

Wayward Heroes: Vagabonds in World Literature

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ABSTRACT: In *Gerpla* (1952), Halldór Laxness's newly envisioned saga characters leave their native fjords and encounter different cultures on their travels abroad. They find themselves where the Greco-Roman cultural heritage meets the Northern legacy. Rewriting the saga heritage in times of civilization's monumental decline, Halldór does not withdraw to the medieval and the remote but instead seeks the very roots of Western narrative and culture. Thus *Gerpla*, recently translated as *Wayward Heroes* (2016), can be located not only as a modern Icelandic response to the literature of the Old North, but also as a contribution to the European literature of exile; from *The Odyssey* to *Ulysses*, from *Divina Commedia* to *Don Quixote*.¹

RÉSUMÉ: Dans *Gerpla* (1952), les personnages de saga nouvellement imaginés par Halldór Laxness quittent leurs fjords natifs et rencontrent différentes cultures lors de leurs voyages à l'étranger. Ils se retrouvent là où le patrimoine culturel gréco-romain rencontre l'héritage nordique. En réécrivant l'héritage de la saga à l'époque du déclin monumental de la civilisation, Halldór ne se retire pas dans le lointain médiéval mais cherche plutôt les racines mêmes du récit et de la culture occidentaux. Ainsi, *Gerpla*, récemment traduit en anglais par *Wayward Heroes* (2016) (traduit en français en 1979 par « *La Saga des fiers-à-bras* »), peut être situé non seulement comme une réponse moderne islandaise à la littérature du Vieux Nord, mais également comme une contribution à la littérature européenne de l'exil : de l'*Odyssée* à *Ulysse*, de *Divina Commedia* à *Don Quichotte*.

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originating from the edge of Europe, the sworn brothers of Halldór Laxness's *Gerpla* dedicate themselves to the heroic worship of a newly Christianized Norwegian king—and in the process undergo a profound displacement. These Icelandic saga characters, Þorgeir Hávarsson and Þormóður Bessason, are newly imagined in Halldór's novel; their journeys ferry modern readers to a seemingly remote region of world literature, where the Classical and Northern European traditions meet. The novel's aesthetics should thus be considered in both an Icelandic and international context.² In responding to the crises of civilization that occurred in his lifetime, Halldór does not simply offer a sparse satire of the remote and those displaced. Instead, in his act of medievalism Halldór aims at the heart of Western narrative tradition—above all through his reinterpretation of the passage across oceans and lands, through life and literature, which the saga-hero Þorgeir and the saga-poet Þormóður pursue.

In this seemingly remote region of world literature, the term *flækingur* [vagabond] enters the stage, a term that first appears in Old Norse after the conversion to Christianity.³ When placed next to the term *hetja* [hero] in the newly Christianized Northern Europe, the *flækingur* can cast some light on what is both lost and gained in the process of conversion: the purposeful days of the heroic ideal have been replaced with sentiments like homelessness and existential cataclysm. This is not to imply that the gates of the city of God are thrown open at the moment of conversion in Iceland, or that *Gerpla* manifests such a transformation.⁴ The intention here is not to explore the religious conversion of Iceland and the way in which *Gerpla* may manifest some of its transformative aspects.⁵ Instead this article considers a “conversion” that is aesthetic in nature, one which is undergone by *Gerpla*'s Icelandic protagonists—and how this fits into the wider context of European and world literature.

Whereas the original title of *Gerpla* is bereft of any obvious references to the story's hero-vagabond transformation, something different occurs in the novel's English translation. If there were an Introduction to *Wayward Heroes* (2016), Philip Roughton's English translation of *Gerpla*, it would perhaps have included a note on *The Happy Warriors*, the title of the previous English translation of the novel by Katherine John.⁶ Published already in 1958, or only a few years after the original publication of *Gerpla* in 1952, John's title-in-translation is no less captivating on the hero-vagabond front than the one introduced by Roughton more than half a century later. Despite the *Happy Warriors*' underlying references to some of the consistent self-destructive features of Western civilization, in comparison with *Wayward Heroes* the former title does miss out on the geographical aspects of the “conversion” in the lives of the Icelandic travellers.⁷

To perceive the subject of heroic worship and vagabondry in *Wayward Heroes*, one must cross a bridge or two in terms of aesthetics, literary traditions, and

cultural heritages. The lives and travels of Þormóður and Þorgeir are shaped by geographical realities; the reader perceives a movement from their natural habitat (the edge of Europe), to (mostly) better-known regions within the more civilized areas of Europe. The heroic legacy that can be found in Norse eddic poetry shapes the sworn brothers; its amoral dimension informs their aesthetic ideas. What they find most praiseworthy is often what other characters and cultures find least moral; thus the clash of perspectives in *Gerpla* is related to not only the simultaneously medieval and modern style of the novel, but also to the rival worldviews that Halldór describes in contrast to the sworn brothers' heroic worship. Raised on Northern lore, the protagonists provoke confusion when they attempt to take this legacy abroad. Like its two protagonists from the Vestfirðir [Westfjords], *Gerpla* itself oscillates between Iceland and the Continent. Considering both the geographical and cultural aspects of exile in European literature, I will suggest that the transition from heroic worship to the state of vagbondry in *Gerpla* reveals the novel's unique position in between distinct literary traditions. In lieu of a conclusion, I will consider the migration of the Icelandic sworn brothers across the heart of Western history-making in relation to the prospects of the modern (and ongoing) migration of literature.

Don Quixote in Greenland? At the Limits of Mythic Amorality

Gerpla was published in 1952, not long after the Second World War. While rewriting an ancient heritage in a difficult and highly demanding act of medievalism, Halldór's earlier (and voluntary) conversion to Catholicism must have served him well, not to mention his later close encounter with Stalin's ideology and admiration of it—for a while.⁸ But how might these conversion experiences of Halldór's inform the concept of heroic vagabondry in a novel like *Wayward Heroes*? First, many have detected an intertextual relationship between Halldór's novel and *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. Halldór himself had no disagreement with the notion; however, he did distinguish Spanish chivalric romanticism from the heroic worship in medieval Icelandic literature.⁹ Perhaps what *Don Quixote* provides, then, is a chivalric parallel to the passage from hero to vagabond in the lives and travels of Þormóður and Þorgeir.

Don Quixote (1605-1615) emerges from the Spanish Golden Age, and is written in a picaresque style of the late sixteenth century. Usually, Cervantes is said to have helped move beyond the literary conventions of the chivalric romance, or from a straightforward retelling of a series of acts to a "display" of the knightly virtue of the hero. However, less has been written about the fact that Cervantes was a contemporary of St. Teresa, the sixteenth-century Spanish nun, and like Kafka, compelled by her ideas and writings.¹⁰ In his introduction to his renewed translation of *Don Quixote*, Guðbergur Bergsson considers how Teresa's writings stood out at the time for her passion toward the inner life of man. *Don Quixote*

may carry a few of her seeds as did the lives of both Cervantes' sister, who entered the religious life and became a Carmelite nun, and his wife, who also sought Teresa's company. For Guðbergur, Don Quixote is literature's knight in disguise and a symbol for the writer, the theme of the book being by and large the nature of art, that is to say, the art that is human life.¹¹ In this light, Cervantes' novel has been viewed as the romantic book par excellence. Maurice Blanchot writes, "it reflects upon and unceasingly turns back upon itself with the fantastic, agile, ironic, and radiant mobility of a consciousness in which plentitude seizes itself as a void, and seizes the void as the infinite excess of chaos" (354).

