

Of Heroes and Cods' Heads: Saga Meets Film in *Gerpla*

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ABSTRACT: Halldór Laxness's satirical novel *Gerpla* (1952) is a socially analytic work that lays bare various misconceptions about Icelandic medieval literature celebrated by the Nazis as well as many Icelanders in the first half of the twentieth century. When it first appeared it was considered by many to have been written in medieval Icelandic and some argued that Halldór Laxness had become "the most conservative" of Icelandic writers (Pétursson 40). In reality, the language of the novel is Halldór's own creation. This article reviews the narrative construction of *Gerpla*, considering changes in Halldór's literary career as he began to address the ancient Icelandic narrative tradition (*Íslandsklukkan*) as well as film (*Atomstöðin*) in the nineteen forties. This reveals how *Gerpla* uses methods of both modern film and medieval literature, such as quotation, montage, and shock effect, to present readers with a defamiliarized saga world.

RÉSUMÉ: *Gerpla*, le roman satirique de Halldór Laxness (1952), est un ouvrage d'analyse sociale qui révèle diverses idées fausses sur la littérature médiévale islandaise célébrée par les nazis et de nombreux Islandais au cours de la première moitié du XXe siècle. À ses débuts, beaucoup pensaient qu'il avait été écrit en islandais médiéval et certains affirmaient que Halldór Laxness était devenu « le plus conservateur » des écrivains islandais (Pétursson 40). En réalité, la langue du roman est la création de Halldór lui-même. Cet article passe en revue la construction narrative de *Gerpla*, en prenant en compte les changements survenus dans la carrière littéraire de Halldór, alors qu'il commençait à aborder l'ancienne tradition narrative islandaise (*Íslandsklukkan*) et les films (*Atomstöðin*) dans les années 1940. Cela révèle comment *Gerpla* utilise des méthodes du film moderne et de la littérature médiévale, telles que la citation, le montage et l'effet de choc, pour présenter au lecteur un monde de saga dé-familiarisé.

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Cods' Heads for Heroes and Skalds

Þorskhaus merkir, svo sem kunnugt er, annars vegar höfuðið á fiski þeim er þorskur nefnist, hins vegar heimskan mann, asna, aulabárð ... Öll meðferð þjóðarinnar á þorskhausunum og hugarþel til þeirra ber *séreðli hennar og menningu* óræk vitni. (Finnbogason 191, emphasis added)

[The term *cod's head*, as we know, refers on the one hand to the head of the fish known as a cod, and on the other to a stupid man, an ass, a blockhead. ... The nation's whole approach to, and use of, cods' heads is an incontrovertible demonstration of her *idiosyncratic cultural identity*.]¹

Such were the words of a nationalistic Icelandic academic in the fifth decade of the last century, followed by speculation on whether consumption of cods' heads had had an invigorating effect on the nation's intelligence and poetic talent. Cods' heads were in fact up for discussion in Icelandic papers and journals of the time; in 1950, for instance, it was reported that many complaints had arisen as to the fact that cods' heads, for centuries a staple of the Icelandic diet, particularly in the countryside, were no longer available in Icelandic shops ("Af hverju fást ekki hausar og lifur?" 7). Two years later Halldór Laxness's novel *Gerpla* was published, recounting amongst other things the story of the early eleventh century heroes and sworn brothers Þorgeir Hávarsson and Þormóður Bersason, characters who feature in medieval Icelandic sagas, particularly *Fóstbræðra saga*. *Gerpla* brings a sharp social analysis to parts of the story, including a particular critique of militarism. At the same time the novel exposes various odd aspects of the reception accorded to ancient Icelandic literature during the first half of the twentieth century, by the Nazis no less than by Icelanders themselves: in Icelandic schoolbooks it was predominantly interpreted in the spirit of romantic nationalism (e.g. Jónsson 34–73).

In *Gerpla*, we encounter cods' heads again when Þorgeir and Þormóður descend on a poor farmer after one of their "Viking raids" on an outlying Icelandic district, and demand shelter for the night. They are served with hard cods' heads:

Þeim þótti lítil matarfurða í þorskahöfðunum og tók Þormóður að kveða vísur blautlegar meðan hann reif en Þorgeir kastaði af afli höfuðbeinum og tálknum í gólfið svo að hrukku upp um veggi og rjáfur.
(163)

[They saw little sustenance in the cods' heads. Þormóður sang lewd verses as he picked at them while Þorgeir flung the head-bones and gills violently to the floor so they bespattered the walls and the rafters.]²

The next day Þorgeir comes upon the farmer's son, a young boy, setting his dogs on the heroes' horses, which were busy stripping the farmer's small hayfield. The champion chases the unarmed boy and challenges him to a duel, finally hewing him repeatedly with his axe until he dies of "fjöldá sára" [many wounds] (163). Subsequently Þorgeir gives notice of the manslaughter, adding the following surprising explanation:

Og er þeir voru stignir á bak hestum sínum lýsir Þorgeir vígi bóndasonar á hendur sér fyrir bæardurum, kvað fylgjufogla kappá, hrafn og örn, hafa fengið örgáta sinn, og var hefnt þess er hetjur og skáld voru til settir í gærkveldi að rífa þorskahöfuð. (165)

[When they had mounted their horses Þorgeir turns to the farm door and announces responsibility for the death of the farmer's son, declaring that the raven and the eagle, birds that wait on heroes, had had their fill, and retribution taken for heroes and skalds having been made to pick last night at heads of cod.]

The episode at the farm with the cods' heads does not occur in *Fóstbræðra saga*, although the description of the farmer's son is reminiscent of the death of Hækil-Snorri in the same saga (802–803). The account of these events is one of a number of occasions in *Gerpla* where readers' minds are directed simultaneously to the past, the present, and to an interpretation of the past in the present, thus encouraging them to take creative part in the work. At the same time it bears witness to the level of precision, often at the single word level, that occurs continuously in the novel. The ambiguity of the word *þorskhaus* [cod's head] exploited so that the reader is left in no doubt that the real cods' heads (i.e. blockheads) are the sworn brothers, as is everyone who practices manslaughter or who acclaims it as heroism. To drive the point home, a more formal and non-colloquial term, *þorskhöfuð* instead of *þorskhaus*,³ is used to underline the bitter satire: Þorgeir intends to sound stern and imposing but instead becomes ridiculous.

