

A History of The Unconsoled:  
The Plays of Guttormur J. Guttormsson

by

Elin Thordarson

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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ABSTRACT ...	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ...	4
DEDICATION ...	5
I: A PANEGYRIC ON A LIBRARY ...	6
II: A PANEGYRIC ON IMMANUEL ...	16
III: A PANEGYRIC ON A TREMOUR ...	24
IV: LOFGERÐ UM SKUGGINN ...	36
V: LOFGERÐ UM HRINGINN ...	51
VI: LOFGERÐ UM ÓDAUÐLEIKA ...	63
VII: A SHORT PANEGYRIC ON A HISTORY OF THE UNCONSOLED ...	74
WORKS CITED ...	79

## ABSTRACT

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An investigation of Guttormur J. Guttormsson's (1878-1966) personal library housed in the Icelandic Collection of the University of Manitoba yields an interesting entry point into a dialogue with his published plays, a collection entitled *Tíu leikrit*<sup>1</sup> (1930). Guttormur owned the entire collected works of nineteenth century playwright Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen's works bear a certain significance to early twentieth century writers like Guttormur. It is a significance whose origin stems back to the philosophical writings of Immanuel Kant. Tracing a history of ideas out of Guttormur's library from Immanuel Kant, through the European romantics, and into the works of Henrik Ibsen we arrive at an appropriate vantage point in which to consider Guttormur's dramatic works, from the modern formalist perspective of the early twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Ten Plays.

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My close friends, Amber McBurney, Kelly Saunderson, Jessica Phillips, and Christie Petersen.

My mother.

And little Zsigunnar.

## DEDICATION

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“Many years later,  
as he faced the firing squad,  
Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon  
when his father took him to discover ice.”  
-Gabriel García Márquez  
*(One Hundred Years of Solitude)*

To the Memory of My Dad.

# I

## A PANEGYRIC ON A LIBRARY

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Consider for a moment a library. If it is at all possible, try to forget for a while the traditional space reserved for the management of such a collection. Forget about the basic bricks and mortar, forget about the inspired vaults and arches, forget about the shelving and brackets. Now forget any organizing scheme our ever-arranging minds might impose upon a book, a piece of literature. Forget now time, forget now place, and now before it all vanishes of itself, simply try to envision a library as a collection of spaces, periods, commas, and letters of the alphabet (Borges 1964: 54).

When considering something on this scale, through the myriad and abstract quality of the imaginary, it is natural for our minds to begin to approach that calm knowledge of the infinite: that concept we can't quite grasp, but that somehow strikes us innermost. Writer Jorge Luis Borges is famously and admittedly fixated upon the infinite, most notably through the use of mirrors (Borges 1980: 33). He is forever fascinated by a mirror's ability to reproduce infinity when reflected upon itself. It is through literature though that Borges expands his sense of the infinite; as with the mirror, Borges sees this same effect of multiplicity in the experience of literature (Blanchot 2003: 93). Meaning that his lifelong passion to understand the infinite begins with a book's mysteriously perceptible ability to endlessly reflect the image of the universe while the universe in turn infinitely reflects the image of a book (94). Writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch puts it another way:

[a] poem, play or novel usually appears as a closed pattern. But it is also open in so far as it refers to a reality beyond itself... This 'other' is most

readily called ‘reality’ or ‘nature’ or ‘the world’ and this is a way of talking one must not give up (from Magee 1978: 281).

That is to say that something, some sort of content or criteria, which originates in the endlessness above us, returns again *ad infinitum* to that space from the pages of an open book. Borges writes:

[t]o perceive the distance between the divine and the human, it is enough to compare these crude wavering symbols which my fallible hand scrawls on the cover of a book, with the organic letters inside: punctual, delicate, perfectly black, inimitably symmetrical (1964: 52-53).

This is what literature does, and is the endless task of good writing; to defeat the formlessness of the reality we may be turned away from, to draw it forward. As philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer believes, the aesthetic experience of art ignites that scrim of a veil that obscures our perception. It forces us to perceive of- and submit to a context outside of ourselves. Art, literature, “is the *camera obscura* which shows the objects more purely, and enables us to survey them and comprehend them better. It is the play within the play, the stage upon the stage in ‘Hamlet’” (Schopenhauer 1907: 345).

“The Library of Babel”, a short story written by Borges, is another example of the man’s personal exploration of the infinite and is yet another experience of a dizzily perceived higher context. Within the work, he presents a universe in the form of the Total Library: “an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries” (1964: 51) which houses the collection of all possible books. Let us try, if we might, to consider this concept of the Total Library, all possible pieces of writing. Let us consider one by one, the infinite continuity of the written word:

Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels' autobiographies, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books (54).

This is an immense collection to be sure: every word, every variant of every letter of every piece of literature that could ever be written, sensible and nonsensical alike, is all kept, fittingly, within a written piece. Let us mentally scale it down now from Borges' Total Library to the concept of the personal library.

In "The Library of Babel" the books signify nothing in themselves (53).

Taken as a whole they are evidence of infinity's unfathomable quality of all-possibility. So what does the personal library represent as a finite whole? Does a personal library's *gestalt* reveal anything? Does the total configuration of the collection reveal anything about the librarian or reader? Writer Thomas Bailey Aldrich once famously said: "a man is known by the company his mind keeps", while writer and bibliophile Holbrook Jackson says: "your library is your portrait". Let us consider the reader as the point where the field of the personal library converges, where "all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost" (Barthes 1977: 148). Is it possible to approach someone else's experience on earth, their life in their times, through the books they acquired, kept, and presumably cherished? Furthermore, what if our librarian also happens to be a writer?

Can the pieces of the personal library hold the key to a deeper understanding of what one attempts to convey in one's written works?

Eventually I intend to explore the collection of dramatic works humbly entitled *Tíu leikrit* (1930) written by poet and playwright Guttormur J. Guttormsson (1878-1966) and attempt to place them in the significance of their time, the early twentieth century. But in order to do so my method must be to approach him and his works cautiously, even windingly. I shall follow the sound advice of historian and philosopher Will Durant:

beginning at a safe and respectful distance from him; let us start at various points on the circumference of the subject, and then grope our way towards that subtle centre (1953: 193).

This will be our point of departure: the idea of the library as the delimited site of literature's qualities of continuity and vastness in an investigation of the personal library of Guttormur J. Guttormsson. This is how I shall begin my approach to this man's dramatic written works; through what becomes revealed through his collection of literature accumulated over a lifetime. But first a few words to familiarize us with the context of his book of plays, *Tíu leikrit*.

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Prior to the publication of *Tíu leikrit* Guttormur<sup>2</sup> had already published several books of poetry, his first being *Jón Austfirðingur og nokkur smákvæði* published in 1909 at the age of thirty-one, *Bóndadóttir* eleven years later in 1920 and

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<sup>2</sup> It is customary in Icelandic to refer to someone by their first name only. I shall acknowledge this custom by oftentimes referring to Guttormur J. Guttormsson simply as Guttormur.

*Gaman og alvara* published the same year as *Tíu leikrit* when Guttormur was fifty-two years old. The relatively lengthy pacing of publication would continue for the rest of Guttormur's life, as another fourteen years passes before his *Hunangsflugur* would appear in 1944, followed by the anthology *Kvæðasafn* in 1947 and finally his last book of poetry *Kanadapístill* published in 1958, eight years before his death in 1966. *Kvæði-Úrval* and *Aurora/ Áróra*, a book of English translations of some of Guttormur's poems, were published post-humously in 1976 and 1993, respectively.

The plays though stand out as a peculiarity right in the middle of Guttormur's life-long career as a published poet. Receiving just the one printing in 1930, the entire ten plays (*Skugginn*, *Upprisan*, *Myrtur engill*, *Hringurinn*, *Hvar er sá vondi?*, *Hinir höltu*, *Þektu sjálfan þig* [sic], *Fingraförin*, *Spegillinn*, *Ódauðleiki*)<sup>3</sup> make up just 237 pages, the majority of them being examples of "the one act play".

Suffice it to say that the scholarship surrounding the plays has been extremely limited. Most scholarship, as limited as even that has been, has focused on the body of works of poetry listed above. But the commentary that does exist on the plays, a few lines here and there, may induce some interesting thoughts on our subject. For instance, Vilhjálmur Bjarnar writes "Guttormsson sees the play as the proper medium for symbolic expression of the reality which he perceives under the illusory surface of earthly things" (from St. George Stubbs 1975: 13-14). Stefán Einarsson echoes this sentiment with his statement that Guttormur preferred the medium of playwriting, and adds that his plays were known for their "vigorous use of symbolism bordering on

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<sup>3</sup> *The Shadow*, *The Resurrection*, *Murdered Angel*, *The Ring*, *Where is the evil one?* *The Lamé*, *Know Thyself*, *The Fingerprints*, *The Mirror*, *Immortality*. Listed in the order they appear in the text.

expressionism” (Einarsson 1948: 243). Árni Ibsen characterizes Guttormur as the most prolific writer of “[e]xpressionistic in tone while subtly satiric one act plays in the history of Icelandic literature” (2006: 561). Stefán Einarsson adds:

Characteristic of Guttormur J. Guttormsson is the strict logical (or at any rate pseudo-logical) construction of the play. Usually it is transparent enough, but at times it is so charged with dialectics that it demands all your attention. But it is this symbolic construction, coupled with stylized characters and a mystic scene, which appeals to thought and imagination alike in Guttormur J. Guttormsson’s plays (1948: 350).

Both Vilhjálmur Bjarnar and Stefán Einarsson make mention of the fact that Guttormur saw the play as the literary form *par excellence*: the method in which to “disconceal” the reality otherwise concealed from our shared but limited modes of perception. Here are Guttormur’s own thoughts on the nature of reality: “[t]he truth is never given by a surface presentation of reality; the surface is mere deception” (from Kirkconnell 1939: 109). Also: “The world of the spirit is more spacious than that which we see with our outer eyes and gives more scope to the imagination and the creative gifts of man” (121). The play it would seem is Guttormur’s chosen medium of communication wherein we can begin to approach an essential reality that we are otherwise turned away from.

Roy St. George Stubbs makes an interesting statement on the plays. He writes: “it is doubtful whether his plays would be successful if produced on the stage. They are literature; not theatre. They were written to be read, not acted” (1975: 13). This remark, that Guttormur’s plays should be considered “closet dramas” as they are known, is very striking because of what it implies about the nature of literature as experience. The play is of course a literary form like any other, but it might be unique

in what it requires of its readers. In our solitary and subjective engagement with the particular language of the dramatic text, through a conscientious reading of a play's dialogue and action, a deep and close intimacy with something unsaid and unutterable is developed.

It may also be useful to consider the fact that these ten short plays were never performed on stage, they have only ever been read, as Stubbs suggests should be the case. Despite some of the rather specific and technically advanced directives for staging that accompany some of Guttormur's plays, they have never been attempted on stage. With the exception of *Hringurinn*, which was performed not in front of a live theatre audience, but over the radio for a live, albeit removed, audience in Reykjavik in March 1939 (Kirkconnell 1939: 118). We shall be engaging with a man's collection of one act plays written during the early part of the twentieth century; plays whose aim is to disconceal reality through the experience of reading.

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According to a newspaper article that appeared in *Morgunblaðið* in the summer of 1967, the then president of Iceland Ásgeir Ásgeirsson formally donated the personal library of Guttormur J. Guttormsson to the Icelandic Collection at the University of Manitoba, on behalf of the family. The article states that it was a solemn ceremony. In addition to the President of Iceland and the family, guests included the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba Richard Spink Bowles, the Minister of External Affairs for Iceland Emil Jónsson, the Minister of Education for Manitoba George Johnson, and the President of the University of Manitoba, Hugh Saunderson.

It really was no small matter that the Icelandic Collection, the largest collection of Icelandic texts in Canada, would receive the personal library from the “Poet of New Iceland’s” estate, just as it is no small thing that the books are preserved and displayed still today as one of the collection’s centerpieces. In fact it is considered to be one of the prized jewels in the crown of the Icelandic Collection. “[E]kki aðeins vegna bókana sjálfra” commented librarian David Wilder in 1967, “heldur engu að síður fyrir þá innsýn sem þær gefa í huga skáldsins” (*Morgunblaðið* August 6, 1967).<sup>4</sup>

But Guttormur’s personal library in the University of Manitoba’s Icelandic Collection is not his entire reading history writ large. In the years when he worked and resided near Shoal he had access to a rather extensive library that facilitated his literary self-education in the years following the unfortunate deaths of both his parents by the time he was only sixteen years of age.

Þar (í Grunnvatnsbyggð) las ég Hómerskvæði í þýðingu Sveinbjarnar Egilssonar og Benedikts Gröndals, *Paradísarmissi* Miltons í þýðingu séra Jóns Þórlakssonar, og *Þúsund og eina nótt* í þýðingu Steingríms Thorsteinssonar; auk þess allar Eddurnar, Sturlungu, o.s.frv<sup>5</sup> (Beck 1946: 84).

But upon settling back at his parents’ farm Víðivellir on the Icelandic River, Guttormur, in his words, “undertook to build up a library with books of the best authors of the various nations, including not only poetry but also novels, plays, and

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<sup>4</sup> “[N]ot only for the books themselves... rather nonetheless for the insight they give into the poet’s mind”.

<sup>5</sup> There (at Shoal Lake) I read Homer in the translations of Sveinbjörn Egilsson and Benedikt Gröndal; Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in the translation of Séra Jón Thorlaksson; the *Thousand and One Nights* in the translation of Steingrímur Thorsteinsson; as well as the Icelandic sagas, Eddas, Sturlinga [sic]<sup>5</sup>, etc.” (from Kirkconnell 1939: 109).

essays” (110). This personal undertaking is rather obvious when one peruses the shelves of his collection, which are organized by Icelandic and English texts.

