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"It Is as Odin Said": Halldór Laxness, the *Hávamál*, and Bjartur of Summerhouses

"[A]n Icelandic author cannot live without constantly having the ancient books in his thoughts," Halldór Laxness once wrote (Hallberg, "Halldór Laxness" 2). Perhaps more than any other twentieth-century Icelandic writer, Laxness revitalized classical Icelandic literary traditions while simultaneously making his own imprint as an author, an achievement for which he was awarded the 1955 Nobel Prize in Literature (Strömberg; Wessén). At the same time as he sought to forge his own literary path in the context of modernization, Laxness owed a significant debt to the ancient tales and poems of his people, especially the sagas and the Poetic Edda. Laxness's engagement with the saga tradition has been extensively studied by scholars such as Peter Hallberg, Steingrímur J. Þorsteinsson, and Christopher Crocker. However, considerably less attention has been paid to the influence of the Poetic Edda on Laxness's novels (at least in the scholarship available in English). A more thorough exploration of Laxness's engagement with Eddic poetry, particularly the *Hávamál*, can yield valuable insights into his philosophy and writings. This paper begins with an overview of Laxness's complex relationship with Old Icelandic literature. It then establishes the significance of the Poetic Edda, particularly the *Hávamál*, for the analysis of his novels. It concludes with a case study interpreting Bjartur's struggle for self-sufficiency in *Independent People* as an attempt to live by the famous stanza 77 of the *Hávamál*, the disastrous consequences of which reflect Laxness's mingled admiration for and misgivings about Old Icelandic literature.

Laxness's Relationship to Old Icelandic Literature

In an interview roughly contemporaneous with the period in which *Independent People* was published, Laxness states, "I have always read Old Icelandic literature; there is no period in my life in which I have not read it" (qtd. in Crocker 113). From his earliest days on, he grew up listening to ancient poems and stories recounted by his grandmother, a woman rooted in Iceland's past who "taught [him] hundreds of lines of old Icelandic poetry before [he] ever learned the alphabet" (Laxness, "Acceptance Speech"; Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* 24-25). By age 11, he had read all the sagas, and at age 14, he published a letter in a children's newspaper praising the sagas as the foundation of his love for his country (Crocker 111).

As Laxness traveled through Europe in his early twenties, however, his reverence for Old Icelandic literature faded into modernist impatience with the "old fogeys" of the past (Hallberg, "Halldór Laxness" 3-4). "Nothing is more eloquent proof of the decadence of a people than when they look for their national character in a past many centuries before," he asserted. ". . . It would be better if our ancestors were forgotten and lost, when compared with the great feats of the new generation, *which is living*" (qtd. in Þorsteinsson, "Life and Works" 129-130, emphasis original). His rebellion against the literary tradition was likely influenced by his experiences abroad and his desire to establish himself as a modern Icelandic writer free from the constraining shadow of the past (Hallberg 3-4; Þorsteinsson, "Life and Works" 129-131). But it was also echoed by many other Icelanders in his generation, a majority of whom were gradually becoming more disenchanted with the style, morals, and ideals of Old Icelandic literature than previous generations had been (Helgason 67-68, 72).

Laxness's modernist distaste for ancient literature did not last long, however. During his travels in the United States from 1927 to 1929, Laxness rediscovered his love for his literary

heritage as he pondered the meaning of patriotism, though he retained some reservations about the ideology of the ancient writings. Hailing Iceland as the land of elves and myths whose people spoke "the language of the gods," he asserted in 1929 that Icelanders had no need to import ideology or literature from other countries. Instead, they could take pride in their own ancient authors, who more than rivalled other European masters of the arts like Dante, Bach, and Michelangelo (Hallberg, "Halldór Laxness" 5-16). In fact, Icelanders owed not only their national identity but also their independence to the inspiration of the sagas, which sustained them through the long years of foreign rule with their "confidence in the hero who lets neither injuries nor death upset him and does not know how to surrender" (qtd. in Helgason 65). From that point on, Laxness's writings, including novels such as *Independent People* and *Iceland's Bell*, began to draw inspiration from and reflect the influence of Old Icelandic literature in theme, content, and style. These works, which sometimes affirm and other times challenge the ideals and worldview of the ancient poems and sagas, reflect his mingled admiration for and unease about his literary heritage (Hallberg, "Halldór Laxness" 5-16; Þorsteinsson, "Halldór Laxness" 103-110).

Laxness, the Poetic Edda, and the *Hávamál*

Scholars have conducted many thorough analyses of Laxness's engagement with the Old Icelandic saga tradition, providing valuable insights into the ways in which novels like *Independent People* engage in conversation with the sagas. However, they have devoted considerably less time to exploring the influence of Eddic poetry on Laxness's works. For example, in his excellent book on Laxness, Peter Hallberg mentions the author's allusions to the Poetic Edda merely in passing, without offering any deeper analysis (*Halldór Laxness* 147, 152, 172). Hallberg's failure to examine Laxness's Eddic influences is understandable given the wide

range and scope of his book, and it in no way detracts from the value of his scholarship. Nevertheless, given Laxness's admiration for the Poetic Edda, the Eddic echoes in his novels deserve further investigation.

