

# Grettir and Bjartur

## Realism and the supernatural in medieval and modern Icelandic literature

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ABSTRACT: This article attempts to draw a parallel between the way the supernatural is used in *Grettis saga* to give psychological depth to the main character and Halldór Laxness's intertextual use of folklore—mostly Icelandic—to give the same kind of depth to his characters in *Independent People*. The results are discussed with respect to the reception of the medieval literature by twentieth-century Icelandic writers eager to adapt the saga tradition to contemporary trends in the novel.

RÉSUMÉ: L'article établit un parallèle entre la façon dont le surnaturel est utilisé dans la *Grettis saga* pour donner une profondeur au personnage principal et le réseau d'allusions intertextuelles tissé par Halldór Laxness dans son *Gens indépendants*. Les résultats sont discutés dans la perspective de la réception de la littérature médiévale par les écrivains islandais du XXe siècle désireux d'adapter la tradition des sagas aux courants contemporains de l'écriture romanesque

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A few weeks before I began writing this paper I was sitting in front of my television set in Reykjavik, as I do too often, mindlessly flipping channels, when I came upon a program on the Discovery Channel about the astronaut Bjarni Tryggvason. Bjarni was born in Iceland but brought up in Canada. He is a Canadian citizen and as such he has participated in one of the space shuttle missions in order to perform scientific experiments. On the program, they showed some of the photos Bjarni had taken of the Earth from space. NASA actually encourages the personnel aboard the space shuttle to take pictures whenever they have some spare time, which of course is not very often. Why? Aren't there plenty of automatic cameras attached to the shuttle, taking pictures regularly as it circles the globe? Not to mention all the satellites photographing our planet probably every minute of the day? However, as NASA has learned, pictures taken by machines do not appeal to the public and therefore cannot be used for promotional purposes in the same way as pictures taken by astronauts. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and that also means that for us to respond to such pictures, they need to have been taken by other human beings, who themselves have responded to the reality before them with their interests, their tastes, their fears and desires, conscious or subconscious.

The photos that were shown were truly beautiful. Bjarni's attention had been caught by voluptuous cloud-masses rising from the atmosphere, and terrifying vortexes making you feel giddy, even in the security of your TV chair, also delicate shadings of blue, green, brown, reminiscent of a cool stream in a forest clearing on a hot summer's day, or of the subtle colouring of someone's eyes. Finally, the rim of the earth becoming incandescent as it slowly reveals the glory of the fiery sun.

I couldn't help thinking that this would be an excellent introduction to what I wanted to say about how the sagas have continued to shape Icelandic literature in our century. It has little to do with the fact that Bjarni happens to be of Icelandic origin. That is only the reason I paid attention to this particular television program. It is much rather connected to the problem of realism in art in general and in literature in particular. Ever since the early nineteenth century, when Stendhal developed his famous simile of the novel as a mirror carried along a road reflecting whatever it comes upon, novelists, critics and readers have recognized the problematic nature of the relationship between reality and its representation. Though it is true that the novel, like the mirror, reflects the part of reality it is turned to, it is also true that what and how it reflects also depends on who is holding it and, equally important, who is looking at the reflection in the mirror. This problem can be formulated in the same way as the one NASA faces: even though cameras reflect on film whatever they're pointed at, the important thing is that a human being is pointing the camera, communicating thereby his subjective experience of reality to other human beings.

Transposed to the realist novel, this tells us that though its ambition is to convey something about reality it must humanize it, in order to make this reality interesting to us—make it subjective. What I would like to show here is how one Icelandic author, Halldór Laxness, solved this problem for himself by using some of the same techniques the saga authors had developed several hundred years earlier. He thereby achieved two things. He created a link between the saga tradition and the more recent development of the realist novel in the Western world. He also made an important contribution to the art of the novel in general, a contribution that was to prove very potent in years to follow.

