

**Entering *Íslenski bærinn*:
On Perceiving Culture, History and the Movement of Time**

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores notions of the past as a means of both containing and constructing our perceptions of life, culture and time. The core of this exploration is *Íslenski bærinn*, an endeavor committed to bringing together contemporary art and cultural heritage, an attempt to reawaken history as a living contribution to the present day. Through entering *Íslenski bærinn*, an old Icelandic turfhouse restoration project by Icelandic artist and turfmaster Hannes Lárusson, the boundaries of art and life, memory and collective growth, delicate tradition and craft become blurred as the constricting nature of technology, industry and unforgiving consumerism take hold of our current perceptions of the past. The question of how much longer we can and will keep our eyes closed to the past and our histories arises and we are left uncertain as to what will remain with us in contrast to what will disappear without much notice. As the material age continues to progress and take hold of our attention, we walk unsteadily on a fine line of reclaiming our roles as individuals and suddenly losing everything upon which we have built ourselves.

Through the writings of Benedikt Gröndal, Friedrich Nietzsche, Einar Jónsson, Gaston Bachelard, among other insightful thinkers, history and the creation of meaning are explored in an attempt to further these questions and put into context their relevant significance.

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This project has come into being by many hearts.

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I am also so grateful to artist Hannes Lárusson, who is the ancient soul and turfmaster of *Íslenski bærinn*. In listening, conversing and through the gathering of the stones and feeling the moist weight of the turf with Hannes this project took its shape through experience. To Dr. Ármann Jakobsson, who is perhaps unaware of the value I have placed on his role in developing this project and how much I have truly appreciated his kind support. To Peter John R. Buchan for his assistance in translating Einar Jónsson's *Minnigar og skoðanir*. Thank you to Cliff Eyland, who shared many inspiring early conversations. To the small Department of Icelandic Language and Literature and Darlene McWhirter for all of her help. The Olsen Jonsson Travel scholarship allowed me to be in Iceland to write, and has been a generosity that I am forever grateful for.

I could not go without acknowledging the unwavering foundation present within my family – both near and, more than I desire, far – it is something that I carry so closely with me wherever I go.

To have the opportunity to experience Iceland such as I have been given is a memory I feel very thankful for. To find oneself surrounded by the raging sea, which can often be heard while awake and dreaming, the darkness and the light creating beautiful

shades in the endless countryside, and that experience of moments, which leave you without breath. An island in the north, where the landscape is often so vast that it becomes difficult not to become lost within its beauty.

To my parents Michael and Wendy
and to my brother Thomas.

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All these thick earth walls, which had withstood earthquakes, rains and storms, decade after decade, and never collapsed entirely, though the piles of stones fell and had to be rebuilt, I imagined to be full of many kinds of invisible beings, whom I sometimes dreamed about at night. This applied no less to those walls that were buried to a certain extent in the earth, (because there I imagined there to be swarms underneath), as well as in the kitchen, pantry and the basement under the living room, which later was filled with earth. And I can still hear the deep sound of the basement trapdoor as it fell into place, and the squeal of the ring that was grasped when it was lifted.

Einar Jónsson, 'My Imaginary Beings'
Minningar og skoðanir

ONE.
On Relating the Past

All nations have, for untold centuries, attempted to imitate or recreate those images and events which have been sensed and experienced, either in nature or in human life. This is accomplished by placing such creations, with the help of the human spirit, in certain relationships, which have the effect of both elevating things and making them even more beautiful than they appear in reality (Gröndal i).

When Benedikt Gröndal (1826-1907) composed *Some Fragments Concerning The Poetic*,¹ it was the initial piece of writing to explore the nature of aesthetics on his home island. At that moment Benedikt entered a field that had already begun its contribution to the stream of ideas in continental Europe. Although from his seemingly remote and somewhat disconnected location, Benedikt was drawing threads linked with his contemporaries on the continent, as his reflections were arriving from a distinctive place with a unique history. This history would, in ways, work itself into the rhythm of his thoughts and writings, providing an unusual perspective from which to view the world.

Benedikt was raised at Bessastaðir, where his Icelandic heritage, embedded in medieval literature, Norse mythology and a belief in the pagan gods was studied alongside the history arriving from the classical period in Europe. His backdrop, in this sense, was a combining of both familiar and far-off mythologies. This fact proved to be an opportunity for him to consider the world existing beyond the seas surrounding Iceland. This is of great worth when considering Benedikt's contribution to the history of ideas, as the development of his thoughts spanned world history, and the thoughtful insight he has

¹ This piece has been translated into English by author and artist Kristjana Gunnars and it can be found within Steingrímur Eyfjörð's *The Golden Plover has Arrived* catalogue from La Biennale Di Venezia 52nd International Art Exhibition. Also found within this piece is an interview and other short writings on Benedikt Gröndal's contribution to Icelandic history and aesthetics by Birna Bjarnadóttir.

left in words potentially reaches just as far. In writing what he perceived to be the nature of art and of the artist, Benedikt introduced thoughts from within a society, which had for long perceived literature, craft and poetic creation as an element of everyday living. The observations he drew during this quiet and extremely poetic venture consider the role of the artist as a key figure in relating to both the past and in the pattern of life. Although the *Fragments* have not yet received their due notice, the depth of this piece still remaining quite unknown, Benedikt's words have begun to pierce the surface of Icelandic history.

The artist, as Benedikt perceives, is a being grounded in both nature and spirit, or as he also refers to it, the human soul. These two essentials, he writes, are intimately connected to all human life and are the basis for all that exists. The artist perceives in a way which bridges both elements. In believing this, he recognizes that there is both a bringing together of the physical and the metaphysical, as well as a relationship of exchange between the spirit and nature in the perception of the world as an artistic medium and entity. The artist provides us with the platform from which to view what is around us at all times; a large part of this being what it may be like for us to experience and engage with these surroundings. As this is not often a simple task to accomplish, the artist is key to life and to the narratives of our histories. The presence of the artist within society may have transformed slightly along the waves of time, but this much can be gathered – the artist is in so many ways one of the most crucial figures in the story of mankind, the one who leaves enduring imprints of momentary fragments of time.

Benedikt also emphasizes the thought of beauty not entirely as an objectified thing, but an entity created through life experience, raised up through the human spirit

and also through the work of the artist. In the above, Benedikt perceives beauty as an ever-changing element in the relationship developed between human beings and a subjective reading of reality. The creations he refers to are given life in the space that happen between the actual tangible object or idea and the spirit or soul. That beauty occurs in the way in which simple moments and everyday recollections can become overwhelming or transform into something other than what they appear to be in our experience of them. “Beauty, then, is that which elicits the right, poetic response from the soul of a human being. This is the widest meaning of the word, and one which looks upon beauty from the point of view of the general public” (Gröndal xv). This idea – of beauty as it has arrived from the point of view of everyday individuals – is key, as in its elevation, beauty also finds itself grounded within us. As Benedikt writes, the smallest of things can contain elements of beauty in their sensed experience along with their intended aesthetic qualities; beauty is also not limited to a restricted gathering of individuals. Beauty is something other than we have come to understand it as, and it can be found surrounding us at all times, choosing us as the beholder, if so desired. Through the work of the artist this idea is often made more clearly visible to us, but there still remains an element of which we are required to contribute to this relationship for it to be fully understood.

There is an aspect of Benedikt’s thoughts, which is quite insightful especially when considering where he had been writing his fragments from. It was he who pointed out that the character of our lives is dependent on where an individual is found, which points to the artist as a crucial figure in the development of cultural foundations (xviii). This marks an imperative moment in the perception and role of the artist within society

and it is Benedikt who has so clearly drawn this idea from his manifestation of the people and place, which surrounded him. Upon a small island like Iceland, with a population of just over 300,000 individuals, this notion seems to be more clearly embedded within the culture than appears in some other distant areas. The artist appears to be everywhere at times, continuously crossing the boundaries of the visual, of music, literature, poetry, performance, and craft amongst others. A value found in the arts is present in many cases, marking these impermanent boundaries as not so relevant to our understanding or perhaps they do not exist as concretely as may have been assumed. In essence the everyday community is based to some extent on the surroundings, endeavors and musings of the artist. One who is creating the world to be witnessed from alternate perspectives is also living alongside and within us as individuals. As such, the artist is a guide in the documenting of history, one who reawakens us to notions we too often forget to observe and reflect upon. The artist is also quite indispensable in the acknowledgement of and connection to past moments with which we struggle.

Benedikt Gröndal's *Fragments*, although still quite elusive in the world of aesthetics and in the thoughts of the people of Iceland, contain a reading of an underlying view of Icelandic society, which puts much into perspective if examined from that angle. The artist produces new potential in recognizing the significance in ideas and the power of creativity, but is nothing if not received by others. This reception takes many forms, but it is evident that in the most successful moments of creative experience take place in an exchange, interaction or development of relationship between different elements or individuals. In penetrating the surface of humankind through creativity the artist also crafts culture, providing at times, a mirror and, in others, a critique of society. This

element in the role of the artist is indispensable to the development of our understanding of our own humanity and if not recognized as such, could become one of our greatest failures. In writing that the history of mankind “is nothing other than the story of those works which humankind has created, which are rooted in man’s thoughts,” (xvii) Benedikt provides the wisdom from which one might gather an understanding of the aesthetic experience as an expression of our own being and culture.

Art is and always has been a part of us, maybe not so as a titled thing, but definitely present within humanity. It is a source through which both individuals and collectives are connected and created. Symbolic of our being, this piece of us, our allegory, cannot fully be felt as a tangible element of life without the understanding of its place within our history and in how we relate to the past. In essence, the work of art, the artist and the experience of art are all a method of access to being, allowing one to perceive the world as it is. Rather than depart from this notion – as has become the case so many times in the present day – we must see the artist as an individual who brings back to life ideas which get lost in the confusion of things, and hence, reawakens us; an individual, with whom we should never choose to depart from but rather hold closely to us. If this is believed to be true, then it only seems natural that we find the artist in the midst of the unending debate on the state of culture, as they may perceive it more acutely than many.



Íslenski bærinn (2010) upon early morning arrival.



Íslenski bærinn (2010) seen from a distance, at the end of a long work day.

TWO.

An Introduction to *Íslenski bærinn*

Among the subsidiary duties of art is that of conserving, and no doubt also of taking extinguished, faded ideas and restoring to them a little colour: when it performs this task it winds a band around different ages and makes the spirits that inform them return. It is only a phantom life that here arises, to be sure, such as appears about graves or like the return of the beloved dead in dreams; but the old emotions are again aroused, if only for a few moments, and the heart beats to a rhythm it had forgotten (Nietzsche *Human*, 80).

Íslenski bærinn, also known as the Icelandic farmhouse, is an evolving upheaval within culture, which very few have yet to come to know about or acknowledge. Manifestly and passionately perceived, *Íslenski bærinn* continues to be nurtured through and in the hands of artist, critic, curator and turfmaster Hannes Lárusson and partner Kristín Magnúsdóttir. A quietly unassuming revolution it appears to be, and taking place in a realm where history, art, life, time and traditions are bound together in a cultural critique that will not easily go unnoticed. As such, the steady whispers from beneath the old wooden floorboards of this forgotten environment can be heard, unwilling to yet falter or fade and knowingly crucial to the past of the people of Iceland.

