

A Modern-Day Saga in Fancy Dress: Contemporary Social Critique in Halldór Laxness's *Gerpla*

KRISTINN E. ANDRÉSSON

TRANSLATED BY LARISSA KYZER

ABSTRACT: This article was written by literary scholar, publisher, and socialist parliamentarian Kristinn E. Andrésson (1901–1973) shortly after *Gerpla*'s publication in 1952. However, it was only published nearly twenty years later, on the occasion of Halldór Laxness's 70th birthday. It situates the novel within its sociohistorical context and reads it as an incisive critique of its contemporary milieu, rather than simply a brilliant reimagining of the sagas. "A reevaluation of the past is a stipulation of the book, but not its goal," Kristinn writes. Rather, by casting the romanticized heroes and ideals of the Viking age in a harsher light, Halldór not only reclaims the sagas, "allowing Icelandic literature to stand for peace instead of war, for life instead of death," but also consolidates his longstanding role as a vocal opponent of the American military presence in Iceland and global nuclear proliferation.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article fut écrit par Kristinn E. Andrésson (1901-1973), érudit littéraire, éditeur et parlementaire socialiste, peu après la publication de *Gerpla* en 1952. Toutefois, il ne fut publié que vingt ans plus tard, à l'occasion du 70e anniversaire de Halldór Laxness. Il situe le roman dans son contexte sociohistorique et le lit comme une critique incisive de son milieu contemporain, plutôt que comme une réinvention brillante des sagas. « Une réévaluation du passé est une stipulation du livre, mais non son objectif », écrit Kristinn. Plutôt, en peignant les héros et idéaux romancés de l'ère viking dans une lumière plus crue, Halldór se réapproprie non seulement les sagas, « permettant à la littérature islandaise de représenter la paix plutôt que la guerre, la vie plutôt que la mort », mais consolide également son rôle d'opposant de longue date à la présence militaire américaine en Islande et à la prolifération nucléaire mondiale.

Larissa Kyzer is a writer and translator based in Brooklyn, New York.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In his original article, Kristinn Andr sson was addressing a readership well-versed in contemporary Icelandic history, as well as the country's rich literary tradition.¹ As such, he sometimes makes offhand references with which contemporary English-speaking readers may not be familiar. I have, therefore, added several contextual footnotes, each of which is marked with "TN," or Translator's Note. Kristinn himself included one note in the original text; this is marked as an "Author's Note."

Kristinn's somewhat ornate writing style—peppered as it is with idiomatic phrases and unexpectedly metaphorical descriptions—is certainly unique, and is atypical of the academic writing that many readers will likely be used to. As such, although I attempted to retain the author's style, cadence, and sometimes colourful word choice in this translation, I did make some adjustments to the English text in the interest of clarity. I have, for instance, occasionally opted to employ an active voice—more common to English writing—where Kristinn used passive sentence constructions. I also broke up some of Kristinn's longer and wordier sentences, as well as divided his paragraphs—some of which run for over a page in the original—into multiple, more easily parsed segments.

Finally, all of the novel quotations cited in this article have been taken from *Wayward Heroes*, Philip Roughton's 2016 English translation of *Gerpla*. For ease of reference, I have included page citations for this work after each quote. Moreover, in addition to using Roughton's translations for the novel quotes, I have also adopted the same character names and spellings that he uses throughout *Wayward Heroes*: for example, Cnut Sweynsson for Kn t Sveinsson, King  thelred of England for  dalr dur Englandskonungur, and King Thorkell the Tall for  orkell hinn h vi.

The Ornamental Cloak

halld r has come a long way since he finished *The Atom Station*, a modern-day story set in Reykjav k, five years ago. This author is as irascible as the loon, and one never knows where he's going to surface next. With his new novel, *Gerpla*, he's leapt many centuries back into the ancient era of the Vikings and from thence taken his inspiration, fashioning a great, ornamental cloak for the work from the ancient fabric of the golden age of the Icelandic language.

I shall not spend much time describing the external attire of this work. It is clear to every Icelander who reads *Gerpla* what an astonishing achievement it is to have, as Halld r does, such a great command over the expressions, vocabulary, style, and tenets of the sagas that he is able to create from these elements the unadorned language that is characteristic of the classical form that *Gerpla* embodies. Halld r has shown yet again, and never to better effect, that his way

with words and talent for linguistic inventiveness have no fixed limits. In *Gerpla*, he's plumbed the deepest waters of the Icelandic language and hauled up great wealth for the modern reader. For those who are accustomed to reading medieval texts, the language of *Gerpla* will feel familiar, as if one were reading a brand-new Icelandic saga, albeit one with a more challenging style—wordier and transformed by a defter hand. For those who have little familiarity with medieval texts, *Gerpla* will doubtless seem impenetrable at first; these readers will find the story to be a very heavy read, although neither the beauty of its language nor the force of its style will escape anyone.

Gerpla is explicitly written in the style and spirit of the Icelandic sagas. One of the Sagas of Icelanders, *Fóstbræðra saga*, provides, so far as it is possible, the basis for the novel. At the start of the novel, Halldór is completely faithful to the plot of *Fóstbræðra saga* and to its main characters, for whom *Gerpla* keeps the same names—Þorgeir Hávarsson and Þormóður Bessason Kolbrúnarskáld—as it does indeed for many other characters. The author makes it very clear where he stands in the beginning. He has taken it upon himself to compose a new book about these two West Fjords men, having “drawn from numerous obscure sources information that seems to us no less credible than the tales that people know better from books” (8).² In this way, *Gerpla* has the authentic form and framework of the Icelandic sagas, but at the same time the author also has the opportunity to periodically interject events from the present day into the narrative, such as when he says of Ringsaker: “I passed by there one morning in late spring” (293) or explains that the skulls of saints “were preserved in the Cathedral of Holy Wisdom in Kiev down to the days of Bishop Sigurgeir, and were seen by us, who, in our great poverty, have put together this little book” (412).

Gerpla also takes after the Icelandic sagas in its structure, which is very different from Halldór's earlier novels. This is an event-driven story, rather than a character-driven story. Neither Þorgeir nor Þormóður sustain the narrative as much as Bjartur of Summerhouses in *Independent People*, for instance. One might recall how restricted the sphere of action is in *Independent People*—it mainly takes place at one small croft. Here, the setting encompasses the better part of the world as it was known at the time of the sworn brothers. Outside of Iceland—that is, in the West Fjords and Borgarfjörður—the book takes place in Ireland and England, in Normandy in France, in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, in Kiev in Garðaríki,³ in Greenland, and at the Apostolic Palace in Rome. It is divided into 54 chapters, each with its own unique style, but many of them with multiple settings. The author imbues each place and every nation that he introduces with distinct characteristics so that behind even minor chapters in *Gerpla* there's always a terrific amount of research into the national history and social customs of the time that the story takes place. The author has taken pains to base everything in his fiction on historically accurate grounds—he's even been to most of the places he describes. He went to “take a closer look” at Greenland (as he said in a 1952

interview with *Tíminn*) and “tried to soak up the local atmosphere and get in touch with the events’ original setting.” And although there are but few descriptions of nature—and those just to set the scene, highlight events, and reflect them in a more complex light—they have a memorable effect and affirm the author’s remarks.