The novel I will be looking at is *Sjálfstætt fólk* [*Independent People*], but first I want to make a few points about the sagas, using as an example *Grettis saga*. Though it is without much doubt the youngest of the great sagas of Icelanders, it has many of the same characteristics that define the genre. The action takes place in a society in which social relations and the power structure are similar to those of the period in which the sagas were written. For the most part, it also takes place in a physical environment familiar to the authors and public of the sagas. The characters, especially the main ones, are to a great extent submitted to the same limitations as we are: they are mortals, with the strengths and weaknesses we all share. All of this contributes to the reality effect the sagas of Icelanders manage to create, i.e. the illusion that they mirror the world of the first centuries of Iceland's history.

I now come to the supernatural, which is in my title, and its relationship to realism in the sagas. The supernatural is present in very many, if not all, of the sagas of Icelanders. This is not sufficient to deem them unrealistic. As Carl Bayerschmidt argued quite a long time ago, the supernatural events they relate do not go against their author's perception of what could happen in the real world. After all, these were people living in the Middle Ages, long before the Enlightenment and later scientific revolutions. Things we perceive as outside the boundaries of the real would have seemed entirely plausible to them.

It could be said that *Grettis saga* is different from earlier and more classical sagas, such as *Egils saga* or *Laxdæla saga*, because of the greater role played by the supernatural in *Grettis saga*. This is true, but I think that the difference is one of degree rather than kind. In *Grettla*, as in earlier sagas, the supernatural has a specific role to play which, paradoxical as it may seem, is very important in creating the reality effect of the saga. It has to do with the inner lives of the characters.

The sagas are notoriously quiet about what goes on inside their protagonists' heads. I don't know why this is, because they obviously take an interest in the inner lives of at least their main characters. I suspect that the silence is in part due to the fact that when vernacular literature appeared in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there did not exist the same poetic tradition as for example in France, where troubadours had for quite a while been singing of the

suffering of the soul burning with desire for its true love. The embryonic inner monologues which can for instance be found in Chrétien's narrative poems and already hint at the psychological analysis which the French novel tradition will later develop, use the language of the troubadours and *trouvères* to express the inner life of the characters. This language does not exist in the Icelandic tradition, and I propose that this might be one of the reasons for the sagas' silence about their protagonists' inner life. Their authors simply didn't have the discursive tools to be very eloquent about what goes on in the soul.

What they had instead was skaldic poetry. Skaldic poetry has two characteristics that I believe are of relevance for understanding the relationship between the supernatural and the inner lives of saga characters. The first is that a skaldic strophe is an enigma that has to be decoded and interpreted. A parallel can be drawn between this and famous episodes of the sagas, such as Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir's mysterious reply to her son: "Þeim var eg verst er eg unni mest." [I treated him worst, whom I loved the most.] Another example is Egill Skalla-Grímsson sitting across the fire from King Athelstan with his eyebrows askew and fiddling with his sword. In both cases we are being invited to wonder about what the characters are feeling, but it is left to us to make an educated guess. In the case of Grettir, the enigma lies in his destiny: why did a man who had all it takes to be a hero make such a mess of his life, ending it as an outlaw?

The other characteristic of skaldic poetry which is helpful when we try to understand the saga's particular brand of "psychological realism" is the way they call upon the supernatural to create meaning. I am referring of course to the kennings, circumlocutions which do not for example call poetry poetry but Odin's mead or ship of the dwarves, building thus on the myth of the origin of poetry. Practitioners of skaldic poetry, as it seems safe to assume that very many of the saga writers were, would have been accustomed to making constant reference to supernatural worlds, to that of Old Norse myth, of course, but also to Christian religion.

The episode I just mentioned from *Egils saga* is rich with such intertextual allusions, one of them being to the prologue of the eddic poem *Grímnismál*, where Odin comes to take revenge on Geirröðr, a king he has helped to take the throne away from his elder brother but who hasn't been faithful to him. Important traits are common to the two scenes: the king and the guest sit opposite each other with a fire between them and one of the protagonists holds a sword half drawn from its scabbard. Egill has one eye closed and this can be seen as a reference to the one-eyed Odin who, in the eddic narrative, has the king stumble on his sword impaling himself. Thus the parallel with the myth suggested by the saga hints at what might be going on in Egill's head as he faces Athelstan after the death of his brother: he might be contemplating whether to kill the English king.

