

tion would be, 'We simply don't need it. We were the first to get the vote and we have an equal rights law.'

The Women's Union, though, bears the ideological struggle of feminism, and has an impact far beyond its membership count. Many members of the Union are themselves active in trade unions and party politics and are thus able to represent and articulate feminist concerns and issues.

These two groups give clear evidence that women's collective activities fall into the public sphere. Any consideration of women's power in Finland must take into account these organizations, regardless of whether the group's focus is traditional or feminist.

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#### NORA E. McCARDELL

##### Life's Work

I'd love to read my poetry to you,  
The way I used to read you assignments  
from school  
And show you reports from college.  
You were always so pleased and proud.

Before the doctorate, I knew you'd  
stopped  
Following the content, concentrating  
instead  
On the weight and feel, the covers of the  
journals.  
I left a copy of my thesis on the coffee  
table —  
So you'd have it —  
Not so you'd understand.

Your appreciation of my work was  
important.  
Like a kitten, seeking approval,  
Carrying a conquered mouse to the front  
step,  
I'd bring each new piece home to you.

And now, the best, the most meaningful  
to me,  
We can't share.  
I couldn't bear you to know how sad I am  
You're not there to open the door  
And praise my trophy.

# Shepherding the Self: Love in the Autobiography of Gudny Jónsdóttir

by Kristjana Gunnars

A Canadian observer once remarked: "Icelandic women belong to a class to themselves; a class that bears no relation to any other class." This comment seemed worth noting because it came from an outsider and it corroborated an impression I had long since formed as an insider. By class he probably meant a society or culture that is distinct in itself, a group that lives by its own rules and sets its own principles. In all the talk about Icelandic culture over the years — the Sagas, the Eddas, the Reformation, Romantic Nationalism, Icelandic Bolshevism, and so on — there always seemed to be something essential missing. A world I myself knew, whose life was never adequately described.

In order to discover something about the validity of the observation that Icelandic women constitute a separate *class* within the larger cultural spectrum, I searched out the most artless and authentic work of recent literature I could find.<sup>1</sup> This work is the autobiography of Gudny Jónsdóttir, published in 1973 when the author was ninety-five years of age, under the title *Bernskudagar* (Childhood Days).<sup>2</sup> Gudny Jónsdóttir was born and raised on a traditional Icelandic farm, the kind of sod farm that has existed in that country from the ninth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Her father was reasonably prosperous and employed a good many farmhands and servants. The home was also frequently visited by travellers and was the scene of district social events. The life there described by the author is traditional: people go about the centuries-old chores of shepherding, milking, spinning, knitting, haying and round-upping, and in the evenings they all gather for house-readings of the Scriptures or Sagas.

*Bernskudagar* covers only the author's childhood years, from as early as she can remember to the time of her confirmation in her mid-teens. The book is composed of

very short chapters, each broken into subject matter and all mostly confined to description: the progress of the text is therefore not entirely chronological. Within each chapter, a certain theme is followed on its own and examples are given from various times in the author's life. One chapter will describe the farm; another, the toys the siblings played with; another, the individuals on the farm; or certain events that illustrate a point; or the children's education, and so on. There is no attempt at being entertaining or interesting. The author seems to assume that her readers will quite naturally be interested, regardless of what she says. She is out to cause no harm or wreak no vengeance. She has no axes to grind and tells her little episodes with an air of reassurance. The voice is very much the grandmother's voice: distant but warm, and entirely sympathetic and forgiving. Perhaps the most striking feature of this book is the love with which it seems to be written — a love for everything she touches on — but it is always a love for something that seems to be very far away.

When this autobiography was published, it was thought to be significant for its descriptions of a now-vanished lifestyle. With the advent of farm machinery, automobiles, television, and public schools, people no longer do their work by hand and on foot in quite the same way, and there are no house-readings. In an era of the urbanization of the farm itself, *Bernskudagar* reminded people of the rural life they still cherished. But a careful reader will soon be alerted to a deeper significance to Gudny Jónsdóttir's narrative — which was read initially as "typically Icelandic." That stronger importance lies in the quality of love that is conveyed by the narrative voice. The more specific questions I intend to ask are: What kind of love is exhibited here? What makes this feature so distinctly Icelandic when it

comes to women's writing? Why is it present in the first place? What does it show about the narrative/cultural personality? Does it tell us anything more general about women's autobiography?

