

Is Halldór Laxness the Author of *Fóstbræðra saga*? On the Author Function, Intertextuality, Translation, and a Modern Writer's Relationship with the Icelandic Sagas

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ABSTRACT: Asking the titular question entails considering different concepts of authorship, from the modern sense of the term to Michel Foucault's idea of the "author function," as well as considering Halldór Laxness's connection with the Icelandic sagas, in terms of his reception, editing, and rewriting/translation of them. The context of Halldór's contemporary Iceland is also important, specifically the prevailing perceptions of the sagas. This article explores the interrelationship between *Fóstbræðra saga* and Halldór's *Gerpla* through intertextuality and, ultimately, Halldór's role in the contemporary reception of *Fóstbræðra saga*. The article was originally published in the journal *Skáldskaparmál: Tímarit um íslenskar bókmenntir fyrri alda* (1990). It has been slightly revised for republication in the author's book, *Orðaskil: Í heimi þýðinga* (2017) and for this translation, which has been produced in collaboration with the author.

RÉSUMÉ: Poser la question en titre implique de considérer différents concepts de la parternité littéraire, du sens moderne de l'expression à l'idée de la « fonction d'auteur » de Michel Foucault, ainsi que de considérer le lien de Halldór Laxness avec les sagas islandaises, en termes de sa réception, son édition et sa réécriture/traduction à leur sujet. Le contexte de l'Islande contemporaine de Halldór est également important, en particulier les perceptions prédominantes des sagas. Cet article explore les interrelations entre la *Fóstbræðra saga* et *Gerpla* de Halldór à travers l'intertextualité et, finalement, le rôle de Halldór dans la réception contemporaine de la *Fóstbræðra saga*. L'article fut publié à l'origine dans la revue *Skáldskaparmál: Tímarit um íslenskar bókmenntir fyrri alda* (1990). Il a été légèrement révisé aux fins d'être republié dans le livre de l'auteur, *Orðaskil: Í heimi þýðinga* (2017) et de cette traduction, qui a été réalisée en collaboration avec l'auteur.

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It is only right to warn readers that, like most articles with a title in the form of a question, this piece of writing will answer my question neither affirmatively nor negatively. I will, however, attempt to examine to some extent the dynamics constituted by the reciprocal connections between literary works, authorship, worlds of ideas, and the conditions of cultural transfer.

I

Few things are more important for modern explorers of creative works than being able to mention their authors by name. The name of the author is a mainstay; we use the name as a guarantee that the author's work possesses a definite *gestalt* that we grasp onto. We know little to nothing about the man Sophocles, but his name is of great importance in the dissemination of his plays, and from them we may perhaps try to draw some outlines of the person. Many literary scholars have found it deeply regrettable to be unable to get a clearer image of the man who conjoins several British plays of the Elizabethan period that are still widely read and are deemed crucial to literary history. But we have at least the *name* "William Shakespeare"; and if we cannot be bothered to gather unreliable tales about his life, we can at least attempt to "construct" the man through a consideration of his works, just as, for example, the Danish scholar Georg Brandes did in his study of Shakespeare.

The researchers of Old Icelandic literature have generously done the same—that is to say, they have by no means always been stuck in philology as we are sometimes led to believe: the search for the authors is, for example, a central factor in the methodology of Sigurður Nordal, who even sketches an image of the poet who composed *Völuspá* [Seeress's Prophecy]. The methods of Hermann Pálsson, as much as they focus on the origin and pathways of words and ideas, still presuppose the figure of a definite author.

I mention this because I think that Icelanders have often experienced it as a tragedy not to possess authors for their sagas, especially the Sagas of Icelanders. Many have tried to find them. I shudder at the thought of all the work that has gone into pursuing these ghosts, the author of *Njal's saga* and his colleagues. But, of course, such toil is the result of a strong desire to get closer to the work, or rather to the source of its meaning.

We long to see the individual behind the work, and often we think we are able to perceive that person. Jónas Kristjánsson cannot be counted amongst the most eager participants in the aforementioned pursuit, but in the foreword to his doctoral dissertation *Um Fóstbræðrasögu* [On the Saga of the Sworn Brothers] there is an interesting comment on his scholarly endeavour:

We may furthermore approach the Icelandic sagas from another direction and observe them as literary works of art. This is especially worthwhile if we have previously picked apart the sagas as far as their factuality and their value as reference material are concerned; it may come as a blessing, then, if instead it may be shown that they are literary works of genius. But if an inquiry into hereditary legends and factuality is not an urgent matter in this book, its main concern is even farther removed from the artistic and literary value of *Fóstbræðra saga*. However, it cannot be denied that during these years of my involvement with the saga, my mind has wandered to its various artistic features, and sometimes it has seemed to me that I was standing very close to the old man who recorded it on vellum a long time ago.

(10–11)

In these words there are various things of interest. Jónas envisions the scribe as an old man; he is a kind of father-figure, if not a grandfather-figure (it so happens that Jónas dedicates his doctoral dissertation to the memory of his grandfather with these words: “Hann sagði mér ungum fornar sögur” [He told me ancient tales when I was young]. Jónas Kristjánsson is not the only one to see the “author” of an Old Icelandic work as an old man.² In the poem “Til höfundar Hungurvöku” [To the author of *Hungurvaka*], Jón Helgason addresses the author in the closing line with the words “gamli maður í jörðu” [old man in the ground] (15). Why should they who brought the ancient literature of Iceland to vellum necessarily be old men? The explanation perhaps is that it is the vellum that is old—which in turn makes the grandfather-figure double-edged. It entails that this is our tradition, our family connection with the past. But at the same time, the works have drifted into a gray-haired distance.

It is no less interesting that Jónas Kristjánsson does not miss the “author” so much as someone who could help locate the work in time, space, and matters of factuality. The author is primarily placed in connection with the “artistic and literary worth” of the work, i.e. with elements that have to do with language and the expressive forms of the text.

II

The harmony of work and author that Jónas Kristjánsson perceives is in fact a variant of the harmony between human beings and language. The human being resides in language, commanding its discourses, and is able to lay “claims” to certain domains within it. But as the French scholar Michel Foucault pointed out so thoroughly in his writings, there is nothing self-evident about this state of affairs, and it is, to some extent, a delusion that characterizes a certain period in the history of this cognitive being of language, *homo sapiens*. What Jónas does—and other scholars have done with much rambling and energetic search for the author—is to “humanize” the work, thus turning it into a work of literature

in the sense that it is seen as a product of a particular *author* and not just a manifestation of some discourse that may be called *literature*. At the same time, the poet is elevated as an individual. What we have here is, in a nutshell, the fusion of humanism and Romanticism, a fusion that constitutes the foundation of our concept of the author in the past couple of centuries. And if we do not immediately fall in line with this view, it may be because the text in question is not at all from that period, but rather comes to us from an entirely different society and after a journey through several centuries. It is not certain that any “authors” existed then in our sense; perhaps rather a variety of scribes.

