A Poet's Great Return

Jónas Hallgrímsson's reburial and Milan Kundera's *Ignorance*

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ABSTRACT: In his novel *Ignorance*, Milan Kundera describes briefly the reburial of the Icelandic Romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson, who was "translated" from Denmark to Iceland more than a century after his death. The article examines how the case of Hallgrímsson contributes to the main theme of the novel, but it also discloses how certain facts relating to Hallgrímsson's relics get distorted in Kundera's interpretation.

RÉSUMÉ: Dans son roman L'*Ignorance*, Milan Kundera décrit succintement la réinhumation de la dépouille du poète romantique islandais Jónas Hallgrímsson, dont les restes furent « translatées » du Danemark en Islande plus d'un siècle après sa mort. L'article procède à un examen de la façon dont le cas de Hallgrímsson contribue au thème principal du roman, mais met également en lumière comment certains faits concernant les reliques de Hallgrímsson sont déformés dans l'interprétation de Kundera.

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Certain individuals or events in the history or literature of nations seem destined to capture the imagination of later generations and become symbols of something more than themselves. It seems that our knowledge of these symbols and understanding of their significance is formed in the subconscious often long before we read about them; they are a part of our cultural heritage, the backbone of our values and identity. The life and works of poet Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845) have long been the stuff of such dreams for the Icelandic nation. Hallgrímsson is simultaneously an exalted symbol of the freedom-loving aesthete and naturalist, and the ill-fated romantic artist who died in the prime of life.[1]

For this reason, one would assume that the return of his bones, or what was left of them, from a Danish graveyard to Iceland in 1946, a century after his death should have been a moment of glory, filling the nation with pride and joy for years to come. But the reality was different. Hallgrímsson's bones were "purloined" right after they had reached Icelandic soil and a strange controversy ensued. First, there were different opinions as to where in the country the nineteenth-century poet should be buried. Secondly there were rumours suggesting that the wrong bones had been excavated in Copenhagen. And the whole affair became strangely mixed up with the contemporary political debate about the presence of American troops in Iceland in the post-war period. Instead of uniting the nation, the episode uncovered a great divide within the people of Iceland.

One of the issues at stake, related to Hallgrímsson's status as a national poet, was to what degree his physical remains could be regarded a "public property." But, as the Czech novelist Milan Kundera has suggested in his novel *Ignorance*, Hallgrímsson's reburial can also be seen as a failed attempt to repeat "the Great Return" represented by Iceland's declaration of independence from Denmark in 1944.

Kundera writes about the destiny of Hallgrímsson in chapter thirty-one of his novel. After comparing him to Hungary's Petöfi, Slovenia's Prešeren, Finland's Lönnrot, Norway's Wergeland, and other romantic national poets of Europe, Kundera describes Hallgrímsson's tragic death: "One day, dead drunk, Hallgrímsson fell down a staircase, broke a leg, got an infection, died, and was buried in a Copenhagen cemetery. That was in 1845 " (112). Then Kundera deals with Hallgrímsson's reburial a century later. He claims that a rich Icelandic industrialist was responsible for the undertaking, after the poet's soul had visited him in his sleep. But while the industrialist intended to bury Hallgrímsson's bones in Öxnadalur "in the lovely valley where the poet had been born," the government had a different plan.

> In the ineffably exquisite landscape of Thingvellir (the sacred place where, a thousand years ago, the first Icelandic parliament gathered beneath the open sky), the ministers of the brand-new republic had created a cemetery for the great men of the homeland; they ripped the poet away from the industrialist and buried him in the pantheon that at the time contained only the grave of another great poet (small nations abound in great poets), Einar Benediktsson. 112

Kundera also discusses whether the right bones were disinterred in Denmark in 1946. And his answer is that they were not. According to *Ignorance*, the body of a Danish butcher, who had been buried in the same grave as Hallgrímsson in Denmark, now lies next to Einar Benediktsson at Thingvellir. For this reason and others, Kundera writes, the Icelandic cemetery, "of all the world's pantheons, those grotesque museums of pride, is the only one capable of touching our hearts" (113).