Two examples may illustrate what lies within the general narrative *love*, before coming to its more complex characteristics. At the outset, Jónsdóttir declares that she is writing about her childhood because that is the time of life people love most. The book begins with this question: "Is not childhood the dearest and fondest time of life for most?" She goes on: "Are not also those places we walked in, the environment our eyes looked on, and the friends and companions of those years, always nearer and bound to us with stronger bonds?"<sup>3</sup> After speaking with affection throughout the book about her brothers, parents, the house servants, and friends in the district, she culminates the whole impulse of fondness at the end of the book in speaking of her relationship with her father:

*I was very ill with pneumonia and hallucinated and sometimes lost all touch, but in between I understood and followed everything. One time when I looked up I saw my father. He knelt by my bed. Large and warm tears fell onto my hand that I reached out to him. It did not escape me in this silent world how intensely he prayed. The inner bond which our hands then tied has not broken to the end of our days. (p. 81)*

The author has a surface explanation for the extreme gentleness of her narrative temperament. Unlike the dealings of Icelandic men with each other — a culture known for its passionately but indirect emotionalism — the women hand down to each other, from mother to daughter, a different principle of conduct. That principle, a kind of gold nugget of Icelandic feminine wisdom, is very simply described in *Bernskudagar*:

*Mother sat with us every evening and had us read prayers and verses before we slept ... Mother told us that we must never be angry. First of all, it was not certain that we were in the right, and even if we were, anger was harmful both to the body and soul. But if we were angered all the same, we must not speak, we must be absolutely silent and walk*

*away. Many have cause to regret all their lives what they utter in anger. "You can release the sheep from the shed and herd them back in again, but spoken words are never again retrieved." (p. 81)*

True to this lesson, the author never relates any incident of anger on her own part. She speaks well of everyone, even a servant girl who gives her a hefty beating in the cowshed for no good reason. Jónsdóttir loves everyone in her family, but in particular her older brother Einar. Einar Jónsson became a well-known sculptor whose work is now among the national treasures; his sister's autobiography receives some of its self-assurance from the knowledge that everyone respects her brother. Sometimes Gudny's love for Einar verges on the worshipful; it is always full of admiration. Yet she does not omit telling how he took delight in frightening his sister when she was very young, by telling her terrorizing tales and putting objects of fear in her way. This early childhood terror was so penetrating, in fact, that even at the age of ninety-five the author still dwells on it with discomfort — even while she is singing the praises of her young torturer.

The admiration, affection, praise and sometimes worship of others in *Bernskudagar* seems directly proportionate to the dubious view of herself exhibited by the narrator. The narrative is laden with self-doubt, self-repression, inferiority and victimization complexes and a rather suppressed impulse at self-searching. She often talks about herself as an 'idiot.'

Jónsdóttir points out her own shortcomings readily, indicating her inferiority, especially when compared to her more perfect brothers Einar and Bjarni. There is a good deal of narrative self doubt: the narrator feels incapable of describing her wonderful parents (p. 79); she cannot describe her love for her father (p. 81); and at the very end she claims that everything she remembers is just "cities in the clouds which of course eventually tumble" (p. 120); and in one blow she tries to take away whatever realistic validity the entire narrative might have had. While this inferiority and self-doubt is fairly mild, like everything else about Jónsdóttir's narrative, the reader may well feel that her love for everyone else has become too much of a good thing and has taken on a dubious character. This is not to say that her love

for her people is not genuine. Looking into this aspect of her narrative may give clues into the nature of love itself.

