

# ICELAND AS AN IMAGINARY PLACE IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT – SOME LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS

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## Abstract

The article focuses on the image of Iceland and Iceland as an imaginary place in literature from the nineteenth century onwards. It is especially concerned with the aesthetics or discourse of the sublime, claiming that it is the common denominator in many literary images of Iceland. The main proponents of this aesthetics or discourse in nineteenth-century Icelandic literature are discussed before pointing to further developments in later times. Among those studied are the nineteenth-century poets Bjarni Thorarensen (1786-1841), Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845), Grímur Thomsen (1820-1896) and Steingrímur Thorsteinsson (1831-1913), along with a number of contemporary Icelandic writers. Other literary discourses also come into play, such as representing Iceland as "the Hellas of the North", with the pastoral mode or discourse proving to have a lasting appeal to Icelandic writers and often featuring as the opposite of the sublime in literary descriptions of Iceland.

## Keywords

Icelandic literature, Romantic poetry; the discourse of the sublime, the idea of the North; pastoral literature.

This article will focus on the image of Iceland and on Iceland as an imaginary place in literature from the nineteenth century onwards. It will especially be concerned with the aesthetics of the sublime, claiming that it is the common denominator in many literary images of Iceland. The main proponents of this aesthetics in nineteenth-century Icelandic literature are discussed before pointing to further developments in later times. By looking at a number of literary works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is suggested that this aesthetics can be seen to continue in altered form into the present day. While aesthetic images such as these can be studied as a kind of "discourse" (de Bolla, 1989), as will become evident in the article, since they touch on national stereotypes, they also fall within the scope of "Imagology", as defined by Joep Leerssen:

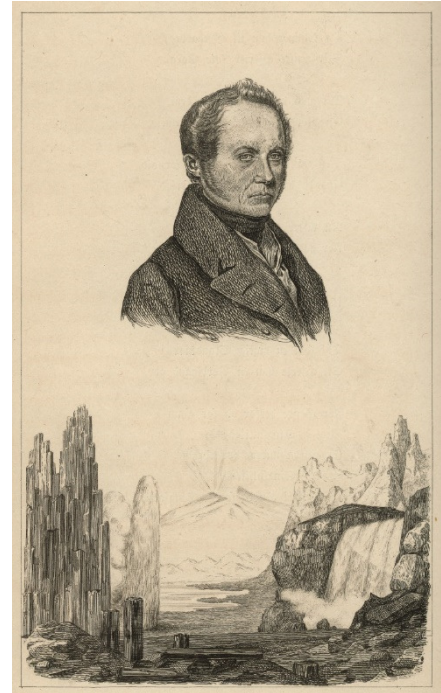
To begin with, Imagology, working as it does primarily on literary representations, furnishes continuous proof that it is in the field of imaginary and poetical literature that national stereotypes are first and most effectively formulated, perpetuated and disseminated" (Leerssen, 2007, 26).

Below, we will see how certain poets and writers formulate, perpetuate and disseminate collective self-images of their own country and its character. These self-images often prove to

be influenced by the way in which the nation or the North is perceived and represented by others (either by foreigners or through national stereotypes created abroad), or by the appropriation of certain cultural categories that are international in themselves (sublime, pastoral, North vs South, Hellenistic, etc.). Even if they are collective, these images of the country or the character of the people can have a bearing on the work of individual writers who use them, and this is why they should also be approached as a kind of aesthetics.

