

**BOOBY, BE QUIET!**

Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl  
**BOOBY, BE QUIET!**

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POESIA  
HELSINKI

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## A brief history of nýhilism: Felix culpa

I

*If a Lorentzian spacetime contains a compact region  $\Omega$ , and if the topology of  $\Omega$  is of the form  $\Omega \sim R \times \Sigma$ , where  $\Sigma$  is a three-manifold of nontrivial topology, whose boundary has topology of the form  $d\Sigma \sim S^2$ , and if furthermore the hypersurfaces  $\Sigma$  are all spacelike, then the region  $\Omega$  contains a quasipermanent intra-universe wormhole.<sup>1</sup>*

When one tries to speak of poetry one usually starts by making a really big circle, a really really big circle that engulfs the entire universe. When one actually starts mouthing the words that will – if god and effort allow – become one's eternal speech about poetry (and therefore everything else) one finds that the circle has shrunk. The circle is now no more than a dot. The dot, dark brown like a mole or something of the sort, one realizes, is on the tip of one's own nose. This, unlike the words that opened this my eternal speech about poetry (and therefore everything else) is not merely a theory. This is the god's honest truth.

Sitting on the edge of my bed a few weeks, days, minutes or seconds ago (depending on who you find it proper to believe in these matters) I noticed something on the tip of my nose and

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Visser, *Lorentzian wormholes: From Einstein to Hawking*

on the unfocused plateau in front of it – I started marvelling at the accomplishments brought to life by my friends, my close acquaintances, my relatives and, oh yes indeed, by myself.

By some astonishing coincidence this was the same time I started writing this piece. My eternal speech about poetry (and therefore everything else) – cleverly subtitled: *The unspoken facts*.

(It shall be noted, and probably has already been noted by the more clever of readers, that this essay, rant, or what you want to call it, is not at all entitled *eternal* anything or the other, and it certainly is not subtitled).

I don't remember what it was that I promised Kim,<sup>2</sup> but it must've had something to do with literature. Very probably poetry, and I am almost positive Icelandic poetry is what I promised to write about. Oh, the late Sigfús Daðason! The marvels of the late Dagur Sigurðarson! The late Einar Ben, late Davíð Stefánsson, late Egill Skallagrímsson, late Tómas Guðmundsson! Ahhh... one's heart throbs with joy at the infinite beauty and bleh bleh.

Please, I don't mean no disrespect. Don't mean no double negatives. Only pure positives. As of late though, I've found an increasing desire to dismiss the late departed, as being a little less than timely. The circle is closing in. We're not crossing the creek to get water, not this time. We don't have time, I am in a hurry. Please.

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<sup>2</sup> Kim Simonsen, editor of *Outsider Magazin* where this essay was originally published.

## II

So Nýhil.

A few years back I was standing on a street corner in Reykjavik. It was a great winter of much poverty in the circles I was circulating in, and me and a friend of mine, a poet with prematurely greying hair and a knack for walking holes into his shoes in a matter of days, were sharing our last cigarette in a quiet winter stillness. It might have been Tuesday, and I think it was around 4 in the morning.

In the night.

We had just shared a beautiful late dinner of rice and soy sauce, a treat that we had grown bizarrely accustomed to.

And there it was. Suddenly, as if it had crashed on top of our heads: an idea as beautifully upheaving and destructive as if Orville and Wilbur had taken off in a Concorde supersonic transport (crashing or soaring, one or the other, take your pick).

After jumping up and down to display our joy and amazement for a few seconds, minutes, days or weeks (depending on who tells the story) we realized that the idea, like we've realized since goes for all ideas worth anything, was naught but a name.

The name was, it goes without saying, Nýhil.

## III

As in *nihil*: nothing. As in *vox et praetera nihil*: voice and nothing more. As in *aut Caesar aut nihil*: Either a Caesar or noth-

ing. As in *nihil obstat*: Nothing obstructs.

And as in nihilism: A doctrine that denies any objective ground of truth and especially of moral truths.<sup>3</sup> A wise man once said that nihilism was the blackhole of philosophy. A wiser statement yet would be that nyhilism is the black hole of poetry.

The nihilists of old went down the black hole to stay there, with rotting teeth and pathetic revolutions that somehow never got farther than a shot in the foot. When the nihilist says: nothing matters so I might as well rape and pillage, the nyhilist asks: if nothing matters then why should I bother with raping and pillaging? They say buddhism is nihilism with a smile. Nyhilism is nihilism with a ‘ý’.

Ný. It’s the age-old prefix for new, as I guess most Nordic readers have already guessed.

#### IV

This is where we start getting closer to the point. The circle keeps closing in and the spot on my nose is itching with glee. The black hole has a theoretical brother known as the wormhole. The name is derived from an analogy according to which a worm crawling over any surface will not circumvent an apple to get to the other side. The worm will dig through it and therefore get to the other side much quicker than otherwise thought possible. Going down the black hole you might reap-

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3 One of a few definitions in the Merriam-Webster’s dictionary.

pear somewhere else:

*Different types of black holes have differently shaped singularities: in a stationary black hole it is a point, in a rotating black hole it is a ring. If you passed through the center of the ring without touching the ring singularity itself, the mathematics predicts you will come out somewhere else and you **cannot return**. This is the basis of the wormhole idea. However the mathematics gives no indication of where (or when) that somewhere else is, and no way to control or select it yourself.*<sup>4</sup>

Apples and worms: Does anyone recall the symbolism?

*“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.”*<sup>5</sup>

Yet, much like in the apple, there’s a hole in the story – there grew no apples in the Middle East. Which is hardly a great matter for anyone godlike, for anyone who has the wisdom not to circumvent the apple (*malum* in latin; evil is *malus*) but to go straight through. From one side to the other, laughing, in an action of non-action known as wu-wei within the Tao – in the old texts they compare it to moving through water. But enough of that.

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4 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_holes#Black\\_hole\\_FAQ](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_holes#Black_hole_FAQ)

5 Genesis 3:4.

What was the first thing the Lord asked, what was the first question to form on the lips (or not-lips) of God Almighty after his children betrayed him?

*The Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"*<sup>6</sup>

Man had dug through the apple and was long gone.

## V

Nýhil is deliberately hard to define. For one, no one really knows who belongs to it. It's been claimed that anyone that has done anything in the name of Nýhil in the two weeks preceding anyone's claim that anyone else is a nýhilist is in fact a nýhilist. If more than two weeks have passed, supposedly that individual (poet, artist, athlete, patron-of-the-arts, etc.) is something completely different.

Anyone who belongs to Nýhil (if anyone really does) can claim whatever they like about Nýhil. Manifestos have been written and forgotten, remembered and rewritten only to be deemed utter nonsense. The plan is perhaps not so much to make a symbolic gesture towards the ambiguity of truth, as much as it is to achieve contradiction, along with all the friction and movement that such an accomplishment brings. That's how it happens that a society of not really anyone, with no one in charge, a worthless army of fools any way you look at it, has

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6 Genesis 3:8.

published around 20 poetry books, 4 essay collections, 2 DVD's, a novel and a CD, produced four short films, a sportsbag, three instruments, while travelling the country for readings, holding a two-day international poetry festival in Reykjavik, and will soon open a bookstore in Reykjavik with an emphasis on underground art and poetry. During this entire time (about four years) people belonging (or not belonging) to Nýhil have continued publishing poetry books, novels, and translations with other more pristine publishing houses.

## VI

Poetry is thinking for those that deem it worthless. Good poetry comes from those that loathe poetry with a greater fervour than your average reader can possibly muster. There's probably a point in explaining it, but I've lost sight of it. But my faith remains as firm as ever.

Originally published in *Outsider Magazin*  
in Faroese translation (2005).

## The importance of destroying a language (of one's own)

The myth about the Icelandic language among the population – the myth that is propagated in the school system, from kindergarteners to doctorates – is that in some ways it is a purer language than that spoken by our brethren in Scandinavia, which at best is considered to be some sort of pidgin Icelandic, “broken Icelandic”, languages not really fit for proper discussion – let alone poetry! – simplified and almost childish in their limited capacity for the use of cases, inflections or the melding of new words. This point of view, whatever merit it may have, has yielded a rabid conservatism within the Icelandic writers’ community that, despite what people might think, and despite the “official” view, is ever increasing: The idea is partly that we must not fall into the blackhole of becoming Scandinavians.

Anyone who reads Icelandic books from the first fifty years of the last century – let alone older books – will notice the lack of uniformity in the use of Icelandic. The grammar is regional and personal, the idioms are regional and personal, the spelling is regional and personal, etc. In the years since, there seems to have been a steady movement towards a uniformist coordination – linguistic scholars will often, although it is not fair to say always, mean that one usage is right and the other wrong – often this is a battle of cases and idioms – and believe-you-me, Icelandic professional proofreaders are among the most anal of the lot, scoffing at those who take liberty with language: “What silly mistakes!”

The general consensus seems to be: If you don't do it the

way the rulebooks say you should, then that's because you don't know how – a peculiarity is written off as a mistake. I have even found the need to justify the use of the few colloquialisms that originate from my own home region – which are mostly about which prepositions to use – in my work as a journalist in my very own hometown, as well as having had battles with proofreaders from the south of the country. The conservative uniformism is so strict that there is quite literally no room for linguistic diversity – be it experimental or traditional.

There are of course exceptions, the Icelandic literati – if indeed there is cause to call the half-illiterate a literati – will now and again ordain a poet or writer a freeman, one that should no longer be revered as a mere servant of the language but as a genius (often with good reason), and grant them permission to play. Normally though, this permission is given afterwards, and it's nearly a matter of coincidence who gets it and who doesn't. To name two brilliant experimental writers, Megas has been ordained, while Steinar Sigurjónsson has not (outside a very small lit-clique).

The need in Iceland to overthrow the language regime is quite dire (“Tear this wall down!”). Viewing a language as such a rigid object does not only promote idiocy, it is literally a pathway to fascism (“No pasaran!”). A postmodern fascism, of course – where people are caressed into action rather than forced (“Make love, not war”). A father saying to his child: “We really do have a great need for protecting our language, we are such a small nation. Now, you wouldn't want to live in a world where no one spoke Icelandic, would you? You know, maybe then we would all speak Danish, and the pronunciation is not very easy.”

And the child whispers: “Yes, daddy, I promise to rid myself of dative-illness.”

Yes, it's called “dative-illness” – and it means that you have a preference for the dative instead of the accusative, or in some cases, the nominative. According to Icelandic parents and elementary school teachers, this is a life-threatening condition.

Enter: Avant-garde poetry. The eternal fucking with language – in the sense of disturbing it and loving it at the same time. Fooling around with it. Cheating on it. Taking it apart and putting it back together again – inverted or otherwise malformed.

Iceland doesn't have a particularly rich tradition of experimentation. Not to say that people haven't experimented, not to say the experiments haven't at times been brilliant – but mostly they've been discarded as momentary flippancies, and the postmodern fascist's answer to the artist's weeping is: “Now now, you are very talented, we know. But you should focus on something more suitable, perhaps...” – And the most talented of people turn to rewriting Knut Hamsun or Halldór Laxness.

A necessary statement to make at this point is that Icelandic literature (or poetry) isn't in all senses bad. What is done is often well done – it is possible to thoroughly enjoy this conservatism, it may even border on the same profoundness that characterized the literature of old, you may feel yourself swept away on a pathos-tour-de-force. But somehow it's often just more of the same. Their qualities need to be recognized, not doing so would be the same as saying the Da Vinci Code isn't a page-turner – a statement intended to belittle it, I guess, but the truth is that while being one of the most awful pieces of literature published in years, it is nevertheless a page-turner.

Icelandic literature is good at pathos. Which doesn't necessarily mean that pathos is good at literature.

Experimental writing isn't rejected violently, it's rejected with an understanding that seems tender but is ultimately intolerant. Like when the Icelandic police a few days ago “removed” two dozen gypsies from Reykjavík – by showing up in police uniforms, giving them plane-tickets and driving them to the airport. Officially no one was deported, officially no one was forced to go anywhere – even though it seems the police hinted that they could deport the gypsies if needed – but still they went. Apparently there was a need to clear the streets of musicians for the Reykjavík Art Festival, that has just started.

The same social-democratic-postmodernist/diet-fascist – or whaddyawannacallit – approach is used on anything else that annoys the precious middle classes, the burgeoning structural enthusiasts that now populate Iceland to such an extent that rebellion doesn't seem just difficult, it seems futile. Just like storming the city hall is pointless for today's revolutionaries – the powers that be don't need no city hall. And picking apart language as if it were a grandfather clock, is not really either a practice anyone hands out Nobel prizes for. But yet it seems that ever more poets find a calling within exactly those structures, or non-structures, of taking language apart and putting it back together, inverted or otherwise malformed. It is what defines most experimental poetry, and to a lesser extent probably almost all poetry worthy of the name. From T. S. Eliot to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets to the Flarfists, from the silliest of slam-poets to the Four Horsemen.

The infinities of the world, every word and every meaning, all the meanings behind every word and all the words behind

every meaning, have been divided into categories of right and wrong, and questioning those categories is nigh pointless – the machine will in all probability have its way. Yet, it's probably the only possible course of action for anyone who actually cares for a language or for language itself.

Viewing language as any sort of finite object is the equivalent of giving up on thinking. Icelandic popstars who sing in English are often criticized with the argument: "You should be able to express it more precisely in your own (natural) tongue". This is in many ways a misunderstanding of how language functions. To begin with, saying anything precisely is as impossible as it is impossible for a road-sign-arrow to turn into the object it points to. It quite simply is not an option. If I were to deduce the "actual" meaning behind said criticism, it would be something along the lines of: "You should take the road more travelled, do not stray into unfamiliar territories for you might get lost." A stay-at-home message to the boldly adventurous.

It is well and right to mention though, that when aforementioned popstars are asked to defend their choice of language, they do so with a logic that is of the same origin: "English is the language of rock'n'roll – the lingua franca of music." That is to say: "We want to stay at home, we aren't bold enough to be adventurous."

Both ideas are equally lingually conservative, and therefore (in my mind!) repulsive.

To begin with, language needs neither to be known nor understood to be profound or beautiful. One could mention

such strangeness as Christian Bök's *Motorized Razors*,<sup>7</sup> Caroline Bergvall's *Host's Tale*,<sup>8</sup> Leevi Lehto's *Sanasade*<sup>9</sup> or Kenny Goldsmith's habit of reading in languages he doesn't understand, with similar experiments being done at *Nokturno's* "In Another's Voice" series.<sup>10</sup>

Another valid example is the Nordic poetry community and the discussions that take place within it. At a recent seminar in Biskops-Arnö in Sweden, the linguistic gymnastics were utterly breathtaking, even to one who has a very basic understanding of the Scandinavian languages. But as Biskops-Arnö conductor Ingmar Lemhagen noted, Nordic collaboration is mostly founded on misunderstandings. Having a decent understanding of written Scandinavian and spoken Swedish, about 70% of spoken Norwegian, 85% of spoken Faroese, all of the Icelandic and most of the English, while none of the spoken Danish, made discussions a very interesting terrain to cover. It was well nigh impossible to know what had been said, what had been covered and what had been discarded – and yet the discussion produced ideas from somewhere, bits and pieces that form some sort of chaotic structure that is far from meaningless, one that is rather impregnating, in the same way that half-finished ideas can generate millions of finished (or half-finished) ideas, whereas a

7 [http://ubu.wfmu.org/sound/bok/Bok-Christian\\_from-Motorized-Razors.mp3](http://ubu.wfmu.org/sound/bok/Bok-Christian_from-Motorized-Razors.mp3)

8 [http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Bergvall/Chaucer/Bergvall-Caroline\\_Chaucer\\_01\\_Hosts-Tale\\_2006.mp3](http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Bergvall/Chaucer/Bergvall-Caroline_Chaucer_01_Hosts-Tale_2006.mp3)

9 [http://www.leevilehto.net/voices/Lehto-Leevi\\_Sanasade\\_20-10-05.mp3](http://www.leevilehto.net/voices/Lehto-Leevi_Sanasade_20-10-05.mp3)

10 <http://www.nokturno.org/index.php?sivu=151>

finished idea is just that.

Paal Bjelke Andersen noted in an article at the communal blog for the seminar:

*The languages spoken in the seminar-room were Norwegian, Swedish, Finland-Swedish, Danish and English. And Norwegian with a French-British accent, Swedish with an Icelandic accent, Swedish with a Finnish accent and Danish with a Faroese accent. And English with a Norwegian accent, English with a Swedish accent, English with a Finland-Swedish accent, English with a Danish accent, English with a Finnish accent, English with a Finnish accent, English with a Faroese accent, English with a Dutch accent, English with a French-Norwegian accent and semiotic Swedish.*

It is only proper to add to this Icelandic and Finnish – even though it wasn't much. Zoning in and out of this debate was, although admittedly tiresome, an interesting experience. Paal also mentioned to me that he found it interesting to read Icelandic, seeing as there are mutual codes in the two languages, and the codes can be cracked more or less just by looking very hard and thinking very long (something which can't really be done verbally – unless you're all the more clever and the speaker talks all the more slowly). The Finnish is a game of its own, although even the tiniest of understandings or misunderstandings can be very enjoyable – as I do remember listening for words and word-parts in discussions by Oscar Rossi and Leevi Lehto, even just trying to notice where one word ends and the next begins. It's a bit like being an infant again, you get to poke at the world in near blindness, trying to figure out how

things work and although it all sounds more or less like baba-beebeegaga, you get the distinct feeling that there is actually something more there. Oscar and Leevi actually seemed to be communicating, with laughter, frowns and gestures, indicating that the words being passed between them were some sort of firm ground to stand on, even though for me the same terrain was pure quicksand.

Some weeks ago I was sitting at a café in Helsinki with two Finnish poets discussing the whole “writing in English-as-a-second-language” thing that has become more and more popular – there are several blogs in the world for this, books have been published – amongst those Leevi Lehto's *Lake Onega and other poems* – and as Leevi has pointed out it may be a way for non-English speakers of gaining the upper hand on English-speaking constraintual super-poets like Christian Bök, who could never enjoy the benefits of working in English-as-a-second-language. Of course, although Christian could not learn to speak English-as-a-second-language, he could learn how to speak Finnish-as-a-second-language – but there really is no language in the world that can compete with English, it's the only one with proper momentum, and perhaps especially English-as-a-second-language.

Reenter: Experimental poetry. Sitting at said café, discussing the niceties of actually having a common culture with the international avant-garde, post-avant, experimental, radical writing, language whaddyawannacallit, it also dawned on me that the need to fuck over our own languages is imminent. Well, it's either that or jumping ship completely, somehow. Let's say I feel aroused by the idea of fucking over Icelandic. Let's say I'm really, really aroused. It will hardly reach anyone interested in

it – seeing as the interest for such things is rather limited with only 300 thousand possible readers – but perhaps it is enough to induce interest in "less than seven people", which again according to Leevi Lehto is the prerequisite for changing the consciousness of the masses. Reaching less than seven people may even be easier in a small country, within a tiny language.

Then again, this is also a certain disability: The groundwork for destruction, the methodical planting of bombs along the frontwalls of nouns and windows of adjectives – pardon my metaphorizing – has not been done, and the destruction of a language is no small feat.

It needs to be said that when I say destruction I mean it in the most creative sense. As the collapsing of a house creates a field of interesting rubble, as taking down a wooden lamppost leaves you with a nice log for bonfires and an electrical light lying on the ground next to it.

There is very little in Iceland that could be called an avant-garde tradition – if that is indeed not a contradiction in terms. Experimental writing has been limited to a few groups or individuals taking small detours that have ended in dead ends only to be (more or less) forgotten. A contemporary example would be the Medúsa group – one of the founding members of which was Sjón, who received the Nordic Literature Prize in 2005. An experimental group of late surrealist poets and artists whose work is very hard to come by, outside the national library in Reykjavík. I have in fact, although being at least mildly interested, not seen much of it at all. The other members of Medúsa have, as writers, mostly been forgotten about – including the poet Jóhannar who remains an experimental writer somewhere in the invisible outbacks of Icelandic literature.

As much as one might find it near-kitschy to canonize and anthologize avant-garde poetry, being interested in it in a society that doesn't canonize or anthologize it isn't particularly much fun. For one thing it makes continuation of experimental writing seem less warranted – the tradition is elsewhere, experimentation doesn't have a tradition (which is probably a lie – most contemporary experimental poets I know get turned on by the experimental poets of the bygones, most of them read anthologies wet&wild, hot&bothered with flaming hard-ons).

It's hard for me to say how much of these, to which extent and in which areas, are international concerns, which ones have a home in several countries and which (if any) are Icelandic phenomena, simply because of the rift that divides Icelandic poetry from its foreign counterparts, the pervading lack of interest in foreign poetry in Iceland – although there are individuals interested, the poetry-culture as such could more or less not care less – which means, for instance, that very little is written about foreign poetry and, outside of Whitman and such gargantuanly canonized figures, foreign poetry isn't found in Icelandic bookstores, and even then, I would dare to estimate that foreign poetry for sale in all of Iceland would not reach 3 shelf-metres.

Originally written as a lecture for a seminar on alternative publishing in Biskops Arnö Sweden, but I ended up lecturing on another subject. First published in Nypoesi ([www.nypoesi.net](http://www.nypoesi.net) – currently defunct) and later published in Danish translation by Basilisk press.

## You are a pipe

I

One's understanding of one's own language is limited, one's understanding of other languages is even more limited, and a perfect transferral of a text from one language to another is impossible simply because the languages are two different languages. "Boat" is not the same as "bátur," which is not the same as "Boot" or "båt", let alone "bateau". So much is obvious.

To translate poetry is to write poetry by procedure, inasmuch as such an act is possible. One is made to choose which characteristics get to remain the same, inasmuch as they can remain the same – form, appearance, alliteration and other similar phonetic characteristics, rhyme, ideas and association of ideas, wordplay, continuity, story, allusions, semantics, semiotics, etc. – and then one is made to choose what gets to enter the work that wasn't there previously. It is inevitable that many things will, since any kind of transferral of text adds layers to what was written, while peeling others off. If we take for example Borges' famous story about Pierre Menard, who takes it upon himself to rewrite Don Quixote word for word in the 20th century, then that book, as Borges ironically points out, is another phenomenon than the one Cervantes wrote in the 17th century: Menard writes in a style which is unnatural to him, whereas Cervantes merely wrote in the language of his time. The two works are different because they are written by different men in different times, even though the letters, words,

sentences and paragraphs are the same and in the same order. The American poet Kenneth Goldsmith performs similar acts; he writes down previously existing language – including an entire issue of *The New York Times (Day)*, everything he said for a week (*Soliloquy*), the weather report (*The Weather*). This has been called a N+0 translation, named after the Oulipo method N+7, where the words in a text (e.g. all nouns) are replaced with the seventh following noun in a certain dictionary. Translation as fair copy, the recreation of *the same* is an impossible feat, the translation is always *new*.

A large portion of foreign experimental poetry today (avant-garde, post-avant, radical, language, digital, flarf, post-langpo, post-prairie, etc.) deals with a presentation, interpretation and a representation which to some extent strives for some sort of transformation, or even destruction, of language itself. Language is treated as any other raw material – its meaning is split and stretched, and its physical attributes (sound and picture) are split and stretched.

A text is a collection of meanings, phonemes and morphemes used to express something about "reality" through "reality". Metaphorical "reality" is used to convey something which the reader can relate to in his own "reality". Language is an independent reality within reality. The task of poetry is then to punch holes in the language of either, or both, of these realities – to seek a way out of the predominant social pact of text as reality and life as reality. Through the holes it might be possible to see something new, and language will heal in a different shape.

Many of the poems in this book<sup>11</sup> are translated from English, a language which differs from Icelandic mostly by not being a single language, but several. The poems in English are written by people of many nationalities who have English as a native language while others are written by people who have other native languages (Caroline Bergvall is French/Norwegian, Gherardo Bortolotti is Italian for example). As the Finnish poet Leevi Lehto has pointed out, this language – *English-as-a-second-language* – is the real lingua franca of the world, being spoken by considerably more people than *English-as-a-first-language*.

There is no way of translating Australian English into Australian Icelandic, or American English into American Icelandic. You can't even localise by using homegrown dialects, since the little that remains of such things in this country of linguistic holocaust quite simply won't suffice (not that it would produce a more accurate "translation"). In this aspect Icelandic and English belong to different worlds.

Experimental poetry as represented in this book has been produced in the English speaking world for several decades by dozens of thousands of individuals, each of whom has done their bit to widen (or tighten, blast, transform, deform) the idea of English as a language – while Icelandic has enjoyed a rather limited amount of similar experiments in its literary history, and has, it seems, had to deal with a serious nutritional deficiency in the last years, there not being very much that escapes from under the petticoats of Icelandic proof-readers. But who

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11 131.839 *slög með bilum* – an anthology of poetry translations – where this text originally appeared.

knows, perhaps the poets like it there.

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Just as you can not translate anything between two languages, nothing is untranslatable once you realize that nothing is translatable. A translation of literary work is never the same work, but a new work related to the former – the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1763–1834) said that an artist could view a translation of his works by imagining what his child would look like, had his wife had it with another man (the gender roles of this example are from Schleiermacher – they can be reversed without getting sand up one's vagina).

Since nothing (and yet everything) can be translated between two languages, it must be just as (im)possible to translate between more than two languages. That is to say, to translate someone else's translation of a poem from a third party. This used to be common practice in Iceland, but this transit has since been deemed shoddy according to the classical theory of translation, or so I've been told. But seeing as the final outcome – the translation – is only a relative of the original work, it should not really matter whether it's a first or second cousin. It is only fair that the relations are mentioned – who begat whom with whom where and whatfor.

Most of the poems in this book are translated from the original language, although a few have been borrowed from other translators. Details can be found in the commentary section at the end of the book.

### III

Even the greatest prudes in Finland would regularly say “voi vittu” without flinching, and this goes for everyone from winter-war grandmothers to pillow-fighting homosexuals to lollipop metrosexuals. The words can be literally translated in at least two fashions – either as “oh, cunt!” or “butter cunt”. Most probably most Finns believe themselves to be saying “oh, cunt!”. But the weight and meaning of these words are not necessarily “the same” from one language to another – he or she who shouts “smörfitta” at the dinner table in Sweden, is not performing the same act as one saying “voi vittu” on the other side of the Baltic, and it is to be expected that Swedish housewives would shake their fists vigorously at such language.

In traditional translation the phrase would be “damn it”, or similar. But the words are of course not “damn it”, they are “butter cunt”. Or, I mean, in a manner of saying.

The Swedish profanity linguist Magnus Ljung divides profanities into several different categories, including theological (“damn”), expletives (“oh!”), fecal (“shit”), sex-related (“cunt”), and many others. The different categories are used differently in different languages. The most powerful of profanities seek to break taboos, go further than others have gone before, even though most of those used on an everyday basis stay far within those limits. But when we wish to go further, we employ the unusual, or original, and seek new ways to express our dissatisfaction. So it happens that something which is completely mundane in one language, like “voi vittu” in Finnish, becomes excruciatingly vulgar in another.

There is somewhat of a tradition for normalisation in the

translation of literary work. An idiom in the language being translated is changed into another idiom in the target language, the names of places and characters are even changed, word-plays are twisted to be understood etc. Anything exotic is normalised.

Naturally people disagree on whether it is more important, in the consumption of art, to understand or to sense, but most (perhaps too many) seem to avoid that which they don't understand, or even reject it completely.

Were I to paint a picture of Kallio (my neighborhood in Helsinki) for the Icelandic market in the same method as many translations are done, I would normalise it – I would change the supermarket chain Alepa into the supermarket chain Bónus, a tram would become a bus, brothels would be solariums, and the flowers grass. Because for an Icelandic person bus means the same as a tram does for a Finnish one (except the trams are on time and used by many – but then translations are merely approximations).

When you come to a new place one of the most enjoyable things to see are those that are different from those places one is used to. Here in Kallio I become amazed seeing three massage-parlours side-by-side, with a sex-shop on one side and a strip-joint on the other. I look into the bottomless misery of the winos in my neighborhood like a well that no one sees the bottom of, or whether it even has one, and I learn something new about man, the places he is able to go (out of sight).

In a recent book of poems from Linh Dinh (whose poetry can be found in this very collection), *Jam Alerts*, there is a poem in the form of a book review on the poetry translations of a man named Reggis Tongue – and Reggis deals in unnor-

malised translations. The poem quotes a prologue by Reggis to his selected translations:

*Slovenly translators – bums, basically – think they have to choose between music and sense. To pin down meanings, many of them squash the tune. To ape the melody, they ditch or deface the semaphores. They don't realize that syntax is melody. A translator must ignore the indigineous drumming echoing in his lumpy head and obey the alien word-order, rhythm of what he's translating. Make it strange – never try to domesticate a foreign poem!*

In most cases in this book *no* attempt was made to normalise text, and that which sounded strange was simply allowed to sound strange. In the light of the work being translated, i.e. work that deals with language and stretches it, it is very possible that in some places the poems are more strange, more incomprehensible than if they were to be read in the original language, although I still hope that they will allow access to some of the thought originally bestowed on them.

As well as being capable of producing weirdness, unnormalised translations can cause misunderstandings which can even be dangerous, particularly when the reader is not aware of the fact that other paradigms govern other languages. In this way I suspect that when the media proclaims that Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad says that the American movie mogul Oliver Stone is “a part of the devil”, it is only proper to wonder what meaning that translation, which I expect is literal, has. Do they mean that Ahmadinejad literally believes that Stone is possessed – that the devil lives within him – or was his point quite

simply one I suppose we can all agree on, that Oliver Stone is a part of the machinery of American capitalism?

It has also been claimed repeatedly that Ahmadinejad wanted to “wipe Israel of the map”. This has been chewed, back and forth, as the God’s honest truth. However, the British newspaper *The Guardian* printed the following correction on the 22nd of February, 2007:

*Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, president of Iran, has not “called for Israel to be wiped off the map”. The Farsi phrase he employed is correctly translated as “this regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time”. He was quoting a statement by Iran’s first Islamist leader, the late Ayatollah Khomeini.*

Then of course we might wonder where Ahmadinejad is going with *this*.