If there is a "radiant mobility of a consciousness" to speak of in the narrative of the lives and travels of Þormóður and Þorgeir in *Wayward Heroes*, however, it is a different one from that which readers encounter in *Don Quixote*; it has a specifically Icelandic character. The sworn brothers' inner life seems to be fettered by what the Icelandic poet and scholar Grímur Thomsen (1820–1896) refers to as the "shadow side" of the otherwise silent Nordic passion (1872, 50), on the one hand, and a curiously fixed idea of poetry's task in a displaced heroic code, on the other. In the Icelandic context, the heroic worship in question manifests in the Northern eddic poetry, which Halldór clearly draws on in his saga-inspired novel. These mythological poems describe the magic and wisdom of everyday life, particularly in the staggering "high sayings,"¹² and this guidance seems to find its way into the lives and travels of the sworn brothers. One of Þorgeir's seemingly obscure (if not stubborn) remarks, which he makes while in foreign lands, testifies to its own eddic-mythological origin:

Seint mun þau tíðendi að spyrja af Þorgeiri Hávarssyni að eg blaðra klútum fyrir mönnum, að biðjast hjálpar. Þyki mér betra að gerast skernár manna en þurfalíngur. Var mér því aldregi spáð að eg mynda í þá ógæfu hrata að þiggja grið að mönnum. Mun eg því hér deya í skerinu heldren þola minkun.
(172)

[It will never be reported of Þorgeir Hávarsson that he flapped a kerchief to plead for help. I would rather be left to die on a skerry than live as a starveling. It was never fortold to me that I would suffer the misfortune of having to live off another man's mercy. Therefore I will die here, rather than endure abasement.]
(160–61)

A parallel perspective is expressed in the following stanza from *Hávamál* [Sayings of the High One], one of the foremost mythological eddic poems in the *Poetic Edda*:

Bú er betra,
þótt lítit sé,
halr er heima hvern;
blóðugt er hjarta

þeim er biðja skal
 sér í mál hvert matar.
 (329)

[A farm of your own is better, even if small,
 everyone's someone at home;
 a man's heart bleeds when he has to beg
 for every single meal.]
 (19)

As distinct from chivalric romantic literature, the tradition of heroic worship in Icelandic literature already manifests what might be considered an earlier journey from heroism to vagabondry, in the secularizing transition from eddic poetry to the saga legacy. Indeed, both the eddic poetry's mythological dimension (as above) and the epic features of the saga world are present in *Wayward Heroes*.¹³ Both are rich in complexity and thus highly challenging; the eddic heroic poetry in particular is a slippery slope for modern interpreters, not the least in the domain of morality.¹⁴ Surpassing all known structures of the concept of morality, the characters' behaviour in the pre-Christian eddic heroic lays cannot be valued on the basis of anything accepted as exemplary morality, from medieval times to the present.¹⁵ Instead, the heroic worship encountered in *Wayward Heroes* draws on Icelandic ideas of amorality that are mythographic; ideas that survived from the eddic world into the world of the sagas.

In its Icelandic literary character, the heroic worship encountered in Halldór's novel determines the nature of the singular journey of the sworn brothers. These characters' total devotion to heroic worship while on their passage from heroism to vagabondry may seem unfathomable, but it can be illuminated by considering it as an aesthetic transition comparable to the religious or political conversions (and perhaps also deconversions and disillusionments) with which Halldór was familiar. In this context, the Icelandic dimension of mythic amorality allows for an aesthetically spectacular view of that which cannot be praised in human behaviour, as manifested in the actions of the sworn brothers. They are allured by the amoral traditions of heroic worship whose roots lie in ancient poetry. If anything, this poetry's mythic amorality casts light onto the characters' "shadow side." Here, at the bloody and demanding heart of Western civilization, the shadow side of literature itself comes to light.

The novel's Greenland chapter is thus especially revealing, as it explores the limits of Western civilization both culturally and geographically. What lies beyond these limits and what drives Norsemen to go to Greenland? At that moment in the lives and travels of the sworn brothers, Þorgeir's head has washed ashore in Iceland after the hero has completed (more or less) unnoticed heroic deeds in the more civilized regions of Europe. The poet Þormóður then awakens to the

task of revenge, departs from everything he loves in Iceland and travels to Greenland, where he suspects his sworn brother's killer resides. The paths of these two never cross, however, and there will be no glorified death to narrate in Greenland.¹⁶ Regardless of the possibility of an alleged heroic encounter, the peaceful Greenlandic fields—shrouded in icefog under a pitch dark sky—cannot respond to the spectacular demands of the heroic passions. Halldór portrays the Greenland episode as taking place at the very edge of Western civilization and finally past the limit when Þormóður's life is saved by the Inuit. As he lives among them he begins to learn their language, but the mutual incomprehension runs far deeper than that:

En lítt skildu núitar af þessari ræðu; var þeim landskipunarbók eigi með öllu kunn og höfðu aldregi heyrt getið konúnga né garpa, eða, spurðu þeir, hvort ekur Ólafur þessi hundum betur en aðrir men?
(312–13)

[The Inuit understood little of what he said. They were completely ignorant of the customs and laws of other lands and had never heard of kings or warriors. “Does this Olaf,” they asked, “drive dogs better than other men?”]
(356–57)

It is not the only time that Þormóður, voicing his ideals abroad, is received as a madman;¹⁷ the Inuit are focused on the practical necessities of survival while Þormóður is obsessed, even at this extremity, with glorifying violence. With its exposure of the faltering fringes of the medieval Norse society, the Greenland episode may signify something profound on the front of Western civilization and its literature. According to Halldór Guðmundsson, it suits Halldór Laxness well “to site Utopia in a place he has never seen” (2008, 342). The Inuit certainly provide a peaceful alternative to heroic worship; they moreover demonstrate an entirely different perception of time, narration, and nature. Yet is Utopia the right word for this episode?

From the writing of *Wayward Heroes* and onwards, Halldór appears to be departing from his conviction that a radical, social reform here on earth is a cause worth fighting for, and aiming instead for the possibilities within literature. Halldór's remarks on this front were not clear cut, though, as for example in a letter to Peter Hallberg, the Swedish literary scholar, where he suggests that “when writing about a novel, it is advisable to keep to what's written in the novel.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, considering Halldór's literary projects and comments leading up to the writing of *Gerpla*, they can provide useful context for the Greenland chapter.

At this time Halldór was mostly occupied with the “Eldur í Kaupinhafn” [Fire in Copenhagen], the final part of *Íslandsklukkan* (1943–1946) [*Iceland's Bell*], where

Snæfriður, the sun of Iceland, rides in black on her departure and casts a shadow over the reader's eyes. Apart from writing the last part of *Iceland's Bell*, Halldór was also working on several other projects. This time saw the final acts of the Second World War, and within the greater region of Western civilization other books with comparable themes to Halldór's works were written. Two important examples are Thomas Mann's novel *Doktor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer, Adrian Leverkühn, as Told by a Friend* (1947) and Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, which was published in 1951, a year before *Gerpla*.

