

# Halldór Laxness, the Mormons and the Promised Land

GEORGE S. TATE

WHEN THE ALL-SEEING EYE on the facade of Zion's Mercantile winked at him, beckoning him with its self-assured commingling of matter and spirit to write a novel about the Promised Land, Halldór Laxness had already received the Nobel Prize for Literature. The Icelander's own quest for a Promised Land—a notion that had tugged persistently at his sleeve since early in his career—had led him from country to country, from Catholicism to socialism and finally to renunciation.<sup>1</sup> As a young convert to Catholicism, he had entered a Benedictine monastery in Luxemburg where for five years he wrestled to reconcile enormous spiritual and intellectual tensions—a struggle that characterizes his first major novel, *The Great Weaver from Kashmir* (1927).<sup>2</sup> Shortly after this flamboyant "Catholic" novel appeared, Laxness traveled to the United States where he became an ardent socialist, saved from deportation only through the intervention of his friend Upton Sinclair. After an enthusiastic visit to the Soviet Union, he returned to Iceland, profoundly committed to social causes and with fresh appreciation for his native literary heritage. Whereas in Luxemburg he had rejected the Icelandic sagas ("Heu mihi, I have nothing to learn from them"),<sup>3</sup> he now imitated, assimilated and revitalized their laconic prose, transforming it with his prolific pen into a weapon against social injustice. His stark masterpieces *Salka Valka* (1931-32), *Independent People* (1934) and *World Light* (1937-40) depict the plight of defenseless and abject people struggling indomitably against indifferent nature and predatory exploitation.

Much to the sorrow of leftists who had claimed him as a hero, Laxness' social radicalism mellowed after he received the Nobel Prize in 1955 at the age of fifty-three and became a kind of cultural ambassador. In the years

---

GEORGE S. TATE is assistant professor of comparative literature at Brigham Young University. He has authored several articles on Old English and Old Norse literature. He interviewed Laxness while a Fulbright fellow in Iceland.

that followed, he disparaged Russian communism, which he had formerly praised, and increasingly refused (and continues to refuse) identification with any ideological position. It was in 1960, during this period of renunciation, that Laxness published *Paradise Reclaimed* (*Paradisarheimt*), in Europe at least, the best known Mormon novel ever written.<sup>4</sup> The novel, which has enjoyed wide critical acclaim, has been translated into Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, English, French, Dutch, German, Finnish and Serbo-Croatian. Preliminary arrangements for a film production have also been made.

*Paradise Reclaimed* tells of a simple Icelandic farmer, Steinar, who dreams of obtaining the Promised Land for his children. Recalling tales of the generosity of Viking kings, he first hopes to purchase it by giving a wonder-pony, symbol of his children's sense of the marvelous, to the Danish prince when the royalty visit Iceland in 1874. But he is invited instead to the royal palace in Copenhagen where he receives, not a kingdom, but autographed photographs which he later trades for four cobbler's needles. At the assurance of Bishop Didrik (Þjóðrekur), a Mormon missionary, that the Promised Land has been established in Utah, Steinar sets out on a second quest and remains in Utah, only partly assimilated into the Mormon community, awaiting the arrival of his wife and children who, in his absence, have been physically and economically exploited. His wife dies aboard the ship; he feels estranged from his children who arrive having thought him dead. With unarticulated disappointment, he returns to Iceland as a missionary, eventually making his way back to the old farm whence he began his quest.

While doing research toward *Paradise Reclaimed* and for two years or so after its publication, Laxness made many public statements about the Mormons. These took the form of interviews, parts of addresses, letters to editors and two major articles, both of which have been translated into other Scandinavian languages and anthologized several times.<sup>5</sup> One of these, "An American Revelation" (published in the Danish newspaper *Politiken*), is a review-article of Ray B. West's *Kingdom of the Saints*. In this article, Laxness discusses Joseph Smith's revelation in the context of an array of others (ranging from the reading of tea-leaves to the visions of St. Paul), and explores the relationship between the novelist's craft and religious revelation:

A novelist is perhaps in his daily life no greater mythomaniac than most people, but at the moment of writing he believes in his fiction totally and absolutely. Herein lies also one of the main reasons why others accept his story as credible. A novelist works under a continuing "revelation" throughout the genesis of his work; not exactly like second-sight in relation to a transcendent world, but something closely akin to it just the same: a world which does not exist in the prevalent understanding of things. And if a reader comes inquiring to what extent an episode in the book corresponds to reality, it seems to the author that the man is stupid. For a writer occupied with the genesis of his work, the fictive world is the only reality that is valid.<sup>6</sup>

The article ends with admiration for West's book and for the Mormons in general:

