

## THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE AND THE ICELANDIC LITERARY TRADITION

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Here I wish to raise the question of whether the emphasis on Satan as a hero and on Christ as the Good Shepherd in Paradísar missir, Jón Þorláksson's translation of Milton's Paradise lost, has stimulated modern Icelandic novelists to reject the influence of Old Icelandic heroic literature and to make use of pastoral imagery and the myth of the Fall, both of which are evident in many Icelandic novels, including Piltur og stúlka (Lad and lass, 1850), by Jón Thoroddsen, and Síðasta orðið (The last word, 1990), by Steinunn Sigurðardóttir. First, however, I shall discuss Halldór Laxness as an Icelandic example of the anxiety of influence, the tendency of writers first to reject and later to become reconciled with their predecessors.

### The anxiety of influence

The idea of 'the anxiety of influence', as propounded by Harold Bloom in his book of that title, published in 1973, has been well summarized by Terry Eagleton: What Bloom does, in effect, is to rewrite literary history in terms of the Oedipus complex. Poets live anxiously in the shadow of a 'strong' poet who came before them, as sons are oppressed by their fathers; and any particular poem can be read as an attempt to escape this 'anxiety of influence' by its systematic remoulding of a previous poem. The poet, locked in Oedipal rivalry with his castrating 'precursor', will seek to disarm that strength by entering it from within, writing in a way which revises, displaces and recasts the precursor poem; in this sense all poems can be read as rewritings of other poems, and as 'misreadings' or 'misprisions' of them, attempts to fend off their overwhelming force so that the poet can clear a space for his own imaginative originality. Every poet is 'belated', the last in a tradition; the strong poet is the one with the courage to acknowledge this belatedness and set about undermining the precursor's power. Any poem, indeed, is nothing but such an undermining - a series of devices, which can be seen both as rhetorical strategies and psychoanalytic defence mechanisms, for undoing and outdoing another poem. The meaning of a poem is another poem.

## Halldór Laxness

If Bloom's opinions may be applied to other literary forms than just poetry, it may be suggested that Halldór Laxness's attitude to Old Icelandic literature in general, and to Snorri Sturluson in particular, is an excellent example of the anxiety of influence in Icelandic literature. Laxness's attitude to Snorri, which has changed and developed considerably since he first read Heimskringla as a young man, may be compared with the attitude of a growing child to its father. As is well known, when Laxness was living in a monastery in Luxemburg in 1923, he wrote to Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 'on the subject of Snorri, and those old Icelandic books in general', as he put it. Einar Ólafur had sent him a copy of Heimskringla so that he could keep alive his feeling for the Icelandic language while abroad. 'I have nothing to learn from them', wrote Halldór of the old Icelandic books, referring to their authors as 'those old fellows'. 'In general', he continues, 'I do not think it is possible to learn to write Modern Icelandic from Old Icelandic. Something else is needed.'<sup>2</sup> Thus Laxness rebels against Old Icelandic language and literature like an adolescent against his parents. But a reading of his later work reveals that his attitude to Snorri has gradually become more favourable, as if the son were learning, as he grows older, to appreciate his father. In ch. 7 of Hús skáldsins (The house of the poet, 1939), for example, the narrator praises the hero, Ólafur Kárason, for the objectivity he employs as a writer: 'There was never any question of his taking sides in a narrative; he never passed moral judgement on a deed or its perpetrator, any more than when Snorri Sturluson tells of the deeds of kings or gods.' (pp. 75-76). In Eldur í Kaupinhavn (Fire in Copenhagen, 1946), the influence of Snorri's Ólafs saga helga can be seen in what Arnas Arnæus says to the German, Üffelen, in ch. 13, after rejecting the offer of being made Governor of Iceland with responsibility to the city of Hamburg, as Peter Hallberg has shown. Arnas's words are reminiscent of Einar Eyjólfsson's speech in ch. 125 of Ólafs saga, where Einar prevents his Icelandic countrymen from making over the island of Grímsey to King Ólafur.<sup>3</sup> And in Gerpla (The happy warriors, 1952), which is of course based to some extent on Fóstbræðra saga and Ólafs saga helga, the narrator makes, in ch. 52, the following statement: 'But to none has King Ólafur become so dear as to Icelandic skalds, as is shown by the fact that there has never in the world been written a book about kings, or even about Christ himself, which could even half-way compare with that which Snorri the Learned has written, and is called the Saga of St. Ólafur'. (p. 474). Gerpla implies both praise and criticism of the Icelandic sagas, and is thus a good example of Laxness's love-hate relationship with them.

