

# Returning to the Old Country: Bill Holm's Quest for an Icelandic-American Identity

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**Abstract:** *This article focuses on the Icelandic-American identity of Bill Holm (1943–2009), American poet and essayist. It explores the twofold identity of an American writer, who was a grandson and a great-grandson of immigrants in the Upper Midwest. Writing from his background in rural and small-town Minnesota, and from his return trips to Iceland, Bill Holm developed what historian Jon Gjerde (1953–2008) referred to as a “complementary identity.” Holm was especially interested in the farmer-poet and worker-intellectual, both in his local Icelandic-American community and in Iceland. As an Icelandic-American writer, Holm had the benefit of using his knowledge of, and his extensive reading of, both Icelandic and American literature in his own experiences and his writing. Both Snorri Sturluson and Walt Whitman provided him with a useful past.*

**Keywords:** *Icelandic-American history, Midwestern literature, cultural heritage, return migration, American literature, Icelandic Sagas*

*“Iceland is my archetypal island,  
the island by which I judge all others.”  
Bill Holm*

Essayist, musician, poet, and teacher, Bill Holm (1943–2009) lived most of his life in the small town of Minneota, in the southwestern corner of Minnesota.<sup>1</sup> His collection of essays from Iceland, *Windows of Brimnes: An*

1 Notice the difference in the spelling of the name of his home town and that of the state.

*American in Iceland*, published in the spring of 2007, turned out to be his last book of prose.

In his writing Bill Holm pursued a life-long quest for an Icelandic-American identity. He grew up in a local Icelandic-American culture; his immigrant great-grandparents and grandparents, his parents as well as their neighbors were Midwestern farmers, a background he often referred to in his brief autobiographical statements. His local setting in Minnesota carried names from Iceland, Sweden, and Native Americans: "I was born at Holnum, an Icelander's farm in Swede Prairie, an immigrant township settled by others first in Yellow Medicine County."<sup>2</sup> A 1965 graduate of Gustavus Adolphus College, from which he later (2002) received an honorary doctorate, Holm pursued graduate studies at the University of Kansas and taught American literature at the Hampton Institute in Virginia, before returning to his home town in 1975. He taught English at Southwest Minnesota State University in Marshall and was a Fulbright teacher of American literature at the University of Iceland, in Reykjavík (1979). During summers late in his career, he conducted writers' seminars in the coastal town of Hofsós, in northern Iceland. Very appropriately, the modest house Holm bought in Hofsós is situated down by the harbour, just a few yards from the Icelandic Emigration Center.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to discuss and document Holm's efforts to define an Icelandic-American identity throughout his life as a writer. His poetry and essays should not be listed as travel literature or as memoirs. He wrote a series of "personal narratives" based on his Icelandic-American upbringing, his experiences in Iceland, and his reading of American literature.

### **Complementary Identity**

While Holm was growing up in Minnesota, his small home town was, as he explained, multi-ethnic, with Icelandic, Swedish, and Norwegian spoken and listened to on every street corner. Just a few miles away older people spoke "Polish and Czech."<sup>4</sup> To Holm, the linguistic diversity of small town

2 Holm 2010 (1985), 17. All quotations from *The Music of Failure* will refer to the 2010 edition.

3 I am indebted to William Beyer of St. Paul, Minnesota, and to Darla Thorland of Decorah, Iowa, for their thorough reading of my first draft of this essay.

4 Holm 2007, 118.

Midwestern life was not a drawback, but rather an intellectual challenge and an unequivocal blessing.

“I was lucky,” he celebrated, to grow up “among the tail end of the Icelandic immigrant community. The old, even the middle aged like my parents, were still bilingual, even bicultural, whether they were born in the old country or here.” He went on to point out how “the smoke of that ancient culture still drifted off them in odd ways. They even read – particularly the old ones – poetry. Many carried hundreds of lines of poetry in their head.”<sup>5</sup>

In a note addressed to his deceased great-grandparents, who had once emigrated from Iceland, Holm sees himself as a great-grandson “sitting in a kitchen only a few miles from your Minneota farm, looking at the old brown-tone picture of the two of you, now a little over a century old, and seeing his own face almost uncannily reproduced in yours. ... His hand holding this pen is smaller than yours, more delicate. It never did any serious farm work. ... Your suit, your dress, and the cast of your eyes say it: you are Icelanders adrift. But then, if we think twice, we are all adrift.”<sup>6</sup> This illustrates how Holm linked himself actively to an ethnic past, through what Werner Sollors has defined as a movement between “descent” (heredity) and “consent” (choice) in American culture.<sup>7</sup>

Holm’s views on what it meant to be an Icelandic-American are supported by earlier observers and scholars. In 1924, historian Knut Gjerset emphasized that the Icelandic settlers in and around Minneota, already in the late 1870s, had “organized a society for the purpose of printing books and papers, for establishing a common burial ground, and for gathering together for the reading of Scriptures on Sundays.”<sup>8</sup>

Bill Holm often wrote as if he was the last representative of an Icelandic-American culture on the point of dying out, at least linguistically. Gjerset had noted, twenty years before Holm was born, that “one of the most notable traits of the Icelanders in America as well as in their own country is their love of learning poetry and intellectual pursuits. Even as immigrants in a new environment and living under difficult circumstances they did everything possible to educate their children and to foster intellectual life among their people in the newly established settlements. Literary societies

5 Ibid., 128.

6 Holm 1996, 75.

7 Sollors 1986, 6.

8 Gjerset 1924, 462.

were founded, congregations were organized, schools and reading circles were established, papers and periodicals were published as soon as the settlers had thatched their first cottages.”<sup>9</sup> Holm’s effort to enliven Icelandic-American culture may be better appreciated with the earlier findings of this historian in mind.