Ray West's book enables contemplative readers to perceive that Joseph Smith's revelation is equally as good as many other historical revelations—perhaps even better than most if, in this matter, anything may be deduced from the results. The book describes how the Mor-

mons were gathered and firmly led by revelation to a promised land, one of the few really such places here on earth. Through revelation they were virtually commanded to build up their remarkable "kingdom" in Utah, a society which has achieved a status that makes the Mormons one of the most sterling and exemplary of America's many prominent ethnic groups. If one has this fact about the Mormons in mind, the often-repeated charge that Joseph Smith's revelation was not "genuine" seems a little beside the point.<sup>7</sup>

The second major piece is an illustrated two-part feature article, "Tale of the Promised Land," published in successive issues of *Samvinnan*, an Icelandic *Life* magazine. The first part of this article recounts the history of the Mormons; the second (and more interesting) part is an account of Laxness' travel experiences and observations about Utah. Within this piece and other shorter statements about the Mormons several recurrent themes are evident, all of which are treated in *Paradise Reclaimed*.

The first of these themes is Laxness' consternation at his countrymen's response to the Mormon missionaries in the nineteenth century. In "Tale of the Promised Land" he writes:

Unfortunately, the reaction of the Icelanders to the revelation of the Mormons is by no means a patch of sunshine in the religious history of Iceland. Our indolent countrymen, who have distinguished themselves least of all as heroes of the faith—and as far as one can tell have contributed nothing to the religions of the world except an occasional heartless assent to a foreign faith—now reacted against the Mormons with a vehemence unprecedented in our religious history. Ecclesiastical as well as secular authorities, learned as well as uneducated, opposed this sect with intensity. Something must have been inherent in the Mormon doctrine which was capable of upsetting the peace of mind of a people so religiously infertile as the Icelanders. . . . The Mormons who came here as missionaries were persecuted and reviled more than any other advocates of religious views in Iceland before or since.<sup>8</sup>

In Iceland, as elsewhere, some of this persecution focused on polygamy. In response to an interviewer's question whether he found polygamy exemplary, Laxness answered that it is treated in the novel "with perfect sympathy and understanding"—though not, I might add, with the uniformity suggested by one Mormon reader's characterization of this treatment as "nothing but our pro-polygamy propoganda given flesh."<sup>9</sup> Laxness continued, with a chuckle:

On the other hand, it was amusing when I went to America for the first time while in my twenties. I had to fill out large questionnaires from the emigration office. One of the questions was, "Are you a polygamist?" I, of course, answered this "No," and most others did likewise, since those who answered in the affirmative would certainly have been in jail rather than on their way westward across the ocean. Then I read the next question, which presented me for the first time with great difficulty: "Are you in sympathy with polygamists?" To this day I haven't been able to solve this difficulty.<sup>10</sup>

Laxness seems not to have a particularly sound understanding of or interest in Mormon doctrine per se. While describing a Brigham Young University devotional assembly at which President David O. McKay spoke, he writes: "The valiantly well-equipped yet unaffected young people, who

appeared to be possessed of all the qualities that make men men, listened with solemn attention to some sort of Christian or semi-Christian wisdom which could have been anything but was, without doubt, genuine Mormonism."<sup>11</sup> Although he appears to see the doctrine as an eclectic amalgam, his real interest is in the material and social results of commitment to a transcendent ideal mediated through revelation. He discusses with humor his amazement at the Church's wealth and the standard of living in Utah:

[The Mormons] have an ecclesiastical economic administration unparalleled in Western religions, if the Catholic church is excepted. The greater part of the land's wealth is church property in Utah. In addition, the church is the promoter of disparate kinds of industries and is a great employer of workers. This is not state capitalism but church capitalism. As I drove along with Bishop Bearson, he often pointed to some unexpected thing and said, "The church owns this." It often reminded me of *Kannitverstan* in the German tale.<sup>12</sup> He pointed up to mountains and plateaus where what appeared to be government-type buildings were going up and said, "The church owns this." We went into a cafe to buy some lemonade—"The church owns this" (both the restaurant and the lemonade factory). Below the mountain slopes stand enormous iron foundries—the church again. In the middle of Salt Lake City we drove into a parking lot and paid 25¢—"The church owns this parking lot. . . ." In few places in America is one confronted with such well-rooted prosperity totally void of slums. . . . I am forced to admit that the average man in the Mormon state enjoys a higher standard of living than the average man in almost any other place I know of, and, although I am ashamed to admit it, it would please me to discover convincing reports of poverty and destitution, depravity and debauchery in the state of Utah. I find it slightly discomfiting to have to admit that a group whose ideas of how to achieve happiness differ so widely from my own brings forth such good fruit—better, even, that I would have dared dream.<sup>13</sup>

And in a paper written in Bombay just after his visit to China in 1957, Laxness praises Mao for clothing, feeding and finding work for his people, and he sees economic hope for the Chinese as he compares them to the Mormons:

