

# POETRY, TRANSLATION & SUBVERSION: THE CASE OF WILLIAM DOBSON'S *PARADISUS AMISSUS* (1750/53)

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## Abstract

In 1750 the Oxford academic William Dobson published an intriguing artifact - a Latin translation of Milton's great English epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667). But this is strangely curious – Milton's poem it has been claimed was “by Englishmen for Englishmen” - and provokes the critical question: Why translate *Paradise Lost* into Latin? One defining feature of the European Epic is that it is always written in the vernacular for patriotic reasons, thereby reducing Dobson's *Paradisus Amissus* to an anomaly. What could be the cause of such a perverse literary enterprise? In this paper I propose six possible rationales. The first two propositions are that the translator seeks to show off his language skills, or that his motivation is purely one of financial gain and/or fame; the third rationale is that the translation was aimed at a foreign readership and was accordingly composed in the international language of educated Europeans; the fourth and fifth arguments variously propose that a Latin translation of Milton's epic is a natural logical conclusion: Milton himself was one of the greatest writers in Latin in the Seventeenth-century, and as a literary classic *Paradise Lost* is in direct competition against, and in dialogue with, Virgil's Latin classic *The Aeneid*. But my final conjecture is the most subversive. Dobson's *Paradisus Amissus* is an attempt by the English middle-class intelligentsia to reclaim from the popular masses the pre-eminent English non-Biblical religious text. This conclusion underlies the disturbing paradox apparent throughout the history of Milton studies: Milton the great radical author of the common Englishman - the proponent of freedom of the press, divorce for incompatibility, and democracy – must be de-radicalised, indeed emasculated, for the English higher classes to remain the guardians of the Miltonic sublime.

**Keywords:** Milton, Latin, translation, subversion, radical, paradox

## 1. Context and Argument

In 1750 a relatively obscure Englishman named William Dobson published an intriguing artifact - a Latin translation of Milton's English epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) - entitled *Paradisus Amissus*. Dobson was an academic from New College, University of Oxford, and his translation written on commission was published by the University of Oxford's Sheldonian Theatre in two parts, the first six books of the epic in 1750, with the final six books in 1753. Dobson was not the first person to attempt a “Latine Redittum” (Dobson, 1750, 1753) of what had become regarded by the Eighteenth-century as undeniably the greatest poetical work in the English language,<sup>2</sup> but he was indeed the last. After 1753 there are no recorded publications

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<sup>2</sup> “English literary criticism came of age in the decades following the Restoration [1660], and in its early self-

of Latin versions of *Paradise Lost*, whether new translations or reprints of previous editions (Hale, 2005, p. 175-76), there being in total only four complete Latin translations ever published. Yet in April 2009 Kessinger Press published a 620 page facsimile reproduction of Dobson's *Paradisus Amissus*, apparently deeming this long-forgotten peculiarity written in a long-dead language marketable to a modern readership<sup>3</sup>. This contemporary revival is strangely curious and leads one back to Dobson's considerable labours in creating *Paradisus Amissus* in the 1740's and 1750's, provoking the important critical question: Why translate *Paradise Lost* into Latin at all? For patriotic reasons of national pride one defining feature of the European epic is that it is always written in the vernacular – Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were composed in Old Ionic Greek (c. 8th Century B.C.); Virgil's *The Aeneid* in Augustan Latin (c. 19 B.C.); *La Chanson de Roland* in Old French (c. 1040); *The Poem of the Cid* in Castilian Spanish (c. 1140); Dante's *The Divine Comedy* (1320), Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532), and Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581) in medieval and renaissance Florentine Italian; Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590) in purposely antiquated Chaucerian Middle English; and so forth. In one sense epics are nationalistic propaganda of 'our' history written in 'our' language to promote 'our' superiority – a perspective Milton shared with Ariosto and considered in his work *The Reason of Church Government* (1642) book II. Translating an epic into another vernacular language is understandable in order to gain a wider readership, despite being somewhat semantically counterintuitive; but to translate epic into an intellectually elitist 'dead' language such as Latin that is anathema to vernacular language raises the question as to why William Dobson undertook such a perverse literary enterprise.

There are, I believe, six possible rationales for William Dobson's Latin translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, ranging from a simple desire for remuneration to that of damaging accusations of social subversion. The first two arguments propose that the translator wishes to show off his language skills, or that his motivation is purely one of seeking personal advancement, whether that be of fame or fortune; the third rationale purports that the translation was aimed at a foreign readership and was accordingly composed in the international language of educated Europeans; the fourth and fifth propositions argue from two different perspectives that a Latin translation of Milton's epic is a natural logical conclusion: Milton was one of the greatest writers in Latin in the Seventeenth-century, and as a literary classic *Paradise Lost* is in direct competition against, and in dialogue with, Virgil's Latin

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consciousness it seems to have felt an instinctive need for a great national poet ...Blind Milton, with his sublime theme, his uncommon but intelligible English, and his explicit claim to divine inspiration, soon emerged as an obvious candidate ...there were no other serious candidates." (Parker, 1996, p. 660)

<sup>3</sup> *Paradisus Amissus V.1-2: Poema Joannis Miltoni (1750) (Latin Edition)* (Kessinger Publishing, 2009). Further facsimile reproductions were printed by Nabu Press and Gale Ecco Print Editions in 2010-11.

classic *The Aeneid*. But my final conjecture is the most interesting and the most subversive: Dobson's *Paradisus Amissus* is an attempt by the English upper middle class educated elite to reclaim from the popular masses the pre-eminent English non-Biblical religious text. This conclusion underlies a disturbing paradox apparent throughout the four-hundred year history of Milton studies. Milton the great radical author of the common Englishman - the proponent of freedom of the press, divorce for incompatibility, and regicide - must be de-radicalised, indeed emasculated, for the English intelligentsia to remain the guardians of the Miltonic sublime.

