

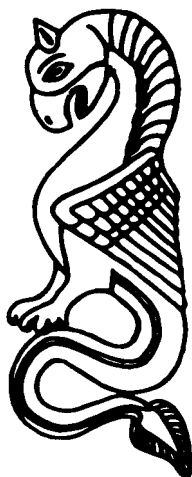
# Leeds Studies in English

## Article:

Peter Hallberg, 'Halldór Laxness and the Icelandic Sagas', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 13 (1982), 1-22

## Permanent URL:

[https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object\\_id=123647&silos\\_library=GEN01](https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=123647&silos_library=GEN01)



*Leeds Studies in English*  
School of English  
University of Leeds  
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

## HALLDÓR LAXNESS AND THE ICELANDIC SAGAS

The text of a lecture given in honour of Bogi Th. Melsteð  
in the School of English, University of Leeds, 2 March 1981.

By PETER HALLBERG

(i)

In *Íslendingaspjall* [An Essay on Icelanders], a little book dating from 1967, Halldór Laxness expresses his regret that Icelandic authors no longer write in the grand style of classical Icelandic literature. The heavens do not arch so high and bright over their work, he claims, once it has begun to adjust to the demands of a Christmas market aimed at a not very fastidious audience. However, the standard set by the Golden Age, as Laxness names it, is still influential among Icelandic critics, and that to such an extent that

such poor wretches as myself and people like me, who are now toiling at writing books, often feel out of place in this country, when any downright rogue can prove beyond dispute that we are worse writers of prose than the men who produced *Njals saga* or *Hrafnkels saga* or *Heimskringla*; and similarly, that as poets we have declined considerably since the tenth century, when the author of *Völuspá* stood beneath this vast sky of Iceland, and could not spell his name.<sup>1</sup>

Laxness is exaggerating, of course. In general he loves to express himself pointedly and paradoxically; it is something of an artistic principle with him. When he wrote the words just quoted, his status as one of the foremost prose writers of our time was undisputed. Twelve years earlier he had been awarded the Nobel Prize. He had little need to feel the pressure of the Icelandic tradition weighing too heavily upon him.

An exaggeration, certainly, but one containing a hard core of truth. As a matter of fact it is not easy for a foreigner to imagine what their great literary heritage has meant to the Icelanders. We are not dealing here with an isolated literary element, or a speciality for scholars and writers. Through the ages and up to our own century Medieval Icelandic literature has profoundly influenced the thought-patterns and ideals of the Icelandic people as a whole. The language itself has played an important part as a connecting link between the past and the present. As is

well-known, Icelandic has remained surprisingly unchanged throughout the centuries, to a far greater extent than the other Scandinavian languages. An Icelandic child of the present time who has learnt to read is equipped to make his own acquaintance with the sagas of Njáll or Egill Skallagrímsson. The Icelandic landscape, too, makes its inhabitants feel the presence of their ancient literature in a wholly unique way. An Icelandic farmer, wherever he lives, is surrounded by places and place-names reminding him of men and episodes in the sagas. The glorious past still lives on for every Icelander who at any time may wish to make contact with it. This unbroken tradition, with its fascinating memories of their ancestors and their lives, has also been a powerful support to the Icelanders in their long struggle for national independence. In periods of weakness and humiliation it offered them an ideal and an unfailing source of strength.

For centuries the Icelanders had assimilated their national heritage of ancient poetry and sagas as a matter of course, without thinking much about its presence or its importance. It surrounded them imperceptibly and inevitably like the very air they breathed. Today, however, the situation has changed. In the twentieth century, Iceland has experienced a radical development in material and social spheres, like other countries in Western Europe. But in the Saga Island, with its unique cultural heritage, this development involved an almost revolutionary change. The Icelandic farming community, which had in essential respects remained relatively stable since the Middle Ages, now underwent a metamorphosis into a modern welfare state in just a few decades. In such a period of ferment as that of the two world wars, Icelanders could not avoid becoming especially aware of their ancient culture, which could no longer be assimilated merely unconsciously. The native Icelandic tradition became a problem to face and consider, at least for more observant and thoughtful citizens.

Halldór Laxness has lived through this revolutionary development from its very beginnings. He was born in 1902, and is thus a contemporary of the present century. His work may be seen, to a greater or lesser degree, as a running commentary on Icelandic culture and Icelandic literary tradition. At the height of his career he once said, as an explanation of why as a layman he had undertaken to write a long essay on the Icelandic sagas: "My main excuse for these notes is that an Icelandic author cannot live without constantly having the ancient books in his thoughts."<sup>2</sup>

(ii)

In a short autobiographical work dating from 1924, when Halldór was twenty-two years old, he tells us of his maternal grandmother - as he has in fact often done since. This old woman, who was born in 1832, obviously made a deep impression on her grandson:

But it was my grandmother who brought me up as a child, and I am proud of having been brought up by a woman who, of all the women I have known, was the least

dependent on the fashion 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 there was never a false note in the language she spoke. I have never known anything more authentically Icelandic than the language of this old woman. . . . It was the language of the culture, eight hundred years old, of the inland farms of Iceland, unspoilt and wonderful, imbued with the indefinable flavour of its origin, like a wild fruit.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps this portrait of his grandmother is somewhat archaized; perhaps his creative imagination has over-stressed the old-fashioned elements of his upbringing. But there can be little doubt that the portrait gives, on the whole, a true idea of how, in this old woman, the boy experienced his country's past as something still present and living.

His first conscious reaction to the great literary heritage of Iceland seems, on the other hand, to have been rather negative. Soon after the end of the First World War, in 1919, the seventeen-year-old Halldór broke off his schooling in Reykjavík High School and went abroad to see the world. In the next few years he lived in different European countries. For some time he stayed as a guest at the Benedictine monastery of St Maurice de Clervaux in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. In January 1923 he was baptized and confirmed there in the Catholic faith, by the Bishop of Luxembourg himself. He evidently had various plans for the future at that time, but first and foremost his ambition was to become an author - though certainly not in the spirit of the Icelandic tradition.

His literary ideal gradually developed in a direction quite contrary to the ideals of Old Icelandic culture. The experience he accumulated during his years of travelling and learning in postwar Europe made him decide to become "a modern man". This was the catchword of the time, and of course it was bound to mark his own literary tastes and aspirations. In April 1923 he wrote a letter from the monastery to his friend Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, who was at that time a university student in Copenhagen and who was later to become a renowned saga scholar. Einar had sent him Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, urging him not to lose his feeling for his mother tongue in his foreign surroundings. When Halldór had finished reading it he wrote back the following comment on "Snorri and those old Icelandic books in general":

And all I can say is this: Heu mihi, I have nothing to learn from them! Those old fogeys lay the greatest stress on the very thing that modern authors lay least stress on - namely, on the drawing of contours. They are all occupied in gathering together a few deadly boring facts, of no concern to anybody. . . .