### The Romantic Era

The idea of a certain Icelandic or Nordic element in literature has undoubtedly been around for a very long time; however, its poetical formulation in Icelandic history is only about two centuries old. It was the poet Bjarni Thorarensen (1786-1841, see picture), credited with being the first Romantic writer in Icelandic literature (Óskarsson, 2006, 251-253 and 260-266), who developed an interesting personal theory about climate and its effects on people. Some of his greatest poems centre on this theory, most of which were written in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Bjarni Thorarensen's poetical theory has been traced to the writings of Charles Montesquieu, the French philosopher and jurist (1689-1755), who put forward ideas on the effect of climate on the national character of peoples in different parts of the world (Guðnason, 1969). Thorarensen, who was not only a poet but also a judge, and later one of the heads of the Icelandic administration, adapted Montesquieu's views such that they constituted the nucleus of his poetical philosophy of life. It has been pointed out that in some of Thorarensen's poems these ideas seem to be combined with the natural philosophy of Henrik Steffens (1773-1845), who:



maintained that the magnetic poles of the earth were power centres that directly influenced the evolution of life on earth. He based this idea upon Friedrich Schelling's *Identitätsphilosophie*, which includes the theory that light, heat, magnetism, and electricity are different manifestations of the same fundamental energy (Gunnlaugsson, 2011, 136).

Thorarensen compared the harsh nature of the North to the gentle nature of the South and, contrary to what might be expected, came to the conclusion that it was quite feasible to live on the icy edge of the world, as the harsher nature and colder climate helped to build character, health and prowess. Thus, the northerly position of Iceland, its being an island in the middle of the North Atlantic, the landscape of the country, its many mountains, even the frequent volcanic eruptions, as well as the climate itself, the snow and frost, were all part of a character-building process, from which the nation could greatly benefit. Had the position of the country been more

southerly, and had it enjoyed the warmth and bounty of the southern climate, the people would not have had such a character and would have been lazy and morally weak. It hardly comes as a surprise that Thorarensen proved to be a very strict courtroom judge; lenience, in his view, only lowered the moral standards of the people of the country. What was needed in society and government was more of the healthy harshness that the Nordic nature and climate had provided for the good of the nation.

What was the effect of this elaborate climatological theory on Thorarensen's own art? Well, among other aspects, it brought about a new vision of Iceland's natural condition and the related subjects that he wrote about in his poetry. He composed arresting and beautiful poems about the delights of the Nordic winter and became the first poet in Icelandic literary history to praise the sublime element of nature. The Icelandic poets of the pre-Romantic age had often preferred summer or spring as a seasonal subject and found great fault with the Nordic winter, if they wrote about it at all, but Thorarensen reversed this rating of the seasons. In the poem "Veturinn" ("Winter": Thorarensen, 1935, 118-121), he revealed that winter had its own beauty and benign presence, no less than summer. Personifying winter as a medieval knight of gigantic proportions riding a huge horse across the universe, Thorarensen argued for its alternative beauty on the grounds that it was sublime and not beautiful in a conventional way. Furthermore, he argued for the essential part winter plays in the development of life through antithesis, based on seasonal changes between heat and cold, thus subverting traditional views of winter as a barren and unfavourable season.

Thorarensen also wrote sublime love poems such as "Sigrúnarljóð" ("The Lay of Sigrún": Thorarensen, 1935, 75-77), where a lover fantasises about joining his beloved in death, embracing her as they fly across the cold sky on a "golden ride of the Northern Lights". He tells her that she would be even more beautiful in death than in life, her mouth and cheeks becoming white as snow, along with her "snow-cold bosom". While not exactly the words a girl would like to hear from her boyfriend, the poem nevertheless suggests an alternative beauty associated with winter – and not summer or spring – and again signals a value shift similar to the poem "Winter".

"Sigrúnarljóð" also takes up a theme from one of the medieval Eddic poems, "Helga kviða Hundingsbana II" ("The Second Lay of Helgi, Slayer of Hunding"), where a dead and frosty warrior reunites with his living wife for one last night, before returning to Valhalla. Such medieval themes, along with revived Eddic forms and archaic diction, are interwoven with sublime images in the poetry of Thorarensen, who was a great enthusiast of the Old Norse heritage in literature. He was not alone in viewing Eddic or Old Norse poetry through the lens of the sublime, emphasising its grand images and terrifying beauty; contemporary poets and artists in Britain were, for example, also inspired by this poetical tradition on a similar basis, seeing it as supremely sublime (Clunies Ross, 1998, 105-202).