Although the language of *Gerpla* is Halldór Laxness's own innovation, when the novel first appeared it was assumed by many to be written in the ancient saga language (e.g. *Velvakandi* 6). In the same way there were few who recognized the ambitiously innovative agenda of the novel in its bid to synthesize the structures of traditional Icelandic narrative art and the techniques of narrative art in the age of "its technological reproducibility"—to draw on Walter Benjamin (251–83). It was even affirmed that Halldór Laxness had, with *Gerpla*, become in some ways

“Iceland’s most conservative author” in that he was the only one who “upheld the art forms that their ancestors” had established (Pétursson 40).

Here I shall describe some of the characteristics of the narrative form and construction of *Gerpla*, such as the way language is used to draw the readers’ attention to certain aspects of the medieval sagas no less than of contemporary reality. I shall touch on the changes of direction in Halldór’s literary career in the 1940s, when he turned to traditional Icelandic narrative and at the same time modern cinema. Placing the *Gerpla* narrative in its contemporary context will reveal striking parallels to several Western novelists who, in the first half of the twentieth century, turned to the cinema to enhance their writing. Considering *Gerpla* as satire and parody—with their concomitant irony and defamiliarization—I shall examine how certain of its characteristics may be seen as comparable with both the cinema and the modern novel rather than with medieval Icelandic literature. Finally, I shall conclude my survey of *Gerpla*’s narrative features with a few examples of the way in which Halldór works with material from *Fóstbræðra saga* and other sagas.

The Literary and Social Context of *Gerpla*: Changes in Halldór Laxness’s Storytelling

In his early years of writing, Halldór was not greatly enamoured of medieval Icelandic literature; during the twenties he was mainly preoccupied by the psychological novel. In *Heiman eg fór: sjálfsmynd æskumanns* (written in 1924, published in 1952), he declared that he had nothing to learn from authors like Snorri Sturluson and described medieval sagas such that their style was “sem hiksti bút[að]i sundur frásögnina” [as if a hiccup had chopped the narration into parts] (65–66).⁴ But two decades down the line his tone had changed. *Íslandsklukkan* [*Iceland’s Bell*] was published in the years 1943–1946, or around the time Iceland gained independence (1944). It is a historical novel set in the eighteenth century when Iceland was ruled by the Danes, although it alludes to contemporary reality and evokes, among other things, questions about the oppressor and oppressed, colonies and colonial powers, contemporary superpowers and the responses they provoke from small nations. In *Íslandsklukkan*, the narrator follows the example of his various ancient predecessors in narrating characters and events from a distance and generally avoiding personal involvement. This narration is fundamentally different from that to which readers of Halldór’s previous novel were accustomed.

Political developments in Europe, including both the rise of fascism and the resistance to it, play a role in directing Halldór’s attention to Icelandic history and narrative tradition, not to mention the impending independence of the Icelandic nation.⁵ In the forties, however, when Icelandic society took the final steps to technological capitalism, the question inevitably arose as to how the

novel could appeal to readers in the new order where cinema appeared to be the medium of the future. It was then hardly surprising that Halldór's focus was not solely on the Icelandic narrative tradition but also on the works of foreign authors, both contemporary authors and innovators in novel writing. In 1941, for example, both his translation of *A Farewell to Arms* [*Vopnin kvödd*] by Ernest Hemingway and his edition of *Laxdæla Saga* [*The Saga of the People of Laxardal*] were published, as were his translation of Voltaire's *Candide ou l'Optimisme* [*Birtingur*], and his edition of *Brennu-Njáls Saga* [*Njal's saga*] in 1945.

Hemingway belonged to a group of writers—e.g. John Dos Passos, Alfred Döblin, and Bertolt Brecht—who employed cinematic techniques in their narration in the first half of the twentieth century (Vondrak 257–79). When *Atómstöðin* [*The Atom Station*] was published—a contemporary story in the first person that Halldór wrote immediately after *Íslandsklukkan*, dealing among other things with the reaction of the Icelandic authorities to a request from the USA to establish a military base in Iceland—it was also said that “its technique [is] cinematic in nature” (Benediktsson 77). One can concur with this view, not least since the *Atómstöðin* narration is characterized by frequent changes of scene.⁶

However, while Halldór was writing *Gerpla* he informed his readers himself that he “owed a great debt of gratitude” to the German author Bertolt Brecht, who had been “an organic part” of his thoughts for many years, adding that he had been unable to repay this debt in any way other than by translating the poem “Von der Kindesmörderin Marie Farrar” as “Barnamorðinginn María Farrar” some twenty years previously (1955, 23–24). Those who are in some way familiar with Brecht's work and have read *Gerpla* will be hardly surprised that Halldór saw the need to particularly mention the German author while writing *Gerpla*. Since around 1930 both had the objective of writing works that would change the world (Wizila 7; Guðmundsson 247–49). In *Gerpla*, Halldór endeavours among other things to set up parallels with medieval history, with events leading up to the Second World War, and with the War itself and its consequences; in this way he is already grappling with a theme often used by Brecht.⁷ In his renovation of narrative, the Icelandic author also treads similar paths to those followed by Brecht in his novels, such as in the satire and “crime novel” (Benjamin 8–9) *Der Dreigrosschenroman* [*The Threepenny Novel*] and in the historical novel *Die Geschäfte des Herrn Julius Caesar* [*The Business Affairs of Mr Julius Caesar*—not to mention his short stories and plays. In these stories Brecht endeavours to adapt cinematic techniques to the aesthetic demands of literature and uses the montage technique, as he considers this to be the principal characteristic of modern literature in contrast to traditional literature of the nineteenth century (Mueller 473).

At the same time as Halldór deals with narrative innovations in *Gerpla*, he embarks on a review of specific aspects of the “context in Icelandic literature” and history—to use the words of a nationalistic and in some ways conservative essay by Professor Sigurður Nordal (ix–xxx), which became the final word on

Icelandic literature until well beyond the middle of the twentieth century. The new language created by Halldór Laxness in his novel and the ancient texture with which he endows the narrative are among the characteristics that reveal how innovative his approach is—and how different it became from Brecht's.