The language of this Snorri may not be so bad as far as it goes, and is good Icelandic. . . . But as

I say, it moves in territories quite different from those of our language, and the man [Snorri] thinks with a brain quite differently structured from that of a modern man, and is interested in events and things quite different from those which excite our interest today (he is greatly interested, for example, in whether some king gives a man a cloak or a ring).

On the whole, I do not think it is possible to learn to write Modern Icelandic from Old Icelandic; something else is needed.<sup>4</sup>

Contours and facts - that is to say, the sober objectivity of the sagas and their want of psychological analysis, which make them, in Laxness's view, unfit to teach him anything as a modern author. His attack on classical Icelandic prose is only one aspect of this young iconoclast's revolt against native Icelandic tradition and conditions in his country as a whole. He wanted to make room for youth and for the new ideas of his age. He felt the current situation to be stagnant and old-fashioned under the paralysing pressure of the past. With polemical impatience he was giving his sleeping fellow-countrymen a good shaking up, and did not spare his ammunition.

His greatest literary achievement from these years, the novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* [The Great Weaver from Kashmir], was published in the spring of 1927. This work very consistently implies an abrupt break with the native Icelandic tradition of narrative art. The story is freely subjective; its rhythm varies like an unstable temperature curve. The principal character, the young Icelandic poet Steinn Elliði, who shares many essential experiences with his author, engages the reader in a whirl of often paradoxical and conflicting ideas. He certainly satisfies Halldór's own concept of "a modern man". At one point Steinn Elliði characterizes himself as follows:

I am the living embodiment of the human type which has seen the light of day in the last ten or twelve years, and never existed before. More precisely: I am an Icelandic Western European steeped in the spirit of the times, which have sent world history to the gallows; my thought is as free as that of a person who might have fallen down from the stars in August of the year 1914 . . . A writer who has grown up out of a continuous tradition with its roots deep down in the culture of ancient Greece has no more in common with me than Neanderthal man, for instance, or fossilized ferns from the prehistory of the earth. . . . It would never occur to me to quote from a book written before 1914 . . .<sup>5</sup>

A more violent reaction against tradition and the "old fogeys" can hardly be imagined. With this juvenile outburst, however, a phase in Halldór's personal development was coming to an end, even though the work of his literary breakthrough contains virtually

all the germs of his later writings. For in spite of all its dialectics and oscillations, his literary production shows throughout a striking continuity.

(iii)

After publishing *The Great Weaver*, Laxness spent a couple of years, from May 1927 to the end of 1929, in the United States, mostly in California. He was anxious to become acquainted with this, the most modern country in the world. He was interested in, among other things, the film industry, and had certain plans to write for this up-to-date medium. His experiences in these years, when he witnessed the development of the great world depression in America, made his political thinking more radical. Laxness became a socialist, though a rather unorthodox one. But more important from our present point of view is the fact that in the United States he became intensely aware of his Icelandic cultural heritage. The collection of essays entitled *Alþýðubókin* [The Book of the People], published in 1929, may be seen as the most important literary production of his years in America. His newly acquired socialist convictions permeate its motley content. But the work is also imbued with an equally strong patriotic enthusiasm. Laxness speaks of the decline of the West in prophetic turns of phrase which reveal the influence of the German philosopher Oswald Spengler. However, the decline of the West has nothing to do with Iceland, he maintains. His pride in his native country rises to a climax in the following passage:

The nation with the oldest civilized language in Europe, and the oldest continuous history, is now awakening as the youngest civilized nation in our part of the world. . . . The people slept among the mountains which teemed with elves and supernatural beings, and in this virgin landscape, where every valley is a memory from our history, every desolate scene a symbol of our most mystical perceptions - there we rise up today as newborn people, gifted with the pristine freshness of the child of nature, with the language of the gods on our lips and the morning sky above us blazing with prophecies and signs.<sup>6</sup>

The Icelanders have their own ideals, and need not borrow them from abroad. The Icelandic sagas are their Old Testament, we are told, the Poetic Edda is their Song of Songs, "and we call our great men heroes, not prophets."<sup>7</sup> Laxness, who five years earlier had written rather disdainfully of the "old fogs", with their contours and barren facts, now refers to the unknown author of *Njáls saga* as the equal of Dante, Michelangelo, Bach and Goethe. Being a citizen of the world, he says, is not a question of wearing one's shoes out in twenty countries and learning to converse in ten different languages; it means being a true son of one's own nation. "God wants me to be an Icelander," Laxness asserts.<sup>8</sup> What this amounts to is a straightforward revaluation of the Icelandic heritage. Laxness now knows for certain that his work has its roots in

Icelandic soil. In the thirties he devotes himself resolutely to the description of contemporary life in Iceland in a series of great novels. But only gradually does the influence of the sagas and the typically Icelandic prose tradition become apparent.

## (iv)

Of this tradition very little is noticeable in the first novel after his return from America, *Salka Valka* (1931-32).<sup>9</sup> It is set in an Icelandic fishing-village, where the modern age, with the labour movement and strikes, begins to influence people's lives. Allusions to the ancient literature occur only in comic episodes. The old heroic ideal and stubborn individualism are invoked by the conservatives as an antidote to the radical tide. If people were no longer willing to work for the pay decided on by the patriarchal merchant - then, as the author ironically comments,

the native country was at stake, the freedom of the nation and the initiative of the individual, which has been the most sacred inheritance of our noble race from time immemorial, when stony-broke chieftains sailed their ships to England, slaughtered infants there, raped women, and stole cows.<sup>10</sup>

A man who refuses to accept an allowance from the strike fund is characterized as "a brave sailor, well-read in the Icelandic sagas and devoted to the heroic spirit."<sup>11</sup> On this occasion it turns out that, on the whole, many workers have a genuine feeling for independence. They want "to live and die by themselves, like wild-cats."<sup>12</sup> "What they cannot endure is a humiliation contrary to the heroic deeds of their forefathers and the spirit of the Icelandic sagas."<sup>13</sup> Thus in *Salka Valka* the spirit of the sagas is seen satirically as a sign of a reactionary nationalistic ideology. This attitude seems to contrast somewhat sharply with the extraordinarily positive assessment of the saga tradition in *Alþýðubókin*. A certain ambivalence on Laxness's part must here be taken into account. In the novel, Laxness is obviously satirizing a comic and dubious misuse of the sagas for practical, political ends.