During this time, Halldór had also been keeping himself occupied with the publication of editions of sagas that used modern Icelandic spelling (see Crocker in this volume). In his Eftirmáli [Epilogue] to *Brennunjálssaga* (1945) [*Njál's saga*], Halldór considers the fatalism of Norse heathendom as the saga's main subject matter, how it contradicts Christian religion in a fundamental way, and that there is a certain "siðblindu" [psychopathology] involved in a doctrine of this sort (416). He also writes about the saga's unique style, thus linking aesthetics and amorality in a way that seems to anticipate *Gerpla*. According to the history of literature, Halldór writes, Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* is believed to have invented the individual in European literature. Prior to the arrival of Dante's individual, however, the anonymous author of *Njála* had already anticipated such ideas in what should be recognized as a European context. Halldór argues that the author of *Njála* demonstrated a unique stylistic enterprise by giving shape to the individual in the description of characters (416–17). He then returns to the saga's main subject matter and discusses the "lífsspeki" [wisdom] of *Njála*:

Þessi hugarstefna, óaðskiljanleg örlagakeningunni, er skilyrðislaus dýrkun hetjuskaparins án tillits til, hvort málsstaður manns er góður eða illur, hún er lof þess manns, sem bregður sér hvorki við sár né bana, þess manndóms, sem enginn ósigur fær snortið og er sterkastur í dauðanum.
(418)

[This idealism, inseparable from the idea of fate, is an unconditional worship of the heroic personality without reference to whether a character's position is good or evil; it is the praise of the man who reacts neither to pain nor death, the type of manhood that no defeat can touch and who is strongest in his own death.]
(Guðmundsson 2008, 300)

Within the context of Western civilization's horrific achievements in the twentieth century, and the way in which Halldór's wayward heroes later enter the bleak scene, this saga interpretation certainly illuminates the amoral nature of heroic worship. Halldór closes the epilogue by recognizing the aesthetic or literary power of this vision, and how it finds followers quite apart from any of the moral implications of glorifying violent men.

In *Wayward Heroes* Halldór's shattering Greenlandic revelation, in turn, highlights how the peaceful Inuit see time differently, as something other than a list of glorious and tragic battles, tailored to support the rise of this or that power. Thus, the fateful requirements of Western narrative tradition and history-making form a key theme in *Gerpla*, as Halldór himself highlights in the above-cited letter to Peter Hallberg:

[Í] *Gerplu* er umfram allt verið að tala um hetjur og skáld, og þar er einnig verið að tala um stríðið og um þá menn sem stjórna herjum, löndum og ríkjum, og náttúrulega einnig þjóðum; en þó framar öllu um þá sem stjórna hugmyndum manna.

(Guðmundsson 2004, 569)

[The subject is first and foremost about heroes and poets. It is also about war and those men who are in charge of armies, countries and states, and of course nations. Most importantly, the novel is about those who control people's ideas.]¹⁹

How far can such amoral heroic ideas reach and still effectively impose their own aesthetics on the world they encounter—impose literature on life—and at what cost? In *Gerpla*, Greenland represents the remote region where the heroic narrative, like the chivalric romance narrative of Don Quixote, shimmers like a mirage.

Heathen Romanticism: Vacillating between Iceland and the Continent

When considering the character of the wayward heroes, Icelanders on the Continent, the reflections of Grímur Thomsen can help to illuminate the scene. Grímur studied at the University of Copenhagen and was the first Icelander to receive a master's degree in comparative literature, his subject being the poetry of Byron in a philosophical context. A few modern poets, writers, and scholars have noted the profundity of Grímur's approach to literature, including his familiarity with the works of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), one of modernity's major philosophers of life and literature.²⁰ Grímur's literary essays, which first appeared in Danish in the 1850s, consider medieval Icelandic literature within the context of the Greco-Roman cultural heritage.²¹ In "What Is Romanticism?" Þórir Óskarsson calls these essays "the most ambitious literary scholarship of the nineteenth century" (112), yet they never became a model for other Icelanders. Grímur considers the special features of medieval Nordic literature by comparing its subject matter and form to what is found in ancient Greek literature. Just as Friedrich Nietzsche would later do, Grímur also inquires into the notion of specific features of literature as they appear in relation to both religion and philosophy.²²

Grímur asserts that a belief in the individual's power and importance is a mainstay of Nordic people. For this reason, the Nordic person suffers alone and in silence, and never wavers. Norse literature thus depicts an image of humanity enduring a "stoic suffering," a view that informs "the entirety of the Nordic man's activity and life" (1972, 67). Such an introverted way of being is, in Grímur's view, proof of the spiritual nature of his ancestors: those who sensed the incompleteness of the word. What differentiates the Nordic spirit from the Greek spirit is, therefore, not only the Nordic's passion for quiet fortitude (or a still, smouldering anger) but also a certain unflinching and overriding will, which Grímur calls *kyrrleiksástríða* [passion for tranquility]. For him the main characteristic of Nordic passion is self-restraint: "Nothing is wasted of that precious passion, and instead of squandering it with words ... words are much more likely to be irritants" (61). Yet the Nordic passion is not always silent. And here Grímur points to a recognized feature of the Icelandic sagas—the obligation to exact revenge. This is the "shadow side of passion," he says, "which even we Christian men must admit has artistic merit when looked at apart from moral law." This "shadow side" acquires a more positive sheen when we remember that "blood revenge was an obligation in the society of our forefathers" (61–62). In a number of ways, Grímur's deep-running approach to the challenge of the saga heritage anticipates that later taken up by Halldór Laxness.

Grímur's essay "On the Character of Old Northern Poetry" begins with a critique of the philosophy of the universalist pretensions of both religious systems and the aesthetics of Hegel: "It is remarkable that Hegel, who said that the idea of a philosopher required that he knew everything, and who pretended himself 'to know everything,' neither makes any mention of the Northern mythology in his *Philosophy of Religion*, nor of Northern poetry in his *Æsthetics*" (45). Despite the fact that the poetry of the North has no place in Hegel's "scientific classification of poetry," Grímur continues, the German philosopher describes all its properties in an essay on romantic poetry. According to Grímur, these properties are "the energetic overbearing will" and the "deep reserved mind" (45). What Grímur sees are proud feelings of freedom and independence, which have their counterparts in romanticism: "Nordic literature is not, therefore, in any way rooted in classical literature; quite the contrary, it can in truth be called heathen romanticism" (85).

When discussing romantic literature,²³ Grímur finds it impossible to miss that it is grounded in something other than, but of equal importance to, a Christian foundation. According to Grímur, one would have to search long and hard to find a Christian spirit in *Macbeth* and *Richard III*—and Shakespeare was certainly more of a Northern poet than he was a Christian when he conceived of and developed these and similar plays. *Hamlet*, for example, is "much more a product of Northern reserve, with all its passion and taciturnity, with all its eloquence, than of a Christian's struggling self-reflection" (46).

Seen from the perspective of medieval European literature and culture, the saga characters' inner lives are shaped by a sentiment that appears to co-exist with, rather than fully belong to, the Christianized Europe. This separate poetic, religious, and aesthetic tradition presents a formidable challenge to modern interpreters, to which Halldór responds with both literary mastery and also some self-doubt. When rewriting *Fóstbræðrasaga* and *Ólafs saga helga*, Halldór questions not only the saga characters' lack of sympathy on their passage from hero to vagabond, but also his own.²⁴ In Halldór's medievalism the characters' "heathen romanticism," and vacillation between the Icelandic and Continental traditions is not viewed as a dilemma to be mastered once and for all.²⁵ Instead, Halldór approaches the literary challenge of reconsidering the saga legacy as a broad phenomenon in the region of European literature, which is related to the crises of modern history. This can be seen in the treatment of geography in *Gerpla*, which is linked to power and ambition throughout the novel.

