

# Introduction

## Dialogues with a “Head of Destiny”

DUSTIN GEERAERT

ABSTRACT: This introduction describes the volume’s organization, surveys its contributions, and explains how they fit together in the context of medievalism. It considers Halldór Laxness’s medievalism in the novel *Gerpla* (1952), but observes not a “hero’s journey” but rather the strange journey of a hero’s severed head. This “Head of Destiny” shapes many events, as the dead hero’s sworn brother pursues his killers to the edge of the known world in the remote ivory colonies of medieval Greenland. While some of this plot is drawn from sources such as *Fóstbræðra saga*, Halldór’s version of the story questions this mission. Two “Dream-Women” interpret the head’s ominous significance with prophecies of light and darkness, thus revealing the fate of this would-be avenger as he passes from life to the abyss.

RÉSUMÉ: Cette introduction décrit l’organisation du volume, examine ses contributions et explique comment elles s’harmonisent dans le contexte du médiévalisme. Elle aborde le médiévalisme de Halldór Laxness dans le roman *Gerpla* (1952), mais plutôt que d’observer le « voyage du héros », elle observe le voyage étrange de la tête coupée du héros. Cette « tête du destin » façonne de nombreux événements, alors que le frère juré du héros décédé poursuit ses assassins jusqu’au bout du monde connu dans les lointaines colonies d’ivoire du Groenland médiéval. Bien qu’une partie de cette intrigue soit tirée de sources telles que la *Fóstbræðra saga*, la version du récit d’Halldór remet en question cette mission. Deux « femmes oniriques » interprètent la sinistre signification de la tête par des prophéties de lumière et de ténèbres, qui révèlent ainsi le destin de ce vengeur potentiel lorsqu’il passe de la vie à l’abîme.

Dustin Geeraert teaches in the Department of Icelandic and in the English Department (DEFTM) at the University of Manitoba.

This volume organizes itself around the thirteenth-century Icelandic literary work, *Fóstbræðra saga* [*The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*].<sup>1</sup> It is a case study in medievalism, the reception of the Middle Ages in all its aspects, since it is especially concerned with this saga's "Afterlife."<sup>2</sup> It considers both the scholarly and creative aspects of reception; as Oren Falk observes in *The Bare-Sarked Warrior: A Brief Cultural History of Battlefield Exposure* (2015), "the porous nature of the boundary between scholarly analysis and popular retelling should itself be leveraged as a source of understanding" (5). In this case, the post-medieval journey of a single saga involves the work not only of textual scholars, editors, and philologists, but also of translators, writers, and critics. Indeed, the boundary between scholarly and creative engagement with the medieval sagas is difficult to draw in Halldór Laxness's postwar retelling of the sworn brothers' story, the novel *Gerpla* (1952), recently translated by Philip Roughton as *Wayward Heroes* (2016). One reviewer related, "I have heard from a leading historian that *Gerpla* is the best source he has read about the middle ages in Iceland."<sup>3</sup> Interdisciplinary consideration of the many-faceted reception of one medieval story may cast light on the meaning of the legacy of medieval Iceland in the modern age, but this introduction has more modest aims: first to survey the volume's articles, and then to explore one major episode as interpreted in *Gerpla*.

The articles examine the saga's "Afterlife" in five sections, an organization which is mythical in its inspiration and thus both chronological and thematic. The present section, "Vision," previews the special issue's concept, topics, and approaches, while the next section, "Creation," discusses the foundations of saga reception. Any medieval literary work's journey through modernity begins with the work of textual scholars, as Susanne Arthur discusses in "From Manuscript(s) to Print: Editorial Practices through the Ages and the Case of Konráð Gíslason's (Incomplete) Edition of *Fóstbræðra saga*." Editions curate our understanding of the sagas and generate possibilities for everything that follows. How have scholars classified this saga, and how should we view its ideas of heroism? Helga Kress considers the saga's composition, narrative perspective, and genre in "The Culture of the Grotesque in Old Icelandic Literature: *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*." The section closes by considering how sagas have been interpreted abroad. In "Old Norse in Italy: From Francesco Saverio Quadrio to *Fóstbræðra saga*," Fulvio Ferrari considers the many boundaries that literature crosses through the often ideological process of translation. I am pleased to note that this special volume itself contains three articles making their first appearances in English translation, often with the active guidance of the original authors.