It is important to contextualise Dobson's translation of Milton's poem. *Paradise Lost* was initially published by Milton in a ten book edition in 1667, with the final twelve book arrangement of the poem published in 1674. The poem was immediately received as a brilliant accomplishment and soon lauded as an English classic, swiftly prompting translations into various languages. In Thomas Newton's biography of Milton prefixing his annotated 1749 edition of *Paradise Lost*, the Bishop notes that Milton's epic has "been translated into several languages, Latin, Italian, French, and Dutch; and proposals have been made for translating it into Greek. ... and the world is in expectation of another [Latin translation], that will surpass all the rest, by William Dobson of New College in Oxford." (Newton, 1749, p. xlviixlix) No ancient Greek translation has ever been published, but the first foreign translation of *Paradise Lost* in any language was fittingly published in a vernacular - Ernst Gottlieb von Berge's complete poem in unrhymed German verse in 1682 - only eight years after the definitive twelve book English publication. That the first translation of the premier English epic should be in a European vernacular, and not in the uncontested European language of the educated elite - Latin - is in itself of considerable import. Nevertheless, there were several attempts at Latin translations of *Paradise Lost*, and these generally appear earlier and in greater numbers than translations into other languages. The first was by "J.C." in 1686 with a translation of Book I only, followed by William Hog's *Paraphrasis Poetica Tria Johannis Miltoni* of the 1667 ten book edition in 1690, which possessed the verbosity to paraphrase the first sixteen lines of Milton's English into forty-three lines of Latin. Thomas Power published his translation of Book I in 1691,<sup>4</sup> as did Michael Bold in 1702,<sup>5</sup> and Samuel Say and Charles Blake published partial translations of Book I and Book V in 1745 and 1694 respectively. In 1709 William Tilly translated the majority of *Paradise Lost* in an unpublished manuscript in Corpus Christi College, Oxford. The first complete genuine translation of Milton's epic into Latin was by Thomas Power

<sup>4</sup> "T. P." also published three Latin translations of other episodes from *Paradise Lost* in *The Gentleman's Journal: or the Monthly Miscellany*, Vol. 3 (May, June, and July 1694, respectively). See John T. Shawcross, "A Note on T. P.'s Latin Translation of *Paradise Lost*", *Milton Quarterly* 21, 2 (May, 1987), pp. 67.

<sup>5</sup> See John T. Shawcross, "A Note on Milton's Latin Translator, M. B.," *Milton Quarterly* 21, 2 (May, 1987), pp. 65-66, for uncertainty concerning the identification of this Latin translator of Milton.

at Trinity College, Cambridge (unpublished, 1690-93?6), with the first translation of Milton's twelve book 1674 edition entitled *Johannis Miltoni Paradisus Amissus Latine Redditus* published by Joseph Trapp in 1740/44. *Gentleman's Magazine*, a monthly digest of news and commentary for the educated public founded in London in 1731, twice published in 1746 (October and December) and once again in 1750 five parallel Latin translations of the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*. (Hale, 2005, p. 175) Finally William Dobson published his new and complete translation in 1750/53 and this proved to be the last Latin published translation.

## 2. Fame and fortune

The first two possible rationales for this short-lived but intense period of Latin translations of *Paradise Lost* are the most obvious but also the most easy to dismiss. One could contend that the translators were motivated by the desire to show off to their countrymen their prodigious skills not only as linguists but specifically as Latinists; in which case, what better subject for their talents could there be than to re-present England's premier epic poem in the language of the educated elite? The four English scholars who published translations of Milton's epic in its entirety – Hog, Power, Trapp, and Dobson – were all professional Latinists. Latin was the unquestioned universal language of the educated classes throughout Europe at this time, with “the Classics”, or “Literae Humaniores” as it is known at Oxford University, being in the late Seventeenth and early Eighteenth-centuries the only subject of study permissible at European Universities. If the primary motivation of these Latin translators was to show off to their peers, then it seems they failed miserably. There are precious few reprints of any of the translations, suggesting that sales were modest at best, and it is doubtful whether any of the linguists gained either fame or fortune through the exercise – the second potential motivation to undertake this Herculean labour. Indeed William Hog, having failed to secure a patron for his 1690 *Paraphrasis Latina*, states somewhat pathetically in elegantly phrased alliterative Latin during his preparatory address to the reader that he undertook this translation “Non amore famae, sed timor famis”, “Not for love of fame but fear of starvation”! (Earl Roy Miner, 2004, p. 45) Similarly, according to a letter by the antiquarian Thomas Baker of St. John's College, Cambridge, Thomas Power's 1691 translation “was sent to Dr. Bentley [Master of Trinity College, Cambridge] with intention to be printed, & in order to discharge Mr. Power's debts. By which it appears that the author had a good opinion of it.” (Shawcross, 1987, p. 67) Notwithstanding Power's high regard for his own work, no publication or riches ensued. Indeed, none of the four primary translators became household names, and this brief interlude of Latin translations of *Paradise Lost* come to a complete close with Dobson's second volume in 1753, suggesting

<sup>6</sup> See Shawcross, “A Note on T. P.'s Latin Translation of *Paradise Lost*”, pp. 67-68, for uncertainty concerning the compositional date of the unpublished translation in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge.