The Poetic Edda, preserved in the late thirteenth-century Codex Regius manuscript, is a collection of twenty-nine Old Norse poems. One of these poems is the *Hávamál* or "Words of the High One," a compilation of gnomic wisdom usually attributed to the god Odin. The *Hávamál* presents a wide variety of magical, mythological, and proverbial knowledge, including advice about how small farmers should conduct themselves in their everyday lives (Gunnell 82, 85). Most famously, stanza 77 urges the audience to remember that their reputations will outlast their possessions, their relatives, and even their own lives: "Cows die, family die, you will die the same way. I know only one thing that never dies: the reputation of the one who's died" (Crawford 37-39). In an essay on Old Icelandic literature, Laxness singles out the *Hávamál* as particularly noteworthy ("The Edda and Saga" 33). Furthermore, all of the Eddic allusions that Hallberg has identified in Laxness's novels are references to the *Hávamál* (*Halldór Laxness* 147, 152, 172). As a result, this poem is probably the most significant part of the Poetic Edda with regards to Laxness studies.

In particular, stanza 77 of the *Hávamál* significantly influenced Laxness's understanding of Icelandic identity and independence, as allusions in his novels demonstrate. In *Iceland's Bell* (1943), one of the main characters appeals to this passage to explain the spirit of Iceland: "There is a verse by an Icelandic poet of ancient times which runs: 'No matter if you lose your property and kinsmen and die yourself in the end, as long as you have won fame'. . . . We Icelanders are certainly not too good to die. And for a long time life has been of no value to us. There is one thing only which we cannot lose as long as one member of this nation, be he rich or poor,

remains alive; not even after death can we be without it; and that is the thing which is mentioned in the ancient poem, and which we call fame" (qtd. in Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* 151-152). In this passage, Laxness portrays stanza 77 of the *Hávamál* in a positive light as the foundation of Icelandic independence and resilience. Similarly, in *Independent People*, published in the previous decade (1935-1936), the protagonist Bjartur of Summerhouses quotes this stanza as an expression of his determination to remain self-sufficient in the face of misfortune (294-295). In contrast to the allusion in *Iceland's Bell*, however, this latter passage portrays the message of *Hávamál* stanza 77 in a significantly more negative light when read in the context of the entire novel. This suggests that Laxness has some significant reservations about the ideals expressed in the ancient poem, as the final section of this paper will discuss.

Reading Bjartur of Summerhouses through the Lens of *Hávamál* Stanza 77

Reading Laxness's portrayal of Bjartur of Summerhouses, the doggedly self-reliant protagonist of *Independent People*, in light of stanza 77 of the *Hávamál* yields valuable new insights into the characters and themes of the novel. The destructive consequences of Bjartur's struggle for independence demonstrate that, despite his admiration for the literary heritage of Iceland, Laxness retained misgivings about the applicability of ancient philosophy to modern life. A small farmer much like those whom Odin addresses in the *Hávamál*, Bjartur chooses to live his life by the principles of Old Icelandic literature. "[H]e was a devotee of the old heroic spirit of the nation as it is revealed in the rhymes and other classics, and he admired only those people who trusted in their own might and main," the narrator writes (19-20). In his fight against the harshness of the landscape, the greed of large landowners, and the constraints of

socioeconomic forces beyond his control, he finds inspiration and vindication in the ancient Icelandic poetic tradition, which he considers far superior to modern verse.

The poetry of the past exerts a profound influence on Bjartur's character and worldview, providing the foundation for his fierce self-reliance. As Peter Hallberg puts it, "Bjartur himself has been given some measure of the Icelandic sagas' dimensions, of their heroes' superhuman toughness and strength of will. . . . In his own old-fashioned Icelandic poetry, with its intricate rules, he binds his own thoughts and experiences in rigorous bonds. It is one of his ways of molding and mastering his existence, of raising himself above it; it is the triumph of his spirit over matter" (*Halldór Laxness* 104-105). Whether educating his children on the sagas or chanting rhymes as he faces down a snowstorm like a hero of old, the ancient poems shape Bjartur's beliefs and provide him with justification for his way of life.

Notably, Bjartur bases his harsh personal philosophy on the principles of stanza 77 of the *Hávamál*. As Odin advises, he prizes his good name, which hinges on his ability to remain self-sufficient, far above the wellbeing of his possessions, his family, and even himself. He frequently cites "his ancestry and reputation" as the reason for his reluctance to indebt himself to others, denouncing such behavior as unworthy of his name. For example, when his wife begs him to save his family and livestock from the privations of the cold weather by borrowing hay, he refuses because of the damage his reputation would take: "My sheep have made me an independent man, and I will never bow to anyone. To have people say of me that I took the beggar's road for hay in the spring is a disgrace I will never tolerate" (Laxness, *Independent People* 246, 380). That Bjartur is trying to follow Odin's advice becomes clear when he explicitly cites stanza 77 of the *Hávamál* to explain his resolve to remain independent. "It is as Odin said: Sheep die," he tells his daughter Asta Sollilja. ". . . I'm not grumbling at all. . . . I'm not by any

means the first to suffer loss in this country. I say as the proverb says: There's room in bed, the goodwife's dead. What matters, girlie, is that I'm not dead myself yet, not yet. Not that it isn't the same to me if I die myself. But I'll stand as long as there's anything to stand on" (294-295). Whether death claims his sheep, his wife, or even his own life, it is all the same to him as long as he continues to stand on his own two feet.

