

“In the Shadow of Greater Events in the World”

The Northern Epic in the Wake of World War II

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ABSTRACT: World War II was marked by widespread use of heroic narratives, national legacies, and grand ideas about destiny or the “arc of history.” These topics have a firm foundation in medieval literature, particularly in northern traditions. While literary medievalism had been in the limelight during the nineteenth century, during the early twentieth century it had been dismissed as a quaint curiosity; suitable for the benighted souls of the reading public, perhaps, but not to be taken seriously by avant-garde intellectuals. In the mid-twentieth century, however, literary medievalism returned with a vengeance. Questioning the critical narrative of twentieth-century literary history, this article examines iconoclastic works by Halldór Laxness (Iceland), T. H. White (England), John Gardner (America), and the Strugatsky brothers (Arkady and Boris, Russia), in order to compare perspectives on medievalism from different countries in the aftermath of the bloodiest conflict of all time.

RÉSUMÉ: La Seconde Guerre mondiale fut marquée par le recours généralisé à des récits héroïques, aux legs nationaux et à de grandes idées sur le destin ou « le cours de l'histoire ». Ces sujets sont fermement ancrés dans la littérature médiévale, en particulier dans les traditions nordiques. Bien que le médiévalisme littéraire ait été à l'honneur au XIXe siècle, il était considéré au début du XXe siècle comme une curiosité pittoresque, peut-être approprié pour les âmes ignorantes du lectorat publique, mais que les intellectuels d'avant-garde ne devraient certes pas prendre au sérieux. Toutefois, au milieu du XXe siècle, le médiévalisme littéraire revint en force. En interrogeant des récits critiques précédemment établis sur l'histoire littéraire du XXe siècle, cet article examine les œuvres iconoclastes de Halldór Laxness (Islande), TH White (Angleterre), John Gardner (Amérique) et des frères Strugatsky (Arkady et Boris, Russie), afin de comparer les perspectives sur le médiévisme de différents pays à la suite du conflit le plus sanglant de tous les temps.

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he *Lord of the Rings* was actually begun, as a separate thing, about 1937, and had reached the inn at Bree, before the shadow of the second war. Personally I do not think that either war (and of course not the atomic bomb) had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of its unfolding.

(J. R. R. Tolkien, *Letter to L. W. Forster*, December 1960)¹

This book will not recount the stories of Olaf the Stout's burnings and murders in Norway, nor attempt to retell the *Saga of King Olaf the Saint* any more than is needed to elucidate how the fates of our two heroes from the Vestfirðir, whose tale we began to narrate quite some time ago, played out in the shadow of greater events in the world.

(Halldór Laxness, *Wayward Heroes*, 2016 translation of the 1952 novel *Gerpla*)²

J. R. R. Tolkien denied allegorical content in his literary works; he particularly denied that the “One Ring” was a symbol for nuclear weaponry, although readers sometimes interpreted it in this light. Tolkien preferred for his medievalist fiction to be read in the context of his philological work, rather than the twentieth-century historical events of his own lifetime. Yet in *The Road to Middle-earth* (2003), Tom Shippey argues that both are important; despite its deep foundations in medieval literature, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) is still a wartime work, “framed by and responding to the crisis of Western civilization, 1914-1945 (and beyond)” (3).³ In *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2001), Shippey further explains that “Tolkien, as a philologist, and also as an infantry veteran, was deeply conscious of the strong continuity between that heroic world [i.e. the world of *Beowulf*] and the modern one” (xxviii).⁴ Still, Tolkien’s unironic depiction of heroism reflects a traditionalist or religious attitude that many of his peers rejected, as Kathryn Hume argues:

Tolkien is an outstanding representative of those who have turned their backs squarely on the void. In his own life, he had Christian doctrinal reasons to do so, so in a sense he is a throwback to an earlier stage of mythic thinking; but he writes during and after the horrors of World War II, and is familiar with the idea of meaningless life preached by many of his contemporaries, so his assertion of medieval values is not a simple affirming of a culture’s unchallenged ideals. His stance is much closer to ... “I would rather find this true than what I see everyday.” (47)⁵

Despite Tolkien’s attempt to separate his medievalist literature from modernity, scholars have produced compelling research examining modern elements in his works (Jackson 44). Perhaps the most famous example is the echo of the tank warfare of the Battle of the Somme in Tolkien’s early tale, “The Fall

of Gondolin” (Garth 220–21).⁶ Thus even in the most conservative medievalist works anachronisms occur; to borrow a line from Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (1842),⁷ in the mirror that connects fantasy and reality, “Shadows of the world appear” (II.12). Such shadows often darken medievalism with modern traumas. For example, the Russian novel *Трудно быть богом* (1964) [*Hard to be a God*] is set in a medieval world, yet a Hitler-like figure seizes power. The protagonist is aware of twentieth century history and recognizes the parallels: “Один я на всей планете вижу страшную тень, наползающую на страну, но как раз я и не могу понять, чья это тень и зачем” [I’m the only one on this whole planet who’s aware of the terrible shadow creeping over the country] (286; 40).⁸ The anachronism is clear at the start of this work, which features epigraphs from Pierre Abelard and Ernest Hemingway.⁹

Aaron Isaac Jackson notes that part of the reason for the clash between Tolkien and modernist writers was their divergent views on the value of archaic language (44). Tolkien went so far as to compose works in Old English—and even when inventing his own languages, he sought to recover the deep past.¹⁰ Jackson notes that critics thus deemed his work reactionary: “Tolkien’s work contradicts the received view of literary history, which is that the First World War finished off the epic in any serious, non-ironic form” (54). Yet the emulation of archaic language or literary forms need not entail any reactionary stance, as Halldór Laxness’s *Gerpla* (1952) shows. It was modeled on its medieval sources as closely as any of Tolkien’s works, yet it represents a very different response to the northern heritage. Laxness smuggled a “modern” (or an anti-traditional, in the view of many) message into a medieval-style work—and won the Nobel Prize (1955), though *his* work was criticized as radical or sacrilegious.¹¹

Wayward Heroes asserts in its inside jacket that *Gerpla* is “decidedly unlike any other piece of modern literature.” However, when placed in an international context Halldór’s “little book” can be seen as part of a wave of postwar medievalist works whose radical revisionism represents an under-recognized contribution to both literary medievalism and modern literature.¹² The comparison between *Gerpla* and contemporary works will range in every direction, like the Sworn Brothers from the West Fjords of Iceland themselves: southward to the British Isles (with the English tetralogy *The Once and Future King*, 1939–1958), westward across the Atlantic (with the American novel *Grendel*, 1971), and eastward to Russia (with the Soviet-era novel *Hard to be a God*, 1964). Although these works have not been discussed in a comparative context before, each has had its importance recognized within its respective tradition. An account of history of these works and their authors follows, as cultural ideas of literary production will be centrally important to interpreting them.

Authors: Iconoclasts

T. H. White (1906-1964) first worked with medieval materials by writing a thesis on Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) at Cambridge. He then spent some years as a teacher, even becoming head of an English Department, before retreating to write. He wrote *The Sword in the Stone* (1938) as a prologue to Malory, followed by *The Witch in the Wood* (1939) and *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940). He wrote *The Candle in the Wind* as a play (1940) then adapted it into a novel for the tetralogy (first published 1958), also revising the other novels and retitling the second novel *The Queen of Air and Darkness* (Grage 33-34). White preferred rustic living; Andrew Hadfield notes that "he spent much of his life as a semi-hermit" (208). Sylvia Townsend Warner, author of *T. H. White: A Biography* (1967), describes White's writing circumstances thus: "The gamekeeper's cottage stood among woodlands – a sturdy Victorian structure without amenities. It was by lamplight that White pulled from a shelf the copy of the *Morte d'Arthur* he had used for the essay on Malory he submitted for the English tripos" (1977, x).¹³ A passionate outdoorsman who found peace fishing in the rain, White had difficulty relating to people. He was far more comfortable with animals; this is clear in his works, above all the posthumous *The Book of Merlyn* (1977). His problems with depression and drinking provide his novel focusing on Lancelot, *The Ill-Made Knight*, with an intense psychology of guilt and shame. Indeed the notion of original sin appears repeatedly throughout the tetralogy, and White was considering converting to Catholicism while writing it.¹⁴ Although he arrived at a more naturalistic (specifically evolutionary) conception of human nature, he retained an intense pessimism about humanity, which led to accusations of misanthropy (Hadfield 211). As Warner explains, "Throughout his life White was subject to fears. ... Notably free from fearing God, he was basically afraid of the human race" (1977, ix).

White's tetralogy enjoyed an afterlife in adaptations such as the animated film *The Sword in the Stone* (1963, directed by Wolfgang Reitherman) and the musical *Camelot* (1960, directed by Moss Hart), later adapted into a film of the same title (1967, directed by Joshua Logan). White's provocative vision of facades of chivalric idealism undermined by ruthless realpolitik clearly struck a chord in the era of Kennedy and Khrushchev. However, critical recognition took longer. In "T. H. White: The Fantasy of the Here and Now" (1977) John Grage remarked, "What the modern readership has generally done to writers of literary fantasy who bother to write it in this century of fantasies of other sorts is all too graphically portrayed in the career of T. H. White" (33). Yet White's reputation grew steadily; Francois Gallix documented the critical tradition which subsequently developed in *T. H. White: An Annotated Bibliography* (1986). More recent studies include Kurth Sprague's special edition of *Arthuriana*, "T. H. White's Troubled Heart" (2006) and *Critical Essays on T. H. White* (2008, edited by Davies, Malcolm, and Simons). The latter considers the place of White's Arthurian legendarium within his literary corpus;

Linden Peach notes, “White’s oeuvre includes comic, serious literary, historical and thriller/detective writing as well as non-fiction” (n.p.). The online resource *England Have My Bones* (1996-2007) offers many relevant documents, and *The Camelot Project* (1995-2019) offers a “T. H. White Glossary.” *The Once and Future King* is now widely considered the gold standard of modern Arthurian fantasy and White’s work is receiving more attention than ever, often focusing on autobiographical, Freudian, and environmentalist elements.