It should be duly noted that the author of this text is no specialist in Iranian politics, and does not take a stance on whether or not Ahmadinejad is “evil” or “good”, but is mostly skeptical of both the media and politicians.

#### IV

The poems in this book were chosen quite simply because they interested me. It really isn’t more complicated than that. It would have been enjoyable to add many other poets, as well as many other interesting (enjoyable and important) poems by the poets that are included in this book, but for reasons of

time it was impossible. If all goes well another volume will be produced in the next one or two years.

Lastly, it is right to thank those who put their shoulder to the wheel. Firstly the poets and the copyright holders who gave their cordial permission for us to publish the poems without looking for financial gain. A list of the poets can be found in the table of contents, but it is also right to mention Ellie Nichol who gave permission to include the texts of her late husband, bpNichol.

The following people read either single poems, the whole manuscript and/or gave useful tips: Arngrímur Vídalín, Ingólfur Gíslason, Haukur Már Helgason, Haukur Ingvarsson, Derek Beaulieu, Nadja Widell and Hildur Lilliendahl. Many of the poets also helped with translations and answered quickly and surely the various questions that popped into the translator's mind. Last but not least Finnish poetry-activist Leevi Lehto gets heaps of thanks; without him this book would never have become a reality.

Originally published as a prologue to the translation anthology *131.839 slög með bilum*.

## The rebellion and the apathy

### I – Post-world and eventual accountability

A few months back I took a stroll through the neighborhood of Södermalm in Stockholm, and got the distinct feeling that I was passing through some sort of post-world – one of those sci-fi places you see in utopian movies, where war and poverty have been eradicated and everyone is free to engage in their own personal growth. I walked through the shopping centre on Medborgarplatsen square, and watched all the humidifiers rejuvenate shiny post-vegetables, and people walking around with post-sushi take-away and post-café lattes – everyone seemingly not rich, in globalist modern standards, but nevertheless so completely content that I could hardly imagine them ever lacking anything they truly wanted. Let alone what they needed. As if all the wealth had been equally distributed and now everyone could have all the sushi they could stomach. It's a scary feeling, 'cause you know it's not true, and yet it would be so easy to believe it – it's so enticing, so beautiful, to imagine a problem-free universe *already here* with nothing more needing to be done, except leaning back and taking it all in.

I sometimes get the same feeling reading literature – especially modern prose work. Of course no one – or at least very few people – write novels without a dramatic angle. The basic formula of *problem leads to problem-resolution* is still the game to play in linear prose. But the dramatic angle is more and more, it seems to me, a personal story – protagonist A finds

herself in an unfortunate circumstance, either because some other protagonist put her there, or because of a series of coincidences. This is all well and good – such things happen in the world, and they should be dealt with in literature – but the amount of this type of literature gives me this same post-world feeling I just mentioned. One could deduce from it that problems are not inherent in systems – that all the “big” political problems have been solved, the fundamentals, as if systematic, deliberate misery had been eradicated – and instead we focus on the particular within the social.

This feeling I get strikes a series of false chords in my soul, and I writhe – and I might even feel a certain anger towards my fellow writers (as a group, rather than as individuals). I may of course be mistaken, but I see our political world as being fundamentally wrong, repressive and cruel in a decidedly systematic way. It doesn't allow for ethical decisions, the system being so overly complicated, all-encompassing and layered that no one can possibly be informed of the consequences of their actions – and the system has been built to use and abuse this fact in order to increase capital gains, the globalist wealth of the few, in particular, but also the contentment of any citizen lucky enough to have a western passport. No one is eventually accountable for people dying in wars, or slave labour camps, refugee camps; or from easily preventable diseases – no one is eventually accountable for torture, political imprisonment, police brutality and other forms of state-run (and/or outsourced and privately run) violence.

But yes, of course, when caught we do arrest and imprison the low-level employee, the single soldier that steps out of line or the foreman who beats his worker to death, a politi-

cian may have to apologize or even step down – but we fail to make the system accountable, and we fail to notice that these things happen repeatedly and systematically and are not single coincidences of brutality, but rather intrinsic to competitive society and thereby just as systematic as in Soviet-socialism or other authoritarian systems, although masked with an idea of personal or individual responsibility. This responsibility is a façade, because those few that get “caught”, so to speak, are in most cases merely following the norms that society dictates, besides being only peripherally guilty – since responsibility is so decentralized that no one person is “wholly” guilty of anything.

The good thing about authoritarian systems is that you can see your abuser, you can point at him and cry for justice. One of the worst things about capitalist cruelty is that you can't do this – responsibility has been decentralized. Nothing is the system's fault, and yet the system breeds both sociopathy and apathy, feeds on war and massive (3rd world) poverty. Everybody's simply doing their jobs. Capitalism having become a global crisis makes this even harder.

In the Spanish movie *Los Lunes al Sol* (*Mondays in the Sun*), by Fernando Leon de Aranoa, the Russian character Sergei tells a joke that goes something like this: “When the Soviet Union crumbled, we properly realized what we already knew, that everything they had been telling us about socialism was a lie. A few years later we also realized that everything they had been telling us about capitalism was in fact true.”

## II – Political writing in the post-world

In an interview with the Icelandic newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, in 2002, Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun was asked about the political dimensions in his work, and he answered thus:

*I come from a country that deals with many problems, not only in the economic sense, but also various types of injustice. In Morocco the demand is that writers cover these issues and take a clear stance. In all countries writers are citizens, but in Morocco a writer would never get away with thinking he was above the community and the issues that govern its debate. The public demands that he participates. The explanation for this important position that is held by writers and scholars in Morocco, is that only about 40% of the inhabitants are literate. This is changing rapidly but the people need someone to talk on their behalf and write about their hopes and suffering. A Moroccan writer really has no choice, he must take a stance. Such a stance is understandably not demanded of the Nordic writers, because their communities have developed much further, here you have human rights, the rule of law and the foundations of your society are not up for immediate debate.<sup>12</sup>*

12 The Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun interviewed by Þröstur Helgason in the Icelandic newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, april 13, 2002: "Ég kem frá landi sem á við mörg vandamál að stríða, ekki bara efnahagsleg heldur og misrétti af ýmsu tagi. Í Marokkó er beinlínis gerð krafa um að rithöfundar fjalli um þessi mál og taki skýra afstöðu. Rithöfundar eru alls staðar borgarar en marokkóskur rithöfundur myndi aldrei komast upp með að telja sig hafinn yfir samfélagið og þau mál▶

What I find interesting in this statement is the diagnosis of Nordic writers and no one demanding of them that they write political work – because not only is it obviously true, but there is also the tendency, in all of the western world (at least), to depoliticize art in general, and act as if one thing had nothing to do with the other, and even that they cast a dark shadow on each other. Indignant *art-for-the-sake-of-beauty* artists will point at Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* propagating national-socialism, or how Pound's *Pisan Cantos* have had to suffer because of their political connection, as examples of the catastrophic effects of mixing politics with art. I would, in turn, point to the mountains upon mountains of unimportant, meaningless work – forgotten, of course – as examples of the catastrophic effects of not mixing art with politics – and George Orwell and Milan Kundera as examples of good political artwork (and I know I'm being particularly nasty in pinning those two together, since the latter has criticized the former for not being a proper novelist).

Good work does not necessarily have good politics, and bad work can obviously be produced with the best of political intentions. But just as the maturity-plot of a "Bildungsroman"

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sem þar eru efst á baugi hverju sinni. Almennitur gerir kröfur um að hann taki þátt. Skýringin á þessari mikilvægu stöðu rithöfunda og menntamanna í Marokkó er sú að einungis um 40% þjóðarinnar eru læs og skrifandi. Þetta er að breytast mjög hratt en fólkið þarfnast þess að einhver tali máli þess og skrifi um vonir þess og þjáningar. Marokkóskur rithöfundur á því í raun og veru engan valkost, hann verður að taka afst! 'föðu. Þessar skyldur hvíla skiljanlega ekki á norrænum höfundum þar sem samfélög þeirra eru mun lengra komin, hér eru mannréttindi, réttarfar og þjóðfélagsgerðin ekki knýjandi umfjöllunarefni."

needs to make sense, needs to be done skillfully and artfully, so the politics of political artwork need to be thought out – there are no shortcuts. A banal work injected with current political trends is nevertheless banal work. All of this should be self-evident – while a great portion of the literature debate ignores political work as gimmicks, and many political writers seem to think all it takes to make the work “important” is an injection of indignant moralism.

Because of literature’s tendency to imitate itself the world is ridden with so-called political authors that show misery, violence, exploitation and injustice as individual cases, rather than the systematic rules that they are. The tendency in literature to represent through single examples – a part for a whole, a single worker for a working class – makes the literature fall through the cracks, in a world where the opposite is true. The single mother in the latest social realist drama is constantly portrayed as a victim of unfortunate circumstance, and I hate to be the one to say it but capitalism is not an unfortunate circumstance – its so-called side-effects are inherent to the system – while many writers wallow in political subject matter, reflecting on little else than their own personal self-righteousness, with at worst a nasty judgmental attitude of mostly ill intent towards the world (of which, I admit, I am not wholly innocent of) and at best a social commentary resembling the readers’ letters and editorials of newspapers. While certain writers may participate in the political debate, none try to reinvent it, none deal with the fundamentals that are nevertheless, in my mind, an inseparable part of the craft. We might write a drama of individuals caught in the system – but it’s all revisionist in nature, as if all capitalism needs to make everyone happy is someone adjusting the

buttons on the machine.

### III–Antagonizing readers

The western world – at least – is inherently amoralist and the most pressing political questions in that part of the world are not about our own suffering or the suffering of our readers but about the apathetic and sociopathic conditions of our daily lives. I do not mean to say that there is nothing wrong in the western world itself, but we do need to find a way to correlate our own plights with those of the world in general – precisely because the world has become globalized. While Finnish students and Danish nurses may be facing bad conditions, we need to be able to see that it’s hardly comparable to the disenfranchisement, exploitation and plain murder that the Finnish and Danish systems propagate abroad, *without* defusing the political struggles within our own welfare states, and thus allowing them to drift towards more libertarian fascist systems. We need to use the wealth amassed in the western world to ease suffering elsewhere – or that suffering will never end – without using that as an excuse to ignore local plights, such as the bad condition of Finnish students and Danish nurses.

Addressing the apathy/sociopathy of western people in general – from underpaid nurses to wealthy investment cowboys – is a potential career suicide, as instead of taking part in, and portraying, the “hopes and suffering” of the readers, it would inevitably be read as attacking them on political, ethical and moral grounds, and such a reading would probably be justified, at least in part. It may very well sound like one was

saying that Danish nurses shouldn't fight for a better salary. This is a serious dilemma, not only because it requires more of the writers – perhaps more than they can do, or are willing to do – but also because, as anyone familiar with political debate can vouch for, antagonizing people doesn't really get you anywhere. And a writer who is not read, or merely seen as an antagonistic moralist, can only hope to be discovered later as “having been right all along” – which might not be that important, no matter how it may tickle the ego. It is proper to note though, that literature does not only occupy the present, but also the future, and “having been right all along” might have political meaning when that comes to pass. But it is naturally hard to say, if it will be so.

The demand that Ben Jelloun mentions, the demand that readers make of writers, that they portray and address the readers' problems, is non-existent in most western literature, and the political dimensions that need to be addressed in my opinion are probably not even welcome. The demand is only put forth in societies where suffering is great, and the suffering in western societies is mostly minor – if put into context with the harm these societies cause elsewhere. It is all too easy to ignore the more serious ethical problems of our societies – such as the near complete disassociation from the human suffering in faraway countries – and turn to mirroring and remirroring our favorite 20th century novelists. Perhaps the obvious answer as to why this is so is that, as Ben Jelloun mentions, writers are citizens and therefore suffering the same conditions as their readers – apathy and amorality coming naturally – rather than them being populist, cowardly careerists pawning off their work as if it were any other consumer product.

#### IV – My excuses

This is a subject best broached in much longer texts than these – and yet a subject I feel should be broached, specifically by writers. I am not a monotheistic writer – I do not believe in absolutes, not even my own. I furthermore do not believe in any one direction of writing to be superior – neither morally, politically nor aesthetically – to another. To a great extent the maxim that literature simply *is* – that poetry should not should – rings true to me. My call for a new approach to political literature is neither fully thought out nor a call for manifestos, and it is not meant to be. It is merely meant to propagate thought, through writing thoughts and subsequently speaking them aloud – for them to be digested with others. I do not say this to withdraw from my call for a new approach to political literature, but to emphasize that the nature of literature can not be easily defined – and it's surely not mine to define alone. Literature can not be dogmatic, and must not be relegated to a space of political propaganda – despite it's nature being, in my mind, political. It is within these borders – or rather, this borderlessness – that I would like to ponder, to throw these thoughts into the mix, these questions and calls, that I deem as greatly important, and see what comes of them.

I thank you for listening.

Originally written as a lecture for the Nordic Summer writer's conference in Jurbarkas, Lithuania, spring 2008. My intentions were, and are still, to eventually finish these thoughts – as I see them simply as the beginning of a train of thought. But I still don't know where the train should be heading.

## Mind the sound

I

It may have been the year 1600 – on the dot – that a child was born in Iceland (probably) named Þorbjörn Þórðarson. Perhaps it was later though, it's hard to tell. No one really knows. And I wouldn't want to lie. You deserve the truth. And he may have smelled just as sweet born on any other date.

Þorbjörn grew up to be a poet of semi-renown, a blacksmith and a fisherman. Not much is known about the man or his life, even his identity and name being up for debate, but he is thought to have spent most of his years in the southern and western parts of Iceland. His poetry lived, as the poetry of many of his Icelandic contemporaries, mostly through an oral tradition of a nation with a fondness for rhymes – through collected folklore, and in part through myth. His early poetry is more or less forgotten, although it is said to have been rather plain – uneventful yet skillful, his art being occasional and his subject matter being (as was common) everyday life. Through an unusual act of divine intervention, this would all change.

One day Þorbjörn was minding his blacksmithing business in Skógarnes at Löngufjörur, Iceland, when a group of travellers approached, looking for a safe way to cross Haffjarðará-river. The travellers greeted Þorbjörn heartily, seeing as here they'd found a local man who could advise them on their journey through terrain that they knew very little of. Þorbjörn was by all accounts having a bad day. His blacksmithing was tiresome and

not moving along with the expediency he would have wished. Perhaps he was, like many contemporary poets, fed up with his dayjob and wishing to have the time necessary to hone his poetic skills.

When the travellers asked where they should cross the river, he answered (as was poets' wont in his time) with a poem. More precisely, a quatrain:

Though with hammer to iron I cater  
'tis all for naught I slammer.  
Take the course for Eldborg-crater,  
and cross at Þóris-hammer.<sup>13</sup>

This would all have been well and good, had the advice Þorbjörn gave to the travellers, in his mindless irritation toiling away with the iron, not been a bit inaccurate. Or to put it plainly (we do strive to make it simple): His advice was dead-wrong, erroneous, false, reprehensible and vicious – put it how you will: Þorbjörn sent the travellers towards an impassable part of the river, straight into the rapids of hell. The travellers however, being sufficiently naïve to believe a poet's pretty words, tried to cross where they were told. Needless to say, they all drowned.

Now in those years God was not the forgiving fellow we've come to admire in later years, and he did not at all enjoy having to receive the all-too early travellers (perhaps he wanted time

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<sup>13</sup> Smátt vill ganga smíðið á  
í smíðjunni þó ég glamri.  
Þið skulið stefna Eldborg á,  
undir Þórishamri.

to work on his poetry). And poetry was not seen to be a mere talent, but a veritable gift from God. So God smote Þorbjörn with a curse: He bereaved him of the "gift of poetry". But Þorbjörn, being of stubborn stock, wouldn't take no-poetry for an answer, and kept at it, poesying like a mad-man, quite literally: no matter how he toiled away at his quatrains and tercets, they all turned out nonsensical, full of words that weren't words, sentences that alluded meaning, leaning on nothing but the verse-framework:

Loppu hroppu lyppu ver  
lastra klastra styður,  
Hoppu goppu hippu ver.  
hann datt þarna niður.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the words in the first three lines can be seen as having "meaning", while some are "meaningless" – the context is complete nonsense, beautiful nonsense, soundbouts in rounds galore – he is less literati than alliterati, or even illiterati – and yet it *sounds* like something a fisherman-blacksmith would write, it *sounds* like a fisherman-blacksmith's vocabulary, nevermind you that the words don't mean anything – they SOUND.

The final line was all Þorbjörn had left of more traditional poetry, word-by-word: *he fell there down*. From the moment his curse became reality, more often than not, only Þorbjörn's

<sup>14</sup> Æri-Tobbi's poetry was collected in 1974 by Icelandic poet, Jón frá Pálmholti, in the book *Vísur Æra-Tobba* published by Íðunn. The collection consists of poetry thought to have been Æri-Tobbi's, from different manuscripts, a few in different versions. <http://libris.kb.se/bib/311850>

last lines would be readable. As his poetic career continued, Þorbjörn got to be known as Æri-Tobbi, Tobbi being a nickname for Þorbjörn and æri meaning crazy or insane – and so he's known today.

Little did God know, on the day he smote his curse on Þorbjörn, that he'd be giving birth to Iceland's first avant-garde poet – a sound poet, no less, whose control of zaum is first-class, putting him in a category with such 20th century greats as F.T. Marinetti and Hugo Ball.

Æri-Tobbi was not the only poet in Iceland to be treated in this manner by the vengeful God, to whom the countrymen swore allegiance (although hesitantly, and merely in public) in the year 1000. Hallgrímur Pétursson, another 17th century poet and priest, was given a similar treatment for abusing his gift. At the time, the gift of poetry was seen as being magical, and poems would be written for magical purposes, be it to *poetry* the evil out of things, or to *poetry* a pretty girl/guy into bed. People would even fight with poetry, the most famous duel of all being that between Kolbeinn Jöklaskáld (yet another 17th century poet) and the Devil himself. Kolbeinn poetried the devil back to hell by rhyming the word 'tungl' (moon) – our 'orange' (unrhymable) – with 'ungl' or 'úln': a variation on the word for 'wrist' – this is all highly dubious, not really words and not even really rhymes, but the devil always being one to promote the avant-garde, readily agreed and cleared off to hell.

Hallgrímur had no such worthy opponent. He was having trouble with a fox who kept killing his sheep – a nasty biter, though no devil. One day, while in the pulpit, he saw the fox in question, and immediately proceeded to poetry it away, with such an astounding result that the fox literally sank into the

ground (I'm not making this up!). God, being enraged at Hallgrímur for poetrying secular matters from the pulpit, dried up all the poet's poetry. It was not given back until Hallgrímur started his 25 thousand word anti-semitic rant / psalm of passion, which counts among Icelandic Christianity's literary classics, having been published over 80 times (in a country currently of 320 thousand people).<sup>15</sup>

As far as posterity goes, there's no remnants to be found about Hallgrímur ever having been a sound-poet or avant-gardist, despite his standing as one of our most respected poets. Quite the opposite.

He eventually caught leprosy and died.

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While Æri-Tobbi was far from making any common-sense with his poetry, while he had totally lost his grip on words, sentences and their meanings, the verse-form remains, fully equipped with rhyme and the old Nordic rules of alliteration: props & mainstoffs – the anchors of poetry that even some modern Icelandic readers would openly claim was an unconditional requirement for any poem (worthy of the name). For a quatrain the most common form these rules take (there are variations) goes something like this: A pair of alliterations in the first and third line (props), and one at the beginning of the

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<sup>15</sup> *Hymns of the Passion* are available in english, translated by Arthur Charles Gook. <http://openlibrary.org/b/OL3060183M/Hymns-of-the-passion>

second and fourth line (mainstoffs). It's to be noted that all words in Icelandic have the stress on the first syllable, so that's where the alliteration goes (moreorless) without exception:

Ambarar vambarar skrumburum sker  
skrambra þumburinn dýri.  
Vigra gígra vambra hver  
vagaði hann suður í mýri.

The rules of props & mainstoffs are so intrinsic to the Icelanders' idea of poetry that when foreign verse-forms, like the sonnet, are imported they get a permanent injection of props & mainstoffs: A sonnet in Icelandic without props & mainstoffs is a rare exception – to the point where it would be considered no mere fault, but an outright mistake, the idea that one would skip them unthinkable – and this includes translations of foreign sonnets.

And the same evidently applies to 17th century sound-poetry in Icelandic. Although being a sound-poet freed from the burdens of meaning Æri-Tobbi could move more easily through in-rhymes, and would consistently over-alliterate (which was/is a semi-crime in Icelandic poetry), and repeat words or similar word-forms and thereby layer his sounds where he was unable to layer his meaning. This is not poetry meant to be taken sitting down:

Aldan skjaldan galda grær  
græfra ræfra russu.  
Sæfra tæfra sildarmær  
sussu sussu sussu.

There's a consistent use of R's in various combinations in his zaum-words – the R in Icelandic being particularly rolled, the alveolar trill of [r] – a common blend being 'br's and 'fr's and 'vr's, with some notably difficult consonant-sequences like 'glr'. Where one of these sounds occur in a line, it's more than likely to reoccur, either in the same line or the next one. Some of this is a dire strain on the tongue:

Aglra geglru geglra stögl  
 og geglra rambið.  
 Gaglra stiglu geglru strambið  
 gaf hún þér ekki stærra lambið?

If living to be seen (read, enjoyed, enlightened) by posterity can be used as a measurement for the worth of poetry, the poetry of Æri-Tobbi is by far more excellent than that of Þorbjörn his predecessor. Its unique type of nonsense has kept it alive for over 400 years – despite the fact that the work is habitually non-canonized, only once collected and out-of-print for decades and his name hardly mentioned in the five volume tome of Icelandic literary history – because, quite frankly, it's inimitable, mad, linguistically destructive, fierce and beautiful.

III

Sound poetry is the art of treating all words (or phonemes) as if they were a peculiar form of *onomatopoeia* – that is, instead of treating words as if they imitated the sound they *describe*, you treat words (or phonemes) as if they imitated the sound

they *make*.

An interesting and (perhaps) descriptive recent example of this is to be found in the poem “1,2,3” by Swedish poet Klas Mathiasson, from his book *urklippt*<sup>16</sup> (trans. “cutout”) – the first three lines are written thusly:

BRA BRA BRA BRA BARA BRA  
 BRA BRA BRA BRA BARA BRA  
 BRA BARA BARA BRA BARA BARA

‘Bara’ is Swedish for ‘only’ and ‘bra’ is Swedish for ‘good’. The poem, magnificently read by the poet on a CD accompanying the book, becomes an incantation where one word melds into the other in a seemingly endless circle. Now, in Icelandic, ‘bra’ is literally onomatopoeic – being the sound ducks make – and in English it's short for ‘brassière’ (French for ‘bra’ I believe). ‘Bara’ is ‘coffin’ in Italian, and ‘gregarious’ in Latvian – in Japanese, ‘bara’ means ‘rose’, but it's also short for ‘Barazouku’, an influential gay magazine, according to the online Urban Dictionary, as well as being a ‘delicious guyanese food which can be eaten at special occasions’ and slang for ‘penis’.

Is it legume from a press, that makes me so digress? These so-called meanings will tell us nothing! Yet it recalls the dictionary-philic attitudes of some of the first sound-poets – the movement of Dada, who claimed their club-title could be made to mean anything from everything to nothing in the various languages of the world. And perhaps I'm not digressing at all.

16 *urklippt. cirklar & fyrkanter* published by Pequod Press in Sweden.  
<http://www.adlibris.com/se/product.aspx?isbn=9197729108>

Phonemes do not *mean*, they *sound*, and if I'm wrong and they in fact do *mean*, they only ever *mean what they sound*. It's the mechanism, I guess – I shouldn't apologize, this is how it might work:

Subject hears sound.

Subject interprets sound.

Sound doesn't exist in subject's innermost dictionaries.

Subject starts fabricating the evidence, eventually landing him/herself in poetry lock-up for fraud.

One of the aspects of sound-poetry, one of the facets that makes it such an international phenomena, is that its untranslatable weirdness is (moreover) equally untranslatable in any given language. Yes, Jaap Blonk's work sounds like Dutch, and Marinetti's work sounded like Italian – just like Æri-Tobbi's work sounded like Icelandic – but none of it is a "correct" representative of the respective language. Yet it's not a given that the words chosen for a piece of sound-poetry don't correlate to an entry in the dictionary. Much of sound-poetry's oeuvre consists of actual words, and even grammatically correct sentences. And can even be found in many dictionaries, in different languages and cultures – simple one-syllable sounds (like 'bra' or 'da', 'bra bra' or 'dada') often exist in several languages and most sound poetry being merely strings of one-syllable sounds means that it might to some extent be interpretable by your brain through a 'close listening'. Hugo Ball's "Gadji beri bimba" *might* be "Gat í beri bimbult" (Hole in berry nauseous, in Icelandic) or God Gee Berry Bimbo.

All sound-poetry is to a great degree something that ad-

vertently/inadvertently becomes subject to an inner homophonic translation, because one's head interprets a spoken voice as language, and interprets language as being something that inherently has a meaning one can look up in a dictionary (I'm not saying it's a "right" way of understanding sound poetry, I'm saying it's inevitably always a part of the mix). This also goes for word-based or sentence-based sound-poetry because the weirdness incorporated into the sound tends to lead us as listeners astray, regarding their spelling or dictionary-meaning. So even words in sound-poetry that exist in dictionaries and are strung together into grammatically "correct" sentences tend to get appropriated by sound-poetry and turned into 'pure' sound at some point, that can (and tends to) be reinterpreted back into "traditional language" – and not always in the original meaning.

The categorical difference between sound-poetry and instrumental-music (including sound-poetry's cousin, scat-singing) is that the listener inevitably interprets what he or she hears as "language" – not only is it the framework that the work is presented within, but it's also inherent to much of the actual work, that it actually "resembles" language. It mimics language. So I theorize: Zaum is to language as onomatopoeia is to an actual quack, an actual bark etc.

#### IV

One of the aspects of Æri-Tobbi's sound-poetry is that it intersects its zaum with perfectly dictionariable words, and I'm told other words can be traced somewhere (go, etymology,

go!) – but in any basic non-researching reading (let alone incanting) of his poetry you're not gonna be sure what *is a word* and what *is zaum*. It's not intentionally written as nonsense, at least that is not how the myth goes – it's an attempt at writing poetry by a poet bereaved of his gift. This, I interject, seems to imply that God is firmly on one side of the content vs. form debate – as he did not choose to bereave Æri-Tobbi of the gift of form, but only his meaning-content (again, in the dictionary sense of meaning (no, not 'meaning' as the word's described in the dictionary, but the way a dictionary conveys meaning)).

And so, once in a while, a sunbeam gets through, a single word or even a sentence:

Imbrum bimbrum ambrum bambrum apin dæla  
 skaufra raufra skapin skæla  
 skrattinn má þeim dönsku hæla.

The tercets closing line means something like: *The devil can praise the Danish*. What of the rest of it? 'Dæla' is *pump*, 'skæla' is *whine* – but without the help of a dictionary the rest of it eludes me, and the endings (conjugations?) are unusual, in the sense that they are repetitive, which in Indo-European languages is more an exception than a rule – especially a 4X repetition, as in "Imbrum bimbrum ambrum bambrum".

Portions of other words can be "translated". Thus 'imbrum' might refer to 'imbra', the fast that begins every quarter of the Catholic church year; the only word starting with 'bimb' I can find, is 'bimbult', *nauseous*; 'ambrum' might refer to 'ambra' which is (amongst other things) the *wailing of a child*. 'Bambrum' could be from 'bambra', to *drink fast* or *swig*. 'Apin'

might be a form of 'api', a *monkey*, or 'opin', that is to say: *open*. 'Skaufra' might be 'skauf' – the *foreskin* of a horse's penis. 'Raufra' might be 'rauf', an *opening*. 'Skapin' might be 'skapaður' or 'sköp' – *created* or *female reproductive system* (more commonly: her genitalia) or even *destiny*.

Most of these words that I've linked to the word-forms in the poem through etymological guesswork are very uncommon.

An attempt at a translation (sans form, plus more guesswork) might look like this:

During the catholic fast,  
 we felt nauseous  
 from the wailing of children  
 and swigging from the open pump.

The foreskin of a horse's penis  
 made the cunt's opening whine.

The Devil can praise the Danish.

Now, we might have different opinions on whether this makes any more sense than the original, but at least these are sentences – not even the most arid critic would disagree with that. But those looking for more finality of meaning, might want to distance themselves even further from Æri-Tobbi's sound-poem, interpreting the interpretation – *The poem discusses sins of the flesh and juxtaposes animal(istic) intercourse, crying infants and barbaric drinking habits with the strict medieval Catholic church*

(abandoned in Iceland, for Lutheranism, in 1550). The final line could be read as an indictment of the Danish colonial-lords of Iceland, either saying that they're on the devil's side (literally) or more colloquially saying something along the lines of "who cares about the Danish". To be noted: When the protestant reformation occurred all the property of the Catholic church was appropriated by the Danish king, and he replaced the pope as head of the church, becoming more influential and eventually subjecting Icelanders to a commerce-monopoly where all imports had to be from (or through) Denmark.

We would not dare to propose such an interpretation, would not bother (the devil can praise these interpretations!) for we are only interested in the sounds. And then again, while phonemes *sound* more than they *mean*, the sounds tend to inadvertently mean while *sounding*.

