

# THE RECEPTION OF OLD NORSE MYTHS IN ICELANDIC ROMANTICISM

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## I

The reception of Old Norse myths has a long and varied history in Icelandic literature. The mythological lays of the Poetic Edda and the court poems of the Middle Ages bear ample witness to the early medieval reception and creative use of these myths, as does the 13<sup>th</sup> century Prose Edda, whose author, Snorri Sturluson, made an attempt to account for and even systematize the mythology of the heathens (see Clunies Ross 1994; 1998). But the post-medieval reception of Old Norse myths in Iceland is also of great interest, even if not as well-researched as the medieval one (some of the essays in the collection edited by Sverrir Tómasson in 1996 tackle this subject). Many Icelandic writers of the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries alluded to these myths in their poetry, especially the many *rímur*-poets, who often used customized *kennings* based on the *kenning*-tradition of the court poets of the Middle Ages. These *kennings* reflected the heathen cosmology and presupposed a certain familiarity of the audience with the old mythology. The *rímur*-poets often cited the names of Old Norse gods and goddesses in their *kennings* and poetry, thus perpetuating the heathen mythology in a way and, needless to say, often irritating the Christian authorities at the time by doing so. During these centuries various lay scholars throughout the country were enthusiastic about the old mythology and wrote essays on the subject, some of which have survived (see Einar Gunnar Pétursson 1998 on Jón Guðmundsson the Learned, the best-known of these lay scholars).

Abroad, the post-medieval reception of Old Norse mythology was virtually non-existent until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, after the publication of some of the medieval Eddic material in Danish and Latin translation. It grew during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when poets in Denmark and elsewhere in Europe started using Old Norse mythology ever more extensively in their works. Danish poetic dramatists like Johannes Ewald wrote tragedies on the death of Baldr, and in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Adam Oehlenschläger, a leading Romantic in the Nordic countries, wrote numerous poetic pieces dealing with mythological themes and other Old Norse material. Another 19<sup>th</sup> century Dane, the scholar-poet N.F.S. Grundtvig, also used Old Norse mythology as an inspiration in his poetic works, but he

argued for a more critical understanding of the medieval sources, criticizing Oehlenschläger for what he considered to be a rather simplistic and sentimentalized rendition of the old mythology. Grundtvig claimed Oehlenschläger and other Romantic poets had failed to grasp the real drama and tragedy of the heathen cosmology, which according to him was reflected in the tragic role and character of *Óðinn*. Grundtvig emphasized Óðinn's ever-present awareness of what would eventually happen in *Ragnaröke*, when the world would come to an end, and, with it, his ill-fated attempts to change its destiny (Ægidius 1985, 25–27).

In my analysis of the reception of Old Norse myths in Icelandic Romanticism, I will argue that the old mythology, once revived, would go on to play an important part in the poetic definition of the character of the Nordic countries, as well as being connected to both national and international issues in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As in the case of Oehlenschläger and Grundtvig, mythological material could become a debated issue between individual Icelandic poets, who responded to each other in creative and suggestive ways. This contemporary and discursive element is what should be the major concern of the student of myths, according to the scholar Anthony John Harding. In his study of the reception of myths in English Romanticism, he points out that myths are constantly in the process of being reinterpreted as they reach a new audience (Harding 1995, 1–24). Rather than look upon these interpretations as something secondary or inferior to the supposed originality of comparable myths in ancient times, it is necessary to historicize such myths and to put them into the context of their times. When a modern author alludes to an old myth, he or she is of necessity reinventing it or making it new, often responding at the same time both to contemporary issues and present circumstances.

In what follows I will use the term *myth* in the general sense of a traditional narrative involving a supernatural force or deity. There is bound to be some overlapping with another time-honoured term, *legend* – a narrative of human actions perceived by both teller and listeners to have taken place within human history – depending, as we shall see, on the level of supernatural content. This is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of the reception of myth in Icelandic Romanticism, but rather an attempt at evaluating the part it plays in the writings of some leading Romantic writers by looking at a number of texts I have selected from their output, mainly poems.