Guttormur has the distinction of being the only second-generation Icelandic-Canadian poet not only to write solely in Icelandic, but also to write in the Icelandic poetic tradition, for the most part (Neijmann 1994: 141). It is no wonder then that his collection of Icelandic books should be as extensive as his English. It is also then no surprise that the shelves housing the Icelandic texts contain the works of some of the most influential writers in Iceland’s long literary history: we have of course the collection of Icelandic sagas (*Íslendingasögur*), and works by Benedikt Gröndal, Gunnar Gunnarsson, Jónas Hallgrímsson, Halldór Laxness, Sigurður Nordal, Stephan G. Stephansson, Grímur Thomsen, and Þórbergur Þórðarson, to name a few. It holds also several Icelandic translations of books from a variety of languages, for instance, a book of poetry by William Blake, Homer’s *Odyssey* (*Odysseif*), John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (*Þrúgur reiðinnar*), Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* (*Móðirin*) and Laxness’ translation of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (*Vopnin kvödd*).

What is striking about the space reserved for the English books is the noticeably large number of plays contained there. There are works by playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Euripides, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Maurice Maeterlinck, Eugene O’Neill, William Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, Friedrich Schiller, August Strindberg, Anton Tchekov, and Oscar Wilde to name some of world literature’s more influential playwrights found in the collection. What is notable, but is not entirely evident upon a first glance of the library, is that Guttormur J. Guttormsson owned a 1914 Charles Scribner and Sons hard cover set of the complete

works of playwright Henrik Ibsen. It is the only complete collection of works from one writer contained within Guttormur's library. Reflecting on this, we begin to believe that this is a sign for something, but what it indicates is not self-evident at first. We must try to understand what Henrik Ibsen's ideas would have meant for Guttormur. What does it mean for a one act playwright in the early part of the twentieth century to have read the corpus of Henrik Ibsen, a man whose career spanned the whole of the second half of the nineteenth century (Moi 2006: 67). Ibsen was a forerunner for a certain *zeitgeist* that emerged during the nineteenth century in Europe. It was a spirit fostering a new understanding of the individual self, a new conception of this self in society, and a new perception of art: it was the birth of the spirit of modernism. But a *zeitgeist* of this caliber doesn't just emerge overnight, modernism has its own genealogy. To get to its source, one of its sources at the very least, we need to again exercise our faculty for conjuring images, our imagination. We need to go back to the city of Königsberg, Prussia in the eighteenth century. Let us just begin to imagine the castle, the King's Gate, those famous seven bridges, the cathedral and the university. For to get from Henrik Ibsen to Guttormur J. Guttormsson, we need to start from the beginning of a history of ideas. Let us enter into the office of Immanuel Kant.

## II

### A PANEGYRIC ON IMMANUEL

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If one should seek to understand the far-sighted thoughts and writings of the playwright Henrik Ibsen, a man whose writings helped to usher in the spirit of modernism, one would be wise to consider the giant upon whose shoulders Ibsen stands. An utterly beautiful metaphor, the image of “dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants” stems from Greek myth. It originates in one of the many stories of Orion, the hunter-giant and one of our night’s sky’s most striking, and colossal of constellations. In this particular tale, the king Oenopion has blinded Orion for attacking his daughter. Orion must head eastwards to regain his sight from Helios, the sun, and so the dwarf-servant Cedalion, who stands atop his shoulders, guides Orion through his own darkness towards the great light. In our less classical times this metaphor has come to mean that the intellectual achievements of a given age are always owing to the pillars of thought of the previous one. If it so happens, as it does from time to time, that one sees more, and further than one’s ancestors, it is due to the fact that one has been carried high by-, and raised up to the level of the giant-sized discoveries of one’s intellectual forebears. The Orion who carries Henrik Ibsen high, and indeed many others who voice the world movement known as modernism, is eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant. For a reading of the dramatic works of Guttormur J. Guttormsson we need an understanding of what the concept of modernism entails. But first we have to unravel it from its genealogy, a history of ideas from which it emerges. Modernism, the faintest trace of it, begins at the

moment in which Kant lifts the lid of a so-called Pandora's Box in the late eighteenth century with his revolution of morals.

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In the opening lines of his essay "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will", philosopher Isaiah Berlin begins:

The history of ideas is a comparatively new field of knowledge, and still tends to be looked at with some suspicion in a good many academic quarters. Yet it has uncovered interesting facts. Among the most striking is the chronology of some of our most familiar concepts and categories, at any rate in the western world. We discover with some surprise how recently some of them emerged: how strange some of our apparently most deeply rooted attitudes might have seemed to our ancestors... changes in widely accepted, consciously followed, secular values, ideals, goals (1991: 207).

Isaiah Berlin writes tirelessly over the course of his life on the major shift in consciousness that led to some of the crucial philosophical disappointments that tend to typify the twentieth century. Again and again, Berlin traces the shift's source back to the writings of one man in particular, the giant moral metaphysician Immanuel Kant.

Immanuel Kant was brought humbly into this world in the spring of 1724 in the city of Königsberg during the age of the enlightenment in Europe. The enlightenment was an age defined by a certain state of consciousness characterized by a certain line of reasoning founded upon three propositions that were "the three legs upon which the whole Western tradition rested" (1999: 21). The first proposition held that "to all genuine questions there is one true answer, and only one, all others being

deviations from the truth and therefore false” (1990: 209), and that these truths are universal in nature: “if the answers were true in any sense, they are true for all men” (183). The second proposition was that these universal truths or these true answers to all genuine questions are knowable to the rational mind. As for the final proposition, “[i]t was maintained that if the universe was a cosmos and not chaos” (184), as it certainly was during the enlightenment, then “[t]hese true answers cannot clash with one another, for one true proposition cannot be incompatible with another; that together these answers must form a harmonious whole” (209). It follows then “there is a description of an ideal universe ... which is simply that which is described by all true answers to all serious questions” (1999: 22).

The combination of these three propositions yields the fundamental view of the enlightenment age. The concept of the world, or the universe, or nature is one of cohesion, of being composed of neutral stuff subject to the laws of necessity, and knowable to the rational human mind. This view would have been at the very heart of the philosophical and scientific beliefs of Immanuel Kant. Indeed, he was a great admirer of the physical sciences, “he believed in scientific principles perhaps more deeply than in any others; he regarded it as his life’s task to explain the foundations of scientific logic and scientific method” (68). But if we are to understand the way in which Kant changed the landscape of consciousness, which would over time lead to the modernist spirit, it will not be through an exploration of him “as a critic of the sciences, nor of course as a scientist himself, but specifically in his moral philosophy” (69).

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What allows Kant to make the claims he does, which then alter the course of the history of Western thought, is another equally important aspect to his life as a quiet professor in the city Königsberg. This is the fact that he is at once a natural scientist as well as a pietist. Berlin defines this Christian movement in sixteenth and seventeenth century Germany:

Pietism was a branch of Lutheranism, and consisted in careful study of the Bible and profound respect for the personal relationship of man to God. There was therefore an emphasis upon spiritual life... and a tremendous stress upon the individual relationship of the individual suffering soul with her maker (1999: 36).

The German pietists were deeply and agonizingly concerned with the inner or spiritual life: the relationship one enjoys and suffers with their own soul, with their fellow human beings, and above all with God (1990: 219). Precisely at this intersection, between his fervent passion for the natural sciences and its search for objective, universal truths, and his intensely personal and pious relationship with God, a great antagonism occurs in the mind of Immanuel Kant. A seemingly irreconcilable conflict between:

[P]hysical science and the moral and religious consciousness. This problem was necessarily brought into view by the advance of physical science itself and by the attempt, which seemed a necessary result of that advance, to extend the use of its methods and principles beyond the purely material world. For such an extension seemed to mean nothing less than the inclusion of all man's life, moral as well as physical, within the realm of nature and necessity (Caird 1889: 144).

This is a principle that Kant cannot abide, for his strong religious conviction holds fast to an entirely different view of human beings.

It is unclear just how long and to what extent Kant would have wrestled with this seeming undermining of his faith by his own passion for the scientific interpretation of the physical world, but it is not until he is fifty-seven years old that he publishes his *magnum opus*, the famous work that stirs the world from its “dogmatic slumber” (Durant 1953: 192), *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). An immediate giant on the scene with this groundbreaking piece of writing, Kant was laying the groundwork for his moral philosophy by first attacking the behemoths of empiricism. These are enlightenment age philosophers who maintain the principle “that the foundation for the validity of our knowledge was the world of objects” (Liddell 1970: 4), objects long thought to be fundamental realities known to us entirely through our modes of experience and perception: our five senses.

At the outset of his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant comes straight to the point:

[E]xperience is by no means the only field to which our understanding can be confined. Experience tells us what is, but not that it must be necessarily what it is and not otherwise. It therefore never gives us any really general truths; and our reason, which is particularly anxious for that class of knowledge, is roused by it rather than satisfied. General truths, which at the same time bear the character of an inward necessity, must be independent of experience, - clear and certain in themselves (1900: 1). He will go on to argue against the popular notion that the mind at birth is, in effect, a *tabula rasa*, “white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas” (Locke 1974: 10) waiting to be furnished with knowledge derived from sense experience. His *Critique of Pure Reason* is instead a call for an analysis of, what he believed were, the *a priori*

inherent structures and activities of reason of the rational mind; for instance, the process by which sense experience is transformed into knowledge, or the ways in which concepts are formed and how they evolve. Kant ultimately wants to show the possibility of an exalted form of knowledge, something he calls pure reason, which does not come to us through the distorted channels of sense experience, but rather belongs to us, inborn, *a priori*, an element of the structure of our rational minds. It is that form of knowledge that for Kant, a pietist-scientist, is “peculiar to us, and not necessarily shared by every being, though, no doubt, by every human being” (1900: 37).

Immanuel Kant may be known for writing obscurely at times, but he is equally known for writing beautifully and movingly, particularly on the nature of humankind as rational beings. It is thus not too broad of a leap from Kant’s idea of rationality being an inborn and distinguishing quality of our species to his moral philosophical work that emerges four years after his *Critique of Pure Reason*, his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785).

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Among that relentless class of questions that every generation of humankind has contemplated are the fundamental questions of morals, of how one should live one’s life, of how one should conduct oneself:

‘What should I do?’ ‘Why should I obey others, and how far?’ ‘What is freedom, duty, authority?’ ‘Should I seek happiness, or wisdom, or goodness? And why?’ ‘Should I realise my own faculties, or sacrifice myself to others?’ ‘Have I a right to govern myself, or only to be governed

well?’ ‘What are rights? What are laws? Is there a purpose which individuals, or societies, or the entire universe, cannot but seek to fulfil? ... (Berlin 1990: 180).

The nature of questions such as these are social and political, and ultimately moral. Their mutable and elusive answers have at once tormented and defined each age of humankind. For the thinkers who preceded and even those contemporaneous with Kant, the answers to moral questions could be objectively perceived and experienced in value-objects knowable to and inscribed upon all rational beings.

Kant’s *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* is his groundwork for “the search for and establishment of the supreme principle of morality” (Kant 1969: 9). For Kant though, morality stems not from some universal principle outside the rational being, but is necessitated by an elemental feature of our nature created by God: our inborn freedom, our native liberty. Kant is firm on this: while the rest of nature, animal, inanimate or vegetable, is held under the laws of causality, we are free to choose what we wish. To Kant, the thinking self’s voluntary actions, raised above natural necessity is the foundation stone of morality. For without the freedom to choose right as well as wrong, there would be no possibility for morality, and Kant, a pietist so intensely preoccupied with the inner life, is certain about morality, so he must be certain about the freedom of the will. In fact, Isaiah Berlin states it rather frankly: “Kant was virtually intoxicated by the idea of human freedom” (1999: 69).

The highest moral principle then, what Kant ultimately seeks to reveal, is the recognition of the validity of human life based on our inborn rational abilities to choose freely. We may choose to do good, just as we may choose to do evil, at the risk of acting irrationally according to Kant. There is no principle higher to a pietist

like Kant than the validity of our God-given pure reason and our freedom to choose good or otherwise.

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It is certainly no small matter that Kant was as piously religious as he was scrupulously and scientifically dogmatic. His contributions to modern philosophy are entirely due to the combination of the intense spirituality of pietism from which he springs and the ravages of science that undermined his faith (1999: 55). In his attempt to reconcile the seemingly contradictory spiritual and material worlds he lifts the lid of a Pandora's Box, and brings into existence a new creature. Sometimes called the Kantian man, he is sewn together from two worlds, from the elevated realm of reason, morality and spirituality, and from the earthbound realm of matter and all that perishes. He is "the offspring of the age of science, confidently rational and yet increasingly aware of his alienation from the material universe which his discoveries reveal" (Murdoch 1997: 365). This is precisely Kant's contribution in the thread of our history of ideas. His groundbreaking moral philosophy, his insistence on the validity of the rational human endowed with God-given pure reason, which calls into being an exalted yet alienated creature. A creature that will spark and then douse the flame of the nineteenth century's romantic movement before he mutates again at the disappointments of and discrepancies in life that define the spirit of modernism.

### III

#### A PANEGYRIC ON A TREMOUR

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In a letter written to his childhood friend, the good doctor and fellow poet Jóhannes P. Pálsson, dated May 3, 1927, Guttormur J. Guttormsson composes the following:

The mob er það sem við fyrirlítum. Það gera allir sem hafa sál! En sálir eru sjaldgjæfar. Mesta lýgi að hver maður hafi sál. Allir mestu rithöfundarnir fyrirlíta the mob. Sjá Galsworthy, Maeterlinck, Ibsen etc.<sup>6</sup>

This letter, just one of about one hundred written over an approximate sixty year correspondence, was composed only three years before the publication of *Tíu leikrit*. Evidently, and not surprisingly, during a period when Guttormur seemed to have been exploring the rogues' gallery that make up world literature's playwrights. What makes this particular passage so compelling though, is that where a passing mention of the writings of Henrik Ibsen occurs, a man's metaphysical beliefs, his reflection on the essence of beings and his decision concerning the essence of truth (Heidegger 2002: 57), are also revealed. As we shall see, the search for the reality of truth is that which marks the mysterious profundity of an Ibsen play.

Toril Moi opens her critical study *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (2006) with two bold declarations: "Ibsen is the most important playwright writing after Shakespeare. He is the founder of modern theatre" (17). She continues her assessment of Ibsen's impact on the history of world literature with:

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<sup>6</sup> "The mob is that which we despise. As all who have souls do! But souls are rare. The greatest lie is that all men have souls. All the great writers despise the mob. See Galsworthy, Maeterlinck, Ibsen etc."