Narration and Construction in *Gerpla*

Gerpla can be classified as complex satire, openly borrowing structures from various sources, not least from well-known works of fiction and historical writing. The novel recreates such structures in a new context and merges them into a new whole, presenting its criticism of society and culture with irony as a weapon. The meaning of the irony is mainly decided by two criteria: on the one hand by the interaction between the said and the unsaid and on the other hand by the relationship between the satirist, the interpreter, and the target of the satire. The impact of the irony is rooted in the fact that it is both what it says and also something quite different. It is variously good-natured and teasing, or cutting and offensive (cf. Hutcheon 1994, 57–66). Units are furthermore organized in *Gerpla* in such a manner that the same unit can be ironic or not, depending on the context in which it is viewed. This results in the meaning of the irony being multiple, fluid, and to some degree dependent on the reader (Griffin 64–70). But the key issue is of course that the irony is particularly suitable in social criticism as “the opposite to common sense” (Rorty 74).

As is the case with a number of satires, *Gerpla* shows that the object of its satire is dangerous, or at least has the potential to become so (Guilhamet 7–9). To this end, *Gerpla* more often than not uses parody (cf. Guilhamet 13–14; Griffin 102–109). The parody has been called “repetition with difference,” as one can describe it as one text imitating another with the “imitation characterized by an ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (Hutcheon 1985, 6). It has also been pointed out that there are three main variations of parody: banging, binding, and blending—depending on whether the differing materials brought together seem at odds with each other, whether they are locked together despite the contrasts, or whether they are smoothly married despite their obvious differences (Chambers 7).⁸ The companion of parody is defamiliarization, which shows common things or situations in a new light, thus making them strange and remarkable.

The narrator of *Gerpla* is a nameless twentieth-century man who speaks like a medieval author or scribe when he appears at the beginning of the story.⁹ He uses the first person plural, known as the majestic plural; his language is tailored to the style of the old sagas; and he has a prologue to his story, just as Ari fróði to *Íslendingabók* and Snorri Sturluson to *Heimskringla*. The narrator says in the prologue that he wishes to relate the story of the sworn brothers Þormóður Bessason and Þorgeir Hávarsson, as many interesting tales about them have not

yet been written down. He also itemizes a number of his sources, including *Fóstbræðrasaga hin meiri*—i.e. one of a number of main versions of the *Fóstbræðra saga* that is preserved in the manuscript of *Flateyjarbók* (Kristjánsson 1–16)—thus following the practice of medieval men who wished to enhance the credibility of their stories. The narrator never speaks of the story as a modern novel but rather uses the wording of those who did not know the concept of the author as used in later centuries; he says he wishes to “revise” accounts, assemble them in “one place,” and suchlike (7). This medieval tone is consistent through to the end of the story and contributes to its being a parody.

Among other important aspects that recall narrative practices from previous centuries, one could mention references to sources—cf. various poems in medieval sagas that serve the function of confirming the “veracity” of the narration, as well as references to other sagas¹⁰—and the two kinds of status of *Gerpla*’s narrator. On the one hand, he narrates using the general practice in the Icelandic sagas of letting the story mostly explain itself. Here he is unobtrusive, describing characters and events as if at a distance and adducing common knowledge of foreign and local books when providing information. On the other hand, he is a most important character in the novel. He not only links various parts of the narration together and bridges gaps in time but also provides explanations of circumstances and situations at the story time. His comments cast light on characters, draw political parallels between narrated time and narrating time, and he even makes long speeches. In this respect he is reminiscent of narrators in the *riddarasögur* [Chivalric Sagas], though mostly of his predecessor, the effusive narrator of *Fóstbræðra saga* in the *Flateyjarbók* manuscript.¹¹

It has been maintained that *Fóstbræðra saga* parodies the Sagas of Icelanders (cf. Kress 1987, and in this volume). If one assumes this to be the case, the style in *Gerpla*, and some aspects of the narrator’s stance regarding the content of the novel, not only indicates a link to medieval methods but also in part to the parody itself, i.e. to the extent to which the parody is directed at medieval sagas and their world view.

In fact, one could say similar things about the montage technique. It constitutes, in its simplest form, the organization of narrative units—each with its own specific meaning—in such a manner that a new meaning emerges, the meaning of the whole. Each unit states to some extent a specific truth, although the whole truth does not appear until there is an understanding of which units belong together and how they are connected to form a whole—which they can do in a variety of ways. The film director Sergei Eisenstein traced visual montage techniques back through the ages and was, for example, particularly impressed by them in the works of Leonardo da Vinci (Eisenstein 2010, 305–309). His ideas have been followed up, e.g. in discussion on myths, montage, and visuality in late medieval manuscript culture (Desmond and Sheingorn). The *Flateyjarbók* version of *Fóstbræðra saga* contains what are called “clauses,” short passages that were

long thought to be additions to the “original” *Fóstbræðra saga* (Kristjánsson 82–87). Some of the clauses are characterized by metaphors and are thus figurative, marking breaks in the narration. They are therefore candidates for interpretation in the manner of Eisenstein as montage technique—and the same also actually applies to a number of other aspects of the story. Shock effects that have been linked to montage (e.g. Eisenstein 1969, 230–31; Benjamin 267) may also be included. It is indeed not difficult to indicate examples in the Flateyjarbók version of *Fóstbræðra saga* that can be said to perform the function of shocking, for example when Þorgeir kills the shepherd “af því að hann stendur vel til höggssins” [because he stood so well poised for the blow] (793; *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* 347).

Halldór Laxness first establishes in his own mind what might reasonably be seen as similarities between medieval times and the twentieth century, and uses them in *Gerpla* to draw parallels between the past and present and furnish the story with the corresponding atmosphere. By using the Sagas of the Icelanders and the King’s Sagas, seen as the canon in what is often called the Icelandic School of saga research, he not only goads readers into feeling themselves in the world of medieval narration but also parodies prevailing ideas on medieval sagas and the Age of Commonwealth. Simultaneously he positions himself firmly against various ideas Icelanders have of themselves and their society. Yet despite its medieval style, *Gerpla* has most characteristics of novels that have been designated, rightly or wrongly, filmic or cinematic (cf. Kellman). Three characteristics of *Gerpla* that can be linked to the cinema will be discussed here.

