4. Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, Knight of Industry

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Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, Knight of Industry

4.1 Remaking the Medieval

Perhaps one of the key differences between Icelandic Crash-writing and its Anglophone equivalents is that Icelandic writers have been able to latch on to real figures from the banking boom, centering their characters and stories firmly on real-life biography. This is an evident strength of how Icelandic writers have been able to respond to the Crash. It is striking, however, that the real-life figures treated in this way are few: primarily Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson (born 1967, the co-owner of a controlling share in Landsbanki from 2002, named the richest Icelander by Forbes not only for 2005 but still in 2017), his father Björgólfur Guðmundsson (born 1941, chairman of Landsbanki 2003–8, and the person who has experienced the world’s biggest personal bankruptcy), and to a lesser extent their competitor Jón Ásgeir Jóhanesson (born 1968, one of the key owners of Glitnir, and a major owner of numerous Icelandic and UK high street brands). As the prosecutions following the Crash have emphasized, writers have had a true rogues’ gallery from which to choose as they criticize the banking boom. Thus the focus on Björgólfur Thor (who has not been prosecuted) reflects the tangibility to writers of the public image which Björgólfur in particular cultivated. Examining this interaction between
Björgólfur’s own self-mythologization and writers’ renarrations of it provides particularly interesting insights, then, into how finance can be made accessible to fiction, and what the limitations of this biographical approach to narrating finance are. Several crime novels model major characters clearly on Björgólfur Thor: the main examples are Óttar M. Norðfjörd’s thriller Áttablaðarósinn (where he is the basis for Egill Brandt, discussed in §2.5.2 above) and Sigrún Davíðsdóttir’s Samhengi hlutanna (discussed in §2.3.2, where he manifests as Óttar Hafsteins-son). But Björgólfur is most prominent in more determinedly literary material, which ostentatiously rewrites his biography through the prism of medieval Icelandic sagas. Bjarni Bjarnason’s Mannorð rewrites Björgólfur as Starkaður-Leví, drawing on the character Starkaður Stórvirksson in the legendary saga Gautreks saga.1 Bjarni Harðarson’s Sigurðar saga fóts uses the medieval romance-saga of the same name to rewrite a blend of Björgólfur Thor and Jón Ásgeir as Sigurður fótur. Töfrahöllin, by Böðvar Guðmundsson, draws on both families in shaping its sinister investor Kormákur Cooltran. Prior to these, Práinn Bertelsson, one of the few writers to highlight the problems of the banking boom long before the Crash, wrote crime novels that were impressively well researched romans à clef focusing on the escapades of the Björgólfar (figured as Haraldur Rúriksson in Dauðans óvissi tími, 2004) and Jón Ásgeir (figured as Magnús Mínus in Valkyrjur, 2005). The former novel makes extensive use of Fóstbræðra saga and the latter Völsunga saga. This chapter focuses on two of these novels as particularly interesting explorations of the mythmaking by Icelandic financiers and novelists: Sigurðar saga fóts and Mannorð. Happily, Mannorð has also appeared in English translation, as The Reputation.

Thus Björgólfur Thor himself is only in a limited sense the subject of this chapter: rather, the subject is the myth of Björgólfur Thor, because it is emphatically this to which novelists have responded. (It is partly for this reason that this chapter refers to him following Icelandic convention, rather than by his preferred international moniker of Thor Bjorgolfsson.) Analysing the representation of Björgólfur Thor does afford a case-study of the representation of financiers after the Crash, but much more importantly plunges us into examining the role of medievalism in Icelandic discourse, both during the banking boom and in its wake. More than most of the protagonists of Iceland’s boom, Björgólfur Thor developed a prominent public persona. He made much of both the ancestral and the mythic resonances of his second name, calling himself Thor in English; calling his investment firm Novator, understood as a Latinizing (albeit coincidentally feminizing) pun meaning “new Thor”; and calling his plan to build a luxury yacht Project Mars, an interpretatio romana of börr. A conveniently Anglophone example of Björgólfur Thor’s public image as the boom reached fever pitch is the 2005 Forbes interview tellingly (if tackily) entitled “Thor’s Saga,” whose header runs “after his father was felled by a business scandal, Thor Bjorgolfsson went to find his fortune and redeem the family name. He’s now Iceland’s first billionaire”.

Bjorgolfsson has been on a quest to redeem his family’s reputation. “Respect is the number one thing that occupies my mind,” says Thor (pronounced “tore”), as he is universally known. “Power, money, that’s just the road to respect,” he explains, before paraphrasing a well-known Icelandic verse: “After all, money disappears, friends die, and you die your-

2 Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir and Guðni Elísson, “‘Og eftir sitjum við með sektarkennd í brjósti’: Hallgrímur Helgason og íslenska efnahagshrunið,” Ritið 12, no. 2 (2012): 169–97, at 188.
4 Kroll, “Thor’s Saga.”
self, but your reputation remains.” That pursuit has led him to the U.S., Russia, Bulgaria and eventually back to Iceland for a triumphant homecoming, when he seized control of the nation’s oldest bank and installed his father as its chairman.

Like his Viking ancestors, Thor got mad, got even — and got very rich.

The “well-known Icelandic verse” comes from the Old Norse mythological poem Hávamál (see §3.2 above). Icelandic novelists’ usual response to Björgólfur’s medievalist myth-making is correspondingly epitomized by the epigraph to Óttar M. Norðfjörð’s satirical Tíu litlir bankastrákar, where Óttar uses the simple expedient of selecting an adjacent maxim from the same poem: “margur verður af aurum api” (“money makes an ape of many”) — that is, the response of novelists after the Crash is to say, “if you can do medievalism, we can do it better.” How far Björgólfur Thor himself is to be credited with the cultivation of his medievalist image and how far he simply reflected the expectations of his Icelandic audience back at them is unclear — certainly his autobiography vacillates between an insistence, on the one hand, on how as an investor he likes to keep a low profile, and on how throughout his adult life he has sought to distance himself from Iceland, and, on the other, a patent obsession with cultivating a public persona (of which the autobiography is itself evidence). Unsurprisingly, then, both Mannorð and Sigurdar saga fóts present a character at times bewildered by the persona which he finds himself inhabiting.

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6 Óttar M. Norðfjörð, Tíu litlir bankastrákar [Ten little banker-boys] (Reykjavík: Sögur, 2008); cf. Evans, ed., Hávamál, 54 (st. 75). See also Sigfús Bjartmarsson’s earlier poetry collection Andræði [Antonymic] (Reykjavík: Bjartur, 2004), which makes extensive use of this strategy.
The recent surge of academic work on medievalism has tended to focus on Anglophone, Anglo-American literature, and the present book is intended as one step towards rectifying this. Focusing on Anglophone writing, John M. Ganim has suggested that despite its continuing power as a source of imagery for popular culture, from films to computer games, the Medieval has lost its status as a critical discourse in relation to the present. It is no longer an Utopian ideal to be recovered, while its negative rhetorical implications, from “medieval justice” to the “medieval” social conditions and practices in, most typically and revealingly, Islamic states, remain almost unquestioned.

How accurate Ganim’s statement is depends partly on what one accepts as “critical discourse” or a “Utopian ideal”: even when he wrote, medieval imagery was being touted by white-supremacists, and white-supremacist medievalism has become increasingly prominent in Anglophonia in recent years. Ganim was also writing before the rise of the self-professed Islamic State and its own mobilization of selected medievalisms. Still, as a generalization about mainstream popular culture, Ganim’s statement is plausible, and is also resonant in an Icelandic context. Still, his claims less obviously hold true for mainstream Icelandic culture than many places in the West. Although medieval texts have enjoyed diminishing cultural salience in Iceland over the last century and a half, the Romantic Nationalism developed in the nineteenth century remains central enough to current Icelandic culture, and medieval Icelandic literature central enough to nationalism, for medievalism to continue as a potent

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resource in Icelandic politics. Indeed, Guðni Th. Jóhannesson has ventured that the “use of Iceland’s past […] was probably never as pronounced as during the economic boom in the first decade of the twenty-first century.” This chapter traces how the medieval has been used in political criticism, and is also able to chart patchy but not uninteresting invocations of medievalist utopias. Meanwhile, as I discussed in the previous chapter, the importance of nationalist medievalism gives rise to a particular anxiety about the “negative rhetorical implications” of the medieval. Icelandic political discourses are well integrated into wider western Islamophobic medievalisms, and the facile equation medieval = muslim = malignant has gained popularity there as elsewhere. In Iceland, however, this equation of the medieval with the barbaric is more discomforting than in places which set less store by their own medieval past, setting up interesting tensions in Icelandic identity.

In turn, medievalism, and particularly the idea of the feudal, is used by Icelandic writers to bring into focus the importance of social class in Icelandic society, and to challenge a dominant discourse which presents that society as egalitarian and indeed classless. Interestingly, the medievalizing handlings of Björgólfr Thor examined here are mostly by authors older than those on whom I focused in Chapters 2–3. Bjarni Harðarson and Bjarni Bjarnason were born in the 1960s, Einar Már Guðmundsson and Þórunn Erlu-Valdimarsdóttir in 1954, Þráinn Bertelsson in 1944, and Böðvar Guðmundsson in 1939. The fact that their work shows a deeper engagement with Iceland’s medieval literary heritage than that of the mostly younger writers examined in Chapter 2 surely reflects the greater prominence that Íslendingasögur once had in Icelandic culture, combined with the perspective of writers whose formative years came before neoliberalization. These older writers, writing from a perspec-

11 Guðni Thorlaicus Jóhannesson, The History of Iceland (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2013), 141.
tive less determined by capitalist-realist norms, tend to see the Crash not as the most momentous political event in their adult lives, but rather as a logical consequence of more deeply rooted social forces.

This chapter focuses its case study on Bjarni Harðarson’s *Sigurðar saga fóts*, and so begins by both summarizing the novel and providing a short biography of Björgólfur Thor to contextualize the analyses that follow.

### 4.2 A Biography and a Satire

*Sigurðar saga fóts* is a fictionalized, satirical account of the developments which led to the 2008 financial crisis. Although it changes names and blends or invents characters and events, it is in many ways a faithful account of the privatization, boom, and, to a lesser extent, bust of the Icelandic banking sector. As my discussion of capitalist realism in Chapter 2 implies, the nature of the Crash makes the novel’s satirical form awkward: often, in seeking to satirize the culture of the boom, *Sigurðar saga fóts* finds itself a somewhat pale reflection of a reality whose outlandishness outpaces satire. But at times the novel rises insightfully to the challenge. It is worth outlining its relationship to real life: doing so provides an exposition of the allusions of the novel, a convenient summary of key aspects of the Icelandic financial boom for readers who may not be familiar with them, and a demonstration of how the structure of *Sigurðar saga fóts* is reminiscent of the great intergenerational histories of the Íslendingasögur. The main character, Sigurður fótur Bjarnhéðinsson (1966–), is most closely modelled on Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson (1967–), who became the effective owner of the newly privatized Landsbanki late in 2002, blended with Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson (1968–), a retail magnate who in 1999 gained extensive control of the bank soon to be known as Glitnir. As *Sigurðar saga fóts* itself implies, fact regarding the larger-than-life cast and murky dealings of the Icelandic financial crisis is itself sometimes hard to distinguish from fiction, and rather than burdening the account below with a plenitude of references to
often disparate sources, I have instead provided or improved English-language Wikipedia entries for key figures.¹²

*Sigurðar saga fóts* focuses on the relationship between the children of Langa-Fritz, a French consul, known as the Fiddarnir, and Oddur Jónsson, a *kreppstjóri* (which might best be rendered “chairman of the parish council”) living at Höfði on the river Skrauta, the finest salmon-river in Iceland. The comment that “Fiddarnir voru […] næstum eins fínir og Thorsararnir” (“the Fiddarnir were […] almost as elevated as the Thorsararnir”) superficially denies the identity of the fictitious Fiddar and the real-life Thorsarar, but in practice indicates it.¹³ The Thorsarar were the children of Thor Jensen (1863–1947), a Dane who moved to Iceland in 1878 and became not only a businessman but also one of the wealthiest people in the country, being credited with a major role in introducing capitalism to Iceland. The Thorsarar were enormously influential in Icelandic politics and business around the middle of the twentieth century: most obviously, Thor’s third son Ólafur Thors led the Independence Party during 1934–61 and was prime minister of Iceland six times. Thor bought up and to some extent rented out large tracts of land, including, over a gradual period, much of the land and all of the fishing rights along the famous salmon-river Haffjarðará, where he took family holidays.¹⁴ In *Sigurðar saga fóts*, the name of Oddur Jónsson alludes to the real-life Oddastaðavatn, the lake where the Haffjarðará rises; Oddur lives at Höfði, recalling the Höfði near Oddastaðavatn; the Skrauta

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¹² However, the single handiest secondary source for the below is Roger Boyes, *Meltdown Iceland: Lessons on the World Financial Crisis from a Small Bankrupt Island* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009). For Björgólfur Thor’s own, autobiographical account of events, see Bjorgolfsson and Cave, *Billions to Bust*, and for the account of his activities in Russia from the perspective of one of his erstwhile business partners see Porfinnur Ómarsson, *Ingimar H. Ingimarsson: Sagan sem varð að segja* (Reykjavik: Bjartur, 2011).


represents the Haffjarðará; and accordingly, in the novel, it is the Fiddar rather than the Thorsarar who gradually destroy the rural community along it through their aggressive aquisitiveness.

The main model for Sigurður fótur is Björgólfur Thor, one of Thor Jensen’s many great-grandchildren. The main difference between Bjarni Harðarson’s Sigurður fótur and Björgólfur Thor is that Sigurður is written (even) larger than life. In 1928, Thor Jensen’s eighth child, Margrét Þorbjörg Thors, married Hallgrímur Fr. Hallgrímsson, best known as the chairman of Shell Oil in Iceland; their first child was Margrét Þóra Hallgrímsdóttir, who, after a fleeting first marriage to Haukur Clausen and a longer second one to the American Nazi George Lincoln Rockwell, was in 1966 brought home from America on her parents’ instructions, along with her children (one by Clausen and three by Rockwell). Björgólfur Guðmundsson married her in 1963, adopting her children, and in 1967 the couple had Björgólfur Thor. Both Björgólfur Thor and Sigurður fótur spend time studying at undergraduate level in the USA (but Sigurður only gets a diploma, not a bachelor’s degree). Both have a period as self-employed music promoters in Iceland before going into business with their fathers (but Sigurður’s self-employment extends to drug-smuggling). Both owe their success to business in the ex-USSR (but Sigurður’s is not in metropolitan St Petersburg, like Björgólfur Thor’s, but in the peripheral, predominantly Muslim Turkmenistan). And, crucially, both are offered effective ownership of a newly privatized state bank by Freedmanite politicians who nonetheless want to keep these assets in Icelandic hands in order to ensure they remain within established networks of patronage and clientage.

Significantly, despite his elevated maternal pedigree, Björgólfur Thor has had an awkward relationship with certain sections of the Icelandic elite: Björgólfur Guðmundsson became the managing director of the upstart Icelandic shipping company Hafskip in 1977, but, according to a widely accepted version of events, in 1985 (when Björgólfur Thor was about 18) key investors in Iceland’s dominant shipping company Eimskip used their banking and political connections to bring about the bank-
ruptcy of Hafskip and the prosecution of Björgólfur for fraud, embezzlement, and other misdemeanours. Although some of the prosecutions stuck and Björgólfur received a twelve-month suspended jail sentence, the affair was widely seen (and certainly by the father and son) as persecution for challenging the incumbent business elite, and the two Björgólfar have presented their subsequent business activities as an effort to regain their reputations and pay their opponents back. Björgólfur Thor’s enthusiasm for asserting his membership of the Thorsarar led him to purchase the townhouse Thor built in 1908, Fríkirkjuvegur 11, from the City of Reykjavík.