For anyone interested in the emergence of modernism, Ibsen's writings are a find: an undisturbed archaeological site concealing a perfectly preserved genealogy of modernism... In the 1850s Ibsen wrote romantic tragedy and national romantic drama; by the 1890s he had become Europe's most famous avant-garde playwright, hailed by the emerging modernist generation as their leader and lodestar. To trace Ibsen's aesthetic transformations is to trace the birth of European modernism (67).

But we have gotten ahead of ourselves by knocking straight away upon the great door of Ibsen's office. For between the publications of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 and *Foundations for the Metaphysics of Morals* in 1785, and Ibsen's first anti-idealist play *Brand* in 1866 (Shaw 1913: 50-51) just over eighty years pass by. A whole eighty years, a lifetime, in a lineage of ideas that originates in the writings of Kant and shortly thereafter reaches its visionary apotheosis with the romantic movement. But in the years that lead up to Ibsen's groundbreaking play *Brand*, the overarching set of principles that the romantics celebrate has mutated into something else. A kind of aesthetics mingled with ethics manages to survive the decline of romanticism. It is precisely this aesthetic development, this particular view of beauty, which the earliest of modernist writers react so vehemently against.

In order to understand the significance of, as we shall see, the reactionary and revolutionary early modernist works of Henrik Ibsen, we need to pick up right where we left off: after Kant's revolution of the human spirit, his moral philosophy rooted in the universality of the free and rational human mind, and move directly, albeit briefly, into the "romantic vision of human perfection and its final incarnation as a desiccated moralism" (Moi 2006: 68).

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Michael Bell claims in his essay “The Metaphysics of Modernism” that modernism emerges out of the collapse of idealism (1999: 18-19). If we are to follow Bell’s claim and think of idealism as the antechamber leading into the expansive library of modernism, then we would be wise to think of romanticism as a kind of grand salon with a side chamber for the sickly known as idealism. It is of the utmost importance that we visit romanticism on our path towards modernism, specifically that we allow ourselves to consider Kant’s philosophical influence found at its very centre. For romanticism, an artistic and literary movement arising shortly after Kant’s heavy blow to the world of metaphysical understanding, is considered to be “the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West” (Berlin 1999: 1-2); all other shifts in consciousness which occurred during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries being of a lesser importance, or at any rate deeply influenced by it (1-2). But first, far from being a pamphleteer himself for the romantic movement, we will begin with Immanuel Kant’s handout to the revolution.

We will recall that Kant springs from an age in the history of Western thought where the pillar supporting the entire world view had been based upon a knowledge and understanding of the natural laws. This faith in human knowledge had “survived the breakdown of classical Greek philosophy, the rise of Christianity [...] the barbarians and the medieval Church, the Renaissance and the Reformation” (1996:175), it was deeply planted in the Western consciousness, and the entire thing rested upon three propositions. The first: that all genuine questions have answers. The second: that these answers are knowable to all rational beings. And the third: that these true answers cannot conflict with one another (1990: 183, 209).

According to Kant, in order to answer any of those ageless questions of what one ought to do, or how one should live, one merely has to listen to an inner voice. For Kant, this voice, the will, naturally takes on his age's prevailing tone: whatever it commands one to do is seen as universal: true for all, in all places, at all times, just as an understanding of the laws of nature instruct (1996: 176). The Kantian chooser then acts in light of moral ideals discovered through reason, a faculty universal to humankind, thus guaranteeing the moral ideal (242).

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries however, Kant's enlightened rationalism had been profoundly and irrevocably reinterpreted. For the romantics, when Kant finally reconciles his belief in science with his faith in God by placing humankind outside the realm of necessity, it is no longer obvious that "being" means to "belong to a particular rank in the order of created things" (Heidegger 2002: 68); specifically, to be crowned the pinnacle of a harmonious, created, and necessitated cosmos (Berlin 1991: 185). Rather, Kant's contra-causal freedom of the will, bestowed upon humankind by a creator-God, serves to wrench human beings from their ideological position of prestige in the universe and creates an unprecedented image of the Western self. The post-Kantian chooser senses instantly both her alienation from the necessity of everything else (with an increasing awareness that her alienation is without cure (Murdoch 1997: 365)), and her lately found ability to impose a free will upon necessitated matter in order to subdue and dominate it (Berlin 1991: 185). A wound is suffered from our violent detachment from nature and its quiet working life, its existence under its own laws, its inner necessity, its eternal unity with itself (Schiller 1901: 280). The romantics though,

recognize a most peculiar pleasure in this detachment; a solitude that allows for a deep search of a bottomlessly free inner space. This is the very moment that the romantic figure of the heroic individual begins to take possession of the European mind (Berlin 1991: 185). The chooser in the first part of the nineteenth century lives not by ideals realized through the objective universality of reason, but rotates her gaze further inward, towards the realm of the subjective, and lives according to her individual inner ideals, at no matter what the cost (187).

[N]ot because they are universal, but because they are my own, express my particular inner nature, the particular vision of the universe that belongs to me; to deny them in the name of something else would be to falsify all I see and feel and know (242-243).

This is where it all begins, where the single most important break in the categories of thought occurs that opens that crucial stage in the genealogy of modernism known as romanticism. For once the romantics have committed their fatal reinterpretation of Kant's enlightenment age moral philosophy, one can faintly feel the first tremours of the modern existentialist position (243).

What ultimately distinguishes the romantic movement from its later idealist development is a difference in theory of beauty. Romantic and philosopher-poet Friedrich Hölderlin encapsulates the key ideas of the romantic aesthetic in a short paper published in 1796 entitled "Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism". Against the conceptual backdrop of Kant's dichotomy between the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity, Hölderlin presents his concept of beauty:

[F]inally, the idea which unites everyone, the idea of *beauty*, the word taken in the higher, platonic sense. I am now convinced that the highest

act of reason, by encompassing all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness* are only siblings in *beauty* (2003: 186).

Hölderlin, one of the earliest of romantic writers, believes that one's unceasing activities of reason and freedom could provide a vision of the relationship one has to the unfathomable infinite through what is known as an experience of the sublime. The sublime emotion, the highest ideal of beauty according to the romantics, is achieved when the realms of necessity and of freedom somehow overlap. At the very intersection of our free existence with nature's existence according to its own proper and immutable laws, the sublime emotional experience offers our alienated selves a brief and abstract glimpse of our divine perfection.

This sentiment is echoed in an essay published that same year by Friedrich Schiller, *On Simple and Sentimental Poetry* (1795-1796). Like Hölderlin, he states that the sublime emotion is approachable through our faculties of reason and freedom:

When the will submits freely to the laws of necessity, and when, in the midst of all the changes of which the imagination is susceptible, reason maintains its rule – it is only then that the divine or the ideal is manifested. Thus we perceive eternally *in them* that which we have not, but which we are continually forced to strive after; that which we can never reach, but which we can hope to approach by continual progress (280-281).

The idealists, on the other hand, develop a different breed of aesthetics. Moi states “idealism was indeed a tremendously powerful aesthetic force in the nineteenth century, and it has disappeared more thoroughly than any other aesthetic category of that century” (69). Where the romantics are concerned with the sublime and the

abstract perfected state of the individual<sup>7</sup>, the idealists are utterly consumed with the beauty of the perfectibility of humankind on a more social scale. Idealism's pet-subject, the vision of Utopia, is based on the Kantian belief in the universal moral goodness and sincerity inherent in humanity. The implication of which is that the morally right actions of the free individual are upheld as the ultimate expression of beauty. Utopia, much like the romantic sublime emotion, may be unattainable in reality, but is at least approachable through the experience of beauty found in the moral actions relating to one's duties to fulfill the dream of a perfect society. For when it comes to attaining the perfected state of society, the recourse to individual moral duty is inevitable. The imposition of personal duty on the freedom of the individual works to assure the eventual impoverished, frustrated, conformist and moralizing view of humans and society that creates the modernist reaction.

The words of another early modernist writer, a contemporary of Ibsen's, shall help to illuminate the reactionary stance towards idealism's views of beauty and art. In Oscar Wilde's piece "The Critic as Artist" (1888) he writes "[t]he sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate. When they are confused, Chaos has come again" (1970: 393).

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<sup>7</sup> Romanticism is a vast subject, riddled with ambiguity, which cannot be easily defined or generalized. As Northrop Frye points out, theses on romanticism have a tendency of disagreeing with one another. "[I]f we try to think of Romanticism as some kind of single 'idea'" he writes, "all we can do with it is... break it down into a number of contradictory ideas with nothing significant in common" (1963: 3). It is thus futile to demand from it a hard and fast rule of aesthetics. To say that romantics were preoccupied with the beauty of abstract human perfectibility is to point to just one feature of the romantic movement which Frye so masterfully interprets as being primarily "a change in the language of poetic mythology, brought about by various historical and cultural forces" (1968: v).

Ibsen's message to you is - If you are a member of society, defy it; if you have a duty, violate it; if you have a sacred tie, break it; if you have a religion, stand on it instead of crouching under it; if you have bound yourself by a promise or an oath, cast them to the winds; if the lust of self-sacrifice seize you, wrestle with it as with the devil; and if, in spite of all, you cannot resist the temptation to be virtuous, go drown yourself before you have time to waste the lives of all about you with the infection of that fell disease (1979: 81).

This is the beginning of a lecture for the Fabian Society composed by one of history's most famous "Ibsenites", writer George Bernard Shaw. It is a clear expression of his reading of Henrik Ibsen's importance as an anti-idealist writer. But we should allow ourselves to consider that over the course of Ibsen's fifty years as a playwright, he was not solely occupied with being a reactionary. Ibsen's earliest plays reflect the overarching romantic nationalist and romantic tragic aesthetics of their times (Moi 2006: 67). As Shaw himself points out, it is not until 1866 with the publication of *Brand* that he finally "takes the field against idealism, and, like another Luther nails his thesis to the door of the Temple of Morality" (1913: 51). This is precisely what makes the works of Ibsen so profound. Taken as a whole, his body of work is a rare and undisturbed site of the development of modernism in world literature (Moi 2006: 67).

It is not that modernism is simply a reaction against the proselytizing of the idealist aesthetic. There is a more complex dimension to its emergence. Less a reaction, early modernism and early modernist world literature are a lamentation; these works are the making of a deathbed. The collapse of idealism under the weight of its own ethics-based aesthetics is an indication of the first crack in one of

humanity's most enduringly sweet ideas. It is the end of any Utopian illusions, any visions of a final human perfected state, and any myths of an ideal world. Isaiah Berlin remarks that writers that we tend to think of as quintessentially modern, writers like Nietzsche, Ibsen, Joyce, Kafka, Beckett and all the existentialists, have at least one thing in common, they do not cling to the guarantee of a happy ending (1991: 236). Henrik Ibsen's corpus spans the entire second half of the nineteenth century, exemplifying the rise and fall of human idealism. There is no doubt that Ibsen himself must have grieved deeply over the loss of the optimism for an idealist Utopian future. Perhaps that is why his characters representing no longer functional idealists are often portrayed rather sympathetically, even pathetically, as beleaguered and antiquated heroes. The moral dilemmas and punishments that characters like, for Brand the "ideal" priest, Torvald and Nora Helmer the "ideal" husband and wife in *A Doll's House* (1874), or Mrs. Alving and Aline Solness the "ideal" mothers in *Ghosts* (1881) and *The Master Builder* (1892), suffer for sticking to a belief in a faraway ideal world are spiritually brutal and crushing.

Brand, who continuously directs himself from the heights of his devotion to his ideal form of Christian worship, plunges to the depths of murderous cruelty at the same time (Shaw 1913: 52). He loses first his infant son to the severe climate where he holds the post he refuses to leave, out of duty to his congregation; losing next his adoring wife to her own broken heart. Killing them both with his sense of duty, he then places himself "beyond ever daring to doubt the idealism" (53) upon whose altar he has sacrificed them both.

Nora Helmer, a model wife and mother to a model family, leaves it all, specifically her husband Torvald, a model husband, father and citizen, as she is effectively stripped of her belief that he would, if necessity arose, give his life to save her reputation. With his ideals utterly shattered by his wife's abandonment of her own, Torvald comes to a famously ambiguous realization in the final moment of the last act:

“HELMER. Ah! The miracle of miracles -?!” (1911: 191).

Mrs. Alving, one of Ibsen's most complicatedly motivated characters, is a woman whose family ideal calls upon her to suffer in silence the cruelties of her scoundrel of a late husband lest she shatter her innocent son's faith in the purity of his home and father (Shaw 1913: 93). Her burden is exceptionally heavy; she employs Regina, the love-child of her late husband and former servant, whom her own son Oswald is falling in love with, unaware of course that they share the same father. The relationship between mother and son becomes ever more complicated as it is revealed that, like his father, he enjoys the sensual side of life and is paying for it with a deteriorating syphilitic mind.

Finally, Aline Solness is made to agonize forever over the loss of her twin sons, which occurs twelve years before the action of the play takes place. Her sense of her own motherly duty to nurse her infant boys, even as she suffers from a fever, leads to their deaths by poisoning.

Each of the cases above reveals exactly what Oscar Wilde alludes to in his “The Critic as Artist”; the Chaos, the turmoil, the destruction that the idealist notion of aesthetics creates in practice. This is typical of Ibsen's middle and later plays that

at once overtly condemn the conservative moral idealism of his age while they ever so subtly lament the waking up from the Utopian dream.

We could start by thinking of modernism as the collection of written works that surface only once this particularly disenchanting and distressing shift has taken its grip of the post-Kantian mind. Modernism gives rise to, among other things, a new school of aesthetics known as formalism.

This is where our history of ideas shall culminate. Out of the despair that tends to characterize the modern outlook, the formalists of the early twentieth century, like Ibsen before them, reject the nineteenth century idealist's assumption that literature could constitute a transparent reflection of reality, that knowledge of it could be appropriated directly and objectively, and that literature could and should express extrinsic social or ideological concerns. Formalists are not concerned with the surface appearance and content of a text, instead the formalist aesthetic school of literary theory finds recourse in the intrinsic form, the inner structures and devices of literature and language, such as paradox and impossibility, in order to "disconceal" truth and indirectly expose that side of life not turned towards us. As we shall see Guttormur himself was a formalist playwright. The formalist understanding and celebration of literature's mysterious abilities is the manner in which we must focus on his plays.