Laxness's next work, an epic novel about farmers with the ironic title *Sjálfstætt fólk* [Independent People, 1934-35], has much more of the "saga mind" behind it than *Salka Valka*. It is true that the small farmer, Bjartur, its main character, does not fight with sword and spear, but he possesses in large measure the toughness and unyielding courage of the ancient heroes. In his brutally hard struggle against inexorable natural forces and adverse circumstances in society, he braces himself by singing some *rímur*, the name given to those unique and extensive ballad-poems which have been cultivated in Iceland from the fourteenth century down to the present time. They often deal with the same material as the sagas. In Bjartur's view Christian prayers and hymns are an artistically inferior and lax type of poetry in comparison with the rigorously constructed domestic type, of which he is such a devotee. On the whole Laxness

has succeeded in conjuring up the life of the nation over a thousand years as an impressive background to the novel, and weaving it into Bjartur's own life and destiny. He thus creates a kind of timelessness, or perhaps the quality of "epic time", as he has since, in another context, called it.<sup>14</sup>

The tetralogy which was later to become known as *Heimsljós* [World Light, 1937-40] seems at first sight very remote from the world and spirit of the Icelandic sagas.<sup>15</sup> Its main character, the parish pauper Ólafur Kárason, is with his gentleness and defencelessness the very opposite of Bjartur. And the style of the novel is more subjective and lyrical than any other prose work of Laxness. Even so, there are some firm connections here with the sagas and the Icelandic literary tradition in general. Ólafur is a folk-poet, who tirelessly continues his writing in the face of almost incredible difficulties. Among his fellow human-beings this browbeaten poet is certainly no hero. At his writing-desk, however, with pen in hand, he undergoes a kind of transformation:

It never happened that he was partial in his narrative; he never passed moral judgment on a deed or its perpetrator - any more than Snorri Sturluson does in telling of the exploits of kings and gods. In the stories written by this man, who himself was incapable of harming the tiniest creature, no offence taken at so-called evil deeds ever showed through; he would tell a story only for the reason that something seemed to him worth telling. . . . In his role as writer, he was quite different from the humble devotee of general average behaviour who was seen in the daytime to be quite prepared to bend to the will of anyone he met.<sup>16</sup>

Thus an Icelandic folk-poet at the turn of the century acknowledges the objective style of writing characteristic of the sagas. It is significant that this kind of prose goes together with an attitude of moral impartiality.

(v)

It is not until the trilogy *Íslandsklukkan* [The Bell of Iceland, 1943-46] that the saga inheritance manifests itself with full force. The story of this historical novel had been in the author's mind for many years, but it was composed during the Second World War, and clearly bears the mark of its time of composition. These years were a turning-point in the history of Iceland. It is true that Iceland was only peripherally affected by the war itself: British and later American troops were sent there in defence of this important European outpost in the Atlantic. But the nation was now also faced with the decision finally to dissolve the personal union with Denmark. Before the war had yet come to an end, on June 17, 1944, the new republic was proclaimed at the ancient meeting-place of the *alþingi*, Þingvellir. Full national independence, which had been



lost almost seven hundred years earlier, was thus regained.

This event was accompanied by a strong upsurge of Icelandic national feeling, providing an obvious reason for calling attention to the native cultural heritage. *Íslandsklukkan* captures this atmosphere brilliantly. The author, who with his sometimes caustic satire of Icelandic society had been a rather controversial figure among his fellow-countrymen, now became, for many Icelanders, something of a Poet Laureate. Laxness found the subject matter for his novel in the history of Iceland at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, a period of great decline and humiliation for the Icelandic people. The main theme of the story is an authentic legal case, concerning the small farmer, Jón Hreggviðsson, who is accused of murdering the Danish hangman in Iceland. After a lifelong struggle against the authorities both in his native country and in Denmark, he is at last found not guilty, as an old man. Around these events the author has drawn a magnificent and vivid all-round picture of the period.

Here, for the first time in his works of fiction, Laxness has utilized the saga tradition in a profound and consistent way. He set to work very well prepared for the task. In the early forties, before and during the composition of the novel, he was intensely preoccupied with the sagas. Indeed, he published in modern Icelandic spelling three of the most famous saga texts, namely *Laxdæla saga* (1941), *Hrafnkels saga* (1942) and *Njáls saga* (1945); and in articles and speeches from these years Laxness again and again emphasizes the significance of the saga tradition for Icelandic national feeling. In particular, a long essay dating from 1945, "Minnisgreinar um fornsögur" [Notes on the sagas], presents viewpoints which shed valuable light on his new novel.<sup>17</sup>

Laxness strongly emphasizes that the Icelandic sagas of the thirteenth century are quite different in character from contemporary European literature. They show a greater proximity to reality, so to speak, a closer connection between referent and word. The interest is focused on reality itself rather than on the cause of this reality, i.e. God. And this, according to the theology of the time, is blasphemy - or so Laxness says.

Although at the time of saga-writing the Icelanders had been Christian for centuries, the sagas are, according to Laxness, surprisingly untouched by Christian ideals. They are the most heathen literature of Europe, he maintains. He admits that the influence of Christianity may be traced in certain episodes. The sagas reveal no pronounced hostility towards Christianity, rather a kind of benevolence, quite free from fanaticism. But that, in Laxness's view, is merely "surface Christianity". On a deeper level the two elements, heathen and Christian, run side by side, in the same stream, but are as incompatible with each other as cold water and molten lead. Further, the philosophy of the sagas is marked by a completely un-Christian belief in Fate. From that perspective all moral judgments on the saga characters become almost absurd. It is Fate that brings about a man's ruin, not his sins or God's punishment. In the world of the sagas forces hold sway which Laxness has labelled with the Latin word *inexorabilia*, the inexorable. One can

thus speak of a kind of amoralism or moral pessimism in the sagas. Their style, too, is adapted to this conception of life. The saga writer does not open his heart to us. His language is completely subordinated to the subject-matter of the story; he models it with ascetic self-discipline.

Laxness ends his reflections on the sagas by reminding us of their importance to the Icelanders as a nation. To them the heroic ideal has not been, and still is not, an empty concept. The belief in the hero who defies wounds and death has sustained the Icelandic people through the centuries. "The saga was our invincible fortress, and it is thanks to the saga that we are today a free nation."<sup>18</sup> This essay, which was published while the author was putting the finishing touches to *Íslandsklukkan*, may to some extent be read as a commentary on his novel. It gives an idea of the light in which he saw the sagas during his work on the trilogy.<sup>19</sup>

The influence of the sagas on *Íslandsklukkan* may be viewed from at least three points of view. In the first place the saga tradition appears as the mainspring of the national self-confidence and power of resistance with which the trilogy is largely concerned. Secondly, the author has, perhaps rather surprisingly, represented the ancient tension between heathen and Christian principles as still active. Thirdly, it is clear that the style of the work has been consciously adapted to that of the sagas. These three aspects are by no means independent of each other.

The relationship of the main characters of the novel to the native Icelandic tradition emerges in various ways and on different levels. The small farmer Jón Hreggviðsson represents the ordinary, poor country people of Iceland. He is engaged in a stubborn struggle against the authorities, with the death penalty hanging over his head. He confronts the difficulties besetting him by singing in a loud voice the old-fashioned popular poems named *Pontusrímur*, grinning with his white teeth like a dog at his adversaries and tormentors. During his stay in Denmark Jón is forced to join the Danish mercenary army. Because of a minor offence - the thrashing of an arrogant army cook - he is court-martialled. Before the court he has to listen to the most amazing accusations from the presiding colonel against Icelanders in general. But when the assisting officer asks him if the accusations are not well-founded, Jón straightens his back and replies: "My forefather Gunnar of Hlíðarendi was twelve ells tall." And when he is threatened with being broken on the wheel if he should be lying, he repeats and develops his description: "Twelve ells. I'm not taking that back. He lived to be three hundred years of age. And wore a band of gold about his forehead. The sound of his spear was the most beautiful song ever heard in the North."<sup>20</sup> The fame of his forefathers, the heroes of the sagas - this heritage cannot be taken away from Jón Hreggviðsson. In a hostile environment, in a situation of the utmost danger and humiliation, he finds support and solace in the saga tradition in an unsophisticated and palpable way. It is an episode where Laxness characteristically intertwines humour with pathos.

