

Halldór Laxness

(Halldór Guðjónsson)

(23 April 1902 – 8 February 1998)

Helga Kress

Háskóli Íslands

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Halldór Laxness is both an international author and a very Icelandic author. He wrote almost exclusively in Icelandic, took his subject matter from the realities of Icelandic society and history, and produced a body of work deeply rooted in the Icelandic epic tradition. At the same time, his work has universal appeal. “Heimurinn er einmitt hér, á Óseyri við Axlarfjörð” (The world is right here, at Óseyri in Axlarfjörður), he remarks in one of his first novels, *Salka Valka* (*Salka Valka*, 1931, 1932; translated from Danish into English as *Salka Valka: A Novel of Iceland*, 1936), which takes place in a poverty-stricken fishing village in one of the most remote areas of the country near the Arctic Circle. A major theme in the work of Halldór Laxness is the conflict of nationality—how to belong to one’s own country and the whole world at the same time.

Halldór Laxness was extraordinarily prolific and versatile as a writer. During his long career he published more than sixty books representing every genre—novels, short stories, poetry, plays, and autobiographical sketches and memoirs. He was no less productive as a cultural commentator and wrote many essays on literature, education, religion, and history as well as on social, political, and environmental issues. He was always a controversial figure, especially in his younger years, because of his radical themes and political views. He considered himself first and foremost an epic author who understood social issues no better than anyone else, and indeed it was for renewing the great narrative art of Iceland through the epic power of his work that he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1955. Through his novels he has won more fame than any other Icelandic author since Snorri Sturluson and the nameless authors of the Icelandic sagas. His works have been translated into more than forty languages and published in countries around the globe. For Icelanders, Halldór Laxness has become a national icon, and his house, Gljúfrasteinn, has now been designated a national museum.

Halldór Guðjónsson was born in Reykjavík on 23 April 1902 in a little rear house at Laugavegur 32. His parents, Guðjón Helgason and Sigríður Halldórsdóttir, made their home on a main thoroughfare of the capital, a city with a population of six thousand at that time. When Halldór was three years old, the family moved to the farm Laxnes in Mosfellssveit (the Mosfell district) near Reykjavík. His parents farmed, and his father also worked as the foreman of a road crew in the summers. Halldór's sisters, Sigríður and Helga, were born at Laxnes in 1909 and 1912, respectively. Halldór later took the name of the farm as his pen name and surname, Laxness (literally, "from Laxnes"). In the first volume of his memoirs, *Í túninu heima* (In the Field Back Home, 1975), he describes his childhood at Laxnes. Although these years in the country were priceless and laid the foundation for the rest of his life, he says that he was lucky to have been born and bred on the longest city street in Iceland, for he did not have to spend years purging himself of the hayseed. Halldór recalls his parents with warmth and respect. His father, who had grown up in the country, was a self-educated man who both read and spoke English, but he was also musically inclined and played the fiddle. Music was a favorite pastime in the home, and neighbors from all over the countryside gathered there to play their instruments and sing. "Allar bernskuminníngar mínar hafa undirleik af tónlist" (All my

childhood memories are accompanied by music), says Halldór in *Í túninu heima*. The sounds that filled the house stayed with him for the rest of his life, and music as a motif figures prominently in his works. Halldór describes his mother as temperamental and so reserved that he felt he never really knew her. She was a “huldukona” (hidden woman), he says, and he felt her presence as his guardian as long as she lived—and even longer.

In addition to his parents and the musical environment at Laxnes, a strong influence in Halldór’s life was his maternal grandmother, Guðný Klængsdóttir, who lived with the family. Halldór was attached to her and as a child sat next to her on the bed as she spun and kept him amused with nursery rhymes, songs, and ballads—an inexhaustible well of lore. In the autobiographical sketch *Heiman eg fór: sjálfsmynd æskumanns* (Leaving Home: Self-portrait of a Young Man, 1952), Halldór says that his grandmother was not the least interested in current affairs, politics, or technological advances, but she spoke a purer form of Icelandic than anyone he ever knew. This grandmother of epic stature, who gave Halldór an appreciation for the land and the past, appeared later in his work as a positive symbol for bygone times, in odd contrast to the modernism he was otherwise quick to espouse.

By his own admission, Halldór had an aversion to physical labor, and members of the household often lost patience with his malingering ways. His mother, however, understood her son’s interests and spoke up for him. Reading constantly, he spent every waking hour with his books. At Laxnes he wrote thousands of pages, filling up many chests with notebooks crammed with novels, short stories, poems, essays, and journals. He evidently built a bonfire and burned them all before he was sent off to school in the autumn of 1915 after completing the rural grammar school.

In the winter of 1915-1916 Halldór attended the technical school in Reykjavík, where he was an erratic pupil, especially in draftsmanship. He also took organ lessons, for his father was convinced of his musical talent and had given him a harmonium. That winter he wrote a long novel that emulated *Elding* (Lightning, 1889), an equally long historical novel by the woman author Torfhildur Hólm that depicted Iceland’s adoption of Christianity. Torfhildur Hólm, who was born in 1845, had published *Brynjólfur biskup Sveinsson* (Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson), which was about an eminent Icelandic bishop of the seventeenth century. It was Iceland’s first novel by a woman as well as the first historical novel in modern Icelandic literature. In *Sjömeistarasagan* (The Chronicle of

Seven Masters, 1978), the second volume of his memoirs, Halldór says that during his childhood he vowed to be a better writer than Torfhildur Hólm. Echoing the title of her book, Halldór called his novel “Afturelding” (Dawn), which he described as six hundred densely written pages. He later claimed that the manuscript had been lost and that he could not even recall two consecutive words of it.

Many Icelandic writers, including Torfhildur Hólm, lived in Canada for many years or settled there permanently. When Halldór was growing up, the Icelandic emigrations to America had largely come to an end, but they were still fresh in people’s minds and frequently mentioned. As a child, Halldór was engrossed by the migrations, and they later came to symbolize in his work the dilemma of being an Icelander—whether to stay or leave. In his works Halldór links the westward journeys to the Icelandic language, poets and poetry, and also to women. His first published works, in fact, were two short epistolary essays concerning the Icelandic emigrants. Appearing in June 1916, one in the children’s magazine *Æskan* and the other in the children’s column of the Icelandic-Canadian paper *Lögberg*, they were signed “H. Guðjónsson of Laxnes.” In both pieces Halldór praises the Icelandic Canadian children for their verses and anecdotes, and pronounces them to be generally much better writers than Icelandic children—with some exceptions, he hastens to add. He tells them all about Iceland and encourages them to learn Icelandic verses and to read the Icelandic classics. In November of that same year, Halldór wrote another epistolary essay for the children’s column in *Lögberg*. He again discusses poetry and Icelandic nature, offers some quotations from Icelandic poems, and concludes by sending some of his own verses—the first of his poems to appear under his name. In these poems he implores the Canadian-Icelandic children never to forget the homeland and closes with these words: “Ég tel ykkur aðeins í útlegð!” (I regard you as merely being in exile!). In the same year, Halldór published a few poems and stories in newspapers and magazines under the pen name “Snær svinni” (Snær the Wise). In November 1916, for the Reykjavík newspaper *Morgunblaðið*, he wrote an article under his own name about an old clock that belonged to a maternal great-aunt.

In the winter of 1918-1919, Halldór entered Reykjavík’s secondary school. Unhappy in school, he neglected his studies and immersed himself in writing. At the end of the term he dropped out of school and ended his formal education forever. In 1924 he took the examination for a high-school diploma but did not pass.

In the summer of 1919, when Halldór was seventeen, his father died of pneumonia, only forty-nine years old. Halldór had just completed, *Barn náttúrunnar: ástarsaga* (Child of Nature: A Romance), his first published novel, self-published that autumn under the name “Halldór frá Laxnesi” (Halldór from Laxnes).

Barn náttúrunnar is about an Icelandic Canadian real estate agent named Randver, who returns to Iceland after thirty years in Winnipeg and starts a new life as a farmer. He meets the innocent Hulda (a name that means “hidden woman”), a free-spirited young woman who lives in the mountains and spends her days singing, composing her own poems and songs, and playing the guitar. When Hulda loses interest in Randver for a time, he takes up drinking, forgets his native language, and reverts to speaking English. *Barn náttúrunnar* is naive and imitative of the exoticism that characterized the work of the Icelandic writers who had moved to Denmark and were writing in Danish. The book was not well received: the author was labeled a “child” and the story “childish” by Arngrímur Jónsson in the newspaper *Alþýðublaðið* (Folk Newspaper) on 6 November 1919. The critic, however, reminded Icelanders that they should coddle the country’s young writers to keep them from moving abroad and writing in a foreign language. In the preface to the second edition of the novel, published in 1964, Halldór calls *Barn náttúrunnar* his best book, because it preserves the sounds of childhood. It was his farewell to this period of his life.