Björgólfur Thor’s genealogy is fundamentally repeated in Sigurðar saga fóts, with exaggeration in order to channel more of Iceland’s class tensions into Sigurður’s character. Oddur’s first daughter Hulda (born c. 1899) has Down’s syndrome; as in the novella Skugga-Baldur (2003) by Sjón, the sexual abuse faced by a woman with Down’s functions as a marker of premodernity. Hulda is made pregnant by one of the visiting Fiddar, Fritz L. Fritz, but the Fiddar refuse to accept paternity which, coupled with their destruction of Skrautudalur’s community through their aggressive purchases of land and fishing rights, leads to an irreparable rift between them and Oddur’s family. Hulda’s daughter by Fritz is christened Hulda Skrauta Oddsdóttir, and on the death of her mother she is fostered in Reykjavík by her maternal aunt Guðríður (c. 1909–79). Hulda Skrauta’s wayward youth sees her getting pregnant, apparently — in an echo of Póra Hallgrímsson’s marriage to Rockwell — by an American service-man; but one Bjarnhéðinn kaupahéðinn Jónsson accepts the paternity (after which, like her model, Hulda settles down to being a prudent housewife and mother, becoming a touchstone for sensible, traditional values in the novel). Bjarnhéðinn, of course, parallels the real-life Björgólfur Guðmundsson (though he dies in 2004 whereas the real-life Björgólfur Guðmundsson is, at the time of writing, living, and, unlike Björgólfur, Bjarnhéðinn is an alcoholic to the end, whereas Björgólfur has apparently been dry, and a major supporter of Iceland’s Alcoholics Anonymous, since 1978). Defying her own rejection by the Fiddar, Hulda
Skrauta names her child Sigurður Frits — the ancestral name-element, of course, paralleling that of Björgólfur Thor — but Sigurður becomes generally known as Sigurður fótur instead (for reasons discussed below). Björgólfur Thor’s purchase of Fríkirkjuvegur 11 is recast as Sigurður fótur’s futile attempt to avenge himself on the Fiddar by buying parts of Skrautudalur.

Sigurðar saga fóts further develops the precarious nature of Sigurður’s connection with the Fiddar through an admixture into his character of the biography of Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson, who with his father Jóhannes Jónsson rose from a lower middle-class background to found, in 1989, the supermarket chain Bó-nus, from which grew Baugur Group, a business empire including, at its peak, many UK high street brands. Through Baugur’s holdings in Glitnir, Jón Ásgeir became one of the most powerful figures in the Icelandic banking sector. His disruption of Icelandic hierarchies was a major source of friction with incumbent elites, and especially with Davíð Oddsson, the right-wing politician whose Friedmanite economic reforms were a direct cause of the Icelandic boom and bust. Thus in Sigurðar saga fóts, Sigurður’s father Bjarnhéðinn is from a poor fishing family, while the partner of Sigurður’s adoptive maternal grandmother, after whom Sigurður fótur is named, is a blacksmith called Sigurður stál í Beggjakoti. Summers in the countryside at Beggjakot during Sigurður fótur’s youth become a touchstone in the novel for a sane and meaningful existence; Sigurður stál is not only from the rural working class but also a staunch socialist, providing the novel with an anchor point in the socialism that flourished in the earlier twentieth century.

Jón Ásgeir’s success began with the Bónus supermarket chain, but the beginning of Baugur Group and their investment career was a highly leveraged takeover of their main supermarket competitor Hagkaup, then owned by the four children of its founder Pálmi Jónsson, facilitated by the bank Kaupþing under the leadership of Sigurður Einarsson. A lack of confidence among Icelandic investors almost led to the deal crippling Kaupþing, until a friend of Jóhannes Jónsson’s, Odd Reitan, who owned Norway’s largest retailer Reitangruppen, took a 20% stake in Baugur,
boosting its perceived credibility. Despite fractious relationships with Pálmi Jónsson’s sons, Jón Ásgeir subsequently married Pálmi Jónsson’s eldest daughter Ingibjörg, who also became his business partner. This story is carried across into Sigurðar saga fóts, with the sinister Hugi Sandal of the investment bank Blöndal & Sandal suggesting that the baffled Sigurður rescue his father’s debt-crushed business Bjarnhéðins og Co. by floating it on the Icelandic stockmarket and taking over its more successful competitor Nord-bræður; Icelandic investors are again sceptical, putting Blöndal & Sandal at risk; but the deal is rescued when a Norwegian steps in to buy “bréf fyrir fáeinar milljónir” (“shares for a few million”) — a mark of foreign approval which sends Icelandic investors, whose lack of self-assuredness implicitly leaves them craving the wisdom of their Nordic cousins, into a panic of enthusiasm for the company’s shares.\(^\text{15}\) Sigurður goes on to enter a marriage of convenience with Ella, a sister of the Nord brothers, though his real affections are for his de facto wife, the ostentatiously working-class Vala Mariudóttir.

The story of Sigurður fótur and Bjarnhéðinn’s purchase of Nord-bræður differs from Bónus’s real-life Hagkaup purchase in that it is part of an elaborate money-laundering deal, which picks up instead on suspicions about the Björgólfar’s business dealings in St Petersburg and about putative roles for the Icelandic banking system in enabling tax evasion and the laundering (in particular) of Russian gangster money (though these suspicions have not subsequently been supported by convincing evidence):\(^\text{16}\) Hugi Sandal sends Sigurður fótur to Turkmenistan to meet the German-Russian gangster Kex Wragadjip, where Sigurður negotiates for Blöndal & Sandal to borrow $400m to buy an old Soviet building materials factory on Kex’s behalf, which Kex will then repay with interest via Norway in the form of share purchases in Bjarnhéðins og Co.\(^\text{17}\) With not only the

\(^{15}\) Bjarni Harðarson, Sigurðar saga fóts, 125.


\(^{17}\) Bjarni Harðarson, Sigurðar saga fóts, 121.
threat of bankruptcy hard on his heels, but now the added risk that bankruptcy would entail losing Kex’s money and incurring his lethal wrath (emphasized when Kex sends Hugi’s stooge Ásgrímur back to Iceland as a consignment of dogfood), Sigurður fótur and his associates have no choice but to hurtle onwards in ever more over-leveraged excess until the crisis breaks. In reality, Björgólfur Thor avoided Iceland by living and working in London, from where, at the time of writing, he continues his business activities. But in Sigurðar saga fóts, Sigurður is sent to safety in the tribal areas of Pakistan near the Afghan border, giving the novel a dramatically non-realist denouement.

4.3 Útrásarvíkingar

Út means “out”; rás, in this context, means “a rush, race, sprint, expansion”; and vīkingur (pl. vīkingar), in Old Icelandic meaning any kind of pirate, today generally denotes a construct of nineteenth-century National Romanticism, firmly embedded in the popular imagination as ethnically Scandinavian (and therefore prototypically white), manly, nobly savage, and inclined — to cite a collocate which is currently used with startling nonchalance in the Anglophone world — to rape and pillage. ¹⁸ Thus the term útrásarvíkingur came to denote the Icelandic financiers who made a string of high-profile, credit-fuelled purchases of European businesses during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Björgólfur Thor swiftly became the prototypical útrásarvíkingur, situating his persona firmly within a medievalizing discourse. The arrival of the word útrásarvíkingur was, in fact, a late development in the Icelandic banking boom: the earliest attestation in the online corpus of Icelandic news-

papers and periodicals Tímarit.is comes from June 1, 2005. Although deeply indebted to Continental National Romanti-
cism, twentieth-century Icelandic nationalist medievalism had
previously been too steeped in real medieval sagas to latch on
to the “viking” label. In the Íslendingasögur, the thirteenth- to
fourteenth-century Icelandic histories which narrate the per-
iod from around the Scandinavian settlement of Iceland in the
870s to the establishment of Christianity in the eleventh cen-
tury, young aristocratic farmers and their clients would fara í
víking (“go raiding”) merely as a sideline to their main business
of agriculture: being a viking was a short-term activity, not an
identity, and still less an ethnicity. Accordingly, later nationalists
generally preferred to locate Icelandic identities in the figure of
the landnámsmaður or “settler.” But as Icelandic financiers start-
ed to make inroads into the UK high street, Anglophone me-
dia began speaking of them in terms epitomized by the Sunday

19 “Peningaskápurinn,” Fréttablaðið 5, no. 146, June 1, 2005, 22:
“Útrásarvíkingarnir í íslensku viðskiptali í hafa oft talið það hafa
gagnast Íslendingum að hér sé návígi mikið” (“the útrásarvíkingar in
Icelandic business life have often considered it useful to Icelanders
that they are at very close quarters here”). The seminal works on the
útrásarvíkingur concept were (prophetically) Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Útrás
Íslendinga og hnattvæðing þess þjóðlega: Horft til Silvíu Nóttar og
Magna,” Ritið 1 (2007): 149–76, and (retrospectively) Kristín Loftsdóttir,
“Kjarnmesta fólkið í heimi: Prástef íslenskrar þjóðernishyggju í gegnum
Kristín Loftsdóttir, “Vikings Invade Present-Day Iceland,” in Gambling
Debt: Iceland’s Rise and Fall in the Global Economy, eds. E. Paul
Durrenberger and Gisli Palsson (Boulder: University Press of Colorado,
2015), 3–14. Other key contributions are Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud,
“The Vikings Are Coming! A Modern Icelandic Self-Image in the Light
Guðbjört Guðjónsdóttir and Júlíana Magnúsdóttir, “Ingólfur Arnarson,
Björgólfur Thor og Ólafur bóndi á Þorvaldseyri: Karlmennska, kynjakerfi
og þjóðernissjálfsmynd eftir efnahagshrun,” Rannsóknir í félagsvindum:
Viking Wave: Cultural Heritage and Capitalism,” in Iceland and Images of
the North, ed. Sumarlíði R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses de l’Université du
Québec, 2011), 461–80; Daniel Chartier, The End of Iceland’s Innocence: The
Image of Iceland in the Foreign Media During the Financial Crisis, trans.
Times headline “Iceland Vikings Storm Britain.” This discourse extended a habit dating to the 1980s of describing the financial sector with a jargon of macho violence. So Icelanders used the viking brand to market themselves outside Iceland, and increasingly the term útrásarvíkingur gained purchase in Iceland itself. Yet although the term útrásarvíkingur was new, it was an extension of a long-standing nationalist medievalism, and this nationalism helped to insulate the banking boom from critical voices. As disquiet about the viability of the Icelandic economy grew and people started to wonder where all the money was really coming from, the idea that Icelanders were, on account of their Viking heritage, simply naturally good at aggressive, high-risk finance became increasingly widely articulated. Everyone but the truly mad understood at some level that these utterances were postmodern playfulness; yet they dovetailed so well with deeply embedded ideas of national and racial supremacy that they nonetheless served as a powerful placebo.

Icelandic novellists reflecting on the Crash have often nodded to, and sometimes drawn heavily on, Iceland’s medieval literary heritage. One might have expected their main reference point to have been the Íslendingasögur canonized by nineteenth-century National Romantics in Iceland and beyond, which enjoy a considerable, if diminishing, prominence in Icelandic culture. Sure enough, many writers do mention these for one reason and another. Most importantly for this chapter, Einar Már Guðmundsson’s Íslenskr kónar makes pointed reference to the Viking Age via the Íslendingasögur. Meanwhile, Dauðans óvissi tími uses Fóstbræðra saga, and I have discussed Þórunn Erlu-Valdimarsdóttir’s rewritings of Njáls saga and Laxdæla saga above (§2.3). Njáls saga is also an important intertext for Sigurðar saga fóts, as one might expect given that Bjarni’s later novella Mörður rewrites Njáls saga from the point of view of its

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main antagonist in ways that suggest parallels between medieval Christianization and twenty-first-century Europeanization and globalization. Yet for the most part, this prestigious genre is little emulated in post-Crash writing. Instead, in the medievalism of novels responding directly to the Crash, pride of place has been given to genres marginalized in the National-Romantic canon. Bjarni Harðarson took the name and some of the inspirations for Sigurðar saga fóts from the medieval romance-saga of the same name. Töfrahöllin draws ostentatiously on the medieval ballad known in Icelandic as Kvæði af Ólafi liljurós, and characterizes its útrásarvíkingur figure through references to the twelfth-century Valþjófsstaður Door, which depicts a knight thought to represent the French romance hero Yvain.21 Mannorð and Valkyrjur take their cues from fornaldarsögur, sagas set in the pre-Settlement, pre-Christian legendary past. Among books for children and young adults, Ragnheiður Gestsdóttir’s Hjartsláttur draws on the romance of Tristan and Isolde, specifically in its Icelandic form Tristrams saga og Ísöndar, while Andri Snær Magnason’s Tímakistan echoes medieval Icelandic romance as it rewrites the story of Snow White.22 As I have discussed in Chapter 2, Einar Már Guðmundsson’s second collection of essays on the Crash begins with a prose updating of a mansöngur, the lament with which traditional Icelandic rímur normally begin, while Bjarki Karlsson’s “Þúsaldarháttur” invokes the early modern Hallgrímur Pétursson’s generically similar, golden-ageist lament for the fallen state of Iceland, “Aldarháttur.”23 Together,

these texts show the awakening of a new interest in medieval genres marginalized by traditional nationalist medievalism.

The invocation of medieval romance and its fellow travellers reflects a long-term revisionism in medieval studies: in the post-nationalist, Europeanist phase of the discipline following the Second World War, Iceland’s more cosmopolitan literature has received progressively more attention from scholars as well as writers. But it also reflects a direct critique of the nationalist medievalism of the útrásarvíkingar. Before analysing this point in detail, it is worth sketching how, in drawing on romance and related genres, and using this form to relate Iceland to a wider world, post-Crash novels are part of a longer, if patchy, literary tradition.

