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## The World of Halldór Laxness

By SIGURÐUR A. MAGNÚSSON It is a constant source of wonder to foreign observers that a scattered and destitute nation of fewer than eighty thousand souls, as the Icelanders were at the turn of the century, should have produced such a plethora of creative talent, especially in literature and the visual arts. In painting there were such outstanding individuals as Ásgrímur Jónsson (1876–1958), Jón Stefánsson (1881–1963), Jóhannes Kjarval (1885–1972), Thorvaldur Skúlason (1906–84), and Svavar Guðnason (1909–87); in sculpture one could single out Einar Jónsson (1874–1954), Ásmundur Sveinsson (1893–1982), and Sigurjón Olafsson (1908–82). In literature the first Icelanders to achieve an international reputation wrote in Danish: the dramatists Jóhann Sigurjónsson (1880–1919) and Guðmundur Kamban (1888–1945), and the novelist Gunnar Gunnarsson (1889–1975). There was also the Jesuit scholar and teacher Jon Svansson (1857–1944), who wrote in German about his boyhood experiences in Iceland and captured a worldwide audience. The first writer employing his native tongue to achieve international renown, however, was Halldór Laxness (b. 1902), who in 1955 was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

No doubt the literary excellence of the Icelanders during the past century and a half owes much to the old and distinguished tradition of the Edda and the saga. It was in thirteenth-century Iceland that the famous sagas were composed, a fresh genre of realistic prose works whose equivalent can only be found in the European novel of the last two centuries. The sagas had little influence on prose writing in the rest of the world, but they still stand as the first successful attempt in Europe to create realistic secular prose narratives. Halldór Laxness works in the tradition of the anonymous saga writers and has actually found some of his subject matter in early Icelandic literature. With his narrative powers and vivid, dramatic style, he has done more than any modern novelist to renew Icelandic prose; indeed, he dominated the

literary scene of his country from the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s. He is a veritable magician with words and has in that respect alone worked miracles. His linguistic virtuosity tends to be lost in translation, as does his innate feeling for the native soil and tradition. Laxness is so deeply rooted in the oral folk tradition, shaped by the history and environment of his people, that much of the fragrance of his exquisite prose is hopelessly lost even in the best foreign renditions. Any translator of his works will testify to the exasperating dilemma of recapturing and rendering some of the original flavor. This is not to say, as some would, that every literature has its own singular attributes which are alien to other literatures. It merely means that some authors identify themselves so thoroughly with the native tradition that the most intimate quality of their writing cannot be conveyed in another language.

HOUSEHOLD FIGURES. In his heyday Laxness was an odd mixture of universal creative genius and partisan essayist, propagating radical socialism; however, he made a point of separating his art from his social and political thinking, with the result that his novels are largely free of those tendencies which often mar the works of socially conscious authors. He has a surprisingly wide range of styles and subjects, so that no two of his novels resemble each other in anything but their felicity of expression and power of character portrayal. Many of his fictional characters have become household figures as familiar in Iceland as the ancient saga heroes or, say, Babbitt and Gatsby in America. One of the remarkable achievements of Halldór Laxness, which may be unique for all I know, is that he has completely reshaped the attitudes of his compatriots and has presented them with an image of the nation's destiny, history, and contemporary reality which they accept as true and valid in a deeper sense than the image conveyed by traditional history books. It is an acknowledged fact that all great art changes our attitudes by changing our vision and perception of reality, but Laxness's unique achievement is that he has molded the *whole* nation and given it a fresh vision of itself. Similarly, his works have been almost the sole source of information about Iceland in foreign parts, so that the image he has created is the only Iceland known to most foreigners. This is indeed a feat most authors would envy. One reason for his wide-ranging influence on his fellow countrymen is that Laxness has from the very start been in constant dialogue with his people—sometimes a bitter one, it is true, but he has never

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been ignored or disregarded, though he might be passionately opposed and vehemently contradicted.

His first significant novel was *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver of Kashmir; 1927), a stylistic tour de force, expressionistic and somewhat chaotic. After years of restless wanderings around war-weary Europe, Laxness had become a devout Catholic, and then sat down to re-create the process in a kind of heated frenzy; the autobiography is thinly veiled. It is interspersed with long passages of philosophical speculations in which Oriental mysticism and French surrealism mingle with Roman Catholicism. The misogynous influence of Strindberg, Otto Weininger, and the later Tolstoy is very strong, and the theme of the book is the struggle in the author's soul between God and Satan, the latter represented principally by woman. God is given the victory, but we have an inkling of the author's consternation when faced with the superhuman demands of the Church. Whatever the merits of this juvenile novel as a work of art, and I think they are considerable, it was epoch-making as a stylistic feat and has indeed been called "the first modern Icelandic novel."