The second section, "Preservation," considers twentieth-century engagement with the saga in question in Iceland. It focuses on the figure of Halldór Laxness who, while perhaps best known internationally as an author, was also a translator,

critic, and editor. As Christopher Crocker discusses in “Guardian of Memory: Halldór Laxness, Saga Editor,” Halldór’s attitude toward Iceland’s literary legacy changed significantly over the course of his life; and some argued that he was not preserving the sagas but hastening the demise of his country’s culture. Moving from producing saga editions to writing saga-inspired literary works introduces metafictional considerations; Ástráður Eysteinnsson’s article asks “Is Halldór Laxness the Author of *Fóstbræðra saga*?” Its subtitle lists key considerations: “On the Author Function, Intertextuality, Translation, and a Modern Writer’s Relationship with the Icelandic Sagas.” In his reinterpretation Halldór even blends medieval narrative with modern cinema, as Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir discusses in “Of Heroes and Cods’ Heads: Saga Meets Film in *Gerpla*.” Finally, Kristinn E. Andrésson’s article, “A Modern-Day Saga in Fancy Dress: Contemporary Social Critique in Halldór Laxness’s *Gerpla*” enshrines one of the appreciative responses Halldór received. In this article, originally written shortly after the novel’s publication and first published in 1972 on the occasion of Halldór’s 70th birthday, Kristinn welcomes Halldór’s unique contribution, but recognizes that *Gerpla*’s stark and startling use of the past to criticize the present will be provocative in a polarized world.

The fourth section, “Destruction,” examines the troubled reception of *Gerpla*, in which the cultural tensions of postwar Iceland and the ideological clashes of civilization more generally led to polemical interpretations. In “Cold-War Confrontations: *Gerpla* and its Early Reviewers,” Shaun F. D. Hughes discusses both the praise and the denunciation that Halldór received from his fellow Icelanders—and examines the controversy that results when rival visions of medieval heritage clash. In “‘In the Shadow of Greater Events in the World’: The Northern Epic in the Wake of World War II,” I consider *Gerpla* as part of a wave of postwar medievalist novels that critically examine militant ideologies for common features. How do Halldór’s observations on ideological justifications for violence compare to those of medievalist writers of his generation in other countries? Finally, Birna Bjarnadóttir’s “*Wayward Heroes: Vagabonds in World Literature*” considers Halldór’s critique of western narrative traditions and the place of his work in European literature. While some were shocked by the iconoclasm of *Gerpla*, it can also be said to belong to a living tradition with deep roots: from the medieval period to the twentieth century, many similarly provocative masterpieces have radically questioned the role of literature in life and society, even if this makes their own foundations tremble.

The final section, “Rebirth,” assesses the current position of saga literature and the inspiration that sagas continue to provide to writers. In “Afterword: Whatever Happened to the Sagas?” Ármann Jakobsson considers the ways in which contemporary writers have responded to the saga legacy, including the cases of his own works *Glæsir* (2011) [Bull] and *Síðasti galdrameistarinn* (2014) [The Last Magician]. Ryan Eric Johnson’s “From the Westfjords to World Literature: A

Bibliography on *Fóstbræðra saga*” and Alex Shaw’s “‘The Lore of Skalds, Warrior Ideals, and Tales of Ancient Kings’: A Bibliography on *Gerpla*” close the volume by summarizing research on the various versions of this volume’s central story.

As this account makes clear, Halldór Laxness is an important figure in this volume in many ways; he is relevant whether one is discussing editions of the sagas, the place of the sagas in modern Icelandic culture, the global export of Icelandic literature (both medieval and modern), or literary responses to the saga legacy. In the remainder of this introduction I wish to consider a possible representation of Halldór’s interaction with the saga legacy in *Gerpla*. Like many an author or compiler before him, from Snorri Sturluson to William Shakespeare, Halldór looked on old Northern narratives with new eyes.

Saga reception has often been mediated by literary comparisons and a search for connections. As Ian Felce notes in “In Search of *Amlóða saga*: The Saga of Hamlet the Icelander” (2016), interest in a potential saga source for Shakespeare’s famous play has reflected enthusiasm out of proportion to the evidence available for examination (203). There is, however, an important way in which Halldór’s literary project with *Gerpla* is akin to Shakespeare’s with *Hamlet* (1602); both reinterpret a traditional Nordic revenge story in light of a later genre with a quite different moral ethos and narrative consciousness. What happens when one imports a saga hero into a Renaissance play or a modern novel? Perhaps the clash of cultures will be captured not only in the story, but also within the psychology of individual characters. Felce distinguishes between the medieval version of Hamlet, a ruthless avenger whose cunning manifests itself in riddles and grotesque behaviour, and the early modern version of Hamlet, a “tormented Renaissance intellectual” undergoing an existential crisis (119). In *Gerpla*, Halldór’s “modern” version of the skald [poet] Þormóður Bessason seems unwittingly to transform from the former to the latter. Perhaps like Hamlet, Þormóður becomes a metafictional figure—one who reflects Halldór’s troubled interaction with his literary predecessors in the saga tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Like Shakespeare’s Prince Hamlet, Halldór’s Skald Þormóður finds himself in dialogue with a departed friend’s head at a very vexed point in his life. While Hamlet interrupts the gravedigger by chance and thus discovers Yorick’s skull in the graveyard, Þormóður finds himself the recipient of a sinister delivery when a malicious vagrant, Lús-Oddi [Louse-Oddi], places his sworn brother Þorgeir’s rotting head on a stake at Þormóður’s farm. Shakespeare’s memento mori scene certainly captures a gothic atmosphere, but Halldór’s version is even more ominous. Hamlet famously laments, “Alas, poor Yorick!” (V.i.10) and foresees his own forthcoming death, but Halldór makes Þormóður’s morbid obsession clear by extending the dialogue for months, indeed over the course of the entire process of decay of the head in question. One might argue that there is a foreboding of this process while Þorgeir’ is still alive when, as Andrew McGillivray discusses in the Foreword, Þorgeir asks Þormóður if he has ever considered beheading

