THE REVERSE SYNCRETISM OF JÓN ÞORLÁKSSON’S TRANSLATION OF PARADISE LOST

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Although it might seem a spurious enterprise to some scholars to make a study of a translation not even based upon the original, there remains more to say about Jón Þorláksson’s Paradísar Missir (PM) than merely to reiterate the appraisals of romantically-minded nineteenth-century literati or the solitary textual analysis of a scholar whose work has languished for three generations.1 Beyond these, I here intend to make a preliminary examination of the Icelandic rendition of Milton’s Paradise Lost (PL), as it constitutes much more than just a translation of a translation. The artfulness of the translator’s ambitious adaptation invites a somewhat more modern scholarly approach to Þorláksson’s text, and fosters our appreciation

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1 However, for a theological consideration, see Gunnar Kristjánsson (1994).
of both poets’ ground-breaking projects, the latter of which stands as a literary and cultural artifact worthy of critical attention in its own right. In particular, Þorláksson recalibrates and reconfigures the syncretistic project of Milton’s epic by taking his translation from the thoroughly Christianized classical matrix of the original, which merges Greek and Roman pagan paradigms with Milton’s own curious brand of Protestantism, back into the mythopoetic matrix of his own cultural tradition; in so doing, Þorláksson effects a kind of reverse syncretism by adapting the Christian core of the English *Paradise Lost* to the conventions of an earlier Norse pagan mythography and versification without compromising the theology of the theodicy. Such a process is predicated upon the Icelandic poet’s formal adaptation of an archaic prosody (namely, *fornyrðislag*); this structural transposition of Milton’s blank verse into a medieval verse form permitted (and perhaps initially inspired) Þorláksson to manage the epic convention of the invocations to the muse differently, in contrast to the choices of his exemplar or to Milton’s own poem. Also, it allowed (or inspired) the particular way he presents the Son within the context of the War in Heaven. The ultimate result is a translation that accomplishes more than simply reproducing the original in another language; it opened up, perhaps, a new way of reading Milton’s poem especially suited to a Christian audience of Norse descent. However, since *Paradísar Missir* remains largely obscure, even to the Icelanders themselves, it seems prudent first to provide some context and background before beginning any actual analysis of Þorláksson’s implementation of reverse syncretism.

Most significantly, a few observations about the
phenomenon of syncretism take precedence. In general, since the term’s first use in English, syncretism describes the “attempted union or reconciliation of diverse or opposite tenets or practices,” especially with regard to religion (Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. 1). Though historically used to minimize schisms between various Christian sects after the Reformation, its practice in the Middle Ages once effected the re-integration of northern European pagan traditions into the post-conversion Christian holidays (or “holy days”) such as Christmas, Easter, and the Feast of All Saints (Halloween). The syncretistic process, built upon analogies between previously discrete religious world views, has been used to make Christianity more relevant to indigenous populations for the purpose of proselytization. In terms of its literary application, as Ana Acosta observes in Reading Genesis in the Long Eighteenth Century, Milton uses syncretism as a means of “establishing a material and spiritual authority by joining the classical with the biblical” (2006, 98). His four invocations to the Muse in Paradise Lost, considered in more detail below, suffuse the pagan underpinnings of the goddess with a powerfully Christian valence, thereby revitalizing the epic topos for his primarily Protestant audience (Phillips 2000). By extension, it is arguable that Þorláksdson reverses Milton’s syncretism to revitalize that same topos for his own Nordic readership, but before jumping to such a conclusion, some account of the translator and the translation itself provides useful context.

Early in the 1790’s, the Reverend Jón Þorláksdson, the “þjóðskáld Íslishinga” (or the “great poet of Iceland”), undertook the stupendous task of translating Milton’s Paradise Lost into his native tongue. On the heels of his
translation of Pope’s *Essay on Man*, Þorláksson, encouraged by his friend and admirer Halldór Hjálmarsson, commenced work on the first three books of the English epic, using a copy provided him by Hjálmarsson of Johan Schönheyder’s Danish blank verse translation of the original, *Det Tabt e Paradiis* (1790). Published piecemeal through the Icelandic Literature Society (1796-1798), Þorláksson’s rendering set in motion the most onerous project of his career as “the poet laureate of his generation” (Beck 1933, 579). He revised his initial attempt and continued to translate the remaining books after procuring a copy of Friedrich Wilhelm Zachariä’s German translation in hexameter (1762). Having, by his own admission, only “some slight knowledge of English,” Þorláksson preferred not to work from the original (Beck 1926, 100). Although the translation was complete by 1805, the finished work had to wait nearly a quarter century to be published in its entirety in 1828, nine years after Þorláksson’s death in 1819, under the auspices of a British aficionado of Scandinavian languages, John Heath.\(^2\) This edition earned the poet the title of “The Icelandic Milton.”\(^3\)

The first and most enthusiastic appraisal of *Paradísar Missir*, however, came from a Scottish member of the British Bible Society who visited the translator in 1814, one

\(^2\) The Icelandic Literature Society suspended its yearly publication subsequent to the release of Books I-III due to lack of funding.

\(^3\) In the preface to the edition including the first book (Vol. XIII), the editor, Jón Jónsson (Johnsonius, 1749-1826), familiar with the English original, declared Þorláksson’s translation a triumph over the Danish, claiming himself to have made certain emendations or corrections where the latter seemed an insufficient analogue to Milton’s own verse (Beck 1935, 40).
Ebenezer Henderson, who claimed that Þorláksson’s version in some respects almost surpassed the English original (Beck 1926, 104). At the time, Þorláksson was in the process of his final translation, that of Friedrich Klopstock’s Messias, a project for which Henderson reports the Icelandic poet had lost some of his zeal, “since Milton [had] used him several years as his riding horse, and spurred him unmercifully through the celestial, chaotic and infernal regions.” Another visitor to Iceland, the Danish philologist Rasmus Rask (1787-1832), though more critical of Paradísar Missir than Henderson, nevertheless declared, “As a separate work of art our translation is … excellent, as the poet has had perfectly at his command the richest and most beautiful language Europe possesses, and has grasped, at least, the principal thoughts of Milton with true poetic genius, and reproduced them with clearness and power” (Beck 1926, 108 [from Literatur bladet 20 (1829)]). Like Rask, the Icelandic scholar and archaeologist Finnur Magnússon (1781-1847) acknowledged the “very great merit” of Þorláksson’s “re-casting of Milton in [the] Eddic mould” (Beck 1926, 109).