Without waiting for his novel to come out, Halldór sailed to Copenhagen in the summer of 1919. There he rented a room and put his calling card on the door: “Halldór frá Laxnesi. Poëta.” This first trip abroad, which lasted less than a year, is described in the third volume of his memoirs, *Úngur eg var* (Young Was I, 1976). Immersing himself in literature, philosophy, and religious questions, he was captivated by the Swedish modernist August Strindberg and by the Chinese mystic Lao-tzu.

About this time a number of Icelandic writers were making names for themselves in Denmark, writing in Danish. They included Jóhann Sigurjónsson, Guðmundur Kamban, and Gunnar Gunnarsson, all born in the 1880s. Halldór perhaps aspired to joining the group, for he soon tried his hand at writing short stories in Danish. Three of them were published in the respected newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*: “Den tusindaarige Islænding” (The Thousand-Year Icelander, 19 October 1919), “Thordur i Kalfakot”

(Thordur at Kalfakot, 20 February 1920), and “Digteren og Zeus” (The Poet and Zeus, 2 May 1920). The stories were later published in Icelandic in the author’s first volume of short stories, *Nokkrar sögur* (A Few Stories, 1923). As its title suggests, “Den tusindaarige Islænding” depicts the archetypal Icelander and his struggle with the forces of nature. The protagonist is Helgi, a farmhand who lives by the heroic code of the Icelandic sagas and believes in the pagan gods. His opposite is the cosmopolitan artist Heiðbæs, who comes to the farm to paint. When a volcano erupts following a massive earthquake, the frightened artist is intent on fleeing, while Helgi fearlessly rushes out to rescue the livestock. The young woman who is being courted by both men, no longer has any doubt about which one to choose. “Thordur i Kalfakot” is about a poor farmer who struggles to survive on a remote patch of barren land and turns to rustling sheep to feed his starving children. Unlike the thousand-year Icelander, Thordur is defeated by not only the forces of nature but also by a hostile society. The story is Halldór’s first to portray the Icelandic subsistence farmer, a subject that he wrestled with for decades. “Digteren og Zeus” concerns an Icelandic poet living abroad and his most trusted friend, a dog named Zeus. In his preface to the second edition of *Nokkrar sögur*, published in the collection *Þættir* (Stories, 1954), Halldór dismisses these early stories, saying that in those days he could write a whole story in the length of time it would now take him to write one sentence, for he had not yet learned the art of striking out words.

When Halldór returned to Iceland early in the summer of 1920, he seems to have already given up the idea of writing in Danish. The scholar and poet Sigurður Nordal was being hailed for his story “Hel” (The Goddess of Death), which had appeared the previous year in *Fornar ástir* (Ancient Passions), a collection of Nordal’s short stories. Written in a fragmentary, lyrical prose style, the story concerns a young man who ventures out into the world to find himself but then returns home as an old man to face his death. Nordal’s poetic use of language in “Hel” apparently demonstrated to the young writer new possibilities. In paying tribute to Nordal’s literary genius many years later, he acknowledges that “Hel” was a turning point for him—for a young Icelander to think of writing in Danish suddenly seemed absurd when there was a chance of writing such fine Icelandic.

The year following Halldór’s return from Denmark in 1920 is the subject of the fourth and last volume of his memoirs, *Grikklandsárið* (The Year in Greece, 1980)—a

somewhat misleading title as Halldór had never gone to Greece but had only dreamed of doing so. For most of this time he lived at home with his family at Laxnes in addition to pursuing his studies and frequenting the coffehouses in Reykjavík. In the autumn he accepted a position as a tutor on a farm in Hornafjörður in southeastern Iceland, in those days one of the most isolated regions of the country. The children of the household turned out to be generally older than he was, and he had ample time for reading and writing. While there he worked on a long novel titled “Salt jarðar” (The Salt of the Earth), but he never finished it, and the manuscript is now lost.

In the autumn of 1921 Halldór again set out to see the world, traveling around Europe and spending most of his time in Germany and Austria. At Innsbruck he wrote a philosophical book titled “Rauða kverið” (The Red Booklet), written in red ink and clearly influenced by Strindberg. The book was not published until several decades later when most of it was incorporated into *Heiman eg fór*. Halldór’s ultimate destination on this trip was America, perhaps with the idea of settling there. To that end he applied to the Canadian authorities for a permit to reside in Saskatchewan, where he intended to work on a relative’s farm. Apparently his application was either lost or processed too late, for when Halldór arrived in New York in the spring of 1922, he was promptly sent back to Europe on the same ship that brought him. During the return voyage he wrote the short story “Júdítt Lvoff,” published in *Nokkrar sögur*. In his preface to the second edition in *Þættir*, he says that the story shows a clear dovetailing of certain characteristics that stayed with him over time. He is obviously referring to the conflict between Iceland and the outside world, the Icelander and the cosmopolitan. The story is narrated by a writer who, as an Icelander and a man of the world, mediates between these two realms. The title character is a wild and exotic young Russian woman who comes to Iceland and seduces an innocent, hardworking farmer’s son. She leaves the country, promising to come back, but then marries a rich American businessman and settles in America. In this story Iceland is poor and primitive, but genuine and true. Foreign countries are superficial, treacherous, and rich. In the end the American businessman offers to introduce the writer to his friends in Hollywood.

Back in Europe Halldór stayed several months in Denmark, mainly on the island of Bornholm. There he met a young Icelandic woman, Málfríður Jónsdóttir, and in April

1923 had a child, María Halldórsdóttir. The news that he was to become a father came as a great shock to Halldór and was one of the factors in his decision to enter a monastery. With the help of the Danish writer and Catholic Johannes Jørgensen, he was admitted to the Benedictine monastery of St. Maurice de Clervaux in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg toward the end of 1922. In January 1923 he was baptized a Catholic by the bishop of Luxembourg and adopted the name of the Irish martyr Kilian (missionary bishop beheaded at Würzburg, circa 689). Halldór then called himself Halldór Kiljan Laxness, publishing his books under this name until 1963, when he dropped the Kiljan moniker.

In the monastery Halldór kept a diary, which he published sixty-five years later, along with a prologue and an epilogue, as *Dagar hjá múnkum* (Days with Monks, 1987), his final book. In the diary he describes his daily activities, which consisted of reading and writing, regular prayers, and theological discussions with the masters of the novices. The Gregorian chants impressed him most of all.

In the monastery Halldór wrote the novel *Undir Helgahnúk* (Under the Holy Mountain, 1924), which tells the story of Snjólfur and Kjartan, two Icelanders who become friends while studying in Copenhagen. Snjólfur marries an American widow and moves with her to Canada, whereas Kjartan returns to Iceland and becomes a country parson after marrying an Icelandic woman who has grown up in Copenhagen. Many years later, after the death of his wife, Snjólfur moves back to Iceland with his young daughter, Áslaug, and takes up farming the land at Kjartan's parsonage. Kjartan's wife, a sensitive, artistic woman who can no longer bear the isolation of rural life, commits suicide. The story then shifts to Atli, Kjartan's son, who has his mother's artistic bent as well as a longing to see the world and become a great man, and to Áslaug, who feels that she has been taken away from a beautiful country and brought to "þetta ljóta land . . . á öfugum stað á jörðinni" (this ugly country . . . on the wrong side of the earth).

In October 1923 Halldór left the monastery, committed to becoming a Catholic theologian and devoting his life to God. After a sojourn in England, where he stayed for some months in Jesuit and Carthusian monasteries, he returned to Iceland early in 1924. "Það var gott að koma aftur heim" (It was good to come back home), he concludes in *Dagar hjá múnkum*.

In England, Halldór started a draft of *Heiman eg fór*, which he finished in Iceland in 1924 but did not publish until 1952. Subtitled *Sjálfsmynd æskumanns* (A Self-Portrait of a Young Man), a pointed allusion to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* of 1916, one of the pioneering works of European modernism, *Heiman eg fór* has clear autobiographical elements. Halldór rejects all that is traditional and preaches modern times. Icelanders would be better off, he argues, if they would forget their heritage and open themselves up to the outside world. He pronounces *Heimskringla* (Orb of the World, ca 1220) by Snorri Sturluson the most boring work he has ever read and the language of the Icelandic sagas insignificant compared with the beauty of modern literature in Danish and English.

