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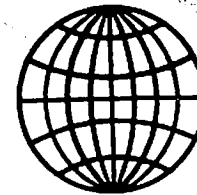
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Halldór Laxness

By PETER HALLBERG
UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Translated by Rory McTurk



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Preface

As an Icelander and a member of a very small Scandinavian nation with an ancient and unique literary culture, Halldór Laxness has rather special qualifications as a writer. Throughout the period of his literary achievement, which has now continued for almost half a century, the Icelandic heritage has constantly been a living force in his work, contrasting or combining in various ways with his modernism and preoccupation with the problems of his time. The tension between the native and the foreign, the national and the cosmopolitan, has formed one of the fruitful contrasts which run through all his writing. I have therefore found it suitable to include a short introductory chapter giving a brief outline of the history of Iceland and its cultural tradition.

Today, at the age of sixty-five, Laxness is still a productive writer. What is more, his literary output, for all its continuity, reveals an unflagging interest in experimenting with new forms. Since 1955, when he received the Nobel Prize for his "vividly descriptive epic works, which have given new life to the great Icelandic art of storytelling"—to quote the reasons given by the Swedish Academy for its choice—he has especially concentrated his energies on writing plays of an extremely original and somewhat bizarre character. A brief but comprehensive assessment of his contribution may therefore be of a merely preliminary nature; surprising features may yet reveal themselves in works still unwritten. The literary historian awaits with especial eagerness a sequel to Laxness' memoirs as a writer; the part published so far, *Skíldatími* (A Writer's Schooling, 1963) covers approximately the period between the two World Wars.

The present study is to a large extent chronologically arranged, in the form of a series of chapters on each of the essential works—a plan which in some measure can be said to have Laxness' own approval, for he readily emphasizes that every literary work is a world in itself, obeying its own inherent

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laws. Three stages in his development may be fairly clearly distinguished. The first is characterized by his attempts as a young man to find his way among conceptions of life and literary trends in Europe after the First World War. It is a period of vehement and restless searching, which finds its artistic liberation in the cosmopolitan novel of ideas *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver from Kashmir, 1927). After a few years' stay in America, mostly at Los Angeles, from 1927 to 1929, Laxness began his long succession of novels with subjects drawn from the social life of Iceland, past and present. This stage, with *Gerpla* (The Happy Warriors, 1952), as its last great literary manifestation, is in part quite strongly colored by the writer's involvement in political and social life, and by his socialistic criticism of society. In his present phase, finally, which began around the time of the Nobel Prize award, his creative powers have, as already mentioned, been directed in no small measure towards the drama. But the novels and short stories written in these later years also differ in tone and spirit from his earlier epic works. They have become "de-ideologized" and have, on the whole, a more calmly retrospective and chronicle-like character; their relation to Icelandic tradition seems to be more free of tension, more conservative.

The three stages that I have outlined here are not, of course, separated by rigid dividing lines. On the contrary, as soon as one penetrates a little below the surface it becomes clear that they are closely linked and develop organically out of each other. Indeed, it could be maintained that *Vefarinn mikli*, the great work of Laxness' youth, contains *in nuce* almost everything that Laxness has later come to write, despite the fact that the book otherwise differs strongly—in setting, style, and choice of subject—from all his other novels. I hope that this unity amid variety, and this basic attitude lying behind what appear to be sudden turns and changes of thought will be clearly discernible in the form I have chosen for my own account of Halldór Laxness and his work.

PETER HALLBERG

Acknowledgments

The author and the translator are grateful to Mrs. Margaret Brittingham Callery, of Wilmington, Delaware; to Gylfi Gíslason, Icelandic Minister of Education, Reykjavík; to Dr. Per-Axel Hildeman of the Swedish Institute, Stockholm; and to The American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York, for generous financial grants. The translator is grateful to Dr. Finnbogi Guðmundsson for a generous loan of books from the National Library of Iceland, Reykjavík; to Magnus Magnusson, of Glasgow, for help and advice concerning some difficult words in *Heimsljós* and for invaluable help with the bibliographical lists; and to a number of friends and colleagues at the University of Lund, Sweden, for help with translation difficulties.

Translator's Note

All Icelandic words and proper names, whether ancient or modern, are given in Modern Icelandic spelling where they occur in the text—except in certain cases where Laxness' spelling is deliberately archaic (as in the title of his autobiographical manuscript *Heiman ek fór*, for instance, or in the book title *Eldur í Kaupinhafn*). Where the Icelandic name of a person or thing is interesting or important in itself, a short explanation of its meaning is given in brackets. In the rare cases where there are examples of Laxness' idiosyncratic spelling differing from normal modern usage, his own spelling has been used. For a detailed guide to the pronunciation and grammar of Modern Icelandic, the reader is referred to Stefán Einarsson's *Icelandic Grammar, Texts, Glossary* (Baltimore, 1949).

In translating the quotations I have been greatly assisted by the author's Swedish rendering of the original Icelandic, and have relied on these for my English versions of passages quoted from letters and from certain relatively "minor" works of Laxness, where I have not had access to the original. The existing English translations of Laxness' works, which are listed at the end of this book, have also been a great help to me, and I freely acknowledge my debt to them—even if the author and I have not always agreed with their interpretations.

The page reference after each quotation refers to the first Icelandic edition of the work in question.

R. W. MCTURK

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Chronology

- 1902 Halldór Guðjónsson is born April 23 in Reykjavík, Iceland, the son of the road construction foreman Guðjón Helgi Helgason, and his wife Sigríður Halldórsdóttir.
- 1905 The family moves to the farm of Laxnes in Mosfellsveit, just northeast of Reykjavík, and takes up farming.
- 1919 Guðjón Helgi dies. Halldór breaks off his schooling in Reykjavík High School and travels abroad for the first time, primarily to Copenhagen. Publishes the short novel *Barn náttúrunnar* (Child of Nature) under the pen name of Halldór frá Laxnesi.
- 1921- Goes abroad again, and stays mainly in Germany and
- 1922 Austria, working on a "philosophical" book, never printed, called *Rauða kverið* (The Red Booklet).
- 1922- With the help of Johannes Jørgensen, the Danish writer
- 1923 and Catholic, Halldór is given a place as a guest at the Benedictine monastery of Saint Maurice de Clervaux in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, some time in November, 1922. Is baptized and confirmed in the Catholic faith by the Bishop of Luxembourg at a solemn Mass in the monastery church on January 6, 1922, and takes at his baptism the names Kiljan Marie Pierre. At the same time he adopts the family name of Laxness, after his father's farm, and this is later legalized by the Icelandic authorities. During his time in the monastery he keeps a diary, which is still preserved. Publishes in 1923 the collection of short stories *Nokkrar sögur* (Some Stories).
- 1924 Publishes the novel *Undir Helgahnúk* (Under the Holy Mountain). Works on the manuscript of his stylized autobiography, *Heiman ek fór* (From Home I Went), which is not published until 1952.
- 1925 Publishes the apologetic *Kaþólsk viðhorf* (From a Catholic Point of View). ✓
- 1927 Makes his "breakthrough" with the publication of his

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- novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver from Kashmir). ✓
- 1927- Travels in Canada and the United States, studies the ✓
1929 cinema world in Los Angeles, and becomes acquainted with Upton Sinclair. ✓
- 1929 Publishes *Alþýðubókin* (The Book of the People), a collection of radical essays, which marks a decisive readjustment of his interests from religious to social problems. ✓
- 1930 Marries Ingibjörg (Inga) Einarsdóttir. Publishes *Kvæðakver* (Poems), his only collection of poems to date. ✓
- 1931 Publishes *Þú vínviður hreini* (O Thou Pure Vine), the first part of the novel about Salka Valka, the fishergirl. ✓
- 1932 Publishes *Fuglinn í fjörinni* (The Bird on the Beach), the second and final part of the novel about Salka Valka. Travels in the autumn in the Soviet Union. ✓
- 1933 Publishes *f Austurvegi* (Going East), an eyewitness account of his journey to the Soviet Union, and the collection of short stories *Fótatak manna* (Steps of Men). ✓
- 1934 Publishes the first part of the novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* (Independent People), and the play *Straumrof* (Short Circuit). ✓
- 1935 Publishes the second and final part of the novel *Sjálfstætt fólk*. ✓
- 1937 Publishes *Ljós heimsins* (The Light of the World), the first part of the novel tetralogy—later known as *Heimsljós* (World Light)—about Ólafur Kárason, the parish pauper and folk poet; and the collection of essays *Dagleið á fjöllum* (A Day's Journey in the Mountains). ✓
- 1937- Travels during the winter months in the Soviet Union. ✓
1938
- 1938 Publishes *Gerska æfintýrið* (The Russian Adventure), an account of his travels in the Soviet Union, and *Höll sumarlandsins* (The Palace of the Summerland), the second part of the novel tetralogy about Ólafur Kárason. ✓
- 1939 Publishes *Hús skáldsins* (The House of the Poet), the third part of the Ólafur Kárason tetralogy. ✓
- 1940 Is divorced from Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir. Publishes *Fegurð himinsins* (The Beauty of the Skies), the final part of the Ólafur Kárason tetralogy. ✓