The same elements of scholarly engagement with medieval materials, literary experimentation, the testing of ideals, and mentorship, occur in the career of the American writer John Gardner (1933-1982). He was perhaps even more prolific, producing an impressive variety of works, as Barry Silesky explains: “Gardner published twenty-nine books in all, including eleven fiction titles, a book-length epic poem, six books of medieval criticism, and a major biography” (back cover). One suspects that a productive comparison could be made between White’s *The Sword in the Stone* or *The Book of Beasts* (1954) and works by Gardner such as *A Child’s Bestiary* (1977). A professor of literature and teacher of writers, Gardner had been teaching *Beowulf* for twelve years when he completed *Grendel* in 1970 (Howell 1993, 61). However unlike White, he tended more toward fearlessness rather than fear. He was a “man of unrestrained energy and blatant contempt for convention,” as Silesky notes. “Once in the limelight, he picked public fights with his peers” (back cover). Rather than a “semi-hermit” he was, as the title of Silesky’s 2004 biography has it, a “Literary Outlaw” who became, in the decade before his tragic death, “larger than life.” Being a less rustic figure than White, Gardner lived faster, dying on a motorcycle rather than on a ship. Silesky writes, “Famous for disregarding his own safety, he rode his motorcycle at crazy speeds, incurred countless concussions, and once broke both of his arms. He survived what was diagnosed as terminal colon cancer only to resume his prodigious drinking and to die in a motorcycle accident at age forty-nine, a week before his third wedding” (n.p.).

Grendel remains Gardner’s most famous novel; it was adapted into the animated film *Grendel Grendel Grendel* (1981, directed by Alexander Stitt) and proved a source of inspiration in music, with the progressive rock epic *Grendel* (1982, by Marillion), the alternative rock anthem *Grendel* (1994, by Sunny Day Real Estate), and the opera *Grendel* (2006, directed by Julie Taymor). Gardner’s legacy was consolidated by John M. Howell’s *John Gardner: A Bibliographic Profile* (1980) and Robert A. Morace’s *John Gardner: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography* (1984), with a critical tradition represented by works like David Cowart’s *Arches and Light: The Fiction of John Gardner* (1983) and Howell’s *Understanding John Gardner* (1993). Online resources include *The Grendex* (2011) and *The Arch & The Abyss* (2015).

In *The Art of Fiction* (posthumous 1983), Gardner discusses the novels of two Russian brothers, Arkady Strugatsky (1925-1991) and Boris Strugatsky (1933-2012), noting that the literary establishment viewed science fiction with “prejudice or

ignorance” (40). The Strugatsky brothers often set their stories in the future, speculating about the direction civilization would take; a comparison might be made between their most famous novel *Полдень. XXII век* (1961) [*Noon: 22nd Century*] and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in terms of sweeping themes such as the evolution of civilizations.¹⁵ In *Hard to be a God*, also set in the future, humans have discovered an unknown planet which, upon closer inspection, proves to be only at a “medieval” stage of historical development.¹⁶ Thus the “medievalism” of the interpreters becomes a theme in this novel; a secret and largely non-interventionist elite of scholars studies the crusades, blunders, and wars of a backwards population in real time. Interpretations of human history, not to mention the ethics of anthropology, are crucial to the story. As the native peoples of the planet have not yet achieved the cultural, economic, and technological capacities that would lift them out of the medieval stage of history, their societies are nightmarish in both medical and political terms. Despite his abstract commitment to noninterventionism, the protagonist, when faced with a civilizational disaster, attempts to intervene—but he does not necessarily succeed in improving the overall situation.

Both brothers were present at the siege of Leningrad in 1942. Although they began writing during the post-Stalin “Thaw,” they had significant difficulty with political censorship. James von Geldern writes, “If science fiction was a massively popular form of Soviet literature ... one that inspired unease among literary officials and captured a readership much broader than traditional fiction, it was because it functioned as dissidence of a different sort” (n.p.). Perhaps inspired by their experience of government interference in cultural matters, the Strugatsky brothers’ model of authorship proves to be that of the dissident intellectual. Early in *Hard to be a God* a characteristic incident occurs: a travelling freethinker is approached by uniformed men who ask for his papers. He is immediately suspicious: “Хамье!—стеклянным голосом произнес Румата.—Вы же неграмотны, зачем вам подорожная?” [“Boors!” Rumata said icily. “You’re illiterate, what would you do with them?”] (275; 24). In the novel’s Afterword, which was written after the fall of the Soviet Union, Boris Strugatsky explains: “We were being governed by goons and enemies of culture” (243). Thus, political oppression became a key theme: “The adventure story had to, was obliged to, become a story about the fate of the intelligentsia, submerged in the twilight of the Middle Ages” (244).¹⁷

Soviet literature in translation offered foreigners insight into a closed and censorious society. *Hard to be a God* was widely translated and first appeared in English in Wendayne Ackerman’s 1973 translation, itself based on a German version; the recent (2014) translation by Olena Bormashenko is the first direct translation from the original Russian.¹⁸ Two years before Arkady’s death the brothers wrote the play *Человек с далёкой звезды* (1989) [*A Man from a Distant Star*], which retold *Hard to be a God*. Peter Fleischmann’s film *Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu*

sein [*Hard to be a God*] appeared that year,¹⁹ and a second film adaptation was released in 2013, directed by Aleksei German.²⁰ The “Noon Universe” novels were also reprinted in the “Worlds of the Strugatsky Brothers” series with a Tolkienian touch: introductions purportedly written by scholars “within” those worlds.

The literary career of Halldór Laxness (1902–1998) has been discussed elsewhere in this volume; suffice it to say here that it rivalled anything herein described in its scope, ambition, and controversies. The title of Philip Roughton’s translation of Halldór Guðmundsson’s biography, *The Islander: A Biography of Halldór Laxness* (2008), captures a key element of the Icelandic writer’s work, life, and career—for despite his rural roots, Halldór quickly became a world traveller. For him the model of authorship was the *skald*, the adventurous poet seeking prestige at a foreign court. He travelled through Europe and America; he wrote film scripts in Hollywood and travelogues about his journeys to the Soviet Union. Whereas T. H. White’s search for meaning was characterized by doubt and hesitation, Halldór committed, first to Catholicism and then to communism. In the years of his international fame he became an ambassador for Icelandic culture; his legacy includes saga editions, tales, poems, plays, essays, and memoirs, but the core of his corpus consists of novels, a growing number of which are available in translation. *The Islander* contains an extensive bibliography of Halldór’s works, and online resources such as *Laxness in Translation* provide information on new publications.

Whether hermits, outlaws, dissidents, or *skalds*, these writers brought different cultural conceptions of authorship to literary medievalism, each with its own implicit relationship to political authority.²¹ The element of medievalism crosses all genre boundaries: it runs through White’s fantasy, Gardner’s existentialism,²² the science fiction of the Strugatsky brothers, and Laxness’s satire. Examining this medievalism will show how the “shockwaves” of modern history have affected literature, as interpreted from multiple cultural/geographical perspectives. The first important element of iconoclasm in these postwar medievalist works is narrative framing.

Narrators: Interrogators

We all know that Arthur, and not Edward, was on the throne in the latter half of the 15th century. ... By that deliberate statement of an untruth I make it clear to any scholar who may read the book that I am writing of an imaginary world imagined in the 15th century. ... I am looking *through* 1939 at 1489 itself looking *backwards*.

(T. H. White, *Letter to Sydney Cockerell*, 1939)²³

Medievalist writers have always had to consider the relationship between their works and the medieval works to which they are responding. The Romantic tradition in literary medievalism may have culminated in Tolkien, but a more skeptical strain of satirical medievalism had occasionally also surfaced in works like Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889). Like Twain's novel, postwar medievalist works revel in self-conscious anachronism. White's narrator, for example, is an authorial persona who demonstrates awareness of the modern era and addresses readers directly: "It was not really Eton ... for the College of Blessed Mary was not founded until 1440, but it was a place of the same sort" (4). The narrator even explains where the tetralogy evolves from prologue to supplement: "There is no need to give a long description of the tourney. Malory gives it" (1966, 364).

White also includes an author-figure in Merlyn, who displays a metafictional awareness that extends far beyond the text he inhabits: he knows about not only Thomas Malory, but also the subsequent literary history of Arthuriana, including Mark Twain (1977, 30) and Lord Tennyson (1966, 332). This awareness is not limited to the "inside" of the various versions of King Arthur's story; it crosses the boundary from literature to history when Merlyn mentions twentieth-century figures including Freud, Einstein, and Hitler (1966 119, 295, 274). He refers to "the book we are in" (1977, 13); he even discusses T. H. White: "What an anachronist he was!" (1977, 4). In a key passage, Merlyn explains that his "second sight" is really memory of the future: "Ordinary people are born forwards in Time. ... But I unfortunately was born at the wrong end of time, and I have to live backwards from in front" (1966, 29). Gill Davies notes that Merlyn "shifts seamlessly between the internal narrative and an external omniscience, enabling White to postulate on a variety of subjects ranging from falconry to fascism" (2).

Anachronism also occurs in character dialogue, as if the narrator is also a translator.²⁴ Janet Montefiore assesses White's narrative as a "double perspective," which occurs when medieval and modern situations are described interchangeably, as when a knight complains about "lollards and communists" (1966, 199). Such examples emphasize historical parallels, in this case between the English Peasants' Revolt and the Russian Revolution. The Strugatsky brothers likewise draw parallels between peasant revolts and their country's revolution; the revolutionaries soon become oppressors themselves.²⁵ White mentions dictators and concentration camps (1966, 350-51, 365), while Laxness leaves the parallels between medieval and modern warfare implicit—including forced marches, starvation in besieged cities, and the burning of settlements.²⁶ Such parallels show that humanity faces timeless problems, which have only been exacerbated by the destructive power of modern technology.