that there was no public demand, or that the extremely small market was saturated, once and for all. One can only speculate upon the reasons for this, but it seems probable to conclude that it was not because the Latin translations themselves were uniformly of a poor quality. One modern Latin academic William Malin Porter in his comparative study *Reading the Classics and 'Paradise Lost'* argues that Dobson's *Paradisus Amissus* is "literarily rather successful":

He strives everywhere to follow the sinuous forms of Milton's periods; he is a pretty skilful Latin prosodist; and he shows care as an interpreter of Milton's difficult English. Hard passages in the original, which William Hog, for example, the author of the first complete Latin translation (1690) and a Neo-Latin poet in his own right, generally steps around (not always gracefully), are usually met straight on by Dobson and rendered with intelligence and precision. (Porter, 1993, p. 137; 139)

### 3. The linguistic homogeneity of Europe

The third possible rationale for translating Milton's epic into Latin is a desire to broaden the potential readership of the poem by making it accessible to the educated classes of Europe. Whether the motivation for this was financial, patriotic, or simply artistic, a Latin translation could with one swoop encompass a far greater number of potential readers than a translation into any one single vernacular tongue. Epic poems, with their complex layers of meanings and reliance upon knowledge of Classical imagery and poetic traditions, inevitably resided within the provinces of the learned middle classes, and it was the Latin language that united these ranks throughout Europe. Whilst it can be argued that this shared common language functioned to break down cultural differences and provide a platform for pan-European intellectual debate, at the same time one perceives it reinforcing and upholding class barriers by restricting access to graduates of European Universities, all of whom inevitably would be drawn from the middle and upper-middle classes. One piece of evidence pointing to a foreign readership was the reprinting in Amsterdam of William Hog's Latin paraphrase in 1699. However, conversely, it appears that this is an exception that proves the rule. As noted, there exist early and numerous European vernacular translations of *Paradise Lost*<sup>7</sup> - with the first ever translation being that of German in 1682 - and Hog's 1699 reprint is the only known Latin edition printed outside of England. Furthermore, there are no Latin translations conducted by Europeans (which would presumably be aimed for a European audience). John Hale, a contemporary Milton scholar well-known for his proficiency in Classical languages, argues that this short flourishing of Latin translations "were made by Englishmen

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<sup>7</sup> For a record of foreign translations of *Paradise Lost*, see Parker 1996, 1200.

for Englishmen” (Hale, 2005, p. 174), although he declines to state why. Certainly this is suggested by the translators’ personal adornments to their publications, and to the textual history: the various prefaces, dedications, addresses to the reader, and so forth, make no suggestion of a non-English readership; and with the one noted exception the places of publication and known circulation of the various volumes are entirely within Britain. The accumulated evidence suggests that Latin translations of *Paradise Lost* were not motivated to extend Milton’s fame into Europe but were intended for the appetites of home-grown educated readers.

#### 4. Milton the Latinist

The fourth rationale for a Latin Milton is grounded upon strong biographical evidence. John Milton (1608-74) was amongst the greatest Classical scholars and Latin writers of his day in the world – a bold statement – but supported by plentiful evidence.<sup>8</sup> In his early poem “Ad Patrem” (1631-32?) lines 67-85, composed in Latin, Milton thanks his father for providing for his proficiency in the five languages of Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French and Italian (Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, 1997, p. 157), and during his lifetime he demonstrated knowledge of a further four: Aramaic, Syriac, Spanish and Dutch (Hale, 1997, p. 8). Whilst at St. Paul’s School Milton studied Greek, Latin, and Hebrew under the brilliant Classical pedagogue Alexander Gil, and held an MA degree from Christ’s College, University of Cambridge. As a young man Milton abstained from employment during his formative years of 1632-39 in order to study voraciously an enormous eclectic assortment of Classical, Theological, Philosophical, Literary and Scientific texts. Under Oliver Cromwell’s Republican Government (1649-60) Milton held the estimable post of Secretary for Foreign Languages (1649-52) – frequently shortened to “Latin Secretary” - an Office entailing some of the duties of what we would now call the Foreign Secretary (Parker, 1996, p. 954). It was during this period that Milton acquired his greatest fame during his own lifetime - not as a poet - but as a superlative writer of polemical Latin. The newly instituted English Republic was under serious physical threat and political pressure from European monarchies and governments following the decision to execute the English King Charles I on 30th January 1649 for treason. The intellectual attack upon the English regicides was undertaken by the leading classical scholar of the day, the French Claudius Salmasius,<sup>9</sup> who published his *Defensio regia pro Carolo I* (“Royal Defence on behalf of Charles I”) in November 1649 to great acclaim. This prompted Cromwell’s government to employ their Latin Secretary Milton in response, and his vituperative but authoritatively argued step-by-step refutation, *Pro*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. “The majority of his prose from any period is in what is arguably the most accomplished Latin of the Seventeenth-century.” (Porter, 1993, p. 136).

<sup>9</sup> “Salmasius was a man of skill in languages, knowledge of antiquity, and sagacity of emendatory criticism, almost exceeding all hope of human attainment” (Johnson, 1905, p. I; 66)

*Populo Anglicano Defensio* (“John Milton an Englishman His Defence of the People of England”) published in 1651, with a *Defensio Secundo* published in 1654, were generally adjudged to have won a stunning victory for the new Republican English Government. (Parker, 1996, p. 387-89) These two argumentative works of rhetoric and propaganda, written in Latin and directed to a European intellectual audience, elevated Milton amongst the highest ranks of European scholars, notwithstanding the unpopularity of many of his political ideas.