In Nature's Cathedral: Halldór's Symbolic Geography of Exile

The dense opening paragraph of *Gerpla* ferries the reader straight to the edge of Europe, in the West Fjords of Iceland, where the stage is set for a medieval-modern spectacle:

Tveir eru garpar er einna hafa orðið nafnkunnastir á Vestfirðum, þeir Þorgeir Hávarsson og Þormóður Bessason svarabræður, og er að vonum mart í frásögnum af þeim við Djúp, þar sem þeir hófust upp, svo og í Jökulfirðum og á Hornströndum; hafa þeir og í þessum stöðum öllum frægðarverk unnin.
(5)

[Two are the heroes from the Vestfirðir that have gained the greatest renown: Þorgeir Hávarsson and Þormóður Bessason, sworn brothers, of whom, as we might expect, much is told in Ísafjarðardjúp, where they grew up, as well as in the Jökulfirðir and Hornstrandir. In all of these places they accomplished great feats.]
(7)

In addition to *Fóstbræðrasaga* and *Gerpla*, the remote natural habitat of the sworn brothers has inspired several key works of Icelandic literature throughout the centuries. There could be many different reasons for the creative power of the Westfjords. Among the foremost may be the fact that Ísafjarðardjúp [The Deep of Icefjord] is one of the deepest fjords in Iceland and opens up into several other bays and deep fjords, which often have a dome-like feel to them.²⁶

In other novels Halldór also begins with geographical realities, which make an immediate claim on the reader's perception and sense of orientation. In *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (1927) [*The Great Weaver from Kashmir*], for example, the story of the lives and travels of some other Icelandic characters is framed thus:

Áðan flugu tveir svanir austryfir.

Veröldin er einsog svið þar sem alt er í haginn búið undir mikinn saungleik: bjarkarilmur í Þíngvallarhrauni, kylja af Súlum, purpuralog á Esjuhimni, bláminn djúpur og kaldur yfir Skjaldbreið; en það kvöldar ekki meir; náttleysa og andvaka í öllum áttum.

(7)

[Once two swans flew overhead, eastward.

The world is like a stage where everything has been set up for an extravagant musical: the fragrance of birchwood in the lava fields at Þingvellir, cold gusts of wind from Súlu, violet light in the Esja sky, the azure deep and cold over Skjaldbreiður, but darkness no longer descends. Nightlessness and insomnia in all directions.]

(9)

The scene above feels very different from the encounter that opens *Wayward Heroes*. Nevertheless, just as the region of the Westfjords is at some point replaced by other regions (including monuments of civilization such as Rome) in the sworn brothers' saga, in *The Great Weaver* the wakeful lava fields of Þingvellir represent the edge of the world's stage. By its conclusion, the latter novel reveals a subtle passage from modernity's newly established secular order into a religious-based rejection of that order; this rejection takes place in Rome, Europe's capital of Catholicism. Thus, despite some differences in their openings, there is a parallel movement to speak of in the two novels' geographical dimensions: before the Icelandic characters are ferried over to more civilized regions of Europe, they are characterized by their natural habitat, the edge, which remains an abstruse backdrop throughout.

In Halldór's later novel *Kristnihald undir jökli* (1968) [*Under the Glacier*], the character Prof. Dr. Goodman Syngmann proposes a more cosmic view of geography: "Við búum hér í útjaðri geimsins. Það er verið að gera tilraun til að lifa hér" [We live at the edge of outer space here. An attempt is being made to live here] (162; 145).²⁷ Considering cultures and their boundaries in such terms makes one reconsider what literature ought to be considered central or marginal, major or minor; but I will set aside the subtleties involved in any movement toward a minor literature.²⁸ Exile is more of a state of being than a particular geographical location; this may be why Halldór transposes one of the most famous exiles in literature, Dante Alighieri, into Iceland in *The Great Weaver from Kashmir*. In *The Great Weaver* the geographical plot certainly thickens when readers encounter the presence of Dante himself at the wakeful lava fields of Þingvellir, where continents meet. As it is, Dante is right there with his *Divina Commedia* to welcome the reader at the novel's gate. As explained by the translator Philip Roughton, the quotation included there is from the third part, *Paradiso*, and is

spoken by Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida, who is giving Dante advice on how to act in exile:

Ma nondimen, rimossa ogne menzogna,
tutta tua visiõn fa manifesta;
e lascia pur grattar dov' è la roгна.
Ché se la voce tua sarà molesta
nel primo gusto, vital nodrimento
lascerà poi, quando sarà digesta.

[But none the less, all falsehood
set aside, make manifest all that you have
seen; and then let them scratch where the itch
is. For if at first taste your voice be grievous,
yet shall it leave thereafter vital nourishment
when digested.]
(XVII. 127-32)²⁹

While Halldór himself obviously found this advice profoundly important, there is no immediate sign of Dante in the sworn brothers' cathedral, Icefjord's Deep. Why should there be? A couple of Icelandic characters who reveal the passage from hero to vagabond in the newly Christianized Northern Europe, and who thereby cast some light on modernity's catastrophies, may not have much in common with the exiled Dante and his Florence in the early thirteenth century. But what if Dante's *Commedia* (1308-1321) hovers over not only the "extravagant musical" which is staged in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, but also the mythically amoral *Gerpla*? At the very least, Dante's poem is among the definitive Western literary works when it comes to European ideas of the afterlife, of which the legendary glory sought by the wayward heroes could be considered a variety. The *Commedia*, of course, contains an imaginative and allegorical vision of the Christian afterlife that is often considered the culmination of the medieval worldview as developed in the Western Church. Dante himself may well have contributed to this understanding of the poem; as Joan M. Ferrante notes, it is Dante who writes in the *Letter to Can Grande* that the poem "purports to be a description of the state of souls after death" (4).³⁰

Dante may not be directly present in nature's cathedral to welcome readers at the beginning of *Wayward Heroes*. However, Halldór's medievalism can certainly be better understood by considering his reflections on Dante and on the author of *Njál's Saga*, including the timing of these reflections. In light of Halldór's involvement with socialism between the two world wars and his temporary approval of Stalin's gospel in particular, the reader of *Wayward Heroes* may also want to explore a possible affinity between its author and Dante on the matter

of political disillusionment. Joan Ferrante explains the way in which literature informs the debate over an exile's ongoing purpose in the case of Dante himself:

Dante, a politician who was unable to continue to act directly or effectively in the political sphere, shifted his activity after his exile to the only other sphere in which he might have considerable public influence, writing, and he chose the mode in which he would have the greatest freedom and potentially the greatest force, poetry. Because neither the empire nor the church was functioning as the guide God intended it to be, the poet had to fill the vacancy. To emphasize that point, Dante has himself crowned emperor and pope over himself in the Earthly Paradise by Virgil, another poet, one who had had the ear of an emperor for his political message, the only figure able to bring Dante to the home divinely ordained for mankind, as Dante is the only one who can begin to lead his audience there. (43)

Ferrante thus observes that political interests, religious sentiments, and poetry all bleed into one another in Dante's exile. A modern writer's equivalent predicament can be seen in the case of Halldór, although his secular circumstances are clearly of a different nature. According to the encounter between the Icelandic poet Þormóður Bessason and his Christian king Ólafur Haraldsson (who in this scene is said to resemble the heathen god Ása-Þórr) at Stiklastaðir in Norway, Þormóður's power seems nothing like Virgil's prophetic guidance³¹ either. It is worth quoting this encounter at length, in which political and poetic expectations alike are defied:

Hér em eg kominn Þormóður skáld Bessason af Íslandi, svarabróðir kappa þíns Þorgeirs Hávarssonar, og beiðumst eg af yður hljóðs, herra, að flytja yður kvæði.