## V

My own relationship with Æri-Tobbi stems from my childhood – I don't remember where or when, but I remember being enthralled and giddy about his poetry. It wasn't particularly hard to recognize or play with (in the sense of reading, like writing, being a game) because I found in it something that reminded me of Þórarinn Eldjárn's (1949– ) children's poetry (and reminiscence is nine-tenths of the discovery). Eldjárn's poetry is often nonsensical, a distortion of sayings and colloquialisms, double-entendres and the like. It's playful in a way I wish all poetry was playful. And in Eldjárn's recent poetry

book from 2001, *Grannmeti og átvextir*<sup>17</sup> (Edible neighbours and eating-interests, perhaps – a wordplay on Grænmeti og ávextir – Vegetables and fruit) he includes a poem called "Takk takk Tobbi" ("Thanks thanks Tobbi") that consists of some of Æri-Tobbi's most famous zaums and stream-lined variations of them. While the poem is infinitely more "understandable" than any of Æri-Tobbi's work, it somehow shows more clearly the connection between these two poets – the 17th century madman, and the 20th century children's poet – than any of Eldjárn's previous work. Or perhaps more precisely, it underlines that which was always there: The joy of (the sounds of) words shared by the two men. And for me personally, it came with the vainglorious feeling of having been right all along (yay!), iterated in the last two lines:

Pambara vambara, Þorbjörn minn  
þakka þér fyrir arfinn þinn.

(Pambara vambara, my dear Þorbjörn  
thank you for the inheritance)

In early 2008 I wrote the poem "Úr órum Tobba", (trans. From the madness of Tobbi) a six-to-seven minute long sound-poem carved from Æri-Tobbi's zaum. The poem was first performed at the Scream Poetry Festival in Toronto, at the Lexiconjury Revival Night, and has in fact not been performed since

<sup>17</sup> *Grannmeti og átvextir*, published by Vaka-Helgafell, 2001. [http://skolavefurinn.is/lok/almennt/ljodskald\\_man/Torarinn\\_Eldjarn/Grannmeti\\_og\\_atvextir\\_9.htm](http://skolavefurinn.is/lok/almennt/ljodskald_man/Torarinn_Eldjarn/Grannmeti_og_atvextir_9.htm)

(although published on CD, along with more of my sound-poems).<sup>18</sup>

"Úr órum Tobba" is at once a found poem and sound poem, collaged and cut-up lines of zaum taken from the quatrains, tercets and couplets of Æri-Tobbi – the first of the thirteen stanzas is written thus:

Axar sax og lævarar lax  
 Axar sax og lævarar lax  
 Hoppara boppara hoppara boppara  
 stagara jagara stagara jagara  
 Neglings steglings veglings steglings  
 Skögula gögula ögula skögula  
 hræfra flotið humra skotið  
 Axar sax og lævarar lax

Each stanza has eight lines, and all are intersected with two of Æri-Tobbi's most famous zaum-lines:

Agara gagara agara gagara  
 vambara þambara vambara þambara

The eight-line stanza recalls for me the ballade, yet the exclusion of Æri-Tobbi's more straight-forward lines (leaving only

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<sup>18</sup> A video of the poem performed can be found on my homepage: <http://www.norrdahl.org/english-under-Readings>. Since the writing of this essay, I've performed it several times at various festivals. The book and CD, *Ú á fasismann* (A boo against fascism) published by Mál og menning, 2008, available at [www.boksala.is](http://www.boksala.is).

the zaum) brings a darker element into the mix, and the stanza-length brings with it more momentum than is to be found in Æri-Tobbi's much shorter poems, and increases the iniquitous nature (sound) of the work. It is indeed still playful, but the game may have turned a bit sinister.

The handling is in some ways opposite to the handling of Eldjárn mentioned earlier. While Eldjárn keeps Æri-Tobbi's signature zaum, he funnels it into more literally understandable stanzas – underlining the light nature of the original poems. My own version of 13 eight-line stanzas where little to no “sense” can be made, becomes more of a dark matter, more of a druidic incantation, and I feel myself stressing the sounds quite differently than I would stress the original – at times moving them back in the throat for a guttural approach. I should mention that these decisions, and I'm not fully comfortable with calling them decisions, were something that came quite naturally through the process of piecing the found-sound-poem together. I would have guessed beforehand (and I think I did) that the poem would turn out much more “pleasant” than it eventually did.

"Úr órum Tobba" is the only sound-poem I've done that's made from zaum – the rest mostly consisting of grammatically “correct” sentences. I guess it's some sort of ode to the old man, and perhaps also to Þórarinn Eldjárn in part, and it may say more about my own interest in reading, writing and sounding than it pleases the audience (although, vainglorious as I am, I should mention that its only performance so far was received very warmly) or than it says anything in particular about Æri-Tobbi (let alone Þórarinn Eldjárn). For a love-song it's pretty dark, I can't imagine anyone wanting a love-song like this:

Viggjara þöggara vúgrar brúgrar  
frugrar skrugrar frá því skreytti  
Vampara stampara vumparar bumpara  
frumbara þumbara fjandans lómur  
ára diks á priksum, krunkum  
nagla stúss og nafra púss  
klastra stir og kjóla ruð  
hellirs dagra hallar suð

But then again, we don't get to choose who loves us, or even how.

Originally written for the Finnish magazine *Nuori Voima*, 2009. First published in English in *aslongasittakes* (<http://www.aslongasittakes.org>).

## The metaphorical crisis

### 1. Like the first part of an essay

This cup of café latté is like a few minutes of work. Between every droplet of coffee and my work stands a peculiar equal sign – a hammered “like” or “as if”. Between the source domain and the target domain stands the analogy which controls our lives – the metaphor itself which we cannot escape, incessantly becoming deeper while multiplying in layers. The dime. The króna. The euro.

This dime is the “like” between the cup of coffee and the work, it separates my labour from my luxury. Unless I exchange the dime for a bank-card. Which would make having the bank-card “like” I had a dime, which would be “like” I had coffee. You run it through your card-reader and we pretend as if I'd earned my coffee. We could take this even further with a credit card. We could then pretend as if I would earn the coffee at some point in the future.

But then our metaphor-machine suffered a meltdown and suddenly we had nothing. No more café latté. No more dimes. No more loans. Icelanders had participated in the western like for about a half a century. We got to pretend like we had TVs and cars, when all we really had was loan contracts and incremental payments – neither the cars nor the TVs lasted (we still have the loans). Which isn't what makes the money imaginary. The money was imaginary all along. Or euphemisms. Hyperbole. Poetry. And like the Icelandic middle classes bought toys

with loans Icelandic businessmen bought toy-stores with loans. With similes.

When the fairytale finally came to an end people were literally asked not to personify the problem. But what were they to do, other than fall into the arms of a metaphor? Yet if I remember correctly personifications were never practiced to any extent – no one was ever arrested for fiscal crimes – but the metaphor as such was strong nonetheless. For the whole winter after the collapse people behaved as if they were angry – some people were even elected to parliament based on their as if anger (and immediately started behaving like politicians). People spoke of the end of capitalism as if nothing was more natural. People whose lives depended on maintaining capitalism.

Capitalism is dead, said the people. The metaphor is dead. And then.

Long live capitalism. Long live the metaphor.

## 2. Extra Coins

The twentieth century belonged to the metaphor. It was the omnipotent context all poetry had to abide by. *The time is like the water, a man's head is weighty, the head of a woman is a snowwhite, downy wisp, the boy has X-ray eyes, the lord comes riding on an emaciated nag, we tear out our hearts and wear them on the outside, over the house a swarm of bombs, outside august turns on a pink sickle.*<sup>19</sup>

19 Famous bits of poems from the following Icelandic poets (in this order): Steinn Steinarr, Sigfús Daðason, Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir, Sjón, ▶

This is the sound of some of the greatest Icelandic poems of the 20th century – I would like to emphasise that I do not mean to belittle them, notwithstanding the fact that more good poetry has thrived in darker recesses, even from the same artists whom we have canonized with fractions of their art. But I would like to point out that this method, this rhetoric, and this imagery has for so long been a part of our community that it has entered all of our language. The world speaks to us in modernist poetry through metaphor and metonymy – we listen to Disappointment and The Soul,<sup>20</sup> we buy Freedom,<sup>21</sup> make Extra Coins and invest them in Farm Pillars,<sup>22</sup> before finally experiencing a property-burnout – and when your entire reality speaks in modernist imagery not much is left of the so-called “dynamics of metaphor”, the metaphor itself becomes mundane and less than thrilling, it goes in through one ear and out the other, becomes an invisible method of expression instead of being analytical or enlightening, we do not stop before it and reflect on our realities in light of it, but understand almost instantly the part of it we feel we need to get further along in the text and then simply move on. Because the imagery is impotent to surprise us anymore.

It has been maintained that the metaphor has no role in the present – that it does not belong to contemporary times, has no relation to it. That the poets have dragged it into a closed world

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Jón úr Vör, Þorsteinn frá Hamri, Dagur Sigurðarson og Stefán Hörður Grímsson.

20 Names of Icelandic bands.

21 This is the common term for prepaid phone credit in Iceland.

22 Names of savings methods in Icelandic banks.

and locked the door. In the book *Swinging with Neighbours* Swedish surrealist Aase Berg turns this around:

*The new poetry discusses reality and sharpens its nails on metaphor, but what if the unreal metaphor is not on the retreat, but quite the contrary continues to infiltrate the reality? What if it has moved in and mixed with the mundane? It seems plausible when one looks at other instances of the object-reality, like the fetishistic and, in fact, rather unreal media of reality TV, and the personality market where people invest in to create an impersonal individuality by designing themselves and becoming vaguely aesthetic and trendy in a petit-bourgeois kind of way.*

And she continues.

*Lifestyle in lieu of a life, I'll say only one word: golf. The whole reality has become a metaphor, a giant as-if personality, where you try to appear normal and happy even though the very notion of 'happy normality' itself is pretty sick, and no one can live up to it without role playing. This façade machinery is being confused with reality, has become reality, the soap dresses up as a documentary. For docureality is only possible when one distances oneself from reality by only seemingly moving closer to it, fabricating the documentary.<sup>23</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> "Metaforen är död–länge leve metaforen"–Aase Berg, *Swinging With Neighbours*.

The reality isn't just more incredible than fiction. It's literally more fiction than fiction. Fiction is like reality which is like fiction. It is no longer an unveiling, but more veiling.

### 3. Picturing reality

Imagery is like calculus, we cannot imagine life without it – every op-ed article we read employs imagery and sometimes (most often?) bad imagery – imagery is quite simply a basic tenet of language, a starting point for all language, from advertisements to pop-songs to conversations and it's still the programming language of poetry: we adore the imagery because it reminds us of a different time, a time when imagery still was flammable. Before walls started blinking and symbols started popping out from every corner of reality.

In the last years before the economic collapse in Iceland it became more and more common for artists to be used to sell junk – bank-junk and other junk, junkfood, junkcars and junk-clothes. It is not a new realization that the market will take anything considered "cool" and pair it up with whatever it wants to sell us – love is like drinking soda,<sup>24</sup> liberty is like owning a big car, junkfood is like health food – and included in what was considered "cool" was, on the one hand, artists – Krummi in Mínus, Sjón, Nýhil, Gerður Kristný, Einar Kárason<sup>25</sup> etc. – and

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<sup>24</sup> Or was that a Frank O'Hara idea?

<sup>25</sup> In the following order: A rocker who did a bank-commercial, a writer who did a bank commercial, a group of poets (which I belong to) that got grants from a bank, a writer who did a bank-commercial, a writer

on the other, the tools of artists, the form, the innovations, the sound and last but not least: the imagery. Once freeing the world was stepping up on a chair and saying a girl's dress was too tight<sup>26</sup> – now freedom is prepaid phone credit. Magga's nipples<sup>27</sup> are used to sell gossip, poets are like businessmen, rock'n'roll is like an airline company and the revolution, which once was a wallpapered room in the mind,<sup>28</sup> is now a revolution in zit-protection, revolution in waste-management, revolution in telecommunications. The room is wallpapered with metaphors.

But they do nothing to increase our understanding of the world. They're not even fun anymore. We ingest language like (excuse my metaphorizing) we drink up trans-fat acids and sodium glutamate – all walls are literally covered in vomit and we have no choice.

#### 4. Like more reality

When Iceland collapsed bloggers turned to our cultural heritage. They quoted 20th century poetry and twisted it to fit. The famous lines of Steinn Steinarr "Everyone's downfall is implicit in their dreams" became "Everyone's downfall is implicit in their banks". "He was like any other worker" became "He was

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who did a bank commercial.

26 From a poem by Steinn Steinarr.

27 The title of a poem by Dagur Sigurðarson.

28 From a poem by Einar Már Guðmundsson.

like any other banker". "The sun's imperial pageant in the west / purples the Eyjafjalla Glacier, standing / huge in the east beneath its icy crest" became "The profits' imperial pageant in the west / the rays on the beautiful glacier, standing / tall the banks beneath its icy crest".

Old poems were taken and reshaped to face a new reality. Icelanders chose to see themselves in their romantic past – in the labour struggles of the forties (which was no doubt unpleasant at the time, but oh so wonderful in the rearview mirror) and the nationalism of the turn of the 20th century. We mirror ourselves in the past for two reasons – to receive a portion of its glow and to enlarge our sorrow with nostalgic rhetoric.

When people discuss politics everything (of course) becomes like something else. The Icesave-agreement<sup>29</sup> is like the treaty of Versailles. Joining the EU is like signing The Old Covenant.<sup>30</sup> Nothing is what it is, it is simply something else. The crisis in Iceland is like the American depression of the 1930's. And when we've hammered in our metaphors all sorts of parallel universes start moving – rumours that businessmen had started committing suicide by the droves (like in the US less than a century ago) had become so common that the newspapers began stating them almost as fact, until the authorities were forced to intervene – suicides had actually decreased and there was no evidence supporting the claims that the rich were cutting their wrists.

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29 An agreement about the Icelandic government paying the debts of privately owned Icelandic banks owed to British and Dutch investors.

30 The Old Covenant joined Iceland and Norway in 1262 (and Iceland forfeited its independence).

The lesbian prime minister of Iceland was like the black president of the US. But unfortunately the left-wing government is just “like” a left-wing government. The phrasing is left (“capitalism is dead”) but the reality is different (“long live capitalism”).

## 5. Excuse me–far-fetched connections

The imagery is a status quo, simultaneously “square one” and a prison – this place has been stolen, whether we like it or not. Without serious deepening, layerings and consequential contextualisation imagery is an unusable tool for poets. Because time is no longer like the water, it’s like some fucking junk you can’t live without.

He who wishes to subsist from metaphors alone will undoubtedly starve. Such poetry will never become more than a billboard advertising itself. A metaphor for a metaphor veiling metaphors. Consciously enacted this might be an interesting experiment, but as one more contribution to the bottomless ocean of poetry pretending to be poetry which incessantly floods our cities and towns, it is quite simply not welcome.

But this tool of governing – the metaphor, this “square one” – is so mighty and all embracing that it tends to swallow up artworks whole. Poetry books fall prey to the metaphor. It will not be stopped when it has gotten going (just count the metaphors in this essay – they are all involuntary!). And then I ask: what if we retreat with haste and instead of allowing a thousand flowers to bloom we only allow 999 flowers to bloom – erase the most predictable of all poetry tools, the

imagery, and promote the others to lead – is that at all a thinkable reality? Like a reality without calculus? What if we just relegate imagery to the second place? Try to deal with the world with all our other tools – parataxis, sound, deconstruction, reconstruction, alliteration, opposites, contradictions, overload, concretism, copy-paste, satire and so forth and so on – relegate imagery to the third place, fourth place, fifth place, as far back as we can squeeze it. Quit leaning on this crutch which is supposed to give our art justification? What then? What if we stop acting like artists and try to be artists? It is not a given that it’ll work – in fact it’s highly likely to fail – but can’t we just try?

## 6. The Rut

Artists find nearly nothing so uncomfortable as facing up to the tendency that art repeats itself, that it gets stuck in the same rut. We make ourselves believe that art is lofty, original – that it glides through life like an icebreaker getting to the heart of the real, our psyches as well as the outer reality, that it shows us the true nature of things, the way the world works, teaches us something about beauty and ugliness. But when we look around, with any impartiality, from any self-critical distance, we are daily faced with another reality: One more poem which adds nothing to the last, one more goddamned song, more happenings, paintings, symphonies, movies, novels – all inherently like the work that preceded it – will this never end, will we ever get peace of mind?

A young person learns how to write bearable texts, rich with imagery and flow, and gets praised – then goes on for a

whole lifetime refining this text in lyrical vanity, an eccentric belief that poetry which has been sufficiently refined and contains rich enough imagery will do something for the world which a well waxed car can't – or an overproduced popsong. In this manner nine-tenths of all poetry is perhaps first and foremost a form of kitsch – attempts at well-sharpened metaphors to please the senses, sophisticated aphorisms and sayings to please the logic, presented in the refined language of wisdom – technical, cold and ugly, and perhaps beyond everything else indifferent, it does not mind its own moments but deals with nothing concrete so that it can live forever, become classical. Heaven, ocean and hot emotion – it refers only to the common. That which pays too much attention to its own moment – the particular – is in danger of becoming outdated, of not lasting – and we've reached a strong consensus that everything which is not classical is somehow worthless. It doesn't last and we deal with eternal matters. An artwork which is good today should also be good tomorrow, otherwise it belongs not to eternity and was never good to begin with, we say, shaking our moralizing heads.

But of course eternity is not so simple – nevermind the relationship between the moment and eternity. Eternity is not linear: eternity is every moment at the same time. The only real relationship we have with eternity is through the moment now – now is the only eternity that lasts, without pause. And then who cares what we feel about the moment when it's gone, it's no less eternal. He or she who affects one single moment affects the entire critical mass of moments we call eternity, no matter what is popular in 10 years, 20 years, 100 years, 1000 years – and though I won't press the matter a perfectly proper

argument can be made for the idea that good art is the art which makes itself outdated, dries up the well of its own possibilities so completely that no one gets a drop from it ever again. Changes the moment that it owns and disappears into eternity – becomes an old cliché which everyone is familiar with, something completely self-evident which never again needs to be repeated or rephrased, something which has enlightened its past and future and become an inseparable part of our understanding of the world. Like calculus – something which demands great effort for us to see through and most of us could not survive without for more than a second or two.

Besides, it seems to me very coincidental what is considered of worth later on. Because this is where history starts fidgeting, so to speak, shows up and starts taking pictures, making notes, sketches, graphs, family trees. We try to map eternity. Label all that which we've thought important in the moment, for a few moments, of what we perceive as impartiality, in order to prevent it from becoming outdated. But with these methods, this eternal hypotaxis of moments, we do not recreate eternity. We create a new eternity, a manageable idea of eternity, linear and historical, a hierarchy meant to tell us something about who we've been. And instinctively we become victims of this idea about reality – about art as a small fraction of what has happened in a hypotactical, compartmentalized and linear process, rather than that which happens constantly. The compartments and the hierarchy undoubtedly help us understand many things, but when we forget that they are only the constructions of some people we never even met, they become religious – disappear beyond doubt. They create our ideas of art and we use them as a measure for the worth of art around us, so that most

discussion about art, most thought about art, becomes very nearly pathologically obsessed with arranging artists from first place to last in family trees like they were athletes or commercially reared dogs, while the people themselves are given much more significance than there's any reason for. And then it may seem too meager to ask which was the best poetry book of last year and we go further and ask who was the best poet of last year – or even, to increase the tension, who was the best new poet of last year. As if art was about who was best – like it was a competitive sport.

This isn't just an inclination within the superficial journalism which finds it most interesting to ask artists about their "dream weekend" or what they have in their pockets – this goes right through the cultural coverage of newspapers like the *New York Times* or *Morgunblaðið*.

100 best books of the 20th century, 1,000 best poems of history, 10,000 best poets of all times, 100,000 best metaphors of eternity – bleh bleh and blah and blah blah blah.

So the present worships an outdated past, even at the cost of a living present. And it thereby despises a large part of what was intentionally meant for the moment it lived, that which lost the great fencing match of noteworthiness – lost history, media, registration, definition and mythmaking – and became "nothing".

The contemporary enthusiasm for that which has "not yet become anything" – that is to say, does not yet belong to a historical reality – is marked by this worship, where the tin soldiers of the cultural media trip through the poetry books of our newest poets and compare them to that which has already been written: does it stand up to comparison, they ask, are the

metaphors as good as in Steinn Steinarr, is the rhetoric up to Sigfús Daðason's snuff, is it as crazy as Dagur Sigurðarson? – but rarely does anyone question the comparison itself, what purpose it is supposed to serve to make Dagur, Steinn, Sigfús and all the others into yardsticks to be used to measure other art works, to beat poets into submission?

These yardsticks can also be more subtle – they're often in the background – and the compartments or the judgements given may be something like "great imagery" (or not), "strong rhetorics" (or not) and the comparisons may refer to a great number of poets, poems or even some completely unmentioned value from the history of arts – something which we find self-evident as a goal for art and poetry. But might not be.

Through these methods we maintain the same values in the hearts of critics and practitioners, poets and literary scholars – and those who stay most firmly within the frame will have an easier time making themselves understood to the reader and thereby get the greatest praise – achieve results, as it is called, get a reserved seat in art history so the circus may be continued. The system is quite literally created to encourage repetition – and thereby we, as artists and art consumers, lose all our talent for enjoying art and creation on its own premises: we may not know how to read or write.

## 7. Is thinking outside the box also a cliché?

All art which dares not step outside its present – outside the senses and paths of governing tastes – all art which intends to get positive reviews or a consent, all art which dares not

change, malform and get destroyed – all art afraid of failing, horribly even, afraid to be ridiculed – dares not its own contradictions – is in my mind mostly a waste of time. It reduces its own possibilities and serves art history more than art. It's the art of the coverband, it is vanity – does not practice honesty towards itself but serves an idea of an imaginary taste of a set of imaginary people we call the audience, viewers, readers, lovers of poetry. It serves the idea of the artform as we are told it functions. Instead of dealing with the tools of the art, its form and content in a critical, heart-wrenching or inventive manner, we imitate what were told to read and thus write like Steinn or Sigfús or Dagur. Yet everyone knows we do not love the imitations of the works of the great poets – we love the works themselves.

Maybe this is a fear of art – a fear of practicing the art – a fear of failing and feeling ashamed or achieving something we didn't intend to achieve, something we may not even like. To become a fool. And perhaps it's not the art, per se, which interests us but the glow of fame – perhaps all we wanted was snobbery and vanity.

But I'm told that now, like always, is not the time to fall for axiomatic ideas – now, like always, is the time to resist, to fight tooth and nail. Now is the time to react to the textual reality instead of reproducing forgotten moments (unless it's a reaction to the textual reality), lost poetry books – our own or others – which belong to lost times. Poetry is not now, any more than before, a vehicle for op-eds or other opinions, not a vehicle for our emotions – for we should not forget old Wittgenstein's maxim “that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language game

of giving information” – for that we have op-eds and private correspondance. Now, like always, is the time to stop painting by numbers, to neither fall for the myth of the author nor the myth of the work, and steal back the world from the arms of those who never appreciate shit and have nothing in mind (on purpose or without) but our enslavement and stultification.

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## Mock Duck Mandarin—the sound and the fury

I

I tend to write three general kinds of poetry which I keep more or less separated in the writing practice, although the borders tend to blur before publication. First there's the poetry meant for the page. As a rule, I approach this type of poetry as a solitary action – it is written in private and it is to be read in private and it functions more on an intellectual, lyrical or humanist level; there's generally speaking less humour and less entertainment, or at least a different form of humour and entertainment, although this isn't consciously made to be so.

Second, there's the poetry meant for the internet – often my approach to this is a relaxed one; this is where I'll put most of my found poetry, poetry that I find immediately relevant, but perhaps not meant for the long-run, and poetry that has either a social (interactive) function or a visual aspect I feel is better presented online than on a page. I also put all my video poetry online, but I feel it belongs to it's own separate *gesamtkunstwerks*-category and should perhaps be published on DVD or some similar format. For technical reasons (e.g. “laziness”), this has not happened though.

Finally there's performance poetry – the poetry I'll try to present here. Most of this poetry employs some sort of conceptual gimmick: I wrote a series of short poems based on the names of dictators; a long collage from the poetic works of a 17th century Icelandic lunatic; a google-sculpture based on

Icelandic nationalist rhetoric in English; I've written a sonnet based only on abbreviations; and I've written (or self-plagiarized) poetry to be performed in various Scandinavian accents (as they sound to the ears of the performer).

As I said, this is how it's compartmentalized in my head – when I sit down to write – but that doesn't necessarily mean that's how it ends up. Sound poetry might end up written in a book or as accompaniment to a visual poem online; page poetry might end up online or get read at a festival; and a provisional found poem might get published in a book and thus get granted some sort of extended life.

A worthy note: I usually perform my poetry for people who don't understand Icelandic. Not only do I live in Finland, where only a handful of the inhabitants speak Icelandic, but I mostly perform at festivals in various countries outside Iceland – with a few local readings. My circumstances thus push the poetry performances further into the domain of sound poetry than they perhaps belong.

II

If we see sound poetry as the art of treating words as if they were inherently onomatopoeic – that the sounds in themselves represent “something” other than what it says in the dictionary, something inherent in the sounds, and thus a construction of sounds can result in a coherent creation, a collage of “somethings” comparable to a sentence, a piece of music or a painting, and yet devoid of the exceedingly obvious expression of “grammatically correct sentences” – that is to say, if we see

sound poetry as the abstract painting of poetry, then most of my so-called sound poems don't really count (although I'm not much of a definition-fascist, and truly you can call it what you want).

My “sound poetry” might be better described as verbal poetry – and it usually entails a conceptual theme. With a few exceptions it employs grammatically correct sentences, which sound poetry usually does not (opting for something closer to pure vocal sounds, which borders on what is called “sound singing”), in no way does it rely on improvisation – which is a key factor in much sound poetry – and I have never written anything which leaves the realm of the linguistic for the purely vocal. Even though a few of my poems might be hard to put together, they all have a structure which reverts back to language, even those few that do not employ grammatically correct sentences.

Let me give an example. “Swing Ding Deng Xiaoping” is the first poem I wrote for the Dictator series – a series of poems based on the names of different dictators (actually, not all are dictators, or even evil – I never really gave the series a name, this one just showed up on its own). It has a little end-rhyming and a touch of scansion, but mostly it's based on “ng” internal half-rhymes, assonance or alliterations. It is to be noted that in Icelandic the “ng” sound changes the vowel sound preceding it – thus “a” is normally pronounced [ɪ(:)] but after an “ng” sound it becomes [au], a sound which otherwise is written “á” – “a” with an accent – instead of writing l-á-n-g-a-r we write l-a-n-g-a-r. And so forth: “I” ([ɪ(:)]) becomes “Í” ([i(:)]), “E” ([ɛ(:)]) becomes “EÍ” ([ei(:)]), “Ö” ([œ]) becomes “AU”, ([ø(:)]), and “U” ([ʏ(:)]) becomes “Ú” ([u(:)]). Swing

Ding is thus for me a poem of vowel harmony, anchored in the consonantal “ng” assonance. (Please note that the following translation is not completely literal.)

### Swing Ding Deng Xiaoping

A boy was sung to sleep at night  
by a hungry maiden:  
“Walking thong, bush of assembly,  
swing ding, Deng Xiaoping”.

A boy was sung awake  
by a young maiden:  
“Young runt, misnamed  
swing ding, Deng Xiaoping”

A pole goes in, goal! goal!  
sings the song and cries:  
“Poor thing, little bitty-boy  
swing ding, Deng Xiaoping”

Resounds in perinea, perineal-tunnels,  
frightened and sung, this nestling bird is edible  
through all the murk, the length of a song  
swing ding, Deng Xiaoping

A fricative stretches on and on  
none will get no restitution:  
“a stab in the chest, a chesty-stab  
swing ding, Deng Xiaoping.”

Söng dreng, svöng mey,  
svefn í um nætur:  
“Gangþvengur, þingfararlyng,  
swing ding, Deng Xiaoping”

Dreng söng, ung mey,  
um morgna á fætur:  
“Ungur pungur, rangnefndur,  
swing ding, Deng Xiaoping.”

Stöng inn, stöngin inn,  
sönginn syngur og grætur:  
“Anginn ungi, drengurinn,  
swing ding, Deng Xiaoping.”

Söng í spöngum, spangnagöngum,  
banginn sunginn, ungin ætur  
drungan langan, lungann úr söng  
swing ding, Deng Xiaoping

Önghljóð anga leiðir langar  
enginn bíður engar bætur:  
“stunga í bringu, bringusting  
swing ding, Deng Xiaoping.”

Now, the poem was written without giving much thought to what it would say, although I did want it to be formulated in grammatically correct sentences – I wanted it to say something within the realm of the linguistic, while primarily being con-

structed as song and sound. Additionally I wanted it to have a gimmick, a conceptual dimension – which in this case is the dictator-name, connecting the series together. The story itself wasn't only secondary – it was in the fourth or fifth place, almost relegated to the dimension of complete non-significance, but it had to be there, that was one of the constraints. Ultimately, I found the result extremely satisfying.

“Swing Ding Deng Xiaoping” can be interpreted as telling the story of death, sex, perversion and love between a young man and either a servant, a young mother or a prostitute. The relationship starts on a caring note – a lullaby; passes through a sexual phase, which flirts with the slightly perverted (note: perinea is the skin separating the vagina and the anus); before ending in murder. It is thus a highly traditional tragedy – nearly Shakespearian, with an oedipal dimension and whatnot.

The storyline of the poem to a certain degree removes the dimension of the actual dictator, replacing him with someone “misnamed” Deng Xiaoping, who's either the boy being sung to or a character in the song being sung. This removal of the actual dictator and his replacement with an unworthy name-sake, which is implicit in a literal, word by word, reading of the poem, perhaps pulls it away from the political and towards the personal – pulls it away from the international arena of cruelty and political dogma and towards a more humanist story of woe: meaning less grand scale horror and more (deeper?) tragedy.

