

“In the days of this story, the southern part of the Vestfirðir, bordering on Breiðafjörður, was in the hands of Þorgils Arason.” The plot of Halldór Laxness’ *Wayward Heroes* begins here, but this sentence is not the first of his novel. Rather, it follows a vague, informal historiography of the stories that make up the saga Laxness is to tell. He is an author apparently intent on historical precision and veracity, at least with regard to the centuries-long literary and oral tradition from which he draws – and as far as that tradition honestly recounts the events it professes to document. Laxness, even so, promises a “history.” He calls himself a “scholar.” He writes in the plural, multiplying his voice and slyly affirming his credibility. “We have drawn from numerous obscure sources information that seems to us no less credible than the tales that people know better from books.” If his history errs on the side of inaccuracy, his is at least as truthful as the lore of old – which, anyway, is itself a kind of history. The stories people tell of their ancestors shape and define their culture and heritage. Stories *are* heritage. Though Laxness adopts the language of a scholar – only to give way to his true calling, the storyteller – he is foremost an archaeologist of Icelandic memory, his artifacts inseparable from the people to whom they belong. “[Any] man or woman who surpasses us in learning and memory and wishes to amend what we have put in letters on these pages” is bid come forward. These are his muses.

The concept of free will is at the heart of the novelistic form. Characters choose their way through reality much as the author charts his or her course. *Wayward Heroes*, published in 1952, might be called a novel but its form recalls the ancient epics, and Laxness’ approach reflects that debt. Epics and sagas have a two-dimensionality about them. The world happens, and individuals react. There is little sense of free will. In Homer’s *Iliad* (circa 850 BC), great heroes make war by necessity. They have little time to consider their convictions about honor, justice, courage, and sacrifice. They face the immediacy of life or death, glory or humiliation. (Among the ancients, the most heroic act is a noble death.) Herodotus’ *Histories* flows in much the same vein as the *Iliad* (the two came only four hundred years apart, or so Herodotus testifies), and Laxness begins *Wayward Heroes* with this tradition in mind. He chronicles the past, claiming accuracy by way of his sources. Whether their ‘histories’ are themselves accurate is another question. It is also beside the point.

Consider this passage from the German-Jewish philosopher and critic, Walter Benjamin, on Herodotus, or the ‘Father of History,’ as he is commonly known:

In the fourteenth chapter of the third book of his *Histories* there is a story from which much can be learned. It deals with Psammenitus.

When the Egyptian king Psammenitus had been beaten and captured by the Persian king Cambyses, Cambyses was bent on humbling his prisoner. He gave orders to place Psammenitus on the road along which the Persian triumphal procession was to pass. And he further arranged

that the prisoner should see his daughter pass by as a maid going to the well with her pitcher. While all the Egyptians were lamenting and bewailing this spectacle, Psammenitus stood alone, mute and motionless, his eyes fixed on the ground; and when presently he saw his son, who was being taken along in the procession to be executed, he likewise remained unmoved. But when afterwards he recognized one of his servants, an old, impoverished man, in the ranks of the prisoners, he beat his fists against his head and gave all the signs of deepest mourning.

Why does this story of Herodotus' move us? It lists facts, events. Where is its emotional consciousness? How are we made to *feel*? Benjamin explains:

Montaigne referred to this Egyptian king and asked himself why he mourned only when he caught sight of his servant. Montaigne answers: "Since he was already overfull of grief, it took only the smallest increase for it to burst through its dams." Thus Montaigne. But one could also say: the king is not moved by the fate of those of royal blood, for it is his own fate. Or: We are moved by much on the stage that does not move us in real life; to the king, this servant is only an actor. Or: Great grief is pent up and breaks forth only with relaxation. Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is the driest. That is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable after thousands of years of arousing astonishment and thoughtfulness.

We cannot read the story of this Egyptian king without filling in what might be called its 'blanks,' as Montaigne does. We stand at Psammenitus' side, and we attempt to understand him. In doing so, we too are overcome by his pain.