Holm’s travels to Iceland strengthened his long-time attachment to, and memories of, the bicultural Midwestern world of his parents and grandparents. In fact, Holm provided solid evidence for the theory of Midwestern immigrant culture in which the first generation could develop what historian Jon Gjerde has called, a “complementary identity.”<sup>10</sup> In retrospect, Holm honored his ancestors who had come from Iceland to the Midwest, where they – in his opinion – gradually established what may be referred to as a “twofold identity,”<sup>11</sup> which indicates that “allegiances to the American nation and to cultural traditions carried across the sea could coexist. Indeed, they could be mutually supportive and self-reinforcing. Immigrants celebrated life in the United States because it enabled them to retain beliefs that originated outside of it.”<sup>12</sup> Holm’s essays indicate that through generations, the small Icelandic-American community in Minneota had lived within the benefits of a “complementary identity.” His project was to explore if, and in what ways, such benefits could be extended to include himself as a third (and fourth) generation Icelandic-American. Exploring the double context, in which he wanted to dwell, basically through reading and writing, became the focal point of his project.

Bill Holm’s effort to define himself and his writing as essentially Icelandic-American, did not place him at the margins of U.S. mainstream culture; it rendered him with a privileged identity, based on the literature of two national traditions. Indeed, this sense of being an active part of traditions of two countries places him among other American immigrant writers, who exercise the advantages of being firmly grounded in two bodies of literature. As the Norwegian-American immigrant writer, Simon Johnson, once wrote, “Ibsen and Bjørnson set the table for us, each in his special way. So do Whitman, Emerson and Longfellow.”<sup>13</sup> The Norwegian immigrant

9 Ibid., 469.

10 Gjerde 1997, 8.

11 See Gulliksen 2004, 19.

12 Gjerde 1997, 8.

13 Quoted in Gulliksen 2004, 4.

writer read texts by both Ibsen and Whitman with no need of translations. On several occasions, Bill Holm expressed similar ideas concerning the privilege of being a reader of both Icelandic and American literature.

In his *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth*, Holm explained how he came to possess books from two Icelandic-American settlers in his hometown, a grocer and a carpenter, who moved with ease among books in both Icelandic and English. On their shelves they had Milton and Whitman. The local carpenter, read “Icelandic as well as or better than English so all the Icelanders stood there too, usually in full leather: *the Eddas*, Halldór Laxness, Snorri Sturluson.”<sup>14</sup> In that sense, Holm’s small Midwestern town constituted fascinating intellectual challenges. It was not anything like the uninspiring place of Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920). Holm’s sense of being endowed with “a complementary identity” was a legacy of reading, inherited from his Icelandic immigrant elders.

### **Essays on Ethnicity**

Driven by his interest in Icelandic-American roots, Bill Holm was one of those Midwestern writers who researched and dramatized their connections to immigrant life in the Midwest, and to family roots in the old country. Another Minnesota writer with a similar agenda is Patricia Hampl, whose award-winning memoir, *A Romantic Education*, influenced other writers to take similar journeys into their own lives, shaped by memories of immigrant experiences. Her book is based on memories of her own upbringing in a Czech-American community in St. Paul, juxtaposed with her report of her very first journey to Prague.

Holm’s report from his visit to Iceland becomes a story of a return, similar to Hampl’s visit to what was then Czechoslovakia. Both writers depend on memories of the old country, retold through generations and shared by members of their Midwestern families, but they are strictly speaking not *returning* to their European countries of origin. When Holm travelled to Iceland for the first time (he was then in his thirties), he felt as if he was representing generations of Icelandic-Americans before him. He went to Iceland as an American writer, enjoying and exploring a composite self,

to see the land for himself and to find the farms of his Icelandic-American ancestors.

Hampf, Holm, and others, contribute to a genre of American literature: the multi-ethnic autobiographical essay, reflecting the meditations of descendants of immigrants. Their travelogues are directed eastward, toward Europe, to a sense of the past, which they want to detect and incorporate into their own lives. In her study of stories of return in American Literature, Maria Antônia Oliver-Rotger has noticed how immigrants “of second or third generations” have been turned “into possible ‘returnees’ to their homes of origin if only as travelers and visitors.”<sup>15</sup> She has also argued that in American “literature about return to original homelands” the writer may be “suddenly displaced” and “psychologically placed in between two cultural and geographical imaginaries.”<sup>16</sup> But Holm’s journeys back to the home country of his American immigrant ancestors, were not a tourist undertaking, nor was he “placed in between” two cultures. On the contrary he felt that his Icelandic-American culture and his present small town life in Iceland constituted a sense of harmony which took him back to a chance to live in a double consciousness, in a positive sense.<sup>17</sup> He went on several journeys, in mind or in body, to a part of Iceland he learned to know and appreciate. In Iceland, Holm must have felt that his Midwestern family history provided him with more than the insights of an informed outsider. He was capable of searching for something attainable, in order to construct his version of a “complementary identity,” with both American and Icelandic components.