him—and thus creates great discord between them. It is noteworthy that one of Þorgeir's most gruesome and pointless killings is a totally unprovoked beheading,<sup>5</sup> and in time this does indeed prove to be the manner of his own death.

When people at Þormóður's farm at Djúp discover Þorgeir's head, Halldór says that it is “mjög saurgað með gamalli blóðstorku” [filthy with old, crusted blood and gore] and even “tröllslegt” [ogriish] (*Gerpla* 317; *Wayward Heroes* 296). Halldór uses the “afterlife” of Þorgeir's head as a ghastly symbol of how the past haunts the present; it provokes Þormóður to recall his oath to avenge Þorgeir, blood for blood.<sup>6</sup> The heroic ideology seems impervious to criticism no matter how catastrophic its failings prove to be. By placing the rotting head in public sight, Lús-Oddi mocks Þormóður's ideas and challenges him to live up to them.

The first one to see the head, however, is the Irish slave Kolbakur, who realizes that Þormóður will seek vengeance and that this will destroy his marriage with Þórdís Kötludóttir. Since Kolbakur is devoted to Þórdís and wishes to please her, he offers to bury Þorgeir's head out of sight. Her response shows that she believes this event has the significance of fate:

Húsfreyja [Þórdís] hlær við og segir að ef þetta var örlagahöfuð, þá var eigi hún til sköpt að fyrircoma slíku höfði, tjóar og lítt þótt eg grafa, enda skal manna hver það höfuð fyrir hitta einhvern dag.  
(318)

[Þórdís laughs and says that if this is a head of destiny, then it is not for her to do away with it. “It is of little use for me to bury it, for some day, every man will encounter that same head.”]  
(297)

The above description of the head as “tröllslegt” may be significant in this context; indeed, a troll may be identified more with a haunting or an omen than with any particular unnatural creature.<sup>7</sup> Þorgeir's head does seem to haunt the farm in a decidedly “trollish” manner. Þormóður tries to preserve his friend's head by salting it; it slowly captures his attention more and more, and he himself begins to withdraw from the living:

Hann reikar örendisleysu úti og inni en sinnir aungu starfi, og hefur upp fyrir sér í hálfum hljóðum kveðskap myrkvan. Marga nátt þá er aðrir menn sofa, rís hann úr rekkju hljóðlega og geingur til skemmu, og mælir við höfuð Þorgeirs Hávarssonar leingi nætur.  
(325–26)

[He meanders aimlessly both outdoors and in and does no work, but mutters dark verses to himself, in low tones. Many a night, while others sleep, he rises quietly

from his bed and goes to the storehouse, where he spends hours speaking to Þorgeir Hávarsson's head.]

(305)

Although readers of *Gerpla* are not provided with any details of these dialogues, subsequent events in the novel make it clear that the main subject under consideration was the obligation of blood vengeance. The relationship between Þormóður and Þorgeir has this mutual vow, of each to avenge the other's death, at its core, and Halldór uses his retelling of Þormóður's quest for vengeance for his sworn brother to reconsider the whole Northern warrior culture.

The inability to let go of the past takes Þormóður away from Þórdís of Djúp, who is always associated with life and light in the novel, and to the ends of the earth in the arctic wastes of Greenland, where the exiled witch Kolbrún, Þórdís's rival for the poet's affections, dwells. This is actually a nickname which refers to her dark looks, as she is known as Þórbjorg *Kolbrún* [Thorbjorg *Coal-brow*] in *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, but she is only ever referred to as Kolbrún in *Wayward Heroes*. As in *Fóstbræðra saga*, Þormóður receives the nickname *Kolbrúnarskáld* [Kolbrún's poet] after reciting rude verses about her, but Halldór hugely expands on the meaning of this. Unlike Þorgeir's head, Kolbrún does not require proximity to haunt Þormóður. This Kolbrún is a seeress of the abyss; the fact that Þormóður simply *is* her poet whether he wishes to be or not thus carries an almost metaphysical sense of darkness. The monstrous "hero" Þorgeir, who still desolates farms even in death, is perhaps only Kolbrún's pawn; even the delivery of his head to Djúp may be the result of her influence, which in *Gerpla* stretches across the Northern world. Behind her is Nature's abyss, a heartless lineage of violent competition for survival stretching back beyond memory; in comparison the domestic prosperity of the farm at Djúp is tiny, limited, and local. Although from Þormóður's perspective he is travelling to Greenland to avenge Þorgeir (as in the original saga), there are other ways of interpreting the manner in which this "Head of Destiny" lures him to Greenland; indeed, upon his arrival he acknowledges that Kolbrún has in some way caused this situation.<sup>8</sup>