We may ask, however, whether our understanding is not always inevitably shaped by present-day mindsets.³ The biographical research methods that developed during the nineteenth century were widely prevalent well into the twentieth century, for instance in Iceland. And though we look to other countries and see that the literary scholarship of the twentieth century is far from being dominated by biographical methods, we are still sitting cheek by jowl with the “author” of humanism and Romanticism despite repeated attempts to get rid of him. During the twentieth century, the advocates of Formalism and New Criticism repeatedly attempted to banish the author from the artistic process of the literary work. And Post-structuralists have given him an even harder time (where he then becomes a kind of representative of the classical “subject”), as attested by the works of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes; in fact, one of Barthes’ best-known essays is famously called “The Death of the Author” (1967). In the essay “What is an Author?” (1969), Michel Foucault considers why the author is, despite all this, still alive. He points to the fact that we find the author not just *in* the text, since “the text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it” (115). According to this, the author is an indispensable father, one who is bound to beget the text and in a certain sense also begets the reader, who gathers meaning from the text. Let us look at the beginning of the essay “Forneskjutaut” [Ancient Chatter] by Halldór Laxness:

The descriptions of social life in *Eyrbyggja Saga* manifest clearly that the author is thoroughly familiar with labour practices at sea and on land; he describes the same methods of haymaking as people were accustomed to in this country in the early twentieth century, and he looks to the sky and forecasts the weather as old farmers still do. He is well versed in stories of the past and in the laws of the land.
(15)

Heidegger taught us that it is language that speaks and not the individual; and that he only speaks by corresponding to language—as Heidegger expresses it in his word *play*⁴—yet our worldview prevents us from obtaining an active understanding of this. It is an urgent necessity for us to understand substantial parts of language as the expressions of individuals and thus attribute an

“ownership” of language to them. To be sure, there are various forms of discourse that we attribute to institutions rather than individuals—and according to Foucault’s theories, this is approximately how we put the author on a stage in our minds.

III

The author is an “institution” in the sense that his or her name refers to a certain centre of meaning; it is a warranty for all kinds of regulation, for the ownership of certain things, for an impact on others; it is a crucial element of comparison—a comment such as “here comes a new Halldór Laxness” would elicit a strong reaction from many. Thus the name is important when an explanation is needed for the practices of lesser-known authors. The names of well-known authors are often key coordinates or reference points in literary canons, and a well-known author can shape the way various works fare in the literary system—for example, as a translator, publisher, or as a propagandist for or against certain authors or works. Such works, then, are consequently connected to the “author function” of this author; and as Foucault indicates, that function can be decisive even though the author is in a supporting role. We are constantly trying to garner something from such author-institutions in order to strengthen our own discourses, whether we admit it or not; just as I am now appropriating the “authority” of Michel Foucault. Among Icelandic authors in the twentieth century, Halldór Laxness is the most obvious example of such an institution; in Icelandic scholarship it is presumably Sigurður Nordal. “Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals” [“The Sigurður Nordal Institute”] had existed for many years before an institution with that name was formally established.⁵

But I am getting ahead of myself. I was talking about the Sagas of Icelanders—and their authors are dead—in name at least. How can we explain their function if we lack, to this end, their author function? Attempts are made to create a nameless author on the basis of the work in question, just as Halldór does in the text previously cited, and as several scholars have done, for example in their introductions to the various volumes of the *Íslenzk fornrit* series. There have also been attempts to assign one or more Sagas of Icelanders to Snorri Sturluson, whose name carries the greatest authority among the known bards and writers of medieval Iceland. I think, however, that two other elements play an even weightier role here: the awareness that an individual saga is a “work,” and even a “masterpiece,” has often replaced the author function, as it were; and, moreover, the name of the genre, “Íslendingasögur” [Sagas of Icelanders], has received increased importance. As a name for a particular “oeuvre” as well as a canon, it has in some ways operated like the name “Shakespeare,” which I touched on above (and such a brand name is indeed a hallmark). But “The Sagas of Icelanders” is at the same time a more open concept and (as the word

Íslendingasögur indicates) presents itself to Icelandic readers in a way that enables them, at any given time, to imagine the nation as an “author,” with themselves as both the offspring of, and heirs to, these works. When the Sagas of Icelanders become a pillar of a particular institution and a strong current in ideological waters—and here I have especially in mind the Icelandic struggle for independence from the nineteenth and into the twentieth century—then their world of ideas is bridled in a fashion similar to how the author function of literary works lends them an overall appearance (that is to say, serves as an anchor for how a work is seen as forming a convincing whole).

IV

As we move into the twentieth century, circumstances relevant to the dissemination of The Sagas of Icelanders change significantly, especially as regards the relationship between readers and works. The centre for saga research moves to Iceland, and the so-called “Icelandic school” shapes to a certain degree the way in which the Icelandic reading public receives and perceives the sagas. I shall not dwell here on the conflict between literary manifestation and oral tradition (“bókfesta” vs “sagnfesta”) nor on the publishing efforts of the “Icelandic school.” Since I am venturing into generalizations, I am more tempted to generalize about the connection of the sagas with modern literary history and then especially with the major “adventures” that set their mark on that history. Among them are, first, the disintegration of the age-old rural society and the concurrent urban development; these changes happen slowly and surely in the early decades of the twentieth century but take a leap during the Second World War, and are duly reflected and processed in the domain of literature; second, the career of Halldór Laxness; third, the modernist upheaval and the revolt against the literary tradition; fourth, the salient presence of women writers in Icelandic literature from the middle of the twentieth century; and, last but not least, the significant force of translation itself in Icelandic literary culture.⁶

All these factors connect in one way or another. As a young author, Halldór Laxness was for some time quite a radical modernist, inclined towards the strife and experimentation evinced in some contemporary foreign literature, and during this period he addressed in highly critical terms both the Icelandic rural society and the ancient saga legacy—these two being closely interwoven threads of the national tradition.⁷ But he soon changed his mind and became hostile towards modernism and remained so for a long while—at least until 1957 he wrote zealously against the “bourgeois novel,” which, he claims, wastes its energy by diving into the depths of the souls of twisted individuals. His own response as an author is to look for ways of developing further the Icelandic narrative tradition already in existence and—while symbolically offering his nation the informal mode of address—to relate new views of life with prevalent conditions in the country. The

scene of his works is generally Icelandic rural districts or fishing villages—and this is important, even though his novels also point far beyond the place of events, just like any other works of consequence.