Chronology

- 1941 Publishes *Vopnin kvödd*, a translation of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). ✓
- 1942 Publishes the collection of short stories *Sjö töframenn* (Seven Enchanters), and *Vettvangur dagsins* (The Contemporary Scene), a collection of essays and articles. ✓
- 1943 Publishes *Islandsklukkan* (Iceland's Bell), the first part of a trilogy of novels. ✓
- 1944 Publishes *Hið ljósa man* (The Bright Maid), the second part of the novel trilogy. ✓
- 1945 Marries Auður Sveinsdóttir. Moves into Gljúfrasteinn, his villa in the neighborhood of Laxnes, his parents' farm, and publishes *Birtingur*, a translation of Voltaire's *Candide*. ✓
- 1946 Publishes *Eldur í Kaupinhafn* (Fire in Copenhagen), the final part of the novel trilogy, and *Sjálfsagðir hlutir* (Obvious Things), a collection of essays and articles. ✓
- 1948 Publishes the novel *Atómstöðin* (The Atom Station). ✓
- 1950 Publishes *Reisubókarkorn* (A Little Diary of Travels), a collection of essays and articles, and the play *Snæfríður Islandssól* (Snæfríður, Iceland's Sun), which is based on the novel trilogy of 1943-46. ✓
- 1952 Publishes *Heiman eg fór* (From Home I Went), the autobiographical manuscript of 1924, and the novel *Gerpla* (The Happy Warriors). ✓
- 1954 Publishes the play *Silfurtunglið* (The Silver Moon). ✓
- 1955 Publishes *Dagur í senn* (A Day at a Time), a collection of articles and speeches. Is awarded the year's Nobel Prize for Literature. ✓
- 1957 Publishes the novel *Brekkukotsannáll* (The Fish can Sing). ✓
- 1957- Makes a world tour, visiting the United States, China, and ✓
1958 India. ✓
- 1959 Publishes *Gjörningabók* (Documents), a collection of articles and speeches. ✓
- 1960 Publishes the novel *Paradísarheimt* (Paradise Reclaimed). ✓
- 1961 Publishes the play *Strompleikurinn* (The Chimney Play). ✓
- 1962 Publishes the play *Þrjónastofan Sólin* (The Knitting Workshop called "The Sun"). ✓
- 1963 Publishes the book of memoirs *Skáldatími* (A Writer's Schooling). ✓

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- 1964 Publishes the collection of short stories *Sjöstafakverið* (The Book of Seven Signs).
- 1965 Publishes *Upphaf mannúðarstefnu* (The Beginning of Humanism), a collection of essays and articles.
- 1966 Publishes the play *Dúfnaveislan* (The Pigeon Banquet), and *Veisla í farángrinum*, a translation of Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (1964).
- 1967 Publishes *Islendingaspjall* (An Essay on Icelanders), a short account of the author's special experiences as an Icelandic writer and primarily conceived as a complement to *Skáldatími* (A Writer's Schooling), the book of memoirs published in 1963.
- 1968 Publishes the novel *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (Christianity in Snæfellsnes).
- 1968 Publishes *Svavar Guðnason*, an essay in Danish, with illustrations, on a modern Icelandic painter (= Vor Tids Kunst. 67. Gyldendal, Copenhagen).
- 1969 Publishes *Vínlandspúnktar* (Some Remarks on Vinland), four essays on Old Icelandic matters. ✓
- 1970 Publishes *Innansveitarkronika* (A Parish Chronicle), a story from the author's home district, Mosfellssveit.

CHAPTER 1

The Icelandic Background

I *Early History and Literature*

THE origin and history of Iceland as a nation are so unique as to give the Icelanders an exceptional position among the peoples of Scandinavia. The remote island in the North Atlantic was colonized by Scandinavians—by far the greater part of them, from Norway—in the decades just before and after the year 900. The first settler is reported to have been Ingólfur Arnarson, who took up his abode in 874 at the site of the country's present capital, Reykjavík—which derives its name, "Smoky Bay," from the steam coming from the hot springs in that area.

The story of the settlement (Icel. *landnám*) is told in the remarkable *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements), which is thought to have been compiled in the twelfth century. It gives a systematic account of the settlement along the coast and inwards from the coast to the glens and valleys round the whole island; more than 3,000 people and 1,400 places are mentioned in connection with the colonization of Iceland. The extensive genealogies in this work are quite often obscured by the confused myth and legend of ancient times, but to Icelanders the book has been of enormous importance in strengthening their feelings of national self-esteem and solidarity.

In the new society some organization was of course needed to handle the general affairs of the community. Thus in the year 930 the Icelandic General Assembly (*alþingi*) was established, with its meeting place at Þingvellir by the country's largest lake, Þingvallavatn. The *alþingi* met annually in June. Its foremost official was the Lawspeaker (*lögsögumaður*), who was chosen for a period of three years, had to know the code of laws by heart, and also had to recite them in their entirety, at meetings of the

alþingi, during his three-year term of office; for at that time the laws were not yet written down and had to be preserved in memory.

In founding the *alþingi* the Icelanders had created a legislative and judicial authority, but no administrative or executive one. This strange feature has left its mark on the many descriptions of legal disputes and acts of vengeance in the Sagas of Icelanders. If a plaintiff managed to secure the conviction of his opponent, it was his own business to see the sentence carried out. The frequent result of this, of course, was that power and strength became the deciding factors. The lack of a central administrative and executive authority was to show itself fatal to Iceland's continuance as an independent state. In the long run it undermined powers of resistance both to internal disintegration and to external pressures.

The hundred years from the origin of the *alþingi* until 1030 are sometimes called the "Saga Age" (*söguöld*) in the history of Iceland; for during those years the events related in such Icelandic Family Sagas as *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*—to name just a few of the greatest and best known—are supposed to have taken place. These suggestively realistic and carefully localized narratives were earlier regarded, both in Iceland and elsewhere, as true stories taken from life. More recently, however, scholars have been able to show that, to a large extent at least, the sagas are not so much historical documents as remarkable works of fiction.

However this may be, the *söguöld* was, in reality too, a time of greatness for Iceland. The sons of the settlers showed the same bold spirit of discovery as their fathers. In 982 the Icelanders made their way to Greenland and founded an Icelandic settlement there. Leifur Eiríksson, a son of the first European to settle in Greenland, was driven off course on a sea voyage in the year 1000 and landed on a foreign coast, which he called *Vínland*. This was America—which was thus discovered by an Icelandic seafarer nearly 500 years before Columbus. As is well known, the description given of *Vínland* in the Icelandic sagas has aroused great interest not only among students of literature, but also among archeologists, geographers, and cartographers.

The year 1000 was also an important milestone in the internal history of Iceland in that Christianity was then adopted, by decree of the *alþingi*, as the official religion of the country. In its earliest days the Icelandic church differed greatly from its Catholic mother church in Europe. It was far from having the independent position of a kind of state within the state, with legislative and judicial authority in its own affairs. In Iceland the church never gained the same firm hold on the people as it did in other countries. Yet no real gulf arose, either, between the ordinary people and the clergy, between layman and cleric. This is one aspect of the strikingly democratic nature of the Icelandic social system which has been preserved to the present day.

The Icelandic Commonwealth consisted of independent farmers who, in theory at least, were each other's equals. No formal class distinction existed among them, and no privileged nobility ever arose in Iceland. The very precondition for such a development—a monarch surrounded by a court, an official hierarchy, and an army—was also lacking.

Nevertheless, the balance of power originally shared by the local chieftains gradually became unhinged; a local chieftain (*goði*) represented, within his sphere of dominion (*goðorð*), both secular and—before the introduction of Christianity—religious authority. A few great families succeeded independently in gaining domination in different parts of the country, and waged with each other a violent struggle for supremacy. This period of unrest, which lasted from the middle of the twelfth century to the fall of the Icelandic Commonwealth in the year 1262, is known as the Age of the Sturlungs (*Sturlungaöld*) after one of the leading families. The most famous representative of this family, which is named after Sturla, its founding father, was the chieftain and historian Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241).

Iceland now paid the price of having no national government. From the very beginning the kings of Norway had had designs on Iceland and had made a number of attempts to gain control of the island. In medieval Europe a nation with no head of state was evidently regarded as something of an anomaly. A cardinal visiting Norway in the middle of the thirteenth century found it "unseemly" that Iceland "was not subject to a king, like all other countries in the world." In their mutual struggles

Icelandic chieftains now began to look to the Norwegian king for support against each other, and to refer the final decision in these conflicts to him. Finally, the Icelanders had to swear allegiance to King Hákon Hákonarson and were made to pay taxes to the crown of Norway (1262-64).

Thus the Icelandic Commonwealth came to an end. The feuds of the Age of the Sturlungs give ample evidence of ruthless self-assertion, low cunning, and cruelty. But this period of unrest in the history of Iceland, when the freedom of the nation was lost, was accompanied by a unique efflorescence of literature. *Sturlunga saga*, the sternly realistic chronicle of contemporary history, was written by men who in many cases had themselves played an active part in the events there described. The principal author of the work was Sturla Þórðarson (1214-84), a nephew of Snorri Sturluson. But writers also turned to the past, and gave historical accounts of the kings and jarls of Norway and Denmark. Snorri's *Heimskringla*, which dates from around 1230, stands out as the great crowning achievement of this historical genre. The most original contributions to the art of prose, however, are undoubtedly the above-mentioned Family Sagas or Sagas of Icelanders (*Islendingasögur*), in which anonymous Icelandic authors cause their forefathers from the *söguöld* to rise up again in all the changing scenes of life, from its small everyday anxieties to its great tragic conflicts. It was also during this period, the thirteenth century, that the old Norse poems of gods and heroes, the so-called "Eddic" poems, were collected and written down in Iceland.

It was not until the seventeenth century that this remarkable literature became known in the other Scandinavian countries. Then it aroused great interest, primarily in being regarded as history. Here were new vistas to stir the imagination, opening out onto an ancient Scandinavian past, previously unknown—an age of heroic deeds, of saga and song. Classical Icelandic literature thus became a powerful stimulus to Scandinavians in strengthening their feelings of self-awareness as members of the Northern nations, and has frequently provided writers of later times with subject matter and inspiration. Examples from the Romantic period are Adam Oehlenschläger (1779-1850) in Denmark and Esaias Tegnéér (1782-1846) in Sweden; while later in

the nineteenth century, Longfellow (1807-82) in America and William Morris (1834-96) in England translated and interpreted in their own way certain poems and sagas from early Icelandic literature.

Above all, however, this Golden Age of literature acquired a national and cultural importance for the Icelandic people themselves—an importance which can hardly be overestimated. In the following dark centuries of poverty and foreign rule in Iceland people could seek comfort and self-confidence in the sagas which told of their forefathers' exploits and glorious lives. For the fact remained that mighty champions such as Egill Skallagrímsson and Gunnar of Hlíðarendi, a man of wisdom such as Njáll, and beautiful women such as Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir and Helga the Fair had lived and been active here in Iceland and nowhere else. Icelandic people still lived and moved, every day, in the surroundings which formed the setting for the sagas; they were well acquainted with the names and geographical features of the places where the events related in the sagas were supposed to have happened. In such places both imagination and longing could call forth with ease the shades of the past.