The quantity of the book’s material, along with the vast distances that it covers, make its reading more difficult and eat away at the simplicity of the plot. The main characters are not always at the fore. Early on, Þorgeir and Þormóður are usually together, but later they go their own ways and the story follows Þorgeir for a time, and then Olaf the Stout, until Þorgeir is no longer part of the story and Þormóður becomes the main character. Neither of them are present at the Apostolic Palace, but rather it is Bishop Grímkell, one of the novel’s secondary characters, who appears there. One of the primary challenges in *Gerpla* is to maintain suspense and balance across a complex, global narrative set in various countries and to channel countless competing narratives into a single stream.

Most of what Halldór does in *Gerpla* is done in order to give it ancient ballast, as well as an ancient appearance. It should be as if it were an ancient saga. There’s no doubt that the author has intensively studied the period in which the novel takes place and familiarized himself with the latest scholarly writing so that the story can stand on a trustworthy foundation, introduce new perspectives, and act as a re-evaluation of the past. I have heard from a leading historian that *Gerpla* is the best source he has read about the middle ages in Iceland. Nevertheless, scholars will be able to identify a variety of perspectives put forth by the author of *Gerpla*. It is worth keeping in mind that Halldór is not writing a historical text here, but a novel, and so he must make use of different methods. In some instances, he diverges from *Fóstbræðra saga*, the *Saga of St. Olaf*, and other ancient texts when availing himself of source material, taking then a free hand and using them according to his needs, occasionally changing place names, events, and so on. At any rate, he would surely have seen little point in simply rewriting these texts.

What is the author’s intention in writing *Gerpla*? Is he having a go at writing a new Icelandic saga, pitting himself against the medieval *skalds*, measuring himself against them or testing his mettle in a new battle, that is, mastering a new style and enriching his own language?

It would be difficult to deny that there’s a little of each in this work, but the author’s object is something different, something greater. Halldór takes great pleasure in being playful, in fiction as sport, and he often goes at it full tilt, leaving in his wake various amusements or provocations for his readers. But producing art for art’s sake is still one of his lesser traits or aims. He sees his role as being much bigger than that of a novelist.

Halldór doesn’t start writing a novel except out of the deepest passion—out of a compelling social and cultural necessity. In each of his books, he has wrestled with major issues. When he goes back in history with his subject matter or settings,

he does so in order to gain a better vantage of the present day and to strike a more enduring and severe blow against it. In *Iceland's Bell*, he bore the historical burden of avenging Iceland's debasement under foreign rule. In this novel, he also has a duty to discharge against the present, one greater and more sweeping than he has undertaken before. Of course, it is important in itself to want to master a bygone style and language and to compose a work on the level of the Icelandic sagas, but in reality all of this has simply been done because the author has also set out with a greater goal, that is to say, not a purely personal or artistic one, but rather a social one that applies to the present day.

At first glance, it may seem when reading *Gerpla* that Halldór is tearing down the ideological world of the heroic sagas, and this obviously cuts many Icelanders to the quick. But one only needs to understand a little of the novel before it becomes clear that it is, in its entirety, a modern-day story and a critique of the present, and that the medieval attire that it dons is fancy dress and nothing more. But Halldór's critique is quite radical and complex, and therefore, the story requires considerable concentration from the reader. The book is both so intricate and exacting that breaking it down to its most basic parts is no easy task, and certainly not one that can be done succinctly. There is much in it that relates to poetry and love, and exalting and celebrating its beauty is best left undone—each reader should take pleasure from that which speaks to him most in the novel.

This article will just touch on the main ideas of the work, as well as its obvious objective and the incisive critique that it sets forth.

The Heroes' Ideals and Aspirations

As the title indicates, *Gerpla* is a story about champions,⁴ a heroic saga—or else, its reversed image. The titular heroes are the sworn brothers Þorgeir and Þormóður, as well as Olaf the Stout. Hero, skald, and king are the three pillars of the heroic ideal. Þorgeir defines heroes and skalds thusly:

A hero is one who fears neither man nor god nor beast, neither sorcerer nor ogre, neither himself nor his fate, and challenges one and all to fight until he is laid out in the grass by his enemy's weapons. And only he is a skald who swells such a man's praise.
(184)

Their shared aspirations are to gain the friendship of a great king, fight at his side in battle, and compose for him an immortal lay. Each one depends upon the other.

The boyhood dreams of the sworn brothers came to life in the world of the sagas and poetry:

More than once, while sitting outdoors, they bandied visions of ancient kings consecrated to the gods: Jörmunrekur, King of the Goths, Helgi Hundingsbani and Sigurður Fáfnisbani, King Hálfur's champions, and other outstanding men. At times, Norns flew by in swan dress, stretching their necks and singing, and they heeded their songs, feeling as if some were sung precisely to them. Eagles flew by as well. (65)

Þorgeir is a hero of the classic mold, the archetype that appears in their imaginations and dreams—he drank the heroic ideal with his mother's milk. He constantly quotes his mother Þórelfur, who taught her son that words “are entirely worthless but for the praise befitting kings, swords, and battle” (24), and that “the only persuasions capable of solving a dispute are the truths spoken by swords. A man's doughtiness in conflict, his valour and cunning, prove his worth. Whether his life is long or short, whether he stands or falls in battle, makes no difference, if his deeds are resplendent with glory” (24). Moreover, “she never burdened him with chores, instead teaching him that farm work was for beggarly folk and fishing was for slaves” (25). Þorgeir lives according to these dictums and always follows them to the letter. Women want to placate him and his patrons conjure up for him images of a tranquil life, but none of this has an effect on him, for, as he reproaches Þormóður, “he who truckles to a woman is lowest laid” (68). He continues straight ahead, invariably, his only thought to find someone to fight and to attain glory in battle, never admitting defeat nor wavering from the commandments of his mother, and chided by many for his stupidity. Nevertheless, “Þorgeir says that as far as his stupidity is concerned—as with anything else—weapons alone would be the true judge” (133).