The endeavour of Halldór Laxness to fight against the stagnation of national traditions and to develop them continuously along certain routes, to energize them, extends beyond his fiction and appears clearly in his position vis-à-vis the Old Icelandic sagas. And here the “Institute” of Halldór Laxness is highly relevant, an institute that of course was in an adversarial position to begin with, though it was later to move to centre stage and become a powerful player in the Icelandic literary system. In the forties Halldór begins to attend to the Icelandic sagas with enthusiasm; in fact, he becomes at once a centre of reception and of distribution—as important as it was disputed—for Old Icelandic literature in the twentieth century. At the same time, he is composing the novel *Iceland’s Bell*, where the cultural value of the ancient literature is a focal point (Þorsteinsson 12). Halldór underlines his intertextual connections with Old Icelandic literature when he asserts in an important essay, “Minnisgreinar um fornsögur” [Memoranda on Icelandic Sagas], that “Icelandic authors cannot live without being always mindful of the old books” (9).⁸ He then takes a big and provocative step towards creating a new connection between the sagas and Icelandic readers when he ventures to publish them with the accepted contemporary orthography, the first person to do so in the twentieth century. In the years 1942-1946 he thus edits and puts forth *Njáls saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Hrafnkels saga*, and *Alexanders saga*. In some ways he is there not just in the role of an editor but also that of a rewriter or translator.⁹

V

The scholar Sverrir Tómasson, in an article in *Skírnir*, has mentioned how he once came across *Færeyingasaga* with modern orthography in a German library. This was in itself barely worth a comment, except that the book was classified with translations of Old Norse literature. Tómasson points out that although this is a misunderstanding, the Germans have a point; modern Icelandic spelling is a product of a different level of language development than that in which the works are written, and a publication with this spelling “is a kind of interpretation, and Old Icelandic literature is written in a language that is in important ways different from Icelandic as it is spoken today, even though limited changes in the structure of the language and conservative spelling help diminish the difference, so that for most readers nowadays it is not all that clear, except where the meaning of words has changed” (130–31).¹⁰ If we wish, in this context, to make use of the concept of “translation,” we are certainly applying it in a wide sense, and the ongoing discussion about spelling and other norms in publishing the sagas can then be seen as a kind of translation debate.

This broad sense of the concept of translation is in itself nothing new. It is concisely discussed in a well-known essay by Roman Jakobson from 1959, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” where he divides translations into three groups. The first is that of “intralingual translation,” or rewording of signs in the same language; the second group is “interlingual translation” or translation proper, that is to say, the common transfer of signs between languages; and the third is “intersemiotic translation,” or transfer between sign systems or media of representation, for instance when narrative texts are translated into visual presentations (233). The sagas are, in this respect, unusual in that they do not exist as original texts or manuscripts; but if we use the extant manuscript versions as points of reference, then printed editions with contemporary orthography are obviously translations in the sense of Roman Jakobson’s first category. But they also overlap with the second category because the contemporary orthography entails signs of a sphere of language significantly different from that of the manuscripts. That classification also reminds us that this is a case of transfer of texts between different worlds of meaning. Indeed, the contemporary orthography involves an attempt to reconcile us as far as possible with the distant, indeed in some sense foreign, world that the sagas manifest and contain (irrespective of how one regards such mediation). In this context it should be mentioned that certain currents in translation studies—I have here in mind the writings of translation scholars such as André Lefevere (1983; 1985) and Itamar Even-Zohar (1981)—tend decisively toward using a hermeneutic point-of-view of translation in exploring various kinds of representation and rewriting of texts in altered forms. In this broad sense, *translation* can encompass many ways of adapting works to any number of new and different circumstances.

VI

When Halldór Laxness translated the Icelandic sagas over to modern orthography, he met strident reactions. He was deemed to be abusing national tradition as well as distorting the sagas. At the same time, many were bound to think that he was “claiming” for himself writings of which the nation itself was the author. And certainly he was not just finding for these texts a new ratification, moving them closer to many readers, feeding new life into them, but also putting them in close connection with his own author function.

Thus, while Halldór is carving out a niche for himself as a “poet of Icelandic consciousness” in the middle of the twentieth century, he does so in part by assuming a certain paternal and authorial attitude towards the Icelandic sagas—but from another point-of-view it is possible to see him as the prodigal son who now demands his inheritance in a radical way. He communicates the heritage to readers in new terms, showing with some bravura how these sagas are a “modern” reading matter.

But this endeavour certainly reached new heights when he composed *Gerpla*, which came out in 1952. The very method of this novel entails a statement that Halldór Laxness is a master of the semiotics of Icelandic sagas, someone whose firm hold in the wrestling match with this central Icelandic tradition enables him to translate the world of the sagas on his own terms and into his own language. The world saw the birth of a new Icelandic saga, and it is under an undisputed name of an author. At the same time, it includes a significant connection with another important author function. For in *Gerpla*, Halldór has translated freely; that is to say, re-written, “corrected,” and “fathered” not only the anonymous *Fóstbræðra saga*, but also a work by the other great prose author in Icelandic literary history: *Ólafs saga helga* by Snorri Sturluson. According to Harold Bloom’s well-known theory, Halldór has here sought for himself creativity through “the anxiety of influence,” and he writes his way around this grand predecessor, Snorri Sturluson, by “misunderstanding” him in a creative way—the big steps in literary history being made through such conflicts, in Bloom’s estimation.¹¹ In that way, we may say that Halldór initiates a dialogue over the ocean of time, doing business with Snorri on equal footing.

