

# Modernism in the Post-war Icelandic Novel up to 1990

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**ABSTRACT:** For centuries Iceland was a rural society. Urbanization accelerated quickly during and after WW II and by 1960 the population was mainly urban. Icelandic novels were predominantly realistic, concerned with social and national issues. In the period 1960 to 1990 several influential authors adopted a modernist mode of narrative, the most prominent being Thor Vilhjálmsson (b. 1925), Svava Jakobsdóttir (1930–2004), and Guðbergur Bergsson (b. 1932). All are first-class writers and masters of the Icelandic language, but otherwise they are quite different. Thor Vilhjálmsson and Svava Jakobsdóttir are mainstream modernists: Thor lyrical and exuberant, expressing reactions of a cultivated European to the post-war world; Svava terser in style and concerned with conventional sex roles, individual freedom and the threats it faces. Guðbergur Bergsson is the most radically modern, constantly deconstructing the words of predecessors and contemporaries, attempting to shock us into an awareness of our language, the constant death-threat hanging over it, its seductive and stupefying effects, and its creative possibilities.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Pendant des siècles, l'Islande est demeurée une société rurale. Après une accélération de l'urbanisation pendant et après la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, sa population est devenue essentiellement urbaine. Les romans islandais étaient alors principalement réalistes, préoccupés par des questions sociales et nationales. Entre les années 1960 et 1990, plusieurs auteurs influents, comme Thor Vilhjálmsson (1925), Svava Jakobsdóttir (1930–2004) et Guðbergur Bergsson (1932), ont adopté un style narratif moderniste. Bien qu'ils soient tous passés maîtres dans l'art de manier la langue islandaise, ils n'en présentent pas moins un style bien différent. Thor Vilhjálmsson et Svava Jakobsdóttir sont des modernistes traditionnels : Thor est lyrique et exubérant, exprimant les réactions d'un Européen cultivé face au monde de l'après-guerre ; Svava, dont le style est plus laconique, s'intéresse plutôt aux rôles conventionnels des sexes, à la liberté individuelle et aux obstacles qui la menacent. Guðbergur Bergsson, radicalement plus moderne, travaille constamment à déconstruire les propos de ses prédécesseurs et de ses contemporains, nous forçant à prendre conscience de notre langue, de la menace de mort qui plane toujours au-dessus d'elle, de ses effets à la fois séduisants et stupéfiants, et de ses possibilités créatrices.

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Icelandic society underwent radical changes in almost every respect in the twentieth century. In Iceland these changes were more profound and more rapid than changes of a similar kind that occurred in most of the countries with which it would be natural to compare it such as the Scandinavian ones. At the beginning of the last century Iceland was extremely backward and in a short period it went through a development that in many other countries stretched over centuries.<sup>1</sup>

The most visible change was caused by the urbanization. Through the centuries Icelanders lived on farms spread along the coasts and in the valleys, and there were no villages, let alone towns. Officials of the Crown and Church lived on their own farms and traders came and went, but had no permanent quarters in the country; only in late winter and spring did numbers of people (mostly men) gather for seasonal fishing near the richest fishing banks in the South and the West.

The nineteenth century saw the formation of villages in centres of trade and fishing along the coast, but in the year 1900 the number of inhabitants in Reykjavík was only around 6000 out of a population of c. 90,000. The overwhelming majority of people lived on farms and did their farming without the help of modern technology. The twentieth century brought new technology to fishing and the fishing industry. The gathering of people in the towns and villages increased steadily, and modern technology reduced the need for manual labour on the farms. World War II accelerated the development greatly; the presence of foreign troops, British and American, brought capital to the country that made possible a renewal of the technical means of production. By the 1960s the country was mainly urban with no more than about 10% of the population living on farms. The greatest concentration of people by far was in Reykjavík and its environs. Of the ca. 320,000 people living in Iceland today, about three-quarters live in the southwest corner of the country and most of the rest live in towns and villages.

This sudden urbanization and the changes that brought it about obviously revolutionized social structure and cultural life. New classes of people emerged and new differences in life styles and culture arose, which were a mixture of the old and still officially respected farmers' culture and an, often superficial, imitation of foreign, especially Danish, middle-class culture.

Communications with Europe had gradually improved in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but World War II and the years following suddenly ended Iceland's isolation. The severing of the last political ties to Denmark as well as the growth in air traffic to both Europe and North America opened the country to the influences of contemporary culture elsewhere—mass culture no less than elite culture.

In spite of Iceland's isolation and economic backwardness in the nineteenth century, its people were relatively well educated. Literacy was general by the

early nineteenth century and a small but influential intelligentsia gained an academic education in Copenhagen. The poetry of the nineteenth century reflects the ideas and forms of contemporary European literature, adapted to the strong poetic traditions native to the country. Nineteenth-century poetry was idealistic, praising the beauty of the country and the national cultural heritage and encouraging Icelanders to take affairs into their own hands.<sup>2</sup>

A blend of nationalism and the idealization of rural life and culture was the strongest ideological trend in Icelandic literature and in Icelandic culture in general up to World War II and even beyond, but a renewed creativity in the field of narrative art had already opened possibilities for a more diverse description of society and for social criticism. Novels and short stories found a ready market with Icelandic readers and although they did not oust the old and always popular saga literature, they presented a welcome addition.

