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AN ICELANDIC SAGA OF OUR TIME:  
HALLDÓR LAXNESS' GERPLA

1

The impact of Old Icelandic literature, Eddas and Sagas, on later European literature has been enormous, ever since these texts became more widely known outside Iceland in the seventeenth century. In those days Danish and Swedish men of learning competed with one another, eagerly and jealously, in order to collect Old Icelandic manuscripts, documenting the great past of our Nordic forefathers. Translations appeared and awakened intense interest, not only among antiquarians and historians, but also among contemporary poets and writers of fiction. By and by Old Icelandic literature for some of them became a source of inspiration comparable to and sometimes even taking the place of Greek and Roman antiquity, with its pantheon of deities and tales of mythical heroes.

This is a long and exciting story, often dealt with by scholars, but it can only be touched upon here. Enough to say that, after a culmination in the age of Romanticism, the heritage of Icelandic Saga time has never lost its hold on writers of fiction. Ernest Hemingway once told me in a letter that he had always read Icelandic sagas. Perhaps it would not be too bold to trace an influence from that quarter on his famous hard-boiled style. Many of us have probably read Eric Linklater's Viking story The Men of Ness (1932), which may have been an incentive for the Swede Frans G. Bengtsson to write his Röde Orm (1-2, 1941-45), beloved by many readers.

As might be expected, this "Icelandic trend", if you will allow me to name it so, has been more influential in Scandinavian literature than elsewhere. Among great authors from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries one could remind of August Strindberg in Sweden, Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Sigrid Undset in Norway, Johannes V. Jensen in Denmark. All of them have been inspired by the sagas, and even written in a kind of saga style on topics from them. I have the impression

that still in our own days, in the late twentieth century, there hardly passes a year without one or more new books in that vein in our countries.

## 2

But how about Iceland itself, with its flourishing modern literature? Of course, the proud heritage from the Middle Ages has a quite special prestige among its nearest heirs today, the Icelanders themselves. Halldór Laxness in a collection of essays named Islendingaspjall (1967; 'Talking on Icelanders') has described the situation in his uncompromising way:

In any case, the Golden Age still provides our critics with their foremost standard of evaluation, though perhaps they sometimes know it only by hearsay, so that the poor creatures who are now toiling at writing books, like me and my colleagues, are often ill at ease in this country: any fumbler can prove beyond doubt that we are inferior as prose writers to the men who created Njála or Hrafnkels saga or Heimskringla; likewise that we have deteriorated considerably as poets since the tenth century when the poet of Völuspá stood under the wide sky over Iceland and could not spell his name. (78-79)

An exaggeration, certainly, but with a hard kernel of truth. Let us also listen to Laxness' fellow-countryman, the renowned scholar Jakob Benediktsson. He once pointed out succinctly the resistance meeting an Icelandic author trying to compete with the old sagas:

Isn't it sheer foolhardiness to be so conceited as to write a novel on such a topic, imagining that it could stand comparison with a literature that we have always regarded as our shrine and treasure of the nation? Is it possible to draw a new picture of the old heroes of the Icelandic sagas, and to make it as living and close to the audience as we have been used to from early childhood? One thing is sure: an Icelandic author who sets about writing a novel out of the universe of the Icelandic sagas, has many problems which do not meet his colleagues from other nations. 1)

But, of course, modern Icelandic writers have not altogether bewared of the foolhardiness Jakob Benediktsson is talking of. A few years before that statement was made, Friðrik Ásmundsson Brekkan had published his novel Drottningarkyn (1947; 'Of Royal Kin'). The author picks up a course of events from the former part of Njáls saga, trying to shed light on Hallgerðr, the principal female character, and her somewhat enigmatic relations to Þjóstólfr, the killer of her first two husbands. It is an interesting psychological approach, following the scanty

clues of the old saga itself. Only very slightly archaizing his language Brekkan thus appealed to a modern audience, but without giving the story a new turn or signification. This novel could hardly be a real offence to Icelandic readers, however touchy.