Konúngur spyr hver sá ölmusumaður var er þar lauk munninn sundur, og hafi troll íslensk skáld, segir hann, hef eg í þeim verri haft flestum mönnum, og er mér leitt orðið skrum Íslendinga. Eða, segir konúngur, hvar er sá þeirra í nótt er jafnan tók mestan af um trygð og fylgispekt við mig er eg þyrfta helst, Sigvatur apvetníngr þórðarson?

Þau tíðendi færi eg þér konúngur, af Sigvati vin yðrum, að hann fór úti Róm að skemta sér; þóttu honum vandséð úrslit orustu er nú eigu þér fyrir höndum. En eg em kominn um brattar leiðir að ná fundi yðrum.

Konúngur sér til hans af bragði og spyr snögt: hverjar leiðir ertu kominn þa?

Þormóður segir: Eg hef, konúngur, því til kostað að ná yðrum fundi, að eg hef geingið frá búi mínu á Íslandi og þar látinn minn varnað er eg máttu aungva stund dags né nætur augum af líta fyrir ástar sakar, og hef alt í hendur lagið útlendum þræli í vonum þeirrar frægðar er skáld ná af slíkum öðlingi sem þú ert sagður, afli aukinn að stýra heiminum; og því fór eg fyrst vestur á Grænland og síðan allar götur norður fyrir mannheim í sjö misseri, að freista þess að hefna garps yðvars Þorgeirs Hávarssonar, er þér hafið mestan áttan í yðru ríki.

Eigi verður mér ljóst í hvern heim sá maður skjalar, segir konungur; og er firn og endemi hve höfðingjadjarfir þér eruð íslenskir stafkarlar; eða hvern garp segir hann oss áttan hafa bestan í voru ríki?

Þormóður svarar: Höfuðgarp þinn Þorgeir Hávarsson, þann er eingi maður hefur á Norðurlöndum borinn verið með svo óskelfdu hjarta.

Sá mun ær, armínginn, er þar klifar, segir konungur; og rekur oss víst eigi minni til að hafa áður heyrt þetta nafn; en þó má vera að nokkur íslenskur afglapi með því nafni hafi rekist í lið vort endur, þá er vér lágum í víkingu.

Að svo mæltu snýr konungur í braut að sinna skyldari störfum.
(399–400)

[“I am the skald Þormóður Bessason from Iceland, your champion Þorgeir Hávarsson’s sworn brother. Pray listen, my lord, while I sing you a lay.”

The king asks what beggar this is, daring to open his mouth in his presence. “Trolls take you Icelandic skalds!” says he. “Few have done me worse than they. I have had more than enough of these Icelanders’ boasting. Where is that man tonight,” says the king, “who always boasted so highly of his loyalty and devotion to me when I needed them most—Sigvatur Þórðarson of Apavatn?”

“Of your friend Sigvatur, my king, I can inform you that he has gone to Rome to pass the time, out of pessimism about the outcome of the battle awaiting you. But I have traveled treacherous paths to stand before you.”

The king casts him a glance and asks curtly: “What paths have you traveled, then?”

Þormóður says: “In order to stand before you, sire, I have given these things of myself: I abandoned my farm in Iceland and left behind the treasures of mine that I could not, for love of them, take my eyes off at any hour of day or night, and placed them all in the hands of a foreign slave, in hope of the glory that skalds reap from such noble lords as you are reputed to be, endowed with the might to rule the world. That being done, I went westward to Greenland, and then far north of the world of men for three-and-a-half years, intending to avenge Þorgeir Hávarsson, the greatest warrior you had in your kingdom.”

“I cannot comprehend what this man is prattling about,” says the king. “The impertinence of you Icelander starvelings toward your lords is an unparalleled abomination. What warrior does he claim to have been best in our kingdom?”

Þormóður replies: “Your glorious champion, Þorgeir Hávarsson. No man has ever been born in the North with such an unwavering heart.”

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

These things being said, the king departs to attend to more pressing concerns.]
(452–54)

Despite the abrupt dissimilarity this holds when compared with the genuine prestige that Dante gives to poetry, some interpreters of religious ideas in modern Europe, including key writers and poets in the first half of the twentieth century, do construct in their works a path where the lost inheritance appears in the

secular ruins. Often this involves relentless travels in the history of Christianity and Western narrative traditions more generally. This transformative act has been referred to as the making of modernist cathedrals, as Clare Cavanagh terms it in *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition* (66–102). Halldór has not been referred to as a modernist, and the perceivable transformative act within the passage from hero to vagabond in *Wayward Heroes* can hardly be termed a modernist cathedral. Yet his act of rewriting the saga heritage within the wider context of European literature is nevertheless reminiscent of the mythio-poetic or religious transformative act of poets like T. S. Eliot and writers like James Joyce. Halldór's wayward heroes manifest a transformation, the nature of which can be charted by considering *Gerpla* as a work in which the European tradition of Homer, Dante, and Cervantes meets the Icelandic tradition of the sagas and eddic poetry, in the context of modernist reconsideration of religious ideas and also ideas about the nature of literature.³² The sworn brothers' displacement in foreign lands relates to their "conversion" in aesthetics and consciousness; these northern heroes stumble onto the well-trodden and bitter path of Dante, that of exile in European literature.

The Russian modernist poet Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938) considers the theme of vagabondry and Dante's *Commedia* in "Conversation about Dante." He writes of literature itself as exile: "What distinguishes poetry from automatic speech," is that it "rouses us and shakes us into wakefulness in the middle of a word. Then it turns out that the word is much longer than we thought, and we remember that to speak means to be forever on the road" (407). On the road to exile, Dante was not only on foot; contrary to what modern readers believe, he was poor. *The Divine Comedy* is an act of performance by a displaced man. Mandelstam explains,

Courtesy is not at all characteristic of him, rather something distinctly the opposite. One would have to be a blind mole not to notice that throughout the *Divina Commedia* Dante does not know how to behave, does not know how to act, what to say, how to bow. I am not imagining this; I take it from the numerous admissions of Alighieri himself, scattered throughout the *Divina Commedia*.

The inner anxiety and painful, troubled gaucheries which accompany each step of the diffident man, as if his upbringing were somehow insufficient, the man untutored in the ways of applying his inner experience or of objectifying it in etiquette, the tormented and downtrodden man—such are the qualities which both provide the poem with all its charm, with all its drama, and serve as its background source, its psychological foundation.

(404)

Dante's circumstances are not Halldór's, it is true. Yet the common element of displacement certainly does relate to the notion of exile as a transition from hero to vagabond. As this relates to the far-ranging travels of the sworn brothers of

Gerpla, their encounters with cultures that possess different philosophical and psychological alignments, whether the Inuit of Greenland or the empires of Christian Europe, is related to the challenge to their identity. *Gerpla* illuminates the migration of literature and ideas, which it also contributes to.