The Chinese are at the handcart stage of the Mormons crossing the desert of the Middle West in 1846. The human being is still pre-eminently the beast of burden in China as was the case with the Mormons in the days of the settlers. Both have behind them their Long March. Both believe that truth and their special destiny is the same thing, written on golden tablets. In both cases the handcart-pushers know in which direction to go, determined to reach the Promised Land. There is no reason to think that the Marxist belief which London has given China will prove itself a less bountiful fulfiller of promise than the Golden Tablets of Joseph Smith which, although never put on display, palpably have made the Mormons one of the most prosperous and sympathetic communities of the United States.<sup>14</sup>

Laxness is by no means blind to quirks and foibles of Mormon society in Utah. He assures the readers of *Samvinnan* that "most of the doings of the Mormons are in some way unusual"<sup>15</sup> and that their "manner of speech is knowledgeable, 'uplifting,' but rather tedious just the same."<sup>16</sup> He jokes about the material proof of truth evident when a non smoker drives a Cadillac, whereas a smoker drives a Chevrolet.<sup>17</sup> And in one of the most

delightful parts of "Tale of the Promised Land" he deals with another aspect of the Word of Wisdom:

I wouldn't like to say that I was very given to cocktails, but I would prefer a cocktail to an abundance of lemonade with prayers. One particular event sticks in my mind. I drove with Bishop Beamsen to visit his mother-in-law the day after arriving in Utah from the eastern states. I was thirsty and asked the good lady for a drink. She hurried into the kitchen and fetched me some cold water from the tap. Naturally enough, out of courtesy, I instantly thanked God for finally receiving a sip of cold water after having been to two or three cocktail parties a day for more than a month in the eastern states. Just as I had begun to explain this, however, the good lady broke in and said, "Would you mind if I recited a little poem I've composed about the cocktail?" Now commenced a fantastic epic in which first came the creation of the world and the Fall, followed by an enumeration of all the principal disasters, self-made hells, and other misfortunes which have befallen mankind from the beginning to the present day. Even the apes were used as a comparison with man with the undeviating proviso that man always came off worse in the comparison. This great decline in mankind's fortune culminated in the ill-starred discovery of the cocktail, and the poem went on to prove that this drink was the climax of all the disasters, stupidity, and misfortunes on earth. That was indeed the longest poem I have heard in all my travels around the world.<sup>18</sup>

In a more serious vein, Laxness composed a letter to the Catholic journal *Wort und Wahrheit* in which he chides a Viennese priest for his bigoted invective in condemning a school of thought different from his own. He writes:

It has sometimes made me sad to listen to my friends the Mormons and the Adventists or other militant sectarians explain how Roman Catholic people would all be damned unless some special act of divine grace interfere with justice and save a few of them. Despite this intolerance, according to my experience the average Mormon or Adventist [is] just as good, if not a better man than the average Catholic.<sup>19</sup>

Despite such comments, Laxness' overall appraisal of the Mormons is very positive. Early in his novel *The Fish Can Sing*, published (as *Brekku-kotsannáll*) in 1957 while he was researching *Paradise Reclaimed*, Laxness has the narrator say: "Then one day, so I have been told, it happened that a young woman arrived at a place from somewhere in the west, or north, or perhaps even east. This woman was on her way to America, abandoned and destitute, fleeing from those who ruled Iceland. I have heard that her passage was paid for by the Mormons. . . ." And then he adds, "and indeed I know for a fact that amongst them are to be found some of the finest people in America."<sup>20</sup> This sentence cannot help but strike the reader as gratuitous in the voice of the narrator who simply has not the experience with America to make such a statement, but it is typical of Laxness' tendency during this period to go out of his way to praise the Mormon achievement.

When an interviewer for *Morgunblaðið* asked him in 1960, "What do you yourself think of the truth of the Mormons, Halldór?" Laxness replied, "If it is true that the truth is concealed in living well, then the Mormons have come closer to the truth than most men. They lead exceptionally beautiful and healthy lives, not only in a moral sense, but in general. They

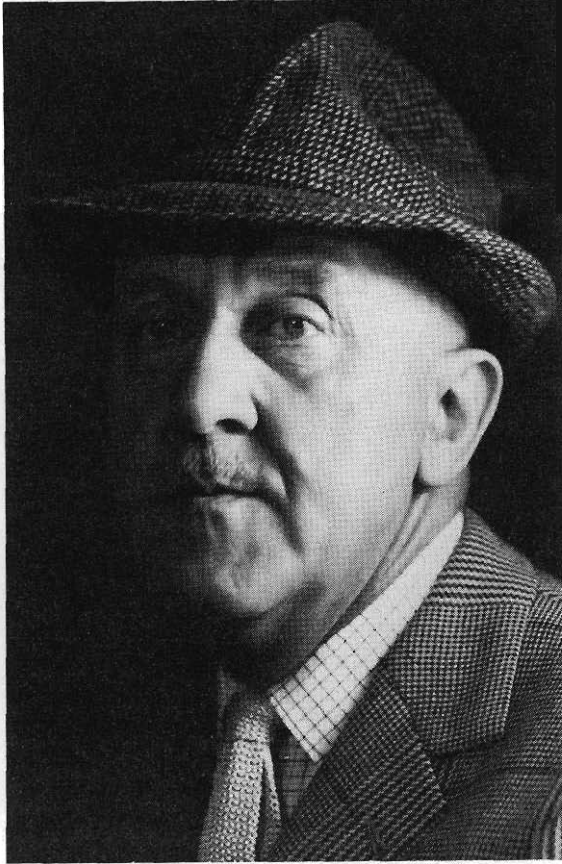
live in a very agreeable society."<sup>21</sup> And in another interview as late as 1970, while discussing various moral issues with Randi Bratteli, wife of the Norwegian prime minister, Laxness said, "I was once interested in the Mormons and traveled twice to Utah. I have also written a book about them called *Paradise Reclaimed*. . . . Unfortunately there are no Mormons in Iceland; I would gladly have supported them."<sup>22</sup>

