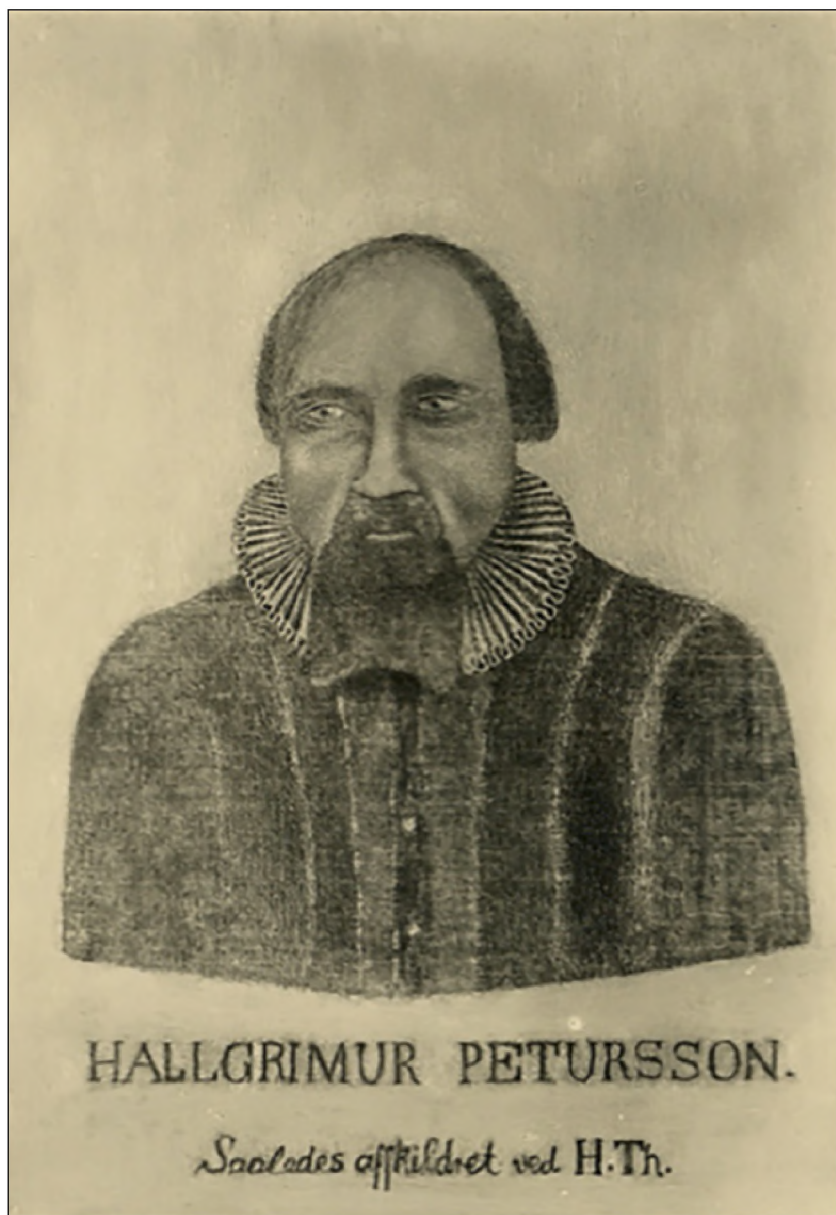


## CHAPTER 19

# Conclusions

The time has been long overdue for scholars studying seventeenth-century Icelandic literature to engage with the idea of the baroque and to reflect on whether or how the term can help to extend our understanding of the literature of the period. The principal aim of the present study has been to consider to what extent the terms “baroque” and “baroque influence” can help to illuminate the works of Hallgrímur Pétursson. This objective might have been pursued by claiming that as Hallgrímur was alive during the baroque period he must therefore have been influenced by (then) current thinking and theories. Potentially valid though such an approach might have been, it would have involved detailed analysis of a whole literary period rather than just a single author, even though he was the major Icelandic literary figure of his day. Instead, the present study has elected to explore the literary genres favoured by Hallgrímur and popular during his lifetime, and to examine the extent to which baroque characteristics as defined by a variety of scholars are reflected in Hallgrímur’s poetry.