As they are represented in Romantic literature, climatological concerns and values associated with winter such as these are part and parcel of the general vogue for the sublime – for the grand and terrifying forces present in nature and the mind. The idea of the sublime – as an alternative to traditional views of what was thought to be simply beautiful – came to prominence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics and thinking about the natural environment. To take an example, high mountain ranges such as the Alps became a place of intense interest and

featured prominently in literature and art from the eighteenth century onwards. The Alps offered an experience of the grand and overwhelming aspects of nature for aesthete and tourist alike, as did indeed any artistic or literary representation that evoked similar feelings or thoughts (on the sublime, see de Bolla, 1989; Mortensen, 1993; Nicolson, 1997 [1959]; Shaw, 2006; on its representation in Icelandic literature, see Egilsson, 2014, 67-95). Needless to say, this was a shift in aesthetics that opened up possibilities for Iceland and the North, as it provided an opportunity for a more positive definition and appreciation than could ever be achieved on a more conventional and classical basis.

Bjarni Thorarensen's new and striking vision did not, however, have an immediate effect on Icelandic poetry, as many of the poets who followed tended to write about the more conventionally pleasing aspects of nature. Some of the later nineteenth-century Romantic poets even went as far as to write pastoral poetry of a kind, where spring or summer are perpetual, and frolicking lambs play alongside Icelandic shepherds, who sing their songs and are as gentle and sanguine as their southern counterparts. They live in a Nordic Arcadia that bears little resemblance to the harsh nature depicted in many of Thorarensen's poems.

Steingrímur Thorsteinsson (1831-1913) is one example of these pastoral poets, although his idyllic descriptions of Nordic nature often have an interesting symbolic side (Egilsson, 2014, 97-120; 2017b, 274-290). A traveller in his poem, "Svanasöngur á heiði" ("Swansong on the moorlands": Thorsteinsson, 1910, 135), is riding across an Icelandic moorland, when he suddenly hears the beautiful song of a distant swan that almost seems to be coming from another world. As is the case in many Romantic poems from various European nations, such encounters with natural phenomena lift the mind of modern humanity and often result in a temporary mystical union with all things great and small. The traveller in Thorsteinsson's poem returns to civilisation with an elevated spirit and filled with a sense of natural harmony, as it were. This, in fact, is one of the principal functions of the pastoral in literature, as scholars such as Terry Gifford have defined it. The pastoral is not only based on the city-dweller finding a *refuge* in nature but also on his or her *return* to civilisation, having benefitted from this encounter (Gifford, 1999, 45-115).

The pastoral and embellished image of Iceland was closely connected to the political struggle for independence from the Danish in the nineteenth century (Iceland had been part of the Kingdom of Denmark for centuries but regained its sovereignty in 1918 and became a republic in 1944). Patriotic Icelandic poets, especially those living and studying in Copenhagen, tended to write about their home country as an ideal island and a dream-like place. As such, the homeland could be generalised to the point that it had few individual features or recognisable local attachments such as place names, but rather seemed to be an enumeration of positive and general landscape features. These could include glaciers, rivers and green meadows, with livestock dotted around the countryside and the land depicted as fertile and welcoming, yet surrounded by sublime mountains and an enclosing sea. Jónas Hallgrímsson's "Íslands minni" ("A Toast to Iceland") and Steingrímur Thorsteinsson's "Eg elska yður, þér Íslands fjöll" ("I love you, mountains of Iceland") are among the many poems of this kind (Egilsson, 2014, 105; 2017b, 277).