I now come to *Grettis saga* and how it uses the supernatural to address the enigma of Grettir's inner life. The saga as a whole is remarkable for the fact that

it makes Grettir's character flaws largely responsible for his destiny. As a boy he is wilful and unruly and his long-standing conflict with his father is never completely resolved. The unruliness lingers on in early adulthood, though he also shows another facet of his personality when he heroically saves the women of Þorfinnur's farm from the berserks who intend to rape them. The enigmatic aspect of Grettir is nowhere more apparent than in this episode, since no one knows, neither the women at the farm nor the reader, whether Grettir is going to save them or help the berserks as he pretends he will do.

After the episode, however, the reader is convinced of Grettir's intrinsic heroic nature. Despite it, his destiny will be that of an outlaw, finishing his life miserably. This is also an enigma, which the saga author solves by resorting to the supernatural. I am referring here to Grettir's fight with the ghost Glámr. This famous episode has been studied by many scholars, among whom I will only mention Hermann Pálsson who has elucidated its links to Christian views of the supernatural. What interests me is how the author uses this ghost story to give us insight into Grettir's psyche.

He does this in several ways. The most obvious one is when Glámr, before expiring a second time, lays a curse on Grettir, telling him that what he has seen in his ghostly eyes will stay with him for the rest of his life, making him unable to be alone at night but also turning most of his actions against him (1010–11). This is not only the tangible—if that word can be used for a curse made by a ghost—explanation for Grettir's subsequent outlawry and misfortunes. It also bears witness to remarkable insight into the effects of trauma on the psyche. What Grettir saw in Glámr's eyes was so devastating in its effect on him, that only a few days later, he tells a friend that since he was exposed to the demon's stare, he has become even less able to control his temper (1011).

It therefore becomes even more interesting to consider how this experience of the fight with Glámr can be interpreted from a psychoanalytic perspective. This is made possible by the saga's use of intertextuality. Indeed, the closest model for the Glámr episode in the saga literature is to be found in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Here the man who dies mysteriously and comes back to haunt his surroundings is not a foreigner like Glámr but the father of an important protagonist of the saga. In *Egils saga* a very similar account, that of the death of Skalla-Grímr also suggests that a father might be coming back from death to haunt the living (Tulinus).

Obviously, Glámr is not Grettir's father. However, some of the Glámr's characteristics, such as size and hair colouring, resemble those of Ásmundr. If this is linked to other aspects of Grettir's life, for example the close relationship to his mother and the difficult one with his father, it becomes tempting to use Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex to explain Grettir's problem. Of course, this is quite an anachronistic thing to do to a text from the fourteenth century, but the fact that it can be done (Tulinus), proves the point I am trying to make: In the absence of a poetic tradition of emotional effusion, staging their characters

as enigmas and confronting them with the supernatural are what the saga-writers could use to give their audience an idea of the inner life of their characters.

After having first considered a Canadian with an Icelandic name photographing Earth while orbiting the planet, and then an Icelander whose name is lost, steering his feather pen over the parchment somewhere in medieval Iceland, let us now take a look at one more Icelander, whose *nom de plume* has gone around the world. In 1931, Halldór Laxness is not yet thirty. He is already recognized as a talented author, bringing a new understanding and mastery of the art of the novel to a somewhat backwards Iceland. His first breakthrough as a writer had been the *Great Weaver from Kashmir*, a novel about promising young people whose souls are torn between the pressures of the flesh and aspiration towards higher ideals. This novel was heavily influenced by Laxness's Catholic period but was also a resolutely modern piece of writing. Shunning whatever had been written in Iceland before him, his aim was to create a truly contemporary European novel in the Icelandic language using the conventions and techniques of the novel tradition, among them the representation of the inner life through endless dialogues and monologues. By the time he had finished the *Great Weaver*, however, he was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the psychological novel, recognizing all the same how much he has learned from it. As he says in a letter to a friend, nothing is "as limited and positivistic. It does not permit strong poetic flight" [eins takmarkað og rammþósvístiskt eins og hún; hún bannar öll sterk vængjatök] (Hallberg 1970 256).