To judge from Laxness's writings, then, the anxiety of influence manifests itself in at least two stages. First the author rejects his predecessors wholeheartedly, and behind this rejection may lie the fear or suspicion that the 'old fellows' are better than he can ever be: that he will never be able to compete with them. Later, however, when he has produced a certain amount himself and developed confidence as a writer, he learns to appreciate the 'old books', and to make use of them in his own works. This is not to say that he ceases altogether to view earlier literature with a critical eye, but his attitude to it is more balanced, more mature, than before. In Sjálfstætt fólk (Independent people, 1934-35), which appeared earlier than those novels of Laxness to which I have already referred, his debt to earlier Icelandic literature is most clearly apparent in the rímur, or rhymed ballads, which he places in the mouth of Bjartur í Sumarhúsum, the hero of the novel; but it perhaps says something about his development as regards the anxiety of influence that he gives this book the sub-title hetjusaga, i.e. 'heroic story', or 'epic', a term which could, of course, be applied to many of the saga narratives he had rejected so decidedly as a young man.

#### The myth of the Fall in Piltur og stúlka

'In general I do not think it is possible to learn to write Modern Icelandic from Old Icelandic. Something else is needed', wrote Halldór Laxness, as we have seen, in 1923. We may imagine that the authors of the first Icelandic novels in the nineteenth century felt something of the anxiety or uncertainty implicit in this remark. How were they to set about writing prose narratives of some length in Icelandic without producing watered-down versions of the Icelandic sagas? It was obviously important to them to reject the influence of the sagas, even though they would probably not have done so in as decisive and conscious a way as Laxness did. In a stimulating book on 'Love and exile: form and ideology in Icelandic novel-writing from 1850 to 1920', Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson points out that in Piltur og stúlka, which appeared in 1850 and is the first novel he treats in detail, there is much that recalls the pastoral form.<sup>4</sup> Here he is chiefly thinking of the descriptions of nature and rural life in the valley in Eastern Iceland where the two lovers, Indriði and Sigríður, the lad and lass of the title, are brought up, one on each side of the river which divides the valley in the middle. As is well known, there is much more than just the river which keeps the two lovers apart in the course of the story, not all of which takes place in the valley in Eastern Iceland; but they finally meet again in Reykjavík, and after misunderstandings have been cleared up they return to the east and are married. On this novel, Matthías Viðar writes:

The descriptions at the beginning and the end of the story portray an ideal world, and have as their model the myth which we know well from the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible. The careers of the hero and heroine show a similar pattern. In the beginning there is harmony, but then discord sets in: the Fall, the expulsion from paradise. They are driven out of the garden into a demonic and corrupt world, but, in contrast to our first parents, they return to it in the end. (p. 52).

Many Icelandic writers of the mid-nineteenth century could have known this myth not only from the Bible, but also from Paradísar missir, Jón Þorláksson's translation of Milton's Paradise lost (PL). The translation was first published in its entirety in 1828, though the first three of its twelve books had already appeared in Jón's translation in volumes 13 to 15 of Rit þess konúngliga íslenska lærdóms-listafélags (RKÍL), which were published between 1794 and 1798. When I quote from the translation here I shall confine myself to these first three books, since in preparing this paper I have unfortunately not had access to the translation as a whole.

Jón Thoroddsen was born in 1818, the year before Jón Þorláksson died; and Paradísar missir appeared in its complete form, as already noted, in 1828, twenty-two years before Piltur og stúlka was published. Although I cannot say for certain whether Jón Thoroddsen read Jón Þorláksson's translation of Paradise lost at all, or whether he did so before he wrote Piltur og stúlka, I consider the latter possibility likely; and even if he did not read the translation, I would by no means exclude the possibility that he knew it indirectly.<sup>6</sup> However this may be, there is no denying the truth of Matthías Viðar's statement that 'most Icelandic novelists organized their subject-matter in accordance with the myth of the Fall, whether consciously or unconsciously' (p. 53), and here Matthías is chiefly thinking of Jón Thoroddsen and his successors. It would in my view be surprising if this had not been at least to some extent due to the influence of Jón Þorláksson's Paradísar missir. I would suggest, in fact, that Jón's translation of Milton's poem had considerable influence on the earliest Icelandic novelists in helping them to shake off the anxiety of influence in relation to Old Icelandic literature, and particularly Old Icelandic heroic literature.