STRUGGLING HUMANITY. Witnessing life on the West Coast during his three-year stay in America, before and at the beginning of the Depression, Laxness had another conversion and embraced socialism. No doubt his friendship with Upton Sinclair contributed to that sudden reorientation. In America he wrote a book of essays, *Alþýðubókin* (The People's Book), expounding his newly discovered truths; it created something of a sensation when it appeared in 1929. During the ensuing three decades there followed a long line of similar books, which established Laxness as the most persuasive and influential ideologue of the Left in Iceland. Much later, disillusioned by the Pasternak affair and Hungary, he sat down to review his gullibility and revise his attitudes in *Skáldatími* (A Poet's Time; 1963), a bitterly honest and devastatingly humorous book on an unsavory subject.

After his stay in America, Laxness returned to Iceland and began what was to be the principal task of his life. Having published a volume of highly accomplished experimental verse—his only one, later enlarged—he wrote his two-volume *Salka Valka* (1931–32), which at once established him as the leading novelist of Iceland. He had by then abandoned his earlier preoccupation with internal action and instead presented a grimly realistic portrait of an Icelandic fishing village, where the exploited fishermen make fumbling efforts to improve their conditions. This novel has the objectivity and dramatic clarity of a saga, and the characterization is masterly. The heroine, the young and lonely Salka Valka, is one of the memorable figures of Icelandic literature. Her hatred for her mother's seducer and her love for her weak idealist boyfriend possess some of the elemental force of the ancient epics. The novel is, how-

ever, more than a mere study in social conditions in Iceland. As in most of his later fiction, Laxness endows his characters with universal validity. They become symbols of struggling humanity everywhere. Laxness has achieved the distinction of being at once the most national and the most international of modern Icelandic novelists.

After this intensely realistic picture from the coast, Laxness turned to the countryside in his two-volume *Sjálfstætt fólk* (1934–35; Eng. *Independent People*), a work of epic proportions in which man and nature, legend and daily reality merge in magical unity. Laxness was decades ahead of Latin American writers in employing "magic realism"—which, by the way, was also a trademark of some of the medieval sagas. Here is the story of the devastating struggles and defeats of the pioneer farmer. The ages-long predicament of the poor and exploited peasant is incarnated in the strong, unbending, ever-losing person of Bjartur the farmer, who, through no fault of his own, loses everything he has earned in thirty years of drudgery and at the end must start all over again. This novel has some similarities with Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil*, but, as Laxness has pointed out, the two works are diametrically opposed in their conception and conclusion. Hamsun's novel ends in idyllic happiness, whereas Laxness draws up a heart-rending tragedy of timeless significance. The work possesses the very qualities of tragedy: it has a cathartic effect, and it enlarges and ennobles our view of the human condition.

THE POET AGAINST THE WORLD. Laxness's next monumental work, the tetralogy *Heimsljós* (1937–40; Eng. *World Light*), is based on a long diary left by an obscure folk poet, and the popular tone is pronounced. The unity, freshness, and poetic beauty of the novel, however, are unquestionably the fruit of the author's poetic genius. The style is so closely related to the subject that large parts of the novel read like ecstatic poetry. The theme of the novel—the poet against the world—is played in all possible keys, and the total effect is that of a magnificent symphony wherein every detail contributes to the whole and the whole resides in every detail. James Joyce would no doubt have called it a work with a "rhythm of beauty."

In four volumes we are told the life story of that extraordinary man, Ólafur the Poet, whose will and ability to suffer at times appear superhuman. He is an orphan and therefore cursed by those who bring him up, even though they receive defrayment from the parish and work him beyond his limited physical capacity. As a result, he is bedridden for long periods of his childhood. The first volume presents the inner world of this sensitive and utterly lonely boy with such poetic force that our attention never flags, even if nothing actually happens around him.