The first Icelandic Romantics sometimes alluded to Old Norse mythology in their works, but they seldom devoted whole poems to mythological themes. They were interested enough in the old mythology, but perhaps the common mythological allusions of the *rímur*-poets of the preceding centuries made them hesitant about using or reinventing the old myths in an extensive way in their works. Indeed, the most influential Romantic in Iceland, *Jónas Hallgrímsson* (1807–1845), attacked the *rímur*-poets mercilessly for what he saw as their uninspired and tasteless poetic diction, not least their mythological *kennings*, in a scathing review (see *Jónas Hallgrímsson* 1989, 356–366). It therefore comes as no surprise to discover that he did not make much use of material based on Old Norse mythology in his poems, although he learned a lot from the anonymous authors of the Poetic Edda and often used metres based on the Eddic tradition (*Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson* 1999, 29–78; 315–339). *Jónas Hallgrímsson* occasionally uses phrases and lines derived from the mythological lays of the Poetic Edda such as *Völuspá* and *Hávamál*, but they seldom shape his poetry in any deeper sense. This is not to say that individual poems by him cannot be interpreted on a mythological level, as the scholar and novelist *Svava Jakobsdóttir* has done in her inventive reading of *Ferðalok*, which she sees as corresponding to *Völuspá* on a number of mythological points (*Svava Jakobsdóttir* 1999, 107–119). *Jónas Hallgrímsson* himself was certainly interested in Old Norse mythology on a scholarly basis, as his short essay on the goddess *Gefjun* shows (*Jónas Hallgrímsson* 1989, 379–381; see also his essay on *Völuspá*, 1989, 382–389).

*Bjarni Thorarensen* (1786–1841), who is generally credited with being the first Icelandic Romantic, had made more creative use of Old Norse mythology in his poetry than *Jónas Hallgrímsson*, although one could hardly say that it is an essential part of his work. However, if one regards the legend-based *heroic* lays of the Poetic Edda as mythical, inasmuch as they deal with the supernatural, it could easily be argued that the mythology in a wider sense played an important role for *Bjarni Thorarensen*. In his poetry, he drew a parallel between modern lovers and the heroic lovers of the Eddic lays, whose love knew no boundaries and recognized neither distance nor death when it came to being near the loved one. The lover in one of his poems, *Sigrúnarljóð* (*Bjarni Thorarensen* 1935, I, 75–77), vows to love his girl as passionately and carnally, should she die, as he loves her now, when she is still alive. The lovers here closely resemble *Helgi Hundingsbani* and *Sigrún* in the Eddic poem *Helga kviða Hundingsbana önnur* or *The Second Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer*. This old lay tells of *Sigrún*'s visit to the mound of her warrior lover, *Helgi*, who has

returned briefly from the dead after being killed in battle. They spend the night together in the mound, much to the dismay and horror of Sigrún's maid, who says that a lady should not sleep in the arms of a dead man. Helgi then has to return to Óðinn in Valhöll, leaving the world of the living for good. Bjarni Thorarensen's use of these Eddic themes borders on necrophilia; it is a sublime elevation of Romantic love and at the same time has touches of the Gothic horror then fashionable in some 19<sup>th</sup> century circles.

When Bjarni Thorarensen writes about love in another poem, *Freyjukettirnir* (Bjarni Thorarensen 1935, I, 179–181), he coquettishly alludes to the cats that were said to pull the chariot of *Freyja*, the Old Norse goddess of love. The poet makes these cats symbolize love of old and new in a teasing way, playfully saying that they differ from other cats in that they catch men, not mice. But again, as in the case of Jónas Hallgrímsson, Bjarni Thorarensen's allusions to Old Norse mythology are interesting but limited in the sense that they do not seem to become a significant factor in giving shape to his poetry as a whole. It awaited the next generation of Icelandic Romantics to pursue the mythology further and use particular myths and tales of the supernatural as a creative background to their poetry. One of these writers was Grímur Thomsen.

### III

*Grímur Thomsen* (1820–1896) was a well-read poet and a literary scholar, who in 1845 published the first full-length study of Lord Byron in the Nordic countries (in Danish, see Grímur Thomsen 1845), having previously written a book on contemporary French poetry (for a critical study of his writings on English and French literature, see Kristján Jóhann Jónsson 2004). Besides being a Byron scholar, Grímur Thomsen wrote extensively on Old Norse literature (some of it in English, see Grímur Thomsen 1972 [1867]). Among his critical writings is an impressive essay on the gods of the North. Grímur Thomsen shows a keen awareness of the tragic character of Óðinn's vision of Ragnarök and his attempts at reversing the fated course of things. And yet the fate of the gods is tragicomical, both humorous and sublime, according to Grímur Thomsen:

But what is humour, if not Ragnarök's swallowing up of the gods, themselves knowing that they are no true gods, and in the midst of their daily strife and toil aware of their decay? And what is sublime, if not the assurance that this evening twilight of the gods, which threatens them with the gloom of a northern winter night, while the storm howls in the branches of the world's tree, and the serpent

gnaws at its root, – is to make way for a better world and one almighty All-father?  
(Grímur Thomsen 1972 [1867], 58)

The concluding remark could be compared to Grundtvig's view of the heathen world as a kind of foreboding of the Christian one (see e.g. Lundgreen–Nielsen 1965, 20–27; Ægidius 1985, 32 ff.). But Grímur Thomsen also wrote a number of poems dealing with motifs and themes derived from the old mythology.

*Hákon jarl* is an interesting poem in this respect (Grímur Thomsen 1969 [1934], 227–228). Earl Hákon Sigurðarson of Hlaðir is a prominent character in some Old Norse narratives, for instance in *Jómsvíkinga saga*. In the medieval sources, the Earl of Hlaðir is described as one of the last upholders of the heathen religion in the North, living in a time when the Christian religion was being adopted throughout the Nordic countries. The Earl must be considered to be one of the most sinister and terrible characters in Old Norse literature, a fierce Norwegian who continued to worship the heathen gods in Christian times. But Grímur Thomsen tries to give a more positive picture of the Earl of Hlaðir in his poem. He makes him something of a hero, an upholder of the old values in the shape of the ancient mythological world tree of Yggdrasil, or as he puts it: “Hákon einn með afli styður / Yggdrasil, þótt skjálfi viður” (“Hákon alone supports Yggdrasil with force, even though the tree trembles”; Grímur Thomsen 1969 [1934], 227). And in his attempt to show this black character in a more favourable light, Grímur Thomsen passes silently over some uncomfortable descriptions of the Earl in the medieval sources. For instance, *Jómsvíkinga saga* tells us that the Earl sacrificed his own son to the gods in order to win an impending battle against the Jómsvíkingar. This gruesome sacrifice of a seven year old results in the appearance of a supernatural being, *Borgerður Hörðabrúður*, a horrible troll, who then proceeds to kill the Jómsvíkingar one by one, and thus indicates that the heathen powers favour the Earl's sacrifice of his son. Grímur Thomsen mentions none of this in his poem, but instead focuses on the Earl's death at the hand of his own slave, who in the medieval sources is said to have cut his master's throat. This is an unheroic and even laughable death, but Grímur Thomsen somehow manages to make the Earl of Hlaðir sympathetic in the end, saying in his poem that even if he was no saint, he surely deserved a more decent death than to be killed and betrayed by his own slave.

Grímur Thomsen does, however, draw attention to the Earl's unpleasant character traits and ill deeds in *Jarlsníð*, another poem focusing on the supernatural (Grímur Thomsen 1969 [1934], 200–203). It is based on a short medieval narrative, *Borleifs þáttur jarlaskálds*, which tells of a young Icelander who sails to Norway and is approached there

by the Earl himself who wants to buy goods from him. Þorleifur declines the offer and says he would rather do business with somebody else. The Earl takes this as an insult and is so enraged that he has all the valuables confiscated from Þorleifur's boat and then burns the boat itself. The Iclander has not said his last word, however, and proves to be a resourceful individual, endowed with both poetical and magical skills.

At Yuletide, a rough old beggar appears at the Earl's court at Hlaðir, and it is at this point that Grímur Thomsen's poem takes up the story from the *þáttur*. The beggar offers to recite some poetry, and he then uses the verses to level various criticisms at the Earl himself. He brings up and recounts many of the Earl's wickednesses, such as the gruesome sacrifice of his own son. The power and, indeed, the sorcery of the poetry is so great that it has physical effects on the Earl and eventually renders him unconscious. When he regains consciousness after the beggar has left, the Earl realizes with whom he has been dealing. In the medieval *þáttur*, the Earl exacts the final revenge, when he uses magic to create a man out of wood and instructs him to follow Þorleifur back to Iceland and to kill him there, which he duly does. In contrast, Grímur Thomsen ends his poem immediately after Þorleifur has left the court at Hlaðir. He even has the Earl respond rather gracefully to Þorleifur's revenge, admitting that he had every right to be angry and behave as he did. One should not enrage the poets, the Earl concludes, because of the fierceness of their revenge. The concluding remarks in the poem show the Earl in a much more positive light than in the *þáttur*, where he is described as a terrible and revengeful tyrant and black magician.