Statements of this kind accord well with parts of *Paradise Reclaimed*, especially with the well-known passage in which Bishop Didrik tells Steinar "Only the man who sacrifices everything can be a Mormon" and goes on to portray in poignant detail the pioneer experience.<sup>23</sup> But many Mormon readers, including literary readers, have been disappointed and even incensed at satiric aspects of the portrait of the Promised Land—Bishop Didrik's habit of wrapping his hat in wax paper, the bizarre baptism of a child in a rushing river, the all-seeing eye on the facade of Zion's Mercantile, the sewing machine as proof of the victory of the All-Wisdom ("it needs a great deal of philosophy to match a sewing machine"),<sup>24</sup> the wives' marching off to defend polygamy. But although such details led one French critic to describe the novel as an "excellente satire du fanatisme et de intolérance,"<sup>25</sup> Laxness' intentions lay in a different direction. On several occasions—in letters to Karl Keller, Ray C. Johnson (mission president in Norway) and to me in an interview—he has expressed disappointment at the reception of the novel by the Mormon community.<sup>26</sup> When *Paradise Reclaimed* appeared in English in 1962, Laxness wrote: "I want to express my gratitude to [my Utah friends] with my apologies for what to them must look like childish superficiality in recording things with which they are conversant. All the same I hope that not only the Mormons, but also other readers who in their fashion believe in the Promised Land, and might even have found it, shall not be doubtful of my intentions."<sup>27</sup> I believe he should be taken at his word.

But certain difficulties do confront the Mormon reader unaware of the background of the novel and its position in Laxness' literary output, and it is in an effort to overcome these that I would like, by way of apologia for the novel, to make four points. The first is that Laxness' humor is an enigmatic and puzzling feature of virtually all his fiction. His creative energy thrives on tension between humor and satire on the one hand and melancholy pathos on the other. Critics frequently refer to his "twofold vision" and puzzle over the sometimes delicate, sometimes strained balance between the comic and the tragic—a balance maintained right to the end and still not tipped (as is so often the case) in either direction. Thus Peter Hallberg, perhaps Laxness' best critic, writes of the conclusion of *Independent People*, "when all is taken into account, it is hard to say whether, from the point of view of its creator, [the novel] may be thought to end happily or unhappily."<sup>28</sup> All of his novels are perplexing in this regard.

Laxness admired Maxim Gorky for striking "the most sacred and sensitive chords in the reader's heart" by looking "into people's destinies, however contemptible they may seem to be, until he has sympathy with them"<sup>29</sup> and Charlie Chaplin for his way of expressing a "melancholy sense of life" through bold contrasting effects "with blending pathos and comedy, with a smile smiled through tears."<sup>30</sup> An ironist with a keen eye for incongruities, Laxness lets nothing, however sacred—not the sagas, not Christianity, not socialism, certainly not himself—escape this "twofold vision" of sympathy

and satire. As Hallberg says, "good natured irony . . . frequently produces its cloven hoof."<sup>31</sup> Laxness' subtlety lies within what Wayne Booth describes as a "vision that encompasses ironies but is itself not finally undercut with irony,"<sup>32</sup> but the intertwining of tenderness and irony, lyricism and satire, makes it difficult to assess tone. Perhaps the most illuminating statement on the function of humor in *Paradise Reclaimed* is in the novel itself, when Steinar (now Stone P. Stanford, brickmaker in Zion) investigates the crumbling house of a woman who has been ostracized by some of her more zealous neighbors because her daughter had a liaison with a Lutheran. After a brief conversation in which Steinar observes—in words symbolic beyond his perception and which adumbrate the final scene of the novel—that the house is certainly in need of repair, but that it "is not so obvious where one should make a start when faced with a fallen wall," Laxness writes,



Halldór Laxness

"The woman made no reply but looked at him from the remoteness of the soul in that huge, deep, tear-filled silence of human life that nothing can break except laughter."<sup>33</sup> Mormon readers who are offended at the satiric aspects of Laxness' por-

trait of Zion should understand that irony and satire are common to all his fiction, regardless of subject or setting, and are not simply marshalled out to undercut the Mormons. Like Chaplin and Gorky, Laxness has warm sympathy for the human condition.