When Ólafur goes out into the world, there is very

little change in his lot. Weak and irresolute, he is continually exploited by his fellow men, high and low alike, but through it all he somehow manages to preserve his integrity and his poetic ecstasy. As always, Laxness makes skillful use of strong dramatic contrasts. There is the humorous contrast between the professional versifier Reimar and Ólafur, who will agonize over a single line the whole night long, cross it out at daybreak, then "[go] to bed cold, tired and disillusioned like a man who has lost all his possessions and will never again live a happy day." A more serious and violent contrast is that between Ólafur and Örn Úlfar, a young poet who has given up his vocation because of the injustice in the world and will "not recognize any beauty as long as human life is a continuous crime." These contrasts attain universal validity, and they are not the only ones which lend the novel such fascinating life.

The characters of *Heimsljós* are not quite so objectively drawn as those of the previous novels, even though they are strangely real. The strokes are bolder, and there is much more humor and satire mingled with pathos and bitter sadness. Above it all soars the boundless compassion of Ólafur the Poet for everything that breathes: "It is the poet in whom everything else suffers."

**BEST HISTORICAL NOVEL.** In his next novel, the trilogy *Íslandsklukkan* (Iceland's Bell; 1943–46), Laxness turned to history for his subject matter. The time is around 1700, when Iceland is in a state of abject decline as a colony of Denmark. One of the central characters is none other than the famous scholar and manuscript collector Árni Magnússon (1663–1730), to whom we owe much of what is still extant of the ancient literary treasures of Iceland. In the novel he is named Arnas Arnaeus. This monumental novel is at once realistic and highly symbolic. The picture of the age is truer than foreigners are apt to believe, but the novel also has a "message" to modern times—a message that was keenly felt during and after World War II, when foreign troops were stationed in Iceland. The ambience of the age has been brilliantly captured through a skillful use of language, for the author employs the quaint and artificial speech of the time when necessary, though it is nowhere forced or pedantic.

The main character of the novel, the destitute peasant Jón Hreggvidsson, is one more unforgettable figure from the Laxness gallery. He stands for the continually oppressed but never-vanquished common man, who meets every nasty blow with a bitter verse or a scornful smile. He gains in stature with each new humiliation. Laxness's roguish humor in portraying this character is heartwarming. Jón suffers all the afflictions of the unprotected—he is even condemned to death on false grounds—but his vitality and resourcefulness are such that nothing subdues him. Ceaselessly persecuted, he is endowed with an invin-

cible inner freedom and thus symbolizes the common people of Iceland through centuries of foreign rule, exploitation, injustice, and starvation. He perseveres without complaint, with a kind of divine indifference, and therein lies, strangely, his final triumph.

Another important character, the proud and aristocratic Snaefrídur, "the Sun of Iceland," who loves Arnas the scholar, has some of the mystical qualities of her natural environment. Her self-will and pride are quite heathen and stand out in bold contrast to the meekness and servility of one of her suitors, a canon of the cathedral of Skálholt. Significantly, Arnas first sees her as a vision, and she does indeed symbolize the vision of Iceland in its glorious past, its saga, dream, and natural splendor.

In his passion for collecting manuscripts to preserve the country's past, Arnas sacrifices his love for Snaefrídur. There is an ambiguity in the symbolism here, in that Arnas does save the treasures of Iceland by moving them to Denmark but also, as it were, betrays Iceland by not trusting his people to guard their heritage. Having been betrayed, Snaefrídur marries an alcoholic wreck, with the comment, "Rather the worst than the next best."

Arnas represents the enlightened, cosmopolitan element in Iceland, and as such becomes his country's spokesman abroad. Though most of his efforts to bring about improvements at home are in vain, he succeeds in saving Iceland from becoming a base for the "empire" of the Hanseatic merchants. As a final mockery of the great, though mostly fruitless efforts of this devoted man comes the devastating 1728 fire in Copenhagen, in which a great many of his manuscripts perish. There is infinite resignation in his final comment, "Now the gods had better govern. I am tired."

In the three main characters, each central to one of the volumes, Laxness has expressed the history of Iceland in a nutshell. Here is the essence of what Iceland stands for: the downtrodden, never-yielding common man; the scholar and statesman with his passionate devotion to bygone glory and his broad view of the contemporary scene; and finally the beauty and harshness of the country's nature, symbolized in the "celestial body" of the lady who, in her mixture of pride and compassion, love and hate, devotion and deep hurt, calls to mind some of the great heroines of the Edda and the sagas. *Íslandsklukkan* is decidedly the best historical novel ever written in Iceland, and some foreign critics have made even greater claims for it. It is the author's most popular book in his native country. For the inauguration of the National Theater in 1950 certain sections of the novel were dramatized. The play has been staged three times during the last four decades, always to great popular acclaim.