4 See also Henderson’s two volume account, Iceland, or the Journal of a Residence in that Island (1818).

5 From “Hamförrin” (or “To Hell and Back”) by Þorláksson (1805)—see Neijmann (2006, 235). Literally, however, the title, hamförrin, refers to the wanderings of a lycanthrope, perhaps a berserker.

6 “Eddic,” of course, describes the qualities associated with the poetry preserved in medieval Icelandic manuscripts or fragments of such poetry contained in Snorri Sturluson’s Prose Edda. Regarding Beck’s work from which I quote here, I would also recommend that interested readers consult some of his other relevant publications (1933, 1945, and 1961) even though the material contained therein may often be virtually identical to that in his original 1926 dissertation.
Since then, little beyond the occasional reference to *Paradísar Missir* has found its way into print outside of Iceland.\textsuperscript{7} One notable exception comes from the late nineteenth-century German philologist, Philipp Schweitzer, in his study, *Geschichte der Skandinavischen Litteratur* (II: 219 [1885-1889] as quoted in Beck 1935, II: 96-97). There, Schweitzer states that Þorláksson’s translations of *Paradise Lost* and *Messias* are both surprising “for that time[,] not only in their unprecedented mastery of [vernacular Icelandic], nor merely through their extraordinary replication of the spirit suffusing the originals, but rather by having come closer to the ideals Milton and Klopstock sought to embody in their immortal works than the originals themselves” (translation mine).\textsuperscript{8} Subsequent criticism is limited almost exclusively to the work of one scholar, born in Iceland and trained at Cornell University, Richard Beck (1897-1980), who beginning with his 1926 dissertation produced a significant body of work concerning the life and writings of Jón Þorláksson, particularly with regard to the translations of Pope’s *Essay on Man* and Milton’s epic. In addition to the biographical

\textsuperscript{7} One of the more recent reconsiderations of *Paradísar Missir*, available only in Icelandic (with an abstract in English) appears in a publication of the *Studia Theologica Islandica* by Gunnar Kristjansson (1994) in which, among other things, the author discusses love and marriage “against the background of Milton’s … and Thorláksson’s life” through the theological understanding of Paul Tillich.

\textsuperscript{8} Schweitzer’s original German reads, “Sie überraschen nicht nur durch die damals beispiellose Herrschaft über die Muttersprache, nicht bloss durch die so ausserordentlich getreue Wiedergabe des durch die Originale wehenden Geistes, sodern sie sind sogar dem Ausdruck der Ideale, welche Milton und Klopstock in ihren unsterblichen Werken zu verkörpern suchten, näher gekommen, als die Originale selbst.”
data he compiled, Beck also offers his own critique of Paradísar Missir, including meticulous catalogues of the poet’s inaccuracies, additions, and omissions to be found in his rendering of books 1, 5, 7, and 12. In general, Beck’s research reveals a poet of extraordinary talent, masterful beyond his peers, who of necessity harbored sympathy with Milton’s subject and an interest in his English predecessor’s life (1926, 128). More specifically, according to Beck, Þorláksson’s additions generally serve to amplify the sense of the original, and his omissions seldom seem consequential. He writes, “Milton’s vivid similes and rich imagery suffer in the translation hardly any loss,” (1926, 122) and also that

Hardly ever does [Þorláks]son fail to maintain his language on a level with that of the original. His interest in the past and his good taste led him to the old literature of his country, for the selection not merely of his verse forms, but also of his language. … He selected the style and the language of the Völuspá, the most sublime of the Eddic poems,

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9 Nevertheless, given the poet’s non-original models, these errors or alternations remain largely irrelevant in comparison to the important contributions Þorláksson has made not only to the literary tradition of his own country, but also to the legacy left to posterity by Milton’s monumental epic composition as it transformed the numerous cultures and eras to have inherited Paradise Lost.

10 Although, as Beck notes, some erroneous renderings stem from the imperfections of his models, especially the Danish, in many cases it would seem Þorláksson intentionally deviated in order to accommodate the alliterative demands of Old Icelandic verse. Significantly, the translation improves in the books for which the poet later also made more extensive use of the German, another language with which he seems to have had greater facility.
dealing with the highest matters, man and his destiny, the beginning and the end of the world. He could find no more fitting vehicle. (1926, 123)

Indeed the most remarkable aspect of Paradísar Missir manifests itself in Þorláksson’s decision to render his translation not into blank verse or hexameter like his models, but rather to transpose Milton’s poetry into the form employed by Iceland’s medieval poets, that of fornyrðislag, as exemplified in one of the most important, and perhaps one of the earliest, Old Norse poems, Völsuspá (or “The Prophecy of the Seeress”).11 As John Hale remarks in his essay on the early translations of Paradise Lost, “Prose would best suit the aim of fidelity to the poet’s meaning, but was this not throwing away the dignity of the verse?” (1984, 39). Consequently, Hale in essence asks also, “[can] a translator … create a poetic medium or should [he] follow what prevails in his own language?” (39). Unlike Schönheyder and Zachariä, Þorláksson chose the latter strategy, adapting the sort of versification at the very core of the Icelandic literary tradition. Resembling that found most notably in the Old English epic, Beowulf, the revered epic meter known as fornyrðislag is organized around syllabic stress and alliteration.12 Its natural

11 Völsuspá is preserved in the 13th century manuscript known as the Codex Regius which contains a number of other early Old Norse poems that would seem to be, like Beowulf, the product of a centuries-long oral tradition. Its position at the head of the codex indicates its pre-eminence and importance.

