

# Cold-War Confrontations: *Gerpla* and its Early Reviewers

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ABSTRACT: Halldór Laxness wrote *Gerpla* during tumultuous times in Icelandic history. In 1944 the country had gained its independence after 682 years of rule from the Scandinavian mainland, and in June 1946 the Alþingi (Parliament) agreed that the United States would have continued use of the Keflavík airbase for six and a half years. There was considerable social unrest at this, which increased in 1949 when the Alþingi voted to join NATO and a large crowd tried to storm the parliament building. *Gerpla* was published on December 5, 1952. This article focuses on early reviews of the novel, illustrating how these reviews were often less about the novel per se, and more about contemporary events and personalities.

RÉSUMÉ: Halldór Laxness écrivit *Gerpla* à des moments tumultueux de l'histoire islandaise. En 1944, le pays avait acquis son indépendance après 682 années de règne scandinave et, en juin 1946, l'Alþingi (parlement) décida que les États-Unis disposerait d'un accès continu pendant six ans et demi pour utiliser la base aérienne de Keflavík. Cela provoqua une agitation sociale considérable, qui augmenta en 1949 lorsque l'Alþingi vota en faveur de l'adhésion à l'OTAN et qu'une foule nombreuse tenta de prendre d'assaut le bâtiment du parlement. *Gerpla* fut publié le 5 décembre 1952. Cet article se concentre sur les premières critiques du roman, illustrant en quoi ces critiques portaient souvent moins sur le roman en tant que tel, mais davantage sur les événements et les personnalités contemporains.

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## A Contextual Note: Political Milestones in Icelandic History during the 1940s

In the tumultuous twentieth century, the 1940s were for Iceland the most tumultuous decade of all. Iceland went from being the poorest country in Europe, largely ignored by the major European powers, to being one of the most prosperous regions and a major player in the international chess game of the Cold War. Among the major events, one may single out:

April 10, 1940. The Alþingi, responding to the German occupation of Denmark, votes unanimously to assume the governmental responsibilities of the crown, in particular foreign affairs and defense.<sup>1</sup>

May 10, 1940. A British force of ultimately 25,000 troops occupies Iceland to protect British interests in the north-west Atlantic. The Alþingi protests to no avail. Numerous naval and air-force bases are established throughout the country.

June 17, 1941. The Alþingi chooses Sveinn Björnsson as regent (*ríkisstjóri*) of Iceland.

July 7, 1941. American troops take over the occupation of Iceland at the request of the Alþingi after British troops are withdrawn for service in other theatres of war. The Americans numbered 50,000 by the end of 1942 (the population of Iceland had numbered 121,474 in the census of December 2, 1940 (Jónsson and Magnússon 1997, 49).

May 20-23, 1944. In a national referendum in which 98.4% of eligible voters participated, 71,122 voted for independence from Denmark and 377 were opposed (Jónsson and Magnússon 1997, 877, 889).

June 17, 1944. Iceland declares itself an independent nation, ending 682 years of foreign rule by first the Norwegian and then the Danish Crown. Sveinn Björnsson is declared the first president of the republic.

July 25, 1946. The Alþingi votes 36 to 6 in favour of Iceland joining the United Nations.

- October 5, 1946. The Alþingi votes 32 to 19 to permit American forces to remain in Keflavík for six and a half years. The political left is outraged that Icelandic independence so dearly won, should be thus squandered by permitting the country to be occupied by a foreign military power.<sup>2</sup> In September a mob had attacked the Prime Minister, who was attending a meeting of his party.
- July 3, 1948. Despite protests from the left, Iceland signs a five-year agreement to take part in the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe.
- March 30, 1949. The Alþingi votes 37 to 13 to join NATO. During the parliamentary debate a large crowd of people opposed to this agreement gathered before parliament and tried to storm the building. A large-scale riot broke out. Police and auxiliaries responded with tear-gas and baton charges. Those who voted in favour of this agreement are accused of treason (*landráð*) by their opponents.
- May 7, 1951. American troops begin arriving in Keflavík. The government announces that, in accordance with the NATO agreement, the United States had taken over Iceland's defense and had been given permission to station troops at Keflavík. This was confirmed by the Alþingi on December 11.

The appearance of a new novel by Halldór Kiljan Laxness was always a literary event, but few could have predicted the furor that was to be generated by the appearance of *Gerpla* [*Wayward Heroes*] in 1952. But this reaction did not arise out of nowhere; the roots of the controversy include academic challenges to traditional understandings of the significance of the *Íslendinga sögur* [Sagas of Icelanders], the controversy surrounding Halldór's plan to produce editions of these sagas in modern spelling, and the mixed reception of his novel *Atómstöðin* [*The Atom Station*]-which reflected deep divisions in Icelandic society over membership in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the establishment of an American base at Keflavík. When *Gerpla* appeared the initial response, especially from the left, was extremely positive, although at least one critic demurred. However, in February and March 1953, two extremely hostile reviews were published in two of the leading newspapers, which garnered a great deal of attention despite valiant attempts to negate their influence. Each of the reviews, positive or negative, from the period December 1952 to mid-1953 are here summarized and discussed in order to give a sense of how the various authors, representing various political factions, presented their arguments. Given the constraints of space involved with

discussing numerous lengthy reviews and other publication-related documents, I have chosen to summarize the Icelandic text; once I have mentioned the venue and author, a summary of the argument usually follows in English. All translations from the Icelandic in the body of the text and References as well as the paraphrases are solely my responsibility unless otherwise indicated. In the context of particular reviews, those who are interested in the original Icelandic will find complete bibliographical information cited in the References.

## I. Who Owns the Sagas?

Between 1933 and 1935, Hið íslenska fornritafélag [The Icelandic Early Text Society] published the first three volumes of what was to become the standard edition of medieval Icelandic texts. This was part of a process aimed at re-claiming Iceland's medieval literary heritage for Iceland rather than sharing it as part of a pan-Scandinavian "Old Norse" culture. Thus, the society and its publications challenged the authority vested in the publications of the Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur [The Society for the Publication of Old Norse Literature] based in Copenhagen,<sup>3</sup> and the Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek, headquartered in Halle, Germany.<sup>4</sup> The Íslensk fornrit volumes also asserted their independence by printing the saga texts in the Society's own normalized spelling convention.<sup>5</sup> In 1935 Halldór wrote an essay condemning this approach, insisting that any edition of the sagas intended for an Icelandic audience should be printed using modern spelling conventions (Laxness 1935).<sup>6</sup>

In the years following this article, 1937–1940, Halldór was at work on his major novel now known as *Heimsljós* [Light of the world] (first published 1955, later editions 1957 and 1967). Then on October 9, 1941, there appeared an article in the afternoon newspaper, *Vísir*, headlined in heavy type: "Bækur á næstunni ... Ný útgáfa Íslendingasagna á nútíma máli" [Forthcoming Books ... New edition of the Íslendingasögur in Modern Icelandic] ("Bækur á næstunni," 2). There was some confusion about what Laxness intended, for initially it was assumed that he was going to translate the sagas into some kind of modern Icelandic. But whatever was intended, this announcement set off alarm bells in conservative quarters. In an editorial published in *Tíminn* two days later,<sup>7</sup> Jónas Jónsson frá Hriflu, who had self-assumed the role of guardian of Iceland's national culture against modern trends (especially those of the leftist variety), attacked the competency of Halldór Laxness as a translator. Jónas said that a "málfróður maður" [language expert] had examined Halldór's translation of *A Farewell to Arms* (Hemingway 1941) and was of the opinion that there were at least 4000 errors of translation in it.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, so far as Jónas was concerned, this translation was so vulgar that it clearly disqualified Halldór as someone competent enough to have anything to do with translating the sagas (Jónsson 1941a, 402).<sup>9</sup> In a long follow-up article published a fortnight later, Jónas warned again of the dire

consequences of Halldór and the communists having a free hand with the “helgur dómur” [sacred relics] of the sagas. The result would be nothing less than the denigration of the ideals of Icelandic womanhood: “Halldór Laxness ætti að ríða á vaðið með því að klæða Guðrúnu Ósvífsdóttur og Þorbjörgu Egilsdóttur í þann skróða sem forleggjari kommúnistanna á Íslandi þætti bezt henta” [Halldór Laxness intends to begin by clothing Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir and Þorbjörg Egilsdóttir in that finery that seems to best suit the publishing house of the Icelandic communists] (1941b, 426).<sup>10</sup> Such was the uproar that three members of parliament introduced a law into the Alþingi that the copyright of all Icelandic works written before 1400 was to be invested in the state, and that any individual or entity apart from the Fornritafélag would have to get the permission and approval of the Menntamálaráðherra [Minister for Education] before publishing any such work. After a contentious debate the law was passed in December.