This nationalistic and highly idealised image of Iceland could go hand in hand with politically motivated and far-fetched similes, such as describing Iceland as "the Hellas of the North"

(Ísleifsson, 2007; see also his 1996 study of the image of Iceland through the ages). Various writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Icelanders and foreigners alike, claimed that Iceland and Greece had long democratic traditions in common and a glorious past that made them similar in this sense. Sigurður Guðmundsson, "the painter" (1833-1874), played an important part in the development of Icelandic nationalism. He drafted a manifesto regarding the institutions that he felt the country needed in order to become a truly great cultural and united entity. He was the originator of the national theatre, the national costume, the national museum and other institutions of Icelandic nationalism.

As I have previously attempted to show (Egilsson, 2017a), Guðmundsson based his ideas of the Icelandic renaissance on a wide-ranging comparison of it with Greece and Hellenism. This is just one of many examples that show how sublime and ideal the image of the country had become in cultural discourse in the second part of the nineteenth century. In Guðmundsson's case, national romanticism was combined with neoclassical ideas based on the tradition of Greek art and culture, and a Winckelmann-like emphasis on sublime simplicity and grandeur. The Hellenistic side of nineteenth-century Icelandic culture has also been pointed out and studied by scholars such as Clarence Glad (2011).

Some of the poets of the nineteenth century had, however, a keen eye for Icelandic nature and did not simply idealise it in their poetry. Among these was Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845), who has sometimes been called the national poet of Iceland. In his short life, he managed to renew the poetic language of his day and is by far the most influential Icelandic poet of the last two centuries. In his poetry, he fuses pastoral and sublime elements very effectively, especially in his last poems, where he counterpoints idyllic and sublime descriptions so that the pleasant aspects of nature are constantly undermined and one gains a glimpse of the terrifying forces of nature. As a natural scientist, Hallgrímsson was well aware of the earthly powers that shape our surroundings and our lives. In some of his poems, this scientific vision of nature is prominent, nowhere more so than in his impressive poem entitled "Fjallið Skjaldbreiður" ("Mount Broadshield"), where he describes a volcanic eruption in all its terrifying power and destruction (Egilsson, 2010; 2014, 13-30; 2016, 108-114).

However, the true heir to Bjarni Thorarensen's views on the sublime, or the Nordic element in literature, is yet another Icelandic Romantic by the name of Grímur Thomsen (1820-1896). Thomsen paid Thorarensen a warm and enthusiastic tribute in an article in the periodical *Gæa* in 1845 and proclaimed him to be an outstanding example of a truly *Nordic* poet. Thomsen simply states that Thorarensen is the kind of poet who should not be read in terms of the beautiful, but in terms of the sublime (he uses the German term "Das Erhabene" and the Danish term "det Ophøjede" in this context: Thomsen, 1845b, 197).

As well as being a poet, Grímur Thomsen held a high post in the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs for almost twenty years (see his biography by Jónsson, 2014). As a poet, Thomsen was, in a way, the successor of Bjarni Thorarensen. He wrote Romantic and individualistic verse that was somewhat hard-edged, glorifying hardy men who challenged the elements and showed grace under pressure. Like his predecessor, Thomsen was very fond of the Eddas and Sagas and wrote many poems on memorable characters from Icelandic literature of the Middle Ages, especially men who believed in their own strength. He was also fond of writing poems about trolls and giants, which for him became something of a metaphor for certain characteristics of



human life, both negative and positive. However, Thomsen also wrote theoretically about the northern element in literature and published interesting studies of Old Icelandic as well as modern French and English poetry.

In one of these studies, *On the Character of the Old Northern Poetry*, Thomsen compares the literature of the North to the literature of the South, especially from Classical Greece (Thomsen, 1972 [1867], 49-51; see also Egilsson, 1999, 120-125). Rather than the elegant balance between form and subject that characterised the ancient classics of the South, northern literature is often characterised by an emphasis on subject, or "spirit", as he calls it, rather than form. Thomsen points out that the form of northern literature is often difficult, and not as smooth and elegant as the literary form of the classical works of southern antiquity. In a way, one could say that he has taken Thorarensen's theory of climate and reinterpreted it in terms of literature. In the same manner that the people must face the challenging conditions of Nordic nature, the spirit has to triumph over form and matter in literature. The poetic spirit of the North has to struggle to express itself through demanding, strict and dissonant forms, which are in clear contrast to the smooth union of spirit and matter, or form, in the classical literature of the South.