The introduction draws attention to the importance of not allowing romantic and post-romantic literary preconceptions to interfere with our judgments of seventeenth-century literature. Romantic notions of the poet as an isolated and uniquely sensitized individual the expression of whose feelings was a high poetic priority were unknown in the seventeenth century. It is thus pointless to seek to find in the works of Hallgrímur Pétursson elements that he



Hallgrímur Pétursson. Probably the work of Hjalti Þorsteinsson of Vatnsfjörður (1665–1754). Þjóðminjasafn Íslands [National Museum of Iceland]. Photograph: Ívar Brynjólfsson.

and his contemporaries would never have considered including or expressing. Seventeenth-century poetry needs to be judged on its own terms. It would, of course, be intriguing to learn more about Hallgrímur's feelings when he and his future wife Guðríður first met in Copenhagen, and about what she might have told him of her years of exile in North Africa. But it would never have crossed Hallgrímur's mind to address such topics in his verse. He followed the literary conventions of his day regarding the role of poetry in society and its forms of expression.

Similarly, it is important to understand attitudes to language and poetry in the period between the Reformation and the emergence of romanticism (whether that period is called the baroque age or the age of humanism or some other formulation). As we have often noted, classical rhetoric was the dominant discursive mode that had helped to form western literary culture over the centuries and was especially prominent in the period under discussion in this book. We have also seen how the Graeco-Roman classical heritage played a major role in re-awakening Icelandic interest in native medieval poetic traditions. Baroque delight in periphrasis and metrical complexity ensured a favorable reception for the renewed interest in *dróttkvætt* measure, with its aurally intriguing rhymes and complex kennings. Magnús Ólafsson and Stefán Ólafsson both composed occasional poems in *dróttkvætt*. Hallgrímur Pétursson used this same meter in his satirical, occasional, and religious compositions, and especially in individual verses, and its influence is also evident in the rhymes used in his works in other genres. One of the present study's conclusions is that *dróttkvætt* came to be highly thought of by scholars in seventeenth-century Iceland. Icelandic poets of the period may well have regarded it as a source of creative stimulus, comparable in some respects with the ancient classical meters that European baroque poets sought to emulate. Thus, many literary and rhetorical influences are identifiable in seventeenth-century Icelandic poetry, sometimes so tightly interwoven that they are difficult to separate.

The present study does not seek to define a baroque period in Icelandic literary history or to classify Hallgrímur Pétursson as a "pre-baroque," "high baroque" or "late baroque" poet, categories that European scholars have used to characterize the period. On

the other hand it is helpful to distinguish between the baroque literature that develops in the urban courts and universities of Europe, and that which emerges in the isolated rural communities of Iceland, where agrarian culture is dominant, scholars are in the minority and seats of learning are few and far between. In such communities the same basic attitudes to the verbal arts that dominated the Scandinavian royal courts are identifiable though the literary requirements of rural society were different. People felt the need for learned men who could compose uplifting hymns and works of counsel and admonition, whereas the limited ranks of the rural upper class favored works that praised distinguished officials, whether living or dead, so that these exemplary figures could serve as a source of general inspiration. Within this select social group panegyrics are composed for those in positions of responsibility, eulogies for their deceased wives, and poems of felicitation and good counsel for their newborn children. These pieces are regarded as official poetry, while others were unofficial but no less popular, such as comic poems and *rímur*, the latter a major source of literary entertainment for the general public. Few love poems from this period have survived. No doubt such pieces existed but may have been regarded by the authorities as problematic or even dangerous and accordingly were never printed. In a European capital city such as Copenhagen, however, the upper echelons of society could allow themselves to compose and read love poems, though meaning was often concealed behind opaque courtly metaphor and images of pastoral bliss.

The present study lays great emphasis on seventeenth-century respect for literary form, not least as reflected in rhetorical figures of speech and complex meters. All such elements derive from the poetry of classical antiquity, regarded as a model for all contemporary writers. It has thus been important for the present study to address the significance of classical culture and neo-Latin verse, though their links with Icelandic poetic composition require further investigation. We have noted that these two discourses have much in common.