One may be curious enough to ask whether the people of Iceland, and for that matter the rest of the world, is fast asleep with thought to this project. For it is one in which the fading tradition of the Icelandic turfhouse is being resurrected through the artist and its living heart given new beating rhythm, an important element in the expression of Icelandic history and in culture. As a refusal to accept change as an element completely separate from the past, the ideas being projected from *Íslenski bærinn* are an attempt to re-examine history, as well as a questioning of the need to give into and conform to society's empty ideals without hesitation or critical thought. It is a return

from the unforgiving nature of the day, while also an emphasis on the foundations of our humanity. Perhaps seen most importantly, is the way in which *Íslenski bærinn* forces one to look into the seemingly strange and bleak state of our current day with a feeling of insecurity. This state, where one might find oneself slipping into an unconscious stream of bare thoughts and actions lacking passion occurs as we become overwhelmed by the lack of notice given to ephemeral nature of the life of the everyday. The time is such that we are constantly forced to look towards the future, to progress and to growth, while not encouraged to question the standards by which we measure the accomplishment of the above. In moving away from our own creativity, we have also lost focus of the need and role of such an endowment in the understanding of life. We as Friedrich Nietzsche emphasized, like the young individuals of the nineteenth century who find that we are “swept along through all the millennia” (Müller-Lautner 24). A movement away from tradition and the ‘old’ has also somehow come to mean a movement away from the mysticism of the everyday; the past has unexpectedly become synonymous with negativity.

What Hannes Lárusson has drawn attention to, and this sheds light on the state of the Icelandic turfhouse tradition as it is today, is that “Icelanders’ consciousness about their own being and past has for a long time been divided into a psychotic double-standard where there is a tension between pride and shame, arrogance and a sense of inferiority. The old Icelandic farmstead has for the last couple of decades been simmering in an existential grinder” (*Chunks* 79). For a culture whose settlement began on this island during the late 9th and 10th centuries, and not without struggle, the turfhouse has become a reminder of this an occasionally dark past. In perceiving the history of the

turfhouse as a historical element more suited to the past, there seems to be a belief that a freedom from the restraints of unwanted struggle would also be left quietly behind. It is not sufficient to run away from such a past though, as forgetting can at times be just as damaging as remembering. “ The Icelandic farmhouse is a deep-rooted object that sheds unique light on the living conditions and history of the northernmost part of Europe” (Hannes Lárusson *Harmony*). Locked away within the walls of the turfhouse are vital secrets and remnants of not only the material culture of the Icelandic people, but also insight into the aesthetic experience of life on an island in the north and philosophical notions solely and distinctly shaped by life lived within the turfhouse.

Questioning many of the decisions and actions of our time by nature, Hannes has been a continuous voice of brave concern and curiosity, most certainly when it comes to the cultivation of culture and in some cases, the lack thereof. He is an individual who freely exercises his right to think critically, and to challenge preconceived notions and meaning in the realm of the creative space. It is with *Íslenski bærinn* that Hannes becomes a keeper of tradition, one of the few individuals concerned with preserving the traditional craft of turfhouse construction, a craft nearly locked in antiquity. He is surely far from living within ancient times, although the turfhouse is rooted in the medieval period, and is rather an individual who sees the value in maintaining and voicing tradition of such in a relevant way to perceiving the present. His use of tradition becomes a means of creating new discussion around the role of history and the artist in the context of the development of future ideas, the role of the artist within society and social decision-making, which is a role he sees as crucial.

It is true that he is restoring the farmhouse from which his own personal foundation is based and to which he was eventually drawn back to, after spending years engaging with Icelandic culture, iconography and symbolism through an extensive practice in conceptual art and performance. Rather than viewing this movement as an end to his artistic career, the restoration project seems a likely place for artistic opportunity and an exploration in craft. The farm at Austur-Meðalholt has historically been linked to Hannes' family and as it stands today, is a bringing together of the changes that have occurred on this specific property in terms of the tradition of homes in Iceland. There can be found the original turfhouse, but also a number of newer developments, each with the intention of bringing to life an element of Icelandic culture, which has been hidden for some time. Through incorporating some of the traditional methods used in historical turfhouse construction with contemporary approaches to the construction of space, Hannes attempts to bridge the gap between the past and the present. As a space engaged with the found, built, material, aesthetic and conceptual aspects of this invaluable element of Icelandic history and consciousness, *Íslenski bærinn* presents itself as an open space for an exploration of an interaction of the above.



Handmade traditional wooden tools, a beginning point for the restoration project and also a point at which Hannes' artistic practice enters the work. These tools are used for compacting soil and turf in layers amongst stone found onsite.



Handmade traditional scythes, mainly used for cutting turf.

The Site as *Experience* and Reading the Stones

Hannes himself has likened the beginning of *Íslenski bærinn* to the notion that “you have to come to terms with a place”, whether it be your place of birth, one chosen or found, where within the body there is something innate in place, which you can’t really run away from; an intricate intimacy.² Hannes’ place may, to a foreign visitor, seem an otherworldly place where the landscape is consumed by a meeting of the past and the ticking present. The site is located at Austur-Meðalholt in the southern district of Gaulverjabær in Flói, where the volcanic lava stones and the lowland turf fields have become characteristic of the southern-region turfhouse style of the area. This is an important element in the history of the craft of turfhouse building, as materials are collected locally and changes in style can be seen throughout Iceland as a result of this fact alone.

Illustrating the relationship of house to habitat, *Íslenski bærinn* emerges from the southern landscape, in an “organic cluster of buildings” which have consciously been “integrated into the landscape, the seasons and the light, and are one of the best examples to be found of harmony between the natural environment and manmade structures” (Hannes Lárusson *Harmony*). There is no doubt that the history of the turfhouse is closely associated with the Icelandic landscape, which at times can be described as completely harsh and often remote. It has been said that “[e]ach farm was in this sense an island of its own, often with minimal contact with the outside world, especially during

² In a radio interview with A.S. Kitchen at the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature, University of Manitoba, Hannes Lárusson describes how it is that this project came about, along with his feelings on the place of the Icelandic turfhouse in contemporary Iceland. See *Works Cited* for information on full radio broadcast.

the long, cold, dark months of winter” (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon 21). If one can imagine the experience of this – long, cold, dark and isolated winters – it becomes easier to see the link drawn between location and structure, as the landscape and change in season is a very tangible element in daily life in the Icelandic countryside. The farms which have survived time, remain to be found in these same isolated environments.

Experiencing the many aspects of *Íslenski bærinn* is at once, like being in the midst of time moving backwards, witnessing life from a different and newly-found perspective, all the while still retaining the awareness of the evident contemporary setting. It is a place where the imagination becomes free to exist and explore time in a different manner. And still, as strange as it may appear, this mixing of old and new, tradition and contemporary thought, an unfaltering element of curiosity forces one to look and feel beyond the foreign sense of its experience. It is, to say the least, far more intricately constructed and complex than initially presented on the surface of things.

Eight buildings connect in a harmonized arrangement at Austur-Meðalholt, the original turf farmhouse having stood there since the late 19th century. The house is surrounded by a seemingly endless backdrop that one may recognize as that of the Icelandic countryside in the south. The turfhouse has been in the process of restoration for the past twenty years or so, when Hannes returned to the site of his childhood upbringing. At this point his conceptual, performance art and curating fused with his investigations in cultural heritage and traditional craft, which had been apparent in his work from the very onset. Although he did spend time away from the farm, it was never far off in his mind or thought. It is also evident that remaining aspects of Hannes’ ongoing artistic career have become part of what takes place at *Íslenski bærinn*. He sees

the two worlds as being closely connected and crucial to one another. Although they in ways seem unrelated, it is as if all of Hannes' past work forges together in the making of the restoration project. Along with this traditional structure, there are also some smaller components related to the original house; small structures where the animals might have been found, a smithy and a summer cottage. As time progressed, the turfhouse building method was transformed into the use of wooden materials, one example of which can be found on site as well. Along with a newer building, there is also a modern museum structure incorporating elements of the tradition of the craft with a contemporary cement building style. As a whole, *Íslenski bærinn* is an evolving landscape of time and storytelling, which as a 'museum project' seeks to acquaint individuals with 700-800 years of Icelandic history, in a way that is not stifling in relation to the present day.

An experience of *Íslenski bærinn* may be as such; leaving the colorful streets of Reykjavík behind, one must drive southeast out of these winding streets and into the countryside, through the moss-covered mountains and lava to a place where there are no sidewalks. Driving up to the farm, leaving everyday routine behind, it becomes apparent that the sheep are often uninvited; yet sit grazing on the turf roof of the house. They are unaware of the distinction between what is house and natural landscape; where one ends and the other begins. Both are growing matter and as such, they go about their everyday lives with the turfhouse as a part of their natural landscape. Living within and amongst, building and repairing with stone and turf is dependent on the weather, like so many other elements of life on the island, and along with this movement in the environment, the turfhouse changes. Drawing a precise image of the turfhouse, Halldór Laxness perhaps put it best within the 'Icelandic Pioneer' pages of his epic work *Independent People*:

“[s]tones have been carried, turf cut, walls built up, framework nailed, rafters hoisted, boards nailed for a clincher roof, range built in, chimney set in place – and there stands the croft-house³ as if part of nature itself” (15). And this is the reality of the turfhouse, it is also what becomes obvious when entering this peculiar world; there is little separation between the house and the landscape, the people and the place, the ephemeral history and the reality of life on an island.

³ The term *croft-house* is questionable in this case and would more clearly be translated to *turfhouse*. The term *croft-house* refers more directly to the type of houses that would be found in Scotland or outside of Iceland.



The physicality of the experience of building a turf wall includes 'dancing' on the wall as a method to compact soil. The body becomes completely engaged in the act of not only perceiving but also constructing.





An example of a layered stone and turf wall found on the exterior.

Containing History and the Role of the National Museum

Much of Iceland's history is contained within the country's medieval past and although the turfhouse has its roots in this past, that does not mean that it should remain there. Icelandic history is in ways most easily understood as having two very distinct periods, that of the Medieval, which goes back to the settlement, and of the Modern, which took place mainly between the 1930s, 40s and 50s. At the present, post the economic crash of the fall 2008, Iceland finds itself in a period of confusion. The movement away from the past has been made, but the realization of this movement is just becoming apparent as a crucial component in understanding what has taken place over the last years. The Icelandic turfhouse plays an important role in reflecting on the changes that have occurred in Iceland, the speed at which those changes have taken place and how something such as the turfhouse may provide comfort or inspiration in revisiting cultural values. In choosing to place the turfhouse in the past, as a stagnant entity, void of any living contribution to the day, one chooses to disregard an important element of the shaping of the consciousness of its people. If one wants to explore such an element, somewhat frozen in time, then they must choose to open their mind, seeing beyond the horizon of history as inactive, and rather considering the living elements of such.

This is the case in contemporary Iceland; along with the whispers and memories of change, the turfhouse has become an object of the past, nearly disappearing without a trace of the handcraft that stands behind it, as well as the experiential aesthetic quality it contains. Although “[i]n many living Icelanders, there is a turfhouse”,⁴ somewhere deep in this sub-consciousness nature there is disapproval lurking over the image of the

⁴ See “The Icelandic Turf House Tradition – Hannes Larusson” interview with A.S. Kitchen.

turfhouse, a negativity which initially arose in the late 19th and early 20th century as Iceland found itself in a period of modernization. Although turfhouses were built as late as 1927-30, they became regarded as images of a dragging past, stagnant symbols of life lacking progress.

Avant-gardist and traditionalist Hörður Ágústsson (1922-2005), was one of the few who fought for the preservation of traditional architecture of old country churches and other historical buildings in Iceland. Through his attempt to provide security for the material architecture of Iceland, Hörður “has argued that the quality of the housing occupied by ordinary working people deteriorated steadily in the early modern period and that much of it constituted little more than hovels” (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon 48). As rapid change took place, the ordinary working population lived in housing which was basic, even primitive and in most cases severe. He also recognized that these elements contributed to and were reflected in several contemporary autobiographies (*Wasteland* 48). In his belief that certain values were not fixed to certain historical periods, Hörður opened up a dialogue for the place of tradition within Iceland.