As if to emphasize the major role of the Earl of Hlaðir in upholding the old order of the heathen gods and times, Grímur Thomsen wrote yet another poem, *Ásareiðin* or The Ride of the Heathen Gods (Grímur Thomsen 1969 [1934], 113–116). There he depicts the Earl accompanying the grand old gods in their magnificent ride through the skies, as they abandon the world at the advent of Christendom, thus granting this latter-day apostle of theirs the place he deserved. This poem furthermore shows how difficult it is – and, indeed, questionable – to exclude the legendary from the mythological, when accounting for the Romantic re-writing of Old Norse myths and medieval sources. In Grímur Thomsen's poem, mythological beings and legendary characters all form one lengthy continuum, whether they are heathen gods, valkyries, heroes from the Poetic Edda or characters such as Earl Hákon. Inasmuch as they are supernatural, they all belong to the same sphere, whether earthly or heavenly creatures.

There is no doubt that Grímur Thomsen's creative use or reinvention of Old Norse saga motifs and mythology is part and parcel of his declared interest in the so-called

*Scandinavism* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was a movement of Scandinavian students and intellectuals, whose objective it was to enhance the sense of fellow-feeling among the people of the Nordic nations, emphasizing what they had in common, and in particular, reminding them of the important literary heritage they shared. In his younger years, Grímur Thomsen lectured extensively on behalf of this movement, and although much of his poetry was written later, in advanced age (he was a late bloomer as a poet), it can be seen as a poetical attempt to support these same Nordic ideals. Grímur Thomsen was a great if somewhat misunderstood nationalist, for his fellow countrymen did not always realize that his patriotism embraced not only Iceland but all the other Nordic nations as well. His selection of subject-matter for his poetry from Old Norse literature shows this clearly. He does not only write about exclusively Icelandic matters such as the Icelandic family sagas, but rather on sagas dealing with the Nordic countries as a whole, for instance the King's sagas and the *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, that is, the mythic-heroic or legendary sagas. This is also true of Grímur Thomsen's views of the Old Norse mythology. He considered it not to be exclusively Icelandic but rather as reflecting the ideas of the Nordic countries as a whole, which is why he assigns it such an elevated place in his lectures and poetry.

A part of Grímur Thomsen's campaign is problematizing the characters and deities described in the medieval sources and making them relevant to contemporary critical thought. His sympathetic and complicated treatment of the Earl of Hlaðir and the heathen gods can be viewed in this light. He was generally sympathetic to those who went against the stream and took an independent stand in the world, but he also saw in the Earl of Hlaðir an interesting character capable of enhancing the fellow-feeling of the Nordic nations and urging them not to renounce their common heritage, even if it went against what was fashionable in the wider European context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Grímur Thomsen wasn't advocating heathendom as such, but rather showing that the people of the North should be proud of what they had in common and that they would only find their place among the modern nations of the world if they were willing to reclaim the shared values and identity to be found in the heroic and mythic literature of the medieval period. In his interpretation, the heathen gods of the North are flawed and doomed, as is their fierce apostle, Earl Hákon, but Grímur Thomsen sees in their twilight a tragic grandeur worthy of serious consideration.

*Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal* (1826–1907) was both a scholar and a poet. Widely respected during his lifetime for his poetry, he is today better known for his prose, particularly his *Sagan af Heljarslóðarorustu* or *The Story of the Battle of Solferino*, a humorous romance written in the medieval Icelandic fashion, the subject being Napoleon III's Italian campaign of 1859 (first published in Copenhagen in 1861 and many times since), and his memoirs, *Dagradvöl* or *Pastimes*. Benedikt Gröndal was the son of the renowned classical scholar and translator of Homer, Sveinbjörn Egilsson. In a way, this made it easier for him to enter the world of learning and poetry, but on the other hand, it also made it more difficult for him to follow in his acclaimed father's footsteps. Whether owing to this or not, Benedikt Gröndal's literary fame never sat easily, but his poetry surely deserves more attention than it has received in the last century or so.