In such a context it would appear natural and appropriate that the greatest poem in the English language, *Paradise Lost*, authored by (arguably) the greatest writer of Latin of his time, John Milton, should be translated and published in Latin - the universal language of the European educated classes. This would be an honour not accorded to the poetical works of Shakespeare; moreover, the oft-noted Latinate diction and syntax of Miltonic English verse would seem particularly amenable to such an endeavour. One modern editor of *Paradise Lost*, Alastair Fowler, contextualises the poem’s oft-criticised Latinity as reflective of Milton’s contemporary (European) audience:

The most notorious feature of the style of *Paradise Lost* is its Latinity. Already Jonathan Richardson commented [in 1734]: “Milton’s language is English, but ’tis Milton’s English; ’tis Latin, ’tis Greek English; not only the words, the phraseology, the transpositions, but the ancient idiom is seen in all he writes” ... We should recall that in Milton’s time intellectuals spoke Latin, thought in Latin, and wrote private notes and letters in Latin. To call *Paradise Lost* Latinate may only mean it is intellectually engaged and intimately expressive. (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1997, p. 15)

Furthermore, Milton had published works composed in Latin from all of his professional and personal interests: as a poet the majority of his pre-1640 verses were composed in Latin, including the much acclaimed “Epitaphium Damonis” (1639), and he translated several of the Old Testament Psalms from Latin into English; as a philosopher Milton published *Artis Logicae* (1672), and in the realm of theology the late-discovered *De Doctrina Christiana* (1825);<sup>10</sup> as a politician he was acclaimed

<sup>10</sup> The Miltonic authorship of *De Doctrina Christiana* has been debated since William B. Hunter questioned the document’s provenance in 1992. Recent important contributions from both ‘sides’ of the debate include William B. Hunter, *Visitation Unimplor’d: Milton and the Authorship of ‘De Doctrina Christiana’* (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1998); John P. Rumrich, “The Provenance of *De doctrina Christiana*: A View of the Present State of the Controversy”, in *Milton and the Grounds of Contention*, ed. Mark R Kelley, Michael Lieb and John T Shawcross (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 2003), 214-33; Stephen M. Fallon, “Milton’s Arminianism and the Authorship of *De doctrina Christiana*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 41 (Spring 1999), 122; and Michael Lieb, “*De Doctrina Christiana* and the Question of Authorship”, *Milton Studies* 41 (2002), 172-230. The most recent book-length study of the treatise’s providence concluded that “*De Doctrina Christiana* rightfully belongs in the Milton canon.” Gordon Campbell, Thomas N. Corns, John K. Hale, and Fiona J. Tweedie, *Milton and the Manuscript of De Doctrina Christiana* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007), 161.

as the author of the two *Defensiones* of the English people. In his youth Milton had flirted with the idea of writing an epic in Latin, as suggested in his patriotic poem “In Quintum Novembris”, itself composed in the Latin hexameter metre of a Virgilian epic poem:

Sed tamen a nostro meruisti carmine laudes  
 Fama, bonum quo non aliud veracius ullum,  
 Nobis digna cani, nec to memorasse pigebit  
 Carmine tam longo, servati scilicet Angli  
 Officiis vaga diva tuis, tibi reddimus aequa. (194-98)

But still you have deserved praise in my song, Fame, a good than which none is more truthful. You deserve to be sung about by me, and I shall never regret having commemorated you at such length in my verse. We English, who were plainly saved by your good offices, wandering goddess, render to you your just dues. (Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, 1997, p. 46; 50)

However, the biographical, historical, linguistic and intellectual rationales that promote the translation of *Paradise Lost* into Latin are refuted by a single piece of evidence: Milton himself considered writing his great epic in Latin only to reject the project decisively. Milton alludes several times in both his poetical and prose writings to both the subject matter and language appropriate for the construction of his epic, and consistently concluded that it must be written in the English language to the glory and praise of his nation England. The so called *Trinity Manuscript*, written in Milton’s own hand, lists twenty-eight subjects drawn from British history as potential epic narratives. As early as 1628 in his poem “At a Vacation Exercise in the College, part Latin, part English” the youthful poet was planning his magnum opus and was unequivocal in “clothing” its articulation in the “sounds” of his native language of English:

Hail native language,  
 ... Yet I had rather, if I were to choose,  
 Thy service in some graver subject use,  
 Such as may make thee search thy coffers round,  
 Before thou clothe my fancy in fit sound” (Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, 1997, p. 79-80; lines 1, 29-32)

What is particularly telling in this laudatory decision to write about the “graver subject” of epic poetry in his native English is that as the full title suggests, this early poetic “Exercise” is composed in both Latin and English. The first two components are written in Latin – an academic *Oratio* followed by a bawdy *Prolusio* – philosophical and literary commonplaces of Latin literature and printed by Milton

as his sixth Proclusion. However, it is at this point that the young Milton expressly turns away from Latin to English; having demonstrated his schoolboy proficiency in replicating Latin language and literature he then launches forth in his own native tongue to sing of “kings and queens and heroes old” (Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, 1997, p. pp. 80; line 47). Until this point in time Milton’s poetry had been almost wholly in Latin, but as the young poet deliberates upon the writing of his great epic he rejects Latin for English, as the heading to this “Exercise” succinctly enjoins: “The Latin speeches ended, the English thus began.” (Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, 1997, p. 79). With regards to Milton’s future poetic voice, Latin is superseded as English is “hailed”.