Upon his departure, Þorgeir's head is the last thing Þormóður leaves to his family. They find that it has been "fáða af mikilli list" [polished with great art]; it becomes an heirloom of heroism and inspiration to the community: "var það hinn besti gripur. Af höfði þessu feingu menn allgóða skemtan við Djúp leingi síðan, og dróst úr hömlu að klerkar sýngi yfir" [it was the finest of treasures. Folk in Djúp were much amused by this head for a long time afterward, and a proper burial for it was constantly postponed] (339; 317). It is venerated for generations—until a fire destroys the entire settlement (thus the possible sense of the object as a troll in the sense of an ill omen). One interpretation is that Skald Þormóður represents the author Halldór, and that polishing the skull represents a kind of mad, aesthetic death-worship. Perhaps what the community takes for

an heirloom or even a tourist attraction, Þorgeir's head, is actually an evil talisman, a revenant that refuses to rest. For better or worse, every ideology has its relics, notes the writer whose journey took him through Catholicism and Communism.<sup>9</sup> In *Gerpla*, polishing skulls does seem to represent the creation of a curated version of the past, one thoroughly worked over so as to shape or control the present. King Olaf Haraldsson, a silver-tongued opportunist and master propagandist, takes on this task in a monastery in Kiev. In a speech justifying his conquest, Olaf displays a distinct understanding of the prestige value of relics:

Vér munum reisa kirkju Heilagri Visku í Niðarósi svo að hvergi bíði veglegri er sjálfa Ægisiflíður, og skulu þar á ölturum í gyldum skrínum dýrlingshöfuð hebergð meiri og betri en annarsstaðar í kristni.  
(488)

[We shall erect cathedrals of Holy Wisdom in Nidaros, as glorious as the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, and on its altars display golden shrines holding the skulls of saints, bigger and better than elsewhere in Christendom.]  
(458)

Þormóður's own attempt to enforce the heroic code, whose symbol he has left to the community in *Djúp*, proves very different in Halldór's version of the Greenland episode. The difference between Þormóður's demonstration of prowess and dedication through his vengeance in Greenland in *Fóstbræðra saga* and his deluded journey in *Gerpla* reveals Halldór's interrogation of the saga ethos. The medieval Skald Þormóður of *Fóstbræðra saga* avenges his sworn brother with a ruthlessness that would impress Macbeth: "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (I.vii.47-48).<sup>10</sup> Grímur Thomsen, the Icelander in Denmark who wrote essays placing the sagas in a European context, notes that even Shakespeare's Hamlet still echoes the Northern hero who "plays the fool, while he broods over revenge" (50).<sup>11</sup> Yet unlike the heroic medieval Þormóður, and indeed more like Shakespeare's famous depiction of Hamlet as a man in the midst of a crisis of doubt, Halldór's Þormóður finds himself staring straight into the abyss.

Like Hamlet, Skald Þormóður begins to wonder whether meaning can be found in any such primitive notion as murdering one man to avenge the death of another, as his appetite for blood and glory wavers in the faltering Norse colony in Greenland. In *Fóstbræðra saga* Greenland is the home of powerful Norse settlers, and the same rules of honour and kin obligation apply there as in Iceland or Scandinavia. In *Gerpla* the Norse settlements in Greenland are depicted with archaeological hindsight; they are dwindling outposts of sickness and starvation, foreshadowing the collapse of Norse colonialism. Yet Kolbrún seems well at home in this most abyss-like of landscapes. In the midst of this vast and indifferent

wilderness, Þormóður's belief in his mission dissipates. Detached from his previous ideals and even his own identity, he undergoes a profound disillusionment:

Hin skömmu sumur Grænlands virðast skemri orðin eða farast fyrir með öllu; og bóndi sá er áður bygði við Djúp þar sem hamínga þróast með blómi, heyrir rödd sína spyrja í meðal kaldra kletta í Ánavík, þar sem ekki blóm mun vaxa um aldur og ævi: hví em eg hér?  
(358)

[Greenland's short summers appear to have grown shorter or even to have dwindled to nothing, and the farmer who once lived in Djúp, where good fortune grows with the flowers, hears his own voice ask amidst the cold crags of Ánavík, where no flower will ever grow: "Why am I here?"]  
(335–36)

Prominent critics asked this very question of medievalist literary works throughout the twentieth century, with varying degrees of hostility.<sup>12</sup> But within such works the question has to do with larger themes of meaning and emptiness, life and death. Þormóður can no longer give himself an answer he believes in, and Nature provides only a silent witness.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless Halldór may have been mistaken about one thing: as a matter of fact, flowers may one day grow "amidst the cold crags of Ánavík," as the Danish explorers in Greenland point out in Daniel Dencik's stunning ecological documentary *Expedition to the End of the World* (2014). Marine biologist Katrine Worsaae explains the changing conditions in Greenland thus: "It's so beautiful here, and it may become even more beautiful. There will be a lot of trees on the coastline. But that will be change, and many of us dislike that. It's like getting back to your childhood home, and someone else lives there" (1:59).