Secondly, in several of his novels Laxness draws heavily but imaginatively on the writings of obscure figures whose lives are nevertheless well-documented. Thus the overall plot of the tetralogy *World Light* and many features of its hero Ólafur Kárasón are adapted from the unpublished autobiography and diaries of the Icelandic folk-poet Magnús Hjaltason. The same is true of *Paradise Reclaimed*. The Mormon reader should realize that the larger outline of the plot and many details are drawn from the writings of Eiríkur á Brúnum (1832–1900), a colorful figure and rather well-known

writer of naive travel books and other autobiographical pieces.<sup>34</sup>

In his first travel book, this farmer from southern Iceland tells how he sold a horse to the prince of Denmark during the millennial celebration of the settlement of Iceland in 1874, and he recounts in tedious detail how he went to Denmark two years later and was well received by the royalty who gave him autographed photographs of themselves. In 1879 Eiríkur settled in Mossfellssveit (where Laxness grew up) and there became a Mormon, convinced initially by Þórður Diðriksson's adaptation of Parley P. Pratt's *A Voice of Warning* (which he bought for a bottle of cheap brandy and called "the best and most needful purchase I ever made")<sup>35</sup> and was finally moved to join the church by "the unjustified hatred heaped upon the Mormons."<sup>36</sup>

He and his family traveled to Utah in 1881 (his wife died in North Platte on the way); he stayed for eight years, filling one mission to Iceland, before leaving the Church and returning to Iceland for good in 1889. His second travel book and several shorter pieces document these experiences. The point I want to make here is that if Steinar is, like Eiríkur on whom he is modeled, to retrace his footsteps back to Iceland, this must be motivated within the novel itself. Steinar's vague, negative experience provides this motivation, but it is left unexplored. He returns to Iceland as a missionary, not as an apostate.

Thirdly, if Laxness had intended, as he assures us he did not, to satirize Mormon beliefs or society, Eiríkur's writings could have provided him much ammunition. Although Eiríkur does not make a point of slandering the society with which he has become disillusioned, he does mention such things as the occasional rejection of an older wife upon the arrival of a younger one.<sup>37</sup> He tells of a Danish convert whom he knew to be a "well-behaved and sensible man" who was so appalled at his first visit to the temple (Eiríkur never went) that he not only walked out of the building but out of the Church as well.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the best of this ammunition would have been Eiríkur's account of his reasons for breaking with the Mormons.

He tells of how perplexed he was when he first learned, late in 1888 through a newspaper article, of the Adam-God teaching. He sought the counsel of another Icelander, a high priest named Magnús, and he recounts their conversation. Magnús read to him from Brigham Young, testifying that he indeed believed Adam was God and that it was he who gave Moses the commandments, whom Stephen saw at the right hand of God, and who fathered Jesus in the flesh. Eiríkur thanked him for his candor and claimed that Magnús was later severely rebuked for having disclosed this information in detail. He writes:

Now I went home and it seemed to me that I no longer fit very well with the Latterday Saints, as they call themselves, and I began to attend church less frequently because it seemed to me to have lost in radiance.

Sometime later I was home in my house and knew nothing until two high priests came to me with greetings and a message from the bishop of Spanish Fork, George Snill (or something like that), concerning whether he should strike my name from the records or leave it in. I had ceased going to church, and they had heard it said that I had become an apostate from their faith. This nearly floored me, but I said, "Does the bishop believe the book by Brigham Young, *Adam Father and God* published in 1852 in Salt Lake City?" They answered, "Yes." "Do you believe it?" Answer: "Yes." I had the Bible and the New



Testament on the table beside me. I took one in each hand, held them up and said, "I have believed in these books literally, cover-to-cover, ever since I've had understanding, and I intend to believe in them, with God's help, until I die, and you can tell the bishop that he should strike my name from the records of the church and the tithing records because I don't want to have dealings with men who tear down these holy books as you do with your false doctrine." One priest flushed red but said nothing, the other jabbered a little unintelligibly and then they left.

Dear countrymen, there you see set forth the reasons for my parting ways with the Mormon faith, whether they seem to you great or small. I joined them with eagerness of heart, but I left them with equal courage when I perceived their error.<sup>39</sup>

This is a famous scene in Icelandic popular literature, a kind of people's Martin Luther—"Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise"—but Laxness ignores it as he does all overt criticism of the Mormons in Eiríkur's writings. He relegates Adam-God, much tamed, to a brief exchange in a larger theological debate between a Lutheran and the feisty Pastor Runolf, a tenuous Mormon at best.<sup>40</sup> While Eiríkur is vocal both about his conversion and his renunciation of the Church, Steinar says nothing. Indeed, one senses that his disillusionment runs too deep and is too dimly perceived to be articulated. But it is not disillusionment with the doctrine or even with the society.