Þorgeir is of one world, Þormóður of two. The latter is introduced as follows:

From his father he learned poetry and other arts, and even at an early age could relate much lore of the Northern kings and jarls most intrepid in war and other noble pursuits, as well as of the Æsir, the Völsungar, the Ylfingar, and the renowned heroes who wrestled with ogresses. In addition, the lad had excellent knowledge of the great passions men shared with women in the world's first days, when Brynhildur slept on the mountain, and he knew stories of the swans that flew from the south and alighted on the headlands, cast off their dresses, and spun men's fates. What is more, he was fluent in the uncanny lore predicting the end of the peopled world and the twilight of the Gods. (16)

Þormóður has the same heroic ideals as Þorgeir and knows that the skald's sovereign duty is to “swell [the] praise” (144) of the hero, but the powerful forces of life and love pull him away from these ideals. He even forgets them for a long time, and would perhaps have given them up entirely, if Þorgeir had not so harshly reminded him of them and thereby shaped his destiny no less than the ogress

and the Valkyrie that toss his life-egg between them. When Þorgeir's "head of destiny" (297) fetches Þormóður at home, he heeds the call undaunted, walking away from his manor at Djúp, which was "more bounteous and brighter than any other place in the world" (447), and from "a swan whose like has never been seen among queens" (447), in order to embark on a journey to avenge Þorgeir. As he says:

I handed it all over to a foreign slave for the sake of the glory that is superior to every other possession, and the praise that the skald is elected to offer to a mighty king and his champions, so that he may live among gods and men throughout the ages.
(447)

The Palace of Dreams Collapses

Throughout the course of the novel, the ideals of these sworn brothers take a considerable beating. In reality, their heroic deeds are entirely different from what they were in their words and fantasies, not yielding them the least bit of glory. Þorgeir's crusade around the West Fjords consists of slaughtering crofters and robbing them, or slaying the defenseless and blind. But most ignominious are his dealings with Butraldi, "the champion" (109), who Þorgeir intended to slay, but then didn't dare to, leading Gils Másson to taunt him, saying, "right now, folk all over Iceland are laughing at how the hero let a measly wretch make a fool of him" (133).

Even less glory awaits him abroad. After the ship that brought him from Iceland wrecks on the coast of Ireland, he's cast, wretched and penniless, into a band of Vikings and is witness to more "murderous deeds" (243) than honorable and heroic ones, as kings take turns using these mercenaries to suppress the peasantry. Standing alone at the end of a battle after the others have fled, Þorgeir is cornered by a mob that makes him a laughingstock, strips him of all his weapons, breaks these in front of him, and bids him "to scam like a stray dog" (235). Þorgeir then has "no idea what destiny awaits him, because he cannot hear the din of wings of those women who fly in swan-dress to determine heroes' fates" (235). He wanders into a large, thorny thicket where "an adder coils round his foot and bites him" (235) and "he finds it quite ludicrous to be laid low by an adder's bite rather than a weapon" (236).

A shepherd boy leads him to the home of a solitary housewife, who attends to him and dresses his wounds. But Vikings killed her husband and Þorgeir finds that "here Norsemen have had little glory" (238). An old crone is then brought to his bedside to speak with him in the Norse tongue. She rebukes him, saying,

Trolls take your valour and your warrior fashion. ... And as for your murderous deeds, they are worthy of praise by none but the fools who sniff along after you, whom you call your skalds.
(243)

When Þorgeir doesn't agree to marry the widow, "to sit here and grow soft, squandering [his] manhood in love games" (243), then

The housewife flung a broom at him as he limped out the door, while the old woman remarked that there went a leper who would assuredly suffer an inglorious death someday, detested by all and succorless.
(244)

No less are Þormóður's defeats when he travels "westward to Greenland, and then far north of the world of men for three-and-a-half years" (453) without managing to avenge his sworn brother and idol. After great hardships, he finally makes it to Norway to seek an audience with Olaf the Stout, to whom he believes Þorgeir Hávarsson, who had been the king's greatest champion, had pledged his fealty. He composes a lay for the king. But the most distressing truth still awaits Þormóður when, finally, the foundation is yanked out from under the sworn brothers' palace of dreams. The king they considered "the greatest in the North and all the world" (382) displayed none of that magnificence that, in their eyes, surpassed all others, nor did they attain through him the glory they had dreamed of.

When Þormóður's ship arrives in Norway, the crew members "were told of the changes that had taken place there: King Olaf Haraldsson had been toppled and driven to the East by his enemies, and most of his friends had turned against him" (376). King Olaf began his campaign in Norway in the ancient Viking manner, with burnings and murders; and when chieftains and petty kings conspired against him, as at Ringsaker, he takes them by surprise, expels several of them from the country, and has others hanged or maimed. Halldór relays a gruesome account:

There, as is told in Icelandic books, Olaf Haraldsson blinded King Hrorek of Hedmarken, then pulled the tongue from the mouth of King Gudrod of Gudbrandsdalen and clipped it in two at the roots.
(292)

Finally, after seven years, farmers reduce his forces so greatly that he must "flee with his household by the shortest route out of Norway, eastward over the mountains" (374). When Skald Þormóður goes to an inn at Nidaros to sing the praises of King Olaf Haraldsson and his champions, saying "King Olaf Haraldsson's warriors were my closest kin, and he who had the noblest heart was closest of

all” (378), the townsfolk answer: “King Olaf the Stout’s army was made up of none but cowards and moochers, and here in Trøndelag you are better off never speaking the names of firebugs and thieves” (378).

The next blow comes when Þormóður hears from the lips of skald Sigvatur Þórðarson, who had been this king’s “marshal and faithful friend for no less than ten years” (382), that he did “not recall ever having heard the king mention” (378) Þorgeir Hávarsson. The story goes, however, “that when the hero displeased the king, the king sent him on a perilous mission to Iceland, to kill Icelanders” (387). To this, Þormóður says: “I would have been better off losing my life in the arms of a wicked mistress, or among trolls, than to have to listen, weaponless and defenseless, to such malicious slander” (387).

Yet again, Olaf gathers forces and returns to campaign again in Norway. Before this, Bishop Grímkell, his most trusted missionary, went to seek an audience with the Pope in Rome, to plead King Olaf’s case and ask the Pope to consider the king’s achievements in Christianizing Norway, while Grímkell himself requested to be conferred “the same rank and authority as the bishops of Bremen in Norway” (432). The Pope then says:⁵

This Olaf belonged to a band of Scandinavian pirates that foreign kings hired to fight for them. He was among those enlisted by the Duke of Normandy to burn Chartres Cathedral. Then he brought fire and destruction to Norway for a long time, but fled to a tributary of the Emperor in Constantinople and the Patriarch, our enemy, to consort with heretics. For his conduct, he is excommunicated by the laws of God.

(434)

Grímkell succeeds, however, in placating the Pope with tributes of gold and silver.

Regarding Þormóður, it may be said that no less significant defeats await him in Norway than those that Þorgeir experienced with the peasants of Rouen. Icelanders in Nidaros

fetch an aged peasant woman, an expert healer, to treat [Þormóður], and he remains bedridden on a farm for the rest of the summer. ... When he is finally able to return to his feet, he is, of course, quite unsteady, since both of his legs are lame, and neither his hair nor his teeth grow back, nor the fingers or toes that frostbite had taken. His youthful beauty can never be reborn.