Milton's version of the myth of the Fall: from heroic literature to pastoral

Paradise lost is, on the face of it, a heroic poem, an epic, but nevertheless implies a criticism of heroic literature insofar as the character in the poem who qualifies best for the title of hero is none other than

Satan. By presenting Satan as a hero and Christ as the Good Shepherd Milton seems to wish to reject heroic literature in favour of pastoral, as Peter Conrad has argued. But pastoral is the very form that Piltur og stúlka, a pioneer work in Icelandic novel-writing, shows distinct signs of, as Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson has shown. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the first Icelandic novelists had adopted Milton as translated by Jón Þorláksson as a model, whether consciously or unconsciously. The translation, no less than the original, teems with images drawn from rural life, if not always from the kinds of rural life that Icelanders would immediately recognize. One implication of these images seems to be that the literary treatment of many of those events that the Fall brings in its train, including the salvation that the Good Shepherd will bring to pass by dying as a sacrificial lamb, as is prophesied in Paradise lost, and which corresponds to the reunion of lad and lass in Piltur og stúlka, requires a rejection of heroic literature in favour of pastoral.

At the beginning of the poem, for example, when the narrator invokes the heavenly Muse, he refers indirectly to Moses, whom he calls 'That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed' ('útvalit sæði'), i.e., the children of Israel, about the creation of heaven and earth. Then the narrator invokes the Holy Spirit, which he compares with a dove brooding on the vast abyss of the primordial void, and making it pregnant: 'alheims afgrunn / sem egg dúfa / til fjörs vermandi / frjósamt gjörði(r);' (PL I, ll. 1-22; RKÍL 13, pp. 285-86). Later in the first book, after comparing Satan's legions to the dry leaves of autumn in a dense forest ('sem purrt lauf á hausti / í þykkum skógi', RKÍL 13, p. 298; 'Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks / in Vallombrosa,' PL I, ll. 302-03), he uses the word jórtrandi ('ruminating') of the ancient Egyptian gods, which he mentions among other pagan gods with which the devils came to be identified; the original in fact has the word 'bleating' here (PL I, l. 489), and Jón Þorláksson supplies a footnote carefully pointing out that the word jórtrandi is applicable to sheep as well as to the bulls worshipped as gods by the ancient Egyptians (RKÍL 13, p. 307). Finally in the first book, in one of the many similes that characterize the poem as a whole, the narrator compares the devils' preparations for their council at Pandaemonium ('Aldiefli') with the behaviour of bees in springtime (PL I, ll. 768-76; RKÍL 13, p. 319).

The one striking example of pastoral imagery in the second book of Paradise lost is in my view the simile describing the atmosphere in hell when the devils have brought their council to an end ('the fields revive, / The birds their notes renew, and bleating herds / attest their joy,' PL II, ll. 493-95):

svo mörk fjöldfiöruð  
fyllist lífi,  
kveða kvöldhörpur

kvakandi fugla,  
tjáir hljómur hár  
hjörð glaðværa [...] (RKÍL 14, pp.  
284-85).

The third book begins with the narrator addressing the light of heaven, which he says he can hardly describe because he is blind - as indeed Milton was, when he composed Paradise lost. When the narrator speaks of his blindness, it emerges that he especially misses being able to see 'flocks, or herds, or human face divine' (PL III, l. 44); the juxtaposition of the words 'human' and 'divine' with the expression 'flocks, or herds' has the effect of reminding the reader, by bringing together the concepts of God, man, and sheep, that Christ is both God and man, both shepherd and sacrificial lamb:

Sér-at ég vorblóm  
né sumarrós,  
ei hjarðar hópa  
í haugum káta,  
eigi guðdómligt  
auglit manna,  
heldur í þess stað  
er þykkvu skýi  
af myrkri sífellu  
mig um orpið. (RKÍL 15, p. 231).

The idea of a connection between rural imagery and the lost paradise is hinted at later in the third book, where it is mentioned that the angels' crowns are 'inwove with amarant and gold, / Immortal amarant, a flower which once / In Paradise, fast by the tree of life / Began to bloom, but soon for man's offence / To heaven removed where first it grew, there grows' (PL III, ll. 352-56):

Já, með amarant  
óðauðligum,  
er hjá eik lífsins  
í Eden stóð  
og bar blómstur fyrr,  
en var burt tekinn  
fyrir fall manns,  
og fluttur aftur  
til himins, hvaðan  
hann var í fyrstu. (RKÍL 15, p.  
248).

