago decided to turn away from, it seems to me obvious that his words about Joyce and Proust are the words of a novelist in crisis.

All the more, therefore, can one admire Laxness' reaction as a surge of new fiction, starting in the mid-1960s, finally brought a modernist paradigm into the sphere of the novel. A number of writers, chiefly Steinar Sigurjónsson (1928-1992), Guðbergur Bergsson (b.1932), Svava Jakobsdóttir (b.1930), Thor Vilhjálmsson (b.1925), Jakóbína Sigurðardóttir (1918-1994) and Þorsteinn frá Hamri (b.1938), broke through the borders of the epic-mimetic novel, opening up a horizon of a radicalized narrative and a more open conception of what could be done with and within the novel. Laxness' novel *Krisniháld undir Jökli* (1968) is very much a part of this revolt, an amazingly daring departure for a writer in his mid-sixties, in which he goes against the 'laws' of narrative that in Iceland had come to be strongly associated with his own aesthetics and career. It is in fact a novel that, even as it despairs at ordering the story at hand (the life and work of clergyman Jón Þrinnus), even as it deconstructs centres and traces peripheries, still makes serious inquiries into narrative itself and its many interactive and social connections to self and subjectivity.

It is in fact a novel driven by what could be called constructive fragmentation, and as such it serves as a reminder of how Halldór Laxness might be fruitfully approached: not as a monolithic figure and a monument, but as a source of many and multifarious cultural practices; as as novelist, certainly, but also as a writer in other genres: drama, poetry, short story, and, last but not least, the essay. At the same time, he is also to be considered as someone who left much cultural space unoccupied: themes, styles, narrative possibilities that have been explored by other, modern and contemporary, writers of Icelandic literature.

Notes

1. Snorri Sturluson, *Risagn*, 3 vols. ed. Helgi Bernóðsson, Jónas Kristjánsson, and Örnólfur Thorsson (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2002).
2. Cf. articles by Guðrún Nordal, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 21 December 2002; and by Vesteinn Ólason and Örnólfur Thorsson, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 1 February 2003.

3. Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson, 'Sambúð skálds við þjóð sína', in *Sjö erindi um Halldór Laxness*, ed. Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1973), p.11.
4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Sheed and Ward Ltd., ed. G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p.79.
5. Heimir Pálsson, *Straumar og stefnur í íslenskum bókmenntum frá 1550*, 3rd rev. ed. (Reykjavík: Íðunn 1987), p.156; and Ástráður Eysteinnsson, 'Modernism at the Borders: Notes on Literary History, Translation and Modernism in Iceland', in *English and Nordic Modernisms*, ed. B. Tysdahl, M. Jansson, J. Lothe and S. K. Povlsen (Norwich: Norvik Press, 2002), pp.106-107.
6. Cf. my discussion in 'Af annarlegum tungum. Þýðingar og íslensk bókmenntasaga eftir stríð', *Andvari* (1989), pp.99-116, and in my book *Tvímæli. Þýðingar og bókmenntir* (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun/Háskólaútgáfan, 1996), pp.244ff.
7. This would belong under item 3), and, again, the context seems shaped by Laxness rather than the other way round. I have not said anything here about no.1), i.e. the connection between Laxness' life and his writing. In this context I am mainly interested in Laxness' public participation in literary and cultural affairs. While the public aspects of his life are fairly well known, no substantial (not to mention critical) biography of Laxness has appeared as yet, but interest in Laxness' personal life is clearly growing. Cf. three quite different books that have appeared in the past three years: *Nærmynd af Nóbelskáldi. Halldór Kiljan Laxness í augum samtímamanna*, ed. Jón Hjaltason (Akureyri: Bókaútgáfan Hólar, 2000), *Halldór Laxness. Líf í skáldskap* by Ólafur Ragnarsson (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2002), and *Skrýtnastur er maður sjálfur. Hver var Halldór Laxness?* by Auður Jónsdóttir (Laxness' granddaughter) (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2002).
8. Heimir Pálsson, *Straumar og stefnur í íslenskum bókmenntum frá 1550*, pp.175-176.
9. Cf. Jón Karl Helgason, *The Rewriting of Njáls Saga: Translation, Politics and Icelandic Sagas* (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 1999), pp.119-136.
10. Kristinn E. Andrésson, 'Salka Valka', in *Um íslenskar bókmenntir. Ritgerðir I* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1976), pp. 37-38.
11. Sigurður Nordal, 'Tvær miklar skáldsögur', *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 24 November 1940, pp.370-371. I am grateful to my student Pétur Már Guðmundsson for drawing this article to my attention.
12. Halldór Kiljan Laxness, 'Um Jónas Hallgrímsson', in *Alþýðubókin*, 5th ed. (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1956), p.57 (first publ. 1929). Later Laxness was

- to edit a collection of Hallgrímsson's poems and stories: Jónas Hallgrímsson, *Kvæði og sögur* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1957).
13. Cf. Ástráður Eysteinnsson, 'Er Halldór Laxness höfundur Fóstbræðrasögu? Um höfundargildi, textatengsl og þýðingu í sambandi Laxness við fornsögurnar', in *Skáldskaparmál I*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson, Gunnar Harðarson and Örnólfur Thorsson (Reykjavík: Stafaholt, 1990), pp.171-188.
14. See Ástráður Eysteinnsson, 'Icelandic Resettlements', *Symploke*, 5.1-2 (1997), pp.153-166.
15. Brad Leithauser, 'End of an Epic', *The New York Review of Books*, 26 March 1998, p.17.
16. Halldór Kiljan Laxness, 'Inngangur að Passíusálmum', *Vettvangur dagsins. Ritgerðir*, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1962), pp.7-52 (first publ. 1942).
17. Halldór Kiljan Laxness, 'Minnisgreinar um fornsögur', *Sjálfsgæðir hlutir. Ritgerðir*, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1962), pp.9-58 (first publ. 1946).
18. Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p.279. Italics in original.
19. Cf. my discussion in 'Halldór Laxness og aðrir höfundar', *Umbrot. Bókmenntir og nútími* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1999), esp. pp.18-19.
20. There has been some disagreement about how to interpret the literary-historical status of the nontraditional 'unrest' of the 1920s. Halldór Guðmundsson sees it as a breakthrough of literary modernity facilitating subsequent literary development, whereas I have argued that recognizing the 'stalling' of modernism is crucial in a historical analysis of the period in question (i.e. the period from the 1920s into the 1960s). Cf. Halldór Guðmundsson, 'Loksins, loksins'. *Vefarinn mikli og upphaf íslenskra nútímabókmennta* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1987), and Ástráður Eysteinnsson, 'Fyrsta nútímaskáldsagan og móðernisminn', *Umbrot*, pp.56-91.
21. Cf. Eysteinn Þorvaldsson, *Atómskáldin. Aðdragandi og upphaf móðernisma í íslenskri ljóðagerð* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1980).
22. Halldór Laxness, 'Breytiþróun skáldsögunnar eða dauði', *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 1 (1959), p.62.
23. Halldór Laxness, 'Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit' (written in 1962), in *Upphaf mannúdarstefnu. Ritgerðir* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1965), pp.67-79.
24. I have discussed this in more detail in my 'Modernism at the Borders'.
25. Halldór Laxness, 'Vandamál skáldskapar á vorum dögum', *Dagur í senn. Ritgerðir* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1955), pp.200-201.