Memory to Holm was personal, yet it entailed the experiences of generations. As such, his essays on Iceland differ from first-generation immigrant return stories, such as Louis Adamic’s *The Native’s Return*. The first generation immigrant writers tell the story of returning to the old country where they grew up and where their family still lives. Such autobiographies of return often focus on stories of becoming an American, an implied success story, in which returnees tend to distance themselves from their immediate family in the old country. Going back to what was then Yugoslavia, Adamic confesses that all “my emotional and intellectual life seems to me rooted in America. I belong in America. My old country, somehow, is a million

15 Oliver-Rotger 2015, 3.

16 Ibid., 5.

17 A term adapted here from W.E.B. Du Bois’s, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

miles away.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, social photographer and author Jacob A. Riis told his story of returning to Denmark, where he had grown up. Stricken by illness while back in Elsinore, Riis saw an American ship pass by. The scene convinced him of his true home: “I knew then that it was my flag [...] that I also had become an American in truth.”<sup>19</sup>

In his narratives of returning to the old country, Holm did not face such dilemmas of the first generation American. As an American writer, he belonged by definition firmly to the American Upper Midwest. Nevertheless, Holm does not fit Marcus Lee Hansen’s famous 1937-thesis of the third generation immigrant. Hansen had mentioned that the struggle “to inhabit two worlds at the same time was the problem of the second generation.”<sup>20</sup> Holm would argue that at least for some second generation immigrants, their situation could be defined as beneficial. Hansen’s famous definition of the process from the first to the third generation immigrant, that “what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember,”<sup>21</sup> did not match Holm’s experience. As a fourth generation immigrant (on his father’s side) Holm wanted not just to remember the world of his forebears in Minnesota, but to reconstruct a useable Icelandic-American identity for himself.

Asserting his membership in the small group of Icelandic-Americans, he felt enriched by the two earlier generations. Holm’s twofold identity was based primarily on his reading and writing. Friends in his local community opened his eyes to two sets of national literatures, two sources he could refer to as his own. To his great joy, Holm noticed later that in Iceland there are “overstuffed bookshelves in almost every house.”<sup>22</sup> There were “local writers who published small volumes of well-made, old-fashioned verse.” Some of them even read and wrote in three languages: “Icelandic, English, and Danish,”<sup>23</sup> just like it used to be in Holm’s Icelandic-American farm community. The Icelandic-American past he is researching and promoting is embodied in the lively presence of the literatures of two (or three) languages.

In several of his books, from *The Music of Failure* (1985) to *The Win-*

18 Adamic 1934, 5.

19 Riis 1937, 284.

20 Hansen 1987, 13.

21 Ibid., 15.

22 Holm 2007, 10.

23 Ibid., 10.

*dows of Brimnes* (2007), Bill Holm builds on and combines two literary traditions. Yet, in his poetry and essays there is no sense of feeling displaced or divided between two cultures. In retrospect, several of his earlier books of essays and poetry may in fact be read as preparations for *The Windows of Brimnes*. He included comments on Icelandic-American culture in his *The Music of Failure* and through collections of poetry, such as *The Dead Get by with Everything* (1990), *Playing the Black Piano* (2004), and the posthumous *The Chain Letter of the Soul* (2009).

### American Literature and The Farmer-Poet

Holm's meditative essays in *The Music of Failure*, his first and perhaps best known book, were inspired by both the Icelandic presence in his Midwestern culture and by his reading of Walt Whitman, who is quoted to explain the title: "With music strong I come, with my cornets and my drums [...] I beat and pound for the dead, / I blow through my embouchures my loudest and gayest for them. / Vivas to those who have fail'd!"<sup>24</sup> Whitman here offers a powerful alternative to the sounds of the common American success story, of which Holm was sceptical, to put it mildly. In his music and poetry Holm made room for what are conventionally considered failures. Failures, he observes, have a special tonality, a theme he pursues in stories of a number of supposedly "failed" immigrants,<sup>25</sup> yet renders them in such a Whitmanesque and saga-like way that they succeed in gaining the respect and the love of the reader.

Typical in this respect are the life stories of an entire Icelandic-American family, already buried in the cemetery outside a disbanded Icelandic Lutheran church, but restored to life in literature by Holm, inspired by Whitman's "Song of Myself."<sup>26</sup> In spite of their lack of formal education, earlier immigrants and their children were ardent readers. On their shelves were "Bjornsson [sic] in Norwegian, Snorri Sturlasson in Icelandic, Whitman, Darwin, Dickens, Ingersoll."<sup>27</sup>

In his *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth: Minneota Minnesota*, family and local history turn into a personal history of the Icelandic

24 Quoted in Holm 2010 (1985), 68.

25 Ibid., 79.

26 Ibid., see 79–88.

27 Ibid., 87.



presence in the Upper Midwest. Holm's invitation to focus on a single, by some dismissed as insignificant, place is again inspired by Whitman: "Walt Whitman examined grass. Henry Thoreau preferred the crow above all birds. Emerson was intoxicated by water. Emily Dickinson lived in a single room. I invite you to Minneota, Minnesota, a very small dot."<sup>28</sup> Here Holm had started a reappraisal of the local: "I was strangely happy and began writing affectionate essays and poems about these people, old Icelandic immigrants with odd accents, aunts, uncles, and baby-sitters who fed and praised me, faces I thought I had forgotten that came to astonishing life in the middle of hot afternoons – wide awake. These were no dreams; it was my own history, my own consciousness, knocking at an interior door, asking for coffee and a little visit. I obliged."<sup>29</sup>

His desire was to lift his Icelandic-American spot into the literature of the Upper Midwest. Holm's reader can almost hear the Icelandic language spoken from the lips and the serious faces of his immigrant great-grandparents, Jóhannes and Soffia, in their published portrait: "They look fresh off the boat."<sup>30</sup> They do, indeed. But again Holm stressed how learned they were: the "Icelanders who settled in Minneota kept their Old Country habits of bookishness." He noted that "reading, owning overstuffed shelves of books, spending money on mail-order books, and decorating your conversation with quotations seemed to them normal habits for working-class people. School degrees or social position had nothing to do with intelligence."<sup>31</sup>

Holm's memoir of life in his own Minnesota small town, *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth*, broadly implies that the meaning of life may be found on a farm outside the town of Minneota, Minnesota, just like it was for Thoreau at Walden Pond. Holm was fascinated by learned men and women in the small locality, for instance the local milk truck driver, who read – and carved a figure of – his fellow Norwegian-American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen (1874–1929).<sup>32</sup> Veblen's criticism of American capitalism was essential to Holm, who must have known that Veblen ended his career by translating the Icelandic *Laxdaela Saga* (1925).