In her essay "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,"<sup>4</sup> Mary G. Mason points out that deference to other subjects is a common feature of women's autobiography. Self-identity is acquired through identification with others: "One element . . . that seems more or less constant in women's life-writing — and that is not the case in men's life-writing — is the sort of evolution and delineation of an identity by way of alterity...."<sup>5</sup> Estelle C. Jelinek in her "Introduction into Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition,"<sup>6</sup> points out the private nature of the concerns of women's autobiographies: "women's autobiographies rarely mirror the establishment history of their times. They . . . concentrate instead on their personal lives — domestic details, family difficulties, close friends, and especially people who influenced them" (pp. 7-8). Jelinek further mentions the mildness of tone in women's autobiographies, the disregard for chronological order, and strategies of detachment as common features of women's life-writing. These observations concerning recurring features of women's autobiography do not, however, address some of the deeper issues suggested by women's ways of writing autobiography. If alterity is a constant feature of women's life-writing, why is this so? When alterity emerges as a form of love, as it does in *Bernskudagar*, is it because love itself involves a form of self-negation that verges on self-destruction? A discounting of the self as a form of gift to another? When the Other becomes many people — in *Bernskudagar* it becomes everyone — what kind of emotional process are we witnessing? In short, what kind of love is this?

Sigmund Freud observed that "The childhood of the individual is the childhood of the race." And there is indeed something in *Bernskudagar* that hits the bedrock of all Icelandic childhoods, and which has elicited a return by her audience of the affection she bestows on the country and its people. There is a feeling of smallness, idiocy, inferiority and admiration for others in *all* childhoods. These feelings may be universal ghosts that all people find themselves trying to overcome. This is particularly so when the

child is growing up in a place where life is difficult and nothing comes easily — as was the case in Iceland until the Second World War. To overcome these ghosts, the autobiographer dwells on them. Small events that have determined a life are therefore seized on in order to be discarded: in so doing the autobiographer is weeding through herself — she is not necessarily *reducing* the self or negating it. She is rather clearing the way. It is in the nature of psychoanalysis to *reduce* things of childhood *from the status of monster to trivia*. This process is also part of the autobiographical effort. Story telling, on the other hand, involves the opposite impulse — that of raising trivia to the status of monster, a signification of previously unidentified events and objects. These opposing forces within the narrative create a tension that is inherent in the very nature of autobiography.

The kind of self-negation exhibited by Gudny Jónsdóttir, therefore, may be seen as a form of self-searching. Alterity as a form of love — the merging of the self with others — is part of that search. As such, the discounting of the self — the autobiographer who sees herself as an inferior half-wit rather than a sentimentalized child — is not the negative force it first appears to be. We in the twentieth century, educated in the cult of the strong personality and the forceful identity, are often blind to the positive nature of self-surrender that necessarily occurs when it is a self-in-love. Love gives rise to a form of self-suppression; its tensions are bound up with the need for self-assertion. These two opposing forces may result in a gigantic clash and give rise to strong creative impulses. There may also be a narrative “place” — a psychological space — where the simultaneous forces of self-negation and self-assertion exist harmoniously, where the conflict is resolved and a clear identity emerges. That is the ‘space’ Gudny Jónsdóttir has found in her autobiography.

*Bernskudagar* is highly orderly, and the significance of the work is derived partly from the distant narrative vantage point that makes order possible. The mildness of tone in the narrative is both an effort to downplay and neutralize emotional con-

tent, as well as an effect brought on by narrative distance. The advanced age of the author means that she is speaking of events and lives as they were nearly a century before. When she writes her autobiography in 1973, she has travelled through the most sweepingly dramatic time in all of Icelandic history. All of life has changed drastically during the last ninety-five years: modern technology, architecture, communication, travel, even diet, have almost completely obliterated the old and stable lifestyle for the whole nation, and this change has taken place only during the final twenty-five years of the author’s nearly one hundred. It is no wonder that she speaks of her childhood as if it were very far away and unretrievable! This distance not only enables the author to view her childhood, when nar-

of a spectacle, horizon or face” (p. 26), and that is exactly what we have here. The narrator of *Bernskudagar* is the old woman who looks back over an area formerly inhabited but now lost and nonexistent, and she has absorbed the loss. There is the repose of something accomplished and unchangeable, the tranquility of accepted powerlessness. What she is looking at is in reality *nothing*, yet that nothing is generative and haunting. In Derrida’s words: “Only *pure absence* — not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced — can inspire” (p. 8).