As the debate in the Alþingi loomed, *Laxdæla saga* was rushed into print before the new law could take effect (Laxness 1941a).<sup>11</sup> As a result the edition is flawed despite being based on the Fornrit text established by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (*Laxdæla saga* 1934). In August of the following year an edition of *Hrafnkatla með lögboðinn stafsetningu íslenska ríkisins* [*Hrafnkels saga* with the legally prescribed spelling of the Icelandic nation] appeared, carefully edited, using the text established by Konráð Gíslason and published as a challenge to the new law (Laxness 1942; *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* 1847).<sup>12</sup> The response was not long in coming. On November 17, 1942, Halldór and his publisher and printer, all of whom were named on the title page, were fined 1000 krónur each or sentenced to 45 days in prison in the event of the fine not being paid. They immediately appealed the decision, and on July 9, 1943, the Hæstaréttur [Supreme Court] announced its decision.<sup>13</sup> The majority ruled that the defendants had not broken the law and that the law itself was an infringement of the constitutionally guaranteed right of freedom of the press although it was for the Alþingi to repeal it.<sup>14</sup>

Halldór and his publishers secured permission from Einar Arnórsson, the new dóms- og menntamálaráðherra [Justice and Education Minister] (and Halldór’s father-in-law, 1930–1940), for a new edition of *Njáls saga*. As soon as this news came out three of the more ardent cultural nationalists in the Alþingi proposed that the state should itself undertake a new edition of the saga and distribute it at the taxpayers’ expense to all households in the country in order to head off the imagined baleful influence of an edition prepared by Halldór Laxness. In this they had an ally in Jónas frá Hriflu, the chairman of the Menntamálaráð [Educational Commission].<sup>15</sup> As might be expected there was a considerable furor about all of this, and Halldór found himself in the thick of it, characterizing the state edition as a “hatursútgáfa” [spiteful edition] before it appeared in 1944 (Laxness 1943c).<sup>16</sup> Halldór’s own edition of *Njála* appeared during the following year in a large and handsome volume, complete with an index and 71 specially commissioned woodcuts by Gunnlaugur Scheving, Snorri Arinbjarnarson, and

Þorvaldur Skúlason (Laxness 1945a).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore Halldór seems to have learned from the criticisms levelled against his *Laxdæla saga* edition. On this occasion no chapters or genealogies are omitted and again the text follows that established by Finnur Jónsson (*Brennu-Njáls saga (Njála)* 1908).<sup>18</sup>

At the same time as he was involved in editing the sagas and coping with the controversies that ensued, Halldór was also working on *Íslandsklukkan* [*Iceland's Bell*], a novel many consider to be his finest work (Laxness 1943a, 1944a, 1946a, 1957).<sup>19</sup> Certainly, he was by this time not only the best-known Icelandic author but also the most divisive. The controversies surrounding his work continued with the publication in 1948 of *Atómstöðin*,<sup>20</sup> a novel-length exposé of the rootlessness of the newly wealthy urban middle class, as seen through the eyes of a simple country girl. The backdrop to the novel is the political intrigue leading up to the vote in parliament on October 5, 1946, which permitted American forces to remain in Keflavík, and also the bizarre story surrounding the repatriation of the mortal remains (perhaps) of Jónas Hallgrímsson—and the intervention of the government to have them interred at Þingvellir on November 16, 1946, rather than his home farm of Bakki in Öxnadalur.<sup>21</sup> In *Atómstöðin* it seems as if it is only the heroes of the *Íslendingasögur*—and the communists—who have Iceland's best interests at heart. As might be expected this novel was not accorded the unanimous praise that *Íslandsklukkan* had received, and there remains no real critical consensus on how to interpret the work.

Earlier in 1945, Halldór published an important essay outlining his views about the family sagas (Laxness 1945b).<sup>22</sup> He refers warmly to the work of Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and particularly approves of suggestions that episodes in the sagas can be traced to similar ones in Continental Latin works. His discussion of *Egla*, *Njála*, and *Gretla* leads him to conclude that the *Íslendinga sögur* are priceless resources concerning Icelandic culture in the thirteenth century and that they say more about the time in which they were written than the time about which they were writing. They are not reliable history, even if they feature elements such as genealogies and supposed eye-witness accounts. He then singles out those “frumstæður” [primitive] or child-like individuals such as Finnur Jónsson, professor in Copenhagen, who are unable to distinguish between *sagnlist* [narrative skill] and *sagnfræði* [history]. The sagas nourished the nation in the times of greatest hardship; their language and style were jewels owned by all. They reminded Icelanders that they too were heroes and had a pedigree.<sup>23</sup>

When it became known that Halldór's next novel was going to be set in saga-age Iceland, both his supporters and opponents eagerly awaited its appearance, given that in the decade before the publication of this work, Halldór had been heavily involved in literary and political controversies involving the *Íslendingasögur*. That Halldór chose *Fóstbræðra saga* as the basis for this novel should not perhaps have been a surprise, as it appears to have been a work about which he was thinking. In chapter 19 of *Atómstöðin*, Geiri í Miðhúsum says:

Mín hetjan er og verður Þorgeir Hávarsson. ... Og af hverju? Það er af því hann hafði minnst hjarta í öllum fornsögum samanlögðum. Þegar þeir skáru úr honum þetta hjarta sem aldrei kent ótta, ekki einusinni á Grænlandi, þá var það ekki stærra en fóarn í titling.  
(162–63)

[My hero is and will be Þorgeir Hávarsson. ... And why? It is because he had the smallest heart in all the early sagas combined. When they cut from him that heart which never knew fear, not even once in Greenland, then it was not larger than the gizzard in a sparrow.]<sup>24</sup>

## II. *Gerpla*: Initial Responses

After a four-year wait, on December 5, 1952, *Gerpla*<sup>25</sup> appeared in the bookstores (Laxness 1952). On the day of publication, *Þjóðviljinn* introduced the novel on its front page as one that takes place in the eleventh century all over the place in Europe. In the beginning of the story several episodes are borrowed from *Fóstbræðra saga*, but subsequently a new and unknown story is told (“*Gerpla*, hin nýja skaldsaga,” 1).<sup>26</sup>

*Tíminn* made the publication of the novel major front page news: “This book which is written in the spirit and with the language appropriate to former centuries, is an innovation in Icelandic literature, and it will be interesting for many to see how the author faces the challenges that the great subject matter has placed on his shoulders” (“Skaldsaga Kiljans,” 1).<sup>27</sup> Halldór Laxness says that this is not a novel to be read on the kitchen steps or during a bout of flu, and not a novel with which to while away the time, but a work of art that many will lose themselves in as they read it.

Later that same month, *Tíminn* published a long review by Halldór Kristjánsson frá Kirkjubóli (1910–2000), which is one of the few contemporary reviews to take a hard look at *Gerpla* as a work of literature and not to get side-tracked by personal animosities or ideological quarrels. The book is introduced as a satire and an attack on hero-worship and the misuse of religion in the service of war mongering. The language is a combination of the style of the Icelandic medieval romances [*riddarasögur*], mixed in with the author’s own innovations. After describing how the three main characters are presented, Halldór frá Kirkjubóli points out that Laxness is following in the footsteps of poets such as Matthías Jochumsson (1835–1920) who likewise attacked hero-worship. Laxness has also chosen to go his own way in his spelling of Icelandic.<sup>28</sup> His obsession with lice is discussed and the possibility raised that some time in the future there will be a doctoral dissertation on this subject. Furthermore, the book is not written to describe individuals but rather symptoms, and the tropes employed by the author will begin to wear on some before the book is finished,

as most practical jokes tire people in the long run (Kristjánsson 1952, 5). Because Laxness chooses to present his protagonists as caricatures, he fails to engage the sympathy and compassion of his readers. While he has composed a great book with great skill, it would have been all the more remarkable if he had sought to show human destiny in peace and war; to show how various kinds of war propaganda sometimes overwhelm good souls. This happens despite the fact that this propaganda incites people to kill others in the name of peace (Kristjánsson 1952, 7).