Iceland entered a new phase of history around the turn of the century, lead by the mechanization of fishing vessels, Iceland’s main source of wealth. Occurring approximately 100 years ago, this ‘movement forward’ also saw the character of rural communities change; they began to disintegrate and disappear. This crisis of tradition only furthered with the Second World War.⁵ Part of these rural communities was the Icelandic turfhouse and the sense of communal living, characteristic of them. As such, the almost complete obliteration of traditional turfhouses became a “moral mission of modernization to improve hygiene and the general well being of the population”

⁵ *Ibid.*

(Sigurjón Hafsteinsson 1). This fact, in many ways, becomes more pertinent as one looks to the modernization of Iceland, which occurred with such rapid speed and that little awareness was put towards the fragile nature of traditional methods and ideas. There remains to be a few individuals who are the dedicated keepers of the secret to *reading the stones*. The knowledge they hold in the ability to perform this method of building, with turf and stone to create and contribute to this traditional and vernacular form of architecture, is as fragile as they are few.

Few turfhouses remain in the southern part of Iceland, and the country in general. In most cases, the remaining ones are found in a state of decay, their stories and craft almost lost in time. *Íslenski bærinn* advocate Sigurjón Hafsteinsson points out that:

a limited amount of turf-houses have survived; some of those that have become part of the Historic Buildings Collection of the National Museum of Iceland. The majority of those turf-houses are themselves from affluent farmsteads, rather than the modest turf-houses in which the majority of the population had lived for centuries (1).

With that in mind, *Íslenski bærinn* at Austur-Meðalholt stands as an indication of the lack of attention and understanding given not only to the material culture we find in history, but also the aesthetic experience and existential engagement involved in the relationship of people to past. With that said there have been attempts by the National Museum of Iceland to preserve some turfhouses throughout the country, mainly those that would have been property of the upper class, belonging to the church or to officials. These restoration projects, as a result, serve the purpose of presenting an image of the turfhouse that is perhaps not representative of everyday use or appearance, but rather only one perspective. As is the case with many museum approaches, the tendency is to view and preserve the object at hand as a technical and contained object or a historical artifact.

This is problematic in that it overlooks experience, while placing emphasis on objectivity. Rather than to focus on the individual experience, the National Museum has its intentions set on presenting general historical remnants that can pertain to a larger class of people and perceiving objectively becomes a means of doing so. In this case, the depiction of everyday life in the Icelandic turfhouse is missing and these houses preserved by the National Museum are done in such a way that they become frozen in time, history contained and removed from the possibility of growing within the present. It might be said that the turfhouse has been depleted of its human quality and artistic nature in an attempt to preserve an image of the past. All connection to the present is lost within this attempt and the image of the turfhouse seems to be bereft of all life.

The individual, to this point, has maintained almost no turfhouses, perhaps for the reason that they are difficult to maintain without proper knowledge, and so they are torn down with shame imbedded within them. With this in mind, Hannes' attempt to shift the discourse and engage in a new dialogue with the past of the turfhouse gains invaluable significance, as it is an individual undertaking which has seen little to no support from the National Museum. In bridging the antiquarian approach to history with the inventive, creative and critical Hannes' project becomes a means of preserving not only the physical object but also more precisely, the aesthetics and ideas surrounding such.

Although the Icelandic turfhouse or *Íslenski bærinn* has its roots within Iceland and more specifically, medieval Iceland, its presence in our contemporary setting carries a vast message: we are moving and in many ways have moved too quickly away from the life of the everyday. *Have we, in ways, overlooked the very elements that hold such vast meaning for culture, so vast we may not be able to fully yet comprehend, but instead*

replace it with empty standards? This is perhaps one of the most crucial components of the project, as *Íslenski bærinn* is a movement against entering blindly into the world of uncertain progress and an attempt at the re-examination of the past. It challenges this turning away from traditional roots, forcing one to reconsider what changes strike as we move further and further from that by we come to know ourselves. In this instance, the crack between all the precious elements of life widens and we are left with an exceedingly and questionable empty space, in which we are uncertain what to do. What then fills this empty space are the products of a lost connection to culture; we become less in touch with what life and experience could possibly mean. Without pausing to acknowledge such things, the fading of the remnant of history leaves culture bare and with very little means for simple reversal.

Hannes's work, both with *Íslenski bærinn* and in his more widely known artistic actions are not solely contained within the island boundaries of Iceland, but may also be examined in their relationship and contribution to the ever-changing world at large, crossing into present and contemporary issues. Throughout his artistic career, Hannes's work has been sturdily rooted in both the traditional and the conceptual, which in fact is most evident in the realm of his restoration project. *Íslenski bærinn* may then be the natural meeting of these two elements, along with perceptions on art and life, ritual and progress, the artist and society; all valuable components in openly perceiving the world from the standpoint of where we are within it.

In perceiving the turfhouse as a valuable form of vernacular architecture and recognizing the traditional role of the development of the craft, the ways in which such important elements in cultural history can be re-examined and reintegrated into the

contemporary setting become evident. In their relevancy, the above serve as reminders of the possibility of approaching the past in a way that creates a bridge, rather than stagnating the perception of the present. In this case, such becomes more so crucial for reflecting and moving forward in time, in history and in culture appropriately. Although, history at times can be heavy, create insecurity and hold closely the things that wish to be forgotten, there is still something to be said of valuing both the good and bad, in seeking balance between and in engaging with such existent elements. *Íslenski bærinn* then may be viewed as a striking illustration and engagement with the thought or question of what happens to us, as living beings, when the traces of our culture begin to slip away from the space we share without a concern or sense of notice? The question then arises of where we will end up after all that we have moved away from has disappeared.



THREE.

Historical Echoes:

Nietzsche's '*On the use and disadvantage of history for life*'

To begin it was in 1873 that Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) composed 'On the use and disadvantage of history for life,' marking the second of his collection of four *Untimely Meditations* (1873-1876). It is a work, which calls directly to the individuals of the world, encouraging them to awake to and acknowledge the use of culture in both building and examining the past, as well as, life in the present. It also makes a statement in support of the role of the artist in contributing to the social construction of history, as an important and vital force. This constructing and observing, Nietzsche describes, is thought to occur best in the meeting of the act of critical thinking within an open space and mind. Also contained in this specific piece is a protest for the reexamination of the 'abuse' of moments in history, ones not meant to be dismissed easily for it would take too much effort to do so successfully. These moments of 'abuse' often arise through the misrepresentation of history and a lack of understanding of how the past plays a crucial role in determining the future. These moments also refer to the stagnation of history through attempting to experience past history directly, although this may not be completely viable. Signifying moments of success and of failure or flaw, Nietzsche attempts to bridge the living gap between the past and the future, the two, he recognizes, cannot be without the other.

If kept in the back of one's mind, 'On the use and disadvantage of history for life' may be read in a way as a footing to an engagement with the ideas surrounding and being drawn into the history at *Íslenski bærinn*. Creating a similarly familiar outcry to Nietzsche's writing, it is attempting to revive an element of shared history from within a

culture that has shied away from its past in the Icelandic turfhouse. Both elements in this written and physical engagement with history provide a context for examining history within the living day, which undoubtedly has been an elemental force in shaping life throughout time. It is a kind of attempt to draw connections and to bridge the traditional and the contemporary in a harmonious way.

‘On the use and disadvantage’ likens history to an ever-growing and present narrative. If and when approached within the context of the living, history crafts an elevating service for the present and future. History is, in essence, crucial for the present. It was shortly after writing this piece that Nietzsche’s profound book intended for the ‘free spirited,’ *Human, All Too Human* would appear in 1878. Though both are separate works, it is in their theme, their perceptive look into life, art and philosophy that they are united. The *meditations*, still rather unknown, have surfaced as an expression of Nietzsche’s frustration with, as well as the consideration of the changes involved with the ‘demythologizing’ of culture. This was of course a creation embedded with an awareness of the changes visibly taking shape around him in the society from which he writes. And, as the unavoidable title indicates, these were ‘untimely,’ but perhaps in the sense that they would not immediately capture the interest of his immediate audience, but rather, their ‘untimely’ characteristic lends to the idea that they fall ahead of their moment, landing more appropriately in time to come. As such, and with note of their possible contribution to the now, they are no less important for us than they were to the society that was somewhat estranged from them.

Nietzsche’s emphasis lies on the idea that the artist is crucial in recreating, reinventing and lighting a new spark in the history we carry as a culture; that to perhaps

reassess the current state of things, culture requires the artist to lead the way of thinking. As has been pointed out by Walter Kaufmann, all of the Nietzsche's works have "dealt, in one way or another, with questions of value: the value of art and life itself, the value of history and the problem whether there are supra-historical values, and the value of self-protection" (51). The inherent value of such things was something that Nietzsche was most certainly interested in as a cultural critique, as he felt that his own society was beginning to drift too far away from the roots of its own culture, that some of the questioning had been silenced. Through these specific writings, he would attempt to open up minds and reposition ideas of both culture and history within the contemporary society, restoring to it a sense of wonder and illumination.

"Following some recent interpretations of Foucault (Jay, 1986), it can be noted that Nietzsche's philosophy, in questioning conventional forms of philosophical investigation, was not offering a privileged location for vision, for the authority of the gaze, or for any controlling optics. Instead, he argued that we should rediscover the senses of the naivety of the everyday world" (Stauth 25).

In this case, and also in general, when one chooses to write of the time, it is often with the intent to reflect upon a certain moment while hoping that the thoughts expressed will carry through time and beyond the moment. It may also be understood as the case beyond writing and reflecting, in considering creative outputs of other artistic forms. They become a more tactile memory of the past, and therefore inform not only the present, but also what is to come of the future. This is done, with little-to-no knowledge of what these future moments may contain, but some understanding that to reflect back upon time and history is essential to knowing and understanding the present. It is with this in mind that one must turn to 'On the use and disadvantage of history for life,' a meditation that imposes a foundation for travelling across time and is no less important to

understanding life today than it was when it appeared in society during the end of a decade which had been filled with radical change. Through this work, Nietzsche opens up a dialogue in which one is compelled to revisit the meaning of life, become aware of the echoing and cultivating sounds of history, to seek our pasts and come to terms with them, all the while acknowledging what it means to engage with these echoes and also what may be lost if they are not heard.

It is a work where such statements as “[a]nd it is a matter for wonder: a moment, now here and then gone, nothing before it came, again nothing after it has gone, nonetheless returns as a ghost and disturbs the peace of a later moment” (61) force one to look into time, time moving forward and all that is left in the remnants of the past. Nietzsche asks one to begin to understand how human life requires both the need for a ‘historical,’ as well as an ‘ahistorical’ perspective of oneself in relation to the past. History, for him, is broken into three categories: that of the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical. Each performs a different task in the service of history and for life.

To distinguish between the historical and unhistorical, Nietzsche turns to the relationship of humans to animals. Animals, as he writes of them, in their honesty and ability to conceal nothing, live *ahistorically*. That is, they hold little or no account at all for the likes of history in their daily life and actions. They are those who at “once forget[s] and for whom every moment really dies, sinks back into night and fog and is extinguished forever” (61). Humans on the other hand, are always curious to know of such a feeling, or perhaps to attain the abilities of the animal in forgetting, for then one would be free of the chains of the pressures of the past and remembering. This of course becomes a measure through which one sees their own image, holding themselves up

against the developing features of the historical past, with which they are so closely connected, and sometimes prisoner to. In likening the desire to see time as an animal does, removing one's self from the direct bind to memory, Nietzsche connects this strongly to the experience of a child. A child, he writes, "which, having as yet nothing of the past to shake off, plays in blissful blindness between the hedges of past and future" (61). Their sense of time and the echoes of history have not fully come into being and hence, the child is able to exist in a space free of the danger of restraining life in relation to history. This is the beginning point for Nietzsche's reflection on the importance of living, both as though life is historical and unhistorical all at once.

If we are able, even if only for a fragment of our experience, to perceive life as a child does, then perhaps one will gain the ability to value history as a living thing. The most distinct point Nietzsche makes is that history must be recreated, time and time again, given new breath and seen each time as new. It is up front, and in no way hidden that 'On the use and disadvantage of history for life' is an expression of history as, "[w]e need it, that is to say, for the sake of life and action, not so as to turn comfortably away from life and action" (59). With that said, it is understood that the relationship to the cultivation of history lingers along a fine line, and there is the possibility that the study of history can, in some ways, become a degenerate thing, which is moreso the product of an age. If the unhistorical is "like an atmosphere within which life alone can germinate and with the destruction of which it must vanish," (63) then it appears to be a space in which danger or fear is present. But perhaps with the balance of the historical sense of man and woman, that in which one sees experience on a narrow horizon, the possibility to sense history while living free from it may arrive.