This clearly remained Milton’s intention a decade or so later. In the elegy upon the death of his friend Charles Diodati, *Epitaphium Damonis* (1639), written in Latin after Milton’s return from touring across continental Europe, the reader once again discovers an implicit rejection of Latin poetic subjects and language in favour of writing on more serious subjects in the English language. The “fistula”, or reed pipe that herein symbolically represents Latin pastoral poetry, is rejected when the poet is to attempt the greater task of “rasp[ing] out a British tune” in the language of “my native muses”, which is English:

O mihi tum si vita supersit,  
 Tu procul annosa pendebis fistula pinu  
 Multum oblita mihi, aut patriis mutata camoenis  
 Brittonicum strides, quid enim? (lines 167-71)

O, if I have any time left to live, you, my pastoral pipe, will hang far away on the branch of some old pine tree, utterly forgotten by me, or else, transformed by my native muses, you will rasp out a British tune. (Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, 1997, p. 279, 285)

This is of course mildly ironic, for Milton is expressing in Latin the rejection of Latin pastoral poetry, notwithstanding that his argument is that Latin is an inappropriate language for his own future nationalistic epic. Yet, as Louis L. Martz argues, this Miltonic rejection of Latin pastoral poetry can be understood as a more generalized refutation of the Latin language in general:

At the same time the *fistula* may represent Latin poetry... and the *patriis camoenis* may thus suggest the Latin language itself. That is to say, the poet is contemplating deeper themes, British themes, and themes composed in English. The power of poetry represented in these early compositions on the *fistula* will not be developed unless the poet can commit himself to English. Perhaps he has already tried those deeper themes in Latin, but without success: the rising poet

knows, as Vergil says in the eighth eclogue, *non omnia possumus omnes* (8,63) [“we can’t all do everything”]; and he foresees that his future fame must be entrusted to his native tongue. (Martz, 1974, p. 407-408)

*Epitaphium Damonis* expresses in Latin the unsuitability of Latin for Milton’s British epic, which furthermore, Milton tells us, will be directed to an exclusively Anglo-Saxon audience. After considering a number of potential British heroic subjects (lines 161-68), the author claims that he “shall have ample reward, and shall think it great glory, although I be for ever unknown and utterly without fame in the world outside” the people dwelling besides the great rivers of Britain (Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, 1997, p. 285).

Not only in verse but also in his argumentative prose did Milton single out and laud the English language as appropriate and necessary for his future epic. Indeed, in the anti-prelatical tract *The Reason of Church Government* (1642) Milton states clearly that it is his intention as an Englishman to relate an English story in the English language for an English audience in order to glorify the country of England.<sup>11</sup> Being cognizant that writing an epic in Latin would incite direct and probably unfavourable comparisons to the original Classical epic authors – “I knew it would be hard to arrive at the second rank among the Latines”, Milton like Ariosto before him rejected writing in Latin in order “to fix all the industry and art I could unite to the adorning of my native tongue” (Milton, *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 1953, Vol. I). Milton’s agenda is very clear. Hitherto, in Milton’s opinion, “*England* hath had her noble atchievements made small by the unskillfull handling of monks and mechanicks”, albeit that “there be nothing adverse in our climat, or the fate of this age, it haply would be no rashnesse from an equal diligence and inclination to present the like offer in our own ancient stories.” (Milton, *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 1953) Milton is that Englishman worthy to tell the great national story, written in their vernacular English language, to the eternal glory of the British Islands. As an epic poet he cannot avoid be compared to his illustrious European predecessors, but writing proudly in his native English language he is content to promote his own nation to his own native readership, admitting that his choice of English rather than Latin may curtail his fame abroad:

...to be an interpreter & relater of the best and sagest things among mine own Citizens throughout this Iland in the mother dialect. That what the greatest and choicest wits of *Athens*, *Rome*, or modern *Italy*, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I in my proportion with this over and above of being a Christian, might doe for mine:

<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of rhetorical effect I have used the term “English” as a synecdoche for “British” in this paragraph.

not caring to be once nam'd abroad, though perhaps I could attain that, but content with these British Ilands as my world (Milton, *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 1953)

## 5. Virgil the rival

The fifth argument for a Latin Milton is based on the perceived intimate relationship between *Paradise Lost* and Virgil's *The Aeneid*. The history of epic poetry is clearly demarcated by the open avowal of a competitive rivalry between authors. Each successive poet imitated yet sought to emulate their predecessors. Hence Virgil takes up and completes Homer's story of the fall of Troy in the birth of Trojan Rome, the guide through Dante's Hell and Purgatory is the character Virgil, and so forth. As noted above, the Latinate quality of Miltonic verse was keenly felt by many readers, and hence it was natural that each and every Latin translator of Milton should translate the unrhymed iambic pentameter English verses of *Paradise Lost* into the dactylic hexameter Latin versification of Virgil's *The Aeneid*. According to John Hale this choice of medium was obvious, "since the chief purpose of translating Milton into Latin at all was to rank him with Virgil and other writers of epic hexameters." (Hale, 2005, p. 183) In his influential "Life of Milton" (1749) Thomas Newton, after noting that a number of Latin translations of Milton's epic had been made in recent years, connects this circumstance with his perception that *Paradise Lost* is now considered a classic work of English literature:

The learned Dr. Trap has also published a translation into Latin verse; and the world is in expectation of another, that will surpass all the rest, by William Dobson of New College in Oxford. So that by one means or another Milton is now considered as an English classic; and the *Paradise Lost* is generally esteemed the noblest and most sublime of modern poems, and equal at least to the best of the ancient; the honor of this country, and the envy and admiration of all others! (Newton, 1749, p. xlix)