While elaborate and ornate presentation was highly prized, the church also sought to present Christian truths in a straightforward and accessible way. The tension between such competing priorities

was nothing new; it is identifiable in medieval Europe and, later, among seventeenth-century humanists. The *Passíusálmar* were influential in Iceland precisely because Hallgrímur Pétursson was able successfully to accommodate and manage these elements. Scholars have previously noted that Hallgrímur made extensive use of classical figures in the *Passíusálmar* (Þorleifur Hauksson and Þórir Óskarsson 1994, 153–156), but the nature and extent of this use are examined in greater detail in the present study. We had also noted that the same rhetorical figures can be found in all Hallgrímur's works, both sacred and secular, but especially those composed around 1660—that is, the *Passíusálmar* and the prose meditations. Baroque scholars agree that classical rhetoric is one characteristic element of the baroque text, and like other baroque features, this rhetorical impulse links the seventeenth century with much earlier literary periods.

Those literary scholars who prefer to avoid “baroque” as a chronological term justify their decision by pointing to the difficulty in assigning viable dates to the different periods, as “Renaissance,” “baroque,” and “classical” intersect in complex ways, and indeed all literary periods from the end of the Middle Ages to the present have features in common. Most scholars who have studied the baroque conclude that while its literature has many similarities with medieval works, it also anticipates aspects of modernity, notably modernism and expressionism at the end of the First World War. It was the emergence of these elements that helped to generate a new wave of critical interest in seventeenth-century literature.

The concept of *lærdómsöld* [age of learning] in Icelandic literary history is convenient partly because it covers the period from the Reformation to the Enlightenment, but also because the notion of “humanism” embraces not only the profession of learning but also learned poets—it recognizes the link between scholarship and literature that characterizes the baroque period. Though the Icelandic term “árnýöld” [early modern period] is not yet fully established even in Iceland, it represents an attempt to express the European notion of a period stretching from the end of the Middle Ages to the beginning of “modernity.”

No matter what we call it, this intermediate literary period has characteristics that distinguish it from medieval, Enlightenment,

romantic and modern literature. The study of Hallgrímur Pétursson has benefited greatly from research into the European baroque. Such work has helped to define the special character of post-Reformation Icelandic literature while also identifying the qualities that it shares with contemporary continental texts. Therefore use of the term “baroque” seems unavoidable when discussing and interpreting works from this period. The idea of the baroque text helps us to understand the distinctive worldview and mindset of the time. Though the present study has been able to explore only a limited number of texts from the “age of learning,” it has sought to show the extent to which those works can properly be called baroque. However, it has also seemed only natural to use this term when referring to a particular period in the history of European literature, especially in the inclusive sense recently adopted by German literary scholars; that is, a term covering many kinds of literary production.

As noted at the beginning of this study some scholars have claimed that the baroque found its purest expression in the great cultural centers and royal courts of mainland Europe, not least those in the south. The implication is that the more northerly and less urban the setting the more dilute baroque sensibility becomes. It is certainly the case that the baroque took on different forms in northern Europe and found diverse expression in the literature of each nation. Two elements mark the special status of Icelandic literature in the period elsewhere associated with the baroque. First, there had been a lengthy tradition of Icelandic vernacular composition, in both prose and verse. We can nevertheless observe a particular effort to employ the vernacular in new and more artistic ways, not least in attempts to imitate old texts and renew poetic language with reference to native tradition. Hallgrímur Pétursson’s “Aldarháttur” is a good example of such an initiative. Second, there was a long tradition of writers in Iceland drawing on Eddic poetic resources, which were said to suit old northern subject matter better than the florid style cultivated elsewhere in Europe. In my view the increased use of Eddic kennings in seventeenth-century Icelandic poetry is directly attributable to baroque influence. Icelandic poets were able to exploit both native poetic tradition and international rhetorical style, as many examples confirm.

Minna Skafté Jensen (2002) has discussed the influence of neo-Latin poetry on Danish baroque poets and has shown that such influences were reciprocal, though initially and for some time afterwards it was the Latin verse that influenced vernacular composition. Skafté Jensen lists the literary genres favored by Danish baroque poets, pointing out that these same genres had been the most popular in Latin verse composition: verse epistles, occasional poems, eulogies (about cities, places, individuals, and the like), pastoral verse, travel works, and, not least, versified biblical narratives. The leading Danish writers of the period were Anders Arrebo, Anders Bording, Søren Terkelsen, Elias Naur, and Thomas Kingo (Skafté Jensen 2002, 11).