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In another letter written to Doctor Pálsson, dated the following summer, June 15, 1928, Guttormur writes:

les eg [sic] Ibsen langt fram á nótt. Er þetta nokkur mælikvarði höfundum?  
Nei! Þetta er mælikvarði á mig... Jú Doktor, við erum modernistar frá  
okkar sjónarmiði.<sup>8</sup>

We know that Guttormur J. Guttormsson's personal library holds a complete collection of the works of Henrik Ibsen. We also know that it is the only entire body of work by any single writer Guttormur ever owned. If one's library can reveal anything about oneself, as a reader, as a writer, as a thinker, as a being in one's time and place, one is tempted to think it could be found in the glaring consistencies such as this.

It is only at this point that we can appropriately begin to explore *Tíu leikrit*, the collection of plays written from Víðivellir. To arrive in the place we are standing now, it was imperative that we followed this fragile thread of ideas, this genealogy of modernism. To examine anything in the modernist context, one must grasp that which came before; for not only is the past simply built into the experience of modernism, but as philosopher Henri Bergson writes "the human mind is so constructed that it cannot begin to understand the new until it has done everything in its power to relate it to the old" (1946: 127). As fine and fragile as a single spider's thread, blotted and burdened with the rain over Königsberg, Prussia, and the morning dew of romanticism, and shaken by the massive raindrops of Ibsen's modernist works; we shall get that sense that we have walked right through this spider's web, that is, the continuity of world literature, as we let ourselves in through the gate of Víðivellir, Guttormur J. Guttormsson's farm.

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<sup>8</sup> I read Ibsen long into the night. Is this somebody's standard of a writer? No! This is my standard. Yes, Doctor, we are modernists from our standpoint.

## IV LOFGERÐ UM SKUGGANN<sup>9</sup>

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Let us enter into this relation:

◆ “[Modern] philosophy begins in disappointment. That is to say, [modern] philosophy begins not, as ancient tradition, in an experience of wonder at the fact that things (nature, the world, the universe) are, but rather with an indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed. One feels that things are *not*, or at least not the way we expected or hoped they might be” (Critchley 2004: xvii).

◆ The ideology of modernism ushers in a completely new school of aesthetics known as formalism. Formalists delight in the complexity of both the reference and the deconstruction of the self, linguistic experimentation, and texts that agonize over the limits of the inexpressible (Moi 2006: 20).

◆ “There remained, however, at the moment when the shooting was no longer but to come, the feeling of lightness that I would not know how to translate: freed from life? the infinite opening up? Neither happiness, nor unhappiness. Nor the absence of fear and perhaps already the step beyond. I know, I imagine that this unanalyzable feeling changed what there remained for him of existence. As if the death outside of him could only collide with the death in him. “I am alive. No, you are dead” (Blanchot 2000- 7-9).

◆”Plato: *For of death, no one has knowledge*, and Paul Celan: *No one bears witness for the witness...* Where can we look for the witness for whom there is no witness?” (Blanchot 2007: 55)

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<sup>9</sup> A PANEGYRIC ON THE SHADOW

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Guttormur J. Guttormsson is known as the preeminent Poet (and Playwright) of New Iceland. History is littered with these figures, those writers whose works come to define the spirit of a certain time and a place. Nýja Ísland, or New Iceland in the English, is the name of the Icelandic immigrant reserve founded along the western shores of the southern basin of Lake Winnipeg in the late nineteenth century. Guttormur, born in 1878, was only a child when the reserve officially came under provincial legislation in 1887, a mere twelve years after its initial founding. Yet the poetic works he began publishing at the age of thirty-one have come to epitomize the experience of this long, long gone society. This is the strange, but inescapable introduction to Guttormur's written works: his title as a symbol whose true meaning is not yet clear, it must point to something further out. If we can but try to grasp the immense history that hides behind the name "Poet of New Iceland", we will gain an understanding of the spectre that haunted the footsteps of our poet and playwright, and which comes to define him forever as a twentieth century modern formalist writer.

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Just as our minds have been capable of stringing together the events of a history of ideas, so too can our minds piece together what it might be like to have been someone else. If we can manage to rise to our feet, if even for a moment, from the cavernous thrones of our inner sanctums, our minds may be struck with a "recollection" of something never before experienced: the untouchable solitude of a

stranger (Kundera 2009: 109). Let us consider for a moment an experience of life on earth other than our own, specifically, let us consider a typical experience of life in rural Iceland prior to the mass exodus of emigrants in the late nineteenth century. Theirs was a fate based upon centuries old traditions of non-mechanized subsistence level farming; it was a world wherein every single aspect of life, both human and animal, had to be clearly, and personally overseen. Without any mechanized implements of convenience, simply to be was to struggle, that is most certain.

In a series of articles that appeared in the Icelandic-Canadian newspaper *Heimskringla* through out the summer of 1907 writer Kristján Ásgeir Benediktsson “recollects”:

Það mátti heita, að menn innu dag og nótt við túnsláttinn. Þar sem tún voru harðbalaleg, vöktu sláttumenn á nóttum, þá þurkatið var, en önnuðust heyþurk og hirðingu á daginn... Á djúpengi stóðu menn á mitti og upp í höku frá morgni til kvelds. Á laufengi fylltust augu, eyru og nef af sandi og menn voru hálfblindir af sandrokinu, en þó staðið þá eins lengi og slægjan fór ekki í kaf af ljánum. Í rigningum og krapahriðum stóðu menn við slátt eins lengi og gras fór ekki á kaf. Sumstaðar þurfti engjafólk að ganga tveggja klukkutíma göngu á engi og af, kveld og morgna (1907).<sup>10</sup>

Let us take the modern formalist aesthetic approach in our reading of Kristján Ásgeir’s description of the monotony of Icelandic farm labour in the nineteenth century. As mentioned, the formalist approach to literature passes over a text’s

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<sup>10</sup> “By day, they turned or gathered the hay, at night, they cut it... In some places, they stood up to their waists in marshland from dawn to dusk. Elsewhere, they were half-blinded by flying sand and dust which filled their eyes, ears, and nose. Often they worked in driving rain and sleet, braving the elements as long as their scythes would cut. In some places, they faced a two-hour walk to and from the fields, a journey they made morning and night” (translation taken from Arngrímsson 1997: 44).

content and explores what is revealed in the form of the piece. If we peer deeply, even to go so far as to “peer through” the surface tension of the content, we shall find that we gain access to something unsaid. Something invisible and unsayable is yoked to it (Blanchot 2007: 57), and something essential to our understanding of Guttormur as the Poet of New Iceland is revealed through it. Writer Andri Snær Magnason makes mention of it in his *Draumalandið: sjálfshjálparbók handa hræddri þjóð* (2006);<sup>11</sup> namely that for these Icelandic farm workers every minute of every day, for generation after generation, was spent in direct contact with absolute reality (2008: 12).

Naturally, it is something we should find difficult to comprehend. But what Andri Snær is referring to is a concept of time, a way to perceive time’s flow. That which saturates our life day to day, technology, having forever altered our perception of experiencing time (Coupland/ Cowan 1996), is the very thing absent from the rural Icelandic context. So let us now allow ourselves to imagine a vision of this temporality: what it is like to be a private witness to nature’s large and small cycles of inspiration and expiration, to taste “the dark drunkenness of the cycle of existence” (Hesse 2000: 13), to exist where what is indistinct is in focus, where “life and death are one and the same expression” (Blanchot 2001: 48). It is an access to, as Hermann Hesse writes:

“the unity of the world, the interdependence of everything that occurs, the inclusion of everything big and small within the same flow... of becoming and passing away” (2000: 27).

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<sup>11</sup> *Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual for a Frightened Nation* translated to English in 2008 by Nicholas Jones.

This romantic sublimation, this access to reality would have defined the experience of life of the Icelandic farm workers in the late nineteenth century.

Consider now the fact that by 1875, the year of the organization of the so-called “Stóri hópurinn”<sup>12</sup> of Icelandic emigrants (Gerrard 1985: 29), the experience of, and encounter with, reality in other parts of the world were already greatly altered by technology’s intrusion on the experience of time. The innovations of the industrial revolution: steam powered engines, railways, the extension of canals, bridges and roads, gas lighting, etc. (Fulford 2005: 99) not having reached the strands of Iceland, were profound cultural catalysts throughout continental Europe and North America in the nineteenth century. When the Icelandic emigrants shoved off from their completely pre-industrial model of existence, they were propelled straight into burgeoning modernity. A compatriot of Guttormur’s, writer and emigrant Jóhann Magnús Bjarnason, eloquently captures the significance of the movement between these contexts in his piece entitled *Eiríkur Hansson* (1899-1903). Jóhann Magnús composes the observations of his seven-year-old protagonist who lands at the city of Hull, England on the way from Seyðisfjörður to America:

Ég man það einungis, að ég horfði eins og steini lostinn á hinar risavöxnu byggingar og hinn mikla fjölda af skipum, sem ég sá þar. Sum skipin voru svo stór, að okkar skip var eins og lítil róðrarkæna hjá þeim... Hvarvetna á bryggjunni voru stórir hlaðar af kössum og pokum og ýmsum varningi; alls staðar voru menn á ferð fram og aftur, og vagnar og hestar komu og fóru; alls staðar var skrölt og hávaði, sem lét mjög illa í eyrum okkar, sem komum frá sveitakyrðinni á Íslandi; og alls staðar var sá blær á lifandi og dauðu, sem ekki átti við okkur. Ég varð alveg utan við mig af að sjá og alt,

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<sup>12</sup> “The Large Group”.

sem ég sá, virtist mér í fyrstu renna saman í eina ósundurgreinanlega heild; og öll ópin og köllin, alt skröltilið og tístið og marrið drógst saman í eina ofboðslega hljóðöldu, sem skall að eyrum mér með svo miklum þunga, að mig svimaði, ef ég má svo að orði kveða. En undur fljótt vandist ég við þenna hávaða, unz ég nærri hætti að verða hans var (1899-1903: 25-26).<sup>13</sup>

As the protagonist Eiríkur Hansson somehow puts out of his mind the din that surrounds him in the harbour of the city of Hull, and as the Icelandic immigrants in Canada and the United States adjusted to their utterly new modern environment, like a wound, an indefinable loss, a kind of “forgetting”, is suffered. Among the wounded: Pálína Ketilsdóttir from Bakkagerði in East Borgarfjörður and Jón Guttormsson of Arnheiðarstaðir in Fljótsdal, Guttormur’s mother and father. Guttormur concludes his piece submitted for the collection of memoirs entitled *Foreldrar mínir: endurminningar nokkurra Íslendinga vestan hafs* (1956) with a fleeting glimpse of the profound loss that for him came to define his mother:

Það verður ekki sagt, að móðir mín festi yndi hér. Hugur hennar dvaldi heima hjá foreldrum hennar og systkinum... Ég man, að eitt sumar átti hún fasta von á annarri systur sinni að heiman. Á hverju sú von var byggð, veit ég ekki. Einn morgun, þegar gufubáturinn Viktoría... skreið inn fljótið fram hjá húsinu okkar, sáuð við konu sitja uppi á þilfarinu... Móðir mín var svo viss um, að þetta væri systirin, sem hún vonast eftir... að hún

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<sup>13</sup> “I stared in disbelief at the huge buildings and the multitude of ships that were gathered there. Some of the ships were so large that *Maria* looked like a little rowboat in comparison... Here and there on the piers were piles of boxes and bags of every description. People were milling back and forth and horses and wagons came and went. There was screeching and noise all around us. The whole atmosphere of the place was upsetting. At first I felt utterly confused by all the sounds around me and by all the commotion. Gradually all this noise faded into the background somehow and I stopped paying attention to it” (translation taken from Borga Jakobson’s translation of *Eiríkur Hansson* entitled *The Young Iclander* (2009)).

bjó sig í skyndi til að fara yfir að Möðruvöllum, þar sem gufubáturinn lenti, að taka á móti þeim. Svo kom hún aftur vonsvikin, og því gleymi ég ekki heldur (76).<sup>14</sup>

This passage is a reiteration of something Guttormur once uttered in an interview with *Morgunblaðið* on the twentieth of July, 1938 when asked how the “börn skóganna”, the children of the forest, think of Iceland some fifty to sixty years after the mass exodus: “Ísland er alltaf í huga okkar. Það gerði heimþrá foreldra okkar. Móðir mín leit aldrei glaðan dag vestra” (1938: 3).<sup>15</sup>

Sigmund Freud discusses this type of loss in his essay entitled “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917). Mourning is the pain of the conscious loss of a loved object, whether that be a person or an abstraction “such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (1964: 243) he writes. Melancholia, a much darker emotional space, is distinguished from mourning as the pathos that accompanies an “object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness” (245). A kind of loss has indeed occurred according to Freud, but one may not see clearly what it is that has been lost (245). Could Guttormur, the Poet of New Iceland, have inherited this lamentation for something indescribable from his parents’ very particular immigrant experience? Especially from his mother Pálína, a poetess herself. Unlike her husband who forever remained

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<sup>14</sup> “It cannot be said that my mother was happy here. In her mind she was always at home with her parents and siblings... I remember that one summer she had fixed a hope on another of her sisters arriving. I don’t know upon what this hope was built, but one morning, when the steamboat *Victoria*... crept down the river in front of our house, we saw a woman sitting up on the deck... My mother was so sure that this was the sister she had hoped for... that she hurried over to Möðruvellir, where the steamboat landed, to meet them. She came back home again, disappointed, and I have not forgotten that either” (*My Parents*. 2007. Translated by Katelin Parson).

<sup>15</sup> “Iceland is always in our minds. It is due to our parents longing for home. My mother never saw a happy day in the west”.

the optimist (Guttormsson 1956: 76)<sup>16</sup>, she apparently suffered greatly from something that proved to be forever lost, and never found again. In an attempt to approach the unapproachable solitude of someone else's experience of life, of Pálína's experience of profound loss, we can draw forward the mysterious meaning of the title "Poet of New Iceland". For if the title should belong to someone whose experiences and memories of the place were those of a child, then we might say that a child of New Iceland is born into a place of forgetting, their inheritance is loss.