The ideological center of gravity of Iceland’s medieval romance-literature was firmly in French- and German-speaking Continental Europe: these were the regions from which the main literary models for Icelandic romances came and, indeed, it is a genre-feature of medieval Icelandic romance that Iceland itself is almost never mentioned (if ever). This is of course profoundly unlike Crash-writing, where Iceland is usually center-stage. But there can be no doubt that medieval Icelanders were exploring their own identity through romances set overseas: implicitly, in mapping the encounters between heroes from France or Germany and their antagonists from the known world’s southern and eastern peripheries, Icelanders were exploring both their own sense of peripherality, and their own aspirations for integration into the narratives of the

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center. Although the business of Icelanders constructing their identity as Western with reference to an imagined eastern Other could perhaps be traced right through the history of Icelandic literature from early medieval Germanic writers’ fascination variously with Goths, Huns, and Trojans, medieval European romance shows a particular interest in the Orient, and Icelandic romance is no exception. Nor, contrary to expectations that Islamophobic discourses of the twenty-first century might lead us to, is the Orient that Icelandic literature constructs necessarily dystopian. The long echoes of historical Viking-Age encounters with Byzantium promoted an admiration for Constantinople rare in medieval western Europe. By engaging with the Continental genre of romance, Icelandic saga-authors imagined spectacular encounters between heroes from western Europe and villains from Africa and Asia (alongside other, more complex combinations). By exploring the East as a heathen dystopia, they abjected their own pagan heritage; they probed and problematized the centrality of France and Germany to European images of the world; and they revelled in the idea of eastern wonderlands of learning and magic echoing their own distinctive commitment to scholarship. A glimpse of Icelanders’ potentially wry attitude to this process is afforded by a knowing comment on the wedding scene which closes the probably fourteenth-century romance Nítiða saga: “er [...] ei auðsagt með ófróðri tungu í útlegðum veraldarinnar [...] hver fögnuður vera mundi

27 E.g., Barnes, The Bookish Riddarasögur, 147–81.
28 Margaret Schlauch, Romance in Iceland (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934); Barnes, The Bookish Riddarasögur; McDonald Werronen, Popular Romance in Iceland.
í miðjum heiminum af slíku hoffólki samankomnu” (“it is not easily said in an uncivilized language on the peripheries of the world […] how blissful it might be in the middle of the world when such courtly people congregate”). The “courtly people” alluded to in the saga include people from France, but also their spouses from Constantinople and India; the comment ostensibly situates Iceland and Icelandic as inferior to a distant Continental Europe, but the fact that the text goes on to describe the wedding anyway, and engages in sophisticated ways with the Continental romance-genre, shows that it is at least partly an ironic comment on Iceland’s supposed marginality. These anxieties about Icelandic peripherality, and complex responses to them, remain startlingly familiar today. While in the fourteenth century Icelandic anxieties of identity were driven by the land’s relatively recent entry into the Roman Church and even more recent absorption into the kingdom of Norway, today they are made piquant by fierce debates over Icelandic sovereignty and whether Iceland should join the the medieval Roman Church’s current closest equivalent, the European Union.

Medieval Icelandic romances and their successors were staples of Iceland’s popular reading culture down through the nineteenth century, so we should perhaps expect more Orientalism in Icelandic medievalism than previous work has identified, and, sure enough, hints of Orientalist medievalism are there when looked for. Halldór Laxness’s breakthrough modernist novel Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír (1927), for example, makes characteristically scathing allusions to medieval Icelandic romance-writing: they include Diljá’s story of a “stóreflis kónur í Suðurlöndum sem hét Hexametur” (“mighty king in the southern lands who was called Hexameter”) and a comically butchered account of Roman history presented by an Italian tourist guide but recalling medieval romance-sagas.  

30 Driscoll, Unwashed Children of Eve; McDonald Werronen, Popular Romance in Iceland, 25–59.  
Critical though they may be, these allusions still indicate Laxness’s familiarity with medieval Icelandic romance, and his participation in its tradition; and Laxness builds on this through frequent allusion to Romantic Orientalism. Partly modelled on Dante’s *Commedia*, and largely set on the Continent, *Vefarinn mikli* explores Christianity through the experiences of a young, aristocratic Icelander, Steinn Elliði Grímúlfsson. Steinn Elliði begins the novel imagining himself as the eponymous Great Weaver, “fæddur í Kasmír, dal rósanna, með hörpu í höndum einsog goðin” (“born in Kashmir, the valley of the roses, with a harp in his hands like the gods”).32 Steinn wishes to see his life as an æfintýri (“adventure,” but also “romance, exemplum”), and his teenage spirituality as expressed towards the beginning of the novel is replete with allusions to Alexander the Great, along with Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic literature.33 Laxness satirizes Steinn’s reception of this material with little less vigor than he satirizes his medieval forebears’. In a particularly wry collision of perspectives between Steinn’s free indirect discourse and Laxness’s narratorial voice, Laxness depicts Steinn sitting in Italy: “hversu snauð og einskisverð er öll dýrð tilverunnar frammi-fyrir hinu annarlega sigurbrosi á andliti dauðs manns! Jafnvel kvæði drottins vors, Ómars Kajams, blikna hjá því! Hann situr í hægindstólnum á svölunum illur einsog dólgur í haugi, hugur hans sýldur” (“how impoverished and worthless is all the wealth of existence compared with the unsettling smirk on the face of a dead man! Even the poems of our lord, Omar Khayyam, pale beside it. He sits in the armchair on the balcony, evil as a thug in a burial mound, his thoughts frozen solid”).34 Laxness implicitly contrasts the eleventh-century Persian world of poetry with the fascination that Icelandic sagas have with ill-tempered, eleventh-century men experiencing a malevolent living death in their burial mounds: he indicates that while you can take the

32 Ibid., 183.
33 Ibid., quoting 22, cf. 29. For examples of allusions to Oriental literature, see 39–41, 188.
34 Ibid., 183–84.
Icelander out of the “hundrað ára gamalt hindurvitni” (“hundred-year-old superstition”) that is his country, you can’t take the superstition out of the Icelander. But Laxness equally leaves us in no doubt that eleventh-century Persia fostered a civilization to which Icelanders should bow in admiration.

This complex mix of attitudes to and uses of the East pervades post-Crash writing as it, like medieval romance, seeks to interpret Iceland’s place in an increasingly cosmopolitan world. The revisionist take of Crash-literature on Iceland’s medieval past is helpfully expounded in a tellingly clunky digression in Samhengi hlutanna about the goðaveldi, the system of governance in Iceland from around 930–1262. Here one Steinn explicates the financial crisis to the novel’s protagonist Arnar:

“To my mind, it’s impossible to understand Icelandic society without tracing it from the goðaveldi.”

“Didn’t the King of Norway take power in Iceland in 1262? I’d thought the goðaveldi had come to an end then!”

“On the surface, yes,” said Steinn, “but the underlying structure of the goðaveldi didn’t. The goðaveldi was based on rulers surrounding themselves with hand-picked men, who in turn surrounded themselves with others. And so their
power spread through the whole society. After the war, it was the political parties which handed out the favours, so power was centred there.”

Arnar’s confusion at Steinn’s account here is because he accepts the traditional, nationalist narrative of a democratic golden age of Icelandic independence foreclosed by Norwegian takeover (this golden age usually being known as the þjóðveldi or “reign of the people,” traditionally rendered in English as the “Icelandic commonwealth”). The nationalist narrative is deeply embedded in Icelandic culture: business magnates are denoted by compounds in -kóngur (“king”), -jöfur or -furstur (“prince”), or -drottinn (“lord”), implying (like magnate) that their dominance is quasi-feudal. As with the word rex in the Roman Republic or tyrannos in ancient Athens, kóngur and other feudal-sounding vocabulary like drottinn (“lord”) have deep resonances for a culture whose traditional golden age was a time without kings, foreclosed by submission to the King of Norway in 1262–64. Thus whereas English has tended to use the Greek loan oligarch, Icelandic has invoked fjáraflakóngar, kvótakóngar, auðjöfrar and lánardrottnar (“finance kings,” “quota kings,” referring to the tradeable quotas of fish determined by the state, “wealth-princes” and “loan lords”). The image of the petty king provides one of the controlling metaphors for the pretentions of the big men of twentieth-century Icelandic fishing villages in Einar Már Guðmundsson’s Íslenskr kóngr, and the novel discusses in some detail the medieval roots of this love-hate relationship with kingship (along with Iceland’s converse pride in a

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37 The validity of the term “feudal” in medieval studies has been the subject of vigorous debate, the most prominent trigger to which was Susan Reynolds, Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Cf. Charles West, Reframing the Feudal Revolution: Political and Social Transformation Between Marne and Moselle, c. 800–c. 1100 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), for a recent reassessment. For present purposes, however, the term is relevant for its continued prominence in popular discourse, and to be understood in these terms.
largely fantastical claim to hosting Europe’s oldest parliament).  
Indeed, *Íslenskir kóngar* even uses the negative connotations that the term *útrásarvíkingur* has acquired since the Crash as a convenient means to criticize the medieval past itself, mentioning the “útrásarvíkingum fornaldar […] Þórólfr úr Egilssögu og Hrút úr Njálssögu” (“útrásarvíkingar of ancient times […] Þórólfr from Egils saga and Hrútur from Njáls saga”): rather than providing the metaphor through which investment bankers are understood, vikings are, in Einar Már’s sardonic phrasing, retrospectively reconstructed as the investment bankers of their day.  
However, returning to *Samhengi hlutanna*, Steinn prefers the unusual term *gøðaveldi* (“reign of the goðar,” which might be rendered for present purposes as “reign of the aristocrats”) for Iceland’s supposed golden age, and posits its continuity throughout Icelandic history since. This kind of revisionism is not new: sagas’ portrayal of a heroic period of Icelandic independence has been open to subversive readings and outright criticisms since, probably, the Middle Ages themselves.  
But it has seldom been very prominent.

By narrating its protagonist as a medieval knight, and therefore feudal overlord, then, *Sigurðar saga fóts* critically renarrates Icelandic nationalist medievalism as a hegemonic discourse that serves to disguise a quasi-feudal reality. Accordingly, *Sigurðar saga fóts* almost entirely dispenses with the noun (*útrásar*) *víkingur* in favor of *riddari* “knight” (or *riddari viðskiptalífsins*, “knight of the business world”). The crucial contest in *Sigurðar saga fóts* over what medievalist terminology should be applied to the emergent financial elite arises at the society event that is the wedding of Sigurður fótur to Ella Nord. While engaged to Ella, Sigurður has recently started sleeping with an overweight and heavy-drinking cleaner from his workplace, Vala Mariudót-

39 Ibid., 31.
40 Jón Karl Helgason, “Continuity?”
tir. Not wanting to miss the marriage of the century, Vala has Sigurður get her onto the roster of waiting staff.

Utanríkisráðherra hafði flutt hjartnæma ræðu þar sem hann likti Sigurði fót við vikinga fornaldar, kallaði hann útrásarvíking hins nýja tíma. Næst á eftir ætlæði veislustjóri að gefa forstjóra eins olíufélaganna orðið en þá heyrðist slegið fruntalega í glas og við borðsenda brúðhjónanna stóð Vala Maríudóttir með svarta svuntu.

— Kæru þið, kæri Sigurður og þið öll. Fyrir hönd, — segir maður ekki þannig? — jú, fyrir hönd eða önd okkar starfsfólksins, okkar hinna óbreyttu á gólfínu hjá köllunum okkar, Sigurði fót og Bjarnhéðini kaupahéðini, já okkur finnst þetta gegi og okkur stelpunum finnst hann Sigurður eiginlega miklu flottari en vikingur, okkur finnst hann vera riddari, hann er í raun og veru riddarinn okkar á hvíta hestinum og nú þegar hann er að gifta sig þá finnst okkur eins og við séum allar að giftast honum og kannski erum við það bara, svo þú skalt passa þig. Ella mín, því við erum allar skotnar í honum og hann veit það. Hann Sigurður minn.41

The foreign minister had delivered a moving speech in which he likened Sigurður fótur to the ancient Vikings, calling him a modern-day Viking raider. Next, the master of ceremonies had planned to give the word to the CEO of one of the oil companies but then an impertinent tapping on a glass was heard, and at the end of the bridal couple’s table stood Vala Maríudóttir in her black apron.

“Ladies and gentlemen — Sigurður, and everyone. On behalf of [lit. for the hand of] — doesn’t one say it that way? Yes, for the hand, or the spirit [fyrir hönd eða önd], of us employees, us other, simple folk on the floor fulfilling our vocations, Sigurður fótur and Bjarnhéðinn kaupahéðinn, yes, we think this is cute, and actually Sigurður seems to us girls much cooler than a Viking: for us he is a knight, he is well and truly
our knight on a white horse, and now, when he is getting married, it feels for us like we are all marrying him, and actually maybe we are — so you should watch out, Ella dear, because we’ve all fallen for him and he knows it. My Sigurður.”

After a silence in which the master of ceremonies wishes the floor would open and swallow him, rapturous applause breaks out. For Vala, of course, part of the point of this speech is to express her claim to Sigurður (which in practice she fulfils until, after the Crash, Sigurður has to flee to Pakistan). But this is also the key moment in Bjarni’s renarration of Sigurður as a riddari viðskiptalífsins instead of the útrásarvíkingur which the real-life Björgólfur Thor was seen as. Bjarni’s point is that the útrásarvíkingar were not in fact like medieval vikings — adventurers whose gains, in the popular imagination, corresponded to the high risks they took, and who disrupted Continental hierarchies from their relatively flat peripheral societies. Rather the so-called útrásarvíkingar were feudal lords, consolidating their existing privilege. As Kristín Loftsdóttir has said,

as economic inequality grew […], so too did the Icelandic tabloid media, which to some extent emerged during these years. Tabloids reported glowingly on the conspicuous lifestyles of the Business Vikings […] and gave regular updates on the intermingling of prominent Icelanders with international superstars. Such idolization of the rich and famous was unknown prior to the economic boom and ran contrary to the common belief that equality was a basic characteristic of Icelanders.42

Through Vala, Bjarni expresses the fairy-tale-like wish-fulfilment which the útrásarvíkingar were supposed to represent,

and satirizes how Icelandic society as a whole bought into the dream — like the nineteenth-century peasants who consumed medieval romances originally composed to promote aristocratic hegemony, enjoying them as tales of wish-fulfilment without thinking through the violent oppression which is their real stock in trade. Vala’s words bring class-conflict in the novel firmly into the twenty-first century, but also foreground the hegemonic power of Jón Ásgeir’s story of upward mobility — a story which is, Bjarni implies, really the exception that proves the rule that the class-hierarchy is seldom disrupted.

Bjarni’s preference for talking about riddarar over víkingar corresponds with how the tone of medieval Icelandic romances differs from the Íslendingasögur. Selected Íslendingasögur, which have been given pride of place in the nationalist canon and provide the classical Scandinavian portrayals of víkingar, are characterized by a restrained style and, at least relatively speaking, gritty realism. Medieval Icelandic romance, on the other hand, revels in cartoonishly unlikely feats of violence; and the genre requires every story to have a happy ending, ensuring that however bloody the path to the protagonists’ weddings, it is only ever the lives of others that are in serious danger. Thus romance-sagas suit Bjarni’s satirical portrayal of the excess of the banking boom. Likewise, whereas Íslendingasögur tend to examine breakdowns in social order, and probe gender relations obsessively but also subtly, most medieval Icelandic romances are cheerfully heteronormative, and ostentatiously promote homosocial male bonds, again making the genre particularly suitable for satirizing the testosterone-driven culture of the útrás.43 An example of all these factors comes in the medieval Sigurðar saga fóts where Sigurður’s foster-brother Ásmundur has travelled to Ireland to seek the hand of King Hrólfr

of Ireland, but been imprisoned for his troubles by her father. Sigurður has come to Ireland to save Ásmundur, defeating Hrólfur and chaining him up:

“En þess vil eg spyrja Hrólf konung,” segir Ásmundur, “hvort hann vill nú gifta mér Elínu dóttur sína.”

Hrólfur konungur svarar þá: “Það vil eg að vísu og vinna það til lífs mér.”

Þarf eigi hér langt um að hafa, að það verður ráðum ráðið, að Ásmundur fær Elínu, og er þegar að brullaupi snúið [...] Leysti Hrólfur konungur út mund dóttur sinnar vænilegir í gulli og dýrgripum. Skildu þeir nú með vináttu.44

“I want to ask King Hrólfr this,” says Ásmundr: “whether he wishes to marry his daughter Elína to me now.”

Then King Hrólfr replies: “I most certainly want that and will do so in order to win my life.”