Holm's hero was the farmer-poet, and the worker-intellectual, a feature

28 Holm 1996, 9.

29 *Ibid.*, 23.

30 *Ibid.*, 69.

31 *Ibid.*, 156.

32 See Holm 2010, 13.

that he found among Icelandic immigrants to the Midwest, perhaps best represented in his works by Stena, an Icelandic-American woman of the second generation. When Holm was eleven years old, she sent him a note in Icelandic, in which she used the Icelandic proverb: “Blind is the bookless man.”<sup>33</sup> In his mind, the local immigrant Icelandic carpenter in Minneota, who was able to read Longfellow and “even an old Viking poem in Icelandic,”<sup>34</sup> surpassed many a college professor. This idea of the farmer-poet is typically celebrated in Barton Sutter’s poem “Not Sleeping at Bill Holm’s House,” where Holm is seen as an incarnation of the old Icelandic bards. Sutter is trying to sleep while Holm is “banging out hymns / On the downstairs piano, just now / that sweet Shaker tune / ‘Tis a gift to be simple.” To Sutter, Holm’s home is “a house full of music ... And Icelandic sagas / Preserved by farmers / For nearly a thousand years.”<sup>35</sup>

Not only does failure become a major theme in Holm’s own Icelandic-American family narrative, but Holm sees it as key to his historiography of Iceland in “Failure in National Life: A Little History of Iceland.”<sup>36</sup> Here Holm argued that without failure there is no memory. In his mind, the Icelandic sagas make up a body of world literature because they are based on family memories, on failures and grief, and on an awareness of man’s finitude: “The Icelanders, by facing the drastic failures of their history and nature, created a literature that held the national ego together” through all kinds of disasters.<sup>37</sup> To write about Iceland was to Holm an effort and a duty to revive the memories of his immigrant ancestors and the Midwestern culture of which they were a part. In other words, he travelled to Iceland and he wrote about the old country in order to activate his American memory, to strengthen “our broken connections to any past.”<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, the stories of his grandmothers, Kristin Thordardottir and Emma Holm, their American children and grandchildren, were linked in Holm’s narration not only to the genre of Icelandic sagas, but to the pre-eminent theme in most of what he wrote: memory does not exist without a sense of failure. He stated that his grandmother Kristin did not “learn

33 Holm 1996, 171.

34 Holm 2010, 42.

35 Sutter 2004, 48–49.

36 Holm 2010, 98–103.

37 *Ibid.*, 101.

38 Holm 2007, 7.

or speak a word of English” and that she “owned nothing except a few books.”<sup>39</sup> The most precious one, to her, was a copy of *Passion Psalms* by Hallgrímur Petursson, a seventeenth century classic in Icelandic poetry. She is supposed to have known many of these psalms by heart, a feature Holm compares to having a couple of plays by Shakespeare “rolling around in your head.”<sup>40</sup> Paradoxically, the music of failure, to Holm, is always linked to a success at reading.

By coincidence, Holm also received a gift from the “estate” of Emma, his other grandmother: “a delicate porcelain coffee cup” from her kitchen. The cup leads the author to meditate that he will only have it for a short time and “eventually someone will pick up this slightly chipped, discoloured coffee cup, look at it briefly, say the hell with it, and chuck it into the nearest dumpster. Geneology is a melancholy science.”<sup>41</sup> His grandfather’s *kista* [trunk] moves him to a similar pensive tone: “I still own the *kista* my grandfather carried aboard ship from Vopnafjörður in 1879 [...] I use it as a nightstand by my bed to hold piles of books to browse before I sleep. The *kista* is empty now, and it no longer smells even faintly of horse sweat.”<sup>42</sup> It once did.

The story of his grandmothers in *The Windows of Brimnes* is intrinsically linked to Holm’s use of the term *ætt*, a term for family history, common to the Nordic countries.<sup>43</sup> Because Holm felt that the value system which his grandmother represented was tragically disappearing from contemporary Midwestern culture, his story strikes a minor tone but avoids sentimentality in his efforts to resurrect his grandmother and her immediate family. His radical notion of the music of failure eradicates all fake romanticism. Because Holm does not dwell on family history as a private hobby, he is able to pull the reader into his text with the invitation “to tie your own life and your own body into a larger history.”<sup>44</sup> Pondering a family collection of old pictures, he addresses the reader directly, “You have pictures of your own to match them.”<sup>45</sup>

That *The Windows of Brimnes* may include inaccuracies or exaggera-

39 Ibid., 74–75.

40 Ibid., 74.

41 Ibid., 97.

42 Ibid., 164–165.

43 Ibid., 83.

44 Ibid., 86.

45 Ibid., 81.

tions in its portrait of present-day Iceland, is of little importance. Holm is not writing a travel guide to modern Iceland. He is trying to reconnect to a changing Icelandic-American culture that still offers him a usable past. Icelandic culture reminds him of his immigrant past in Minneota, while contemporary American culture had developed “too much news and not enough wisdom.”<sup>46</sup> He needs a vantage point from which he can venture his criticism of contemporary American commercialism. Northern Iceland was the place to sharpen his pencils. *The Windows of Brimnes* may perhaps be shelved with a series of other American and English travel books on Iceland, all well-informed, from Samuel Kneeland’s *An American in Iceland: An Account of its Scenery, People, and History* (1876) to Katharine Scherman’s *Daughter of Fire: A Portrait of Iceland* (1976). Holm, however, is not a foreign observer writing from Iceland for other outsiders. Iceland is in his bones, in spite of his loss of language. His book about Iceland signalled his coming to terms with an older part of himself. It strengthened his “complementary identity.”