Where does the skeptical interrogation of the "double perspective" leave the sources of medievalist works? *Hard to be a God* is not a retelling,²⁷ but *The Once and Future King*, *Gerpla*, and *Grendel* are all "supplementary" retellings; they

represent “back-handed tributes” to their respective medieval legends, as Kim Moreland terms Twain’s retelling (59). Howell observes of *Grendel*, “Gardner deconstructs the original epic’s characters and actions and many of its lines by placing them in an ironic context which implicitly questions the vision of the original work while saluting its literary power” (1993, 61–62). A similar comment might be made about *Gerpla*; Halldór’s narrator presents himself as a meticulous compiler and mentions his major sources, even though the book also contains invention and often employs irony.²⁸

Intertextuality goes hand in hand with metafiction as the boundaries between history and fiction become increasingly difficult to detect. The protagonist of *Hard to be a God*, Rumata, translates Shakespeare into the local language, provoking an awed response.²⁹ White confusingly deems Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* a cultural achievement that could only be enabled by the political achievements of King Arthur: “Where the raiding parties had once streamed along the highways ... now there were merry bands of pilgrims telling each other dirty stories on the way to Canterbury” (1966, 445). White’s references to events in both medieval English fiction and history places his work in a very ambiguous “medieval” setting in “the Old England of the twelfth century, or whenever it was” (1966, 204). It is as if, for White, “medieval England” is the sum of medieval English texts, to be idiosyncratically sorted by what he found most relevant. History and myth alike are brought to bear on present-day problems as the story self-consciously separates itself from both. For example, Merlyn considers the successive invasions of the British Isles in order to examine political tribalism.³⁰

Like White’s Merlyn, Don Rumata of *Hard to be a God* sees a medieval world around him, but remembers a modern one. A scientist from earth, he has come to study a planet at the feudal stage in history. His job title is Progressor, and his actions are bound by the largely non-interventionist ethics of the institution that employs him. This notion of a modern man trying to subtly “speed up” medieval history shows a remarkable similarity to a subgenre of medievalist literature, the “Time travel” romance (i.e. Morris’s *A Dream of John Ball*, 1886; Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee*, 1889). *Hard to be a God* might aptly be titled *A Soviet Anthropologist in King Arthur’s Court*: it features similarly anachronistic humour when Progressors go too far, as historians of the Middle Ages find themselves, like Twain’s Hank Morgan, opposing serfdom and leading peasant revolts (87–88; 40–41).³¹

The anthropologists in *Hard to be a God* possess a cogent big-picture theory of history; yet this does nothing to avert a crisis at any given point in history, nor does it solve problems deeply rooted in human nature. Moreover acting out the role of a medieval man in a medieval world, with only the occasional communication with colleagues from earth, places Rumata in a condition of cognitive dissonance. He finds his work surreal, as if he has spent half a decade living inside a costume drama. His audience at the Institute of Experimental History, he muses, could signal the end of this anachronistic performance at any

moment with a burst of applause (282; 35). One of Rumata's colleagues fears that scholar and subject have become inverted:

Я, голубчик, уж и сны про землю видеть перестал. Как-то, роюсь в бумагах, нашел фотографию одной женщины и долго не мог сообразить, кто же она такая. Иногда я вдруг со страхом осознаю, что я уже давно не сотрудник Института, я экспонат музея этого Института, генеральный судья торговой феодальной республики, и есть в музее зал, куда меня следует поместить.
(283)

[I've even stopped having dreams about Earth. One day, rummaging through my papers, I found a picture of a woman and for a long time couldn't figure out who she was. I occasionally realize with terror that I've long stopped being an employee of the Institute, that I'm now an exhibit in the Institute's museum, the chief justice of a feudal mercantile republic, and that there's a room in the museum in which I belong.]
(39)

As in Twain's time travel romance, medieval and modern worldviews involve conflicting definitions of reality and thus of not only orthodoxy, but even sanity (33). In this novel, the concept of sanity has become ominously politicized. Michael Atkinson describes elements in Soviet science fiction that could be considered Orwellian: "[Due to] the pressures of real-life totalitarianism. ... Reality itself was often under question" (n.p.). In the climax of the story, Rumata is arrested and accused of being an impostor, as worlds collide disastrously.³²

Hard to be a God presents a sort of "historical determinism": the arc of history overwhelms the actions of any individual, no matter how powerful (or godlike), as opposed to the "textual determinism" of Arthurian retellings such as those of White or Twain, where the plot must eventually arrive at the same ending as its source. Gardner, however, introduces a scheme of *philosophical* determinism. An omniscient dragon explains, "My knowledge of the future does not *cause* the future. It merely *sees* it, exactly as creatures at your low level recall things past. ... I do not change the future, I merely do what I saw from the beginning" (63). As this dragon perceives the entire history of all universes, his vision is exponentially greater than that of Merlyn; yet knowing the future does not allow either of them to save themselves, and in all of these deterministic schemes fate seems more a matter of entropy than destiny.³³

Such visionary powers, as possessed by these narrators and author-figures, enable them to warn modern readers who may naively believe that *they* are "outside of" or "beyond" history itself, and thus condescend toward the earlier "dark ages." Gardner's dragon, for example, actually corrects himself when quipping at Grendel: "It's damned hard, you understand, confining myself to concepts familiar to a creature of the Dark Ages. Not that one age is darker than

another. Technical jargon from another dark age” (67). White’s narrator similarly protests the term “Dark Ages” as excluding the era of Hitler and Stalin: “Do you think that they, with their Battles, Famine, Black Death and Serfdom, were less enlightened than we are, with our Wars, Blockade, Influenza and Conscription?” (1966, 569). Unfortunately, these works observe, political power has manifested itself in similar ways in every age.

Kings: Usurpers

During decades defined by some of the most notoriously murderous dictatorships in history, the figure of the usurper became centrally important in medievalist literature. King Mordred of White’s *The Candle in the Wind*, King Olaf of *Gerpla*, and Don Reba of *Hard to be a God* are all usurpers, conspirators, and destroyers of civilization. These three characters are informed by the historical figures of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Lavrenti Beria. Moreover, there appears to be significant cultural overlap in the symbolism of the malignant usurper. All three feature similar attributes: a dubious past, a pale and ungainly physique, a deep inferiority complex, an uncanny aptitude for manipulation, and a love of power for its own sake, which inevitably leads to paranoia, torture, and murder.

King Olaf the Stout is overweight, beardless, and awkward, so used to life at sea that he waddles on dry land. His crude concept of royal status reveals his roots as a raider; he wears more rings than he has fingers, as well as multiple belts and cloaks (191; 177). Yet beneath his comical exterior lurks an appetite for cruelty; he loves to torture his enemies, especially to remove eyes and tongues, which he keeps as grisly trophies (312; 292). Olaf’s “conversion” of Norway is wholly fraudulent: Christianity was well-established and people lived in peace whatever their religion, when Olaf realized that he needed an ideology to justify his desire to conquer (414; 390). Every time he refers to Christianity, it is in a folkloric sense that shows his very limited understanding (218, 485; 202, 455).³⁴ His claim to the throne is similarly flimsy: that he is descended from Harald Tanglehair, the first King of all Norway. Few take this claim seriously; some say that even if it is true, Harald himself was no better than a tyrant.

White’s Mordred, of course, stakes a claim little better—although he is Arthur’s son, he is illegitimate (being the result of incest); like Olaf, he seizes the throne unprovoked and by force, causing a civil war. Like Olaf, he is pale and beardless, drained of colour except for his strange blue eyes (1966, 454). He begins as a sort of evil dandy, who smirks and scoffs at chivalric notions of honour (1966, 548-51). As he encourages the decadence of Camelot, avant-garde fashion replaces chivalric ideals: “Mordred wore his ridiculous shoes contemptuously; they were a satire on himself. The court was modern” (1966, 505). Agravaire, his closest ally, suggests publicizing Guenevere’s infidelity and seizing power during the ensuing confusion: “If we could make a little merry mischief between Arthur and Lancelot,

because of the Queen, their power would be split. ... Then would be the time for discontented people, Lollards and Communists and Nationalists and all the riff-raff” (1966, 552). A cynical opportunist, Mordred at first encourages Camelot’s decadence, and then becomes the leader of a populist party and condemns it (1966, 458). Stephanie Barczewski notes that this party is “clearly intended as an analogue to Nazism” (232); Mordred is even called “a Führer” (1977, 121). Agravaine, who plays Himmler to Mordred’s Hitler, suggests a term very similar to “National Socialism”:

You need a national grievance—something to do with politics. ... You need to use the tools which are ready to hand. This man John Ball, for instance, who believes in communism: he has thousands of followers. Or there are the Saxons. We could say we were in favour of a national movement. ... We could join them together and call it national communism. It has to be something broad ... against large numbers of people, like the Jews or the Normans or the Saxons, so that everybody can be angry.
(1966, 549)

William Morris’s “Teutonic Democracy,” as depicted for example in *A Dream Of John Ball* (1886), certainly looks rather different once it has been hijacked into a paramilitary movement.³⁵ The atrocities committed in the name of various utopian ideologies during the twentieth century changed medievalism by forcing writers to scrutinize their source materials for notions of class warfare, cultural struggle, or ethnic-linguistic essentialism, as all had been revealed as possible pretexts for the deception, dispossession, starvation, and annihilation of whole populations. Where these themes occurred, they then had to be confronted in some sense.

Gerpla describes racial dehumanization when the Norse encounter the Inuit (whom they call *skrælingar*, meaning savages or trolls): “Kölluðu norrænir menn eigi mannakyn standa að þjóð þessari og kváðu réttþræpa, sógðu spott dregið að menskum mönnum er ókindur taka á sig mannslíki með augum og nefi og öðrum skapnaði sem menn væri” [The Norsemen refused to consider skraelings as human and declared them unfit to live, calling it a mockery of human beings for monsters to take on their form, with eyes and noses and other human features] (346; 324). Similar to the chillingly dehumanizing perspective of wartime eugenicists, for the Norse colonists in *Gerpla* this attitude justifies the extermination of another people in a situation of intended population replacement.³⁶ In contrast, Halldór emphasizes the universal humanity of all people with bitter sarcasm: “Svo er sagt að nafn það er þjóð þessi hefur gefið sjálfri sér haldi sömu merkíngu og þá er vér nefnum menn” [It is also said that the name this race has given itself means the same as our word for “men”] (362; 340).

