Imagined, Intangible Hope:

Images of Iceland from W.H. Auden and Halldór Laxness

by Neven Lochhead

In 1935, the second and final volume of Halldór Laxness’ *Independent People* was completed and published. The year following, English poet Wystan Hugh Auden traveled to Iceland with his companion, Irish poet Louis MacNeice. During his few months in Iceland, Auden wrote prose and poetry in large quantities, an endeavor that led to the publication of a travel book titled *Letters from Iceland* in 1937, which also included photos taken by Auden. The distance between Laxness and Auden as writers is as vast and as wide as the great Vatnajökull glacier: Laxness the steadfast national voice composing in his native tongue, Auden the radical young poet seeking artistic exile from a repressive England and finding refuge in the landscape of the fjords. In terms of their position in the world in relation to Iceland, their perspectives are equally polar: Laxness looks outwards from Iceland to the rest of the Europe, while Auden gazes towards the island with a lens of European modernity. In these works, Laxness and Auden independently explore, express, define and move through their own version of Iceland, portraying its mythic history, its modern people and its extreme landscape in ways specific to their personal position in the world. Auden’s *Letters from Iceland* introduces Iceland as a great hope, a place where a spiritual connection between man, nature and myth has been preserved and can be retrieved by the poetic mind. Laxness’ Iceland in *Independent People* is a dark and despairing placed filled with decay, death and hopelessness. His native Icelandic voice relentlessly rids the landscape of any idealized or romanticized notions, allowing for only brief moments of brightness before a continued onslaught of dark, unfiltered reality. However, despite the vast differences between *Independent People* and *Letters from Iceland*, these two texts present unique dialogues about Iceland, the notion of place and its role in the pursuit of hope, and by
extension, of a yearning human spirit of modernity as expressed in the 1930s.

Auden’s *Letters from Iceland* is a diverse collage of works written during a three-month voyage, featuring prose, poetry, newspaper clippings, photographs and other media. Following the book’s opening poem, which is the first installment of a five-part poem written to the deceased Lord Byron, is the poem *Journey to Iceland*. The brief poem invites the reader into the poet’s mind in a pre-journey state – Auden arrives on the page with a fresh and excited mind ready to absorb a new and foreign land, then approaching on the horizon. It is as though the poem was born amidst the sea, with the boat cutting through a thick fog, and the scene of Reykjavik’s shore becoming visible in the distance. It is a suspended moment of travel, and the poet is filled with only abstract and vivid visions of the approaching land. Within the form of the poem, Auden displays eagerness for the approaching land by constantly beginning lines with “And,” which happens four times in the first two stanzas and is the word that begins the poem. This constant conjunction, also defining the beginning of a new thought, creates a kind of psychological leaping, as though he is unable to remain focused in on one specific idea or image for too long, like a child first entering a blossoming park at the peak of spring.

The first line of the poem reads, “And the traveler hopes,” (Auden, l. 1) a line which is perhaps the most instructive statement in understanding Auden’s position in relation to the Island. His self-identity as a “traveler” and as the other is made explicit to the reader in this line. He does not refer to himself as an explorer or even a poet, but a traveler, a man in motion who will pass through a space and then be gone. It is a consistent theme in *Letters* for Auden to refer to himself with these terms of otherness. In a later work, *Letter to R.H.S. Crossman, ESQ*. Auden writes, “I walk among them taking photographs; The children stare and follow, think of questions to prove the stranger real.” (Auden, 220) In this instance, Auden refers to himself as a “stranger,” a man unknowable
to the native Icelanders. Unlike his life in England, in Iceland it is not his writing, his family name nor his reputation that defines him, rather it is the inquisitiveness of the innocent children who detect a stranger that “proves” or ushers him into reality. In this moment of self-reflection, Auden invites us to discover how the Icelanders view him, as opposed to how he views himself. One can imagine the children asking: Who are you? Where are you from? Auden does not concern the reader with the imagined answer of “I am W. H. Auden, a poet from England.” For Auden, these answers are not critical. As a traveler, the vaporous existence he has on the Island is shaped by the questions that are presented before him – simple, unadorned questions that materialize his identity on the island as a traveler, as a stranger. Auden distinctly admits, the traveler is not able to walk with the children, but is instead only able to walk “among” them, not unlike a Whitehall might float among the swans, but never with them – never knowing the water as they know it.