Although Bjartur's struggle for Odinic independence — which demands considerable courage, fortitude, and self-denial — may seem admirable on the surface, Laxness exposes the moral and relational problems with this way of life by depicting the terrible toll that it takes on his household. Over the course of the novel, Bjartur's inability to even consider compromising his independence leads to sorrow and suffering for his family and livestock, including the deaths of his two wives, his oldest son, a series of stillborn children, and many of his sheep. In the face of such devastating tragedy, his sole response is a fatalistic acceptance of their deaths. The only tears he sheds for the loss of his family and sheep are "tobacco tears" caused by snuff, since he has never understood the point of weeping (105, 295-296). Instead of mourning for the dead, he responds with a heartless pragmatism that prioritizes the living. "[I]t wasn't because of the wife that I popped over here tonight, for I don't suppose there's much point in trying to quicken the life in her now, the way she is," he quips carelessly after his first wife dies in childbirth (105). Similarly, after his second wife dies of heartbreak and his runaway son is presumed dead, he rebukes his remaining children for their grief and jocularly quotes the proverb "There's room in bed, the goodwife's dead." His indifference to the fates of his household stems from his self-absorption and pride: "Bjartur of Summerhouses never thought of anything he had lost once he was certain he had lost it" (293-294). For Bjartur as for Odin, there is no use getting too attached

to his possessions, his family, or even his own life, since he will lose them all eventually. The only thing that truly matters is his reputation as an independent man.

Through Bjartur's example, Laxness pays tribute to the enduring legacy of the Poetic Edda in Icelandic culture while simultaneously exploring the potentially disastrous consequences of living life by the philosophy of the ancients. Consumed by his desire for independence, Bjartur loses almost his entire family. All but one of his children die, depart, or are driven out of his house thanks to his misplaced pride and stubbornness. In the end, he loses everything, even his beloved farm of Summerhouses. Throughout all of this, he fails to recognize the ultimate futility of his struggle. As Hallberg Hallmundsson observes, "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" (41). In pursuit of a self-sufficiency he could never truly achieve, Bjartur has sacrificed everything that should have been more important to him, highlighting the dangers of relying on the wisdom of the past to guide one's life in the present.

Despite the bleak consequences of Bjartur's prioritization of independence, however, the ending of the novel offers a faint hope for a better way of life through the character of Asta Sollilja. With her tender heart, romantic disposition, and taste for modern poetry, she serves as a foil to her father and poses an implicit challenge to his Odinic philosophy. Despite knowing that she is not his biological child, Bjartur cherishes her as "the flower of his life" (Laxness, *Independent People* 234), and she serves as his only "tender spot" (Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* 94). He has never been able to regard her with the harsh, fatalistic detachment he directs towards the rest of his family. Instead, he reserves his few kind words for her, treats her more leniently than the rest of the household, and flies into a fury at the thought of losing her (Laxness,

Independent People 258, 295-296, 272-273). When Asta Sollilja conceives a child out of wedlock, Bjartur drives her out of his house in a mixture of misplaced pride and betrayal, but her absence torments him and prevents him from enjoying his newfound prosperity. Although his stubbornness prevents him from asking her forgiveness, he gradually unbends over the rest of the novel — even going so far as to write modern poetry to entreat her to return (427-428) — as he realizes standing on his own two feet means little if he is left standing alone.

At the end of the novel, Bjartur finally reconciles with Asta Sollilja only to discover that she is seriously ill. As he holds her in his arms, they pledge to remain together until their deaths (470). As father and daughter set off to a new life together, the happiness of the moment is marred by the foreboding that this life will likely be a short and tragic one. Nevertheless, it will be a life worth living, because Bjartur has finally recognized that independence is not worth having without his daughter. Through this ending, Laxness presents a poignant critique of Bjartur's self-absorbed, self-reliant Odinic philosophy, which subordinates love of family to love of reputation. At the same time, he offers a glimpse of a more compassionate and meaningful way of life through the final reunion of father and daughter, however temporary it may be. Even as he acknowledges the grandeur and beauty of Old Icelandic literature, he also redefines the value of poetry, expanding it beyond the constraints of the literary tradition. For Laxness, the pitiless independence of the ancient heroes that Bjartur strives so pitifully to imitate is not the true origin of poetic greatness. On the contrary, "[t]he source of the greatest song is sympathy. Sympathy with Asta Sollilja on earth" (345).

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