And the poem might prompt the question, as somebody phrased it, if it's about something truly holocaustal or merely genocidal, truly genocidal or merely catastrophic, truly catastrophic or merely disastrous, truly disastrous or merely harrowing, truly harrowing or merely tragic, truly tragic or merely

lamentable, truly lamentable or quit your whining? That is to say, one might ask what this shift in presentation does to the poem's ability to represent – if it at all represents – a victim or several victims. And isn't it perhaps just cute to nickname a little boy “Deng Xiaoping” – a bit like calling him “a little terrorist”, a “Genghis Khan”, a hyperbolic way of saying the child is an energetic handful? And where does that leave the victims of Tiananmen square?

### III

The whole dictator series is for me also a proposition or assertion – a statement of sorts – on dictators – and, granted, one that I'm not always particularly comfortable with. I've only once (knowingly) performed “Swing Ding Deng Xiaoping” in front of anyone Chinese – the poet Tian Yuan, at the Copenhagen Poetry Festival 2010, and it made me surprisingly self-conscious and uncomfortable. I very nearly took it off my program. Regrettably I did not get his viewpoint on it afterwards, partly because he spoke no English and partly because I was too timid to ask his interpreter, afraid that I might've insulted his tender sensibilities with my loud western arrogance. He showed no particular sign either way, that I could interpret in my paranoid state.

Let me put it this way: for me the poem, like many in the dictator series, symbolises the madness of a dictatorship and the ridiculous, pure and simple outlandishness of cruelty. But I can very easily see how it could a) be construed as insulting a nation or an ethnicity, rather than commenting on a political

situation b) be interpreted as “mock chinese”, as a joke on asian languages, one that is very common in humour based on racist stereotypes; although I'm not sure the mere western malformation of the peculiarities of a tonal language would constitute a racist comment, notwithstanding its use in racist commentary or c) be seen as trivialising the horror and cruelty of a repressive regime, rather than portraying it.

There is little representation in the dictator series (plus it's all rather abstract) and there is no adjudication, which to some degree limits its political efficacy – it's too interpretable to be good propaganda for anyone, and yet let me state that I wish it were, I wish it did in fact make a clearer statement against cruelty, I wish it, like me, would take a proper stand against inhumanity. But to write such poems, I need to find a way to bypass the putrid taste of the holier-than-thou type of moralism which does more ill than good.

Added to this I tend to feel uncomfortable about the series' trend towards Asian dictators in particular, and non-western politicians in general. This is mostly due to the fact that I find Asian (tonal) names (in particular) more resounding, and non-western names (in general) more exotic – and not to be seen as an indictment of the third world with an accompanying amnesty for western countries (and perhaps it's proper to remember that Deng Xiaoping is most famous for taking China in a capitalist direction and “improving relations with the west”; he is a pro-western third-worlder).

I'll come back to the “mock chinese” a little later.

#### IV

One of the main things that initially interested me about the Dictator Series was the weight of the words – the political intensity of proper names of dictators – and I became more and more fascinated with this as I started understanding that certain names, or more specifically, a certain name proved impossible to use. I thought about it for weeks and months, but no matter how I tried to wrap my mind around it, I couldn't find a place for Hitler within my series.

In western Europe – at least – there's probably not one single word which conjures up so much ... I don't want to call it emotion, because Hitler doesn't affect me emotionally more than Pol Pot. Maybe it's the banality of repetition – so much has been said about Hitler – or the absolute appropriation of the name in political arguments and propaganda, obvious in both the famous logical fallacy *Reductio ad Hitlerum* (comparing someone to Hitler) and the use of the accusation *Reductio ad Hitlerum* as a means of not making anything comparable to Hitler, and thus propagating his inhumanness as well as the idea that modern day horror on a nazi-scale is not only implausible but utterly unthinkable and, perhaps even more so, unmentionable.

As far as language is concerned, the word Hitler simply means "evil". Socially the word (or the concept) is a yardstick for evil, and one that must always be kept high enough so no one can surpass it, or even come close. And thus it becomes unusable.

What interested me about the dictator names was their weight, but I found Hitler simultaneously too heavy to carry

and too light to flash, the word had too many connotations and it was too one-dimensional, and therefore there is still no Hitler poem.

#### V

As I mentioned in the beginning, another series, related to the dictator series, is based on accents – let's call it "the Scandinavian series" – reading poems in Icelandic as if they were in another language. This series only contains three poems – one with a Danish accent, one with a Swedish accent ("Skånska") and one with a Norwegian accent; and with some good will we could add to the series two half-siblings, so to speak, both performed in the target language: An American English Google sculpture and a performance of a Finnish poem by Rita Dahl.

The Swedish one was written with this type of sound-performance in mind, while the Danish and the Norwegian were appropriated from older poetry of mine; one Google sculpture and one conceptual poem. I'd like to give you an example of the Norwegian one, the Google sculpture.

## Kennara með köldu blóði

Nemandi stóð og kynnti sig:

“Virðulegi skólameistari  
æruverðugu skólasystkin  
jafnvel kærustupör

Spennan vex  
fyrir sunnan fríkirkjuna  
þar sem stórar flugur

mæta með byssur og önnur drápstól í skólann

Hægri höndin

komin með fyrstu beinagrindina  
til að leysa ágreiningsmál með

ófötluð klappaði hundum og hestum

satt að segja taldi ég  
tengsl stjúpbarna

ótrúleg  
við allt

hið látna

og ljóð fórnarlambins

## A Teacher in Cold Blood

A pupil stood up and introduced himself:

“Honourable headmaster,  
distinguished fellow students  
perhaps even lovers

The excitement grows  
south of the free church  
where big flies

show up in school with guns and other murder weapons

The right hand

has got the first skeleton  
to solve disputes with

able-bodied patted dogs and horses

truth be told I found  
the connection of step-children

to everything  
incredible

he deceased

and the victim's poems

mæta með byssur og önnur drápstól í skólann  
í formi tómstunda og annarra slíkra hluta

(hvað er betra til stríðni en svona lagað?)

gamlingjar, unglingar og allt niður í 6 ára gömul börn  
verða að neita þeim um það  
jafnt í orði sem verki

Fyrst og fremst er byggt á  
umhugsun  
en ljóð fórnarlambins

geta nýtt sér stærðfræðileg  
hugtök og aðferðir við lausn verkefna  
og notað tákni og skýringarmyndir

byssur og önnur drápstól  
í formi annarra slíkra hluta

fá ekki að lækna

en geta útskýrt munnlega  
hugtök og aðferðir  
ef ljóð fórnarlambins ekki  
fyrirfara sér eða gera tilraun til þess  
fjarri góðu gamni

Tilfinningin er ljúfsár.

show up in school with guns and other murder weapons  
in the form of hobbies and other such objects

(is there anything better for teasing than this?)

old ones, young ones and right down to 6 year old children  
must deny them this  
in both word and deed

First and foremost we build upon  
contemplation  
but the victim's poems

can make use of mathematical  
concepts and methods for solving projects  
and use symbols and diagrams

guns and other murder weapons  
in the form of other such objects

can not heal

but can explain orally  
concepts and methods  
if the victim's poems do not  
kill themselves or attempt to  
far from any joy

The sensation is bitter sweet

móðir hans og önnur  
börn nággranna

að mála andlit með þökk, virðingu og söknuði  
með hærri skotvopnamorðtíðni  
til að dreifa athyglinni

Nei, æruverðugu skólasystkin  
virðulegi skólameistari  
jafnvel kærustupör

spennan  
fyrir sunnan fríkirkjuna  
er fullnægjandi.”

his mother and other  
children of neighbours

paint faces with gratitude, respect and a sense of loss  
with a higher firearm death rate  
to spread the attention

No, distinguished fellow students  
honourable headmaster  
perhaps even lovers

the excitement  
south of the free church  
is sufficient.”

The accent is of course “imaginary” – Norwegian people don’t really speak the way I make them speak and the Swedish version is even further from actual Skånska, as I’m unable to produce the miraculous sounds of the inhabitants of Skåne, Sweden. The idea came from a conversation with Caroline Bergvall, Leevi Lehto and several others during a lunch break at a seminar in Biskops Arnö, Sweden, a few years back. Now, Caroline has of course been working with “ye olde english” in her *Chaucer Tales*, and we got to speaking about the role of pronunciation in sound poetry – with an emphasis on accents and dialects that actually exist (instead of sound poetry’s more traditional stance to seek out sounds and accents that exist outside or beside a language). Being a French-Norwegian who works in England, Caroline is naturally very much a crossnational creature in her poetry, who has turned her polyglottal ability into brilliance, much like Cia Rinne, although in a different manner.

Leevi had at one point informed me that although he could read French more or less perfectly he could not speak it or understand it spoken, and during this conversation he admitted that although he had trouble understanding some of the Scandinavians with their various forms of Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish, he had no problem understanding Caroline, who speaks Norwegian with a bit of a French accent. That is to say – he could not understand French with a French accent, or Norwegian with a Norwegian accent, but he could understand Norwegian with a French accent (as far as I know it remains to be seen whether he can understand French with a Norwegian accent).

I find all of this horribly exciting, as you can imagine, and

for several reasons. To name one I have a one year old son whose parents’ native languages are Icelandic and Swedish, being raised in Finland, surrounded by his parents’ friends’ many of whom are foreigners who mostly speak English between themselves, but also Spanish, German, Czech and quite a bit of French – so he’s literally soaked in languages, and now is the time he’s starting to try and make himself understood. When he says “koo-kah” – does he mean “kukka” in Finnish (“a flower”) or “kúka” in Icelandic (“to defecate, shit”), or is it merely a malformed version of his old favorite word “titta” in Swedish (“behold!”).

But at the time I wrote the Scandinavian Series (which is actually not finished, having been left mid-air, so to speak) I had no children and what interested me most, poetically speaking as well as politically, was a kind of creative destruction of the Icelandic language – breaking it, stretching it, trying to take it to places it’d never been. I’ve written more extensively about this in an essay entitled “The Importance of Destroying a Language (of one’s own)” – where I posited that writing in Icelandic, as opposed to English, was a privilege of sorts, given the fact that the language was so virginal, that so little had been done to stretch and disfigure it and there were still so many rules unbroken. I may have been mentally overcompensating a bit, due to my envy of those working in English, who not only have a strong international tradition to seek refuge in, but an actual audience of more than 7 people interested in the work. But the fact remains that Icelandic is a very homogenized language, seemingly just waiting to be re-heterogenized.

There are no different accents in Icelandic – at least none to speak of. There are no dialects worthy of the name. Hardcore

theorists might disagree with me here, and I guess a trained ear could hear a difference, but outside of a tiny variation in pronunciation of a few words from the people who live around Akureyri – there are no dialects audible to the general public (which is the standard I apply, being an uneducated buffoon myself) – and definitely none that you could portray in a written text. There is certainly no equivalent of Rauman murre, Skånska, Trønderisk or Sønderjysk. Add to this the fact that until the late 1990’s Iceland had almost no immigrants, meaning that there’s very little tradition for foreign accents in the language – so little in fact that it’s almost never heard on the radio or on TV, a policy often justified with the argument that people wouldn’t understand it – in and of itself probably not untrue, but of course people simply don’t understand it because they never hear it. Their ears are only accustomed to a “pure” pronunciation, they are stuck on homogenized Icelandic. The situation brings to mind the Chinese-American Lee in John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, who having been born in the United States speaks flawless English that no one understands, and thus he’s forced to revert to the pidgin white people expect him to speak. It feels like Icelanders are still one step behind Steinbeck’s America of the first part of the last century, when it comes to immigrants and language – instead of expecting immigrants to speak pidgin Icelandic, a nonexistent language (at least in official circles), we expect them to speak Globish, or what Leevi Lehto has termed, “Barbaric English”, and refuse to acknowledge non-Icelandic Icelandic.

All of which led to the Scandinavian Series – a distortion of Icelandic by filtering it through what I imagined to be a Norwegian, Danish and Swedish accent, a caricature of the Icelandic

language, the Scandinavian pronunciations and my own poetic texts. Interestingly I always meant to do a more “proper” Swedish version – that is to say, not in the thick Skånska, but more the way my wife speaks, which is a kind of diplomatic Swedish between Östgötska and Västmanländska, but I was never able to tone it to my liking – I could never figure out how to do it, although this was the Swedish that I knew the best, the closest to how I speak Swedish myself. After much mindbending I eventually settled on that perhaps it’s hardest to caricature that which one knows at an intermediary level – and easier to caricature what one knows almost perfectly, like my Icelandic, or hardly at all, like my Danish.

## VI

And now back to the Mock Chinese – to the Mock Scandinavian and Mock Icelandic, onwards to Mock Finnish and Mock American. I’ll start by reading a poem about Iceland, called “The Iceland Report on the Observance of Standards and Codes”.

### Iceland Report on the Observance of Standards and Codes

We interrupt this Iceland Report serial to offer up the following vocabulary trivia quiz.

Within an hour of Bork Bork  
I am not yet defending those who are making stupid  
comments and unfunny jokes

Bork is happy and energetic – with borderline manic tendencies  
and if you expect any fucking  
YOU DON'T KNOW ME!!@!@!@!

I'm from Iceland and I practice yoga every night,  
I shit you not...

With my body, you'd NEVER know I birthed 2 babies..

I am hot, people. HOT.

My secret? A diet of Juarez tequila and ho-hos, and a steady regimen of cock-sucking. Or is cock-sucking more like part of my diet? Either way, I have an ass like a 24 yr old. And now you know.

Do you know who Björk is?

She is in desperate need of some attention

I have panties, I'm telling you, three more innocent people died after watching her "Reaming an eskimo" video on MTV last night. She's that desperate. That's how cool she is.

She can use a gun to shoot herself in the face with,  
I don't care, I'd still tongue-bork her.

I'm an Icelandic student, I'm broke and I'm not

an attention whore.

You don't like other people's sweaty ball cheese odor in your delicate little throat.  
But I got some ball cheese for you, right here.

Served, to the surprised delight of your girlfriend, who will say "Wow, I kinda had my doubts about this meal. But this is good! You done good, babe." Awake the next morning to the strong smell pervading every nook and cranny of the house. If you have regrets, just remember that this is the smell of Christmas in Ísafjörður, Iceland.

"Ísafjörður?" (puzzled face)

"Last time I was there, in the 80s, I was stuck for five days because of snow. They couldn't get an airplane out of there."

The main industry in Ísafjörður, Iceland is cleaning the fucking kitchen.

Iceland, incidentally, is at war with Kebabistan for smuggling dolphins up their snatches. Fucking ragheads.

We killed "Free Willy", and I don't mean "we" as in all of Icelanders, I mean as in me and my dad fucking drowned that michelin-tyre-fucking dolphin, or whatever the hell he was. Now, that's some proper existentialist symbolism for you.

I know I make it sound like Iceland is a fucking super-power. But it's only funny, cause it's true.

Trust me. Iceland is streaming in its entirety on YouTube.

Iceland is known as the NORDIC TIGER.

Of course, Iceland is hardly the ideal clime for peanut growing, nor does it have the economic clout to lord over a country that does. But nevermind you, we'll do fine without your god-fucking peanuts.

I woke up this morning with fuck on my mind. Then I punched fuck into Google. I punched fuck long and hard into Google. Then I punched fuck once more, just to be on the safe side. What do you reckon showed up? Lo and fucking behold: Iceland.

We are the world, so fuck off.

This poem is more in the spirit of my earlier poetry – to a certain degree performative, but based on a principle of transgression rather than sound. I quite literally find it horrifying at times – and I ritually jump over some of the lines while performing it. It was originally written for the Flarflist Collective in 2006. Now, Flarf – the inappropriate google-sculpture poetry, for those not familiar with it – has proved more or less impossible to produce in Icelandic, due to the fact that the Icelandic source-text (internet in Icelandic) is so tiny compared

to the English source-text (internet in English). The English source-text is much more likely to provide wild and wonderful associations than is the Icelandic source-text – and without wild and wonderful associations, there isn't much Flarf left.

So not being able to properly Flarf in Icelandic, I decided to Flarf about Iceland in English instead (being the crazy nationalist that I am). And to drive it all the way home, I try to pronounce it in the only English ever native to Iceland: Military American. For decades a small portion of Iceland, the American military base in Keflavík, was for all intents and purposes considered U.S. soil. Military American is of course not a language – neither a written one nor a spoken one. But I think we can all imagine the way it sounds, just like we can imagine the Nazi-language (another English Hollywood dialect) or even Mock Chinese.

The final example I would like to mention is a reading I did for *Nokturno's* "In Another's Voice" series, of a Flarf-poem written in Finnish by Rita Dahl. I recorded it in 2005, I think, when I was living in my hometown, Ísafjörður, and I rehearsed it quite a bit – since the Finnish words somewhat dumbfounded me. Walking back and forth, pacing the floors of the creaky old apartment building I lived in, screaming in Finnish, I lived in constant fear of what my neighbours would think.

I had no idea what I was saying, outside of a few key phrases – “anti-capitalist”, “Eurovision”, and “helvetti” (“hell”) which is “helvíti” in Icelandic. I feel this poem belongs to the Scandinavian series in particular, and “my” sound poetry in general – even though the poem (the source-text of my performance) is written by Rita Dahl and the idea for me to read it (the conception of my performance) came from Marko Nie-

mi – since it, to a major extent, fits to the themes presented in the other Scandinavian poems and it contains an assertion similar to those in my other sound poems, a statement like “mock chinese”, a transnational or binational malformation of language – Finnish words with Icelandic pronunciation; it’s like the Scandinavian series run backwards.

## VII

My sound poetry might not always be a particularly deep analysis or commentary on language. It is what is called in academic circles “taking the piss”. It’s foolish, childish and mostly pointless in the same manner as when comedians speak English with a “Nazi accent”. But perhaps, for me, the most interesting and enjoyable thing about sound poetry is this inherent immaturity of it – it is the way children play, although it poses as serious art for cultivated grownups, which I guess is the only way for us of getting away with it.

It’s a kind of perversion maybe, and perhaps one that results from societal inhibition, which teaches us to behave in public even when we don’t want to, as well as from the demands of intellectual rigour – rampant in avant-garde poetry circles – which lead us to live in a world we only partially understand, constantly striving to understand the complexities we willingly surround ourselves with and hardly ever making it. Which in turn creates a powerful sense of dissatisfaction accompanied by this need to break out, burst and explode in glossolalian nonsense. Making the nonsensical part of it, the part not meant to be understood, the anti-intellectual part of

it, all the more attractive and enjoyable. Because to some extent sound poetry may be an expression of a common insanity which we habitually disown, a common need for a wonderfully simplistic stupidity to go with our intellectual posturing (or honest intellectual pursuits, if you will, they are just as trying) – an escape from the palpable pseudo-self-evidency of language, which is either nothing but subtlety or lacks all subtlety, nothing but depth and understanding or merely a cerebral charade, depending on how you see it.

But in an all too common mode of irony, this escape from the cerebral towards the sublimely stupid, intrinsic to sound poetry, has a tendency to produce a group of pregnant afterthoughts which all bear a million intellectual conversations hell-bent on dissecting, diagnosing and understanding these results of our need to behave like idiots. Which again, may be interesting, and will probably cause an increase in our pent-up need for glossolalia and divine idiocy.

Thank you for listening.

Originally presented as a spoken lecture at the Kuopio Sound Poetry Seminar 2010, Finland.

## Attention: Attention

### I (non-disclaimer)

Yes, you are correct, this is an epilogue about Icelandic poetry from one of the poets presented in this book. I will now go on to praise my poetry and that of my friends (in Iceland, everybody's friends). But in particular, my own. Anyone derided in this epilogue will remain nameless. In fact everyone, save the epilogue's author, will remain nameless.

I am told that the only opinion I ever have of Icelandic poetry is that everybody else's sucks while mine reigns supreme. I prefer not to argue. (Either one of these statements is not true).

### II (this is where I mention myself)

I would, nevertheless, like to guide your attention towards the poems of Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, who has an exceptional sense for the aeonian within the contemporaneous (just kidding).

### III (advertisements vs. poetry)

Icelandic poetry (like Icelandic literature (like Icelandic arts (like Icelandic life))) is in the throes of the economic collapse. Not merely because a large number of poets and artists some-

how participated in the financial madness that caused the chaotic meltdown, from being ad-whores to being (artistic) entrepreneurs themselves, but because art – and thereby poetry – has a way of wanting to deal with these things: of wanting to pierce eternal holes in instantaneous historic occurrences.

And artists, being the vain creatures that they often are, have a tendency for wanting to participate in whatever is seen as “large” in any given moment. Whatever seems to be larger than the moment. The poets and artists want not only to view history but shape it – and if they can't shape it, then at least make believe they're shaping it by mimicking the movements of those who truly are shaping it. (The same goes for anybody with an ambition to be influential).

The results, of course, are varied. But mostly the poetry being written about the crisis – or the kitchenware revolution itself, as it's called – is a lot better than the commercials being made before the crisis.

### IV (wishful thinking)

Icelandic poetry (I hope) has been opening up in the last years. It's been (re)discovering foreign poetry (it seems). It's becoming more playful (I think). (Perhaps) there's less snobbery and more dynamism. Less posing and more running. It's trying to take itself seriously (to be ambitious) while not taking itself too seriously (no more overtime!)

I.e. it's not taking its own inherent magic for granted (I wish).

## V (the part with the sex in it)

Icelandic poetry hopes for a rebirth, as Iceland hopes to be re-born. Icelandic poetry (like Iceland) might not realize what it's asking for. Icelandic poetry (it seems) wants to wipe the slate clean. To act as if there never was a pregnancy – that it's pure and not the bastard-fruit of smelly, sweaty fucking by apparent (drunk) strangers. It wishes not to discuss the past. Mentioning the past should be a thing of the past. And if you insist on mentioning the past, then leave Icelandic poetry out of it.

It wasn't us! It was the bankers!

## VI (the poets in this book)

The poets in this book are some of my favorite people/poets. Most of the poetry in this book is from before we became poor. And maybe the poets in this book were always poor. I seem to remember them always being poor.

But nice!

And fun!

And compelling!

(You're welcome).

Originally published in Danish in the poetry anthology *Ny Islandsk Poesi* (Arena, November, 2010).

## Literature in the land of the inherently cute –the search for literary crisis

(Practically) all political writing engages in representation and a form of adjudication – i.e. “picking a side”. Classic social realist writing about capitalist societies not only represents the exploited classes, but furthermore represents them against their mortal enemy, the bourgeois classes; nationalist literature not only represents a certain land and a certain people, but it represents the land and people as different (unique) from other lands and other peoples; feminist writing represents women against male domination (and/or “men”); postcolonial literature represents “natives” or “immigrants” vs. “colonials”, “locals” or “nationals”; pacifist writing represents those willing to “be friendly” against those who feel aggression is the only viable course of action; postmodern capitalist literature represents “the individual” vs. the alienating, dystopic horrors of society (and ritually asks: do I deserve to be selfish?). And, at least theoretically, if not in practice, vice versa (i.e. Ayn Rand represents the “energetic” bourgeois against the “lazy” classes who allow themselves to be exploited).

(Practically) all Icelandic writing represents Iceland, regardless of the author's intentions. The mere size of the population (320 thousand) creates a situation where anything said aloud becomes first and foremost “Icelandic” and what is actually said takes second place to that fact, which in and of itself is peculiar enough to demand most of your attention – because statistically speaking only around 0.0046% of all words spoken (or written) in the world are spoken (or written) in Icelandic.

An Icelandic opinion is thus a rarity like Bigfoot or The Abominable Snowman – so rare in fact that most people who’ve come into contact with it aren’t entirely sure if they did at all, and think that perhaps what they saw was just a really big cow or a really small Danish person. When best-selling crime novelist Arnaldur Indriðason is sold to German readers, the book cover will generally sport a picture of an old Icelandic farm and perhaps a horse, despite the fact that his books are about the criminal horrors of big city living (in as much as Reykjavík – pop. 120,000 – can be considered a “big city”); that is to say: drugs, alienation, loneliness and murder.

This form of representation is not limited to books written for a foreign market – the Icelandic condition is one of constant awareness of the (ridiculous) size of the country as well as the speaking population and the limits that this imposes. Thus Icelandic literature tends first and foremost to represent Iceland to Icelanders, and this reaches back to (Nobel laureate! – woo-hoo!) Halldór Kiljan Laxness teaching Icelandic farmers basic hygiene (and thus claiming they were filthy) and propagating the literary myth that goes all the way back to the Sagas, that Icelanders were first and foremost a stubborn independent people not willing to be subjugated. Although Laxness did not necessarily glorify these traits, as is done in the Sagas (and in some modern literature), he nevertheless maintained that they were present, which still today means that Icelanders cannot by definition be “complacent”, “tame” and easily led – despite any evidence to the contrary, such as the national ecstasy over the “success” of “our” “financial vikings” (known as the “outvasion” – Iceland invades the entire world, “outvades” the world); or the vilification of protesters before and after the immedi-

ate uproar surrounding the actual financial crash; or the easily manufactured consent for lax civil liberties to uproot “undesirable” organisations (such as the Hell’s Angels) or allow inclusive privately-owned genetic databanks with everybody’s medical information; or the current national lunacy, which claims that cutting back on health, culture and education can be done while simultaneously jumping for joy that “we finally have a left-wing government”.

Icelanders have their own personal agenda; they are individualists who refuse their common identity. Or so goes the myth. Someone like me might in turn argue (bitterly, foaming at the mouth) that Icelanders are in fact a bunch of easily manipulated sheep.

### Bowing to the mighty Medici

Up until the crisis many of the financial institutions in Iceland played Medici-like patrons to artists – and used the artists’ image to promote their loans, overdrafts, savings and pension-plans in national ad-campaigns and carefully orchestrated media events, complete with oversized cheques, handshakes and photo-ops. Everybody (more or less) played along. There were sponsored squats for artists and a rubbing of shoulders with European jet-set elites – including the president’s wife, Dorritt Moussaieff and the baroness Francesca von Habsburg – a considerable portion of the young art scene in Reykjavík had in this way direct access to some of the most powerful people in the European art world. And the financial institutions – mainly Landsbanki Íslands – would throw petty alms at the starving

artists, who proved more than willing to prostitute themselves (including me and my friends) for what was in all honesty a mere pittance.

A colossal symbol of this situation is a series of commercials done for Landsbanki Íslands, where a large group of people are playing football – variously inside the bank or outside in a field. The ads read like a veritable “who’s who” of Icelandic arts, literature, culture and music. Everybody was involved in this scene. Even self-proclaimed revolutionary organisations, such as Nýhil (which I had a large part in founding and running), were for sale – on the premise that a) everybody else was doing it b) it’s good to get money to run this proverbially bankrupt industry and c) it’s not as if they control what we say, just ‘cause they give us money. All of which were illusions, it turned out. Some people did in fact refuse to participate (although not many), the little money we got did not help (we got overly zealous and almost literally went bankrupt; and it deprived us of much credibility) and whether or not they “controlled” what we said ... at least they were never openly criticised. They may not have bought our silence, but they did buy our friendship – or at least a sort of kindness.

Before the collapse only a constantly fading grey line separated what painter Tolli Morthens once called “two of humanity’s greatest interests”: The arts and the financial market.

After the collapse this situation has hardly been mentioned, let alone discussed to any serious degree – the artists in question variously denying involvement (even doing so overtly to foreign media), pointing to others as “having been worse” or trying to kill any mention of it by saying it only aimed at provoking bitterness and “blame-games”. As for the Icelandic liter-

ary scene, routinely when anything controversial is about to be discussed collectively, memories are invoked of “the great rift” of the early eighties, when the Writer’s Union split over some argument which nobody really remembers anymore – and thus everyone becomes convinced that, as the song goes, silence is golden (and everything else is not).

### Not there anymore: The Ground Beneath Our Feet

Immediately after the “hrun” (collapse) – followed by the “kreppa” (crisis) and the “kitchen utensil revolution” (named for the banging of pots and pans during the protests) – questions of an aesthetic nature started forcing themselves on unsuspecting artist circles. What does this mean for literature? For music? For the visual arts? What will be the response? For a few years before the collapse artists had been becoming increasingly political, although it was mostly in the realm of the environmental issues rather than economics or social justice – and it had less to do with their art and more to do with parallel activities (like playing concerts for nature, as opposed to writing songs against aluminum plants).

Critic Valur Gunnarsson probably echoed a common sentiment when he said that people would start paying more attention to “serious” art and (at least partially) turn their gaze away from inconsequential popular culture. Though not necessarily implicit in Valur’s words, I often found that this sentiment included a disdain for the experimental, avant-garde or plain “weirdo” arts – that which at times in history has been described as “degenerated” art, devoid of the socially improv-

ing agendas of either “beauty” or “message”. Before the collapse there might have been a sort of pointlessness, or self-obsession, habitual to the art scene, where artists ritually explored the possibilities and limits of art itself – repeatedly asking the same (important?) question: “Is this art?” And after the collapse you could feel an increase in the disdain for artist happenings such as cleaning an apartment or standing on a street corner for a week – a hatred for the pointlessness in art, which for some is the whole point of having arts, the true zen-like magic of art; that which separates it from the goal-orientation of everything else in the world. Why were these people getting paid, people asked, to fool around like idiots, often from the empty pockets of taxpayers – while the government was closing hospital wards and firing “actual” workers? And, like in any society of (relative) less-than-plenty, the artists themselves had to ask themselves these same questions: why were they getting paid, when people needed hospital beds?

Valur also predicted that the “outvasion” of Icelandic artists would come to a halt, like the “outvasion” of Icelandic businessmen; and that consequent generations would be more angry than their “cute” predecessors – “cute” being a derogatory term for musicians Björk, Sigur Rós, Amiina, múm and the like. This has not necessarily proven to be the case, although it’s hard to notice in the short run, but it seems young Icelandic musicians are still touring the world – and while there might not be a new Björk on the scene, that has hardly anything to do with the crisis. As for literature, Iceland is going to be the guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair this year, which means that international interest in Icelandic books is probably greater than ever before.