In the chapter dealing with Hallgrímsson, Kundera elaborates some of the themes of his novel. *Ignorance* tells the story of two exiled Czechs, Josef and Irena, who are visiting their native country after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. Josef is a widower at the beginning of the story, his late wife had been Danish and it was she who told him the story of the Danish butcher who was shipped to Iceland, instead of the romantic poet. At the time, the couple thought the story was funny, "and a moral lesson seemed easily drawn from it: nobody much cares where a dead person's bones wind up" (113). But when Josef's wife was struck by a fatal illness, he found the story terrifying. He anticipated that his in-laws would claim his wife "for their family vault, and the idea horrified him" (117). Unlike the Icelandic industrialist, Josef prevailed and when he had made sure his wife was "in the grave that belonged to them (a grave for two, like a two-seat buggy), in the darkness of his sorrow he glimpsed a feeble, trembling, barely visible ray of happiness. Happiness at not having let down his beloved; at having provided for their future, his and hers both" (117).

In addition, the affair of Hallgrímsson's bones illustrates the myth of the Great Return, which is one of the most important themes of Kundera's novel. *Ignorance* depicts how difficult it is to return home after a long exile; it proves impossible to find again the place you left behind, time has erased it and created a gulf between you and the people that you once abandoned. Josef's and Irena's attempts to bridge this gulf, during the days they spend in Bohemia, prove futile. The only reconciliation that takes place is between the two of them, but in the end they realize that their short-lived relationship is based on a misunderstanding. In the chapter devoted to Hallgrímsson, the poet visits the industrialist in his sleep, asking whether it is not time for his skeleton to come home "to its own free Ithaca" (111). These words refer to the opening of the novel where Kundera considers Odysseus's return from Troy to his native Ithaca, as described in Homer's *Odyssey*. This reference implies not only an analogy between Hallgrímsson and

Odysseus but also between Josef's and Irena's trip to Prague and the return of the poet's remains to Iceland. All three cases feature the motif of the Great Return.

Kundera suggests that the return is the antithesis of the adventure; it indicates that one is at ease with the finalities of life, that the passionate exploration of the unknown is over. Accordingly, he lets Irena doubt that Odysseus was pleased when he finally returned to Ithaca, to his loving Penelope. "He saw that his countrymen had betrayed him, and he killed a lot of them. I don't think he can have been much loved," Irena states and suggests that Penelope's love for Odysseus was not genuine: "At first she didn't recognize him. Then, when things were already clear to everyone else, when the suitors were killed and the traitors punished, she put him through new tests to be sure it really was he. Or rather to delay the moment when they would be back in bed together." (117) The case of the poet Hallgrímsson is in some respects similar. Icelanders still have their doubts that it was indeed he who returned to Iceland in 1946. The basis of this doubt, like the doubt of Penelope, is perhaps a resistance to the finality of the Great Return. As long as the final resting place of Hallgrímsson's bones is uncertain they will continue to be important as a symbolic, national relics.

In a recent book on Icelandic nationalism, historian Guðmundur Hálfdanarson draws attention to the fact that many politicians that spoke publicly when Iceland won its independence in 1944 referred to that event as a return. This idea was clearly expressed in a speech delivered by Prime Minister Ólafur Thors (1892–1964), who said on this occasion: "Fellow Icelanders, we have come home. We are a free nation" (*Þjóðhátíðarnefnd* 263). Hálfdanarson suggests that Thors's imagery was inspired by the idea that the independent nation state was "not primarily a mode of government but a home, where the nation could finally find peace in its own country … Hence, it seemed natural to institute the republic at Thingvellir, the place where that nation assumed it could find its symbolic origins, the place where the ancient republic and the new one became unified" (7–8).