To break down the three elements Nietzsche regards in history, the first would be *Monumental* history, which arrives as the relationship between the human individual and the great moments of the past, a ‘counter-world’ of greatness. Existence in this instance takes a seat in the back, as the monumental moments, which produced great effects, take one away from being at ease in the present. The monumental becomes the measure of individuals up against things remaining and grand creations of history left behind, such as walking amongst the pyramids of great past times. This type of history becomes problematic as it deceives through the use of analogy, in that history is written by those moments in which the grand is exposed, leading one to believe in the possibility of greater things, but at the same time shedding the anchor of value in everyday life and experience. Secondly, Nietzsche addresses *Antiquarian* history. He expresses that it is a history that “knows only how to preserve life, not how to engender it; undervalues that which is becoming because it has no instinct for divining it – as monumental history, for example, has” (75). As in the sense of the antiquarian, history is preserved and revered, in a sense looking back for reassurance. This does contribute to the serving of living life in that it creates a preserved map for those to follow, but does not necessarily allow for a bridging between past and present days. Thirdly, the *Critical*, in which Nietzsche states, “[i]f he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past” (75). This points to the existing potential danger for an age to loath in its history. This danger, as it carries belief with it, may become disruptive to the instincts of both the individual and the whole in reflecting upon the present, amongst other potentially hostile things.

In asking for both objectivity and subjectivity in approaching history, Nietzsche calls for a 'historical sense' without restraint. This means that the past is the source of both the present and the future. It is in this case that we may turn to the artist, who has the power of objectivity and will to venture into the unknown world of the past, bringing forth the qualities of history which are not restraining and viewing history as living in and through the present. Most clearly put, it is the:

hope that the significance of history will not be thought to lie in its general propositions, as if these were the flower and fruit of the whole endeavor, but that its value will be seen to consist in its taking a familiar, perhaps commonplace theme, an everyday melody, and composing inspired variations on it, enhancing it, elevating it to a comprehensive symbol, and thus disclosing in the original theme a whole world of profundity, power and beauty (93).

Here we find that in seeking an awareness of ourselves in the present, we are unavoidably conditioned to the past. Forgetting completely would lead one away from seeing and contain the ability to float across borders, gathering pieces from time and connecting to culture through being and becoming. There is also a certain anchoring in this, as it involves grounding oneself in the everyday, the ordinary and familiar, rather than getting lost in the grand accomplishments of the past, while forgetting what is in the face of us all. Rather than striving for accomplishment in the somewhat unattainable, Nietzsche urges that power is found in the equal perception of the historical and unhistorical, and in embodying memory, breaching the inner and outer worlds of the past and present, the balance may momentarily occur. In turning to Schopenhauer on the matter, the idea is that "one giant calls to another across the desert intervals of time and, undisturbed by the excited chattering dwarfs who creep about beneath them, the exalted spirit-dialogue goes on" (111). History then becomes the intermediary in this sense.

This is a parable for each one of us: he must organize the chaos within him by thinking back to his real needs. His honesty, the strength and truthfulness of his character, must at some time or other rebel against a state of things in which he only repeats what he has heard, learns what is already known, imitates what already exists; he will then begin to grasp that culture can be something other than a *decoration of life*, that is to say at bottom no more than dissimulation and disguise; for all adornment conceals that which is adorned (123).

If one reflects back upon the idea of the cultivation of culture, rather than the flattening down and diluting of it, then it becomes clear that “On the use and disadvantage of history for life” plays a crucial role in placing us as humans within the narrative of history. Threads through time which, when continuously forgotten and remembered, help to create surprise, reawaken insight and inspiration in the act of the everyday, most importantly keeping the sense of wonder alive and drifting. This is key to our perception of the past – that of being able to release ourselves from the restraints of the weight of history – but it is also necessary to remain anchored to the ground of that which surrounds us.

FOUR.

A Farmhouse Philosophy and the Nature of Childhood Perceptions

I am thinking home is where you choose to forget and choose to remember at the same time. Nothing hinders your choices. Nothing forces you to repress any memory. There is no reason to hold it up against the daylight either (Gunnars 125).

An often-overlooked element in human nature is locked up in the ability to perceive the world in the spirit of a fascinated child. This notion seems to easily slip from the mind as time evolves, we age and we find ourselves introduced to new moments and insight, thus shaping our adult lives. With this evolution of time, it becomes clear that one's findings, views and constructed prejudices of the world are developed through accumulated personal and lived experience. Like this, the essence of awareness found within time moves us through collected poetic images we seem to gather and accrue in our minds, and that serve to remind us of the past when necessary. This collection, our memories, begins in the early years of life and is carried throughout life, often with little consideration for the value 'childhood' images hold in shaping how we come to know. It was the creative spirit, Icelandic sculptor Einar Jónsson⁶ who pointed out that in his work *Minnigar skoðanir*, which contains titles such as, *The Atmosphere of Things*, *Beauty of Nature*, and *My Imaginary Beings*, that: "no recollections are by their very nature as sacred as childhood memories" (7).⁷ This must be because they allow us the space to think and remember without preconception; they allow us to become lost in time. And,

⁶ Einar Jónsson's *Minnigar skoðanir* has yet to be translated into an English version. All of the translated fragments found within this text have been kindly done so by Peter John R. Buchan, Language Instructor at the University of Manitoba's Icelandic Department. All of the citations and page numbers in this case refer to the original work.

⁷ "Engar endurminningar eru í eðli sínu jafn-helgar sem bernskuminningarnar."

as a result we do not find ourselves distracted by all that we know and have experienced.

In an attempt to explain this very notion Einar Jónsson writes:

I have tried to determine why that is, where this glamour comes from, which surrounds them. I have asked myself, whether it could be the glow of past states of happiness, which the soul has known, before the earth became its home. Is man not closer to heaven in childhood than in other periods of life? Is he then preserving in his mind recollections of some glory, which he has known? Or is his untouched soul just more open for happiness-filled influences of the universe, enchanted by [the soul's] own power to grow and the sweet premonition of a wide and powerful wingstroke – [the wingstroke] of heavenly possibility, which later [the soul] loses? Neither is unthinkable (7).⁸

The sacredness of childhood thoughts is sacredness that should be nurtured in our daily lives, as it may provide us with the freedom to imagine and dream, understand and relate to the shaping of ourselves. It is, in a way, the time when our thoughts are most clear and innocent and the need to remember not yet present. When looking back though, this remembering becomes a crucial aspect of the process of understanding time.

Nietzsche describes a drifting from this notion in his attempt to illustrate how man finds himself captivated by the ability and inability to see the world differently. He addresses the need to remember with the sense of childhood thoughts, to become unaware of the restraints of history and to live momentarily by returning to a place where history does not always seem apparent. It is essential to allow age to find itself misplaced. If one is able to merge colorful young memories with history, as a memory also then they may become more aware of their place within time, space and more certainly within the changing world. History as memory then becomes a way of keeping the past close, while acknowledging the living state of the present aside from that past. As he writes of the

⁸ “Ég hef reynt að gera mér grein fyrir því, hvaðan þeim ljóma muni stafa, sem um þær leikur. Ég hef spurt sjálfan mig, hvort það gæti verið ljósroði liðinna sæluvista, er sálin hefur þekkt, áður en jörðin varð heimkynni hennar. Er maðurinn ekki nær himninum í bernsku en á öðrum æviskeiðum? Varðveitir hann þá í vitund sinni endurminningar einhverrar dýrðar, er hann hefur áður þekkt? Eða er ósnortin sál hans þá aðeins opnari fyrir sælufullum áhrifum allífsins, töfrud af vaxtarmætti sínum og ljúfu hugboði um vítt og þróttugt vængjatak – hins himneska möguleika, er hún síðar kann að glata? – Hvorugt er óhugsandi.”

way in which the innocence of childhood memories becomes a longing for the image of the “vision of a lost paradise”, man in this role:

braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden which he can sometimes appear to disown and which in traffic with his fellow men he is only too glad to disown, so as to excite their envy. That is why it affects him like a vision of a lost paradise (Nietzsche 61).

It is as if history itself, “the pressure of what is past” becomes too heavy a weight for some to place in context with the present. Remembering is done so only with heavy weight. Time then becomes locked in an image and our recollections of time passed are only illustrated to us through these images. In a sense we can never escape what has become of history. Along with this, the “crisis of the modern value systems” is highlighted by Nietzsche’s need to return to the everyday image alongside the monumental weight of historical moments. In the present, individuals are overrun with uncomfortable social changes and therefore become nostalgic for a time better perceived. Through the return to the vision of the “lost paradise” remembrance becomes fluid and approachable. The question arises, although, of where to look for this lost image of paradise, and how one might acquire the knowledge to approach such a preserved image of grace. As phenomenologist and philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) has commented, “[g]reat images have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly” (33). As these images become only merely memory it becomes crucial to turn to the moments of our meeting with them, as well as their place. One might turn to the house as a means of looking further into this idea, where Bachelard would argue that our first universe is found within the walls of the childhood house and where our first poetic images occur.

In a description of the old farmhouse, the following is drawn: “[d]eep down in the dark tunnels of the Icelandic subconsciousness stands a turf-house on a hill” and one must not forget that projected from this image “[t]here is smoke rising from its chimney, there are legs of smoked lamb dangling from the ceiling and Christmas trolls are peeping through the windows and slamming the doors” (Hannes Lárusson 79). Not only here do we find reference to the structure, but also to the oral culture and traditions embedded in Icelandic culture. Although the image is drawn more closely of a past or “lost paradise,” the direct references to Icelandic heritage cannot be escaped, as it highlights certain material symbols, which become crucial to reading the past. The description continues: “[b]ut in the non-imaginary hills in contemporary Iceland, most of these houses have now disintegrated into mud and [have been] bulldozed away” (79). As a representation of a history of habitat or shelter linked so closely to an environmental place, the image performs the task of illustrating both the ephemeral and tactile.

This image also invites criticism on the state of affairs and recognition of historical matters in contemporary Iceland, a time where material ventures have allowed individuals to stray from the depth of reawakening the past. In this case, the turfhouse begins to take on the role of protective memory, a kind of consolation perhaps, a shelter for comforting notions of times nearly passed. In a state of moral crisis, a symbol as such becomes a means to reconstruct the past, while confronting issues of the present, and in a way, a stirring up of an element that has been lost within culture. As the following fragment reveals, Bachelard is someone to emphasize this:

[w]e comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real

historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost (6).

One must also not forget that this is a solitary image of the old Icelandic turfhouse, and one of many. Not all recollections contain a space that consumes a “lost paradise.” This idea may pertain to a moment in time that was more focused on building life through what was necessary and less through what was desired. The experience within the turfhouse was the desired thing, rather than the experience of living in a “mud house.”

This image, that of a dark “mud house” or structure dug from within the earth has much to do with the way in which the turfhouse has always been closely connected to the environment, which surrounds it. Not only in material, but also in the way in which the house becomes part of the landscape through the use of natural structures, barriers and walls in the earth. In the case of Einar Jónsson’s recollection, and as within many other images, the house stood:

Like an inseparable part of the surroundings, both in form and location, thus was this old farm built precisely where it should stand, and just as it should be. It is the one most clear witness to the deep-rooted artistic nature of Icelanders, how the organization of the old farms was generally on the mark and their location in the landscape ideal, – each in its way set in beautiful harmony with the environment (5).⁹

This use of the environment is an element that sets the turfhouse craft apart from other forms of architecture, but it is also one which has been used to convey an image of the old, unsanitary of lack of modernity.

