The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North

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It is only natural that the two humans upon whom Bergbúa þátt is focused carry their own expectations of the ensuing encounter with them into their temporary rocky haven, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, they are in some way realised. The unknown something encountered in the cave remains an unknown something throughout and even beyond the tale. In many paranormal encounters the audience is tempted to focus on the unknown element, as if their attention is drawn there by a clever illusionist, and to forget the humans who experience the paranormal and subsequently frame their experience in language. In Bergbúa þátt, it is the experience of the individuals that is emphasized above explicating the nature of the chthonic monster that they encounter. A monster narrative it remains and yet its primary focus seems to be the human thoughts and emotions awakened by this monster’s appearance, or at least its presence, which are externalised in the narrative.65

The two humans involved are clearly established as binary opposites. There is the protagonist and hero Þórunir, the one who lives, and the anonymous servant who is fated to die. The servant fears and even attempts to flee from the paranormal while Þórunir remains calm and composed throughout, possibly even unaffected by his dark and cavernous surroundings. The petrified servant is also unable to remember even a single line from the paranormal poem whereas Þórunir remembers the whole thing and in doing so somehow seems to ensure his own survival.
In the poem itself it is actually stated, as clearly as is possible in this opaque poetic form, that the listeners’ survival may depend on their remembering it and perhaps this is why it is repeated three times. Paranormal beings may not, however, always be so accommodating and may generally tend towards repetition, somewhat in accordance with Freud’s theory of the death drive.66 This may be a sign of the essentially thanatic nature of monsters and perhaps fear itself, that thanatic impulse which dominates the servant while Þórr maintains his self-control, possibly his own erotic life force, that instinct for survival which helps people to embrace and enjoy life instead of stagnating in the overwhelming fear of death.

Constantly throughout the narrative we are told what Þórr and the servant hear, see, and remember. We are also told of acts or rituals that are somehow essential to their survival, though in ways never clearly explained in the narrative. It seems that these two humans represent the audience and the choices each of its members faces: to be, like the nameless servant, a fairly average and anonymous human who fears the unknown and loses his head in crisis situations, or to be righteous or even heroic like Þórr, the good Christian who is resourceful, remains calm and gains strength from the rituals of Christianity and, presumably and ultimately, from his imperturbable faith.67

Apart from its large and luminous eyes, the creature in the cave never reveals itself and remains mostly unidentified and likely unidentifiable. The two glowing eyes are the only identifiable feature of this metonymic monster, a creature whose physical form is never fully revealed but rather represented only by a terrible part of what must be an even more unimaginably terrible whole. Like a Lovecraftian monster or the eponymous enemy in The Lord of the Rings, this creature could never be more terrible if it ever revealed its whole self and thus it does not. Like all danger it is at its most potent lurking in the darkness,
watching rather than attacking, preying from a distance and leaving fear to do its work from within.  

The skaldic poetry that the two men hear recited throughout the night indicates that this creature should be considered a “bjargálfr” but the word álfr (elf) should not lead us, for example, to imagine the fair and angelic beings of Tolkien’s Middle-earth; the word conveys, as mentioned above, a broad significance and may include any superhuman figure, mostly benevolent and yet still dangerous, that has to be venerated or at least placated by humans, perhaps through cultic practices. Thus the “bjargálfr” may save us, since it is in its power to do so, but may also become destructive, as this narrative seems to strongly suggest.

The role of the poem within the narrative is ambiguous and not surprisingly so since it is clearly a nebulous ode. Its pagan nature is evident in the abundant heathen kennings used with references to heathen gods like Þórr and Óðinn (Þundr) and giants such as Surtr, Hrungnir, Hrímnir, and Aurnir. Thus the “bjargálfr” in the cave is situated within a heathen parallel universe, and its presumably superhuman powers belong to a past which is evil, savage, and, most importantly, has refused to go away as the past is supposed to do. It uncannily remains in the present but is nevertheless slowly disappearing into the cavernous depths, shadowed from the light of Christianity. The poem’s reference to the eruption and the apocalyptic imagery is hardly interesting as evidence that Icelanders knew of volcanic eruptions — a fairly self-evident fact — but due to the atmosphere of threat and doom that such events inevitably signify.

When Þóðór and the servant, the latter only temporarily, have escaped the doom that had been glaring at them through the darkness, the terrible luminous eyes, they speak of the whole experience as “undr” (a wonder), a statement that defies simple classification. A wonder can be either good or evil, Christian or pagan, miraculous or magical. Its occult nature is fundamental to the continued
existence of the wondrous; the wondrous is an impossible riddle, it is everything which cannot be explained and must retain its enigmatic state.

As it turns out the servant is under a curse — the audience will have suspected this from the outset since in this sort of narrative the bell must be tolling for someone. His death has been more or less predicted in the impenetrable skaldic verse, and thus his worst fears, which seemed so silly only moments ago, are in fact realised. Following his moment of fear already exiled from life itself, as the terrified must always be, he is now permanently exiled. The tragedy of this lies in the fact that his is the same fear familiar to every mortal human, presumably including everyone in the medieval audience of the tale, fear of the sudden displacement from life to death, which is beyond all imagining, despite any of the epistemological systems that have been invented to rationalise and reduce it. The servant has no name of his own precisely because he is only all of us, as we really are: timid, vulnerable, and easily disposable humans.

In stories, however, we are allowed to choose another role and a more heroic ending. In the end, the narrative of this paranormal encounter focuses on the survivor, Þórdór, who escapes doom. The audience is thus offered the opportunity to identify with this heroic man, rather than the everyman who accompanied him, and to survive along with him; indeed its members are encouraged to do so, evident in the particular focus on his survival provided at the end of the story, a survival in this case based on Þórdór’s resourcefulness and his Christian faith in the transcendence and the immortality of the soul. The survivor is indeed the most important person in any disaster narrative as only the survivors are able to relate their accounts of the event.71 Identifying with the survivor provides a sense of relief so enormous that it can only be acquired through a close brush with death. As everyone who wants to will know, though, Þórdór’s release is only temporary and any
eventual or eternal salvation must remain strictly a matter of faith.