Laxness exalted the power of storytelling in his 1955 Nobel Prize acceptance speech:

From the day I learned to read, I have been irritated by stories with a moral, a hidden pointer, in the guise of adventure. I immediately stopped reading or listening as soon as I thought I understood that the purpose of the story was to force on me some kind of wisdom which someone else considered noteworthy, a virtue that someone else found admirable, instead of telling me a story. For a story is still the best thing that one can tell.

A story has no preexisting agenda, or political or moral intent. A story is not an opinions column. A story simply *tells*.

How does this idea of storytelling free Laxness as a writer? How does it constrain him? How might the tale of our two heroes, the sworn brothers Þorgeir Hávarsson and Þormóður Bessason, diverge, if Laxness wrote their story in the form of a contemporary novel? Would it bear any resemblance? Or would its content remain intact?

Throughout *Wayward Heroes* we encounter the central importance of storytelling. Þorgeir Hávarsson and Þormóður Bessason, from early childhood, are both steeped in tales of the

warriors of yore, “stout-hearted” men with considerable thirst for the spilling of blood. It is the brothers’ guiding aim to themselves serve kings and achieve great acts of valor *so as to be remembered* by a tale recounting their own heroics. Poormóður himself is a ‘skald,’ or bard – a master poet – and he promises Porgeir to enshrine his heroism in words surviving all time. “Two are the heroes from the Vestfirðir that have gained the greatest renown: Porgeir Hávarsson and Poormóður Bessason, sworn brothers,” *Wayward Heroes* begins. Poormóður’s promise stands.

In their immediacy, stories run through the veins of men and women, Laxness suggests, guiding and consoling them in their darkness. He shifts from past to present tense in dramatic moments (a technique derived from the Old Icelandic sagas) as if to say, ‘This is happening now, as we speak – We stand by our heroes and live out their truths.’

Would we recognize our two heroes without the lore that so compels them? In what ways do Porgeir and Poormóður live through their heritage? Can we separate stories from the deeds they compel, or those same deeds from the stories later told of them? And what role do stories play in our society today? How are they told, and through what mediums? What does this say about modern culture? What is it, anyway, that shapes our morality and gives us knowledge of ourselves, in the way that the lays of the skalds form the substance of our heroes’ metaphysic?

Further: Who precisely speaks from the pages of this book? Halldór Laxness, and his translator Philip Roughton? Poormóður Bessason himself? The collective imagination of centuries of Icelanders? We, his readers, are the ones to breathe life into Laxness’ history, one might hold. We struggle with his heroes and ‘fill in their blanks.’ Is it fair to say *that we speak to ourselves* from that distant Icelandic past, made common by our engagement with it? Who is that ‘We,’ after all, which Laxness the scholar assumes at the beginning of Chapter I? Are you and I, his readers, part of it?

There is real humor to Laxness’ narrative. The religious stoicism of Porgeir, who seldom speaks, and Poormóður, who refuses to work except if it should involve the slaughtering of men, the two determined to achieve ‘heroism’ more than anything else. The role of Christianity, too, in pardoning corruption, and, for example, the all-conquering, savage behavior of King Olaf Haraldsson, who slaughters most of Norway and sets fire to what remains in the name of Christ, ‘converting’ more peasants in two years than in the previous one hundred and fifty. (With the blessing of his right-hand man Bishop Grímkell, who, as we are constantly reminded, was unofficially ordained in a crowded marketplace several feet from the rump of a horse. And yet he is perhaps the saintliest figure in Laxness’ world, his head perpetually inclined toward heaven, or so he is described.) This is not to mention the absurd

asceticism of the Irish monks Porgeir encounters after surviving a deadly shipwreck, who seem to have suffered every possible calamity. The land infertile, their bodies emaciated and skin covered in boils, their monastery long since devastated by Viking pirates, their holy relics and treasures pillaged, save for one, a tooth from the mouth of the virgin Belinda. Nonetheless, they avow an uncompromising belief in Christ's providence, certain the extremity of such 'tests of faith' are an indication of his favor.