Although the first novels written in Iceland were sentimental love stories, the drawing of characters and setting was usually more realistic than the ones found in traditional narratives, and the appeal of the books no doubt owed much to the sense of recognition they evoked, people recognized their own environment and the character types of their community. A wave of naturalism was brought from Denmark in the 1880s and 90s which coloured the works of Gestur Pálsson (1852-91), Einar H. Kvaran (1859-1938), Þorgils gjallandi (the pen-name for Jón Stefánsson 1851-1915) and Jón Trausti (the pen-name for Guðmundur Magnússon 1873-1918). With these authors the Icelandic novel came of age reaching a scope and quality similar to that found in the rest of Scandinavia, although Icelandic novelists were few in number and enjoyed limited professional and commercial possibilities because their market was so small.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century Reykjavík gradually became more of a capital in the modern sense of the word. A university was established in 1911 and publishing activity increased greatly: the first daily newspapers started to appear, cultural magazines were created, and more and more books were published each year. When the economy underwent serious setbacks in the 1930s, the social problems and the new forms of class struggle were described and interpreted in a wave of novels influenced by socialism and social realism. Foremost among the authors appearing in this period was of course Halldór Laxness (1902-1998).<sup>3</sup>

I am not going to discuss or describe the authorship of Halldór Laxness. His oeuvre is vast and varied and had a tremendous impact in Icelandic literature and culture in general throughout most of the twentieth century. His international reputation was well established by the end of World War II and culminated in the Nobel prize for literature in 1955.<sup>4</sup>

Young Icelandic authors starting their careers after World War II were in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand the world lay open to them and their generation to a degree unknown to any previous generation of Icelanders. The

chains of isolation and poverty seemed suddenly to have been broken. But while the authors of Laxness's generation, not to mention the nineteenth-century poets, had gone abroad to pick up such cultural treasures as appealed to them and bring them back to the Icelandic people, the new generation had competition from all directions, because of all the channels of communication that had been opened. In order to get the attention of their countrymen and achieve the cultural authority of previous generations of authors, new novelists had to get out of the shadow of Halldór Laxness, out of the shadow of a great tradition of story telling, at the same time as they had to define a modern Icelandic identity.

In spite of almost innumerable labels that have been attached to different kinds of literature in the course of the twentieth century, it is probably safe to say that the two dominant modes of narrative discourse, competing and blending in different ways, are realism and modernism, two terms rather difficult to define. For my purpose it is enough to say that realism is characterized by a will to describe important and typical aspects of human life, as well as by a belief in the communicative potentialities of language, its power to tell us some kind of truth about "the real world." Modernism, on the other hand, does not take literary form or the functions of language as given and cultivates probability neither in characters nor in action.<sup>5</sup>

It is safe to say that the dominant tendency in the Icelandic novel has been realistic. The most important influences forming Icelandic novel writing from the 1880s into the 1920s were, on the one hand, traditional Icelandic narrative: sagas, legends and folktales, and on the other hand, the realistic European and, especially, Scandinavian novel. Modernism is above all a child of the great cities of the world, and when it first came into vogue in Europe it found no resonance in the simple rural setting of Iceland. In the wake of World War I there were, however, a few works clearly influenced by modernist attitudes, especially by the fierce individualism and spiritual quest of a number of European authors among whom Strindberg was the foremost. Such influence is apparent in Halldór Laxness's brilliant novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* [*The Great Weaver from Kashmir*], which appeared in 1927 and was the cause of much controversy among Icelandic readers. But in the face of social conflicts Laxness and others turned to realism and in many cases to radical socialism in the 1930s. World War II and the discussion of national issues around the establishment of the republic made the forties a time in which realism blended with idealism rather than with the despair of modernism, as exemplified above all in Laxness' *Íslandsklukkan* [*Iceland's Bell*] and in the works of some of his younger contemporaries like Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson, by then a prolific novelist and short story writer in the realistic mode. It is first in the fifties and sixties that a modernist search for identity and the feeling that realistic narrative is unable to deal with significant issues becomes a pressing problem for a new generations of writers, and then modernism appears as a real option.

Modernist influences appeared sporadically in Icelandic poetry in the first half of the twentieth century, but the breakthrough came with the suite of poems by Steinn Steinarr (1908-1958), called *Tíminn og vatnið* [Time and the Water], and in poems published by a group of young poets soon acquiring the nick-name “atóm-skáld” [atomic poets].<sup>6</sup> Modernist tendencies in poetry were soon explored in the writing of short stories and prose sketches, but as far as the novel was concerned, it was still mainly realistic in the fifties. The sudden social changes during the war years and after were matter well suited to realistic treatment. By this time probably every second Icelander had personal experience of tearing up roots in the countryside and moving from a farm, where the family might have lived for centuries, into a town with new customs and above all new and uncertain values. The years of military occupation during the war had brought easy money to a number of people, and when the Americans did not leave their base in Keflavík after the war many Icelanders continued to do business with them.<sup>7</sup> Novels from this period often expressed the common experience of the time, a feeling of guilt for having betrayed old traditions and old values and a critical attitude or rejection of an urban way of life seen as materialistic and characterized by loose morals and a lack of values and ideals, a troubling state of affairs for which it was, however, hard to see any alternatives.