It’s not necessary to make a long tale of this: it was decided that Ásmundr would marry Elína, and the wedding was immediately prepared [...] King Hrólfr paid his own daughter’s bride-price in a noble fashion, with gold and precious things. They parted now with friendship.

Reading the saga from the critical standpoint of Bjarni’s novel, we must read the “noble fashion” of Hrólfur’s payment of the dowry and the “friendship” with which the families part ironically, viewing Sigurður and Ásmundur as a pair of gangsters feigning politeness as they shake down a rival. This reading is consonant with the proverbial post-Crash criticism of Iceland that notwithstanding its pretentions to being a Nordic welfare state cleaving firmly to the rule of law, it is actually the “Sikiley norðursins” (“Sicily of the North”) — an island known for two things: volcanoes and organized crime (see §3.6 above). The meta-textual framing of Bjarni’s novel in relation to romance-sagas puts a stamp of authorial approval on Jamil’s observation that

44 Hall et al., “Sigurðar saga fóts,” 90.
the tight integration of business and political interests in twentieth-century Iceland constitutes a lénskerfi (“feudal system”).45

Bjarni’s insistence on identifying Sigurður as a “knight of the business world” echoes the image of the “Ritter von der Industrie” (“knight of industry”) probably best known from the work of Karl Marx. Marx took what he understood as “feudal” relationships between lords and serfs as a paradigm for understanding the relationship between nineteenth-century capitalists and wage-labourers. A serf, tied to land, was transparently unfree, whereas a wage-labourer was ostensibly free to travel and to choose work as he pleased, this freedom being a key tenet of liberal capitalism. But, particularly in the absence of an effective welfare state and in conditions where there was a large supply of labor, Marx noted that the wage-labourer was no less compelled to work for others’ profit than the serf, and might in practice have no freedom to withdraw his labor or change employer. While recognizing that the increased productivity of agriculture following the Enclosures made for tangible gains in meeting human needs, then, Marx argued that “wage-slavery” was more a continuation of serfdom than a state of freedom: that from the point of view of the proletariat, “die Ritter vom Degen” (“the knights of the sword”) had simply been replaced by “die Ritter von der Industrie” (“the knights of industry”).46 Whereas the time a serf spent working his lord’s land was transparently for the benefit of the lord, the surplus value created by a wage-labourer and appropriated by his employer is less tangible. By presenting the economic position of the wage-labourer as a continuation of that of the serf, then, Marx sought to expose how “liberal” capitalism too was exploitative and authoritarian.

In the wake of the financial crisis, there is a widespread concern that the social-democratic societies of the second half of the twentieth century are giving way to something resembling medieval feudalism. Ideas of “refeudalization” and “neo-me-

45 Bjarni Harðarson, Sigurðar saga fóts, 112.
dievalism” are in the air, whether simply as bywords for stagger- 
ing inequality — the simple caricature of “bad old days” medie- 
vialism — or a more subtle comment on the dominance of 
crony capitalism, the replacement of a true public sphere with 
the spectacle of personality politics (Jürgen Habermas’s Refeu-
dalisierung) or the collapse the the post-Westphalian order of 
sovereign states (Hedley Bull’s “new mediaevalism”). Marx’s 
analogy, therefore, is widespread in post-Crash Icelandic writ-
ing. As Einar Már Guðmundsson pithily put it, “fjármálasfurstar 
hafa riðið um hérúð og skilið eftir sig sviðna jörð” (“the finance-
princes have ridden through the provinces and left scorched 
earth behind them”), and the title of his Íslenskir kóngar points 
in a similar direction. Katrín in Ævar Örn Jósepsson’s Önnur 
líf describes the small-time businessman Brynjólfur’s depen-
dence on the conservative politician Ingólfur Halldórsson as 
“skólabókardæmi um samband drottnarans og hins undirgef-
na” (“a textbook example of the relationship between the lord 
and the vassal”). The same kinds of relationship also drive the 
plot of the same author’s 2008 Land tækifæranna. Steinar Bragi’s 
Hálendið puts a more sophisticated version of the same idea 
at its center, by examining the tense relationship between the 
petty-aristocratic Hrafn and his old school-friend, the upwardly 
mobile Egill. Even Björgólfur Thor himself quotes at length in 
his autobiography from a blogpost on America’s rising inequal-
ity by the venture capitalist Nick Hanauer, including the claim 
that “our country is rapidly becoming less a capitalist society

47 On which see respectively Sighard Neckel, “Refeudalisierung der 
Ökonomie: Zum Strukturwandel kapitalistischer Wirtschaft,” MPIfG 
Working Paper 10/6. Cologne: Max Planck Institute for the Study of 
Bruce Holsinger, Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on 
Contemporary World Narrative Fiction and the Spaces of Neoliberalism 

48 Einar Már Guðmundsson, Íslenskir kóngar, 111.

49 Ævar Örn Jósepsson, Önnur líf [Other lives] (Reykjavík: Uppheimar, 2010), 
350.
and more a feudal society.”50 I doubt that many of the Icelandic authors who have used the idea of a feudal Iceland have done so in self-conscious emulation of Marx himself. Nevertheless, the idea that, with rapidly growing inequality and increasingly entrenched commitments to rent-seeking, along with diminishing opportunities for social mobility, developed countries are returning to a feudal state is widespread.51

Portraying Iceland today as a neo-feudal society does not, however, necessarily challenge golden-ageist Icelandic medievalism, because the particular medieval past traditionally lionized by Icelandic nationalism predates the emergence of the kind of relatively hierarchical and formalized power-relations for which the term feudal has traditionally been used. Indeed, in many ways the medieval past depicted by the Íslendingasögur is the archetype for Romantic visions of the “free Germanic peasant.”52 Whereas the quotation from Samhengi hlutanna above does question the reality of the so-called þjóðveldi, the valence of reading Iceland as “feudal” is often not the familiar abjection of the medieval (“Oh no! We are returning to the Middle Ages!”). Rather the valence is “the Middle Ages we are returning to aren’t the ones we were promised.” Thus Alda Sigmundsdóttir’s Unravelled, commenting on what became the Kitchenware Revolution, claims that “Icelanders had a habit of reacting fiercely to injustice but soon sinking back into the lethargic serfdom that had been conditioned into the nation’s soul during centuries of colonial rule and oppression,” which figures the essential Icelander as a paragon of egalitarianism predating

Norwegian (and later Danish) rule. Kári Tulinius’s *Píslarvottar án hækileika* is altogether more knowing, but makes a point of introducing Geiri’s complaint that “íslensk stjórnvöld og íslenskir auðmenn hafa alltaf fengið að valta yfir þjóðina” (“the Icelandic government and Icelandic oligarchs have always got to lord it over the people”) and Sóli’s rejoinder “alveg síðan Ísland var nýlenda og Danir réðu öllu” (“ever since Iceland was a colony and the Danes controlled everything”). These comments replicate the nationalist narrative of a medieval golden age of true Icelandic ness which reveals an innate, egalitarian Icelandic fighting spirit and enthusiasm for justice, overlain with the cultural baggage of later Danish imperial rule.

The golden-ageist pattern is particularly clear in *Töfrahöllin*. In *Töfrahöllin*, much of the action is explicitly set in the same areas of Iceland as *Njáls saga*, and this detail is often mentioned, implicitly as a reference point for proper Icelandic values in contrast to the corrupt culture of shady business deals, drug-taking, and prostitution which the protagonists Kormákur and Jósep are establishing in the same place. These portrayals, then, do not show Icelanders dispensing with golden-ageist thinking. Rather they use golden-ageism as a baseline for critiquing the present, characterizing Iceland today as reinstituting the wrong kind of medievalism—the kind associated with Norwegian and later Danish rule rather than the golden age of the settlement period.

But in *Sigurðar saga fóts*, Bjarni Harðarson does put up some significant resistance to golden ageism. Whereas in content, *Sigurðar saga fóts* draws on a medieval Icelandic romance, its style owes much more to the classical *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*—which comes as no surprise, given the author’s subsequent novelistic rewriting of *Njáls saga*, *Mörður*. *Sigurðar saga fóts* closes off sections with classical-sounding phrases.
like “þaðan eru engar sögur,” and indeed mentions Njáls saga three times. In keeping both with the deep historical roots of the Crash and with the literary form of classical Íslendingasögur such as Egils saga or Laxdæla saga, the novel begins several generations before the birth of the main character, in the interwar years. Like these, Bjarni’s Sigurðar saga fótis insists on trying to expose intergenerational cascades of cause and effect and complex webs of circumstances beyond the protagonists’ control.

The novel challenges the idea that Iceland’s settlement period was a golden age most memorably at the moment in the story — which the reader has awaited with curiosity for fifty pages — when the origin of Sigurður fótur’s epithet is revealed. The saga that gives the novel its title is itself intriguingly unsatisfying on this point, breezily offering the somewhat baffling observation that Sigurður “var svo snar og fóthvatur, að hann hljóp eigi seinna né lægra í loft upp og á bak aftur á öðrum fæti en hin-ir fræknustu menn á báðum fótum framlangt. Af því var hann Sigurður fótur kallaður” (probably meaning “was so quick and nimble-footed that he neither leapt up more slowly nor lower into the air, landing backwards on only one foot, than the most valiant people on both feet forwards. Because of this he was called Sigurður Foot”). The description echoes, or even parodies, Njáls saga’s initial description of Gunnar Hámundarson á Hliðarenda, but these remarkable skills of Sigurður’s never resurface in the saga, making the epithet a curious diversion. The eight-year-old Sigurður Frits finds himself as confused about his own second name as the reader of the medieval Sigurðar saga fót is about its hero’s. Having begun to get an inkling of his complex ancestry, Sigurður Frits asks his eponymous grandfather Sigurður stál (a.k.a. Siggi) why Siggi does not also have the name Frits. Siggi replies

55 Ibid., 70, cf. 80.
56 Ibid., 51, 66, 226.
57 Hall et al., “Sigurðar saga fótis,” 78.
58 Ibid., 78.

What rubbish! What rubbish — you’ve never been called Frits. Not here in this smithy. You’re just called Sigurður F., yes, F like in … in foot. You have such big feet, and always have […] Yeah, and you know who the people with big feet in this country were in the olden days? […] It was the slaves who had big feet, from all the yomping about in the marshes, and they were also the only upstanding people who came here. The rest were just rogues and knaves, bloody bullies wandering about stealing everything from upstanding people, and they’re still stealing, yep, still stealing. Stealing salmon-rivers and profiteering.

Siggi stál is one of the touchstones of solid reasoning in the novel, and this passage is also one of the novel’s key expressions of egalitarian values, contrasting with the neoliberalism in which Sigurður fótur becomes embroiled. Siggi stál’s exposure of continuity between medieval and modern oppressions comes at a key moment in Sigurður fótur’s character development, and emphatically reaches beyond the infamously troubled Sturlungaöld — the period of aristocratic conflict which ran from about 1220 to 1264 and led to the annexation of Iceland by Norway — to be equally damning about the island’s first settlers. Íslenkir kóngar figures the settlement of Iceland in the same way: not as the flight of freedom-loving farmers from royal tyranny, but as the establishment of a tax-haven for greedy vikings:

59 Bjarni Harðarson, Sigurðar saga fóts, 56–57.
Ekki þurftu gömlu víkingarnir að gefa allt upp til skatts, enda nenntu þeir ekki að búa í Noregi þar sem skattayfirvöld gen-

gu hart fram gegn höfðingjum og smákóngum. Þess vegna flúðu þeir hingað, í þá skattaparadís sem hér var.60

The old vikings didn’t need to give everything up as tax, and certainly didn’t fancy living in Norway when the taxman went hard at chieftains and petty kings. It was for this reason that they fled to Iceland, to the tax-haven that was here.

Thus, whereas Böðvar Guðmundsson’s references to Njáls saga in Töfrahöllin seem simply to be contrasting the golden age de-
picted in the saga with the novel’s present, Bjarni gives the same idea a more critical edge: the ill-starred encounter of the young Sigurður fótur and Ásmundur Jamil with the drug-lord Addi feiti, characterized as a “nútíma þjóðsagnapersóna” (“modern-
day folktale-character”), is not only set in the cellar of the youth center and concert venue Njálsbúð, but explicitly (in the words of Sigurður fótur) in “einhverjum Njáluslóðum” (“some kind of Njáls saga country”), hinting that Addi is not so different from the region’s venerated tenth-century strongmen.61 Meanwhile, Iceland’s relationship with Denmark before independence, a traditional scapegoat in Icelandic nationalist discourses, is por-
trayed with wry humor in Íslenskir kónar, and kept out of view in Sigurðar saga fóts. Instead, as I discuss below, Sigurðar saga gives Iceland’s post-colonial anxiety about its status some prom-

ince, and despite characters’ occasional trips abroad and the novel’s emphasis on international money-laundering, its focus on Iceland positions the Crash first and foremost as the product of domestic culture. There are no major women characters, but the novel fairly firmly positions masculinity as a key theme in the culture of the boom — and where women are given a voice, it is often the voice of reason. Sigurðar saga fóts thus stands as a pre-eminent example of a widespread post-Crash discourse,

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60 Einar Már Guðmundsson, Íslenskir kónar, 206.
61 Bjarni Harðarson, Sigurðar saga fóts, 65, 66.
in which Björgólfur Thor’s útrásarvíkingur identity is recast to expose Icelandic capitalism as quasi-feudal, with bankers as its knightly aristocrats.

4.4 Orientalist Medievalism

Like many post-Crash commentators, Bjarni Harðarson points to Iceland’s post-colonial inferiority complex as a key reason for its over-expansion in the banking boom. In a scene which is part of an allusion to the rapturous national welcome given to the silver-medallist Olympic handball team on 27th August 2008 — 40,000 people gathered in the center of Reykjavík to celebrate this rare Olympic achievement — Iceland’s state master of public ceremonies greets returning Icelandic businessmen at the airport with the following speech:

Ég var nýlega á fundi með forseta Indlands […] Í hans landi búa margir og þeir þar hafa lyft grettistaki í baráttu við hin gömlu heimsveldi. En á fundi okkar undraðist forseti þessi og dánist raunar að því að við svo fár gatum unnið slik hervirki, jafnvel slegið eign á gamla gimsteina heimsveldanna. En ég svaraði forsetanum með setningu sem kona mín skaut að mér fyrir fundinn og er svona:
— You ain’t seen nothing yet. He, he.62

I was recently at a meeting with the President of India […] In his country there are many people, and there they have lifted a grettistak [a large glacial erratic, proverbially understood to be liftable only by the fabulously strong hero of Grettis saga] in their struggle with the old Empire. But at our meeting, the President was amazed and actually full of admiration that

Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 51–52


Þeir voru ellefu, alveg að verða tólf, þegar leiðir þeirra lágu saman og eftir það lengi óaðskiljanlegir þó að ólíkari menn fyrirfandust ekki á þessari íslensku Gólanhæð. Sigurður var friður drengur og hægur, íhugull og með það pókerfés að enginn vissi hug hans. Þó hann væri seinþreyttur til vandræða var hann í hverju máli seiglan og einurðin. Jamil aftur á móti var maður ekki einhamur, skapbráður og jafn fljótur að snúa af hverju máli eins og að. Hann var allra manna greindastur á bökina en þolíði hans við bóknám voru þó mjög takmörk sett og í öllu námi treysti Jamil frekar á náttúrugreind en lærðóm og lauk hverju prófi með góðri einkunn. Það var meir undir hælinn lagt hjá Sigurði fót hvernig prófum lyktði. Þeir félagar voru mjög samstiga í að stunda bóklestur hóflega og leggja því ákafari stund á það líf sem hvergi er á bók fest.
we — so few — could have achieved such a conquest, indeed gain ownership of the family jewels of the empires. But I replied to the President with a sentence which my wife suggested to me before the meeting, which goes something like this: “You ain’t seen nothing yet. Hahaha.”