*Morgunblaðið*, the country's most read newspaper, noted that the novel had been published ("Gerpla—ný bók Kiljans," 2),<sup>29</sup> while *Alþýðublaðið* held its report over to the back page ("Gerpla, ný skáldsaga," 8).<sup>30</sup> The discussion focuses on the secrecy surrounding the publication of the volume, which is longer than *Íslandsklukkan*, and on how it employs the written conventions and vocabulary of the medieval sagas. It notes the author's claim that this was such a difficult task that it took him four years to complete the novel (8). The following week "Hannes á horninu" (Vilhjálmur S. Vilhjálmsson, 1903–1966) in his regular column reported that the book was already controversial, but that one person whom he had met who was on the other side of the political spectrum from Halldór Laxness had found the book excellent, with its caricature of the medieval Icelandic sagas recalling the spirit of *Don Quixote* (Hannes á horninu 3).<sup>31</sup> Two weeks later, in the column "Brottnir Pennar" [Broken Pens], the newspaper published a letter from Filipus Bessason *hreppstjóri*, who looks forward to Halldór Laxness rewriting other sagas, especially *Njála*. For example, he could make the scene where Njáll and Bergþóra place themselves under the ox-hide at the burning of Bergþórshvoll much more accessible and memorable by having Bergþóra say to her husband: "Legg þú koll þinn í skaut mér, Njáll bóndi minn, og skal ég nú leita þér lúsa í hinzta sinn!" [Put your head on my lap, Njáll dear, and I shall now for the last time check you for lice!] (Bessason 6).<sup>32</sup> He could also make the saga more artistic and raise it to a higher literary level, by calling Hallgerður "Hallinrassa" [lack-arse] or "Langrassa" [long arse], just in the same way he called Kolbrún, "Kolrassa" [black arse] (Bessason 6).<sup>33</sup>

### III. *Gerpla*: Laudations from the Left

The first periodical review also appeared in December in the journal *Tímarit Máls og menningar*. This final number of the year normally would have appeared on December 1, but it appears to have been held up so that it could include the text of the public lecture on the novel by one of the journal's editors, Jakob Benediktsson (1907–1999).<sup>34</sup> "*Gerpla* er komin út" [*Gerpla* has been published], it announces. However, the review itself is quite remarkable for how little it says about the content of the novel. Jakob emphasizes how each one of Halldór's novels is different from the one before, and *Gerpla* is no exception. Noting that the novel



draws its material from the medieval sagas, Jakob raises the question as to whether any modern writer can improve upon that which Icelanders already consider sacred relics [*helga dómur*] and a national treasure. This is certainly an issue on which other authors have found themselves in difficulty. The key to success is language and style: how does the matter stand with *Gerpla*? Jakob rejects those who claim that it is written in Old Icelandic. It is true that much of the vocabulary is found only in earlier literature, as is some of the morphology. But the language in *Gerpla* is very much a living language, with distinct, charming, and alluring tension between the old quality and modern style (Benediktsson 1987, 43).<sup>35</sup> Then there is the humour that one has come to expect from Halldór's works. Of all of his novels, *Gerpla* is probably the one that is composed with the greatest skill in terms of language and style. But what about the characters and the events? It is as if they are reflected in a *spéspegill* [funhouse-mirror]. But Halldór has pointed out that the medieval sagas are founded on imaginative art, rather than historical reality, and *Gerpla* abounds with unforgettable scenes and descriptions. Jakob mentions some of the more memorable and then briefly discusses the three main characters, Þorgeir, Þormóður, and Ólafur. He notes that some people are going to be upset because several of the book's other characters are described very differently compared to the medieval sources. But Halldór's characters have to live the life he gives them, whatever the source texts may have to say about them, for they contribute to delivering the message of the novel—although Jakob excuses himself from addressing what that might be. Even so he continues by claiming that the novel is about the stupidity of the heroic ideal that trusts in the sword alone and measures an individual's accomplishments in terms of killings. This position is contrasted to the lives of those people who are content and peaceful, such as the inhabitants of Hornstrandir or the Inuit, people whose way of life is threatened by the values represented by the heroic code. But this is not done to criticize the historicity of the sagas or to deprive them of their romantic veil of glory.<sup>36</sup> No, argues Jakob, it is to remind us today that we still struggle with the same problems, even though there is a difference between the blunt blade of an axe and an atomic bomb. Industrial warfare may have dramatically increased the kill ratio that was possible in the Viking age, but the belief in power and violence has not changed. This message concerns all of us, especially now, which is why *Gerpla* is a book about the present despite its setting.

Also in December 1952, the linguist Sveinn Bergsveinsson (1907–1988) published a review of *Gerpla* in *Menn og menntir*, the short-lived periodical of the Menningar- og fræðslusamband alþýðu [M.F.A. Workers Educational Association] edited by Tómas Guðmundsson.<sup>37</sup> As in the review by Halldór Kristjánsson frá Kirkjubóli, Sveinn attempts to evaluate *Gerpla* on its own terms, and he finds it to be a novel about futile heroics. He outlines what he considers to be the lesser of the two plots in the novel involving Þorgeir Hávarsson, a man whose most sought-after pastime is to learn how to use weapons and kill people, a man who

never chooses peace if there is the possibility of war, and Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld, a poet and womanizer who finds it a noble occupation to compose poetry about Þorgeir's feats so that they may live forever. The problem is that Iceland is a country poorly provided with weapons and a land where the inhabitants are more concerned with farming than killing people. Their exploits on Strandir and the encounter with Bútraldi Brúsason end unsatisfactorily. Eventually Þormóður finds himself stranded in Greenland in his futile attempt to avenge Þorgeir's death—a situation not conducive to poetry. Finally at the Battle of Stiklastaðir, he is unable to recite to King Ólafur the long poem he had composed celebrating him.

For Sveinn, the more important plotline follows Þorgeir overseas, although he is hardly the focus of the narrative. Powerful people interact with him, but Þorgeir, the Don Quixote of the novel, as might be expected, does not understand these people. Sveinn observes that when the Northmen made themselves Icelandic farmers, not because of the persecution of Haraldur háfagri, but because they wanted more space for themselves, they brought with them the social structure they knew best, that of the independent farmer. In Norway a monarchical system developed with royal officials. Killing someone was no longer an heroic exploit, but rather a part of lawful royal rule. Sveinn argues that this was something the Icelanders did not understand. Their custom was: one against one unless timidity intervened. Þorgeir becomes tired of the king's mass murders. He tries to obtain a modicum of fame for himself, but is able to achieve little more than his own disgrace. The kings however were only interested in fighting each other, burning settlements and farms, killing farmers, women and children, and oppressing the people with taxes to pay for wars or their own ransom. And they behaved worst of all towards their own retainers. *Gerpla* is not only a book about the vanity of heroism but also about the crimes of humanity. This for Sveinn is the main theme of the novel.

The language of *Gerpla*, Sveinn states, is new. That is, old. Not old as in the family sagas, but rather with their literary tinge and structure. Archaic words abound, most of them from medieval literature or similar sources. The author has called it an experiment, and it is an experiment that would be impossible to repeat. *Gerpla* is a devastating book, full of magical power. If anyone is going to read it, then that individual needs to read it closely. And it is not a book for Icelanders, but rather for all those people who do not have war as their god. But unfortunately the book is not translatable into other languages (Bergsveinsson 104–07).

After a six year hiatus, the journal *Helgafell* was revived in 1953. The first issue included a review of *Gerpla* attributed to “Crassus”<sup>38</sup> who in this instance was Sverrir Kristjánsson (1908–1976). The review opens by claiming that Halldór's new novel is a masterpiece [*dvergasmíður*] in every respect. *Gerpla*—a heroic saga in the heroic style—has been published. Yet the book review columns of some

newspapers keep quiet about the book, while the most popular newspaper in the country summons some kind of *bændaferð* [rural attack]<sup>39</sup> on the author. Inevitably, the reviews of these bookish individuals create an atmosphere similar to when the dogs are set on a guest who rides into the yard. Such is Icelandic hospitality when one should welcome into Bragi's yard<sup>40</sup> a new novel by Halldór Kiljan Laxness.<sup>41</sup>

No living writer except Halldór Laxness, Sverrir argues, could have taken the enormous leap in language and style that he did with such apparent ease when he began writing *Gerpla* after *Atómstöðin*. But for Halldór, delving into the past is not abandoning those themes that he addressed in *Atómstöðin*, his novel of the war years. In *Gerpla* he is getting to the core of a number of contemporary problems. His subject matter is war and peace, subjects that loom large in the modern world, and yet that are as old as humanity itself. He could have set out to create a highly moral "historical novel" in a contemporary style, but he elected not to do so. He chose rather to let the burning problems of the past illuminate the personal life and events of the present, to dress them up and interpret them in a linguistic style that, in terms of the choice of words and ideas, was tied to Old Icelandic literature. The review makes it clear that while *Gerpla* is not "historical fiction," it is the result of a great deal of historical research. *Gerpla* is similar to other Halldór Laxness novels in that it is exaggerated, ornamented, and embossed. But Halldór always tells the truth. When he ceases to tell the truth, he will cease to be a poet.