For the new generation of writers, the realistic way of dealing with the chaos of post-war society was too slow in its tempo to catch the rhythms of modern life; furthermore this artistic approach tended to be nostalgic or naive in its implicit or explicit idealization of rural life and/or the simple working people often contrasted in literature with a caricature of a *nouveau-riche* middle class. These novels were received with lukewarm interest, and readers seemed to be wondering whether the rumours from abroad that the novel was dying might have some foundation.

By the mid-sixties the tide began to turn, and since then the production of new novels has been high and the novelists themselves have had no reason to complain of lack of interest. The realistic mode of narrative has survived, though faced with strong competition from a number of modernists.<sup>8</sup>

I shall now turn to a discussion of three novelists each of whom published their first novels in the 1960s, and continued to do interesting work in the following decades, thus maintaining their roles as leading Icelandic authors in this period. They are so different from each other that it is hard to find any points of likeness, apart from the fact that they can all be described as modernists rather than realists. These authors are Thor Vilhjálmsson, born in Edinburgh in Scotland in 1925, Svava Jakobsdóttir, born in Neskaupstaður in the East of Iceland in 1930 (but who lived with her parents in Canada from 1935 to 1940) and died in 2004, and Guðbergur Bergsson, born in 1932 in Grindavík in the South-West of the country.

When Thor Vilhjálmsson made his debut as a novelist in 1968, he had already been a well known literary figure for twenty years, as a poet and writer of short stories, sketches, and travel books, and as translator and co-editor of a literary magazine. He had studied in England and France for a number of years and was well-versed in English, French and Italian literature and film.

In his previous prose works Thor had established himself as a brilliant and original stylist and observer of human life and culture. His readers were therefore not surprised that a novel by him would be different from the novels they had read before. But the sustained brilliance of style and the acute cultural criticism of *Fljótt fljótt sagði fuglinn* [*Quick Quick Said the Bird*] (1968) was somehow more than anyone had expected, and many readers found the book difficult and strikingly un-Icelandic in its cosmopolitan outlook.

Like T.S. Eliot, who is being echoed in the book's title, Thor sees modern Western culture as a waste land which has lost something irrevocable. In *Fljótt fljótt sagði fuglinn* the characters have no names. They are called "the man," or "the woman," or occasionally their occupation is indicated, "the painter" etc. Although the narrative is in the third person, almost everything is experienced through the senses of "the man," some sort of intellectual whose concrete experiences and fantasies are interwoven in the text. However, the narrator sometimes seems to merge with a person he has been describing from the outside, and occasionally an event is described, at different places in the book, from different angles, from without and within. The reader is of course free to interpret this as a change between two or more narrators, but the style and the dreamlike quality of the text, rather indicates that the narrator is constantly inventing and arranging his material in different ways and from different viewpoints.

The narrative starts in an Italian village, not far from Rome, where the narrator arrives on his travels. There are extremely sharp and vivid images from the surroundings given dimension through metaphors and unexpected but accurate similes. In his mind, the traveller is a witness to an ancient ritual where a meeting between the goddess Diana and the forest god Virbius is enacted by the goddess's priest—a slave who keeps his office only until a younger and stronger one kills and replaces him. The enactment of the rite and the ritual killing of the priest while he is having intercourse with the representative of the goddess is set in the time of emperor Caligula, who is watching the event, and it is connected with a tale about how on a different occasion Caligula watched a great number of his partying guests drowning in a lake, an event which the emperor had arranged himself. The terrifying content of the two tales contrasts strikingly with a tightly structured and beautiful text that weaves past and present smoothly together. The narrator identifies with the death-marked slave/priest, and as the novel proceeds, we see that Caligula's madness is only a miniature image of the madness of the modern world.

All this becomes clearer in the continued wanderings of “the man” which take him to a metropolis (presumably Rome) and along the freeways of a modern European landscape. There is a flow of conversation in the book, but it is superficial and devoid of real content, real feeling. People talk and drink, and make love, but they are isolated from each other, and never is the total isolation of the individual and the presence of death more overwhelming than during the act of love.

As already said the borderlines around the individual are transgressed in this novel. Most characters are experienced in brief flashes of clear vision, but at other times appear as out of focus and with no clear demarcations between them; another borderline that is frequently transgressed is the one between the inner and the outer world, microcosmos and macrocosmos; a long, detailed and vivid description turns out to be the fantasy of the narrator, or his fantasy may seem to turn into reality. Art and life are also seen as interchangeable. The paintings and decorations in a renaissance palace merge with life images of the people having a feast or an orgy in its halls.