On the Modern Migration of Literature

The step from poetry to vagabondry is a small one — or it was, before so much of the poetry world was institutionalized by competitions and universities.³³

A couple of decades prior to the composition of *Gerpla*, Halldór Laxness expressed deep-seated doubts regarding modern Icelandic literature's chance to cross over into "foreign" minds and souls. This was at least the case with the poetry of Stephan G. Stephansson (1853–1927), a farmer who emigrated from Iceland to Canada at the end of the nineteenth century and taught himself to travel in world literature and the philosophy of both man and nature, also becoming a notable disciple of Emerson in the ranks of North American poets.³⁴ When Stephan passed away, Halldór was in Manitoba and was asked by members of the Icelandic community there to write a eulogy for the Icelandic newspaper *Heimskringla* in Winnipeg. It was titled "Landneminn mikli" [The great settler], and appeared on September 7, 1927. The eulogy later appeared in Halldór's *Af skáldum*, a collection of essays on Icelandic poets and novelists. Here are its opening lines:

Með Stephani G. Stephanssyni er í val hniginn einn efldasti andi þeirra tíma sem vér lifum. Hvort útheimurinn muni nokkru sinni fá skygnst inni þær veraldir sem ljóð hans opna hugskotssjónum íslensks lesanda læt ég ósagt, því reynsla hefur þrásannað að hross íslenskrar tungu eru lítt miðlanleg erlendum huga. Hvort sem oss tekst nokkru sinni að deila gleði vorri yfir Stephani með öðrum þjóðum, þá hefur hann látið eftir sig auðæfi sem nægja mundu til framdráttar miljónum sálna. Hann hefur arfleitt okkur að stóru ríki, ýmist með hrjóstrugum fjöllum og hrikalegum eða gróðursælum sléttum og fögrum borgum. Og uppaf borgum hans gnæfa háir turnar. Yfir þetta mikla land hvelfist víður himinn fullur af spám og teikum. Sem sagt ef erlendum sálum tekst ekki að nema land í þessum víðáttumikla ljóðheimi Stephans G. Stephanssonar, þá eigum vér hann einir Íslendingar.
(7–8)

[With the death of Stephan G. Stephansson, one of the most powerful spirits of our times has passed away. I don't know if the outer world will ever become aware of the universes this poet has created in the minds of Icelandic readers. If we are to rely on our experience, the treasures of our language are not easily translatable. Regardless of the possibility to be able to share our joy with other nations, Stephan

has handed down to us a fortune that could be shared by millions of souls. We have inherited a kingdom: On the one hand, there are the barren heaths and majestic mountains, and on the other, vast and prosperous prairies and beautiful cities. And towers rise from his cities. Above all of this, a vast sky, full of prophecy and signs. Thus, if foreign souls cannot settle in Stephan G. Stephansson's vast poetic world, it can only mean that it is ours to keep.]³⁵

Stephan G. only wrote in Icelandic,³⁶ and the language he ferried across the Atlantic Ocean does not offer his poetry much chance of crossing over into "foreign" minds and souls. Different from some of Halldór's early novels, it took a while for Stephan's poetry to appear in English translation. Even existing translations of some of his most profound poems have only filtered through the sturdy barriers of the cultural hierarchy of the English-speaking world in small numbers and far between.

Whereas Stephan G.'s poetry continues to testify to the seemingly untranslatable aspect of some of the world's modern poetic treasures, Halldór was still a young author when he witnessed the travels of his novels across linguistic regions. According to the aforementioned eulogy, however, there are other kinds of barriers, and these appear to be universal:

Stephan G. Stephansson er einn þeirra fáu sem bera gæfu til þess að vera velgerðarmenn heillar þjóðar. Hann er einn þeirra manna sem gefa þjóð sinni tilveruréttinn, því þrátt fyrir ágæti þau er kunna að felast í verslun og vélgeingi þá er þó enn þakkarverðara hitt sem gert er fyrir mannlegar sálir, enda mat sögunnar menníngarlegt á þjóðum og sú vegin og léttvæg fundin sem ekki eignaðist snillínga í heimi andans. Það er í mikilúð snillínga sinna sem þjóðirnar sækja upphæð ... í verkum þeirra skynjar hvert brjóst bergmál síns eigin andvarps og veit um leið að það var ekki ófyrirsynju. Þessir menn lyfta úr grasi mensku vorri og smæð. Fyrir tilverknað þeirra stækkum vér og eflumst. ... Og vér förum að lyfta höfðinu í virðulegri reisu en áður gagnvart alheiminum.

(8)

[Stephan G. Stephansson is one of the very few who becomes a benefactor for entire nations. He is one of those who provide their nations with the right to exist. Despite the significance of trade and worldly success, the goods that are allocated to the human soul are more worthy. History measures nations by their culture, if they do not foster geniuses in the world of the spirit, they do not score. Nations rise and fall with their geniuses ... in their work every heart perceives the echo of existence and realizes that all is not lost. Our humanity and fragility gravitates towards these human beings, and we grow and prosper because of them ... And we begin to move around in the world in a more dignified manner than before.]³⁷

When Halldór wrote this eulogy the wounds of the First World War were soon to be made fresh again, and the Western world was about to experience its first

modern economic crash. All the more reason to take notice of Halldór's ideas on the role of poetry, literature, and culture in the gloomy context of the interwar years: Individuals like Stephan G. Stephansson (who was a pacifist on a world's scale and seemingly immune to the all-inclusive temptations of capitalism),³⁸ provide their nations with "the right to exist." Nations are not only "measured by their culture." Nations are measured by what Halldór refers to as "geniuses," for if they do not "foster geniuses in the world of the spirit," no trade agreement, it seems, can save them from a bad report. It is with the geniuses that "nations rise and fall"; it is in their work where "every heart" perceives the "echo of existence and realizes that all is not lost."

Halldór's eulogy expresses ideas both universal and tradition-specific, directed to his fellow Icelanders on both sides of the Atlantic. A sentence like "[Stephan] is one of those who provide their nations with the right to exist" has an insular air, and alludes to some of the geographical and political realities of modern migration of Icelandic literature in the wider European context. As such, Halldór's eulogy for Stephan, like many of his writings on key modern Icelandic poets and writers, seems to anticipate Milan Kundera's seven part essay on European literature *Le Rideau* (2005), translated in 2007 as *The Curtain*, particularly the one titled "Die Weltliteratur" [World Literature].

Setting other continents aside, including North America, Kundera reflects on the travels of European literature. After stating that the "dynamism and long life span of the history of the European arts are inconceivable without the existence of all [European] nations" and that these "diverse experiences constitute an inexhaustible reservoir of inspiration" (32), he reflects on Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and the saga legacy: "We should certainly ponder this thoroughly: the first great prose treasure of Europe was created in its smallest land, which even today numbers fewer than three hundred thousand inhabitants" (32).

Since the publication of Kundera's essay, the numbers of the inhabitants of Iceland have increased a bit. Other more significant aspects of his reflections remain intact, not the least within the context of the travels of both medieval and modern Icelandic literature in Europe alone. Iceland is of course not the only European country that can rely on the experience of seclusion in matters of existence and literature. In the mind of Kundera, what distinguishes the small nations from the large is something deeper than the "quantitative criterion of the number of their inhabitants" (33). For the small nations, Kundera writes, their "existence is not a self-evident certainty but always a question, a wager, a risk; they are on the defensive against History, that force which is bigger than they, that does not take them into consideration, that does not even notice them" (33). He then wonders about what the travels of the heroes of the sagas might have been like, had they been written in English:

Let's try to imagine that the Icelandic sagas had been written in English: Their heroes' names would be as familiar to us as Tristan or Don Quixote; their singular aesthetic character, oscillating between chronicle and fiction, would have provoked all sorts of theories; people would have argued over whether they should or should not be considered the first European novels. I don't mean to say that they have been forgotten; after centuries of indifference they are now being studied in universities throughout the world; but they belong to the "archeology of letters," they do not influence living literature.