Sverrir then analyzes the events of the novel in some detail. He notes that Þormóður's story differs quite considerably from its sources, although Halldór changes Þorgeir's narrative very little. Together, the narratives are reminiscent of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. The love story involving Þormóður, Kolbrún, and Þordís is also examined before the exploits of Þorgeir in Normandy and England are discussed. If his exploits on Hornstrandir had not brought Þorgeir much glory, being on the Continent is hardly an improvement. The guerilla warfare of the citizens of London defeats the much better equipped Viking army. Halldór sets up nameless peasant forces against the famous generals and heroes of the Viking armies and rewards them with victories. The working farmer is the representative of this social morality that grows in the soil of peace. And alongside the farmers are their women.

As Sverrir observes, some may find that perhaps no individual in the novel is dealt with more disgracefully than saint Ólafur. But he is a Viking. He conquers Norway with fire and sword. This is the kind of king whom the foster brothers want to serve. Those who are upset about Halldór's treatment of Ólafur should go back and read *Ólafs saga* in *Heimskringla* where they will find that Snorri comes very close to blaspheming the Saint. The description of Ólafur in *Gerpla* comes from Snorri himself.

For Sverrir, it cannot be said too often that *Gerpla* is Halldór's greatest achievement. It is true that it is difficult to draw distinctions between his many books. But, for most readers, the greatest source of wonder will be Halldór's ability to master the narrative voice that was necessary for the creation of a work such as *Gerpla*. The perennial literary argument over the content and form of any work of art seems to have been solved a long time ago, at least so far as Halldór is concerned. The argument about which should be given priority is in reality an argument over which comes first, the chicken or the egg. Halldór has always found in each work a stylistic form appropriate to the content. He took the greatest risk when he developed the style for *Gerpla*, but he has succeeded magnificently in avoiding all pitfalls. As to how he achieved this—that is the secret of genius that people will probably never understand, even if it were shown to them. It is the secret that Halldór Laxness alone knows, along with the muse of fiction ("Crassus" 91–102; Sverrir Kristjánsson 4: 171–88).

#### IV. *Gerpla*: A More Measured Response

But not everyone was quite so positive or as rapturous as these reviewers. The novel was reviewed in the first issue of *Eimreiðin* for 1953 by Þorsteinn Jónsson (1885–1970), who usually wrote under the pseudonym Þórir Bergsson. He opens his review by noting that Halldór Laxness is in the first rank of Icelandic authors, although *Atómstöðin*, his most recent work, was the source of some disappointment. But everyone has to stumble sometimes. *Gerpla* has now arrived, and Þorsteinn notes the peculiar vocabulary deriving from both medieval and modern works and from who knows where. The novel is a mixture of the style of the *riddarasögur*, the glibness of children's books, the romanticism of the medieval sagas, and modern language—a peculiar style without parallel in Icelandic literature. The novel is a sharp satire [*háðsrit*] of the medieval sagas, casting a dim shadow over their brightness. For its subject matter, it takes one of the most improbable [*óhugnanlegusta*] of the sagas, *Fóstbræðra saga*, an ugly and unlikely story about a murder-sick man and a half-crazy poet. The novel also attacks chivalry and the people of the period. Not that Halldór does not have many true and important things to say, but everything is painted in the most garish colours and most often it is the worst things that receive the most emphasis. All periods have their dark corners, the Middle Ages no less than the present, and many nations seem not to have advanced since those days. Barbarity and brutality still predominate in the world, especially where "nýir siðir" [new faiths] are proclaimed, and some of those missionaries are grimmer than ever Ólafur Haraldsson may have been.<sup>42</sup> But it is unpleasant to know that the gentle faith of Christ is preached with such ferocity and in such a discreditable fashion. Ólafur is presented as a monster and Þorsteinn is sure that little of this will stand up to scholarly scrutiny. It is clear that Halldór *intends* to attack Christian missionary activity, rather than give a

neutral description of it. He does this in the most scathing and ludicrous fashion, utilizing the style of stories about knights and robbers. The novel is a kind of resurrection or rebirth of a medieval prose style, mixed with the new, and presented in a masterly, although not always comprehensible, way. Worst of all is the prospect that there will be a horde of imitators of this style in future years, and Þorsteinn warns writers against trying to follow in the footsteps of the master. As a novel, *Gerpla* does not come up to the level of Halldór's masterpieces. Nevertheless, it resonates with power and is an amazing book, although in many respects unfair and full of extremes, like the knightly romances and religious books. The review concludes by complaining about Halldór's idiosyncratic spelling, noting that it is a bad state of affairs when people cannot agree on a single, consistent spelling system for Modern Icelandic.

## V. *Gerpla*: Rural Wrath

But the real controversy only began with a long review in *Tíminn* by Helgi Haraldsson á Hrafnkelsstöðum (1891–1984) (1953; text quoted from 1971 printing).<sup>43</sup> Helgi had crossed swords with Halldór Laxness before, and this time there was no holding back.<sup>44</sup> For him the medieval sagas are stock market shares underwritten by gold, whatever turmoil there might be in the storm-tossed world market. Every good Icelander would agree that it should be a sacred matter of high seriousness for each of them to ensure that the gold standard of the medieval sagas remains unchanged through the ages. But there appears to be one exception, because Halldór has taken it upon himself the noble [*veglegur*] task of cataloging this literature in terms of a different and debased rate of exchange. He has begun with *Fóstbræðra saga* and his rehash is twice as long. Helgi admits that he was among those who looked forward with apprehension to the much advertised appearance of the novel because of its subject matter. No one can deny that when he wants to, Halldór can write elegantly and well, but it is equally clear that his puerile disposition gets in the way. Helgi suspected that the approach might be playful and bought the book immediately, reading it from cover to cover. Never before had he needed to exercise such strength of mind in reading through to the end of the novel. In brief, he had never before encountered “önnur eins uppgrip af bulli í einni og sömu bók” [another such overwhelming amount of drivel in one and the same book] (151–52). Either Halldór is mocking himself or the Icelandic nation, or perhaps both at the same time. The principal components in the book are pornography and blasphemy: it is among the most disgusting of its kind to be read. Woven into the narrative is a kind of grotesque vocabulary that the author has cobbled together. Yet, there are the phrases stolen from the medieval sagas, which shine like gems in this mudslide [*leirskríða*]. In short, that which is good in this book is not new, and that which is new is not good. Then Helgi tackles the vocabulary and outlandish terms such as *prinsípissa* [princess].

And while everyone knows what *frilla* [mistress] means, it is apparently not vulgar enough for Halldór who comes up with *fuðflagi*.<sup>45</sup> Nor has Helgi ever heard of *vændismenn* [male prostitutes, but here probably just a term of abuse], another of Halldór's vulgarities.<sup>46</sup> Neither of these words appear to have been used in Old Icelandic and to introduce them to the language would not be to clothe it in any kind of Sunday best.

The novel begins by following *Fóstbræðra saga*; as an example of how Halldór describes his characters Helgi takes the example of Butraldi Brúsason from chapter 14 (Laxness 1952, 118–20; Laxness 2016, 111–12). There is nothing like this in *Njála* or *Heimskringla*. There is no point in referring to *Gerpla* with the intention of identifying the most stupid element in the narrative, because this book is superior to all the other Halldór Laxness books that Helgi has read; unlike the author's other works, this one is far from stupid in a number of respects [*misvitlaus*].