Finally in Book III, Satan is compared, in the description of his journey from hell to earth, where he will in due course bring about the Fall of man, to a hawk (as the translation has it; he is compared to a vulture in the original) which seeks 'To gorge the flesh of lambs or yeanling kids / On hills where flocks are fed' (PL III, ll. 434-35); 'Fer hann langa leið [...]'

til heiðarhaga  
þar hjarðir alast,  
að hann ljúffengu

lamba kjöti  
fái saddan sig  
og sjúgandi kiða. (RKÍL 15, p. 253).

As these examples show, pastoral imagery is so much a feature of Paradísar missir and its original that it is used even to describe the devils, though mostly in a rather negative way; the devils are compared to dry autumnal leaves, to bees (for which the word úng-yrmi, reminiscent of illyrmi, is used in the translation, see RKÍL 13, p. 319), and to ruminating beasts. More often, however, if not especially often in the first three books, they are described with images of warfare, industry, and engineering - concepts which all imply a threat to rural life. Examples of this in Book I are the description of the devils led by Mammon (PL I, ll. 675-78; RKÍL 13, pp. 315-16) and the description of Mulciber (PL I, ll. 747-51; RKÍL 13, p. 318). Paradísar missir may thus be read as a kind of Gerpla, where country life is for the most part praised, and heroism and warfare are subjected to criticism, and where being a hero such as Þorgeir Hávarsson, or St. Ólafur, or Satan, is the worst thing one could possibly be.

The last word

In Steinunn Sigurðardóttir's Síðasta orðið the myth of the Fall of man, or the story of Paradise lost, may be glimpsed behind the narrative's external form, which is for the most part made up of obituaries - fictional ones, of course - which various characters in the story write about others. It may indeed be maintained that in this book there is a tension between pastoral, which implies the recollection of a lost paradise, and the obituary as a literary form, which on the first page of the book is linked to traditional Icelandic literature by the character who edits the obituaries, Lýtingur Jónsson:

This type of literature is related to various others: essays, short stories, elegies, heroic poems, and in exceptional cases (fortunately) to lying sagas, saints' lives, and folktales. This literary genre is undoubtedly just as unique as the Sagas of Icelanders were in the Middle Ages. (p. 7).

Steinunn's novel is, among other things, a criticism of the superficial, hypocritical, and misleading style that often characterizes obituaries in the Icelandic newspapers, where the truth about the deceased is seldom plainly told - for understandable reasons in many cases, admittedly. In this book, however, one of the characters, Friðþjófur Ívarsen, writes an obituary about himself, and asks for it to be published after his death. In this obituary, which the editor, Lýtingur, reluctantly allows to be included in the collection, and which appears near the end of the book, it emerges that Friðþjófur, who was unmarried, and had also been the

author of many of the preceding obituaries, had had close relations with three of those characters in the story about whom he had written obituaries, though this has hardly emerged from a reading of the obituaries in question. He had had by Geirprúður, the sister of his brother's wife, a son, Friðfinnur, who died before the age of twenty and who was in the eyes of society Geirprúður's son by her husband Leifur. After Lýtingur's death his place as editor is taken by the auditor Ómar B. Ómarsson, under whose editorship there appear, among other things, a letter sent by Leifur to his sister Hrefna, in which it comes to light that Leifur had known the paternity of Friðfinnur, contrary to what the latter's true parents believed; and, last but not least, a love-poem, which appears under the title Síðasta orðið (The last word) on the final page of the book. It is hinted that the poem is composed by one of Friðfinnur's true parents and addressed to the other.

After one has read Friðþjófur's obituary on himself, some of his remarks in the obituaries he writes about others become all the more understandable and poignant, as when he quotes Sonatorrek in his obituary of Friðfinnur, and when he says in his obituary on his brother, Oddur, just after having mentioned Geirprúður: 'I can't help looking back in sorrow and lamenting lost innocence.' (p. 20). This idea of lost innocence, or Paradise lost, nevertheless emerges most clearly in Friðþjófur's obituary on himself, where he describes how he and Geirprúður first met, when she was twelve years old, in the country by the river Sog, and then again, when she was eighteen: 'For you were mine and I was yours for one summer [...]. And you kissed me and warmed me like the sun itself. And what a wondrous sun! What a solar wonder!' (p. 116). The beauty of this description is echoed in the poem 'The last word', where pastoral images (lamb, bird, budding tree, and spring sun) are prominent:

Lamb og fugl á göngu við vatnið,

Tré með nýju brumi. Hæfileg sól í  
heilhring.

Ég veit hvað það heitir:

VORLAND!