(397)

Once recovered, “Þormóður’s only option now was to go from door to door and earn his living in such labor as tends to extend one’s days rather than one’s fame, for instance, mucking out peasants’ pigsties and leading their goats to and from pasture” (398). Being “scarred by sickness and decrepitude” (398), it is said that “the skald’s mind wandered to the power and authority of Cnut Sweynsson” (399)

to the point that he “persuaded himself to rework his lay for King Olaf in praise of King Cnut Sweynsson” (399). Then he journeys to Denmark, but he is dismissed from Cnut the Mighty’s palace gates as a beggar, while skald Sigvatur Þórðarson sits “arrayed in precious velvet” (402) at the feast within.

So Þormóður returns to Norway to seek an audience with Olaf the Stout. He hears the talk of labourers and farmers on their way to Stikelstad, where they are gathering to battle and expel the king’s band of ruffians. Meeting these men,

Þormóður grips one of the peasant’s clubs, laughs, and says: “What do you think you wretches can do with your staves against the king’s men’s storm of steel?”
The peasant replies: “In war, those get the worst of it who put faith in steel.”
(442)

Finally, there comes that great moment when Þormóður stands before King Olaf Haraldsson:

he steps forward and addresses him, speaking loudly and clearly: “I am the skald Þormóður Bessason from Iceland, your champion Þorgeir Hávarsson’s sworn brother. Pray listen, my lord, while I sing you a lay.”
(452)

To this, the king replies:

“This wretch must be mad. ... We certainly do not recall having ever heard that name—though some Icelandic imbecile by that name may have stumbled his way into our band back in our Viking days.”
(452)

Later that night, before the battle at Stiklestad, Þormóður sees the king groveling in the grass and overhears his anguish when he addresses a cairn and then meekly asks after the Icelandic skald:

“Ease your king’s mind awhile now, skald,” says Olaf Haraldsson, “and deliver me your *Lay of Heroes* by this cairn tonight.”
After some hesitation, the skald replies: “I can no longer recall that lay,” says he, and he stands up slowly and hobbles away, leaning on his cudgel, and disappears behind the cairn.
(463)

A Reevaluation of the Viking Age

It was noted earlier that the author makes a point of giving his fiction historically reliable footing. *Gerpla* was written in light of recent research on the Viking era, and it is specifically in order to reveal the novel's origins that the narrative has been allowed to occupy so much space and the story allowed to expand to so many places. Above all, it is a tale of war with much rattling of sabers and descriptions of weaponry, militarism, and the murderous exploits of warrior kings and their mercenaries, the Norse Vikings.

There are enough examples of their savagery and combat methods in the book that it could be called an uninterrupted indictment. Of King Thorkell the Tall and his sacking of Canterbury, it says:

Having a rather scanty population, particularly for mounting a defense against a Viking fleet of two hundred and forty ships, the town is taken without a fight. The Vikings seize everything of value within it and burn the town's churches and monasteries, as well as the king's castle, to cinders. ... English books record that the Norsemen then burnt every house in the town to cinders, and cut down any person unable to escape. Drove of dead bodies floated down the Stour River, says one book, and the town's soil and water both ran red with blood. Women and youths they loaded onto ships, calling them their cargo.
(175–76)

On the treatment of the hostages, it says:

These were disfigured in various ways: some had their hands and feet severed, others had their noses or ears chopped off. People mutilated in this way were nicknamed “nubsy” or “stubsy” by the Vikings. No small number had their eyes gouged out.
(178)

In this way, the novel is undeniably a reevaluation of the Viking Era, evoking an altogether different image than the heroic ideal that has long existed, not least in Icelandic medieval texts and fiction—court poetry in particular was composed about the glorious works and largesse of kings.

Gerpla critiques the true value of medieval texts, which to Icelanders is a sensitive issue. As it says:

Although some books state that the Norsemen had axes so sharp that they could cleave men from head to toe, the way wooden rafters are split, or cut men's heads off and slice their limbs off their bodies without needing a chopping-block, or halve a fleeing enemy with one blow, making him fall to the ground in two parts, we

believe all this to have been dreamed up by people who actually wielded blunt weapons.

(135)

During Þormóður's argument with the townsfolk over who is greater, Norwegians or Icelanders, he says:

We took no possessions from Norway apart from the lore of skalds, warrior ideals, and tales of ancient kings. To Iceland, we brought Mímir's head, and Boðn, the vessel of the mead of poetry, yet here you remain, dull-witted, bereft of skalds, and speaking a corrupt language, with no glory of your own making. Norway will never have any glory, apart from what Icelanders bestow on it.

(379)

To this, the townsfolk reply:

it is high time to have done with the glory bestowed on Norway by Icelanders. Icelanders had never portrayed Norwegians in poetry or sagas as anything but bullies and crooks, mustered by their rulers to ride roughshod over the populace and trample it underfoot. Icelanders consider none to be men apart from those who kill people en masse.

(379)

Similarly, when Þorgeir Hávarsson hears Skald Þórður from Apavatn, a Jomsviking, recite a lay praising the exploits of King Thorkell the Tall and his triumph when he wasted Canterbury and conquered London, he remarks:

I am tired of listening to your twaddle. What a liar you are—and a feeble skald—when you say that we sacked London (210) ... yet you know better than anyone that in London, piss and pitch were poured on us, and we were sliced with table knives like cured shark, and those who did these deeds were women and decrepit, helpless old men.

(212)

Snorri Sturluson trod softly when he assessed the value of praise poems as sources. But while there is an uncompromising historical core to *Gerpla's* reevaluation of the Viking Era, one must also keep in mind that the author is writing a piece of fiction in a polemical style, and that he renders everything in hyperbole, as he is wont to do. Thus does he achieve an intellectual understanding of the Viking frame of mind, and he emulates Þorgeir no less than Þormóður: no sooner has he presented a perspective and reached a definitive conclusion than he hacks at it over and over again with a fiery aggression. This style of Halldór's has never been more exacting than in *Gerpla*.

In and of itself, the historical reevaluation of the Viking Era in *Gerpla* provides no simple explanation nor qualification. The author would not so harshly assault the hero worship of the ancient skalds that Þorgeir and Þormóður embody if he didn't know that these same ideas characterize Western history and are alive in even more ghastly forms in the present day. A reevaluation of the past is a stipulation of the book, but not its goal. The author is creating for himself a platform from which to aim a long-range missile at our time. In all aspects, even in its word choice, the novel reveals that its goal is to critique the present day—and only this can account for the intensity of its style.

