Never Forget

Before burning Víga-Hrappr’s body and, as far as that is possible, terminating his hauntings, Óláfr the Peacock had met the zombie in the doorway of his own byre. Óláfr had then launched a spear at Víga-Hrappr and tried to grapple with him, demonstrating through his actions that a true magnate fears nothing. As noted above, nefarious spirits are closely allied with fear and are thus partially incapacitated by a simple show of courage. Óláfr is fully awake during this encounter but much later he experiences a mostly unrelated paranormal encounter during a bout of sleep, shortly after having had the eighteen-year-old ox Harri butchered. The ox had had remarkable talents and these may have been no accident, since after the animal’s death Óláfr dreams of a large and angry woman appearing before him. She tells him that he has ensanguined her son and that she will react in kind, choosing his favourite son in returning the favour. When Óláfr awakens, he feels that he still briefly sees the woman, and he “þótti mikils um vert drauminn ok segir vinum sínum ok varð ekki ráðinn svá at honum líki. Þeir þóttu honum bezt um tala er þat mæltu at þat væri draumskrök er fyrir hann hafði borit” (was impressed by the dream and tells his friends and none could decipher it to his liking. He liked those best who said it was a false dream that he had experienced) [77]. Denial is always an attractive solution to any problem, but it may prove futile in this case.

Paranormal encounters in dreams and sleep are a subject in their own right and, as my aim here is not to map all paranormal motifs found in medieval Icelandic texts, the
generally liminal nature of sleep will only be noted here and not analysed further. However, the dream woman’s emphasis on reciprocity is worth pondering since this is an attribute common to paranormal encounters described in the sagas and one of those features that indeed posit paranormal figures as human doubles. The troll you meet in a cave or in your slumber will indeed act as a mirror, whether it is successfully trying to magnify your fears or simply coldly informing you that unyielding relentless payment is due for all of the mischief one commits in life. The troll is relentless. It never forgets or forgives, calculating your crimes with mathematical precision and, then, callously collecting any outstanding debts. Óláfr the Peacock, as sage as he is benevolent, knows this already — what else do we dream than that which we already know? — but the unnamed woman hammers the message home that there will be blood. It is a mathematical certainty.

Long before the age of unsmiling functionaries gathering their strength from relentless computers who tend to “say no” at the most important and punishing moments, the same hardcore ruthlessness was embodied in paranormal others. They often also, however, brought the same unimaginative, mathematical precision to the aid of those fortunate humans who had somehow managed to acquire a store of good karma. The well-known folktale AT 156, famous in the Aulus Gellius’s version Androcles and the Lion, highlights the commonly benevolent aspect of this unflinching law. As the apparition of the late or possibly undead legendary heroine Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, visiting the teenager Jóreiðr in her dreams in Sturlunga saga, remarks, she is a friend to her friends. Similarly, many indigenous Icelandic romances contain narratives in which the hero acquires a paranormal helper through a good deed. In sagas taking place in Iceland, however, this phenomenon is rare, the humans here having rather to soldier on as the otherworld offers mostly hostility and danger. As Þórðr’s fate in Bergbúa þáttr indicates, however, survival in the
face of the paranormal is possible, both through strength of mind and strength of rituals, and, possibly, through some kind of truce with the paranormal threat, which in his case involved memorising and disseminating its verse.

Whether benevolent or hostile, these occult forces are mostly characterised by elephantine memory and a blind adherence to the laws of reciprocity. They are blind and deaf to excuses as well; no extenuating circumstances are possible. The audience knows, and sees the injustice in this. Óláfr, for example, had meant no harm in slaughtering his ox, and the entitled magnate whose life has been characterised by wealth and success can hardly believe he has been singled out to be damned for it, eagerly seeking denial from every quarter. Yet the paranormal has already reared its ugly head as an unforgiving and unflinching *memento mori*. Blood has been spilled and the dream woman will extract her own pound of flesh, caring naught for the quality of mercy.

The dream woman inside Óláfr the Peacock’s subconsciousness who refuses to forgive or forget is perhaps so relentless precisely because she is inside his head, a creature born of his unresolved guilt. In this instance, not uniquely, the human mind is far more merciless to its own possessor than any alien creature ever could be.

Whether this lack of forgiveness, presented more as an irrefutable natural law than an act of will, is seen as pagan or un-Christian is not clearly specified in the text. Such dream women stand outside of the official religion, still not official in Iceland when the encounter is purported to have taken place (close to 970), but the half-Irish and widely travelled Óláfr would certainly have been exposed to it. Throughout the story Óláfr never expresses any doubts about the powers of the dark forces he encounters but, as already evident in his struggle with the ghost Hrappr and in more examples that follow below, he actively opposes them on numerous occasions, fulfilling his role at the apex of the civilised world.
The mnemonic function of the paranormal other may be linked to its seemingly fundamental identification with the past, a thread which will be pursued at greater length below. Another fundamental thread evident here is the emphasis on the callow of this scene. The dream-woman’s “son,” the butchered ox, represents youth, as does also the son of the magnate the dream woman intends to collect in compensation for her own loss. The vulnerability of confident, unsuspecting youth, carefree and liberated from the timidity of the old, is indeed an important theme in some of the most memorable paranormal encounters found in the sagas.