Auden pushes this self-reflexivity in a photograph included as part of Letters from Iceland, called “The Student of Prose and Conduct” - a grainy, haphazardly framed image of the poet himself, almost completely obstructed by what appears to be someone’s leg very close to the lens. In the image, Auden appears with sleep-filled eyes and holding a cigarette in his mouth. It is as if he is turning himself into the caricature of a poet, or at the very least presenting himself as an object in the frame of his own camera. In this photo, Auden becomes the object of the process of observation.

Despite making great efforts to be consciously aware of himself as a traveler in Iceland, he also makes many references to being not someone and not somewhere. In this first line of Journey to Iceland he tells what the traveler hopes for; “And the traveler hopes: Let me be far from any Physician,” (l. 1-2) Auden is using the physician as a symbol for a modern, developed society. To be far from a physician is to remove oneself
from a structured world, for physicians do not employ themselves in nature or untouched land. In these first two lines, Auden reveals that it is this distance from society at which he hopes to find himself.

On this journey, Iceland provides all the sensual surroundings to satisfy this dream of distance from the menacing modern world. Auden creates an idealized picture of a beautiful, primal and otherworldly experience of the country in *Journey to Iceland*:

“And the great plains are for ever where the cold fish is hunted,
And everywhere; the light birds flicker and flaunt,
Under the scolding flag the lover
Of islands may see at last,
Faintly, his limited hope; and he nears the glitter
Of glaciers, the sterile immature mountains intense
In the abnormal day of his world, and a river’s
Fan-like polyp of sand.” (l. 5-12)

Auden imbues his hope within the physical features of the island, declaring that his hope is something that can be *seen*, within the rocks and mountains of an abnormal world as the boat approaches Iceland’s shore. The use of the word “sterile” suggests a land that has not been infected or become sick with the maturity of modernity. Auden being a man of the modern world and of England, who has undeniably suffered from the infection of modernity, views these mountains as an area of untainted life where he can cleanse his own stained perspective.

Later in the same poem, another statement provides great definition of Auden’s perspective of Iceland: “For Europe is absent. This is an island and therefore unreal.” (l.
The nature of Iceland of being a land removed from Europe makes it a unique and surreal entity compared to what Auden understands of reality or the real world of Europe. It is this unreality which Auden seeks, and he is ready and willing to exile himself into “The rock, and rocks, and waterfalls brushing the rocks, and among the rocks birds.” (l. 15-16)

The wonder and escape that Auden experiences in the moments of approach in the *Journey to Iceland* is perhaps the beginning of what Paul Beekman Taylor calls in his article “Auden’s Icelandic Myth of Exile” a “Life long artistic commitment to Iceland.” (Taylor, 213) According to Taylor, this was an artistic perspective that Auden applied to his writing that allowed for him to create distance from the rest of the English writers and don what his contemporaries labeled as a “Nordic Mask.” (Taylor, 220) As a child and through his years of adolescence in England, Auden’s concept of Iceland existed purely within the imagination and through the reading of Nordic myths. He expressed this connection to Iceland later in his life when he stated in a speech, “The images of Nordic myths which my father planted in my imagination were protected like a treasure trove to be retrieved in good time.” (Taylor, 227) In *Journey to Iceland*, written during Auden’s first of many trips to Iceland, a special “good time” had arrived for the poet – a spectacular and rare moment when the magical and intangible myths that were planted and grew within Auden’s mind, within his dreams as a child, are meeting with excitement a tangible reality. The “rock where an outlaw dreaded the dark” (Auden, l. 19-20) of which Auden writes is for him no longer a line on the page or a flickering dream, but can be seen, felt, understood and lived before him. Taylor continues to describe the experience of Auden’s time in Iceland as “a confirmation that the worlds of the poet’s physical and imaginative visions can converge on one natural and mythological landscape.” (Taylor 227) It is as if Auden’s image of Iceland is double exposed: one being the true and physical space of the mountains and the fjords, the other a hazy Viking
ship resting in the water outside of Gisli’s fjord of hiding. It is through these two realities, the imaginative and the tangible, that the poet navigates Iceland.