The twenties and thirties are exciting times for novelists: Proust, Gide, Joyce, Faulkner, Hemingway, Gorky, Musil are just a few of the great authors whose work is making an impact on other writers during this period. They are experimenting with new techniques of narration, of point of view, of composition, of style. The novel is the major literary genre of the time and, like his contemporaries, Halldór Laxness is very conscious of the fact that what he is doing is art.

It would be a worthwhile task to undertake a careful study of the evolution of Laxness's art, especially during this crucial fourth decade of our century. Such a study would evidently benefit from Peter Hallberg's excellent work from the fifties, sixties and seventies, to which I am indebted, as is anyone who takes an interest in Laxness as a writer. What I will say here is only a minor contribution to a picture Hallberg has already done more than outline, but is still not complete.

Between the *Great Weaver*, which he finished writing in 1925, and *Independent People*, of which he completed the first volume in 1933, Laxness subjects himself to many kinds of influences and experiments with different forms. He abandons Catholicism for socialism, tries writing for the movies, and publishes a collection of essays on politics and a volume of poems while continuing to absorb everything that is going on around him in the world, artistically, intellectually, politically.

Originally intended as a movie script, his next novel, *Salka Valka*, bears witness to this intense and fertile activity. True to his socialist beliefs, he focuses in this political novel on the poor people of a fishing village instead of the soul-searching of the middle class. In order to portray these people, especially their inner life, he resorts to techniques that are different from those in the *Great Weaver*. They are not city people but people of the land, and as such they have a kinship with the nature which surrounds them. This is especially true of the most memorable characters, Salka and Steinþór. There is an underlying energy in the two of them, which reminds one of forces of nature. The energy stems from the story itself, of course, the sexual tension between Salka and her former stepfather, but also from an almost poetic prose of which Laxness has acquired a new mastery, combining similes and metaphors from the sea with a musician's ear for the sounds and rhythms of the language.

Despite its undeniable qualities, *Salka Valka* is not wholly satisfying. Laxness still relies heavily on dialogue and monologue and too much authorial commentary, at least for my taste. However, he has achieved something new, fusing poetry and politics within his own personal art of the novel.

While still writing *Salka Valka*, Laxness took a new look at a manuscript he had been working on a few years earlier. It was about a poor mountain farmer living in a mud house with his half-starved and overworked family. It was a story close to his heart, but he had nearly thrown away the manuscript because he wasn't satisfied. Now he started working on it again and it would become *Independent People*, his first and maybe greatest masterpiece. The two years that elapsed had probably been beneficial to the work. Laxness had sharpened his perception of rural Iceland with a Marxist analysis of how the ideology of the small independent farmer was in fact an instrument subjecting them to the rich landowners. More importantly, Laxness displays an extraordinary inventiveness in this novel, experimenting as never before with style and composition. He was aware of this and in a letter to his wife tells how proud he is of what he has just written, the opening chapter of the second book: *Vetrarmorgunn* or [Winter morning] (157-172; 139-153). "No one has ever written such prose in Icelandic," he says and he is probably right (Hallberg 1970 203). It shows Bjartur's farm as it is perceived by the awakening consciousness of a young child, Bjartur's third son, Nonni. The way he achieves this suggestion of a child's mind is by narrowing the point of view to that of a small boy, by infusing this world with his fears and fantasies and by humanizing it, turning the objects that inhabit it into people the way a child would.

One of the problems Laxness had been battling with when he abandoned the book temporarily was how to get his readers to sympathize with these people who were so poor and miserable it could seem doubtful that they even had any inner lives. In *Independent People* he had found the solution. To make them human, he would suggest their fears and their longings through precisely what Icelanders

had expressed their humanity with, even in the darkest periods of their history: their folklore.

Space does not allow me to go into this in any sort of detail. Those who know the novel will remember for example how Bjartur's second wife Finna and her children are comforted by stories of elves, telling them that in the stones they inhabit there is a better world, where people are kind and life is beautiful. In his grief after Finna's death, Helgi, Bjartur's eldest son, will try to enter this world, but the stones are hard and cold and won't open up to let him in. His grief turns into despair and with despair comes madness. Here again it is through the staging of an event from folklore, the ghostly sheep murders, that the inner anguish of the character is expressed.