And the reception follows suit. Although some saw in *Gerpla* a debasement of Icelandic literary heritage, Halldór came to receive an ever-growing recognition as exactly the author who rises to the challenge of the old and exalted tradition. Three years after *Gerpla* was published, Halldór Laxness received the Nobel Prize, among other things for resurrecting the Icelandic epic tradition, as stated in the Swedish academy’s prize announcement. Halldór was not averse to this connection in his Nobel speech: “The most important thing I care about at this moment is that the Swedish Academy, which has been lent great authority, has named me in connection with the unknown masters of the old Icelandic sagas” (quoted in Þorsteinsson 1962, 19).¹²

VII

But if *Gerpla* is Halldór’s “translation” of the world and narrative material of the old Icelandic sagas, people may be prone to see it first and foremost as a radical parody, as a grotesque inversion of the heroic features of the saga world. According to the article “Bróklindi Falgeirs” by Helga Kress, which was published in 1987 and was a formidable and innovative contribution to saga research at the time, such a parody already exists in the very saga that seemed to be the main butt of Halldór’s parody in *Gerpla*, that is to say, *Fóstbræðra saga*. Helga Kress sees in *Fóstbræðra saga* a certain discrepancy of substance and form, and thus an ironic stance towards the heroic subject matter. She argues that it is “narrated from the point-of-view of the common people,” that it makes fun of “the heroic ideal and the literature that worships it,” and that the saga is characterized on the whole by what Kress calls “grotesque realism,” a trait neglected in saga

scholarship, but one that in her view is a current within saga writing that opposes “heroic realism” (271).¹³

This raises the question whether Halldór Laxness is a latecomer on this scene; whether the “author” of *Fóstbræðra saga*, this remarkable ghost, has already achieved what Halldór undertook to do. Or perhaps Halldór Laxness is a translator more akin to “Pierre Menard, the author of the *Quixote*” of whom we learn in the eponymous short story by Jorge Luis Borges. Menard undertakes to translate *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. With much tenacity he reaches an ever-closer understanding of the work and its author, moving toward the original until the translation has become the original text, word for word, line for line. But his creations are of course not the same work; *Don Quixote* by Cervantes has the classic ambience of a seventeenth century tale, whereas *Don Quixote* by the twentieth-century writer Pierre Menard is a text that surprises, for example with its ancient appearance and its bountiful “defamiliarization.” As far as this is concerned, however, *Gerpla* may also be seen as contradicting the historical distance that supposedly sharpens our view; in this “*Fóstbræðra saga* by Halldór Laxness,” we read the work with eyes wide-open, because it is held right against our nose, in a translation that refuses to adapt to circumstances of reception that we are used to—which includes the custom of reading the Sagas of Icelanders as ancient narratives and not as new works. If, however, such a saga is absorbed as a new work, we may conclude, as the Dadaist Tristan Tzara does in his manifesto: “I appreciate an old work for its novelty” (7). Then we may also ask whether Halldór has in *Gerpla* perhaps instituted a new mode of reading the Icelandic sagas. In other words: Is it possible that we are now reading the Icelandic sagas under the influence of *Gerpla*?

VIII

Easy now, someone is likely to say. *Gerpla* is, to begin with, not a translation in the spirit of Borges’s Menard; Halldór Laxness allows himself all kinds of freedom in his treatment of the original text. True enough; if we examine the harvesting of angelica by the sworn brothers in Hornbjarg, a scene which is one of Helga Kress’s examples of grotesque realism of *Fóstbræðra saga*, we note that Halldór exaggerates the incident. *Fóstbræðra saga* says of Þormóður, while Þorgeir is silently hanging from a cliff, holding on to an angelica stalk: “Þormóðr beið uppi á hömrnunum, því at hann ætlaði, at Þorgeirr myndi upp koma, en er honum þótti Þorgeirr dveljask svá miklu lengr en ván var at, þá gengr hann ofan í skriðuhjallana” (*Fóstbræðra saga*, edited by Þórólfsson and Jonsson, 1943, 190). Lee Hollander translates, “Thormód waited on top of the cliff, thinking that Thorgeir would be coming up; but when it seemed to him that Thorgeir was taking so much longer time than could be expected he climbed down to the ledge where the slide had occurred” (*The Sagas of Kormák and the Sworn Brothers*, trans. Hollander, 1949, 179). Halldór allows himself a great deal of freedom in translating this passage,

lengthening it significantly, and he even lets Þormóður sleep for most of the day close to where Þorgeir is dangling from the angelica plant. It is equally true that Halldór more or less records word-for-word other parts of *Fóstbræðra saga*, as for example Þorgeir's famous answer about how the angelica collection is going: "Eg ætla að ég hafi þá nógar að þessi er uppi er eg held um" [I think that I will be finished when the one in my hand comes out] (*Gerpla* 157; *Wayward Heroes* 147). It is interesting that with the contemporary Icelandic orthography in the publication of *Fóstbræðra saga* by Svart á hvítu in 1985, these words come out exactly as they do in Halldór's text in *Gerpla*, to the letter—as if they had been taken directly from the novel.

But frequently, Halldór Laxness has "misread" the text of *Fóstbræðra saga* crudely. Of Butraldi, who is killed by Þorgeir Hávarsson, it is said in *Fóstbræðra saga*: "He was a bachelor, without house or home, a fellow of great size and strength, ugly, pugnacious—a man who had committed many murders, hot-headed and vengeful" (*The Sagas of Kormák and the Sworn Brothers*, trans. Hollander, 1949, 100). In *Gerpla* (*Wayward Heroes*) however: "Butraldi Brúsason was unimposing in appearance, but very band-legged. He was past his youth and had thin, grey down on his jowls, shallow bug-eyes, a broad jaw and a wide mouth" (111). It is interesting that instead of the grotesque killing of Butraldi, which Helga Kress discusses in her article, he is made to disappear in *Gerpla* while Þorgeir is sleeping, and Butraldi sends him and their mutual host his regards by pissing into the water well as "payment" for his lodging.¹⁴

In such scenes there is still strong affinity between the saga and the novel—but perhaps Halldór sometimes does not find himself capable of effectively reiterating or amplifying the grotesque characteristics of the "original text," and he attempts instead to create a different mismatch of heroism and reality. The fact, though, is that if one reads saga and novel together, roaming back and forth between them, various passages may start to intermingle, and thus the reader is not always sure where he/she stands (for readers of Icelandic this is of course particularly true if *Fóstbræðra saga* is read with contemporary orthography). For example, where does the following scene occur?

Snýr bóndi þá utar eftir hlöðunni og ætlaði út að ganga. Í því höggur Þormóður eftir honum. Það högg kom á bakið og hjó hann af honum báða þjónnappana.

"Styn þú eigi nú," kvað Þormóður.

Bóndi kvað við hátt með miklum skræk og þreif til þjónnappanna báðum höndum.

(849)

Martin Regal translates this violent description as follows:

Then the yeoman turned and was about to leave the barn, and as he did, Thormod struck at him. The blow caught him on the back and cut off both of his buttocks.

“Let’s hear no groaning from you now.”

