Trollspeak

Keeping in mind the effect of the locutions of the unknown on its audience, the parlance of the trolls seems to demand further attention. Even though the din of the skaldic drápa recited in Bergbúa þáttir produces a powerful effect, paranormal others do not speak only in obscure, skaldic verse. In some narratives, trolls are more clearly intelligible, and their speech relegates human witnesses to the uneasy role of interpreters.

The events of Ch. 52 of Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar, a hagiographical kings’ saga composed in Iceland c. 1200 by an otherwise unknown Þingeyrar monk named Oddr Snorra-son, take place shortly before the death of the heroic and chivalric King Óláfr Tryggvason around the turn of the first millennium. Here the king is sailing north to Hálagaland, anchors his ship when night falls, and asks his men to remain on the ship until the next morning. However, two of the king’s men awaken during the night and leave the ship to go on a private excursion. Soon they come upon a mountain with a cave and notice that “váru trǫll mǫrg við eld” (many trolls were at the fire). These trolls are conversing about the great missionary king and his antagonism to their lot, and their trollspeak will be quoted here in its entirety:

They heard that one of them spoke and said—they identified him as the leader of the trolls:

“You will know that King Óláfr has come to our regions and will tomorrow go ashore and attack our homes and drive us away.”
Then a second troll answers: “That is not a good prognosis since I will tell you that we met once. I was living in Gaulardalur in the south close to Earl Hákon my friend and this was a bad change when this one replaced him as the earl and I had many good dealings. And once when the king’s men had a game close to my abode I found their noise unpleasant, and I did not like them, and I entered the game with them so that I was invisible to them, and I left them so that one had a broken hand. The next day I broke the foot of another and I thought the prognosis was excellent. And on the third day I entered the game and wanted to attack one of them. And when I grasped one, that man grasped my thighs and I felt his touch burned me and I wanted to escape but I could not and I realised then that this was the king. And wherever he touched me I burned and I have never been as miserable and finally I went down under and then I left and came here to the north.”

Then a second demon spoke: “I came to where the king was feasting and wanted to betray him with a drink and took the guise of a fair woman and stood with a horn near the trapeze-shaped table and well adorned. And during the evening when the king saw me he stretched out his hand to take the horn and then I felt sure of success. But when he took the horn he struck my head with it with such strength that I thought it would break and I had to use the lower passage and this is what I got from our meeting.”

And then a third troll spoke: “I will tell you how I fared. I came to the room where the king lay and the bishop in another bed and I took the guise of a fair woman. The king said: ‘You, woman! Come and scratch my leg.’ And I did that and scratched his leg and made him itch all the more. Then the king fell asleep and I loomed over him and wanted to kill him. But in that moment the bishop stuck me between the shoulders with a book and I was so injured that every bone broke and I had to
take the lower passage. But the bishop woke the king and asked to see the foot and plague had entered it and the bishop cut out the spot and it became whole again. This is the mark he left me with.”

And having heard this, they returned to the ships.

But the morning after they told the king and the bishop what they had seen and heard and they recognised about this. But the king asked that they would not do this again and said it was very dangerous to go there. And then they walked up and cast holy water and chanted and destroyed all monsters there. And after that the king went to Þrándheimr with great prestige.86

The laconic tone and lack of wonder demonstrated by the human protagonists is at first striking.87 The two humans who witness the talk of the trolls are almost invisible in this narrative, but since the king has already specified the danger of and warned against their straying from the ship, their thrill during this session of eavesdropping is palpable even if the author felt it superfluous to depict or to mention it explicitly.88

The focus here is on the trolls’ discourse, opening up a set of questions commonly raised in light of many monster narratives throughout the ages, since such monsters are frequently not content to merely grunt or roar but are able to strike up a curiously intelligent conversation in an intelligible language. This fact alone compels the audience to consider the partial humanity of the trolls and to wonder whether or not the sophisticated and structured way in which they emote their concerns about the king might negate their bestiality. Or should we perhaps regard the human witnesses as translators and interpreters? One may note the uneasy application of categories upon these ogres, variously referred to as trolls, demons, or all monsters — the trollish, demonic, and monstrous seeming to belong together in one broad category.89 Possibly this unease reflects the confusion of the witnesses who, like Ásbjörn and his
men on the mountain ridge, cannot fully understand what they see and hear but know that they are in the presence of some kind of paranormal peril.