The final and most important point of this apologia has to do with the relationship of the novel to Laxness himself. Peter Hallberg finds it tempting to interpret Steinar's journey to Copenhagen (with a "soul-casket" after having given his "soul-horse" to the prince) as corresponding to Laxness' early immersion in Catholicism, Steinar's quest for a material paradise for his family in Utah as representing Laxness' socialist stage, and the final resignation as characterizing his own present refusal to be identified with any ideology.<sup>41</sup>

Hallberg rightly cautions that such topical equation would be too pat, but it does seem important that the Mormon reader understand that Laxness is not writing a biography of Eiríkur á Brúnum or a story specifically about the Mormons. *Paradise Reclaimed* is at once personal and universal. There is something of Laxness in Steinar, something of his own spiritual or ideological odyssey that has taken him from monasticism, to socialism, to his present renunciation and mistrust of ideologies and dogmas. From the standpoint of its overall treatment of a quest for truth and utopia, *Paradise Reclaimed* is perhaps Laxness' most nearly autobiographical novel.<sup>42</sup>

Despite his resignation and disillusionment, Laxness can look on this personal odyssey with humor: rather than an epic mode, he chooses as the paradigm for Steinar's quest the "Lucky Hans" folktale in which a simple-minded peasant sets out to market with a horse, barter continually (for sheep, a dog, and so forth), is easily persuaded to foolish decisions and, returning home with only a couple of cobbler's needles for his efforts, loses these while fording a stream.<sup>43</sup> Steinar's cultivated habit of never saying yes or no reflects Laxness' ideological neutrality. Characteristic of Laxness' renunciation is his loss of interest in truth per se. In an interview in which he was asked "Has your consideration of the life of the Mormons brought you closer to the truth yourself?" he responded, "I am not so much concerned with truth as with facts. The truth is to me such a philosophical notion. But

those men who have sacrificed the facts for their system and have emersed themselves in their truth obtain a viable position in the world. I don't personally believe in the revelation of Joseph Smith, but it may well be valid for all that."<sup>44</sup>

In an essay written in English entitled "The Origins of *Paradise Reclaimed*," Laxness tells how the notion of a promised land, "perhaps one of the fundamental ideas inborn in humanity" and maybe even in birds and fish, did not leave him in peace for over thirty years from the time he first stood before the temple and tabernacle in Salt Lake City in 1927 and recalled his childhood reading of Eiríkur's travel books, "the story of the long peregrinations of the little man through the kingdoms of the world in search of the Promised Land." Although he "tried again and again to contain the . . . story within a reasonable volume," the "real thing, the Promised Land of God, did not get into focus," and for years he gave up. Laxness then illuminates for us his own relationship to the theme of the novel:

The truth is that to write successfully about the Promised Land you must have sought and found it in your own life with all that is implied in the concept. You must have made the pilgrimage yourself; figuratively speaking you must have crossed the ocean holding the rank of cattle, walked across the Big Desert on foot, fought within and outside yourself the continuous battles for your Land over the years. In your young pilgrim days while still struggling along, you can only bear witness to your Lord and praise Him. But He leaves it to yourself to find the Way.

You go groping along through a jungle of ideas, which it would take volumes to describe, sometimes you get into blind alleys, at other times you are stuck in bottomless quicksand and saved by a miracle—until finally you find yourself in a small place, in a little enclosure which, it seems to you, has a sort of familiar look, a place that somehow looks like the old home. Was it the same garden from which you started? It seems so, but it is not. A wise man has said: He who goes away will never come back; it means that when he returns he is a different kind of person. Between the garden from which you set out and the garden to which you return lie not only the many kingdoms, but also the big oceans and the big deserts of the world—and the Promised Land itself as well.<sup>45</sup>

Laxness translated *Candide* (as *Birtíngur*) into Icelandic in 1945, and it is instructive to compare the endings of Voltaire's work and *Paradise Reclaimed* and to relate them to this statement. Pangloss, feeling that his theory required unceasing exertions of ingenuity,

seized every occasion to say to Candide, "All the events in this best of all possible worlds are admirably connected. If a single link in the great chain were omitted, the harmony of the entire universe would be destroyed. If you had not been expelled from that beautiful castle, with those cruel kicks, for your love of Miss Cunegonde; if you had not been imprisoned by the inquisition; if you had not travelled over a great portion of America on foot [as did the Mormon pioneers]; if you had not plunged your sword through the baron; if you had not lost all the sheep [related to the 'Lucky Hans' tale?] you brought from that fine country Eldorado, together with the riches with which they were laden, you would not be here today, eating preserved citrons, and pistachio nuts."

