

# Foreword

## Companions on the Edge of Iceland

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The recent publication of *Wayward Heroes*, translated by Philip Roughton, marks a significant event for world literature, the first direct translation from Icelandic to English of Halldór Laxness's masterpiece novel *Gerpla*. It is also a landmark event that a special volume of *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* is now dedicated to criticism related to the epic novel, its formidable author, and the medieval literature from which the novel draws inspiration. Both demonstrate the continuing importance and influence of the medieval Icelandic sagas and of the works of Halldór Laxness, who notably won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955.

The medieval Icelandic *Fóstbræðra saga* [*The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*] and the modern Icelandic *Gerpla* [*Wayward Heroes*] both tell us about the lives of two main protagonists, the titular “sworn brothers” or “wayward heroes.” They are Þorgeir Hávarsson, a warrior who is committed to the glory of armed combat, and Þormóður Bersason, a warrior-poet who, while pursuing glory in battle, also finds comfort in the company of at least two women in the West Fjords region of Iceland, the area in which early sections of both the saga and the novel are set. These companions are childhood friends who in their later lives dedicate themselves to the Norwegian King Ólafur helgi (Saint Olaf, who reigned from 1015–1028), referred to often as Olaf the Stout. The sworn brothers are never in the king's retinue at the same time, however, which might strike us as odd, since they are “sworn brothers.” The everlasting bond of friendship between these two main characters is a theme that is shared by the medieval saga and the modern novel, and this Foreword takes up a key moment in the friendship as we find it in the saga and as it is recreated by Laxness. Even though they are so close, the sworn brothers must part company midway through the story, after only a few years of marauding in the West Fjords as feared bandits. They enter into a verbal conflict and their lives are changed forever. We will now look at two versions (and their translations) of this important and life-changing moment.

The saga version relays the scene as follows:

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Þorgeirr mælti: “Hvat ætlar þú, hvárr okkarr myndi af öðrum bera, ef vit reyndim með okkr?” Þormóður svarar: “Þat veit ek eigi, en hitt veit ek, at sjá spurning þín mun skilja okkra samvistu ok föruneysi, svá at vit munum eigi löngum ásamt vera.” Þorgeirr segir: “Ekki var mér þetta alhugat, at ek vilda, at vit reyndim með okkr harðfengi.” Þormóður mælti: “Í hug kom þér, meðan þú mæltir, ok munu vit skilja félagit.” Þeir gerðu svá ...  
(150-51)

[Thorgeir said, “Which of us do you think would win if we confronted each other?”

Thormod answered, “I don’t know, but I do know that this question of yours will divide us and end our companionship. We cannot stay together.”

Thorgeir said, “I wasn’t really speaking my mind — saying that I wanted us to fight each other.”

Thormod said, “It came into your mind as you spoke it and we shall go our separate ways.”

And that is what they did ... ]  
(344)

Halldór Laxness recreates this scene, presented below, to which I have added ellipses and omitted some text for brevity:

Þorgeir segir af hljóði:

Þótt þú sért maður elskur að konum, Þormóður, er eigi við það að dyljast að allra manna ertu vopnfimastur þeirra er eg þekki ... og leiði eg tíðum hug minn að því, hvor okkar fóstbræðra mundi af öðrum bera ef við reyndim með okkur.

Þormóður segir þá: Eg hef vakað við hlið þér um nætur oftsinnis þá er þú svafst, Þorgeir, og horft á brjóst þitt bifast við slátt þess hjarta sem eg veit öllum hjörtum þrúðara, og virt fyrir mér háls þinn er aldregi hefur styrkri súla borið höfuð manns.

Þorgeir mælti: Hví hjóstu mig eigi þá?

Þarflaust er þess að spyrja vinur, mælti Þormóður ...

Eg veit eigi hvor okkar mundi af öðrum bera í einvígi; en þeim orðum hefur þú mælt sem nú munu skilja vorar samvistir og föruneysi ...

Mér vóru þau orð eigi alhugað, kallaði Þorgeir Hávarsson.

Í hug kom þér meðan mæltir, svaraði Þormóður; og að vísu oft fyrr; og mun skilja með okkur fyrst að sinni, og far heill og vel.

(137-39)

[Þorgeir said, quietly: “Although you are a man who loves women, Þormóður, you are clearly the most skilled with weapons of any man that I know ... and at times I find myself pondering which of us sworn brothers would be the victor if we tried our strength against each other.”

Þormóður then said: “I have often lain awake by your side as you slept, Þorgeir, and watched your chest move to the beating of the heart that I know to be braver than all others, and gazed at your neck, knowing that no stronger pillar has ever borne a man’s head.”

Þorgeir said: “Why did you not behead me then?”

“You have no need to ask, friend,” said Þormóður ...

“I do not know which of us would win in single combat with the other, but the words you have spoken now will divide our company and fellowship ...”

“I did not mean all that I said!” shouted Þorgeir Hávarsson.

“You said what you were thinking,” replied Þormóður, “and what you no doubt have thought oft times before. And now we shall part for the time being. Fare you well.”]

(157–58)

The significance of Þorgeir’s words as they are spoken is emphasized in both the saga and the novel, for the words and what they represent cause the companions to part. The saga version is short and direct, the point quickly made that the two must split because of the question Þorgeir has asked about which one of the two would overcome the other in physical combat. Þormóður interprets this question to represent what his companion has thought, even though Þorgeir tries to backtrack and insists he spoke something that is not sincere.

In Laxness’s version the scene is made more complex. Þorgeir says that he has repeatedly wondered which of the two would be victorious over the other, and among Þormóður’s final words to Þorgeir is the vocalized confirmation that his companion has likely thought about which of the two would overpower the other many times before, which for the warrior-poet is too difficult to accept, even though, as in the saga, Þorgeir denies his words after he learns Þormóður is upset by them. This unwelcome knowledge breaks the trust that the two share, even if the trust has already been strained. The verbal conflict in the saga is immediate and unfortunate, but in the novel it represents an accumulation of doubt that lingers for too long.

Shortly after the confrontation Þorgeir travels abroad to search for glory. For the warrior there is more honour to be gained in the service of foreign kings than in the West Fjords, and, for that matter, he has been outlawed for his behaviour in Iceland and has little choice but to leave the country. When Þorgeir meets an early death, one that an audience might expect due to his character’s violent impulses, Þormóður in turn leaves the West Fjords behind, dedicating his own life to avenging that of his sworn brother, even though the two parted ways earlier in the story in the scene cited above. Made official in the sworn oath of their youth, their bond remains so strong that even though they could no longer continue on side by side Þormóður is no less dedicated to his lost companion. Their separation is exactly what preserves their friendship, and their spectacular bond draws our attention to the bond that exists between a writer and his subject

matter, the unbreakable connection between creation and destruction, and not least the relationship a reader develops with a great work of literature.

Readers of the saga and those of the novel follow the sworn brothers, these wayward heroes, through their adventures together and apart, their travels in Iceland and abroad. What follows in this special volume is sure to add to our knowledge of the saga, the novel, and the illustrious Halldór Laxness, enriching our appreciation for world literature, translation, and the various arts of criticism. This reader, for one, eagerly follows the path set out by the volume's guest editor, which celebrates the many versions of this story, among others, and challenges contemporary readers to think about the words we read and the meanings behind them. The story of Þorgeir and Þormóður illustrates many qualities of great literature, one of which is to transform that which is familiar, another to remind us of what we might forget.

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