Halldór had planned to write a sequel to *Undir Helgahnúk* but gave up the idea in favor of a “meistaraverk” (masterpiece) about Leif the Lucky (Leifur Eiríksson), which, as he revealed in a letter to a friend in August of 1924, was to be a fashionable, monumental novel. This fashionable novel about the Icelander who discovered America in the year 1000 also came to naught. In 1925 he published an essay defending the Catholic church, *Kaþólsk viðhorf: svar gegn árásum* (Catholic Views: A Reply to Attacks), occasioned by the attacks of Þórbergur Þórðarson in *Bréf til Láru* (Letters to Lára), which had appeared the previous year. He devoted most of the winter of 1924-1925 to his Surrealistic poem “Únglingurinn í skóginum” (The Youth in the Woods), which he tinkered with for months and which turned out to be his most expensive poem, as he remarked in the 1949 edition of *Kvæðakver* (A Booklet of Poems, originally published in 1930). He had planned on going to Sicily that spring to work on a new novel and had assurances of a travel grant from the Icelandic Parliament. But when “Únglingurinn í skóginum” appeared in the periodical *Eimreiðin* in January 1925, the avant-garde style of the poem created a scandal, and Parliament withdrew the grant.

In an interview with Halldór that appeared in *Morgunblaðið* (13 December 1924), he was asked whether he was now back in Iceland for good. “Nei, nei, nei” (No, no, no), he answered, and went on to say that he did not even live there. He had intended to amuse himself in Iceland for only a few months, but now it was likely that he would have to suffer the boredom of staying on into the spring. When he was asked about his next destination, he replied, “Suður, – alfarinn. Jeg er vantrúaður á pólarloftslagið” (South—for good. I’m skeptical of the polar climate).

In the spring of 1925 Halldór once again left the country, this time for Taormina in Sicily, where he spent the summer working on *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver from Kashmir, 1927) in sweltering heat and a swarm of insects, stripped down to his monocle, as he phrases it in his literary memoir, *Skáldatími* (Poet's time, 1963). That summer he also wrote articles about various pressing social issues and sent them home to be published by the Icelandic press. These articles included “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan” (Bobbed Hair and the Icelandic Woman), which created quite a stir when it appeared in *Morgunblaðið* on 9 August. That autumn Halldór headed north with great relief and finished the novel over the winter at the monastery in Clervaux. In the spring of 1926, when he returned to Reykjavík with the manuscript in hand, he could find no publisher to print a work “eftir nýtt sení, samanskrifað uppúr öllu því sem þá var efst á baugi í tímanum, að surrealismaum ekki undanskildum” (by a new genius, cobbled together from everything that was then in vogue, including surrealism), as he says in *Skáldatími*. Thus, he decided to publish the book himself, and it appeared in eight installments in the first half of 1927.

Halldór considered *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* the first of his works that deserved to be called a novel. Shortly after its publication, in an interview in the 24 August issue of *Heimskringla*, he explained that the work had grown out of a need to explore various problems that weigh most heavily on the soul of modern man. In *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, Halldór rebels against the Icelandic literary tradition in both subject matter and style. The protagonist of the novel, Steinn Elliði, is a modern cosmopolitan man and a writer, a sponge for doctrines that he constantly flaunts. Much like Halldór himself during this period, Steinn wants to sever all ties with the past and dedicate himself to the latest trends instead. He says that to refer to a work that had been written before 1914 would never enter his mind, even though he is thoroughly versed in all the world's literary masterpieces. Nevertheless, the author chose for the book an epigram in Latin from *Paradiso*, Canto 17, of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (circa 1307-1321), in which the poet is urged to tell the truth despite the ill that may befall him: “Tutta tua vision fa manifesta” (Make manifest your whole vision).

Steinn Elliði's megalomania, stoked by his desire to become “fullkomnasti maðurinn á jörðunni” (the most perfect human being on earth), is repeatedly exposed by

the young woman Diljá, who becomes the other protagonist in the novel. In contrast to Steinn Elliði, who seeks a higher goal, Diljá represents sheer sexuality and, as such, is God's antithesis and rival as well. The story ends in Rome where Diljá has come to "liberate" Steinn Elliði, who has entered a monastery. Her efforts are in vain; he rejects her and chooses God instead.

The story is told primarily through Steinn Elliði's rambling confessions and monologues but also through letters, such as those that Diljá writes to Steinn Elliði but does not send, philosophical discussions; literary quotations from eclectic sources; and Steinn Elliði's Surrealistic poems. *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* is an extravagant mix of the Icelandic and the foreign, the old and the new, often conveyed in carnivalistic scenes, grotesque metaphors, and paradoxical expressions.

Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír was a breakthrough for Halldór Laxness as an author, and along with Þórbergur Þórðarson's *Bréf til Láru*, the novel is regarded as the harbinger of modernism in Icelandic literature. Yet, in its day it received mixed reviews, and its author was accused of writing everything from rubbish to obscenity. A different opinion was expressed by the critic Kristján Albertsson in his laudatory review in the periodical *Vaka* in 1927, and his opening words have become proverbial in Icelandic literature: "Loksins, loksins, tilkomumikið skáldverk sem rís eins og hamraborg upp úr flatnesku íslenzkrar ljóða- og sagnagerðar síðustu ára! Ísland hefur eignast nýtt stórskáld—" (At last, at last, an impressive literary work that rises up like a monolith from the flatness of Icelandic poetry and fiction of recent years! Iceland has gained a new bard—).

In the epilogue to the second edition of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* in 1948, Halldór noted that when he finished the novel, he had written his way through Christian dogma and let go of it. Shortly after returning in 1926, he spent six months in the eastern part of Iceland collecting material for another book because he wanted to "re-do" Steinn Elliði in the guise of an Icelandic farmer, as he says in *Skáldatími*. He also published a series of critical newspaper articles about poverty in the rural areas of Iceland. They included "Raflýsing sveitanna" (The Electrification of Rural Areas), in which he argues that electricity could be brought to an entire district for the money that is wasted on one good-for-nothing scoundrel of a parson.

With *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* Halldór was also finished with Europe and made plans for another trip to America. In May 1927 he again crossed the Atlantic, this time sailing from Glasgow to Montreal. That summer he stayed among Icelandic Canadians in Manitoba, visiting Icelandic settlements, delivering lectures, and reading from his works. This period produced one of his most celebrated short stories, “Nýja Ísland” (translated as “New Iceland” in *Seven Icelandic short stories*, 1960), which first appeared in the Icelandic Canadian newspaper *Heimskringla* on 19 October 1927 and was later reprinted in the short story collection *Fótatak manna: sjö þættir* (People’s Footsteps: Seven Stories, 1933). It tells the story of an Icelandic farmer who leaves his farm in Iceland with his wife and four children and settles in New Iceland. However, his dream of a better life is soon shattered: he is forced to take a backbreaking job digging ditches; two of his children die in an epidemic; the land proves to be too poor to cultivate; and the family is split apart. The story, a variation on the theme of the Icelandic subsistence farmer, was met with disapproval by Icelandic Canadians, who did not appreciate being described as destitute pioneers.

The real purpose of Halldór’s trip to America was to make his way to Los Angeles, the center of the motion-picture industry, which became his destination in late fall of 1927. In a letter written to a friend shortly after his arrival, he described his surroundings this way: “Hollywood. Goldwin Studios. Laski Studios. Universal Film. The Movies. Movie actors. Movie Stars. The movie game.” He went on to say that he had assumed the name Hall d’Or “in movie circles” and was finishing an essay on “cinematography and creative art,” which he intended to submit to the ten largest newspapers in the world. This essay was never published, however, and nothing came of the lecture he was contemplating “on the Spirit of the Nordic Classics” and “the dramatic value of the Sagas.” Around the same time Halldór drafted script treatments in English for two screenplays—“Kari Karan,” from his Danish short story “Digteren og Zeus” of 1920, and “Woman in Pants” or “The Icelandic Whip,” which later became the foundation for his novel *Salka Valka*. With his exotic descriptions of life in the Far North, Halldór intended to make his mark in Hollywood, much as Icelandic writers had done in Denmark. According to the treatment for “Kari Karan,” the characters are “rude, naive and primitive,” driven by “uncultivated passions,” and the dog Zeus is renamed “Viking.”

For a time Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer seemed interested in a movie about Salka Valka, the “woman in pants,” but the project never materialized.

In California Halldór became a socialist, not so much from reading socialist tracts as from watching the homeless in the parks, as he says in *Alþýðubókin* (The People’s Book, 1929), a collection of radical essays on social and cultural issues that he wrote near the end of his stay. He took an interest in the sociological novel and devoured the works of Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Upton Sinclair. He even took the initiative of writing to Sinclair, and a friendship developed, which Halldór recounts in detail in *Skáldatími*. But it was the work of Hemingway that impressed Halldór most, especially the author’s unfailing ability to whet the concept of love with the concept of death, as he says in the preface to his translation of *A Farewell to Arms* (*Vopnin kvödd*, 1941).

For a time, Halldór mulled over the possibility of writing in English, and his letters home about his future plans reveal a deep conflict between Icelandic and English, the novel and the film. After his motion-picture projects fell through, Halldór tried to market *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* in the United States and spent much time translating it into English with the help of his friend Magnús Á. Árnason, an artist living in San Francisco.