But in his obituary on himself Friðþjófur explains that his fear of women has prevented him from facing up to the consequences of his love:

Such was life. I was offered a dream which I did not dare to accept. [...] He who has dwelt in a garden with his beloved and then thrown her out, out of the garden, he is doomed to die. His soul is doomed. I have wandered with parched tongue through the wilderness of life. (pp. 116, 120).

But if Paradise is lost at the level of story in Síðasta orðið, if we make a distinction between story, i.e., what



happens, and narrative, i.e., the statement of what happens, it may be said that on the level of narrative Paradise is regained, as what has the last word in this book is the love-poem, with its powerful pastoral images.

Whether or not Steinunn Sigurðardóttir has read Paradísar missir, there is no denying that the myth of the Fall and the imagery characteristic of pastoral have been of assistance to her in composing this novel, which has the loss of Paradise as a principal theme, and which is, among many other things, a critical investigation of various literary forms. If Steinunn has suffered from the anxiety of influence in relation to those Old Icelandic literary forms to which she links obituaries on the first page of her novel, the myth and imagery in question have been a strength and stay to her.

The last word of all

My argument is, then, that the myth of the Fall, transmitted to some extent by Milton through Jón Þorláksson's translation of Paradise lost, has had a positive influence, directly or indirectly, on some Icelandic novelists to the extent that it has provided them with the rudiments of a plot, and supported them in their anxious struggle against the influence of Old Icelandic literature. But whatever their relationship with Old Icelandic literature, it should come as no surprise that the myth of the Fall should be well received by Icelandic novelists, no less than by others, since the myth in question is closely linked to the concepts 'story' and 'narrative', which I have already mentioned and distinguished between above: the story is what happens, and the narrative is the statement of what happens. According to the myth, as Milton communicates it, mankind would have had no history if Eve had not caused the Fall by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; had the Fall not happened, Adam and Eve and their offspring would have lived on earth in uneventful bliss until they became angels, as the archangel Raphael explains in the fifth and seventh books of Paradise lost.

Thus the Fall brings world history in its train; without the Fall there would have been no history. But without history, or story, there can be no narrative; before they can be stated to have happened, in the form of a narrative, things first have to happen, in the form of events. Thus the Fall carries with it not only world history, but also world literature; for without history mankind would have had no need for literature, or at least for the kind of literature that requires narrative, and knowledge of good and evil. It should thus come as no surprise that Icelandic novelists, no less than others, should have appreciated and made use of the myth of the Fall of man. This link between history and the myth of the Fall is something that Sigurður Nordal, for example, seems to have understood particularly well when

he describes in the preface to his Íslensk menning (1942) the 'dizzying anticipation' that the word veraldarsaga ('world history') aroused in him when he heard it for the first time as a child, and continues:

I have since come to realize that so must Eve have felt in her innocence and unknowingness when she was promised that her eyes would be opened and she would become like God, and acquire the knowledge of good and evil. (p. 10).

#### NOTES

1. See Terry Eagleton, Literary theory: an introduction, Oxford 1983, p. 183. - The present paper is an adapted version of a lecture given in Icelandic in Reykjavík at the invitation of the Sigurður Nordal Institute on February 12, 1991. I am grateful to Ólfar Bragason, the Director of the Institute, for inviting me to give the lecture, and to Árni Sigurjónsson for suggesting a number of improvements.
2. See Peter Hallberg, Vefarinn mikli. Um æskuskáldskap Halldórs Kiljans Laxness, Þýðinguna gerði Björn Th. Björnsson, 2. bindi, Reykjavík 1960, pp. 45-48.
3. See Peter Hallberg, Hús skáldsins. Um skáldverk Halldórs Laxness frá Sölku Völku til Gerplu, Helgi J. Halldórsson Íslenskaði, 2. bindi, Reykjavík 1971, pp. 135-37.
4. See Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson, Ást og útleqð. Form og hugmyndafræði í Íslenskri skáldsagnagerð 1850-1920, Studia Islandica 44, Reykjavík 1986, p. 51.
5. References to the translation are by volume and page number to the relevant volumes of RKÍL; references to the original are by book and line number to Alastair Fowler's edition of PL, Longman annotated English poets, Harlow, Essex, 1971.
6. Cf. Steingrímur J. Þorsteinsson, Jón Thoróðsen og skáldsögur hans, 1. bindi, Reykjavík 1943, pp. 56-57.
7. See Peter Conrad, The Everyman history of English literature, London 1987, pp. 247-48.
8. Cf. C.S. Lewis, A preface to Paradise lost, London 1967, p. 68.