Thus the classical literature of medieval Iceland has undoubtedly been of moral significance in the Icelandic people's struggle for existence. But it has also left its mark, in a decisive way, on the Icelandic language and literary tradition, as can still be seen today. In the prose of the sagas the written language was fixed earlier in Iceland than elsewhere in the North in such a way as to provide a linguistic standard. This—together, perhaps, with certain other factors such as the geographical isolation of the country—has undoubtedly contributed to the fact that modern Icelandic has preserved the structure and vocabulary originally characteristic of Old Norse, and has done so incomparably better than any of the other Scandinavian languages. Thus an Icelandic child who has learned to read can without much difficulty read the classical sagas in the language in which they were written in the thirteenth century—provided, of course, that the varied orthography of the manuscripts is modernized. It is easy to understand the importance of this unique linguistic continuity for the Icelandic sense of closeness to the past.

But the sagas have also provided a literary and stylistic standard. With their tersely matter-of-fact prose style and powerfully effective dialogue they formed perfect models for Icelandic storytellers of later times. Not only in prose but also in poetry has the power of the tradition given ample evidence of its continued strength. Icelandic poets still make frequent use of the alliteration and internal rhyme which formed an essential feature of Old Norse poetry. It is characteristic that when Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Klopstock's *Messias* were translated into Icelandic at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Icelandic versions of these poems were written in the *fornyrðislag*, one of the ancient metrical forms of the Eddic poems.² If Icelandic authors have sometimes regarded this overwhelmingly powerful native tradition as restrictive, as a hindrance to literary regeneration, we can well understand their attitude. In his short book of memoirs, *Islendingaspjall* (An Essay on Icelanders, 1967), Laxness has described, with his customary sharpness of emphasis, the profound extent to which the Icelandic "School of Literature," with its strict rules, has become second nature to his countrymen, and how "the standard set by the Golden Age" still dominates today the literary opinions of the public as well as of the critics. It is not to be wondered at if "such poor wretches as myself and people like me, engaged in the laborious work of writing books, often feel downhearted in this country; any ordinary simpleton can prove beyond dispute that we are worse writers of prose than the men who fashioned *Njáls saga* or *Hrafnkels saga* or *Heimskringla*; and similarly, that as poets we have declined considerably since the tenth century, when the poet of *Völuspá* stood beneath this vast sky of Iceland and could not spell his name."³

Thus even for the modern Icelandic author the great literature of the Middle Ages is to a large extent a living heritage of which, whether consciously or unconsciously, he is always half-critically aware. The native tradition and foreign literary trends are continually being confronted and balanced with each other. This process is strikingly reflected in various stages of Laxness' development as a writer, and we shall later have reason to return to the treatment he gives it.

II The Struggle for Independence

After the fall of the Commonwealth, Iceland had greater difficulty in keeping economically and culturally apace with the other Scandinavian countries. Shipping and foreign trade, which were, of course, a condition of life for Iceland, deteriorated considerably, and the Icelanders became more isolated than ever before. From the year 1380, when Norway was united with Denmark in a personal union, Iceland was brought more and more completely under the power of the Danish crown. When the Reformation was established in Denmark, the king wished that Iceland, too, should acknowledge it. He met with stubborn resistance, however, especially from one of Iceland's two bishops, Jón Arason of Hólar (1484-1550). This warlike prelate was taken prisoner and beheaded, together with two of his sons, without legal proceedings. Jón Arason has become, through his death, something of a martyr, an Icelandic national hero. His struggle was directed not only against Protestantism but also against Danish bureaucracy and arbitrary rule. The Reformation meant in Iceland, as it did elsewhere, that the power of the king was strengthened; and when in 1660 the Danish king made his rule supreme, the Icelanders also had to accept him as their absolute ruler. The result of this was that Iceland's autonomy grew weaker and weaker. The *alþingi* was but a shadow of what it had been.

Economically, the Icelanders were especially hard pressed by the Danish trade monopoly. In accordance with contemporary custom the king gave the merchants in certain Danish towns the sole and exclusive right to trade with Iceland, and tariffs were fixed for both foreign and Icelandic products. For example, the Icelanders needed grain, wood, iron, and hemp, in exchange for which they could provide, among other things, split cod, train oil, and woolen goods. In practice, however, this could hardly be described as trade on an equal footing. The Danish merchants who had control of the shipping lines to and from Iceland gained through lack of competition an overwhelming advantage over the islanders, whom they treated as recipients of charitable maintenance.

Among those Icelanders who sought to create better conditions for their countrymen was Árni Magnússon (1663-1730), a civil

servant and professor in Copenhagen. Together with another Icelanders he made an exhaustive analysis of the situation in Iceland, compiled a highly detailed rent roll of the Icelandic farms, listing their resources and profits, and examined the work of the courts, etc. But Árni Magnússon was above all a learned collector of manuscripts who has done more than anyone else to trace and gather into safekeeping the ancient Icelandic vellums which are the visible result of his forefathers' literary efforts. He left his treasure hoard of books and manuscripts to the University of Copenhagen, where they have been kept under the name of the Arnarnagæan Collection. By a decree, however, of the Danish Parliament, which was confirmed by the Danish Supreme Court in 1966, these unique manuscripts are now to be restored to their land of origin; and thus has been settled, once and for all, a matter of long and heated dispute between Danes and Icelanders.

In one of his works of fiction, the trilogy of novels which began with *Islandsklukkan* (Iceland's Bell, 1943), Laxness has made use of many features drawn from Árni Magnússon's life as a patriot and collector of manuscripts, and has brought to life, with great artistry, the Icelandic world of the times in which he lived.

In the early nineteenth century liberal movements began to assert themselves in different parts of Europe; various oppressed nations and minority groups raised the demand for freedom. These ideas gave new life and energy to the Icelandic struggle for national independence. A few young Icelanders in Copenhagen, among them Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-45), one of Iceland's finest lyrical poets, became energetic propagandists for the reestablishment of the *alþingi*. A forceful spokesman was found in Jón Sigurðsson (1811-79), who for forty years was Iceland's leading politician—"Iceland's shield and sword," as he has been called. Thus between 1843 and 1845 the *alþingi* was reestablished, but at first only as an advisory body. In 1854 the last vestiges of the earlier trade monopoly were finally removed, and the Icelanders were able to establish trade relations where it best suited them to do so. Thus the ice was broken, both on the political and the economic level. The hundred years which followed tell the story of how Iceland gradually advanced towards its long-sought goal of full national autonomy.

At the thousand-year anniversary of the settlement, which was celebrated in 1874, King Christian IX visited Iceland—the first official royal visit to Iceland in the history of the country—and introduced then a new constitution, which among other things gave the *alþingi* joint legislative power with the crown and control of the country's finances. Just over twenty-five years later, in 1903, the special office of Minister for Icelandic Affairs was established in Reykjavík; and by the Union Act of 1918, finally, the independence of Iceland was fully recognized. Only the king of the two countries and the Danish administration of foreign affairs still remained as reminders of Iceland's earlier state of dependence. In 1944 the final step was taken: on June 17—the anniversary of Jón Sigurðsson's birth and now the country's National Day—Iceland was proclaimed a Republic at Þingvellir, the meeting place for the *alþingi* of the ancient Commonwealth. The country had then had a foreign head of state for well-nigh seven hundred years.

It is clear that in *Islandsklukkan* Laxness has been inspired by political events in Iceland at the time of writing, by the exultation accompanying the birth of the new Republic—the completely independent state so eagerly desired for so long, and now a reality. In his description of a past age, with its sufferings, its spirit of resistance and the people's yearning for an indigenous culture, the novel is sustained by a profound national fervor with direct appeal to the author's Icelandic contemporaries. The work may be seen as a kind of inventory of the native Icelandic heritage, a magnificent synthesis of what is essential in the Icelandic character, as the author himself has experienced it.

III The Modern Writer's Background

The political liberation of Iceland has run parallel with a corresponding development in economic and social spheres. The past fifty years or so have probably meant speedier and more drastic material changes for Iceland than for most other European countries. At the turn of the century the built-up areas or "towns" contained 13 per cent of the island's total population, which was then 78,500; and in 1945 the population of the towns had risen to 55 per cent of a total population of 130,500. In 1900 the capital city of Reykjavík had only 6,500 inhabitants; in 1965 the figure had risen to 78,000, that is, to

about 40 per cent of a population of almost 194,000 people. In Iceland the essential precondition for these changes, which are so typical of the times, has been the development of the fisheries to a level of large-scale production, and the vigorous industry and trade which have grown up around them. Iceland has emerged today as a modern welfare state which is not strikingly different from the other Scandinavian countries.

Laxness himself, being more or less a contemporary in age with the present century, has lived through this revolutionary development which is also reflected, in many different ways, in his work. The novel *Brekkukotsunnáll* (The Fish can Sing, 1957), gives a pleasantly humorous description of the idyllic environment of Reykjavik at the time of his childhood. In direct contrast to this stands *Atómstöðin* (The Atom Station, 1948), which is set in the same Reykjavik at the end of the Second World War: a hectic metropolis in a newly created Republic, placed only a few years earlier in the midst of international communications and drawn into events of great political importance.