Auden’s physical and poetic journey is a liberation of the imagined. Auden writes:

“The pale,
From too much passion of kissing feel pure in its deserts.” (l. 28-29)

Iceland is a place where the pureness of intimacy can be found and restored. It is a place where idealized notions of emotions have remained completely untouched. The emotions are found only within the experience of the landscape, within the endless expansive deserts of Iceland.

The sentiments Auden expresses of emotion often echo those made by the Romantic poets. Specifically, the emotional overflow that Auden is unable to contain mirrors the connection William Wordsworth expresses in his contemplative nature poetry in his trips to Tintern Abbey. From “Lines Composed a few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the banks of Wye during a Tour July 13, 1798:”

“And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.” (l. 93-103)

Wordsworth implants an unexplainable, sublime joy within the images of landscape, saying that an all-encompassing spiritual “motion” in fact “dwells” within the landscape of Tintern Abbey, a place that is silent of the industrial roar. For Wordsworth, this abstract connection with the natural space is an elevation of thought, for it maintains purity that can only be contained by nature. It seems Auden is also channeling this abstract “spontaneous overflow of powerful things” (Wordsworth, 273) that Wordsworth claims lies at the heart of poetic experience. For Auden in Journey to Iceland, this powerful experience is one that forces him to the writing of poetry, as he states in the final line, “The writer runs howling to his art.” (Auden, l. 52) In this extremely inspiring and foreign visual landscape, the only place to which Auden can turn to express it is to poetry, as if the mountains are drawing words out of him. This, again, reverberates in what Wordsworth describes poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” (Wordsworth, 273) a phenomenon that, for Auden, can only happen in places like Iceland where nature remains untouched and preserves a life and space alien to modernity.

In so many of the beautiful moments of nature poetry from Auden, it is difficult (if not impossible) to remove the reality that the poet will always be a traveler and an observer. In a brief passage in Birna Bjarnadóttir’s A Book of Fragments, after remarking how people flocked to the Island to see a spectacle, she makes a reflection of those who come to Iceland to observe how the Icelanders are different: “One could observe the observers projecting their transparent need for a different kind of place here on earth.” (Bjarnadóttir, 27) Is this not exactly what Auden himself is searching for in his trip to Iceland? Does Iceland not just satisfy Auden’s need for a place to escape from the
constricting world of English society and to realize his poetic visions? His reflections about Iceland as being “unreal” shows his belief in the Island not being just an escape from the constrictions of England but an outright removal from reality, an unreality that Auden needs to exist on earth. A moment of truth shows itself in Wordsworth’s *Lines* as he writes:

“\[I bounded o’er the mountains, by the sides\_

Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,\_

Wherever nature led: more like a man

**Flying from something that he dreads, than one**

**Who sought the thing he loved.**” (68-72)

In these Romantic impressions of nature, there is a blurred line between truly connecting and admiring the land and the simple fleeing from the modern age. Wordsworth’s distinction between fleeing from dread versus searching for love presents an interesting perspective of Auden’s Icelandic works. One must wonder whether Auden is not simply providing himself with what Bjarnadóttir calls a “luxury” (Bjarnadóttir, 27) that observers allow for themselves in places of great foreignness. Perhaps after inquiring about his garments, the children and the mountains too should ask the lover of islands this question: Well, Wystan Hugh Auden, is this love?