This raises an important question regarding the causality of *Paradise Lost* as a classic text: Is Milton's epic regarded as a classic in its own right such that it should be awarded the distinction of being translated into Latin? Or is it the fact that *Paradise Lost* has been translated into Latin that now demarcates it as a classic text? In other words, is a Latin Milton the cause or the result of the classic status? Newton's account is ambiguous on this point, but certainly in Newton's eighteenth-century the oft repeated praise of *Paradise Lost* as a work of *sublime* poetry is frequently connected at certain junctures with the text's Latinity. Such being Virgil's enormous contemporary influence and reputation, the consideration of the Latinity of an epic poem necessarily involves the text in a relationship to Virgil. W. R. Parker

speculates that it is this perceived affinity of Milton's epic to Virgil's that motivated "a succession of Anglo-Latinists who were seemingly determined to make Milton as intelligible to Virgil as Virgil so clearly was to Milton." (Parker, 1996, p. 661) Notwithstanding this impossible act, that the sense of the sublime which was so readily felt by readers of Milton in the eighteenth-century was due in part to the epic's Virgilian style, is a plausible motive to translate *Paradise Lost* into Latin:

The Latinizers were obeying a sense that the poem's sublimity was connected with something Latin, and especially Virgilian, in its English. To reveal that quality was not the gilding of the lily, but an act of poetic appreciation, in fact of source-detection and stylistic analysis. (Hale, 2005, p. 176)

However, notwithstanding Virgil's enormous influence on the European epic, to Latinize a seventeenth-century English epic remains an incongruous and, one can argue, a self-defeating project. As noted in the Introduction, historically epics are always composed in the author's vernacular, and whilst of course Virgil's mother-tongue was Latin, by the Middle Ages even the Italian Dante was writing his *Divina Commedia* in the medieval Florentine dialect of Italian. The vernacular language of the epic was an important component in its role as nationalistic and patriotic propaganda. But to render Milton in Latin in honour of Virgil and by so doing translate Milton's Virgilian allusions into Latin in an act of exposure - as a Latin translation in Virgilian dactylic hexameters would almost certainly do - this is to defeat the very purpose of these Miltonic Virgilian references - to play off against a hidden original. The act of a revelation of sources merely destroys the subtle interplay and intertextuality which is the preeminent power of allusion. To translate *Paradise Lost* into Virgilian Latin as an act of veneration to the great Augustan poet is a self-defeating project that traduces rather than reveals the important relationship between the two texts:

An eighteenth-century reader educated in the classics would have treated Milton's text as a kind of linguistic palimpsest: the reader would be constantly aware of a dimension of classical syntax and diction just beneath the English itself. What is odd, however, is that the top level is referring to the level that it overlays. Spenser, from whom Milton learnt so much, antiquated his English, but it remained English. Milton's strategy is more profound. He writes English that is constantly pointing beyond itself to something else, or perhaps I should say that it is *playing against* something that does not appear to be there, like Marcel Marceau leaning on a wall that is invisible, but solidly suggested by his pantomime. (Porter, 1993, p. 135-36)

To make the invisible visible is to ruin the game, and to defeat the very purpose of playing. The Milton/Virgil relationship is endlessly fruitful when hidden; it cannot survive a translation into open view.

## 6. Class appropriation and subversion

The five rationales that I have considered for the Latin translations of Milton's epic which took place from the late seventeenth till the mid eighteenth-century appear somewhat inadequate to explain the great labours of such linguistic acts. John K. Hale suggests that this brief flourishing of Latin translations "are, in fact, massive evidence that, almost from the first, Milton's poem gained the status of a classic in the eyes of the English intelligentsia, a status comparable with that of Virgil's *Aeneid* in imperial Rome." (Hale, 2005, p. 174) Herein, I believe, lies a sixth and far more subversive rationale for these Miltonic translations. Noting above that all epics were composed in the vernacular so that citizens could read to the glory of their country patriotic stories written in their own mother-tongue, Milton's *Paradise Lost* is specifically a theodicy that purports to vindicate before all of mankind the Christian God's role in the world in the light of the existence of evil. This grand and universal subject was yet not composed in Latin – the universal language of educated middle and upper-class Europe – but in vernacular English spoken and understood by everyone in Britain, from whatever class. Milton's aim in the epic is succinctly phrased at the end of the first paragraph of the poem, in now famously couched lines:

what in me is dark  
Illumine, what is low raise and support;  
That to the height of this great argument  
I may assert the eternal providence,  
And justify the ways of God to men. (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1997, p. 60; lines 22-26)

Dobson's Latin translation reads as follows:

Tu mihi lustra  
Corda bonus; lucem caeco, invalidoque vigorem  
Suffice, ut ingenti non impar Argumento  
Consurgam; legesque Dei venerandaque jura  
Defendens, pandam dictis quam numine justo  
Torquet res Hominum, atque aequis moderator habenis. (Dobson, 1750, 1753, p. 2)

Milton's avowed aim was to justify God to men, to mankind, or at least to all his own countrymen, and writing his poem in their mother-tongue was the means to do this. Dobson's "Latine Redittum" immediately subverts and negates this prime function of the poem. Milton's *Paradise Lost* tells the story of Adam and Eve, or in other words the story of Everyman, and seeks to explain human nature with all its conflicts and contradictions, experienced by all mankind.<sup>12</sup> Dobson's translation restricts and curtails

<sup>12</sup> "It is justly remarked by Addison that this poem has, by the nature of its subject, the advantage above all others,

the justification of God to wealthy and well educated men, barring the explication of Christian truths to those deemed capable of understanding, and of judging. In this sense *Paradissus Amissus* is an act of intellectual elitism promoting anti-democratic religious and ethical values.