For all the book’s dreamlike qualities, one thing portrayed in the novel is experienced as overwhelmingly real: the narrator is a fugitive, constantly on the run from something, although it may be difficult to pin down exactly what it is he is running from. It is sometimes experienced as an external, sometimes an internal threat. Just as the slave/priest is constantly running away from the threat of extinction caused by the drying out of the sources of life within him, the modern narrator is on the run from the barrenness and madness of modern society, from the withering of the life nerve that connects him with other people, and with nature.

It is a strange paradox that a book vividly portraying the barrenness of modern life and the threat of extinction of real human emotions, staring this barrenness in the eyes, as it were, should be a work of such verbal richness and stylistic variety that there are hardly any parallels in the Icelandic language. In fact it reads like a long poem, and it is therefore no wonder that many readers found it overpowering, and, one has to admit, even boring. But it is worth the time it takes to really let it sink in. There is at its core the despair of modern man, yet its poetry and verbal magic is a sort of a chant or protective charm, a desperate clinging to life through language, a creative act which in itself defies the forces of destruction that seem to threaten life and emotion in western society.

Since *Fljótt fljótt sagði fuglinn* Thor Vilhjálmsson has published many works of fiction, mainly novels but also shorter texts. In a number of these works he has continued along the lines staked out in his first novel: they are wanderings of a perceptive mind through the jungle of modern society and modern consciousness presented in a language rich in metaphors and images. However, these later novels are no mere repetitions of *Fljótt fljótt sagði fuglinn*. The external world experienced and portrayed varies and so does the general message of the books. *Óp bjöllunnar* [The Beetle’s Cry] appearing in 1970 shows a clear influence from

the tumultuous years around 1968-1970, and it is obvious that the youthful enthusiasm and revolutionary fervour of these years has awakened in the novelist a new hope. The world is indeed the same in most respects as in *Fljótt fljótt sagði fuglinn*, and much of the flow of conversation going on between people is superficial and cliché-ridden. There is, however, an earnestness about much of it, which is new, and in the communications between individuals there seem to be new openings, new hopes. Among the positive elements added in this book are brief but poignant experiences of nature, which provide a contrast to the still mainly urban setting of the work. New variations in a similar kind of discourse are found in *Mánasigð* [Moon-sickle] from 1976 and *Turnleikhúsið* [The Tower Theatre] from 1979.

In between these works Thor has written a different kind of fiction: satires and satirical fantasies aimed at contemporary Icelandic society. There is of course much satire and satirical fantasy in the novels already mentioned, but in books like *Folda* with three narrative reports, as they are called, from 1972, and *Fuglaskottís* [Bird-dance] from 1975, and others, there are found satirical descriptions with recognizable Icelandic character types and Icelandic themes. These tales are witty in their burlesque fantasies, which frequently use elements from Icelandic legends and folk-beliefs.

Thus the European and the Icelander in Thor Vilhjálmsson seem to have been living separate lives to some extent, although that is of course an illusion which disappears when his books are carefully read. But they are undoubtedly united in *Grámosinn glóir* [Justice Undone] from 1986, his greatest success by far with the Icelandic reading public and a work that won him the Nordic Council's Prize for Literature, a recognition only awarded to two Icelanders before him.

*Grámosinn glóir* is a historical novel set near the end of the nineteenth century. The protagonist of the novel is a young poet and lawyer who after some years of study in Copenhagen is temporarily appointed judge in a country district where his first assignment is to investigate and judge a case of incest and infant-killing in an isolated area. The defendants in the case are destitute orphans, a half-brother and sister who have not been brought up together. The young judge (simultaneously an investigating, prosecuting and judging authority as was customary in Iceland at the time) manages to get a confession from the brother, but the sister who is older and a stronger character, commits suicide before the sentence is passed.

The novel is based on real events: the poet and judge is modelled upon the well known poet Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940) and the case, as well as the suicide and the final sentence, is historical. But the book is far more than the reconstruction of a criminal case. Its main focus of interest lies in the complex experiences and reactions of the young poet/judge. Having spent years abroad, where he has become acquainted with the refinements of urban culture, experienced erotic passion, and faced death from a serious illness, he comes back



to his country, absorbs its magic landscape and folk traditions and is confronted by the brutal facts of the lives of common people, but also by the reality of their passions. The work is far too complex to summarize satisfactorily in a few words. Many of the themes of Thor's modernistic works are here treated once again in a discourse that seeks to absorb concrete Icelandic historical reality into modern consciousness, at the same time as the modernist way of telling a story is combined with a realistic mode of story-telling. Perhaps it could be described as post-modernistic.