In May 1929 Halldór sent Upton Sinclair the first chapters of his translation of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* for comment. In his reply Sinclair says that he has read the manuscript with great interest, despite the flawed translation, and that stories like these are “in the fashion just now,” so “it seems to me you should ‘arrive’ in America.” Yet Halldór did not “arrive” in America. He succeeded neither in breaking into the movie business nor in publishing a book in English. Instead, he found himself mired in controversy. In 1928, to commemorate Sinclair’s fiftieth birthday, Halldór wrote a tribute to his friend that also criticized American capitalism. The article created a furor in the Icelandic Canadian press when it appeared in the 27 December 1928 issue of *Alþýðublaðið*. Halldór was subsequently charged with treason by the immigration authorities in California, but the highly publicized case was dropped in the fall of 1929.

Halldór thus turned once more to the Icelandic hardscrabble farmer. During the last few months of his stay in America, he wrote a draft of a long novel that he entitled “Heiðin” (The heath). The extant manuscript indicates that the work was intended as a trilogy about the Icelandic migrations. However, Halldór completed only the volume that

takes place in Iceland, and the subsequent two volumes, “Westra” and “An Icelander from Winnipeg,” exist merely as names inscribed on the title page of the manuscript. “Heiðin” was never published, but it served as the basis of Halldór’s great masterpiece, *Sjálfstætt fólk* (Independent people).

Over the next decade, the most productive years of his life, Halldór published fifteen books, including three lengthy novels, all consisting of multiple volumes. During this period he also traveled widely, both around Iceland and abroad, with trips to Europe, South America, and the Soviet Union, and was deeply involved in the cultural and political affairs of the day. He took part in establishing the Félag byltingarsinnaðra rithöfunda (Society of Revolutionary Authors) as well as *Rauðir pennar* (Red Pens), which came out annually between 1935 and 1939 and was the forerunner of the influential periodical *Tímarit Máls og menningar* (Journal of Language and Culture). Both *Rauðir pennar* and *Tímarit Máls og menningar* published many of his essays. In May 1930 Halldór married Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir, whom he had met in the winter of 1926-1927. The ten-year marriage produced a son, Einar Laxness, born in 1931.

Halldór’s first book after his return from America was a collection of thirty-two poems, *Kvæðakver* (A booklet of poems), which came out in the autumn of 1930. In the preface he describes them as experiments in lyrical techniques, explorations into the world of the real and the surreal, the mundane and the absurd, composed in the burlesque style. He says that some of the poems are straightforward imitations, either of his own poems or those of others, and that a few could even be called parodies of poetic thinking. The poems thus broke with the formal, sentimental style of poetry that prevailed in Iceland at the time. Although *Kvæðakver* is Halldór’s only book of poetry, it was reissued in 1949 with forty-two additional poems. Many of the poems come from his novels, where they are integrated devices for expressing the feelings of the characters. He composed some of his best poems abroad, for example the beautiful “Íslenskt vögguljóð á Hörpu” (An Icelandic Lullaby in Springtime), written in San Francisco in the spring of 1928. In the lullaby a mother sings to her child (a son) about the glory of the Icelandic spring and the coldness of foreign lands.

Published at the end of 1933, the short-story collection *Fótatak manna* included new stories as well as some older ones from Halldór’s years in California, such as “Og

lótusblómið angar . . . ” (The Scent of the Lotus . . .), which is told from the viewpoint of a poor ten-year-old boy in San Francisco who supports himself and his sick mother by selling cigarette stubs that he picks up off the streets. The mood and setting are reminiscent of the films of Chaplin, whom Halldór greatly admired, especially for his interest in social issues and sympathy with society’s outcasts. A similar story in the collection is “Lilja” (translated as “Lily” in *Great Stories by Nobel Prize Winners*, 1959), which takes place in Reykjavík and tells about an old derelict whose one dream in life is knowing how to sing. The longest story in the book and one of Halldór’s best-known works of short fiction is “Úngfrúin góða og húsið” (translated as *The Honour of the House*, 1959), which exposes the hypocrisy of a bourgeois Icelandic family when the younger daughter has a child out of wedlock.

Halldór’s 1934 play *Straumrof: sjónleikur* (Short Circuit: A Drama) diverges sharply from his other works of this period and clearly reflects the influence of the prevailing trends in European dramaturgy. Like his four later plays, *Straumrof* is indebted to the theater of the absurd. The setting is a fishing lodge in the wilderness, where a winter storm has caused a power failure. In the ensuing darkness, a married woman seduces her daughter’s fiancé but then is spurned by him. In her desperate state she shoots her daughter. The play was performed in Reykjavík shortly after it was published, but it was unpalatable to Icelandic audiences and was quickly taken off the stage.

Halldór’s articles from this period show that his opinions about literature had undergone a sea change. In “Borgaralegar nútímabókmenntir” (Bourgeois Modern Literature), which appeared in *Rauðir pennar* in 1935, Halldór describes his view of contemporary literature and lays out a new platform. He criticizes one author after another for what he calls the lack of a fundamental concept and a driving force—that is, the epic principle that he considers the premise of great narrative art. In his view this principle is implicit in the dramatic past of a nation, in sweeping vistas as well as the grueling struggle for survival, both of which Iceland has to offer. In his notebook jottings from this period Halldór observes that in the Iclander lies a certain dramatic sublime that stems from the formidable landscape and the ludicrous battle to stay alive, and that a magnificence rests in the fate of the smallest individual. Thus the life of the nation is an inexhaustible source of literary material.

Halldór's three great novels from the 1930s brought him international renown and are still among his most popular works. Focusing on the life and destiny of Iceland's common people, these narratives are broad, epic works of social realism. The first was *Salka Valka*, originally published in two volumes, *Þú vínviður hreini: saga úr flæðarmálinu* (O Thou Pure Vine: A story from the Seashore, 1931) and *Fuglinn í fjörunni: pólitísk ástarsaga* (The Bird on the Beach: a Political Romance, 1932), republished in one volume in 1951 as *Salka Valka* (translated as *Salka Valka: A Novel of Iceland*, 1936). With the one-volume Danish translation in 1934, *Salka Valka* became the first of Halldór's novels to appear in a foreign language. It paved the way for the English version, which was followed by translations in other languages.

Salka Valka, set in a small Icelandic fishing village in the early 1900s, tells the story of Salka Valka from the time she arrives in Óseyri at the age of eleven until she reaches her early twenties. She and her mother, passengers on the boat to Reykjavík, have been put ashore in this remote and unfamiliar place because they do not have the full fare for the journey south. As elsewhere in Halldór's work, the narrative often reflects the child's point of view. Thus the village and the grandeur of its natural surroundings are described through Salka Valka's eyes as she goes with her mother, Sigurlína, in search of shelter and work. Óseyri is a place of grinding poverty, primitive housing, bitter cold, disease, and infant mortality. Fishing, the mainstay of the village, is controlled by the oppressive local merchant. Eventually the fisherman Steinþór feels sorry for Sigurlína and her daughter and takes them in, a move that gains him Sigurlína's domestic and sexual services. But it is the daughter he desires, and after an attempt to rape her, he disappears, leaving Sigurlína pregnant. Salka Valka rebels by renouncing her sex: "Ég vil ekki sjá að vera stelpa. Ég skal aldrei verða kvenmaður eins og hún mamma" (I won't be a girl, I will never, never become a woman—like Mother), she says to her friend Arnaldur, an educated young man who has taught her to read. To make the point, she wears trousers and bobs her hair. Sigurlína, on the other hand, finds refuge in the Salvation Army, especially the hymn "O Thou Pure Vine," which becomes her talisman until she finally drowns herself.

Arnaldur goes away to Reykjavík to study, but returns many years later as a socialist agitator. By now Salka Valka is financially independent—she owns a cottage and

has a share in a fishing boat. A brief but passionate love affair develops between them, and Salka Valka provides the impoverished Arnaldur with food and spending money. He succeeds in organizing a strike in the village and driving out the merchant, but he is too weak-willed to see the revolution through. Steinþór returns, now rich, after a stay in America, the land of Arnaldur's dreams. When Arnaldur gets his chance to go to California, Salka Valka gives him all her money for the journey. The story ends as he sails away while she watches from the shore, alone among the winter birds, a symbol of Iceland and nature.

The initial reaction to *Salka Valka* was ambivalence, even among socialists, who felt that it was inconsistent with a key doctrine of social realism—to create heroic literature for the working class. One of Iceland's leading socialists, Einar Olgeirsson, complained that Halldór's depiction of the labor movement was too much of a caricature. In his article "Skáld á leið til sósíalismans" (Writers on Their Way to Socialism), published in the periodical *Réttur* in 1932, Einar took Halldór to task for showing only poverty, not the power of the people to overcome it, and dismissed any possibility for the novel to become the heroic epic of the Icelandic working class.