Not unlike a fading memory, much of what remains of the old Icelandic farmhouse is locked up in an image of the past. As time pushes forward, the history of

⁹ “Eins og óaðskiljanlegur þáttur umhverfisins, bæði að formi og legu, þannig var þessi gamli bær byggður einmitt þar, sem hann átti að standa, og eins og hann átti að vera. Er það einn hinn gleggsti vottur um rótgróið listeðli Íslendinga, hve skipulag hinna gömlu bæja var yfirleitt hnitmiðað og lega þeirra í landslaginu ákjósanleg, - hvort tveggja stillt til fegurðarsamræmis við umhverfið.”

both people and place, of culture, is drawn into poetic images, while lists and collections of things and time gone by are created. Rather than exist as a tangibly preserved fragment of living history, the turfhouse, which once found its root in the heart of the Icelandic people, has become a passing idea. Its reality is that of a fragmented image, the uncertainty of its use or contribution in the everyday life of contemporary Iceland is vague and fragile. However in times of change, this often is the reality, things go overlooked, and it is not until much later that their insight surfaces. It may be said of this case that, “[i]t is not until late in life that we really revere an image, when we discover that its roots plunge well beyond the history that is fixed in our memories” (Bachelard 33). Perhaps now is the moment where the turfhouse will provide reassurance, insight and find place in the history of the current making. At one point “[t]he turf farmhouse was a focal point of everyday life,” (Byock 34) and a crucial cultural root, which is not to say that returning to this ‘house’ is a return to the ‘ideal’ life, but rather that there was a time where all seemed to focus around this historical entity. To avoid this altogether would be a great loss to the catalogue of Icelandic history and detrimental to opening up ideas around how a sense of shame has wrongfully become attached to the turfhouse.

In picturing the memory of the old turfhouse standing within a mossy and grass-covered hill, it may be best to refer to Bachelard again on the matter. He knew perhaps more intimately than many that the house, the home, our first universe, the place where the imagination takes hold of its own place in the world, the place we will most likely visit in our memory as life flashes in a moment before us, is the place drawn so tightly to us, that it may be hard for us to escape it. This is said to be true of the fate of the Icelandic turfhouse and just as you “have to come to terms with a place,” so must you

come to terms with the imagination of this place. In Bachelard's words: "I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). And if this be the task of the house, to nurture creativity, then something must be said of the way in which the turfhouse was a place where great minds were raised. Not only this, but the turfhouse was habitually filled with festivities, oral and literary traditions, the Sagas and stories of mythology, craft and creative work, not to mention a place where the imagination was forced to take hold as time escaped and the darkness and weather kept one sheltered inside of its doors; the childhood home of the people still in a state of coming to terms with their roots in a stone, turf and timber frame.

This said, there are some who would take issue with a romanticized image of life in the turfhouse like the above asserting that this was not a festive space, but rather a dark and heavy one. As Sigurjón Hafsteinsson points out, "[i]n a newspaper article written in 1899 the housing condition of the Icelanders is described in stark colours. The author describes Icelandic turf-houses as dark, ugly underground hovels. The author finds them impractical and unhealthy, as they have low ceilings, foul air" (1). Although this excerpt is taken from a newspaper article published many years ago, Sigurjón highlights how this image was resurrected in discussion surrounding the crash, and not as a positive one.

Turning again to Einar Jónsson, it becomes relevant to visit his childhood recollections of the farm where he was born and believes to be a source of inspiration for the creativity found within the Icelandic community. As Einar describes his childhood home: "[e]ach thing had its own particular atmosphere and secrets, each building on the farm was its own special world. The *baðstofa* I knew through and through, I knew each knot and scratch in the beams, struts and supports and saw in them various images, which

the magic of twilight and glimmers could endow with mysterious life” (10).¹⁰ In other words, the *baðstofa* – as a means of encapsulating life – provided the space to dream and imagine. The *baðstofa* lay at the center of most things in the Icelandic turfhouse, and may be more commonly understood as the living room where everyone gathered and all things took place; “a place where the Icelanders worked and ate and slept, were born, made love and eventually died” (Hannes Lárusson 79). In essence, the *baðstofa* is the place where life took place and was contained. Where both young and old performed daily tasks and played, came to know themselves and it may have been the utmost haven for daydreaming and the release of the creative mind.

It is a wonder how a space such as this may contain all the value of an entire universe for a budding mind, and so much so that one must, at some point in life, return to such a space in thoughts to truly come to terms with where they have arrived from. Within this space there was also a source of community, which meant that individuals found themselves constantly surrounded by others and by things to do. Although individual, people shared this experience, were together and closely connected in this significant experience of everyday life. In many ways, this direct contact has shamefully been lost within today’s lifestyle and our distance from one another may also contribute to the distance we find between our connections to the past. If it is possible to maintain the kind of thought required to long for such a moment in the past then perhaps it is possible to see the value in the experience of such spaces although we may not have experienced them personally.

In recollecting another childhood memory Einar recalls upon one day waking and being drawn to a *blue clock-glass*: “I looked into the glass and saw the *baðstofa* reflected

¹⁰ “Hver hlutur átti sinn sérstaka hugblæ og leyndardóm, hvert hús í bænum var sérstakur heimur.”

in it. It awoke in me a memory of a specific event, which I no longer recall, but it seemed to me then that it was long past and heavenly to think of” (8).¹¹ These recollections serve to illustrate the profound power of remembering and in this instance; the house becomes a place where “imagination augments the values of reality” (Bachelard 3). Imagination and reality, in this sense, hold nearly an equivalent worth, existing together in illustrating the world to us.

It is not precisely so, that that sense of wonder, which our childhood memories are connected to, is by no means a delusion, rather a result of the fact, that over them spreads the calm holistic view of distance? We do not see them until later in that light and from that vantage, which we should always have examined them from. Delusion blinded us, while the time of experience passed; only later did we see [the time of experience’s] beauty and real value (Einar Jónsson 7).¹²

Although our learned “blindness” can sometimes demythologize our perceptions of the everyday, it is in the acknowledgement of times past that a realization of the worth of our own individual experience begins to take shape. That said, there is also value in collective experience as it is recalled in fragments that serve to remind us of how things used to be. In imagining such, we are forced to step outside of what we know as comfortable and into a reconsideration of how we have come to perceive the world, thus making the world less one-dimensional.

In Bachelard’s mind, “we are not “cast into the world,” since we open the world seen as it is, or as it were by transcending the world seen as it is, or as it was, before we started daydreaming” (184). This idea of opening up the world, this idea of transcending it opens up the dialogue between things and their meanings, what is reflected or cast

¹¹ “Ég horfði inn í glerið og sá baðstofuna speglast í því. Það vakti hjá mér minningu um eitthvert ákveðið atvik, sem ég man ekki lengur, hvað var, en mér þótti þá sem það væri liðið fyrir óralöngu og himneskt til þess að hugsa.”

¹² “Er það ekki einmitt svo, að unaðartilfinning sú, sem bernskuminningum er tengd, sé alls engin blekking, heldur afleiðing þess, að yfir þær fáiast hin kyrra heildarsýn fjarskans? Við sjáum þær ekki fyrr en síðar í því ljósi og af þeirri sjónarhæð, sem við hefðum alltaf átt að skoða þær frá. Blekking blindaði okkur, meðan reynslustundin leið; aðeins síðar sáum við fegurð hennar og raunverulegt gildi.”

shadow upon. Perhaps most importantly this notion allows for critical thinking along with creative thinking. This is an element in thought, which Nietzsche recognizes as vital for the world as we craft and collect images of it.

Einar Jónsson, through the recollection of his initial introduction to the universe in the turfhouse, illustrates the power of these poetic images in shaping us as humans. It is in a way a special case, which relates with the turfhouse as foundational, however the message is easily translated to other aspects of life as well:

For all those, who wish to see the beautiful and the good and are not sunk into the swamp of materialism and basic physical needs, must childhood memories therefore become one of those life-giving fountains, from which they can most often draw healthy and refreshing water during difficult lonely times in life; and not least, if they have the happy opportunity, to relive them in that place, where [the childhood memories] first came into existence (8).¹³

¹³ “Öllum þeim, sem vilja sjá hið fagra og góða og ekki eru sokknir í fen efnishyggju og búksorgar, hljóta æskuminningarnar því að verða meðal þeirra lífsbrunna, sem þeir oftast geta ausið úr heilnæmu vatni og hressandi á örðugum einverustundum ævinnar; og þá ekki síst, ef þeir eiga kost þeirra hamingju, að endurlifa þær þar, sem þær urðu til.”

FIVE.

Independent People:

Images Drawn through a Literary History

The sun had risen with its long shadows that made of the croft a palace. But it was dark away in the west. Summer was passing and the birds had sung all their sweetest songs; now their cry was short and hurried, as if they had discovered time (Halldór Laxness *Independent People* 43).

As the discussion of the turfhouse tradition develops, the image of this house as it appears in the literature of Iceland is a means of collecting descriptions, which carry valuable meaning. It is a well-known element in the history of Iceland that much of the cultural identity and past is strongly built upon the literary heritage originating from the *Sagas* and the Old Norse mythology of the *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas* from the 13th century. These works were at one point in time lesser known but through their imagery have created mindscapes rich with narratives of the past. Also, much in the same way as the turfhouse tradition is being resurrected and preserved through the work done at *Íslenski bærinn*, these literary treasures were resurrected from being nearly lost in time by individuals such as Snorri Sturlusson. This appears to be the case with keeping tradition alive; there must be an individual or group of individuals with the intent of upholding living tradition, before the danger of falling behind ‘the times’ becomes reality. Most often this is done not with the individual in mind, but rather for the good of those beyond only themselves. This is an incalculable contribution to humanity, which keeps culture alive and thriving. Images and stories from historical sources and modern literature provide the metaphors to recollect material culture, ideas and perceptions in and of Iceland, but at the same time, these works have also created long-standing, challenging structures for much of the contemporary literary work that has come to follow. While

seeking knowledge within these sources, one must acknowledge that the importance of such comes of the insight they provide into the context derived from Icelandic culture, although they are mainly fictional. Regardless, they have provided invaluable descriptions, which pertain to a reading of the turfhouse.

Literature has a way of confronting our imaginations, creating mirror-like reflections not only of time and place, but also of experience. It is not completely surprising that literature of the past is reborn in times when history appears to repeat itself, struggle or change, and in this rebirth new meaning for both the work and the society is produced. Halldór Laxness's *Independent People* or *Sjálfstætt folk* (1934-5) reemerged in this way in the fall of 2008, when Iceland saw itself along with the rest of the world, in a state of not only financial, but also cultural crisis. This realist story stemmed from the events of the time in Iceland (Jóhannsson 384), and continues to inform the historical growth of Iceland. There is a subtle socialist critique found within the work which carries forth into the present – that of the individual struggle within modernity – and is a struggle that remains to be deeply rooted in our humanity. This is expressed most clearly through the protagonist, Bjartur, whose “life is a constant struggle against forces bigger than [sic] himself – nature, his old master and debtor Jón, banks, merchants and the swings in the international economy as a result of the First World War, not to mention ghosts and demons. Bjartur never acknowledges the power of these phenomena or succumbs to them” (Jóhannsson 385). This constant fight is as present today as it was with Bjartur in *Independent People*, where the individual has yet to come to terms with the power of such forceful and often misleading entities in the personal struggle for autonomy. *Independent People*, nonetheless, sheds light on the important

relationship between historical times and the modern day, and places emphasis on the living quality of history and its relevance to the moving present, while highlighting the often-blind story we humans regrettably continue to write.