The man screamed out loudly and felt for his buttocks with both hands.
(*Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, trans. Regal, 1997, 400)

It is as if he is trying to pull his buttocks back into place. Those who know the works well may be quick to refresh their memory that this grotesque scene is in *Fóstbræðra saga* and not in *Gerpla*. Others may find it very much at home in Halldór’s text, and in general I think that *Gerpla* can confuse readers as they travel between works, between historical paradigms, and, finally, between different literary worlds. Such confusion and such “anachronism” have sometimes been associated with a postmodernism that playfully reworks traditional forms in ironic ways. We could even ask whether *Fóstbræðra saga* is postmodernist, if we read it with Helga Kress. However, *Gerpla* is more conscious of its place as a reworked form, particularly as regards its interplay with two timeframes. Not only does the text at one point refer to the very author writing the text, “Kiljan skáld” [Kilian the skald] (89; 83),¹⁵ but the characters in the novel are also sometimes like Quixote-figures, trying to act according to ancient epic formulas. Þorgeir says: “Where does it say in the old tales that a man saved himself by pretending to be blind and deaf when men of might rode by?” (155)—and there he could be referring to himself as a man of might in *Fóstbræðra saga*. In *Gerpla* (*Wayward Heroes*), he attacks a “deaf” and completely innocent man, throws him off his feet “and started hacking at the man’s neck to take his head off, though the task went incredibly slowly due to the dullness of his weapon, despite the champion’s firm intent. Finally, however, the head came off its trunk” (155–56).

IX

The question was raised above whether we possibly read the Icelandic sagas under the influence of *Gerpla*. Now we may also ask whether we need to re-evaluate the connection of *Gerpla* with the sagas in light of Helga Kress’s hermeneutic approach to the Icelandic sagas.

The literary scholar Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson saw in *Gerpla* an example of a “savage” contemporary work: “There the author advances upon the holy icons of national history and thrusts a spear through Icelandic identity. His spear: an exposing style” (79). Let us keep in mind this image of Halldór Laxness armed with a spear, in an attacking position. According to this understanding, Halldór breaks in *Gerpla* the mirror of heroic images and the ancient society of greatness that has long served Icelanders seeking strength and comfort. Now, however, it appears that the mirror was broken all the time; that the ancient storytellers,

from early on, smashed it with their weapons of style, in *Fóstbræðra saga* and doubtless various other works. According to Helga Kress's interpretation, it also seems that the perspective of the common people, which is quite prominent in *Gerpla*, is already employed in *Fóstbræðra saga*.¹⁶

As far as such matters are concerned, one may conclude that *Gerpla* "repeats" *Fóstbræðra saga*, while also re-emphasizing and fleshing it out in a modern context—contrary to a tradition of reception where parodies and a common folk point-of-view have not been foregrounded saga elements. This alone would suffice to lend *Gerpla* a sure and special place amongst the modern novels that try to "repeat" the sagas (their settings and human interaction)—this being generally carried out according to traditional ideas about heroism and other (laudable) Icelandic qualities.

But the above example from *Gerpla*—of Þorgeir working like a madman on the neck of the poor wretch until his head is finally severed from his body—raises speculations about the differences between *Gerpla* and *Fóstbræðra saga*. So absurd is the sight of the victim who seems to wait patiently while the "hero" hacks away at him with a dull blade, that one finds this scene to surpass the parodical borders of *Fóstbræðra saga*. From the perspective of a *Gerpla* reader, it may thus seem as if *Fóstbræðra saga* is not totally subsumed by what Helga Kress calls "grotesque realism." Can we perhaps see in the saga's challenging and unpolished structure a manifestation of conflicting views within the signifiatory world of the Icelandic sagas?

It may be that *Gerpla*'s "translation variant" helps us come to grips with such conflicts within the ancient world of meanings. In the description of one of Þorgeir's pointless murders, Halldór gives an account of how the warrior for little or no reason attacks the young son of a farmer, a boy holding a short spear for prodding bulls. The narrative unfolds thus:

Þorgeir sækir á eftir honum. Heytótt stóð að baki lambhúsinu, og var tóm að öndverðu sumri, leitar bóndasonur þángað. Tóttardyrnar innan úr lambhúsinu voru of þraungvar og lágar svo miklum manni sem Þorgeir var vexti, enda var hann ófús að beygja sig, hann hverfur nú á það ráð sem leingst hefur dugað í fornsögum, að rjúfa þekjuna, en þar lágu á stoðum torfur er skýlt höfðu heyum um veturinn. Stendur Þorgeir Hávarsson á veggnum en bóndasonur niðri kumlinu og etjast á spjótum gegnum torfið. Halda þeir áfram þessum starfa uns spjót bóndasonar brotnar af skafti, Þorgeir hleypur þá ofanum rauфина niður í tóttina og hefur uppi öxi sína við sveininn, og tekur að höggva hann svo að þar sýndust sjö á lofti, hné sveinninn þar niður við moldarveggnum og dreyrði úr fjölda sára, lét hann þar líf sitt.
(164–65)

[Þorgeir pursues him. Behind the lamb shed is an enclosure for hay, empty now at the start of the summer, and the farmer's son retreats there. The doorway

from the lamb shed into the enclosure is too narrow and low for so big a man as Þorgeir, and he is disinclined to bend down. Instead, he adopts the plan that always seems to work in old stories: to tear his way in through the roof—which, in this case, is patches of turf laid over posts, to shield the hay ricks in winter.

Þorgeir Hávarsson stands on the wall and the farmer's son crouches in the enclosure, and both jab their spears at each other through the turf. They keep this up until the shaft of the farmer's son's spear breaks, at which point Þorgeir jumps into the enclosure through a gap in the turf, hoists his ax over the lad, and starts hacking at him so furiously that it looks as if seven axes are whirling in the air. The lad slumps against the earthen wall, bleeding from innumerable wounds—before giving up the ghost.]

(153–54)

If we look for the model of this passage in *Fóstbræðra saga*, we find a different scene altogether. There, Þorgeir goes against three fully-capable men, a strong and unpopular farmer and his two farmhands:

Þorgeir verst þeim með miklum mjúkleik en sækir að þeim með miklu afli og öruggleik sem hið óarga dýr. Húskarlarinn verða brátt sárir af Þorgeiri því að þeir höfðu skammskeftar öxar en Þorgeir lagði spjótinu hart og tíðum. Hrukku þeir Snorri inn í lambhúsið. Dyrnar voru lágar og þröngvar á húsinu og var illt þar inn að sækja eftir þeim. Þorgeir hleypur upp á húsið og rýfur til. Þar sem húsið raufaðist leggur Snorri spjótinu út í móti. Þorgeir verður sár af því nokkuð og þó lítt. Kastar Þorgeir þá spjótinu en tekur exina í hægri hönd. Sækir Snorri þá að Þorgeiri með hörðum hug þar sem húsið var rofið. En Þorgeir varðist með skildi og exi og leitar eigi annars en höggva spjót Snorra af skaftinu. Létti eigi þeim leik fyrr en Þorgeir hjó spjót Snorra af skaftinu. Og þegar jafnskjótt hljóp Þorgeir inn í húsið um glugg þann er á var rofinn með skjöld og exi og hjó þegar í höfuð Snorra svo hart að hann klýfur hausinn allan. Fær Snorri af því sári þegar bana. Þá snýr Þorgeir að húskörlum Snorra og sækir þá fimlega, hlífandi með skildi, höggvandi með exi þeirri er vön var að fá mörgum manni náttstaðar. Lauk svo þeirri atsókn að Þorgeir vó þá báða. (803)