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A few words are now required on the manner in which to approach *Tíu leikrit*, for, if truth be told, human life is not sufficiently long to become acquainted with even a hundredth part of its vast and quivering forest, and we should easily become lost if we were not to make a few violent decisions on how to find our way out. Firstly, as the plays were never performed before a live theatre audience, and were never intended to be according to Roy St. George Stubbs (1975: 13), I am choosing to approach the reading of *Tíu leikrit* as a collection of closet dramas, closer to literature than to the art of theatre. Secondly, despite the fact that his three full length plays, *Hvar er sá vondi?*, *Hinir höltu*, and *Þektu sjálfan þig* are ripe with some of the more enchanting stage directions and more fantastic casts of characters,<sup>17</sup> I am choosing only to

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<sup>16</sup> "Öðru máli var að gegna um födur minn. Hann lifði á framtíðarvonum, hafði tröllatrú á landinu – trú, sem ekki var sjáanlegt þá, að hann gæti byggt á neinu" (1956: 76). "The situation with my father was a different story. He lived on his hopes for the future and had a "troll's faith" in the country. At the time it did not seem as if there was anything on which to build this faith" (Translation by Katelin Parson, *My Parents: Memoirs of New World Icelanders* 2007: 90).

<sup>17</sup> For instance, the scent of flowers is meant to fill the scene and later white figures and the sound of beating wings add to the denouement of *Hvar er sá vondi?* The *dramatis*

approach three of the one-act plays: the first in the collection *Skugginn, Hringurinn* the only play ever to be performed, and the last play in the collection *Ódauðleiki*. The one-act play is beautiful literary form all itself. It demands a relatively short concentrated gaze upon that no man's land that lies between the text's form, so systemically laid out upon the page, and the evanescent impressions of what the text signifies. The one act play represents the essence of the modern formalist aesthetic's fondness for lingering in the space of the inexpressible.

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The following is the opening to *Skugginn*, the very first piece in *Tíu leikrit*, and the one in which Guttormur seizes the opportunity to open his collection of plays by requiring of his readers a catharsis of the soul:

*Breitt stræti – talsímastaur við gangstéttina – þverstræti upp til hægri handar – stórt leikhús á horninu – hliðin gluggalaus og dyralaus snýr fram – hornið á leikhúsinu lokar að miklu leyti sýn upp strætið, sem er til hægri handar. Múgur og margmenni er á gangi frá vinstri til hægri. Húmt súmarkvöld. Unglingurinn, Öldungurinn og Sá blindi koma frá hægri<sup>18</sup>*  
(Guttormsson 1930: 1).

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*personae* in *Hinir höltu*, described in great physical detail are Reason, Sense, Hair, Eyes (to be played by twins), Nose, Ears (another set of twins), Mouth, Hands and Feet (two more sets of twins). “[A] sloping stage is supposed to incorporate all these separate characters into one huge body” (Kirkconnell 1939: 118). The characters of *Þektu sjálfan þig*, just as stylized, are a Worm, a Firefly, a Butterfly, and an Ant.

<sup>18</sup> A wide street – A telephone booth on the sidewalk – A cross street on the right hand side – A big playhouse on the corner – The windowless and doorless side faces out – The corner of the playhouse blocks, for the most part, the view up the street on the right hand side. A crowd of many people are walking from Left to Right. A summer's evening. The Young Man, The Old Man and The Blind One enter Right.

As the townspeople hurry past our three central characters, The Young Man, The Old Man, and The Blind One, to see a comedy “that has never been played here before and may never be played again” (Kirkconnell 1939: 119), a mysterious seaman enters the scene. He is shouting “Dauðinn fer hér um í nótt”.<sup>19</sup> The scoffing townspeople suspect that this is merely the typical behaviour of a landbound seaman: at once excessively drunk and unreasonably superstitious. But our three characters suspect otherwise and they decide to wait and see what indeed shall visit them that night, much to the worry of The Young Man, the insistence of The Old Man, and the calm clarity of The Blind One:

UNGLINGURINN: Við ættum ekki að tefja hér, ef það er satt, að dauðinn fari hér um í nótt. Við skulum allir verða samferða.

ÖLDINGURINN: Dauðinn gerir engum mein. Lífið veldur meinum en ekki dauðinn. Eg ætla að bíða og sjá.<sup>20</sup>

SÁ BLINDI: Eg ætla að bíða<sup>21</sup> (5-6).

A couple of Newsboys enter selling copies of the evening paper, *The Sunlight*:

BLAÐADRENGIRNIR (*kalla*): Sólarljósið. Sólarljósið, kveldblaðið. Alt um stórslysið á hafinu. Fjögur hundruð menn farast. Skipstjórinn fremur sjálfsmorð, slysið honum að kenna. Nákvæmlega sagt frá öllu í Sólarljósinu.

(Ekkjan kemur frá vinstri)<sup>22</sup> (7).

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<sup>19</sup> “Death is visiting here tonight” (Translation by Watson Kirkconnell 1939: 119).

<sup>20</sup> Through out *Tíu leikrit* the accent commonly found in the Icelandic word for “I”: “Ég/ég”, is lacking. I shall use the form found in the printing of the text.

<sup>21</sup> THE YOUNG MAN: We should not delay, if it is true, that death will visit here tonight. We should all leave together. THE OLD MAN: Death does no harm. Life causes harm not death. I intend to wait and see. THE BLIND ONE: I intend to wait.

<sup>22</sup> THE NEWSBOYS (yell): The Sunlight. The Sunlight evening paper. All about a catastrophe at sea. Four hundred men perish. The ship’s captain commits suicide, he is to blame for the accident. Exactly as said in The Sunlight. (The Widow enters left).

Just at this moment, the widow of the ship's captain enters as the boys are delivering this awful sales pitch. Not only has she heard everything but she has also come to meet her children who, like many of their fellow townsfolk, are attending the theatre that night. It is assumed that the children don't know yet of the shipwreck. The Widow means to give them the unbearable news of their father's death, worse yet, his suicide. Guttormur is leading us by the hand but his intent is to leave us here awhile and gather us back up shortly. This moment in the reading of *Skugginn* is a formal experience of the liminal state. As readers we have become planted in the metaphysical space that lies between everything that comes before and everything that comes after a metamorphosis. Liminality is the middle place, it is the feeling of awaiting someone's death alongside of them; it is the moment right before the (always unexpected) loss of one's father.

The three main characters explain to The Widow that they are waiting on a visit from death as foretold by the unknown seaman.

EKKJAN: Þið trúið því, sem sjómaðurinn sagði.

ÖLDUNGURINN: Já, eg trúi því. Eg horfði í augu hans um leið og hann fór framhjá. Eg sá inn í sálu hans.

SÁ BLINDI: Eg heyrði að hann sagði satt. Orðin komu frá djúpi sálar hans – sálin talaði sjálf.

EKKJAN: Hvernig veit sjómaðurinn þetta?

SÁ BLINDI: Sálir okkar allra fá vitneskju um óorðna hluti. Hverjir þeir hlutir eru, kunnum við ekki öll jafnvel að greina. Sína til fulls, því hún er ótakmörkuð eins og algeimsrúmið. Maður lærir aðeins að skilja það af sálinni, sem næst manni er<sup>23</sup> (10).

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<sup>23</sup> THE WIDOW: You believe it, what the seaman said. THE OLD MAN: Yes, I believe it. I looked into his eyes as he went past. I saw into his soul. THE BLIND ONE: I heard

A liminal state can only culminate, and here it culminates in what is known as a catharsis. How shall we define this particular term that tends to elude definition?

Philosopher Karl Jaspers writes:

“Admittedly, even Aristotle does not make clear to us just what this catharsis is. This much is certain: it is an experience that touches the innermost being of each man. It makes him more deeply receptive to reality, not merely as a spectator, but as a man who is personally involved” (1969: 36).

As we shall see this is precisely Guttormur’s aesthetic intention at the very end of *Skugginn*. Watson Kirkconnell summarizes what remains of the play:

Yonder there has been continual laughter and applause [from inside the playhouse], but now there is a sudden uproar, with screams that betoken fire and terrible catastrophe. The screams gradually subside as the light of the conflagration increases. The strange sailor crosses the stage behind the waiting four and casts a huge black shadow as he goes (1939: 119-120). After a “djúp dauðapögn”<sup>24</sup> of indeterminate length, the closing dialogue of the play runs thusly:

ÖLDUNGURINN: Eg sá skugga dauðans á veggnum.

SÁ BLINDI: Eg fann skugga dauðans hvíla á mér.

ÖLDUNGURINN: Dauðinn fer einatt á bak við okkur. Við sjáum bara skuggann.

SÁ BLINDI: Það er ljós hinumegin við dauðann, annars sæjist ekki skugginn<sup>25</sup> (Guttormsson 1930: 15).

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that he spoke truly. The words came from deep in his soul – the soul itself talked. THE WIDOW: How does the seaman know this? THE BLIND ONE: All our souls have knowledge of inexpressible things. Whatever these things are, we don’t know them enough to distinguish them. Only they know it, those that understand their soul. But no one understands their soul completely, as it is as infinite as space. One learns only to understand this about the soul, that’s the closest one can.

<sup>24</sup> Deep deathly silence

<sup>25</sup> *Old Man* : “I saw the shadow of Death on the street.” *Blind Man* : “I felt the shadow of Death rest on me.” *Old Man* : “Death always walks behind us; we only see his

The catharsis of the soul is attained in *Skugginn* through the paradox of what literary theorist Maurice Blanchot and poet Paul Celan call bearing witness to that for which there is no witness. We reluctantly, and with enormous difficulty, confront our own finitude in a profound way through the hauntingly silent encounter with the symbol of death's ever-encroaching shadow.

From the modern formalist perspective, the vantage point whence Blanchot surveys the province of literature, the power of the experience of the symbolic is integral in triggering the catharsis that *Guttormur* requires of us. Blanchot writes:

From the start, [the symbol] wants to jump outside of the sphere of language, of language in all its forms. Its goal is in no way expressible; what it offers to sight or hearing is not susceptible to direct understanding, or indeed understanding of any kind [...] Through symbol [...] there is a leap, a change of level, sudden and violent change, there is exaltation, there is falling, a passage not from one meaning to another, from a modest meaning to a vaster richness of significations, but to that which is other, to that which seems other than all possible meanings. This change of level [...] is the essential nature of the symbol (2003: 87).

The change of level that describes the symbol for Blanchot is echoed in philosopher Simon Critchley's piece *Very Little... Almost Nothing* (2004), which is the author's attempt to understand the significance of his own father's death (xvii). Critchley writes:

Since direct contact with death would demand the death of the person who entered into contact, the only relation that the living can maintain with death is through a representation, an image, a picture of death, whether visual or verbal. And yet, we immediately confront a paradox: namely,

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shadow." *Blind Man* : "There is light beyond Death; otherwise the shadow would not be seen." (translation taken from Kirkconnell 1939: 12).

that the representation of death is not the representation of a presence, an object of perception or intuition – we cannot draw a likeness of death, a portrait, a still life, or whatever. Thus, representations of death are *misrepresentations*, or rather they are representations of an absence (2004: 86).

In their introduction to *Death and Representation* (1993) Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin again refer to the paradox of representing death as an absence; in the way that Guttormur does through the symbolic use of a shadow, an area where light cannot reach due to the obstruction of an opaque object. They write that any representational discourse implies a mutedness, an absence, a nonbeing (7). As every representation of death must be a misrepresentation, the analysis of it must show not only how it claims to represent death, but also what else is referred to by it. Death cannot be represented, therefore attempts to represent it seek to appropriate something else (20). A change of level, as Blanchot would say. As Jaspers would say, “something different speaks to us” (1969: 94), he continues, “[B]y watching the doom of what is finite, we witness the reality and truth of the infinite” (78). This is the insight, the catharsis, the experience that is demanded of us from the very first play in the collection. An experience of the universal shipwreck we are all abandoned to. But through the jagged break caused by this experience, we are allowed a glimpse at an essential reality, something larger than we could ever fathom. For just as Guttormur’s Blind One says, “There is light beyond Death” (from Kirkconnell 1939: 12).

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There is little doubt in my mind that the concept of death was something that Guttormur J. Guttormsson struggled with profoundly over the course of his life. We

should bear in mind that by the time he had reached the age of sixteen he had lost both of his parents, losing his hapless mother at the all too young age of seven. Death, it seems, comes into one's life through grief, through the *loss* of loved ones. Emphasis is placed on the term 'loss' and an omission of the word 'death' because it should be made clear that mourning and grieving are first person activities, and the self that grieves is a self that becomes aware of its own dying (Critchley 2009). Mourning and grieving are activities of the mind that must have occupied Guttormur for quite some time.

We shall see in our continued readings of his plays that the seeming paradox and impossibility of the self's death in reality can be disconcealed through the insight of the paradoxical devices of literature. Literature as an incredibly powerful, intensely vivid experience of a larger context is something that clearly dominated Guttormur's understanding of reality and writing, and of the relationship between them. Over and over again, through different devices of disconcealment, his dramatic writings remove the veil before our eyes and expose an experience of a reality that he believes to be beyond our comprehension, that lies just outside the reaches of our senses. For Guttormur, a formalist in his own right, literature is an experience of at once the inexperienceability and the approachability of essential reality. Such are the capabilities of our minds, that through the imagination of art and literature, we can at least draw nearer to both that which we have not experienced, and that which cannot be experienced.

## V

### LOFGERÐ UM HRINGINN<sup>26</sup>

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On the evening of Saturday the fourth of March 1939, a performance of Guttormur's *Hringurinn* was aired during a segment of a radio program entitled *Leikþættir* on the Icelandic national broadcasting service, Ríkisútvarpið (RÚV). The performance was directed by Lárus Sigurbjörnsson, the head of Leikfélagið Reykjavíkur<sup>27</sup>, and performed *viva voce* by four performers. Valur Gíslason and Ingibjörg Steinsdóttir played Guttormur's Faðirinn (The Father) and Móðirin (The Mother) characters respectively, Sigfús Halldórsson as Eldri sveinninn (The Elder Boy), while the role of Yngri sveinninn (The Younger Boy) was performed by Ásta Lóa Bjarnadóttir; providing no doubt that peculiar touch that only a little girl can bring to the characterization of a little boy. Not much else of note<sup>28</sup> can be found concerning this milestone event in Guttormur's career as a playwright, despite the fact that this one time radio performance of *Hringurinn* is the closest that any of his plays got to the stage. It does seem rather fitting somehow that the performance of a play that hazily peers into something as certain as the mortality of the self, and something as eternal as the duration of time should hover above us still in the infinitude of space ever since its broadcast some seventy-two years ago.

