Causality

The narratives examined thus far are dramatic in nature, showing rather than telling, their purposes expressed through acts rather than sober attempts to define images of the universe—as is the art of the saga. Ideas of causality are adumbrated but rarely elaborated upon or explained. The reasons for this become manifest when specific episodes in which attempts are made to talk about the paranormal and even to define it are closely examined. Immediately contradictions begin to emerge, binaries between rationalism and superstition cannot be sustained and reality becomes slippery. Language, man’s tool for imposing order, becomes rather an implement of chaos.

In the preceding chapters the focus has been placed upon descriptions of paranormal encounters and the experiences of the humans who sit facing the trolls. However, the actual experiences described are inseparable from the causal explanations attached to each encounter. Tagging along with experience are matters of identification, classification, and rationalisation. The human is Cartesian in that he exists since he thinks. Words may not always come easy and yet they will arrive in the end and wrap up the experience, taking not only care of but also exercising some sort of control over it. As unknown as the occult may be, it never arrives or departs without an implied causality, even if it is never completely summarized or explained.

In medieval Iceland, the identification of the occult was an endeavour fraught with contradiction, and this may be best illustrated with a case study of three paranormal en-
counters involving the same historical figure whose own relationship with the paranormal was essentially incongruous. This man was by his very social standing a liminal figure, in one famous incident even straddling divergent tectonic plates, but, perhaps more meaningfully to the medieval audience, historically situated on the crest between two religions: organised Christianity and the nebulous heathen customs that preceded its arrival, himself presumably a former pagan official who had quickly adapted to the new Christian ways. The three paranormal encounters involving this figure are indicative of the essential contradictions that the causal explanations of occult phenomena entail: everything is explained and identified, yet things remain also crucially unexplainable and only nominally identified.