The leading female character of *Íslandsklukkan* is Snæfríður

Björnsdóttir, daughter of the highest-ranking legal official in Iceland. Like Jón she embodies much of the cultural heritage of the nation, but she does so in a more conscious, more literary manner. Her father is dismissed from office because of supposed breaches of duty. After his death she sets out for Denmark to try to obtain a retrial and so clear her dead father's name. She is given an audience by the Governor of Iceland, Gyldenlöve. Face to face with this Danish nobleman, who knows nothing of Iceland and has no understanding of Icelanders, she at last makes a fervent appeal, where her pride in the history and culture of Iceland rises to an impassioned climax:

Our poets were making songs and telling stories in the language of the king from Ásgarður, Óðinn himself, while Europe was still speaking the language of slaves. Where are the songs, where are the sagas, that you Danes composed? Even your own ancient heroes were brought to life by the Icelanders in our books. . . . Forgive my talking like this, forgive the fact that we are a saga people and can forget nothing.<sup>21</sup>

And she concludes by referring to a famous passage in *Hávamál*:

We Icelanders are certainly not too good to die. And for a long time life has been of no value to us. There is one thing only which we cannot lose as long as one member of this nation, be he rich or poor, remains alive; not even after death can we be without it; and that is the thing which is mentioned in the ancient poem, and which we call fame.<sup>22</sup>

The widest coverage of the history and culture of Iceland, however, is given to the third main character of the novel, Arnas Arnæus. The historical prototype for him is the famous Icelandic scholar and manuscript-collector Árni Magnússon (1663-1730), whose bequest of books and manuscripts to the University of Copenhagen has become known as the Arnamagnean Collection. At a big festival at the royal court in Copenhagen Arnas has a conversation with a delegate from the city of Hamburg, a businessman named Uffelen. The Danish government is planning to sell Iceland to Hamburg, and Uffelen now brings up this business deal for discussion with Arnas Arnæus. In the event of such a transaction prominent people in Hamburg will require an Icelandic representative on the island, and have thought of Arnæus for this purpose. When Arnas has listened to Uffelen's argument, he remains silent for a while. Then he begins his answer by describing a voyage over the North Sea to Iceland, until suddenly "storm-lashed mountains" and "glacier peaks wrapped in stormy clouds" rise out of "a troubled sea".<sup>23</sup> The delegate from Hamburg does not quite understand what the Icelander is driving at:

"There is no sight more ominously powerful than Iceland rising out of the sea," said Arnas Arnæus.  
"Well, I don't know about that," said the German

rather wonderingly.

"That sight alone gives the key to the mystery of how the greatest books in the whole of Christendom came to be written here," said Arnas Arnæus.

"Well, what of it?" said the German.

"I know that you realize now," said Arnas Arnæus, "that it is not possible to buy Iceland."<sup>24</sup>

Once more, then, the ancient books embody the spirit of the nation, its past, its present, and its future. It may be assumed, incidentally, that when Laxness created this scene, he was thinking of a burning national question of the day. At the end of the Second World War the United States of America asked to take a long lease on two military bases in Iceland. This request kindled a bitter political feud among the Icelanders. Laxness vehemently opposed such an agreement with the United States; according to him it would mean nothing less than selling Iceland - just after it had at last regained full national independence.

As pointed out earlier, Laxness in his long essay on the sagas strongly emphasizes the non-Christian and to some extent amoral attitude of this literature. A similar attitude also characterizes the three main figures of *Íslandsklukkan* in different ways - despite the fact that the period was otherwise dominated by a strictly orthodox Lutheran church.

With Jón Hreggviðsson there is hardly any question of morality at all. This poor farmer in his struggle for survival cannot afford such a luxury. Circumstances have forced upon him a cynicism free from all illusions. When he listens to talk of the necessity for repentance, he remarks that it is not because of their lack of repentance that the Icelanders have fallen on evil days, for when did Gunnar of Hlíðarendi ever repent? Answer: never. According to Jón, the lack of fishing tackle has been far more harmful to the Icelandic people than the lack of a repentant disposition. The concept of sin is completely alien to him:

"Sins!" said Jón Hreggviðsson and flared up. "I have never committed any sins. I am an honest, large-scale criminal."<sup>25</sup>

Snæfríður seems to be astonishingly unaffected by Christianity, although she is a close relative of the Bishop and his wife, and although her teacher is the Dean himself. "My happiness is not prescribed by prayer-books,"<sup>26</sup> she says to her pious sister, the Bishop's wife. Her conversations with the Dean are especially informative. When he instructs her on repentance and punishment, she rejects his teachings impatiently: "Let us leave all foolishness aside!" she says.<sup>27</sup> In the scenes between them one remembers what Laxness says of heathen and Christian elements in the sagas: they are as incompatible as cold water and molten lead. The Dean, for his part, is well aware of the origin of the young woman's mentality: "I have always known that the poetic language of your forbears is of heathen origin."<sup>28</sup>

As a man of learning Arnas Arnæus has pondered questions of

ethics and morality to a greater extent than Jón or Snæfríður. But he, too, stands at a rather far remove from Christian doctrine. He is a sceptical man of the world, who looks at things from more than one angle. When, in the course of a conversation on the Pope and Martin Luther, the Bishop's wife asks him if there are two kinds of truth, one for the South and another for the North, he answers with a similitude: "There is a mountain in Kinn in northern Iceland. It is named Bakrángi if you look at it from the east, and Ógaungufjall if you are in the west, but from out in Skjálfandi bay seafarers call it Galti."<sup>29</sup> Such an answer shows his relativism. In moral and ethical matters Arnas Arnæus reveals an almost legalistic attitude. "Nothing has happened if it cannot be proved," he says on one occasion.<sup>30</sup> As is well known, the legal aspect of human life plays a prominent part in the sagas.

It is wholly consistent with the three main characters' view of life that both Arnas and Snæfríður seem to believe, to a greater or lesser extent, in the inexorability of fate. At the end of *Íslandsklukkan* it is as if we see the *inexorabilia* - as Laxness characterizes the philosophy of *Njáls saga* - coming into their own. From the very beginning of his work on the trilogy he had thought of using the word *inexorabilia* as the title of its second volume.

As a "historical" novel *Íslandsklukkan* presented its author with certain problems of style. He needed a touch of archaism. The many contemporary sources he used supplied much of his material for various episodes and conversations, but the most important general prototypes for the narrative art of his novel were the sagas themselves. Laxness referred to their style in a newspaper interview (in *Pjóðviljinn*, December 23, 1944), when the second volume of the trilogy had just been published. Here he contrasts the "objective" prose of the sagas with the "subjective" art of later periods. The "objective" language keeps, on the whole, to the external appearance of things, to what can be seen and heard, people's actions and words. It offers no reports of thoughts and feelings, no "stream of consciousness".