Old Norse mythology was one of Benedikt Gröndal's greatest interests and it is the subject of a number of scholarly works by him (he did, for instance, publish a long essay on the myth of the giant *Hrúngnir* in the periodical *Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* in 1860). The mythology and its reinvention also play a major role in his poetry, not least the myth of the love goddess *Freyja*, to which he often refers. His epic to Freyja was *Brísingamen*, a narrative poem originally published in the poet's own journal *Gefn* in 1871 (re-issued with some alterations by Benedikt Gröndal in *Dagrún*, a book of poems, in 1906, 55–60). This epic is based on various sources from medieval times, especially the Eddas. In his Prose Edda, Snorri Sturluson mentions Freyja's husband by the name of *Óður*. Not much is to be gathered about her husband from the Prose Edda or from the Poetic Edda for that matter, except that he seems to have been away from home most of the time, which is said to be the reason for the frequent tears of Freyja. But the name of Benedikt Gröndal's poem is an allusion to the famous *Brísingamen*, the love goddess's necklace and her arch-symbol according to the old sources. In the poem he makes use of these vague allusions to Freyja's husband and really invents a new myth on *Óður*'s journey to the South, where he meets the Greek sun god Apollo, thus melding together Old Norse and classical mythologies. Benedikt Gröndal alludes to the South as the classical seat of learning in Europe, and also as the originating place of the idea of Romantic love. Apollo receives his northern colleague favourably and indeed points out to him a magic flower, a powerful rose which, if picked at the right moment, will bring about a great change in the world. *Óður* manages to pick this rose of roses at the right moment and returns to the North, where he presents the magic flower to Freyja. The rose is clearly a symbol of love



and learning in Benedikt Gröndal's poem, and as the rose supplants Brísingamen, the old arch-symbol of the Nordic love goddess, this leads to a new age of love and learning in the far North. All this may sound rather simplistic, but, put up against the background of previous formulations of the relations between North and South in Icelandic Romanticism, Benedikt Gröndal's *Brísingamen* reveals itself to be an important poem and indeed shows that the poet is really doing something new. I will mention a few relevant facts concerning this poem, for it is clearly written as a response to certain poems by Bjarni Thorarensen on the one hand and mythological poems by Adam Oehlenschläger on the other.

The prevailing poetic definition in 19<sup>th</sup> century Iceland of the relations between North and South was that formulated in Bjarni Thorarensen's poems. He had put forward a climatic theory of sorts, which has been shown to be directly or indirectly derived from the ideas of Montesquieu, the French philosopher and jurist (Bjarni Guðnason 1969). Montesquieu claimed that climate affected the national characters of peoples in different areas of the world. Bjarni Thorarensen, who besides being a poet was also a judge and later one of the heads of the Icelandic administration, adapted Montesquieu's views so that they made up the nucleus of his poetical philosophy of life. He compared the harsh nature of the North to the gentle nature of the South, and contrary to what might be expected came to the conclusion that it was quite a positive thing to live on the icy edge of the world, as the harsher nature and colder climate helped to build up character, health and prowess. Thus the northerly position of Iceland as an island in the middle of the North Atlantic – the landscape of the country, its many mountains, the frequent volcanic eruptions, and the climate itself, the snow and frost – contributed to a character-building process from which the nation could benefit greatly. Had the position of the country been more southerly, had it enjoyed the warmth and bounty of the southern climate, the people would have lost their character altogether and become lazy and morally weak. It hardly comes as a surprise to discover that Bjarni Thorarensen proved to be a very strict courtroom judge; lenience, in his view, only lowered the moral standards of the people of the country. What was needed in society and government was more of the healthy harshness which the Nordic nature and climate had provided for the good of the nation!

It is against this ideological background that Benedikt Gröndal's poem *Brísingamen* is written. Bjarni Thorarensen's ideology had been favourably received by other contemporary poets and scholars. Grímur Thomsen for one had developed a personal theory on the character of the people and literature of the Nordic countries that bore clear resemblance to this poetic ideology. But instead of opposing the two hemispheres in a *northern versus southern* culture clash, as Bjarni Thorarensen and Grímur Thomsen had done

earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Benedikt Gröndal purports that North and South have something to offer each other and need not be irreconcilable opposites as the earlier poets had maintained. In a way, the North even proves itself the inheritor of classical values and learning in the poem, a point that is symbolically alluded to when the northern god Óður indirectly accepts the rose of love and learning from the hands of Apollo, thus ensuring that the cultural heritage of Greece will live on in the northern part of Europe.