In an autobiographical fragment dating from 1924, called *Heiman ek fór* (From Home I Went) and not published until much later (1952), Laxness has described his grandmother as he remembers her from the days of his childhood. He emphasizes strongly the archaic qualities of this old Icelandic woman, her links with the past and with all that is most profoundly native to Iceland and its people. It is a document of great cultural-historical interest, and merits lengthy quotation in that it throws light on how the writer has experienced the situation in which he finds himself as an Icelander and modern man of the twentieth century:

At every opportunity I point out—and always with noble pride—that I knelt at the feet of the eighteenth century to receive my upbringing. My maternal grandmother was born during that half of the nineteenth century which carries all the distinctive features of the previous century, and grew up among those members of the population who might be described as fragments broken from the rock of distant ages. My grandmother's foster-mother lived through the fires of Skaftá [the volcanic eruption of Laki in 1783, Iceland's most severe eruption in historical times], and had to lay shoe leather on the table for her family to eat. A woman who has dealt out shoe

leather at meals must surely inculcate in her children rules of life quite different from those encouraged nowadays. My grandmother brought me up and taught me many rules of life which she had gleaned from her foster-mother. ✓

My grandmother was an eighteenth-century person and did not know a thing about what went on in the nineteenth century, either in politics or science. . . . No wonder, then, that the news of twentieth-century events seemed as vague, passing fancies in her eyes, and moved her little. . . . Our telephone was now installed and was placed in a room next door to hers. But even though this strange contraption rang noisily and continually in her ear throughout the remaining years of her life, she died heartily convinced that the telephone was nothing but humbug. No notice should ever be taken of news which came from the telephone. If anyone tried to explain the telephone to her, she simply laughed at his attempts; she just could not be bothered to waste words on these fantasies, she said, and began to talk about something else. ✓

It was from this unusual woman that the boy Halldór received his first impression of Icelandic saga and song:

But it was my grandmother who brought me up as a child, and I am proud of my good fortune in having been brought up by a woman who, of all the women I have known, was the least dependent on the fashions and spirit of the times. She sang me ancient songs before I could talk, told me stories from heathen times and sang me cradle songs from the Catholic era. . . .

Her speech was pure and strong and never a note false as far as language was concerned. I have never known anything more authentically Icelandic than the language of this old woman. It was neither generally Nordic in quality like the folk tales, nor tinged with Latin influence like the writings of the Middle Ages, nor blended with Danish like the Icelandic in vogue at the time of the Reformation. It was the language of the culture, eight hundred years old, of the inland farms of Iceland, unspoilt and wonderful, imbued with the indefinable flavor of its origin, like a wild fruit.⁴

We may suspect that in the interests of gaining his artistic effect the writer has given this portrait a rather stronger element of archaism than his childhood really had. But even if this is so, the description undoubtedly tells us something of fundamental importance, not only about Laxness himself but about all Icelanders of his generation. It is sometimes said that in the

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 twentieth century Iceland has made a direct leap from the Middle Ages into modern times. This, of course, is an immense exaggeration. Implicit in the statement, however, is the undeniable truth that the rapid development into a modern society must have seemed especially dramatic in a small, homogeneous nation with a cultural tradition as strong and ancient as that of Iceland. To the Icelander conscious of his culture and its implications the meeting of the old and the new, of the native and the foreign, was full of problems, and will have acted as an incitement to self-examination, to a stock taking of his own national values. This situation is to a large extent reflected in Laxness' years of travel and inquiry as a young man, the period of orientation in postwar Europe, which found powerful literary expression in the novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver from Kashmir, 1927).

CHAPTER 2

*Life in Europe. The Great Weaver from Kashmir*I *From Hearth to Cloister*

HALLDÓR Guðjónsson was born in Reykjavík on April 23, 1902, the son of foreman Guðjón Helgi Helgason and his wife, Sigríður Halldórsdóttir. He was evidently christened Halldór after his maternal grandfather; and in accordance with the ancient Scandinavian system of name giving, which still exists in Iceland, he was known as Guðjónsson (Son of Guðjón) after his father. Only as a grown man did he change this patronymic for the new family name of Laxness, by which he has become known.

When Halldór was three years old, his parents moved into the country to the farm of Laxnes in the district of Mosfellssveit, just northeast of Reykjavík, and became farming people. His father died in 1919 but his mother remained on the farm until the spring of 1928, when she returned to the capital. The writer-to-be thus spent a great part of his childhood in the country. Much later, in letters and elsewhere, he has himself described the environment of his youth; the portrait of his grandmother, drawn from his childhood memories, has already been quoted. He showed rather less enthusiasm for his duties on the farm, if we may believe his own description:

I was really rather a "nice boy" at home on the farm. I was a dual character—an ordinary errand boy and milk collector in the eyes of human beings, but a far from ordinary philosopher before God. I was what people call "lazy." From my earliest childhood I have loathed physical work, and I wormed my way out of all jobs that could possibly be avoided. I was just as skillful, too, at getting others to do the jobs I was supposed to do myself. I was ill-liked by the

testifies to the fact that Laxness has not only seen but actually studied Chaplin's art. It is very difficult, however, to give concrete examples of how Laxness in his own work has benefited from his experience of Chaplin—partly because it is a problem in itself to make a direct comparison between two art forms as different from each other as the film and the prose epic, and partly because Laxness' mature writing surges forth with so much breadth and depth that the influxes from various sources are quite imperceptibly absorbed by the main flow. Where Chaplin was concerned, Laxness was surely affected most deeply by what he called "the melancholy sense of life" in his films. But Chaplin's way of expressing this sense of life through bold contrasting effects, with a blending of pathos and comedy, with a smile smiled through tears, must also have found an echo in the writer's own temperament.

CHAPTER 5

Independent People

I "The Life of the Independent Man"

WITH *Salka Valka* Laxness' interests as a writer had become firmly rooted in the soil of his native country. In one work after another during the thirties he adopts typically Icelandic subjects and gives them broad epic form. The book dealing with the fishing community of Óseyri was followed by the story of the Icelandic small farmer—the novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* (Independent People) which was published in two parts, in 1934 and 1935. Like *Salka Valka* this great work also goes back to a draft dating from the American period.¹

The main character is a certain Guðbjartur Jónsson (Bjartur), who after toiling for eighteen years as a farmhand in the service of Jón hreppstjóri á Útirauðsmýri, (Bailliff Jón of Útirauðsmýri) has managed to scrape together enough money to buy his own little farm. From his employer he buys a patch of ground on the very edge of the Icelandic wilderness, where the remains of an old sheepfold, called Veturhús (Winterhouses) can still be found. As if to conjure the future into a favorable direction the new owner rechristens the place Sumarhús (Summerhouses). On his land he raises a dwelling place of turf and wood, as the Icelandic farmer has done for a thousand years, and moves in as a newly married man with his wife Rósa, a dog, a horse, and twenty-five ewes. Now he is Bjartur í Sumarhúsum (Bjartur of Summerhouses), a yeoman farmer, an independent man in his country, the king of his own small realm.

Yet his life as an independent farmer, the life he has so passionately desired, begins with a tragedy. The marriage between him and Rósa has chiefly been arranged by the

wife of the Bailiff, and not without ulterior motives. For Rósa who, like Bjartur, has been in service at Útiraðsmýri, is pregnant at the time of the wedding, and the father of her child is the Bailiff's son. Bjartur becomes aware of the situation and pretends that he wishes to have nothing to do with the expected child. As Rósa's time approaches, he leaves her alone at home in order to go out by himself into the wilds and search for a lost sheep. After appalling hardships on the highland moor he returns one evening in midwinter to his snow-covered cottage and is welcomed only by the howling of his dog. Upstairs in the loft he stumbles over something huddled on the floor—his wife, who is lying there dead in her own congealed blood. But in her bed lies the dog, shielding with the warmth of her body a new-born girl child who shows feeble signs of life.

Bjartur is not the man to let himself be broken down by a misfortune such as this. The spiritual shepherd of the parish, The Reverend Guðmundur, who is respected by Bjartur for his magnificent rams, provides him then and there with a new wife, along with her old mother, to help on the farm. With his family Bjartur endures a brutally hard struggle for his existence as an independent man. In that struggle he himself renounces and relentlessly forces his family to renounce even the barest necessities of life. But even a man of his tough disposition has a tender spot, a romantic weakness. These softer feelings are bound up with the little girl, who came into the world in such dramatic circumstances. She is not, it is true, his own daughter, but he nonetheless feels a special tenderness for this tiny creature, to whom he gives the name of Asta Sóllilja. But the trust existing between them is brought to a tragic end. One winter, by which time his second wife has also died, Bjartur sets off for the coastal village to work as a day laborer for the subsistence of his family. In the meantime Asta Sóllilja, who is not yet confirmed, is to keep house for her three half-brothers and their old grandmother. But from the village Bjartur sends up to Sumarhús a young man to instruct the children—particularly Asta Sóllilja, who must be prepared for confirmation. As ill luck would have it, the teacher, who on top of everything else is a consump-

tive, cannot one night resist the temptation to take the innocent girl to his bed. When the teacher has left and Bjartur has returned to his family it comes to light with the approach of spring that Asta Sóllilja is expecting a child. Bjartur experiences a feeling of cruel betrayal and brutally drives her from his home. By way of farewell he gives her a box on the ears: "Take that, he said, 'for the shame which you have brought upon my land, the soil which I have bought. But there is not a drop of my family's blood in you, and so much the better; I ask you, therefore, to give birth to your bastards in the houses of those who are more closely related to them than I.'" For Asta Sóllilja this blow was "like some sort of confirmation; now she was free, and this was her confirmation" (II, 175-76). She goes off in the direction of Fjörður, the village on the coast, in search of the loved one of her dreams.

But Bjartur struggles on, more and more alone. His eldest son has been mysteriously lost in a whirling snowstorm, and his youngest son is now in the care of a relative in America; only the middle one, Guðmundur, remains. But the First World War—known to many "by no other name than the Blessed War"—brings good times for Bjartur and for other Icelandic farmers. Even the poor farmers now begin to see a little money and to live a more endurable life. "People began to grow things on a larger scale than before, people increased their livestock, people actually sent their children to school, and on some farms four china dogs of the larger sort had appeared. . . ." In times of such affluence it may be difficult to keep a cool head: "It could not be denied that many farms were bought for more than they were worth; on some of them too many extensions were built, and a number of children came home from their schools both speedily and excessively educated." Others, however, took the matter calmly, "did not change their way of living or buy china dogs . . . but quietly steered their course towards higher goals" (II, 194-95). One of these is Bjartur í Sumarhúsum. But his time of grace does not last long. He is generously urged to borrow money so that he may add new buildings to his farm. Then one fine day, when the prices of his products have fallen again, nothing is left with which to

pay the interest and the installments on the loans. The bank cuts off his credit, Sumarhús is put up for auction, and is bought back at an absurdly low price by the Bailiff, who intends to start a fox-breeding farm there.