But what is the goal of a nation that has already experienced the realization of its greatest dream, reached its final destination? The answer to this question may lie in Irena's reflections about the life that waited Odysseus back in Ithaca. It is indeed tempting to compare such a nation to an aging hero who is preoccupied with the memories of his past achievements, his most thrilling adventures. The greatest dream of such a nation is to experience again its glorious moment of triumph. In fact, there are several events in the recent history of the Icelandic nation that can be interpreted as attempts to repeat the Great Return of 1944. The best example is Iceland's successful struggle to reclaim its ancient manuscripts from Denmark. This effort, which formally ended in 1971, was in some respects an extension of the country's fight for independence. The return of Hallgrímsson's bones was a related enterprise, as Kundera clearly suggests, when he claims that the soul of the poet had complained to the industrialist that his skeleton had for a hundred years "lain in a foreign land, in the enemy country" (111). Kundera's

inclusion of Hallgrímsson in his book made the news in Iceland when *Ignorance* was originally published in 2000. According to the Icelandic translator of the novel, the chapter in question had been inspired by a discussion he and the novelist had had when the latter visited Iceland a few years earlier. Kundera had mentioned that a friend of his, André Malraux's daughter, had been upset by the plans of the French government to move Malraux's corpse from the family vault to the Pantheon in Paris. The translator then told Kundera briefly about the destiny of Hallgrímsson's skeleton and remarked that the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness (1902–1998) had dealt with this topic in 1948 in *The Atom Station*, a novel Kundera was able to read in translation. Perhaps the translator's summary was imprecise or Kundera's memory defective, but a few facts of Hallgrímsson's case are distorted in *Ignorance*. For a better understanding of the poet's reburial, it is vital to correct at least one detail. Hallgrímsson's Great Return was not a failure because the wrong skeleton was exhumed, as Kundera suggests. It turned out to be a catastrophe for other and more complex reasons.

The industrialist responsible for the excavation of Hallgrímsson's bones was named Sigurjón Pétursson (1888–1955). In his youth he had been a celebrated wrestler, but in 1946 he owned the textile factory of Álafoss near Reykjavik and was known for his interest in Icelandic culture and psychic research. It is inaccurate of Kundera to claim that the soul of Hallgrímsson visited the industrialist "in his sleep." According to Pétursson's own testimony, he had for many years been in telepathic communication with Hallgrímsson and many other departed Icelanders. In a report published in the newspaper *Tíminn* on October 9 in 1946 Pétursson stated: "And Hallgrímsson asked me, 'whether I was prepared to let him continue to rest in Danish soil'" (1). In a speech he delivered after driving the coffin 400 km from Reykjavik to the north of Iceland, Pétursson had addressed Hallgrímsson directly, claiming that he had devoted himself to this project,

> because I believed you, when you came to me and asked me to help you home from exile. I sensed your desire for your home—your childhood-home—for this place where you were born—for this place where you were brought up—for this home, where your childhood dreams live on—for this home where your parents are buried. Welcome—a hearty welcome to you.
> (1 and 4)

Like Kundera, Pétursson seems to have regarded the transportation of Hallgrímsson's bones as a Great Return. But unfortunately, important members of the Icelandic government—which Pétursson had not consulted before appropriating the bones—did not define "home" in the same way as he did. In their view Hallgrímsson's natural home was the national cemetery recently set up in the dramatic surroundings of Thingvellir. In this respect, Hallgrímsson's

case seems parallel to the case of Josef's wife in *Ignorance* and the case of Malraux in reality. But Kundera does not make that comparison and consequently he does not seem to realize how the affair of the bones touched on issues relating to private and public property.

As the von Benda-Beckmanns and Wiber note in their article "The Properties of Property," recent developments in the world have forced academics and policy theorists "to take a renewed look at property. One is the rapid increase in new types of properties, including social security rights, tradable environmental allowances, bioinformatics, cultural property and even such ephemeral things as air" (1). They stress that it is necessary to conceive property as a "'bundle of rights' ... in order to capture the different roles that property may play" (3). In an article dealing with the Icelandic fishing-quota system, philosopher Atli Harðarson shares this view and points out that in the narrowest sense, the noun property and the verb to own refer to an unlimited right to "sell, give, use, dispose, change, pledge, and destroy" material objects, such as cars, buildings or ships (13). In the wider context of the law, these words, at least as they are used in Icelandic, can also refer to other rights, such as copyright or the right to earn a living from a particular profession. Finally, in daily speech, these words seem to have a rather different meaning, as when we talk about the atmosphere as the common property of mankind, or talk about the ancient sagas as the mutual property of the Icelandic nation. Here, the owner rarely has the right to sell, give, change, pledge, or destroy the property in question, but merely a limited right to utilize it.