Few places on earth are simultaneously so beautiful and so inhospitable to human habitation as Greenland; the ruins of the Norse colony there offer a poignant reminder of the fragility of civilization. Jared Diamond, author of *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies* (1997), uses the colony as an example of "Why Societies Collapse" (2003). He points out that over-exploitation of natural resources and the behaviour of political elites according to short-term interests that conflict with the long-term interests of the society are common elements between the Norse colony in Greenland and many industrialized societies today (11:48). In "The Lost Norse: Why did Greenland's Vikings disappear?" (2016), Eli Kintisch points out that climate change, which contributed to the original colony's collapse, now poses a threat to the *evidence* of that collapse: "Organic artifacts like clothing and animal bones, preserved for centuries in the deep freeze of the permafrost, are decaying rapidly as rising temperatures thaw the soil" (1). Newer research suggests that the settlements were driven by the search for ivory rather



than farmland, an element which plays a significant role in *Gerpla*, as it gives Kolbrún power and allows her to travel from Greenland to Norway in order to be close by for Þormóður's last battle and ensure his fate.<sup>14</sup> In fact, while the Norse sought ivory from walruses rather than elephants, one could read the Greenland section of *Gerpla* as a sort of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) for the atomic age, with Kolbrún in the role of the rogue ivory trader Kurtz.

Like Joseph Conrad's Kurtz, she takes on some of the ways of the local peoples, in this case the Inuit (*Gerpla* 356–57; *Wayward Heroes* 335), yet also manifests a sinister persona of colonial conquest. Conrad's Marlowe tries to understand the paradoxes of Kurtz thus:

I think it [the wilderness] had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception until he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.  
(95)

In spite of himself, Þormóður similarly finds himself drawn to Kolbrún's foreboding wisdom:

Fúsari hlýðir Þormóður hennar merkilegum orðræðum sem hann býr við hana leingur, og koma honum rúnar hennar á Grænalandi hinu myrkva í gæsku stað flestrar er hann áður naut, sælumaður hjá hinu bjarta Djúpi.  
(357)

[The longer Þormóður dwelt with her, the more eager he was to learn her wondrous discourses—for him, her runic lore in Greenland the Dark filled the place of the bounties he formerly enjoyed as a man blessed by kind fortune in bright Djúp.]  
(334–35)

Marlowe considers colonialism a “sordid farce acted in front of a sinister backcloth” (30), a description that could equally apply to *Gerpla*. By contrasting the Norse and Inuit cultures in Greenland, Halldór exposes the madness of war and genocide, of humans slaughtering one another when Nature already presents continual threats to human survival. For Conrad, organized violence in the pursuit of wealth, land, and resources, in the context of a clash of cultures and worldviews, must be viewed in an evolutionary context that is profoundly amoral, and even more destructive than it is creative, as extinction is its invariable result. Conrad's Marlowe sees the Congo River as like the beginning and the end of the world (59), and speaking to Þormóður, Kolbrún similarly takes upon herself an apocalyptic mantle:

Em eg fyrir víst sú kona er byggir undirjúpin: skulu fyrir mér ekkjur verða allar skjaldmeyar yðar bjartar, og falla konúngar þeir er þér trúðuð best; og þóttú farir á endi heims skaltu mig hitta eina.  
(361)

[I am the woman who inhabits the Abyss. Through me, all your bright shieldmaidens shall be made widows, and the kings in whom you placed greatest faith shall fall. Though you were to journey to the world's end, there you would meet only me.]  
(339)

Kolbrún's vision of Greenland as a place prophetic of the world's end receives a compelling visual parallel in *Expedition to End of the World*, with its striking imagery of tiny human figures wandering vast fjords. Conrad placed the "scramble for loot" (xxiii) of the ivory trade in the larger context of Nature, in which it is tiny: settlements are "no bigger than pinheads on the untouched expanse of their background" (29), and even the life-cycles of empires are as ephemeral as candle-light: "We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday" (19). Similarly, in Dencik's film one of the explorers makes the following observation on humanity's place in nature: "We will only rule for a short time, and then it's back to the spider. But as far as we know, the spider doesn't write poems" (40:25).