First is the technique of external descriptions—a kind of narration that has been simply characterized as camera eye. In *Gerpla* the narration attests to opposition to the psychological novel; it is directed at maintaining a certain distance between the readers and the characters so that they do not become lost in “tómum einkamálaáskáldskap” [pure private affairs’ fiction] (Laxness 1955, 90), but rather look at everything in the context of the whole and learn lessons from it.

Second, the *Gerpla* narrator continuously knits sources into the text and names them explicitly, a technique that, in addition to the medieval sagas, can be related to the view that movies and photographs have a “documentary quality” which enables them to depict the truth more successfully than literature (Kracauer 302, 306).¹² The variety of quotations—without quotation marks!—and references to sources in *Gerpla* tend especially to widen the scope of the novel. Readers are steered away from experiencing the world into which they have entered as a closed unit without connections to the outside world. At the same time the fiction is brought home to them. Around the time *Gerpla* was published, Halldór had serious concerns that a deep rift had opened between ordinary people and Western authors, many of whom had become self-centred and had turned their backs on life and whatever could be called “alþýðlegt, blátt áfram og áþreifanlegt” [popular, unaffected, and tangible] (Laxness 1955, 199). Various comments from the *Gerpla*

narrator on the situation and circumstances in the eleventh and twentieth centuries, which at first sight seem to be simply an endeavour to achieve the style of medieval sagas, often prove to be based on medieval chronicles, or on the writings of anthropologists or historians on the Middle Ages. The same can most often be said about his references to various books, though there are instances where such references serve the parody and are clearly comic devices to draw attention to some of the issues that conflict with the reader's prior experience. In addition, references are often woven into the text in places other than the narrator's comments and in those instances modern history is no less predominant, particularly the history of fascism and the Cold War. Yet, the references to various books and sources often serve the parody more overtly, comically drawing attention to the issues that conflict with the readers' prior assumptions.

The third and most significant characteristic that can be linked to the cinema is the montage technique. It characterizes the construction of *Gerpla* to such an extent that one might call it a montage novel, in the words of Walter Allen on cinematic texts during the fourth decade of the last century (cf. Feigel 3). Defamiliarization accompanies the montage technique no less than parody does, but the technique aims more than anything at making the readers active participants in the process of creation of the fiction. The arrangement of the material means that they themselves need to connect the units, to consider interactions between them, and to draw conclusions. The creation of meaning, in other words, stands or falls with them.

Montage occurs in several forms in *Gerpla*. Rather than only attributing the aforementioned two roles of the narrator to medieval sagas, one can also say that two domains of narrative have been cut together, i.e. the actual events on the one hand and the comments and explanations of the narrator on the other. In addition there is the fact that the narrator is dialectic, enjoys contradictions, and mediates a socialist worldview—which one can hardly say are the primary characteristics of medieval Icelandic sagas.

Many stories take place concurrently in the book, and the narrative switches between them with frequent cuts. This characterizes the plot as a whole no less than small narrative units. Small sections sometimes prove to be structured in such a manner that each sentence or paragraph is carefully thought out within a unit, which is in turn also a well-thought unit in a larger whole.

Use of the montage technique makes the construction of *Gerpla* quite different from the structures of narratives where only one story takes place, where events follow one after the other with clear causal relationships, and where one or a few characters are in focus until the end. The novel is not first and foremost about certain characters, but rather an illusion is created such that each person is allocated similar space to that which they would have in the world we call reality. However, *Gerpla* makes greater demands on readers, particularly for readers to

actively seek continuity themselves, than Icelandic novels generally did around the middle of the twentieth century. The widely varying interpretations of *Gerpla* during the decades following its publication may doubtless be attributed to how unaccustomed readers were to a novel of this kind (cf. Hughes in this volume).

There is also the fact that the novel is “crime fiction” no less than Brecht’s *Dreigroschenroman*. It shows that Halldór, just as in *Alþýðubókin*, is still preoccupied with the relationship between crime and the nature of the society. In *Alþýðubókin* he says: “Hið borgaralega þjóðfélag, með ójöfnuði sínum, lögvernd ranglætisins og hvernd, er ekki aðeins móðir allra glæpa, heldur skorar það á menn til allra glæpa” [The bourgeois society, with its inequality, legal protection of injustice and military protection, is not only the mother of all crimes, but also challenges men to commit all crimes] (Laxness 1929, 255). There were many who found such a stance difficult to tolerate—not least when it was related to the Icelandic Sagas and Kings’ Sagas (e.g. Haraldsson 8).

Halldór himself later (1965) suggested that we should not interpret *Gerpla* as a socialist novel, but rather as a settling of accounts with Stalinism and Nazism as well as a criticism of militarism and the arms race (cf. Hallberg 1975, 136). In what follows, I shall examine some prior interpretations of the novel and adduce examples.

Chieftains and Paupers

One can read *Fóstbræðra saga* in such a way that it constitutes a parody of a specific literary tradition where the targets of the parody are not least heroic ideas about the obligation for revenge and Icelanders’ dreams of being honoured by foreign dignitaries. The saga, for example, shows that on the strength of family connections with chieftains, scoundrels get away with more than the common people (e.g. 786), but doubt is not cast on the fabric of the society itself. In *Gerpla*, however, the society is the base cause of those events that take place. Some believe that the parties in conflict in the novel are not the common people and the property owners but rather the nation and those ruling the country. In support of this view, it has been mentioned that some prosperous farmers in the story were spokesmen of peace. The farmer most often mentioned as the messenger for peace is Þorgils Arason (Pétursson 40; Hallberg 1956, 502) but there are also examples of Vermundur in Vatnsfjörður being included in this group (Sønderholm 249–50). Both chieftains are introduced immediately at the beginning of the story, and this presents an excellent example of sections that are carefully planned montage constructions. They also jointly show varying interests of property owners, both in saga times and at the time of narration, but for the sake of brevity, only Halldór’s introduction of Þorgils will be dealt with here. With the montage technique in mind, one can interpret his introduction such that it constitutes six montage units as follows:

1. Í þann tíð réð fyrir Vestfjörðum breiðafjarðarmegin Þorgils Arason; hann sat á höfuðbóli á Reykjahólum.
[At that time Þorgils Arason ruled the West Fjords on the Breiðafjörður side; he lived at his estate at Reykjahólar.]
2. Þorgils hafði á úngum aldri stundað farmensku og kaupskap og æxlað fé úr öreigð;
[As a young man Þorgils worked as a seafarer and in commerce and went from rags to riches;]
3. Þótti honum friður ábatavænlegri en hernaður;
[he believed that peace was more profitable than war;]
4. hafði hann keypta við silfri staðfestu sína og svo mannaforráð.
[he had paid for his position and his authority with silver.]
5. Lítil var hann blótmaður, sem títt er um þá menn er fjöld hafa farið og kynst við mart guða;
[He was not a stickler for heathen sacrifice, which is common with men who have travelled widely and encountered many gods;]
6. en þá er kristni kom á land tók hann fram tvo gripi úr kistum sínum, kross góðan með Kristi hinum kórónaða áföstum, vini kaupmanna, og svo líkneski móður hans, en hún er stjarna mikil farmönnum.
[when Christianity came to the country he took two statues from his chest, a good cross with a crowned Christ, the friend of merchants, and the other of the mother of Christ, who is a splendid guiding star for sailors.]