12 It should be noted that Þorláksson at times deviates from the form in that he does not limit the stanza length to the prescribed parameters of fornyrðislag; doing so, he tacitly acknowledges the insufficiency of the form to encapsulate sense units which, in the original, often come in extensive and comparatively convoluted verse paragraphs.
solemnity and somber tone made it appropriate to the wellspring of Viking cosmology and eschatology comprised by the Völuspá, which is, considering both its style and substance, a most suitable model for Þorláksson’s translation of Milton’s theodicy.

The structure and content of Völuspá, despite its relative brevity, is curiously apposite to that of Paradise Lost. Although Hjálmarsson specified that his friend worked hard to render his translation in the Old Meter of the Poetic Edda, one may reasonably speculate that the analogous natures of Milton’s epic and the anonymously authored prophecy in verse rendered the metrical choice de rigueur. Beyond the occasional pedantic catalogue of obscure names, Völuspá exhibits a tripartite structure looking to the past, the present, and the future. In it, Óðinn, father of the Norse equivalent of the Olympian pantheon, is often thought to consult a “seeress” (a völva or witch) who, like the archangels, Gabriel and Michael in Paradise Lost, reveals to her interlocutor (in the form of a spá or “spell”) visions of, and truths concerning, cosmic history. She begins with an account of the creation of the world and the gods; within this world, she explains the creation of humanity in the figures of Ash and Elm (mythic analogues to Adam and Eve), and of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, which, though not the site of any prohibition or temptation, is central to Norse cosmology as the thing which gives structure and support to the many realms making up the universe.13 Next, Óðinn learns of the first of two wars—the

13 The tree is also that upon which Óðinn hangs himself for nine days, a Norse pagan analogue to the Crucifixion; as a result of his self-sacrifice, the god increases in wisdom and gains knowledge of the mystical runic alphabet.
one in which his own forces, the Æsir, do battle with another group of deities, the Vanir, in a conflict not unlike Milton’s “War in Heaven.” The future then, as the seeress continues, involves another collision of cosmic powers, this time one that is to bring about the “end of days” known as Ragnarök. As the prophecy reveals, the purest of the gods, Baldr, the son of Óðinn, meets his death as the result of the mischievous interference of Loki, a satanic analogue who undergoes a kind of infernal punishment for his role in the course of the calamitous cosmic events. Out of this apocalypse emerges a new world order embodied in the resurrected son of Óðinn, the All-father.  

Völuspá’s syncretism of pagan and Christian lore cements the basis of comparison between it and Paradise Lost, which itself fuses Antique myth with Milton’s own Protestant theology. It would seem that there could be no more apposite Old Norse model for Þorláksson’s translation of the English epic than Völuspá in that it too comprises a cosmogonic and cosmological history involving the cyclical or recursive struggles between the forces of order and chaos, the former ultimately prevailing. It is no surprise then that Watson Kirkconnell, who himself translated a portion of “The Prophecy of the Seeress” and two of Þorláksson’s original poems in his own volume, The North American Book of Icelandic Verse (1930), praises both fornyrðislag as a verse form and the Icelandic

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14 Þórr’s role in these events is also apposite to that of Christ’s; each mitigates the chaos engendered by his principle enemy. As a “keeper,” or rather, “restorer” of order, he is something of a redeemer in Norse myth.
Reverend as a translator. Old Norse poetry, writes Kirkconnell, demonstrates a “lyric intensity … so charged with passion, so torn with poignancy” that the “Icelandic utterance,” as he puts it, constitutes “instinct with human emotion focused to a burning point, rendered in the light of its highest significance” (1930, 10). Þorláksson, he declares, “gave Iceland new windows toward the outside world through his masterly translations from such poets as Pope, Milton, and Klopstock” (1930, 13) by making superb use of “one of the most musical of human tongues,” achieving “an austerity of restraint that often gives a marmoreal hardness” (16) to his poetry. While English may not be as innately musical in Kirkconnell’s estimation, it would seem that the “marmoreal hardness” of Paradise Lost itself was able to find a suitable matrix within the Icelandic translation.

Beck concurs, commenting, “By [Þorláksson’s choice of ‘Eddic measure’] more was gained in association than was lost by dissimilarity” (1926, 110). He applauds the Icelandic bard’s capacity to capture what he calls “the spirit of the original” (Beck 1950, 8)—a “Miltonic spirit”—even if it succeeds in part not so much as a translation as it does

15 The two poems in question are entitled “Poverty” and (the highly acclaimed) “Farewell to Summer.”
16 In addition to being a poet himself, Kirkconnell, a Canadian, was also an erstwhile Miltonist, authoring three books, one of which focuses on Paradise Lost.
17 Þorláksson was at the vanguard of the 18th century Icelandic movement to preserve and purify the country’s mother tongue, especially through his translation of Paradise Lost, a demonstration of his commitment to the national agenda fueled by patriotic pride. In this role, he won himself recognition as the poet who revivified traditional Norse versification.
as a paraphrase or redaction (1935, 56). Many translators over the centuries have rendered *Paradise Lost* into prose, an easier task allowing greater lexical precision while sacrificing esthetic parity. Þorláksson, according to Beck, recognized as a poet that prose simply could not do Milton’s verse justice, and “that it is a poor verse translation … which does not surpass the prose one” (1926, 118). One must also accept that, in the Icelandic tradition from Þorláksson’s point of view, the only venerable poetry was the alliterative verse of his medieval predecessors. Though others of his contemporaries had rendered great classical *pagan* works like Homer’s *Iliad* into Icelandic prose, for Þorláksson, it would only seem appropriately respectful to translate the greatest *Christian* English epic into the classic form of his revered Old Norse exemplars. In his own culture and era, the Icelandic poet could afford Milton no higher honor, nor pay *Paradise Lost* more solemn homage.