This attempt to de-radicalise Milton by the middle and upper classes is not in the least surprising; indeed, it has been systematically attempted from Milton's own lifetime forthwith. The fundamental motivating factor for such a manoeuvre is what is seen as a distasteful dichotomy in the published writing of Milton. While on the one hand the poetic oeuvre of Milton was commonly considered sublime, even divinely inspired, yet on the other hand a great majority of Milton's prose works were perceived by many as morally perverse, destructively radical politically, religiously heretical, and revolutionary socially. That Milton the poet was as greatly admired by the majority of the British educated classes as Milton the polemicist was detested, was true during Milton's own lifetime and in the eighteenth-century until the Romantic movement gained literary ascendancy. Milton was a social radical who was the first advocate for divorce due to incompatibility of character, one of the ideas promulgated in the so-called four 'divorce tracts' of 1643-45 (*The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), *The Judgment of Martin Bucer* (1644), *Tetrachordon* (1645), and *Colasterion* (1645)). In a legally, religiously and morally male-dominated patriarchal society this was considered outrageously libertine and dangerously subversive in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, and perhaps for longer. At the same time Milton was promoting the unrestrained freedom of the press in *Areopagitica* (1644) – another libertine concept too advanced for its day but initiating the argument relating the concept of free choice to that of individual expression which was to be taken up by proponents such as John Stuart Mill two centuries later. As I have considered Milton was (in)-famous politically for his vociferous and unrepentant defense of the regicide of King Charles I, being forced to go into hiding and narrowly escaping execution on charges of treason upon the Restoration of the executed King's son Charles II in 1660.<sup>13</sup> Not only in *The Defences* (1651; 1654), but less than two weeks after the execution of Charles I Milton had published the controversial but popular work *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649)<sup>14</sup>, condemning the institution of monarchy and being the first work to posit the argument that a Republic is the only acceptable form of government,

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that it is universally and perpetually interesting. All mankind will, through all ages, bear the same relation to Adam and to Eve, and must partake of that good and evil which extend to themselves." (Johnson, 1905, p. I; 221)

<sup>13</sup>. This did not prevent Milton reiterating his Republic principles even on the eve of the Restoration of the monarchy in *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth, and the excellence therof compar'd with the inconveniences and dangers of readmitting kingship in this nation* (1660).

<sup>14</sup>. *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* was so popular it went through five editions during the seventeenth-century (Shawcross J. , 1993, p. 105).

followed by *Eikonoklastes* (1649), a systematic deconstruction of the noble portrayal of King Charles. As a Christian Milton was generally believed to be doctrinally orthodox, albeit that as a non-conformist Puritan he confronted the middle and upper class establishment through his condemnation of the policies of Archbishop Laud's Church of England and in particular its hierarchy in his five anti-prelatical prose pamphlets of 1641-42 (*Of Reformation* (1641), *Of Prelatical Episcopacy* (1641), *Animadversions* (1641), *The Reason of Church Government* (1642), *Apology for Smectymnuus* (1642)). Even late in his polemical career Milton remained consistent in his views concerning religious toleration and expression, addressing *A Treatise of Civil Power* to Richard Cromwell and Parliament in 1659 to argue for a liberal interpretation of the concept of heresy. Ultimately the discovery and publication of the stridently anti-Trinitarian and therefore heretical *De Doctrina Christiana* in 1825 further marginalized Milton the thinker and prose polemicist from polite society.

This was Milton as seen through his prose works, and it was a Milton repugnant to great numbers of the British educated classes. As beloved as was Milton the poet, Milton the man was frequently despised. The Milton of *Paradise Lost* invokes the aid of the Holy Spirit to soar high above the Aonian mount of humanist knowledge to tell his adventurous song (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1997, p. 59; lines 13-15), whilst Milton the republican, regicide, libertine, and heretic grubs around in the moral decrepitude of the common people. The famous literary critic and writer Samuel Johnson, a political Tory and University educated public figure, can be quoted as representative of genteel eighteenth-century opinion. In his *Life of Milton* Johnson reports that Milton's repugnant political actions initially stunted the sale and reception of what was to be acclaimed the national epic: "That in the reigns of Charles and James the *Paradise Lost* received no publick acclamations is readily confessed. Wit and literature were on the side of the Court; and who that solicited favour or fashion would venture to praise the defender of the regicides?" (Johnson, 1905, I; p. 134) Furthermore, Johnson records that Dr. Sprat, the dean of Westminster Cathedral, refused to allow an inscription in the Cathedral for "the name of Milton was, in his opinion, too detestable to be read on the wall of a building dedicated to devotion." (Johnson, 1905, I; p. 156). In Johnson's account Milton was a social hypocrite - "they who most loudly clamour for liberty do not most liberally grant it" (Johnson, 1905, I; p. 170) - being the free-thinking advocate of divorce for personal incompatibility, but in his personal life a tyrant to his own wife and daughter. Ultimately Dr. Johnson readily admits that "His literature was unquestionably great", and in particular "*Paradise Lost*, a poem which, considered with respect to design, may claim the first place, and with respect to performance the second, among the productions of the human mind", but "His political notions were those of an acrimonious and surly republican,":

Milton's republicanism was, I am afraid, founded in an envious hatred of greatness, and a sullen desire of independence; in petulance impatient of controul, and pride disdainful of superiority. He hated monarchs in the state and prelates in the church; for he hated all whom he was required to obey. It is to be suspected that his predominant desire was to destroy rather than establish, and that he felt not so much the love of liberty as repugnance to authority. (Johnson, 1905, p. 163, 207, 168, 169).