The closest parallels to the history of the Nazi Party in Germany, however, occur with Don Reba of *Hard to be a God*. An eerie figure whose sinister nature only

becomes clear once he gains power, he rapidly evolves into a fanatical dictator bent on establishing permanent control. Like Mordred and Olaf, sadism and *ressentiment* lurk within this usurper:

Три года назад он вынырнул из каких-то заплесневелых подвалов дворцовой канцелярии, мелкий, незаметный чиновник, угодливый, бледненький, даже какой-то синеватый. Потом тогдашний первый министр был вдруг арестован и казнен, погибли под пытками несколько одуревших от ужаса, ничего не понимающих сановников, и словно на их трупах вырос исполинским бледным грибом этот цепкий, беспощадный гений посредственности.
(317)

[He emerged out of some musty basement of the palace bureaucracy three years ago, a petty, insignificant functionary, obsequious and pallid, with an almost bluish tint to his skin. Soon the then-First Minister was suddenly arrested and executed, a number of horror-stricken and bewildered officials died during torture, and this tenacious, ruthless genius of mediocrity grew like a pale fungus on their corpses.]
(85)

If Don Rumata is another Marxist equivalent of a messiah-figure, tormented by watching the suffering of benighted mortals from the vast distance of the right side of history (as defined by Progressors), Don Reba is the equivalent of the anti-Christ, seeking to move his society out of the frying pan of feudalism and into the fire of fascism. In the hands of writers who saw their country invaded by the German war machine, the sinister Reba's rise to power closely echoes that of Hitler, including a situation which seems intended as a direct parallel to the Reichstag fire:³⁷

И в том, что украшение города, сверкающая башня астрологической обсерватории, торчала теперь в синем небе черным гнилым зубом, спаленная “случайным пожаром.”
(307)

[The jewel of the city, the gleaming tower of the astrological observatory, now protruded into the sky like a black rotten tooth, burned down in an “accidental fire.”]
(72)

Reba claims to be protecting the king from assassination attempts, while demanding more power to deal with enemies of the state—and eliminating dissidents through paramilitary groups whose actions he can wash his hands of, until it is too late for his enemies to resist. Remembering earth, Rumata recognizes Reba's tactics as similar to those of Hitler; thus, he suspects Reba of planning to

consolidate a coup by betraying former allies such as the gray soldiers (so called after the colour of their uniforms):

Ему было известно о трениях между доном Рэбой и серым руководством.
История коричневого капитана Эрнста Рема готова была повториться.
(340)

[He was aware of the tensions between Don Reba and the gray leadership. The story of brownshirt leader Ernst Röhm was about to be repeated.]
(121)

As Reba's coup begins, Rumata already suspects a Night of the Long Knives.³⁸ Yet although the parallels to Hitler are obvious, Reba was originally named Rebia, an anagram for Beria, the infamous head of Stalin's secret police. Using a fascist as the primary villain would be ideologically acceptable, indeed laudable, in the censorious context of a Soviet novel; yet the Strugatsky brothers included a politically subversive message by drawing parallels between an authoritarian dictator and a supposed hero of the Soviet Union. The novel's Afterword condemns Stalin and Beria and their "monstrous offspring ... up to the elbows in the blood of innocent victims" (239). This widely successful novel, which seemed to bolster Soviet ideology, actually undermined it by advocating anti-Stalinist, anti-authoritarian views.

A common feature in all of these works is consideration of the question of war from many angles, but this is perhaps especially true of T. H. White. His King Arthur is a tactical innovator who rejects the conventions of war, which he sees as tilted toward the upper classes (1966, 47). Since they profit from war and rarely get hurt as a result of their expensive armour and ability to pay ransom, they have no incentive to stop the violence, while commoners suffer (1966, 307). Yet even in conducting what he believes to be a just war, King Arthur commits atrocities: "in the effort to impose a world of peace, he found himself up to the elbows in blood" (1966, 380). Halldór Laxness's Vikings similarly pillage the countryside and kill peasants, and all the while King Æthelred continues to pay them off—with money he gained from taxing peasants.³⁹ War is thus simply racketeering. Indeed, when locals organize a militia to defend themselves, Æthelred makes a deal *with* the Vikings, since he "Þótti honum minni ógn standa af erlendum óvinaher en þegnum sínum" [considered hostile foreign armies less of a threat than his own subjects] (187; 174); and later on, King Olaf proves the same, only worse (393; 371). In *Gerpla*, the peasants who suffer the most as a result of the ambitions of great men are perfectly aware of their unlucky place in the grand and cruel scheme of things; and the same proves to be the case in *Grendel* (114). In the most anachronistic example of peasant class-consciousness since William Morris, a peasant explains the roots of political oppression thus:

Rewards to the people who fit the system best, you know. King's immediate thanes, the thanes' top servants, and so on till you come to the people who don't fit at all. No problem. Drive them to the darkest corners of the kingdom, starve them, throw them in jail or put them out to war. ... Public force is the life and soul of every state: not merely army and police but prisons, judges, tax collectors.
(119)⁴⁰

King Olaf's last speech in *Gerpla* reveals the criminal nature of those usurpers who would be dictators, who use Orwellian rhetoric and burn villages in order to save them:

Er það mín skipan að þér þyrmið aungu kykvendi er lífsanda dregur í Noregi, og gefið eigi skepnubarni grið þar til er eg hef feingið alt vald yfir landinu. Og hvar sem þér sjáið búandmann við hyski sínu á akri eða eingi, á þjóðgötu eða eikjukarfa, þá gángið þar milli bols og höfuð á; og ef þér sjáið kú, þá leggið hana; og sérhvert hús, berið eld að, og hlöðu, látið upp gánga; og kvernhús, veltið því um koll; brú, brjótið hana; brunn, mígið í hann; því að þér eruð frjálsunarmenn Noregs og landvarnarlið.
(486)

[It is my command that you spare no creature that draws breath in Norway, and show no man mercy until I have once again gained complete control of the land. Wherever you see a churl with his brood in field or meadow, on the highroad, or in his punt, cut off his head. If you see a cow, slaughter it. Set each and every house ablaze, and send barns up in flames. Millhouses—topple them; bridges—break them. Wells—piss in them. You are the liberators and defenders of Norway.]
(456)

Heroes: Madmen

Þorgeir Hávarsson, the kind of person inclined to follow the sort of commands just related, is the terror of farmers in every region of the world he visits. While Þorgeir's sworn brother Þormóður praises his prowess, everyone else sees him as a thug whose character is not at all improved by his delusions of grandeur. Calling upon his sworn brother on a stormy winter night, at this fateful moment he enters the farm building with a sinister aspect, i.e. he “var líkari sjókind en manni” [looked more like a sea-monster than a man] (94; 89). The difference between heroes and monsters involves both how others see them, and how they see themselves.⁴¹ In *Grendel* the hero Beowulf sees himself as ascendant over nature and reality itself when he boasts of his exploits fighting sea-monsters while swimming in full armour. The passage is hyperbolic in the original poem, and upon hearing this account Gardner's Grendel considers it “preposterous” (161). Everyone in the hall laughs—at first: “Now the Danes weren't laughing. The

stranger said it all so calmly, so softly, that it was impossible to laugh. He believed every word he said. I understood at last the look in his eyes. He was insane" (162). In contrast to Grendel's existentialism or the dragon's nihilism, Beowulf seems to manifest a kind of postmodern solipsism or weaponized relativism, in which power conditions all claims and truth disappears amidst competing delusions—a competition he expects to win. In this Nietzschean nightmare, Beowulf has developed a grandiose view of himself that justifies both his ruthlessness and his messianistic pretensions, as he lies creatively and continually enacts fictions that he himself believes to be adaptive. Abandoning any rational epistemology while embracing strategic self-deception and making heroic new pronouncements about reality and the destiny of consciousness from on high,⁴² this Beowulf is, in the eyes of Grendel, a "fucking lunatic" (171). Yet Grendel fears that his time is over and that the age of madness has truly arrived; thus even he is intimidated by Beowulf's "childlike yet faintly ironic smile" (154).

For these self-styled heroes, the need for affronts to honour to be avenged justifies all of their acts of aggression, even though they often create a vicious circle of violence. Grendel finds their justifications absurd: "I laughed. It was outrageous: they came, they fell, howling insanity about brothers, fathers, glorious Hrothgar, and God" (81). Likewise when Þorgeir announces to Butraldi that he has come to avenge his crimes, Butraldi responds by snorting like a horse and laughing dementedly (119; 112). When Þormóður announces his mission to avenge Þorgeir in Greenland, he is similarly received with mocking laughter (352; 330). In Norway even King Olaf is surprised by how seriously Þormóður takes heroic ideas; when he announces his resolve to avenge his fallen sworn brother, Olaf assumes that the Icelander must be a madman (483; 453). The consensus among these works seems to be that those who most see themselves as heroes are often acting out precisely those dangerous delusions that are encouraged by the politically powerful. Grendel deliberately disillusiones the would-be hero Unferth by refusing to fight him, preferring instead to insult him and throw apples at him. No level of heroic fanaticism will make Unferth's performance a reality: once his "merry mask" of heroism is "torn away" he stands "reduced to what he was: a thinking animal stripped naked of former illusions, stubbornly living on, ashamed and meaningless, because killing himself would be, like his life, unheroic" (104). Similarly, Þorgeir's father Hávar portrays himself as "einn mestur garpur á Norðurlöndum" [one of the greatest champions in the North] (16; 15) even though he is merely an arrogant oaf who prefers maiming animals to farming. He soon picks a fight over less than nothing and gets himself killed. When the seven year-old Þorgeir finds his father's body, Halldór describes the sunny murder scene in gruesome, even shocking, detail (16; 15). As we will see, the "mask" of heroic identity alters its wearer's perception in both directions, revealing the importance of aesthetics even to concepts of sanity.