The bodies of deceased people would seem to belong to this latter field of reference. A man can make arrangements for the disposal of his physical remains, otherwise his closest relatives will inherit this right, and they are usually considered the owners of the grave in question. In most countries, governments impose certain limitations as to where and how a person can be buried and as time passes ancient graves and tombs become redefined as antiquities or cultural property, belonging to the nation or the country in question. Harðarson argues that in the narrowest legal sense of the word, nobody "owns" the fishing-grounds around Iceland, as no one has the right to destroy them or give them away. According to the law, the fishing-grounds are the public property of the nation, but there are no clear directions in the legislation as to how a nation can exercise its property rights. In reality, the government acts as a representative of the owners, with members of parliament passing various laws relating to the fishing-grounds, and ministries and officials making sure that these laws come into effect. On the other hand, Harðarson points out, owners of vessels and sailors who have for some time made a living from fishing have a constitutional right to continue to do so, as they have invested their time and capital in their professions. Pétursson's involvement in the Great Return of Hallgrímsson can be understood in this context.

"These bones are my property," Pétursson claimed in an interview with the newspaper *Þjóðviljinn* on October 9 1946, but by that time the Icelandic government had prevented him from burying Hallgrímsson's bones in the north of Iceland and the police had brought them back to Reykjavik. Pétursson's argument was that he had paid a considerable sum of money in order to have the Icelandic poet exhumed in Copenhagen. Additionally, he claimed that the project had been solely his initiative. On August 9 1946, he and his associate had written Prime Minister Thors a letter, suggesting that the government or the Icelandic embassy in Copenhagen should take the necessary measures to transport the bones back to Iceland. In their estimate the cost would be around 3000 Icelandic crowns and they said that they could pay or lend the sum, if the government needed it. In the end, Pétursson's funds covered most of the cost, or 2842.35 Iceland crowns. This, in his view, was the price he had paid for Hallgrímsson's bones. The Icelandic government viewed the matter differently. In a report Thors wrote in 1947, he pointed out that the idea of transporting Hallgrímsson's bones to Iceland had been discussed by the government a number of times during the previous three years. He also denied that he had given Pétursson permission to finance the whole project, referring to a letter he had written to employees at the Icelandic embassy in Copenhagen instructing them to pay all the necessary costs. However, the embassy had only paid the churchyard authorities in Copenhagen for the exhumation of the bones, a total of 178 Danish crowns. The rest had indeed been paid by Pétursson, except for 244.50 Danish crowns that The Reykjavik Student Association had paid to the churchyard authorities in 1938 to obtain the rights over Hallgrímsson's Danish grave. [2]

In view of this, one might say that a joint-stock company had been formed round the investment in Hallgrímsson's bones, with Pétursson, the student association and the government as shareholders. Although it may seem important to calculate who owned the biggest share, for our present purposes the major question is what kind of property Hallgrímsson's bones actually constituted. Pétursson evidently regarded them as his personal property in the narrow legal sense, claiming in *Tíminn* on October 9, 1946: "I was not stealing or robbing. I had every right to handle the bones ... I have expended my money and energy to get them home." (1) Thors, on the other hand, considered the bones the public property of the Icelandic nation, as he clearly stated in parliamentary debates about the affair in the fall of 1946. When asked, he admitted that close relatives of deceased people "had the primary rights in matters of this kind, even when we are dealing with national property like the great mind we are discussing here." (Alþingi 1962-63) But in Thors's opinion, such a long time had passed that the living kin of Hallgrímsson could hardly be regarded as close relatives and therefore he suggested that their property rights over his grave were extinguished. Hence, the government buried Hallgrímsson at Thingvellir in the fall of 1946 despite Pétursson's objections and despite a letter of protest signed by people whose

family-line could be traced back to Hallgrímsson's siblings. But the atmosphere of the Great Return had been ruined, the poet's burial at Thingvellir turned out to be anti-climactic.