## Groupies cum revolutionaries

Interestingly enough, just as artists played groupies to the “outvasion”, they also had a grand presence in the “kitchen utensil revolution” – being both numerous among protesters and in the forefront of organising and rabble-rousing. Most self-respecting artists made sure they were seen on Austurvöllur-square, beating pots and pans – participating with various degrees of irony, from going “all in” and seemingly taking a sincere interest in an important cause, to somehow completely missing the point and taking a break from the tear-gas and mayhem with the masses to attend an exclusive champagne-party with the Baroness von Habsburg at a nearby theatre (which many did): celebrating the still-standing aristocracy while cursing the just-fallen aristocracy, and seemingly not experiencing it as a contradiction.

Living abroad I only attended one of these protests – on a quiet Sunday in early December when it seemed the revolutionary fire was going out. That day a group of younger boys climbed up on the balcony of parliament, where it had become tradition to hang protest banners, but this time the hooligans were in fact not protesters but a little-known rock band using the momentum to advertise their MySpace page. At another instance I heard of an Icelandic rapper, famous for his “revolutionary stance”, having his picture taken outside a siege at the Central Bank – before leaving to attend to more important business. There were a number of similar events, where artists tried to “use” the protests to enhance their public image, in a somewhat less than sincere manner.

The media having failed, in the opinion of most of the pro-

testers (and the people at large, I assume), an online webzine called *Nei*. ("No." – including the period), run by poet, novelist, philosopher and filmmaker Haukur Már Helgason (who coincidentally is my best friend), became the hub for both immediate (reliable) information about events as they unfolded as well as in-depth commentary and first-person accounts after-the-fact.

The main organizer of the protests on Austurvöllur, starting with only a handful of people shortly after the collapse, was old-timer Hörður Torfason – a troubadour and gay-rights campaigner who was most influential in the seventies and early eighties. Of the 47 speeches held at Austurvöllur from October 11, 2008, to January 31, 2009 – 22 were held by artists or people immediately connected to the arts, including writer Einar Már Guðmundsson and poet Gerður Kristný. At one point, famed writer Hallgrímur Helgason was seen banging his hands on the hood of the Prime Minister's car; "distorted with rage" claimed the media. After the "kitchen utensil revolution" at least two of the artists involved with the protests got elected to parliament, as members of the newly founded Borgarahreyfing (Citizen's Movement – soon after they split and the parliamentary faction was renamed Hreyfingin, The Movement) – poet Birgitta Jónsdóttir and novelist and filmmaker Þráinn Bertelsson. Besides the "bona fide" artists, a creative spirit was plentiful on Austurvöllur during the protests – noticeable on anything from slogans, signs, flags, dolls, clothing and the "instruments" themselves: anything that made a racket was suddenly both useful and beautiful.

## What is "Crisis"? What is "Book"?

Defining what literature counts as "crisis-literature" is not an easy task. To a certain extent (practically) all literature written during (or right after) the crisis is "crisis-literature" – and even a great deal of the literature written during the economic boom, before the crisis. Many books included the crisis, the collapse and/or the protests – simply adapted the storyline to the times. If the story happened in 2008–2009, there was no way of skipping it, although most of the books that included the crisis were not about it at all – they neither reflected it to any degree nor did they comment on it. Then there are books which don't mention the crisis at all, but somehow seem to allude to it constantly – this of course goes mostly for poetry books, which are more easily interpretable in all directions, and if you look for it you can probably find in them whatever you wish to find. Finally there was plenty of immediate work being published both online and on protest-signs at the time of the crisis – small bits, ranging from video cut-ups of speeches to remixing classics of modernist and pre-modernist Icelandic verse, fitting it to the political situation. Much of this was non-authored and none of it had a consistency justifying a specific treatment, other than of the whole thing as a social phenomena – it wasn't necessarily many poems, but one really big poem.

Excluding the non-fiction written about the crisis – like Einar Már Guðmundsson's *Hvíta bókin* ("The White Book") – the prose fiction which deals with the crisis does so, in a certain sense, peripherally. The novels are all essentially about something else – they stand right in front of the crisis and they turn

their gaze away. *Bankster* by Guðmundur Óskarsson, winner of the Icelandic Literature Prize 2010, is for instance first and foremost a story about being unemployed and falling into self-deprecation, self-pity and thus losing control of one's life. The protagonist is an employee in a bank which comes crashing down, and subsequently he loses his job. For the rest of the book he lounges about in a Raskolnikovian introversion, without the guilt – and while lounging about his life falls apart around him, his wife leaving him and so forth. At the same time the massive protests are going on, literally outside his house, but he hardly notices – and the one time he gets mixed up in them he flees the chaos back into his introverted world of spiritual exile.

Kári Tulinius' *Píslarvottar án hæfileika* ("Martyrs without talents") is about a group of young would-be revolutionaries, pre-crisis, who wish to start a terrorist cell. These are young people, with young problems – love, ideals etc – trying to find a footing in life. The first section ends in September, 2008, days before the collapse, when two of them go as volunteers to Palestine on a humanitarian aid mission. The second section starts in November, when the volunteers are back. Instead of throwing themselves into the revolutionary spirits of Austurvöllur, they (like the protagonist of *Bankster*) are thrown off track by a personal tragedy: namely the accidental (yet violent) death of one of the main characters in Palestine.

A third novel, *Vormenn Íslands* ("Iceland's Men of Spring") by Mikael Torfason, is about a former assistant to a financial viking who is reckoning his past – but instead of dealing with the years as an assistant to a financial viking, it jumps over it and mostly focuses on the protagonist's childhood. A

fourth, *Paradísarborgin* ("The Paradise City") by Óttar Martin Norðfjörð is a Saramagoan account, if a tad more sci-fi-ish and less style-orientated than the Portuguese Nobel laureate, about a fungus growing under Reykjavík which entices the minds of the people, like a shamanic drug. It does in some sense deal directly with the crisis but it does so with a metaphor which is perhaps too vague and too general in its presentation, and too conspicuous in its (solicited) interpretation – and the author did at some point stress that it in fact wasn't about the crisis.

*Allir litir regnbogans* ("All the Colours of the Rainbow") by Vignir Árnason is a strangely puerile self-published novel about an anarchist movement, which runs quickly through the kitchen utensil revolution into total (melodramatic) civil war between cops and revolutionaries. An interesting account, if rather callow, which never surpasses the expression of its teeth-grinding angst to provide anything resembling an idea.

Thus these authors, whose novels deal most directly with the crisis of all of the novels published in Iceland since the collapse,<sup>31</sup> avoid dealing with the actual events of Austurvöllur or the crisis itself, but circle it, or rather confront it and, having seen a glimpse of it, take a violent turn towards the personal and away from the general, the masses, the overtly political.

This may of course be interpreted in a symbolic sense, as

31 For obvious reasons I'm leaving out my own novel, *Gæska* ("Kindness", 2009). But suffices to say, it also leaves off moments after the economic collapse (which, having been written before the actual collapse, looks quite a bit different from real life) and resumes "a while later this same endless summer" – meaning that it too contains a gap where the actual "action" took place, and does not deal directly (unsymbolically) with the events of Austurvöllur or the crisis itself.

literature's utter defeat before the "actualities of life". In private correspondence poet and novelist Haukur Már Helgason confided in me that after editing *Nei*, he felt a much greater need to engage in text that directly affected the world – and perhaps this lack of "crisis" in the "crisis-literature" is mainly a symptom of another "crisis", namely the lack of agency in contemporary literature which for too long may have been busy picking at its own bellybutton and now knows not what to do.

### Cue the pre-cog

Bizarrely, the novel most tenaciously associated with the collapse was written before it happened and published shortly after the banks fell. *Konur* ("Women") by Steinar Bragi is symbolically foreboding – it tells of a young woman, Eva, returning to Iceland from living in the USA and her inhabiting a borrowed apartment of a wealthy friend. The apartment – showy, expensive and in bad nouveau riche taste – turns out to be (almost) alive, an entity of its own, and it starts sadistically manipulating Eva's life, pushing further and further until the end, when she literally gets sucked into the walls.

One of the major noticable symbols of the "plentiful years" in Reykjavik was the building of houses (mostly by Polish workers). Entire neighbourhoods were built without anyone to live in them; the rich tore down their mansions to build better mansions; higher income apartment buildings for the elderly were built, only to stand empty while the contractors built a lower income apartment building next to it, one that the elderly could "afford" to live in; a woman could not have a dog in

her apartment building, because she needed a signed approval from the inhabitants of the 20 other apartments in the house, all of which were empty. Loans for building were granted without fail and plots were distributed with much ease.

It should therefore be easily understood how *Konur* might be construed as a crisis-novel, where the newly-built house of nouveau riche plenty, owned by a "financial viking", turns on the inhabitant, starts torturing her before literally (and symbolically) devouring her. It is in all ways a novel written about the times pre-crisis and it successfully demonstrates the seeds of the city's, and the country's, self-destruction, through a kind of symbolic pre-cognition.

### Collective poetry

There's boatloads of poetry about the crisis. The immediate answer to the crisis was poetic, with countless and nameless online personalities sharing remixed versions of modernist classics (with metre and rhyme) – so you could literally sing the kitchen utensil revolution in real time, if you wanted to. Hallgrímur Helgason wrote a rap and performed on TV, several people made YouTube videos with cartoons or cut-up news footage – making poems from the bits and pieces surrounding them. Actor Hjalti Rögnvaldsson read political poetry at the protest events on Austurvöllur. During the kitchen utensil revolution the whole of Iceland somehow became (at least for some) a poetic dimension. Even that which wasn't poetry, was still somehow poetry.

In the months and seasons following the collapse this en-

ergy seems to have dissipated as it has not been extensively seen in the poetry books published, where the poets seem to have reverted back to the “contemplative” and away from the “immediate”. Most of the poems which deal with the crisis do so in a rather mundane manner (though by no means all of them) and many of the books supposedly about the crisis seem to be not at all about the crisis – but as if either the author or the publisher had decided the crisis was an easy sell. Crisis-stuff was in vogue, so everything was “somehow” and “symbolically” about the crisis.

### Selected poetry

There were two notable exceptions to this trend. *Gengismunur* (“Arbitrage”) by Jón Örn Loðmfjörð and *Ljóðveldið Ísland* (“The Poetic Republic of Iceland”) by Sindri Freysson; both very ambitious projects. The former is a computerized textual mashup of a nine-volume, 2,000 page report written by a parliamentary investigative committee on the events leading up to the collapse of the banking system (resulting in a 65 page long poem); and the latter is its own investigative report, of sorts, published before the actual report – a long poem (over 200 pages) divided into chapters for each year from the founding of the republic (1944) until the supposed bankruptcy of the republic (2009 – a few months after the collapse, when the government finally fell).

“The Poetic Republic” is as highly “creative” as “Arbitrage” is not. While “Arbitrage” deals with and represents the banality (and hilarity) of the language surrounding the crisis, the

politics and the market – as well as dealing a blow to more traditional poetry, “The Poetic Republic” is a flamboyant retelling of Icelandic 20th century history in a traditional postmodern ironic tone. Its vision or historical perspective is hardly new, but nor does it have to be. Its vision is probably correct (from a liberal, (moderate) leftist stand-point), however common it may be.

“The Poetic Republic” doesn’t dwell on any single events for more than a few lines, and thus it starts casually but increases in weight and speed until you feel you’re drowning in knowledge, memories, history and feeling; while “Arbitrage” reads like a malfunctioning economic robot – like a Burroughs adding machine for the 21st century – and hardly needs to be read at all, being first and foremost a conceptual work. One would probably benefit more from looking at it like one looks at a painting, rather than reading it from A to Z like a (traditional) poem.

These two poetry books deal with the crisis in an almost unthinkable dissimilar manner; and yet they somehow belong to each other, could be published in tête-bêche format as brother and sister, hand in hand, shoulder to shrugging shoulder; not having a solution, but somehow trying hard enough to get us an inch closer to “something”, whatever it is.

### A total uncontrollable shitstorm of metaphorising

A literary reaction worth mentioning is the constant metaphorising in public debate surrounding the crisis. Common phrases included “the financial thunderstorm” – the word for thunderstorm being used is “gjörmíngaveður”, a weather of

great “happenings” (same noun as used for performance art happenings); the national ship (a common euphemism for the economy of a fishing nation) was shipwrecked; the leaders of the country were the crew of a ship; the old government (which refused to resign) were arsonists in charge of putting out their own fire; the crisis was rough seas or a game of war (“hildarleikur”); the nation needed to “arm itself” (“vígbúast”); Iceland was “in flames”; a great “catastrophy” had hit the international financial market – there were earthquakes, tidalwaves and the markets were frozen; the infrastructure had collapsed (like a building); the people were sheep; the currency was in “free fall” (and subsequently either getting “stronger” or “weaker”); the wheels of the economic life (called “the job life” in Icelandic) needed to be kept in motion; the plentiful years had been a raucous orgy and the aftermath was the hangover, and somebody had to clean up after the party; unemployment was an infectious disease and so forth and so on.<sup>32</sup>

According to a media study conducted by Álfhildur E. Þorsteinsdóttir, in the week following the crash the most common categories of metaphor were “ocean and sailing”, “militaristic”, “fire and catastrophe” and “weather” – in this order. No one needs to be surprised that on a volcanic rock in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean people would resort to metaphors of fishing, fire or weather – but military? In a country whose traditional role in NATO is not having its own military but nodding yes to

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<sup>32</sup> Many of these examples are taken from Álfhildur E. Þorsteinsdóttir’s excellent analysis, *Kreppatal. Myndlíkingar í dagblöðum á krepputímum* (“Crisis-talk. Metaphors in Newspapers in Times of Crisis”). <http://skemman.is/handle/1946/3625> Last read August 29, 2010.

the American agenda (they had a base in Iceland until 2006). Iceland has neither had conscription nor a professional army, excluding the dozen or so “peace keepers” – who are more like our former foreign minister’s tin soldier collection than anything else. Militaristic metaphors were furthermore the second most common category after ocean and sailing metaphors.

This is the popular poem – poem of the people, for the people – the world democratically poesied; sometimes in extremely mundane and predictable manners and at other times divine, fresh like spring and/or mighty. It’s always there and we hardly ever notice it. But when an event occurs which sends the minds of a certain community seeking in the same direction, like the economic collapse in Iceland, all of a sudden the visibility of this collective metaphorical agenda increases many-fold and we’re presented with a massive linguistic project which can not be fully understood or interpreted outside the poetic dimension.

### Finnish lama vs. Icelandic kreppa

I’m told that in Finland, my adoptive country, which experienced its own total collapse in the early nineties (the “lama”), the crisis got relatively little attention in literature, if it was dealt with in words at all – the cliché, which undoubtedly is at least partly true, being that the Finnish people suffered in silence, making their (relative) poverty and social problems go away by not mentioning them. But of course there were certain social and economic effects which could not leave the literary scenes be. The bigger publishing companies, for instance,

started publishing less poetry – what with the lack of funds for this financially disastrous art form – eventually leading to the emergence of a scene of poetry collectives, self-publishing and small-publishing which still thrives today, two decades later. During the “lama”, and in the wake of it, there also seem to have been certain tendencies to “bring the poetry to the people” – a trend towards a popular realism in the vein of Charles Bukowski or Hal Sirowitz, rather than experimentation or political confrontation, which may have been left to what is termed “the new millenium generation” whose debut works have only been published in the last few years.

### Fighting over the paradigm

I think it is safe to say that the literary response to the crisis in Iceland has been both swift and markedly honest, even if it seems that the authors and poets don't have any particular answers to give. There is no new moral center, no serious deconstructive (or reconstructive) tendency, no reckoning with capitalism nor exacting analysis within the ‘belles lettres’ published as a reaction to the collapse. You could even imagine many of the authors mentioned here objecting to being construed as “reacting to the collapse”, as indeed in some respect they hardly deal with it at all (while simultaneously standing knee-deep in it).

The non-fiction about the crisis has mostly been fighting over the paradigm, constructing present-day history and bickering about the interpretation of events, the focus of discussion – ranging from confessions of aged, right wing, cold-war

newspaper editor Styrmir Gunnarsson, to megalomaniac (and disturbingly disassociated, in an *American Psycho* kind of way) accounts of financial viking Ármann Þorvaldsson during the economic boom, and the clear-cut anti-capitalist and metaphorically enraptured essays of Einar Már Guðmundsson.

### A healthy distrust

One of the immediate responses of the Icelandic critics – not to call it a “critical response”, as it was mostly presented in the form of commentary rather than an attempt at succinct analysis – was to question, belittle and even ridicule the attempts to portray or comment upon the crisis in fiction or poetry. This was of course not an across-the-board response – there were many exceptions amongst the critics, especially in more formulated essays, reviews and articles, which were by and large less irritable and more generous than were stray comments. But this one was, in my opinion, most obviously felt as a response to the phenomenon in total, as opposed to more generous critical responses to individual books or projects.

The argument mostly went that it was “too early” to write about the crisis; that the authors and poets were lacking the necessary “historical distance” to provide understanding (an argument surprisingly not present in the treatment of non-fiction books about the crisis). This attitude may be criticised for confusing the writing of history with the writing of fictional accounts, which are not subject to rules of “providing understanding” nor even historical accuracy, and as propagating an elitist attitude towards literature – i.e. that instead of see-

ing literature as a massive democratic project – which tries to approach (as opposed to provide) any understanding of our societies and “the human condition”; tries to approach an understanding inherently impossible in any perfect or even near-perfect sense – the author is portrayed as a demi-godly figure who steps down from Olympus to tell us what is what, in no uncertain terms (and yet perfect bull’s eye metaphors). If I may be so bold: This is of course nothing short of the 20th century fascist idea of the genius classes – the leaders of society.

But this is also evidence of an attitude of displeasure and dissatisfaction which has in general increased after the crisis – a (healthy) distrust of the amazingly populous army of self-proclaimed prophets and analysts who have bombarded the public scene (newspapers, radio and TV as well as the blogosphere, where they naturally enjoy a free reign) with their ideas and thoughts, sometimes perhaps provoking more confusion than anything else – and often one suspects that confusion (misinformation) is in fact the point, with great political and economic potential at stake. And this distrust does of course not limit itself to the non-fiction army of fiscal messiahs found online, but reaches the poets and authors as well.

It is nonetheless my opinion that this distrust would’ve been put to better use against the non-fiction books, most of which attempted to maintain (or re-attain) the status quo; to explain Iceland post-crisis in pre-crisis terms and thereby reinstating the old paradigm. Whereas I’ve found the belles lettres to be inspiring, thought-provoking and, though less assertive and less self-confident, better at providing new (and limber) views and senses of what happened in Iceland in the first decade of the millenium. Most of the non-fiction felt as if it were there to pro-

vide a dead-end explanation – a final stop for thought – while the novels felt like serious attempts at seeing something – no matter if they turned away, which also constitutes seeing something (not to mention saying something) – serious attempts to not constrict understanding or meaning with exceedingly easy explanations; and the poetry did what poetry does best, and approached the weird, stupid, cerebral and divine about the crisis – all at the same time.

### A call for immediacy

One of the myths or clichés about Icelanders goes that they are all kind of trawler-sailers – “the sort of people” who like to work like crazy and then lounge about sucking on beers and scratching their asses, that they are somehow simultaneously hard-working and lazy, and that they are willing to do a half-assed job if it means they get to go home early. Their natural habitat is thus the trawler-boat, where you fish for a month and rest for a week or two, your pockets lined with money.

Despite the exceedingly limited truth found in these mythological self-descriptions, the Icelandic “outvasion” was in fact deeply characterised by amateurism, lack of experience and a sense that “it was all gonna work itself out” – it was performed in the optimist spirit of the seasonal worker, the one who’s resourceful enough, strong enough, resilient enough, quick enough and daring enough not to need years of experience or time to mull things over. This may factor into the aforementioned critics’ response to the quick and sudden representation of the crisis, collapse and kitchen utensil revolution in Icelandic

literature – seeing it as arriving in the same spirit, being performed in less than perfect tune, with a similar attitude of “anything’s possible”, and thereby foreboding a similar (aesthetic) collapse. But a thriving literary society needs not only mulled-over concise accounts of metaphorical precision (if it needs those at all), but a sense of immediacy, a sense of belonging to and partaking in society as it is happening – lest it want to be relegated to the dimension of history-telling, fairytale-ism.

Notwithstanding the fact that it would be horrible to keep repeating the same books about the crisis (which is not unlikely, as literature has a tendency to reproduce in its own image), and notwithstanding the relative excellence of the work produced thus far, it would be a great tragedy, in my mind, if this attempt to portray the crisis, collapse and kitchen utensil revolution in poetry and fiction were to end here, if it were to be buried now with an inscription of a job well done – as the job, the collective experiment, is still very much in its infancy.

Originally appeared in Polish in the book *Kulturalne oblicza Islandii* (Krytyka Polityczna, 2010), and subsequently published as a feature in the bi-weekly *Reykjavík Grapevine* (2011).

## THE GRAPEVINE COLUMNS

The following texts were all originally published in the English-language magazine *The Reykjavík Grapevine*. They are presented chronologically, with the exception of the first column, which isn’t presented at all—as it was really no more than a shortened version of the story about Æri-Tobbi, which can be found in the essay “Mind the Sound” on page 42.

## Icelandic art makes me feel nothing at all

They tell me that Iceland, and in particular Reykjavík, is too small an environment to foster a critical arts debate, since the feeling of being able to speak freely is a luxury given only through a certain remove, a certain distance which is not to be found in the Icelandic arts world (and moving abroad, I assure you, doesn't help much – unless you decide never to return). Sooner or later you're gonna share a table at a bar with the artist in question, and although the situation is more likely to turn out to be less violent and more strained, repressed and weird, it's still uncomfortable and religiously avoided by almost anyone that engages in criticism in Iceland.

And thus literary reviews have become a minimalist art form where the reader is more or less left to interpret what the reviewer thought of the book in question – leaving the option open whether he or she had any thoughts about it whatsoever. All poetry is so-and-so – and the few truly lauded seem to be lauded mostly for being old men that have begun to believe their own hype writing new books as if they were word for word imitations of their own best-of collections.

Icelandic art seems to be “mostly ok” and the spectrum of quality for Icelandic movies spans three-and-a-half to four stars – while the spectrum for music is a tad wider, it still shares the same sort of mentality: An utter fright of any concrete opinion.

Being “cruel” – or “open” or “honest” or whatyouwannacallit – is not going to get you any friends and we all know that without friends you're basically worthless. Dale Carnegie calls

it “How to win friends and influence people” because the two tend to go together. And besides, you should do the work justice, judge it on its own merits. Does it achieve what it sets out to do? And by all means, ask not whether what it sets out to do makes any sense, if it's any fun or has any merit. Speak carefully, for you may later prove to have been (historically) wrong. As if discussing arts was a matter of being right or wrong.

Now let me state: Being objective doesn't bereave you of your right to an opinion – being objective doesn't preclude you from being subjective as well – and commenting on plausible/possible faults in a piece of work doesn't mean you hate the artist and all his kin. It doesn't even mean you hate the work in question. And yes, you're allowed to misread and misinterpret – just don't be cowardly. If you're not willing to risk misreading you're probably not reading at all.

Arts differ from, let's say, engineering. If you miscalculate the structure of a bridge it might crumble – and it means you were probably wrong. A book? A play? A film? The bridge of a song? – while it need not sit well with the artist you're still entitled to an opinion. And the artist, the artist's friends, the artist's mother, fans, other critics and culture enthusiasts are entitled to have opinions about your opinions – it doesn't mean you're wrong and they're right. It doesn't even mean you're right and they're wrong. It means that to some degree you disagree.

It's called a discussion, relax, get over it.

## Hay-grinder of the greenpeace-kitten earth-channels of the desert-asphalt sugar- free beach-found transparent salt-Coke

When modernism in poetry shocked its way through Europe in the beginning of the last century, people's main concern was how the hell to understand it. The modernists would often build image upon image in ways many readers found antagonizing – like oh so much posturing, it was made new rather than simple, the emphasis being on visual (mostly metaphorical) complexity as the number one tool of the trade. “The tower like a one-eyed great goose / cranes up out of the olive grove,” to quote Pound (Canto II).

When, eventually and long last, modernism reached Iceland in the mid-fifties understandability wasn't anybody's main concern, but lack of rhyme, alliteration – that is to say, traditionality, singalongevity and rememberability. People asked, how am I supposed to remember this drivel if it doesn't drive on alliteration? Where is the song in irregular metre? Why are you disregarding the Icelandic heritage?

As interesting as these questions are, I'll leave them be for now, and ask instead (I already have an answer, it may be right, it may be crazy, but it just might be a lunatic we're ... wait a minute ...): why didn't the readers criticize the difficult visuals of the poetry? Why weren't they pissed of at Steinn Steinarr's “Sun-winged circle-waters / equipped with hollow-mirrors / of four-dimensional dreams”? (“The Time and the Water”).

The answer is to be found in the crossword-puzzly nature of ye olde Icelandic metaphors: The kennings of skaldic poetry. A

kenning (I'm copypasting from Wikipedia) is a circumlocution used instead of an ordinary noun [...] For example [you] might replace *sverð*, the regular word for “sword”, with a compound such as *ben-grefill* “wound-hoe”.

Kennings can be rather complicated, and Icelanders not having anything simpler to be proud of (this is way before the rise and fall of Mercedes Club), had to make do with being proud of ye olde Icelandic poetry (and ye olde Icelandic Sagas, *bien sûr*). Which meant at least reading it, and perhaps occasionally, with some luck and a scholarly background, understanding bits of it.

But, you ask, enraged: what's so difficult about a metaphor? You don't need to have a doctorate in literature to get that “wound-hoe” might mean sword?

Well, no, I answer, blushing yet happy to have this opportunity to expound: Wound-hoe ain't that hard – but I'm a fairly literary person, and I had to look up both *ben* and *grefill*. I've heard the latter, and I might've guessed correctly (we'll never know), but that doesn't make it part of my active vocabulary, snoozing on the outskirts of my passive vocabulary. And *ben*? I thought that was Michael Jackson's rat (the two of us need look no more!) .

But wait! It still gets more complicated. You can replace one part of the metaphor with another metaphor. That is to say, instead of just simply saying “ship of the desert” (camel), you can replace either ship or desert with yet another metaphor, making, for example “sea-steed of the desert”. “Steed of whale roads of the sand-sea” or “Hay-grinder of the greenpeace-kitten earth-channels of the desert-asphalt sugar-free beach-found transparent salt-Coke.”

And all it “really” means is camel, in a more fun and interesting way. According to Snorri Sturluson, you can have up to six metaphors in a kenning, and although more are to be found in some poetry, they’re considered useless (Snorri is too dead for us to ask why). Add to this allusions to nordic mythology, the gods etc. – Sif’s hair is gold, for example – and other particulars which you can’t really know without being well versed and read in this particular form, most of it’s completely unreadable to a layman reader, and even a scholar must delve into it to solve these puzzlified mysteries. A lot of it’s actually easier for me to understand in english translation, having been modernized and interpreted, than it is in the original – although I was taught in elementary school, that I could read it, and made to read it in high school (with thorough notes explaining every step, and it still was hard to get).

Oh, and yes, the word order could be totally messed up as well, making the piecing-together of base-word and determinants quite a challenge.

So when modernism finally, finally (hurrah! hurrah!) made it to Iceland, it’s no surprise that the people, so used to reading poetry they couldn’t understand, didn’t really react much to it being difficult. Because when it comes to being hard to decipher, Ezra Pound and Steinn Steinarr can’t hold a candle to Snorri Sturluson.

## Warning: You don’t need poetry

Anyone that receives a rudimentary education in the western world, or at least in the places I know anything about, is taught that poetry is like vitamins – it’s good for you. It’ll enlighten your mind, make you more aware of your emotions, your sensibilities, the entire scope of your inner life. It is the “highest of art forms” – so sublime that it can hardly be viewed with human eyes, read with human brains. It’s extremely difficult to understand and just to grasp the littlest bits of it requires a life-long commitment.

While none of this is necessarily untrue, the same argument could as easily be applied to rock’n’roll, to movies – to the whole boatload of “popular culture” that we (as a society) simultaneously love and loathe. Many of the so-called simple songs of the Eurovision Song Contest are in fact complex constructions that meld super-produced pop-genres with ethnic music, the history of which reaches thousands of years into the past of the participating countries. And yet you’ll never hear anyone say they didn’t quite “understand” the Armenian song – that its use of musical intricacies simply left you baffled. Very few people ask of pop-music that it should be more simple, or that movies should not have so many jump-cuts, should not be shot from weird angles or with unnatural camera movements. Quite the contrary, we’ve completely embraced all of popular-culture’s complexities, so much so that they’ve become utterly mundane – we don’t even notice them without a conscious effort to do so.

And yet, when it comes to literature in general, and poetry

in particular, most people's first reaction is to not "understand" it – giving up before you've tried is the name of the game – no matter how often poets and writers try to emphasize that you are in fact not meant to "understand" it. This is one of the problems of making art with and through language, a medium we first and foremost see as a vehicle for information – it's what we use to communicate our thoughts. It's how I tell you that I'm hungry, how you give me directions, and so forth. But poetry doesn't work like that. Ludwig Wittgenstein (a practitioner of that other "difficult" art: philosophy) once said: "Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information."

This misunderstanding is also why so many poems of poets that don't read much poetry have more to do with anecdote or lineated prose, than they have to do with poetry – I feel like this [insert metaphor-cliché] and then I feel like that [insert metaphor-cliché] – and even more experienced poets often don't seem able (or willing) to ever stray from the realm of the metaphor, the most basic of poetic tools (metaphor is to poetry, as 4/4 is to rock'n'roll).

In this manner a lot of the poetry that people find "difficult", can seem very simple ditties to anyone that spends time reading it. Juxtapositioning one pretty image with the next, jumping between the lilies of the ponds – it's not rocket science, and it's not cross-word puzzles (i.e. you're NOT supposed to "solve" it – it doesn't "mean", it is "mean"). It's "Layla", "A Hard Day's Night" – but it's also *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier*, Atari Teenage Riot, African tribal music and "Mack the Knife". You can have your pick of the litter.