Laxness finds a point of contact here with modern psychology. Behaviourism, he observes, confines itself to studying what can be objectively verified. He also notices a certain affinity between the prose of the sagas and Hemingway's style, and had, incidentally, translated *A Farewell to Arms* into Icelandic in 1941.<sup>31</sup> He is, however, well aware of an essential difference between Hemingway and the sagas, and describes it thus:

A hundred years ago sentimentality was in fashion among the Romanticists. Now it is fashionable to employ a kind of sarcasm instead of sentimentality. But that is in fact only the reverse of sentimentality, a denial of it. I have been trying to train myself to avoid both, to get onto a level removed from that way of thinking, and to see things from without instead of from within.<sup>32</sup>

Now *Íslandsklukkan* is certainly no saga pastiche. Laxness has

skilfully adapted the narrative art and style of the sagas to his own purposes. He is obviously laying considerable stress here on what he had once impatiently dismissed as characteristic of the "old fogeys": their care in the "drawing of contours". Many descriptions in the novel reveal a predilection for contours, for a sober and objective report of what can be seen. The episode when Jón Hreggviðsson is publicly whipped by the hangman is a case in point:

Jón Hreggviðsson did not flinch at the first lashes, but at the fourth and fifth his body contracted convulsively, so that it rose up at both ends, and the legs, the face and the upper part of the chest arched above the ground, while his weight rested on his stretched abdomen. His fists clenched themselves, his feet were stretched at the ankles, his joints stiffened and his muscles hardened; it could be seen from his soles that his shoes were newly repaired.<sup>33</sup>

(vi)

However, Laxness was to penetrate still further into the saga tradition. After an interlude with *Atómstöðin* [The Atom Station, 1948], where he flung himself straight into the harrowing political disputes in Iceland at the end of the war, including the question of "selling" the country to the United States, he turned again to the sagas, with *Gerpla* [The Happy Warriors, 1952]. Here we apprehend the sagas not merely as an undercurrent, for Laxness uses two ancient texts, *Fóstbræðra saga* and Snorri Sturluson's *Ólafs saga helga*, as foundations on which to build his new novel. This time Laxness aims at writing a real Icelandic saga. The narrator adopts the role of a medieval saga man seeking to reproduce a story already known, though with new insights. To this end he has created his own saga language by taking over many words, turns of phrase and constructions from the sagas themselves. But this language naturally has its own special qualities also. It is more supple than its saga prototype, and richer in shades of meaning. As far as I can see, it is unique among the many attempts that have been made in this direction.

As is to be expected, the new work reflects our own time, in spite of its heavily archaized style. The author has his own urgent message to convey. During the years when Laxness was working on his novel, he was deeply involved in the so-called World Peace Movement. At the time of the cold war between the superpowers, under the shadow of the atom bomb, he often published articles and gave lectures on the theme of peace and war, in a radical, socialist spirit. *Gerpla* can be seen as the artistic expression of these ideas. Laxness is here subjecting the old heroic ideal to caustic satire. For this purpose *Fóstbræðra saga* must have been an especially rewarding source. It is distinguished from most other sagas by the fact that one of its two main characters, Þorgeir Hávarsson, appears - though probably unintentionally from its author's point of view - as a thoroughly repellent representative of the heroic ideal, to such an

extent that, for the modern reader at least, the story can lapse into grim comedy. This young man and his companion, the well-known poet Þormóður Bessason, nicknamed Kolbrúnarskáld, are the principal characters of the novel.

The story is set at the beginning of the eleventh century. The Iceland of that time is described in *Gerpla* as having a Christian and relatively peaceful peasant society. But the two young men, Þorgeir and Þormóður, have from early childhood been listening enthusiastically to all kinds of poems and stories about heroes, valkyries, great battles, etc. and they have, unfortunately, become somewhat intoxicated by this spiritual nourishment. In an anachronistic manner, like Don Quixote, they adopt in all seriousness extremely old-fashioned ideas and attitudes, and are firmly resolved to realize the Viking style in their own lives. Their philosophy, if it may be so called, is dominated by three embodiments of that ideal: the warrior-hero; the poet who praises the hero in immortal songs; and the Viking leader and king, to whom they both swear allegiance.

After Þorgeir and Þormóður have become sworn brothers - by a ridiculous ceremonial involving the mingling of blood under frozen turves, which provokes sarcastic comments from the bystanders - they obtain a miserable little boat, and in this caricature of a Viking ship proceed to raid the north-west coast of Iceland, with the intention of robbing small farmers of their treasures, and in the hope of finding other heroes to engage with them in fights to the death. A parody of a Viking expedition, in fact.

At last the two companions part, and Þorgeir goes abroad to enter the service of the far-distant, much-admired king. The king in question is Ólafur Haraldsson, who later came to be known as Saint Ólafur. But for the time being he is a far from saintly figure, raiding in Europe as a Viking chieftain and leading a group of mercenaries. We follow Þorgeir on his travels and are given a view of contemporary conditions in different countries. Laxness describes with biting irony how the rulers regard the ordinary people in their own countries as their most dangerous enemies, and are always prepared to buy assistance from abroad in suppressing them. And when he shows how church leaders lend the authority of the Christian faith to all kinds of war crimes, one cannot help thinking of Laxness's vehement polemics against Archbishop Fisher of Canterbury. He was indignant because the Archbishop did not condemn the use of the atom bomb unconditionally - which was a main desideratum in the programme of the World Peace Movement. There is nothing far-fetched about this connection; on the contrary, there are notes on Archbishop Fisher in the manuscripts of *Gerpla*.<sup>34</sup>

In these foreign surroundings the primitive Icelander Þorgeir appears as an almost harmless, though ridiculous figure, with his brutal and rigid, but comparatively honest, heroic ideal. A speech made by Laxness in the summer of 1952, the year that *Gerpla* was published, shows a certain sympathy for the old domestic type of hero, when compared with the mechanized war experts of our own time:

We Icelanders are peaceful farmers and fishermen,

and the heroes whom we revere in ancient lays have nothing in common with the heroes of modern armies who are most effective in annihilating unarmed people with atom bombs, napalm bombs and other instruments of wholesale murder, but who are otherwise ill-suited for warfare.<sup>35</sup>

The criticism of the warlike ideal in *Gerpla* is obviously aimed at our own time just as much as, or more than, at the saga age itself. We can hardly be mistaken if we read this story as a condemnation of the romanticism attached in later times to "germanisches Heldentum", and the like. Of Þorgeir we are told that he would be given iron by other men of the household in exchange for his weekly ration of butter, because he found it unmanly (*lítilmannlegt*) to eat butter: "Iron is more to our taste," he says.<sup>36</sup> This, of course, is a comical and relatively innocent echo of Hermann Goering's notorious slogan about guns before butter. The author has clearly set out to make a clean sweep of what he regards as a misuse, at once naïve and dangerous, of his country's glorious literary inheritance.