(34)

Kundera's interpretation of the whereabouts of the sagas and their characters in what he refers to as the "large context" of world literature thus emphasizes the sense of isolation. Of course, this notion does not exclude works like *Gerpla* from being recognized as a major modern testament to the living influence of the sagas.³⁹ The same is true of a few other novels by modern Icelandic writers, the latest being Guðbergur Bergsson's (1932-) *Þrír sneru aftur* [Three returned], a novel published in 2015 and nominated for the Nordic Council's Literature Award in 2016. In "The Secret of the Ages of Life," his review of Guðbergur's novel *Svanurinn* (1991) [*The Swan*], Kundera gives the following advice: "Please do not read it as an 'Icelandic novel,' and an exotic oddity. Guðbergur Bergsson is a great European novelist" (28).

As noted also by Kundera in "World Literature," there is something about the way in which universities across the globe go about the subject of world literature that demands attention. Different from the art of music, for example, which moves freely in the *large context* among musicologists, the art of the novel is bound up with its language and in "nearly every university in the world it is studied almost exclusively in the small—national—context" (2007, 34). And what of the professors of foreign literatures? Is it not their "very natural mission to study works in the context of world literature?" Kundera asks. This is his reply: "Not a chance. In order to demonstrate their competence as experts, they make a great point of identifying with the small—national—context of whichever literature they teach" (34).

Seen from the *large context* of world literature, the region where the Greco-Roman cultural heritage meets the Northern tradition can appear remote. If Þorgeir's and Þormóður's postwar medieval-modern passage from hero to vagabond is challenging for readers to understand here and now, the input of the secular age and its fanfare in academia should not be underestimated as possible causes. Even Adorno could not have foreseen rapidly expanding fields such as online media, blogging, and the digital humanities that reveal the thrilling and profitable machinery of mass-culture at work in the former headquarters of perception and reflection. But thanks to Philip Roughton's English translation of *Gerpla*, readers of literature in the English-speaking world have been given an opportunity to approach the heart of Western narrative tradition through the

passage of a saga-hero and saga-poet, and to recognize Þorgeir and Þórmóður from the Vestfirðir as Northern versions of vagabond-figures in their larger context of home and exile in European and world literature.

NOTES

1. This article is shaped by my years of teaching Icelandic literature at the University of Manitoba's Department of Icelandic Language and Literature. While serving there as the Chair of Icelandic (2003–2015), I enjoyed the good fortune to reflect on the subject in the company of highly gifted students. One of them is the guest editor of this special volume, and I would like to thank Dr. Dustin Geeraert for his immense contribution to this article.
2. This article's policy on quoting and translation is as follows: Literature (poetry and prose) is quoted in its original language, followed by English translation. In the case of *Gerpla*, English translations are provided from *Wayward Heroes*. Quotes from Halldór Laxness's essays and epilogues also appear in their original language, followed by English translations. All other quotes appear in English, regardless of their original language.
3. See Bergsveinn Birgisson's *Leitin að svarta vikingnum* [In search of the Black Viking], 45.
4. The cultural chasm that separates the conversion to Christianity in Iceland, on the one hand, and on the European continent, on the other, is a vast subject, and may be deep enough to be called existential. As discussed in this article, Halldór Laxness's observations in his Epilogue to his *Brennunjálssaga* (1945) [*Njál's saga*], can provide some guidance regarding the conversion to Christianity in Iceland. *Under the Cloak: A Pagan Ritual Turning Point in the Conversion of Iceland* (1999) by Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson is one of the key scholarly sources on this subject. In addition to the original medieval Icelandic sources themselves, *Under the Cloak* reveals the absence of some of the existential ideas and cultural aspects that circulate in key texts throughout the conversion on the Continent. See Birna Bjarnadóttir, *Veruleiki Krists í holdgerðri frásögn. Um fjarveru erfðasyndarinnar í Ólafs sögu helga* (1994) [On the Absence of Original Sin in the Saga of Saint Olaf], which considers the concept of Original Sin as a compass in this vast field. In *Gerpla*, of course, Halldór draws heavily on Snorri Sturluson's *Ólafs saga helga*, one of the key sagas in his *Heimskringla*, which displays a wholly different attitude toward Original Sin from that found in, for example, Saint Augustine's *City of God*.
5. It should be noted that despite the combined efforts of generations of medievalists in various disciplines, the existing evidence of the impact of the Christian doctrine in the religious/cultural transformation in Iceland is limited. As can be read in a newly published monograph where a group of scholars reflect on the impact of the culture of European monasteries in medieval Iceland, even the term "culture" (as known and applied in modernity) did not exist at the time. See Gunnar Harðarson's "Viktóriuklaustrið í París og norrænar miðaldir" [Victorines Monastery in Paris and Nordic medieval times], 142.

6. *Die glücklichen Krieger* (2004), Hubert Seelow's revised German translation of Bruno Kress's earlier translation, draws on the *Happy Warriors* title, and has the same instant macabre ring to it. Kress's original translation of *Gerpla*, which appeared in 1977, stresses, however, the "hero" more than anything else: *Gerpla. Eine Heldensage*. On the Icelandic and German titles, see Hubert Seelow's "Nachwort" [Epilogue].
7. Similar to Halldór's revision of the lives and travels of Þormóður and Þorgeir, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is another modern novel from the first half of the twentieth century that reveals some captivating complexities in relation to the term hero. In fact, these two novels can be viewed as great examples of modern literature's varieties in the expression of the heroic experience. Different from *Wayward Heroes'* spectacular archaic realism, *Ulysses'* modernistic style harbours a more direct approach to the complexities, it seems: "Like Stephen Dedalus, Joyce feared 'the big words which make us so unhappy'" (See Declan Kiberd's Introduction, *Ulysses* ix).
8. See discussion in Bjarnadóttir, *Recesses of the Mind*, 50.
9. See Matthías Jóhannessen's *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina. Halldór Laxness og Matthías Jóhannessen* [Conversing through time: Halldór Laxness and Matthías Jóhannessen], 25. See also Halldór Guðmundsson's *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, 567.
10. Teresa's *Interior Castle* is a key source in this context.
11. See Guðbergur Bergsson's "Formáli fyrir þýðingu mína á Don Kíkóta" [Preface for My Translation of *Don Quixote*], 15–27. Thomas Mann's preface—which is titled "Homage"—for a certain English translation of Kafka's *Castle* is also of great interest in this context. Cervantes and Teresa are not discussed there, but Mann introduces an equally compelling interpretation of the relation between Kafka and his novel *The Castle*. When discussing Kafka's passion for writing and his melancholy, which is associated with it, Mann notes the following: "It is possible, of course, to take in a symbolic sense this passion which makes everything else a matter of indifference. ... Art is not inevitably what is was to Flaubert, the product, the purpose, and the significance of a frantically ascetic denial of life. It may be an ethical expression of life itself; wherein not the work but the life itself is the main thing" (xii). Kafka's works, Mann continues, express "the solitude, the aloneness, of the artist—and of the Jew, on top of that—among the genuine native-born of life, the villagers who settle at the foot of the 'Castle.' They express the inborn, self-distrustful solitariness that fights for order and regularity, civic rights, an established calling, marriage—in short, for all the 'blisses of the commonplace.' They express an unbounded will, forever suffering shipwreck, to live aright. *The Castle* is through and through an autobiographical novel" (xiii–xiv).
12. This is a reference to the eddic poem *Hávamál* [Sayings of the High One], an important source on Old Norse proverbs and wisdom, as well as on the god Óðinn.
13. This is a big subject, not only in *Wayward Heroes*, but also in a novel like *Íslandsklukkan* [Iceland's Bell]. In the latter, it is the character Snæfríður Íslandssól who can be said to manifest the sad and beautiful legacy of Brynhildur; the domesticated shield-maiden.
14. Aron Gurevich (1924–2006) has written beautifully on this subject in his *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*.