Many other examples could be named, such as the way Ásta Sóllilja's nascent sexuality is suggested through the rhymed romances she learns, or the way the whole episode of the cow which is given to the family is suffused with the Icelandic tale of Búkolla, a cow which disappears one day from the farm, the unloved son of the farmers being sent to look for it. Búkolla has been taken away by trolls and when the boy and the cow are fleeing them together the magic that saves them comes from the cow's tail.

Of course, the Gunnvör story with its ominous forebodings tells us, right at the very beginning of the novel, that we are in a world where the old folk-beliefs are very potent, and all through the novel a wealth of allusions to the treasures of Icelandic folklore are used to make the lonely inhabitants of the desolate Summerhouses come alive to us. One could say that the folk-tales are to them what the camera is to Bjarni Tryggvason. They are the instrument of their subjectivity making their world accessible to us. Through them we acquire a strong sense of what's going on in the hearts and souls of these people, except maybe that of Bjartur.

This is because, alongside his use of folklore, Laxness has now made his peace with the saga tradition. Indeed, after shunning it for so long, he creates the extraordinary Bjartur who, as many have remarked, has so many characteristics of a saga hero, with the strong sense of individuality he shares with figures such as Egill and Grettir (Hallberg 1970 239). Like Egill the skald, he expresses himself through elaborately wrought poetry, and like Grettir the outlaw, he lives on the border between nature and culture. More important, Bjartur's inner life is an enigma and it becomes more and more enigmatic as the novel unfolds and he is perceived through the eyes of his children.

Indeed, for them he is above all a tyrant, imposing on them the hardships the economic system is subjecting him to. There is, however, one thing that makes him human, the tenderness he cannot suppress for the eldest of his children, Ásta Sóllilja, the baby he found barely breathing beside the dead body of his first wife, Rósa, when he came back from his eventful search for the lost sheep. She is not his child, but the bastard of the land-owner's son, the proof that his so-called



independence is only an illusion, serving the interests of those who exploit not only the labour of his limbs but also his very soul, making him believe that he could ever be an independent man, that he could ever marry a woman who loved him.

Herein resides the enigma of Bjartur: why does he adopt the little girl? Is it charity for a newborn waif, an orphan abandoned by her real blood relations? Pride over being morally superior to them? The fascination of a coarse, ugly working man for the beauty he does not have and which he sees in Ásta, the grace of the upper classes?

Here, as the sagas do, Laxness hides and shows the answer to the mystery of Bjartur's behaviour in an adventurous encounter with the supernatural. I am referring to one of the most memorable episodes of the novel, Bjartur's trip to the mountains to search for the lost sheep (98-114; 85-101). I believe that Laxness has finely wrought this whole account not only to deepen the psychology of Bjartur but also to give the story its meaning, already preparing, in the first book, how the fourth and final one will end, when like King Lear taking Cordelia in his arms, Bjartur goes and finds the dying Ásta after having scorned her love and sent her away (Hallberg 1970 251).

To understand this, we can begin by looking at "what's in a name," Ásta Sóllilja's one. I had always thought that Laxness had invented it, but then I came across it in the diaries of Magnús Hjaltason, the model for his next novel, *Heimsljós* (Magnús H. Magnússon 1998). This doesn't mean however that the choice is a gratuitous one. On the contrary, it is Bjartur who gives her the name when he decides to adopt her. He chooses it with care, though he doesn't explain it.

Let me. Ásta is the love he is giving to the little girl, the unrequited love he had for Rósa, the girl's mother. Sól is the sun, making Bjartur, the bright one, a recipient of her light. Lilja, the lily, is a flower name, like Rósa, but this flower has no thorns. Ásta won't hurt Bjartur, he will harm her, in her tender innocence, when he is on the verge of committing what is and is not incest, and again when he sends the poor girl away, when she is pregnant with the child of a drunk that Bjartur had sent to teach his children while he was away working as a fisherman. The flower metaphor is omnipresent in the novel, especially in Bjartur's poetry, when he compares himself to a cold and lonely mountain cliff sheltering a tiny blossom, also in the last words he says to her at the very end of the novel: "Haltu þér fast um hálsinn á mér, blómið mitt" [Keep a good hold round my neck, my flower] (525; 482).