**POSTWAR CONCERNS.** In his next novel Laxness jumped right into the passing moment with a bril-

liantly executed and consciously tendentious satiric fantasy, *Atómstöðin* (1948; Eng. *The Atom Station*). This sarcastic novel, which prompted demands from some elderly patriots that its translation into foreign languages be forbidden, presents a grotesque world of hysteria, cynicism, and decadence, where politicians and businessmen conspire to sell their country to the Americans in order to ensure the high standard of living reached during and after the war. The plot is based on two historical events, shrewdly interwoven: the 1946 treaty between Iceland and the United States involving the Keflavík military base, and the transfer from Copenhagen to Reykjavík of the bones of the great and beloved poet Jónas Hallgrímsson (1808–45); the latter were spirited away by a well-known businessman and taken to be buried at his place of birth in the north, before they were retrieved and officially buried at the national shrine of Thingvellir. The motto of the novel is “Sell country—bury bones.”

Apart from the scathing satire of the politicians and the humorous caricature of the businessmen, there is in *Atómstöðin* a very serious discussion of the confrontation between past and present in Icelandic society, the fossilized old tradition of the countryside versus the amorphous nouveau-riche mentality of the capital. The two most interesting characters in the novel are the narrator, a young girl from the country who has come to work for a parliamentarian in Reykjavík, and her friend and mentor the Organist, both of them sane, genuine, and undogmatic persons. The technical device of having an uneducated girl tell the story is indeed hazardous, but it proves on the whole successful and lends the novel a very special flavor. The dominating figure of the unassuming Organist is the most intriguing feature of the novel, especially as he prefigures similar characters who come to play ever more important roles in subsequent works, both novels and plays. This is the so-called Taoist type of man—as far as I know a unique type in modern fiction.

THE HERO DEFLATED. After a long pause, Laxness published another controversial novel, *Gerpla* (1952; Eng. *The Happy Warriors*), based on saga motifs and written with unflinching brilliance in the exact style of the thirteenth-century sagas. It was a linguistic feat that most people would have thought impossible. The work deals with certain well-known saga figures, mainly from the *Fóstræðrasaga* (Sworn Brothers' Saga), and their exploits at home and abroad. It was at first received with very mixed feelings, since many people were embittered by the treatment of the all but hallowed heroes of medieval Scandinavia. Rebel that Laxness had always been, he had turned all traditional notions topsy-turvy. He made a fat, barbarous villain out of one of the most renowned kings of the North, St. Olav of Norway (d. 1030), and most of the other characters received similar treatment, includ-

ing Canute the Great of Denmark. The novel is an utter deflation of the heroic spirit as extolled in Old Icelandic and other medieval literature. Classical scholars were understandably upset at this unorthodox onslaught, but few ever challenged the brilliant style or the fertile imagination of the author, or, for that matter, the historical veracity of his interpretation. The novel is unquestionably one of Laxness's great artistic triumphs.

One of the reasons that prompted Laxness to undertake this monumental task was the state of international affairs during the Cold War. There are many striking allusions to modern European history in the delineation of some of the major characters: St. Olav as a precursor of Hitler, to take but one example. Laxness himself has declared that his objective was to preserve Iceland's literary treasures from being used by modern warmongers. His intention is clearly to lay bare the illusions inherent in popular definitions of the heroic ideal, to expose the folly of blind adherence to ideals or ideologies that collide with reality and common sense. At the same time he endeavors to present an alternative, a positive form of life that can replace the militaristic civilization of Europe. Two opposing life-styles are presented: on the one hand the simple, peaceful, and self-sufficient one of ordinary people, exemplified by the Eskimo culture of Greenland and the peasant community of Iceland; on the other hand the false heroic life of warriors, which entails constant violence and the fruitless pursuit of a chimera. Comparing the warrior-poet Thormóður in *Gerpla* and the folk poet Ólafur in *Heimsljós*, one realizes that the latter, despite all his high-flown dreams, is the more realistic of the two, because he faces and acknowledges reality and draws the correct conclusions from his experience.