Benedikt Gröndal's epic *Brísingamen* can also be seen to have been written with one eye on Adam Oehlenschläger's poetic cycle, *Nordens Guder* or Gods of the North, which had been published in 1819. This was a work that clearly showed the understanding – or lack of understanding – that Grundtvig so criticised in Oehlenschläger's mythological poetry. In *Nordens Guder*, Oehlenschläger described the world of the Old Norse gods as something of an idyll. His Óðinn and the other Nordic gods often resemble sanguine and laid-back country folk, pursuing amorous adventures that have no deeper significance, unlike the sexual intrigues and power politics in the Old Norse mythology itself. Oehlenschläger's view of Old Norse mythology tends to be pastoral or idyllic, rather than tragic.

A small detail reveals that Benedikt Gröndal's *Brísingamen* was influenced by Oehlenschläger's *Nordens Guder*. Gröndal describes the chariot of Óður, Freyja's husband, as being pulled by *tigers* of all animals (Benedikt Gröndal 1906, 59). This seems really bizarre, as tigers are highly unlikely animals in a northern context, until one becomes aware of the fact that tigers are also said to pull the chariot of Óður in Oehlenschläger's *Nordens Guder* (Oehlenschläger 1819, 195–204). These animals come in a more natural if somewhat far-fetched way into Oehlenschläger's poem, as Óður is said to have originally been a Bacchic god from India, an assertion which is offered by way of explanation for the presence of the tigers (for a further discussion of this, see Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson 1999, 176–205).

Benedikt Gröndal's *Brísingamen* can thus be shown to be a counter-poem of a kind, redefining the ideology of the North as it had been conceived of by earlier Icelandic Romanticism, especially in the poems of Bjarni Thorarensen. But in melding together northern and southern elements, Old Norse and classical mythologies, Benedikt Gröndal seems to have been influenced by Oehlenschläger's work. Although he did not share Oehlenschläger's pastoral and uncritical view of the Old Norse mythology, the famous Dane's flawed work was an interesting example of how a poet could freely fuse together northern and southern elements of mythology.

It should be added that Benedikt Gröndal, a great humorist, also used Old Norse mythological material with far less serious purposes in mind. In the Aristophanic farce *Gandreiðin* or *The Witch Ride* (1866), for instance, he depicts Óðinn, Þór and other heathen deities as his contemporaries, putting them into the circumstances and troubling them with the concerns of the Icelanders then living in Copenhagen, often to hilarious effect. Along the way, he finds time to criticize a few of his fellow-countrymen by means of various thinly-veiled stand-ins, most of whom are derived from Old Norse sources. There is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, as Napoleon Bonaparte famously said when retreating with his army from Russia, and Benedikt Gröndal is keenly aware that this two-sidedness is inherent in the mythology itself, as was Grímur Thomsen and, indeed, those medieval authors and transmitters responsible for literary masterpieces ranging from the tragic grandeur of *Völuspá* to the grotesque flyting of *Lokasenna*. The last Romantic I will discuss here rewrote the old mythology on a still larger scale and made it mirror not only the local interests of the Icelanders living in Copenhagen, but also the political situation in continental Europe.

## V

The scholar-poet *Gísli Brynjúlfsson* (1827–1888) wrote articles and essays on contemporary political matters in Europe, and a number of his poems take their inspiration from European politics and contemporary history. The internationally minded Gísli Brynjúlfsson – a way of thinking which made him suspect in the eyes of his more nationally minded fellow countrymen – was especially sympathetic to the plight of the Hungarians or Magyars, who, in the middle of the century, were fighting for their freedom from the Austrian empire. At first, the Hungarians did very well in their battle against the Austrians and for a time seemed to be on the brink of gaining their longed-for independence. But then the Russians came to the aid of the Austrians and soon the Hungarians were vanquished.

In Gísli Brynjúlfsson's writings on this subject, the Russians are often compared to the eastern trolls or giants that the god *Þór* was busy beating up in the Eddas. Thus he translates the modern political landscape of Europe into the mythological world of the Eddas, often with striking effect. Gísli Brynjúlfsson, a literary scholar and lecturer at the University of Copenhagen, gave a partly philological basis to his translation, citing in detail

medieval sources for his creative combination or mirroring of Eddic and European elements.