One day soon afterwards Bjartur finds himself down in Fjorður with his son. There is an atmosphere of unrest in the place—a strike among the harbor construction workers is going on, and there is talk of police reinforcements being sent from Reykjavík. In the evening father and son fall in with a group of young strikers, and Bjartur is actually tempted to share their bread, even though he knows that it is stolen. He deeply regrets having done so; he felt "that he had sustained the greatest defeat in his life: he was so ashamed, even, that the blood rose to his cheeks; time and again he had been within an ace of rising from his bed and spewing up the bread of humiliation out through the door" (II, 335).

Early next morning he walks aimlessly around in the village; the independent man has tamed his pride to the extent that now, after many years, he is prepared to visit Ásta Söllilja. He finds her in an indescribably wretched hovel where she is living with her two children, deserted by her lover and stricken with consumption, which is in a highly advanced state. It seems to her as if she has been dead and recalled to life by this meeting: "'Father,' she repeated simply, and did not take her eyes from his face; she remained standing there as if rooted to the spot. 'No, I cannot believe that you have come'" (II, 341). In the evening of the same day Ásta Söllilja walks with her children alongside the brook, which runs through the farm at Sumarhús, her old home, and gazes wonderingly at the ugly new building; the whole of the new farmstead calls to mind "the ruin of some building which had been riddled with bullets in the war": "It was the palace which he had built in the hope that she would come." All she misses now is the old cottage with its gentle outlines, where she had experienced her most sacred pain, her most treasured hopes. In her thoughts she recapitulates her short life, which "had been laid in ruins before it began, like the house and independence of Guðbjartur Jónsson." Even so, she felt that evening as if "she was

not too old to see the future once again in a dream; in a new dream. To hope is to live" (II, 343-44).

Bjartur has been able to take over his mother-in-law's abandoned farm, Urðarsel, and has built it up again with turf and wood. The book ends with a description of how he finally moves from Sumarhús to the new farm. At the head of the little procession goes the old horse Blessi (Blaze), the same as when Bjartur long ago moved into Sumarhús. But the journey is too much for Ásta Söllilja. She falls down and coughs up blood in the grass, and Bjartur has to take her in his arms and carry her. He asks her to hold her arms tightly round his neck and she whispers: "'Now I am with you again.' And he answered: 'Hold your arms tightly round my neck, my flower.' Yes, she whispered. 'Always—as long as I live. Your only flower, the flower of your life. And I shan't die quite yet—not straight away.' Then they went on."

II The Social Slant in Sjálftætt fólk

Sjálftætt fólk readily invites comparison with an earlier and famous Scandinavian novel about farmers and settlers—Knut Hamsun's *Markens Grøde* (*The Growth of the Soil*, 1918): it was primarily for that work that Hamsun was awarded the Nobel Prize two years later. Laxness himself has commented in a few words on the supposed similarity of the two works. He finds it correct to juxtapose them in so far as he in his own book poses the same questions as Hamsun does in *Markens Grøde*. Yet his own answers to these questions are directly opposed to those of Hamsun: "I do not wish to claim that all the social—or other—conclusions in *Sjálftætt fólk* are the right ones, but my certainty that Hamsun's social conclusions in *Markens Grøde* were on the whole erroneous had its part to play in the origin of my book. These two books, like thousands of other books, have in common the fact that they deal with farmers and their problems; but the keynote of the one book is clearly opposed to that of the other."²

We can indeed find a number of striking similarities between *Markens Grøde* and *Sjálftætt fólk* in certain episodes and details. It is essential to realize, however, that in Laxness' work such episodes and details have received a quite different

character and been fitted into a new total view of the subject. On the first pages of both these novels the settler appears as a wanderer coming to survey his land. Hamsun's Isak ends up in secure possession of his world, a well-to-do man; he could without irony be called the king of his little realm. Bjartur, on the other hand, finally has to leave everything which, through thirty years of slavery, first as a farm boy and then as an "independent" man, he has worked to acquire; he has to move off in order to begin anew. Isak's story develops into an idyll, while Bjartur's departure from Sumarhús is veiled in tragedy. There is above all in Laxness' work a social slant which is not to be found in *Markens Grøde*. It is true that Hamsun bitterly criticizes industrial capitalism, which he contrasts with the life of the farmer—the life lived according to nature's laws. But otherwise, Isak and his little world are described as being virtually independent of society. The mining of copper on his land results in much commotion and an influx of money. But it is an episode which passes, and afterwards people manage just as well as before. In *Sjálfstætt fólk* economic policy and trade conditions are made to shape the course of the farmer's life both perceptibly and irrevocably. The fixing of prices on agricultural products, the trade boom during the First World War, the liberally granted or actually forced bank loans, the fall in prices and the bankruptcies—all these things are realities which make their presence thoroughly felt, even in the remote moorland farm of Sumarhús. Near the end of the book, when Bjartur happens to fall in with a group of strikers down in the coastal village, he hears tell of the poor farmers of Russia who had tired of their masters and plunderers and joined forces with their comrades, the workers in the towns, in order to create "a new society in which no one can profit from other people's work" (II, 333).

The reference to the Russian Revolution is no accident. During his time in America Laxness had already talked of visiting the Soviet Union—"the only one of the great civilized countries which I have yet to spend some time in," as he wrote in a letter from San Francisco in March, 1928.⁹ He went to Russia in the autumn of 1932 and stayed there in October and the greater part of November. He recorded

his impressions of the visit in the short work *I Austurvegi* (Going East, 1933), an eyewitness account which deals essentially with agriculture in the Soviet Union. As a farmer's son Laxness has always been greatly interested in the work and living conditions of the Icelandic farmers, and has made frequent critical contributions to the subject. At this particular time the subject must have engaged his interests more than usual—partly because a severe agricultural crisis, following in the wake of the great world depression, was prevailing in Iceland; and partly because he was then fully occupied in writing his novel about farmers. It is significant that the very word "crisis" occurs in the projected title of a handwritten manuscript dating from 1933: *Bók kreppunnar, sagan um frelsi Þorleifs Jónatanssonar og heimsstyrjöld hans* (The Book of Crisis, the Story of Þorleifur Jónatansson's Freedom and his World War). On the same title page we also find a highly illuminating note, written as a memorandum for the continued work: "Sharpen the contrasts between the small and large-scale farmer. Show how the large-scale farmer exploits the small farmer in his service both politically and economically, and dubs himself a knight at his expense with promises and flattering gifts—such as roads, a telephone, and building loans—until the large-scale farmer has become a bank manager in Reykjavík and a Cabinet Minister, while the small farmer has become completely impoverished, has to leave his farm and joins up with the crowd of unemployed in the towns."¹⁰

This declaration should be placed side by side with the author's impressions of his visit to the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1932. The postscript to the second edition of *Sjálfstætt fólk* in 1952 provides, inter alia, a few glimpses of this decisive phase in the story of the work's origin. It says that the draft written in Los Angeles in the summer of 1929 was very incomplete. The writer had early become aware of his inadequate knowledge of the subject, and it was not until three years later that he considered he had laid the proper basis for a continued work. The journey to Russia, where collective farming was just then making its name, seems to have provided him with a new grasp of the task before him: "In the Soviet people's realistic view of the matter, where no lyrical faddists got an opportunity to

confuse the onlooker's view, I soon noticed a few dominant features, and among them was the simple but clarifying method of grouping farmers according to class: large-scale farmers, middle-type farmers, and small farmers. This classification, which is afterwards found to be the most obvious one of all, actually opened the whole problem to me, and enabled me to handle it, fully and clearly, on a social basis."³

With the guidance of this comment we may easily notice that in *Sjálfstætt fólk* Laxness has attempted a social differentiation of his farmer types, in accordance with the knowledge he had acquired on his visit to the Soviet Union. Certain of Lenin's ideas, which are reproduced in *Í Austurvegi*, are clearly discernible in *Sjálfstætt fólk*. Thus Jón á Útirauðsmýri, the Bailiff, obviously represents the Icelandic version of the Kulak or "rural capitalist" (Icel. *landburgeis*, *sveitaburgeis*). Much as we should expect, his son Ingólfur rises within the farmers' party to the status of member of Parliament, bank manager in the capital, and Cabinet Minister, just as the author had indicated in the memorandum, quoted above, for his work on the novel. Between this country-dwelling upper class and the out-and-out poor farmers, the proletarians of the soil, like Bjartur, Laxness places a man like the "mountain king," the typical "middle-type farmer" (Icel. *miðlungsbóndi*). In the travel book we find a quotation from Stalin: "The middle-type farmer, that is, the man who waits and sees. He waits to see who will triumph; he waits and waits, and only when we have gained the upper hand and freed ourselves from the bourgeoisie and the landowners, will he begin to incline in our direction. He is, after all, a middle-type farmer" (57-58). This reminds us strongly of Laxness' characterization of the "mountain king," who is always cautious and vacillating: "the mountain king who had not, it is true, become a large-scale farmer yet, although he had wormed his way onto the parish council, but was a middle-type farmer, who for more than a year had been in agony of mind because of the merchant and the cooperative society, for when two strong parties are disputing, it is important to have the patience to wait and see" (II, 45).