A Genuine Critique of the Present Day

Gerpla has been written at a critical point in the history of the Icelandic nation, and few have taken this fate more to heart than Halldór, as is best evidenced by *The Atom Station*. But these are also times in which the terrifying danger of a new world war that would make use of nuclear weapons hangs over all mankind; and the capitalist lords in the United States threaten the world's inhabitants with a plan for the annihilation of whole cities to scare petty kings into falling in line. And yet, there is also the widespread mobilization of the masses in defense of world peace. Clashes over war and peace have moved into an international arena. *Gerpla* reflects these clashes—they are the undercurrent of the book and anchor it. It has been a feature of Halldór's novels that they bear the likenesses of their times, and they have always been connected to those social conflicts and battles that he himself has waged. To see this, one need do nothing more than look at his works side by side—his novels and those articles that he wrote at the same time.

Gerpla has been in the works for the last four years and is an explicit continuation of *The Atom Station*. The conflict over the military base, NATO, and military occupation no longer concerns the fate of Iceland alone, but rather that of all mankind, and Halldór has taken an active role in this struggle. He has written numerous articles about the years that are paralleled in *Gerpla*. Many actual events show up in the novel in some form: the sayings of contemporary war heroes have been inserted practically unchanged, the self-defense of the common people in *Gerpla* bears a clear resemblance to guerilla warfare against fascism, and I have the word of the author himself that in one instance in *Gerpla*, he has staged an incident from the Korean War. *Varnarlið*, or "defense force,"⁶ is also a common term throughout the novel. Invariably, the sense in which contemporary warmongers use it is the same as that of the rulers in the novel, signifying them as traitors to their own countries, like modern-day plutocrats.

Countless such examples from the book are supported through comparison with Halldór's articles from the last few years. In a speech given at Þingvellir on Iceland's National Day, June 17, in 1952, Halldór said of the military occupation:

Some of the spin doctors who hold themselves as the guarantors of this conquest have taken to calling this foreign army “The Iceland Defense Force” and in so doing, no one has noticed or heard about several attacks that the defense force has made here. On the contrary, it seems that this christening of the foreign army signifies but one thing, that by “defense force,” they mean troops that are supposed to protect the country from Icelanders, and prevent Icelanders’ self-determination in their own land and country.

In *Gerpla*, rulers and kings frequently call on a foreign Viking army to suppress the peasantry at home, calling that army a *varnarlið*. As Þorgeir says: “Vórum vér til keyptir af stjórnarmönnum yðrum að gerast þeirra *varnarlið* í Normandi” [We were hired by your masters to defend them in Normandy] ([1952] 2011, 211, emphasis added; 2016, 241). King Æthelred of England is safest in his country when he has a foreign army: “He considered hostile foreign armies less of a threat than his own subjects” (174). Therefore, he offers to “láta opna þeim sérhverjar dyr í Lundúnaborg, og skuli þeir heita *varnarlið* borgarinnar” [open every door in London to the Vikings, and to designate them *protectors of the city*] ([1952] 2011, 167, emphasis added; 2016, 190, emphasis added).

When the Cold War was at its height in 1950 and every capitalist pawn stooped to the whims of the United States government under the threat of the atomic bomb, instructions were issued in Denmark that reveal how close to madness politicians in the West were. A war against Russia was thought to be imminent. Copenhagen would be razed to the ground in the event of a nuclear explosion and a large proportion of its citizens would be killed. All surviving Danes would carry a card with their names and a measurement of how much radiation each of them had undergone in the bombing raid. These instructions appeared in the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Aftenavis* (May 17, 1950) among other places, given by the national defense advisor, a man by the name of Christensen. A year later, the national defense secretary, Petersen, issued a decree that amounted to the deposition of the Danish king, government, and the army general once nuclear war began, in as much as any safeguards would be useless.

Another incident should be mentioned: when a hundred million people from around the world signed the Stockholm Appeal regarding a ban on nuclear weapons, Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury, urged his clergy not to sign it and offered various justifications by way of excuse, all of which Halldór tore apart in one of three articles he wrote in 1950.

Halldór combines the current events mentioned above and inserts them in *Gerpla*, as may be observed in the following passage:

It is also the greatest of heresies for people to believe that Christ ever stated, *in carne* or *in spiritu*, or that the Holy Spirit ever decreed *in synodo*, that churches and holy relics, clergymen, women and children or other defenseless folk are to be spared, *de facto*, from destruction by fire. ... In such a case, a swift verdict shall be

rendered: when Satan rears his head, no decree issued by a king or alderman or lawgiver or warlord shall apply.
(217–18)

These words are put in the mouth of Robert, Bishop of Rouen, and Bishop Grímkell delivers the same message:

But as long as that peace remains unestablished, we have the words of all the eminent bishops and Church fathers and holy doctors, as well as the decrees of the Lord Pope. And Christ himself, who rules over Judgement Day and the world's end, says, when he preaches the sword, that it is neither prudent nor sensible to enact and unreservedly observe laws that prohibit the slaying of men or the destruction of settlements that deny the redemption of the soul.⁷
(290)

Halldór has not only waged his battle in words, but also in deeds. While the shackles of military occupation were being forged around Icelanders, the lie that they were in danger of an attack from Russia was harped upon every day. All of a sudden, the republic in the east that had saved mankind from fascism and lay wounded after the Second World War supposedly wanted to threaten the United States and wage atomic war on it. Many here in Iceland were appalled by these attempts to deceive the nation, and Halldór was one of the agitators who founded MÍR, the Russian-Icelandic Cultural Alliance, and became its president. At the same time, he took the initiative to found an Icelandic Peace Committee that made an effort to promote, among other things, a more widespread signing of the Stockholm Appeal and to take an active part in the work of the global peace movement. After Iceland had been turned into a stronghold and ensnared in a military alliance with capitalist nations, it was equally vital to increase an understanding of the U.S.S.R. through direct cultural links and also to make it known on an international stage, and from within the global peace movement, that it was not the will of the Icelandic people that shame and mortal danger be brought upon them by living alongside a foreign military power's base of terror.

In the 1950 introduction of the first issue of *Tímarit MÍR*, the magazine of the Russian-Icelandic Cultural Alliance, Halldór names examples of “the unhealthy blindness that governs the judgement of public media outlets regarding the culture of the Soviet Union.” He says that MÍR was established to “overcome this unhealthy blindness,” and goes on to state that:

I am thus certain that a more intimate understanding of the mindset of the Soviet people would be good for us. For my own part, I'll say that in the young nation that I have become acquainted with, optimism reigns equally alongside a youthful faith in the world we live in, in man himself, in culture as the truly redemptive force of mankind, and in peace as the basis and origin of human life on earth.

He proceeds by saying:

What is important for us to know about that superpower with the other prevailing worldview is not gossip, slanderous speech, and invective, and not all kinds of half-truths, misrepresentations, and distortions of issues, but rather facts, and facts alone.