The gaze that returns Auden’s romantic impressions as a traveling poet is the unblinking stare of Iceland’s most prominent writer in the 20th century, Halldór Laxness. Laxness is a writer who comes from not only a completely different country and upbringing from Auden, but also chose early on to embark on a literary enterprise that completely opposes the notion of exile from home that Auden embodied throughout his
career. While Auden was seeking an escape from his cultural reality, Laxness remains constant in his deep devotion to his native land of Iceland. Laxness’ relationship with his homeland was certainly a complicated one, often stating that he felt as though he was “shipwrecked” on the Island. Where Auden travels to Iceland as a passer-by, an impermanent entity on the land, Laxness’ shipwrecked identity is one that affirms a true sense of permanence, if not imprisonment, within the country. Leithauser writes that Laxness was “a man apart yet always true to his origins.” (Leithauser, 14) This closeness and loyalty to his origins is reflected in the very decision that Laxness makes to write in the Icelandic language. Leithauser informs, “For writers of his generation, prevailing wisdom maintained that any notable literary career should be conducted in Danish, a Continental tongue that linked its writers to a vigorous and sophisticated world. Icelandic, by contrast, was a ‘small’ language, spoken back then by fewer than 200,000 people, most of them rural and poverty-stricken.” (Leithauser, 16) Laxness was by no means an uneducated man, nor was he a man who had not traveled the world. This decision to compose his literature in Icelandic was therefore a conscious and deliberate choice that defined him as a writer of and for Iceland.

*Independent People* is the story of Bjartur: a farmer, poet and father. As a complete product of Iceland itself, Bjartur’s connection and history with the land draws great parallels with Laxness himself. A part of Laxness’ shipwrecked soul that is trapped on the Island has been implanted into the steadfast farmer of Bjartur who is purely a product of the land. Further, the intense appreciation that Bjartur has for language and poetry mirrors stories about Laxness as a person. Leithauser writes, “No one in his presence took more seriously than he did the business of releasing a sentence into the air.” (Leithauser, 14) The comparisons to make between Bjartur and Laxness can only be speculated and Laxness’ intentions never truly confirmed. But at the very least, it can be said that Bjartur and Laxness share a deep native Icelandic history – they are both, and
always will be, men of Iceland.

Given that Laxness has this identity as a native and devoted Icelandic author, the way in which he interprets the landscape of Iceland, as well as the world beyond it, varies heavily from the travel texts of Auden. Laxness demonstrates an incomparable prowess of knowledge when it comes to navigating the physical space of the fjords. In the chapter called “The Search” in which Bjartur has embarked on a journey to recover one of his lost, beloved sheep, Laxness weaves the reader through the extreme landscape with an unmatched knowledge of the space and specifically its inhabitants, the birds: “The winged summer visitors of the moors have most of them flown, but the grouse has not yet left for the farms and remains to skim the frozen peat in low flight, gurgling much, blinking an inquisitive eye.” (Laxness, 86) Where Auden’s vision of the landscape is clouded with the idealized dreams of mythology, Laxness’ is crystal clear, as if presenting a detailed ethological survey of the land. He observes the nature not from a distance, but cuts through the space between him and the birds, bringing the proximity of perception closer and closer, so that one can hear the nearly inaudible “gurgling” of the animal, and closer still to the very eye of the creature. In this brief idescription, Laxness has ushered us towards the vision of the bird itself; and as such, the very vision of nature is presented before the reader with a complete clarity of perception.

Bjartur’s connection with nature is demonstrated not only through a clear knowledge of the space, but also by the importance of time in the landscape, of which Bjartur and Laxness are wealthy: “It was on the eastern slopes of this extensive moorland plateau that he had spend his childhood, on its western border that he had worked as a shepherd all the years of his youth, and in one of its valleys that he now lived as a freeholder, so he knew it from spring to the end of winter, in fragrance and the song of birds, in frost and silence, through innumerable journeys in search of sheep that bound
him so closely to it.” (Laxness, 85-86) Experience itself has tied the farmer to the land. He has grown from it as the plants have grown from the soil, or the sheep from the grasses. The connection here between man and nature is simply impossible to question as it has the undeniable power of actual experience living on the land. In the heart of this Icelandic farmer, the land is “his spiritual mother, his church, his better world, as the ocean must inevitably be to the seafarer.” (Laxness, 86) These descriptions of spiritual fulfillment in the landscape certainly echo those made by Auden, yet it is simply the position of Laxness, as man and author of Iceland that makes these pronouncements more believable, genuine and clear.