At this point Laxness had a change of heart in the sense that he was totally disillusioned with the political doctrines he had adhered to and advocated. Turning his back on the class struggle, he embraced a more humanistic attitude, concerned with the individual seeking a mode of existence that would enable him to live in harmony with his environment, without infringing upon the rights of others to do the same. In this new phase the Taoism of Lao Tse was of paramount importance. *Tao te ching* by that ancient Chinese sage had been translated into Icelandic and was a favorite with Laxness from his youth.

TOLERANCE AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY. Laxness's first novel in the new vein (there had been many hints before) was *Brekkukotsannáll* (1957; Eng. *The Fish Can Sing*), a finely wrought, lyric description of life in Reykjavík at the turn of the century, before modern methods of production and commerce were introduced. The theme of the novel is the distinction between illusion and reality or, more correctly, between the genuine way of life as lived daily in a Reykjavík homestead and the misguided pursuit after



HALLDÓR LAXNESS, 1953

false renown. The young narrator is pitted against his older counterpart, a famous singer who has sacrificed his integrity and inner peace for outward fame. It is the perennial contest between inner- and outer-directed life, set in the social context of preindustrial Iceland on the verge of a new and radically different age of modern capitalism. This is one of Laxness's most endearing and many-faceted novels, with a large gallery of memorable individuals. Rarely has the Taoist ideal of tolerance and self-sufficiency been so graphically and trenchantly depicted as in the fantastic person of the Superintendent or, in a lower key, in the grandparents. In one sense the novel is a monument to a way of life irretrievably lost.

This fascinating fable about "paradise lost" was followed by another parable, *Paradísarheimt* (1960; Eng. *Paradise Reclaimed*), where man's everlasting search for the absolute in human existence is represented by the adventures of the poor farmer Steinar, who leaves his paradise of a home to seek salvation for himself and his family in a distant land. For this dream he sacrifices everything, including his family, only to return, after much suffering, to his point of departure, having discovered that all his efforts have been in vain. In the end he accepts his predicament, thereby proving that his experience has brought him to maturity.

Laxness found the subject matter for his novel in a remarkable autobiography from the last century, written by a farmer who went to Copenhagen to visit the king of Denmark and Iceland, whom he had previously presented with his best horse, and then journeyed to Utah and became a Mormon. The material has been refashioned almost beyond recognition, however. There are also tangential points of contact with Voltaire's *Candide*, which Laxness had translated into Icelandic. As always with this author, the characterization is at once clear and ambivalent: the characters are both simple and inexplicable. This is especially true of the protagonist, who is an idealist and a truth-seeker yet ruthless enough to leave his family without any protection or means of subsistence while he pursues his goal. Human nature in all its complexities and contradictions is the mystical clue to this picaresque novel, but its most extraordinary feat is the language, with its shifting styles, its distant tone, and its very concrete and palpable images. This is Laxness at his linguistically most accomplished, and that is saying a lot.

It has long been my pet idea that two Greek authors have expressed the quintessence or archetype of the Greek psyche: Homer in the character of Odysseus and Kazantzakis in Zorba. Similarly, it seems to me that two authors at opposite ends of our literature have expressed the essence of the Icelandic psyche: Snorri Sturluson in his portrayal of Viking poet Egil Skallagrímsson and Halldór Laxness in the person of Steinar Steinsson.

A SHIFT TO THE STAGE. Having reached the zenith of his narrative mastery, Laxness seemed to grow tired of his chosen literary form and turned to the theater for a new mode of expression. During the next few years he wrote three original plays, all of which were staged in Reykjavík. Previously he had written two rather indifferent dramas, which debuted respectively in 1934 and 1954; the latter of the two was also staged in Moscow and Helsinki. All three of the later plays testify to a growing preoccupation on the part of the author with those qualities in human nature and social conduct which make life meaningful and rewarding. Here the Taoist ideal of self-sufficiency reigns supreme. In the last of the plays, *Dúfnaveislan* (The Pigeon Party), which premiered in 1966, Laxness found his own theatrical voice and succeeded in dramatizing the protagonist, a simple, almost inane clothes-presser who is anything but a dramatic character; he admits having been too stupid to learn the tailor's trade. The style of the play is at once absurd, hilarious, and strangely realistic-sarcastic, rich in queer episodes and cranky characters. The presser has his counterparts both in Laxness's other plays and in most of his novels, especially the later ones. He represents essentially one of two poles in all the author's creative output: the simple, "innocent," self-sufficient individual who is entirely independent of his surroundings, society, fashion, public opinion, money, and all the paraphernalia of the mundane world. There is a strong romantic element in the conception of this human type, but the amazing fact remains that Laxness has created many starkly real and vivid individuals of this kind—not at all "types" in the usual sense—each of whom stands for a clear and profound concept of the human situation. They represent the difficult art of living, of Being in the true sense.