Nevertheless, to find descriptions of the lower classes in Icelandic literature was a rarity at the time, as Halldór points out in a 1938 essay commemorating the writer Einar Kvaran—later reprinted in *Vettvángur dagsins* (The Day's Arena, 1942). In Halldór's view Kvaran's most significant contribution as a novelist was the emphasis he placed on the value of the human. When Kvaran was young, Halldór explains, to go so far as to turn wretches and paupers into the heroes of a novel was a revolutionary position in fiction. The authors of the Icelandic sagas, Halldór says, took no notice of the common people—the downtrodden are not mentioned, and human worth is measured in heroic exploits. In contrast, Einar Kvaran's best characters are poor and defenseless, indicating his deep conviction that the human being is by nature a poor and helpless creature in the world.

Halldór's next novel, *Sjálfstætt fólk* (1934-1935; translated as *Independent People: An Epic*, 1946), originally published in two volumes with the subtitle *Hetjusaga* (A Heroic Tale), is an ironic answer to both the socialists' demand for heroic literature for the working class and the heroic ideal of the Icelandic saga tradition. The novel takes place in the first part of the twentieth century among small farmers on the remote and barren moors in the east, an area of the country that most Icelanders had abandoned in the

migration period. Like *Markens grøde* (The Growth of the Soil), Knut Hamsun's idyllic novel of 1917 to which *Sjálfstætt fólk* is to some extent a response, the story centers on a pioneer trying to work his land. Bjartur—short for Guðbjartur and meaning “bright” or “fair”—has managed to purchase a small patch of moorland from the bailiff after working for him eighteen years as a farmhand. The property has been abandoned for more than a century and reputedly carries a curse, which Bjartur scorns. The moldering ruin of the old farmstead has been used as winter quarters for sheep and is thus dubbed “Veturhús” (Winterhouses). Bjartur rebuilds it from sod and rock and renames it “Sumarhús” (Summerhouses). Now an independent man, he moves in with his new bride, Rósa (who is pregnant by the bailiff's son), and his dog, a horse, and twenty-five sheep.

Fanatically devoted to his sheep, Bjartur puts their welfare above all else, even people. This “independent” life is too much for Rósa—she dies in childbirth, alone in the cold hut in mid-winter while Bjartur is off in the mountains searching for a missing sheep. He returns to find that the dog has kept alive Rosa's infant daughter, whom he names Ásta Sóllilja (literally, Beloved Sun Lily) and rears as his own child. Bjartur soon acquires a second wife, Finna, accompanied by her elderly mother, Hallbera. Over the years Finna gives birth to three sons who live beyond infancy. Verging on starvation, the household ekes out an existence, despite Bjartur's tyranny as a harsh taskmaster who requires everyone to be as independent as he is. He even slaughters the milk cow so that the small store of hay available will go to his precious sheep—an act that so traumatizes Finna that she languishes and dies.

Gradually Bjartur's actions turn all his children against him, and he loses them one by one. Ásta Sóllilja is the one he loves most, and yet he sends her packing when she becomes pregnant by her tubercular tutor. To avenge his mother's death, the oldest son kills his father's sheep and then vanishes in a blizzard. The youngest son is sent to America to be brought up by his maternal uncles, and there becomes a singer. When the middle son tells his father that he, too, wants to go to America to make something of himself in the world, rather than take over the property as his father wishes, Bjartur snorts: “Ég vil ekki heyra neitt um neinn helvítis heim, þykist þú vera að tala um einhvern heim? Hvað er heimur? Þetta er heimurinn, heimurinn hann er hér, Sumarhús, jörðin mín, það er heimurinn” (What the devil do you think you know about any damned world? What is a world? This is a world, the world is here, Summerhouses, my land, my farm is

the world)—words that recall a similar remark about the universality of the fishing village in *Salka Valka*. When the story draws to a close, Bjartur is bankrupted by a collapse in livestock prices and unable to repay a bank loan that he had intended for building a new house. His property is sold at auction, and as a result the bailiff gets back his “Winterhouses” for a low price. Bjartur, however, clings fiercely to his ideal of independence. Instead of joining the laborers in the coastal village as his son has done, he chooses to work a new piece of land, this time a deserted plot farther inland on the heath. Before setting off, he goes to the village and finds his beloved Ásta Sóllilja, who, destitute and dying of consumption, is living alone with her two small children. He takes them with him, along with a horse, a dog, and old Hallbera, now in her nineties and complaining that “allir fá að deyja, nema ég” (everyone manages to die except me). As they make their way north like pilgrims, the scene takes on an almost a mythic significance: “Þau voru einsög lángrferðafólk sem tekur sig upp úr lélegum næturstað á heiði. Það var heiði lífsins” (They were like people on a long journey leaving a poor night-lodging on the heath. It was the heath of life. Ásta Sóllilja collapses on the way, and when Bjartur picks her up and carries her dying in his arms, she whispers, “Nú er ég aftur hjá þér” (Now I am with you again).

Sjálfstætt fólk was highly controversial at first because of its caustic portrayal of Icelandic farmers. Halldór commented that this reaction took him aback as much as that of the Icelandic Canadians who had objected to the way they were portrayed in his story “Nýja Ísland.” But the novel became the most popular of his works, both at home and abroad. When the English translation appeared in the United States in 1946, it was chosen as the July Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Today *Sjálfstætt fólk* has attained the stature of a national epic: in an opinion poll in 2000 Icelanders named it the best Icelandic book of the twentieth century.

In an afterword to the second edition of *Sjálfstætt fólk*, Halldór attributes the enduring appeal of the the work—manifested by its best-seller rank in countries as different as Czechoslovakia and the United States—to the the small farmer’s being a classic, universal type recognized the world over. He observes that this type of man is found not only in rural areas but also in big cities, where Bjartur’s counterpart is any man who is fighting for survival—his own and his family’s—with similar means, principles, and outlook. He goes on to say that, after beginning the novel in Los Angeles in 1929 and

putting it aside for lack of knowledge about the subject, it was not until he had witnessed the plight of Russian farmers in the fall of 1932 that the problem unfolded and he could begin the novel once again. He had notebooks full of material that he had collected on trips to the most remote farms of Iceland, so there was nothing left to do but to find peace and quiet to sit at a desk ten or fifteen hours a day for several years. He says that when he completed the novel in the summer of 1935 and let go of Bjartur in the final chapter, “fanst mér um stund einsog ég ætti ekki haldreipi leingur í veröldinni” (I felt for a while as if I no longer had a lifeline to the world).

The spring following the publication of *Sjálfstætt fólk*, Halldór took a month-long trip around the isolated settlements of the West Fjords to collect material for his next novel. In *Skáldatími* he explains what led to this work: “Mér fanst að úr því ég hefði skrifað hetjuljóð bæði soðningarinnar og sauðskepnunnar þá yrði ég líka að skrifa hetjuljóð skáldsins, ekki einhvers sérstaks stórskálds með heimilísfáng og síma í bókmentasögunni . . . heldur þess skálds sem var og er og verður á Íslandi og í öllum heiminum” (I thought that since I had written the epos of both the fish and the sheep, then I likewise had to write the epos of the poet, not some special great poet with an address and a telephone in literary history, . . . but rather the poet who was and is and will be in Iceland and in all the world).

The “epos of the poet” appeared in four volumes: *Ljós heimsins* (The Light of the World, 1937), *Höll sumarlandsins* (The Palace of the Summerland, 1938), *Hús skáldsins* (The House of the Poet, 1938), and *Fegurð himinsins* (The Beauty of the Skies, 1940). In 1955, with the second edition, *Heimsljós* became the title of the whole tetralogy (translated as *World Light*, 1969), and the first volume was renamed *Kraftbirtíngarhljómur guðdómsins* (The Revelation of the Deity).

The novel describes the miserable life of the folk poet Ólafur Kárason from his early childhood until his death in his early thirties. Ólafur Kárason was inspired by Magnús Hjaltason, an obscure folk poet from the West Fjords who lived between 1873 and 1916 and whose unpublished autobiography and diaries are preserved in the National Library of Iceland. In depicting this “world poet” from the West Fjords, Halldór adhered closely to these sources and even incorporated into the novel many passages verbatim. But he also transformed these materials and created in Ólafur Kárason an antihero who has been variously compared to Jesus, Charlie Chaplin, and Dostoevsky’s idiot.

Ólafur, a parish pauper in the custody of strangers on an isolated farm, is a lonely, introspective child who feels that he does not belong—that his life has no connection to the lives of others. He seeks consolation in the beauty of nature and in poetry, which comes to him as a strong sound and visions of the deity. This sound, as a manifestation of divine beauty, becomes a recurring motif. The entire story is filtered through his consciousness and narrated in a lyrical style. Thus, to a certain extent Ólafur is the author of his own story.