The evident fact that here man and troll share a language immediately makes the encounter more intimate. The moment the alien speaks intelligibly it is displaced from one category of the monstrous to another, no less monstrous but now uncannily so in its intimate otherness. The troll remains alien and yet becomes familiar, and the marriage of its familiarity and strangeness makes it eerie and uncanny, frightening in ways different from those monstrous others that are wholly unfamiliar and seem to be utterly alien. This kindred dynamic shared between protagonists and monsters is indeed an essential theme of medieval Icelandic monstrosity.90

In this way the near-invisible human witnesses again draw our attention. How can the experience described be separated from its retelling; is it even possible to separate the two in any narrative of otherworldly experience? We have no direct access to the paranormal encounters of the Middle Ages, indeed from any age, as such, only textual attempts to put inexplicable experiences into words and thus, to some degree, make sense out of nonsense. The sense, as well as a part of the experience, rests though not in the supposed lived experience but in the minds of other humans. When discussing the experience, an effort must thus be made to discuss the possible paradigms for its conceptualisation. Paranormal experiences thus become inseparable from language since language cannot but define and shape the experiences it is used to describe.91

In this case, the paranormal experience is the discourse: long speeches by trolls expressing their vulnerability when faced by the powerful king, and in which everything is perverted and topsy-turvy as we are forced to momentarily adopt the point of view of the enemy. In this inversion, the humans hiding in their very midst may seem uncomfortably akin to the troll attempting and failing to
hide amongst the royal court. The spies, our representatives in the narrative, have now descended unnoticed into an inverted otherworld, experientially if not spatially, into a world where troll is the norm, perhaps unsettling the known cosmology.

With no description of the physical appearance of the trolls, the focus here is indeed on their behaviour, mostly as described by the trolls themselves. These creatures are characterised neither by the nature of their speech nor their appearance but by their self-proclaimed unusual and seemingly magical powers. The “second troll” reveals its ability to become invisible to the king’s men although the king himself seems fully aware of its presence, possibly through his own transcendental powers. Then a “second demon” describes its own ability to metamorphose into a beautiful woman, once again failing to fool the perceptive king who turns out to be a most able defender against such dark arts. The fourth speaker, the so-called “third troll,” claims to possess the same powers, the only difference being that it was a bishop and not the king who once saw through its disguise as a beautiful woman. All three speakers reveal that their magic skills are used to maim, poison, and make people itch in order to infuse their legs with the plague. Their arts are very dark indeed although they ultimately turn out to be no match for humanity’s and civilization’s able defender King Óláfr and God’s agent, the bishop.

After suffering defeat all three villains end up having to escape through “the lower passage,” indicating that these are creatures of the infernal regions, the netherworlds occupied by the devil himself and all his demons. Their accounts also reveal that such beings are most successfully foiled by the holy book or by persons who possess an aura of the sacral, such as the holy king himself or the bishop. In the end, they are driven away by holy water and chanting, and thus their opposition to the sacred is drawn in no uncertain contours.
This is far from the only paranormal visitation described in this particular narrative; the king himself faces a multitude of other hostile visitors throughout the saga, including assassins, who turn out to be witches, demons or even heathen gods. The message conveyed throughout the narrative is that the paranormal walks among us, or at least it did so at the dawn of the last millennium, in the period during which the North was Christianized. It sometimes becomes hard to draw a clear line between the normal and the paranormal in this transcendental history; we are in a world replete with demons, witches, and trolls—the various heathen spirits of Óláfs saga seem as ubiquitous as the aliens in Men in Black, many of which may remain undiscovered—who in spite of their paranormal powers are as much a part of the reality the saga describes as are the king himself and his men.

In Oddr’s Óláfs saga, the binary opposition between the sacred and the profane, the Christian and the pagan, God and the devil, that provides the interpretative framework for such paranormal encounters. However, while God is plain, unified, and intact, no such simplicity characterises his enemies. God and his saint-like king oppose a plethora of monsters with different names and different guises. And, on occasion, we are presented with their strangely familiar and yet macabre discourse which reveals, whether we want to hear it or not, that far from being utterly alien there is an essential familiarity, even intimacy between man and troll.