What sets us homo sapiens apart from other life forms, then, may be our imaginative capacity, even though this often involves self-deception. As Robert Trivers notes in *The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life* (2011), our minds are systemically biased because self-deception offers an evolutionary advantage in the arms race between deception and deception-detection; it is thus a Sisyphean task to disentangle ourselves from the web of delusions within which we dwell (1). Conrad's Marlowe refers to instincts and passions that drive people to self-destruction as devils, noting that none is so dangerous as the "devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (34). Perhaps this is the devil that Þormóður is truly beguiled by.<sup>15</sup>

For Halldór's Þormóður there will be no vengeance for Þorgeir in Greenland; the situation is in fact much better described as *Kolbrún's* vengeance upon *him*. Perhaps what is true of Þormóður and Kolbrún is true of Halldór and the saga tradition as well: "Skaltu æ og ævinlega í minn stað koma, hverja för sem þú fer, og þó aldrei nær mér en þá er þú stefndir mér first" [you shall ever and always be drawn to me, wherever you go, yet shall never be nearer than when you set your course farthest] (23; 21). *Gerpla* presents Kolbrún's ivory-trading hut in Greenland as a place where mythologies meet in the context of Norse colonization in the West Atlantic,<sup>16</sup> taking into account a vast geographical scope including not only Iceland and Scandinavia, but also Europe and the wider Northern and Atlantic worlds. Throughout his long journey Þormóður has always found a way

to adapt his craft to the needs of the moment, yet the world is too small for him to escape Kolbrún's influence; he is her poet, and when he finally refuses to recite poetry, he is not far from death.

Shakespeare's Hamlet dies upon completing his mission of vengeance and wants his story to live on; Conrad's Marlowe tells Kurtz's story to his fellow sailors but refuses to tell the truth to Kurtz's beloved. Halldór's Þormóður dies for nothing and deliberately falls silent. Thus despite its wry humour and ingenious sense of absurdity, *Gerpla* presents a story that seems at times radically pessimistic: the cycle of killings only pauses long enough for deluded propagandists to praise its heroism. This broken poet finally regrets glorifying Þorgeir as a hero, realizing that the one cannot exist without the other. In *Frygt og Bæven* (1843) [*Fear and Trembling*] the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, writing as the fictional author Johannes de silentio [John of the Silence], interprets the respective roles of the hero and the poet in terms of mythic transfiguration:

Dersom der ingen evig Bevidsthed var i et Menneske, dersom der til Grund for Alt kun laae en vildt gjærende Magt, der vridende sig i dunkle Lidenskaber frembragte Alt, hvad der var stort og hvad der var ubetydeligt, dersom en bundløs Tomhed, aldrig mættet, skjulte sig under Alt, hvad var da Livet Andet end Fortvivlelse? Dersom det forholdt sig saaledes, dersom der intet helligt Baand var, der sammenknyttede Menneskeheden, dersom den ene Slægt stod op efter den anden som Løvet i Skoven, dersom den ene Slægt afløste den anden som Fuglesangen i Skoven, dersom Slægten gik gennem Verden, som Skibet gaer gennem Havet, som Veiret gennem Ørkenen, en tankeløs og ufrugtbar Gjerning, dersom en evig Glemsel altid hungrig lurede paa sit Bytte, og der var ingen Magt stærk nok til at frarive den det – hvor var da Livet tomt og trøstesløst! Men derfor er det ikke saaledes, og som Gud skabte Mand og Qvinde, saa dannede han Helten og Digteren eller Taleren. Denne kan Intet gjøre af hvad hiin gjør, han kan kun beundre, elske, glæde sig ved Helten. Dog er ogsaa han lykkelig, ikke mindre end denne; thi Helten er ligesom hans bedre Væsen, i hvilket han er forelsket, glad ved, at det dog ikke er ham selv at hans Kjærlighed kan være Beundring. Han er Erindringens Genius, kan Intet gjøre uden minde om, hvad der er gjort, Intet gjøre uden beundre, hvad der er gjort.

(35)

[If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential; if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what then would life be but despair? If it were thus, if there were no sacred bond uniting mankind, if one generation rose up after another like the leaves of the forest, if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of birds in the forest, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless whim, if an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches – how empty and devoid of comfort life would

bel But for that reason it is not so, and as God created man and woman, so too he shaped the hero and the poet or speech-maker. The latter has none of the skills of the former, he can only admire, love, take pleasure in the hero. Yet he, too, no less than the hero, is happy; for the hero is so to speak that better nature of his in which he is enamoured, though happy that it is not himself, that his love can indeed be admiration. He is the spirit of remembrance, can only bring to mind what has been done, do nothing but admire what has been done.]

(49)

While admitting that misunderstanding may threaten the legacy of poets and heroes, Kierkegaard's rhapsody over the poet's transfiguration of the hero employs religious language; and indeed Kierkegaard seems to see in this transfiguration a means of transcending death, so that "Derfor skal Ingen være glemt" [Therefore no one who was great will be forgotten] (36; 50). A skeptic might object to Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" in the phrase *for that reason*, but whether we accept this reasoning or not, this passage makes it clear that the hero-worship of romantic interpreters like Kierkegaard himself, Grímur Thomsen, and Thomas Carlyle—author of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841)—was really an attempt to find in literary traditions a replacement for the loss of religious faith so deeply felt by many nineteenth-century thinkers. Friedrich Nietzsche famously predicted that in the twentieth century this search for a replacement metaphysics and mythology would lead to drastic cultural shifts, radical political revolutions, and unprecedented wars.<sup>17</sup> Reading Halldór's novel in this way, whether we take the writer's religion to be Catholicism, Communism, or literature itself, it is especially important to be careful with what one worships; attempts to transcend oblivion may in the end only hasten it. Discussing the divisive nature of political ideology in a Cold War context, James Baldwin observed in *The Fire Next Time* (1963):

Life is tragic simply because the earth turns, and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have.