Halldór Laxness writes of life in the turfhouse in this work, drawing the image of a small and humble handmade shelter closely connected with the surrounding environment. It is a symbol of pride for its owner, although it had to be crawled in and out of, as though a hole in the surrounding ground, by ladder. It is closely connected to the earth from which it was built and the depiction of this connection is quite a clear and natural one. Laxness also draws a tale of deeply embedded human torment as the forces of both nature and industry pull at his main character, a determined farmer and house owner. The tale is not an unfamiliar one in our day, as this tension between nature and destructive disposition of consumer industry is a present struggle for many. As Charles Taylor points out, the narratives of modernity have actually created such “achievements of civilization as – industrial wastelands, rampant capitalism, mass society, ecological devastation” (718). The story of Bjartur of Summerhouses, as a result, becomes a symbol of man trapped between tradition and culture in the wake of the consumer age; the struggle being, how to reconcile the two. Pride is wrapped up in things, namely the ownership of a turfhouse, but the socialist discussion continues further as Laxness acknowledges the three stages of the farmer, pointing out that the small farmer never has the opportunity to fully reach his dream in the modern situation. In many instances, the role of the turfhouse in the development of this tragic story is the crux of the work. As the claim to independence becomes Bjartur’s downfall, his fight against the systems of progress through the turfhouse is a failure, as he cannot ward off the temptation of

advancement forever. It is in this dichotomy that Laxness achieves the task of bringing to life the struggle of the individual within modern society, but also the movement from tradition in a period of change.

This novel was written at a time when the world was between two world wars. These conflicts undoubtedly left an impression on the author, and this time of extreme upheaval stirred his disillusionment with progress. The time frame of the novel, 1900-1922, sees World War I occur, creating a crisis everywhere in the western world, and heavily influencing life in Iceland. There was not a part of culture that was left untouched, but rather invisible scars on the connection of the people to their own culture. Keeping this in mind and considering the relevance of a current reading of the work alongside contemporary society, a link may also be drawn from the past of the turfhouse and up to the current economic crisis. Iceland, along with many other nations, is entangled in this questioning of human need, as the structures of society appear to collapse. The current setting is also important because, once again, social traditions are at stake, as a different type of war is taking place, a war on culture.

This notion in relation to the house is perhaps best expressed once again by Bachelard, who illustrates the complexity of the human struggle to exist alongside the power of desire for change with an analogy of the dream house:

Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the dream house is opposed to that of the childhood home. Late in life, with indomitable courage, we continue to say that we are going to do what we have not yet done: we are going to build a house. This dream house may be merely a dream of ownership, the embodiment of everything that is considered convenient, comfortable, healthy, sound, desirable, by other people. It must therefore satisfy both pride and reason, two irreconcilable terms. (61).

Here Bachelard is referring to the value of living in a state of “impermanence,” where dreams are free to develop and roam, versus a state of “finality,” where one is static and unable to see the freedom in dreaming. That does not mean that his idea is not worthy of consideration in the present context and although we often long for the need to express through material things, the force of outside factors often misguides this expression. As Bachelard points out, acting with pride and with reason are most often two incompatible conditions, which do not co-exist without struggle.

It is in these moments of the push and pull of outside forces that the individual brave enough to challenge these elements becomes most crucial for us. As Benedikt Gröndal asks of these moments: “Are the great revolutions anything other than the massive revolt of the human spirit when it has been oppressed and tortured by poverty and subjugation? They are like thunderstorms that occur when the air is struggling to acquire its balance and harmony again” (xvii). Those willing to stand up against the change in time and life in this struggle to conceive both pride and reason in a unified way become examples for all to consider. The revolution requires hard questioning as we attempt to regain our footing in time. It might be said that individuals like Halldór Laxness or Hannes Lárusson are those who dare to seek harmony and balance again.

As noted previously, Hannes Lárusson often addresses the conflict between culture and civilization. Through *Íslenski Bærinn*, Hannes is working along lines that are very similar to Halldór Laxness in his use of tradition. As Ástráður Eysteinnsson has expressed, Laxness was, “a cultural agent in a radical sense of the word, very often, in fact, as a cultural hero who shaped his environment” (50). Although his concern was often based upon the traditions of his own Icelandic culture, he managed to reveal

circumstances in which these traditions entered the living, contemporary world through his writing. It may be said that Hannes chooses the same path as he enters into Iceland's history while both challenging and highlighting its place within the larger context of the world. Also, connections may be drawn between Hannes's and Halldór Laxness's aims as cultural agents, seeking an awareness of the past. In fact, "Laxness' whole activity during this period constitutes a multilayered contemporary dialogue with Icelandic tradition. Or perhaps one should say that Laxness grasps hold of the horns of tradition, having learnt to be its master, rather than be collected up by it" (Ástraður Eysteinnsson 53). The same can be said about Hannes Lárusson in relation to the turfhouse endeavor.

The story of Bjartur of Summerhouses is that of a modern man engaged in the struggle to preserve the past while looking hopefully into the future of modernity. The turfhouse¹⁴ at Summerhouses is representative of the Icelandic farming tradition and serves as a tangible symbol of Bjartur's struggle for independence; this was the case for many in the history of Iceland. Bjartur, however, moves away from this tradition, as modernity enters the scene in Iceland and decides to build a new cement house. In doing so he steps too far away from tradition in too short of a period of time, in a rush to be recognized as 'something'. Bjartur's independence slowly fades from prosperity as he is forced into a new living situation, as the function of his house as a family or communal house, is swallowed up by the changes in attitude during modernity.

In turn, Bjartur builds himself a current, contemporary cement house, but is unable to fill his new house with things, as all of his belongings arrive from the traditional farmhouse structure. Instead of integrating the old and new building

¹⁴ The term *croft house* is solely used within the english translation of the book, *turfhouse* would be seen as a more appropriate translation.

traditions, he leaves the turfhouse method behind and embraces the use of cement, something that Hannes would see as a fault in the bridging of the traditional with the contemporary. He is unable to sustain the new home, as this sort would function, because he is trapped between this tradition in his knowledge and the modernity in his dreams. Essentially, Bjartur and his family end up without a working house: the old turfhouse is in disrepair from neglect and the new cement house is dysfunctional as a result of Bjartur's tragic seduction by modernity. "So Bjartur's house stood in the moulds all that summer, a most depressing object to meet the eye; travellers passing that way missed the friendly old grass-grown turf cottage, for it lay out of sight behind this formless, gaping monstrosity, which reminded one of nothing so much as the havoc and devastation left in the trail of a hurricane" (Laxness 435).

In this instance the logical elements of the farmhouse have been overlooked as new methods have been introduced into society in the wake of prosperity and consumer culture. The turfhouse, as Hannes Lárússon would say, is "a vernacular masterpiece", with an "unbroken history of perhaps 1000 years" ("Turfhouse Tradition" *Icelandic Radio Journal*) and there are reasons why it is constructed as it is. For example, the sheep live underneath the turfhouse for the generation of heat in the winter. The landscape surrounding the house, as we have seen in earlier descriptions, becomes a foundation for the structure out of necessity, protection, and reason and adds to its aesthetic quality. The cement house, however, has no such quality and that energy, previously used and kept within the farmhouse, is lost.

The turfhouse is a fading symbol of national identity and there is great importance in the tale of Bjartur of Summerhouses. Halldór Guðmundsson writes, "Bjartur is a hero

but his heroism has tragic consequences, because he is devoted to ideals that are not in accord with reality” (221). This reality is that of a man who is misled by his desires to step into the progression of time, who did so without the proper knowledge to exist without tradition. This is not without considering the socialist subject matter of Laxness’s work, which may in fact have misguided the protagonist in his choices. With that in mind though, is this misguidance not the case with many of us in the contemporary world? And it is within a project such as *Íslenski bærinn* that one is forced to confront these misleading desires, and our reasons for straying from tradition.

Independent People is relevant to the current day, as much as any other time. The work has become a pillar in the Icelandic cultural landscape. It “deals with the life of a small farmer, and thus, addresses issues that for many were at the very heart of what was considered Icelandic: farming, life in the countryside, was, to politicians and many intellectuals, the very essence of Icelandic nationality” (Jóhannsson 387). As Hannes has contended, the turfhouse is in some ways more important than the literary history of the sagas. A bold comment and one sure to stir much discussion, but also a comment which highlights the way in which some elements in history become larger and recognized as more important, while just as valuable elements are brushed aside. Almost all of the sagas have elements of the farmhouse within them and focus on the central entity of life within such a communal space. Hannes’s comment is made with some intention to shock, and for some may be too far drawn. There may be some sort of truth found within it though, and his point is so radical that it demands investigation into the thought behind it. There is a mutual interest in preserving the literary history along with the turfhouse, as

they are both symbols of cultural history. It is acknowledged that the literature is a key element in Icelandic identity and therefore the turfhouse must also be seen as such.

The loss of the farmhouse, and ultimately, Bjartur's loss of Summerhouses symbolizes the movement away from tradition that came with modernity in Iceland after the First World War. It also forces one to consider the place of the individual in capitalist society. In fact, there may be a connection between independence for the individual and the nation, on the one hand, and a moving forward, away from tradition, on the other. In order for cultural independence to be sustainable in the present, however, the traditions of the past must be incorporated into the dialogue surrounding the movement into the future. The same may be said of today, as we still find the changes in our contemporary world dependent on historical moments as such. We have only moved further away since.

If, as Bachelard believes, our house is in fact our individual corner of the world (4), our house may be the humblest of spaces, but it is, put simply, the place where life is rooted in the interactions that take place within its walls. It is no question that Bjartur takes pride in his house, as it represents eighteen years of hard work for another individual, his emancipation from such and his devotion as a farmer. In many other ways it also serves as an indicator of the lack of understanding and perhaps attention Bjartur pays to his family. His obsession with image becomes detrimental to his human relationships.

Halldór Guðmundsson, in *The Islander*, sees this fragment as the heart of the novel:

‘What the devil do you think you know about any damned world? What is a world? This is the world, the world is here, Summerhouses, my land, my farm in the world. And though you propose to swallow the sun in a fit of momentary madness because you’ve seen a couple of blue banknotes from America, which are obviously false the same as any other large sum of money that falls into the hands of the individual unless he has worked for it himself, sooner or later you will find out that Summerhouses is the world and then you will have cause to remember what I have said’ (Laxness 393).

As Bjartur attempts to convince his son, who is tempted to leave for America, that all his needs in the world can be found within his home at Summerhouses, Bachelard’s point echoes in the distance, as does Hannes’s idea that you have to come to terms with a place to fully understand its importance. That said, it also points to the relationship of place, namely Iceland and America, in their likes in the realm of this “monetary madness.”

Most symbolic of the Icelandic tradition is the turfhouse, which is rooted deeply in logistics of farming and has existed as the center of rural life for Icelanders of the past. It is not uncommon that the house plays such a significant role in the literature of Iceland and the relationships between people, as it is often a place that becomes representative of the world outside of its doors. It is a microcosm for the rest of the world, for the structures in society and the ways in which our views of the world are developed. In *Independent People* the turfhouse becomes the site where all of life’s important interactions take place. It is the site where wives and mothers die lonely in the dark, where a daughter is born, left motherless, and later driven away, where children grow and learn of life’s work, where the difference between bailiffs and independent sheep farmers become apparent over hot, black coffee. It is essentially the place where the outside world, the individual and culture meet, as well as the place where progressing history,

consumer culture and a struggle for independence collide. It is a place not to be overlooked although it may appear unassuming.

Hannes Lárusson may perceive the significance of the turfhouse tradition more than other individuals. He has created a life enveloped with a concern for the Icelandic turfhouse. In an act to create a disruption in the *business as usual* attitude of his fellow Icelanders, Hannes is working within the much greater context of the challenge of cultural heritage in the ever-increasing “age of mechanical reproduction”. In fact, Hannes has consciously stumbled upon an element of his own culture that may serve as an example for the many cultures of the world. The project has spanned over 20 years and in the particular state of Iceland today, has gained new significance as the crisis has forced Icelanders to reconsider their past, while perhaps gaining a more profound perspective of the value of tradition and its contribution to life in and up against the restraints of capitalism.

The restoration of the original turfhouse has less to do with the actual physicality of the structure and more to do with its symbolic presence. As Ólafur Gíslason points to in the text *Icelandic Art Today*, “the concept underlying this project is not first and foremost to reconstruct an old environment in a romantic, nationalistic manner. The idea is rather to stimulate, in a new setting, consideration of certain aspects of Iceland’s cultural heritage regarding the value of crafts and the value and history of human relationships with nature” (120). The project is a step aside from the cranes that penetrate Reykjavik’s skyline and a resistance to the disconnection between the past and the present.