As for the latter part of the book, it is as if Vellygni-Bjarni [Bjarni the big-liar]<sup>47</sup> has taken over, so completely is the narrative turned inside out, in the sense that none of the events described have anything to do with the medieval sources, and Helgi spends some time putting Halldór right. In Lúsa-Oddi, Halldór encountered someone in the medieval sagas who was to his taste, and thus Halldór gives him a significant role in the latter part of the novel. But there he is called Lúsoddi, because it is apparent that one should rape [*naudga*] the language whenever possible. Nor do things improve with Þormóður. He follows Lúsoddi to Greenland, never meets him, and ends up involved in the most preposterous adventures before returning to Norway as a cripple incapable of doing anything. Then Helgi poses the question to the older generation of readers, those who grew up with and adored the medieval sagas: how do they like Halldór's description of one of the chief champions of medieval saga literature?<sup>48</sup> What kind of message does this send to the younger generation, given this description and with no mention of Þormóður's heroic death after the battle of Stiklastaðir? If the Icelandic nation had the manhood it had a hundred years ago, it would say in one voice: "Vér mótmælum allir" [we protest all of it].<sup>49</sup> Has Halldór Laxness ever thanked his Creator for that indispensable attribute, which has been granted to him, to not know how to be ashamed? Or has he taken out a patent to lie regarding all kinds of crimes and shameful behaviour involving long-dead people of distinction as he does in this singular book? Was he so short of names for his characters that he had to reach back to the medieval sagas when he set out to write such balderdash [*bvætting*]? Instead of Þorgeir and Þormóður, why did he not call his protagonists Halldór and Kiljan? Had they been so called they would be able to behave as *klauffættir grasbítar* [cloven-hooved grass-grazer(s)] (Laxness 1952, 119; Laxness 2016, 112) to use one of his witticisms. So far as Helgi is concerned, Halldór sets out to sell counterfeit goods under a trustworthy label. He knows that especially in the countryside, medieval literature has still such a hold on people that they thirst for whatever is based upon it, and any new book on such subject

matter will sell well. It is evident to Halldór that he over-played his hand with *Atómstoðin*,<sup>50</sup> and it was not clear that people would care much for more of the same. He must have then thought to cover his bare arse by taking names from the middle ages.<sup>51</sup>

Then Helgi takes up what he sees as Halldór's obsession with lice. It is as if he has lice on the brain. They are all over the place in *Gerpla*. Two new sports have been added to those enumerated in *Íþóttir fornmannanna* (Bjarnason 1950), to kill lice and to kill fleas. Even Haraldur hárfagri is not exempt: "Hann gat að visu börn við ambáttum og gaungukonum af endilangan Noreg um sjö tigu vetra, en lítt gerðust tignarkonur til lags við svo lúsugan mann" [In fact, he begat children with maidservants and vagrant women from one end of Norway to the other for seventy years, since noble women had little desire to take such a louse-ridden man to their beds].<sup>52</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845) completely forgot to mention that he found lice in his beloved's hair when he combed her locks by Galtará.<sup>53</sup> Helgi has sufficient faith in the Icelandic people to believe that any work that tries to turn their golden age literature into a huge rubbish heap will never be popular. Halldór would be considered a treasure east of the Iron Curtain, in helping the communists rewrite the history of humankind. It would not be entirely useless for the imperial aims of the Russians and for world literatures were Halldór Laxness to describe, in his incomparably copious vocabulary, how communists go about hanging an individual in the presence of Saint Stalin. However, the loud-mouthed Reykjavík Reds will discover that neither Kiljan's lice nor communism will thrive in the country districts of this land.

While *Morgunblaðið* had acknowledged the publication of *Gerpla* in December, 1952, it was not until after Helgi's review in late February 1953, that the country's most widely-read newspaper paid any further attention to it. On March 3, an article appeared under the by-line "Fræðavinur" [Friend of knowledge] that warned that the communists wish to tear down everything that the nation cherishes and values so that their own views can start to prevail. It is particularly dangerous when they attack spiritual and cultural institutions. The most recent example of this is Kiljan's book, which was published before Christmas. His goal with this work is obviously to destroy the value of medieval Icelandic culture in the minds of young people. The family sagas and our medieval literature in general are one of the building blocks of Icelandic nationality and without this cultural achievement it is unlikely that we would have managed to regain our independence. For this reason it seems to the communists that the time has now come to demean it. Nothing may remain standing and no bonds are to connect the current generation to the past. When everything has been torn down, victory for these miscreants will be the more likely. There is a large Norse Studies Department at the University of Iceland and one might have hoped that they would have been at the forefront in warning people about Halldór's cunning assault. But nothing has been heard from these people except for a few who have

heaped praise on this disgraceful work. It has taken a farmer from Hrunamannahreppur to boldly defend the Icelandic cause. Shame on all the others who have been asleep at their watch and forgotten to defend Icelandic culture when a blow is aimed at its heart (“Fræðavinur” 1953, 9).

Eventually, on March 17, *Morgunblaðið* published its own review of the novel in the form of a letter to the newspaper dated February 20, 1953, written by Þorbjörn Björnsson (1886–1970), a farmer at Geitaskarð in Langidalur.<sup>54</sup> Þorbjörn begins by positioning himself as a reader. Some works do not affect him at all while others give him the greatest pleasure. On one occasion while in hospital in Reykjavík he read everything he could lay his hands on including four of the very first works by Halldór Laxness, and he found them delightful. *Gerpla*, however, is hideous and needs to be handled with gloves. It shows the difference between a long-winded literary work and a good one. It goes without saying that *Gerpla* is a unique phenomenon on the Icelandic literary scene. There are many reasons for this assertion and there is no need to go into them here. Almost everywhere the choice of words and style is vulgar and disgusting, and the dialect is such that a clear understanding of various words and whole sentences is possible only for those highly educated scholars of language with a pile of dictionaries at hand. Þorbjörn does not see the point of all this in a modern work. It is also clear to any reader of *Fóstbræðra saga* that the foster-brothers are hardly model citizens. But in *Gerpla*, all of the personal descriptions of individuals are unrelentingly negative. Although the novelist is sympathetic to peasants and fishermen, he pays so little attention to them, that their characters remain undeveloped, unlike those of the warriors. Þorbjörn declares that no Icelandic writer now or in the past has been as hostile to the rural class as Halldór Laxness. He then quotes passages to demonstrate the mindset of the novel and its character descriptions. What does the author think he is doing with such an approach? There are two possibilities. The first is that he is attempting a feeble attack on hero-worship and our nation’s medieval literature, and it will not be long before he tries his hand at other works such as *Njála* and *Laxdæla saga*. Secondly, it seems to be part of the novelist’s efforts, now as before, to put the blame for violence on Christianity. Some people have maintained that the point of the novel is to attack prevailing military policies, atrocities, and violence. This seems doubtful, because Halldór is said to be a great supporter of communist imperialist policies, which now have half the world in the iron grip of bullying, repression, and terrorism, to such an extent that they terrify the peace- and freedom-loving other half of the world. It is also strange that Halldór, who is said to be dapper and fastidious, should take such an inexhaustible delight in describing the worst and the ugliest things in human experience, past or present. Not content with just narrating ugly reality, he seems to revel in doing so. Þorbjörn concludes by asserting that it is the responsibility of Halldór Laxness and others blessed with literary talent to bring us together around the fires that once warmed and enlightened us, to the fires that live now



and will always live, to the spiritual fires that make humankind's future brighter and better (Björnsson, 11).

## VI. *Gerpla*: To the Barricades!

Attacks of this nature in the country's leading newspapers were not going to go unanswered. In the Wednesday edition of *Þjóðviljinn*, March 11, a news item appeared under the by-line "Svipall" [i.e. Óðin] (1953, 11), which opened with a reference to a stanza in a set of old *rímur*<sup>55</sup> that mentions a farmer who in the distant past lived at Hrafkelsstaðir and who spewed fire and poison. Helgi does not spew fire, but rather stupidity and ignorance, which have for a long time been one of the greatest poisons in the world. It is evident that he does not get the point of *Gerpla*. He does not understand this great work of art, neither its artistic relevance nor its spirit. He takes words and phrases out of context and pays no heed to the fact that Halldór is a master at breathing new life into old words. If he were really to think about this, he would have to admit that Vikings were pirates and rowdies who went from land to land killing innocent people. The greatest among them were those who could both steal and kill the most. The modern day Vikings are the industrialists who wage war against innocent peoples, as is now happening in Korea. The spirit is the same, and it is this spirit of war that Halldór takes issue with in *Gerpla*. That is the question posed to Icelanders in this perilous time. Are you for or against war, for or against the Vikings? The writer was of the opinion that people in the country were good, peace-loving folk, but the final part of the review calls that into question. We must hope his is a solitary, anomalous voice. History will prove that, even though it may take a long time, these "loudmouthed Reds," as Helgi calls them, will save Icelandic culture, if this is at all possible, rather than those who think the same as Helgi Haraldsson ("Svipall," 11).