While Thor Vilhjálmsson was born into the new bourgeois upper class of Iceland (his grandfather a Danish merchant and a founder of a dynasty which for decades wielded great financial and political influence), Svava Jakobsdóttir was the daughter of a clergyman. After studying English and English literature in the United States and Oxford, and later in Uppsala in Sweden she published her first book, a collection of short stories, *12 konur* [Twelve Women] in 1965, and another collection of short stories in 1967, *Veizla undir grjóttvegg* [Party by a Stone-wall]. Svava Jakobsdóttir's short stories are written in a style which is almost the diametrical opposite to the style of Thor Vilhjálmsson. It is terse, matter-of-fact and seldom reveals much emotion. And her stories, mainly about women, usually take as their point of departure everyday situations in the lives of these women. The suburban tranquility that they portray is, however, only superficial, and without raising her voice or revealing any signs of distress the narrator tells the strangest stories, where laws of nature or probability are disregarded: the absurd is treated as real, and the real is seen to be absurd. One of the most immediately memorable stories, "A Tale for Children," in the beginning tells about a housewife, an absolutely normal person, preparing a meal for her family. But this woman has a strange story. Her son, a boy interested in experiments, once removed her brain with the help of her other children, and although she felt a bit uncomfortable for a while she has got used to the fact that the brain is kept in an urn on a shelf in her home. Later the husband dies and the children leave home and she is alone. In an attempt to reawaken her children's interest in her and love for her, she cuts out her heart and carries it, bleeding, from one child to another, but there is no response; they have no time for her. The message of this story seems obvious, but when it appeared in a newspaper on Christmas Eve the readers were shocked. In many of her stories Svava uses equally shocking but usually less crude means to create an acute feeling for the absurdity and hidden pain or even desperation in lives that have lost all sense in the race for the acquisition of material things and in the routine of everyday life.

Although these stories, paraphrased thus, can sound as general allegories about life in modern society, that is not the whole truth. Most of them are primarily concerned with the lot of women in our society; the confinement and reduction of personality that women's relationships with men seem to occasion. And one can indeed see in these stories that men also suffer in their role.

Svava Jakobsdóttir has only written two novels, but both have been much read and discussed in Iceland. The first, *Leigjandinn* [*The Lodger*], appeared in 1969.<sup>9</sup> It has many of the characteristics of her short stories: an apparently realistic opening and a fantastic course of events. The story tells of a young couple of small means living in Reykjavík. He goes to work and she takes care of the rented apartment and his needs. She is unsatisfied and extremely insecure, feeling threatened all the time. She blames this on the uncertainty that goes with being a tenant, and the pair decide to start building their own house. The project is difficult economically and they have to leave their rented apartment and move into the house before it is quite finished. One day, when the woman is alone at home, a stranger, a man speaking with an American accent, knocks at the door, and having come inside is reluctant to leave. He subsequently settles down in the entrance with his things. The woman wants her husband to throw this man out, but he hesitates to do so, and soon the guest, or the tenant, starts to contribute money to the finishing of the house. They can finish the house, but instead of leaving, as the woman had expected, the tenant moves into the living room and becomes more and more a part of the household; gradually he and the husband start to grow together into one person.

As Christmas approaches, the woman notices a man who is walking around in the vicinity of the house. He seems poor and wretched. On Christmas Eve this man comes and knocks at the door and asks to be let in, but the husband and the tenant, who by now have become almost one person, forbid her to let him in.

When the novel appeared many readers were quick to point out that it could be read as a political allegory about Icelandic history. The young couple living in a rented apartment were supposed to represent the Icelandic people while the country was still dependent on Denmark, the building of a new house as the establishment of a republic, and the tenant who moved in without being asked, contributed with money to the building of the house and did not leave when it was finished, represented the Americans in their military base in Keflavík. The stranger appearing at the end of the book could then be seen as representing the wretched of the earth, our smallest brothers whose needs are neglected by the rich whose main concern is their own safety and the protection of their privileges.

This is no doubt one of the legitimate ways of reading *Leigjandinn*, but it is a reductive reading. On another level it is a story about the domination of women by men and its psychological effects; there are passages in the book that can have no relevance for a political allegory, but exemplify the crippling effects of an unsatisfactory relationship between men and women. But on a more general level the novel deals with the question of human freedom. It demonstrates that there may be conflicts between a need for security and possibilities of freedom. Security means building walls, and there is always a danger of moving from one state of dependency into another.

The incredible story told in *Leigjandinn* is accepted by the reader because of the narrative technique. The absurd and the irrational is not presented suddenly but in small portions, so that each step in its direction goes almost unnoticed, a process which is indeed seen in real life in many military and environmental developments. Svava shows her readers the irrationalities and absurdities of life with techniques that remind us of Kafka, but although she offers no solutions, one cannot say that she portrays the absurdities of human life as an essential aspect of the human condition, which one may feel that Kafka is doing. Rather she sees them as man-made and therefore indicates the possibility that they can be un-made. Perhaps this can be interpreted as evidence that she is basically a realist who makes use of one of the literary techniques of modernism.

In the seventies Svava Jakobsdóttir more or less gave up writing while she was involved in politics as a member of parliament, but she emerged again forcefully in 1987 with *Gunnlaðar saga* [Gunnlöð's saga].<sup>10</sup> Gunnlöð appears in Norse mythology as the daughter of a giant who takes care of the mead of poetry, but is cheated by Óðinn who sleeps with her and gets away with the mead. Once again Svava writes a narrative filled with symbols and events that seem to be contrary to the laws of nature.