Paradoxically enough, however, it turns out that Stiklastaðir and King Ólafur's fall in battle against the Norwegian peasant army does not imply merely the collapse of an ideal of heroism and conquest, which is both sterile and inimical to human life. In fact, the belief of the sworn brothers in Ólafur Haraldsson's greatness is not altogether mistaken. For this king was to win, as Saint Ólafur, as much praise in heaven as on earth. Yet to none has he become so dear as to Icelandic skalds, "as is shown by the fact that never in the world has there been written a book about kings, not even about Christ Himself, which even halfway compares with that which Snorri the Learned has written, and which is called the saga of Saint Ólafur."<sup>37</sup> And of Þormóður we read: "But Icelandic saga writers have clothed with honour the death of Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld at Stiklastaðir in immortal books, to the end that the fame of the skald should live as long as that of the king whom he sought and found."<sup>38</sup>

In literary documents both king and skald shine with the glory denied them by life. Thus *Gerpla* may also be read as a eulogy of classical Icelandic literature, and as a reminder that life and literature are two different things.

(vii)

A closer approximation to the Icelandic sagas than *Gerpla* can hardly be conceived. Perhaps such a novel represents, in a way, a kind of blind alley. It is certainly a remarkable artistic achievement, but it may also seem somewhat artificial.

However this may be, the sagas and the native literary tradition in general have continued to play an important part in Laxness's writings. A number of his later novels bear witness to this influence. But here one feels the presence not so much of the sagas themselves as of the heritage of innumerable Icelandic folk-poets



and authors, who have, of course, passed on the narrative art of the sagas in many ways. Two of these novels are labelled as "annals" or "chronicles" in their titles: *Brekkukotsannáll* [Annals of Brekkukot, 1957] and *Innansveitarkronika* [A Parish Chronicle, 1970]. The terms are appropriate. These works are in fact more like chronicles than dramatic fictional representations of social life, as Laxness's earlier novels had been.

This change is clearly related to a modification of his earlier radical satire which has recently become apparent. Things are now viewed from a distance in Laxness's work, in a completely undogmatic, almost wholly detached way. Laxness seems to have withdrawn to a kind of grassroots position, leaving all doctrines and systems aside. Thus in an essay dating from 1963 he says: "In my youth, the gibberish of Freud competed with that of the Marxists to plague the language spoken in the West. Today it is best to be on one's guard against this blight on spoken and written language, so as not to become branded as old-fashioned."<sup>39</sup> Disillusioned by his past experiences, Laxness has now adopted a sceptical attitude of non-involvement as his guiding star.

In a chapter of the novel *Brekkukotsannáll* entitled "The University of the Icelanders" the author reminds us of the stories told among ordinary Icelandic people. Among such people there was little enthusiasm for "Danish novels - which was our name for modern literature in general, especially if it had a touch of hysteria."<sup>40</sup> In the cottage of Brekkukot stories are told in a different manner:

The stories were legion. But most of them had one thing in common: the method of telling them was directly opposed to the one we associated with Danish novels - the storyteller's own life had nothing to do with the story; his opinions had still less to do with it. The plot of the story was allowed to speak for itself. . . . Cool and lofty, the story lived its own life independently of its telling, free from the smell of men - rather like Nature, in which the elements have complete dominion.<sup>41</sup>

There is no doubt that the author sympathizes with this kind of narrative art. Many of his statements from later years confirm that he regards this ideal not only as an artistic but also as a moral value. The inheritance of an uninterrupted tradition signifies, for him, discipline and objectivity combined with equanimity and balance in the interaction of man, matter and language - qualities which he regards, or would like to regard, as distinctive features of a true Icelandic disposition.

(viii)

Throughout his life as an author Laxness has felt the saga tradition as a fruitful and perhaps sometimes terrifying challenge. But in later years his attitude to it has developed a new character. It is no longer marked by dialectical tension or confrontation.

Instead, he has come to study the ancient literature more and more as a scholar, so to speak, in an almost academic manner. This interest of his has often become apparent in his later collections of essays.

This is not to say that Laxness is now writing or arguing as a professional scholar, in strictly poised and guarded terms. That has never been his style, and still is not. At the beginning of this paper I quoted his words on the poet of *Völuspá*, who "stood beneath this vast sky of Iceland, and could not spell his name." A few years later this same poet, as viewed by Laxness, became a learned man well versed in Latin - because he had to be another kind of man in the argument that Laxness was then offering.<sup>42</sup> But that is perhaps an extreme case. His reflections on such matters should not always be taken literally, or too seriously. They are often refreshing, however, and may sometimes force scholars out of their accustomed thought-patterns, making them reconsider certain facts and points of view.

Laxness has never regarded Old Icelandic literature as something belonging to the past. He knows that "an Icelandic author cannot live without constantly having the ancient books in his thoughts." Like no other modern author, he has adopted the heritage of the "old fogeys" as a profoundly enlivening element in his own creative work. The dialogue between old and new, between Iceland and the larger world, has imbued his writings with a characteristic tension. In this interplay of contrasts, the saga tradition has served as an important catalyst. Out of his confrontation with this glorious literary heritage Halldór Laxness, the man of our times, has formed his vision of Iceland and its people.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In my rendering of quotations from Laxness in English I have profited very much from my friend Rory McTurk's excellent translation of my book, *Halldór Laxness* (New York, 1971). A bibliography of English (and other) translations of Laxness's writings will be found in P.M. Mitchell and Kenneth H. Ober, *Bibliography of Modern Icelandic Literature in Translation, including Works Written by Icelanders in Other Languages*, *Islandica* 40 (Ithaca and London, 1975) pp.164-186.