Readers had to wait until the middle of April before *Þjóðviljinn* mounted a full-scale defense of *Gerpla* from the pen of Helgi Jósef Halldórsson (1915–1987).<sup>56</sup> He begins by comparing stormy weather with the critical "storms" surrounding a work like *Gerpla*. In particular the novel has been attacked by two farmers who, it appears, have more in common with the rascal Butraldi Brúason than with the laudable Þorgils Arason or Vermundur í Vestfirði.<sup>57</sup> He then goes on to talk about the varying relationships Icelanders have with their ancient literature. Some hold it for a fact that everything that is good in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Icelandic literature bases its phrasing and vocabulary on the older literature. The present hails the past and communicates with it concerning the problems of life and art. This is surely what Halldór has in mind in writing *Gerpla*. But he chose to work as a novelist rather than as a scholar, although he has combined the two roles in the depiction of his characters, simultaneously showing both the old and the new. Helgi then indicates that he intends to review

the book from a literary rather than an historical perspective or through an analysis of sources—that would take as long as the novel itself. Under the heading “Samsetning” [Composition] he summarizes the plot of the novel before turning to “Persónusköpun” [Character Creation]. The characters of *Gerpla* are all recognizable types from the medieval sagas, albeit updated. As the title of the book indicates, particular attention is paid to the kind of man now known as “hero.” The chief among these is Þorgeir Hávarsson, the personification of the medieval concept of “hero” and a Viking with no interest in women. This is based directly on *Fóstbræðra saga*. Even so he refuses to take part in the sport of tossing infants around on spear points (Laxness 1952, 235; Laxness 2016, 221) and yet he refuses to extinguish the hero in him in the arms of the women of Rouen and become the successor to a farmer the Vikings had killed (Laxness 1952, 256–60; Laxness 2016, 240–44). And he dies at home in Iceland. In contrast, there are three parts to Þormóður’s character. The first derives from *Fóstbræðra saga*, as he is the foster brother of Þorgeir and accompanied him on various escapades in Iceland. He is a poet and is fond of women. But there is tension between these three traits. He is torn between the physical attraction he feels for Kolbrún and his love for Þordís, who inspires him intellectually and spiritually. For a while it looks as if he will settle down with Þordís, with whom he has two daughters. But the arrival of the salted head of Þorgeir reminds him of what it was to be a hero and to compose poetry for a king. He abandons his life with his wife and heads off to Greenland in search of Þorgeir’s killers. There he encounters Kolbrún again. But things do not work out. Þorgeir’s killers elude him, and when he goes to Norway and meets up with King Ólafur, he ultimately finds himself unable to remember the poem he has composed in praise of the king.

The reviewer then turns to consider the women characters. They are the heirs of Brynhildur Buðladóttir and Guðrún Ósvífurisdóttir who get their lovers to kill each other and take the victor. This is certainly the case with Kolbrún and Geirríður, although somewhat less so with Þordís. The devoted love of Lúka and Mamúka is always valued the least. The old crone in Normandy is a realistic character drawn from experience (Laxness 1952, 273–84, 257–60; Laxness 2016, 351–62, 241–44).

The second part of the review opens with Helgi Halldórsson leaving it up to the historians to pronounce on the historical interpretation of the novel. Instead he turns to some elements that are essential in understanding the work. In Iceland there are those opposed to the behaviour of the foster brothers, namely Þorgils and Vermundur. In England Þorgeir encounters the hopeless government of Æthelred the Unready, who caved in to the Vikings and tried to buy them off with Danegeld. (This section is illustrated with long quotes from the novel.) The episode involving Ríkarður í Rúðu is described in great detail. But even though the novel is set in the eleventh century, it is not merely about recounting the history of that time. The book is also written to sharpen our understanding of

twentieth-century history. Despite technology having made it possible to provide everyone with the necessities of life, the old struggles over wealth and power continue. Colonial politics are merely a continuation of the Viking depredations though in a different form. There are still leaders who are like Æthelred, more afraid of their own people than of the “Vikings,” as with the British in Greece, let alone the Korean War, which is the greatest crime [*glæpur*] in the history of the world.<sup>58</sup> What causes such enormities? Halldór’s answer is that the head lags behind the advances of technology. In order to prevent this happening, there needs to be a complete reassessment of core values. *Gerpla* is the first step in this direction. First one has to see through the deception [*blekking*], as when Þorgils tells Þormóður to go home to his farm, advice Þormóður does not take. Þormóður as a poet contributes to the deception by writing poetry in praise of unpraiseworthy deeds. Helgi á Hrafnkelsstöðum criticizes the way Halldór describes the appearance of Þormóður when he arrives in Norway from Greenland. For his part, Helgi Haraldsson could not but be amazed if he were to find himself in say Hamburg and see those individuals, one-legged, missing an arm, with crutches under their stumps, begging for food with one eye in a burnt face, who in the last World War travelled the same path as Þormóður did of old.

The review continues by asserting that many will say that *Gerpla* is a critique of hero worship in general, but such is a misunderstanding of the basic issues. There are more heroes than those who bear weapons. The stewards of life are also heroes, whether they till the earth, haul in fish, or are occupied with other tasks. Perhaps the greatest act of heroism today is “þora að vera maður” [to dare to be a man].<sup>59</sup> In this, too, medieval literature can be a source of inspiration. There are more poets than those who write poetry praising the deeds of the Vikings. There are also *Hávamál*, *Völuspá*, and *Sólarljóð*. Nobody now writes poetry in praise of war. And hopefully women nowadays and in the future will refuse to exchange their happiness for the head of Þorgeir Hávarsson. The fact is that the hideous head, which gapes at the world today, brutish on the cowardly torso of the beast of war that the rulers now spur on with hellish bombs in their hands, should be eliminated so that peace-loving peoples might be able to live with their blessings in a fair and generous world.

Despite the length of the review, the author apologizes for not having discussed the style and narrative techniques of the novel that will perhaps be its enduring legacy rather than its message. Each reading will reveal something new. Most Icelanders probably do not realize the incredible amount of work that lies behind such a novel. And even though Helgi recognizes that not all his contemporaries will agree with him, he claims, based on his knowledge of Icelandic literature ancient and modern, that since *Njáls saga*, no Icelandic book has been composed with more skill than *Gerpla*—unless one makes an exception for *Íslandsklukkan* (Halldórsson 1953).

## VII. Conclusion

The immediate controversy over *Gerpla* is now over, although it was not forgotten and continued to flare up from time to time, as in a little booklet by Pétur Magnússon from Vallanes (1893–1979).<sup>60</sup> This argues that Halldór Laxness did not deserve the Nobel Prize for literature and that there were others equally deserving such as Gunnar Gunnarsson (1889–1975). From *Atómstöðin* onwards, Pétur claims, Halldór's work had rapidly deteriorated—not least as represented in the strangest object in recent literature, *Gerpla*. Pétur considers the mudslinging in *Gerpla* as directed at the family sagas and *Heimskringla*, and in particular at Ólafur, the patron saint of Norway (23). The Icelandic public greeted this work with silence, but it was Peter Hallberg, from 1943–1947 lector in Swedish at the University of Iceland, who pushed Halldór Laxness's case with the Swedish Academy.

It is ironic that a novel so clearly grounded in a message of peace should have unleashed such a war of words. But this response was as time sensitive as the novel's other topical illusions. In 1952 there were still many Icelanders for whom the sagas were a living entity, an essential part of their national and individual identity. This is less so today. Even when *Gerpla* was published, readers had difficulty with its language. No matter how lavishly some reviewers may have praised its innovative style, those difficulties have only increased with time. It is nearly 35 years since the school edition of *Gerpla* appeared, with the vocabulary lightly annotated. A new edition is now needed with full scholarly apparatus.

Sveinn Bergsveinsson was prophetic when he wrote in 1952 that *Gerpla* was an experiment that could not be repeated. He was not quite so perspicacious in his comment that the novel was untranslatable. It certainly presents a major challenge to any translator, and this probably explains why *Gerpla* has had to wait until 2016 for Philip Roughton's full English translation directly from the Icelandic (Laxness 2016).<sup>61</sup> Roughton has wisely concentrated on translating and made no sustained attempt to imitate the archaic vocabulary of the original. I would not be surprised if *Wayward Heroes* not only introduces a new generation of English readers to the richness of the novel, but also makes *Gerpla* accessible to Icelandic readers who may still read *Njáls saga* unaided, but find this work by their Nobel laureate impenetrable.

