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Hallberg Hallmundsson

Halldór Laxness and the Sagas of Modern Iceland

IT has been said that nowhere was Iceland loved as much as in Copenhagen. Given the fact that Iceland was for centuries a Danish colony, exploited to the enrichment of king, crown, and monopolistic merchants, such a statement might sound strange. But during those centuries Copenhagen was, for all practical purposes, the capital of Iceland, where young Icelanders would go for their higher education. And it was among students and intellectuals in Copenhagen that the struggle for independence began and was largely waged. In that light, the statement becomes eminently reasonable: it pertains to the love of those who were long away from their mother country and missed it.

As Halldór Laxness was reaching maturity, he lived abroad for a long time. From age seventeen to about twenty-five, in the years following World War I, he roamed through Europe with only intermittent short returns to Iceland. In the process, he absorbed the restlessness and frenzy of a continent in chaos, "play[ed] the range of the most horrible expressionism and the craziest surrealism,"¹ and embraced Catholicism (Icelanders are generally Lutheran) in a Luxembourgian monastery. "The Holy Catholic Church," he later said, "saved me from turning into a common dance idiot in the night clubs of Central Europe." He then promptly wrote himself away from religion with a novel, *The Great Weaver from Kashmir*, that marked a watershed in Icelandic fiction and might be interpreted as his *Divine Comedy*: pointedly divided into one hundred chapters and bearing an epigraph from Dante's "Paradiso," it records its young protagonist's own heaven, hell, and purgatory. As Laxness described it: "My way to earthly interests took me through the futility of the Heavens. . . . I knew no rest until I had scrutinized the features on the face of the Christian concept of God and thus lived in a twenty-month-long passion the two-thousand-year-old tragedy of a whole civilization. And when I came to again, the cloister gates were closed far behind me, and I sat once more by the lake listening to the murmur of winds in the sedgegrass."²

¹ *Vesfarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, 3rd ed. (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1957), p. 297.

² *Alþýðubókin*, 4th ed. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1955), pp. 51, 203.

HALLBERG HALLMUNDSSON was born and educated in Iceland. Since moving to New York in 1960, he has authored six books of poetry in his mother tongue, edited *An Anthology of Scandinavian Literature* (1966), and with his wife May, translated and edited *Icelandic Folk and Fairy Tales* (1987). His translations from and into Icelandic encompass more than two dozen books.

All this before the age of twenty-five. Afterward, Laxness spent more than two years (1927-29) in the United States, and it was here that he not only became a socialist ("from observing hungry, unemployed men in the parks") but, more important, came to the realization that he was an *Icelandic* writer and could never be anything else. In a March 1928 letter he wrote: "It is insane to tear oneself away from the culture of one's own country and people and roam about among foreigners for years on end. . . . Nothing has taught me better to appreciate Iceland—the land and the people—than my stay in the million-peopled cities of the United States. . . . [It has] taught me to judge of my own worth in relation to my nationality. I am an Icelander, the complete Icelander. . . ."³ Returning to Iceland a year later, Laxness began the great cycles of epic novels depicting Icelandic reality that make up the core of his *oeuvre*. From then on, his work would be a glorification of his heritage—the country and the people of Iceland.

On the surface, this might suggest that Laxness had resigned himself to being a regional writer. But it is more likely that he realized the paradoxical nature of art: even the most "provincial" experience is universal as it pertains to struggling humanity—or, as he worded it in an interview in 1937, "What is human is international."⁴

Thus, Laxness' turn from the international playground of *The Great Weaver* (never published in English) to more narrowly national themes did not mean that he became a chauvinistic flag-waver—far from it. An Icelandic saying has it that a true friend will point out your shortcomings, and he continued to play the *enfant terrible*: no one more fiercely criticized his countrymen. In fact, the most frequent accusation by his detractors—and there were many in those years—was that he reviled his country with descriptions of poverty, ignorance, and degradation.