As gruesomely humorous as Haraldsson and his interminable conquests might be, or the Irish monks and the calamity of their pious fervor, why should Laxness labor in such absurdity? Porgeir, hanging by a finger on the ledge of a cliff, refuses to call his brother to save him, branding such an act of desperation unfit for a hero's conduct. What does Laxness mean to demonstrate here? Might the discipline of conviction—pursuit of the honorable and heroic, or of the spiritual, no matter how calamitous or savage or outright mad—be a kind of transcendence? What makes for heroism, or piety? What is honor and faith?

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Of note, too, is the role of women in this book. In Homer's *Iliad*, save for a few prominent spouses (the Trojan War is fought over the gorgeous Helen of Sparta, though she is somehow blamed for this fact), females are chattel, very often the spoils of combat. This is at times true of Laxness' epic, too. But we see, also, women of immense mystical and seductive power, who "fly like swans" through the night and "decide the fates of men." And their men are as terrified by such women as they are inextricably and inexplicably bound to them. It is ritual—a mix of superstition and the fiercest sacrifice—for a woman to direct her wooers to kill the one she truly loves, and then for her to marry the killer.

Think of Mistress Kólbrun, who seems to hold eternal seductive sway over Poormóður (she holds his "life-egg," he tells us) and whom he continually reencounters in various forms and by various names despite his Sisyphean wanderings, land to distant land, in search of Butraldi and Lúsoddi, the Well-pisser and the Tramp, Porgeir's killers. Or the angelic Pordís of Ögur, who completely nulls Poormóður's otherwise staunch and unyielding desire for glory, her spell broken only when the head of his sworn brother is staked outside their door. Or Queen Astrid, who without second thought denounces King and Viking berserker Olaf Haraldsson to his face—and in the most poetically incomprehensible way (he is completely flummoxed, and flees without another word), only to take his hand in marriage. Soon after, as soon as his fortunes turn (this time he flees his own people, who were never really his except by fear, vacating his throne of several months), she abandons him for the luxury of her palace back in Sweden.

What are the boundaries of Laxness' conception of love—traditional, or free-spirited, or both—and how and when do they seem to shift or merge? His men and women remain equally

convinced of the mess and horror of passion, which is as intertwined with death as Viking combat is, and yet they cannot escape it. And very often, certainly more so than combat, the depth and unshakable commitment of love is what brings joy, peace, even prosperity (think of Þordís), or shelter and sustenance (Mistress Kölbrun), and a somewhat enchanting sense of fate and motif, which is at once mysterious and comforting. How does Laxness portray love and passion—both physical and of the spirit—in ways that contrast and contradict? How does he cast his female leads as heroes in their own right? How does his portrayal of female wisdom compare with the simple, stubborn defiance of his males?

Are Þorgeir and Þormóður as noble and valiant as we are set up to think? (What of the Inuits?) The continual procession of power-hungry kings and bloodthirsty Norsemen, the primacy of strength and fortitude, the self-defeating cycle of siege and conquest, looting and massacre—What does it all come to? Is it real to the Norsemen who carry out such savagery, to them the noblest aspect of their existence? Or is it a kind of joust, or sport? Is it real to the peasants who weather siege after siege, stripped many times over of the possessions they have worked since the last siege to regain, their loved ones dead and their own lives in constant danger? Or is this simply the way of things in Laxness' world, the exaltation of brutality and the immediacy of death? Is it real to us, his readers, or is it a kind of transporting, mythical theater?

What about our lives today might be said to be 'two-dimensional,' reactionary, or unthinking? What do we take for granted? We may look down on the violence of Norse mythology—or that of the Greeks—as amoral or barbaric, but what in our society and world might serve to parallel, or similarly outrage? Likewise: What do we hold to be true and preach unconditionally? How, and in what circumstances, do we act ignorantly or selfishly in holding to the righteousness of our own beliefs? What do we consider an affront to a person's honor? A nation's integrity? Does our behavior comport with the spirit of our convictions? Do we act on our beliefs?

There is not a character in Laxness' saga whose bearing or speech proves dishonest to his or her convictions, not an instance of dishonesty. "Character is fate," said the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, whose lifetime overlapped with Herodotus' by nine years. Is the strength of one's character the only judgment of consequence? Is honesty to oneself the greatest virtue? Does it excuse one's faults, or the delusion of his or her morality?

Who are the true heroes of this epic?