## 3

I will concentrate here on one text only, Halldór Laxness' Gerpla (1952; Engl. transl. 'The Happy Warriors', 1958), till now certainly the most ambitious, and also the most complex and paradoxical attempt at gaining new insights out of an Old Icelandic saga. But the author had had a long way to go before he was ready to tackle that task successfully. As a young iconoclast at the age of twenty he was, or at least pretended to be, extremely negative to the Old Icelandic sagas. As a modern writer he had nothing to learn from those old Icelandic foyeys, like Snorri Sturluson and his cronies, he told his friend Einar Ól. Sveinsson in a letter.<sup>2)</sup>

But his attitude was going to change, and thoroughly so. In the forties he edited himself Laxdæla, Hrafnkatla and Brennu-njálssaga with modern Icelandic orthography. The current "Wimmerizing" orthography seemed to him artificial and false, alienating the ordinary Icelandic readers from their great medieval heritage. (Curiously enough, Laxness' initiative, which does not seem strikingly bold to us, was in some quarters regarded as a sacrilege. The author was even threatened with legal procedures for his venture.) In 1945 Laxness also published his inspired essay "Minnisgreinar um fornsögur" ('Notes on the Old Sagas').<sup>3)</sup> And now, according to him, an Icelandic author cannot exist without having forever those sagas in his mind. In the years 1943-46 appeared his famous trilogy Íslandsklukkan ('Iceland's Bell'), a historical novel with an obvious touch of saga style.

Laxness was thus well prepared for writing his own Icelandic saga. He began his work in Rome in the autumn 1948; it was published in December 1952.

## 4

Gerpla is based on Fóstbræðra saga, which has its name from the

two principal characters, the sworn brothers Þorgeirr Hávarsson and Þormóður Bessason, with the nickname Kolbrúnarskáld. Þorgeirr is killed by enemies in Iceland. Þormóður's duty to avenge his companion takes him all the way to Greenland, where he meets with almost incredible adventures. He ends his days in the battle at Stiklastaðir, as poet and warrior in the retinue of king Ólafr Haraldsson - later known as Saint Ólafr.

In some respects this story is rather peculiar among the old sagas. With Þorgeirr the heroic ideal has undergone an intensification, or deterioration, into complete insensibility and brutality. He seems to live for his weapons only, carrying on his killings as a kind of games, without caring for reason or purpose. And his acts are related in the factual manner of saga style, without any sign of indignation on the part of the author. On the contrary, Þorgeirr is praised as a paragon of courage and bravery. It is typical for the man that he has no interest whatsoever in women. He is lítill kvennamaðr, we are told with an understatement, and he announces himself that it is a degradation of his strength to bow to women.

In that respect he differs remarkably from his sworn brother. Þormóður is a highly inflammable poet, constantly getting involved in erotic adventures. Thus the two men are rather odd companions. Their common denominator is a fanatically heroic ideology, their unbounded devotion to the ruler and warrior whom they both adore, king Ólafr of Norway.

About the connection of the sworn brothers with king Ólafr we are not told very much in the Fóstbræðra saga. Laxness, on the other hand, dwells at length on the history of the king himself, following Snorri Sturluson in his Kings' sagas. He has welded together Fóstbræðra saga and Ólafs saga helga, and presented a new story of the triad King, Hero and Skald.

Gerpla, as well as Fóstbræðra saga, covers a vast geographical area. Laxness has taken pains about visiting himself many places of the saga scene, among them Stiklastaðir in northern Norway. I once asked him what he had got out of seeing that famous battle-field. "Well", he said, "I got an adjective." That epithet appears in the very last words of the book: hinn síðfrjóva hegg 'the bird-cherry's late-ripening fruit'.

Below I will make some use of the thousands of hand-written pages, with many notes and references shedding light on the printed version of Gerpla. Among them we find an indication of the author's attitude to the medieval saga text:

I put myself in the place of a man who has heard Fóstbraðra saga from his grandmother when he was a young boy, and now tells the story again as an old man, not as it was told to him, or as other men know it, but as he remembers it to have been.

Thus Laxness pretends to regard himself as just still another link in a continuous tradition. This fiction has also found expression in the narrative art of Gerpla. In order to maintain the contact with his medieval fellow-countrymen and colleagues, Laxness has adopted a saga language of his own. On the other hand, in spite of its ancient subject-matter and its old-fashioned apparel, Gerpla is something quite new, in fact a mirror of our time. In that respect the author considers himself to be principally on a line with the old saga writers. According to him the classical sagas reveal more of the time when they were committed to parchment, the thirteenth century, than of an age hundreds of years earlier, when their events are said to have taken place.

As for the language of Gerpla, Laxness has left nothing to chance. In a late manuscript version his old friend Jón Helgason, at that time still the head of the Arnarnagaeian institute in Copenhagen, has as an expert examined the first chapter. In his characteristic small and distinct hand he has proposed various alterations. With few exceptions Laxness followed his advice. In two places Jón made the remark kvæðamál 'poetic language' on certain words. However, in both cases the author kept his own wording. Obviously he did not shrink from introducing poetic forms and expressions into his saga prose. He has also inserted many well-known quotations from the poetic Edda and the skalds in the text. Otherwise, as you know, the strict distinction between poetry and prose is a criterion of the Old Icelandic writers' feeling for style. On that point, as of course on several other points, Laxness deliberately deviates from genuine saga style.