If that situation is compared with the literary genres favored by the Icelandic poets discussed in this book, we can see that while no one composed pieces in all these genres, everyone wrote in some of them. Magnús Ólafsson composed occasional verse and eulogies. Stefán Ólafsson composed verse epistles, occasional poems, and eulogies, and translated pastoral verse (by Terkelsen) and travel pieces (by Kingo). His hymns about Christ's death and resurrection are straightforward retellings of the scriptural narrative. Hallgrímur Pétursson composed occasional verse, eulogies, travel poems, and many biblical hymns or biblical narratives in verse. All these writers composed hymns and comic verse. Hallgrímur is the only one who composed *rímur*, in the traditional sense of the term, and he was the only one not to compose in Latin. These two facts show that Hallgrímur's writings were to some extent "íslenskari" [more Icelandic] and more broadly accessible in Icelandic society than those of Stefán and Magnús, who were more international scholarly figures. There are, however, baroque features in all these writers. The six literary genres favored by Hallgrímur in his compositions have been examined: hymns, Passion hymns, consolatory verse, polemical writing, poetry about transience, and occasional verse. It may be going too far to claim that all these genres were adopted from mainland Europe, but at the very least they all have their parallels there.

More than once Minna Skafté Jensen calls Zacharias Lund (1608–1667) a "modernist" (Skafté Jensen 2002, 14). She claims that the poems of his youth confirm his interest in "modern ideas"

and that by translating French pastoral plays into German he was following the advice of Opitz. Indeed, by undertaking translations of any sort Lund was directly influenced by Opitz. Though Magnús Ólafsson of Laufás was slightly older than Lund, the same spirit of literary innovation touched his poetry, and both writers stood securely within the tradition of international neo-Latin poetic composition. It is not argued here that Magnús directly influenced Hallgrímur as a poet. In his religious poetry Hallgrímur may well have modeled himself on earlier writers of hymns, such as Einar Sigurðsson of Eydalir (1538–1626) and, not least, Ólafur Jónsson of Sandar (1560–1627), though this idea has not been researched in detail. On the other hand Magnús Ólafsson of Laufás was a poet who heralded a new era and as such prepared the way for the poetry of Hallgrímur Pétursson, Stefán Ólafsson, Bjarni Gissurarson and others. In the poetry of all these writers the Renaissance and the baroque intersect in complex ways.

There is no doubt that Hallgrímur's schooling was irregular and his background less prosperous than that of his literary contemporaries. He undoubtedly realized that if his poetic gifts were to find their fullest expression, he would need to extend his knowledge, and this he did, no doubt on his own initiative, at every opportunity. Hallgrímur would have encountered the traditions and practice of rhetoric in the course of his education in both Iceland and Denmark. Moreover, Hallgrímur must have had access to contemporary European literature, which proved to be an important source of inspiration and ideas. There is good reason to assume that Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson played a part in this overall consciousness-raising process.

Finally, we may ask whether the present study changes our view of Hallgrímur Pétursson in any way. We have seen that far from being an isolated figure as a poet, he was a man of his time in terms of ideas about the world, the position of mankind within that world, the function of poetry, and the nature of poetic beauty. Hallgrímur was an ambitious poet the source of whose ideas lay jointly in native tradition and contemporary European verse. The image of Hallgrímur that many Icelanders first encounter is the one created by Matthías Jochumsson—the great poet as a poor, suffering and isolated figure. Yet this portrait was true only for particular periods



in his life: he was poor during the year he lived on Suðurnes, and the final years of his life were marred by serious illness. Overall, however, his life was more varied, eventful and adventurous than the lives of many. He managed to overcome his share of misfortunes, secured a good church living, and earned the respect of his contemporaries. His interests were many, as his poetry and other writings confirm. He was responsive to new influences and over the years accumulated the knowledge and education on which he had missed out as a young man, so that he was thus able to stand on an equal footing with other poets. So it is that Hallgrímur Pétursson became one of Iceland's most celebrated and beloved poets.