In an article that appeared in *Tímarit máls og menningar* with the title “Ísland og samsærið gegn heimsfriðnum” [Iceland and the conspiracy against world peace], Halldór said: “I cannot understand that man who wants to be called an Icelander, but would turn Iceland into the military base of a foreign nation. The day that Iceland hands itself over to a foreign power as a military base, it is no longer Iceland and we no longer Icelanders.” Later, at the Nordic Peace Conference in Stockholm in 1951, he said:

Remember, I come from a Nordic country that has received, on top of imported warmongering, the honour of an imported army, and this army is now building an enormous military stronghold that shall pit my peaceful motherland against nations and countries that it is unthinkable that Icelanders should have ever taken issue with. The establishment of this foreign military base in Iceland is, in itself, a hostile action against the Icelandic nation.

This heated battle of words and deeds against the present-day forces of war is the beating heart of *Gerpla*. It is about the fate of Iceland and of the whole world, and that alone explains the ardency and fire of its style.

The Common Man as Hero

It was stated earlier that *Gerpla* is a heroic saga, or else, the reversed image of one. What was meant by that is that the novel's three “heroes” do not sustain the work, that each endures the others' shame, and that none of them carry out heroic deeds the likes of which were celebrated in ancient books or live in their imaginations. And the main hero, Þorgeir, is not by any means allowed to receive a death befitting a hero:

Yet on one point all the authorities agree, and not a book has been written nor a tale told that holds this in doubt: that Þorgeir Hávarsson was killed in his sleep, not cut down in battle, and what is more, that he lost his life not to the weapons of a hero or indeed of an honorable man who had earned distinction or a good name.

(301)

The sworn brothers are not, in reality, the heroes of *Gerpla*, and even less so is Olaf the Stout. Rather, these men are the novel's targets. The heroes and victors in *Gerpla* are neither the warriors nor warrior kings, but rather the common man, the peaceable masses that halt these men's encroachments, exhaust their resources, and knock the weapons from their hands. As the novel says:

Books on the art of war state that nothing is more perilous for a valiant warrior wielding a sword or other noble weapon than to find himself pitted against a peasant armed with a post or a tree stump, and indeed, learned men believe that Þórr's hammer Mjólfnir was made of wood.
(232)

Throughout *Gerpla*, warrior kings and renowned heroes meet with failure and suffer defeat at the hands of the masses; it is unnecessary to name examples. The concerns of the masses are asserted everywhere. In the sworn brother's altercation with Jörundur the priest (a semi-literate commoner), the latter's final response makes just such an assertion:

Then it was that Christ displayed his full munificence and authority, when, with his overflowing wealth, he ransomed both king and slave at the same price, lifting and straightening the infirm and the bent, teaching them many a bloom-bearing hymn.
(60)

And later, during Þorgeir's quarrel with an elderly Irish monk, the latter says, "you shall be granted no relief as long as you pride yourselves on your name and rank above those who have nothing" (168), after which, the old man adds:

I will now answer your previous question, concerning how we returned here, despite having been either beheaded or bartered. In brief: the same men who buy us tonight, we shall sell tomorrow—and the poor men whom you behead at sundown, each and every one shall rise again with two heads at dawn. Those men whom you shackle now shall shortly be borne on wings.
(170)

Halldór consistently shows complete faith in the common man and his triumph.

The role of slaves in *Gerpla* is interesting. Þormóður's wife, Þórdís of Ögur, considers her slave Kolbakur an equal to him, takes Kolbakur as a lover, and, in reality, trusts him more than she does Þormóður. In *Iceland's Bell*, Halldór writes: "A fat servant is not much of a man. A beaten servant is a great man, because in his breast freedom has its home" (388).⁸ Slaves in *Gerpla* are great men and wiser than others. As a young maid, Þórdís asks Kolbakur: "How can a man as comely as you ... be a slave, for others to beat at will?" The passage continues: "Heroes

and skalds came to my home in Ireland,' said he. 'Why do you not cry when you are beaten?' asked the girl" (36). Kolbakur then enumerates all that he has already endured and experienced and explains, "that is why, young woman, I do not cry" (36).

After Þorgeir's head visits Þormóður where he lives in bliss with Þórdís at Djúp, she wants to enable him to undertake his bound duty to avenge his friend. And so she sleeps with their slave Kolbakur and has by him a beautiful baby boy,

fiery-haired and squint-eyed. Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld comes to see the boy, and after looking him over for several long moments, greets him, bidding him welcome to rule lands, Iceland as well as Ireland.
(316)

At first, after having discovered the situation, Þormóður intended to kill the slave. Kolbakur tells him: "my life has seldom been less precious to me than now, and I will not beg for it if you are intent upon killing me" (311), and lays his head on the chopping block under Þormóður's ax. However, "Þormóður flings his ax aside and tells Kolbakur to stand up" (312) and the slave returns to his work. The passage continues:

Þormóður sits watching him work for some time, without saying a word. Finally he stands up. "It may be," he says, "that you speak the truth: that slaves will inherit this land when we heroes and skalds have fallen into oblivion, and my children will learn your wisdom—that only cowards put faith in steel."
(312)

Many times after this does Þormóður repeat that he laid everything in the hands of the slave, even his "swan-winged Valkyrie" (383). The author of *Gerpla* is, therefore, certain that it is the downtrodden who will inherit the earth, although Þormóður is also allowed to say: "I look forward to being dead when your Irish wisdom prevails in the world" (312).

The Danger of Fictional Revenge

It is in keeping with *Gerpla*'s historical-as-contemporary objective that King Olaf Haraldsson is made the novel's target and receives its most pitiless treatment. This is not without grounds. He was the first Norwegian king to trespass upon Iceland and his demands regarding the establishment of a military outpost on the island of Grímsey are quite applicable to recent history. Einar Þveræingur's speech,⁹ which saved Iceland on that occasion, is still today the most forceful appeal to Icelandic patriots to defend themselves against the military base demands of the American government, and it is quoted many times in the novel.

In the wake of the previous demand for a military base, there came a loss of independence, also brought about by the Norwegian king, under whom the Icelandic nation suffered for seven years.

There was then an excess of reasons to bring the Norwegian king to account in *Gerpla*, no less than there had been with the Danes in *Iceland's Bell*, but rather more, as Norwegian rulers continued to tread the same paths and bear no little responsibility for Iceland being seduced into joining NATO. In an article entitled "Atlantshafsbandalagið" [NATO] that Halldór published in *Tímarit máls og menningar* in March 1949—after, of course, he had already started thinking about writing *Gerpla*—he has severe words for Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs:

Halvard Lange broke with Nordic society and invited in the American cartel, almost exactly like Vidkun Quisling wanted to invite in, and did invite, the German cartel—all in order to triumph over the world's radical working-class movement.

And:

Is his crusading spirit against the liberators of Northern Norway so strong that he would work, on top of everything else, to hand over the remainder of Norway's wealth and Norway's sovereignty, in the hope of getting to knock about the Soviet Union in a war that his soulmates in North America hope to wage against them? Through the steps he took just the other day, he succeeded in tricking half of Scandinavia into a military alliance and now it is ever more likely that three Nordic nations will get tied to the back of this war machine that has nothing to do with us, and which the residents of Wall Street want more than anything to drive into the Kremlin, the same way Hitler did. It is said that those whom the gods would destroy, they first drive mad.