After years of cruel and unjust treatment, Ólafur is transferred to a nearby coastal village where he is allowed to live in an abandoned warehouse, his “summerland palace.” The village is controlled by a caricature of a manager, Pétur Pálsson, nicknamed “Þríhross” (Threehorses). For a time Ólafur enjoys the manager’s patronage but then is dismissed because his poetry lacks the right ideology. Ólafur’s love affair with an equally poor young woman ends when she becomes pregnant and leaves him for a fisherman who can offer her security. He then renews a relationship with the epileptic woman Jarþrúður, who is many years his senior, and they begin living together in a shack beyond the village outskirts. In this “house of the poet,” Ólafur has long discussions with a friend and fellow poet about the connection between justice and poetry. On these occasions the little house “bæði víkkaði út og hækkaði uns það var eins stórt og allur heimurinn” (became both wider and higher until it was as large as the whole world). In her own misery, Jarþrúður turns into a jealous, domineering woman, and Ólafur falls in love with a young woman who is a labor agitator in the village. She urges him to leave Jarþrúður and to come down off this “andstyggilegur kross” (disgusting cross). But he does not have the heart to abandon Jarþrúður and takes her with him when he moves on, leaving everything behind: “Alt. Alla sína drauma. Allan sinn skáldskap. Alla sína von. Alt sitt líf. Alt” (Everything. All his dreams. All his poetry. All his hopes. All his life. Everything).

In the last part of the novel he has become a schoolteacher and is living with Jarþrúður in a remote village at the foot of a glacier. Accused of sexual misconduct with one of his pupils, a fourteen-year-old girl, he is sentenced to a one-year jail term. Upon his release from prison, he meets a young woman who strikes him as the incarnation of the beauty he has yearned for all his life. After an enchanted midsummer night of lovemaking, they go their separate ways, and she returns to her own village on the other side of the glacier. But they correspond with each other, and he writes love poems to her

and then later an elegy when he learns of her death. These are among Halldór's most beautiful poems and were included in the second edition of *Kvæðakver*. Finally, in the deep, new-fallen snow of Easter morning, Ólafur walks off toward the glacier and the novel concludes with the famous line "Og fegurðin mun ríkja ein" (And beauty alone shall reign).

Halldór's three novels of social realism from the Depression years stemmed from the contemporary realities of poverty and class division. In the next decade Icelandic society was transformed by sweeping change, and his work took a new turn. With the occupation of Iceland by first British and then United States forces beginning in May 1940 and the establishment of a foreign military base, employment surged and economic conditions improved. In 1944 Iceland ended its union with Denmark and reestablished itself as a republic after almost seven centuries of foreign rule. These events generated intense debates among Icelanders about their national identity and their autonomy as a nation among other nations. In his renowned 1942 essay "Höfundurinn og verk hans" (The Writer and His Works), published in *Vettvángur dagsins*, Halldór says that the value of Iceland's literary heritage lies in its expression of the *Zeitgeist* of each era, with both national and universal significance. Citing examples from Iceland's literary canon, he argues that all good literature is both national and international—for the simple reason that people, especially nowadays, are no longer national but rather as international as the birds. A good book written in China is written for Iceland.

The essay shows Halldór's growing interest in an Icelandic literary heritage that he wants to bring closer to his own time in a kind of synthesis of the old and the new. With perhaps this aim, in the early 1940s he published his own editions of several Icelandic sagas with modern orthography, replacing the normalized (but archaic) spelling system. As he explains in the preface to his edition of *Laxdæla*, which appeared in 1941, his intention is to show readers that the language of the Icelandic sagas is essentially the same as the language they use themselves. This edition was censored by the authorities, and the Icelandic parliament immediately passed a law that banned publication of the Old Icelandic texts with anything other than the normalized spelling. When Halldór forged ahead with an edition of *Hrafnkatla* in 1942, also with modern spelling, the Ministry of Justice brought charges against him. After protracted legal proceedings, he was acquitted

and the orthography law was ruled a violation of a constitutional provision guaranteeing freedom of the press.

Although Halldór advocated standard modern spelling for the sagas, the spelling that he used in his fiction was far from standard. In the late 1930s he invented his own idiosyncratic spelling, which adhered more closely to pronunciation than the mandated system, and he used it in all his work thereafter, including republished versions of earlier works. This arcane orthography, which gives his works a distinctive and even strange look on the printed page, is a characteristic of his style that is lost in translation.

While he was publishing his editions of the sagas, Halldór was at work on a lengthy article titled “Minnisgreinar um fornsögur” (Notes on the Sagas), published in *Sjálfsgæðir hlutir* (Things Taken for Granted, 1946). In it he rejects the accepted view of the Icelandic sagas as historical accounts and argues that they are fictionalized accounts that succeed in bending history to the narrative truth of the works. He praises their objective, concise style in which not a single word is superfluous and concludes, directly contradicting his statements from the 1920s, that an Icelandic author cannot get along without the old books. Halldór’s interest in Old Icelandic literature thus grew not merely from patriotic feeling but also out of his search for new narrative techniques.

In 1942 Halldór published *Sjö töframenn* (Seven Magicians), a collection of short stories written mainly in the 1930s except for “Temúdsjín snýr heim” (Temúdsjín Returns Home), which dates from 1941 and was Halldór’s last short story for more than twenty years. Set in the Far East, the story is about Genghis Khan discovering Taoism and shows the first emergence of the mysticism of Lao-tzu and the *Tao Te Ching* (circa 206 B.C – A.D. 220) that was to characterize all of Halldór’s later works. In an 1942 essay, “Bókin um veginn” (The Book about the Way), published in *Sjálfsgæðir hlutir*, Halldór discusses the abiding influence of the *Tao Te Ching* in his life and work. He also remarks on the stillness of Taoism that is exemplified in the simplicity of the sentences in the book, which he deems, in their musicality and directness, the most perfect in all of world literature. Halldór’s deep interest in such diverse works as the *Tao Te Ching* and the Icelandic sagas is significant, for both are marked by detachment and objectivity in style, with the laconic speech of the sagas corresponding to the subtle aphorisms of Tao. From these complementary sources Halldór synthesized a highly creative style that typifies his subsequent fiction.

His next major work was the trilogy consisting of *Íslandsklukkan* (Iceland's Bell, 1943), *Hið ljósa man* (The Fair Maiden, 1944), and *Eldur í Kaupinhafn* (Fire in Copenhagen, 1946), republished in one volume as *Íslandsklukkan* in 1957 (translated as *Iceland's Bell*, 2003). *Íslandsklukkan* is a historical novel, set in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, based on historical and legal records, and written in the antiquated language of the period. It focuses upon three main characters: the poor farmer Jón Hreggviðsson, who is sentenced to death for killing the king's henchman; Arnas Arnæus, a figure based on the Icelandic scholar and manuscript collector Árni Magnússon; and Snæfríður Eydalín, daughter of the local magistrate and the sister-in-law of the Bishop of Skálholt. Þingvellir, where the story begins and ends, is the focal point of events, and other important settings include the bishopric at Skálholt and Copenhagen, places that are also important in Icelandic history.

Íslandsklukkan provides an accurate picture of the political and social conditions in Iceland during one of the most degrading periods in the nation's history. It opens with a scene at Þingvellir where the king's henchman has arrived to oversee the destruction of an ancient bell that has hung from the gable of the old courthouse as long as anyone can remember. Over the protests of an old man whose family has lived in the vicinity for generations, Jón Hreggviðsson is commanded to smash the venerable bell, which is then shipped to Denmark in pieces. Þingvellir is also the setting in which the henchman flogs Jón Hreggviðsson as punishment for composing sly verses that lampooned His Majesty while destroying the bell. Jón accompanies him home, and the following morning the henchman is found dead in the bogs.

To some extent Jón Hreggviðsson resembles Bjartur of *Sjálfstætt fólk*—crusty, intrepid, clever at versifying, and enthralled by the saga heroes. The paths of Jón and Arnas cross when Arnas comes to Jón's poor cottage and discovers, in Jón's mother's bedstead, some sheets from a precious vellum manuscript of ancient poetry that he has been seeking for many years. Arnas realizes that his calling lies in sacrificing himself to rescue the old books from oblivion, which in his view embody the soul of Iceland, so he forsakes Snæfríður, the woman he loves, and marries a rich, elderly and crippled Danish widow. After Jón has been sentenced to death and is awaiting execution at Þingvellir, his mother walks to Skálholt and appeals to Snæfríður for help. Snæfríður manages to free Jón and sends him to Arnas in Copenhagen for protection, along with both a message

telling Arnas that she understands his sacrifice and a ring as a token of her affection. Through Arnas's assistance, Jón is acquitted and the corruption of Snæfríður's father, the magistrate, is exposed. For a time, Snæfríður and Arnas foresee a common future in their vision of the Promised Land, a motif that appears frequently in Halldór's works, but nothing comes of their dreams and the novel ends apocalyptically with the great Copenhagen fire, which consumes Arnas's manuscripts. The only manuscript that escapes destruction is the one that once belonged to the poor old woman, Jón Hreggviðsson's mother.