### Homage to Whitman and Thoreau

Holm described Hofsós, his adopted village in Iceland, in terms that earlier bishops in the Nordic countries used in their visitation reports that provide geographical and spiritual surveys of their dioceses for readers who had not been there: the houses, coastline, cliffs, people, faith, fish, fowl, fjords, and flowers. Holm finds sacredness in his own experience and his own locality, whether in his Midwestern town or the village in northern Iceland. To him, this sacredness is not tied to abstract idealism but to the material world close by: “Sacredness is unveiled through your own experience.”<sup>47</sup>

Walking with an Icelandic friend into an “empty hayloft” in a “round red barn / by the river,”<sup>48</sup> near his home in Minneota, feels like entering “a cathedral dome.”<sup>49</sup> The “horizontal grandeur,” or “his prairie eye,”<sup>50</sup> defined in Minnesota, is later easily transferred to his region of Iceland. To a prairie

46 Ibid., 14.

47 Holm, 2010, 16.

48 Holm 1990, 17.

49 Holm 2010, 31.

50 Ibid., 21–23.

mind that gets nervous in “dense woods,”<sup>51</sup> a treeless Icelandic coast could also bring calm and comfort, much like the prairie. The Icelandic-American, entrusted with a prairie eye, has a sense of “magnitude and delicacy” and “looks at a square foot and sees a universe,”<sup>52</sup> in Minneota or in Hofsfós.

When Holm wrote his personal narrative from his stay in Iceland, he was working with other earlier writers in mind. He brought American writers of the past into his own project, a project that only a writer with a complementary identity could accomplish. Growing up on the tallgrass prairie, he confesses that “throughout my boyhood, I dreamed of the sea.”<sup>53</sup> He had not cared much for *Giants in the Earth*, the classic American novel of immigrant life on the prairie by Ole E. Rølvaag, “except for his metaphor of an ocean of grass with the wakes from the prairie schooners opening through it.”<sup>54</sup> Later, in Iceland, he noticed “Icelandic grass is remarkable. How Walt Whitman would have loved it!”<sup>55</sup>

Buying a simple cottage in northern Iceland late in life, Holm saw himself as imaginatively repeating Thoreau’s putting up his cabin on Walden Pond. Thoreau had found “his angle of vision at his cabin on Walden Pond. I had to go outside the United States to find mine [...] I found a little Walden cabin far away.”<sup>56</sup> Bill Holm was looking at American culture from his vantage point in Iceland, reporting on his visions from behind the windows of his cabin. As he writes his meditations on the prices and economy in Iceland, on neighbors, on the solitude of reading, on visitors, on birds and nature, he used Thoreau’s *Walden* as his model. Holm, too, wants to find out if life was “mean” or “sublime.” Like Thoreau, he felt the need to explain where he lived, and what he lived for. When he came to Hofsfós to live for three months of the year, he was conscious of making a parallel life project to Thoreau’s *Walden*, knowing that we “see more clearly when the noise is less, the objects fewer.”<sup>57</sup> Holm wanted, like Thoreau, to use his experience in his modest abode, to find what life is all about, “to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, [...] to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its

51 Ibid., 23.

52 Ibid., 23–24.

53 Holm 2007, 19.

54 Ibid., 19.

55 Ibid., 153–154.

56 Ibid., 20.

57 Ibid., 14.

lowest terms.”<sup>58</sup> Holm’s literary discovery of Iceland is both deepened and broadened by his reading of Whitman and Thoreau.

Creatures, large and small, circle Holm’s sacred places: “a half dozen deer by a fenceline” and the “lone red fox”<sup>59</sup> on the prairie at night, or a “pure white, snow white, ice white” young horse in Iceland.<sup>60</sup> Looking at the mist of the sea from his windows of Brimnes “into the blank, endless whiteness,”<sup>61</sup> Holm is reminded of Herman Melville’s chapter on “The Whiteness of the Whale” from *Moby-Dick*, which to Holm was “the most eerily terrifying description of any natural phenomenon I know in literature.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, in Holm’s Icelandic-American imagination, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” combines with the two ravens of Odin in Icelandic mythology, a combination which leads to the following conclusion of Holm’s poem, “Ravens at the Hotel Tindastóll”: “Whenever any gods arrive / how shall we know them / but by their ravens? / Only by their ravens.”<sup>63</sup> The reader must have both Poe’s text and the Icelandic *Eddas* close by to get the point. In Holm’s text, Poe’s fear that his raven is sent as an ill token by God suddenly gets support from Odin’s ravens. It may have filled Holm with a sense of terror, but nevertheless he must have enjoyed such comparisons. Other American writers turn up in Holm’s work in unusual ways. A light and open fjord is contrasted to a narrower “Cotton Mather fjord,”<sup>64</sup> indeed a bleak, forbidding, but also humorous modifier in this context, and obscure without an American literary context.