(90–91)

Ideological narratives, which often appeal to human aesthetic and psychological sensibilities, including desires for certainty, moral status, and identity, can have devastating consequences. In this way they can become more dangerous than the starkest realities. In *Gerpla*, those with extravagant beliefs (or unhealthy imaginations) chase phantoms and risk everything on foolish crusades. As Halldór Guðmundsson notes, "since his Catholic period Halldór had often expressed the

opinion that ideals were of greater significance than people” (180). In Þormóður’s misguided quest, and particularly in his realization of how he has been a fool only when it is too late, we can perhaps see Halldór’s guilt over his defense of the “heroes” of communist totalitarianism. Even Kierkegaard, with his leap of faith, admits that the hero-worship of poets could, as a kind of replacement religion, be replete with all the same dangers; and elsewhere in *Fear and Trembling* he quotes the French poet and critic Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux to the following effect: “Un sot trouve toujours un plus sot, qui l’admire” [A fool can always find a greater fool who admires him].<sup>18</sup>

Halldór does not give readers a single word of Þormóður’s dialogues with the “Head of Destiny,” the skull he polishes when he prefers the company of the dead. The contents of this dialogue have to be inferred from the context, and from the disastrous journey on which these dialogues send Þormóður. However we diagnose this disaster, Þormóður’s self-examination proves too little, too late. Perhaps what is truly timeless about *Gerpla* is its critical concern with how our ideals themselves can lure us away from the light of Djúp and toward the outer darkness of Anavík. *Gerpla*’s parodic medievalism, which mocks apparently archaic delusions, may be why from the first appearance of Halldór’s novel to the present, it has been compared to Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605-1615). Yet the connection may run much deeper than that; whatever else it may be, in the case of *Gerpla*, medievalism is also a kind of confession.<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

1. See discussion of the dating of manuscript witnesses of the saga in Susanne Arthur’s “From Manuscript(s) to Print: Editorial Practices through the Ages and the Case of Konráð Gíslason’s (Incomplete) Edition of *Fóstbræðra saga*”.
2. Jón Karl Helgason develops the idea of the reception as a given work as its “Afterlife” in *Echoes of Valhalla: The Afterlife of Eddas and Sagas* (2017).
3. See Andrésson in this volume for discussion of this comment; see Hughes in this volume for discussion of this and other reviews of *Gerpla*.
4. Skald Þormóður, like Halldór himself, was raised on traditional Icelandic lore. Halldór states that his grandmother “sang me ancient songs before I could talk, told me stories from heathen times” (Hallberg 3), while *Wayward Heroes* describes Þormóður’s upbringing thus: “From his father he learned poetry and other arts, and even at an early age could relate much lore of the Northern kings and jarls most intrepid in war and other noble pursuits, as well as of the Æsir, the Völsungar, the Ylfingar, and the renowned heroes who wrestled with ogresses. ... What is more, he was fluent in the uncanny lore predicting the end of the peopled world and the twilight of the Gods” (16).
5. This is in contrast to beheadings “provoked” by slander as in *Njál’s Saga*. See discussion of this killing in this volume: Eysteinnsson and Geeraert.