Beck speculates as to the relative greatness, both actual and potential, of Þorláksson as compared to his contemporaries:

… judged from his results, handicapped as he was, still more could have been expected from Þorláksson, if the original had been available to him and mastery of the English language had permitted him to use it. He possessed two of the most important qualifications of a successful translator: great poetic ability and mastery of his native language. That he must have been, at least to some extent, in sympathy with the subject [of *Paradise
Such a sympathy might also explain Þorláksson’s choice of Pope’s *Essay on Man*. “Pope,” writes Beck,

... from a different point of view and in a different manner, attempted what Milton had done a generation before—to ‘vindicate the ways of God to man.’ Obviously, the *Essay* and *Paradise Lost* have at least a similar purpose. The relation between the latter and the *Messias* is even more close [sic]. Milton’s epic [likewise] served Klopstock both as a model and an inspiration. (1935, 98)

Þorláksson’s interest in Milton as a kindred spirit may have been indicated by his desire to obtain the English poet’s *Vitam* included in the third of Zachariä’s volumes (as evidenced in a letter he wrote to Hjálmarsson as he neared the end of his project [1803]: see Beck 1929, 128). His affinity for Milton certainly went beyond the single work he selected for translation.

As his chief biographer, Jón Þorkelsson, explains, Þorláksson was considered something of a savant by his contemporaries; he excelled both in sciences and language, studying among other things, Greek, Latin, theology, philosophy, and mathematics. He translated, among other authors, Ovid and Horace. Like Milton, he acquired a working knowledge of Hebrew, and wrote original poetry in Latin. Of course, he also demonstrated facility in Danish and German. One surmises too that the English and Icelandic Miltons shared the Virgilian career path so espoused by many aspiring poets of yore. The rector at the Cathedral School of Skálholt went so far as to refer (with a

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18 See also Beck (1926, 128).
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genial archness) to Jón Þorláksson at his graduation in 1763 as “poeta non ineptus” (Beck 1935, 74). In his younger days, the poet became known for his hymns, occasional pieces (elegies and the like), and lyrics. Another commemorative poem, not unlike in some respects Milton’s *Lycidas*, is one in memory of a friend, Bjarni Pálsson, Iceland’s first Surgeon-General. Beck describes the elegy as a “dignified poem, a fitting monument for an excellent man” (1935, II: 83). Jón Þorláksson was also a composer of nuptial songs, a moralist, and a satirist, rather prolific and often humorous. His original poems, writes Beck, “are marked by unusual facility of expression and often by deep feeling; … at times they rise to noble heights and are always pure and unaffected in language” (1935, 88).19 The biographer, Þorkelsson, remarks, “In translations of poetry, [he] far surpasses all previous [Icelandic] poets as well as those of his day, both in productivity and excellence; and he alone has more advanced the art of translation in our country than all other poets of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries put together” (Dánarminning 241; translation Beck’s [1935, II: 95]).20 Although the culmination of his authorial career, his own epic, is not technically an original work, it constitutes far more than a mere translation of *Paradise Lost* since the

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19 Of particular note is Þorláksson’s poem, “Villu Vitran” (“Revelation of Error”), written during the same decade that the poet was also working on his translation of Milton’s epic, in which the character of Lucifer appears. The influence of *Paradise Lost* is noted by Dick Ringler in his on-line edition of the selected poetry of Jónas Hallgrímsson (8 n3) regarding Satan’s address to the sun.

20 For the original, see Jón Þorkelsson’s biography of Jón Þorláksson (1919).
idiomatically Icelandic nature of *Paradísar Missir* distinguishes itself as an extraordinarily exquisite literary and cultural artifact in its own right. A comparison of the opening lines of each demonstrates the majestic sonority they share, as well as their style, one both decorous and lyrical. First, Þorláksson’s translation:

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Um fyrsta manns felda hlýðni
Ok átlysting af epli forboðnu,
Hvaðan óvægr upp kom dauði
Edens missir, ok allt bör manna;
Þartil annarr einn, æðri maðr,
Aptr før oss viðreista,
Ok afrekar nýan oss til handa
Fullsælustað fögrum sigri;
Sýng þú, Menta-móðir himneska!
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* (PM I.1-8; emphasis mine)

Then, Milton’s English:

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Of Man’s first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world and all our woe
With loss of Eden till some greater Man
Restore us and regain the blissful seat,
Sing Heavenly Muse …
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* (PL I.1-6)

Here also do we find the first evidence of Þorláksson’s reverse syncretism, for the Icelandic poet departs from his Danish and German exemplars and from Milton with regard to the deployment of the term, *muse*. Rather than resort to the use of the common noun borrowed originally from the Greek μοῦσα, Þorláksson makes use of the idiomatically Icelandic “menta-móðir.” He even forgoes the parlance of his own modern vernacular from which he
may have selected either “mennta-gyðja” (“goddess of art or skill”), or its synonym, “andagift” (“giver of breath”—i.e. inspiration), although he does opt for the former at the beginning of Book III. Importantly, in contrast to the more familiar choices, “menta-móðir” (what one might identify as a sort of para-kenning) indicates more clearly the progenitive, and specifically maternal, power of the inspirational deity. As the feminine character of this term is clearer in the Icelandic than in the English appropriation of the Greek, it personifies aptly the being that “warms [the abyss] into vigor like a dove on its egg to make it fruitful” (ll. 28–29, translation mine). Þorláksson’s lexical formulation constitutes a *hapax legomenon*, a singular term, occurring once not only in the corpus of his own work, but also within the larger canon of Icelandic letters (to the best of my knowledge). Neither does the poet elsewhere resort to “muse,” but chooses instead to invoke the spirit-deity as “menntagyðja” (III), “hjalpar-gyðja” (or “helper-goddess”; IX), or simply, “gyðja” (VII). In so doing, Þorláksson imparts an indisputably Eddic flavor, sharply distinguishing his translation from all others, as these terms are at once exclusively feminine and divine, evoking a Norse pagan esthetic akin to that of the classical religions of Antiquity which provided the foundation upon which Milton composed various elements of *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, *menta-móðir* conjures thoughts of a Nordic fertility goddess, perhaps Frigg or Freyja, each associated with childbirth.