The central figure in Gunnlöð's saga is a well educated and successful businesswoman and a partner in her husband's entrepreneurial firm in Reykjavík. She gets a message that her daughter has been arrested in Copenhagen for stealing a precious object from the National Museum. She visits the prison, and the daughter tells her a most fantastic story. She was watching a golden bowl in the museum when she suddenly sees a face of a woman in the bowl and is drawn into another time and place. What she experiences there is a story within the story, an alternative version of the myth of Gunnlöð. She is here a princess in a society where a female deity is the highest one. Gunnlöð is her priestess, a king's daughter guided by the elderly woman (*völva*, norn) Urður. Her cousin Óðinn is to become king, and in accordance with convention he is to be consecrated as king by spending a night with Gunnlöð in a holy place and having a drink of the holy mead, prepared and taken care of by the women. But Óðinn is an adventurer who has been around and is filled with greed for power. He desecrates the temple by bringing the new and evil metal, iron, into it, and he steals the mead. We are given to understand that he steals all power and afterwards falsifies history by making himself a god, and his relatives, Gunnlöð's family, into evil giants. We witness a transformation from a society where women guard the highest secrets and where man strives to live in harmony with nature, to a society of male dominance, deceit and war. The fiction of this invented mythology is very skilfully woven into a warp formed of elements from real mythology, mainly Norse.

This "saga of Gunnlöð" within *Gunnlaðar saga* is in itself a beautiful and poetic pseudo-myth, and in style and texture it is more sensuous and lyrical than anything Svava had written before. It is not the main story, however, although

it has an important function within the work as a whole. The main story is the story of the mother. At first she is disbelieving and angry when she hears her daughter's story, but she grows more and more confused and the effect of the story sends her on her own journey, not to another time but to places in Copenhagen where ladies of her class are not supposed to go. The course of events gradually breaks down her previous personality, breaks down the self-image and the defences she has built up around her self, her life and her family. Gradually she comes to realize the deep truth of her daughter's story. How that truth is to be understood is more or less left to the reader to decide. In the end the story of the mother becomes a repetition of the story of the daughter in a most unexpected way, forcing upon the reader the need to answer the disturbing existential questions that have been asked in the novel.

How is one to classify such a novel? The frame-story can be read as totally realistic and psychologically refined, if we dismiss the mythological tale as symbolic. And what else can we do in our modern age? Nevertheless, the internal logic of the work seems to demand that we accept the myth as true—just as all myth demands to be believed if it is to stay alive. We know, of course, that both stories are fiction, and the outcome is that we have to accept the text's images of life and society with their realistic and mythical elements as an indivisible whole, as equally valid statements. In a way the attitude to reality in *Gunnlaðar saga* seems to be of the same kind as the one we find in the so called “magic realism” of some Latin-American authors, although Svava with her typically protestant seriousness about moral issues is hardly reminiscent of her Latin-American colleagues.

Latin-American influence is, on the other hand, obvious in the works of Guðbergur Bergsson. He was born in the small fishing village Grindavík (ca. 20 km. from Keflavík and 50 km. from Reykjavík). After graduating from the Teacher's College in Reykjavík he spent a number of years in Spain. He has translated classical Spanish works like *Don Quijote* and *Lazarillo de Tormes* and modern authors like Jimenez, besides a great number of works by Latin-American authors like Borges, Marquez, Alejo Carpentier, and others. He made his debut as a novelist with *Músin sem læðist* [The Sneaking Mouse] in 1961. His breakthrough as a modernist and iconoclast came with *Tómas Jónsson metsölubók* [Tómas Jónsson: a Bestseller] in 1966. No other novel had had such a shock-effect on the Icelandic reading public since *Vefarinn mikli* by Laxness some forty years earlier.

*Tómas Jónsson* is not an easy book to describe. At its centre is an old man, Tómas Jónsson, and the book is a collage of texts he has created to tell the story of his life, or perhaps to create this story, or perhaps to hide the truth about himself. Like many of Guðbergur's later persons he seems to be totally dominated by clichés in his understanding of himself and his world, and through the several kinds of discourse, the various styles he attempts, he actually lays bare and undermines the inherent ideologies of Icelandic discourse in his times, both

spoken and written. But Tómas has limited control over his writing and all kinds of things get out that he does not really want to talk about. This opening is symptomatic of the conflicts demonstrated in the text:

Ævisaga

Ég er afkomandi hraustra bláeygðra víkinga. Ég á ætt að telja til hirðskálda og sigursælla konunga. Ég er Íslendingur. Nafn mitt er Tómas Jónsson. Ég er gamall  
nei nei

(7)

Biography

I am the descendant of strong blue-eyed vikings. My genealogy goes back to the skalds of princes and to victorious kings. I am an Icelander. My name is Tómas Jónsson. I am old

no no

Here Tómas starts with the most empty clichés of the self-image of Icelanders, narrows the definition down to his name, and then, inadvertently as it were, tells the fact of overriding importance and a cause of anxiety: he is old. Here the subconscious or the suppressed takes over the text, as frequently happens in the book, and he protests: no no.