"That's very well said, and may all be true," said Candide, "but let's cultivate our garden."<sup>46</sup>

When Steinar, after returning to Iceland as a missionary and being received with cordial indifference rather than persecution, wanders out to the site of his old farm and notices that stones have rolled down knocking over the stone fences,

he laid down his knapsack . . . , slipped off his jacket and took off his hat; then he began to gather stones to make a few repairs to the wall. There was a lot of work waiting for one man here; walls like these, in fact, take a man with them if they are to stand.

A passer-by saw that a stranger had started to potter with the dykes of this derelict croft. "Who are you?" asked the traveller. The other replied, "I am the man who reclaimed Paradise after it had been lost, and gave it to his children."

"What is such a man doing here?" asked the passer-by.

"I have found the truth, and the land that it lives in," said the wall-builder, correcting himself. "And that is assuredly very important. But now the most important thing is to build up this wall again."

And with that, Steinar of Hlidar went on just as if nothing had happened, laying stone against stone in these ancient walls, until the sun went down on Hlidar in Steinahlidar.<sup>47</sup>

After long and arduous journeys through kingdoms, across oceans and deserts, and after a sojourn in a "promised land"—be it Eldorado or Zion—both of these optimists arrive at a garden.

But the tone of *Paradise Reclaimed* differs from that of *Candide*. The novel is informed by a deep melancholia at lost innocence and the passage of time—relieved, yet paradoxically augmented, by the puzzling humor that plays through the work. Though not a romantic, Laxness seems to see the proximity of paradise as a vision experienced in childhood; as Steinar says, "The whole point is, my dear fellow, that when the world ceases to be miraculous in the eyes of our children, then there is very little left."<sup>48</sup> The novel suggests that man's seemingly futile quest for paradise is not, as he so often supposes, a forward journey to a material promised land, a wedding of "a dream to geography and its truth to facts,"<sup>49</sup> but an unaware attempt to retrace his steps. The mellow tone becomes more poignant as time progresses in the fictive world Laxness creates and as Steinar senses that he left to find what he lost by leaving. In Eliot's words:

... the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>50</sup>

His wife dead, his family separated and estranged, his children's sense of the marvelous and their innocence lost—Steinar's final insight, sensed in complete simplicity, has very nearly cost him everything. "'Only the man who sacrifices everything can be a Mormon,' said the bishop. 'No one will bring the promised land to you.'"<sup>51</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Much of this brief biographical sketch depends on Peter Hallberg's excellent study *Halldór Laxness*, trans. R. McTurk (New York, 1971) and his fuller discussion of the period after 1955 "Laxness, Konstnärskapet, Ideologierna: Något om hans senare Diktning," *Nordisk Tidskrift* (1967), pp. 65-102.

<sup>2</sup> Titles are given in English, but dates refer to publication of the original.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of April 17, 1923 to Einar Ól. Sveinsson, quoted by Hallberg in *Halldór Laxness*, p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> The term "Mormon novel" is here used broadly; in a letter to me (February 16, 1972), Laxness refers to *Paradísarheimt* as "probably the most well-known Mormon novel ever written."

<sup>5</sup> "En amerísk Ábenbaring," *Politiken* (Copenhagen), 2 June 1958, reprinted in Laxness, *Gjörningabók* (Reykjavík, 1959), pp. 218-25 (I cite this edition) and in *De islandske Sagaer og andre Essays*, ed. Erik Sønderholm (Copenhagen, 1963), pp. 129-36; the essay appears in Norwegian in Laxness, *Egil Skallagrimsson og Fjernsynet* (Oslo, 1964), pp. 118-26, and in Swedish in Laxness, *Utsaga*, ed. and trans. Peter Hallberg (Stockholm, 1959), pp. 214-21. "Eventýri um fyrirheitna Landið," *Samvinnan*, Part 1, May 1958, pp. 4-7, Part 2, June 1958, pp. 4-7, 27; the article is reprinted in Laxness, *Gjörningabók*, pp. 110-27, and appears in Swedish in Laxness, *Utsaga*, pp. 196-213. Translations of these and the shorter statements concerning the Mormons are my own.

<sup>6</sup> "En amerísk Ábenbaring," p. 224.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>8</sup> "Eventýri um fyrirheitna Landið" 2:4.

<sup>9</sup> Laurel T. Ulrich, "Fictional Sisters," in *Mormon Sisters*, ed. Claudia L. Bushman (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), p. 258.

<sup>10</sup> *Morgunblaðið* (Reykjavík), 23 July 1960, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> "Eventýri um fyrirheitna Landið" 2:7.

<sup>12</sup> The reference is to Johann Peter Hebel's tale in *Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes* (1811) in which a German bumpkin visiting Amsterdam thinks each time he asks "Who owns this house?" etc., and receives the reply "Kannitverstan" (I don't understand) that the owner's name is meant. See Hebel's *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. H. Rupp and R. M. Kully (Gütersloh, 1966), pp. 135-37.