Hollander translates this battle scene thus:

Þorgeir warded them off with great dexterity and then attacked them with the strength and fearlessness of a lion. They were wounded soon because their axes had short hafts and Þorgeir thrust at them hard and often. So Snorri and his men retired into the lamb shed. Its doors were low and narrow, so that it was difficult for Þorgeir to get at them there. So he leaped upon the roof and began to rip it up; but Snorri thrust at him with his spear as soon as he had made a hole, and Þorgeir was slightly wounded by him. He laid his spear aside and took his axe in his right hand. Snorri thrust at him furiously through the hole, but Þorgeir fought him off with shield and battle-axe and tried to lop off Snorri's spear from its shaft, and he finally succeeded in doing so. In the same moment Þorgeir jumped down into the

shed through the hole and split Snorri's head with a blow of his axe so that he fell down dead. Then Þorgeir turned to Snorri's men, attacked them nimbly, protecting himself with his shield, and levelled blows at them with that axe of his which was wont to give many a man his last night's rest. It ended with his slaying both of them.

(*The Sagas of Kormák and the Sworn Brothers*, trans. Hollander 1949, 123)

From the perspective of the grotesque excesses of *Gerpla*, it may seem that the discourse of heroic realism is still operative in passages such as this one in *Fóstbræðra saga*. However, if the saga text is read from the perspective that Helga Kress argues for, we may notice a persistent inconsistency in the description; in wording that is alliterative and has a clichéd ring to it: “miklum mjúkleik” [great dexterity], “hörðum hug” [furiousness], as well as in other topoi that can be seen as characteristic of *Fóstbræðra saga*: “hið óarga dýr” [wild beast or lion]. And this little lamb shed is hardly a worthy example of the strongholds that heroes long to break open. Is the text making fun of Þorgeir? But an example like this may also be shifted around, for instance in the case of Þormóður's fight against the three champions in Greenland, a fight that ends with a particularly humorous scene, where Falgeir drowns because his belt is torn and he gets tangled in his trousers, which Þormóður, himself exhausted, was able to pull down. Þormóður's victory is incontestably “grotesque,” as Helga Kress argues in her analysis, yet must we not deem his tenacity “heroic,” both in the context of *Fóstbræðra saga* and in the wider context of the Icelandic sagas? A similar double-edged heroic/humorous effect may be seen in Þorgeir's final battle where he defends himself staunchly, so much so that when Þórir Austmaður thrusts his spear into him, Þorgeir uses the last of his strength to push his advantage further down the spear until Þórir is within the deadly reach of his sword.

In any case, *Fóstbræðra saga* is not grotesque in the same way as *Gerpla*; rather, we may detect a double-edged strain running through the saga, possibly caused by the struggle of different symbolic or semiotic systems. The saga depicts images of heroic endeavours that, however, are also shown in a parodic light. In *Gerpla*, the “heroic realism” is first and foremost a well-worn norm that is fiercely and ceaselessly parodied and satirized in the novel; the narrative appears to reject this norm clearly and unquestionably and to stand outside it (although there is a twist to this). *Fóstbræðra saga*, conversely, undermines the norm “from the inside”; the saga narrative is conscious of itself within the imaginary world of the Icelandic sagas and it opens itself up to be “read apart.” As a result, we may ask whether such “duplicité,” such inner conflict of different symbolic systems, is not to be found in other works, including the most famous Icelandic sagas.

X

It may not be all that easy, however, to get a firm hold of the world out of which *Fóstbræðra saga* emerges. Halldór Laxness translates the saga in various respects into the conceptual world of modernity, but he does not exempt the readers of *Fóstbræðra saga* (and perhaps not the readers of *Gerpla* either) from the problems and challenges of interpreting this medieval narrative, facing the world of ideas of a society that is unlike our modern one in some basic terms, in no small part because it is not a *state* in the modern (or even ancient) sense, and is not under the sway of an executive power that we know as a natural part of the social apparatus and which as such shapes our understanding of human relations. We cannot let go of our modern conceptions, and thus the fusion of horizons, which hermeneuticians often see as the basis of communication with older texts, is bound to be characterized by ideational and linguistic conflicts. As a translation, *Gerpla* is exactly a manifestation of such a conflict, an image that is fascinating not least because it does not level out irregularities and disjunctions.

It also finds disjunctions where we least expect them. We experience the constant conflict in Icelandic sagas as a natural element in these works and in the society they describe. In *Gerpla*, Halldór robs the conflict and the violence of their normality and unveils them as a constant outlet of dread.¹⁷ It is one of the distinctive features of *Gerpla* that its various events, just as Þorgeir's neck-hacking mentioned before, are at once jocular and gruesome. We may find that *Fóstbræðra saga* already has indications of such material treatment, as in the famous scene where Þorgeir lets his axe drop to the neck of a shepherd who supports himself on a staff, unwitting and innocent, but "he stood so well poised for the blow" that Þorgeir could not resist seeing his head get whisked away (*Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, trans. Regal, 1997, 347). It is interesting that Halldór chooses not to repeat this scene in *Gerpla*.

Halldór takes such dread to the cruellest extremes; *Gerpla* is a book that is literally aflame with violence and foul deeds. Warfare in *Gerpla* reveals itself as a threat to humanity as a whole; this is an apocalyptic novel. We may wonder whether this is a modern aspect of Halldór's "translation"—whether he is using the symbolic order and discourse of Icelandic sagas primarily to pass a severe judgement on modern warfare, which has the capacity to destroy the whole world, while simultaneously critiquing universal embodiments of power and use of violent force, the worship of leaders, and acts of inhumanity that erupt in the course of war. Thus Peter Hallberg sees the "thrust of the novel" in the "sharp, universal criticism of war which is to be found underneath the humour" (176).