Imagine for a minute that your experience of poetry was the same as your experience with music, that it was everywhere – that there was no way of escaping it. Literacy of poetry, like literacy of pop-music, movies etc. is an acquired skill and "complex" is a very relative term. It's of note that the more anyone listens to music the more complex their taste becomes, the less anyone listens to music, the more mainstream their taste. The same goes for poetry.

The bottomline is this: Poetry is not vitamins, and you're not going to shrivel up and die if you don't get regular doses of it. It's not (necessarily) any more difficult than pop-music. And you don't need it. You can, I'm sure, live a very decent life without it. I've seen it done. And although you'll miss out on the fun, that never killed anyone.

## Two thousand krónur's worth of freedom

Your language is somebody else's property. Not only does it get dealt with in grammar books, by officials making official rules for how things can and cannot be – but everytime anybody gets a good idea for a phrasing, a metaphor, a pun or a pickup line sooner than later someone is going to use that piece of (your?) language to sell you something – deodorant, cars, bras, müsli, politics, sneakers.

In the early seventies Gil Scott-Heron told us that the revolution would not be televised – meaning that it will belong to the masses and not the mass media. It will not be watched, you can't subscribe to it – everyone will participate. In the nineties hip-hop artist and self-proclaimed radical KRS One rephrased it for Nike – The revolution is basketball, and basketball is the truth and thus the revolution was televised.

In Iceland the name for cellphone credit is “frelsi”. Freedom. You literally enter a store and ask for “Two thousand krónur's worth of freedom”. This is the fruit of a succesful marketing campaign. In the UK people “hoover” their carpets – Hoover being a manufacturer of the machines that suck carpets. All over the world people “xerox” documents. Xerox being a manufacturer of those document-copier thingies.

Of course people buying cellphone credit know they are not getting actual freedom for their money. For one thing the people have long ago been told they already are free, and they do not believe themselves to be encaged. And yet they keep saying it. Sneaking it past the gates of their subconscious – two thousand krónur's worth of freedom – repeating the advertise-

ment to themselves, to the clerks, to the people behind them, to their friends and family. Until everybody's saying it. And you realize you're running out of freedom and need to go get some more.

Language is not where we perform our thought. Language is merely the tool we use to categorize it and “control” it. Gaining control over language is the closest anyone can come to actually controlling thought. Think of prayer. Think of slogans. Think repetitive pop lyrics (If you seek Amy). Think of all the banal sentences you hear and say every day for all of your life – meaning close to nothing. Think of your predetermined route through grammatical structures – the paths you take to form your thought.

This is where poetry comes in. If it has any role in the world, any function that I'd allow myself to describe as holy, it's to regain language, to strike down banal structures with furious anger, to reveal the thievery that's taken place – to steal back what I feel belongs to me (or, in your case, you). To not gain control over language, but to relinquish control and liberate language. Sometimes that means making it weird. Making it difficult. Making it damn near illegible.

The point is simply to squirm and dance, kick and struggle, hug and cuddle – the more righter it feels the more gooder it is.

## Poetry—to the death!

As I may have mentioned before, poetry was (in Iceland) once considered a gift from God, the misuse of which could result in the loss of said gift. Thus 17th century poet Æri-Tobbi had his gift taken away for giving false directions (in verse) to a group of tourists (all of whom died as a result). But there's a heathen tone to the culture of poetry as well: it was seen as partly (if not wholly) magical & witchcrafty. A decent poet could "poetry" the evil out of things – poetry as exorcism, if you will – or s/he could "poetry" a pretty girl/guy into bed (evidently, this part of the gift was later bequeathed to rock'n'roll). Poetry was utterly sorcerous.

Poets would also duel with their poetry – one throwing forth a "first-part" (first two lines) of a quatrain while the other would do the "bottom" (last two lines) with correct rhyme, rhythm and alliteration. You won when your opponent could not do a bottom you yourself could do. But if your opponent gave up, and you could not do it either – you lost. Thus it was mostly a game of finding hard rhymes that you could deal with – but your opponent could not.

The most famous duel of all was that between Kolbeinn Jöklaskáld (another 17th century poet) and the Devil himself. Kolbeinn poetryed the devil back to hell by rhyming the word 'tungl' (moon) – our 'orange' (unrhymable word) – with 'ungl' or 'úln': a variation on the word for 'wrist' – this is all highly dubious, not really words and not even really rhymes, but the devil always being one to promote the avant-garde, readily agreed and cleared off to hell.

Hallgrímur Pétursson, yet another 17th century poet and

priest, was adept at getting into trouble with his poetry. Having been thrown out of school for poetrying all sorts of nasty things about his headmaster, he headed off to Denmark to continue his studies. In Copenhagen he met an older Icelandic woman, Guðríður Símonardóttir, who'd just escaped slavery in Algeria. Hallgrímur (undoubtedly) used his gift to poetry the woman – and subsequently had to leave the school and return to Iceland on account of their fornication (which lead to pregnancy and marriage).

Back in Iceland Hallgrímur eventually got ordained as a priest, but his mischievous nature did not subside. He was soon having trouble with a nasty fox who kept killing his sheep. One day, while in the pulpit, his eye caught a glimpse of his furry nemesis and he immediately proceeded to poetry it away with all his might. Hallgrímur was a modest man and did not realize his own poetry's strength – and the fox literally sank into the ground and was never seen again (I'm not making this up!).

God, being fed up with Hallgrímur's antics, and quite frankly enraged at him for poetrying secular matters from the pulpit, dried up all the poet's poetry. Hallgrímur did not get the gift back until he started his 25 thousand word anti-semitic rant, *The Psalms of Passion* (1656–1659), which counts among Icelandic Christianity's literary classics, having been published over 80 times (in a country currently of 320 thousand people) – more often than any other book.

For having written *The Psalms of Passion*, Hallgrímur Pétursson counts as one of the most respected poets in the history of Icelandic literature – he's up there with Snorri Sturluson and Jónas Hallgrímsson.

He eventually caught leprosy and died.

## Award this!

A few years ago the Icelandic poetry world was rocked by a tectonic scandal that nobody noticed for weeks (and by now, everyone's forgotten about). The country's most prestigious poetry award, Ljóðstafur Jóns úr Vör, was given to the wrong poet. A young man from one of Reykjavík's neighbouring towns was called up and told that he had been chosen by a panel of experts – that his poem had been handpicked as the best of the lot. He could now bask in the glory of literary prestige, he who had not even published a book – nor even a single poem, anywhere – he was the king of the crop, top of the pops, best of the land, tonk of the lawn.

This young poet laureate to-be came to the award ceremony with his family. He sat through speeches, music and recitals – and eventually the panel judge came up on stage to present the award. His poem was read and he turned white as the driven snow. This was not what he had written. Not one of the dozen or so poems he'd submitted. Traumatized he went up on stage anyway, not knowing what else to do. He was there, his grandmother was probably watching with tears in her eyes. You don't let your grandmother down if you can help it.

The ceremony drew to a close and the cocktail after-party started. With a drink in him (or so) the young poet approached the panel judge and admitted the truth. He had never even heard the award-winning poem – let alone written it. There had been some misunderstanding.

A cloud of bureaucrats dispersed in a whiff of smoke – back to the filing cabinets, the calculators, and where did I put my

Excel? The mistake was quickly corrected – the young poet had submitted his poetry under the same pseudonym as another (experienced, well-known and respected) poet. The older poet was called in immediately and the prize quickly transferred to him.

But not even in the land of the Eddic and Skaldic poetry does the mainstream care very much about poetry or its awards. Not a single reporter was on site to tell about “the most prestigious poetry award in the country”. And so the story traversed the grapevine (not the paper you're holding) for weeks and months before reaching the disinterested ears of a journalist – whose ears swashed and buckled forthrightly, catching the news and pasting it frontpage.

This disinterest has not plagued all poetry awards. A few years back, around the time of the aforementioned scandal, I founded and organized the “Icelandic Championship in Awful Poetry”. As all good things it was born in the blogosphere and quickly grew out of proportion. The media can always be trusted to reinforce your idea of reality. Poetry is boring, therefore we don't cover it, but awful-poetry is funny (and reinforces the idea of poetry being awful to begin with) and therefore we cover it. The week before the announcement of the prize, *Morgunblaðið* (Iceland's biggest newspaper) ran three interestingly bad poems at a time, with comments from the panel of judges, and the top three prizes were handed out on prime-time TV's Kastljós.

(I'm btw not entirely sure the media was completely wrong, since the best awful poems were indeed much more interesting than a lot of the award-orientated drivel being published these days).

I will leave you with the last verse of the victorious poem by Eyrún Edda Hjörleifsdóttir (in my own translation):

A pile of ringworms eddies in a bath of remoulade  
– mine and the Choco-beast's,  
a single unblossomed and trembling late-summer  
night in May.  
My toenail splits and bleeds, the road up the way  
and the hour of my most yellow band-aid has sunk  
in a pool of pus.

## Poetics Anonymous

I became a poet for more or less the same reason everybody else did: I'm lazy and I wanted to sleep late. That was the job description. You get to sleep late, drink late and most people won't ever find out you're stupid because what you do is beyond comprehension anyway – your roots are in some ephemeral world on the other side of everything and poetry's not supposed to be understood anymore than flowers (that's why so many poems are about flowers – flowers rarely return the favour).

I'd read books about poets. They were absent-minded and sentimental – check. They liked drinking and smoking – check. They read a lot of books but in schools they were flunkies – check. They loved nothing more than lounging about – I remember hearing the Icelandic poet Sjón (I think it was him) say that 90% of a poet's job consisted of sitting at cafés talking about shit. Double-check.

It all seemed so easy. You don't need any formal education and nobody can say (without a doubt) that what you do sucks. It's all a matter of taste, and anyways, most poetry doesn't even get noticed, let alone deemed good or bad. And poems are short. It takes years to write a novel. You can write a 60 page poetry book in a decent afternoon. At some point I, and my friend (and poet) Steinar Bragi, calculated that we could technically write 10,000 poetry books in one year. Most of which would be better than most of what we were reading.

And in some years, if you're lucky, you get a government stipendium and get sent to exotic countries to read onstage and

lounge about with like-minded (lazy) individuals and being admired by people who wish they were as good at being lazy as you are.

If you're a loser, a drunkard, if you're mean to people – it's all a part of the game. Poets are supposed to be alcoholic, rude and emotional, self-centred (wo)menizers – people love it! It means they are really gifted, they've seen the depths of hell and are reporting back (to offer up one cliché on the matter).

I've been a (serious) poet now, with intermittent jobs, for about a decade. And let me tell you, it's not all it's cracked up to be. I used to be a slacker. (Wo)Man, I was king of the slackers. I could hardly be bothered to keep up with a conversation, let alone participate in one. But times have changed. I haven't had three consecutive days without working in years. My day starts at eight in the morning and sometimes stretches past midnight. You know that time just before you fall asleep and all the weirdest thoughts in the world seem to crowd your mind? Well, that's the most important time of the day for a poet. One has to keep vigil. Stay concentrated. And woe to him who falls asleep, for he will lose. (What he loses is not certain, but he loses nonetheless). And still you have to get up at eight because there's stuff to be done, deadlines to be met.

In two and a half months I'm gonna start my paternity leave, and I'm scared shitless. In ten years I've managed to go from aspiring sentimental loser to neurotic workaholic. I'm not worried about having nothing to do – babies are work, so much I do know. But I don't know what'll happen if I leave poetry alone for three whole months. Will it wither and die without me? Will I start writing in secret? Locking myself in the bathroom to scribble a hurried poem? Will the authorities

find out and punish me (I'm not supposed to be working while receiving government money).

Babies are inspiring. They will not be ignored. They induce sleeplessness, which induces creativity. I'm headed for disaster. In short, I'm not sure if I know anymore what to do with myself, if I'm not working.

Besides, whatever happened to becoming a loser? That was a fine and noble plan. Had I been lounging about for the last 10 years, perhaps I'd feel totally rested and relaxed and ready to face the challenge of getting up in the middle of the night to change diapers. Or perhaps I'd be totally out of shape, with cirrhosis of the liver, still mopping floors for a living, whining about never getting anything done.

And despite all the neurotic worrying, I'm as psyched as the next guy about becoming a dad. It'll be peaches and blueberries, all day long, until he becomes a teenager (at which point I'm sending him to military school).

## The word is a virus

Imagine a poem so robust and resourceful that it could survive humanity. Imagine that the Americans finally go completely bonkers and rip the globe apart with liberational glee, the nuclear dust finally settles and all that's left of mankind is poetry. The mark of craftsmanship has always been durability. A good cabinet has a couple of hundred years in it. A decent car will carry you for ten to fifteen years. The best laptops have at least six crash-free months in 'em. The Eddas are as good now as they were a thousand years ago. But a poem that'll outlive humanity?

Enter: The Xenotext Experiment, a "literary exercise that explores the aesthetic potential of genetics in the modern milieu" in the words of its author, multi-maniac, mad scientist and poetic mastermind, Christian Bök (né "Book" – The Christian Book, get it?). And Mr. Bök has all the God-complexes you'd expect from a savant named after the good Book: not satisfied with simply producing dead poetry for the page Christian Bök has decided to make his poetry come alive. Literally.

"I propose to encode a short verse into a sequence of DNA in order to implant it into a bacterium," says the biblical scribe / poem-god in an essay on the matter. The plan is that the text be composed in such a way that, when translated into a gene and then integrated into the cell, the text will be "expressed" by the organism, "which, in response to this grafted, genetic sequence, begins to manufacture a viable, benign protein – a protein that, according to the original, chemical alphabet, is itself another text".

The bacterium will not only store a poem – it's not only a living poem – it's also supposed to create its own poetry, elevating Christian from mere poem-god to poet-god: creator and programmer of poets (what sort of poetry Christian's future army of bacteria-poets will write, no one knows – perhaps they'll make their own bacteria. Perhaps they'll be rhyming neo-formalists).

Freaked out already? Until recently chances of Christian actually doing this were slim. Not because it was theoretically impossible – quite the contrary, similar things have already been done (the cybernetic expert Pak Wong partially stored the lyrics to Disney's "It's a Small World" as a strand of DNA inside a bacterium) and Christian has already proved his capability for writing creatively within severe constraints (each chapter of his book, *Eunoia*, contains only one of the vowels). But science doesn't come cheap. I don't think anyone actually expected Christian to ever get the money needed – including the poet-god to-be himself.

A couple of months ago, the grants came through. Christian Bök now only waits for his sabbatical from the University of Calgary to start.

It's officially time to start freaking out.

## Killing yourself with poetry

‘Twas the eve of Nýhils 2nd International Poetry Festival, late autumn 2006. I was the manager for the second year in a row. For some reason I can’t remember we didn’t have any microphones. The Norwegian poet, Gunnar Wærness, had misunderstood his flight-information and missed his flight. The Swedish poets Anna Hallberg and Jörgen Gassilewski would be arriving late from Copenhagen – just before going onstage – and they’d be accompanied by their one month old son, Bruno. A storm was ripping through Europe and the Canadian poet Christian Bök was stuck at the international airport in Frankfurt, waiting it out. We were an hour from opening the doors.

Two hours earlier my neighbour in Ísafjörður had rung me up to inform me that when I left the town ten days earlier I’d forgotten to close the big skylight window over my bed. It had now been storming for three days straight in the Westfjords and as my bed filled with melting snow water had started to drip down into my neighbours apartment.

The week prior to this I’d made some rather harsh remarks on the radio about a member of the Liberal Party who’d written a fiercely racist article in the newspaper, titled “Iceland for Icelanders?“. As I was standing there, waiting for microphones and foreign poets and a message from my sister who’d gone to check out my wet apartment, the phone rang.

“Hello?“ I said, trembling and sweating. “Is this the guy that was on the radio?“ a husky voice asked me. I admitted that I was indeed I. The voice on the phone threatened to kill me. I don’t remember exactly what he said, but I remember he spoke in a

“we” – as in “we will kill you” and not “I will kill you”.

My apartment turned out to be wet but not destroyed. The foreign poets all showed up and got on stage on time and I haven’t yet been assassinated by some anonymous group of Icelandic racists. But it’s probably the closest I’ve come to having a complete and utter mental breakdown (and I’ve come pretty close). And still, the two years I arranged the Nýhil International Poetry Festival were some of the best times I’ve had in my life. Neurotic, beer-marinated madness on a shoe-string-budget, to get some of the world’s best poets to perform in a country where (almost) nobody had ever heard of them. But as it was all rather nerve-wrecking and I myself, being rather susceptible to such fear and trembling, I decided to let other people have a go at helming the madness.

This’ll be the first year though, that I don’t get to attend. In a week’s time (the weekend of 21st to 23rd of August) the festival will once again be realized in Reykjavík. Be on the lookout for a bugger-eyed, sweating lunatic in the crowd. That’s the person responsible for the whole kit and kaboodle. Be nice to them. Give ‘em a hug and a pat on the back. Thank them for their work. The Nýhil International Poetry Festival is no mean feat nor easy task.

## Longest Poem in the World (dot com)

Three hundred and fifty thousand seven hundred and fourteen verses. Twenty lines per verse, and every line rhymes with the following one.

That's how long Andrei Gheorghe's poem is. It's almost four times longer than the *Mahabharata* of ancient India. Forty times longer than *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* combined and twenty times longer than Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It's (appropriately) called "The Longest Poem in the World" and it's composed by aggregating real-time public twitter updates and selecting those that rhyme. Every day the poem grows longer by about 4000 verses. Some of it sounds inane ("Playing hide and seek at the park. :) / Waiting on Heather and Mark!") A lot of it sounds funny ("im hoping that its easy and i can finish it quickly / They made porcupine love, so stiff and stuck and prickly" and "Had a great gala evening and won lots of prizes / And also simulating penis sizes"). But most of it's actually fantastically mundane. Boring. Stupid. People waiting for their favorite TV show to start. People twittering about God during the sermon. People announcing their hangovers like victories. People regurgitating sayings and Oscar Wilde quotes.

Gheorghe has called it a collective consciousness. And in effect it is – it brews an essence of human thought and if you read it for too long you'll be moved. You'll get angry. You'll feel every ounce of wasted life like somebody was yanking your hemorrhoids with a tire-iron. But perhaps this is humanity. Perhaps this is the essence of our being, making "The Longest Poem in the World" one of the most relevant pieces of art

around. One that mirrors (a part of) reality in a one to one correlation. One that, if read in it's entirety, would annihilate the little that may still be left of our souls and leave us completely aware of the emptiness that envelopes our lives. The poem consists of what hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of people deemed most worthy to communicate to the world and/or their friends at a given moment (in real-time). And it rhymes. Which somehow accentuates the inherent nihilism of this deranged and disturbing poem.

I don't blame Twitter. The results would probably have been the same (or worse) if the material had been small-talk. In person. Offline. And I'm not sure my own statuses and/or small-talk would've been any more interesting. Yet perhaps the sensation it evokes is false – not based in the reality it stems from. Perhaps the world is not as empty and meaningless as "The Longest Poem in the World" makes it seem. Perhaps these lines of poetry – these bits of small-talk – are beautiful and filled with meaning, when experienced in their natural habitat.

The soldiers in Homer's *Odyssey* were never turned into swines. Not really, I mean. We suspend disbelief and allow Homer to take us there, and so the soldiers indeed turn into swines. Gheorghe has in some way (perhaps) turned an innocent humanity into swines, and just maybe that does not detract an ounce of worth from the poem itself (at least if we allow for the artistry of Gheorghe's poem to be purely conceptual – as formally it's mostly horrendous). This non-relation to reality might also make it the perfect representative for reality, in Georgia O'Keefe's words:

"Nothing is less real than realism. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis that we get at the real meaning

of things.”

And so regretfully I must admit that (once again!) I can not yet say whether or not there is meaning in the world.

Oh, the nihilism!

"The Longest Poem in the World" can be found  
at [www.longestpoemintheworld.com](http://www.longestpoemintheworld.com)

## Babe, come onto me

Lo, the oogly woogly wiggly toes of my puffinous  
pinkster!

Lo, the perpetual whirlpool of his gung ho rainbows!

Lo, the sabre-dancing jiggifunk of his eyeyeyeyeyes!

Behold his umpteen-breasted olympic warrior,  
mother-of-it-all, and recognize!

Lo, his oceanaut stereo-grip on the world,  
udderly unparalleled!

Lo, his unfathomable floods – Earth never saw  
floating like this!

Lo, his beautiful cutity, his cutiful beauty and all the  
King's men bowing!

Behold his umpteen-breasted olympic warrior,  
mother-of-it-all, and recognize!

Lo, all the frazzled futures, eating legal tender and  
excreting wisdom!

Lo, all the curly horizons and lock up your plutocrats,  
deadbolt the deadbeats!

Lo, all the puppyfied fates, don't be sucky, and dodge  
thus his kitty-whiskers!

Behold his umpteen-breasted olympic warrior,  
mother-of-it-all, and recognize!

Lo, his fuzzy snout, groggy inspectors and bitty  
digits of itty-bits!

Lo, his babbling baby fish mouth suckling – RE-LO,  
his fantastic suckling!  
Lo, his turtly feet, feetly turtles, turtly ottles, inkly  
puddles!  
Behold his umpteen-breasted olympic warrior,  
mother-of-it-all, and recognize!

At 9.56 AM Wednesday, 02.09.2009,  
the columnist/poet had a baby and went bonkers.

## Speaking like a God

They say human beings use language to make sense of their surroundings. We frame, categorize and systematize the objects around us with the help of nouns and verbs and adjectives. The sky is blue. The horse gallops swiftly. The sentence is a ridiculous rhetorical filler. We do this to understand each other, to convey information, give orders, ask for favours. To some, thought is practically unthinkable (!) without language. If there is no word for mother, then there is no mother – or, at the very least, no mother to speak of.

And yet when we've finally managed to raise and strengthen these structures enough to have some sort of conversation, we start picking them apart. We join the boy-scouts to sing gibberish like Ging Gang Goolie; we giggle at Smurf-books with debates about whether an object should be called "a smurf-opener" or a "bottle-smurfer"; we can't be bothered with films in (real) languages we don't understand, but who can withstand the charm of a Klingon conversation?; we play computer games in simlish; listen to music in hopelandic<sup>33</sup> and scat; devise made-up languages of our own – pig latin, rhyme-slang, arpy-darpy – to cloak our darkest secrets from our parents and/or the police.

There are many theories about divine languages – spoken by God, angels, Adam and Eve, languages of pure universal harmony. Some pentacostal Christians speak in tongues – "glos-

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33 A made-up language that Icelandic band Sigur Rós has devised and written lyrics in.

solalia”, as it’s called – which is believed to be a holy language, perhaps from Eden and perhaps from Heaven itself. These people fall into some sort of trance and start speaking something which resembles a language, and indeed has linguistic structures, although the sounds usually originate from the speaker’s native tongue. These divine languages sound mostly like gibberish – like complicated pig-latin or simplified Klingon, like very basic sound-poetry – at least to the uninitiated. Religious zealots from the glossolalian’s particular sect would, of course, be more likely to sense “the presence of God” than the presence of, let’s say, hopelandic.

In the 13th century the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, had his servant experiment on newborns to see if, undisturbed by human languages, the infants would eventually start speaking in the language of God (presumed to be Hebrew, Latin, Arabic or Greek). The infants were completely isolated from hearing any language. They never spoke – they died for they could not live without “the gladness of countenance”.

Jacob Grimm, of the famous Brothers Grimm, theorized that if God speaks any language involving dental consonants, He must have teeth, and since teeth are made for eating and not for speaking, He must not only be a talker but also an eater – which, as the dutch philosopher Frits Staal put it (according to Wikipedia): “leads to so many other undesirable assumptions that we better abandon the idea altogether”. We can only assume that Staal means He might speak with His mouth full.

Poetry, as everyone knows, is full of gibberish. Not only are poets often deliberately labyrinthine as well as voracious neologists and portmanteurs – making up new words with varying degrees of sanity – but some of them actually attempt to write

pure nonsense, utterly bereft of any sense. The Russian Futurists wrote poems in a language they called Zaum, a transrational language to awaken the creative imagination from its drowsy everyday existence. The Dada-poets had Hugo Ball’s “Karawane” and Dada-Mertz had Kurt Schwitters’ opus magnum, the “Ursonate”. Since the beginning of the 20th century sound-poetry has a non-stop history. But even before the birth of the so-called avant-garde, there was nonsensical poetry – in Iceland, Æri-Tobbi wrote his tercets and quatrains in the 17th century; in 13th century Catalonia the troubadour Cerverí de Girona had his own songs of gibberish, and 16th century Italy had Teofilo Folengo. The history of poetry is blotted high and low with work of such inspired delirium.

Perhaps, deep down inside, we are not as impressed by “actual” language as we sometimes let on. Perhaps we feel there are other ways of using and abusing our tongue, our language centres and vocal cords – a thinking beyond mere meaning. Like screaming. Like laughing. Grunting. Like giggling. And then, if I’m allowed to quote “meaningful” poetry to drive my point home, perhaps Emily Dickinson had something like gibberish in mind when she wrote “Much madness is divinest sense / To the discerning eye; / Much sense the starkest madness.” And maybe Kurt Schwitters said it all, when he said: “Ziiuu ennze ziiuu nnskrmmüüü; / ziiuu ennze ziiuu rinnzkrmmüüüü; / rakete bee bee, rakete bee zee”.

## I'll have what he's having

Are you tired of writing your own damn poems? Does it feel like you'd rather plunge through the fiery gates of hell rather than come up with one more metaphor/ simile/ aphorism to explain the human condition? There's so much poetry in the world already! So much language! Why make more?

Now, what if there was a way of making a poem without actually having to resort to our supposedly original ideas? What if we could simply appropriate somebody else's words and call them our own? Text-piracy, of sorts. Plagiarism. Theft. We've gotta fight for our copyright to "party".

A found poem is a piece of language reframed. In some cases the pieces were already poems to begin with, collaged together in a new context, as in Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Pound's *Cantos*; but in other cases they are bits of overheard conversation, the text from a commercial or a news story, reframed as poetry. Charles Reznikoff's famous book, *Testimony*, is just what it says: slightly altered texts from American court transcripts. Kenny Goldsmith's *Day* is one issue of the *New York Times* – word for word, retyped. The Norwegian poet Paal Bjelke Andersen is working on a book of sentences found in the new year speeches of Nordic prime ministers, including the Icelandic ones. Icelandic artist Ragnhildur Jóhanns recently published a limited edition book, *Konur 30 og brasilískt* ("Women 30 and Brazilian"), consisting of sentences lifted from an online forum about women over thirty and brazilian wax treatments. Doesn't that sound fantastic? Delightful? The language around you actually runs amok, constantly, all on its own it seems and needs merely

to be picked up and repeated to forthwith metamorphose into wonderful poetry.

Now, finding language in a world so full of it (pun intended) may not seem like a great challenge for the average creative mind. Quite the contrary most of us wouldn't mind finding somewhere, anywhere, a quiet place devoid of language. Some calm resort, a haven, where we could be free from the incessant chatter, free from screaming billboards, blazing televisions and the latest Top 40 list.

But, as strange as it may sound, found poems tend to provide a certain relief from the inanity, stupidity, supposed depth or other imaginable attributes of the given source text. Like a good piece of adusting, a decent-to-brilliant found poem both negates and amplifies the original text creating a flux of meaning and anti-meaning. An eye in the storm, if you will, where one is given the possibility to observe what actually happens within this given piece of language (or what didn't happen, but, in some parallel universe, might have). Not to mention the irreverent joy that found poems tend to offer, as well as their quirky insight into the discourse and thought of a society.

Found poems document the movements of language, rather than imitating it – found poems leave language exposed, rather than exposing it. But trying to follow the way language moves is an arduous task. Words come and go, become fashionable and fade (particularly when enough people have realized that they indeed have become fashionable). But certain tendencies are obvious.

These days, the language that most Icelanders find themselves submerged in is legal and economic. Suffering a financial blitzkrieg does not only bring with it (rhyme-alert!) oceans of

emotion (throes of woes!), but new additions to the everyday vocabulary. Concepts like “debt-equity ratio” are now household terms, as familiar as milk and honey. “Restructuring” is more common than the cold, and “shadow price” is getting so worn as to verge on being unusable.

We’ve contracted these words from reading the newspapers, blogs and listening to pundits who regurgitate each other’s language as if they were ruminating cows. And you’d think, given how much they’re thrown about, that we understand them. Yet it seems, according to a survey conducted by the Icelandic Institute for Financial Literacy, that we don’t. Only a third of Iceland’s inhabitants, 18 years and older, have any understanding of the mere basic economic concepts. And yet we keep on yapping as if everyone understands. Restructuring opportunity costs according to the debt-equity ratio of offshore shadow prices.

And if reproducing language that you don’t understand, to people who understand it even less, isn’t poetry, then by golly, I don’t know what is.

## READ THIS COLUMN DON’T READ THIS COLUMN NOW READ

I recently saw a Norwegian sketch on YouTube about the invention of the book. A medieval man has just gotten his first book and can’t seem to get it to work, so he has to ask for help. A help desk employee shows up to guide him through this new state-of-the-art technology, showing him how to flip the pages back and forth, read from left to right etc. The dim-witted book-owner has trouble understanding the instructions and the irritated help desk employee asks if he never considered consulting the manual.

The manual, of course, is another book.

Instructional poetry is a modern day verse form in which the reader is told to do certain things in a certain order, often “ridiculous” things which cannot be done or don’t seem to serve a “purpose”. One of the most famous examples of such poetry is to be found in Yoko Ono’s book *Grapefruit*.

“Make all the clocks in the world fast by two seconds without letting anyone know about it” it says in one of the poems. “Decide not to use one particular syllable for the rest of your life. Record things that happened to you in result of that”, says another.