The final words appeared in President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson’s infamous Walbrook Club speech of 3 May 2005, in which Ólafur Ragnar attributed Iceland’s success in business to an innate entrepreneurial spirit deriving directly from Icelanders’ viking ancestors. The speech in *Sigurðar saga fóts* implicitly recognizes that Iceland’s challenges and achievements since 1944 have in fact been of an entirely different order from India’s since 1948 — amongst many other and profound reasons because of Iceland’s cultural status as a white, Western country discussed in the previous chapter. Adapting the real-life Björgólfur Guðmundsson’s attempt to purchase the newspaper *DV* in response to it reporting his editional interventions into *Edda*, Iceland’s then largest publisher, which Björgólfur largely owned, along with Kaupþing’s purchase of the Danish FIH bank, Bjarni has Sigurður’s father Bjarnhéðinn make an over-leveraged purchase of a Danish newspaper because of his desire to get one over on the Danes. And, trying to convince Sigurður fótur of the merits of borrowing his way out of bankruptcy, one of Blöndal & Sandal’s employees suggests that

Íslands kapítal var dauitt. Það lá ósnertanlegt inni hjá pabbadrengjum gamla auðvaldsins og í dag væri enda leiðin til ávöxtunar í gegnum okurlánastarfsemi ríkisbanka. Sam-


The friends Sigurður F. and Ásmundur Jamil Neró were Breiðholt boys. Jamil was not only Sigurður’s best friend but at the same time, from their first meeting, his assistant, ideas specialist and adviser. He was half Palestinian and half Dalesman, but at the same time half neither, the most nationalistic of everyone in Breiðholt, and read Njáls saga before his confirmation; but meanwhile was an enthusiastic Palestinian, a PLO-supporter and much later—and without anyone suspecting—a Hamas-member. As he grew up, Jamil was soon a bit ugly, podgy and chubby-faced, so that all of his enthusiasm and impatience were reflected there and elicited defensive reactions from those who encountered them. He was a hyperactive in-betweener, feeling the lack of both child labour and ritalin. Children of that generation pushed the parenting skills of Icelandic mothers and fathers—which were limited—to the limit.

They were eleven going on twelve when their paths first crossed, and for a long time after they were inseparable, even though no-one more different could be found in these Icelandic Golan Heights. Sigurður was a good-looking, calm lad, thoughtful, and with the sort of poker face that meant that no-one could guess his mind. Though he was patient, he was persistence and determination personified in any matter. Jamil, by contrast, was not a resolute person: hot-tempered and just as quick to turn his attention from something as to turn his attention to it. He was the best-read of anyone but his patience with book-learning was very limited and in all his studies Jamil relied on his inborn wit rather than learning—and finished all his exams with a good grade. Sigurður was less sure-footed when it came to exams. The friends were very much in agreement in studying in moderation and more eagerly pursuing that life which is nowhere set down in books.
Icelandic capital was dead. It lay, unreachable, with the daddy’s boys of the old capitalism and today, moreover, the route to growth was through the usury of the state banks. A comparable conservatism would be hard to find outside the Arabian Peninsula — and actually, there was a lot in common between the sheikhs there and the Viðey dynasties here at home.

The “Viðey dynasties,” though also evoking the real-life “Engey dynasty” (to which many, mostly Independence Party, politicians belong), implicitly include the Thorsarar, named here for the fact that Thor Jensen’s iconic fishing company Milljónarfélagið was based on the island of Viðey. Their quasi-feudal domination is expressed through comparison to the repressive monarchies of the Arabian peninsula: this comparison of Iceland to the post-colonial Arab world is unfavourable, and implicitly intended to incite Sigurður to taking part in bringing Iceland into a neoliberal modernity better befitting a developed, Western country. (The irony, of course, is that Iceland was implicitly better off under the nepotistic but stable old capitalism than under neoliberalism; meanwhile, in 2010, states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were, notwithstanding their monarchies, repressiveness, and exploitation of resident aliens, economically thriving: “hina íslensku ríkiskapitalista virtist á slikum dögum ekki skorta fé frekar en Arabíská soldána og afríská ráðherrasyni,” “the other Icelandic state-capitalists seemed no more to lack money in those days than Arab sultans and the sons of African government ministers”).

As well as criticizing Iceland’s nationalist medievalism, then, Bjarni also situates Icelandic medievalism in relation to medi-

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65 Bjarni Harðarson, Sigurðar saga fóts, 88–89.
66 Ibid., 177.
evalist constructions of the developing world. A key moment for the book’s development of both its medievalism and its Orientalism comes at the opening of the second section, when the eponymous protagonist Sigurður fótur is first described in detail (Excerpt 6).

There is plenty of traditional Icelandic medievalism here. The passage mentions Njáls saga, and a deeper connection again with the classical Íslendingasögur is indicated by style and allusion. Its thumbnail sketches of the characters’ attributes recall sagas, as do the archaic turns of phrase “á vöxt var” and “hann var allra manna greindastur.” In Sigurður fótur’s case, the characteristics are certainly the attributes of a promising Íslendinga saga-hero — physical beauty, mental fortitude, and a disinclination to waste words — while also echoing the reputation of Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson for these characteristics. Incorporating the time-honoured expression seinþreyttur til vandræða, Sigurður’s portrait neatly echoes both Hildigunnur’s celebrated characterization of Gunnar Hámundarson in Njáls saga and a self-characterization of Björgólfur Thor: “ég hef alltaf sagt að ég sé seinþreyttur til vandræða, en harður í horn að taka ef svo ber undir” (“I have always said that I am patient, but I fight my corner hard when it’s called for”).

But Bjarni’s medieval Icelandic literary allusions, resonant with an essentially white Icelandic nationalism, are juxtaposed with his description of a half-Palestinian Icelander — who is made to chime with a glib nickname for the downtrodden Reykjavík suburb of Breiðholt that was popular in the 1970s and ’80s, “the Icelandic Golan Heights.” Jamil has no neat real-world correlate — his clearest inspiration is Einar Páll Tamimi (1969—), a

member of one of Iceland’s best known immigrant families, noted for its participation in both Palestinian and Icelandic politics, who was a lawyer for Glitnir and in 2008 its best paid employee; but the comparisons with Ásmundur Jamil are, however, not otherwise close.\textsuperscript{69} Jamil’s inclusion partly reflects Bjarni’s medieval model: in romance sagas, every hero must have a foster-brother, and it is not uncommon for the fosterbrother to arrive from a positively portrayed but fantastic Orient. Equally, as a number of writers have noted, Björgólfur Thor’s image-crafting was not without Middle Eastern resonances: his holding company in the boom years was Samson ehf., alluding to the Israelite Samson’s vengeance on the Philistines, echoed in Sigurðar saga fóts in a fleeting portrayal of Bjarnhéðinn og Co.’s attempt to disrupt Iceland’s aristocracy as David facing Goliath.\textsuperscript{70} But Jamil is clearly doing much more besides mirroring a medieval saga character or echoing the Samson brand: instead he provides a way into interrogating insular Icelandic identities.

Jamil’s enthusiasm for \textit{Njáls saga} at one level simply indicates his nerdiness. But at another level it indicates his need to be more Icelandic than the Icelanders, in the same way that the half-Greek Erlend’s enthusiasm for Ólafur Tryggvason does in \textit{Hetjur}, discussed in Chapter 3. Sigurðar saga can be read to suggest that this inequality takes its toll, portraying a hierarchical relationship between Sigurður and Jamil. While Sigurður has wonderful summer holidays with his grandfather in Beggjakot, Jamil has miserable ones with his harsh grandfather in Palestine. Like their saga-namesakes, Sigurður fótur and Ásmundur Jamil get into a fight over a girl, whom Jamil gives up to Sigurður in a way that hints at his beta-male status to Sigurður’s alpha. When Sigurður and Jamil are arrested for drug-smuggling, Jamil elects to confess to the whole crime and to take the prison sentence


for the two of them. Jamil does not emerge unscathed from the experience: his increasingly nihilistic attitude is hinted at as the novel goes on, such that at the moment when the financial bubble bursts, he chides Sigurður for wanting to switch off the news: “djófullinn að hann pabbi þinn skuli missa af þessu. Sá hefði skemmt sér” (“it’s crap that your dad should have to miss out on this: he’d have enjoyed it”).\textsuperscript{71} 

Sigurðar saga fóts does explore how Sigurður’s identity is complicated by class tensions, but although Sigurður is upwardly mobile and uneasy at his new status, and so has his crosses to bear, he is implicitly secure enough in his identity to exert a hegemonic masculinity. Jamil does not enjoy this possibility. By the end of Sigurðar saga fóts, it is clear that Jamil, alienated from his society as well as from his labor (and conceivably having never forgotten his teenage Marxism), has implicitly embraced the discourse that high finance is a game to be played — and that it would be unwise to care too much about whether the game is lost or won.

This makes Jamil a particularly ambivalent, troubling character. The novel seldom gives us access to his thoughts, and when it does it is usually through his laconic comments to Sigurður fótur, leaving Jamil a rather shadowy figure. The novel is fairly clear that if Jamil feels alienated from Icelandic society, it is to a significant extent society — and to some extent specifically Sigurður — that is to blame. Yet the emotional detachment with which Jamil seems to embrace the culture of the bubble — quite unlike the bewildered angst of Sigurður, which the novel portrays in detail — is unnerving. The last company Jamil gets Sigurður to create in order to unlock new credit before the bubble bursts is called Sam Foxtrott, named for the faithful manservant of Basil fursti, secret agent and hero of a series of interwar-era pulp fiction stories by the Danish writer Niels Meyn which were translated into Icelandic in the 1930s and ’40s. Accordingly, when Jamil engineers Sigurður’s escape to Pakistan, Sigurður is given the false identity of “Basil, lífsleiður þýskur þýskur fursti” (“Basil,

\textsuperscript{71} Bjarni Harðarson, Sigurðar saga fóts, 238.
a world-weary German duke”). These names, then, stand as Jamil’s ironic commentary on his relationship with Sigurður, affording him some agency. This agency comes to the fore in the story when the Crash breaks, and Sigurður places himself in the hands of Jamil. As the crisis unfolds, Sigurður and Jamil face a double peril: the wrath of the Icelandic people and, much more scarily, the wrath of the gangster Kex Wragadjip, whose laundered money has evaporated. As usual, it is Jamil who comes to the rescue, engineering his and Sigurður’s escape from Iceland: when the crisis breaks, Jamil uses his Middle Eastern contacts to escape to Palestine, where he is protected from a vengeful Kex by a “tvöföld öryggisgæsla, að útan sú ísraelska, að innan frá Hamas” (“double security service, the Israeli one from the outside and Hamas’s from the inside”). Meanwhile, Jamil arranges Sigurður’s escape to “hinn öruggi staðurinn [...] í fríríki herskárra Hasara uppi í Khyber-skarði nærri landamerkjum Afghana og Pakistana” (“the other safe place [...] in the militant free state of Hazara, up in the Khyber Pass, near the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan”). Here, Bjarni manages to fit in a side-swipe at the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip following 2008’s Operation Cast Lead, implying sympathy for the Palestinian predicament, while also deepening the shadows with which Jamil is surrounded.

Through Jamil, a marginal and troubling character, Bjarni begins to express not only how Iceland’s nationalist medievalism was a hegemonic discourse that helped the financial elite exert their influence over society, but also how it formulates an image of Icelandic society that struggles to accommodate incomers. At the same time, however, Sigurðar saga fóts encodes disquiet about how Iceland’s marginalized immigrants might respond to their ambivalent status: with little to lose, Jamil proves too willing to risk everything. The novel is unclear about whether Icelandic society would be best off making more space

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72 Ibid., 241.
73 Ibid., 240.
74 Ibid., 241.
for people of a complex ethnicity like Jamil to belong and flourish, or whether it would be better off without them altogether.

4.5 Nostalgia

Jamil is also the mechanism whereby Sigurðar saga fóts shifts into its curious epilogue. This too owes something to intertexts. Bjarni’s stated inspiration for the novel besides its medieval namesake is the song Furstinn by Iceland’s most renowned singer-songwriter, Megas, which recounts the life of a retired drug baron. The song opens with the lines “pað veit enginn hvar í veröldinni hann býr | en vinir hans giska á píramída eða klaustur” (“no-one knows where in the world he lives, | but his friends guess either the Pyramids or a monastery”), an oriental image which clearly meshes with Sigurður fótur’s final escape to Hazara. But the end of the saga also recalls the end of the medieval Grettis saga, another bleak account of a promising young Icelander who, caught up in cultural changes which he cannot control, winds up becoming more of a menace to his society than a help. Grettir grows up in a land newly converted to Christianity where monsters of various kinds are a threat, and his skills as a monster-fighter compensate well for his lack of social graces. But as Christianity gets established in Iceland, implicitly chasing away demonic forces of its own accord, Grettir’s skills are progressively less called for. He increasingly becomes a social problem and eventually, as a preternaturally strong outlaw himself, almost as much of a bane as the monsters he once faced. In both tales, a key message is that the best the protagonist can hope for is to look fate in the eye and take what is coming to him. However, whereas Grettir’s problem is that he is fated not to move with the times, Sigurður fótur’s problem is that he is fated to be at the forefront of change. Both texts, in their ways, mourn the passing of older ways of doing things. Grettis saga, however, ends firmly on a message of hope, encoded by a dra-

75 Megas, Hættuleg hljómsveit & glæpakvendi Stella [A dangerous orchestra and Stella the criminal], Íslenskir Tónar IT237, 1990.
matic shift of mode to Continental-style romance in an epilogue fittingly entitled *Spesar þáttur* (“the story of Spes,” a woman whose name is Latin for “hope”). *Spesar þáttur* follows the journey to Constantinople of Grettir’s brother Þorsteinn Drómundur and recounts how Grettir became the Icelander whose death was avenged farthest from home. It is inspired by *Tristramps saga og Ísöndar*, itself translated from French, and balances the story of Christianization in Iceland, and the mourning for the loss of heroic, pre-Christian Icelandic culture, with the prospect of Iceland’s inclusion in a bright, new, cosmopolitan, Christian future. *Sigurðar saga fóts* likewise ends with a startling shift of mode, also to an Orientalist setting, having Sigurður flee Iceland in a wholly unrealistic escape to the north-west borders of Pakistan. The resonances between the two denouments are increased by the fact that Sigurður fótur is initially sheltered in an old monastery, while *Spesar þáttur* concludes with Þorsteinn drómundur and his Byzantine wife Spes becoming religious recluses in Rome. *Sigurðar saga* demands to be read no less symbolically.