Þorgeir grows up aspiring to avenge his father and become a great warrior. As fanatical as Gardner's Beowulf, he refuses to ever set aside the mask of the hero. He even sleeps armed: "Var það trúá hans að hetjur svæfi í þessum stellingum en lægi eigi niður" [It was his belief that heroes slept in this position, and never lay down] (62; 57). A peaceable relative takes a dim view of Þorgeir's heroic aspirations, commenting that, "er auðfynt að þú ert heimskra manna að faðerni, er þú hyggur þig góðan verða af manndrápum" [it is obvious that you are descended from fools on your father's side, if you believe that manslaughter makes you more of a man] (47; 44). That Þorgeir thinks this becomes clear when he brutally attacks a man on the slightest possible pretext: simply for failing to acknowledge him. The man does not hear Þorgeir; it is windy and he is carrying a load of wood, but Þorgeir kills him. Þormóður is also present and if anything he encourages Þorgeir. Þorgeir then decapitates the man's corpse:

Vanst furðu seinlega því að vopnið var deigt þótt hugur kappans væri góður; þó varð laust höfuðið frá bolnum um síðir, og lá maðurinn þar í tvennu lagi á grundinni hjá hrísbagga sínum og var dauður.
(167)

[The task went incredibly slowly due to the dullness of his weapon, despite the champion's firm intent. Finally, however, the head came off its trunk, and the man lay there dead on the ground in two pieces, his bundle of brushwood next to him.]
(156)⁴³

The Þorgeir of the original saga commits similar killings,⁴⁴ but this senseless episode captures the psychology of Halldór's Þorgeir: a narcissistic oversensitivity to slights real or perceived, a hunger for domination, and a blockheaded stubbornness that cannot be reasoned with. He is a disturbed individual who commits murder repeatedly; yet even *he* refrains from throwing infants onto spears, which other Vikings happily do (238; 222). Still others commit further war crimes: "nokkrir heingdu og við belti sér höfuð kvenna þeirra er þeir höfðu nauðgað þá um daginn" [hanging from the belts of others were the heads of the women that they had raped that day] (236; 220).⁴⁵ Yet this does not convince him to defend farmers or find another life for himself; the closest Þorgeir ever comes to critical self-reflection is when he admits that

hins er eigi að dyljast að mjög hafa orustur orðið því ólíkar sem frá segir í fornum fræðum þeim er eg nam að móður minni og öðrum áætismönnum útá Íslandi.
(257)

[it is no secret that the battles we have fought have been most unlike those described in the stories and lays of old that I learned from my mother and other noble persons in Iceland.]
(241)

In the end, Þorgeir's king betrays him and he dies in shameful circumstances—thus denied the heroic death of legendary characters like Beowulf or the outlaws of the Icelandic sagas.⁴⁶

The worst of knights in White's tetralogy is Agravaire, similarly a northern warrior obsessed with avenging perceived slights to his family honour. Like Þorgeir, he can erupt into brutal violence without warning. Indeed, in a saga-like scene of foreshadowing, he commits an act of cruelty while young, one which reveals his disturbed nature. First the young Agravaire recruits an innocent virgin, the kitchen maid Meg, to lure a unicorn. His brothers, including Gawaine, also accompany him into the woods. The unicorn duly appears and trustingly lays its head in Meg's lap. Agravaire then slaughters it in one of the most brutal scenes in all of medievalism—and one which is particularly important given White's hatred of cruelty to animals. Gilles Davies writes: "The reader of White is frequently confronted by difficult, unpalatable aspects of his work. I still remember my shock when ... I encountered the death of the unicorn. ... It was some time before I could continue with the narrative" (vii).⁴⁷ Wanting a trophy from this grisly killing, Agravaire decides, "We must cut its head off somehow, and carry that" (1966, 269). Like Laxness, White emphasizes the difficult and disgusting task of beheading a body: "So they set to work, hating their work, at the horrid business of hacking through its neck" (1966, 268). This violence is nihilistic and senseless; it stains the souls of the perpetrators for the rest of their lives. The scene can be read as an analogy for wartime atrocities; the unhinged elder brother Agravaire exploits his position to make others, connected to him by "blood and soil," complicit in his crimes. What value he places on life itself becomes clear from the horrific butchery of this innocent victim, just as Þorgeir beheads the man carrying wood.⁴⁸ Indeed these aspiring heroes sometimes even resemble the monster Grendel, who wallows in his own monstrosity. As Agravaire butchers the unicorn in a sadistic rage and punctures its intestines, Grendel admits that the beauty and innocence of others provokes only hatred and rage in him. Thus when he sees the young queen Wealtheow he plans to rip her to pieces and "squeeze out her feces between my fists" (109). Such deliberately revolting scenes would never be found in Tolkien's literary works, nor in many medieval ones. In scenes like these, which deliberately dwell on gruesome violence, readers encounter the aesthetics of nihilism.⁴⁹

The results of this bravado are uniformly hideous. All of these postwar medievalist writers portray the misery of combat conditions: the mud and the disgusting food, the injuries and illnesses. Halldór always depicts the physical

process of dying from severe wounds in detail. He describes conditions aboard Viking ships as “seltu og tjöru, fúka og spýu, lús og ýldu, hrýfi og óþverra, skyrbjúg og kláða” [salt and tar, rotten seaweed and vomit, lice and decay, rashes and scabs, scurvy and itching] (273; 256), and mentions lice repeatedly. The Strugatsky brothers novel takes place in a barbaric world, in which parasites and diseases have free reign:

На сотни миль—от берегов Пролива и до сайвы Икающего леса—простиралась эта страна, накрытая одеялом комариных туч, раздираемая оврагами, затопляемая болотами, пораженная лихорадками, морами и зловонным насморком.
(270)

[This country extended for hundreds of miles—from the shores of the Strait until the saiva of the Hiccup Forest—blanketed with mosquito clouds, torn apart by ravines, drowning in swamps, stricken by fevers, plagues, and foul-smelling head colds.]
(18)

Boris’s Afterword summarizes the desired atmosphere as “medieval piss and filth” (235), and bedbugs take the place of the lice in *Gerpla*: they are a constant reminder that Nature involves an ongoing transfer of blood, quite aside from any blood that may be spilled in the course of aestheticized heroics. White’s references to ants, in contrast, are meant to depict human conflicts in terms of population dynamics, with political propaganda and much else satirized by comparison with ant colonies.⁵⁰ While such scenes offer a somewhat abstract overview of war, White also dwells on wartime conditions on the ground: “barns burnt, and dead men’s legs sticking out of ponds, and horses with swelled bellies by the roadside, and mills falling down, and money buried” (1966, 234). Gardner observes the consequences of raids: burned buildings, dead livestock, and mutilated corpses. Indeed Grendel argues that since human tribes wipe one another out all the time in raids, wars, and other population-level conflicts, and do so apart from any of his actions (which were initially motivated not by malice but by hunger or at most curiosity), he is not an unusually monstrous life form.⁵¹ Through Grendel’s bleak perspective, Kathryn Hume writes, Gardner “supplies something which we know must logically have been there all the time, but has been ignored as contrary to heroic decorum,” emphasizing the book’s original publication context of 1971, during the Vietnam war (89).⁵²

In *Gerpla*, the first account readers receive of a Viking raid comes from the slave Kolbakur. Although he is only a minor character with few lines in *Fóstbræðra saga*, Halldór’s Kolbakur shockingly describes how he was enslaved when Vikings raided his farm in Ireland:

Hetjur og skáld brendu hús mitt, þeir hjöggu föður minn á akri og lögðu afa minn spjóti, örvasa mann. Þar lá amma mín á knébeð að lofa blessaðan Kólumkilla hollvin sinn, og rotaði maður hana með öxarskalla; og því græt eg ei. Þá tóku þeir bróður minn ómálgan, undu af honum reifa og köstuðu honum nöktum milli sín á spjótum, en móður mína og systur únga drógu þeir brott hljóðandi á skip.
(39)

[Heroes and skalds burned down my house. They slew my father in his field and thrust a spear through my grandfather, just a frail old man. My grandmother was on her knees praising her beloved friend, the blessed Columkille, when a man bashed in her skull with a blow from his ax. That is why I do not cry. Then they took my infant brother, unwound his swaddling clothes, and tossed him naked between them on their spear points. My mother and my young sister they dragged away wailing to their ship.]
(36)

Kolbakur is, rather understandably, opposed to what he sees as needless violence. Viking raids are never glorious in *Gerpla*—whether in Iceland, Ireland, England, France, Norway, Sweden, or Russia. At one point the raiders' accomplishments are summarized as “stolið kúm og brent Evropam í sjö kynslóðir” [stealing cows and setting fire to Europe for seven generations] (222; 206). Yet the later stories are utterly different from Kolbakur's account, being shaped instead by court poets to conform to a heroic aesthetics. W. H. Auden's *The Shield of Achilles* (1955) captures a similar reevaluation of its titular hero. Inverting the traditional poetic praise of a victory, Auden gives the goddess Thetis a timeless vision in the divinely forged shield; like White's Merlyn, Gardner's dragon, and Don Rumata, this direct link between different stages in history proves shocking by its juxtapositions. From her mythologized world, one defined by the ancient aesthetics of heroism, Thetis is faced with direct sight of the industrial realities of modern warfare, including vast death camps and the desolation of whole countries:

The thin-lipped armorer,
Hephaestos, hobbled away,
Thetis of the shining breasts
Cried out in dismay
At what the god had wrought
To please her son, the strong
Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles
Who would not live long.
(207)⁵³

If kings have become frauds or usurpers, and heroes have become madmen, what can be said about those who glorify their acts and deeds?