One of the most quoted sayings of conceptual poetry is from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: “Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information” – I’m even pretty sure I’ve let it grace these fine pages of the *Reykjavík Grapevine* in some earlier column. Instructional

poetry takes this idea to task and uses the language of information to give information (i.e. instructions) which deviates from the thinkable and thereby (literally) bends reality.

While Yoko Ono provides the reader with well nigh impossible tasks, Canadian poet Darren Wershler-Henry, in his book *The Tapeworm Foundry*, feeds the reader with ideas for art-works and poetry books, some possible and others impossible and many borderline: “find the threads in redhats andor litter keyboard with milletseed so that exotic songbirds might tap out their odes to a nightingale andor transcribe the letters pressed onto the platen when stalactites drip on the homerow keys andor reconstruct the ruins of a bombedout capital i”.

The imperative form of instructional poetry is a dizzying tool which can easily send the reader spinning. Instructions are made to make sense, they are there to guide us, and yet they can so easily be used to fuck with our heads – when they leave the realm of the expected. Do not finish this sentence. Before proceeding with the article, go back to the previous sentence (which you obviously finished, you fool!) and read it again, this time without finishing. Do not read the following sentence. If all goes well you should not be reading this. Then jump to this sentence and continue from there.

For an Icelandic example I’d recommend Sigurður Pálsson’s “Nokkrar verklegar æfingar í atburðaskáldskap” (tr. “A few practical exercises in performance poetry”) from *Ljóð námu völd*.

Italian-American poet and artist Vito Acconci once wrote a famous instructional poem, which contrary to most instructional poems could easily be followed. So easily, in fact, that not doing what it says proves to be impossible even for the most

agile readers, the most cunning minds:

“READ THIS WORD THEN READ THIS WORD READ THIS WORD NEXT READ THIS WORD NOW” etc. etc.

This is the pataphysical, the sphere beyond the merely metaphysical. Like in the book-manual-book problem of our medieval reader mentioned earlier, instructional poetry deliberately breaches the social code of messaging. It undermines the trust we naturally put in the imperative, and thereby manages to rid us (at least partially) of our ridiculous obsession with obeying everyone that sounds like an authority, while simultaneously entertaining us with the sweet, humorous sound of chains breaking.

## Poetry and prose

The difference between poetry and prose?

Poetry sings, prose talks. Poetry dances, prose walks. Poetry's fewer words with more ("deeper") meaning. Poetry's about form while prose is about content. Poetry's the memory and prose the remembrance. Poetry's constructed in lines, whereas prose is constructed in paragraphs.

Don't know, but I know it when I see it!

The amount of clichés about the difference between poetry and prose is quite sufficient. Abundant, even. In all honesty, there's boatloads and shitloads of opinions on the matter. There's so much of it that when you start acquainting yourself with the ideas you'd wish you'd never heard of either one.

The clichés are mostly as true as they're untrue. Poetry sings, but it also talks – the Persian word for "poetic body of work" is "kalam", which literally means "talk" in arabic. Poetry dances, but it also walks. There's a million walking poems, from Wordsworth to T.S. Eliot to John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara. Sarah Cullen's *Maps* is a series of visual poems created by a pendulum device – a box with a swinging pen inside that wrote the poems while the poet took walks in Florence.

A lot of conceptual poetry is more words with less apparent meaning – some conceptual poems are computer engines that produce infinite amounts of texts with no apparent meaning. Most war poetry or love poetry is more about content than form and many so-called proseworks, such as Joyce's *Ulysses* or Stein's *The Making of Americans* have a lot more to do with form than content.

Hal Sirowitz's poetry books *Mother Said* and *Father Said* are the remembrance, whereas Proust's prose masterpiece, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is memory. The most instantly recognizable feature of poetry, for any layman at least, is the line-breaking. Poetry tends to be cut into short lines. The French poet Jacques Roubaud has called it "le vers libre international" – international free verse, a plague on all your houses, in effect nothing more than lineated prose and not poetry at all. Of course you don't have to read a lot of poetry, or be acquainted with any radical avant-garde, to realize that much poetry is not divided into short lines. Take Ginsberg or Whitman, Rimbaud or Octavio Paz. Sometimes they get classified as "prose poems", but a lot of the time such a definition proves seriously lacking.

The American poet James Sherry once pointed out that a piece of paper has a definite economic value. Paper is a commodity that can be sold for profit in the marketplace. The production cost is lower than the selling price. Sherry also noted that when you print a poem on it, this value is lost. Sherry's colleague and friend, Charles Bernstein, calculated that a print-run of 2000 copies of a poetry book from Sun & Moon Press, that sells out in two years, actually loses money.

This does not go for prose. When you print prose on a piece of paper, it actually increases in economic value. Isn't that amazing?

Which leads me to the only usable explanation of the difference between poetry and prose that I've come across so far (after about a decade of looking): If the text that you've written sells for less than it cost you to produce it, chances are you're not a novelist but a poet.

## The death of a poem

Poetry is a culture heavily impregnated with the idolisation of poets. Popular knowledge of poetry stops where the anecdotes about poets end and the poetry begins. We remember Rimbaud as the original rockstar, vomiting all over the Paris culture elite. We remember Ginsberg as the mad fairy who blew people in parties and undressed on stage. Li Po as the alcoholic who drowned while trying to embrace the reflection of the moon in the river. Sylvia Plath for being suicidal. Ted Hughes for being her husband. Gertrude Stein for her dinner parties. We remember poets for being crazy, for being loners, bitter or ecstatic, for their failures more than their victories, for their eccentricities more than their attempts at finding common human traits. Not counting a few soundbytes etched into the mental gravestones of our mutual consciousness (“I saw the best minds of my generation” ... and “I am large, I contain multitudes” and the like) we hardly ever touch on their poetry!

Having soon spent a decade in Icelandic literary cliques I can confirm that this is not limited to the society of dead (famous) poets. Literary enthusiasts gossip about living poets and writers, big and small, like there’s no tomorrow. And culture-reportage in Iceland usually consists of asking a writer or artist what his or her “dream-weekend” might be, what they have in their pockets, or chit-chat about politics and social matters that may or may not have anything to do with the artist’s subject matter. What you soon realize when you first get interviewed for a book you’ve written, is that the reporter in question will,

in 9 cases out of 10, not have read your book. Even the critique, the reviews in the newspapers or other media, is inherently focused on the writer’s person – he or she has grown, he or she has lost his or her touch, he or she is venturing where no he-or-she has ventured before, he or she is old-fashioned, he or she is revolutionary. He or she should’ve taken more time. The list of clichés is longer, but as it induces involuntary vomiting in the columnist, I will stop here.

The French literary-critic Roland Barthes wrote a famous essay in the late sixties entitled “The Death of the Author”. In the essay Barthes railed against the idea that we read the text in the context of its author. The text should be free from whatever the author is, says Barthes, and in fact there is no actual “author”, only a “scriptor” who produces the work but does not explain it, does not have the (sole) right to unentangle his or her symbolic efforts – or indeed any other part of the work.

This may be a creative way to approach a poem, although perhaps a bit fundamentalist for most people’s taste. A poet’s life may be relevant to his or her work, either the methods of composition or his or her maternal relationship – whatever it is. Reading is a free world. And poets should maybe not be the ones deciding what readers see in their works or how they should be read. But I am confident that most of my fellow poets would be overjoyed if the media, when discussing the life, methods and opinions of the poet, would be so kind as to do so in the context of the poet’s work, rather than the context of the contents of the poet’s pockets.

## So what, you gonna cry now?

Most poetry's pretty fucked up. It tries hard to be hard. Not only hard to understand, but also hard to touch – hard to feel. Sentiment isn't really welcome in poetry anymore, it's been outlawed. Sentiment is bad for poetry. It eats up the poetry and excretes it as pure whiny mush.

As is usually the case, sentiment wasn't outlawed for just any old no-good-reason – it was kicked out 'cause it'd started to misbehave so badly as to not be considered tolerable anymore. It had had too much to drink and was creeping everybody out with its nonsensical, overemotional whimpering. It was all in your face with its “The depths of my pain/ the drip of my drugs/ today's the day/ I die” and it's roughed-up, false bravado, driving everybody nuts. So it got kicked out. Boot in the ass and out the door.

It all started with the pleasant idea of representation. Poetry was to become the voice of the underprivileged, the huddled masses, the proletariat – it was to become the voice of the voiceless. This is North America in the sixties and the seventies – beatniks, hippies, black nationalists, anarcho-communists, neo-marxists, orgy-enthusiasts, feminists, shock-artists and the like. Anybody who wanted to be somebody was either underprivileged, or revolutionary enough to make up for their lack of underprivilege. It was, in many ways, a beautiful time.

But poetry was never a tool meant for representation – never an archaic form of Powerpoint, never a public diary. It was never a tool, per se (although many poets, I'll admit, are in fact tools). And as often seems to be the case, things escalated fast. By the late seventies it was hardly enough to feel yourself an

outsider anymore, to speak on behalf of your forgotten people or to project social problems. It quickly turned from the social to the personal – as poets realized that for pure muscle the personal always beats the social, hands down. Telling an audience that your people had been raped, had nothing on telling the audience that you yourself were the survivor of your own personal holocaust, and then proceeding on with the gritty details. The lump in the throat beat the fist in the air.

By the mid-eighties, surprisingly enough, this turned into a competition. Literally. Poets got up on stages all over the world to espouse their clever, rhythmical rhymes for sexual abuse, rape and whatever else could keep the audience gasping. And the judges picked a winner. Usually the one who'd fit the most –ation rhymes into his or her poem. “Due to complications with my castration, and the depreciation of my flagellation, I fell victim to demonization without ejaculation.” The victor was the one who got the most applause. The one whose authenticity seemed most true. Whose pain ran deepest.

And so, embarrassed by all this sentimentality, most poetry worthy of the name turned it's back, turned cold and turned hard. It intellectualized, codified and peculiarized – it kicked back with a vengeance. Sentiment, being an old tradition in poetry, gets all the proper lip-service, of course, but it's not a card-carrying member anymore. On those rare occasions that it gets invited to poetry's shindigs, it's kept thoroughly in check, its punch is de-spiked and if it so much as hints at having had a rough time recently, poetry gets all like “so what, you gonna cry now?” and boots it without further ado.

Which is a shame, I guess. But until sentiment learns how to behave itself, that's just how it's gotta be.

## The barbaric arts

The philosopher Theodor Adorno famously stated, in 1949, that writing a poem after Auschwitz was barbaric. He proceeded: “And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today”.

With some simplification poetry may be understood as an art of beauty, and indeed that is how poetry has been perceived in most times and most places. Anyone not in poetry’s “in-crowd” is sure to start thinking of flowers, waterfalls, nationalism, high-end emotion and heartbreak when presented with the word “poetry”. Poetry, in this sense, is a bit like water-colouring, somehow – standing between being purely decorative and an expression of something private, almost lavatorial in the sense that even though your poetry springs from a natural (in some sense beautiful) need, maybe you should refrain from doing it in public.

Properly executed ‘tis the finest of arts, all oohs and ahs with exclamation marks making you shiver with its allusive and powerful imagery, its nearly divine rhetoric and its authoritarian voice. In short, it’s everything a Nazi would want to read at night to secure himself a goodnight’s sleep, a haven from the horrors of his day-to-day activities. Reading it makes you feel cultured in the same way that systematically killing people makes you feel not so cultured at all. And maybe they’re not so much opposites as they are partners-in-crime.

When WWII came to an end the Allies found more than concentration camps in the Reich – they found homes, tunnels, secluded castles, salt mines, caves, trains and other hideouts

stuffed with the finest European artworks, paintings, sculptures and artifacts. Top Nazi Hermann Göring filled his country home with some of the most beautiful and famous works of art in the history of man. Hitler was planning on building the greatest art collection ever, the Führermuseum, designed by Albert Speer. It was to be erected in Linz, Austria and filled with stolen and bought art from all over the world – the best money can buy and muscle procure. Included in the plan, of course, was a library with 250,000 books.

Nazi Germany thought of itself as the height of civilization – a refined world order, creating a structured, civilized beauty out of mayhem, chaos and degeneration, through the violent application of a stern ideology. Although their methods were not always applied in a systematic and organized fashion – not everyone died in the machine-like gas-chambers; children were also beat against rocks to save bullets – their ideal was to be “efficient”, “civilized” and not least “beautiful”.

I’m not sure what Adorno meant by his famous words – and apparently that goes for most people. To add insult to injury Adorno (reportedly after reading the works of Paul Celan) took most of it back, saying maybe it’s so and maybe not – God knows! (I’m paraphrasing). Perhaps he took offense to beauty in the face of horror. Perhaps trying to get to the heart of humanity was worthless if humanity was so tainted. And perhaps he felt that if fine arts could also be enjoyed by Nazis, fine arts had themselves become reactionary.

Poem by Adolf Hitler (1915)–from John Toland’s biography  
and (presumably) in his translation

I often go on bitter nights  
To Wotan’s oak in the quiet glade  
With dark powers to weave a union –  
The runic letters the moon makes with its magic spell

And all who are full of impudence during the day  
Are made small by the magic formula!  
They draw shining steel – but instead of going into combat  
They solidify into stalagmites.

So the false ones part from the real ones –  
I reach into a nest of words  
And then give to the good and just  
With my formula blessings and prosperity.

## Canon fodder

I regularly read poetry to Aram, my infant son. He doesn’t “get it”, of course – no matter how I try to explain that he’s really not supposed to understand it – but rather “sense it”. But he seems to like the rhythms of it anyways (and/or his father’s theatrical performance) so I keep at it. I mostly read from this famous little blue book called *Skólaljóð* (“School Poetry”), which contains all the national classics from Hallgrímur Pétursson to Steinn Steinarr – the Icelandic poetry canon as it was compiled in the middle of the last century. And as I find myself skipping more or less every poem that deals with God, Christ or Country (about two thirds of the book), in an attempt not to inadvertently indoctrinate my boy as a christian nationalist, I become strangely aware of how Icelanders have really never taken the trouble to properly reevaluate their canon. There are a couple of newer books, where some oldies have been skipped, and a few newbies have been granted access – but mostly it’s the same ol’ same ol’. The same sombre tones, the same sombre attitudes (and when I say newbies, I mean mostly very old newbies, most of whom are dead already).

Some things are probably too sacrosanct. It’d be hard, for instance, to rouse support for changing the national anthem to something more up-to-date (I’d vote for Haukur Már Helgason’s *Matarsíðir Sýslumannsins í Kópavogi* (“The Dining Habits of the District Magistrate in Kópavogur”) or Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir’s *Klofvega menn* (“Crotches Kill Men”). So we might have to keep Matthías Jochumsson’s “Song of Praise” – “Oh, God of our Country, Country of our God” – despite the fact that I wouldn’t

read the horrendous thing to my son if it'd spawn peace on earth (well, okay, maybe then, but I want it in writing!).

But how about Bjarni Thorarensen? Hannes Hafstein? Do we really need them? How about just cutting the nationalism and the godliness in its entirety? I, for one, believe in the power of poetry, the power of words, of language – and I don't think this drivel is doing us any good, nor has it ever. It rots your mind.

If one were to actually reduce *Skólaljóð* in this manner, what you'd be left with is nature and a few verses of Steinarr's "The Time and the Water". Now, nature is fine and all (and knocking Steinarr is a veritable crime), but nature and more nature might eventually get a little monotonous. So, instead of us just picking out what isn't popular anymore and inserting a few innocent examples from newer poets (which seems to have been the method of composition for anthologies thus far), how about we enter the archives ourselves and start picking out new interesting examples from the history of Icelandic poetry? Why, for instance, is there so little of Æri-Tobbi to be found? He gets hardly even mentioned in the five-volume *Bókmenntasaga Íslands* ("Iceland's Literary History"). This is a serious canonical mistake – "agara gagara" etcetera!

In this process we might also end up finding some more female poets. When reading Icelandic anthologies, one might think that women hardly ever wrote poetry back in the days – but to the contrary poetry was very much a feminine sport and indeed most poets were women. Granted, not all of it got written down, and collecting the poetry of Icelandic women throughout the centuries is hardly unproblematic – but it is, truly and utterly, a cultural heritage mostly ignored (while

we spend years after years debating whether or not poet Jónas Hallgrímsson had syphilis, and whether saying it aloud is decent or not). And if there's anything that gives Icelandic authorities a hard-on, it's the words "cultural heritage" (attention, scholars: free grant money!)

A cultural heritage is not, and has never been, an impermeable fact. What we consider important to our "national image" (a dubious and difficult concept in and of itself), or to ourselves privately – what we make available so that I can read it to Aram – isn't etched in stone. It's written on paper and it can, and should, be reevaluated every other year or so. A cultural heritage is a construction like any other, we define it – it is not an otherworldly, uncontrollable entity which controls us – we control it. And so we should, if – at all – we give a damn.

## Left, right and center—a self-righteous rant

One of the greatest conservative projects in Western poetry is called New Formalism. In short it supports the return to rhymed metrical verse and classical themes. It's a let's-write-like-Keats kinda movement originally associated with the yuppie culture of the 1980's, with that perverted type of pseudo-sophistication that makes most modern day readers think of Patrick Bateman and his cronies – or Gordon Gekko. Lubricious slickers with a peculiar need to associate themselves with a bygone golden age while simultaneously proclaiming themselves as “the true new” of poetry (‘hey, look at me, I’m neo-Keats!'). This is poetry for a Roman master race; this is the right wing of poetry; this is literature for those who seek a moral center and a sense in poetry, and find both in nostalgic form and subject-matter.

Can you tell that I don't care for it much?

Well, alright, I'll admit I do get some pleasure out of it. My problem is more with the philosophy behind it than the parlour-game of pentameter per se. I'm no enemy of form or rigorous sportsmanship in poetry – both form and rigour are key traits of most experimental poetry, which is the part of the park I prefer to play in. But New Formalism's spite towards modernism in particular, and modernity in general – not to mention its teeth-grinding malice towards experimental poetry – is so violently geriatric in its appeal that it verges on necrophilia.

Now, as in the real world, the problem of the progressive left wing poetry tends to be dogmatism on the one hand and maddening factionalism on the other. Everyone has their own

theory on what constitutes great post-avant poetry, and how the rest of poets, however slightly they may differ from the party line, are a bunch of revisionist nutters – interesting, perhaps, but eventually of no importance (“we must break you”). It's poetry that praises community but (often) has little sense of community – and most of its communities are comprised of tiny revolutionary factions of mini-Lenins, each of whom can't wait to push the others off the cliff, so that they may lead the revolution on their own (“at best, you get to be Verlaine to my Rimbaud, but that's as far as I'm willing to go”).

(Can you tell I'm trying to be equally cruel towards my own, as I was towards the evil fascists of New Formalism above, in a perverted democratic tradition?)

Last but not least, oh woe to ye of putrid intentions, is the center: International Free Verse. Like its political representatives in real life, the poetic center is mostly without vision and has no discernible wish to be one thing or the other. It is a despicable mish-mash of nothing, whose primary goal is to have a nice desk-job in the Poetic Institution – preferably a well-paid official position with a respectable title.

Its philosophy is that no news is good news. When nothing happens, you don't have to be afraid of the wrong thing happening. The poetic center came out of the twentieth century – through the indiscriminate bombings of Marinetti, the degenerate hippie logic of Allen Ginsberg and the rabid intellectualism of Language Poetry – feeling like it needed a break, at the very least. It deploras ideology, method, form, discernible content and conversation while idolizing all that which is vague: inspiration, harmless abstractions, cliché-ridden symbolism, simple juxtaposition – and simultaneously indoc-

trinitates us with the idea that not asserting anything is in itself a form of supreme modesty.

Sometimes all of this seems too much for a poor soul – we still haven't even begun discussing the rampant paranoia and petty hatreds permeating poetic circles left, right and center – and I feel this prompts serious questions about my career choice. Questions to which I've sadly still not found a satisfactory answer. But it's totally fucked up, right?

## A few words about the surprising qualities of sucking really hard

Recently, I read on the news that a man, one Kenny Strasser, had successively duped the producers of numerous TV-programs into putting him on the air by claiming he was a master in the art of the yo-yo. When put on the air, however, it quickly became clear to everyone that Kenny had no yo-yo skills. And while madly swinging his yo-yos, beating himself over the head, bruising his genitalia and trying to “fake it”, Kenny claimed he had no muscle memory, and perhaps the yo-yo was something he had never mastered. Sorry.

Lying to people is easy. Claiming talent is something everyone is capable of. But things tend to get a bit more complicated when we're pressed to prove our talents – when we're made to bring forth our yo-yos and perform a perfect “Buddha's Revenge”, a “Reverse Double-or-Nothing” or – my God! – an “Elephant's Trunk”. Then we either put our money where our mouths are or we fold. Which is why most people don't go around faking mad skills they don't possess. They don't want to get called on.

When it comes to the arts, proving talent or skill isn't so straightforward though. Sure, you don't really fake the cello anymore than the yo-yo (although there's more tolerance for avant-garde weirdo shit in the cello-world than in the yo-yo world – and yes, breaking a cello while masturbating and drinking your own urine can be faked) – but the same does not go for the creative compositional arts. These days you can fake a painting. You can fake a song. You can fake a movie or a play.

And you can fake a poem.

This is because creative art isn't necessarily based on skill per se – or even talent. Creative art is mostly performed on instinct, it's created in a hinter-dimension, in the subconscious and brought forth into the conscious world where the artist either uses his or her cognitive skills to “finish” the piece, or throws it away before diving back into the hinter-dimension for more interesting stuff. And there's no perfect, or even imperfect, way of judging it objectively. There's no Turing test for creative arts.

Yet most creative art forms require other kinds of ambition – other ways of “proving” one's dedication to (and love for) the art form, which are also hard to fake. If you want to write a novel you need boatloads of patience. Just writing a hundred pages that seem semi-coherent is an arduous task for a lazy person. If you want respect in the visual arts, you go to school – often you have to stay there for years! A modern composer doesn't get the time of day until he's finished a doctorate. Even a lowly singer/songwriter has to invest in a guitar – or worse, a piano.

Nothing of the sort applies to poetry. A poet needs no qualification. There are no schools and the only required investment is some paper and a pen. And if you can't afford paper or a pen, you can always borrow your mother's laptop. There's nothing obviously discernible about a poem that says it's “good” or “bad” – not since we dropped metre and rhyme, in any case. It's now all a matter of taste and taste is a superbly dubious and fleeting concept.

This results in two things.

On the one hand poetry attracts everyone who wants to be an artist without having to strain themselves too much. Every

lazybone, wannabe, poseur and charlatan who wants part of the (perceived) “glamour” of being an artist, becomes a poet. Simply because it's the easiest art to get away with faking.

On the other hand, for those willing to embrace it, it may provide greater possibilities for creation – casual or stringent, oblivious, spontaneous, uneducated, stupid, banal, kitschy, experimental, nutty – without any outer guidelines or official framework to tell us what constitutes a “true” poem and what doesn't.

And still, telling which is which will be well nigh impossible.

## Inscribed around the rectum of a Hollywood superstar

The Kindle, the iPad, the Nook, the Cybook Opus, the Sony Reader, the iLiad – and now: Megan Fox’s right flank.

We’ve come to accept the fact that books are no longer just pages tied together. Just as we graduated from scrolls and tablets, we’re now in the process of graduating from paperbacks and hardcovers to more novel (pun intended) ways of presenting our texts. From storing entire libraries in a pocket-sized computer to encoding bacteria with poetry; to programming machines to summarize, mash-up, read aloud, and produce new texts; to print-on-demand and the immediate publishing of blogs – traditional books are no longer the only vehicles for poetry (or other texts), leaving traditional book publishers desperately clinging on to a past that’ll never come back. The “book” has been born again – but the world of literature (from authors to publishers to buyers) is still going through the painful labour of rebirth.

This doesn’t necessarily mean that the “old book” is dead, although there’ll probably be less of it in ten years time. All the different vehicles for text, including the paperback and the hardcover, have their own value, their intrinsic qualities. Bacteria carrying poetry will probably outlive humanity. Storing text electronically takes a lot less space, doesn’t waste paper (although the reading gadgets are hardly “environmental”) and reduces the cost of distribution (fiscally and environmentally). Print-on-demand makes (almost) anything that is printable also publishable in book form, no matter the “marketability”.

Blogs give us the chance to share text with lightning speed, making it easily accessible across the globe in a matter of seconds. And paperbacks and hardcovers feed our more fetishistic needs – reading as religion; personal libraries as shrines of knowledge, tributes to genius.

But until recently, we’ve not cracked the mystery of how to make sure that what we write will be read by millions, rather than just our devoted mothers. We’ve not had an obvious vehicle for this, the most desired quality of all: guaranteed success (short of printing our poetry in humongous letters on the moon, of course).

Enter: ultra vixen of oozifying sex appeal, smooth-skinned smorgasbord of poetry, mighty transformer of all our textual realities, Megan Fox.

The first poem to be published on the oh-so-popular body of Megan Fox was the somewhat traditional “chinese symbol” – in this case “strength”, on the back of her head. From Chinese minimalism, she moved on to publishing a bit of Shakespeare: “We will all laugh at gilded butterflies” on her right shoulder-blade. She followed up Shakespeare’s success with a bit of her own poesying: “there once was a little girl who never knew love until a boy broke her HEART” on her right flank. Last but not least, quite recently she added a mysterious line to her left flank: “And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music” – variously attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche, Jelaluddin Rumi, the 18th century mystic Rabbi Nachman, Henri Bergson, George Carlin or an “unknown” poet by the name of Angela Monet. But no matter who wrote it, there is no doubt whatsoever no poem was read as widely last week.

But just like the iPad or the Kindle, blogs or bacteria, Megan Fox, although a welcome addition to the plethora of poetic vehicles, is more of an addition to the book culture than a replacement of it.

## Cotery poelumn: Pwoermds

It's a poetic mouthful – a hard-to-perform sound poem in its own right – “pwoermd”. When you Google it, the machine asks if you meant “powermad” and you're half inclined to say “yes I am, what are you gonna do about it?”

beautyfault (Karri Kokko)

fjshjng (Geof Huth)

breathrough (Christopher Rizzo)

llyllylly (mIEKAL aND & Geof Huth)

eyeye (Aram Saroyan)

It's the new new in poetry. The new black. Yet the mere concept is already 23 years old (whereas, per usual, the practice is as old as language itself – in fact, it's probably how language was born). Coined in 1987 by entrepoeteur Geof Huth “pwoermd” is a combination (obviously!) of two four-letter words “poem” and “word”.

One of the first instances of public notoriety for pwoermds – the “obscenity trial” that made ‘em famous (with no tabloid interest since the 1800's, poetry wouldn't have survived without its obscenity trials) – was when Aram Saroyan (son of William) typed the infamous “lighght”. Saroyan was a 22-year-old fan of dada and concrete poetry and had started working on one-word poems that, instead of requiring a “reading process”, simply happened in an instant, a single moment. No subject-verb-object; no meenie, minie, moe; no ifs or buts or even abouts.

“Lighght” was first published in *The Chicago Review* in 1965 and in 1969 it was included in the second volume of *The American Literary Anthology* – whereupon the National Endowment

for the Arts (NEA) awarded it the same sum as any other poem in the book: 750 dollars. Which makes about 5,200 dollars at current value (104,000 times what I make per word). For a single poem. Consisting of a single word.

Whoa!

Tax payers were incensed. The government could not afford to cut taxes but they could afford to pay beatnik weirdos exorbitant amounts of money for writing one word “and not even spelling it right”? The American right – congressmen, voters and bureaucrats – had a full-on hissy-fit, with mailbags upon mailbags of rage arriving in Washington. The NEA was made to answer on Capitol Hill, the Republican Party used the opportunity to squeeze the NEA and as late as 1981 Ronald Reagan was still citing Saroyan’s poem as a reason for the abolition of government funding for the arts.

The shortest poem I know is Steve McCaffery’s “William Tell: A Novel”. It is simply a lowercase “i” with an extra dot over the dot. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, however, the shortest poem is one by Charles Chigna entitled “I” (uppercase) – which goes “Why?”. But neither constitutes a pwoermd as they are both dependent on their titles – and are thereby a process and not an instant.

Like writing any poetry, writing pwoermds is basically easy while writing good pwoermds is somehow miraculous. To a reader of pwoermds they all seem very interesting at first, but the more you read the higher your standards become and the more it takes to surprise you, to create that prodigious instant which blows you away and leaves you “discombobulated”. Which incidentally is a “normal word” – a nwoormadl – and not a pwoermd.

## Gung Ho

Hot-shot Chinese businessman, millionaire poet and patron-of-the-arts Huang Nubo, recently decided to start a fund to promote the cultural relations between Iceland and China, inventively named “The China Iceland Cultural Fund”. Reminiscent of pure Icelandic small-town nepotism, one of the main catalysts for Huang Nubo’s interest in Icelandic culture was rooming with Hjörleifur Sveinbjörnsson, translator from Chinese (and husband of Ingibjörg Sólrún, retired goddess of Icelandic social-democrats), when they studied together at the University of Beijing in the seventies.

Besides being one of the richest businessmen in China (as if that was somehow insufficient), Huang Nubo is, according to the information website [factsanddetails.com](http://factsanddetails.com), a former chief of Communist Party propaganda department as well as being a poet in his own right. Richer than most poets, he’s worth around 770 million dollars, says *Forbes Magazine*, making him the 114th richest guy in China – so, according to a 2010 CIA Factbook estimate, there should be around 1,338,612,854 people in China who are poorer than him. Give or take.

And Huang Nubo has guaranteed The China Iceland Cultural Fund one million dollars in the next ten years. Out of the good of his heart.

Now, Icelandic artists are no strangers to being bartered and bought by the infinitely rich. Until a few years ago, Landsbanki Íslands, or should I say the owners of that particular financial institution, played Medici-like patrons to artists – and used their image to promote their loans, overdrafts, savings and

pension-plans in national ad-campaigns. Everybody (more or less) played along. Hell, even I published a poetry book, whose printing was mostly financed by Landsbanki Íslands. And I defended it vigorously. Printing was not the same as publishing, I argued, and even though I got money from them, it didn't mean I was their whore ('cause I'd never copulate with them bastards) and so forth, but I was wrong.