The language of Gerpla is in itself an impressive achievement. As far as I know, it has no counterpart in any other experiments in this genre, and probably never will have. But of course it is far from a close imitation of Old Icelandic prose. It is much more diversified and supple, sparkling of its author's humour and satire. As Jakob Benediktsson puts it, with supreme expertise and authority:

Once again Halldór Laxness has expanded the border-lines of Icelandic art of writing. He has tried the elasticity of Icelandic language as no one has succeeded in doing before: Icelandic tongue of all times from the origin of our nation is the bass-chord underlying the magic music of language and style in this book. <sup>4)</sup>

No translation, however congenial, can reach that effect on the reader.

The book title itself seems to be a late invention. It is not until close to the printed text that we find the name Gerpla. Presenting his topic in the first chapter the author explains: og munu vér af görpum draga nafn bókar vorrar, er hér saman stendur, og kalla Gerplu (8). We have to do with an analogy to such short names for the old sagas as Egla, Njála, Grettla. The title is indeed a lucky hit. Among the Old Icelandic words for a warlike man and fighter - garpr, hetja, kappi, kempa - especially garpr stands out by having rather frequently an ironic note of bravado. Moreover, it is a fact that this noun is used more often in Fóstbræðra saga than in any other Old Icelandic saga. Laxness has certainly had a sense of that fact when in the final version of Gerpla he made garpur, with derivatives and compounds, such as garplegur, garpskapur and höfuðgarpur, a key-word in his story. By and by it assumes a devastatingly ironic character, by being used in a context of acts that by our standards are foul and despicable. Thus garpur and its relatives in the vocabulary become an important link in the ideological trend of the story: the furious onslaught on the heroic ideal and its manifestations.

## 6

No Old Icelandic text could have been better suited for that purpose than Fóstbræðra saga. In Gerpla the sworn brothers are regarded as anachronistic figures at a time when the Viking Age

was on the decline. They have been poisoned, so to speak, by old tales of warlike kings, heroic fighters, valkyries, and so on, tales which Þorgeir had imbibed from his mother. (By the way, it is highly probable that women, and especially old women, were in real life the foremost transmitters of such traditions.)

Among peaceful peasants home in Iceland the two young men call people together to witness their ceremony of swearing brotherhood. But since the earth

was frozen deep down, too hard to cut a fresh strip of sward, they borrowed some frozen turves from a haystack and crawled under those, opened a vein, mixed their blood, and pronounced that they had now sworn brotherhood, and that they would stand together in everything from now on, and go halves in all they obtained like true men by force of arms, and that he who was granted longer life would spare no pains to avenge the other. (47)

The bystanders, however, are not impressed by those old-fashioned manners:

Christian folk laughed at the madness of these two frozen-turves planning to go halves in the lice that crawled on them both, for it was likely to be some time, they said, before such a pair of tramps had anything else to go halves in. (47)

This scene sets the tone for the wretched career of the sworn brothers. You may call it tragic, but tragic in a decidedly donquixotic vein. They are the protagonists of the story, as they are in the old saga. But in Gerpla they have become pitiable pawns in the bigger game that king Ólafur, the adored ideal of theirs, and other kings and rulers in Europe are playing ruthlessly with their subjects and ordinary people everywhere. It is in that direction that we find the real appeal and pathos of the novel, the target of its social and political criticism, its caustic satire of war in the eleventh century as well as in the twentieth.

Certainly, this purpose should be evident to any reader of Gerpla. But I will quote a few memoranda from the manuscripts, revealing the author's contemporary inspiration still more clearly than the book itself. They are a kind of exhortations and directive rules for his work.

## 7

The parallel to our own age is never drawn directly in Gerpla;

intrusions of that kind could have disturbed the reader's impression of artistic unity severely. But in the following manuscript note on the sworn brothers it is stated drastically enough:

"The hero and the skald" are behind the times as murderers and robbers - they grope about in the void, gain nothing by it; the age of murder with robbery, the Viking Age, is finished. They are anachronistic like American colonial war enthusiasts. Though these send out armies, they grope about in the void. They may be able to murder but not to rob, murder nations but not subdue them. They are as far from the goal after the murder as before.

The comparison with American warfare and colonialism of course refers to the Korean war in the years 1950-53 - when Laxness was intensely occupied by his Icelandic saga. In contemporary speeches and articles he also passed a harsh sentence on the western participants in that war, from his leftist point of view.<sup>5)</sup>

By the way, western colonialism also has its counterpart in Gerpla. The Eskimos there are in the position of a far-off primitive people. By the whites, in this case represented by the Scandinavians, such as Þormóður and his equals, they are treated scornfully and brutally, as an inferior race. Ironically enough, in the eyes of the heroic sworn brother the Eskimos' friendliness, their ignorance of using arms in order to kill other people, is the definitive proof of their inferiority as human beings.