It is interesting that The Reykjavik Student Association did not publicly object to Hallgrímsson's burial at Thingvellir. Most probably, its members saw themselves as humble patrons of the whole project. If Pétursson had shared that view, and not considered himself personally obliged to fulfil Hallgrímsson's "last" wishes, he might have been content simply to advertise his textile factory in the fall of 1946 with the slogan: "*The Poet's Great Return was sponsored by Álafoss.*"

In conclusion, it is necessary to examine Kundera's suggestion that the wrong bones were excavated in Copenhagen. In *Ignorance*, Josef claims that soon after the excavation

> everyone learned what the patriotic industrialist had never dared admit: standing at the opened tomb back in Copenhagen, he had felt extremely disconcerted: the poet had been buried in a paupers' field with no name marking his grave, only a number and, confronted with a bunch of skeletons tangled together, the patriotic industrialist had not known which one to pick. In the presence of the stern, impatient cemetery bureaucrats, he did not dare show his uncertainty. And so he had transported to Iceland not the Icelandic poet but a Danish butcher.
> (112–13)

This statement is highly misleading. In reality, Pétursson was not present in Copenhagen when the bones were dug up, he was impatiently awaiting their return back in Iceland. The excavation itself was supervised by Matthías Þórðarson (1877–1961), director of the Icelandic National Museum. Þórðarson was Iceland's chief archaeologist at the time and probably the first Icelander ever to write about the prospects of recovering Hallgrímsson's physical remains from Denmark. His article, published in 1905, dealt exclusively with the poet's burial ground in Copenhagen. It explained who had been buried there subsequent to Hallgrímsson and traced changes made in the system of marking the graves of the Assistents-churchyard during the nineteenth century. Þórðarson convincingly suggested that Hallgrímsson was positioned under one of two juxtaposed grave-sites of the new system. Then he went on to discourage anyone who might be interested in digging there for the poet's coffin in order to transport it to Iceland.

> Nonetheless, it would be difficult to find any traces of his corpse, after such a long time, 60 years, according to knowledgeable sources, as the grave has been excavated twice since then. If anyone burrowed down to Hallgrímsson's coffin, it must have been soggy; then the timber was probably confiscated, but the remains of the body have merged in with the mud and then grave was filled up again.
> (93)

It is certainly remarkable that the man who wrote these words went to Copenhagen four decades later to look for muddy remains of the beloved poet, but at the same time it is unreasonable to suggest that the wrong bones were excavated from the Danish churchyard because the person in charge was ignorant or lacked experience in these matters.

It seems that Kundera's source for this part of the story was Laxness's *The Atom Station*, in which an Icelandic industrialist travels to Copenhagen to buy the bones of the national poet. Like Kundera, Laxness obliterates Þórðarson from his version of the story. Neither was aware of Þórðarson's meticulous report of his excavation in Denmark in which he convincingly argued that it was indeed Hallgrímsson who was transported to Iceland in 1946. However, according to this report and a photograph taken in the Copenhagen churchyard at the time, only a small fragment of the original Icelandic poet took part in his Great Return; a few mouldering bones and the shattered base of an old coffin.

The last photograph of Jónas Hallgrímsson, taken in the Assistens-churchyard in Copenhagen on August 31, 1946. Photograph: N.N. © Icelandic National Museum.

NOTES

1. The best introduction to Hallgrímsson's life and works in English is Ringler 2002. An extensive treatment of Hallgrímsson's reburial can be found in Helgason 2003.
2. Most of the information in this paragraph, and some introduced below, is based on the following documents that I got a copy of from Birgir Thorlacius (1913–2001), who was a secretary at the Icelandic Prime Minister's Office in 1946: a letter from Sigurjón

Pétursson and Ásmundur Jónsson to Ólafur Thors, August 9, 1946; draft of Ólafur Thors's report to the Ministry of Justice, June 3 1947; a telegraph (K.S. 1519/46) from the Icelandic Embassy in Denmark to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; a letter from the Assistens-churchyard authorities to Sigurður Ólafson, May 2 1939; a letter from Sigurður E. Hlíðar to Ólafur Thors, October 28 1946; a letter from Matthías Þórðarson to Ólafur Thors, September 21 1946 (a report about his trip to Copenhagen). See also Thorlacius 1990.

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