The novel’s presentation of Jamil is reflected in its ambivalent representation of Hazara, which is, however, far from simply negative. *Sigurðar saga fóts* likens the Middle East to Iceland in an earlier time: “Sigurður fótur var óafvitandi kominn í Áradal þann sem leitað hafði að Jón forfaðir hans í Höfða” (“unwittingly, Sigurður fótur had arrived in the very Áradalur which his forefather Jón í Höfða had looked upon”). For all its criticism of nationalist medievalism and its challenging of medievalist golden ageism, *Sigurðar saga fóts* is an enthusiastically nostalgic novel, locating happiness in the rural lives and pastoral economies, manual labor, and autodidactic working class cultures two generations above the *úttrásarvíkingar*. Nostalgia was, of course, widespread following the Crash, in Iceland and abroad. In Iceland it was perhaps most obvious in the sudden fashion for *lopapeysur*, the jumpers hand-knitted from the un-

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spun and untreated wool called *lopi* which seem to have taken their present form around the 1930s but are now seen as icons of traditional Icelandic handicrafts. Indeed, Þórarinn Eldjárn even published a short story, “Flökkusaga,” in which an out-of-work financier takes on an acting job playing a nineteenth-century vagabond, wandering from one settlement to another and taking payment for his storytelling. Identifying with the role altogether too much, the character is eventually found dead in the countryside: the story invites interpretation as an allegory for post-Crash nostalgia.

But *Sigurðar saga fóts* does offer a fairly radical nostalgia, challenging the time- and date-stamped financialized temporalities of many Crash-novels. Its account of early twentieth-century rural Iceland and its petty elites takes a satirical tone, but the satire is gentle, and, in a description more idyllic than parodic, we are told how “ofan til rann áin beina leið en þegar kom niður á mýrarnar hlykkjaðist hún eins og óþekk og fjörug stelpa, tók beygjur út í bláinn og horfði eins og fullþroskuð kona til tunglsins” (“the river ran down on its straight course, and when it came down to the marshes it [lit. “she”] curved like a disobedient and lively girl, took a bend out into the blue, and gazed like a full-grown woman towards the moon”). In a circular process of naming which presents a charmingly naive parochial pomp, the river Skrauta í Dölum is properly known as Skrautudalsá (“Skrautadale River”), “og dalur hennar þar eftir Skrautudalsárdalur” (“and its valley Skrautadale River Dale after it”). Beside it lies the farm named Höfði (literally “chief”).

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80 This is presumably inspired by the infamous real-life place-name Staðarstaður (which might, using the corresponding English place-name
“eftir höfðanum” (“after the chief”). We are at this point in the genteel world of the down-to-earth squire Jón in Halldór Laxness’s Sjálfstætt fólk rather than his pushy, would-be cosmopolitan wife or his philandering, metropolitan son. By insisting on giving his account of the Crash class tensions and a rural dimension, Bjarni encodes a widespread concern at land-purchases by wealthy individuals; at the power of the wealthy to destabilize rural communities; and the risk to urbanites of being cut off, perhaps irrevocably, from their rural heritage. This roots the Crash in the initial development of Icelandic popular capitalism around the beginning of the twentieth century, and demands that it be read in terms of the class conflicts that came to prominence at that time.

Focusing on the grandparents of the útrásarvíkingar’s generation helps Bjarni to situate the Crash in a discourse of class struggle and to suggest a critique of neoliberalism which has otherwise been difficult to sustain since the fall of the Soviet Union. But it also implicitly locates Icelandic values in the generation or so before Iceland’s independence. Jón Karl Helgason, discussing the Icelandic independence struggle, has asked what is the goal of a nation that has already experienced the realization of its greatest dream, reached its final destination? […] It is […] tempting to compare such a nation to an ageing hero who is preoccupied with the memories of his past achievements, his most thrilling adventures. The greatest dream of such a nation is to experience again its glorious moment of triumph.
Although independence is scarcely mentioned in the novel, the impression one gets from *Sigurðar saga fóts* is indeed of a need to reach back to the time of the independence struggle to locate and attempt to revive true Icelandic values. In Bjarni’s Skrautudalur, the politics of the valley are those of the *hreppur*, an ancient administrative unit:

Rigurinn milli bakka er íprótt sem á góðum degi gerir hvern mann að sagnameistara og skáldi.

Og nú þegar siðmenningin hafði loksins skotið rótum á milli striðsarrunum með útvarpsvítakjum og línlömpum þá urðu til nýjar tegundir fylkinga.\(^8^4\)

The quarrelling between the two sides of the river is an art which on a good day makes everyone into a master of story and poetry.

And now, when civilization had finally put down down roots during the inter-war years, with radio sets and oil lamps, new kinds of factions came into being.

Here, then, “siðmenningin” (“civilisation”) is introduced with a somewhat critical tone; the older politics encourage *sagnameisterar* — people who can tell stories and sustain history — whereas the new party politics and modern media, with their endlessly mutable manipulations of reality, are both to be the subject of sustained critique throughout the novel. Hulda’s baby-boomer acquaintance Ágústa gains no credit by taking on a forty-year mortgage simply for the amusement of fitting out a new house, nor for taking it as an opportunity to throw out her husband’s grandfather’s Danish encyclopedia along with all the *Íslendingasögur*.\(^8^5\) Thus *Sigurðar saga* promotes knowledge of the past, and implies that for all its petty tensions and inequalities, the rural society of interwar Iceland was, until it was interrupted by the predations of a capitalist metropolitan elite, a better place

\(^8^4\) Bjarni Harðarson, *Sigurðar saga fóts*, 7.
\(^8^5\) Ibid., 214.
than the society that produced the banking crisis. It also hints, in its talk of *sagnameistarrar*, that we can read this past as part of Iceland’s long literary Middle Ages.

While clearly enjoying this nostalgia, then, Bjarni complicates it by extending it beyond Iceland itself to Hazara, where, in exile, Sigurður employs the skills taught him by his grandfather Siggi stál to become a gunsmith. When, in 2047, Vala Marióðtir’s sons come to bring the elderly Sigurður back to Iceland, he explains that

> Næst á eftir henni mömmu ykkar er þessi byssusmiði það besta sem fyrir mig hefur borið. Þegar ég byrjaði hér að smiða, plóga fyrst og svo byssur, fann ég loks það fræsl sem ég átti í smiðjunni hjá afa mínum. Hitt allt var martröð þar sem ég gerði alrei neiðt, nema skemmta skrattanum. Hér er ég þó að smiða áþreifanleg verðmæti, guðsgjaðir.

> — Til þess að drepa fólk, sagði sá yngri og fýldari. Það er nú varla gaman að vera skotinn með svona verkfæri?

> — Hmmmm. Það deyr enginn nema einu sinni og þegar að því kemur eru byssurnar mínar ekki það versta. Það eina sem skiptir er að gera vel það sem manni er falið að gera. Við ráðum svo engu um það hvað um þau verk verður og hvert þau leiða veröldina. Sjálfum finnst mér jafnan eins og að það sem ég vildi að yrði best og til mestra heilla hafi orðið mér öllum til mestrar bólvunar. Eins og þegar ég reyndi að ala ykkur upp, það er skelfing að sjá ykkur í dag, he, he.86

> After your mum, this gun-smithing is the best thing that ever happened to me. When I began smithing here, first ploughs and then guns, I finally found the freedom which I had in the smithy with my granddad. Everything else was a nightmare where I didn’t do anything except amuse the Devil. But here I get to make something of real value, God’s gift.

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86 Ibid., 251–52.
“In order to kill people,” said the younger and more peevish one. “It’s hardly fun to be shot with that kind of tool, right?”

“Hmm. You only ever die once, and when it comes to it, my guns aren’t the worst way to go. The only thing that matters is to do well what you’re hired to do. We don’t have any control over what becomes of what we make and where that takes the world. In fact, it’s actually as if all the things I wanted to turn out best and the most perfectly have been my greatest misfortunes. Like when I tried to bring you two up — it’s a fright to see you today, hahaha.”

The novel ends with the observation that “til Völustrákanna spurðist aldrei meir” (“of the Vala-boys, nothing was ever heard again”). Sigurður obviously comes across as a dark figure here. At the end of Grettis saga, Þorsteinn drómundur proceeds from the darkness of Iceland’s pagan heritage into the light of religious devotion, and, barring a brief final chapter recording Sturla Þórdarson’s assessment of Grettir, the saga ends with a characteristically matter-of-fact statement about Þorsteinn’s descendants: “en ekki hafa börn hans né afkvæmi til Íslands komm sé frá ger” (“but neither his children nor descendants have come to Iceland, so far as history records”). By contrast, Sigurður fótur steps back into an ancient and decidedly uncosy temporality: swords in this world are not beaten into ploughshares; quite the reverse. The last line of the novel echoes the end of Grettis saga, but strikes an altogether more sinister tone. It recalls how Signý has those of her sons who do not live up to her expectations for her kin killed in the spectacularly gory Völsunga saga, or how, in Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss, Bárður kills his only son, Gestur, for converting to Christianity, thereby ending his own trollish dynasty, as well perhaps as Völundur, a smith, murdering the sons of his enemy and hiding their bodies

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87 Ibid., 252.
in his forge in Völundarkviða. But it is far from clear that we should read Sigurður fótur simply as having reached the nadir of a decline from childhood promise to violent depravity, having gone to seed in a violent and backward Orient. The narratorial voice flatly portrays Sigurður’s sons as “miðaldra kramarmenn” (“middle-aged consumptives”) who “höfðu aldrei náð sér til fulls eftir að hafa rekið nefið í lúxus á barnsaldri” (“had never fully recovered from getting their noses in the trough of luxury as children”). We get the impression that Sigurður’s career in banking has given him a bleak world view, but also a certain moral clarity.

The particular moral clarity Sigurður gains is once more consonant with Marx’s thought, and given that this section of the novel is in a symbolic mode, we are invited to read it in philosophical terms. Working in a Hegelian tradition, Marx built on Feuerbach’s idea that God was a human creation, and that in attributing their own achievements and merits to God, humans alienated themselves from their own natures. Marx took the further step of arguing that economic systems were also (and were more fundamental) mechanisms of alienation. Labor, and its products, are essential to being human; to produce something, undertaking every stage of its production and disposal, is to undertake a meaningful and fulfilling activity. But the more “abstracted” labor becomes, as the worker enjoys progressively less control over the means of production, undertakes a progressively thinner slice of divided labor, and has less benefit from the value they have generated, the more alienated the worker becomes from themselves. Sigurðar saga fóts echoes Marx’s use of metaphors and ideas about religion by repeatedly likening the

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89 R.G. Finch, ed. and trans., The Saga of the Volsungs (London: Nelson, 1965), 8–9 [ch. 6]; Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., Harðar saga; Bárðar saga; Þorskfjörðinga saga; Flóamanna saga [The saga of Hörður; the saga of Bárður; the saga of the people of Þorskfjörður; the saga of the people of Flói] (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1991) [ch. 21]; Guðni Jónsson, Eddukvæði (Sæmundar-Edda) [The Poetic Edda (Sæmundur’s Edda)] (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnautgafan, 1949), 1:185–98.
90 Bjarni Harðarson, Sigurðar saga fóts, 251.
blind faith demanded by high finance to the faith demanded by Christianity. Relatively early in this trajectory, Sigurður is depicted as going to work the forklift-truck on the warehouse floor of his and his father’s company, and the relative solace even this highly abstracted enterprise brings him is pathetic; later, the relief with which he undertakes to launder Kex Wragadjip’s drug-money implicitly arises from his recognition that he is at last participating in a real economy of concrete supply and demand. Entering what is effectively figured as a pre-capitalist economy where handicrafts are still valued and necessary, then, is portrayed as Sigurður’s emancipation from alienation and a long-awaited opportunity to fulfil himself.

Bjarni’s account of Hazara is not uncomplex, nor merely an empty caricature. Rural Iceland really can look like northern Pakistan. Moreover, Sigurðar saga fóts doughtily resists discourses which posit Afghanistan as a proverbially awful place to live, exhibiting a knowing awareness of Iceland’s post-colonial anxieties. It is possible, then, to take Bjarni’s account of Sigurður’s escape as a partly serious, if symbolic, endorsement of life in Hazara as a living example of how Iceland has been and should be: a serious attempt at utopianism.

Yet Sigurðar saga fóts’s utopia is still more an Orientalist fantasy than a call to action. The idea that someone who learned a bit of blacksmithing as a child can turn up in his forties in a completely unfamiliar environment and make himself a successful gunsmith fulfils a fantasy of Western superiority and civilization. Bjarni’s text is explicit that in 2047, “það var að vísu allt annað ár í Mehet-dal eða jafnvel ekkert ár því þar líðu árin lengstum án talningar” (“it was of course an entirely different year in the Mehet-valley, or indeed no year at all, because the years passed mostly without being counted”). This proceeds from alluding to the Islamic calendar to becoming a classic depiction of the Orient as belonging to its own temporality, outside the Western progression to modernity. This section of the book

91 E.g., ibid., 79, 149.
92 Ibid., 251.
suggests that Bjarni’s critique of Icelandic masculinity is not so much that masculinity needs to be revolutionized (in line, say, with Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir’s 2007 Afleggjarinn, the diffident protagonist of Óttar M. Norðfjörð’s 2009 Paradísarborgin, or indeed Porsteinn drómundur’s reliance on both the wiles and the spiritual guidance of Spes), but that, by traditional standards, Icelandic bankers were not truly masculine. Bjarni tends, conversely, to associate traditional gender norms with a condition of non-alienation. And whereas Spesar þáttur presents a positive view of Constantinople and has its protagonists end their lives in Rome, Sigurðar saga fóts seeks its utopia in a sparsely populated rurality— one which seems more nostalgic than a model for political change in the present. In this, it is rather similar to Óttar’s Örvitinn, discussed in §2.5.3.

So despite its critique of a neo-feudal medievalism, Sigurðar saga fóts also attempts a medievalist utopianism, seeking a return to a pastoral past which is not idyllic, but which draws on medieval Icelandic literature to situate pre-modern modes of production as more conducive to human wellbeing than post-modern ones. This utopianism has an internationalist character, insofar as it sees in the present of Hazara the possibility of a return to the Icelandic past of a century or so ago. But to make this move, the novel lapses into Orientalist fantasy, while failing really to make a case for this shift in temporality in Iceland.