## 8

Now and then we find in the manuscripts biting remarks on the way of kings to promote Christianity. For instance, under the heading "A new patent for getting a reason to murder people", there is a quotation from the so-called Legendary saga of Saint Ólafur: "There was no man in Norway who should not either adopt the Faith or else suffer death." On the same leaf we read the following ironic statement: "The superiority of Christianity over heathenism lay in providing robbers and those in power with a pretext for killing people and take their property for idealistic reasons, particularly in order to redeem their souls,"

Elsewhere Laxness comments in much the same vein on Ólafur's

activity as conqueror and missionary king (Um sigur Ólafs kongs f Noregi):

Christianity implied an important prescription, namely that the kings of the world and other men of power should adopt a rule which was till then unknown in the world, that is to murder people for idealistic reasons and burn down their houses for the sake of Christ. Charlemagne had 45000 Saxons decapitated one morning so that they could go to Heaven. Previously kings and other rulers had pursued arson and manslaughter for fun and in order to frighten men and get at their property. To the men of power Christianity meant that from now on people should be killed for the sake of God and eternal justice.

In a note in English (!) Norwegian peasants express their opinion of king Ólafur thus: "Possible that we may take up Christianity but not from the hands of this felon and murderer. We might make him our saint. But we most certainly shall kill him as a human being."

Still less favourable is the following remark on Canute the Great of Denmark and England: "Canute was so saintly a man that he never had his friends and kinsmen killed except in front of the high altar during mass."

On the collaboration of the Royal power and the Church we find for instance this remark:

Ólafur asks bishop Grímkell's advice in all moral matters, and Grímkell always answers in the same way as the bishop of Canterbury: I am of the opinion that it is not advisable to cease killing people unconditionally, cease burning houses unconditionally, cease permitting to cut off men's noses unconditionally.

This note is hardly intelligible out of its contemporory context. Grímkell of course is Ólafur's court bishop and companion on his expeditions. But why is the bishop of Canterbury introduced in this connection as a spiritual mate of Grímkell? We get the explanation when reading some comments by Laxness in 1950 on the bishop of Canterbury at that time, Fisher. In speeches and articles Laxness presented a violent criticism of that Primate of all England. The reason was that Fisher had exhorted the British clergy not to put their names to the so-called Stockholm call ("Stockholms-appellen") against the atom-bomb. In those days Laxness was an active member of the World Peace Movement under the presidency of the French nuclear physicist and Nobel Prize winner Frédéric Joliot-Curie.

In an article Laxness describes bishop Fisher's attitude thus:

A tough guy, this bishop of Canterbury. How safe his advice against war would be you may infer from the fact that all the maddest warmongers in the world are truly Christian men who never miss an opportunity of going to church and listen to spiritual leaders like Fisher, and they would never dream of murdering their neighbour without praying Our Father meanwhile. In *Illustrated London News*, which is the mouthpiece of the English court, you often see pictures of Mac Arthur's soldiers kneeling and praying Our Father before going off to murder Korean people. 6)

In that place Laxness also quotes a sentence by the bishop in direct speech: "Eg held það sé hvorki rétt né skynsamlegt að leggja til að atómsprengjan verði bönnuð skilyrðislaust" ('I think it would be neither right nor wise to recommend that the atombomb should be banned unconditionally.')<sup>7)</sup> The same quotation appears among the notes in the *Gerpla* manuscripts. As you see, it accords principally with bishop Grímkell's advice to king Ólafur, though medieval rulers had no atombomb at their disposal: "it is not advisable to cease killing people unconditionally" etc.

In the book itself the bishop of Rouen in France speaks in quite the same spirit, when ~~men have gathered~~ in the cathedral of Chartres for refuge, awaiting the attack from the earl of Rouen and his Viking mercenaries including Ólafur Haraldsson and his followers, among them Þorgeir Hávarsson. Military leaders in the invading army are keen on setting the cathedral on fire. However, the supreme moral authority, the bishop of Rouen, is consulted for advice. After having invoked the Holy Spirit and prayed a few powerful prayers, the bishop concludes that Christ has not fortakslaust (234) prescribed that "churches and relics, clerks, women and children and other helpless beings are without exception to be spared destruction by fire" (136). His word fortakslaust ('without exception') is fairly synonymous with the adverb skilyrðislaust, which his colleagues Grímkell and Fisher both use in the notes, in similar predicaments. Thus, from his own experience, and interpretation, of a dispute on the atombomb Laxness has secretly smuggled a rather cynical argument into his picture of medieval sophisticated theology.