Neither did Laxness become a one-theme writer, except perhaps as it might be said that the Icelandic sagas have but a single theme. For he became a modern saga-man, a creator of characters through whom he interpreted his nation's condition and history. His works are spun of numerous strands, but the most notable of them may be said to be Christianity, socialism, and Taoism. To some, this might sound like an odd combination. But at their simple cores, all three "creeds" have something in common: Christianity proclaims that the last shall be the first; socialism, the preeminence of the proletariat, i.e., the downtrodden; Taoism, that the soft shall conquer the hard, or, as stated in an Icelandic proverb, "the drop hollows the stone."

It is worth noting that all these fundamentally related thoughts are based on paradoxes—and this might be called a key to Laxness' art, which is pervaded

³ Peter Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness*, tr. Rory McTurk (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), p. 60.

⁴ Hallberg, p. 130.

by skillful play with paradoxes, ambiguities, juxtaposed opposites, and point/counterpoint. All his famous characters are made up of crucial opposites, their actions contradictory and paradoxical. Thus a stone-hearted brute like Bjartur of Summerhouses—the main character of *Independent People*, who seems to be totally impervious to any and all human suffering and has thrown out his fifteen-year-old daughter because she has become pregnant—can later compose poems for her as the “flower of his life,” even though he knows that he is not her real father. Conversely, that poetic soul Olafur Karason of *World Light*, a paragon of inoffensive sensitivity who will not say a harsh word to anyone, is not beyond taking advantage of a thirteen-year-old girl to whom he is teaching Christianity in preparation for her confirmation. In Laxness’ world, even the sacred are “guilty in [their] holiness as are the saints of this earth,” and—vice versa—“a little girl who was unfaithful to me and asks my forgiveness in the night is the purest nun in heaven.”⁵

Such playing with opposites is equally evident in his style of writing: the grimmest realism is juxtaposed with the tenderest lyricism, the wryest mockery with an obvious fondness for its object, an affectionate remark (especially if it borders on sentimentality) with a rude answer. When the “shy policeman” in *The Atom Station* asks the protagonist Ugly to show him their baby daughter, whom he has not seen before, the following exchange takes place:

“Do you feel how nice she smells?” I said.
 “Smells?” he asked.
 “Babies are fragrant,” I said. “They’re fragrant like flowers.”
 “I thought they reeked of piss,” he said.⁶

Even the whole idea of *Independent People* is a huge, ironic paradox. Bjartur of Summerhouses fancies himself to be an independent man; he is the king of his miserable little croft and takes lip from no man, God, or ghost. And he is nobody’s fool either. Yet he never realizes—not even after he has lost everything he worked for throughout his life to those he thought himself independent from—that he has in reality always been their slave. He has even raised—and is fondest of—a child they foisted on him.

Perhaps the three creeds mentioned before can be summarized as sympathy for the underdog, a sentiment that Laxness thinks of as an Icelandic characteristic: “Icelanders are always on the side of those who lose, ready to help them up and brush them down, probably because they feel, deep down, that they have a common cause with all losers.”⁷ Like Bjartur, in fact, most of Laxness’ “heroes” are losers in the worldly sense of that word. If we look at

⁵ “Fyrirburður í djúpinu” in *Sjö tóframenn* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1942), p. 123.

⁶ *Atómstöðin* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1948), p. 219.

⁷ “The Defeat of the Italian Air Force in Reykjavik 1933” in *Anthology of Scandinavian Literature*, ed. Hallberg Hallmundsson (New York: Collier Books, 1966), p. 266.

Salka Valka, for example, we have Sigurlina, who may be regarded as the main character in part one, "Thou Pure Vine." The single mother of Salka Valka, an illegitimate child, Sigurlina is stranded in a small fishing village because she doesn't have the means to continue the journey to Reykjavik as she had intended. She falls in with Steinthor Steinsson, a hard-drinking gorilla of a fisherman, full of swagger and animal magnetism, who is the personification of the harsh, rough-hewn country ("I am the sea that breaks upon this shore, I am the wind that blows around these peaks, I am the ebb and the tide that reigns on this beach, come into my strong and faithless arms, my beloved, and I shall fulfill all your hopes and drown all your sorrows").³ Having impregnated Sigurlina, Steinthor also tries to rape her daughter, then only a child, before fleeing abroad. When he returns three years later, he breaks up Sigurlina's engagement to a peasant in the district and reluctantly agrees to marry her. Before that comes about, however, he tries to seduce the fourteen-year-old Salka—an event the mother becomes aware of, and on the night of her scheduled wedding Sigurlina drowns herself. She is found washed up on the shore the day after, Easter Sunday. Throughout her pathetic life, she has been a typical loser. Yet through the symbolism of Easter, the feast of the resurrection, the author is clearly hinting at the Christian paradox that the last shall be the first.