In “The Search,” the commonalities between Bjartur’s connection with the land and Auden’s continue, as Laxness states that in this nature Bjartur “would feel himself exalted above the trivial,” (Laxness, 86) and instead “live in that wonderful consciousness of freedom.” (Laxness, 86) These moments are certainly romantic ones, depicting a purity of experience found within the surrounding environment. These statements are quite similar to the ethos of Wordsworth who also cherishes the powerful overflow of emotions that arises only in the wilderness. There are lines that Laxness writes that could very well appear verbatim in Wordsworth’s philosophical texts, such as “In this silence, this light, this landscape, the man is also perfect in his harmony with the soul within him.” (Laxness, 87) Further, Laxness also associates nature’s presence and need for poetry to best describe it. He writes, “There was nothing to trouble the proud eye of the poet,” (Laxness, 86) and “Here there was nothing to distract the mind from poetry.” (Laxness, 86) It seems that for Bjartur, Auden and Wordsworth too, in the face of the immense beauty of nature, it is only possible to do what Auden articulated as “howling” towards his art. This moment within the chapter of Bjartur first setting off in the mountains is filled with a Romantic and beautiful harmony between man and nature. However, within the context of the rest of the chapter, and the rest of the novel, it is clear
that this moment is to be recognized as an extremely brief flicker of light amidst the dark shadow of reality that Laxness casts over the mountains, the fjords and image of Iceland that he wishes to project.

Only a few pages away from these moments of blissful freedom, Laxness introduces a complete loss of control, clarity and perception in Bjartur’s journey. As the search for the missing sheep continues, events begin to spiral out of control. The clearness of Laxness’ description of the birds is willfully disrupted by the author as the scene shifts suddenly such that “there was nothing to be seen except a bird that Bjartur did not know.” (Laxness, 87) The creatures of nature have escaped the grasp of Bjartur, not unlike his lost sheep. This new presence of an unknowable bird signals an onslaught of disorientation that is thrust upon the farmer as the snow grows “heavier and heavier, the face of the desert wearing a sullen look.” (Laxness, 88) As the scene continues, he stumbling upon a steed, which he decides to attempt to hunt, an endeavor that leads him to ruin in the mountains. While grappling the back of the steed, Laxness asks a question: “Was Bjartur really proud of his romantic progress? No, far from it.” (91) Here, Laxness directly speaks to the romantic vision that previously filled the space and exposes it as a kind of shameful and destructive condition for Bjartur that has brought misfortune to his hunt for the whereabouts of his sheep. Where he was previously one with nature, Bjartur now “felt himself as unhappily situated as a man out in mid-ocean in an oarless boat,” (Laxness, 91) completely inverting the previous image of a seafarer amidst a sea with this image of hopeless drifter lost in a surging and unforgiving ocean. The romantic connection with his environment that preceded these moments now seems an utter impossibility – Bjartur is in a fight with nature and with death.