Such theological subtleties are meant for the well-informed and powerful. They are far beyond the grasp of the poor Icelandic sworn brothers. In a way, these men and their equals

are rather innocent victims of an ideology the implications of which they cannot, or do not want to, see through.

## 9

No wonder that in the eyes of some of his fellow-countrymen Laxness seemed to have disgraced their precious saga heritage. And certainly many Norwegians were not very happy about his presentation of Saint Ólafr. However, in spite of the furious onslaught on the heroic ideal of arms and war, there is in Gerpla a counterbalance of a somewhat paradoxical kind. As in other cases, the notes in the manuscripts also on this point illuminates the matter far more clearly than the definitive text. On a separate leaf Laxness has written the following words, and marked his comment with a big NB:

The more thoroughly and longer we read the old sagas, the more we admire the spiritual greatness of the thirteenth century, and the more contemptible appear the men and their heroic gestures in the tenth century which the sagas tell us about. Snorri's little toe is worth more than all the kings together the stories of whom are told in *Heimskringla*.

In the printed book the positive part of this statement has found enthusiastic expressions. Shortly before the end of the story at *Stiklastaðir* we read that king Ólafur

on his way to be crushed by Norse peasants was yet to be the only king in the North that would surpass Knud the Rich in glory and praise, and his praise has flourished no less in Heaven than on Earth; to him not only terrestrial dukes and emperors and bishops and popes have bowed down, but also saints, martyrs and virgins, and all the Mighty of Heaven, archangels, thrones, cherubim and seraphim. Yet none have been so smitten with Olaf as Icelandic skalds, and here is a sign of it, that never in the World has there been a book, not on Christ himself, that can even halfway compare with the one we owe to the learned Snorri, which is called the saga of Olaf the Holy. (275)

And in the last chapter we find the following epitaph on one of the swornbrothers: "Thormod Coalbrowsskald's death at *Stiklastaðir* has been honoured by storytellers of Iceland in immortal books, that the skald's name might not perish before that of the king he sought and found." (285)

Thus the author has stated the built-in ambivalence of his work. On one side his admiration for the language and narrative art of the old saga writers; on the other side his contempt for the "heroism" and warlike ado, such as he had also found them

displayed in his own age, on a much larger scale.

## 10

The notes which I have adduced here from a huge pile of manuscripts should not tempt us into a too unequivocal reading of Gerpla. After all, the novel does not deal with modern colonialism, the Korean war, the atombomb, or bishop Fisher of Canterbury - although those and other phenomena of our time reverberate in the new story of the sworn brothers and their king. Long ago Laxness characterized the literary work of art as an independent and autonomous universe in its own right. He has certainly thought of Gerpla as such a universe, without distinct chronology, and rising out of what he has once named "epic time". It is a triumph of his skill as a writer that out of his complex materials, old and new, he has managed to create a homogenous and impressive work of art, an Icelandic saga of the twentieth century,

At last. It is interesting to note that Gerpla, since it appeared in 1952, has had a definite impact also on the scholarly interpretation of Fóstbræðra saga itself. There is nowadays a marked tendency to read the medieval text as a parody of heroism and a harsh criticism of the sworn brothers and their turn of mind. I think that is an anachronistic view and a misunderstanding of the saga writer's intentions. But it is certainly a testimony to Laxness' forceful and seducing craftsmanship.

## Notes:

- 1) Jakob Benediktsson, Lærdómslistir (Reykjavík 1987), p. 42.
- 2) Letter from the monastery S:t Maurice de Clervaux in Luxemburg, April 17, 1923.
- 3) "Minnisgreinar um fornsögur" first printed in the periodical Tímarit Máls og mæringar, 1945, later in the collection of essays Sjálfsgödir hlutir (Obvious things) (Reykjavík 1946).
- 4) Jakob Benediktsson, *ibid.*, p. 43.
- 5) See for instance his book Dagur í senn (One day at a time) (Reykjavík 1955), the article "Vér íslendingar - og trúin á stálió" (We Icelanders - and the faith in arms).
- 6) Dagur í senn, the article "Fisher biður um atómsprengju - með skilyrði" (Fisher asks for the atombomb - conditionally), p. 127.
- 7) *Ibid.*, pp. 127-28

Page references to quotations from the original edition of Gerpla (Reykjavík 1952) and from the English translation, by Katherine John, The Happy Warriors (London 1958), are to be found in the text above.