As far as I know, no one has noticed yet how the whole episode of Bjartur's search for the missing sheep is built on a folk-tale, the one I have already mentioned about the cow Búkolla. It is a typical adventure tale: the cow has been stolen by evil troll-women; the unloved son is sent out to find it and does so with the help of Búkolla herself, thwarting the troll-women's attempts to capture it and bringing back the cow to the joy of his parents. Laxness uses the Búkolla tale

as the basic pattern for this chapter but transforms and displaces its elements in order to adapt it to the underlying metaphorical structure of the novel. The boy's quest for the lost cow, basically what could be called his quest for his parents' recognition, becomes symbolically Bjartur's existential quest, a sort of *mise en abyme* of the plight which is his. Here it is a sheep which is missing and not a cow, but the links with folklore are suggested by the name which is given to it: Gullbrá. In place of the evil troll-woman, it is Rósa herself who has taken the sheep. Obviously, Bjartur won't find it. Instead he comes across a flock of reindeer.

It is here that the author starts playing with the folklore elements in order to serve his more general purpose. Bjartur decides to try and capture one of the animals and bring it to his farm as a compensation for the loss of his sheep. He chooses the biggest and strongest one, the male. When he makes his attempt, however, the reindeer nearly impales him with his horns. The reindeer carries Bjartur into a glacier river, in which he barely escapes drowning and as he climbs out of the river, he finds himself on the opposite bank. It is a whole day's walk to the nearest bridge. He is at least two days away from home and a violent storm is breaking loose. While he fights through the storm, he goes through all the poetry he knows, first metrical romances of heroes fighting terrible foes, then, when he is assailed by the need for rest, other romances about evil queens trying to lure their stepsons to sleep with them. More dead than alive, covered by ice, he finally stumbles into the first farm on his way. A peasant woman leads him into the farm, taking his clothes off and massaging the life back into him. The only thing he can say is: "Ég geing einn ... ég geing á eftir konunni með ljósið [I'll walk by myself ... I'll follow the woman with the lamp]" (111; 98).

This is no small ordeal and many things suggest that it verges on being a supernatural one, for example the strange birds that Bjartur sees just before his encounter with the reindeer. More importantly, his adventure, like Grettir's, plays out what is going on in his soul. When he sets out he is entangled in a thorny marriage, when he comes back, the Rose is dead. It has been replaced by the graceful Lily who has no thorns and will love him as he loves her, even though it will take him the rest of the novel to realize it. Also, the gender shifts in the objects of his quest, first a female sheep then a male reindeer, and then in the imaginary foes he conjures up in the poetry he recites during his long walk, first Vikings, then evil queens, mirror the conflict in which he finds himself. In the social logic of the novel, his foes are the male representatives of the dominant class. They keep him from attaining the real object of his quest, the right to be an independent man who can take a wife and build a home for his family. However, he is also confronted with female foes, who deceive him: the wife of the landowner and Rósa herself. Her replacement by Ásta Sóllilja can be seen as a symbol of the possibility for him to know true love and build himself a home outside the system of oppression and exploitation the novel portrays.

In his introduction to the recent English language edition of the novel, Brad Leithauser says that with *Independent People* Laxness invents magical realism a few decades before the Latin American writers (xii). He's right in the sense that the Icelandic novelist resorts to the treasures of the folklore of his people in order to portray the inner lives of his characters. In 1955, when they gave him the Nobel Prize for Literature, the Swedish Academy said something along the lines that it was for reincorporating the saga tradition into the more recent art of the novel. As we have seen, they were doubly right. Confronted with a crisis, not only in his own career, but in the development of the novel as an art form, which had to integrate new views on society and new insights into the workings of the human soul, Laxness found a solution by going back to the saga tradition and its unique way of using the unreal to throw light on the real. By doing this he shaped Icelandic culture in a manner which is still quite present in the works of today's artists and writers.

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