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<sup>26</sup> A PANEGYRIC ON THE CIRCLE.

<sup>27</sup> Reykjavík Theatre Society

<sup>28</sup> Shortly after the performance, in the sixteenth of March 1939 issue of the former Icelandic newspaper *Vísir*, an article by Jóhann Árnason appears where he makes an analogy between the lost and ever-seeking characters and the future of Icelandic culture (1939: 3). According to the announcement of RÚV's broadcast schedule in *Þjóðviljinn*, an Icelandic daily newspaper since folded, *Leikþættir* was preceded by *Dönskukennsla*, a ten-minute Danish lesson, and followed by *Dönskulög*, evidently a program on Danish poetry (1939: 4).

Guttormur begins:

Greniskógur í óbygð; limið er þakið snjó; greinarnar hafa hnigið undan snjóþyngslunum og drúpa; grenstu trén hafa bognað niður. Djúpur snjór er á jörð. Þetta er um nótt, snemma vetrar.

Faðirinn grúfir yfir litlum sprekakesti og margreynir að kveikja á eldspýtum. Eldri sveinninn og yngri sveinninn standa skamt frá honum.<sup>29</sup>

The father and his two boys have lost their way in a pine forest during a snowstorm. As the chill of nightfall quickly descends upon them, the chances of even lighting their meager collection of sticks are vanishing with every wetted match. Guttormur has lifted the curtain on a scene that opens in the otherworldly light of death's plains; our characters are going to die, they are going to freeze to death. Distinct from the paradoxical nothingness of death that Guttormur attempts to shine a light upon in *Skugginn, Hringurinn* is rather an exploration of the process or act of dying and how one should think about the mystery of this thing not yet experienced, but forthcoming.

In the opening lines of “To philosophize is to learn to die” sixteenth century essayist Michel de Montaigne writes: “Cicero says that to philosophize is nothing else but to prepare for death” (1958: 56). Our philosopher Simon Critchley elaborates, “philosophy is the cultivation of an attitude towards our own finitude” (2009). We could say then that from the modern formalist literary perspective, from the way in which literature strips away the swathe that obscures the existence of our own death in reality, that to read and write literature is to learn to die as well. “*La mort est ce*

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<sup>29</sup> An uninhabited pine forest. The foliage is thick with snow, the drooping branches bow under the snow's weight. The youngest trees have bent down. The ground is covered with a deep snow. It is nearly night, early winter. The Father crouches over a little pile of sticks and tries again and again to light a match. The Elder Boy and The Younger Boy stand near him.

*côté de la vie qui n'est pas tourné vers nous*"<sup>30</sup> writes Blanchot (1988: 169).

Literature, in the way that it functions to disconceal death to us, is also a kind of making-ready for dying, a preparation for an anticipated encounter with one's annihilation. As we shall see, the manner in which Guttormur tries to think about the act of dying and the reality of our own death is by exposing our participation in a larger context in an experience of time's enduring and indivisible nature.

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When there is nothing more to come but death, as Blanchot writes in his short piece entitled *The Instant of My Death* (2000), the feelings of what remains of one's existence must become changed. A certain lightness "that I would not know how to translate", writes Blanchot, "freed from life? the infinite opening up?" (7). This untranslatable change in feeling which also overcomes the characters in *Hringurinn* is signaled to us by The Father's sudden and mysterious comment on the nature of their existences. The three have been confusedly discussing both the direction home, and the direction whence they came, when:

(Það stýrmir; hvín í skóginum; eitt tréð fellur með brestum og braki; fönn hristist niður af trjánum)...

FADIRINN: Vindurinn hefir hrist fönnina niður af trjánum í sporin okkar, þau eru alstaðar horfin nema hér. Það er eins og við hefðum hvergi verið nema hér. Það er eins og við hefðum orðið til hér<sup>31</sup> (Guttormsson 1930: 46-47).

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<sup>30</sup> "Death is the side of life not turned towards us".

<sup>31</sup> (Storming; a moan from the woods; one tree falls with a crack and breaks; snow is shaken down from the trees)...THE FATHER: The wind has shaken the snow down off

The Father makes the unusual observation that it was as though the three of them had come into being in the woods' clearing, that it seemed that they had forever existed in that place and no where else. The sense of infinite terrestrial immortality produced by the image of the characters existing forever in the forest clearing surrounded by pristinely untouched snowfall betokens The Father's sudden insight into time's inherence in reality, indicating perhaps a revelation of what remains of it for them in this world. Alas! How scant a share of life these three have left, to loosely use the words of sixth century poet Maximianus (from Montaigne 1958: 63). Guttormur will follow up this image with another great vision of time. The Younger Boy, ever-weakening, begins to hear the approach of something from deep within the woods, a message of time's constancy. In conjunction with The Younger Boy's allusion to time, the other two call to mind time's favorite bedfellow, the death of all things, as they discuss death's relentless presence in nature:

YNGRI SVEINNINN: Eg heyri eitthvað langt úti í skógi. Það er einhver að leita að okkur.

FAÐIRINN: Þú heyrir trén leggjast til hvíldar niður í snjóinn.

ELDRI SVEINNINN: Ungu trén falla í storminum.

FAÐIRINN: Það eru stöðugar jarðarfirir í skóginum.

*Vindurinn hristir fönn af trjánnum*

ELDRI SVEINNINN: Trén, sem standa, leggja til líkblæjurnar fyrir þau, sem eru fallin.

FAÐIRINN: Þau fúna þar sem þau falla.

YNGRI SVEINNINN: Heyrið þið þetta? Það er einhver að blása í lúður langt úti í skógi. Það er einhver að leita að okkur.

FAÐIRINN: Í hvassviðri hefir skógurinn hljóð allra hljóðfæra.

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the trees into our tracks, they have everywhere disappeared but here. It is as though we have been nowhere but here. It is as though we had been created here.

YNGRI SVEINNINN: Heyrið þið ekki glym úti í skógi, glym eins og í dimmum klukkum?<sup>32</sup> (47-48).

As The Younger Boy hears the echo of what he so beautifully calls “the tolling of dark bells”, The Father and The Elder Boy suggest death’s continual presence in order to represent time’s creative and destructive, never static character. The Younger Boy continues to hear something in the woods, something stalking them. He says:

YNGRI SVEINNINN: Eg heyri bresti úti í skógi, eins og sprek séu brotin óviljandi... Það er eitthvað að læðast að okkur gegnum skóginn (49).<sup>33</sup>

What are stalking them are their own deaths, hunting them down in three, and it is only a matter of time really. In order to represent the physical process of dying, a preparation that, mystically, evades us, Guttormur composes the following incredibly striking stage directions:

Það hvessir meira; fönn hristist af trjánum; margbreytileg hljóð heyrast í skóginum, eins og væri verið að stilla saman hljóðfæri í heilu symfóniu-orkestri (50).<sup>34</sup>

Shortly after this otherworldly orchestral tuning, Móðirin, The Mother, is heard calling out to her sons and husband, searching for them in the wildness of the twilight. “She has left their warm log-cabin and her younger children in order to hunt

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<sup>32</sup> THE YOUNG BOY: I hear something far off in the woods. It is someone looking for us. THE FATHER: You hear the trees laying themselves down to rest in the snow. THE ELDER BOY: The young trees fall in the storm. THE FATHER: There are constant funerals in the forest. *The wind shakes snow from the trees.* THE ELDER BOY: The trees left standing lay funeral veils on those that are fallen. THE FATHER: They rot there where they fall. THE YOUNGER BOY: Do you hear that? It is someone blowing a horn far off in the forest. It is someone looking for us. THE FATHER: The forest has the sounds of all the instruments during storm winds. THE YOUNGER BOY: Don’t you hear a tolling out in the woods, like the tolling of dark bells?

<sup>33</sup> THE YOUNGER BOY: I hear a crack out in the woods, like a stick was broken unintentionally... It is something stalking us through the woods.

<sup>34</sup> It gets windier; snow is shaken from the trees; many sounds are heard in the woods, as though a whole symphony orchestra is tuning their instruments together.

for them” (Kirkconnell 1939: 119). Over an unspecified length of time they exchange a series of calls of “Ó-hó!” (52) in order to locate each other in the increasing dark and cold.

Þeir kalla aftur og aftur og bljóðið [sic] heyrir nær og nær, unz þeir og móðirin hafa eftir nokkuð langa stund kallað sig saman. Móðirin kemur frá vinstri (53).<sup>35</sup>

Despite being relieved to have found one another, there is a foreboding sense that what locating each other has done is tied their dooms together, rather than ensuring their salvation. The Father and The Elder Boy “*eru daprir í bragði*” (53)<sup>36</sup> as they embrace her. Their anxieties rise again when they realize that The Mother has not come with matches and a long trek home is rolling out before them, but that a “*vel lifandi*” (53), a blazing fire awaits them in the hearth. She turns towards her younger son, whose condition betrays nothing. He is closest to death:

MÓÐIRIN : ...(*kysir hann*). Guð minn góður! Þú ert frosinn. Hvað þér er kalt, elsku barn.

YNGRI SVEINNINN: Nei. Nú er mér vel heitt, mamma, mér líður vel.

MÓÐIRIN: Það speglast í augum þínum ljós, sem ekki er sýnilegt neinstaðar umhverfis okkar.

Hægur vindur þýtur – leikur þýðlega á hljóðfæri skógarins og hristir snjókornin niður af greinunum. Um leið birtir af tunglsljósi og er þá sem fenni demöntum og silfursvarfi. Hið efra verður stirnt og bjart af marglitum glömpum, en inni um skóginn flökta dimmir skuggar eins og þar fari fram grímudans eftir hljóðfallinu.

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<sup>35</sup> They call again and again and the sound is heard closer and closer, until they and the mother have after a long period of time found each other. The Mother enters from the right.

<sup>36</sup> “are sad in appearance”.

YNGRI SVEINNINN: Mamma mín, hvað það var gott að þú skyldir koma til okkar um þessi jól. Sjáðu öll þessi jólatré. Ó, hvað þau eru falleg. Við eigum að fá allar þessar jólagjafir – þessa silfurkrossa og hvítu kransa. Sjáðu hvað ljósin á trjánnum eru björt. Þau eru köld. Ó, mamma, ljósin eru köld (54-55).<sup>37</sup>

Guttormur creates a beautiful and cruel atmosphere as The Younger Boy appears to be crossing death's plains ahead of the others. And with The Father's words: "Hann talar eins og hann hefði vaknað annarstaðar en þar sem hann hefði háttað" (55),<sup>38</sup> they have no other option but to try to find their way home through the night and through the snow if they wish to try to survive.

It is Guttormur's stage directions nearing the end of *Hringurinn* where he really explores the understanding of time gained through the experience of facing one's imminent death. Guttormur brings to fruition an experience of the "infinite opening up" (Blanchot 2000: 7) with the repetition of a couple strange and fascinating instances. He writes:

Þau fara til vinstri. Yngri sveinninn dettur. Faðirinn reisir hann á fætur.  
Þau hverfa inn í skóginn. Það dimmir, eins og þykt ský dragi fyrir tunglið.  
Leiksviðið er autt.

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<sup>37</sup> THE MOTHER: ... (kisses him). My God! You are frozen. How you are cold, dear child. THE YOUNGER BOY: No. I am very warm now mom, I'm feeling well. THE MOTHER: There reflects in your eyes a light which is not visible anywhere around us. *A light whistling wind – the forest's instruments play gently and shake the snowflakes down off the branches. While shining by moonlight they become like falling diamonds and silver filings. The higher level becomes starry and bright with many-coloured twinkles, but from inside the forest dark shadows flicker as though a costume ball is being held along to the music.* THE YOUNGER BOY: Mom, it was so good that you should come to us this Christmas. Do you see all the Christmas trees? Oh, how they are beautiful. We have to get all these Christmas presents – this silver cross and white wreath. Do you see how bright the lights in the trees are? They are cold. Oh, Mom, the lights are cold.

<sup>38</sup> He talks as though he had awoken in another place than where he had gone to sleep.

Þrír skógarúlfar koma frá hægri. Þeir grafa djúpa gröf í snjóinn þar sem fólkið hafði verið, finna síðan sporin þess, rekja þau til vinstri, hverfa inn í skóginn. Það tekur að hvesa.

Leiksviðið er aftur autt.

Fólkið kemur frá hægri, fyrst móðirin, svo eldri sveinninn. Faðirinn ber yngri sveininn á bakinu (56).

The family has returned to the selfsame clearing, unaware that they have traveled in one big circle, as a matter of fact, they are convinced that their tracks and the wolf tracks belong to a search party with hounds out looking for them. The play shall end with the family disappearing forever into the ever snowy, ever windy, ever darkest forest of the night.

The writer and translator Watson Kirkconnell is the scholar who has written the most on Guttormur's plays, a page or so in his essay entitled "A Skald in Canada" (1939). He offers a very interesting reading of the final portion of *Hringurinn*.

Kirkconnell writes, beginning from when the foursome first exit the stage together:

The four now begin their search anew and leave the stage to the left. An hour is supposed to elapse, and wolves cross the stage from right to left, following hungrily on the track of the wanderers. Still another hour elapses with no sound but the crackling of the frost and the sighing of the spruce branches (1939: 119).

He states that an hour is meant to pass each time the stage becomes deserted. It is unclear at this time where Kirkconnell gleans this from as it is not specifically written within the text of *Hringurinn*, but by giving it the benefit of the doubt it does allow us to more fully comprehend the formalist approach to literature that Guttormur appears to subscribe to. The scene may be emptied save "the crackling of the frost and the sighing of the spruce branches" (119), but as we shall see through a reading of the

works of Henri Bergson, this goes to show that the scene is anything but deserted. Reality, time and death, whatever kind of existences they may have, become accessible in this experience of witnessing an hour's time, the duration that makes up an hour. For a committed and faithful reader it is an experience of an hour of life, and of death, and of the great cosmic mystery therein.

