



Address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of the Halldór Laxness exhibition
in Athens
September 18 2001

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

A writer's life – the fate of a nation – poems and stories – identity and *raison d'être*. Passages and words which are intrinsic to our sense of the challenges and privileges of being Icelanders. A citizen of the world and the laureate of his nation.

These are the kind of thoughts that pass through our minds when we struggle to interpret Halldór Kiljan Laxness. Even so, this is hardly possible. His gigantic presence and versatility are above and beyond simple descriptions. More than other men he was synonymous with the main movements in twentieth-century thought, the greatest period of upheavals in the history of mankind.

A brilliant young man who abandoned his studies to devote himself to writing, set off to see the world, entered a monastery, converted to Catholicism, charted youthful rebellion, the ancient and the modern in swirling flux, went to America and tried his luck in Hollywood, was appalled by poverty and oppression, became a supporter of communism and champion of radical reforms, a popular visitor to the Soviet Union who would later write a scathing dismissal of those times, the author of successive novels interpreting the Icelandic nation in a turbulent world, a brilliant portrayer of fishermen and farmers but who was also the most cosmopolitan of all Icelandic authors, made satires in the vein of the sagas from centuries ago, wove oriental philosophy into the world of the Icelandic countryside and fishing villages, wrote plays in which the absurd became true experience, gave us poems that play nimbly on the tongue, commented on the issues of his age and fought with words and his pen.

Halldór Kiljan Laxness is not only Iceland's greatest writer in modern times. He is also a powerful representative of the movements that

swept Europe during the century that has just come to a close. It is doubtful whether any other European author had such a broad span of involvement with the continent's intellectual history, from the First World War right up to space travel and the computer age. An Icelandic writer who shows us Europe in the mirror of the age – his works.

Iceland and Greece have endowed Europe with a literary heritage from ancient times, tales and thoughts enshrined in their ancient writings, classical works of philosophy and creativity. Just as the writers of the Icelandic sagas did seven hundred years ago, Halldór Kiljan Laxness has given us visions that have enabled Icelanders to interpret themselves in a new way, given his nation new perspectives on itself and the whole world.

It is highly appropriate on this first state visit to Greece by a President of Iceland to present Iceland's Nobel laureate in this cradle of Western culture, with this exhibition dedicated to Halldór Kiljan Laxness' life and work.

I would like to thank everyone who has helped to make this exhibition a reality. As I declare this exhibition officially open it gives me great pleasure to present to you a gift of a selection of works by Halldór Kiljan Laxness.