#### NOTES

- 1 *Íslendingaspjall* (Reykjavík, 1967) pp.78-9: "Þeim veslum mönnum sem nú eru að burðast við að skrifa bækur, einsog ég og mínir líkar, er oft illa viðvert í landinu: hver ótíndur strákur getur sannað svo ekki verður í móti mælt að við séum lakari prósahöfundar en þeir sem bjuggu til Njálu eða Hrafnkötlu eða Heimskringlu; sömuleiðis hafi okkur hrakað töluvert sem ljóðskáldum síðan á tíundu öld að höfundur Völuspár stóð undir þessum víðum himni Íslands og kunnir ekki að stafa nafnið sitt."
- 2 "Minnisgreinar um fornsögur" (Notes on the Sagas], *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 6 (1945) pp.13-56; my quotation is from the reprint in Halldór Laxness, *Sjálfssagðir hlutir* [Obvious Things] (Reykjavík, 1946) p.9: "Höfuðafsökun mín fyrir þessum greinum er þó sú, að íslenskur rithöfundur getur ekki lifað án þess að vera síhugsandi um hinar gömlu bækur."
- 3 *Heiman eg fór* [From Home I Went] (Reykjavík, 1952) pp.23-24; the manuscript dating from 1924: "En það var amma mín sem fósttraði mig úngan, og ég er hreykinn af að hafa setið við fótstör þeirrar konu sem fjerst var því að vera tísku háð eða aldarfari, allra kvenna, þeirra er ég hef þekt. Súngið hefur hún eldforn ljóð við mig ómálgan, sagt mér æfintýr úr heiðni og kveðið mér vögguljóð úr kaþólsku. . . .  
Túngutak hennar var hreint og sterkt og einginn hljómur falskur í málfarinu. Ég hef ekkert þekt rammíslenskara en mál þessarar fornaldarkonu . . . . Það var mál átta hundruð ára gamallar menníngar úr íslenskum uppsveitum, ósnortið og undursamlegt, gagnsýrt hinum óskilgreinilega keimi upprunans líkt og viltur ávöxtur."
- 4 Letter to Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, dated April 17, 1923, S. Maurice de Clervaux: "út af Snorra, og þá ifirleitt út af þessum gömlu íslensku bókum":  
"Og það eina sem ég segi, er: Heu mihi, ég get ekkert lært af þeim. Þessir gömlu karlar leggja mesta áhersluna einmitt á það sem nútíðarhöfundar leggja minsta á - nfl. að búa til kontúrur. Þeir eru allir í því að tína saman einhver hundleiðinleg facta, sem einga skepnu geta interesserað. . . .  
Málið hjá þessum Snorra er sennilega ekki óviturlegt, það sem það nær, og góð íslenska. . . . En sem sagt, það liggur á alt öðrum sviðum en okkar mál, og maðurinn hugsar með alt öðruvísi innréttuðum heila en nútíðarmenn, og interesserar sig fyrir alt öðrum atburðum og hlutum en við (t.d. er hann mjög interesseraður fyrir því ef einhver konungur gefur manni frakka eða hring).  
Ég held ifirleitt að ekki sé hægt að læra að skrifa níja íslensku af gamalli íslensku. Það þarf eitthvað annað."
- 5 *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (Reykjavík, 1927) p.456: "Ég er lifandi líkarníng þeirrar manntegundar, sem séð hefur dagsins ljós síðustu tíu, tólf árin, en aldrei var áður til. Og til að kveða enn nánar á: Ég er íslenskur Vestur-Evrópumaður, mettaður anda þeirrar tíðar, sem sett hefur

mannkynssöguna í gálgann, hugsun mín frjáls eins og hjá manni, sem hefði rignt niður úr stjórnum í ágúst árið 1914 . . . Skáld, sem vaxið er upp úr samhágangandi erfðamenningu, sem á rætur sínar allar götur aftur í forngrísku, á ekki meira sammerkt við mig en t.d. Neanderdalsmaðurinn eða burknaupppgrafningar frá fornöld jarðsögunnar. . . . Mér gæti aldrei komið til hugar að vitna í rit, sem samið hafi verið fyrir 1914 . . ."

6 *Alþýðubókin* (Reykjavík, 1929) pp.69-70: "Þjóð hins elzta menningarmáls í Evrópu og hinnar elztu samstæðu sögu vaknar nú sem hin yngsta menningarþjóð álfunnar. . . . Þjóðin svaf milli fjalla, sem voru krökk af vættum og álfum, og í þessu ósnortna landslagi, þar sem hver dalur er þó endurminning úr sögu vorri, hver öræfasýn ímynd vorra dulrænustu skynjana, - þar rís um vér á fætur í dag eins og nýfæddir menn, gæddir frumleik náttúrubarnsins, með mál guðanna á vörnum og himin morgunsins yfir oss logandi í spám og teiknum."

7 *Alþýðubókin*, p.37: "en hetjur nefnum vér stórmenni íslenzks stíls, og ekki spámennt."

8 *Alþýðubókin*, p.47: "Guð vill, að ég sé Íslendingur."

9 The novel was published in two volumes: *Þú víniður hreini* [Oh Thou Pure Vine] (Reykjavík, 1931) and *Fuglinn í fjörunni* [The Bird on the Beach] (Reykjavík, 1932).

10 *Fuglinn*, p.153: "hér var föðurlandið í veði, sjálfraði þjóðarinnar og framtak einstaklingsins, sem verið hefur helgust erfð vors göfuga kyns allar götur framan úr fornöld, að blankir höfðingjar sigldu skipum sínum til Englands, slátruðu ungbörnum, nauðguðu konum og stálu kúm."

11 *Fuglinn*, pp.175-6: "dugandi háseti, mjög vel lesinn í Íslendingasögunum og gagntekinn af hetjuanda."

12 *Fuglinn*, p.176: "lífa og deyja upp á eigin býti eins og urðarkettir."

13 *Fuglinn*, p.176: "En auðmýkingu, sem færi í bága við hetjudáðir fornanna og andann í Íslendingasögunum, slíkt gátu menn ekki þolað."

14 In an interview in the newspaper *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning*, October 25, 1955, Laxness said that the new novel, i.e. *Brekkukotsannáll*, on which he was then working, took place "i epikens tíð. Utan inblandning av tíð" ["in epic time. Without interference by time"].

15 The four volumes of the tetralogy have the titles: *Ljós heimsins* [The Light of the World] (Reykjavík, 1937), *Höll sumarlandsins* [The Palace of the Summerland] (Reykjavík, 1938), *Hús skáldsins* [The House of the Poet] (Reykjavík, 1939) and *Fegurð himinsins* [The Beauty of the Skies] (Reykjavík, 1940).

16 *Hús skáldsins*, pp.75-6: "Aldrei kom fyrir að hann hallaði á mann í frásögn, aldrei feldi hann siðferðilegan dóm um verknað né verksfremjanda fremur en þegar Snorri Sturluson segir af störfum konunga eða ása. Þessi maður sem sjálfur gat ekki gert kvikindi mein, aldrei bar það við í þáttum hans að vart yrði hneykslunar á svokölluðum vöndum verkum; hann sagði frá aðeins vegna þess að honum þótti sögulegt. . . . Sá sem skrifaði bækurnar var allur annar en hinn auðmjúki játandi almennrar meðalhegðunar sem maður sá á daginn ódfúsan að þóknast hverjum sem hann hittir."