Sigurðar saga fóts is a playful, prickly novel, engaging vigorously with the medievalism of the Útrásarvíkingar and making good use of satire of Björgólfur Thor, in particular, as a way into a nuanced and historically sensitive exploration of the Crash. At times it struggles to keep up with the outlandishness of its own subject matter, but its engagement with medieval form— both the intergenerational explorations of cause and effect of the classical Íslendingasögur and the enthusiastically cartoonish and riddarasögur— helps it to chart some of the deep complexity of the Crash, to challenge the nationalist medievalism of the boom, to articulate an account of Iceland’s deeply entrenched but little discussed class hierarchies, and to formulate an account of Iceland’s medieval past that conveys its critique of the present. By
dispensing with golden-ageist medievalism and developing the case that Iceland is really experiencing feudal, dystopian medievalism, the novel seeks to expose the hegemonic power of the útrásarvíkingar. All the same, despite its awareness of Iceland’s post-colonial anxieties, it struggles to do justice to its readings of Iceland in relation to Hazara. In these ways, Sigurðar saga fóts is quite representative of the post-Crash medievalism of the baby-boomers and their elders. Thus Sigurðar saga fóts and Íslenskir kónar both take a satirical stance on the Crash. While the former concentrates on the generation that provided the key personnel of the banking boom and the latter on their parents’ generation, both go to some lengths to situate the origins of banking boom with the nepotistic, often criminal, right-wing elites that took the tiller of Icelandic society as it adopted capitalism and moved towards independence in the first half of the twentieth century. Both novels put allusions to a feudal model of aristocracy at the center of their satires, reading the Crash partly as the outcome of intergenerational class-dominance. That said, barring a passing mention of Viking trade in the East, Íslenskir kónar avoids framing its account of Icelandic society with references to the world beyond Europe, but it does pointedly emphasize the degree of sympathy for the Nazi regime in Germany during the 1930s and ’40s, adverting to the lasting importance of white supremacism to how Iceland constructs its identity in relation to the wider world.\footnote{Einar Már Guðmundsson, Íslenskir kónar, 175–76, 105–13.}

Sigurðar saga fóts is even more similar in many of its plot decisions to Töfrahöllin, emphasizing the degree to which these stylistically very different novels nonetheless represent the post-Crash Iceland Zeitgeist. Whereas Sigurðar saga fóts is cheerfully burlesque, Töfrahöllin is a ploddingly realist, psychologically driven character study of a troubled man who can readily be read as an allegory of the Icelandic public. But despite their contrasting style, the books’ underlying themes are very similar. Both develop their útrásarvíkingur figure through medieval and folkloric intertexts: Sigurðar saga fóts draws on the medi-
eval romance-saga of the same name, while Töfrahöllin uses the twelfth-century carving of a knight on the Valþjófstaður Door, the ballad Kvéði af Ólafi liljurós, and the Goethe poem inspired by a Danish variant of the same ballad, Der Erkönig. Both novels are deeply concerned with class, presenting main characters whose ancestry manifests a collision of elite and working class identities: in Bjarni’s novel, this is Sigurður; in Töfrahöllin it is Jósep, whose devotion to the útrásarvíkingur Kormákur parallels Jamil’s devotion to Sigurður fótur, and likewise arises partly because Jósep is uncertain of his identity, tugged in three different directions by the communism of his grandfather, the aristocracy of his father, and the frustrated ambition of his mother; Jósep is further undermined when his father, who is gay, abandons the family. Both show how the masculinity of the útrásarvíkingur figure exerts a hegemonic control over his doting right-hand man, who in both cases gets involved in his friend’s drug-smuggling and chooses to do time in jail rather than betray the útrásarvíkingur. Both weave a deep alarm about elites’ purchases of land and fishing-rights in the countryside into their stories. Finally, both intersect their medievalist accounts of Icelandic boom-time culture with characters from the Islamic world, both ending with an unlikely Orientalist denoument. In Töfrahöllin, the counterpart to the fourth elf-maiden encountered in the ballad Kvéði af Ólafi liljurós turns out to be a Turkish sex-worker whom the protagonist rescues from violent oppression so that the two of them can settle down in unexpected petit-bourgeois comfort. This emphasizes how Bjarni Harðarson’s Orientalism in Sigurðar saga fóts is, relatively speaking, quite productive and interesting — but also how it is not only Bjarni who has struggled to write Iceland convincingly in relation to the Global South.

The similarities between Sigurðar saga fóts, Íslenskir kóngr, and Töfrahöllin point clearly to the tightly integrated discursive structures of post-Crash Icelandic culture, perhaps specifically in this case among the baby-boomers and their elders. The tension between “nationalist” and “Orientalist” medievalism which I described in Chapter 3 is very visible here, and one which writ-
ers are clearly struggling to resolve. The possibilities for a more revealing and challenging engagement with medievalism and the Orient are, however, shown by Bjarni Bjarnason in his own satire of Björgólfur Thor, *Mannrð*.

4.6 Bjarni Bjarnason’s *Mannrð*: Writers and Reputations

Bjarni Bjarnason’s *Mannrð* (“reputation”) presents a revisionist approach to Iceland’s nationalist medievalism using rather different strategies from *Sigurðar saga fóts* and attempting a rather grander scope. It shifts our attention away from Iceland’s struggles to integrate ethnic Others, on which *Sigurðar saga fóts* focuses, and onto the international nature of Icelandic finance and Iceland’s participation in the West’s asymmetric, neo-colonial economic relationships with the developing world, this time choosing India as its point of reference. As well as helping us examine the use and abuse of the mythic figure of Björgólfur Thor, and Iceland’s medievalism and Orientalism, *Mannrð* further provides a case study of the anxiety discussed in Chapter 2 about the co-option of Icelandic art to the banking boom (and to neoliberal capitalism more generally). *Mannrð* engages vigorously with Iceland’s medieval literary heritage to imagine how, after the Crash, a despised Icelandic banker, Starkaður Levi, attempts to recover a good name (but not, as it turns out, *his* good name) by paying an agency to help him take on the identity of a world-weary but well-loved Icelandic author, Almar Logi. *Mannrð* is ultimately, probably, more cynical than *Sigurðar saga fóts*; but it also succeeds in engaging with international finance in ways that *Sigurðar saga fóts* does not.

Much about *Mannrð*’s style will be familiar from the survey in Chapter 2: it is at one level an extended meditation on the angst of an author who feels that reality has overtaken fiction. Accordingly, large sections of the novel are ostensibly drawn from the diary of one of its protagonists, the author Almar Logi, putting anxiety about authorship, the relationship between the author’s life and his writing, and the position of the author in society at the forefront of the tale. The same device is used in Guð-
Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson

mundur Óskarsson’s *Bankster* (2009) and Óttar M. Norðfjörð’s *Lygarinn* (2011), emphasizing the appeal of diaristic form to post-Crash Icelandic writers keen to muse on the nature of writing. Describing his most recent work, *Demón Café*,

Almar sagði að saga af djöflinum sem kemur til Íslands og auðgast á því að fórna sál gamals manns og ætlar síðan að vinna ást guðs með því að fórna barninu sínu, hafi verið lýsing á Íslandi 2007 eins og hann skynjaði það. Þetta hefði ekki verið fantasía, heldur raunsæi, eins og síðar kom í ljós.94

Almar said that the story of the Devil who comes to Iceland and gets rich by sacrificing the soul of an old man, and intends thereafter to win God’s affection by sacrificing his own child, had been a description of Iceland in 2007, as he perceived it. This had not turned out to be a fantasy, but reality, as later became clear.

Local audiences had not, however, apprehended the significance of the novel, helping to precipitate Almar Logi’s existential crisis. As well as its Judaeo-Christian resonances, ranging from Abraham to Faust, in the context of *Mannorð* this story recalls Snorri Sturluson’s account of Aun inn gamli, the Swedish king who sacrificed all but one of his sons to Óðinn in return for a grotesquely extended life:95 the use of medieval intertexts is a key means for *Mannorð* to gain some purchase on the problems of writing within capitalist realism.

The multiple resonances of the book’s title are emphasized by the forty-fifth of the collection of poems on the Crash by Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Hnefi eða vitstola orð*.96

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96 Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl, *Hnefi eða vitstola orð [A fist or words bereft of sense]* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2013), unnumbered pages.
Orðlof is an archaic word, literally meaning “word-praise”; mannorð is its modern counterpart. Orðlof evokes the stock-in-trade of medieval Icelandic court poets, and thus the power of writers to praise or criticize their rulers. Its insistent repetition in Eiríkur Örn’s poem evokes the almost proverbial centrality of personal honor in canonical Old Icelandic literature, and it sets this golden age in contrast to the corruption of the present. But it can also be read ironically as a comment on current Icelandic golden-ageism and obsession with keeping up appearances at the expense of deeper reform. It comments not only on the personal reputations of bankers, but Iceland’s national anxiety about foreign views of the country — a point underscored by the fact that every page of the collection Hnefi eða vitstola orð charts the changing (mostly falling) value of the króna relative to the Euro from about 24 July 2008 to 15 May 2009. Mannorð, despite focusing on the personal reputation of one banker, evokes similar issues.

Bjarni takes the self-medievalizing Björgólfur Thor and re-narrates him through the saga-character Starkaður Stórvirksson from Gautreks saga. Starkaður Levi’s first attempt to regain his reputation is to publish an open letter of apology “eins og […] hann væri á pari við þjóðina sem hann talaði til líkt og fyrr-verandi eiginkonu í biturri ástarsorg” (“as if […] he was in a relationship with the nation, which he talked to like it was his ex-wife in a bitter break-up”). This is a method which several real Icelandic financiers attempted, not least Björgólfur Thor. These epistles appeared both to widespread incredulity and

97 Bjarni Bjarnason, Mannorð, 7.
literary parody, and Starkaður Levi’s fares no better. In Gautreks saga, Starkaður Stórvirksson’s life is shaped by a series of blessings and curses he receives respectively from the gods Óðinn and Þór (which in turn resonate with the second part of Starkaður Levi’s name: the biblical patriarch Levi is characterized by the curse he receives from his father Jacob in Genesis 49). Þór begins by cursing Starkaður to have no descendants; Óðinn counters by according Starkaður a life three life-spans long; Þór curses him with a niðingsverk (“atrocity”) in each; and a long series of further blessings and curses follows. Óðinn and Þór’s exchange closes thus:


Óðinn said: “I give him the art of poetry, such that he will compose poetry no slower than speaking.” Þór said: “he will not remember anything he composes.” Óðinn said: “I decree it for him, that he will be considered the highest by the noblest and best people.” Þór said: “he will be despised by all the common people.”

The exchange is conventionally understood to reflect an antagonism between Óðinn (associated with aristocrats, court poetry, and provoking war), and Þór (thought to have been more popular further down the social ladder, and associated


with maintaining social order by patrolling the borders of the worlds of gods and men against giants).\textsuperscript{100} As I described in §4.1, Björgólfur Thor has made much of associating himself with his popular namesake. By renarrating Björgólfur Thor instead as an Óðinn-hero in the mould of Starkaður Stórvirksson, then, \textit{Mannorð} figures Björgólfur Thor’s self-presentation as a hegemonic discourse disguising his true resemblance to the wily, selfish, and destructive Óðinn. \textit{Mannorð} then goes on to have Starkaður Leví fulfil Óðinn’s blessings—but unlike his namesake, ultimately also to avoid Þórr’s curses.

Starkaður Stórvirksson’s first step in fulfilling Óðinn’s blessings is his first \textit{níðingsverk}: sacrificing his foster-brother Vikar to Óðinn. Accordingly, \textit{Mannorð} has Starkaður Leví regaining his reputation, and gaining for the first time an \textit{innihaldríkt líf} (“content-rich life, meaningful life”), through the sacrifice of the depressed, jaded, but well loved author Almar Logi. Spurred partly by the mockery of a detractor wearing a Thor’s hammer pendant, Starkaður Leví pays a company which specializes in arranging new identities for the hyper-rich to take on Almar Logí’s identity and life. Starkaður Leví takes on Almar’s form through plastic surgery, and Almar himself accepts a lethal injection by a \textit{sprauta} (“syringe”), echoing the way Vikar agrees to be the victim of a mock-sacrifice in which Starkaður thrusts a \textit{sprota} (“twig”) at him which, however, magically becomes a lethal spear.\textsuperscript{101} Yet rather than delivering the infamy accorded to Starkaður Stórvirksson, Starkaður Leví’s secret sacrifice of Almar Logi is unknown to the rest of society, allowing Starkaður Leví in many respects to gain the best of both worlds. Likewise, whereas Starkaður is cursed with sustaining horrific injuries, Bjarni has Starkaður Leví lightly injured by a startling but not life-threatening knife attack. In his life as a banker, Starkaður Leví had been dumped by his long-term partner and left child-


\textsuperscript{101}Bjarni Bjarnason, \textit{Mannorð}, 222.
Ég gerði hagfræðilega tilraun í Jaipurferðinni. Hún fólst í því að ég skipti tíu þúsund rúpíum í þúsund tíu rúpíu seðla í bankanum og fór niður í miðbæ Jaipur, fyrir utan gömlu konungshöllina og hóf að deila þeim út, einum í senn. Ég get sagt þér það, að allt för á annan endann. Ég ætlaði að dreпат úr hlátri þegar ég var að troðast undir æstum betlaralýðnum. Það er skömm að segja frá því, amma, af því að ég gerði þetta í vísindaskyni, að ég man ekki meira frá þessu. Nema hvað ég rankaði við mér undir ávaxtaborði á markaðstorginu með lögreglumenn vopn-að bareflum yfir mér. Tilraunin mistökst kannski fyrst ég rankaði við mér og mér tókst ekki að sanna kenninguna. Eðlilegast hefði verið að ég hefði kramist undir æstustu gyðju heimsins, fátæktinni. Það hefði sannað tilgátuna um að ríkir eiga ekki að reyna að þóknast fátækum. Ef til vill var það bílstjórin sem þarna spornaði við framþróun vísindanna. Fyrsta sem ég sá var hann að tala við lögreglumennina, ífæði sigað þeim með kylfurnar á börnin og gamalmennin.

Ég staulaðist á fætur, lét hann keyra mig út á flugvöll og gat ekki gert að því að ég hló allan túrinn. Sársaukafullum hlátri því likaminn var allur lemstraudur eftir hvílubrögðin með fátæktargyðjuni.

But why didn’t I see any undernourished people anywhere? I thought about that a lot. One time, when the car was stuck yet again in the nightmare traffic, I got the answer to my question. I saw a totally destitute man who was trying to support himself by selling tea in these plastic cups. His shop was this upturned wooden box that he’d patched together from leftover bits of wood. His demeanour changed when he stood behind the box, became really proprietorial. When an even poorer passer-by was passing with his stick, he stepped out into the road in front of him and silently handed him a cup of tea and a dry
less (matching Þór’s curse that Starkaður Stórvirksson should have no descendants), but in becoming Almar Logi he both metaphorically gains another lifespan, echoing the longevity granted by Óðinn to Starkaður Stórvirksson, and a fulfilling family life. (Ironically, moreover, Almar Logi’s wife is a key witness in the prosecution of Starkaður Leví.) In death, Almar Logi may forget everything he has ever written, but, inheriting Almar’s diaries, Starkaður Leví not only gets to remember it, but to use it as the basis for his next novel, circumventing Almar’s writer’s block. Thus Starkaður Stórvirksson’s gift of skáldskap is a key motif for Mannorð. As well as writing the Crash as a personal crisis for a banker, Mannorð also writes it as a personal crisis for an author who, worn down by life as a critical voice on the margins of capitalist society, can be bought too readily.

By rewriting Gautreks saga, then, Bjarni challenges the útrásarvíkingur narrative by renarrating one of its leading figures as a destructive, Odanic character; but he also concludes — with justifiable cynicism — that such characters generally get to have their cake and eat it. Mannorð mounts a pointed critique of the medievalism of the útrásarvíkingar, while also exposing their continued capacity to continue to reap the profits of their finance activities.

4.7 International finance

Mannorð is also particularly interesting, however, for the way it uses medieval intertexts to situate Iceland in relation to the developing world. While Mannorð shows the same desire as Sigurðar saga fóts and Töfrahöllin to write Icelandic medievalism in relation to the Orient, it makes a concerted attempt to think about the meaning of Iceland’s banking boom in relation to global economic and political forces, and to recognize that the boom also had consequences for the developing world. The novel opens with Starkaður Leví in self-imposed exile in Kochi in south-west India. Later in the novel, as he reaches the point of no return in abandoning his identity, Starkaður pays a final visit to his grandmother and finds himself unexpectedly mus-
wheat-cake. The poorer one received the meal in dignified silence, crouched down on his heels and ate with the stick lying between his feet. His eyes, bloodshot and gazing, had seen it all. The stall owner looked at him proudly, as if he was the richest man in the world, because he’d been able to offer him a free meal.