Tómas Jónsson is old and he has little control over his life or his thoughts, but this situation is paradoxical: when he is doing what he consciously wants, and therefore ought to be seen as in control, his writing is really being invaded by texts from the outside. The official definition of an Icelander with which he starts is obviously not of his own making; the several experiments with writing he performs in the book, as for instance texts classified as “Úr Þjóðsögum Tómasar Jónssonar” [From the folktales of Tómas Jónsson], reminiscent of *Þjóðsögur Jóns Árnasonar* (the standard collection of Icelandic folktales), are entirely unoriginal; such texts are of course Guðbergur’s device to parody all kinds of Icelandic prose-styles and reveal and make ridiculous the clichés of conventional Icelandic prose. He produces texts in order to reveal their emptiness. It is only when Tómas loses control, when his suppressed ego takes over, that he produces his own text, tells us something significant, but here bodily functions and low desires dominate the text, and as a consequence Tómas’s own uncontrolled text contributes to a fundamental doubt about personal, subjective control over any kind of text. The text is a meeting place invaded from all directions. But through the confrontation of different kinds of discourse where Tómas Jónsson’s own outbursts of uncontrolled thoughts are at the centre, the text as a whole liberates itself.

Tómas Jónsson lives in Reykjavík, but he has relatives in a small fishing village, and this fishing village was the focus of a number of novels and short

stories by Guðbergur in the sixties and seventies. Many of the same persons appear in most of these books, sometimes in small, sometimes in big roles. The books in question are *Ástir samlyndra hjóna* [The Loves of a harmonious Couple] 1967, *Anna* 1969, *Það sefur í djúpinu* [It is sleeping in the Deep] 1973, *Hermann og Dídí* 1974, and *Það rís úr djúpinu* [It is rising from the Deep] 1976.

This group of works is sometimes talked of in Icelandic as the “Grindavík” novels, the implication being that Guðbergur has modeled his village on his native Grindavík. To some extent this is true, there are many points of likeness between the two worlds, but there is also a fundamental difference, because Guðbergur’s world is a textual one. It is typical of the nature of these works that none of them can be picked out and taken as an example, none of them is what could be classified as a finished masterpiece. Rather they are unfinished, open towards each other, towards an infinite intertextuality, and above all open towards the reader who must find an interpretation, a closure for himself or herself.<sup>11</sup>

Realistic descriptions are intermingled with fantasy in Guðbergur’s fictional world. People are seen in familiar situations, at work and at leisure, but then the camera moves closer and we look through “unspeakable” regions of body and mind, i.e. the stories talk of things previously unspoken even unthought-of consciously. The people we meet are almost exclusively of the working class, and there are no working class heroes among them, such as we might find in the works of many Icelandic authors. Overburdened with labour that has no meaning for them, they drift through life in a stupor, dominated by lazy desires and vague dreams. In their more awake moments they give expression to greed and aggression. These people are socially passive, and have a very limited understanding of the forces that govern their lives, although they are constantly quarreling about their own confused ideas.

My description of these works may sound quite depressing, and it is indeed a depressing picture of the world we meet with in these novels. But it is equally true that the world of the novels is described with great humour, Guðbergur’s early novels are indeed hilariously funny most of the time. They recreate and caricature daily speech and the general debate that is constantly going on in the media and among ordinary people. While retaining a recognizable tone, the dialogue glides smoothly into the area of the absurd and back again, revealing the prejudices, illusions and delusions of the speakers.

Guðbergur portrays a general emptiness of human relationships, and he gives no hints of a golden age of human relations in the rural past. He exposes the hollowness of such modern ideological concepts as the nation, the family, rural culture, the working class, and so on. Many of his readers have found him nihilistic and even misanthropic, and perhaps such interpretations are justified. But it should not be forgotten that he is emphatically not pretending to give a true picture of life. His negative image of the world compels more positively inclined readers to create their positive worlds for themselves. As in Tómas

Jónsson the dialogues and external descriptions of these village stories are constantly punctuated or even punctured by intrusions from the Deep, from the even more chaotic inner world of the suppressed and the subconscious.

The chaotic world of Guðbergur's village is not unified by any references to classical myths or master-narratives, in the way Joyce's *Ulysses* is organized on the basis of Homer's *Odyssey*, or, for that matter, Thor Vilhjálmsson's *Fljótt fljótt sagði fuglinn* on the myth about Diana and Virbius, but strange and unnatural happenings as well as a dreamlike treatment of time give the fictional universe a legendary or even mythical character. One of the devices producing this effect is the narrative technique. The reader is systematically confused about who is telling the story. A small group of central figures with unclear identities appear both as characters in the narrative and its creators. Thus there is a fundamental uncertainty about who speaks the text, an uncertainty that finally makes the reader the one who determines its significance, demanding of him or her a creative effort.