How do I feel about that now – post-meltdown? I feel ashamed. I feel I was opportunistic and naïve. I feel it gags me more than I expected, and in different ways. I don't remember ever finding a reason to directly criticize Björgólfur Guðmundsson, the chair of Landsbanki Íslands and the silver-haired chief of our modern Medici clan – at the time he was one of the most popular people in Iceland. A cute old man with class, a filthy-rich philanthropist who'd been victimized and put in white-collar jail and rerisen for a second helping. And I didn't feel any reason to attack him personally – international capitalism, yes, but Björgólfur Guðmundsson, no. Maybe that was sensible – and maybe sensible is what it feels like to be somebody's bitch. I'll never know. I was robbed of that option when the banks collapsed.

But more than this, I feel that whatever I say today is tainted with a) the fact that I did partake in the financial adventure, however peripherally and b) I feel guilty about it and might therefore be willing to lash out at other participants who don't seem the least bit guilty.

Perhaps I just don't find it fair, that everyone else is so calm about it. I'm not asking for self-critique à la Mao Zedong, but a shrug of the shoulders – a collective “yes, shit happens and we're sorry, we'll try to be smarter and less egotistical” – that'd be nice.

I don't think the most important thing in dealing with the meltdown is that measly poets and artists engage in any kind of purgatory so that they can be re-allowed into the heaven of artistic bullshit – I don't want to make the crisis about us. But it saddens me to see so many critical minds – superbly intelligent people – sitting around and behaving like politicians in denial: “Nothing happened, please, everybody just move along. There's nothing to see here.” Yes. Politicians, bureaucrats, the media, businessmen – the list of culprits is long and poets are way-back. But let's not do like everybody else and act as if we don't recognize the scene of the crime.

Maybe this is just one of my useless manias. But I'd still like – in all humbleness – to advise those invited to participate in the projects of the newly founded China Iceland Cultural Fund to be careful in what they lend their names or faces to, their reputations and their artistry. Because, in my experience, it does matter – even though artistic autonomy may be only a far-fetched ideal, it might still be something worth striving towards.

And in case you've forgotten, Chinese state capitalism/market communism isn't anything worth cheering for. Stuff may be relative, but fuck me, it's not that relative.

## There's a new screen in town

So far poetry has proved far more adaptable to a higher-and-higher high-tech world than prose fiction, which clings to the book as if the only thing justifying its existence were the bar-code and ISBN-number (not to mention the prize-tag). This would be relatively easy to explain away if we were only talking about longer fiction – novels and novellas – since they demand more attention for longer and more numerous time periods than are comfortably provided on our laptops, smartphones, and other electronic data readers. But this also goes for shorter fiction, which has very little room on blogs or Facebook (let alone Twitter) compared to poetry. Prose of similar length – non-fiction articles, whether on blogs or news sites – is the most popular text online while comparably lengthed fiction is probably the least popular.

And it makes you ponder.

For one thing: almost everyone's a poet. As I may have mentioned before, poetry's the lazy man's art form. So blogs and online poetry forums are easy to fill up with, excuse my French, emotional drivel in pretty little words. Any teenager with a laptop and an emotional problem; any middle-aged used-to-wannabe with a drawer full of anything from a lifetime's worth of occasional quatrains to half a manuscript of semi-serious yet dated modernist verse; anyone who's tired of solving Sudoku while the laundry dries – i.e. anyone without the time or the patience to write longer works (or more ambitious poetry) can self-publish online. And by jolly, let's not forget that while this may make horrible poetry available to an unsuspecting (and

sometimes unsavvy) general public, this is (in itself) nevertheless a good thing – überdemocratic and pretty like peaches.

Another thing: the writers most interested in the possibilities of text, and hence with the hardest hard-ons for the textual, social and lingual possibilities available online, usually call what they do poetry rather than prose – since prose is somehow supposed to be a story while poetry can (at least peripherally) be whatever the hell it feels like being. So the people who want to make movable or moving poems, who want to make self-generating or interactive texts, who want to write for a new venue – in short, the people who fall flat for the innovative are less likely to wanna constrict themselves to a one thousand year old Arabic invention. For prose, any medium is a vehicle. For poetry, any medium is a limitation on the path towards divinity.

Third: while length does not explain why people read the *New York Times* online and not the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges; while it does not explain why fiction can't keep up online with non-fiction, length may explain why poetry beats fiction. You can get snippets of poems – but not stories. You can have a minute of poetry. Or half a minute. A second of poetry. Add to this the fact that a lot of poetry can be disjuncted, spastic and humorously dysfunctional like comedy – it can be very audience-friendly. Anyone who's attended poetry readings and prose readings can attest to the fact that poetry readings are usually much more enjoyable – poetry is (by nature) more performative than prose; by origin it is a spoken or chanted art form. And on the internet you can find anything, save patience – hence the popularity of short fun.

Fourth: while there is no money in poetry and (for some

reason) people have no compunctions about giving away non-fiction, or republishing it online a few weeks or months after it's printed, the world of prose fiction has been sufficiently conservative and self-protective to avoid both the blogosphere and the webzines – nor has it much of a presence within the (semi-legal) world of peer-to-peer networks.

Much of this may change with the advent of the e-book, which so far is mostly designed around linear prose fiction. For one thing, the books of many popular and/or respected writers are now available (illegally, in most countries) in various e-reader formats through torrent sites. They're not available in the same enormous way as music or film, but the files are there and they're much smaller than music or film and therefore more expediently downloadable. Although e-reader platforms are mostly geared towards longer works of prose fiction (including collections of short stories), non-fiction does have some presence, while poetry – with all its line-breaks and weirdo layouts – will have to adapt (and become more adaptable) if it wants to fit in.

## Experimentalism is a humanism

A few days ago (the rather awful) writer's magazine *Writer's Digest* tweeted the following: "Free short story competition to raise awareness for those suffering from depression". Followed by an url. Being the cold-hearted asshole I am, this made me chuckle. I'm sorry for it, I truly am – I don't mean to belittle the people suffering from depression, nor the writers who'd like to support the depressed, or even Circalit and the publishers at Little Episodes, who so graciously decided that their contest should be "free". (This is where I meant to insert a "but", halfways excusing myself – but unfortunately there is no honest "but" to be found, I seem to be nothing short of an asshole. We'll go on without a but then – bear with me).

Writing short stories (or poetry) is of course highly therapeutic, as a cure not only for depression but also for various other mental ailments. Literature is a powerful tool for catharsis – it is prescribed by licensed psychiatrists as a means to purify the soul, to get stuff out there, to grasp emotions and thoughts before they flutter away, to gain self-understanding. Formulating thoughts in non-linear (and even non-logical) texts can furthermore bring about harmony, coherence and satisfaction for the practicing writer, as well as uncovering hidden bits you'd never've dreamt you were feeling and/or thinking. This despite the fact that the result may also be quite the opposite; writing can make you predictable and cause you nothing but anguish.

In international avant-garde circles the cathartic powers of writing are traditionally derided – which is sort of why I chuck-

led. They're seen as an evil force hellbent on destroying all that's good about literature, transforming it into a support group for the mentally needy. And in all truth, cathartic writing is often not very good – it's extremely self-centred, it's rarely performed with much artistry (in 9 times out of 10 the cathartic writer never passes the novice-phase) and it's overtly melodramatic. None of which retracts from the fact that it's highly therapeutic and healthy. But people don't seem to have the same hesitancy about publishing their therapeutic poetry as they have about, for instance, recording and publishing their songwriting. Quite simply there doesn't seem to be much of a border separating the presentation or reception of serious and therapeutic poetry, which perhaps tells us something about either the literacy of the poetry reading masses or the quality of the so-called serious poetry.

And yet. As mentioned earlier, one of the consequences of the less-than-artistic nature of therapeutic writing is a growing disdain for anything resembling a humanist tendency within more serious (and/or experimental) literature – and what gets lost in this desperate flight from the horrors of sentimental confessionality, is the reader's catharsis (as opposed to the writer's catharsis) and the notion that literature can help in explaining “the human condition” – or god help me, provide a (much needed) radical approach to social commentary.

This isn't necessarily so much seen in the work, as it is seen in the critical reception of scholars and the poetics of the writers, who choose to frame their works outside a humanist context (even when such a context seems self-evident, for instance with Christian Bök's *The Xenotext Experiment* – a humanist feat comparable to the moon landing, a sentimental march of

hope – or better yet, Kenny Goldsmith's *Soliloquy*, a raucous and daring take on Sartre's maxim that “hell is other people”, without the “other people”).

On the other hand, the writing deemed “humanist” or even “confessional” is often machinistic, foreseeable – as if written by automatons, its main collective feature is a massive sameness with a dystopic feel.

The dichotomy of humanist writing vs. experimental writing needs to be put to rest – because just as obviously as therapy isn't necessarily art, experimental writing is, through its radical political and social approaches to language and creative living spaces, inherently a humanist act.

## Making perfect sense

Poetry is the art of the illogical, or even anti-intellectual, performed with the tools of logic and intellectual zealotry: language. Poetry is an invoker of feeling, or more correctly, perhaps, sensation and/or experience – while simultaneously being a way of thinking, of “catching yourself thinking” and “noticing what you notice” as Allen Ginsberg called it. Poetry is the logically/illogically logical/illogical. Its job is to escape our grasp as we try to pin it down, to defy the defying of defying definition. It tries to look and act as if it were making sense, while basking in its own glorious idiocy behind our backs.

Like the Zen monks who threw shoes at each other attempting to use the shock and surprise of the counter-intellectual as a method to induce a divine state of knowing – or getting beyond knowing, or whatever it is Zen monks want to achieve with their silly antics – poetry aims to jolt the intellectual, emotional, cognitive, and memorable by presenting texts that are counter-intuitive and strive against everything that is coherent. This doesn't only go for the “mad” poetry of bohemians, from Rimbaud to Hugo Ball and to the beatniks – it also goes for the so-called “disciplined” poetry of lawyers and bankers like T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, whose powerful imagery is constructed to jolt, no less than Hugo Ball's glossolalia or Rimbaud's wilder associations. The poetry may be disciplined, but it is not created to form coherent thoughts – neither from the poets and to the text, nor from the text and to the readers.

I'm writing this as I'm returning from lecturing and performing at a seminar on sound poetry in Kuopio, Finland, and

as I sit here I become more and more amazed at the fact that people, in general, and me, in particular, make a living – however meager it may be – from what is best understood as behaving like idiots on stage (while explaining our behaviour in more intellectual terms in essays in between our “fits”).

A large portion of my performance, for instance, was shouting a collage of the poetry of a 17th century Icelandic lunatic; famous sound poet Leevi Lehto sang (in a “melodically deconstructive manner”, an academic code phrase for “very out of tune”) the lyrics of classical Finnish poets – including Paavo Haavikko and Eino Leino – to the music of the Rolling Stones and other American rock artists; while Cia Rinne read alphabetized poetry in French; and Miia Toivio and Marko Niemi read Miia's work in an apparently random chorus, chopping up the words into bits in improvisational inspiration.

Don't get me wrong – I had a blast and so, it seems, did the audience. They laughed, cheered, clapped and came up and thanked us afterwards. And they weren't even that drunk. But that didn't decrease my surprise in the least. If anything, I'm even more surprised that avant-garde poetry is generally something people enjoy. It's mind-boggling.

Maybe I am still trying (in vain) to “understand” poetry – which is a no-no, poetry may not be understood, you shouldn't try. Maybe I'm just trying to get at why it fascinates me so much. And then perhaps, as the cliché about good humour goes, the magic dies if you manage to explain it. Which doesn't mean we can't talk about it. It just means we should be sure to never make perfect sense while doing so.

## Quiet, you ignorant Booby!

Anything an author does (or says) can be used as evidence against (or for) her (or him). Their actions and words are commonly seen as shedding invaluable light on the work they've given the world – and to a certain extent this is of course true. It's hard to understand the poetry of Ezra Pound if one refuses to see his (personal) fascist tendencies – they may not detract from the poetry, per se, but they do belong to it, they do inform it, enliven it.

Lifestyles and opinions impregnate the poetry of poets from Jack Spicer to Emily Dickinson to Li Po to Gertrude Stein to Sylvia Plath to William Carlos Williams, Tor Ulven, Ingeborg Bachman and Pablo Neruda. We could for instance ask ourselves what would've become of Allen Ginsberg had he succeeded with his original plan of becoming a lawyer – or had he just been hetero? What would an indian summer of peyote abuse have done to someone like TS Eliot? Where would the Flarf poets be if they were pastoral hermits deprived of Wi-Fi's and iPhones? What would Margaret Atwood sound like, if she had the opinions of F.T. Marinetti?

We live in times of continuously repeated 15 minutes of fame for everybody – we're all bloggers, tweeters, facebookers, tumblrs, flickrers; exceedingly sophisticated self-promoters, and we're all famous ALL THE TIME. This is a well-known and well-documented fact (“nauseamus igitur”). And in this system of self-promotion no one is as suspect as he or she who actually has something to promote. Celebrity Tweeters, like British author and comedian Stephen Fry, can't possibly tweet without a

hidden agenda of also peddling their crap, no matter that their crap sold out weeks ago and actually sounds kinda interesting. It's still suspect. We know this and they know this.

Most authors (or artists /entertainers in general) live in a universe where they're forced to admit that even though they might be irrelevant small potatoes today, their Twitter feed, their emails, their scribbled grocery lists and the rate of their production of used-condoms and /or bastard children might be used to “devise their literary intentions” if luck (good or bad) would happen to make them famous. And if they happen to become VERY famous, the devising will be maniacally thorough and the exegeses increasingly inspired.

This, as you may imagine, is a recipe for paranoia and permanently suspended intellectual animation for all partakers – which is why so many contemporary authors stay silent on matters concerning anything under the sun: you know you're just gonna use it against them. Most authors are even scared witless of writing their own books. It doesn't mean that the books'll be bad – but the myth that neurosis is a helpful tool for increasing creativity is about as true as poets having to be alcoholics to write interesting poetry. That is to say, it's mostly a funny anecdote – a part of 20th century mythmaking and image-related careerisms. Not only was it never true, as an idea it's also totally passé.

Self-doubt? Yes. – Paranoid delusions? No, not really.

As everyone knows the founding document of Icelandic thought is the Elder Edda – a curiously repetitious ode about the importance of never seeming stupid. In Auden's translation:

The ignorant booby had best be silent  
When he moves among other men,  
No one will know what a nit-wit he is  
Until he begins to talk;  
No one knows less what a nit-wit he is  
Than the man who talks too much

[...]

Wise is he not who is never silent,  
Mouthing meaningless words:  
A glib tongue that goes on chattering  
Sings to its own harm

[...]

Of his knowledge a man should never boast,  
Rather be sparing of speech  
When to his house a wiser comes:  
Seldom do those who are silent  
Make mistakes; mother wit  
Is ever a faithful friend

... and so forth.

These are the verses etched in the wretched souls of Icelandic poets – and poets worldwide. For us, the bitches of Icelandic tradition, that's where it all began. With a clear and concise precept: Booby, behave! Booby, be still!

And Booby, be sure to be quiet.

## Future perfect poetry

When this text is eventually published the world will know who received the 2010 Nobel Prize for Literature. It will have been announced yesterday. The person in question will already be lauded worldwide, in today's newspapers next Friday, with a few dissenting voices perhaps mentioning cultural politics and even fewer voices claiming that prize-giving is invalid, that it reduces literature (and by association, the human spirit) to a competitive sport. But mostly we'll just participate in the joy, because everybody loves a party. And just like we know that our birthdays and Christmases and whatever don't have any gigantic "actual" meaning, they're still fun and we'd like to keep 'em fun, if possible.

When this text is written, however, the world (with me in it) does not know who will receive the 2010 Nobel Prize for Literature, seeing as now it's Sunday the 3rd of October and the announcement isn't due until Thursday. That is to say, your yesterday, in my four days time. This is all due to a complicated lag in publishing tangible printed material that I won't go into. Suffice it to say, it could not have been otherwise.

I am terribly excited, of course.

The front-runner of poetry for the LitNobel this year, at Ladbrokes bookies, is Sweden's own Tomas Tranströmer – a poet most people in the world have not heard of, but is an immense presence within the inconceivable world of poetry. The Swedes have not got a LitNobel since 1974, when Harry Martinson and Eyvind Johnson had to share one. I don't know how that works. Maybe you get half a gold medal. Or each winner

gets a smaller medal, than had he or she won alone.

And it seems Ladbrokes feels poets are particularly thinkable winners this year, with Adam Zagajewski (Poland), Adonis (Syria), Ku On (Korea) and Les Murray (Australia) following Tranströmer on the list. They are mostly as or more obscure than Tranströmer (nobody reads poetry anymore, I say, shaking my head indignantly, last Sunday).

By now (or then, I mean, at publication), I guess you will know who got it. It probably wasn't Tranströmer, was it? Nor was it Philip Roth? It never is. But they always mention him. He's the guy who never gets it. Apparently he's nonchalant about it, doesn't feel it's any special honour – he feels American literature has towered over world literature for decades and that they don't need Swedish Nobels for justification. Maybe he's right. But it still sounds a bit arrogant, with a tinge of bitter disappointment. And, I would venture, it has something to do with his involvement with American literature – I doubt that he has read Tranströmer or Ku On. Americans don't translate much, as Horace Engdahl, member of the Swedish academy has pointed out, they don't speak other languages much – and they're mostly not in any position to judge non-English literature (whereas most people, worldwide, read english-language literature – either in the original or in translation – which is one of the reasons why Philip Roth is so famous).

The race for the Nobel is no longer exciting, not where you are sitting, but over here, in the past last Sunday, we're still all very anxious to know. The writer chosen will enjoy immense rekindling of sales and translations worldwide, increased respectability and mentions, interviews, acknowledgment and critical response. But it doesn't last. It never does. In three or

four months people will be going: "Tomas who?" Or "Did Philip Roth ever get it?" Or "Ko Un who?" (Am I right, was it Ko Un?) Oh, sure, a few nerds still remember Elfriede Jelinek and Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio – and a few will remember Thursday's winner, but not many will be able to spell their names correctly and even fewer will be familiar with their work (although some will have bought it today – or tomorrow at the latest).

Because despite the good party, the good fun, the medals and the boatloads of cash – despite the respect, the myth-making qualities, the critical debates and the high-fallutin' rhetoric – we all know that literature isn't a competitive sport and nobody can tell you which books enlighten and which don't. Except for you, of course. But then again, you might be wrong.

## So is The Waste Land

Oh, alright, I'll admit it: I don't understand most poetry. It baffles me. I read it, shaking my head and scowling. I don't even understand my own poetry. Objectively speaking, most of it's just nonsense – like how many 'P's or 'S's can I fit into a sentence? How about if I jumble up the sentences of a politician's speech? What if I put all the letters in this poem in alphabetical order? Does that make more sense?

Everytime I start unravelling the allusions and metaphors of the poetry I like, picking apart its rhythmical devices and unsounding its assonance, I draw blanks, paint myself into a corner and rush off of cliffs probably not meant for rushing off of. I get lost in poetry's circular aphorisms, its noncommittal politics and trivial idiosyncratic observations – I get thrown by its semantics and semiotics, surprised by its rhyme and its imagery and derailed by its linebreaks and crazy indentations. It makes even less sense than before I started trying to fit it into my narrow view of what makes sense.

Put another way, it's not just that I don't understand poetry, it's that poetry doesn't make sense. And to take it a notch further, the little poetry I do understand, I tend to dislike – I find it banal, mundane, lacking fervour and strength and I'd like to live my life not being bothered by it. It feels like a waste of time and reading it I get a sensation more akin to having overdosed on blog comments than approaching the rapture of poetic hilarity/severity/generosity. I feel tired, uninspired and unmoved. If I feel that I can readily "understand" the poem in question – if I get a clear sense of it's moral, social, political or

emotional message – I brush it aside and move on. Yet I can find logical reasons for liking the poetry that I don't like – I can see its witty metaphors, its righteous politics and metric rhythms and go: This is good.

But it's not.

I don't feel it.

The poetry can be as correct or incorrect as anything else, it can be as funny or right-on-target as anything else – but it remains exactly that: anything else. It does not remove itself from the constraints of everyday written or spoken language, does not leave or jolt the realm of message-giving, does not venture beyond the art form of, say, the text message or the Facebook status – both of which can contain poetry, but don't have to. Unlike, for instance, poems – which are utterly dependent on poetry.

Not surprisingly, then, I prefer poetry that I don't understand. It fascinates me, enlightens and illuminates me – vivifies my otherwise dormant, stagnacious soul/mind/heart/body/spirit/breath. And when I say that I like poetry I don't understand I don't necessarily mean dadaist odes or jumbles of Zaum – it can seem like perfectly normal text at a first glance. But it'll contain something that's a little off. Something jilted or tilted or tainted. A shade of imbalance.

What this boils down to is a dimension of understanding or feeling (or whatever) which I can only recognize as religious – a belief or faith which prompts the reader (or writer) to jump the gap to join the poem on the other side. Prompts unearned and unsolicited participation. To shit or get off the pot, so to speak. I don't believe in God but I cannot disavow an illogical belief in poetry or language, because I cannot find a logical reason for

liking the poetry I like or writing the poetry I write.

But, in my defence, as one benevolent critic of my poetry put it: “The work may be nonsense, but so is *The Waste Land*.”

## This is your brain on crack cocaine

Each year, for about eight weeks, Icelandic book culture loses its cool and turns into a crazed media circus. When the clock strikes ‘October’ literature suddenly gets two-handedly drowned, literally strangled, with attention – having been mostly ignored or patronizingly shrugged off for the previous 43 weeks of the year (the final, remaining week, the last week of the year, is kept free for actually reading books). All of a sudden, as if somebody snapped their fingers, literature becomes important enough to warrant a series of author interviews, book reviews, the incessant parlour games of “best cover” and “best title”, and the motormouthed drivell of “the author’s favorite recipe” and “fifteen personal questions”. Automatic for the people, indeed.

All of this is performed in the rising harmony of what has been termed “the inflation of adjectives”, with books being judged as either “a superb piece of unparalleled genius” or “an utterly immoral diatribe which might have been worth reading were it not also death-defyingly boring.” Granted, there are varying degrees of poetic ecstasy and abject dismissal, but what remains is that the only question ever asked – in book reviews or among authors or readers – is: “is it any good”?

Now, given how many books are published in these eight weeks – this year 85 novels were published, 747 titles counting all genres of “book” – this approach to literature is hardly surprising. Reading and contemplating 85 books in 8 weeks isn’t just impossible, it’s the dumbest thing you could attempt, as you’d probably get none of all of them, and gain nothing but lost

time. Therefore we try to figure out which books we should try before we approach them – to spare us the marathonian stupidity of trying to gobble up the entire universe in one swallow. But by doing this, notwithstanding all our honourable intentions, we turn literature into a competitive sport and authors into racehorses.

To further simplify the enormous task of sifting through a great body of literature in a manner of no time and no patience, we've abandoned the more complicated (and time-consuming) philosophical approach to literature, and replaced it with a culture of grading and gossip. The literati (popular and/or intellectual) seems almost exclusively interested in finding out where a piece of literature belongs on a scale of 1–10 – discarding its ideas, its message or even its beauty (evident in the tradition of judging books on a sliding scale according to genre – for instance not putting any stress on the text in a suspense thriller) as irrelevant.

The argument for this ludicrous race is that without it Icelandic literature wouldn't survive – financially – as people wouldn't buy enough books to keep the industry afloat if they weren't culturally required to educate their friends and relatives through the obligatory gift of literature, force-feeding them reading materials in fancy packaging. Intriguingly, it is ritually maintained in political speeches that Icelanders are a reading nation – while the fact that very few people buy books for themselves remains undiscussed.

Some people, of course, enjoy the excitement of the Christmas book-flood. I'm being a bit of a fuddy-duddy, honestly. Irritability towards this phenomenon is hardly news. And I can understand why people enjoy the flood – all of a sudden

authors and (at least in a sense) their books are put in the lime-light – with all its glitz and glamour, fun and games, rivalries, beautiful heroes and horrifying foes – and I won't deny that it can be pleasurable and exhilarating, for writers and readers alike. But evidently, so is crack cocaine.

## The art of any impact

The most important thing to keep in mind during a fist fight (or while writing a poem) isn't what to do with your arms and knuckles, but where to place your feet. If you keep them too close together, you're liable to fall over – and if you keep them too far apart you leave your genitalia vulnerable (you don't want to do that, not even if you're a girl). If you have one foot directly in front of the other, you might keel over to your side, whereas if you keep them side by side, you risk falling on your ass – or alternatively, your face. So while your fists may be doing most of the bodily harm, your punching is pointless if you don't mind your footwork.

The same goes for writing. Or, for that matter, living. (I have now assumed the position of life-changing prolonged metaphor – do not stop reading!)

Writing does of course not cause much bodily harm. In fact writing entails only a bare minimum of bodily harm and it's usually harmful only to the person doing it (long bouts of writing have been linked to bad blood flow, back aches, haemorrhoids, alcoholism, sleeplessness, severe angst and frequent panic attacks), while the person reading need not worry. At least not much.

But just like when you punch someone in the face (which I'm supposing is a reality most *Grapevine* readers are intimately familiar with) to perform any good (nevermind great) writing you need to find a comfortable base-stance from whence you throw your jabs, strophes, plots and uppercut in-rhymes.

And yet. And yet. And yet.

And yet most poets, most writers – and indeed perhaps most people (not excluding me, a lot of the time) – tend to put a great deal of effort into perfecting their punches (the most obvious aspects of their technique) while failing to seek good grounding. Now what I'm trying (and failing, obviously) to aggrandizingly metaphorize towards (besides changing your life), is that (sometimes) I get the distinct sense that most writers, poets, painters, musicians and performance artists seldom stop to think about why they do what they do, what it is they seek to accomplish. That is to say: where they want to place their right foot, and where they want to place their left foot. Rather, they seem to have perfected their quick-jabs and knockouts – their paintstrokes, metaphors, plots, frills and moaning, without seemingly having the slightest idea why they are doing so. And so the world slowly but surely gets filled – not with revelatory art curious about life, its bits and pieces, but hollow posing.

Now, lest I be misunderstood (oh! the horror of possibly being misunderstood!): I'm not saying everyone should now go fill their poetry with social consciousness or political messages. I'm not saying art can't (or shouldn't) be made for the sake of art. I'm saying art shouldn't be made for the sake of nothing-better-to-do or being-an-artist-seems-fun (or, at the very least, if so, then be it decisively so).

What I'm saying (with any and every ounce of whatever authority I may have, and a lot of assumed authority I have never had) is that the fundamentals of what you do are more important and deserve more of your attention than your technical prowess. When you know what you want to do, you may accidentally stumble upon a great way to do it. But if you don't, you most definitely won't.

## On the urgent necessity of banning poets

Plato, in *The Republic*, wished to ban all poets. He felt their work was neither ethical, philosophical nor pragmatic – that poetry kindled undesired emotions, wreaked havoc upon true knowledge and was furthermore useless. What Plato failed to see (and I realize this critique may be coming a bit late in the game) is that kindling undesired emotions (like fear, sorrow, anger etc. – nevermind lust!) is not only cathartic but often a hearts-and-mind-altering experience which puts the reader into direct emotional contact with a broader array of humanity than otherwise possible, it literally helps to foster and engage our empathy, our feeling for common humanity; while I can think of nothing more useful to society than bashing the arrogance of true knowledge, which is never more than socially approved ideology designed to propagate the status quo (and thus keeping the fat cats fat).

The problem, though, is that poetry really doesn't do much of this anymore. The undesired emotions poets once stirred have long since lost their symbolic importance, become nothing but weak floral imagery stripped of its petals, as likely to rouse a spirit of lust or revolution as a bare ankle in public (incidentally “bare ankle” is the least googled concept in the history of the internet). Its euphemising is mundane, its philosophy self-evident and its posturing literally intolerably obnoxious.

Add to this that poets lost most of their desire to shock and awe ages ago – and perhaps lost the knack for it as well. As poets kept breaking more and more aesthetic rules – abandoning rhyme and rhythm, euphemizing about modern mundanity

instead of God and Country etc. – they unknowingly built a tradition of constantly excusing themselves and religiously bowing down in (pseudo) humility and claiming themselves unworthy of anything ranging from their own talent to the presence of tradition, readers, other writers, whatever you threw at them (if you discount the regular generic rant of *sic transit gloria mundi*, a mandatory behaviour without which poets become outcasts from award-winning cocktail parties – do you now understand why I've been writing for the *Grapevine* all this time? Without this column I would have to buy my own booze.)

The people once known to be carriers of dangerous ideas gradually became apologists for their art, their outlook and their own existence, incapable of saying anything important, victims not only of a constantly stronger and more demanding social fabric but caught up in an endless circle of bickering between the stupidly incorrect and the morally austere; modernity having forced intellectual revolutionaries to become Victorians in sexual matters, censors in ethical matters and bigots towards the (seemingly) less educated (The 'oh, she conjugated a verb in the wrong way, I wish somebody'd rip her titties off' sort of view on life). None of which is anywhere near dangerous enough to warrant attention.

And when Icelandic artists engage in the political (mostly because it's a post-crisis fad) it's mainly to relegate 19th century ideas about nature and class – that mountains are beautiful and Icelanders've all been equal all along (well fuck you very much) – if not down right to promote their own populist disavowal of the political, as rampantly stupid now as when the Führer started the trend almost a century ago.

Plato, as I said, wished to ban poets from the Republic, for

emotionally and philosophically undermining the state and thus being useless to its existence. I, on the other hand, would argue that precisely because poets do NOT undermine the state – emotionally, philosophically, politically, epistemologically, sociophilologically etc. – they certainly are becoming useless enough to warrant their total excommunication, not only from the best of cocktail parties, but from the republic itself.