Poets: Propagandists

[Sometimes, the dragon tells Grendel, the people] have uneasy feelings that all they live by is nonsense. ... That's where the Shaper saves them. Provides an illusion of reality. ... Mere tripe, believe me. Mere sleight-of-wits. He knows no more than they do about total reality—less, if anything; works with the same old clutter of atoms, the givens of his time and place and tongue. But he spins it all together with harp runs and hoots, and they think what they think is alive, think Heaven loves them. It keeps them going—for what that's worth.
(64–65)

Tolkien wrote that “The utter stupid waste of war, not only material but moral and spiritual, is so staggering to those who have to endure it,” adding that it “always was (despite the poets) and always will be (despite the propagandists)” (quoted in Jackson 55). The medievalist writers discussed here, however, would hardly distinguish between the two. Kings and heroes never lack a poet to glorify their wars, like the Anglo-Saxon *scop* or the Norse *skáld*. Halldór emphasizes how irresponsible poets have been through Þormóður’s praise of Þorgeir and Olaf; early on a relative warns him that “ógagn eitt og hamíngjuleysi hefur jafnan af því leitt er saman kómu vígamenn og skáld” [nothing but harm and misfortune result when killers and skalds come together] (56; 52). Grendel watches Hrothgar’s court poet invent the heroic story that will become *Beowulf*: “The Shaper was singing the glorious deeds of the dead men, praising war. ... It was all lies” (54). Like Halldór’s Skald Þormóður, Gardner’s Shaper aims to benefit directly from glorifying his king: “He would sing the glory of Hrothgar’s line and gild his wisdom and stir up his men to more daring deeds, for a price” (42). And yet, with all the cynical understanding that Grendel has, the Shaper’s art still works on him: “The man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots and had transmuted it, and they, who knew the truth, remembered it his way—and so did I” (43). Like Winston Smith, beleaguered by party propaganda in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), Grendel worries about his memory being rewritten. Even his narrative style briefly changes to reflect the Shaper’s manipulation (44). Through aesthetics the Shaper distorts history; all of his creativity is aimed in the single direction of increasing the power and glory of his paymaster. When he dies he stops speaking mid-sentence, still prophesying future victories for his king.

The Strugatsky brothers depict the degradation of literature from art to propaganda through the figure of Gur the Storyteller, who composes a masterpiece based on the lives of people he actually knew, but is forced to burn his own books because the government considers them immoral. Truth is no defense; he is forced to submit to an Orwellian maxim: “Мне объяснили, что правда ... это то, что

сейчас во благо королю ... Все остальное ложь и преступление” [Truth is what currently benefits the king. Everything else is a lie and a crime] (350; 135). He soon finds himself reduced to composing abysmal praise poetry for the court. In a comic moment he poetically proclaims that the king is so wonderful and powerful that “И отступила бесконечность” [Infinity is in retreat] (351; 135) to which the king responds: “Хвалю. Можешь кушать” [I commend you. You may eat] (351; 136). All of this is a damning judgment: poets, it appears, just glorify the nearest violent madman who offers them status and money, just like certain European intellectuals during World War II (Wolin xi).⁵⁴

In the poignant conclusion of *Gerpla* Þormóður finally meets Olaf, the king he has glorified—and finds him truly repugnant. As Þormóður broods over what the path of the skald has cost him, Olaf asks him to recite his praise poem, the *Lay of Heroes*. Refusing to recite the poem, Þormóður basically burns his life’s work: “Nú kem eg eigi leingur fyrir mig því kvæði” [I can no longer recall that lay] (493; 463).⁵⁵ Presumably he also refused to rouse Olaf’s army with the glorious poem on the heroic Scylding dynasty, the *Bjarkamál*, the next morning.⁵⁶ Halldór’s Þormóður thus achieves the self-recognition that the Shaper, whom Gardner depicts as an early propagandist of this same dynasty, never did; he chooses to fall silent in condemnation of his own previous words. In *Gerpla* the legend that grows after King Olaf’s death legend is thus wrong and illegitimate, or at least it does not reflect Þormóður’s final understanding of Olaf.

How does such an unpleasant figure as Olaf become a saint? Olaf’s corrupt collaborator, the bishop Grímkell, bribes the papacy and launches a propaganda campaign: “Og fer sem jafnan vill verða, að þeir er veita eftirmæli konúngum ráða og sögu þeirrar æfi sem var, en kjósa öllum og óbornum dýrlínga” [Now it went as it so often does, that those who bestow posthumous glory on kings also rewrite the stories of their lives, and thereby create saints for generations present and future] (490; 460). Grímkell’s motivation is simply to advance his own power. Halldór notes that in this time the power of poets like Þormóður was fading, to be replaced by that of bishops like Grímkell (467; 439). Unfortunately, bishops prove to be no better than poets when it comes to justifying violence. When recently baptized Vikings ask a bishop whether they should burn a church in which their mutual enemies are hiding—along with numerous innocent people—they receive this reply:

Kristur heldur víst eigi loflegt né rétt af aungum sökum eld að bera að kirkjum og brenna konúnga inni, ellegar landsmúg, konur og börn og önnur vesalmenni. Á hitt ber að líta, að þó að Kristur sé mikill fiskimaður, þá verður hann eigi í sjálfs neti fánginn.

(233)

[Assuredly, Christ holds it neither laudable nor just, for any reason whatsoever, to set fire to churches and burn kings inside them, or commoners, women and children, or other wretched folk. Yet it should be kept in mind that although Christ is a great fisherman, he will not be caught in his own net.]
(217)

This ingenious explanation carries on at some length, and in the end entails a justification for war crimes. In *Grendel* clerics likewise use theology to maintain their grip on power; it is merely cynical sophistry that obscures its circular reasoning with pretentious vocabulary (131). Thus the torch of propagandist passes from shaper to priest, from poet to churchman.

Halldór Laxness had once believed in Lenin as a Christ-like figure and the Soviet Union as a “Promised Land” (Guðmundsson 180). Halldór Guðmundsson writes, “One is inevitably led to ponder how Halldór, a man who truly wished the best for his countrymen and who interpreted their lives and fates with more sympathy and artistry than has ever been done since, could have become a defender of Stalin” (191). When considering the peculiar phenomenon of western intellectuals’ love of foreign dictators such as Stalin, Orwell writes that many “intelligent and sensitive people” nevertheless unleash exactly the vindictive emotions associated with tribalism in relation to whatever intellectual cause upon which they have projected (or in Orwell’s term “dislocated”) their primal psychological tendencies (n.p.). Orwell notes the association of ethics and aesthetics in utopian thinking; Halldór Guðmundsson likewise observes that Laxness himself was first interested in communism by the appeal of its dreams of ultimate liberation; and he later recognized this very appeal as dangerous (260). It is well worth noting that the Icelandic Nobel Laureate’s doubts about communism began with aesthetic ones (336). Gardner’s *Grendel* likewise observes that because of the power of aesthetics art shades into religion and holds within it the power to make men mad (43). This may explain why these postwar medievalists insist on depicting deliberately hideous and shocking scenes of war.

In many ways, an Orwellian analysis of politics sets the works herein discussed apart from previous works of literary medievalism.⁵⁷ Orwell himself fought in the Spanish Civil War and was severely wounded, which could certainly be considered heroic; yet he was skeptical enough of heroic literature to call Thomas Carlyle, author of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), “one of the intellectual fathers of Fascism” (n.p.). Of the astounding cynicism and ruthlessness of political leaders, particularly in times of war, no writer warned more powerfully than Orwell. Yet he reserved particular scorn for the intellectuals, who “make lies sound truthful and murder respectable,” and who seek “to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind” (1999, n.p.). Using the term “Transferred Nationalism”⁵⁸ to criticize political ideology in general, Orwell argues that by

selling their souls for power, intellectuals become ideological propagandists, all the while remaining convinced of their own moral superiority:

Nationalism is power-hunger tempered by self-deception. Every nationalist is capable of the most flagrant dishonesty, but he is also—since he is conscious of serving something bigger than himself—unshakably certain of being in the right. (1999, n.p.)

Like propagandists, ideologues grant themselves a license to deceive others, justifying their actions in the here and now by appealing to the beauty of the dreams they believe in, although this sort of thinking amounts to little more than “the ends justifies the means.” It is exactly this golden haze of idealism, Orwell notes, that motivates the most militant ideological fanatics to undertake the most extreme measures: “What remains constant in the nationalist is his state of mind: the object of his feelings is changeable, and may be imaginary” (1999, n.p.).

Thus Þormóður considers reworking his lay in praise of King Olaf to praise King Cnut, before finally rejecting the idea of praise poems entirely. The conclusion of *Gerpla* seems to express skepticism of narrative itself, at least if it is in any way linked to the exercise of power. White’s tetralogy concludes in a manner which displays striking parallels to *Gerpla*. Halldór’s narrative concludes on the eve of a famous battle, one in which readers already know that both Olaf and Þormóður were killed.⁵⁹ Like Laxness, White does not depict his King’s last battle, but instead looks forward to it (490; 460). The night before his final defeat, White’s King Arthur considers many theories which might explain war: original sin, human nature, determinism, ambitious leaders, hateful populations, the “Deep Roots” evolutionary theory, antecedent feuds, economic inequality, and political geography (1966, 676). The tetralogy ends on a pessimistic note as Arthur realizes that these problems are beyond his understanding and he cannot save his kingdom. He knows what *will* happen: “Everybody was killed” (1966, 674). Yet whereas Þormóður repudiates his ideals completely, White’s King Arthur hopes that someone will keep alive the titular “Candle in the Wind” of his lost idealism; not any particular belief system or ideological solution, but simply the idea that humans can still do good and that it is possible to improve or at least preserve the world. Thus he sends his page Tom (Malory) away to preserve the dream of Camelot. Stephanie Barczewski points out that by inserting Malory as a character in the finale of his tetralogy, White crosses boundaries of history and legend, fact and fiction, authorship and story (232-35). This ending device confers unreliability on the *Morte*; the Malory who witnessed these events is a youth, full of just the naïve idealism that Arthur tries to dispel. Colin N. Manlove notes, “The drive of events seems to be towards the defeat of any ideal, of any attempt to make sense of human affairs” (78).