### NOTES

1. For this and the following events see Pétur Hrafn Árnason and Sigurður Líndal, eds. 2016, 68–118.
2. In a bitter denunciation (one of several) published in 1946, Halldór characterized those who voted in favour of this bill as “föðurlandssvikarar, saurugir og

- ósnerttanlegir” [traitors to their country, filthy, and untouchable] (Laxness 1946c, 78). The tone of the debate would not improve over the years.
3. The STUAGNL published 64 volumes from 1880–1953, mostly Old Icelandic texts, but also including works in Old Norwegian, Old Danish, and Faroese.
  4. The ATB published 18 volumes of exclusively Icelandic texts, from 1892–1929.
  5. This was based on the normalization developed by the Danish philologist, Ludvig Wimmer (1839–1920) (Wimmer 1879) and familiar to Icelandic scholars from a translation made from the third edition of 1881 and long used in the schools (Wimmer 1885). The translator, Valtýr Guðmundsson (1860–1928), a prominent politician and subsequently Professor of History at the University of Iceland, called the language “Old Icelandic” and not “Old Norse.” Halldór was to subsequently characterize this adherence to Wimmer’s formulations as a “þrælsmerki” [sign of servitude] (Laxness 1943b, 248).
  6. See also Crocker in this volume.
  7. *Tíminn* (1917–1996) was the newspaper of the Framsóknarflokkur [Progressive Party] to which Jónas Jónsson frá Hriflu (1885–1968) belonged. He was member of the Alþingi representing Suður-Þingeyjarsýsla (1924–1949) and an arch cultural nationalist.
  8. Two days later on October 13, Árni Jónsson frá Múla (1891–1947), Sjálfstæðisflokkur [Independence Party] member for Norður-Múlasýsla 1937–1942, attacked the announced project in *Vísir* (Árni Jónsson 1941). The next day, in response to these attacks, Halldór and his publisher printed a “Leiðrétting” [Correction] in *Vísir* which tried to clear up the confusion. Halldór stated *Laxdæla saga* would be printed in the legally established, official government spelling. Otherwise, the wording of the text, style, and language, would remain unchanged (“Leiðrétting” 1941, 4).
  9. Tómas Guðmundsson (1901–1983) followed an edition of his pieces for the column “Léttara hjál” [Chit-chat on the Lighter Side] (1942–1946), which had appeared in *Helgafell*, an up-scale literary magazine published by Halldór Laxness’s publisher, with a postscript in which he characterized Jónas frá Hriflu as someone well known for characterizing as communists all those who were not of his disposition or might not share his views (Tómas Guðmundsson 1981b, 162).
  10. The title of this piece, “Innsta virkið” [The innermost keep], suggests that Jónas sees himself as a chivalric knight defending the castle of Icelandic culture against the barbarian hordes. Jónas manages to get wrong the name of both the major female characters of *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir and Þorgerður Egilsdóttir.
  11. In the second edition (Laxness 1973), the text is based on *Laxdæla saga* 1896 with the passages omitted in the 1941 edition restored in smaller type. A feature of this new edition are the well-executed line drawings by Þorbjörg Höskuldsdóttir, Hringur Jóhannesson, Guðrún Svava Svavarsdóttir, and Gylfi Gíslason.
  12. The choice of this saga (apart from its brevity) was probably a homage to Sigurður Nordal whose study of *Hrafníks saga* (Nordal 1940) is one of the manifestos of the Íslenski skólinn [Icelandic school] of saga criticism. These scholars were intent on demonstrating that the sagas were not historical documents, but marvelously crafted works of historical fiction. Halldór Laxness’s editorial work and other writings on the medieval sagas lead Jón Karl Helgason to claim him as the most outspoken member of

- this school (1998b). Even though the position of the Icelandic School has become the dominant view in twenty-first century saga criticism, in the 1940s it was still a very radical point of view and perhaps out of step with majority opinion at the time. For an introduction to the debate over truth and fiction in the sagas, see Hughes 2016.
13. While the case was being heard, the Alþingi appointed a commission to review the law. The commission asked three professors from the University to examine Halldór's *Laxdæla* edition. The professors reported that the edition, by modernizing the vocabulary, often reorganizing the syntax, and by omitting passages, "distorted the substance and character of the saga." See Jón Karl Helgason 1999, 122 and 2005, 79–80. In contrast, Kristján Karlsson in his afterword to the second edition praises the 1941 version with its omissions as establishing the novelistic credentials of the saga (Laxness 1973, 219–20).
  14. For the prefaces to both editions and some related essays, see Laxness 1941b. On the legal case see Jón Karl Helgason 1998c and 2002.
  15. Ironically, Jónas was replaced as Chair of the Menntamálaráð two months before the parliamentary debate on governmental support for the state edition of *Njála* (Jón Karl Helgason 2002, 158), but his influence was nonetheless discernable. The edition was to be published by the Menningarsjóður [Cultural fund], an organization with which Jónas was also closely connected, and which had been established in 1939 to counter Mál og Menning, the publishing arm of the socialists. See also Laxness 1946d.
  16. See *Njáls saga* 1944. The text of the saga is based on *Brennu-Njáls saga (Njála)*, 1908, with a few changes. The spelling is modernized and the edition is illustrated with maps, pen and ink line drawings and photographs, elucidation of the verses, notes, and an index. For Halldór's review of the edition see 1944b. "The Spirit" mentioned in the title is Halldór Laxness's long-time antagonist, Jónas frá Hriflu, who is held responsible for the book's publication, even though he was not actually one of the volume's editors.
  17. Gunnlaugur Scheving and Þorvaldur Skúlaason were two of the five artists singled out by Jónas frá Hriflu as being a "klessumálari" [dauber] and their work exhibited in the Alþingishús [Parliament Building]. Tómas Gúðmundsson responded with an opinion piece in which he reminded readers of the 1937 Nazi exhibition in Munich of "Entartete Kunst" [Úrkynjaðri list, Degenerate Art], and states that it was remarkable that, just seven years after such an event in Hitler's Germany, a similar exhibition should be held in Parliament Building in Reykjavík (1942, 89).
  18. It was common knowledge that the Fornritafélag was also preparing an edition of the saga, although this did not appear until nine years later (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, 1954). Still the question was raised as to whether the nation could absorb so many editions of this one saga without someone suffering financial losses. See Jón Karl Helgason 1994 and 1999 (particularly 119–36 and 141–53).
  19. On Halldór's incorporation of historical sources into this novel, see Eiríkur Jónsson 1981, a work which in 1984 was considered inadequate as a doctoral dissertation by the University of Iceland. The ensuing lawsuit concluded with the court vacating the assessment of the examining committee whose members included the Swede, Peter Hallberg (1916–1995), who had played a pivotal role in promoting Halldór Laxness for

the Nobel Prize in Literature. The book is now considered one of the key texts in understanding how Halldór Laxness worked.

20. Laxness 1948; English translation Laxness 1961. The title reference is clearly to the NATO base at Keflavík. A better translation might have been “The Atomic Base,” i.e. a military base where atomic weapons are stored: “Iceland shall never be sold nor the nation betrayed, no atomic base built, which would cause the Icelanders to be killed in a single day; at the very most a rest and recreation point permitted south there on Reykjanes [i.e. at Keflavík] for foreign charitable organizations” (Laxness 1948, 170).
21. See Jón Karl Helgason 2003. On October 5, the Þingvallanefnd [Þingvellir Commission] under the directorship of Jónas frá Hriflu obtained an order forbidding internment of Jónas Hallgrímsson’s remains at Bakki, the same day as the contentious vote permitting the Americans to stay.
22. See Crocker in this volume.
23. See Jón Karl Helgason 2005, 64–65.
24. This mish-mash of misinformation is based on *Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, chap. 2, 128, where it is said that Þorgeir’s heart is not like “fóarn í fugli” [the gizzard in a bird] and chap.17, 206–11 at 210–11 where Þorgeir’s heart when cut from his body is found to be extremely small. Furthermore, Þorgeir never went to Greenland; that was his foster brother, Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld. But it is correct to say that Þorgeir never knew fear; see chapter 13, 191.
25. The word *gerpla* is first recorded in the proverb collection of Guðmundur Ólafsson (c. 1652–1695). Entry 3774 reads: “Þær þyker gaman að Gerplu” [‘Gerpla’ seems fun to you] (172). The Swedish editor of the work finds the word puzzling, reporting the suggestion of a native Icelander that the word refers to an otherwise unknown book(!), but tentatively preferring to see the word as a clipped form of *gerpilegur* [heroic] (186). But the form is nominal and the consensus is that the word refers to a book containing heroic stories. Laxness’s use is ironical.
26. *Þjóðviljinn* (1936–1992) was a newspaper established by the Communist Party of Iceland, but from 1938–1968 run by the Sameiningarflokkur alþýðu—Sócialistaflokkurinn [People’s Unity Party—Socialist Party]. In a special issue of *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* published April 20, 2002, to celebrate the centenary of Laxness’s birth (April 23, 1902), Jónas Ragnarsson prepared a list enumerating when each of Laxness’s 22 novels was published and providing a summary of the initial critical reactions to each work. For *Gerpla* see Ragnarsson 20.
27. Page 2 has a lengthy interview touching on various aspects of the novel between Laxness and “I. G. Þ.,” that is, the novelist Indriði G. Þorsteinsson (1926–2000) (1952, 2).
28. Given his concern over the spelling of medieval texts, it is ironical that recently voices have been raised arguing that Halldór Laxness’s idiosyncratic spelling is proving a hindrance to younger readers and there has been a call to republish his works in the official modern spelling.
29. *Morgunblaðið* (1913–) is the most widely-read newspaper in Iceland and one that has a close relationship with the centre-right Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn [The Independence Party].