6. See related discussions in this volume: of the description of Þorgeir's head in the saga (Kress), of the effect that the head has on Þormóður in *Gerpla* (Andrésson, Hughes, and Bjarnadóttir), and of the symbolic importance of beheading in *Gerpla* (Kristjánsdóttir).
7. Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North* (2017), 17.
8. He says that she has caused birds on his farm to make noise and keep him awake; although this could be considered a joke, it could also be a reference to beliefs about witches' familiars, and indeed Halldór often relays folkloristic materials in a wry and humorous manner—a well-established practice in Icelandic literature.
9. Halldór Laxness travelled to Moscow in 1932, where Lenin's body was on display. Halldór Guðmundson notes that Halldór Laxness admired the Soviet Union even many years later: "Here Lenin takes the place on the pedestal of the man in Halldór's mind when he was twenty: a man born approximately two thousand years earlier" (260).
10. In *On the Character of the Old Northern Poetry* (1867) Grímur Thomsen remarks that "Shakespeare, when conceiving such characters as Macbeth and Richard III, undoubtedly was rather a Northern poet" (45), thus assessing ambitious men who live and die by the sword as characteristic of the spirit of the Old North.
11. For discussion of Grímur Thomsen see Bjarnadóttir in this volume. For discussion of Shakespeare and the sagas, see Eysteinnsson in this volume as well as Heather O'Donoghue's *From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths* (2007), which discusses Norse traditions in relation to Macbeth and Hamlet (101), and Jón Karl Helgason's *Echoes of Valhalla: The Afterlife of Eddas and Sagas* (2017), particularly chapter 3.
12. For discussion of the critical reception of medievalist literature see Geeraert 2016, 9-51.
13. In a similarly iconoclastic medievalist novel, John Gardner's *Grendel* (1971), the same question occurs in the same context of a confrontation with ancient and silent Nature, when the titular character asks his mother amidst the stalactites of dripping caves, "Why are we here?" (28). She can no longer speak or remember; thus cut off from cultural memory or traditions of his ancestors, Gardner's Grendel finds himself separated from any mythological system that might bestow meaning upon his actions or provide any sense of identity. Like in Halldór's novel, Nature provides no answers. Gardner's dragon, whose intelligence perfectly and identically models the laws of Nature, rejects the question itself: "Why? Ridiculous question. Why anything?" (73).
14. It is likely that Kólbrun is directly responsible for Þormóður's final fate, as she sends her slave Lóðin to kill him just before the battle (although the battle and its aftermath are not depicted in Halldór's novel). Moreover in *Gerpla* Kolbakur, the slave of Kólbrun's rival for Þormóður's affections, Þórdís of Djúp, specifically refuses to kill Þormóður to please her. This is another example of how Þórdís and Kólbrun mirror one another as the Light and Dark aspects of nature and fate, who are even depicted in a dream sequence fighting over the soul of Þormóður.
15. Of course, Þormóður refers to the Norse Hel rather than to the Christian Hell. Later in *Wayward Heroes*, Þormóður gives his own account of his journey: "When at last I escaped that cruel woman, after being constantly confounded by her sorcery in the darkest of

places, I determined to make my way north to the farthest reaches containing any seeds of human life, to see whether I might be fortunate enough to carry out my revenge, and I joined the company of men who gather narwhal tusks and slaughter trolls. Yet after the trolls that we had gone to slaughter saved my life, and cured my broken leg and frostbite, and elevated me to the rank of their dogs, I felt as if those two churls, Well-Pisser and Louse-Crop, were nothing but the offspring of my delirium—once I had come north of Northern Seat, I forgot the purpose of my journey. It seems rather likely to me that Þorgeir’s slayers now occupy a place below Niflheimur, in the ninth and worst world” (384–85).

16. Here *Gerpla* seems to anticipate a genre of novels and films that has since developed that depict the contact between European and First Nations populations in the West Atlantic and North America in terms of the meeting of disparate mythologies, and which often include elements of supernatural horror. Examples include novels such as Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* (1988), William Vollman’s *The Ice-Shirt* (1990), and Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* (2001), and films like *Ravenous* (1999), *Valhalla Rising* (2009), and *The Revenant* (2015); one finds similar elements in *The Terror* (Dan Simmons novel 2007, film series 2018) and in *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), the Inuktitut epic film.
17. On how these shifts affected the reception of Norse literature, see Julie Zernack, “Old Norse Myths and the *Poetic Edda* as Tools of Political Propaganda” (239).
18. French quotation and English translation from Alistair Hannay’s translation of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* (84). Hannay’s footnote there gives Boileau’s *L’art poétique* (I. 232) as Kierkegaard’s source. The corresponding discussion in Kierkegaard’s original *Frygt og Bæven* is on page 82.
19. One might consider many of the works herein discussed as confessions in some sense: not only *Don Quixote*, which Cervantes admitted was in some sense autobiographical, but also *Hamlet*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Heart of Darkness*. Don Quixote, of course, eccentrically imagines himself a knight errant in the age of gunpowder. His attempt to act out an archaic heroic role reveals his compulsive self-deception. Comparing Cervantes’ novel to Halldór’s *Gerpla*, Peter Hallberg writes, “In an anachronistic manner, like Don Quixote, they [the Sworn Brothers] adopt in all seriousness extremely old-fashioned ideas and attitudes, and are firmly resolved to realize the Viking style in their own lives” (14). Others compared Halldór’s literary project to that described in Jorge Luis Borges’s story “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” (1939) [Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote]. With characteristic humour, Borges describes Menard’s writing plan as a kind of method acting: to “Learn Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602-1918 ... to be Miguel de Cervantes” (91). Of course, a modern author could never be a medieval one, but explaining why requires a theory of authorship. In *Borges the Unacknowledged Medievalist: Old English and Old Norse in His Life and Work* (2014), M. J. Toswell calls this story “a *tour-de-force* investigating the notion of originality and authorship in ways both clever and profound” (70). See Eysteinnsson in this volume, “Is Halldór Laxness the Author of *Fóstbræðra saga*?”; comparisons to Don Quixote are also discussed in this volume by Crocker, Hughes, and Bjarnadóttir.

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