This was the dilemma of the literary and educated elite: how to rescue Milton from the great unwashed and reclaim him for themselves. Milton the political, social, and religious non-conformist rebel must be divorced from his plebeian democratic commonplace notions and de-radicalised in order to stand representative of the nation in the exalted vision of his epic voice. Dr. Johnson was aware that "if they lessen the reputation of Milton, [they] diminish in some degree the honour of our country" (Johnson, 1905, p. I; 242). One method of reclaiming Milton the sublime poet and disassociating him from Milton the vituperative polemicist would be to translate his transcendent epic into the Latin of the exclusively educated classes and beyond the comprehension of the lower classes. Joseph Addison, one of Milton's earliest and most influential commentators, perceived that the greatness of *Paradise Lost* was inextricably linked with its "foreign assistances" – the influence of its Greek and Latin epic predecessors. Expressing an early eighteenth-century view, Addison argues that the English language was inadequate to express the fullness of the Miltonic vision which necessitated patterning his epic to the classical originals of Homer and Virgil:

*Milton's Sentiments and Ideas were so wonderfully sublime, that it would have been impossible for him to have represented them in their full Strength and Beauty, without having Recourse to these Foreign Assistances. Our Language sunk under him, and was unequal to that Greatness of Soul, which furnished him with such glorious Conceptions.* (Addison, 2007, p. 37)

If Milton's English sunk in the exalted narrative of his sublime poem, the Latin of Virgil was available to translators to resurrect it. This perhaps was the chief motivating factor for translating *Paradise Lost* into Latin, and the effect was to reclaim the sublime sentiments and ideas of Milton from the common people by exalting them in a language made suitable by its exclusivity. Milton's narrator in the Invocation to Book VII of *Paradise Lost* was aware that his "song" would "fit audience find, though few" (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1997, p. 391; lines 30-31); William Dobson and his Latinizers merely provided the translation to achieve this

elite brotherhood. To compare Dobson's rationale as a translator with that of William Tyndale a century and a half earlier may be to compare "Great things by small" (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1997, p. p. 354; line 311), to borrow Milton's own phrase, but is nevertheless instructive by its contrast. As is well known, Tyndale became a leading figure in the Protestant Reformation due to his religious commitment and scholarly dedication to translating the Latin Vulgate Bible into a vernacular translation that all Englishmen could read for themselves. This anti-establishment and pro-popular action cost Tyndale his life in 1536, but his proto-Protestant principles lead Tyndale to believe that all people should read the sacred text for themselves. Dobson's makes an identical translation to achieve the opposite results. He takes the vernacular *Paradise Lost* – arguably the most venerated religious text in English after the 1611 King James Authorised translation of the Bible – and translates it into Virgilian Latin hexameters, thereby barring the common people from access to Milton's quasi-sacred poetic text. In the Invocation to Book IX of *Paradise Lost* the narrator makes yet another bold claim to direct divine inspiration for the specific language of his epic poem; the Holy Spirit "dictates" to Milton the author who writes the epic in the corresponding or "answerable style". This, according to the narrator, will result in a poem "Not less but more heroic" than the Greek and Latin epics of Homer and Virgil:

...argument

Not less but more heroic than the wrath  
 Of stern Achilles on his foe pursued  
 Thrice fugitive about Troy wall; or rage  
 Of Turnus for Lavinia disespoused,  
 Or Neptune's ire or Juno's, that so long  
 Perplexed the Greek and Cytherea's son;  
 If answerable style I can obtain  
 Of my celestial patroness, who deigns  
 Her nightly visitation unimplored,  
 And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires  
 Easy my unpremeditated verse (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1997, p. 468-  
 69; lines 13-24)

The claim made in *Paradise Lost* is that the Holy Spirit dictates the poem in English to surpass the classical epics written in Greek and Latin; it is nothing more than perverse for William Dobson and his fellow Latinizers to labour to achieve the reverse.

## 7. Conclusion

Of the six possible rationales for Dobson's endeavor, it is this final one that is

both the most plausible – for reasons that I have explained - and the most sinister. Notwithstanding this conclusion, it is important to acknowledge that this is a conjecture based upon scant *prima facie* evidence, there being no biographical or historical documentation to authenticate a more certain cause. Nevertheless, to compare Dobson’s rationale as a translator with that of William Tyndale a century and a half earlier may be to compare “Great things by small” (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1997, p. p. 354; line 311), to borrow Milton’s own phrase, but is nevertheless instructive by its contrast. As is well known, Tyndale became a leading figure in the Protestant Reformation due to his religious commitment and scholarly dedication to translating the Latin Vulgate Bible into a vernacular translation that all Englishmen could read for themselves. This anti-establishment and pro-popular action cost Tyndale his life in 1536, but his proto-Protestant principles lead Tyndale to believe that all people should read the sacred text for themselves. Dobson makes an identical translation to achieve the opposite results. He takes the vernacular *Paradise Lost* – arguably the most venerated religious text in English after the 1611 King James Authorised translation of the Bible – and translates it into Virgilian Latin hexameters, thereby barring the common people from access to Milton’s quasi-sacred poetic text. In the Invocation to Book IX of *Paradise Lost* the narrator makes yet another bold claim to direct divine inspiration for the specific language of his epic poem; the Holy Spirit “dictates” to Milton the author who writes the epic in the corresponding or “answerable style”. This, according to the narrator, will result in a poem “Not less but more heroic” than the Greek and Latin epics of Homer and Virgil:

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 69; lines 13-24)

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With thanks to my brother-in-law, Martin Williams, who so generously gave me a beautiful 1753 bound copy of Dobson’s book that appropriately in the light of this paper’s argument, was once used as a doorstop in his mother’s kitchen.

The claim made in *Paradise Lost* is that the Holy Spirit dictates the poem in English to surpass the classical epics written in Greek and Latin; it is nothing more than perverse for William Dobson and his fellow Latinizers to labour to achieve the reverse.

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