The task of taking up the challenge offered by Hamsun's famous novel about farmers, and of doing so on the basis of his new points of departure, must surely have seemed tempting and

pressing to Laxness. By virtue of his experiences and radical views he had found that the social outlook in *Markens Grøde*—or rather, perhaps, its lack of any real view of society—showed an escapist and perhaps dangerously reactionary tendency. In the years when *Sjálfstætt fólk* was written the Blut-und-Boden ideology of National Socialism had already had time to place in an ambiguous light even the essentially harmless concept of Rousseauism, and the romantic tendency to idealize the farmer's life. In July, 1934—before Laxness had seriously set to work on the second volume of his novel—he published a short article about farmers, in which he described himself as an "Icelandic farmer's son and a member of the Icelandic Agricultural Society"; it is an ironic "Þakkarávarp" (Speech of Thanks) addressed to a German Commissioner for Agriculture who on leaving Iceland after an official visit had had published a turgidly phrased message of greeting to the Icelandic farmers.⁴ The idea of romanticizing the Icelandic farmer's life must surely have appealed to Laxness less than ever once he had encountered its German equivalent as expressed by an envoy of the Third Reich.

III "The Cosmopolitan of the Whole Earth"

Sjálfstætt fólk confronts the reader with the question of how it can happen that a man like Bjartur, with his cunning, his strength of will, his physical endurance and toughness and the endless anxiety he suffers on behalf of man and beast, must nonetheless see himself defeated in the struggle for his own and his family's livelihood. The author gives a kind of answer to the question when he comments on Bjartur's departure from Sumarhús; the passage is a beautiful expression of his humane passion for social justice:

Once again they had broken down a poor farmer's farm; they are the same from century to century, and that is because the poor farmer always remains the same, from century to century. A war abroad may strengthen his backbone for a few years, but the help it brings is merely illusory; a delusion; through all centuries the poor farmer never escapes from his state of crisis; he continues to exist in misery as long as man is not man's safeguard, but man's worst enemy. The life of the poor farmer, the life of the independent man, is of its very nature a flight from other men who seek to kill him. From one

night lodging to another one still worse. A poor farmer's family moves to a new home, four generations out of those thirty which have kept up the continuance of life and death in this country for a thousand years—but for whom? Not, at least, for themselves and their children. They resembled nothing so much as fugitives in a ravaged land, where long-lasting wars have raged, or outlaws without sanctuary—but in whose country? Not, at least, in their own country. In foreign books there is a legend about a man who became perfect through sowing in his enemy's field for one night. The story of Bjartur í Sumarhúsum is the story of the man who sowed in his enemy's field all his life, day and night. Such is the story of the most independent man in this country (II, 345-46).

In the eyes of their describer, the activities of Bjartur and his like are hopeless as a solution to the practical problems of life. Their independence, which they uphold with tooth and claw, is an illusion and a deception, both a self-deception and a deception on the part of the landowners; we ought, indeed, to imagine ironic quotation marks on either side of the book's title—*Sjálfstætt fólk* (Independent People). For his own part Bjartur cannot, or will not, revise his opinions. But he leaves his son behind among the strikers in the coastal village, where the exploited workers who have begun to grow aware of the mechanism of society glimpse a solution to the problem in the idea of joining forces and working together in the struggle for a better existence.

But once it has been pointed out and established that this social attitude is adopted in the book, we see at once how inadequate it is as an expression of the work's individual character. Considering the great extent to which socially critical viewpoints contributed towards the origin of *Sjálfstætt fólk*, it is surprising indeed that this social slant does not thrust itself more directly forward in the finished work. The chief reason for this is probably that the social motif has expanded to mythical proportions of universal applicability. The first chapter of *Sjálfstætt fólk* relates the ancient legend of Kólumkilli, a powerful raiser of spirits and sorcerer of Irish origin, and his woman worshiper, the housewife Gunnvör, who murdered people in order to drink their blood and suck their marrow. After being exposed and broken to death this woman walked again on her farm and haunted the place as a ghost to such a degree that it lay

deserted for many a long year. It is, however, the very place which under the name of Sumarhús becomes Guðbjartur Jónsson's property. Thus his life on the moor is laid from the beginning beneath the spell of supernatural and terrifying powers—even though he refuses to acknowledge them to the very last. Kólumkilli becomes a symbol of what has been inimical to man from time immemorial. His shadowy figure melts imperceptibly together with the invisible enemies in society who are constantly depriving Bjartur of the fruit of his work—these “they,” who “are the same, from century to century,” according to the passage quoted above. These latter seem in their way as irrational, and as unapproachable for the purposes of honest combat, as Kólumkilli himself, for it is impossible to wrestle with a bank.

Thus the present is linked together with the distant past in such a way as to provide a powerful perspective through the centuries. Despite the fact that we have the First World War as a landmark in the chronology of the narrative, the story of Bjartur leaves an impression of bewildering timelessness. According to the Marxist pattern, and perhaps in accordance with the writer's earlier intentions, the poor farmer, who is forced to leave his farm, ought surely to have been made to join up with “the crowd of unemployed in the towns.” But the final scene in *Sjálfstætt fólk* shows the aging Bjartur, still unbroken, leaving Sumarhús to start life all over again in a new dwelling place. As a character in the book he has grown away from the pattern and acts according to his own inherent logic.

There is, however, no reason for trying to challenge the author's view that his radical and politically social outlook has helped him, in a decisive way, to give artistic form to his material. A political conviction or belief does not, of course, constitute any guarantee of esthetic qualities in an imaginative work. But it looks as if Laxness' own view of society has contributed towards giving steadiness and dramatic stature to *Sjálfstætt fólk*—qualities which are noticeably lacking in the draft of the novel dating from 1929. But as we have hinted, this theoretical basis never reveals itself in a crude or obtrusive form. It lies embedded in the narrative's mass of teeming life and individual human destinies, and plays the part of an invisibly supporting structure. This is one of the reasons why Laxness' social outlook—to say nothing of his Marxist or socialist view of society—here seems

so universally applicable, so little bound to a definite political situation, such as the agricultural crisis at the beginning of the thirties. Commenting later on his work, Laxness has emphasized very strongly that "the small farmer is a classic, international type, except in the Soviet Union and in those countries which have advanced far in socialism":

. . . Bjartur í Sumarhúsum is understood in all countries of the world: he is the cosmopolitan of Iceland, because he is the cosmopolitan of the whole earth. And it is not only in the sparsely populated areas of the countryside that this type of man belongs; he has his parallel and surprisingly exact equivalent in every man who, with a similar financial position and a corresponding way of thinking, fights for his own and his family's life in the cities of the world. I recall that shortly after *Sjálfstætt fólk* came out in the United States, [in New York, 1946] I was visited by a gifted American who, to judge from his manner, was a city dweller. He said that he had interrupted his journey at the airport here, in order to talk to me about Bjartur í Sumarhúsum; he told me, among other things, something which might seem strange to many, although nothing could seem less surprising to me: that in the very city of New York there were millions of people who in all essential respects lived more or less exactly as Bjartur í Sumarhúsum and his family did—not only under the same economic conditions, but with the same moral principles and way of thinking.⁷

IV "Father" and "Daughter"

In *Sjálfstætt fólk* there are many individualized characters who deserve closer study as fictional creations. Here, however, we must concentrate on three characters who, to a higher degree than others, have been made to crystallize the narrative's deepest meaning and pathos: Bjartur, Ásta Sóllilja, and Bjartur's youngest son, Nonni.

Bjartur himself has been given some measure of the Icelandic sagas' dimensions, of their heroes' superhuman toughness and strength of will. It is not just for amusement's sake that he takes comfort from the story of Grettir Asmundarson—Grettir the Strong—who lived as an outlaw among the Icelandic mountains for nineteen years; his own situation is basically not very different from Grettir's.⁸ In his characterization of the book's leading figure Laxness for the first time makes use, in a truly

masterly way, of his country's ancient poetic tradition. Loudly singing *rimur* (rhymed ballads) about the exploits of ancient warriors, Bjartur forces himself onward, dead tired, against the snowstorm on the highland moor.⁹ In his own old-fashioned Icelandic poetry, with its intricate rules, he binds his own thoughts and experiences in rigorous bonds. It is one of his ways of molding and mastering his existence, of raising himself above it; it is the triumph of his spirit over matter.

This adventure on the heath shows the writer's art from yet another angle. We are given here an excellent example of his capacity for allowing the landscape itself to play a living part in the description. Bjartur's fantastic ride on a wild bull reindeer over the ice-cold and rapidly flowing glacier river has, for all its palpability, an element of saga and myth about it. "There came moments, both then and later, when it seemed to Bjartur as if it were the fiend Kólumkilli himself, and no other, who had shown himself here" (I, 149). In the storm on the highland moor the man fights for his life in single combat with the monsters of the land, the enemies of man. The severity of the landscape is in harmony with the *rimur* which he sings about the legendary warriors of ancient times, and with his own indomitable will.

Bjartur dominates the narrative and gives it its fundamental tone. But here as elsewhere Laxness works with strong contrasts and tensions. In Ásta Sóllilja he has created a contrast and complement to her hard-hearted father. If a snowstorm on the heath seems the natural setting for Bjartur's struggle for existence, the author surrounds Ásta Sóllilja with the most ethereal shades of feeling, with the most spiritual kind of lyricism, which the Icelandic countryside can inspire. The young girl is to be allowed, for the first time, to accompany Bjartur to the market town and "get to know the world from her own experience" (I, 310). The night before the journey is midsummer night, when those who bathe in the dew may have a wish, and Ásta Sóllilja steals out alone:

A dell by the river. Two inexperienced feet. Hither leads her curving track in the dewy grass. For a while the birds are silent. She sits on the bank and listens. Then she takes off her worn-out, everyday rags beneath this sky which actually manages to veil in oblivion

the midwinter darkness of a whole life—a midsummer sky. Young goddess of the sunlit night, perfect in her youthful nakedness. There is nothing more beautiful in life than the night before what is yet to come, and its dew. She makes her wish, half-grown and slender in the half-grown, dew-besprinkled grass. Body and soul are one and this unity is perfectly pure in its wish (I, 311-12).

If Bjartur embodies man's indomitable qualities, then Ásta Sóllilja represents man's defenselessness in the face of life. Her very birth in the snow-covered hovel, where she is being kept alive by the warm body of a mangy dog, gives a pathetic picture of man's situation in life. "It is terrible how weak human-kind can be when one sees it as it really is" (I, 178), says Bjartur, when he looks at the newborn child. Coming straight from his fantastic adventure on the highland moor, he touches the girl's face, "with his strong and grimy hand which had fought against the monsters of the country: 'She shall be called Ásta Sóllilja'" (I, 179). He is proud that the poor little creature has no one in the world but him, and is determined that the same fate shall befall them both.