In a chapter on the Icelandic horse, Holm reminds the reader of horses in Icelandic sagas, like the mythic Sleipner or Freyfaxi from *Hrafinkel Priest of Frey*, combined – in a typical juxtaposition – with the two Indian ponies in the well-known Minnesota poem, “A Blessing” by James Wright. Holm explains that one time he found himself in front of a beautiful white Icelandic horse, completely taken by the eyes of the horse, “two of the deepest eyes I’ve ever seen – deep brown, almost black.”<sup>65</sup> He then evokes a parallel with Wright’s poem, in which Wright described a moment of short-lived,

58 Thoreau 2012, 1028.

59 Holm 2010, 4.

60 Holm 2007, 167.

61 Ibid., 104.

62 Ibid., 103–104.

63 Ibid., 45–46.

64 Ibid., 21.

65 Ibid., 167.

but intense beauty, in the eyes of the ponies “darkened with kindness,” which Wright concludes with lines of immediate ecstasy: “Suddenly I realize / That if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom.”<sup>66</sup>

Holm’s essay here is one of the best illustrations of how he constructs a personal and poetic Icelandic-American narrative by linking his own experience to both modern American and classic Icelandic literature. He argues that looking at horses is an activity he also shares with Walt Whitman, who in section 13 of “Song of Myself” observes an African-American holding “the reins of his four horses [...] And the look of the bay mare shames silliness out of me.”<sup>67</sup> With Whitman in mind, Holm wrote a poem about Icelandic horses coming to meet him by the fence: “They are watching you / with full attention. / You look curious to them: / docile and harmless. / They want to touch you, pet you, / see what skin feels like. / Don’t disappoint them.”<sup>68</sup>

Holm’s story of looking at the “handsome mare,”<sup>69</sup> an experience that was over in a few seconds, yet vividly remembered and captured in his prose, echoes Whitman. Holm also brings in a modern American poem about looking at Indian ponies, before he again refers to horses in the Icelandic sagas. It becomes an inter-textual composite story of men and horses, typical of Holm’s *contrapuntal* way of writing, to use a term he knew well from music.

### Poetry and Theology

In *Eccentric Islands*, Holm explores his return to Iceland in 1979 as a Fulbright professor in American literature, as well as a return trip twenty years later. Here, Iceland is included in a comparative study of his island experiences, and, in fact, his life in Iceland covers well over a third of the entire book. In 1979, even if friends warned against it, Holm decides to go to Iceland by boat from New England in the winter, as a “backward immigrant,”<sup>70</sup> to commemorate his ancestors who had come from Iceland by boat in the late 1800s. Reminded of the loss of language that generations of Icelanders have experienced in the Midwest, he feels he is paying the appropriate price

66 Wright 2007, 2634.

67 Whitman 2012, 1337–1338.

68 Holm 2009, 93.

69 Holm 2007, 167.

70 See Holm 2000, 83.

to reassemble his community's language from scratch, from the living and the dead, word by word.<sup>71</sup>

His voyage to Iceland leads to a resuscitation of his typical good-humoured, radical materialist philosophy: "It all goes into the sea at last: bread, fruit peels, coffee grounds, sheep bones, brandy bottles, shit, piss, failed love letters, unread novels, and finally us."<sup>72</sup> But when he arrives after eleven days at sea he is convinced "Iceland is my archetypal island, the island by which I judge all others."<sup>73</sup> He does not mention much from the classes he taught at the university, except that he is "evangelizing" for Walt Whitman,<sup>74</sup> and that he deepens his love for *Independent People*, Hall-dór Laxness's novel in English translation.<sup>75</sup> In the report from 1979, he often refers to himself in third person singular, as if he is writing a novel: "Holm loved Reykjavík, a moderately small town full of chamber music, theatre, bookstores, eccentric citizens."<sup>76</sup> He often addresses the reader as a character called "Sensible Reader." His humor is, as always, constructed from poetic exaggerations, as when he describes dancing in Iceland. They danced way into the night before they stopped, "often at an hour when puritans rise from bed."<sup>77</sup> He recounts his own participation in one dance party, but then also as if seen from the outside: "Holm can no more dance than he can speak Icelandic or play hockey, but that night, by God, he danced."<sup>78</sup>

The second essay on Iceland in *Eccentric Islands* focuses on a tour Holm led for Minnesota students in 1999. His introducing students to the magic of Icelandic storytelling must have met with certain scepticism by university leaders. He took his students in the literary footsteps of Grettir, the saga outlaw, in a text Holm had taught. Partying on the way to see Grettir's lair, they spent a summer's night outside with their share of temptations. This magic of a forgotten, yet present, aspect of Iceland made Holm consider moving permanently to Iceland in 1979. He did not and he explained why. He would miss his rural native Minnesotan: "not the English spoken in the

71 Ibid., 85.

72 Ibid., 88.

73 Ibid., 95.

74 Ibid., 132.

75 Ibid., 121–122.

76 Ibid., 133.

77 Ibid., 155.

78 Ibid., 156.



academy, the government, the church, the striving suburbs, but the true music of everyday speech in tavern, coffee shop, hog yard, old folk's home."<sup>79</sup>

Meditating on old ethnic cemeteries was always a favourite pastime of Holm's. In the poem "Icelandic Graveyard, Lincoln County," from *The Dead Get By with Everything*, Holm returns to his old Icelandic-American Lutheran church. The poet brings an Icelandic visitor to the graveyard, next to the church: "She's never been here, but she sees / her own name on every headstone: / Svanhilder, Svandís, Svanhvít, the swan [...] Sometimes the name spelled right, sometimes not."<sup>80</sup>