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There exists a short footnote, an afterthought really, in the text of George Bernard Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1913). It serves as a unifying comment for us; a passing mention of the spirit of Henrik Ibsen, the early modernist, which then, in terms of the continuity of world literature, points us in an interesting direction in which to consider the experience of Guttormur's *Hringurinn*. Shaw writes:

... I attach great importance to the evidence that the movement voiced by Schopenhauer, Wagner, Ibsen, Nietzsche, and Strindberg, was a world movement [...] The movement is alive today in the philosophy of Bergson and the plays of Gorki, Tchekoff, and the post-Ibsen English dramatists (36-37).

As a modern philosopher, the writings of Henri Bergson are the elaboration of Ibsen's hazily perceived sense that a great failure had occurred in the Western mind. Bergson's philosophical works, especially those on that which he names "la durée", his concept of duration, are an example of the settling of the gaze on a deeper and unimaginable fundamental reality in order to search for truth.

Osman E. Chahine makes the claim that, “[I]a durée est le Cogito de Bergson” (1970: 74).<sup>39</sup> It sits as the very centrepiece of his theory of time as an intrinsic element in the nature of reality, and plays an important role also in his philosophy of mind as we shall soon see. In arguably his most important book *Creative Evolution* (1907), Bergson develops his concept of duration. He writes:

The universe endures. The more we study the nature of time, the more we shall comprehend that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new (1914: 11).

If we wish to grasp at what duration entails, this is the key; the duration of time is enduring, indivisible, uninterrupted, inexpressible, and immeasurable. Time is a succession without distinction, a continual making (1955: 27) which excludes all ideas of a tidy juxtaposition of states (1913: 101), it is a flow not implying a thing that flows, a passing not presupposing states passed (1965: 44). Duration is not the replacing of one instant with another, “duration” writes Bergson, “is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances” (1914: 5).

It is not surprising, as they enjoyed the heights of their notoriety during the same period of time in the early twentieth century, that formalism and Bergsonism, as it is known, share some common fundamental features, particularly with respect to the philosophy of mind. Formalism and Bergsonism are both implicitly preoccupied with perception and misperception, a shared fundamental sense of the mind as deluded, as unable to apprehend the world as it really is. Equally resonant in both is the idea that the mind’s capacity for imagination may strip away the film that obscures reality, that

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<sup>39</sup> “Duration is Bergson’s Cogito” (Chahine 1970: 74).

is, an experience of duration through art or literature functions to reveal a fundamental unity. This is precisely the effect of the experience of duration in Guttormur's *Hringurinn*.

Guttormur, on two separate occasions, leaves the scene completely unoccupied, for an hour each time according to Kirkconnell's readings of the play. Let us consider this. Let us imagine trying to sustain in our minds, at least for a moment, an image of this forest clearing as night falls, imagine the minute changes that are endured through the effects of the natural elements. Imagine the biography of this forest as we try to experience the effect that the duration of time has on it. Undoubtedly, our minds will be unable to maintain this task that Guttormur requires of us for very long, but what is intuitively sensed through this exercise of the imagination is both the existence of an essential infinite reality, and of our finite participation within it. An inexplicable expression of our own existence occurs. Bergson writes:

... the matter and life which fill the world are equally within us; the forces which work in all things we feel within ourselves; whatever may be the inner essence of what is and what is done, we are of that essence (1968: 147).

Guttormur gives us a glimpse of our own finite essence when he leaves our minds to consider the indivisible nature of the duration of time. "Let us then go down into our inner selves," Bergson continues, "the deeper the point we touch, the stronger will be the thrust which sends us back to the surface" (147). In philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reading of Bergson, he claims that imagining an experience of duration conjures up this personal revelation: "[s]o time is myself; I am the duration I

grasp, and time is duration grasped in me. And from now on we are at the absolute”  
(1964: 184).

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Just as Montaigne once wrote that it was his custom to not only hold death in his imagination, but also in his mouth (1958: 62), so it is with Guttormur J. Guttormsson. He is clearly one who brooded over the mysteries of death and dying; having lost both parents at a young age. There is likely little coincidence that the family in *Hringurinn* bears a striking resemblance to the fabric of his own family, a younger brother as a seer, an older brother, a father and a mother. This play peers into the cloudy dream known as “what it is like to die”, as dying is an act we know not how to accomplish. Of course Guttormur can offer no answers, but he does suggest that the Bergsonian concept of duration may play a vital, yet inexplicable, role in what the process of dying might be like. From a formalist perspective the experience of duration in *Hringurinn* pulls back the shade on something larger: it is an expression of our finite existence; finite, most certainly, in an infinite reality.

## VI LOFGERÐ UM ÓDAUÐLEIKA<sup>40</sup>

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In the catalogue of the Norse gods in his *Gylfaginning*, Snorri Sturluson lists, in seeming order of importance to the Norse chronicle, one named Bragi fourth (Lindow 2002: 86). Snorri writes:

Bragi heitir einn. Hann er ágætur að speki og mest málsnilld og orðfimi. Hann kann mest af skáldskap. Og af honum er bragur kallaður skáldskapur. Og af hans nafni er sá kallaður bragur karla eður kvenna bragur, er orðsnilld hefur frammar en aðrir, kona eður karl. Kona hans er Iðunn”(1975: 45).<sup>41</sup>

This last part bears repeating. One of the most significant gods in Norse mythology, Bragi skálda, best of poets, is married to a goddess by the name of Iðunn. Snorri writes of her “Hún varðveitir í eski sínu epli þau, er guðin skulu í bita, þá er þau eldast, og verða þá allir ungir. Og svo mun vera allt til ragnarrökkurs” (45).<sup>42</sup> Let this be our point of departure: the holy union that lies between a goddess of immortality and a god of literature. This mythological union serves as an expression of the human fixation on the connection between the written word and the inability to die, a fixation hearkening back at least since the beginning of written history.

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<sup>40</sup> A PANEGYRIC ON IMMORTALITY

<sup>41</sup> “One of the gods is called Bragi. Though renowned for his wisdom, he is mostly known for his eloquence and his way with words. He is the most knowledgeable about poetry, and because of him poetry is called *brag*. From his name comes the usage whereby a person, more skilled with words than others, is called *bragr* or foremost of men or women. His wife is Idunn” (Translation by Jesse Byock 2005: 36).

<sup>42</sup> “In her private wooden box she keeps the apples which the gods bite into when they begin to grow old. They all become young again, and so it will be right up to Ragnarok” (36).

What is this ancient preoccupation that humans seem to have with literature and deathlessness? Words shall inevitably fail us here, but it would seem as though our interest in them originates in the same place, each necessitating the existence of the other; so that a fascination with immortality somehow demands literature, and literature somehow demands a fascination with immortality. For which came first to humankind: the desire to go on living, or the fallible script of the human hand?

The act of writing protects one from complete and total annihilation. The written work guarantees that at least an abstract portion of the self survives its own death: “[t]he work, after death, is sent, like the dove of Arche, to give recognition to that which has survived” (Blanchot 1992: 88). Maurice Blanchot writes on our culture’s understanding of the relationship between the inability to die and the written work:

the idea of immortality assured by the work, or the idea that to write is to preserve oneself from death, thus to keep it in reserve, or the idea that the death of the writer would liberate the work in casting a new light on it, a light of shadow, and so on, the work always suspected of being the life of death itself (89).

The written work is not only simply proof of one’s bygone existence, but it is also the immortalization of one’s authentic voice. But what if one were to compose a piece that betrays one’s own voice? What kind of deathlessness is this? So far we have concerned ourselves with Guttormur’s plays that reveal his lifelong preoccupation with the obscurity of death and the mystery of dying. We shall now turn our sights towards the tenth and final play in *Tíu leikrit. Ódauðleiki*, a play in which a writer character “achieves” immortality, is Guttormur’s satiric commentary on writing and how not to die.

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The rising curtains reveal a highly decorated and spacious office belonging to The Writer's business manager. The set pieces are a plush and expensive looking armchair and two desks piled high with books and papers. Seated at these desks are The Manager and The Secretary. They function somewhat as the play's overseers, catching the reader up on the antecedents, the history that hides within the play. They are together discussing the commercial success of The Writer's newly published novella entitled *Kálfagatan*, or *The Street of Fools* in English.

RÁÐSMADURINN: Já. Kálfagatan lýsir svo nákvæmlega öllu, sem liggur við fæturna á manni – ritdómarar ganga ekki framhjá neinu þessháttar – og svo er hún þjóðleg, að ef maður væri að lesa hana og legði hana frá sér, en tæki upp í ógáti einhverja aðra bók þjóðarinnar og færi að lesa, yrði maður ekki umskiftanna var (Guttormsson 1930: 217).<sup>43</sup>

We have been thrust straight back into the middle of an aesthetic idealist's celebration of the national character. As expressed in The Manager's view that the height of the beauty in literature, found to the greatest degree in national literature, is in the disappearance of the writer. The writer, like any other individual considered to be the property of his nation (Kundera 2009: 104) is subsumed under the celebration of the patriotic, so that the work becomes completely interchangeable with all others expressing the same sentiment.

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<sup>43</sup> THE MANAGER: Yes. *Kálfagatan* exposes so exactly everything, which lays before the feet of man – the critics don't just walk away from anything of this kind – and how it is nationalistic, that if one were to read it and put it down, but then take up by mistake any other nationalistic book and were to read it, one would never become aware of the switch.

At this point, we are made aware that *Ódauðleiki* is not about the composition of just one fictional piece, but two: *Kálfagatan*, only just published and already flying off the shelves due to its rave reviews, and one written well before *Kálfagatan*, a play, the title of which is never given. The play, seemingly controversial in its views, has been utterly panned by these selfsame critics who “réðu yfir listasmekk fólksins” (219),<sup>44</sup> and all copies of it were subsequently destroyed.

SKRIFARINN: Svo það er ekkert eintak eftir?

RÁÐSMAÐURINN: Ekki eitt einasta. Leikritið er horfið um aldur og æfi (218).<sup>45</sup>

Upon learning of the violent incineration of all the existing copies of the play, we are introduced by word of mouth to a character simply called The Doctor, conceivably based on Guttormur’s close friend, mentor, and correspondent Dr. Jóhannes P. Pálsson of Elfros, Saskatchewan. The Doctor character is clearly a learned scholar in the field of the experience of literary formalism:

SKRIFARINN: Sorglegt! hafi eitthvað verið í það varið. Lækninum fanst mikið til um það, sagði að það væri ekki aðeins leikrit, heldur leikurinn sjálfur og hann færir fram á leiksviði í hugskoti lesandans, þar næði það tilgangi sínum; leikendur íklæddir holdi og blóði myndu draga úr áhrifum hans, sökum ófullkomleika þeirra, hversu fullkomnir sem þeir væru, því alt sem bæri fyrir augu manna, væri ófullkomnara og áhrifaminna en hugsjón.

...

RÁÐSMAÐURINN: Læknirinn var í minni hluta með sitt álit.

Ritdómaramarnir hafa rétt fyrir sér, meiri hlutinn hefi ætíð rétt fyrir sér. Og þó það sé ekki rétt, er það samt það réttasta sem vér þekkjum, nefnilega

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<sup>44</sup> “controlled the artistic taste of the people”.

<sup>45</sup> THE SECRETARY: So there is no copy left? THE MANAGER: Not a single one. The play has disappeared for forever and ever.

sannleikurinn. Svo er það nú bót í máli að Kálfagatan hefði aldrei orðið til ef leikritið hefði ekki algerlega mishepnast [sic]. Eftir að búið var að brenna – alt upplagið -... höfundurinn sá sér ekki annað fært en rita eitthvað þjóðlegt, sem almenningur vildi kaupa og lesa.

SKRIFARINN: Já, en hann var tregur til þess sem hann kallaði að misþyrma sál sinni, gerði það ekki fyr [sic] en fokið var í öll skjól (218-219).<sup>46</sup>

In order to pay back the debt incurred by the failure of the play, to pull himself out of the “bláfátækum” or “blue poverty”, meaning the utter destitution that awaits him, and to salvage his slandered reputation, The Writer finds no recourse but to compose something for the masses, something with guaranteed success, something mainstream, meaning something with national fervour. He has sacrificed the most important part of himself as a writer, his own voice, his soul, in order to earn commercial success and good favour with the critics and the public, not to mention also, a woman. The Manager and his Secretary discuss the seeming physical change that has come over The Writer since the composition and the publication of *Kálfagatan*, as The Writer now finally makes his entrance.

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<sup>46</sup> THE SECRETARY: How tragic! as something would have been in its being. The Doctor felt so highly of it, he said that it was not just the play, rather the acting itself, and it would all have taken place on a stage in the reader’s mind, there is where it would have achieved its goal; flesh and blood actors would diminish its effects, because of their imperfection, how perfect that they would have been, because everything that lies before the eyes of man would be less perfect and less effective than an idea of it. ... THE MANAGER: The Doctor was in the minority with that viewpoint. The Critics are right, the majority has always been right. And even if it isn’t right, it is still the rightest, as we know, namely the truth. So it is now the case that Kálfagatan would never have been made, if the play had not completely failed. After the burning – of all the copies – was done... The Writer saw nothing else to do but write something nationalistic, that the public wants to buy and read. THE SECRETARY: Yes, but he was reluctant of what he called mistreating his soul, and couldn’t do it before there was no other way out.

SKRIFARINN: Þú manst að hann leið óbærilegar þjáningar og tók þrjú andvörp rétt áður en hann byrjaði á Kálfagötunni.

RÁÐSMAÐURINN: Það var eðlilegt að hann varpaði öndinni, þegar hann var búinn að líða allar þessar kvalir.

SKRIFARINN: Eg held að enginn geti gert fleiri en eitt meistaraverk.

RÁÐSMAÐURINN: Það er vitleysa.

SKRIFARINN: Getur verið. En altaf [sic] síðan hann tók andvörpin er hann –

RÁÐSMAÐURINN: Er hann hvað?

SKRIFARINN (*hikandi*): Svona. Þú veizt –

RÁÐSMAÐURINN: Æ, þér bara sýnist það.

SKRIFARINN: Getur ekki verið að hann sé –

RÁÐSMAÐURINN: Uss, uss, nei.

SKRIFARINN: Að einhverju leyti – ?

RÁÐSMAÐURINN: Nei, blessaður, láttu engan heyra þetta.

SKRIFARINN: Það er þó að minsta [sic] kosti eins og hann gangi í svefni.

RÁÐSMAÐURINN: Þei, þei, þei! Hann kemur þarna (*þeir sökkva niður í skriftirnar*).