(8–9)

The first unit describes only the area controlled by Þorgils and where he lived. The second unit tells how he became prosperous, and one can expect readers to have very differing perceptions about “self-made men.” The third unit observes, in an insinuating manner, that Þorgils considered his interests to be *better* served by peace than war, which can have a positive impact in isolation. The fourth unit names his currency and how he gained his current position. This is a logical progression from the third unit, regardless of how readers have understood it. Those reasonably acquainted with general history will probably have been struck by the fact that it is specifically mentioned that Þorgils’s currency is metal. He is a representative of the merchants who are coming to power side-by-side with incumbent rulers such as Vermundur, who traces “kyn sitt til norrænna höfðingjaætta” [his lineage to Nordic nobility] (9). Þorgils is a man of new times in trading—silver instead of barter (cf. Gullbekk)—and thus he represents important changes in society. The fifth unit appears at first sight to indicate indifference or impartiality in religious matters, but when the sixth unit is added it gains a new dimension. This perfectly “mundane” personal characteristic, indifference to religion, becomes instantaneously very special: Þorgils proves to

have little interest in heathen traditions not only because of tolerance or indifference, but also because he values everything in terms of money; he is heathen when society and profit require, but is ready with a Christian statue in his chest the minute that Christianity is enshrined in law. It is clear that this unit is placed at the end to defamiliarize all that precedes it so that it now appears in a new light. The pursuit of profit is made Þorgils's most salient characteristic. He uses wealth equally as a measure of war, peace, and religion, and sees everything as a source of profit. By comparison, one should note that in *Fóstbræðra saga* he is deemed “mikill höfðingi, vitur og vinsæll, ríkur og ráðvundur” [a great chieftain—powerful, honest, wise and well-liked] (776; *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* 331) and nowhere is he connected with seafaring, while his brother Illugi is the merchant. Neither is Þorgils described in the saga as “ættlaus” [without kin], as in *Gerpla*, for his kin is traced back through settlers to Sigurður Fáfnisbani.

The montage technique in *Gerpla* not only manifests itself in carefully structured sections, it also provides information in fragments, so that readers must be constantly on their toes. Later in *Gerpla*, Þorgils reveals his own position on wealth and human life when he says “eg hefi auðgast mest af hinu, að drepa eigi menn” [I have prospered most from the practice of not killing people] (324). These words relate to comments previously made by the narrator in the story. He reveals that Þorgils owns a share in a ship with merchants and sees reason to add:

Þeir voru svo kaupmenn að þá keyptu þeir við menn ef þess var kostur, en ræntu að norrænum sið þar sem eigi voru menn fyrir líklegir að verja eigur sínar.
(171)

[They were such merchants as traded with people where possible, but robbed in Nordic fashion where there were no men likely to fight for their property.]

The irony is cutting in these words and refers both forwards and backwards in time. The reader who knows *Egils Saga* [*Egil's Saga*] can smile at how they echo the description of Þórólfur, Egill, and their companions when they waited in their boats outside Lund to decide if they should raid, since they might expect “viðtaka er bæjarmenn væru” [resistance from the townspeople] (425; 87). If the reader is interested in history, it is more than likely that the imperialism of the last century—and contemporary globalization (cf. Petras and Veltmeyer)—will spring to mind, and consequently the manifold relationships between commerce and violence (Findlay and O'Rourke xx, 330–45). Here one should also consider the description of Vermundur, who represents the old bartering society in *Gerpla*—taking his wealth in kind from tenancies and thus having a well-stocked larder (10). Taking this into account, the description of Þorgils gives readers reason to deliberate on those wealthy Icelanders who profited in trading during

World War II. With their advent it became easier to see two distinct factions among wealthy Icelanders, who sometimes had—and still have—distinct interests. In the twentieth century and up to the present day they have been linked to commerce and fisheries. The owners of the fisheries were also merchants until World War II and sometimes paid their seamen with credit in the shops. In this light, the silver and butter of the Icelandic chieftains in *Gerpla* becomes quite amusing.

Accounts of common people in *Gerpla* reveal the structure of society no less than the depiction of chieftains. A key example is the account of Hávar, the father of the hero Þorgeir Hávarsson, which functions as an Icelandic miniature version of major events that are later related as taking place in southern Europe. In *Fóstbræðra saga* Hávar is said to be “mikill vígamaður og hávaðamaður og ódæll” [a great warrior, raucous and unruly] (776), and we are told that he had been driven out of Akranes to the West Fjords for killing. There Vermundur, the local Godi (chieftain), tells him: “Ertu, Hávar, utanhéraðsmaður ... og hefir sest hér niður að engis manns leyfi” [You are not a local person, Hávar ... and you have settled here, with no one’s permission] (777). Vermundur later drives Hávar out because he feels that his son Þorgeir emanated “órói og stormur” [disruption and storm] (777). *Gerpla* differs in this account. Hávar comes from Viking raids without money and fame and becomes a tenant of Vermundur. The story also explicitly demonstrates that his is a world of heroic literature and that he feels that working in the soil and at sea is menial compared to “vega menn” [killing men] (10). His dealings with his neighbours are described as follows:

Hávar bóndi þótti snemma óeirinn í nábýli, sló í rot ágangspening fyrir mönnum og hjó hænsn þeirra eða gögl ef því um náði, en hafði á lofti kylfu sína er menn andæfðu honum; runnu þá flestir undan og forðuðu svo lífi sínu, en margir leituðu á fund Vermundar og báru sig upp við hann.
(11)

[Hávar the farmer was quickly deemed a troublemaking neighbour, clubbing people’s stray cattle and killing their hens, or geese if he could catch them, and raising his club aloft if objections were raised; most ran off to save their lives but many went to Vermundur and lodged complaints.]