Visits to family graveyards, in both countries, teach us all a lesson of the brevity of life. Bill Holm's cemetery in Lincoln County, Minnesota, was, in addition, a study of cultural pluralism. It contained headstones "that read Hallgrimur, Vigfus, Adalborg, Metusalem, Gottskalksson, Gislasonon, Isfeld! They say: we're not melted yet, or if so the job is just finished, and the alloy still smoking. Those are graveyard names next to the Lincoln County Icelandic church, a bare white wood-frame building visible for miles [...] I took three people there at the end of a warm late fall day ten years ago, showed them the graves, told them a story or two, and then walked them into the church to hear the old reed organ."<sup>81</sup> Holm urged those who studied local history of counties in Minnesota to "ask the dead."<sup>82</sup> Immigrant cemeteries, he wrote, spread around country churches, "like a field of petrified corn."<sup>83</sup> Icelandic names, chiselled in stone, underscore that "[m]emory is the language of graveyards. [...] They are frequently lovely places, filled with fine shadows and angles and light, gifts for the painter and photographer. They contain the rudiments of our common history, reminding us who we now are, who go us to that point, and what at least one part of our future looks like, if we are able to see it with a steely eye."<sup>84</sup>

Holm's *The Dead Get By with Everything* may in fact be read as his "essays upon epitaphs."<sup>85</sup> In a discourse on the blessings of a "complementary identity" a dialogue with the past is necessary: "I talked to the dead in the middle of the night / raising my voice when they don't answer.

79 Ibid., 185–186.

80 Holm 1990, 16.

81 Holm 2010, 10–11.

82 Holm 1993, 137.

83 Ibid., 131.

84 Ibid., 141.

85 A title used by William Wordsworth for his graveyard meditations.

/ Maybe they speak a foreign language now.”<sup>86</sup> Holm opens the section called “Learning Icelandic” with a poem about the joy and frustration of learning the language in Iceland: “For a week I say nothing, / understand only a little. / Without words, I’m lighter; / float around more / than I have for years.”<sup>87</sup> To the Icelandic-American, coming to Iceland from Minnesota, this is a language of old-time farming: “In this language, no industrial revolution [...] The middle class can hardly speak it.”<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the inaccessibility invites another meditation on the poet’s preoccupation with failure: “Once the sentence starts its course, / all your grief and failure come clear at last.”<sup>89</sup> Holm’s poetry comprises several stories of Icelandic-American families, already buried in the cemetery outside a disbanded Icelandic Lutheran church, but restored to life in his essays and poetry.

In *The Music of Failure* Bill Holm visits an old Icelandic-American church in his community, and in *The Windows of Brimnes* he includes his impression of Lutheran churches in Iceland. Icelandic-American churches may have folded, but if he were looking for a vibrant church life in Iceland to make up for what he considered lost in the Midwest, he must have been disappointed. He finds that the main function of the Icelandic state church is “to mark the passages into and out of this world, and to note the major markers along the way.”<sup>90</sup>

To Holm, poetry has taken over from theology, and he cites the poet Stephan G. Stephansson (1853–1927), an immigrant from Iceland, who first settled in the Midwest (1873–1889), but who moved to settle in Canada. According to Holm, Stephansson “created one of the great bodies of work in the Icelandic language in the twentieth century.”<sup>91</sup> Admired in Iceland, he reminds Holm what poetry means to the modern Icelander: “Poetry is their glory and their internal cement as human beings, and they mean to remind you, the foreign traveller, as well as each other, of that central fact.”<sup>92</sup> Stephansson is seen as the very incarnation of Holm’s ideal, the local, yet transnational, farmer-poet. Early on as a poor, Midwestern farmhand, Stephansson’s “independence in religious and political thought” was

86 Holm 1990, 73.

87 Ibid., 46.

88 Ibid., 48.

89 Ibid., 48.

90 Ibid., 176.

91 Ibid., 28.

92 Ibid.

inspired by Icelandic literature, as well as his “reading of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Twain,” and other writers.<sup>93</sup>

The church at the time often opposed Stephansson’s poetry. Holm honors Paal Thorlakson, born in Husavik, Iceland, as an important minister to Icelandic-American congregations in the Midwest. As Holm points out, Thorlakson went to Concordia seminary in St. Louis, where he was not trained as an evangelical Haugean (as Holm supposed),<sup>94</sup> but as a stern orthodox Lutheran of the Norwegian Synod type. Thorlakson was instrumental in setting up Icelandic congregations in and around Minneota.<sup>95</sup> Even though Thorlakson later served Icelandic-American congregations in Pembine, North Dakota, and elsewhere in the Midwest, he is commonly listed on the Norwegian-American roster of pastors.<sup>96</sup>

Holm credits Thorlakson as a social worker and as a supporter of the Icelandic language in the Midwest but considers his theology obsolete, and his skepticism to the Icelandic-American poetry of his one-time parishioner Stephansson absurd. Holm uses both of them in his modern reflections on poetry and religion, as two figures who were engaged in an interesting, now dated, controversy over the place of theology and poetry in the Icelandic immigrant community. Holm’s larger point emphasizes the crucial role of the immigrant church: “In church, you could live and die in Icelandic, while you had to buy coffee, flour, and your first pig in stumbling English.”<sup>97</sup> Yet, the “Icelandic Synod of the Lutheran Church is now dead – only a historical blip, amalgamated first with the Swedes and now finally assimilated into the big, new corporate synod that includes all the old ethnicities and some surprising new ones.”<sup>98</sup>

Holm knew that the poets’ struggles with theology and pastors were over. Yet, his Icelandic Lutheranism may live on because it has put on the robes of American pragmatism, as he confesses: “I am still a member in good standing of St. Paul’s Icelandic Lutheran Church in Minneota, now a ghostly remnant of the congregation of my boyhood—shrunk in size

93 Ibid., 182.

94 Ibid., 179.

95 Gjerset 1924, 462.

96 Norlie 1914, 156. His colleagues Hans B. Thorgrimson and Jon Bjarnason, leading figures in the Icelandic Lutheran Synod in America, were also included among Norwegian-American pastors. See Gjerset 1924, 460; Norlie 1914, 192 and 202.