Jónsdóttir cannot reinvest the deserted past with emotional life. Therefore her narrative is descriptive: it describes the form of that life, the structure it took — and it is ‘neutralized’ of content; emptied.

This is not to say that her narrative lacks significance. It is, rather, precisely this emptiness that constitutes the sig-

nificance of the work. That it is a book *about nothing* is what creates its value. The emptied core; the neutralized zone; the deserted city; the peacefulness of distance: these elements constitute a form of incredible loneliness. It is a loneliness informed by love: if she did not love what she has neutralized — or destroyed emotionally — there would be no ‘city’ or narrative. She writes from the position of the exile, but it is an exile of time and history rather than geography. The exile is defined by her love for her origins; it is only that love which can tie the exile to her origins. Without that love, the tie does not exist. Love therefore becomes *essential* for the generation of narrative, and loneliness of voice becomes an *inevitable* consequence.

All of these reflections become curious, however, when they are related to the concerns with which this essay opened: the separate *class* within which Icelandic women were suggested to be living. It is a curious fact that in *Bernskudagar*, Gudny Jónsdóttir is seen living in this state of lonely exile even as a child, while she still inhabits the ‘city’ that is later deserted. To refrain from anger and from voicing feelings is a way of cutting off one’s involvement with society. It is a form of dislocation, and a way of maintaining the posi-

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rating it as a text, in a very orderly way. She can, at one stroke, single out the few significant memories that each of her subject categories requires and can classify her childhood in that manner without any sense of contrivance.

Jacques Derrida, in “Force and Signification,” posits a remarkable image for structuralist narrative distance which describes *Bernskudagar* very well — this uninhabited city, or the city deserted in the wake of some kind of radioactive catastrophe:

*...the relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized. Somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture.<sup>7</sup>*

Perhaps we are witnessing in *Bernskudagar* the placidity of catastrophe — Jónsdóttir’s own “tumbled castles in the clouds” — the narrative effects of a condition we recognize as the ‘space’ of the refugee: the aftermath of trauma and loss. Derrida speaks of “...the repose of the beginning and the end, the peacefulness

tion of observer rather than participant.

When reviewing the episodes and incidents Jónsdóttir chooses to relate in her short autobiography, we find that the moments she singles out are those in which she is observing something. For this reason her narrative appears mostly descriptive. She observes her parents; her brothers; the servants. She takes note of what her brothers are building and reading and learning. She watches the guests that come to the farm and listens to their conversation. Seldom is she a participant; even descriptions of herself at play record only the ingeniousness of her brothers' games. Most significantly perhaps, her work — her contribution to the running of the farm — is that of the quintessential *watcher*: She is a shepherd. It is her task to go out early in the morning and watch over the sheep from some height where the view of the flock is good. There she spends her hours alone: the wind

blows and she waits. If a sheep escapes into the mountains, she feels mortifyingly guilty; her solitude is infused with her own form of childish angst. It is an anguish of loss and possible loss. An early trauma of love and loss is also related in her book: as a young child she has a lamb of her own, which she loves. The lamb grows and is eventually slaughtered. When the rest of the family is eating the blood sausage, she suffers and cannot eat. She also describes the departure of her beloved brother Einar who leaves for Copenhagen to study; the home feels deserted without him. If life, even at that early age, is made up of a series of losses, it is perhaps no wonder that by the age of ninety-five, Jónsdóttir would construct a narrative of distance and emptiness.