In accord with Halldór's principle of artistic representation, formulated in an interview about the first two volumes of the trilogy in the newspaper *Þjóðviljinn* on 23 December 1944, the characters' thoughts and feelings are reflected in their speech and physical reactions, and the action does not take place "í sálarfylgsnum" (in the soul's hideways). Although the narration itself is objective, Halldór makes use of literary allusions, parables, and aphorisms. The language is often highly lyrical, with descriptions of nature reflecting characters' mental and emotional states, especially those kindled by Snæfríður, whose beauty and worthiness have earned her the epithet Íslandssól (Iceland's Sun). Of the three protagonists, Snæfríður is the only one whose name bears no relation to that of the historical counterpart, in this case, Þórdís Jónsdóttir. Rather, she is named for the Snæfríður of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* who so bewitched Harald Fairhair that he neglected his kingdom. The novel also alludes to her as "hið ljósa man" (the fair maiden) of the Eddic poem "Hávamál" and describes her as a "huldukona" (hidden woman) out of folk tales or a Valkyrie from heroic poetry. Like many other women in Halldór's works, Snæfríður has a remoteness that suggests she does not quite belong to society. In the end Snæfríður Íslandssól, dressed in black and riding a black horse, disappears into the landscape as a sublime symbol of Iceland.

Íslandsklukkan was received with great enthusiasm by the Icelanders at a turning point in their history. The stage adaptation of the novel, published in 1950 as *Snæfríður Íslandssól*, was one of three Icelandic plays that had their debut at the new National Theatre (Þjóðleikhúsið) in Reykjavík when it opened in October of that year.

While Halldór was at work on *Íslandsklukkan*, he met Auður Sveinsdóttir, and they were married at Christmas in 1945. They moved into a new home near Gljúfrasteinn (which means Canyon Rock) in Mosfellssveit, close to his childhood home, which

fulfilled Halldór's long-standing dream of building a house on this spot. He named the house for the nearby rock, and it was his home for the remainder of his life. Two daughters, Sigríður Halldórsdóttir and Guðný Halldórsdóttir, were born in 1951 and 1954, respectively.

When World War II ended, Iceland entered into an agreement with the United States permitting American forces to maintain the military base at Keflavík and to install radar stations around the country. Many Icelanders feared that this foreign presence would threaten the newfound independence of the nation, and the agreement precipitated heated protests over this "sale." One of the most influential opponents of the agreement was Halldór Laxness, who blasted it as treason in a series of articles that appeared in the fall of 1946 and were reprinted in 1950 in *Reisubókarkorn* (A Travelogue).

The controversy inspired his 1948 novel *Atómstöðin* (translated as *Atom Station*, 1961), the title of which refers to an occupied Iceland that harbors atomic weapons. A social and political satire with dark humor, this work is the first of Halldór's novels written in the first person. It is no coincidence that Ugly, the narrator and protagonist, is a young woman from the country who has come to Reykjavík to learn to play the organ. Thus, she represents the opposite of the urban corruption that she witnesses as a maid in a well-to-do bourgeois household, where the man of the house, an influential member of Parliament and the conservative party, hosts secret political meetings for planning the "sale" of the country. In contrast, the organist's house, where Ugly takes her lessons, is open to all of society's outsiders—artists, prostitutes, and assorted freaks with no political clout. The organist is the first of Halldór's characters to represent a mystic type that can be linked with Taoism. An altruist who sells his house to help a friend, he speaks in paradoxes, understands all and forgives all, is broad-minded and unflappable. The novel ends with Ugly standing alone in the middle of town holding a bouquet of flowers from the organist's house. The flowers are important as a symbol of eternal life, and it is significant that the novel was originally titled "Blómin ófeigu" (The Flowers Everlasting).

In his next novel, *Gerpla* (Heroica), published in 1952 (translated as *The Happy Warriors*, 1958), Halldór takes his material from the saga age of the tenth and eleventh centuries. Both the style and the plot are based upon the Old Icelandic sagas, in particular the anonymous *Fóstbræðra saga* (Saga of the Sworn Brothers) and *Ólafs saga helga*

(Saga of Saint Olaf) by Snorri Sturluson. In a 1972 interview published in *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina* (Discussions through Time) Halldór said that his aim was to create an archaized work of art for modern readers, a work that deals with people who, down through the ages, have always sought some universal truth as their sovereign. In the same interview, Halldór revealed that he had planned to write *Gerpla* in modern Icelandic but then realized that it would be downright laughable to use modern language to write about the sphere of classic literature.

As the title indicates, the novel is about *garpar* (heroes). Like a scribe, the narrator constantly cites his sources, both written and oral, in telling the story of the sworn brothers Þormóður Bessason and Þorgeir Hávarsson. With grotesque imagery, the narrator recounts what the two believe to be their heroic exploits, but in the eyes of everyone else, the two are misfits and troublemakers. The novel portrays them as a comic, quixotic pair—one a foppish poet and womanizer, the other a brawny fighter and misogynist who is afraid of women. *Gerpla* parodies the idealized view of heroes as depicted in the Icelandic sagas, drawing parallels between the atrocities of King Olaf and those of Hitler and Stalin. As a tragicomedy, *Gerpla* deals with illusions and those ideals that breed them. Þormóður sacrifices everything for the chance to recite his lay “Heroica” before the king, then admits that he can no longer recall it.

Gerpla was poorly received by some Icelanders, who took it to be a gibe at the Icelandic sagas. However, certain elements of the sagas can be viewed as parodic, and with *Gerpla* Halldór simply elaborated on this aspect of his models. But Halldór was reluctant to acknowledge the humor in *Gerpla*. When readers found it amusing, he professed surprise and disdain, insisting that it was his most sorrowful book.

In 1955 Halldór Laxness was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for, in the words of the Swedish Academy, his “vivid epic power which has renewed the great narrative art of Iceland.” In his acceptance speech of 10 December, Halldór emphasized his debt to the literary heritage of his native country, in particular the old Icelandic storytellers who created the classics and were as much a part of Iceland as its landscape.

In the opinion of Halldór’s biographer, Peter Hallberg, the Nobel Prize—and the accompanying public recognition that suddenly transformed Halldór into a cultural ambassador for Iceland on the world stage— had a debilitating effect on his writing, a

view echoed by many others, especially leftists. His new fame aside, Halldór's career did take a sharp turn at this time, more likely a result of his disillusionment with socialism and a growing scepticism toward all ideologies and dogmas. In his 1962 essay "Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit" (Personal Memoranda on Novels and Plays), published in *Upphaf mannúðarstefnu* (The Origins of Humanism, 1965), he objects to what he calls the "alheimsresept" (universal recipe) in literature. The role of literature is not to preach morality, he says, for the author is no more upright than the reader, but rather to show facts. The basis of fiction and its chief advantage, he believes, are that fiction is by nature a chronicle, and the author pretends to transform past events into a written narrative, turning human facts into a book. The problem, he says, is having to function as both chronicler and fabulist—that is, record events and invent them at the same time.

Brekkukotsannáll (The Annals of Brekkukot, 1957; translated as *The Fish Can Sing*, 1966) is Halldór's first novel after the Nobel Prize. Like *Atómstöðin*, it is told in the first person and resembles its predecessor in other respects. The narrator, or "annalist," is a young man named Álfgrímur who recounts his years growing up in Reykjavík around 1900. The narration blends together two perspectives—that of the child as he experiences events and that of the adult reflecting on them much later. An orphan, Álfgrímur lives with an elderly couple, whom he calls his grandmother and grandfather, in the cottage Brekkukot, where his mother gave birth to him before boarding a ship to America. Much like the organist's house in *Atómstöðin*, Brekkukot is a free boardinghouse for all, with no strings attached, and in the spirit of Tao, tolerance and harmony prevail. For Álfgrímur Brekkukot is the Paradise of his youth, and he remains there until the end of the novel, when he goes abroad to study.

Álfgrímur dreams of becoming a singer. Following in the footsteps of his idol, the mysterious Garðar Hólm, Álfgrímur launches his career in the cemetery, where he sings at the funerals of vagrants and other unidentified persons. Garðar Hólm lives abroad and is a famous "world singer" in the eyes of Icelanders, but gradually Álfgrímur discovers that he is a charlatan and a fraud, a singer who cannot sing, a motif that also runs through the short story "Lily" and the play *Silfurtúnglið* (The Silver Moon) from 1954, in which Lóa bumbles her lullaby when she sings onstage in front of an audience rather than for her child.