In Ásta Sóllilja's eyes this father of hers is safety itself, her stronghold in life. She can lean against his chest and feel that he is the strongest thing that exists: "There was one lovely place on his neck, between the neckband and the root of the beard, and when her mouth is hot and trembling with weeping, she pines for this place; and finds it. Thus life's misfortunes vanish, perhaps all at once—just a moment in the dusk, and they are gone" (I, 272). A faint element of eroticism gradually becomes apparent in the way she looks at her father—who is not, of course, her real father—and clings to him. The innocent girl cannot separate the shy dreams of love awakening within her from her feelings for him. On his side Bjartur shows that he, in a corresponding way, is attracted towards Ásta Sóllilja. But he is on guard against his feelings and fearful of the girl's constant need for tender affection and security. This can be seen most clearly in Chapter 32, in the description of their journey to the market town. In the bunk which they share at the simple hostel Ásta Sóllilja feels her father's warm, strong hand touching her body. A tremor goes through her and she clasps him with both hands, "with an iron-hard grasp, in a transport of this

impersonal, demanding kind of selfishness, which in an instant had made her forgetful of everything. This was the world's long-awaited joy—" (I, 335-36). Then Bjartur violently pushes the girl away from him, gets up, dresses, and walks out into the darkness. For Ásta Sóllilja, who sees no harm in what has happened, who has merely believed herself to be seeking a sweet safety in him, this experience is in the nature of a shock. It will "cast an indelible shadow on her awakening youth, and add the final load to the burden of harshness and cruelty, which already was her lot" (I, 336). After her father has left her to herself in the bed she thinks that her life is wasted, and that she is alone in the world.

This episode on the visit to the town gives a darker and more bittersweet character to the relationship between Ásta Sóllilja and Bjartur. Indeed, their mutual trust is precipitately and tragically shattered. And when in spite of everything they are finally reunited, it is too late for them to continue their life together. Bjartur with the dying Ásta Sóllilja in his arms reminds us of a similar situation in one of the great dramas of world literature: King Lear with Cordelia dead in his arms. In both cases the pathos of the story is capable of rising to a breaking point, because it is so thoroughly steeped in the writer's total vision of the tragedy of human life. When all is taken into account it is hard to say whether, from the point of view of its creator, *Sjálfstætt fólk* may be thought to end happily or unhappily. For in his eyes man's personal triumph in life is seldom more, perhaps, than a fleeting moment of close contact between human beings, or a glimpse of tenderness in the shadow of death. "There is nothing so merciless as human life" (I, 367), he writes. Bjartur is a man who seems to have made this insight his own and is ready to take its consequences, and when his middle son Guðmundur, the last child left at home, is on the point of leaving him, he reflects: "Let those who wish to go, go; it is probably best that way. Strongest is he who stands alone. A man is born alone. A man dies alone. Why, then, should he not live alone? To stand alone, is not that the perfection of life, its aim?" (II, 218).

But it takes a man like Bjartur to sustain so tough a philosophy of life, a philosophy so free from illusion—"the man who had fought with his bare hands against the monsters of the land"

(I, 335) on the very night that Asta Sóllilja was born. More applicable to the weak and ordinary human type is another saying in the book: "The human soul needs a little consolation each day if it is to live" (II, 78). This opinion is given on the very subject of Asta Sóllilja, with the characteristic addition: "but there seems to be no consolation." The element of tragedy in the relationship between her and Bjartur is due in considerable measure to the infinite distance which separates them both. They stand there before each other, and before life, without understanding this—"each one with his own soul, he strong, she weak. Yes, there certainly was, quite definitely, an unbridgeable sea between them; his life was far too complex to be able to harmonize with her simple life of few words, or for his strength to go with her tender sensitivity" (II, 68).

Basically, the author's opinion is surely that human beings in general are strangers in life and strangers to each other. All that has happened here is that the situation has been artistically and symbolically intensified in the description of Bjartur and Asta Sóllilja. Thus the author is also able to give expression to their bitter experience in a sentence of universal relevance; it is said of the girl, who is listening to her father's words, that "She looks at him with beating heart and knows that he is talking about serious things, even though she has difficulty in understanding him; two human beings have such difficulty in understanding each other—there is nothing so sad as two human beings" (II, 70).

However, Asta Sóllilja does not simply function in the novel as a contrast to Bjartur. It is above all her own character which appears as a bewildering interplay of contradictions. Laxness often presents one or another of his characters as a paradoxical and tension-filled complex of opposing elements. In his earlier work this is true of Steinn Elliði and Arnaldur Björnsson, for example, and also, in her own way, of Salka Valka. And we are given this portrait of Asta Sóllilja, with her bitter experience of life, when her brother Guðmundur sees her again for the first time after her departure from Sumarhús: "In the whole of her manner and appearance there was something at once strong and weak, attractive and repellent; one had to notice her—there was no sign of dullness in her face, never a moment of dumb stupidity in the glance of her eye, and no movement

without personal expression; all her expressions had their opposites, showing humiliation and exaltation at the same time, and her life was a single uninterrupted and impassioned torment, so that one had to wish to be good to her; and to push her away; and to come back to her again because one had not understood her—and perhaps not oneself either" (II, 223).

Man's difficulty in bringing into harmony his contrasting qualities and conflicting impulses must have been an experience deeply felt by the creator of Asta Sóllilja. In her pathetic defenselessness in the face of the riddle posed by life and by her own nature, she appears to be a true expression of the author's view of humanity. We might perhaps call her the victim of her open trust in life, of her dreams for the future. Bjartur, on the other hand, clings persistently to his own unalterable will. He will not allow himself to be carried off course by any irrational "streams"; he regards feelings as air, and tears are in his view just another kind of wetness, like some sort of rain leaking through the roof. His armor seems to be without chinks. But for this very reason his character takes on the proportions of something inhuman or superhuman.

When her half-brother Guðmundur visits Asta Sóllilja in the coastal village, she is depicted not merely as a symbol of defenseless humankind itself, with its hopelessly contradictory nature. She stands there "clad in rags, clad, perhaps, in the shame of a whole people, of a people innocent for a thousand years, with a decayed tooth and an illegitimate child" (II, 223). It seems as if the author here wishes to present her as something of a national, proletarian symbol. The social slant also plays its part, perhaps, in one of the very last comments on her destiny. As she walks with her children in the evening alongside the brook running through the farm at Sumarhús, for one last time, she is described as follows: "She was like unprotected nature, which withers in the storm, because it receives no shelter—neither from God nor from people; people do not give each other shelter, and God?—we shall find out about that when at last we have died of consumption" (II, 344).

Such words can, of course—and probably do—imply an indictment of the prevailing social order; immediately after this, for example, Bjartur is characterized as a victim of forces in society which are unjust and inimical to man. But fundamentally,

the drama shared by him and Ásta Sóllilja seems to belong to that kind of destiny which—to concur with Arnaldur in *Salka Valka*—"not even a trade union, not even the revolution" can change. And Ásta Sóllilja receives no more shelter from God than from people, we are told. It may be asked whether this indictment of the divine order is not of a more primary nature than the indictment of the social order. The harrowing and primary experience of man's forlornness and defenselessness in life has increased the writer's sensitivity to what he regards as social injustice and human tyranny—both of which it is possible to remove. Pessimism on the metaphysical level has found its complement on the social and political level in a consciously developed optimism and faith in the future.

Against the background of such a darkly conceived view of life, even the most simple kind of comfort for the soul, even the most fleeting moments of sincerely felt human companionship, will be suffused with an exceptional splendor. Thus it is that little Nonni on a day in early spring can bring the news that there is a blossoming dandelion by the cottage wall. The mother and her children go out together to look at this "little flower of eternity"; "They touched it with the extreme tips of their fingers in reverential silence, like members of the faithful who are allowed to touch the bones of some saint in the presence of the Pope, in order to be saved; it was as if they wished to say: you are not alone, we also exist, we also are trying to exist. Light shone over that day. All the anxiety of winter had vanished in a single day. The brightness of the day was as boundless in the soul as in the vault of heaven; it was one of the happy days of life and they remembered this day all their lives" (I, 399).

Another example of how the single moment may hold a saving and heartening experience of eternity is given in the presentation of Ásta Sóllilja. As a young girl she sees the goodness and gentleness in a stranger's eyes: "It is in this that the soul longs to rest; from eternity to eternity. And she saw it for the first time in his eyes, and perhaps never afterwards; she stood face to face with it and understood it. And that was how it was" (I, 376).

To pause once again before the final scene of the work: Bjartur has suffered defeat in his lifelong, unrelenting struggle for

independence; in his arms he carries Ásta Sóllilja, who is dying—perhaps chiefly through his own doing. Viewed from without the situation may seem merely depressing or meaningless, but for Bjartur and Ásta Sóllilja it must, in spite of all, mean a rare and happy glimpse of eternity such as two people may experience when able to meet each other in a state of mutual understanding, free from turbid reservations. Thus the final reaction of the reader or spectator here, as in the case of Lear with Cordelia dead in his arms, is not a feeling of oppression and despair, but a sense of human richness and greatness.