In part two, "The Bird on the Shore," Salka Valka is a grown-up young working woman and is drawn into the nascent labor movement in the village, where she becomes one of the founders of a fishermen's union. The "enemy" is merchant Bogesen, who is also a boat owner and, as the only employer in the village, practically owns the place. The labor struggle is intensified when Arnaldur Björnsson, Salka's childhood crush and playmate, returns as an educated man and an agitator. The two eventually become lovers. But another returnee has also shown up. Ever consumed by his desire for Salka, Steinthor has anonymously sent her money from abroad, where he has accumulated some capital, and she has used it to buy the cottage in which she lives. Steinthor now buys motorboats in direct competition with old Bogesen, who—faced also with a new cooperative store begun on Arnaldur's initiative—pulls up stakes and moves to Denmark to enjoy his wealth. Steinthor moves into Bogesen's villa; he is the new "owner" of the village. The socialist Arnaldur, meanwhile, is tempted by and yields to an offer from the archenemy—a "capitalist" American woman—to move with her to sunny California. In this we have the ultimate paradox: Steinthor invites Salka Valka to live with him in the merchant's house; after all, she is the one for whom, in his obsession, he has been working all these years, and he has finally proved the faithful one, both to her and his village. But he becomes a loser, too, inasmuch as Salka spurns him

³ *Salka Valka*, 2nd ed. (Reykjavik: Helgafell, 1951), p. 16.

despite her ambivalent attraction to his elemental life force. Arnaldur, in going away to a probably carefree life in America, may look like a winner, but by what may easily be judged an act of faithlessness he becomes a moral loser. And Salka? By losing Arnaldur, the love of her life, she is surely not a winner—except perhaps over herself.

One might also say that the author triumphs over himself, for despite his socialist convictions and his obvious sympathy with the impoverished working people of the village, he overcomes the temptation to depict the capitalist Bogesen as anything remotely resembling a devil. On the contrary, Bogesen comes across as a kindly old gentleman (making his exploitation of the poverty around him all the more insidious). Nor are the victors over the merchant any angels. It could easily be argued that one oppressor is simply replaced by another. Thus we even have a paradox within a paradox: although the last become the first, they remain the last!

And yet there is one among the downtrodden last—the poet—who in Laxness' view will definitely take his place among the first, even though it may be only after his death. Olafur Karason, the protagonist of the *World Light* tetralogy, is a parish pauper, brought up from infancy to be everybody's whipping boy. But he has a gift and a longing for beauty. Beaten unconscious as a teenager, he is bedridden for two years, during which time he makes the acquaintance of another pauper, a former crofter who has lost all *he* had—wife, children, land—except for a few books that he preserves as if they contained his soul. "These were written out by Gudmundur Grimsson of Grunnavik," he explains to the boy. "I had Gudmundur Grimsson of Grunnavik for a friend. At any time I was ready to lead my only cow out of the barn and take it to him if he needed it, even if it meant depriving my own children of their sustenance."⁹ (This is, of course, Laxness' poetic exaggeration of what learning and literature have meant to the Icelandic nation through the ages, even in the most abject degradation. He strikes a similar note in *The Bell of Iceland* trilogy, when the rapscallion peasant Jon Hreggvidsson—another personification of the Icelandic everyman—silently pulls off his only pair of boots to ransom the precious manuscript of *Skalda* that contains irreplaceable Icelandic poetry.)