<sup>13</sup> "Eventýri um fyrirheitna Landið" 2: 6, 7, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Printed in Laxness, *Gjörningabók*, pp. 203-4; the English is Laxness'.

<sup>15</sup> "Eventýri um fyrirheitna Landið," 2: 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Letter of 15 August 1958, printed in *Gjörningabók*, p. 229; Laxness writes in English in response to Fr. Abendroth's "Status Confessionis," *Wort und Wahrheit* 6 (1958).

<sup>20</sup> *The Fish Can Sing*, trans. Magnus Magnusson (London, 1966), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Morgunblaðið*, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Arbeiderbladet* (Oslo), 28 February 1970.

<sup>23</sup> *Paradise Reclaimed*, trans. Magnus Magnusson (New York, 1962), p. 49; *Paradísarheimt* (Reykjavík, 1960), pp. 55-56.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142; p. 163

<sup>25</sup> R. Hilleret on the jacket of his translation (from English) *Le Paradis Retrouvé* (Paris, 1966).

<sup>26</sup> See the letter to Keller (July 13, 1971) in his "The Witty and Witless Saints of a Noble Prize Winner," *Dialogue* 6 (1971): 52; the letter to Johnson (March 24, 1970) is in the files of the servicemen's branch at Keflavík.

<sup>27</sup> "The Origins of *Paradise Reclaimed*," a pamphlet published by Thomas W. Crowell Co. in conjunction with the appearance of *Paradise Reclaimed* in 1962, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness*, p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88; see also Magnus Magnusson's preface to his translation of *World Light* (Madison, 1969), p. viii.

<sup>32</sup> *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, 1974), p. 240.

<sup>33</sup> *Paradise Reclaimed*, pp. 239–40; *Paradísarheimt*, p. 283.

<sup>34</sup> His collected works are edited by Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason, *Eiríkur á Brúnum: Ferðasögur, Sagnabættir, Mormónarit* (Reykjavík, 1946). Important for *Paradise Reclaimed* are *Litla Ferðasaga*, *Önnur litla Ferðasaga*, "Tólf Manna Árás," and various short pieces grouped as *Mormónarit*. Laxness also used details from Eiríkur's writings in his portrait of the farmer Jón Hreggviðsson in *Íslandsklukkan* (*Bell of Iceland*, 1943); see Hallberg, "Laxness, Konstnarskapet," p. 88.

<sup>35</sup> *Eiríkur á Brúnum*, p. 90; Diðriksson's tract is entitled *Aðvórunar og Sannleiksraust um Hófuðatriði Trúar Jesu Kristi K irkju af sið ustu Daga Heilógum* (Copenhagen, 1879).

<sup>36</sup> *Eiríkur á Brúnum*, p. 102.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 229–30; the translation is my own.

<sup>40</sup> *Paradise Reclaimed*, p. 164; *Paradísarheimt*, pp. 191–92.

<sup>41</sup> Hallberg, "Laxness, Konstnarskapet," p. 96; for other appraisals of *Paradise Reclaimed* and its relationship to Laxness' renunciation see Ólafur Jónsson, "Um *Paradísarheimt*," *Tíminn*, 24 December 1960, pp. 19, 27, and Tryggvi Gíslason, "Paradís í *Paradísarheimt*," *Skírnir*, 146 (1972): 48–55.

<sup>42</sup> Laxness' stylized autobiography of his youth *Heiman ek fór* (From Home I Went), written in 1924, published in 1952 is not a novel.

<sup>43</sup> This tale, Type 1415 (Grimm, no. 83), is widely disseminated; an Icelandic version is printed by Jón Árnason in *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æventýri*, rev. Á. Böðvarsson and B. Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík, 1954–61), II: 504–5.

<sup>44</sup> *Morgunblaðið*, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> "Origins," pp. 6–7.

<sup>46</sup> *The Complete Romances of Voltaire* (New York, 1927), pp. 184–85.

<sup>47</sup> *Paradise Reclaimed*, pp. 253–54, *Paradísarheimt*, pp. 301–2.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17; pp. 18–19.

<sup>49</sup> Laxness, "Origins," pp. 3–4.

<sup>50</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," 5, lines 27–29 in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York, 1963), p. 208.

<sup>61</sup> *Paradise Reclaimed*, p. 49; *Paradísarheimt*, p. 55.

A creative writer is someone ridden and driven by a consuming passion that has been called the divine discontent. He is not a reporter but an interpreter; he is eternally a crusader; he is a non-conformist and a dissenter who cries out the faults of his world in his attempt to make a better one. His integrity demands that he search his environment honestly, whether he writes of the contemporary scene or of an historical setting. His drive compels him to present the essence of things as they are and were and not as positive-thinking apologists have decided they should be. He is abrasive to the organization man because no organization is perfect; most good and great creative writing is basically the literature of protest.

—SAMUEL W. TAYLOR  
Vol. II, No. 2, p. 19