Troll

A group of men riding in the west of Iceland along a mountain ridge look on as a troll, particularly "tröll eitt mikit" (a great troll), crosses their path.[7] This is an event thought worthy of mention in a narrative generally preoccupied with more prosaic concerns, Icelandic politics of the thirteenth century; thus, however, is it preserved for posterity. The riding party is headed by Ásbjörn Guðmundarson, the date of the sighting in the first months of the year 1244. The event is related in a single sentence with no further details but for a remark about the men's feelings, "varð þeim sumum ósvipt við, en Ásbjörn hrakti þá þar um" (some of them were startled, but Ásbjörn scolded them for it). However, the significance of this only just ephemeral yet palpably unresolved encounter may be realized when later during this same journey Ásbjörn drowns in a river, followed not long after by the death of the group's leader, the young magnate Tumi Sighvatsson.

In only a few sentences matters of life and death are related. The troll is ominous; it is also unknown. A simple binary graph could be used to explain the logic of this brief narrative of clear opposites. At one end: the known, the human, life, safety, civilization, and the audience itself, compelled to use Ásbjörn and his startled men as stand-ins. At the distant other end: the occult, the inhuman, death, danger, wilderness, and the extraneous other.[8] The troll has to represent all of those things. It is danger, death, and the vastness extending beyond the human grasp of the world. No small role has the troll. And yet it does nothing

here on the ridge but circle the humans. Its power does not rely upon its specific actions. Its presence alone suffices.

The first thing readers of this book must do is refrain from imagining that they know precisely what a troll is. While in the nineteenth century Icelandic trolls were taxonomised, an endeavour worth returning to below, in a thirteenth-century narrative a troll has no such clear identity, not even within the human psyche. Trolls do not constitute a race or a species. The first step when considering the troll sighted on the ridge is to avoid the idea of a clearly demarcated group. Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century textual evidence from Iceland makes it clear that a witch is a troll but so also is a ghost or vampire, a demon, a possessed animal, and a mountain dweller. The evidence does not suggest that any one of these groups held primary claim on the term.[9] Thinking like a nineteenth-century scientist will not further one's understanding of the medieval troll. Furthermore, it might be useful to resist the glossarial impulse to treat medieval Icelandic words as concepts that are carefully defined as they are used.

Considering the location, a mountain ridge, where Ásbjörn and his men encounter the troll, it can easily be imagined to be a creature native to the mountains. This does not however preclude the troll from being also a figure that may reside much closer to home, such as a ghost or a witch, a demon or a possessed beast. Since no further statement is made about it, other than a vague reference to its enormity,[10] any vision we may conjure up may be more or less erroneous. Sober zoologists may gnash their teeth at this deplorable lack of classifiable characteristics.[11] And yet the audience knows all that it needs to know about the troll, which is its place in the binary outlined above.

Perhaps it is a modern rather than a medieval obsession to wish to understand everything. It might be superfluous to gnash teeth: the troll's very potency seems to stem from its occult state. Ásbjörn's men did not expect to understand the troll. They would probably not have asked themselves

what it feels like to be a troll; the very idea being alien to them. How could these men understand a troll? They accept it as an other which they fear and they cannot imagine knowing it. Why is the troll not described? Possibly it is too distant, a black shape in the night. How then do they know it is a troll? One suspects their own feelings told them so. They are afraid, that is how they know.

The troll is danger; what is not dangerous and feared cannot be a troll. That much is evident in the men's startled reaction. The word "ósvipt" is well placed here, "svipr" denoting the human face, which each of the men loses with the onset of their dehumanising fear — they are defaced on the mountain ridge. Danger turns the world on its head. Like death it intrudes into the established order, snatches all imagined control from the humans who have set themselves up to be the protagonists of their own lives. Danger becomes an abyss, into which one can feel themself helplessly falling. As an image of danger, the troll cannot be but terrible. Its very appearance is ominous. A troll may attack; there is no shortage of attacking trolls in medieval Icelandic literature. But the troll always attacks before it ever acts, its very appearance an attack on presumptions of order and of control.

In the story of Ásbjörn, the troll does next to nothing. It is sighted, nothing more; not described, never explained. The only thing we need to know is that it startles the men, momentarily unmasking their human faces. In the end, this troll-story is not about the troll but about the men who encounter it. Could that be the case with all troll-stories?

As we will come to see, it is no coincidence that ghosts, vampires, and zombies are also framed as trolls.[12] To living humans, the various guises of the undead serve as specific reminders of their own mortality. In this case the troll is an omen of both Ásbjörn's and his master Tumi's impending deaths. The omen hardly acts; its presence is enough to startle. The spectre of death is omnipresent in human existence as its denial, its end. The trauma of annhiliation

tends to have many symbolic guises and the troll can represent it in several ways, both by predicting it and by becoming it, in the guise of an undead.

Some of the worst predators described in the Icelandic literature of the late Middle Ages are undead humans, and their occasional designation as trolls serves as a reminder of how the separation of the human and inhuman, or indeed otherness in general, may be vague. There is here an abundance of anthropomorphic otherness, including the undead, signifying the impossibility of total separation between us and them; what we are faced with instead is a shared uncanny relationship. While trolls are inhuman, they are essentially not absolutely separate or separable from humanity.[13] Uncanny otherness is perhaps the most potent of human threats, an attack on all notions of humanity and on order itself. Being both human and inhuman, the troll is chaos incarnate. Faced with such chaos, the strongest impulse may be to seek order, and imposing order has often been regarded as one of the primary duties of scholarship, intensely focused on the negation of its own futility.