This is still the only thing that explains the intensity of style when Halldór, in his description of Olaf the Stout, cuts the sainted king down to size and plucks him of all his feathers. *Svá skal hersis hefnd við hilmi efnð*—thus, the warrior's revenge is repaid to the king.¹⁰

Another important aspect of *Gerpla's* goal bears mentioning. It's a well-known fact that Nazi leaders in Germany exploited ancient Icelandic literature and the heroic poems of the *Edda* in order to add some lustre to their militarism and slayings. In *Gerpla*, Halldór wants to do away with this abuse of the dead. He thinks the time has come for ancient Icelandic texts and Icelandic skaldic genius to no longer support warmongering heroes.

He is again defending Iceland and upholding the nation's honour. He does this in *Gerpla* by allowing Icelandic literature to stand for peace instead of war, for life instead of death. And here we arrive at one of the main explanations for the author choosing a medieval basis and medieval dress for the novel. If a work written on Iceland's behalf had to be able to triumph over ancient Viking worship

forever, then it had to stand on the same footing and be composed with the same genius. The author of *Gerpla* refuses to recite his lay for the gods of war.

Coded Messages

Coded messages are a part of fiction. One such message in *Gerpla* has to do with how the author makes perfidy a universal trait of women and poets, although such psychology can be found in ancient texts. Women “always break their vows” (315), play their lovers against one another, and determine their deaths: “All their oaths are vanity, hollow and pointless” (315).

Likewise, all skalds are treacherous and easily bought with fame and money, in every instance singing praises to that king who is perched the highest. When Þorgeir reprimands Þórður, the skald from Apavatn, for his flattery of King Thorkell, Þórður answers: “It goes ever for kings as for vicious dogs: they lie on their spines when their bellies are scratched. That is the lot of skalds” (212). Sigvatur Þórðarson is described as a “finely-dressed man” (278). At first, he is the skald of Jarl Haakon Ericsson, but once Olaf Haraldsson has captured him, skald Sigvatur wastes no time stepping onto the ship of King Olaf and asking if he might recite a lay for him: “Jarl Haakon Ericsson sits at the helm of his vessel, his fur cloak wrapped about him, and watches silently as the skald changes ships” (280). Later, when Sigvatur sees that Olaf’s star has faded, he changes vessels yet again and seeks fresh fame for himself in the court of Cnut the Mighty.

Þormóður and Sigvatur have a conversation during which Þormóður recites “the great lay that he composed with a fiery heart for King Olaf Haraldsson” (385). Sigvatur says that poem is genuinely very good,

yet it has one drawback. A good lay is of little worth if it is composed too late. Praise bestowed on a king other than the one that now rules the land is worse than silence, however well-worded it may be. A lay for a fallen king is no lay. A lay for a victorious king, who now rules the land—that alone is a lay.
(386)

To this, Þormóður replies:

When in Iceland I heard tell of Sigvatur Þórðarson, I never imagined that he, when his luck waned, would be first to betray his troth to his king—who, through the valour of his champions, conquered Norway. In the old lore that I learned from my father, a far different kind of gallantry is extolled.
(388)

And here is honour in its true sense. Later, however, Þormóður doesn't withstand temptation when, thirsting for fame and fortune, he goes, admittedly with some shame, to seek an audience with Cnut the Mighty.

In *Gerpla*, there is no leniency for heroes, kings, or skalds. But these three pillars of the heroic ideal must also contend with something else. Women create peaceful or pleasure-filled lives for men that, for a while, are filled with a happiness that repels great heroes, but attracts skalds. And so the mysterious contradictions that the author brings together shine through. Without heroes and skalds, there would be no story.

An Ancient Tree Bears New Fruit

Many people who see *Gerpla* solely as a critique of antiquity think that the author is unreasonable, or even that he wants to diminish the worth of ancient Icelandic texts. But in reality, this is far from the truth. The author's accusations are only leveled at these texts' notions of heroism, their idolization of kings, their reliability as sources about the Viking age, and their romanticism—not the texts themselves, their genius, nor their artistic value. No one has sung higher praises of the ancient texts than Halldór did in *Iceland's Bell*, and he calls them “ljós yfir Norðurlöndum” [lights over the Nordic lands]. Much about the word choice in *Gerpla* is, indeed, cutting—the way in which honour and valour, for example, are continually made to coincide with brutality—but these usages have their true origins in *Fóstbræðra saga*, which the author relies on. But the novel works to challenge the beautiful examples of true honour and friendship in the Icelandic sagas, lest it be blinded by partiality.

Antiquity is not really Halldór's specialty, which is instead, first and foremost, the present day. And with regards to antiquity, and even those notions of heroism that appear in the sagas and ancient poetry that the critique opposes, *Gerpla* is not at all advocating for its destruction. The sworn brothers, the heroes of the novel and agents of aggression and acts of violence throughout the West Fjords, stand isolated so that peaceful farmers, such as Þórdís and Vermundur and other people from Djúp, look upon them with disapproval and as objects of ridicule. And of course the peaceful way of life at Djúp is cast in a bright and lovely light that contrasts with the saber rattling of the sworn brothers. And when these Icelandic heroes, with their ideals about valour and heroism, leave home and become acquainted with the marauding of warrior kings and Vikings abroad, their ideals suffer bitter setbacks. Appalled by these men's murderous deeds and other terribly unheroic combat methods, the heroes keep themselves apart and even refuse to participate when their ideals are attacked.

A good example of this is when Þorgeir is in battle with the peasants of Rouen when the other Nordic Vikings have fled:

As for Þorgeir Hávarsson, there is this to tell: when the chieftains bid each man save himself, and most take to their heels and vanish, he alone stands his ground, calmly, in Icelandic fashion. After standing there for a time, he observes folk approaching him with lighted lanterns. These men holler something in the Frankish tongue at him ...

At which, he yells back:

“I am an Icelander,” says he, “and I do not recall old tales ever mentioning valiant fighters fleeing from battle. It has always been the vow and war cry of us Vikings that, when we enter the fray, we shall fight to the end and never desist as long as any man of our company remains standing. Others may do as they will, but I will never be made to belie what I learned from my mother in my childhood, and from my sworn brother Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld and other good skalds in the North.” (234)

And when the Vikings amuse themselves by throwing children onto spear points, Þorgeir refuses, saying: “Nor will I ever lay a weapon to an unspeaking infant or any man that lacks the manhood to defend what is his” (222).