In the 1980s Guðbergur Bergsson published several novels and a collection of short stories, apart from being very active as translator. These novels are not as tightly linked to each other as the novels from the village, but their setting is either Reykjavík—and then especially the world of intellectuals and professional people—or a locale more general and less strictly located. If the intellectuals of Reykjavík by any chance should have felt a secret *Schadenfreude* when studying the portrait of the working class in Guðbergur's novels from the sixties and seventies, they have little cause for pride faced with their own image in the novels of the eighties. However, if they have any sense of humour, it is difficult to resist laughing. In *Hjartað býr enn í helli sínum* [The Heart Is Still Living in its Cave] from 1982, the protagonist is a psychologist. He is recently divorced from his wife, a social worker and a feminist, and wants nothing more than to get back to her and their two daughters. There are no heroes in this story about people who like to call themselves the generation of 1968. It is typical that the psychologist and the social worker, both professionally trained to solve other people's problems, have no control over their own lives and their actions are seen to be as selfish, short-sighted, and dominated by clichés as those of the workers in the village in the earlier novels. The novel is tragi-comic, and although the clichés that are supposed to express the noble ideals of leftist intellectuals and feminists alike are ridiculed and treated with sarcasm, there is real desperation beneath the surface. The name of the novel is an allusion to Plato's myth of the cave, the action takes place during one weekend in December, when darkness reigns, and the persons are seen as shadows moving about in twilight, each of them the prisoner of his or her boundless egotism and inability to love without claiming anything from the loved ones.<sup>12</sup>

The picture of the world drawn in the novels of the three writers described above may be a dark one. Why should we cause ourselves pain by reading such

books and how can they be of interest to people living elsewhere in the world? Jónas Hallgrímsson, the nineteenth-century poet, says in one of his poems that he would rather feel pain and live, than live a numb life without feeling (Ringler 300-03). People of the modern world must face many terrible facts if they are to have real feelings and live a real life, but getting acquainted with the darker aspects of life through art is not only painful. There is also pleasure and joy to be found in works of art that face reality and transform it, and at the same time demand a creative effort from the recipients—from us.

The three novelists I have tried to describe here are in my opinion all first-class writers and masters in the use of the Icelandic language, but they are quite different from each other. They all demand much from their readers, each in their own way: Thor Vilhjálmsson and Svava Jakobsdóttir can perhaps in most of their work be classified as mainstream modernists of two different types. Thor is lyrical and exuberant, trying to express the feelings and reactions of a cultivated European to the post-war world. Svava Jakobsdóttir is more economical in her means and more directly concerned with concrete social problems, such as the effects of conventional sex roles in our society, while always seeing such problems in the light of a quest for individual freedom and development and the threats with which it is faced. In their later works both these authors seem to be attempting some sort of fusion between modernism and realism. Guðbergur Bergsson is in my opinion the most radically modern, the most disturbing of these three authors. He is constantly deconstructing the speech and writing of predecessors and contemporaries, attempting, as I see it, to shock us into awareness of our language, both of the constant death-threat hanging over it, of its seductive and stupefying effects and its creative possibilities.

Icelandic literature has always been surprisingly quick to pick up and make use of foreign influences at the same time as it has retained its specially Icelandic flavour. I see the sudden flowering of the modernist novel in the 1960s as a natural development considering the sudden urbanization and internationalization of this society, but the great differences we find between the individual authors should remind us that there is nothing mechanistic about such a development. It is the result of a complex interplay between culture and society, history and present, and in the end totally dependent on the individual writers and their creative fantasy.<sup>13</sup>

#### NOTES

1. A convenient and reliable survey of Icelandic history in English is to be found in Gunnar Karlsson's *The History of Iceland*.
2. A recent survey of Icelandic literature in English (reviewed in this volume) is *A History of Icelandic Literature* edited by Daisy Neijmann. This work contains a rich bibliography that includes translations into English of Icelandic works.



3. Concise surveys of the development of the Icelandic literary scene in the first half of the twentieth century are to be found in Árni Sigurjónsson's *Laxness og þjóðlífð: Bókmenntir og bókmenntakenningar á árunum milli stríða*, pages 13-101, and Halldór Guðmundsson's "Loksins, Loksins." *Vefarinn mikli og upphaf íslenskra nútímabókmennta*, pages 25-129.
4. Much has been written about this author; an excellent survey of his life and work is Halldór Guðmundsson's *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*. This study is available in English, German, and Swedish translations.
5. These comments are obviously not an attempt to define these concepts in a scholarly fashion but only an indication to the reader on what grounds I have characterised the novels chosen for discussion as modernistic.
6. The term was originally used by Halldór Laxness in *Atómstöðin*, a political satire that cannot be classified as modernistic.
7. As a matter of fact the US forces left for a few years to return in 1951, but in the meantime US contractors were active at the military base.
8. Prose literature in the period 1940 to 2000 is competently surveyed in *A History of Icelandic Literature*, pages 404-70.
9. Translated as *The Lodger and Other Stories* by Julian Meldon D'Arcy.
10. Unfortunately, this great work has not been published in an English translation, although there are translations into the four Scandinavian languages and French.
11. An interesting discussion of Guðbergur's aesthetics is found in Birna Bjarnadóttir's *Holdið hemur andann: Um fagurfræði í skáldskap Guðbergs Bergssonar*.
12. Since this essay was first written, Guðbergur has published several novels and semi-autobiographical works. For his novel, *Svanurinn*, 1991, he won the Icelandic Literary Prize, and it has been translated into many languages, including English, and has received critical acclaim.
13. This article was originally written as a lecture in 1989 and presented as a Beck lecture at the University of Victoria. I am grateful to John Tucker for encouraging me to publish this and for constructive criticism.

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