Readers have ample opportunity to smirk and come to their own conclusions when faced with binding and blending of the ancient and the new in this passage. An instant parallel can be drawn between the slaying of the geese and *Grettis saga* [*The Saga of Grettir the Strong*] (968; 64). It is also obvious that the description of neighbours encountering Hávar’s club is tailored to descriptions of battles in the Sagas of the Icelanders. However other references to medieval sagas or quotes from them do not as clearly indicate a specific place or places. The term “óeirinn”

[troublemaking] may for example be found in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* [*Gisli Surrsson's saga*] in the description of Snorri the Godi (871). In *Laxdæla saga* [*The Saga of the People of Laxardal*] there is also an account of the killing of Þorgils Hölluson (1637-38; 103). Thus the collision between the ancient and the new can become more severe in readers' minds if they envisage, side-by-side with beheaded hens and geese, the body of Þorgils Hölluson—whose head has been severed at the instigation of Snorri the Godi.

In the account of Hávar, much fun is made of the prevailing attitudes toward various primary characteristics of society as manifested in general language use, and references are made no less to medieval sagas than to the years in which *Gerpla* was written. When Hávar is introduced, the narrator makes, for example, the following comment on Viking raids: “eigi urðu slíkar ferðir flestum mönnum févænleg atvinna um þær mundir” [for most, such trips showed no profit at that time] (10; emphasis added). In *Gerpla* Vikings play a comparable role to the criminal gangs in many of Brecht's works, such as the aforementioned *Dreigrosschenroman* and *Die Geschichte vom Herrn Julius Caesar*, as well as the play *Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui* [*The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*]. Both thugs and Vikings are presented as parallel actors to the ruling propertied class, thus warning against the extortive nature of a particular social order. We could therefore assume that in the middle of the last century the comment on Viking raids would have a broad implication in the novel's historical context: its readers might either have thought of the many Icelanders who profited from the war, talking of the “blessed war” and worrying about peace (cf. “Útrýming atvinuuleysisins,” 1945, 3)—or turned their minds to conflict in distant countries such as Korea.

Few who have written about Hávar in *Gerpla* have dealt to any significant degree with the social revelations of the narration. They discuss his dream of being a hero and sometimes the formative influence his life has on his son Þorgeir. But they seldom note that by killing poultry and cattle Hávar breaches an important social precept: Thou shalt not steal. This is in fact a key issue. Hávar's neighbours complain so much to Vermundur that he later recommends to Þorgils Arason that he find a place for Hávar to live outside the West Fjords, as Hávar is related by marriage to Þorgils. On that occasion the Godi from Vatnsfjörður says the following words:

Er það mikil óhamingja, segir hann, er menn koma slyppir úr hernaði og setjast í friðgott hérað og taka að höggva hænsn manna til að bæta sér þau frægðarverk er þeim varð eigi auðið að vinna á öðrum löndum.
(12)

[It is a great misfortune, he says, that people come empty-handed from war and settle in a peaceful district and then turn to killing people's poultry to make up for the heroic deeds they were not able to perform in other countries.]

The parodic reference here is cutting, as the words “mikil óhamíngja” [great misfortune] are not least used in the Sagas of the Icelanders, in *Heimskringla* and in *Ólafs saga helga* in the case of a person being killed. But this is not all. The banging of the parody occurs when the readers realize that the words “frægðarverk” [heroic deeds] mean killing. In the Godi’s opinion, it is fine to kill people abroad, but evil to steal and kill poultry in your own neighbourhood. If it has previously occurred to readers that Hávar the tenant would probably not get away with subjecting poultry to the fate that Snorri the Godi afforded Þorgils Hölluson, they can now consider who stands to gain from the laws and injunctions of society.

Gerpla’s account of the treatment of Hávar by Þorgils (and other chieftains) is particularly shrewd. When Þorgils gives Hávar livestock and has a house built for him in Borgarfjörður, it is because he feels “eigi ... örugt” [not ... safe] having him “í ríki sínu við Breiðafjörð” [in his domain at Breiðafjörð] (12). As an isolated montage unit, the chieftain’s behaviour may at first glance appear to be somewhat noble. Yet this conceals a toxic irony: Þorgils simply wishes to move the problem away from himself, by expelling Hávar from his territory. The narrator states that Þorgils placed Hávar precisely in the Borgarfjörður of the saga world, a “blómganlegt” [flourishing] district where there are, quite notably, “mart ríkismanna” [many rich men] (13). The wealthy and powerful men of Borgarfjörður, it turns out, also consider Hávar a poor addition to their district. The narrator relates:

Höfðu þeir ráðagerð með sér um það hversu bægja mætti frá svo ágætu héraði ódæmum sem þeim er stefnt var hingað skillitlu fólki eða vændismönnum af öðrum landshlutum.
(13)

[They schemed as to how they could avoid, in such an excellent district, the misdeed of sending here rogues and worthless rabble from other parts of the country.]

The scheme is not mentioned again. There is, however, a related reference in the text that strikes an extremely strange note: Hávar’s arrival in Borgarfjörður is called “ódæmi” [a misdeed]. This word is used among other places in *Grettis saga*, about the conduct of the revenant Glámur when he simultaneously breaks the back of a farm worker and drives a bull crazy in the byre (1007). In addition, the word “skillitill” [of little worth] is a reference to words spoken by Jón Loftsson in *Íslendinga saga* [Sagas of the Icelanders]. The circumstances of the case are that the chieftain Einar Þorgilsson intends to steal from a widow and is beaten so thoroughly by her sons that he dies. When Jón gets the news he says: “þó þykir mér í óvænt efni komið ef það skal eigi rétta er skillitlir menn drepa niður höfðingja” [I consider however that a strange situation has arisen if the case is

not brought when worthless rabble kill chieftains] (182). As before, class distinction is the target of the parody; moreover, the attitude of the chieftains toward Hávar is defamiliarized, with unexpected and dismal ironic connotations.