As such, despite other unremarkable correlations

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21 Compare Milton’s “dove-like” spirit that “with mighty wings outspread / … sat’st brooding on the vast abyss / And mad’st it pregnant” (I.20-22).
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between the English and Icelandic epics, Þorláksson’s translation would seem more profoundly transformative than those of Schönheyder and Zachariä. Finnur Magnússon, who wrote a poem in thanks to Heath for his generosity in underwriting the 1828 publication of Paradísar Missir, praises Milton’s “matchless tune” and remarks gratefully how it can now be heard in the voice of “Iceland’s Thule.”22 As such a þyle, Þorláksson performs a role not unlike that of the seeress (or völva) of the Völuspá, by revealing to his readers the mysteries of a mythic world—its origins, vicissitudes, and its apocalyptic consummation. In this sense, we might consider Milton, alternately, England’s “thule.” Or, considering the affinity between the two nationally prominent and culturally influential bards, one might declare not only that Þorláksson actually does constitute the Icelandic Milton, but that Milton just as much may constitute “The English Þorláksson.”23 In any case, both employed a form of syncretism, though the later poet in a sense reverses the ideological fusions achieved by the former.

On the most basic level, Þorláksson accomplished this

22 The term þyle (also, it is to be noted, applied to Unferth in Beowulf) signifies an orator, spellbinder, bard or spokesman, and in modern Icelandic, has taken on a less dignified and revered meaning as it is now used to designate an announcer of news broadcasts.

23 Incidentally, as the Puritans once read Paradise Lost aloud for edification and enjoyment, so would it seem post-Reformation Icelanders read Paradísar Missir during the kvöldvaka (or ‘evening wake’), a centuries-old winter practice witnessed by Ebenezer Henderson also known as sagnaskemmtun, a diversion to keep family members awake while they performed their nightly chores before retiring (Driscoll 1997, 196-201). Henderson describes the tradition in his travelogue, Journal of a Residence (1818, 283-285).
Norse pagan re-casting through his transposition of the Danish version’s (as well as Milton’s) blank verse into a pre-Christian pagan form called fornyrðislag. Although prose might have been the easiest option, and blank verse would have mimicked the style both of the original and Schönheyder’s Danish translation, to subject the epic to such a stylistic sea-change was undoubtedly part of an explicit strategy by Þorláksson to render the English epic into a culturally specific poetic idiom with roots in the Eddic tradition of medieval Scandinavia. Perhaps, seeing the syncretism already integral to Milton’s poem, even in the other translations, Þorláksson also saw the natural affinity between Paradise Lost and the cosmologically and eschatologically oriented Völuspá. What the French critic, Auffret, referred to as Milton’s “pagano-Christian” syncretism becomes, in the Icelandic version of the epic, a Christo-pagan, or perhaps more accurately, a kind of Christo-Nordic syncretism.

In addition to the formal choice of fornyrðislag (which facilitates the recognition of Þorláksson’s reverse syncretism) and his re-paganized, Nordicized muse, there remains at least one other line of inquiry, an analysis of a particular narrative moment (though there may be many others), namely what we might call the locus classicus of the Icelandic Milton’s reverse syncretism in his rendition of Paradise Lost as Paradísar Missir: the expulsion of the rebel angels by the Son of God riding upon the Chariot of Paternal Deity. Of course, the imagery deployed at this moment in the English epic takes as its principal model the account in the Old Testament book of the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 10, but scholars identify other, syncretistic, layers to Milton’s description that hark back to Greco-Roman
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mythological sources. As Flannagan observes in a footnote in Book VI (1998, l. 820, n. 260), the Son’s “power echoes that of Zeus to oppose that of all the other Olympian gods combined, as when Hephaistos acknowledges [in the *Iliad*], ‘For if the Olympian who handles the lightning should be minded to hurl us … out of our places, he is far too strong for any’” (1998, 533). Other scholars have noted the verbal pun of the Son (S-O-N) and the Sun (S-U-N), evoking the Greek Helios who travels across the sky in his blazing chariot. Helios, later conflated with Phoebus Apollo, son of Zeus, compounds the syncretistic possibilities as the pagan underpinning of Milton’s rendering, and as such, the image here takes on a polyvalent potential; the Messiah is at once also a figure that exhibits aspects of all three pagan gods of light. To them we might add Phaeton, son of Apollo, who steals the sun-chariot, and who must subsequently be cast from the vehicle by the *aegus*-wielding Zeus as the latter hurls one of his signature lightning bolts in order to unseat the incompetent charioteer. Zeus or Jupiter in fact had many epithets among which were *Fulgens* (“god of lightning”) and *Tonans* (“the thunderer”). In his capacity as god of

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24 As Davidson (1965) notes, thunder and lightning, thought to be manifestations of divine power, naturally and inevitably gave rise to such figures as Zeus, Þórr, and the Christ Triumphant.