In comparison with modern military methods, the author of *Gerpla* knows that ancient warrior's ideas about warfare were entirely different. In his speech at Þingvellir in June 1952, which was referenced earlier, Halldór said:

We Icelanders are peaceful farmers and fishermen, and those heroes whom we idolize in ancient poetry have nothing in common with the heroes in modern armies, the most powerful of which kill defenseless people with nuclear blasts, napalm bombs, and other weapons of mass destruction, but are not otherwise fit for warfare.

There are clear examples of Icelandic aspirations in *Gerpla*, as there are in other books of Halldór's. The ancient foundation that he co-opts for his vehement critique of the militaristic agenda of the modern era, and of all eras, is his battleground. And the author himself is clearly in a fighting mood—one might even say he's taken inspiration from the heroic spirit of the Icelandic sagas and ancient poetry, the spirit of which takes flight in *Gerpla*.

Every epoch exploits its heritage in accordance with its needs and perspective. Ancient Icelandic texts have been a constant wellspring of inspiration for Icelanders. Their romantic idealizations have given the nation life. In times of distress and oppression, they kept courage alive in the nation's breast. In its battle for freedom, they have been life-savers and sources of strength, they've incited love of country, self-confidence, and a hope for the future. In *Gerpla*, they have been transformed as forces for peace and challenge the world about peace. The author calls upon their strength in his masterpiece. *Gerpla* is inspired by their

spirit. Much of what is at the heart of the novel or takes it to its greatest heights can be attributed to these ancient role models. The author has studied and absorbed their language, which gives *Gerpla*, among other things, its captivating beauty.

NOTES

1. This is a translation of an article originally written by Kristinn E. Andrésson, published in 1972 as “Gerpla” in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 33 (3–4): 273–91, and published here with permission.
2. Translator’s Note (TN): All novel quotations cited in this article have been taken from *Wayward Heroes*, Philip Roughton’s 2016 English translation of *Gerpla*. While passages from *Wayward Heroes* are provided here for simplicity’s sake, the corresponding *Gerpla* passages may be found in the original article. Unless otherwise noted, all page citations refer to this work (see References).
3. TN: *Garðaríki* is the Old Norse name for the medieval kingdom of Kievan Rus’, which today is part of Western Russia.
4. TN: Derived from the Icelandic word *garpur*, meaning “hero” or “champion,” *Gerpla* literally means “a saga about heroes.”
5. TN: Kristinn attributes this quote to the Pope, but it is actually said by a German monk who is an advisor in the Pope’s household.
6. TN: *Varnarlið Íslands*, or the Iceland Defense Force (IDF), was the name given to the American troops stationed in Keflavík from 1956–2006. The IDF was created through a NATO-sanctioned agreement between Iceland and the United States. Its stated mission was to protect Iceland, a country without a military of its own, from foreign incursion, although securing a base from which to conduct airspace and naval missions in the Northern Atlantic was undoubtedly a more primary concern for Americans during the Cold War era. Halldór makes use of the word *varnarlið* nine times in *Gerpla*, but the phrase “defense force” does not appear in *Wayward Heroes*. Rather, *varnarlið* is translated as “protectors of the city” (190), “defenders” (194), and “army” (371). As such, in this section, the original *Gerpla* quotes that use the word *varnarlið* appear alongside Roughton’s English translations, so that readers may see Halldór’s original wording and understand it in context.
7. Author’s Note: The articles that are referenced above have been reprinted in Halldór’s essay collection *Dagur í senn* [*One Day at a Time*] (1955): “Fisher í Kantaraborg: hugarfarsbreyting nauðsynleg - en atómbomban lifi” [Fisher in Canterbury: change of heart required—while the atom bomb exists] / “Fisher biður um atómsprengju - með skilyrði” [Fisher asks for the atomic bomb—with conditions] / and “Trúarbrögd og friðarhreyfing” [Religion and the peace movement]. There’s also the essay “Æfintýri frá blómaskeiði kalda stríðsins” [Fairytale from the heyday of the Cold War], wherein Christensen and Petersen’s “agendas” are outlined.
8. TN: Quote taken from Philip Roughton’s 2003 translation of *Iceland’s Bell*. See References.
9. TN: This speech is found in chapter 134 of *Ólafs saga helga* [*St. Olaf’s Saga*], part of the *Heimskringla*. The speech is as follows:

if I may give my opinion, our countrymen might just as well make themselves at once liable to land-scatt to King Olaf, and submit to all his exactions as he has them among his people in Norway; and this heavy burden we will lay not only upon ourselves, but on our sons, and their sons, and all our race, and on all the community dwelling and living in this land, which never after will be free from this slavery. Now although this king is a good man, as I well believe him to be, yet it must be hereafter, when kings succeed each other, that some will be good, and some bad. Therefore if the people of this country will preserve the freedom they have enjoyed since the land was first inhabited, it is not advisable to give the king the smallest spot to fasten himself upon the country by, and not to give him any kind of scatt or service that can have the appearance of a duty. On the other hand, I think it very proper that the people send the king such friendly presents of hawks or horses, tents or sails, or such things which are suitable gifts; and these are well applied if they are repaid with friendship. But as to Grimsö, I have to say, that if nothing that serves as food were ever shipped away, a whole army could find food there. And if a foreign army were there and were sallying out in long-ships, then I should think poor peasants would find trouble at their door.
(263)

10. TN: Here, Kristinn paraphrases the first line from a poem delivered by Skallagrímur in chapter 27 of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* [*Egil's Saga*]. I have adopted Bernard Scudder's translation of the verse, as is found in the collection *The Sagas of Icelanders* (see References.) The original line reads: "Nús hersis hefnd / við hilmí efnð" [The warrior's revenge / is repaid to the king] (47).

REFERENCES

- Egil's Saga*. 2001. In *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Translated by Bernard Scudder. New York: Penguin.
- Laxness, Halldór. 1946. "Ísland og samsærið gegn heimsfriðnum." *Tímarit mals og menningar* 9a (2): 124–29.
- . 1949. "Atlantshafsbandalagið." *Tímarit mals og menningar* 10b (1): 4–10.
- . 1950. "Inngáingsorð." *Tímarit MÍR* 1: 3–4.
- . [1952] 2011. *Gerpla*. Reykjavik: Vaka–Helgafell.
- . [1955] 1986. *Dagur í senn: ræða og rit*. Reykjavik: Helgafell.
- . 2003. *Iceland's Bell*. Translated by Philip Roughton. New York: Vintage International.
- . 2016. *Wayward Heroes*. Translated by Philip Roughton. Brooklyn: Archipelago Books.

Sturluson, Snorri. 1964. *Heimskringla, Part One: The Olaf Sagas*, Vol. 2. Translated by Samuel Laing, and revised by Jacqueline Simpson. New York: Dutton.

“Viðtal við Halldór Kiljan Laxness: Gerpla, hin nýja bók Halldórs Kiljans Laxness, kemur út í dag.” 1952. *Tíminn* 277 (December 5): 2.