Olafur Karason goes through life without ever getting off the dole. He endures hunger, humiliation, and mistreatment without becoming bitter or vengeful, without taking sides in controversies, leading a passive life in a true Taoist fashion, while always writing and striving after beauty in his ugly existence. Even when the business tycoon Juel J. Juel violently wants to force a drink down his throat, Karason clings to his only true possession, his gift:

⁹ *World Light*, tr. Magnus Magnusson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 39-40.

But at the moment when the poet felt he was going to be robbed of his last scrap of human dignity because it wasn't possible to rob him of anything else . . . at the moment when he actually felt the gentleman's boots on his face, he suddenly felt that it did not matter. He thought of his poems: When everything was said and done he owned a fortune that the station owner's hands could never touch. He thought of the thousands of poets whom the station owners of the world had trampled into the dirt with their boots before him. Time passes, and grass grows on the graves. But long after the station owners have sunk into the dark night of oblivion, shrouded in the contempt of the centuries, the songs of the poets will still sound on the lips of living and loving people. (*World Light*, p. 230)

As a child, Olafur Karason has a dream vision of Sigurdur Breidfjord, a real-life folk poet who practically starved to death in nineteenth-century Reykjavik. He "laid his gentle master's hand on [Olafur's] pain-racked head and said, 'You are the light of the world'" (p. 49). With that obvious reference to John 8:12, Laxness wants to make clear that he regards the suffering poet as the redeemer of his nation's aspirations, for which he, too, must tread his *via dolorosa*. And so in the end, the poet walks to his death at Easter, not as Sigurlina into the sea but "onto the glacier, towards the dawn, from ridge to ridge, in deep, new-fallen snow, [where] the sun of the day of resurrection will shine on the bright paths" (p. 521). For "where the glacier meets the sky, the land ceases to be earthly, and the earth becomes one with the heavens; no sorrows live there any more, and therefore joy is not necessary; beauty alone reigns there, beyond all demands" (p. 397).

An assessment of Halldór Laxness' works, however short and superficial, would not be complete without mention of his fascinating delineation of women characters. There is a whole roster of them—all complex, contradictory, ambiguous, paradoxical. Beyond that, they have about them an aura of mystique that is not always easy to define (although their foremothers may be found in the Icelandic sagas). Gudrún Ósvífursdóttir is one of the superb female portraits in the *Laxdæla* saga. A beautiful woman, married four times and living to a ripe old age, she had once been betrothed to a dashing young man. When he went abroad and failed to return in time for their scheduled wedding, she took a friend of his for a husband and later instigated the slaying of her erstwhile fiancé. Toward the end of her long life, pressed by her son to tell him which man she had loved most, she spoke the famous words: "To him was I worst, whom I loved the most." So, in *The Bell of Iceland* trilogy, when Snæfridur (called the Sun of Iceland) can't have the man she puts above all others and instead marries a drunken wastrel with the words, "Rather the worst than the second-best," there is little doubt about the genealogy. (Unfortunately, this trilogy, which certainly rivals the best of Laxness' other epic cycles, has never been published in English.) And when Thordis, wife of

Thormodur Kolbrunarskald in *The Happy Warriors*, becomes aware that he wants to leave her to pursue the killers of his sworn brother but cannot tear himself away from her and their two young daughters, she slips into bed with her slave because, she says, "So overwhelming is Thormodur's heartache to me that I will sacrifice everything to free him of me." This despite the fact that she "loves him above anything else on or in this earth."¹⁰

But perhaps the most mysterious of all of Laxness' female creations is Gudrun Sæmundsdottir, alias Óa, of *Christianity at Glacier*. A combination sinner and saint like so many of his characters, she has been both a madam of a whorehouse in Buenos Aires and a nun in a Spanish convent. She is totally inscrutable and perhaps only a vision, a sorceress out of a folk tale who finally vanishes into an old, deserted farm house where nothing remains of her but the laughter!

That, in the end, may be the perfect metaphor for the way Laxness—a sorcerer himself, if there ever was one—is likely to reverberate in the thousand-year-old abode of Icelandic literature.

¹⁰ *Gerpla*, 3rd ed. (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1956), pp. 328-30.