25 As described in a Hymn to Jupiter by the third century poet Callimachus (as translated by H.W. Tytler):

> Whilst we to Jove immortal and divine,
> Perform the rites, and pour the ruddy wine;
> What shall the Muse, with sacred rapture sing,
> But Jove th' almighty and eternal king,
> Who from high heav'n, with bursting thunder, hurl'd
> The sons of earth, and awes th' ætherial world!
thunder and lightning, he leads the Olympian host against the Titans or the giants who fall defeated before him like the rebel angels fall before the “ten thousand thunders” of Milton’s Son (*PL VI.836*).26

Confronted by such imagery, even through the Danish and German translations Þorláksson consulted, how could the Icelandic poet, though a devout Christian clergyman, not recognize its inherent affinity with literary depictions of the gods of his own pagan forefathers, and specifically, how could he not see the medieval Germanic god of thunder, Þórr, in the figure of the Miltonic Messiah? Like the Son, Þórr rides a chariot, the wheels of which produce a thunderous roar; like the Son, Þórr conjures lightning against his foes; like the Son, he is the progeny of the “father of all,” the Alföðr (in Old Norse) named Óðinn; like the Son, he leads the forces of order against the armies of chaos, the intractable giants and other monsters who besiege Ásgard, home of the Æsir (the Norse equivalent of the Olympian pantheon); like the Son, he will be instrumental in the defeat of those adversaries in the end times at Ragnarök, the “twilight of the gods” (in Nordic eschatology). In this cosmic conflict, a reiteration of earlier battles, Þórr, like the Son, will confront the greatest agent of chaos in the monster known as Jormungand or Miðgarðsormr, the World-Serpent, a beast akin to the Red

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26 For accounts of these and other relevant legends, I direct the reader to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Hesiod’s *Theogony*, and the *Bibliotheca* of Pseudo-Apollodorus.
Dragon of the New Testament Book of Revelation. This foe is itself the progeny of the Norse trickster-god, Loki, erstwhile giant and pagan analogue to Satan, whose diabolical deceptions Þórr repeatedly thwarts. As Milton’s Satan sires Sin, and then Death upon Sin, Loki brings into the world not only the cosmos-crushing Serpent, but the deadly Fenris wolf, and Hel, giant-goddess of the dead and damned, whose name is synonymous with the realm she

27 Christ likewise engages in multiple bouts with Satan, beginning with the War in Heaven, and continuing through the Temptation in the Desert, the Harrowing of Hell, and the Apocalypse. It ought to be noted that in the Norse version of the Harrowing of Hell from the Gospel of Nicodemus (Niðrstigningarsaga), interpolations made by the translator explicitly enshroud Christ in the “warlike aura of Þórr” (Aho 1969, 155). Here as elsewhere in the writings around the time of Conversion, Aho notes, “we have a … mixing of Norse mythology and Christian belief, where an association is made between Þórr and Christ, both of them sons of the All-Father, both of them militantly opposed to evil.” It would seem however that Þorláks son misses another opportunity for Christo-Nordic syncretism in the sea-beast “haply slumbering on the Norway foam” (PL 1. 203); it suggests an allusion or reference to the Midgard Serpent (or World Serpent), yet the Icelandic translation preserves the biblical “Leviathan.” Though Milton most likely was unaware of the association, medieval scribes were known to have glossed the term in the homilies they transcribed as “Miðgarðsormr” (Aho 154). Þorláks son might have exploited this opportunity. This conflation, reports Turville-Petre is confirmed by the Gosforth ‘Fishing Stone’: “The Norse god Thor was well known in England in Viking times. Whether the work of a Scandinavian or British artist, [it] suggests that the pagan myth of Thor, the giant Hymir and the World Serpent had infiltrated the Christian legend of Leviathan” (1975, 94-95). Preben Sørensen likewise notes that some have interpreted the myth “as a product of the time when the pagan religion was replaced by Christianity, and several scholars have here pointed to the parallel between this myth and the Christian myth of Leviathan, which was already recognized by learned men in the Middle Ages” (1987, 259).
(like Satan) rules. Indeed, there are so many points of intersection facilitating reverse syncretism, it is scarcely possible to enumerate them in their entirety. Suffice it to say that Þorláksson seizes the opportunity to exploit these coincidental convergences in order to retranslate Milton’s own syncretistic project within the original epic, making the Icelandic rendering a cultural touchstone for his own readership, one not so much in tune with the myths of classical Greece and Rome as with the legends of their own Viking heritage, especially those concerning the figure of the god of thunder.

This however is not to say that there had never been any cross-pollination between the ancient and medieval theological systems. In fact, Þórr, himself, had been identified with Jupiter; the sermons of the Anglo-Saxon clerics, Aelfric of Eynsham and Wulfstan (Bishop of London), clearly conflate the two deities (Turville-Petre 1975, 95).28 Turville-Petre claims that “English and Norse writers of the Middle Ages commonly identified Thor with Jupiter, and the similarity between the two was emphasized by Adam of Bremen” (101); “The reason,” he explains, “can only be that Jupiter, the sky-god, was also god of

28 In fact the confusion extends into the 20th century. A 1930 stock certificate from the European Electric Corporation depicts “a vignette of Zeus driving horses on his chariot with lightning”(available at the time of the initial writing of this article on-line at the site <http://www.scripophily.net/euelcoca19.html>), yet the charioteer is clearly wearing a Viking helmet and wielding a large hammer, evocative of Mjöllnir, Thor’s weapon. The facts that he drives horses and that the harness and tack seem more classical in design than medieval, compounds the confusion.
thunder and lightning” (102). As the son of the father-of-all, Þórr is no less an analogue of the chariot-riding Apollo, for according to Norse legends such as are contained within the Poetic (or Elder) Edda and Snorri Stulson’s Skáldkaparmál of the Prose (or Younger) Edda, he travels across the Nine Worlds of the Norse cosmos in a wagon, albeit one pulled by two goats rather than fiery steeds. In the Elder Edda, the twenty-first stanza of Þrymskviða (or the “Lay of Þrym”) describes the thunder-god’s journey to Jötunheimr, the home of giants, to retrieve his fabled hammer which had been stolen by the king of that land:

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Senn váru hafrar heim of reknir,
skyndir at sköklum, skyldu vel renna;
björg brotnðu, brann jörð loga,
ók Óðins sonr í Jötunheima.
(emphasis mine)
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(Then home the [he-]goats to the hall were driven,
Halted with ropes to run with the wain:
*The mountains brake, the earth burned with fire,
Rode Óðin’s son to etin-world.*)

Here we not only have a glimpse of Þórr’s similitude with

29 Others associated Thor with Hercules. See Lindow’s reiteration of Schröder’s contention (1988, 121). See also Auffret’s article on *Lycidas* (1969, 32) and Milton’s comparison of Jesus to the demi-god in *Paradise Regained* (IV.560-572); as Jesus vanquishes Satan, so Hercules bested Antaeus. Such associations solidify the equation of Thor and the Son as exploited by Þorláksson in his rendering of the expulsion of the rebel angels.

30 The translation is that of Lee Hollander in the second edition of *The Poetic Edda* (2004). *Etin*, it should be noted, corresponds to the Old Norse word *jötunn*, or giant; for the original Icelandic text, see Dronke (1969).
Phaeton setting the world ablaze, but more importantly, an image of the god’s vehicle, the wain or “wagon,” the wheels of which, wreathed in flame, “shook throughout” “the stedfast Empyrean” (as Milton puts it) like those of the Chariot of Paternal Deity (VI. 832-833). In the Prose Edda, we find the partially preserved Þórsdrápa in which the fourteenth stanza identifies the Norse deity as húfstjóri ... hreggs váfreiðar, or the “hull-controller of the hovering chariot of the thunderstorm.” For this reason, Þórr is subsequently identified in a kenning as “god of the chariot” (karms tývi; st. 18), and appears in various other texts designated by the epithet, Óku-Þórr (or “Driver-Thor”). As is often the case, Þórr in this laudatory poem defeats a number of giants in part by wielding his hammer. Illustrations of the god from the nineteenth Century bring these poetic accounts to life.\(^{31}\)

To these works, we might add Haustlong, another poem also preserved by Snorri, in which the god of thunder is explicitly named reiði-Týr (“chariot-God”; st. 20). Not surprisingly, his wagon once again causes the “Moon’s path” (a kenning for the firmament) to rumble on his way to slay the surly giant, Hrungnir (st. 14). In stanza 15, we encounter the image of Þórr aboard his hircine-powered wain:

Knóttu oll, en, Ullar endilóg, fyr mági, 
grund vas grápi hrundin, ginnunga vé brinna, þás 
hafregin hafrar hógreiðar framm dógu (seðr gekk 
Svolnis ekkja sundr) at Hrungris fundi.

\(^{31}\) For example, see Thor in his Chariot (1865) by Ludwig Pietsch (1824-1911), and Thor’s Battle against the Giants (1872) by Mårten Eskil Winge (1825-1896) both easily accessible on the Web through a standard image search engine.
(All the sanctuaries of falcons did burn, while down below, thanks to Ullr’s father-in-law [Þórr], the ground was kicked with hail, when the bucks drew [the temple-god of the lightly-riding chariot] forward … to meet [his adversary]).

In line with such literary depictions, we learn from Flateyjarbók (a compendious manuscript containing texts of a more historical kind) of a temple in which a life-size effigy of Þórr in his chariot was constructed such that it imitated the noise of thunder when pulled along by a cord (Davidson 1965, 3). Since some pagan temples were converted to serve as Christian chapels after the Conversion, it is tempting to imagine the potential for syncretistic transference often used as a proselytizing tool by missionaries in reference to this pagan idol.

When one then examines the relevant passage in Paradise Lost, many of the details dovetail with representations of the chariot-god from the medieval Norse poems examined above. Turning then to Þorláksson’s rendering, by way of comparison, we find the Son preparing to ascend the Almættis vagn (the “wain” or “wagon of the Almighty”; PM, p. 186; PL VI.750); more than that, it is the hvirfilblir ógrligastr—the “most awesome cyclone-car”—from which emanates a hvass

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32 The English translation of the original quotation is a conflation of that of Richard North (1997) and my own of the relevant verses.
33 Around the time of the conversion of the Vikings, as Lindow observes, “we already know that Thor and Christ were … locked in combat for the religious sentiments of the North” (1988, 134). This competition might have been ameliorated via syncretism which itself functioned as a tool of proselytism.
hvíñandi, or a “keen/sharp whizzing” sound, as opposed to Milton’s comparatively nondescript rushing “whirlwind” (PM, p. 185; PL VI.749). Flanked by the “war-wagons of God”—hervagna Guðs—the Son’s eldvagn (or “fire- chariot”) sports wheels that barrel such that they emit a “violent roar like a tremendous gushing waterfall or a vast army” (PM, p. 186; PL VI.829-830). Grasping the tíu þúsund þrumur í hönd, as Zeus might wield the aegus, or Þórr, his hammer Mjollnir (“the Crusher”), the Messiah in Paradísar Missir drives his father’s “fierce chariot” on “living wheels” bearing a “multitude of eyes,” eldigum öll—“all ablaze,” writes Þorláks-son—from each flashing a “fearsome lightning” or eldingar ógnarligar (PM, p.189). Like Milton’s Son of God, his Icelandic counterpart “check’d / His Thunder [reīða] in mid Volie” to “root” the rebels “out of Heav’n” (VI.853-855):

The overthrown he rais’d, and as a Heard
Of Goats or timorous flock together thronged
Drove them before him Thunder-struck …