Those familiar with some of the medieval poetry of the Icelandic Skalds will know only too well the difficulty of poetical diction, obscure mythological *kennings*, strict metre and strange word order that faces both poet and reader in this particular literary tradition. According to Thomsen, this is not only a characteristic of medieval literature in the North but also of much of the Nordic literature of modern times. He claims that yet another hallmark of the northern character is the undying belief in one's own strength; a characteristic that is, of course, also to be found in literary works outside the Nordic countries. Thomsen points out that this is true of many characters in Shakespeare's plays, for example, and he consequently makes the interesting claim that the famous playwright is, in this respect, a *Nordic* author *par excellence* (Thomsen, 1972 [1867], 45-46). According to Thomsen, Lord Byron can also be seen to incorporate Nordic characteristics into his poetry (Thomsen, 1845a, 12 ff.). This demonstrates just how encompassing – or transferable – labels or geographic terms such as "Nordic" can be, even able to include Britain or, for that matter, the northern part of Europe.

### **The Post-Romantic Era**

What has become of the climatic concerns of these nineteenth-century poets in later times? Have these or similar ideas of the northern element in literature lived on into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Yes and No. The theory, or rather myth, of the heroic northerner demonstrating his strength of character in the difficult natural conditions of the North has proved very long-lived. The origins of this myth are, of course, much older than its poetical formulation in the nineteenth century, and probably as old as the settlement of the country. It is a myth that has proved useful to a community that has had to live off a land and a surrounding sea in the northernmost part of the inhabitable world, in conditions that have demanded the utmost effort of every individual who wanted to survive. However, this is particularly true of the time when Icelanders were mostly a nation of farmers, an agricultural community, which they were until the fishing industry took over and became the cornerstone of the economy in the twentieth century (which has been overtaken in recent years by tourism as the largest source of income). Since then, this old myth has been losing its grip on the nation, although a similar

kind of myth has sometimes been adapted in what might be called "the heroic hunter ideology" of the fishing industry.

In a more general sense, the modern Icelandic community thrives on various forms of individualistic ideology, some of which are much the same as those one comes across in other Western countries and some of which seem to be exclusively Nordic or Icelandic. At the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of Icelanders made their names abroad as investors and entrepreneurs, often invoking Viking images of bold raids on foreign shores and other such individualistic and reckless models of behaviour (Jóhannesson, 2014, 141-144). In the end, however, their business ventures grew out of proportion to the economic and financial size of the country itself, and they came crashing down in 2008, when the international banking crisis halted the easy flow of loans on which these "Venture Vikings" had built their empires. Their opportunistic and irresponsible behaviour caused a great deal of damage to many people, both in Iceland and abroad, and will serve for a long time as a reminder of the follies and hazards of such an ideology.

In the area of culture, one could easily argue that traces of Bjarni Thorarensen's climate theory can be found in Icelandic literature of the first part of the twentieth century. Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940), a cosmopolitan giant among Icelandic poets in the first decades of the century, was a firm believer in strong individuals and held similar views to Thorarensen on the healthy harshness of the North: "The cold is the physician of the Nordic countries", he writes in one of his poems ("Fyrir holds eða moldar kvilla og kröm / er kuldinn handlæknir Norðurlanda": Benediktsson, "Hafísinn" ("Pack Ice"), 1964, 302; see also the survey chapter of this period in Icelandic literature by Elísson, 2006).