V Little Nonni

Laxness has undoubtedly put much of himself into Bjartur and Ásta Sóllilja, however distant from both of them he may seem to be. As a writer and an interpreter of human life he must have possessed Ásta Sóllilja's open and trembling sensitivity. But in his work as an artist he has also shown a good deal of the strength of will and fixity of purpose characteristic of a man like Bjartur. Perhaps, however, we meet the author most directly and completely in little Nonni, Bjartur's youngest son. For if nothing else Laxness has, as far as we can judge, made use of his childhood memories of his own grandmother in describing the child Nonni and his grandmother at Sumarhús.¹⁰

Nonni is an imaginative person, an artist-to-be, who gives form to life in accordance with his dreams and visions. In the remarkable chapter called "Winter Morning" the world of fairy tale blossoms forth. In the early, awakening day the household utensils change their form in the boy's imagination and become people: the blackened pot is none other than the Bailiff; the ladle, which plays "a role of great importance in the pot," is the Bailiff's wife, and so on (I, 225-26). Laxness here shows himself as a teller of fairy tales and a maker of myths in the sense that Hans Christian Andersen was. It is also striking how often the animals—sheep, dogs, horses, cows, and birds—are personified, and not only in the children's imagination. Little Nonni has a healthy respect for "The Reverend Guðmundur the ram and his brother" (I, 228), who sometimes fight down in the byre the whole night through. When the cow on the farm has calved, everybody—except Bjartur—participates sincerely in her

joy, and looks at "the recent mother and her son, keeping a respectful distance" (I, 364).

In the beautiful days of spring, when Nonni is allowed to go with his mother out into the field to tend the cow, Búkölla, the countryside seems mysterious and holy in its peace. The rocks and hillocks are peopled with elves friendly to man, who come to life in his mother's fairy stories. For the boy, his awareness of his mother and the experience of this animated nature both run together into a wondrous unity, in which he as a grown man fancies he perceives the meaning of life, the reconciliation between earth and heaven, between time and eternity. The evening before Nonni is to leave Sumarhús forever in order to go to America, the singing of birds is heard from the marshes—or perhaps "bird song from the marshes echoing in his soul, and unwilling to fall silent for the brief space of this tranquil night in spring": "It was a sound which was never afterwards to desert his soul, however far and wide he traveled and however grand were the halls in which he later trod—the marsh with its Icelandic birds, one short night in spring" (II, 156-57). The long, strange story of the redshank may seem rather uneventful, "just going hee, hee, hee for a thousand years." But one fine day, in a distant continent, perhaps, it will be discovered to have been "more beautiful and more sweet than most other stories," simply "the most remarkable story in the world," and then one will dream of being able to "wander about on the marshes at night, on the night before Ascension Day, after one is dead, and hear this incredible story; nay, this story and absolutely no other" (II, 154).

A rather similar wish had been placed in the mouth of the widely traveled Steinn Elliði, the author's alter ego in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasnir*: his innermost longing is that after his death he should "be able to hover like a strange bird over Icelandic mountains on the silent nights of high summer." We are obviously faced here with something that belongs to the world of Laxness' deepest experience. On one occasion he praises his countryman Jónas Hallgrímsson, for the reason that in his poetry Jónas has recreated with brilliant spontaneity the simple, fundamental experiences of nature which have left their mark on the Icelandic sense of life. These "happy, ancient memories" are free from "heavy, dramatic strains": they have a delight "which nei-

ther revolutions nor world wars can wipe out." Laxness himself, in his own writing, has given them a sincerity and intensity which is virtually unsurpassed. The Icelandic countryside as he describes it is raised at times to a wholly spiritual plane, and is handled with a "visionary gleam" and trance-like sublimity reminiscent of religious feeling.

Little Nonni is said to have "so strange an instrument in his breast." He does not yet know how to play upon it but merely fingers at its strings in wonder and reverence. But in his breast there trembles "a poetic melancholy and a mysterious feeling of sorrow" (II, 143). It is his dead mother's sighs which have "planted sorrow in his breast, that sorrow which was afterwards to follow him through his whole life and color his every song" (II, 158). Nonni early becomes familiar with "that death from which no one returns." As a seven-year-old boy he has seen his father carry away on his back a baby of the family in a box, to have it buried by the Bailiff and the local clergyman. The next day he talks about this with his mother. When he realizes that not only really small children die, but that all shall die, and he himself shall die, a string breaks within him—"one of these fine strings of childhood, which break before one has realized that they sound, and this string never sounds again" (I, 224).

In his early novel *Undir Helgahnúk* the author had described how death became a terrible reality for the boy Atli Kjartansson. The latter shares noticeable features with his creator and on essential points reflects his psychological *habitus* and experiences. But Laxness also gives intense expression to his fear of death in autobiographical documents dating from the years of his youth, such as the manuscript of *Rauða kvætið* and the monastery diary. In the case of Atli this harrowing experience seems to have increased his tendency towards self-assertion and caused him to tie himself up in a frantic desire to become a famous man, and thus defy mortal decay and blunt the sharpness of death.

His early contact with death has surely also given expansive force to little Nonni's longing, and has fanned the flame of his efforts to deaden, by means of creative activity, the metaphysical perception of void. But he has nothing of Atli's ruthless self-centeredness. The experience of death and human suffering has not made him hard-hearted; on the contrary, it makes him feel

the more deeply, and with all the more compassion, for his fellow mortals. One day Asta Sóllilja is lying out in the grass and crying bitterly as a result of her first painful experience of love. Her little brother, who his dead mother has prophesied will become a singer and sing for the whole world, comes to her and timidly listens to her moaning: "It was the first time that he looked into the labyrinth of the human soul. He was very far from understanding it. But what was more, he suffered with her. Much, much later he relived this memory in song; both in his own most beautiful song and in the world's most beautiful song. For the understanding of the soul's defenselessness, of the conflict between the two poles, is not the fountain-head of the highest kind of song. Compassion is the source of the highest song. Compassion for Asta Sóllilja on earth" (II, 150-51). With these words the author widens the situation into one of universal applicability. The figure of Asta Sóllilja becomes a symbol of what is eternally and helplessly human, of that which calls so irresistibly for our sympathy, because in it we recognize ourselves. Thus the author can also speak of the "magic power of poetry, which shows us the human condition so truthfully and with so much sympathy and so much love of what is good, that we ourselves become better people, and understand the life of man better than before, and wish and hope that what is good may always triumph in human life" (I, 346). He must have seen as an ideal the ability to communicate something of this magic power in his own poetic language.

VI "The Heath of Life"

"This moorland valley contained all the turns and changes of mood which characterize life" (II, 154), as we read on one occasion of Sumarhús and its surroundings. And when the middle son wishes to go out into the world and travel to America Bjartur can answer him: "World? What is that? 'This is the world, the world is here; Sumarhús, my farm—that is the world'" (II, 214). A similar thought is formulated at one point in *Salka Valka*, in the following words: "It is so difficult to realize that the world is just here, in *Oseyri við Axlarfjörð*" (II, 70). On the whole, the author has laid great stress on giving the sequence of events in *Síðstætt fólk* a significance for humanity in gen-

eral. Among many examples two or three must suffice to illustrate here how this process of expansion may present itself in the novel. From the first twitches around little Nonni's eyes in the early winter morning, to the time when he has raised his eyelids completely, not only hour after hour goes by—"no, age after age passes by through the immeasurable expanses of the morning, world after world, like the visions of a blind person, reality after reality; they pass by, and no longer exist—the light of day begins" (I, 223). The joy of the brook running through the farm is "eternally new, every spring, for a thousand years." And when Nonni sits at its brink he is the boy who "listens for a thousand years": "The boy and eternity, two friends, with the sky over the land, cloudless and never ending. Yes" (I, 287). When Bjartur finally moves off from Sumarhús with his family they look like "travelers on a long journey, leaving a poor night lodging on a heath. *It was the heath of life*" (II, 345).

The wish to derive a symbolic or universally applicable meaning from that which is particular and special characterizes vitally all literature to a greater or lesser degree. But in the case of Laxness it is quite often unusually pronounced, and goes together with his whole individuality as a novelist. Despite the fact that his work teems with unique and living individuals, it is hardly to psychological realism and individualization that he is chiefly adjusted. In a letter written as early as February, 1926, from St. Maurice de Clervaux, where he was completing *Vefarim milli frú Kasmír*, he says that he is always getting "further and further away from the 'psychological novel'"—and here he is probably thinking, in the first place, of certain French analysts of the psyche, such as Bourget. "The psychological novel has taught him a good deal, he admits, and has been a necessary stage in his development. But, on the other hand, nothing is "so limited and massively positivistic as it; it acts as a hindrance to all strong wing beats."

Laxness' own novels seem to express, first and foremost, a vision of man's condition in life. The different figures in the epic sequence of events—such as Bjartur, Asta Sóllilja, and Nonni—give rhythm and dynamic qualities to this vision. This does not mean that they were supposed to surrender their individual character and freedom of movement. But perhaps we may notice

at times, in the characterization, a certain tension between the demands of psychological realism—or of realism in general—and the desire to rise with “strong wing beats” to the bird’s-eye view which the vision offers.

CHAPTER 6

World Light

I *Ólafur Káráson*

WITH *Salka Valka* and *Sjálftætt fólk* Laxness had become well on the way to becoming internationally known. But he did not rest on his laurels, for during the following years the four volumes of his novel about Ólafur Káráson, the parish pauper and folk poet, appeared in rapid succession. These were *Ljós heimsins* (The Light of the World, 1937), *Höll sumarlandsins* (The Palace of the Summerland, 1938), *Hús skáldans* (The House of the Poet, 1939) and *Fegurð himinsins* (The Beauty of the Skies, 1940). Later, in the second edition, *Heimsljós* (World Light) became the collective title of the whole work; and the first part was renamed *Kraftbirtingarníðmúr guðdómsins* (The Revelation of the Deity):¹

Ljós heimsins describes the life of the boy Ólafur Káráson as a parish dependant, living on the farm of Fótur undir Fótarfæti (Foot under Foot's Foot). The book begins with the following words: "He stands together with an oyster catcher and a purple sandpiper on the strip of shore below the farm and watches how the waves are sucked in and out. Perhaps he is playing truant from work. He is a parish child, which means that the life in his breast is a separate world, a different blood, without kinship with the others; he is not a part of anything, he stands outside, and is often surrounded by a void; it is a long time now since he began to yearn for some inexplicable consolation" (1, 5). But no such consolation is afforded him on this farm. The mistress of the household, the widow Kamarrilla, her daughter Magnína and sons Nasi and Júst, the housemaid Kartas and her daughter Jana, the servant girl—none of them have