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An Interview with Ὸfeigur Sigurðsson and Lytton Smith

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Ófeigur Sigurðsson is the author of six books of poetry and three novels. He was awarded the European Union Prize for Literature in 2011 for his novel, *Jón*, making him the first Icelander to receive the prize. His novel *Öræfi: The Wasteland* was published in Iceland in 2014 to great critical and commercial acclaim, and received the Book Merchant's Prize in 2014 and the Icelandic Literature Prize in 2015.

Lytton Smith is the author of *My Radar Data Knows Its Thing*, *While You Were Approaching the Spectacle But Before You Were Transformed By It*, and *The All-Purpose Magical Tent*. He has translated several novels from the Icelandic in addition to *Öræfi* and is a 2019 recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellowship. He is a professor of Creative Writing and Black Studies at SUNY Geneseo.

***Gandy Dancer*: Reading Öræfi in translation, I couldn't help but dwell on the passages that remind us of the presence of Interpreter, who relays Bernharður's words to Dr. Lassi, who writes the report described in Bernharður's letter received by Auth. in the spring of 2003. Reading passages in which Interpreter filters out "all the delirious babble and needless descriptions" and weaves together "a pithy narrative, an escalating, logical series of events," it's hard not to remember that English-language readers are consuming a text**

which has been translated. Were you aware, when writing these lines, that Öræfi would eventually find its way into English?

Ófeigur Sigurðsson: Good question! No, I was not aware of that; it would probably have blown my mind, since there were already so many layers of narration. The "babble" and "needless descriptions" was to me a little joke, since the narrative is consumed with some babble but necessary descriptions. My state of mind, as I was writing the novel, was such that I was sure nobody would ever want to publish it, so I felt completely free to do all kinds of literary stunts and had a lot of fun writing it.

***GD*: The reader is consistently reminded that the information we receive is traversing a chain of memory and interpretation in order to reach us, as exemplified in passages like "The snow was packed around me, hardened like concrete, said Bernharður, interpreted the interpreter, wrote Dr. Lassi in her report, or so Bernharður wrote to me in his letter that spring of 2003." Throughout the novel I found myself assuming that this technique is designed to make the reader question the truthfulness of the narrative: at the end of the book, the narrative, although based on a false premise, seems as though by virtue of its construction by only by one person, to be reliable after all. What can be said as to the ultimate truthfulness of the narrative?**

ÓS: Well, in the end it becomes clear that it is a work of fiction, as the author speaks from the future. This chain of memory and interpretation is an experiment to make transparent the multi layers of how stories generally come into being. The ultimate truthfulness of every narrative, I think, lies in the narrative itself. Meaning that it has to be agreable with the reader, even all the unbelievable things, supernatural and so on, have to be credible to make an emotional or mental connection between the text and the reader.

Lytton Smith: I'd also add that a narrative's truthfulness has to do, I think—and maybe this is the translator's experience speaking—with the moment and context in which you're reading the book. That the author is both writing from the future (as the afterword makes clear) and from the past (because working with things retrieved from the glacier, from the recent past for we as readers now, and echoing a real-life, mid-20th century tragedy), I can't help but read the truth of the narrative as a warning about how susceptible we are to climate. That doesn't even have to mean that we accept a human role in climate change, though of course I do; it's just that we're not at all humble before the environment at this point in U.S. history, and that's such a dangerous thing. The book's a fiction, Ófeigur writes, but maybe it's very much not, too...

***GD*: The novel's blurb presents its plot as the "mystery of Bernharður Fingurbjörg," although the way that the plot unfolds separates the book from the trope of a mystery which hinges on clues and signs and a collection of suspects. The unanswered mystery that remained for me at the end of the novel: who is the Author? Does it matter who they are?**

ÓS: The author of the book is a fictional author. It was intended so to give the discovered letter more credibility. And also, stretching the concept of authorship, there is a author behind every author.

***GD*: *Öræfi* combines a character-driven plot with passages on Icelandic geography and toponomy, a tally of seemingly every suicide in the Öræfi region from 1611 to 1793, a theory of poetics based on alkaline or basic fungi which grow inside the bodies of poets, and histories of Iceland's sheep and dogs. Is the novel written out of a particular formal tradition that American readers might not be familiar with?**

ÓS: Not that I am aware of, no; I do not think so. But, what I was trying to do was mix the European novel (whatever that might be, exactly), mainly my favorite authors at that time, for example Thomas Mann and Thomas Bernard, with the Sagas and the Icelandic folklore. Combining amateur writing with professional, natural talent and trained writing. If I succeeded, I am not sure. But every novel is an experiment, an experiment with form, structure, plot or non-plot. It is an adventure, a journey into the unknown. Thomas Mann said something like, if the author knew beforehand what the novel was going to be about or how it will finally be, he would never be able to write it. The novel seems, Mann said, to have a mind of its own. So the work of an author is to follow his intuition to find the way. The author has to invent a new form for every book. There is no formula for art.