Certainly the critique of war may be counted as one of the main components of *Gerpla*. But the implied author of the novel is far from being a unilateral peacekeeper. Violence and battles are not just the subjects of *Gerpla* but also, in various ways, the life force of the work. In his showdown with the old and great

heroic literature, in his tussle with material that is embodied in words alone, the art of words, which are, nonetheless, Iceland's major national legacy, Halldór Laxness is a fierce guerrilla fighter. Perhaps this can be seen most clearly in the manner in which the implied author identifies with the guerrilla warfare of the common folk against the vicious viking raiders. And then the dread, the horror, is not without a trace of cheerfulness:

En sérhver víkingur sem náði að komast yfir múrinn, þá var hann umkrýngdur og þraungdur af múginum og lostinn margskyns ógöfuglegum bareflum, eða lagður tálguhúknifum og borðknífum, þélum og öllum, nálum og prjónum og skærum, ellegar bitinn til bana af borgarmönnum og slitinn sundur kvikur og gefinn hundum.
(203)

[Every Viking that did manage to make it over the wall was surrounded and thronged by the crowd and pummelled with all sorts of base bludgeons, or stabbed with carving knives and table knives, files and awls, pins and knitting-needles and shears, or bitten to death by the inhabitants and ripped to living shreds and thrown to the dogs.]
(189)

The unceasing strife that characterizes *Gerpla* expresses not only the implied author's censure of warfare but is also a manifestation of his warlike encounter with his subject—a subject with which he feels strong kinship and which stands in a paternal relation to his pen. From this contradiction stem the reactions of scholars who find that *Gerpla* to some degree perverts the heroic ideals of the Icelandic sagas. Steingrímur Þorsteinsson writes that it weighs in against “their outlook on life with their own weapons” (16), while Kristinn E. Andrésson suggests that *Gerpla*'s author even finds himself “in a mental sense in the skin of a viking and then no less akin to Þorgeir than to Þormóður, so that when he advances a cause, and has come to a definite conclusion, he hews hard and fast, relentless in his passionate fervor” (42).

Halldór Laxness, when it comes down to it, is an armed viking who moves boldly against the prevalent native force. The implied author of his novel is thus a sworn brother of the heroic image, which he seems bent on overthrowing. *Gerpla* is therefore a sworn-brothers' saga in more than one sense. And the sworn-brotherhood of the author and the ancient warriors rests on the confluence of the elements that I have discussed: author function, intertextuality, and translation.

XI

The scene most crucial for this sworn-brotherhood, harbouring its yearnings, all its mutual insurance, all its conflicts and inconsistencies, is the battlefield of

language. In an interview with Matthías Johannessen, Halldór relates that while he was working on *Gerpla*, four years of his life were spent learning the Old Icelandic language (22).¹⁸ But he did not just have a hard time mastering the old language, for the language struggle—to stay with the battle imagery—also involves translating the old language into a new one. For, as Jakob Benediktsson points out, *Gerpla* is not at all written in Old Icelandic; “if a novel were to be written nowadays in a language that would be a precise imitation of that of the sagas, it would inevitably become a dead letter, not literature at all”; yet, the language of *Gerpla* is not the prevalent contemporary language either: “It is a language full of life, with a special, charming, and seductive tension between old attributes and a modern style” (42–43).¹⁹

This sworn-brotherhood is characterized, among other things, by a fusion of features that are “marked” variously as old language, modern language, or Halldór’s own personal usage. Readers may even try to pick apart these characteristics in individual sentences: “Eg em kelling afgömul í Rúðu og þú yngismaður af Norðurlöndum, og má vera að eg kynni sögu að segja þínum fóla í tómi” [I am an old woman from Rouen and you a young lad from the North—but it may be time that I tell you a tale, you simpleton] (258; 242).

But in its totality this new language is one continuous deception; a language that does not exist except in this book. This book, however, admits to “recycling” other books. Garðar Baldvinsson has pointed to this open textual awareness in *Gerpla*, how it is “conscious of being a book, of being a truth while also being a fiction” (23). He also mentions how the self-conscious interplay of images, truths, and fictions make the work multi-faceted. The truth of the old heroic image is disclosed as fiction, and yet the author also has doubts about the truths of this disclosure, as it is carried out through fiction, which is inescapably a new image. Behind this multiplicity, in this labyrinth, there stands in the end “the old image of the author who has the appearance of a world builder, he who keeps all threads in his hand and pulls them as needed” (26).

In light of the author function, this *image* of the author harbours a truth about the achievement of the writer Halldór Laxness, an achievement of which *Gerpla* itself is quite conscious and refers to with its title. “Gerpla” [Warrior tale] is not just an ironic word referring to the delusion of the heroic ideal, nor simply an allusion to the warrior lay that Þormóður cannot honour the king with, at the end of the novel, since he says he cannot recall it. “Gerpla” also refers to the fact that contrary to Þormóður, Halldór Laxness has brought forth his tale, composed his heroic lay. He is the creator who becomes a master of the old and silent world, making it speak anew, giving it a new language. The author as the viking of language.

But this viking is also a master of deception, and though he ruptures his verisimilitude by letting us into the dressing room, his language, as already noted, is a whole web of deception, and “Gerpla” a halfway ironic nickname. This web’s

intertextual connections with the old language and the Icelandic sagas is chimeric and fluid. Sometimes he translates “verbatim,” i.e. repeats the “original text” like Pierre Menard, but he also moves away from the older works with stories that are not to be found there. And despite the (old) Icelandic language, we sometimes find ourselves in a *world of language* that seems to have little to do with the world of the Icelandic sagas. This is true, for example, of a paragraph that Halldór himself has stated is his favourite one (Laxness and Johannessen 26–28). It is in the part of the novel that is about Þormóður’s stay with the Inuit in Greenland and manifests the contradictory desire of an author who is enchanted by the linguistic legacy of the sagas but chooses, at the same time, to take it elsewhere and use it to create a “new classicism,” which here is at once Laxnessesque and Homeric inasmuch as it is Greenlandic and Icelandic:

Nú líður af þessi vetur sem aðrir er eigi vóru skemri, og tekur brestum að slá í nóttina, og þefvísir menn segja tíðendi, að þá andaði móðir sjóskepnunnar þey að landi úr hinum firstum höfum þar sem hún á soðningarstað. Og nær sól ekur sínum björtum himinhundum sunnan jökulinn, og túnglbóndinn, vörður lágnaettis, er sofa genginn, þá vekja menn hunda sína jarðneska og bursta af meiðum snjó, og fara að vitja þeirra gjafa er kona hin einhenda hefur upp látnar á ísskörina.
(379)

[That winter passes like others that are no shorter, until cracking sounds begin to red the night, and those in the know announce the tidings, that the Mother of Sea Creatures is breathing a warm breath toward the land from the farthest seas where she has her abode. When the sun drives its bright celestial dogs south of the glacier, and the Moon Man, the guardian of midnight, returns to his bed, men wake their earthly dogs, brush snow off their sled-runners, and go to see what gifts the one-handed woman has left on the rim of the ice.]
(357)

This is an epic realm, but one that is neither the world of Icelandic sagas nor the world of the modern reader. It points both ways, it is a translation but also a mirage spun in the space between two worlds. Not least in this respect is *Gerpla* a book about language and fictional creation while it is also a grotesque anthropological study of the world of Icelandic sagas and our connection with it.