In 2006 Andri Snær Magnason published the much-needed work, *Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual for a Frightened Nation*, which addresses not only the importance of the environment in Iceland, but also the relevance it holds to the culture. Although the work is centered around the contemporary situation in Iceland, its message exceeds the limits of being directed towards the Icelandic public solely. In essence, like *Independent People*, the manual is relevant to the world's public as a whole, as it deals with issues that are often overlooked in all societies. In the section titled "Farming Report" Andri Snær addresses the ways in which the long tradition of farming has been broken, as people move further and further away from the source of their history and civilization progresses. Although much of this section deals with the ways humans have removed themselves from the source of such essentials as food, it also describes the evolution of the farmer from independent to nearly non-existent as such. People have, been replaced with machine. The link to both Laxness's concern in *Independent People*, as well as the similar threads apparent in *Íslenski bærinn* are hard to avoid in this instance.

In this discussion, Magnason questions the ways in which significant elements within society have essentially lost their significance as a result of uninformed progress. He also notes that this is often the case as things of less importance gain recognition. This idea is closely connected to a point highlighted by *Íslenski bærinn*, in that value may shift, as do ideas and significance according to the state of affairs at any given time, but that does not mean that this transition has to occur at the expense of other elements that may not seem as significant in the moment, specifically tradition. He writes; "It depends entirely on the significance a person ascribes to the thing and the significance society ascribes to it. Significance lies in the eye of the beholder and is fundamental property of

human thinking. Man is ready to wage war and lay down his life for mere significances, perceived meanings, of no tangible value to anyone” (45). The relevance here, in terms of Bjartur within *Independent People*, Hannes Lárusson and *Íslenski Bærinn* and what Magnason is pointing to is that these transitions often occur too quickly, with little thought put into what may be lost in the course of the matter, until the results become irreparable. In this instance it often requires radical measures to direct focus towards understanding the significance of such cultural heritage as the turfhouse and this is only strengthened through its attachment within the literature of Iceland.

Laxness was one such person who understood his country, its people and their traditions. In an article titled, “War Against the Land” published in 1971 and quoted in *Dreamland*, Laxness expresses his deep concern for his country in the turmoil of modernization. The quote is directed against metal smelting within Iceland but its message draws from the heart of the locations where the farmhouse was given birth.

Laxness writes:

The problem is the unquestioning faith of the people at the National Energy Authority in filling this country with endless metal smelters. For it presents a grave danger to the land and its community when a group of men in suits, at the say-so of their slide rules, sets out to obliterate as many of the places we hold sacred as they can in as short a time as possible, drowning familiar settlements in water (twelve kilometers of the Laxá valley are to set to be submerged, according to their plans), and, given the chance, declaring war upon everything that lives and draws breath in Iceland (Magnusson 163-164).

As discussed, there is a perceivable connection, or even an important parallel between Halldór Laxness’s *Independent People* and Hannes Lárusson’s *Íslenski Bærinn*. *Íslenski bærinn* is a venture not only reflecting an act in spirit with Laxness’s attempt to question the world around him, but also to explore the meaning of tradition. Literature is

a living entity that arises from its context in time and place. For history to break this repetition the past must be embraced with a sensibility for the future. Bjartur is the modern man, who leaves the past behind in the hope of a prosperous future. The postmodern man, such as Hannes Lárusson, experiences the failure of the future in the present and is attempting to maintain a close tie with tradition in order to create a sustainable present. If it is the course of art and literature to repeat itself in the face of reality through a return to the spirit of tradition, then it is only natural that the artists of today guide this matter into being.

SIX.

Torn from the Origins

It may be fair to say, at this point, that we humans have been cut away from our origins, misled from the value of the everyday and perhaps even stripped of the most mystical elements of life. It may also be fair to say that as individuals, we have done this to ourselves. Although we may think otherwise, we seem to exist in a world where technology, industry, fast-paced advancement and the unforgiving nature of consumerism govern all means of life and most decisions we make. While thoughtless choices go unnoticed, we fail to see the relationship of our actions to the often destructive results they produce. Our thoughts on the matters of daily life seem unable to escape the distracting forms and shiny illusions of industry, thus leaving us victims of the empty standards we set for ourselves. History seems too far away for us to value it as being worth anything, non-monetarily speaking.

We have become disconnected from the past in a way, which has left little room for traces of any time other than our own present to be found within us. All the while the decaying materials and fading images that make up our cultures, if noticed, are done so in a way that is less important than they deserve to be ascribed. History becomes fractured in this sense, missing pieces and losing parts of itself in the confusion of our disillusionment. And, unfortunately, the pieces left are more so the diluted remainders of our diminished cultures and humanity. Unknowingly, it is in this act that elements of the shaping of ourselves grow fainter without detection and we truly do not know what it means to be without something until the occasion is too late to reverse. It is within history that we are to be reminded of a different moment, given the opportunity to

imagine life before all of the glitter and to witness the narrative of time as a clearly living entity. We as individuals have the choice to perceive time as something we live within, not something to be run up against. In doing so, we have to acknowledge all time as an ever-moving present, a movement through history and an entry into the world. It becomes a means of understanding and a way to experience.

One of the most profound activists of the intellect and philosophers of our time, Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), in his work *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, describes the history of ideas, and the understanding of human civilization across history not as a single linear movement which can be gauged from one end until the other, but as a series of rises and declinations, or a

dialectical movement of clashing opposites always resolved in a higher synthesis, but as the realization that cultures are many and various, each embodying scales of value different from those of other cultures and sometimes incompatible with them, yet capable of being understood, that is, seen by observers endowed with sufficiently acute and sympathetic historical insight, as ways of living which human beings could pursue and remain fully human” (58).

History occurs in a narrative form, with breaks, clashes and meeting points between cultures and with this push and pull between forces, history finds its place not only in written form but also as a series of related memories or moments. History cannot only be seen in the sense of a recollection of a different time, and as the objects of the past are carried through time, it is essential to question and assert their place within this movement. In this sense he views history as a perceivable assembly of ups and downs, providing us with “authentic examples – and exemplars – of virtue and vice, with vivid illustrations of what to do and what to avoid – a gallery of portraits of heroes and villains, the wise and the foolish, the successful and the failures” (Berlin, *Crooked* 49). We

should perhaps look to these instances to provide some sense of guidance for our decision making.

A project such as *Íslenski bærinn* – while awakening a history that has been dormant for some time, through artistic creativity – allows for a profound exploration of the movement of time. It must also be acknowledged though, that there remains the constant danger for an endeavor of this fashion. There is a fine line, in which *Íslenski bærinn* has the potential to slip inadvertently into the pattern of lost opportunities. It is of course a work of restoration and a rebirth of history, but the question of what it will be in its completion lingers on the boundary of a visionary success or an objectified idea perceived in the wrong way. *Íslenski bærinn*, by nature, could quite easily fall into the trap of consumer tourism, which in the end would be no better than it being forgotten in time. That being said, it is a destination to be witnessed, experienced and thought about. And, like the above discussion, it can be noted that:

[i]n an age wherein people have lost their sense of connection through time, the Icelandic farm might become an escapist's paradise on the edge of Europe, or serve as an object of fetish. Not so for most Icelanders, though, who are still good at repressing the memory of this chapter in the history of Icelandic culture, the one that lasted for centuries (Birna Bjarnadóttir 1).

There are, as with all things, questions that arise from within the project, which may not ever be fully understood or answered within or outside of Iceland. These questions in the end, the process through which they have taken both Hannes and all that care to venture into understanding such a place, provide incalculable insight into the importance of the past. Relevance is most apparent in the way in which *Íslenski bærinn* re-examines the role of history as a movement away from the cluttered and unbearable world of consumerism. Although it is a break from what has become the norm, the fate of such an

endeavor is somewhat uncertain. Questions are left lingering, as it – in some ways – becomes swallowed up by the craziness that surrounds it. For Andri Snær Magnason, “[i]t is a strange feeling walking through this condemned country” (253), a place where the ability of history to perform its task is so willing, but the acknowledgement, acceptance and action upon such falls short of being awakened. This point not only acknowledges the nature of Iceland and its history, but also directs attention to the way in which such a small and somewhat isolated nation can become condemned by empty and disturbing wastelands of both industry and ideas. In essence the creative and unbridled space for thought has become clouded and disregarded through an increase in the consumer. *Íslenski bærinn* has the potential to stand as a symbol against this perception of life in the present, allowing one to reexamine a crucial part in time in the context and familiarity of their everyday life. This past specifically and the past in general opens up doors for examining life beyond what we know of ourselves.

Berlin has more often presented a wealth of deeply unsettling and exploratory questions than he claims to provide answers for (Hausheer xiii). These puzzle-like questions reflect on the soul and on the changes of humanity as an increasing collective. Berlin also investigates history and encourages his listeners to do so, not without the thought of how the transformation of human nature and thought has shaped and continues to shape how we perceive our time. This means relying on the boundaries and instabilities of the past not as concrete limits, but rather as a means for measuring change and acquiring knowledge. The past becomes a platform from which to travel further. It is, for Berlin, essential that we not attempt to escape historical ideas and although we may not possess the power to answer all the lingering questions attached to these ideas,

we rely on the history of ideas in its creating natural bridges between the past, present and future. The same is true of art and the role of the artist, as they become not only a voice for the individual, or crucial to creative development, but also a voice, which has and continues to be carried throughout time. It is perhaps through the exploration of these often-curious elements of life, creativity and growth, into the lives of our ancestors, that the key to seeking and taking hold of the tools needed for examining life as a means to greater reality take shape. This does not mean that we must do as has been done in the past, but rather look to the moments in history where ideas can be linked and adjusted to the way life is lived in the present day. Berlin writes:

If we are to hope to understand the often violent world in which we live (and unless we try to understand it, we cannot expect to be able to act rationally in it and on it), we cannot confine our attention to the great impersonal forces, natural and man-made, which act upon us. The goals and motives that guide human action must be looked at in the light of all that we know and understand; their roots and growth, their essence, and above all their validity, must be critically examined with every intellectual resource that we have (*Crooked 2*).

The very root of the current discussion is one in which making conscious choices about perceiving the everyday and living in the present with a balance of both reality and imagination is fundamental and relevant. This also means that the notion and act of coming to terms with the past is more crucial to humanity than ever before, as we more commonly watch silently as history's presence quickly fades. If we remind ourselves of the role of history as discussed by Nietzsche, it then becomes apparent that the echoes of history are everywhere, and before we have gone too far, it is time to accept this. Berlin recognizes that "since human history is made by men, it can therefore, even in principle, be wholly understood by 'entering' into the minds of our ancestors" (*Crooked 64*). In the same nature, Nietzsche looks to Schopenhauer who spoke of the progressive movement

of history as building a bridge where once more the giants of the past call to one another, through the barriers of time, carrying on the “spirit-dialogue” which continues to inform our growth (*Use* 111). In these relationships a link through time is constructed, allowing for collective memory to guide certain instances into being. By regarding the movement of time and growth of history as such, we not only gain an awareness of what life may have been for our ancestors in distant moments, but also develop critical perceptions of the development of our cultures. If we lose this, we lose a possible chance at stumbling upon something that may appear without measure in the context of how we choose to assess the elements of life currently. Revisiting the past seems to have been lost somewhere in between the advancement of technology and the industrial nature of life within the twenty-first century. There are, however, those who choose to see differently and it is within them that the artist stands in as a means to challenging such uniformity. Although the restoration of *Íslenski bærinn* appears upon the surface as the work of a historian or perhaps even an anthropologist, it is the fact that its nurturer is in fact an artist devoted to bridging contemporary art and cultural heritage that pushes the boundaries of critical thought in both art and historical studies.