Like Laxness, White provides a conclusion that is both poignant and devastating, perhaps seeking the antidote to war in a true understanding of humanity's place in nature: "I think I can really make a comment on all those futile -isms (communism, fascism, conservatism etc.) by stepping back—right back—among the other mammals" (1977, xvi). Similarly, Gardner designed *Grendel* as a survey of the "Great Ideas of Western Civilization: love, heroism, the artistic ideal, piety, and so forth" (Child 113).⁶⁰ Yet the Voice of Nature—in the form of the dragon—rejects them all. Gardner's novel thus exposes the illusory nature of various "futile -isms," even while recognizing that it may be impossible for pattern-seeking primates such as humans to avoid a certain level of "-ism" in their worldviews. It is interesting to consider that the strongest belief in the positive power of narrative, art, and culture to emancipate populations rather than justify their maltreatment comes from the Strugatsky brothers, whose novel is clearly an attack on Hitler, Stalin, and Beria alike. Still, the "basis theory of feudalism" saves no one, and villains like Reba have their own theories of history, which they use quite adeptly as ideological pretexts to persecute all those who stand in their way. Whereas Tolkien's religious perspective entails belief in the validity of narrative in a deep sense (what Tolkien called Story), that is just what these medievalist schismatics rejected.

In examining the role of the poet, these postwar medievalist writers close the loop of metafiction and account for the creation and history of their own sources. Acknowledging the profound symbolism and aesthetic inspiration of medieval literary masterpieces, they also reveal the ominous extent to which such things can prove to be a double-edged sword, especially when the strange gleam of romanticism settles upon them. For T. H. White, Halldór Laxness, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, and John Gardner, medievalism could not provide a nostalgic escape to a time of honour and nobility. Instead horrible suspicions about human nature and destiny, borne of the "Midnight of the Twentieth century," haunt their works. Rewriting their respective literary traditions from a bleak point of view, these works reconsider the nature of narrative itself, especially in the case of the cultural processes that produce heroic legends. Perhaps for generational reasons even more than for cultural or biographical ones, each of these writers arrived at an Orwellian analysis of the interrelated roles of ruler (king), enforcer (hero), and propagandist (poet); they form a sort of unholy trinity as authoritarianism and war sweep across the world. Perhaps these are the three figures who glower in Alberto Giacometti's sketch on the cover of *Wayward Heroes*.⁶¹

NOTES

1. From *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (2000), 303. I am grateful to a number of colleagues who challenged me to expand my horizons in this article, and who helped make it

possible. Birna Bjarnadóttir's guidance and inspiration was invaluable throughout, particularly regarding *Gerpla*. I would like to thank Sigríð Johnson for all her wonderful work at the Icelandic Collection of Elizabeth Dafoe Library, where I did the research for this article. Christopher Crocker's suggestion of looking at *Hard to be a God* proved to be a very good one. I am glad to acknowledge the help of further librarians at Dafoe: Lyle Ford, who purchased the English translation for the library via the Margaret Stobie Fund, as well as James Kominowski and Nicole Boudreau, who procured the Russian novel and assisted with transcription. Thanks to Evgenia Cherkasova (Suffolk University) for checking my transcriptions, and to Julia Rochtchina (University of Victoria) for double-checking. Their generous assistance made it possible to represent a perspective from the Soviet Union in this article; any remaining errors are my own.

2. For discussion of the Vestfirðir (or West fjords region), from which these saga protagonists hail, see Bjarnadóttir in this volume ("In Nature's Cathedral"). The quotation comes from Laxness 2016 (286); see the corresponding original Icelandic passage in Laxness 1952 (305).
3. Shippey acknowledges this in the conclusion to the third edition of *The Road to Middle-Earth* (374), a book which is almost entirely about the connection between Tolkien's literature and medieval European traditions through philology (first edition 1983). This conclusion to the third (2003) edition connects readers to Shippey's second major monograph on Tolkien, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2001). Here we find that Tolkien's unique body of literature reflects the concerns of its own time while also revealing its roots in the Middle Ages.
4. Shippey also notes that aside from Tolkien, several other major twentieth century authors of fantastic literature were also military veterans, and turned to the fantastic mode of literature so as to express alienation that could not be captured by biography, journalism, or historical fiction; George Orwell is one of his main examples (viii).
5. Hume's statement may not capture the complexity of Tolkien's relationship to religious traditions. Tolkien was a lifelong Catholic, although his attitude toward belief did fluctuate; this ebb and flow also influenced how he understood his own creative work (see Shippey 2003, 324).
6. Another oft-discussed example of echoes of the Somme in Tolkien's work, which Tolkien himself admitted, is the corpse-filled marshes through which Gollum leads the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* (see Shippey 2001, 217).
7. This poem was first published in 1832; I refer to the 1842 revised version (*The Camelot Project* includes both).
8. Henceforth the title in English translation is used to refer to the Strugatsky Brothers' 1964 novel, and Russian quotations from the 1984 edition are followed by corresponding quotations from Olena Bormashenko's 2014 translation.
9. See also Kristjánsdóttir in this volume for discussion of Hemingway and Halldór Laxness.
10. For further discussion see Shippey 2003 (338) and 2001 (xv).
11. See Hughes in this volume on the reception of *Gerpla*; see Shippey 2001 on the reception of *The Lord of the Rings*, whose popularity modernist critics dismissed as, in Shippey's terms, "a kind of literary disease" (vii).

12. Halldór's narrator uses this phrase in one of several references to the novel's own storytelling. Quoting this comment as it occurs in *Wayward Heroes*, the narrator disclaims any responsibility for readerly disillusionment: "Holy Scripture says that the man who is fettered to a place by his flesh, and who feels as if everything around him is orchards and roses, will one day go walking and notice that the orchard is naught but burning desert, offering neither water nor shade, only barren rocky wastes where there is not a single blade of grass for a bunting's beak. Whether such wisdom comes gradually, or is revealed to a person in a single moment one day, will not be debated in this little book" (335).
13. The Tripos is the English literature exam at Cambridge.
14. For White's thoughts on conversion to Catholicism see Sprague 134. Tolkien was a lifelong Catholic, whereas Halldór Laxness's journey led into Catholicism in the 1920s, and later into (and out of) communism.
15. The science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, directed by Stanley Kubrick) was inspired by Arthur C. Clarke's short story "The Sentinel" (1948); Clarke cowrote the film and published a novel version the same year.
16. This novel, while a Strugatsky Brothers science fiction novel, is not part of the set of fourteen novels that are considered canonical to the "Noon" universe (named after *Noon: 22nd Century*).
17. Boris Arkady's Afterword appeared three decades after the novel's original publication; he was only able to publicly acknowledge that Don Reba was intended as a depiction of Beria once the Soviet Union had ended. The Russian version from which I am quoting does not include this Afterword, so only passages from the Afterword as it appears in Bormashenko's translation are given here.
18. The Afterword notes that the novel has been translated into many languages and that by the post-Soviet era there had already been nearly fifty editions.
19. This was a joint production with both German and Soviet involvement.
20. The original title of this film was *The History of the Arkanar Massacre*, a reference to the coup that takes place at the climax of the story.
21. Tolkien's models of authorship included the epic poet (i.e. the *Beowulf*-poet) and the prose mythographer (i.e. Snorri Sturluson); on this topic see Geeraert 2018. Shippey notes that Tolkien believed that "people, and perhaps as a result of their confused linguistic heritage especially English people, could detect historical strata in language without knowing how they did it" (2001 xiv). In other words, for Tolkien the roles of poet and mythographer cannot be separated from that philologist, capturing and preserving expressions sanctified by widespread use, which thus reflect the wisdom of the crowd or even the gleam of divine inspiration. One finds in Tolkien's *legendarium* a corrupted or dark parallel role in ambitious manipulators like Saruman whose industrial schemes, in aiming to establish artificial, centralized control, desecrate ancient cultures and pristine ecosystems alike.
22. Regarding Gardner's complex views on existentialism and how these apply to *Grendel*, see Child 113; other articles in the same volume consider related matters of Gardner's views on existentialist thinkers such as Sartre.

23. Quoted and discussed in Sprague 47.
24. This is of course a device that Tolkien uses (his narrator is translating from ancient sources) and indeed a device medieval authors themselves often used, claiming to be translating from an old book whether or not they actually were. M. J. Toswell writes,
- In the Middle Ages, it was right and proper to invoke authority, and even more right and proper to suggest that one's own contribution to a story was slight, a matter purely of presenting it in a different language or a different form. In other words, a medieval author would emphasize the sameness of the text, would be likely to disclaim all innovation; if innovation did happen, it had to be in the spirit of the original and be presented almost as something the authority would have written if it had been possible. Innovation was bad; the best thing for any given text was a rich traditional authority. In other words, the things that make "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" subversive and theoretically aware in the modern era are precisely the same elements that make it an exactly appropriate medieval text – but in an equally subversive way since medieval writers claimed to be following their authorities exactly, often at precisely the moment they were most thoroughly departing from them.
(71)
25. The protagonist Don Rumata considers this inevitable quandary of power and human nature when the idealistic revolutionary who has been born too early in history, Arata, asks him for advanced weaponry in order to accomplish his revolution at the end of Chapter Nine (*Трудно быть богом*, 300). Rumata notes the historical pattern that, in the wake of the overthrow of an old elite, elitism itself remains as a new elite simply takes control.
26. See King Olaf's disastrous march through Sweden in particular: Laxness 1952, 395; 2016, 372-73.
27. The authors mention they may have had *Don Quixote* in mind (on this topic see the Introduction in this volume), but their story is not directly based on a medieval source text to whose plot a retelling, no matter how heretical, must be anchored. Yet there certainly may be a thematic echo of *Don Quixote* in *Hard to be a God*, as the protagonist's assumption of heroic superiority could be construed as a kind of messiah complex—and here the Strugatsky Brothers resemble the earlier science fiction writer Evgeny Zamyatin, who satirized the Soviet messiah of "Reason" in *We* (written 1921, published 1924, and widely translated; Zamyatin died in exile in 1937).
28. Howell's statement on Gardner's narrative methods might be applied to *Gerpla* in many ways; on *Gerpla*'s complex relationship to its sources see Eysteinnsson and Kristjánssdóttir in this volume.
29. In *Hard to be a God*, the poetry Rumata translates into the fictional language of Arkanar, Irukianian, is entitled "To be or not to be?" and is perhaps a version of Hamlet's famous monologue. Rumata's listener, a medieval priest, responds with admiration to this early modern text: "'Holy Míca!' cried the inflamed Father Hauk. 'Whose poetry is this?'" (60). Rather than explain that other worlds exist to a medieval man (his orders prohibit this level of interference), Rumata claims that the poetry is his own (see the

corresponding passage in *Трудно быть богом*, 300). Placing real literary works in fictional contexts is a well-established tradition in medievalist literature and has led to remarkable developments in metafiction; writers like Borges (see Toswell 2014), Tolkien (see Shippey 2003), and E. R. Eddison (see Geeraert 2016) envision mythologies that connect the texts of many traditions.