The other pole in Laxness's writings is the "man of the world," the self-seeker, the practical entrepreneur and administrator, the man of action. He is not always depicted in dark colors or negative terms; he sometimes has in him a streak of resigned pessimism, sometimes good-humored altruism, but at bottom he is contemptible because he is either insincere or morally blind. His actions are not inner-directed, and he deludes himself, thinking he can gain life by playing according to the rules of a depraved world. In some instances he comes to a realization of his fallacy and "repents," but in most cases he is beyond redemption.

ALLEGORY AND MYTH. In his first novel after the "theatrical interlude," *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (1968; Eng. *Christianity at Glacier*), Laxness presented the two poles more vividly and succinctly than in any other of his works. In the characters of the Reverend Jón Prímus and the millionaire-entrepreneur Godman Syngman the author has given us the most fully developed incarnations of the two kinds of human

beings, the constructive and the destructive. Essentially *Kristniöld undir Jökli* is a biblical allegory or existential myth, with constant allusions to Adam and Eve, Christ and Thomas à Kempis, Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross, to name a few of its many and widely different references. It is a very complex novel, with many levels of meaning and a highly intricate and intriguing structure. Its main theme is the world in all its ramifications versus stale and inhibiting ideologies, which limit and impoverish human life. In its essence the novel is a myth about "paradise reclaimed," about the will to accept reality as it is and to live and survive in the face of threatening war and destruction. It is a unique work in contemporary Nordic literature.

In *Innansveitarkronika* (A Country Chronicle; 1970), a description of the valley near Reykjavík where the author grew up at a farm called Laxnes (hence the pen name), Laxness produced a little gem of a parable about man's fidelity to himself and his kin. On one level it is a humorous account of the reactions of the quaint and stubborn representatives of traditional Icelandic culture when faced with new and unfamiliar developments, such as state authority and directives. There is a rich gallery of noteworthy eccentrics, but the basic theme is loyalty to custom, family, and proven values.

In *Gudsgjafapula* (God's Good Gifts; 1972) Laxness uses a well-known entrepreneur as the model for an endearing character, who has many admirable traits but is an incurable dilettante in his private as well as public life. The delineation of this confused and constantly active businessman, who has a formidable ability to exploit people and handle difficult situations with his excellent common sense, is combined with a scathingly satiric depiction of Iceland between 1920 and 1970, in which politicians, ideologues, labor unionists, businessmen, and bankers are debunked and their daily world revealed as one of shallowness, stupidity, and chance. Laxness shrewdly employs different literary styles to highlight his grotesque human comedy.

Between 1975 and 1980 Laxness wrote four auto-

biographical novels covering his first twenty years. They give many vivid and informative glimpses into his childhood and youth. He has also written four collections of short stories wherein his inventiveness and narrative skill are everywhere in evidence. His volumes of essays and travel descriptions number more than twenty. In addition to his five original plays, six of his major novels have been dramatized and staged.

THE FINAL PARADOX. During his career Laxness has been able to mix, to a remarkable extent, the contemplative life with that of the activist. His ideal is clearly the self-sufficient, inner-directed individual who is unconcerned about the world around him, but few Icelanders have been more engaged in the social and political struggles of this century. This interesting paradox is part and parcel of the phenomenon Halldór Laxness. His strength has, in a sense, been his weakness. He has led a dynamic and stormy life and has always been highly impressionable. Beguiled by great ideas, he has twice given himself to powerful ideologies—Catholicism and Marxism—and he has been a passionate and influential fighter for social justice. Although he has wrestled with the problems of both his art and his society, this battle on two fronts seems not to have wasted his energies but rather to have inspired and strengthened him. His artistic fertility has been closely linked to his openness and curiosity about the world around him, his sensitivity to social injustice, and his very keen and often-injured sense of beauty.

Somewhere Laxness has said that his writing was part of the struggle for a just society which, when achieved, would make writers like him superfluous. Similarly, he has delineated his human ideal in many memorable characters, knowing that they would probably not stand by his side in his political struggles. Such are the inconsistencies of life and literature, even though the two are so tightly intertwined that one cannot easily be distinguished from the other in the lifework of Halldór Laxness.

*Reykjavík*