(VI. 856-858)

Likewise, Þorláks-son’s Son “drove” (Icelandic: rak) those who “lay fallen” (lá fallit)—the “overthrown” in Milton’s English—like (perhaps) the goats of fainting fame, so terrified that they are “thunder-struck” or reiðskelfda (PM, p. 190). Here, I might suppose, despite the fact that the English epic uses the rather facile simile—the rebellious angels herded like timorous livestock toward the “spacious Gap” through which they will soon fall “into the wastful Deep”—through the lens of Þorláks-son’s Nordic sensibilities, those goats would invariably conjure up images of Þórr, whose chariot, as we’ve noted, is pulled by two he-goats, Tanngrisnr (Tooth-Gnasher) and
Tanngnjóstr (Tooth-Grinder). It would seem then not so inappropriate to claim this Miltonic image, already so pregnant with syncretistic significance for more classically-minded readers, would to the Icelandic poet demand its reconfiguration within the medieval mythological matrix (established by his use of fornyrðislag) so profoundly rooted in his own society; however, such an intellectual equal of Milton would undoubtedly recognize the Son-qua-charioteer as evocative of Helios, Jupiter, or Apollo (and Þorláksson was no slouch when it came to classical learning),34 his own deeply ingrained Nordic sensibilities must have recognized the visual analogy. Indeed, in a subsequent passage, where Milton rather vaguely refers to the “insufferable noise” Hell hears as the rebels suffer their expulsion (VI.867), the Icelandic poet specifically characterizes the “racket” and “din” (hark ok dunur; “din” / dunur being etymologically related to the Germanic root word for “thunder”) sem þrumur þungar (“like ominous thunder”; PM, p. 190). This embellishment then becomes a symptom of Þorláksson’s reverse syncretism as he reinforces the similitude of Christ and Þórr.

It is an historical irony then that, as John Lindow observes, through the process of Viking conversion, during the tenth and eleventh Centuries, “Thor and Christ were … locked in combat for the religious sentiments of the North” (1988, 134).35 This tension is epitomized in an episode

34 For an example of the poet’s own treatment of Jupiter, see his satirical poem “Bardaginn við lýsið” referenced by Beck (1935, 85).
35 Consider also that amulets representing Þórr’s hammer and pendants fashioned as Christian crosses were, around the conversion period, practically indistinguishable in design. Artisans thereby might effectively double the market for such wares.
from one the most famous of the Icelandic family sagas, that of *The Burning of Njál*. In it, the shipwrecked missionary, Thangbrand, encounters a woman preaching heathenism, Steinunn; she claims that a cowardly Christ (*kvítakristr*) dare not duel the thunder-god, to which the Christian retorts, “Thor would be mere dust and ashes if God didn’t want him to live” (Cook 2001, 177); with that, Steinunn recites a verse implying that “the slayer of the son of the giantess” (Thor) crushed Thangbrand’s “sea’s horse” (his ship), and that neither Christ nor God lifted a finger to interfere. Some eight centuries later, the affinity between these two cosmic conquerors provided the Icelandic pastor and poet, Jón Þorláksson, a means by which to adapt Milton’s chariot-riding deity to suit more closely the cultural expectations of his own readership; by having transmuted unrhymed pentameter into the alliterated half-lines of *fornyrðislag*, the Son would rise in their imaginations as a figure not at all unlike the pagan god of their medieval ancestors.

In closing, I ought to note that, like Þorláksson’s translation of Klopstock’s *Messias*, *Paradísar Missir* was one among a number of texts that became integrated into the traditional Icelandic practice of the *kvöldvaka* (as cited by Driscoll from Magnus Gíslason’s *Kvällsvaka* (1977, 95-100)). What began in the Middle Ages as a way to pass the time productively during the dark and cold winter nights reciting sagas and *rímur* (poems) aloud, grew to include other non-Icelandic material by the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries (Driscoll 1997, 38 and 44).\(^{36}\) One

\(^{36}\) Driscoll reports that “the reading aloud of sagas and recitation of *rímur* and other poetry [is a] practice dating apparently from the earliest
might imagine then that any of the old myths pertaining to Þórr in verse or prose could have found a place right alongside a portion of Milton’s recently re-syncretized epic, maybe even Book VI, and that listeners, while sewing or whittling, could perceive what Þorláksson did in the process of translating the English epic, permitting him to build a cultural bridge from Heaven to Ásgard and back again. In so doing, the “Icelandic Milton” exploited an opportunity to knit the Classical-Christian threads of *Paradise Lost* to the medieval poetic and theological fabric of the tradition his audience, who were like him descendants of settlers that brought with them to the North Atlantic their own pagan pantheon, their mythographical heritage remaining a touchstone by means of which *Paradise Lost* was able to achieve an effective, albeit idiosyncratic, illumination through reverse syncretism. Þorláksson not only translated the theodicy, he transfigured it.

What Jonathan Collett writes of Milton’s syncretism might equally apply to the Icelandic poet’s use of the tactic in *Paradísar Missir*:

> It is natural that as he became concerned with his great task of justifying God’s ways to men … the uses to which he put this pagan material would be carefully calculated and concentrated in accord with his subject and form. But a more skillfully controlled handling of the myths to meet the demands of theme and genre must not be mistaken for a rejection of the gods and goddesses as a fertile times and surviving, in some places at least, into the present [20th] century” (1997, 38).
source of imagery. On the contrary, their persistence … would indicate that Milton had over the years developed a view of pagan myth that not only reconciled its careful use in his poems, but more, revealed in it a value and truth. (1970, 88)

In Þorláksson’s case, we need only substitute material from the Norse tradition for that of Greece and Rome; in the former, he too found a fertile source of imagery through which he revealed an enduring value and truth for his own flock.

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LATCH, Vol. 6, 2013, pp. 1-34


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