The irony is not lessened when Jöður Klængsson, who lives in Borgarfjörður, is introduced. Similar to Hávar, he finds little joy in farming, but his position in the society is quite different:

Var hann lítil jafnaðarmaður við marga menn, *vígamaður góður* og bætti menn sjaldan fé en neytti höfðingjafylgis. Bú átti hann lítið og óduglegt, og vissu menn eigi gjörla hvaðan honum komu bitlíngar.
(13; emphasis added)

[He had little respect for parity with many men, was a *good warrior* and rarely paid compensation, but enjoyed support of chieftains. His farm was small and feeble, and people had little notion of where he got his favours.]

The narrator underlines the difference in status between Jöður and Hávar when he mentions that Jöður owned a “graðhest forkunnlegan” [remarkable stallion] while Hávar had a “garðjálk ... rauðan” [red packhorse] (13). This also prepares for the coming conflict between them about the horses. When Jöður is a short distance from Hávar’s farm on his way to Akranes, Hávar shakes his “skellu” [rattle] (13) in the farmyard, with the result that Jöður’s stallion bolts up the mountain. In response Jöður seizes Hávar’s packhorse. Hávar demands the return of the horse when Jöður is on his way home and cuts him loose from the packhorse train, complete with harness. Jöður does not stand for this and their altercation ends with him and his son killing Hávar.

In the account of Jöður and Hávar there is a mocking reference to the law-book *Grágás* [Grey Goose]. In the chapter entitled “Of hrossreiðir og hrossarásir” [On horseback riding and horse racing] it says, among other things:

Ef menn reka hross frá mönnum þar sem þeir hafa áð eða skaka hrossabrest að þeim í þingför eða brúðkaupsför og tefja hann, varðar það þriggja ára útleið frá landinu en fjársekt ef um aðrar farir er að ræða.
(179)

[If anyone should drive horses away from others where they are resting, or shake a rattle at them on the way to parliament or to a wedding and so hinder their journey, the penalty shall be three years’ exile from the land, or fines in the case of any other sort of journey.]

It is, however, possible to steal in many ways. If Hávar is guilty of stealing a horse then Jöður is hardly less guilty. *Grágás* says that the penalty for riding another

man's horse past three farms is lifelong exile, but to have another man's horse follow him past two farms to the third is three years' exile (175, 179).

If one considers Jöður to be a thief, then the comment that he enjoyed "support from chieftains" may gain new significance. It echoes the continuous egging on by the Organist in *Atómstöðin* [*The Atom Station*]: "ef þú ætlar að drýgja glæp þá verðurðu fyrst að ná þér í miljónung, annars ertu hlægileg persóna" [if you're going to commit a crime then you must make sure to find yourself a millionaire, or otherwise you are ridiculous] (256–57).

Few have recognized such references in the exchanges between Hávar and Jöður: these references are implicit, among other things, in single words that are inconspicuous, and some are even mostly decided by syntax. When Hávar demands the packhorse from Jöður, he says for example:

Nú er að skila aftur hestinum, og eruð þér djarfir menn að taka gripi bónda uppí opin augu þeim bónlaustr og án umræðu. Var eg slíku gamni óvanur þá er eg var vestrí fjörðum.
(14; emphasis added)

[*Now is the time to return the horse, and you are audacious men to take a farmer's animals in front of his eyes without leave or deliberation. I was not used to such games when I lived in the West Fjords.*]

Hávar speaks as haughtily as Eiríkur blood-axe does to Egill Skallagrímsson at York: "Hví varstu svo djarfur Egill að þú þorðir að fara á fund minn?" [*Why were you so audacious Egill that you dared to present yourself to me?*] (456; emphasis added). But Hávar is also reminiscent of the main hero of *Njáls saga* [*Njal's Saga*], Gunnar á Hlíðarenda, at Rangá: "Nú er að verja sig. Er hér nú atgeirinn" [*It's time to defend yourselves. My halberd is here*] (189; 65; emphasis added). In other words, Hávar talks like a king or hero—and reveals the implicit fantasy with his final sentence which refers to circumstances and events with which readers should be familiar, namely the hopeless lot of the tenant and his forced removal from one district to another.

Jöður is no less haughty than Hávar when he responds to his address:

Meir höfum vér þó heyrt að þér væri bægt að vestan fyrir illverka sakar og hænsnaþjófnaðar, og eru býsn mikil er aðkomumenn í Borgarfirði, slíkir sem þú ert, digrast svo mjög við oss heimamenn.
(14)

[*We have however, heard further about how you were driven out of the West for wrongdoing and theft of poultry and it is intolerable that newcomers to Borgarfjörður, such that you are, should behave so insolently with us local people.*]

Jöður speaks like a ruler and chieftain. He is their mouthpiece and is in reality the person that Hávar dreamed of becoming when he went on Viking raids. Within the story, Jöður's response echoes discussions among the powerful men of Borgarfjörður about "rogues from other parts of the country"; outside the story, among other things, it plays on the words of Vermundur in *Fóstbræðra saga*: "Ertu, Hávar, utanhéraðsmaður ... og hefir sest hér niður að engis manns leyfi" [You are, Hávar, not a local person ... and have settled here, with no one's permission] (777). Moreover, the contrast between "locals" and "outsiders" is an almost waggish allusion to Icelandic reality in the middle of the last century and up to the present day. One can say that for many decades news of mischief from the countryside has often been accompanied by the comment that outsiders were responsible.

Many people reacted strongly when *Gerpla* was published (e.g. Haraldsson 8; Drangsnæs 2). When one considers the account of Hávar, one has a sneaking suspicion that the exposure of society and culture as manifested in the story—with attendant shock effects—cut too close to the quick of Icelanders' self-image. One could for example interpret the exchanges between Hávar and Jöður such that Icelanders' image of themselves as small chieftains is lampooned; two common men imitate that which is most reprehensible in the wealthy class—each in his own manner. Nor can one come to any other conclusion than that Icelanders' parochial thinking, which always allows for evil coming from the outside, is treated in the same way. The imagined community, to use the words of Benedict Anderson (1983) to describe Icelanders' perception of themselves as a nation, relies on the stories they have told about themselves for centuries; the myths they have built up about their characteristics. Yet in *Gerpla* such myths are, in short, lampooned and ridiculed.