At the same time, this myth or ideology has also proved an irritant to many writers in the twentieth century and provoked them to challenge it in their writings. A strong response to the myth of the heroic nation living in the harsh North can be found, for example, in some of the greatest novels of Iceland's best-known author of the twentieth century, Halldór Laxness (1902-1998). In *Sjálfstætt fólk* (*Independent People*, published in two parts in 1934 and 1935), he subverts this Nordic myth by writing about a poor farmer who believes so stubbornly in his own strength and independence that he sacrifices everything he really cares for on the altar of his individualism, including the happiness of his own family. In the end, Bjartur, as the farmer is called, loses the little farm, Sumarhús, of which he is so proud, but in his defeat becomes something of a better man. He begins to see that "Each man for himself" might not be the only maxim on earth, and that the working classes might benefit from solidarity and similar stances. As can be gathered from the conclusion of this important novel, it was written under the rising star of socialism in the Nordic countries, in the period between the two world wars (Jóhannesson, 2006, 384-386).

Gunnar Gunnarsson (1889-1975), another great novelist, wrote about the sublime nature of Iceland in a very special way. In the novella *Aðventa* (*Advent*, 1937), Gunnarsson tells the gripping tale of a hardy shepherd rounding up sheep in the extreme cold in the Highlands in December. He is something of the Good Shepherd (the novella was indeed translated into English under that name in 1940), although the story need not be interpreted on religious grounds, despite it centring on an individual who is willing to risk his life repeatedly to save stray sheep in the deep of winter. The common hero of the novella shows great dignity in the

face of extreme weather conditions and in his quiet way proves to be a survivor (Jóhannsson, 2006, 361-362). These are just two examples of important Icelandic novels dealing with the harsh reality of nature and the myths that are connected to it.

Certain aspects of the lingering myth of the heroic nation of the North have been tackled in various modern and postmodern works of Icelandic literature (see the survey chapter of this period by Eysteinnsson and Dagsdóttir, 2006). One could name novelists of different generations, such as Svava Jakobsdóttir (1930-2004) and Einar Kárason (b. 1955), and many more who have written interesting stories about the individualistic and competitive character of the Icelandic community. The shaping powers of Nordic nature are certainly at work in novels by writers such as Steinunn Sigurðardóttir (b. 1950), Vigdís Grímsdóttir (b. 1953), Gyrðir Elíasson (b. 1961) and Sjón (b. 1962), where an exciting fusion of poetry and prose is often to be found. Some of their characters are, however, not only shaped by the natural but also by the supernatural or mystical – a characteristic which was, for example, also to be found in Grímur Thomsen's literary definition of the Nordic elements, where supernatural creatures such as trolls played an important part.

The half-mystical territory of the Highlands is now quite common as a setting in Icelandic novels. A few years ago, Ófeigur Sigurðsson (b. 1975) published *Öræfi* (2014), a novel that can be read as a magnificent ode to the sublime in nature, centring on the area around the glacier Öræfajökull in the southeast. The terrifying beauty and attraction of the glacial landscape in Sigurðsson's novel can be juxtaposed with works such as Gyrðir Elíasson's *Sandárbókin* (*The Book of Sandá River*, 2007), which has the significant subtitle *Pastoralsónata* (*A Pastoral Sonata*), suggesting a more placid, lowland nature, although equally hazardous in itself, suffused with beauty and melancholy.

Both novels present nature – whether emphasising its sublime or pastoral aspects – as opposed, as an alternative, to the trappings of modern-day city life. They show the breadth of Icelandic writers' preoccupation with nature and how important it still is, not only as a setting but also as an artistic subject and reality in all its diversity. Furthermore, these novels can be seen to reactivate the sublime and the pastoral as the literary modes or fundamental opposites that originated in Icelandic letters in the nineteenth century and clearly continue to appeal to writers and artists today. Literary discourses or aesthetics such as the sublime and the pastoral are just as relevant now as they were during the heyday of Romanticism, and it seems to be difficult to imagine Iceland without them.

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### Biographical note

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