In this struggle, where Bjartur is dragged into glacier water by the reindeer for which he is hunting, and his distance from certain death becomes less and less, the farmer
continually returns to poetry: “To still his senses he kept his mind fixed persistently on the world-famous battles of the rhymes.” (Laxness, 93) The poetry fills his mind completely, at one point shouting it at the mountains themselves. Sleepless, Bjartur descends into madness, perceiving his battle with the landscape as the battle of Grimur. The blizzard becomes “the demon’s gnashing jaws” (Laxness, 94) to which Bjartur hurls curses. His mind is whirling with images of the Icelandic myths: “There swam before his inner eye pictures of men and events, both from life and from the Ballads – horse-meat steaming on a great blatter, flocks of sheep bleating in the fold.” (Laxness, 95) It is a complete confusion of two realities, the imaginative and the tangible, and Bjartur is falling further and further into this chaos. The madness reaches its peak as he becomes another character completely by, “assum[ing] another personality.” (Laxness, 95) Bjartur has lost his identity as a farmer on a hunt, descending into the myths and drowning himself within them. This is an assault from Laxness’ on the romantic vision of nature, with the farmer no longer being able to be one with the land, and has in fact engulfed him claimed his humanness, describing Bjartur as “making his way through the blizzard on all fours, crawling over stony slopes and ridges like an animal.” (Laxness, 96) Here, Laxness has shattered the romantic vision of the land by pushing the vision itself, one fuelled by poetic inspiration, further and further into the foreground until romance bursts and becomes madness. The freedom of poetry and experience grows into a storm where the two worlds violently merge and swirl the rational Bjartur into an incomprehensible state. The romantic vision of Bjartur’s joy that Laxness briefly allows on the page quickly becomes that agent that propelled the farmer’s utter demise.

The novel continues along with this tone of darkness with the complete fall of Bjartur and his farm. It is a story that is ridden with death, decay, and hopelessness. There are, however, some more brief moments of brightness. An instance of brightness occurs when Bjartur has left the farm on a trip and a teacher who brings with him books and
knowledge about the rest of the world visits the children. This is one of the rare moments of *Independent People* in which the gaze of Laxness looks beyond his native land and the idea of an external world comes into the experience. The teacher’s knowledge is filled with a true sense of hope, telling little Nonie and Asta Sollilja that he will be teaching them “… of new countries and old; of new lands that rise from the ocean like young maidens and bathe their precious shells and thousand-coloured corals in the summer’s first light, and of old lands with fragrant forests and peacefully rustling leaves; of castles a thousand years old that tower up from the blue mountains in the roman moonlight, and of sun-white cities that open their arms on green waveless oceans lapping in one perpetual dancing sunlight.” (Laxness, 314) The teacher weaves together a highly romantic vision of distant lands that causes, in comparison with the darkness of the children’s lives in Iceland and on the farm, a distant hope to grow in the hearts of young children. However idealized and false this image of the rest of the world may be, it nonetheless introduces for the first time in the novel, a sense of brightness amongst the dread. Laxness writes, “Yes, there’s a better time for all of us. This refrain of [the teacher’s], this new motive, rose singing with sudden joy through winter’s somber music, to warm winter’s chilly hearts, crushed beneath the laws of an inflexible calendar.” (Laxness, 313) The teacher’s mere presence is a thoroughfare to the outside world, providing warmth to the frigid air of hopelessness. In these moments, one can imagine Auden’s spirit in his boyhood, lifting above the everyday life of England and being filled with the mystical hope of a distant land after hearing the sagas for the first time. Nonni and Asta share this excitement and intoxication with an alternate reality: “Long after the guest had started snoring, the children lay awake, the fragrance of the books still in their nostrils, savoring the glory of this new era which they knew had dawned upon their lives.” (Laxness, 317) Laxness introduces the same idealized beauty of a distant land that Auden experiences with Iceland in his travels. This moment is welcomed and provides a total relief from the sorrowful world of *Independent People*, a relief that Laxness locates
Another instance of hope comes when Bjartur’s son, Gvendur, is extended an invitation to America. It begins with a letter from little Nonie, who has long since fled Iceland and is living in America. The note reads: “Two hundred dollars, which Uncle is sending you so that you can come to America immediately, the war is over, times are good, you can be anything you like.” (Laxness, 391) The invitation presents Gvendur with an incredible possibility to be something, and even further, to become any thing he desires. This is the promise of America, and it is a vivid and inspiring distant reality for Gvendur that exists only externally, beyond the Island. Gvendur is, of course, taken by this promise and decides he will go to America, at which point he takes on an almost mythic identity within the community of Iceland, as “Children stood behind house corners and yelled after him: ‘America, America hey!’” (Laxness, 392) Gvendur has come to represent the link to a larger and better world and thus has an element of exotic excitement for the local Icelanders as he plans to take off into what is perhaps an unreal dream for most. Laxness continues to tell, “Lots of people stopped him on the street and asked him if he was the man. Yes, he was the man. Women appeared at the windows, lifted the curtains, and measured him from top to toe with romantic curiosity because they knew it was he.” (Laxness, 397) In Letters from Iceland, Auden experiences this same “romantic curiosity” in the landscape of Iceland and it is for him as well, a place where a new identity can be attained and where his dreams can materialize. Where Auden looks to Iceland as a place where he can find hope and escape, Laxness describes it as an island where the desire for leaving is very strong amongst its people.