- 17 On "Minnisgreinar", see note 2 above.
- 18 *Sjálfsgæfir hlutir*, p.66: "Fornsagan var okkar óvinnanlega borg, og það er hennar verk að við erum sjálfstæð þjóð í dag."
- 19 The three volumes of the trilogy are: *Íslandsklukkan* [The Bell of Iceland] (Reykjavík, 1943), *Hið ljósa man* [The Bright Maid] (Reykjavík, 1944) and *Eldur í Kaupinhavn* [Fire in Copenhagen] (Reykjavík, 1946). In the Icelandic quotations below the volumes are referred to only as I, II and III.
- 20 I, p.194: "Forfaðir minn Gunnar á Hlíðarenda var tólf álnir á hæð. . . . .  
. . . Tólf álnir, endurtók Jón Hreggviðsson. Ég sný ekki aftur með það. Og varð þrjú hundruð ára. Og bar gullhlað um enni. Atgeirinn hafði þann fegursta saung sem heyrst hefur á Norðurlöndum."
- 21 III, pp.125-6: "Vor skáld ortu ljóð og sögðu sögu á máli sjálfs Óðins kóngrs úr Ásgarði meðan Evrópa mælti á tungu þræla. Hvar eru þau ljóð, hvar þær sögur sem þér danskir ortuð? Jafnvel yðar fornhetjum höfum vér Íslenskir gefið líf í vorum bókum. . . . Forlætið ég set á tölur, forlætið vér erum sagnþjóð og getum aungvu gleymt."
- 22 III, pp.126-7: "Vér Íslenskir erum sannarlega ekki ofgóðir að deya. Og lífið er oss laungu einskisvert. Aðeins eitt getum vér ekki mist meðan einn maður, hvortheldur ríkur eða fátækur, stendur uppi af þessu fólki; og jafnvel dauðir getum vér ekki verið þess án; og þetta er það sem um er talað í því gamla kvæði, það sem vér köllum orðstír."
- 23 III, p.24: "Þar rísa hreggbarin fjöll úr úfnum sjó og jökultindar slúngnir stormskýum."
- 24 III, p.25: "Það er ekki til ægilegri sýn en Ísland sem það rís úr hafi, sagði Arnas Arnæus.  
Ekki veit ég það, sagði Þýskarinn dálítið undrandi.  
Við þá sýn eina skilst sú dul að hér voru skrifaðar mestar bækur í samanlagðri kristninni, sagði Arnas Arnæus.  
Þó svo væri, sagði Þýskarinn.  
Ég veit þér skiljið nú, sagði Arnas Arnæus: að það er ekki hægt að kaupa Ísland."
- 25 III, p.140: "Syndir, sagði Jón Hreggviðsson og rauk uppá nef sér. Ég hef aldrei drýgt neina synd. Ég er ærlegur stórglæpamaður."
- 26 II, p.40: "Mín hamíngja er ekki uppskrifuð eftir bænabók."
- 27 III, p.107: "Sleppum öllum hégóma."
- 28 II, p.85: "Ég hef altaf vitað að tunga skáldakynsins forfeðra yðar og formæðra er af heiðinni rót."
- 29 II, p.148: "Það er til fjall í Kinninni fyrir norðan, sem heitir Bakrángi ef maður sér austaná það, Ogaungufjall ef maður stendur fyrir vestan það, en utanaf Skjálfanda kalla sjófarendur það Galta."
- 30 II, p.213: "Ekkert hefur gerst nema hægt sé að sanna það."
- 31 Interestingly enough, in a letter to me dated March 13, 1959, Hemingway remarks that he has "not read the sagas recently but almost certainly

read some at some time."

- <sup>32</sup> From the newspaper *Þjóðviljinn* [The Will of the People], December 23, 1944: "Fyrir hundrað árum var viðkvæmnin tízka hjá rómantikurinum. Nú er tízka að vera með einhverja kaldhæðni í stað viðkvæmninnar, en það er í rauninni aðeins ranghverfa, neitun viðkvæmninnar. Eg hef verið að reyna að efa mig í að forðast þetta hvorttveggja, komast í annað plan en þessi hugsunarháttur liggur í, reyna að sjá hlutina utan frá í stað innan frá."
- <sup>33</sup> I, pp.23-4: "Jóni Hreggviðssyni brá ekki við fyrstu högginn, en við fjórða og fimta högg hljóp í skrokkin stjarfi svo geingu upp á honum endarnir og vatnaði undir fötleggji, andlit og ofanvert brjóst, en þungi mannsins hvíldi á spentum kvíðnum, hnefarnir kreptust, fæturnir réttust fram í öklunum, liðir stírnúðu og vöðvar hörónuðu; það sá í iljar mannum að hann var í nýstógluðum skóm."
- <sup>34</sup> See my article "Halldór Laxness' Gerpla. Einige Bemerkungen über Sprache und Tendenz", in *Scientia Islandica. Science in Iceland. Anniversary volume* (1968), pp.31-40. On Archbishop Fisher, see p.39.
- <sup>35</sup> "Vér Íslendingar erum friðsamir bændur og fiskimenn, og þær hetjur sem vér dýrkum í fornum kvæðum eiga ekkert skylt við hetjurnar í herjum nútímans, sem stórvirkastir eru í því að granda vopnlausu fólki með kjarmerkusprengrum, napalmbombum og öðrum múgmoróstækjum, en duga að öðru leyti illa til hernaðar." (From a speech made at Þingvellir on June 25, 1952; under the heading "Vér Íslendingar - og trúin á stálið" [We Icelanders - and faith in steel] in *Dagur í senn* [A Day at a Time] (Reykjavík, 1955).
- <sup>36</sup> *Gerpla* (Reykjavík, 1952) p.29: "er oss járn skapfeldra."
- <sup>37</sup> *Gerpla*, p.474: "Aungum hefur þó Ólafur konungur jafnkær orðið sem íslenskum skáldum, og er þar til marks að aldri hefur í heimi verið bók ritin um konunga, né um sjálfan Krist in heldur, er kæmist í hálfkvíði við þá er Snorri hinn fróði hefur saman setta, og heitir Ólafs saga hins helga."
- <sup>38</sup> *Gerpla*, p.490: "En dauða Dormóðar kolbrúnarskálds að Stiklarstöðum hafa sagnamenn íslenskir reifðan lofi á ódauðlegum bókum, svo að oróstír skáldsins mætti uppi verða eigi skemur en þess konungs er hann leitaði og fann."
- <sup>39</sup> "Golfranska Freuds keptist við golfrönsku marxista um að tröllsliga mælt mál Vesturlanda á mínum sokkabandsárum. Í dag er vissara að vera á verði fyrir þessari óværu í tali og skrifum til að verða ekki brennimerktur sem eftirlegukind." (From a chapter in *Skáldatími* [A Writer's Schooling] (Reykjavík, 1963) p.55.)
- <sup>40</sup> *Brekukotsannáll* (Reykjavík, 1957), p.71: "danska rómáni - en sú nafngift var hjá okkur höfð um nútímabokmentir yfirleitt, en þó sérstaklega um móðursýki."
- <sup>41</sup> *Brekukotasannáll*, pp.71-2: "Sögurnar eru margar, en þær áttu flestar sammerkt í einu, þær voru sagðar öfugt við þá aðferð sem við kendum við danska rómáni; líf sögumanns sjálfs kom aldrei málinu við, þaðanafsíður skoðanir hans. Söguefnið eitt var látið tala. . . . Sagan sjálf lifði svöl og upphafin sérstöku lífi í blóra við frásögnina, laus við mannþef, dálítið einsog náttúran, þar sem höfuðskepnurnar ráða einar öllu."

<sup>42</sup> For Laxness on the author of *Völuspá*, see the chapter "Latína og enska í *Völuspá*" [Latin and English in *Völuspá*] in *Yfirskygðir staðir* [Hidden Places] (Reykjavík, 1971) pp.32-9.