What kind of love is this? Given that it is an *essential* love, without which the text would not exist, and a love informed by alterity; self-surrender; emptiness; loneliness and distance, a distinction needs to be made between the love with which the narrative is written and the love which the narrator, as a former self and character in the book, feels for her surroundings. While a mild, distant love is practically the only emotion conveyed by the narrative voice, the child Gudny possesses more varied feelings. Her fear of loss and her anxiety have already been described. There are

other fears that play a larger role. Jónsdóttir dwells on a number of objects of fear which beset her, as well as incidents of fright. When she is very young, sitting on her mother's lap, a bluish light suddenly gleams through the window. The little girl senses her mother's fright at this light and become afraid herself (p. 9). She tells of how she is afraid of the word 'skruggur' as a little girl — an unidentified signification — and of how her brother Einar teases her by telling her a certain type of fish in the stream is 'skruggur' (p. 17). She has an inordinate fear of tiger beetles (p. 18); of a certain green liquor cask (p. 21); and toadstools (p. 21). Anything that is ugly, in fact, frightens her out of her wits (p. 22).

It seems impossible for the girl Gudny to maintain possession of happiness; she always loses it, even when it is merely a

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***To refrain from anger and from voicing feelings is a way of cutting off one's involvement with society.***

moment seized. Since this kind of loss is self-engendered, it may be that something in her psyche will not allow her to be in possession of that which she loves. Her anxiety predetermines her loss. As with the lamb she owns and cares for, it is loved with the knowledge that it will be slaughtered. She anticipates her loss and sorrow; therefore she loves the lamb more. If this kind of anxiety infuses the woman Gudny Jónsdóttir's life, it may be that the sense of repose in the narrative is the repose of the one whose loss is complete. The worst has happened, therefore there is nothing more to lose. All that remains is "castles in the clouds" and distance. This distance is the *nothing* at the core of the narrative.

Given that the narrative voice acquires its identity through the father and the brother in *Bernskudagar*, when these two die, meaning ceases. The woman who is 'trapped' in an unshakable bond then lives a dislocated life, or a life of banishment. The self-surrender of the narrator becomes, at the end of her life, a form of defeat. Yet, at the same time, it is her self-surrender that sustains her — and gives rise to her narrative. Sustenance and sacrifice become simultaneous; possibility and impossibility of identity are aligned. To be *banished* is still to be contained in that from which she is exiled, for it is her love that determines her banishment. Without

love there is no trauma or loss and there is nothing to mourn. When banishment and loss are complete and accepted, however, that narrative is numbed by its own meaninglessness and lack of content.

Given that Gudny Jónsdóttir's voice is 'typical' for the Icelandic woman, as it was described when her book first appeared, I can formulate some speculations concerning the separate 'class' of these women. The typical woman's life may seem to be continually distant, and her voice gentle, slow to anger and slow to proclaim. These have long been truisms concerning the Icelandic 'grandmother' figure. But these are not necessarily negative forces: instead, the alterity and the banishment-love that mark Jónsdóttir's narrative may be indexes to her strength. She herself admits that even as a child she

was thought to have great patience (p. 87). It is a patience that served her for a century and saw

her through the collapse of all her "castles in the clouds." She writes at the end that: "In the school of this earthly life we learn to be grateful for not knowing what lies ahead" (p. 120). What lies ahead is, as the filter that is her narrative shows, *nothing*. Yet in the deserted city of her life, where all is reduced to a skeleton, love itself may remain — a love not marked by its passion or intellect, but by its solitude. It is the candle that will not go out.

<sup>1</sup>Complete artlessness is of course quite possible in writing. All writing is a filter between the writer and her subject. My discussion here will therefore be directed at this filter, and the ideas will be handled only as suggested by that narrative.

<sup>2</sup>Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1973.

<sup>3</sup>Jónsdóttir, p. 7. Hereafter all quotations from this work will be contained in the text of my essay. All quotations are my translations.

<sup>4</sup>In *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

<sup>5</sup>Mason, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup>In *Women's Autobiography; Essays in Criticism*, ed. E.C. Jelinek (London: Indiana University Press, 1980).

<sup>7</sup>In *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 5.