Höfundurinn kemur. Hann er lotinn í herðum – bleikur í andliti – augu hans are gljáandi, líkust því sem þau væru brostin. Það er eins og hann sé dauður á gangi – fótatakið heyrir ekki. Hann staðnæmist á miðju leiksviðinu – horfir framundan sér í áttina til gluggans (225-226).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> THE SECRETARY: You remember how he endured unbearable agony and sighed three times right before he began *Kálfagatan*. THE MANAGER: It was normal that he would have sighed when he was finished enduring all that suffering. THE SECRETARY: I don't think anyone can create more than one masterpiece. THE MANAGER: That is nonsense. THE SECRETARY: Could be. But ever since he sighed he is – THE MANAGER: He is what? THE SECRETARY (*hesitating*): Well. You know – THE MANAGER: Ach, only to you it seems that way. THE SECRETARY: Couldn't it be that he has become – THE MANAGER: Ssh, ssh no. THE SECRETARY: In some way - ? THE MANAGER: No, dear, let no one hear that. THE SECRETARY: It is at least as though he walks in his sleep. THE MANAGER: Ssh, ssh, ssh! Here he comes (*they sink down into writing*). The Writer enters. He is stooped – white faced – his eyes are glowing, gazing as though they were smiling. It is as though he is the waking dead – his

As The Writer stares off into the blue, A Representative of the Nation enters carrying a crown of laurel leaves to be ceremoniously bestowed upon him. The Representative's speech describing the criteria which are required if one is to receive the honour of the crown of arts echoes The Manager's previous national aesthetic views.

FULLTRÚI ÞJÓÐARINNAR: ... Aðeins vildi eg geta þess, að Kálfagatan sýnir afburða hæfileika yðar til að yrkja á þjóðlegum grundvelli við allra hæfi, sem er hámark listarinnar. Ekki þarf annað en sjá hið ytra útlit persónu yðar til að verða þess vís, að þér eruð andlegur, afburðamaður, snillingur, gení. Og mér er ánægja að tilkynna yður, að þjóð vor mundi einskis óska fremur en að öll skáld hennar og rithöfundar hefðu slíkt andans atgerfi sem þér hafið... í umboði þjóðar minnar krýna höfuð yðar kórónu listarinnar – lársviðarsveig (*setur kransinn á höfuð höfundarins, sem staðið hefir hreyfingarlaus og horft út í bláinu*) (232-233).<sup>48</sup>

Having stood motionless and silent, The Writer finally begins to shuffle towards the armchair.

Höfundurinn gengur með kransinn á höfðinu að hægindastólnum og sezt [...] Sólin skín inn um gluggann. Sólskinið upplitast um leið og það fellur

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footsteps are silent. He stands in the middle of the stage – looking ahead of himself in the direction of the windows.

<sup>48</sup> I would just like to mention this, that Kálfagatan displays your excellent abilities to compose on a national level to everyone's taste, which is the height of art. No need other than to see your outer personal appearance to become certain of this, that you are an intellectual, a man of excellence, a master, a genius. And I am pleased to inform you, that our nation would want nothing, except that all her poets and writers had such an intellectual gift as you have... by the power invested in me by the nation I present you with the artist's crown – the laurel wreath (*places the wreath on The Writer's head, who has stood motionless and stares out into the blue*).

á höfundinn og verður alhvítt. Við það verður andlit hans óumræðilega ferlegt (234).<sup>49</sup>

*Ódauðleiki* now approaches the denouement with which it is destined to be crowned, as The Doctor character, mentioned earlier, enters in a fury.

LÆKNIRINN: Eg verð að segja höfundinum að hann hefir hneykslað mig. Kálfagatan hefði betur verið óskrifuð. Hún er ófæri; aldrei hefi eg séð meiri vaðal. Hún er til skammar höfundinum og þjóðinni í augum allra, sem ekki eru kálfar. (*Sér höfundinn*) – hjálpi mér! Hvað hefir komið fyrir höfundinn? Hann var þó einu sinni snillingur. Sólskinið, sem fellur á hann, verður að tunglsljósi (234-235).<sup>50</sup>

He sends someone to fetch one called Sálarfæðingurinn. An interesting name for a character, translated into English it means The Psychologist. But given this character's role it is likely that a more literal interpretation is required;

Sálarfæðingurinn, The Scholar of the Soul.

SÁLARFRÆÐINGURINN (*eftir að hafa virt höfundinn fyrir sér með gleraugunum*): Eg er kominn að þeirri niðurstöðu, að hann geti aldrei dáíð. Hann er sálarlaus. En dauðinn, eins og allir vita, er ekkert annað en aðskilnaður sálar og líkama (236).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> With the wreath on his head The Writer walks towards the armchair and sits[...] The sun shines through the window. The sunshine fades and then falls on The Writer who becomes completely white. With that his face becomes unspeakably monstrous.

<sup>50</sup> THE DOCTOR: I will be telling The Writer that he has scandalized me. Kálfagatan would have been better never written. It will not do; never have I seen such drivel. It is a shame upon The Writer and the nation is the eyes of all, who are not fools. (*Sees The Writer*) – God help me! What has come over The Writer? He was once such a genius. The sunshine that falls on him is like the moonlight.

<sup>51</sup> THE SCHOLAR OF THE SOUL (*after having examined The Writer using a pair of glasses*): I have come to the conclusion, that he can never die. He is soulless. But death, as everyone knows, is nothing other than the separation of body and soul.

Through a mere happenstance in the printing of *Tíu leikrit*, the final words of *Ódauðleiki* ring out like a proclamation on its very own page: “Now I understand how one’s writing makes one immortal” (237).

A twisted and cunning criticism of the perceived authority of national literature, *Ódauðleiki* is Guttormur’s subtextual expression of “the autonomy of the aesthetic” (Jameson 2002: 162). As we know, modern formalism begins when the separation of ethics and aesthetics is complete, so that art, literature, the artist, or the writer is “perceived as fully autonomous of all moral, social and political duties (Moi 2006: 102). In his essay “Exile as Liberation According to Vera Linhartova”, Milan Kundera refers to a paper given by his fellow countrywoman, Linhartova. She writes, albeit in another context, on this very notion, the autonomy of the writer: “[t]he writer is above all a free person, and the obligation to preserve his independence against all constraints comes before any other consideration” (from Kundera 2009: 104). This is an expression of the foundation stone of modern formalism, that art must enjoy a liberty from any impediments in order that it can reveal what is possible to reveal. Guttormur’s Writer character sacrifices the very essence of his being as an autonomous writer, his everlasting authentic voice, his very own soul as it were, to make amends with the general public. He thus forfeits what is most natural to him as a writer, his ability to die. This is the twisted connection that Guttormur finds between literature and deathlessness. With a double wink, he says that the preservation of the writer is indeed guaranteed by the work.

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\* \*

In yet another letter written to Dr. Pálsson, this time dated the first of October 1923, Guttormur's thoughts on the true nature of literature are revealed. Literature is not as The Manager and The Representative of the People contend, the expression of popular taste or national sentiment to the point of complete interchangeability. Guttormur writes: "ætla ég að minna þig á, að ef þitt subconscious eða undirvitund er ekki að verki með þér þegar þú ritar, þá framleiðir þú ekki skáldverk".<sup>52</sup> What does he mean when he writes this?

*Ódauðleiki* is by and large a statement to close *Tíu leikrit* on the formalist fundamental view of art and literature's autonomous nature. But from a more "formal" standpoint, there is at least one element within *Ódauðleiki* that will help to expand upon Guttormur's thoughts written to his friend all those years ago, and shall confirm Guttormur's works as being ripe for a formalist interpretation. They are, *Kálfagatan* and the untitled play, the pieces within the piece.

World literature is charged with works that involve a fictional written work within, no surprise, since the writer as character has always been one of literature's pet-subjects. The story within a story, specifically ones like *Kálfagatan* and the untitled play, that are unwritten, and unread, nonetheless reveal a depth to the space that literature can occupy in the mind. Guttormur allows us an indirect interaction with literature beyond his text when he introduces us to the fictional *Kálfagatan* and untitled play. Meaning that something is at once disclosed to us, as well as concealed from us. It is the tension perceived between this disclosure and concealment that functions to disclose the depth of a reality concealed. This is the deep sublevel that

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<sup>52</sup> "I want to remind you, that if your subconscious is not at work when you write, then you are not creating literature".

Guttormur is referring to in his letter, a faintly perceived tension in a work of literature that hazily reveals something more essential.

## VII

### A SHORT PANEGYRIC ON A HISTORY OF THE UNCONSOLED

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The least reflection on any of the written works by Immanuel Kant, Henrik Ibsen, or Guttormur J. Guttormsson reveals a long and difficult personal pursuit, and expresses a struggle with the unconsolation that an unending search inevitably stirs up. Each sought confirmation of the reality of truth, and expressed that search through writing. But what is the truth that Kant, Ibsen and Guttormur are said to have sought? The line that we can draw between Kant, Ibsen, and Guttormur is the way in which they approached the world as beautiful losers, so-called. A connection we can discover through Isaiah Berlin's famous hedgehogs and foxes analogy.

He begins his essay "The Hedgehog and The Fox" (1953) with: "There is a line among the fragments of Greek poet Archilochus which says: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing" (1978: 3). When taken figuratively, Berlin writes that these words "can be made to yield a sense in which they mark one of the deepest differences which divide writers, thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general" (3). For to Berlin, there is a "great chasm between those [...] who equate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent" (3), and those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and contradictory, related by no moral or aesthetic principle in their search for the reality of truth. The hedgehogs, Berlin lists: Plato, Lucretius, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Proust express the former intellectual and artistic personality; his foxes: Aristotle, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Molière, Goethe, Pushkin, Balzac and Joyce, the latter.

According to Berlin, Henrik Ibsen is a hedgehog, due to his belief in a single uniting cosmic principle, or one big truth. For despite lamenting the loss of the vision of Utopia, an ideal world where all true answers are said to create a cohesive whole, Ibsen nonetheless celebrated the idea of reality whose depths were meant to be discovered. There is a mysterious profundity to the Ibsen play, something left unexpressed, but is sensed through the spiritual losses suffered by his most enduring characters.

It is not too difficult then to take Berlin's assertion that Ibsen is a hedgehog and apply it to Immanuel Kant. This is a man who believed in the coherence and continuity of nature and in the universality of human free will. This is a man whose very spiritual foundation had begun to flounder under the ravages of his passion for scientific inquiry. Kant's search for the reality of truth is ultimately a personal religious crisis. His faith in the ordered coherence of the natural world, created by God, wherein humanity occupies the pinnacle, is Kant's view of the singularity of reality.

It follows also that Guttormur was a hedgehog, a writer who ultimately believed in a single and large truth, a reality in which he believes we participate but cannot perceive. That is to say, that reality enjoys an existence outside the reach of our immediate sense perceptions. There is little doubt that death occupied the mind of Guttormur J. Guttormsson his entire life. He lost both of his parents by the time he had become a very young man. He experienced the loss of his dear mother, luckless and a poetess herself, at the too tender age of seven. Having forever left their lives, their families, their friendships, their homes behind in Iceland in 1875, Jón

Guttormsson of Arnheiðarstaðir in Fljótsdal, and Pálína Ketilsdóttir of Bakkagerði in East Borgarfjörður each lived only ten and twenty years longer in their new world. They are counted among the unconsolated, for what was lost in the immigration? For Guttormur, a child witness to the losses his parents suffered, the inexpressible realm of existence, concepts such as death and dying, came to influence his plays.

In the first play in the collection *Skugginn*, Guttormur expresses the unrepresentable instant of death through the use of an encroaching shadow on a wall, an absence of light. As the mystery of death cannot be represented, it must then be an expression of a misrepresentation in which something else is referred to by it. But by witnessing the doom of what is finite, we are privy to the existence of the infinite. An essential reality is glimpsed through the jagged break caused by the experience of this misrepresentation.

*Hringurinn*, the only one of Guttormur's plays to enjoy the privilege of performance, is another glimpse at death. In it he explores what it might be like to die, and again reveals a depth to the reality we cannot fathom. Time is an intrinsic element in the nature of reality; it is a succession without distinction, a continual making. It is the mind's capacity for imagination that may strip away what obscures a fleeting perception of time's quality of duration. Guttormur asks his readers to imagine the effects of time's duration on the biography of a forest clearing. It is a task guaranteed to fail, but what is sensed intuitively in the attempt to sustain an image of this forest emptied of all human life is a context much larger than our mind's perceptions allow, and our participation within it.

Finally, the last play in *Tíu leikrit*; the piece in which he facetiously comments on how not to die, *Ódauðleiki*. This is truly Guttormur's statement on the nature of literature. *Ódauðleiki*, yes, is a comment on the autonomy of the artist, but it also functions to reveal a depth to the space that literature occupies. There are two fictional pieces within the text of *Ódauðleiki*, a novella by the name of *Kálfagatan*, the other, a play, left untitled. In the tension Guttormur creates between what is concealed and what is disclosed, the space of literature opens up, revealing its own depth and breadth.

This is ultimately all we can arrive at in the end, a mere glimpse of another's experience of his or her life on earth based on their understanding of reality. In the beginning, we entered into the site of one man's personal library and discovered one striking element – the entire collected works belonging to another man of another time. The task was to discover the significance of Henrik Ibsen's complete and collected works. By traveling all the way back to the days enjoyed by Immanuel Kant, we discover that its significance lies in being a signal for the disappointments discovered by humanity in the nineteenth century, which hearkens all the way back to the colossal philosophical writings of Immanuel Kant.

The title of this piece is *A History of the Unconsoled*. It is a reference to a piece by writer Kazuo Ishiguro. It is meant to refer to the continuity and vastness that defines world literature. Consolation, or unconsoled in this case, betokens the concept of losing something, or of something lost forever and never found again. Guttormur J. Guttormsson, Henrik Ibsen, the romantics before him, and Immanuel Kant are a history of unconsoled. Each took up a lifelong search for a reality they

believed was there but too large to perceive, a truth that can never be truly sensed. It is a bitter thing to try to take on a mystery wherein the mystery itself is unknown, for again, what is lost in the search? The unconsolation of this kind of deep yearning for truth by these beautiful losers is what this thesis is ultimately devoted to.

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