30. *Alþýðublaðið* (1919–1998) was the newspaper of Alþýðuflokkurinn [The Social Democratic Party].
31. To compare *Gerpla* to *Don Quixote* soon becomes commonplace.
32. “Filipus Besson” is possibly a pseudonym.
33. Hallgerður’s nick-name was “langbrók” (long-pants). See the folktale “Kolrassa krókríðandi” (Black-arse hook-rider) in Jón Árnason 1954–1961, 2: 432–37 (as collected from Guðný Einarisdóttir [1828–1885] of Akureyri). Kolrassa is also a name sometimes given to a mare or a female dog. See Laxness 1952, 79; Laxness 2016, 74 (Coal-Rump).
34. The other editor of *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, Kristinn E. Andrésson (1901–1973), an old-time Marxist and a firm believer in Soviet-style “socialist realism,” also wrote a review of *Gerpla* at around the same time although it was not published until later (Kristinn E. Andrésson, 1972, 1976–1979). See Larissa Kyzer’s translation in this volume.
35. First published in 1952, but the quotations are from the republished text of 1987 (both listed under References).
36. Although it is possible to argue that this is exactly what the novel is doing.
37. *Menn og menntir* appeared in April 1951 and ceased publication with the double issue of December 1952. The M.F.A. was founded in 1937 by the Alþýðusamband Íslands [ASÍ, Icelandic Confederation of Labour]. From 1953 until his retirement in 1974, Sveinn Bergsveinsson taught at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, German Democratic Republic.
38. “Crassus is the pseudonym for all those who write reviews in Helgafell” (Friðríka Benónýs, 12). Crassus was the family name of several famous Roman orators and the use of the name here probably represents no more than a claim for the “well-spokenness” of the reviews.
39. The reference is to 1905, when hundreds of farmers streamed into Reykjavík to protest against the government’s intention to establish telegraph communication with the outside world. The word suggests an unwillingness to accept progress.
40. Bragi is the god of poetry, but here used of literature in general.
41. The references here are probably to *Morgunblaðið*, which waited until three months after the publication of *Gerpla* before publishing two hostile reviews.
42. I take the “new faiths” referred to here to be National Socialism and Soviet and Chinese communism.
43. On Helgi see Þorsteinn Jónsson, ed. 1999 2: 499–501. He is best known for his speculations of the authorship of *Njála* (Haraldsson 1948).
44. His first published article (Haraldsson 1944) begins with a strong-worded response to Laxness 1943d, one of a series of polemical articles about the need to diversify and modernize agricultural production and to make food less expensive. See Laxness 1946b. This article is omitted from the later second edition (Laxness 1980).
45. Haraldsson 1971, 152. *Fuðflagi* is a misprint. Laxness 1952, 136 uses the term *fuðflogi*, an Old Norwegian legal term (“one who flees the female sex organ”) for a man who refuses to consummate his wedding vows. Laxness 2016, 128 translates the term as “fugitive.” Helgi clearly misunderstands the passage.



46. Laxness 1952, 13, 78, 320; Laxness 2016, 13 [disputable riff-raff]; 73 [horrible miscreant]; 300 [miscreant]. Again Helgi does not seem to understand the use of the word, or he is interpreting it too literally. Helgi furthermore states that he has never heard it mentioned that males pursued the same kind of occupation as prostitutes, which reveals a certain kind of rural innocence.
47. There is a collection of stories about this Bjarni who was from Bjarg in Miðfjörður, Vestur-Húnavatnssýsla, in Ólafur Davíðsson 1978–1980, 4: 181–87.
48. Had they been asked, the answers might have surprised Helgi. See the comments culled from two surveys on attitudes to the family sagas made in 1927–1930 and 1994 in Jón Karl Helgason 2005, 65–78.
49. This refers to the oft recounted episode that occurred when a National Assembly convened in Reykjavík on August 9, 1851, to discuss constitutional relations between Iceland and Denmark. Jón Sigurðsson had drafted an alternative proposal, which, in effect, granted Icelandic independence. The Governor, Frederick Christopher Trampe, declared that the assembly had no authority to discuss such a proposal and dissolved the meeting. Jón Sigurðsson protested at this to no avail. Jón protested again, and then the entire assembly is reported to have said in one voice, “Vér mótmælum allir” [we protest all of it] as the Governor left the room.
50. Helgi Haraldsson 1953, 155: he “Spilaði rassinn úr buxanum” [played the arse out of his trousers], that is he made a bad decision from a position of strength (here *Íslandsklukkan*).
51. The imagery here plays on the idiom explained in the previous note.
52. Helgi Haraldsson 1953, 155 (slightly altered from Laxness 1952, 291); Laxness 2016, 275. Ingi Freyr Vilhjálmsson (2013) reports that Anders Österling, a member of the Selection Committee for the Nobel Prize in Literature at the time, has revealed that this description of King Haraldur cost Halldór Laxness the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954, which went to Ernest Hemingway instead. Halldór had to wait for his accolade until 1955.
53. The reference is to Jónas’ poem, “Ferðalok” (Jónas Hallgrímsson 95–97 at 97, lines 49–50; “Journey’s End” (Ringler 282–83): “Beside the bank / of Boar River / I carefully combed your hair.”
54. The date “February 20” is likely to be fictitious as it would place it before Helgi Haraldsson’s review, which appeared in *Tíminn* nearly a month earlier. I suspect that the letter was written after “Fræðavinur,” 1953.
55. *Rímur* were metrical romances, probably the most popular form of literature among ordinary people from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. I am not aware of any such work with a fire-breathing farmer from Hrafnkelsstaðir.
56. The greater part of Helgi’s review from April 14 reappears as the “Eftirmæli” [Postscript], dated 1983, to an annotated school edition of *Gerpla* (Laxness 1983, 494–506). The volume’s cover in addition to being blood red is decorated by the woodcut “Hann hljóp upp á skip Hrut’s” [He leapt aboard Hrut’s ship] by Þorvaldur Skúlason, commissioned to illustrate an episode in chapter 2 of Laxness 1945a, 18–19, and having no particular relevance to *Gerpla*. Helgi also translated Hallberg 1956 as Hallberg

- 1970–1971. Hallberg 1971 is a summary version of this work with three short chapters dealing with publications before Laxness 1951 (1931–1932).
57. The reference is to the reviews by Helgi from Hrafnkelstaðir in *Tíminn* and Þorbjörn from Geitaskarð in *Morgunblaðið*.
  58. The Greek Civil War (1946–1949) was fought between the army of the Greek government (supported by the United States and Britain) and the Democratic Army of Greece, the military wing of the Greek Communist Party. The Soviet Union had declared war against Japan in August 1945 and moved troops down to the 38th parallel on the Korean peninsula. The United States moved troops for a time into the south and a tense situation developed with both North and South claiming to be the legitimate government. On June 25, 1950, Northern forces crossed the 38th parallel. The United Nation declared the same day that this was an invasion and two days later authorized forces to resist. Chinese forces entered the conflict in 1951. Fighting eventually stabilized around the 38th parallel and on July 27, 1953, an armistice was signed which is still in effect.
  59. This sentence is in bold in the original.
  60. Pétur was pastor at Vallarnes in Suður-Múlasýsla 1939–1960. In 1970 he published a volume of plays that may explain why much of this little booklet is devoted to exposing what he sees as Halldór Laxness's incompetence as a playwright.
  61. Earlier he had translated Laxness 1957 as Laxness 2003.

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