LS: And, to echo Charles Olson and Robert Creeley's mantra, form is never more than the extension of content. But it's always interesting to think about how translation has to retrace what might have been the author's mindset: one task a translator has is to find touchstones that might work for the reader reading in the target language, i.e. American literary English; while European writers were a touchstone for me (and Bernard especially), you also find yourself thinking about discursive American writers with whom readers might be familiar, such as Richard Bach.

***GD*: What, if anything, was lost in the translation of this book from Icelandic to English? Translating poetry from English into Spanish this semester, I've found that English slides around its own rules of grammar more easily than Spanish does, and there's often not a way to avoid leaving something behind. What concerns did you have for the English version of *Öræfi*, and how were they dealt with in the English version of the novel?**

LS: Most students of translation at some point get told Robert Frost's adage that poetry is what gets lost in translation, and many more people know that saying than actually read translations. And there is something left behind, as you neatly put it, of course there is: in your case, the particular cadences of Spanish, which is softer in its consonance (at least to my ear) than English or Icelandic. But I think we have to remember any language is always in motion, like a glacier is; it's just invisible to us until a major event—a glacial flood, a coinage of a divisive word or syntax, a translation—happens. So there will be nuances of Icelandic history and culture that don't make it across; details that resonate with many Icelandic readers will either fall on deaf ears in the U.S. or not make it into the translation. And yet I think, if the translation has worked, the atmosphere has become a bridge between these two texts. I know it's more abstract that your question's asking, but I think of translation as an anti-nationalist endeavour: it's not replacing one national literature with another, but recognizing the impossibility of national categories, that we're always globally influenced (see Ófeigur's last answer!). Different Icelandic readers will get different things; it's not that there's a guaranteed, essential version of the novel in Icelandic. So while you try to get everything across, you can't, because the novel is always a moving target, its language more like a river than an ice sculpture.

***GD*: Students of literature are trained not to conflate narrator/characters of a text with the author. In a book where characters frequently perform the literary equivalent of turning to the camera and addressing the audience directly, and in which the author and a central character share the experience of having been teenage Icelanders in death metal bands, how wise is it to assume that there is separation between author and character?**

ÓS: I am sometimes of the opinion that all the characters are the author, and if I remember correctly, I think it says something of that sort in the book. At least, the characters reflect the author, some in a negative way, some in a positive way. Writers use their experience to build characters. I, for example, have a lot in common with the Regular, I gave him a lot of my own past, same experience regarding the death metal, same address, same interests, same experience in Öræfi with Kiddi, and a lot of people see him as me, the author, me included, sometimes, although the trip and meeting Bernhardur is pure fiction. And I agree with not conflating characters with the author, for the work of fiction should stay a work of fiction and not be dragged into reality by trying to find the truth. There is no reality-truth in fiction, only fiction-truth.

***GD*: Dr. Lassi speaks for nearly six pages about her disillusionment with her career as a veterinarian, which she reduces to "castrating and killing." Within this speech, addressed to the Interpreter, Dr. Lassi speculates briefly that**

she will give up veterinary medicine and apply herself "to creative writing," which she calls "the most exalted and most sinful thing, worse than castrating and killing." What should we make of this statement's place within a work of fiction? Is Dr. Lassi right, or does her judgement reflect her inexperience with writing?

ÓS: Well, I do not know what to make of all of Dr. Lassi's opinions. She was hard to handle and a bit of a untamed beast. You are right in assuming that her judgement reflects her inexperience. That is a very good point, since she is insecure after being intimidated by her parents when she was young and wanted to become a writer. Now, wanting to break out of the security of her daily job as a vet, she hesitates about going into the insecurity of being a writer. But she is right in a way. Writing is linked to guilt since it is most often non-economical and seems not to be doing any good, to be a waste of time, done alone in a room, to be for lazy people, etc. As with all artists, she often doubts her ability and talent. Art is not about just doing a job; you have to create the job first and then do it well. Maybe she was reading *Literature and Evil* by Georges Bataille? I don't know, maybe that's it.

LS: I just want to add that I love how Ófeigur's responding here in a way that recognizes characters have a life of their own! I think they can both be parts of ourselves (of our psyche) and also unknown to us, for we never fully know our deepest selves. And maybe that's what makes translation possible: we're not trying to faithfully copy a certain answer, but sharing the experience of trying to explore and understand characters and plots alongside the author. I've been fascinated recently with the metaphysical problem known as the Ship of Theseus: if you have Theseus's ship set up as a museum artifact, and a board rots, and you replace it, and another, and another, one at a time, until all the boards have been replaced, do you still have Theseus's ship? Maybe that's what translation is: the ship of Theseus.