The incident showed me the most civilised culture on earth, and it begins in the most extreme poverty. Every attempt to take poverty away from mankind ends in this horrible distortion of nature. The spirit grows up healthy and beautiful from poverty, but is corrupted by wealth. The soul of the poor is the clearest image of holiness in the world. You see what I mean, Gran? Indians know this better than anyone, and nothing seems more natural to them than that a tiny number of the high-born own all the flash possessions and the others revolve around them as if they’re a god, and massage them with hot, aromatic oils from morning to night. There are eight-hundred million in poverty in India. You see what I mean, Gran? Eight-hundred million! That’s twice as many people as the whole population of Europe. Do you have to think about who owns how many krónur when this is the state of the world? Couldn’t you just as well be thinking about asset allocation when you’re looking at the stars? If anyone wants to change this they have to take into account the laws of nature and the ordained orbits of the heavenly bodies.

On the Jaipur trip, I did an economic experiment. It consisted of me changing ten thousand rupees into a thousand ten-rupee notes at the bank and going down into the middle of Jaipur, outside the old royal palace and court, to hand them out, one by one. It all went differently than I expected, I can tell you. I intended to die of laughter as I was squashed by a demented crowd of beggars. It’s a disgrace to admit this, Gran, given that I did it in a scientific spirit, but I don’t remember any more about it. Just that I came to my senses under a vegetable stall
ing at length on his time in India. As far as I am aware, there is no historical basis for situating the self-imposed exile of a disgraced Icelandic banker in India or elsewhere in the Global South. For Starkaður, however, his reminiscences about India become an opportunity for a meditation on the privilege of the super-rich in a global context. Starkaður finds himself spending two months not leaving his air-conditioned five-star New Delhi hotel and availing himself of the oblivion afforded by hours of massages. Starkaður is eventually spurred into flight by an unexpected invitation from the Icelandic ambassador in India to attend a garden party for a visit by the Icelandic president: one of the “kokteilboðin sem stjórna heiminum” (“cocktail parties that rule the world”), and the sort of event at which

It felt like we were a segment of reality and we controlled the future through one another’s anecdotes: the future came to ordinary people through our laughter, which jingled like gold coins dropping into a treasure chest. Yep, this was the gilded-elite-laughter-choir of the world, which the cocktail glasses accompanied with the rhythms of avant-garde music when the smiling people said “cheers!”

This nods to the existence of a global elite of the super-rich and national leaders whose class solidarity transcends national borders at the expense of the sovereignty of national governments, and contradicts the interests of lower social orders across the globe. “En ég var víss um að gamansögurnar yrðu á minn kost-

102 Bjarni Bjarnason, Mannord, 153.
in the market place, with policemen armed with clubs over me. Perhaps the experiment went wrong because I came to my senses before I could prove the hypothesis. The most natural thing would have been that I would have been crushed under the most furious goddess in the world, poverty. That would have proved the theory that the rich don’t have to try and please the poor. Perhaps it was the driver who impeded the advancement of science that day. The first thing I saw was him talking to the policemen—he’d set them on the children and old folk with their truncheons.

I got myself to my feet and had him drive me out to the airport, and couldn’t do anything because I was laughing the whole way. With painful laughter, because my body was totally beaten up after getting into bed with the goddess of poverty.

nað að þessu sinni og framtíðin kæmi til heimsins í gegnum hlátur einhvers annars en mín” (“but I was sure that this time the anecdotes would be at my expense, and the future would come about through the laughter of someone other than me”), Starkaður goes on, reflecting a loss of agency that pervades the novel. Instead of attending the party, he heads to Jaipur.

Starkaður recounts to his grandmother how, as he travelled, he reflected on the charity he witnessed around him between people who to his eyes were uniformly impoverished, and the enormous inequality that characterizes Indian society. Excerpt 7 presents the key account. Starkaður’s story is ambiguous: his vision of the solidarity of the poor is romantic, and does not address the brutality of the caste system. This is a confusing narrative, and if it is hard to imagine just what Starkaður Leví thinks he is doing here, that is surely partly because his sense of normality has become so detached from the reader’s. But there is no doubt that Bjarni here is developing the portrayal of Starkaður Stórvirksson as an Óðinn-hero by alluding to the ac-
count of how Óðinn gained the mead of poetry in *Skáldskaparmál*, which begins thus:

Óðinn för heiman ok kom þar, er þrælar níu slógu hey. Hann spyrð ef þeir vili at hann brýni ljá þeira. Þeir játa því. Pá tek hann hein af belti sér ok brýndi, en þeim þótti bíta ljárnið miklu betr ok ǫlluðu heinina. En hann mat svá at sá er kaupa vildi skyldi gefa við höf, en allir kváðusk vilja ok báðu hann sér selja, en hann kastaði heininni í loft upp. En er allir vilduðu henda þá skiptusk þeir svá við at hverr brá ljánum á háls öðrum.103

Óðinn travelled from his home and arrived at a place where nine slaves were mowing hay. He asks if they would like him to sharpen their scythes. They agree to that. He then takes a whetstone from his belt and sharpened the scythes, and the slaves found that they cut much better, and asked to buy the whetstone. And he priced it such that whoever wanted to buy it should give accordingly in return, and everyone said they did want to and asked him to sell it them. But he threw the whetstone up into the air. And when everyone tried to catch it, they crossed each other’s paths such that each one drew his scythe across the throat of the others.

Óðinn here shows a callous indifference to the unfree poor: his motivation for engineering the slaves’ demise is to take their jobs as a first step to stealing a drink of the Mead of Poetry. In *Gautreks saga*, Starkaður Stórvirksson undertakes no such activity, but *Egils saga Skallagrímar* suggests that Óðinn’s trick here is the sort of thing we should expect his followers to get up to. In his old age, *Egils saga*’s eponymous protagonist, an old devotee of Óðinn, plots to take two chests of silver onto the *lögberg* at the Alþingi and cast the silver amongst the crowd, “ok þiki mér undarligt, ef allir skipta vel sín í milli. Ætla ek at þar myndi vera

útrásarvíkingar!

pá hundningar eða þústrar, eða bærisk at um síðir, at allr þing-heimrinn berðisk” (“and I will be surprised if everyone shares it out nicely. I want there to be pushing and punching, or it ending up with everyone at the þing getting into a fight”). Both Egill and Starkaður Levi seem to want to expose people’s inner barbarity, but to do so in ways which serve equally to expose their own psychopathy.

Recognizing that Mannorð is mining a mythic seam here, we are surely expected to read Starkaður Levi’s distribution of ten-rupee notes allegorically: he represents the power of Western finance to win the coercive support of the post-colonial state, working systematically to maximize profits without regard to the wellbeing of the slave-like poor, while claiming to bring wealth by redistributing a fraction of the wealth that the poor have themselves produced. Bjarni’s critical deployment of Snorra Edda, which stands close to the heart of the nationalist medievalist Icelandic canon, brings home how, once Iceland joined the global financial machine, and contrary to its habitual self-image as a newly independent, plucky post-colonial underdog, it took on a significant new role in a neo-colonial financial system.

Iceland initiated an official overseas development policy in 1971; it created a peacekeeping force, the Icelandic Crisis Response Unit, in 2001; it supported the US-led invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003); and all of these activities were partly intended to support the ill-timed (and unsuccessful) attempt to join the UN Security Council in 2008, one of Iceland’s self-professed qualifications for which was an impressively hollow sounding sympathy with post-colonial countries, supposedly born of a shared experience of colonial oppression.105

These manoeuvres reflect the wider trend for the militarization of “development” through the discourses of “peacekeeping” and “security,” and have been widely criticized in Iceland as militarization through the back door — not least in Þráinn Bertelsson’s novel Valkyrjur, where the government’s efforts to create a secret service without proper public oversight are roundly criticized. Likewise, Óttar M. Nordfjörð’s Örvitinn; eða hugsjónamaðurinn, following in the footsteps of Candide’s portrayal of European colonialism, tumbles brilliantly from Iceland’s participation in the Iraq war and its discourses of “the war on terror” to the Crash, hinting through juxtaposition at how participation in war chimed with the macho, chauvinistic hubris which gained such prominence during Iceland’s boom. But Óttar never really brings war and Crash into dialogue; the economic drivers for Western war in Iraq are not explored in Örvitinn. Sigurðar saga fóts, Sigrún Davíðsdóttir’s Samhengi hlutanna, and Ernir K. Snorrasen’s burlesque crime-novel Sýslumaðurinn sem sá álfa work on the assumption that Icelandic banks were laundering Russian mafia money, thus implicating Iceland in corruption overseas, but none attempts to depict the consequences of these activities for foreign societies. By contrast, Bjarni Bjarnason’s account of Starkaður Levi’s “economic experiment” implicitly recognizes the shared history of Iceland and India as recently poverty-stricken colonies, the complicity of Icelandic finance in the perpetuation of colonial-era systems of political economy, and the moral imperative for Iceland to make common cause with the poor of India. The invocation of medieval Icelandic texts in this argument helps to bring the critique close to home: whereas the use of fornaldarsögur and romances enables writers to articulate different medievalisms from the nationalist medievalism at the heart of the útrásarvíkingur myth, the critical use of texts at the heart of the nationalist canon — Snorra Edda and Egils saga Skallagrímssonar — enables Bjarni to suggest that the psychopathy and corruption he identifies in these canonical

texts is as integral to the elite culture of the banking boom as it is to the medieval texts that the útrásarvíkingar have appropriated.

4.8 Conclusion

As satirical biographies of Björgólfur Thor Björgólfsson, Siguurðar saga fóts and Mannord do not strike me as particularly powerful politically: for all their dark humor, it is hard for the reader not to come to sympathize with the protagonist, who in both novels finds himself increasingly (even tragically) alienated from himself. This is not to say that the financiers at the heart of the financial crisis do not deserve some personal sympathy, but rather that biographies of bankers struggle to harness affect to a critique of financial systems; a similar criticism can be levelled, for example, at the portrayal of Eric Packer, the financier at the center of Don DeLillo’s 2003 Cosmopolis.106 It is, moreover, instructive that the range and ingenuity of Icelandic novels inspired by Björgólfur Thor for the most part seem unlikely to reflect a specific Icelandic capacity to use biographical forms to write about the Crash: rather the novels reflect the high public profile and personal myth-making that made the more colourful protagonists of the banking boom digestible to writers. The contrast between Björgólfur Thor and another key pair of Icelandic financiers, Ágúst and Lýður Guðmundsson, who beginning with share purchases in 2002 became the single biggest owners of Kaupþing, is instructive: Ágúst and Lýður gave their companies bland names and kept a low profile before and after the Crash, and correspondingly have stayed firmly beyond the criticism of Icelandic novelists. Much the same might said for their British counterparts. In John Lanchester’s Capital, the banker Roger Yount is a bumbling caricature of Britain’s privately educated and overprivileged elite, while in Sebastian Faulks’s A Week in December, the financier John Veals is a James Bond-villain without the intrepid antagonist: it is as if both authors, in

their different ways, are trying to condense their villains from the ether. The main British exceptions to this unwritable anonymity are perhaps Fred Goodwin, erstwhile CEO of the Royal Bank of Scotland Group, and Philip Green, one-time owner of British Home Stores and much else besides: both had the misfortune to receive knighthoods of which they could be stripped. (Curiously, then, they too have been given their cultural meaning through anachronistically medieval sign systems.) That said, while not necessarily more realistic than Yount and Veals, Starkaður Leiði and Sigurður fótur are at least more tangible, given form by the literary strata that underlie them.

These limitations notwithstanding, though, it is also clear that, by taking bankers’ eminently postmodern remixing of medieval signs (as mediated through National Romanticism) and not only renarrating them but bringing them forcibly back into intertextual contact with medieval sources, Iceland’s baby-boomers have been able to chip away at the medievalist-nationalist narratives which economic and political elites used to justify their boom-time activities. We might go so far as to suggest that a key way for many Icelandic literary writers to gain some purchase on the capitalist realism discussed in Chapter 2 has been to work with medieval texts: texts from pre-capitalist societies. In terms of Fredric Jameson’s famed injunction to “always historicize,” they could perhaps be said to historicize the medievalism of the Útrásarvíkingar, helping to reveal how it is the product of nationalist, patriarchal historiography rooted in nineteenth-century Romanticism and colonialism. By drawing on neglected medieval genres, associated in Icelandic nationalism with Norwegian oppression and so-called feudal social structures, Icelandic novellists have been able to present rather forcefully an image of Iceland entering a neo-feudal epoch, and in doing so challenge nationalist neoliberal hegemonies.

In Chapter 2, I argued that a great deal of post-Crash fiction fairly neatly inhabits capitalist realism, seeking to resist neo-

liberalism, but struggling to examine neoliberal culture from outside its own frame of reference. I found these limitations manifesting themselves at the levels of style (the ostensible realism of crime novels, for example, actually promotes a very particular understanding of the politically “realistic”) and content (the fantastical character of children’s fiction often seemingly unable to imagine the end of capitalism, or to assert a progressive agenda beyond resistance). I emphasized that novels tend to be constrained by the post-war Western commitment to the novel as an exploration of individual psychologies, and that this contrasts with the classical Islendingasögur, pre-eminently Njáls saga. While acknowledging individual psychology, the classical Islendingasögur focus firmly on the long-term, social, and systemic causes of violence, presented in a vividly portrayed, non-capitalist society. Njáls saga is a literary work precisely concerned with the relationship between individual responsibilities, social structures, and the institutions that are supposed to mediate them, and deftly explores the ethical dilemmas and individual tragedies these relationships entail without taking its eye off the social.

It will be clear that in some ways the same critique holds for the literature examined in this chapter too: both Mannorð and Sigurðar saga fóts are committed to the exploration of the inner thoughts of a main protagonist in a way that even sagas focusing on a single character seldom concern themselves with. Yet both texts do, in different ways, echo the achievements of classical sagas. When Steinar Bragi bodily included a quasi-folk tale in Háleindið, he succeeded brilliantly in allegorizing neoliberal hegemony, but did not get much further than this. Sigurðar saga fóts, however, firmly situates the boom in a multi-generational frame going back to the first decades of Icelandic industrial capitalism. Both this novel and Mannorð, in their different ways, make some progress in explicating the global character of Icelandic finance, and even, in the case of the former, to contemplate other forms of reality—albeit with an Orientalizing nostalgia which Steinar Bragi would contemplate with deserved scepticism. Mannorð manages to complicate nationalist and Oriental-
ist medievalism alike by using canonical texts to indicate how the troubles of the Global South are both a consequence and an integral part of the nationalist-medievalist project. Albeit tentatively, Mannorð helps to indicate that the medieval does at least suggest productive challenges to dominant discourses. Nevertheless, Mannorð’s message is (justifiably) cynical. In one sense, it is the financier in Mannorð who is metabolized by literary sign-systems rather than the writer: as perceived by the rest of the world, it is Almar Logi who lives and thrives, and Starkaður Leví who vanishes. But in a practical sense, it is clearly the financier who gets the last laugh: the novel exposes hegemonic discourses but struggles to envisage their successful subversion. To borrow another rephrasing of the same passage of Hávamál once invoked by Björgólfur Thor, this time from Bjarni Harðarson’s 2011 rewriting of Njáls saga, “órðstír deyr aldrei þeim sem sér góðan kaupir” (“good word-glory never dies, for those who buy it for themselves”). But, though nostalgic and Orientalist, Bjarni Harðarson’s insistence on a utopian, Spears þáttar-style denouement to Sigurðar saga fóts does point the way to a key aspect of post-Crash writing, on which the next chapter focuses.