The killing of Hávar can be seen as the beheading of this self-image—where readers who most resolutely participate in the exposure in the story can be both in the role of the killer and the killed. With Jöður and his son they inflict one wound after another on Hávar and even hew him "ótt og títt" [repeatedly] (15), while he is fallen and unconscious. They themselves then lie in their last spasms as the boy Þorgeir takes a look at his father:

Blóð og heili vall út sem grautur þar sem brotinn var hausinn, en öll mynd var af andlitinu eftir högginn, skrapp til annar armleggur í axlarliðnum um leið og maðurinn linaðist í andlátinu, og var það kvik hans hinst.
(16)

[Blood and brains leaked out like gruel where his skull was broken and his face was obliterated by the blows, one arm jerked at the shoulder as the man relaxed into death and this was his last movement.]

Here we might maintain that more than one sense is being played on. Only the head is in focus—and there is an arm that one can not only see but also hear in its spasm. This is a direct appeal to people’s conception—at least that of those in the West (Classen 135–38, e.g.)—of themselves as having a large head, long limbs and small torso; to the basic conception manifested in children’s stick-drawings (Ackerman 95–96). In addition to this the face has gone, the main manifestation of what we feel distinguishes us from each other. And in an instant the stories of the past that constitute our identities—stories of heroics and honour and human dignity—all evaporate. Yet perhaps the most difficult challenge for readers in the middle of the last century was that *Gerpla* confronted them with context in Icelandic culture. One example of this must suffice.

Þorgeir Hávarsson is seven years old when his father is killed. He is a teenager when he avenges him. On this occasion Þorgils Arason says: “Laungu var sæst á það mál og bætur teknar” [That case was long since settled and compensation taken] (51). The chieftain chooses his words like modern politicians when they wash their hands of deeds that the public does not like; he speaks impersonally and uses the passive voice—as though the settlement and compensation are no business of his. Yet who should have been responsible for them, if not he? There is every likelihood that Þorgils set a trap for Hávar and for the men of Borgarfjörður; he had got rid of his relative, who is “óeirinn í nábyli” [a troublemaking neighbour] (11), under the pretext that he was helping him; but had trusted that the Borgarfjörður chieftains would have him killed—and would subsequently have to pay. It is at least clear that the demise of the poultry-thief and the resulting compensation covered Þorgils’ prior “outlaid costs” for the small farmhouse and cattle.

Final Words

I have attempted here to show how Halldór Laxness in his novel *Gerpla* makes use of *Fóstbræðra saga* and other medieval sources, while at the same time he innovates on the structure of the novel. Various conclusions can be drawn from the examples I have given, but my final focus must be the dealings between Þorgils and Hávar. They show amongst other things that it is not only possible to steal in more ways than one; it is also possible to be “peaceful” in many ways. If one deliberates further on these matters, comparing past and present, the following question may confront us: Is context in Icelandic culture simply implicit in a continuum of domestic sagas and poetic art, as people often maintain? Is it not rather decided by how the language through the centuries has been used to mould people’s ideas, for example ideas on what kind of theft, and what kind of peace, should be considered exemplary?

NOTES

1. All translations are those of the author, except where a separate citation is provided. Because specific wording is often important to the argument, particularly in the case of *Gerpla*, this article often employs italics. Wherever italics occur within quotations, the emphasis has been added.
2. This article provides its own translations of passages from *Gerpla*.
3. *Höfuð* is the formal Icelandic word for head, while *haus* is used of animals or colloquially/pejoratively of humans (Blöndal 305).
4. See discussion of the 1924 manuscript of *Heiman eg fór* on page 5 of the 1952 print version.
5. In the Independence Agreement from 1918 there was a provision for its review after 22 years (Þorleifsson 174–75).
6. It should be noted that Halldór had shown interest in cinema since the twenties, see the chapter “Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928” in his collection of essays *Alþýðubókin* (1929, 199–243). He also tried to promote himself in Hollywood in the thirties (cf. Hallberg 1956, 56–73; Guðmundsson 215–33).
7. We could note for instance that Hitler’s rise to power was achieved with the help of several wealthy individuals in Germany and abroad who profited from their support (it has transpired that their support was far greater than has previously been assumed, cf. Ferguson and Voth)—and Ólafur digri [Olaf the Stout] came to power in Norway by virtue of the fact that a section of the Norwegian propertied class profited from his accession: Sigurður sýr offers these people bribes. Hitler got away with killing, jailing, and torturing people in Germany without the propertied class lifting a finger as long as they saw no threat to their own interests. The accounts of German exiles regarding attitudes in the countries to which they had fled are useful in this connection (Wagner 36). Ólafur digri gets away with murder and torture in Norway in the same way as Hitler, until King Knútur [Cnut] comes to hear that the Norwegian peasantry is about to take matters into their own hands. It is also worth noting that Nazi phraseology finds its way into descriptions of Þorgeir Hávarsson: he is for instance “more fond of iron than butter”—cf. the slogan “Kanonen statt Butter” (Corni and Gies 359).
8. It could also be helpful to use the theory of *conceptual integration or blending* (Fauconnier and Turner) to define the satirical, parodic, and ironic characteristics of *Gerpla*, not least if one were specifically examining the reception of the novel.
9. We assume here that Halldór Kiljan Laxness is himself in the role of the narrator. In Chapter 52 of *Gerpla* the narrator and the actual author become one and the same: “Og þá er vér sem saman tíndum kómum í Veradal einn dag þúsund ára síðar ... lifði af Ólafs konungs sögu eigi utan þytur í laufi.” [And when we the compiler came to Veradal one day a thousand years later ... nothing remained of the saga of King Olaf but the rustling leaves] (473–74).
10. The *Gerpla* narrator often refers to “English books” or “English annals” (e.g. 185, 189, 195, 204, 301) and it is clear that he makes use of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. He also quotes from Icelandic medieval poetry and refers to the medieval sagas (e.g. 7, 221, 287, 297, 302).

11. Examples could be *Vilmundar saga viðutan* [*The Saga of Vilmund the Outsider*] (1951, e.g. 31) where the narrator combines the narrating time and narrated time; while in *Elís saga og Rósamundu* [*Elye of Saint-Gilles*] the narrator adds comments to explain the characters' actions and provides information for the reader (1951, 35, 71–72).
12. Here one might also use the term “intertextuality” in a broad sense (cf. Johansen and Larsen 126).

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