One example of this creative combination is his use of the name *Atli* in the poems he devoted to the Hungarian fight for freedom in 1848–1849, the so-called *Magyaraljóð* or Poems of the Magyars (Gísli Brynjúlfsson 1891, 121–150; Gísli Brynjúlfsson 2003, 111–130; he also wrote inspired articles on the Hungarian fight for freedom in his own journal, *Norðurfari*, see Gísli Brynjúlfsson 1848 and 1849). Gísli Brynjúlfsson is thinking of Attila the Hun, or Atli as he is called in the lays of the Edda such as *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*. He argues that Atli or Attila was in fact an ancestor of the people now living in Hungary. He is very sympathetic towards Atli, even if Atli often plays the part of the villain in the old lays of the Edda. It is a re-evaluation which can be compared to Grímur Thomsen's aforementioned re-evaluation of another medieval villain, Earl Hákon of Hlaðir.

According to Gísli Brynjúlfsson, Atli may, surprisingly enough, be identical to the god Þór. He points out the fact that Þór is once or twice called *Atli* in the Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson (Gísli Brynjúlfsson 1891, 146). Furthermore, Attila the Hun seems to have considered himself to be the “hammer of the world” (*malleus mundi*), according to the Latin chronicle of the Hungarians (Gísli Brynjúlfsson 1891, 137). Gísli Brynjúlfsson's argument is that this would assign him a role similar to that of Þór in the Old Norse mythology, guarding the world and holding the evil forces at bay with his hammer. The evil forces in Attila the Hun's case would be the Roman Empire, but the giants and trolls in Þór's case.

I am not retracing Gísli Brynjúlfsson's argument because I think it is sound or plausible (for a further discussion, see Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson 1999, 242–277). It does, however, provide an interesting example of the creative mixture of mythology and modern politics in the poems of the Icelandic scholar-poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gísli Brynjúlfsson's identification of Attila the Hun with the god Þór allows him to write poems which shed new light on the Hungarian fight for freedom by filtering it through the lens of Old Norse mythology. It also makes it possible for him to let this distant fight in Hungary reflect contemporary concerns for national freedom in Iceland. Gísli Brynjúlfsson's argument is unconvincing philology but interesting poetry. In a way, it allegorizes the fight in Hungary, for it reflects both the Old Norse fight against evil forces in the East and, last but not least, it can be read as a comment on the contemporary Icelandic struggle for independence from the Danes.

An Icelandic historian, Aðalgeir Kristjánsson, has suggested that Gísli Brynjúlfsson's account of the contemporary struggle for freedom in Hungary might have affected the struggle for independence in Iceland (Aðalgeir Kristjánsson 1986, 125). According to this

view, Gísli Brynjúlfsson's powerful glorification of *Lajos Kossuth*, the heroic leader of the Hungarians, might have convinced the Icelanders of the need for a strong political leader in their own case and thus paved the way for *Jón Sigurðsson* (1811–1879), who was soon to become the unchallenged leader of the Icelandic movement for independence. Whether Gísli Brynjúlfsson's writings did in fact have such an influence is difficult to know for certain, but there is no doubt that the poet himself intended his writings to be understood as a reflection of the Icelandic condition old and new, not just as a rhymed account of occurrences in a far-away country. His use of Old Norse mythology and literature in the poems on the freedom fight of the Hungarians was clearly meant to make the Icelanders sympathize with the cause of this oppressed nation and at the same time identify themselves with it.

## VI

By looking at selected works by a number of 19<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic poets we have seen how the Romantic revival of Old Norse mythology is connected to both national and international issues. It plays a part in the definition and redefinition of the ideology of the North in the poetry of Bjarni Thorarensen, Grímur Thomsen and Benedikt Gröndal. In Gísli Brynjúlfsson's writings, Old Norse mythology is made to reflect contemporary European issues, whilst at the same time reflecting contemporary issues in Icelandic history and politics.

We can conclude that the revival or reinvention of Old Norse mythology played an important if limited part in Icelandic Romanticism. This is particularly true in the case of the younger Romantics, especially Benedikt Gröndal and Gísli Brynjúlfsson. Although we have not attempted to discuss all the Icelandic poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who can be regarded wholly or partly as Romantic writers – a more encompassing study of this subject would have to include such poets as *Steingrímur Thorsteinsson* (1831–1913) and *Matthías Jochumsson* (1835–1920) – there are clear indications that the Icelandic Romantics chose to revive the Old Norse mythology for more than just enthusiastic or purely aesthetic reasons. They were certainly interested in Old Norse mythology as such, but they also made creative and political use of it in their works, thereby endowing the old myths with new resonance and new meaning in the national and international contexts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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