97 Holm 2007, 180.

98 Ibid., 184.

and elderly, but still alive. [...] It's none of your business what I believe, or if I believe, nor is it the church's business."<sup>99</sup> Holm belonged because he adopted a pragmatic faith in which it was nobody's business to find out what he believed.

It is as if in his imagination his Icelandic-American church in Minneota existed under the auspices of the diocese of northern Iceland, housed in Hólar, the small red stone cathedral he loved so much. In one of his latest poems he described the cathedral as "a jewel box of old art: / a carved alabaster triptych [...] Here too under glass rests / the first printed book in Icelandic – / a heavy Bible, price: one cow. / Under it, the bishop's bones."<sup>100</sup>

It is in his discussion of ethnicity and religion that Holm mentions another book about Iceland that influenced him greatly, *Letters from Iceland* (1936) by the poet W. H. Auden. According to Holm "Auden liked Sunday morning in Iceland, too."<sup>101</sup> Auden, who since childhood had been interested in Icelandic sagas, became Holm's fellow spiritual traveller. He had also visited the cathedral in Hólar (in the 1930s) but with less enthusiasm than Holm, decades later. Auden wrote: "Holar was the seat of a bishopric, and I spent the next morning in the church, which is ugly as most protestant places of worship. The only relic of the past is the carved altar piece."<sup>102</sup> To Holm, Auden's book from Iceland was "the most peculiar travel book in English." It was, he noted, "more than anything else a book about books, mostly a poem about poems."<sup>103</sup> Auden had brought ideas from Lord Byron with him to Iceland. Holm brought those of others, but compared his own interest in poetry with Auden's: "Auden saw words and lines on a page very clearly; for a man of his habit of mind, books *are* life. I share his predilection, and in this we are both being thoroughly Icelandic."<sup>104</sup>

Holm contemplates Auden's return to Iceland from England "after thirty years' absence"<sup>105</sup> and quotes from Auden's confession: "In my childhood dreams, Iceland was holy ground; when at the age of twenty-nine, I saw it for the first time, the reality verified my dream; at fifty-seven it was holy

99 Ibid., 187.

100 Holm 2009, 61.

101 Holm 2007, 175.

102 Auden 1996, 265.

103 Holm 2000, 189.

104 Ibid., 189.

105 Holm 2007, 207.

ground still, with the most magical light of anywhere on earth.”<sup>106</sup> Holm must have admired those lines, even if his affinity to Iceland was connected to his Icelandic-American complementary identity, so very different from Auden’s.

He notes that Auden on his return trip in the mid-1960s found that Icelandic culture still had the unique quality of “the resilience of a homegrown literary culture that valued narrative and versifying skill, and a deep and essential decency and kindness of character.”<sup>107</sup> Auden was worried upon his return, and so was Holm on later visits. Even before the financial crisis of 2009 hit Iceland, Holm feared that his dream country was “moving in the wrong direction.”<sup>108</sup> “The real estate market has gone berserk,” Holm observed, “[j]obs in farming, fishing, or fish processing have disappeared all over Iceland. [...] Most farmers here are over sixty, while children are in faraway Reykjavík at their computers, cashing in on the new urban prosperity.”<sup>109</sup>

What would become of his ideal of the farmer-poets in a new Icelandic capitalism? These worries became doubly serious to Holm because he had invested so heavily both in his own Icelandic-American identity, and in his earlier discovery of a vibrant rural culture in Iceland. He had combined these two topics in his literary work, with compassion, humor, sincerity, and a sense of history.

### **Singing to Lift the Fog**

In 2007, at the end of *The Windows of Brimnes*, Holm must have suspected that the epoch of which he had written so fondly was coming to an end and that he was one of the last ones in a line of local, yet transnational poets. In the last line of *The Windows of Brimnes*, Holm adopts Auden’s secular religion as he invites his reader to come to Brimnes, not to pray, but to sing “to lift the fog.” Holm’s favorite ideas were gathered there – the “sacredness of place,” the “prairie eye,” the “music of failure” – in an aesthetic crescendo as he looks out on Skagafjörður: “So don’t come to the windows of Brimnes to pray – instead, lift your heart to peer about, even into the

106 <http://katiemariefunk/tumblr.com/port/3413>, (Accessed March 7, 2016).

107 Holm 2007, 208.

108 Ibid., 208.

109 Ibid., 208–209.

heart of the fog. Take it all in, grandeur, foolishness, the whole lot. And then: praise something. Sing. Maybe Bach, to lift the fog.”<sup>110</sup>

Bill Holm held to the “complementary identity” of immigrants and their descendants everywhere for as long as he lived, even if he may not have been familiar with Jon Gjerde’s term. In “New Dreams,” a poem published after he died, his parents, then long dead, enter his dreams at night, using the Icelandic language, which in their son’s imagination compares with other languages associated with great myths. His parents in Minnesota appear “alive in their prime, my father always / in his bib overalls, looking impatient / to get back into the field, my mother / in a brightly colored dress, her hair fixed. / They speak only Icelandic to each other, / probably arguing or telling secrets / How would I know? Can’t follow a word of it. / They’re back in dreams for some good reason, / but I will never figure out what it is. / The language of dreams is always Icelandic, / unless it is Latin, Chinese, Hebrew, Sanskrit.”<sup>111</sup>

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110 Ibid., 211.

111 Holm 2009, 67.

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