In the two examples of these instances of hope and brightness, the teacher and the invitation to America, Laxness employs the same shattering of romantic vision that he
used in Bjartur’s earlier scene in nature. With the teacher, the beacon of a new world, his time with them ends in the most horrific of ways with his raping of Asta Sollilja: “Never, never might anything so horrible happen again.” (Laxness, 334) The teacher precedes the act with a game of wishing, where the teacher tells them that he will grant them any wish. The brief flicker of hope that fills the hearts of the children in this game and the hope that the teacher embodies as a gateway into the outside world is extinguished by this single violent and horrific act. The gaze immediately turns inwards to the desolateness and despair of Iceland again. In the instance of Gvendur and America, the young man himself is filled with too much of a romantic vision and falls for an Icelandic girl the night before his departure. He misses the boat, decides he will spend his money instead to buy the girl a beautiful racehorse, and embarrasses himself publically when the girl looses interest in Gvendur now that he is not going to America. America remains a hazy mirage for the young man. With this turn of events and shattering of expectations, a sense of being trapped or “shipwrecked” on the island returns to Laxness’ account of Icelandic life. This self-induced emptying of hope can perhaps be explained by critic Kristjan Karlsson who writes of Laxness, “He has deprived us, a small nation much sinned against by God and men, of the vice of self-pity.’” (Leithauser, 17) The harshness and hopelessness that Laxness casts over Iceland, denies the possibility of self-pity, creating a landscape that is raw and unforgiving. The steps that Laxness takes to define the cold reality is a necessary step for Iceland to escape their mythological and romantic identity, an outsider’s vision that authors like Auden insist upon when arriving on the shores of the island. With the native writer of Laxness painting such a dark picture and defining the truth of iceland, he creates an Icelandic reality that is fully infected with despair - in the process he frees it from a stifling historic and imposed image. It states that the country is more than its myths. Stripping the mythic romanticism from the image, Laxness leaves only the power of the land itself and the despair of its people, ferrying Iceland away from an “unreality” that Auden insists lives in the sublime fjords, and into a harsh yet ferociously tangible
These two books *Letters from Iceland* and *Independent People*, written and published within a few years of one another, demonstrate two prominent figures writing from two very different perspectives. Auden displays an intense need to escape from his home of England and the clutches of modernity, to arrive on Iceland with the intense hope that his innocent and pure dreams can merge with reality. His dreams and hopes in *Journey to Iceland* present a beautiful relationship between poet, landscape and the past, yet they do not escape a tendency to romanticize and exoticize the country, as Auden views the land as a world of foreignness that is inherently unreal. What Laxness does in *Independent People* is inform that Iceland is like the rest of the world – fully capable of harboring despair, hopelessness or vanity. Despite the vast differences between *Independent People* and *Letters from Iceland*, these two texts present a dialogue about the location of hope and it’s relation to the global identity of Iceland, each text reflecting a yearning for hope the 1930s. These two books from the 1930s prove that whether in the industrialized England or the rural heart of Iceland’s agricultural heritage, hoping and dreaming of idealized futures in imagined, intangible landscapes is a product of a global, modern human spirit.
Works Cited