This notion – of engaging directly with history in the larger context, as an art even – whether similar to or completely different from other histories, is something to be considered in the way that each culture may have its own unique contribution to the progression of humanity. And, although some variety or dissimilarities occur, it should be without conflict, as the function of cultural history is to enhance universal harmony between individuals, collectives and institutions (Berlin, *Crooked* 57). History sometimes allows for the feeling of a sense of human purpose in the individual, often

providing a role or sense of place within the crowd. Amongst collectives, history provides a sense of relationship to one another, a place within the world and the collective, providing both similarities and differences. Within the institution, history grants possible interaction with unfamiliar ideas and in this engagement new reflections have the prospect of being born. With that thought, variety presents us with a wealth of knowledge to be shared amongst cultures, which has the possibility to open us up to new ideas and opportunities, this difference is, nonetheless, a learning experience. This is why it deserves to play a role in the formation of current ideas. Berlin describes the way in which history can be understood as a “cyclical process which leads to a peak of human achievement, then to decadence and collapse, after which the entire process begins afresh” or of how history might be perceived as a “cosmic drama,” eventually coming to an end beyond any past time or history and above the human understanding (*Crooked* 50). Many attempts have been made to assign some sense of pattern in the study of history, and for some, the most crucial idea may be that observations should not be seen as universal for all individuals, but rather a sense of cultural pluralism¹⁵ accepted.

Berlin, as does Hannes, acknowledges that it is not only the past as seen in collective providing understanding, but rather that in considering the individual in this instance allows for the humanity of the matter to surface. Berlin writes,

To see the past through the eyes of those who lived through it, from the inside, as it were, and not merely as a succession of distant facts and events and figures in a procession to be described from some external vantage-point as so much material for narrative or statistical kind of understanding, even though with considerable effort, is a claim to a capacity that could scarcely have been made before the modern age by historians concerned with the truth” (*Crooked* 59).

¹⁵ This idea is furthered in Berlin’s *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, page 59. Giambattista Vico is described as the father of the modern concept of culture and the term *cultural pluralism*, which is the thought that each “culture has its own unique vision, scale of values, which, in the course of development, is superseded by other visions and values, but never wholly so”.

Not much is more intimate than the experience one may encounter in within a house – a private but also outwardly relatable experience of space and a microcosm of the world or universe. Just as Berlin points out in the writings of philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), his view on culture “did not suppose that men are encapsulated within their own epoch or culture, insulated in a box without windows and consequently incapable of understanding other societies and periods whose values may be widely different from theirs and which they find strange or repellent” (*Crooked* 60). This is imperative to finding within possible shared experiences ways in which we as humans may relate to and learn from one another. It is maybe even in these more personal reflections, as childhood memories or perceptions, within collections or as a communal sense of space, that the most precious constructions take place. Without the keeping of these instances, we as a whole allow for the fading away of our culture, while placing emphasis on more transitory material things that will not matter in the end.

“It is worth remarking, in this connection, that the history of ideas offers few examples of so dramatic a change of outlook as the birth of the new belief, not so much in the inevitability, as in the value and importance, of the singular and the unique, of variety as such; and the corresponding conviction that there is something repressive and deeply unattractive in uniformity” (Berlin, *Crooked* 56). If one is to believe this, then does it not make sense that in seeking, preserving and valuing the differences we find amongst our cultures is an element that allows us freedom in being different. The unattractiveness in uniformity Berlin speaks about can be linked to the dilution of culture, which seems to have become an acceptable view on life. Much of what is locked up in

history is the wealth and richness in a realm where ideas have the space to reflect freely and to work against this watering down of the meaning of humankind.

The problem arises, in the use of history for the life of humankind, when history's moments are used in a manner drawing a distinct line between these moments of the past and that of the present. Ideas of the past can be manipulated to create scenarios fitting different critiques and discussions, but not always with the best intention for retaining history in mind. In essence, and in this use, history becomes frozen in time, *antiquarian*, as Nietzsche would term it, and therefore fails in its use for life. This is not uncommon to much of the world, but specifically in the case of Iceland, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon in his social history, *Wasteland with Words*, acknowledges that “[t]he people that governed Iceland over the last decades of the twentieth century had little interest in the traditions and customs of their forefathers, except when it came to making fine speeches for formal occasions. The whole picture has become distorted: all points of reference have been cut away from their origins” (*Wasteland* 268). Such is the exact case surrounding the turfhouse tradition at *Íslenski bærinn*, where the battle within the project is that of rebuilding a relevant historical image, which has been ill-used, in an attempt to call attention to the beauty of tradition.

In questioning the role the Icelandic population plays in both the deterioration of culture, but also the possibility of reinstating its usefulness, Hannes Lárusson describes the currently bleak state of the matter in this way:

Icelanders learned to read turf and rocks generation after generation for roughly a thousand years. But then they unlearned their skills of turfing almost overnight when modernity came storming into Iceland during the first part of the twentieth century. Now they again stand at the same starting point as when the first inhabitants of Iceland began settling on the island, and now cut their small chunks

of turf in their slippers while sitting in front of their computer screen on a lukewarm chair (*Chunks* 81).

Once again the image of Taylor's *industrial wasteland* is brought to mind and the question of what to do in this instance comes to matter more significantly. As it is not always the easiest choice to disregard the progression of society in the consumer terms of the current day, one can see how our views of life and of the world have come to be developed. That should not be accepted as an excuse though as it is however an individual choice to be conscious of the role played by the self in choosing to regard or disregard the complications and implications attached to agreeing to the role of the consumer – the pawn. *What will it take, and at what point will we stand up out of these lukewarm chairs, ready to face the reality of the matter?*

Although this is the question for many places, there is some element of Iceland, which makes the struggle all the more apparent and real. Andri Snær Magnason proposes that, “[p]erhaps the world will see it in this light: if the richest country on earth cannot protect and preserve its heritage, what hope is there for the rest of us? Iceland’s reputation is fragile and vulnerable. It is like integrity, honesty, rectitude. These are things you cannot buy” (277). The statement is in a way full of irony, but also full of a certain truth. On the small island of Iceland one can find history everywhere, for the moment, although such will not be the case in time shortly if more is not done to retain what is left. It is really a matter of becoming aware of the possibility to gain some control over the way the past is perceived and put to use in developing, with some insight, what lies ahead. Andri Snær perhaps best puts the issue at hand into perspective when he writes, “[m]an is free. The machine is there to serve man. And if the machine

fails to do this, it is best to switch it off. Over the last few years we have watched on as a machine has run out of control” (277). In this age, where the *machine* governs what seems to be most things, it is maybe time that its power and control be brought into question and perhaps the moment has come to disengage.

SEVEN.
The Surrounding Landscape

Íslenski bærinn is an endless endeavor consumed with the need to explore the depths of culture. Reawakening, even if only some fragment of the life of the turfhouse, and going beyond the history of the people of Iceland. In its nature the project crosses into the soul of our very existence and reaches into the heart of what it truly means to be human, a vulnerability that cannot be escaped. To bind together so many aspects of life – art and creation, childhood memory, the very notion of history, its place in literature and the relevance it holds to and for the living – is at the core of the matter. It is difficult to draw the boundaries outlining *Íslenski bærinn* as a complete and contained entity it may be viewed more sufficiently as releasing and accepting many floating threads, not entirely fixed to one thought, description or notion. Rather, *Íslenski bærinn* is an open space, with much to investigate, and from many different angles. It is dependent on the individual to do so in this instance though. As it is, perhaps the endeavor is more so about the crossing of these seemingly tightened boundaries into a realm where dream and reality collide. And as this occurs, we are left with more questions to ponder than we as individuals can construct the answers for.

If history is a living thing, it is in historical moments such as the one we are able to witness in *Íslenski bærinn*, that we have the opportunity to become one with certain ideas and return to our sense of life with a new perception of our place within it. This is a struggle though, in that there are continuous forces, which push us down and pull us, try to convince and convey to us something very different from what we truly seek in existence and detach us violently from the root of things. The balance is found in coming

to terms with these overwhelming powers, and in accepting that as time goes on we change, but that does not mean that we lose the moments before or our previous selves. It is key to hold on to tradition simply because it provides us with a place to rest our heads when all is said and done and we seek the comfort of moments we have collected along the way. Despite the feeling that these moments seem far off in the distance, we must also in those instances acknowledge those moments that have been given to us.

With this train of thought, it seems only natural to note that although many years have passed and shaped us since Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) wrote his unforgettable piece *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* in 1936, the repercussions of this immense moment can still be felt. This moment was one of change, where the experience of life had suddenly reached a different state, and one in which the introduction of the machine into everyday life left a lasting imprint. His thought that the mechanical age would remove any sense of ritual from our daily lives seems distant from the thoughts of Benedikt Gröndal and his *Fragments*. Benjamin's proposal that the mechanical age would see our deteriorating traditions become lost in a misunderstanding of the nature of progress resonates maybe even most clearly today. The introduction of the mechanical as a result of the industrial age has left more than just a trail of misplaced auras. Rather, it has penetrated all elements of life through a change in the conditions of the way we perceive society and our position within it. Benjamin's work expresses an idea that can be heard resonating through many different aspects, not only in art but also in life everywhere. Our attachment to tradition has struggled through this progression, and in many ways we have been left with little direction or understanding of where to travel further. As is the case with *Íslenski bærinn*, a return to the roots and an

engagement in the development of ideas is necessary to return from this removed position in time and to find grounding in actively participating in culture.

The point of the matter is best summed up in the engagement with the following words from visionary Hannes Lárússon as he describes the experience of engaging with history:

With these ancient tools, one cuts and slices strips and chunks of turf from damp and stringy marshes. The turf craft revolves around applying these tools, and some others as well, and then developing the skills to build turf houses from the chunks and strips. The way to that goal is, like in so many cases, to read history backwards, and then lie down on your knees in the moist marsh and slip the well-shaped scythe underneath the turf, or put your hands solidly on the handle of the turf spade, step firmly on its blade and listen for the appropriate sound as the edge slips into the ground (Hannes Lárússon, *Chunks* 81).

Hannes has created an occasion to enter into another world and one, which provides an opportunity to perceive history, time and culture from a perspective that has not been valued enough. He as the artist, is in this moment, draws from his surroundings and creates new and invaluable experience for his island in the north, but also for the world at large. Culture is shaped through such individuals, they reveal the path to preserving memory and perceiving history in its living form.

In the final scene of the short film *Síðasti bærinn*¹⁶ one watches as an aged man buries himself alongside the casket he has built for his dead wife with decaying wood taken from their house. In its very location, the *bæjarstæði*,¹⁷ one can imagine an old turfhouse standing in isolation and the history that exists within the surrounding ground. The grave dug by his own hands in his northern Icelandic landscape enters into this

¹⁶ *Síðasti bærinn* or *The Last Farm* (2004) is a short film written directed by Rúnar Rúnarsson, which has won multiple awards. The story surrounds an elderly couple, as they are leaving their farm, the last in its region of the Westfjords in northern Iceland, for life in a retirement home in the city.

¹⁷ This word refers to the place where a farm stands and has stood through generations. It also acknowledges, to an extent, the change that has taken place over time in such a place as society has progressed, new methods have been adopted and the farm has transformed along with its people.

history. Seconds before this, our eyes follow his, as he stops to notice the surrounding backdrop once again, marking it with his eyes for the last time. The mountains appear blue in the distance and the sea calm and grey, the green landscape reaches on endlessly. He is saying farewell to their farm, for the last time. This image is not without a similar sense of loss as the fear of those who almost helplessly notice as tradition fades away without a trace. It is not without the contrast of time then and now and although time has without doubt advanced, there is something curious in the need to completely detach oneself from the roots of one's life. It is these roots, which contain an innate humanity, which keep us grounded while allowing us to explore and imagine. Memories and reminders which create in us a sense of place amongst other people of the world and provide us with the bridge from which to carry forward, while always keeping tradition in the back of our minds. Even if it is only a sliver of the essence of life, we become artists in the ability to capture something significant, as if we are provided with a gift of experience in all of its insecure, vulnerable and endless beauty.

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