The literary act, the art of fiction, comes closest to admitting that language is a deceptive web, something that has been spun and yet turns out meaning, albeit sometime only halfway. Meanings that we imagine watch over us from all around, but have always come from somewhere else and from another time. When Icelanders say that their medieval literature is a main pillar of their national consciousness and even the existential foundation of Icelandic culture, they are referring to a nearness which is full of distance. They are referring to the activity of translation, to a search for meaning, under the auspices of exile and

anachronism, at least when people have passed beyond the most staid laws of national heritage—and *Gerpla* goes beyond those limits. The method of *Gerpla* and its intertextual links to the sagas rhyme in their own way with creative paths of translation; the pursuit of such paths has been described in trailblazing writings as a mode that resists conformity with the language into which the translated work is brought. The translator swims against the current, taking risks and working in *between* ideological realms and thus forming his work in a melting pot that is located at the dynamic borders between linguistic worlds.²⁰ Such a translation moves us forward to lost times, vanished worlds; it carries surprising news of what we thought was old.

NOTES

1. This is a translation of a remark Helga Kress made, “Gunnar á Hlíðarenda ... hver er nú það?” in a discussion following her public lecture on love and male domination in Steinunn Sigurðardóttir’s novel *Tímaþjófurinn* [The thief of time] at the University of Iceland (October 31, 1987). This article includes translations of Icelandic sources quoted in the original version; see Eysteinnsson 1990 and 2017. In the case of quotations from literature rather than scholarship, this translation provides corresponding passages from published English translations such as Lee Hollander’s *The Sagas of Kormák and the Sworn Brothers* (1949), Martin Regal’s *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* (1997), and Philip Roughton’s *Wayward Heroes* (2016). In short, all translations are those of the present translator except where otherwise noted.
2. Helgi Þorláksson gives an overview of the connection of scholars with their grandfathers in the article “Um hollan missi feðra, fræðayl mjúkra afa og mannbætandi konur.”
3. On the hermeneutic connections between Icelandic sagas and contemporary attitudes, see Vilhjálmur Árnason’s article “Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas.”
4. In “Die Sprache” Heidegger writes, “Die Sprache spricht. / Der Mensch spricht, insofern er der Sprache entspricht” (32–33).
5. The name of the Sigurður Nordal Institute has actually changed since this article was originally published; it is now called “Stofa Sigurðar Nordals” [The Sigurður Nordal Centre] and is a part of the Árni Magnússon Institute of Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík.
6. Cf. Eysteinnsson, “Halldór Laxness and the Narrative of the Icelandic Novel” (2003) and “Halldór Laxness og aðrir höfundar” (1999) [Halldór Laxness and other authors].
7. In the article “Af íslensku menningarástandi” [On the condition of Icelandic culture] which Halldór wrote in 1925 (and which was republished in 1986), he lets on that “Icelanders have arrived at the truth of recognition, that very few sagas are more important writings than much of what is now composed within the country and elsewhere” (46). We may also point to a similar provocative point of view he advances in another of his writings in the twenties: *Heiman eg fór*: “I personally have not had a more boring work in my hands than *Heimskringla* by Snorri Sturluson. I find the thriller about Alfred Dreyfus more notable than the bone-dry descriptions of lawsuits in the Icelandic sagas. ... *Maria Grubbe* by J.P. Jacobsen is a much better work than *Njáls saga*,

- one in which a much deeper and more artistic spirit administers content and form” (63–64). Cf. Þorsteinsson, 10–11.
8. This essay was first published in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* in 1945, then in *Sjálfsgæðir hlutir* in 1962.
 9. See also Crocker in this volume.
 10. In fact, it may be said that we only have recourse to “translations” of sagas, since there are no “original manuscripts,” only copies that also vary among themselves. But this is especially true in the case of publications with regularized spelling. Thus, the standardized spelling used in the Íslensk fornrit series is in its own way a translation variant, no less than the publications that use the accepted orthography of their time. The latter are generally meant to be as accessible to the general reading public; the text itself is meant to be as self-explanatory as possible, so that readers need not have misgivings about the meaning of individual words or be overly conscious of different textual variants. Cf. Crocker in this volume.
 11. Cf. Bloom’s book, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973). Although Bloom’s theory may be applicable here, I have serious doubts about its general explanatory value for the various traits of literary history.
 12. In this excellent article, Steingrímur discusses, among other things, the “filial role” of Halldór as he faces the sagas: how it can be problematic “for a man of talents and excellence to have a world-famous parent” (18).
 13. Helga Kress’s interpretation implicitly suggests that a revision of saga groupings may be in order, as she has in fact pointed out in a description of her own research, cf. *Rannsóknir við Háskóla Íslands* (1985–1986) 47–48. See also Helga Kress’s subsequent studies of Old Icelandic literature in her books *Máttugar meyjar. Íslensk fornþókmennsaga* (1993), *Fyrir dyrum föstru. Greinar um konur og kynferði í íslenskum fornþókmennnum* (1996), and her article in this volume.
 14. This episode occupies *Gerpla* 118–23 and *Wayward Heroes* 111–16; see Kress in this volume for discussion of the grotesque and the character of Butraldi.
 15. “Kiljan” was Halldór Laxness’s Catholic middle name.
 16. On “the victory of the common people” in *Gerpla*, see both Andrésson and Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir in this volume, and both of their works listed in the References. In the article “Um beinfætta menn og bjúgfætta, kiðfætta, kringilfætta og tindilfætta” (1988) for example, Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir also touches on the modern aesthetics in *Gerpla*, such as Brechtian material articulation and the editing technology in film style.
 17. On the horror in *Gerpla*, see also Dagný Kristjánsdóttir, “Aldrei gerði Kristur sálu Þórelfi, vorri móður” (1988).
 18. In the same interview, Halldór adds: “Of course, I sorely regret not having learnt Chinese instead!” (22).
 19. Jakob Benediktsson’s “Um Gerplu” was first published in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* in 1952 and later included in *Lærdómslistir. Afmælisrit* in 1987.
 20. See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s “On Translations,” trans. André Lefevere (2006) and Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” trans. James Hynd and E.M. Valk,

both in *Translation – Theory and Practice: A Historical Reader* (2006), and also George Steiner's *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1998).

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