15. It is not only modern interpreters of the eddic heroic lays who are faced with problems of belief and perception. For Scandinavians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the deeds of the heroes in the oldest poems had already lost their meaning (see Gurevich 169).
16. Events in Greenland in *Gerpla* are very different from those that take place in Greenland in *Fóstbræðra saga*. This is also discussed elsewhere in this volume (see Eysteinnson, Kristjánsson, and the Introduction).
17. See also King Olaf's remark upon meeting Þormóður, "This wretch must be mad," discussed below.
18. The letter is preserved by Kristján Hallberg. It was written in Reykjavík on November 29, 1964. See Halldór Guðmundsson's *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga* (569 and Endnote 363, 790). My translation.
19. Trans. Birna Bjarnadóttir.
20. Most of these sources are in Icelandic and have crossed over into the contemporary international dialogue only fragmentarily. Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, a poet and scholar of modern Icelandic literature, is the author of one of the key sources available on Grímur's world-scale writings. See *Arfur og umbylting* [Heritage and Transformation]. A single newspaper article on Grímur's contribution by Hannes Pétursson—who is one of the key poets of modern-day Iceland—reveals also the depth of Grímur's aesthetics, not the least within the context of Kierkegaard's philosophy. As noted in this article, Kierkegaard's *Diary* reveals his reading of Grímur's thesis on Lord Byron. Whereas Grímur did not cite works by Kierkegaard in his thesis, the Danish philosopher is in no doubt about the presence there of books like *Fear and Trembling* and does, of course, apply some irony regarding Grímur's oversight. As noted further by Hannes Pétursson, what is remarkable is the fact that according to his knowledge, Grímur's thesis on Byron may be the only work Kierkegaard read by an Icelander. See "Lítið eitt um Grím" (*Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, November 23, 1996, 4).
21. Some of Grímur's essays have appeared in Icelandic. See Grímur Thomsen, *Íslenskar bókmennir og heimsskodun* [Icelandic Literature and Philosophy].
22. See discussion in Bjarnadóttir, *Recesses of the Mind* 43–48.
23. The term "romantic literature" here refers to Romanticism and not to medieval romances such as those parodied by Cervantes, which are referred to by the term "chivalric romantic literature."
24. Given Halldór's familiarity with Christianity, one can assume that he was no stranger to the idea discussed by Derrida in his *Gift of Death* that a writer belongs to Christianity, this "stroke of genius" as Nietzsche once called it, by questioning himself in it. See Derrida's *Gift of Death*, 114–15.
25. When approaching the Sagas of Icelanders as literature with Greek, Roman, and Christian origins, the presence of the Northern heritage tends to be viewed as an isolated paradox; a dilemma to be mastered once and for all. Yet instead of gaining from such an interpretation, even if it is proposed in the name of belonging, the isolation of these characters and their region is increased.

26. The perception may, in part, be inspired by Halldór's novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* (1933–1935) [*Independent People*], where the narrator refers to the heath in Iceland's Eastfjords as Bjartur's "[andleg] móðir, hans kirkja, hans betri heimur" (2011, 134) [spiritual mother, his church, his better world] (1997, 86). It should also be noted that prior to writing *Sjálfstætt fólk*, Halldór travelled far and wide in the Westfjords region. His novel *Heimsljós* (1937–40) [*World Light*] is set there, too, and not too far away from Isafjord's Deep, while the novel *Kristnihald undir jökli* (1968) [*Under the Glacier*] takes place in Breiðafjörður, Iceland's widest fjord.
27. This phrase also appears in an intriguing context: Vol. 2 of Reiner Stachs' biography on Franz Kafka, *The Decisive Years* (156).
28. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, would be an excellent source to draw on regarding several of these subtleties.
29. These books and line numbers apply to both the Italian original and the English translation listed in References.
30. Can Grande (1291–1329), the Italian nobleman, was in his own time chiefly acclaimed as a successful warrior and autocrat, but later as the leading patron of the poet Dante.
31. Virgil is Dante's guide through the *Inferno* in the first part of *Divina Commedia*, and although he is confined to hell for his unbelief it is clear that Dante regards the poet as a towering figure of not only aesthetic but metaphysical significance. The poet Statius is able to ascend Mount Purgatory on the theory that he was a Christian.
32. More than half a century after *Gerpla's* landmark revelations on this front, Guðbergur Bergsson's novel *Þrír sneru aftur* (2014) [Three Returned] was published. It likewise illuminates how the saga character's sentiment seems to co-exist with, rather than fully belong to, Continental traditions. In Guðbergur's novel, a young man from England appears in contemporary rural Iceland. He is travelling with two older gentlemen, Martin and Shelby, who are revisiting their beloved saga-island after a long absence; they visited Iceland for the first time before the Second World War, and again during the war itself. Martin is the father of the young man. Like his father, the young man has studied Icelandic medieval literature at Oxford and is well versed in the sagas. But his perception of the saga characters and their culture does not match with his father's: In the sagas, there are no "hetjudáðir" [heroic deeds] to speak of, only "hrok[i], öfund, hégómlyndi og smámunasemi sem fylgir einangrun eftir að fólk af vissri þjóð hefur slitnað að mestu frá stærri evrópskri menningarheild og myndað sína eigin sögu" [arrogance, envy, vanity and pettiness which characterizes the people of those isolated nations that have created their own saga after drifting away from larger European cultural unities]. As if to coin a proverb in expression of this perception, the son also states the following: "Í þessu fátæklega þjóðlífi var allt metið til fjár" [In this impoverished nation, money was the sole measurement of everything] (208).
33. From "Vagabond Poets" in *The Times Literary Supplement*, January 13, 2017, 36.
34. Stephan G. was a somnabulist who worked in the field during the day and read and composed at night. In Iceland, he is still referred to as the "Mountain poet," although the mountains in Alberta would never cast a shadow over his farm, the distance between the two being far too great. See "mountains casting imaginary shadows" in Birna Bjarnadóttir's *a book of fragments*.

35. Trans. Birna Bjarnadóttir.
36. On the language front, Stephan G. Stephansson is no different from other key authors of modern Icelandic literature in North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason (1866–1945), Helga Steinvör Bjarnadóttir (1858–1941), and Guttormur J. Guttormsson (1878–1966) all only wrote in Icelandic. As is the case with Stephan G. Stephansson’s poetry, some of the works of both Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason and Guttormur J. Guttormsson have appeared in English translation.
37. Trans. Birna Bjarnadóttir.
38. For a detailed discussion on Stephan G. Stephansson’s life and work, see *Wakeful Nights* (2007), Viðar Hreinsson’s biography of Stephan.
39. On Halldór’s rewriting of the saga heritage, see Eysteinnsson 2003.

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