Extended discussions of literature and art recur throughout *Brekkukotsannáll*. Just as the poet in *Heimsljós* fails in his attempts to capture beauty, the singer Álfgrímur tries to achieve the one pure note, but it is always out of reach. He learns to play the organ and also takes singing lessons until the onset of puberty, for in the world of Halldór's novels, song in its purest form belongs to the domain of children and women, beings who are closest to nature. Thus, Álfgrímur is no more successful in mastering the pure note than Garðar Hólm, and the story hints that he has become a writer instead—and can perhaps be seen as the author's alter ego. In fact, many details of the novel directly parallel aspects of Halldór's life as depicted in his memoirs. The grandmother figure is similar to Halldór's own grandmother, with the same opinions and the same manner of speaking. The old clock whose ticking so preoccupies Álfgrímur and that symbolizes eternity in the novel is the same one that belonged his great-aunt and provided the subject of his first published article.

In October of 1957 Halldór spent several months traveling in the United States and several Asian countries, lecturing at various public cultural institutions. He also visited Taoist monks in China and Mormons of Icelandic descent in Utah. In *Skáldatími* he recounts a 1927 visit to Salt Lake City, where he was reminded of a travelogue he had read in his boyhood by an Icelander named Eiríkur frá Brúnum, who converted to Mormonism and emigrated to Utah in the late 1800s. The story of his travels, published in two books as *Lítill ferðasaga* (A Little Travelogue) in 1878 and 1882, is the impetus behind Halldór's next novel, *Paradísarheimt* (1960; translated as *Paradise Reclaimed*, 1962). In "The Origins of Paradise Reclaimed," an essay accompanying the special United States edition of the novel, Halldór says that he was at work on the book for thirty years because the central idea refused to come into focus. The truth is, he says, that "to write successfully about the Promised Land, you must have sought and found it in your own life You must have made the pilgrimage yourself You go groping along through a jungle of ideas, which it would take volumes to describe, sometimes you get into blind alleys, at other times you are stuck in bottomless quicksand and saved by a miracle—until finally you find yourself in a small place . . . that somehow looks like the old home. Was it the same garden from which you started? It seems so, but it is not." The person who goes away, Halldór says, returns as a different kind of person.

In *Paradísarheimt* the poor farmer Steinn Steinsson leaves his farm and family to seek Paradise, which he finds among the Mormons in Utah. Many years later he sends for his family, but his wife dies during the journey, and his children no longer know him. He returns to Iceland as a missionary but becomes disillusioned, for everything there has changed and no one listens to him. He roams the countryside until he suddenly finds himself standing before the ruins of his old farmstead, and he begins to restack the stones of the dilapidated rock wall.

Paradísarheimt, the story of the man searching for a promised land that he ultimately finds in his own backyard, where he began his quest, is perhaps an allegory of the author's own experience, an expression of his resignation and disappointment with a political ideology. But the novel can also be seen as a rendition of the Tao teaching that one should be content with one's home and delight in one's customs. *Paradísarheimt* was the last novel that Halldór wrote in the third person as well as his last for another eight years. In addition to the literary memoir *Skáldatími*, he published three plays during this hiatus from novel writing: *Strompleikurinn: gamanleikur í þrem þáttum* (The Chimney Play: A Comedy in Three Acts, 1961), *Prjónastofan Sólin: gamanleikur í þremur þáttum* (The Sun Knitting Shop: A Comedy in Three Acts, 1962), and *Dúfnaveislan: skemtunarleikur í fimm þáttum* (The Pigeon Banquet: A Comedy in five Acts, 1966; translated as *The Pigeon Banquet*, 1973), which is based on a short story of the same name in the collection *Sjöstafakverið* (1964; translated as *A Quire of Seven*, 1974). Halldór's plays are interesting experiments, mixing farce, satire, and allegory with influences from the theater of the absurd as well as the Epic Theater of Brecht, but they have never enjoyed the popularity of his novels. The plays adapted from the novels, however, are staged regularly in Iceland.

In his final novels—*Kristnihald undir Jökli* (1968; translated as *Christianity at Glacier*, 1972), *Innansveitarkronika* (A Local Chronicle), 1970, and *Guðsgjafapula* (A Litany of God's Gifts, 1972) Halldór continues to write in the first person but with a different approach. These works experiment with the limits of narrative objectivity. In *Atómstöðin* the narrator participates in the action as it unfolds and is the only authority for what is conveyed in the story. *Brekkukotsannáll* is similar, even though the narrator is an annalist telling about the past. In these last novels, anonymous narrators stand outside of the story

that they are investigating, repeatedly citing historical or fictional sources as their authority.

In *Kristnihald undir Jökli* the Bishop of Iceland sends a young theologian to a remote district in the western region to investigate and report on a pastor's activities. He has the right qualifications for the job because he knows shorthand and can operate a tape recorder. Although unnamed in the novel, he refers to himself as "the undersigned" or "Umbi" (short for "umboðsmaður biskups"—the bishop's emissary). Before Umbi departs, the bishop gives him a methodology to follow in preparing his reports. He is to learn from the tape and write as much as possible in the third person, describe what he sees and hears, but by no means verify anything or venture an opinion: "Töluð orð eru staðreynd útaf fyrir sig sönn og login" (Spoken words are facts in themselves, whether true or false).

Since this objective narrator is not entrusted to relate conversations, they are presented with no introduction, as if they are transcribed from the tape. Nevertheless, Umbi cannot avoid taking part in life at Glacier. Eventually, he merges with his story: he throws the report away when he meets the mysterious woman Úa, the pastor's wife, who ran off to America on her wedding day but has now returned decades later as if nothing had ever happened. Úa is the culmination of the eternal feminine, which is so pervasive in Halldór's works. Umbi describes her as the receptive, quiescent Mystic Female and Great Mother of the Tao. She is both the origin and the end, as ineffable as the Promised Land, beauty, and the pure musical note. When Úa offers Umbi a lift in her dilapidated Imperial, the road leads to a dead end, and Umbi asks where they are going. Her answer is enigmatic: "Hvert heldurðu elskan mín nema á heimsenda" (Where do you think, my love, except to the end of the world). But in the dense fog, Umbi loses sight of her as she disappears into nature and her laughter echos in the screech of the seabirds.

Innansveitarkronika is a mixture of a documentary novel and a legend about the restoration of the church at Mosfell in Halldór's parish in the Mosfell district. The church was closed down in the late nineteenth century, and the old churchbell that had vanished reappears in a miraculous way at the dedication of the new church almost one hundred years later. At the same time, the book is a chronicle of the Mosfell district, with its farmers and "hidden women," described in Tao terms as the place of origin that people never want to leave.

In *Guðsgjafaþula* the anonymous narrator is an eighteen-year-old Icelandic writer who has just arrived in Copenhagen, penniless and in trouble, until he meets Íslandsbersi (Iceland's Bear), an Icelandic herring merchant who hires him to write his life story. The novel is about the writing of this biography—purportedly based on the best available sources, although most of them are fictitious—and the narrator constantly points out that his own story is not important. In an afterword Halldór characterizes *Guðsgjafaþula* as an essay novel, the same epithet that he gives his four little books of memories, as he calls them—*Í túninu heima*, 1975; *Úngur eg var*, 1976; *Sjömeistarasagan*, 1978; and *Grikklandsárið*, 1980—which are about his life up until the age of twenty. The similarity between these memoirs of his early years and his final novel, which likewise focuses on how a young writer gets his start, points out the connection. Halldór has come full circle and ends his career as a writer where he began it.

The 1990s were difficult years for Halldór Laxness. Suffering from progressive dementia, caused primarily by Alzheimer's disease, he was unable to continue writing. He also had to give up much else in his daily routine, such as the long walks around the neighboring heath and the fat cigar that had become his hallmark. Near the end of his life he was admitted to Reykjalundur, a rehabilitation center near his home; he died there on 8 February 1998 at the age of ninety-five. His funeral was held with great ceremony at the Catholic Dómskirkja Krists konungs (Cathedral of Christ the King) in Reykjavík. He was buried in the old graveyard of the beautifully situated and restored parish church at Mosfell, on a south-facing knoll that—as he describes it in *Innansveitarkronika*—“sáskar að sér meira sólskini en aðrir hólar” (gathers more sunshine than other knolls).

The span of Halldór Laxness's life was nearly commensurate with that of the twentieth century, as he was born soon after its beginning and died in its waning years. Thus, he was a mirror of the age, both reflecting the century and exercising a major influence on it, within the realm of Nordic culture and in the wider world. Simultaneously a successful Icelandic and international author, he was and continues to be an unequalled exemplar to those Icelandic writers who followed him. “Þetta er hægt. Ekkert þarf að hindra þig: ekki tungumálið, ekki fólksfæðin og söguefnin þau liggja í loftinu” (This is possible. Nothing has to hinder you: not the language, not the smallness of the nation; and as for the subject matter, it floats in the air). This characterization of Halldór Laxness'

approach to writing by one of the most renowned novelists of the younger generation, Einar Már Guðmundsson, in an essay written in memory of Halldór Laxness for *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* (21 April 2001), captures the uninhibited optimism that Halldór Laxness brought to the spirit of Icelandic literature.

(Translated by Alison Tartt in cooperation with the author).

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