30. The ability of opportunists to gain power by dividing populations along ethnic, religious, and cultural lines is a consistent theme throughout White's tetralogy. For example, Merlyn states, "Neither the racial maniac nor the overlord stops to consider the lot of the common soldier, who is the one person that gets hurt" (1966, 241).
31. The novel seems to take the view that history cannot be "sped up." Even Progressors are bound by something similar to the "Prime Directive" of noninterference in premodern civilizations as outlined in the science fiction series *Star Trek* (1966-1969) since any interference, even if well-intentioned, could create disastrous unintended consequences. Rumata remembers several examples; here is one as it is described in Bormashenko's translation: "Carl Rosenblum, one of the leading experts on the peasant wars in France and Germany, also known as the wool-seller Pani-Pa, led a revolt of Murissian peasants, stormed two cities, and was killed by an arrow to the back of the head while trying to stop the looting" (41). Is this tragedy or absurdity? The scene in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1974) in which a historian, lecturing on medieval battles for a documentary, is struck down by an armed "knight" on horseback, also comes to mind in this context of metafictional humour (and peasant revolts).
32. In *Hard to be a God*, the villain Reba actually suspects that Rumata does not belong in his world: "I don't even try to gaze into the abyss that brought you forth. My head spins and I fall into heresy" (172).
33. I discuss this dragon's dialogue in a scientific context elsewhere (2016). On Merlyn and his sense of inevitable fate see White 1966 (228). Other writers (for example John Steinbeck) also developed Merlin's sweeping and yet fatalistic perspective of timeless vision in parallel ways (see Geeraert 2016).
34. It would not be unfair to describe Olaf's understanding of Christianity in *Gerpla* as simply that Christ is the most powerful god, and he is on Olaf's side.
35. On William Morris and Teutonic Democracy, a Victorian interpretation of the history and literature of the Old North, which can be found in Morris's "Germanic" romances, see Geeraert 2016 (Chapter 2).
36. In *Gerpla* the fact that the Norse do not take over Greenland and displace or even annihilate the Inuit is more a result of their limited ability to adapt to local conditions (a historical narrative which is now being questioned as an explanation for the failure of the Greenland Norse) rather than any kind of restraint, much less good intentions. Þormóður himself even complains that the Norse lack the ability to wipe out the Inuit population.
37. In T. H. White's tetralogy Merlin rejects Hitler as a false messiah in what appears to be a reference to the same historical events: "Jesus did not turn the disciples into storm troopers, burn down the Temple at Jerusalem, and fix the blame on Pontius Pilate. On the contrary, he made it clear that the business of the philosopher was to make ideas available, and not to impose them on people" (274).

38. This is the exact phrase which Bormashenko's translation uses (Chapter six, page 149). The interpretation of Reba as Hitler is obvious through this and other parallels, and likely helped the authors conceal the fact that on a deeper level they were implying that Hitler and Beria were morally indistinguishable.
39. See *Gerpla* 192–93 and *Wayward Heroes* 178–79 on ransom payments.
40. Likely as a result of the hindsight offered by the history of the Russian Revolution leading to Stalinism, even the medievalist writers most sympathetic to communism ideologically (Halldór Laxness or the Strugatsky brothers) still display a view of communism more similar to that of George Orwell than William Morris. This speech does seem somewhat reminiscent of the analysis of power in Goldstein's book in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
41. Here a particular physical detail may be relevant: both Halldór's Þorgeir and Gardner's Beowulf are beardless. This trait is famously associated with the wise and benevolent protagonist of *Njál's Saga* whose paranormal knowledge may be associated with notions of androgyny; on this topic see Ármann Jakobsson (120). However these "heroes," while they may be uncanny or even paranormal, are not benevolent but instead take on a monstrous aspect. Notably, King Olaf of *Gerpla* and King Mordred of White's tetralogy, both of whom are eerie and sickly usurpers, are also beardless.
42. Orwell used the term "doublethink" for strategic self-deception; it is at the core of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
43. See discussion of this killing in Eysteinnsson in this volume.
44. Ármann Jakobsson argues that the Þorgeir of *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* is not a realistic character but rather a symbolic literary construction (51); whereas Halldór attempts to imagine how delusional a man like this would have to be if he tried to act out such an exaggerated role in reality.
45. Halldór follows this description of the horrors of Viking war crimes with a description of how joyful the killers feel as they feast among the ruins, a juxtaposition that emphasizes their lack of empathy for their victims.
46. Regarding Þorgeir's death and the resulting "Head of Destiny," see the Introduction to this volume.
47. Davies also mentions Freudian interpretations of this scene; Agravaire believes his mother Morgause (who also tortures animals) will be proud of their deed. White certainly reinterprets the traditional medieval Christian symbolism of the unicorn (with its association of innocence and purity) in shocking biological terms.
48. Halldór changes this scene significantly from the saga version; for further discussion of this killing see Eysteinnsson in this volume.
49. On this subject it may be worth quoting Thomas Ligotti, who in *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2011) condemns tragedy as insufficiently pessimistic because of its aesthetics of beauty: "It is as a counterweight to the blithering fatuousness of human life that tragedy as entertainment performs a crucial function – that of coating the spattered nothingness of our lives with a veneer of grandeur and style, qualities of the theatrical world and not the everyday one" (165). With a similar point of view, perhaps, these writers deliberately employ shock and disgust; White's butchering knights

- “perforate the intestines” of the unicorn’s corpse and cause an awful stench, an apt depiction of the aesthetics of nihilism this generation of medievalist writers felt compelled to employ. See also Bohrer, Felski, and Nye’s “The Tragic: A Question of Art, not Philosophy of History” (2010).
50. Gardner’s *Grendel* makes the same comparison, seeing human warfare as a population level phenomenon (38).
 51. *Grendel* makes a related point about killing to eat versus for other reasons and is shocked to see human clans wipe one another out in raids yet let meat go to waste, as he has never encountered this with any other species.
 52. Of course, even an aesthetics intended to revolt readers still in some sense follows literary conventions, and many “heroic” literary works feature “anti-heroic” elements. Thus the relationship between aesthetics, authorial political alignment, and reader response may not be as simple as Hume’s statement would imply.
 53. Through divine vision, Thetis looks into the Shield of Achilles and sees not the Homeric wars in which her son will fight, but rather imagery from the second World War, far in the future. Achilles seems to be a symbol of warfare itself in this poem and Thetis is taken aback by the industrial carnage to which it will one day lead (For discussion see Taylor 224). Frederick Ahl, translator of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, explains how the classical tradition in which prophetic visions appear in the scenery of a famous shield was already anachronistic by Virgil’s time: “Rome’s history [is] depicted through an *ekphrasis* [description] of the scenes on Aeneas’ shield. Homer had devoted much of *Iliad* 18 to the description of the scenes on the shield made by Hephaestus/Vulcan for Achilles, but these were scenes representing all of Greek life—the cities and countryside at peace and at war, harvest, and ritual dance. What Aeneas sees are episodes from his future city” (xxxvi-xxxvii). With this new vision Auden thus contributes to a long literary tradition indeed; a contemporary comparison might also be made to the visionary artifacts called Palantír in Tolkien’s mythology.
 54. In *Gerpla* the shifting allegiances of skalds are symbolized when Sighvatur Þórðarson of Apavatn changes ships (and patrons). Sighvatur provides a very different view of the skald’s role than Þormóður; it is more self-consciously mercenary, perhaps, but also far more realistic; above all, Sighvatur never falls for his own fictions.
 55. See Eysteinnsson in this volume on Halldór’s self-representation as the author of *Gerpla*, “Kilian the Skald,” which would seem to support the idea that Þormóður’s story holds echoes of Halldór’s own.
 56. Byock discusses these verses and their later interpretation in a pan-Germanic context in his introduction to his translation *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (xiii-xiv). See also the American science fiction writer Poul Anderson’s retelling, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* (1973). In “Hrólf kraki: from Sentimental Drama to Fantasy Fiction,” Tereza Lansing notes that Anderson’s literary traditionalism is more a matter of aesthetics than ideology: “Anderson has the most conservative approach to the material, which he not only tries to preserve but also reconstruct. ... His aim is not to idealize the past; on the contrary, he brings forth an Iron Age dystopia that, written as it was at the height of the Cold War, presents a frightening image of what shaky Western civilization may once again become” (177).

57. For a comparison between White and Orwell see Glyn Salton-Cox 143.
58. Writing in an age shaped by many -isms, which nevertheless displayed similar tactics in enforcing their own orthodoxies, Orwell uses the term “Transferred Nationalism” to refer to political ideologies more generally, following the argument above, that these represent a “dislocation” of humanity’s tribal psychology.
59. Halldór implies, however, that rather than being wounded in the battle and dying in the aftermath, the skald is actually killed by the slave of Kolbrún, thus completing his descent into the abyss where she dwells.
60. Howell recounts five -isms which Susan Strehle identifies as subjects of Gardner’s critiques, and adds six more as well (1993, 78).
61. For further discussion of the connected roles of poet, king, and hero in *Gerpla*, see Andrésson in this volume.

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