Ljót’s nefarious ambition was to attack not only its inhabitants but also the very earth itself and to deplete it of its bounties. Such depletion is often the primary purpose of parasitic monsters such as incubi, succubi, hags, moras, and vampires, and such parasitic motives can also be conceptualised as fundamentally trollish. Though some undead remain in the confines of their mounds, dangerous only within their own limited territory, other trolls are essentially vampires, meaning that they actively seek to infect others with their own trollish nature. A prime example of the workings of such ghostly infections or vampirism can be found in Eyrbyggja saga in the hauntings of infamous undead Þórólfr twistfoot, protagonist of what must be considered one of the most extensive medieval Icelandic ghost stories.

In life, and particularly in his old age, Þórólfr had been a man full of frustration and hate, which he directed at the young and vivacious and his own son in particular. After his undeath his hatred is transformed and multiplied into an undead’s animosity towards all living things. Many of the undead described in the sagas were unpopular and marginal during their human lives, their undead atrocities natural continuations of the misery they had experienced in life and thus perhaps partly an indictment on the shortcomings of human societies and their inability to embrace all of their members equally. If not evidently frustrated and malicious, they are still unpopular for some unstated reason, like Garðarr (or Garði), for example, the foreman of Þorsteinn Eiríksson’s farmstead in Lýsfjörðr (Amerag-
dla) in Greenland, first to die in the so called Lýsufjørður-wonders and thus the cause of all the ensuing haunting.267

Most of the legendary ghosts of medieval Iceland started out as shunned, anti-social, troublesome, and gloomy people, all with an air of misery hovering over them and later to metamorphose into infectious paranormal otherness.268 In fact one of the undead of Fróðá, which Snorri goði had to exorcise and expel with his mock trial, was in life a practising witch: the line between ghostly visitations and witchcraft is always a thin one. And if the social standing of the future undead does not indicate clearly enough their potential for pestilential vampirism, there are always various clues in the event of death itself: the corpse often appearing strangely upright, its eyes to be avoided at all costs.269

Along with the later Fróðá wonders, Þórólfr twistfoot’s hauntings are a prime example of a ghost epidemic with an emphasis on its infectious threat.270 When Þórólfr begins to roam no-one is safe in the open air after sunset, with cattle becoming trollriða (trollridden), the parasite familiarly conceived as a rider, riding its victim into a craze. The aim of the parasitic undead, the vampire, seems to be to “troll” or craze people, to infect and thus recruit them to join their own zombie cohort. Þórólfr soon begins gathering followers, the first of which is a shepherd, chosen — as mentioned above — as is the lot of such youngsters more on account of his vulnerability than his potential for evil. He is once found kolblár (blue as coal) and is soon seen in the company of Þórólfr, filling the role of monster as well as that of victim.271

This dual role of victim and troll taken on by what were originally ordinary humans such as the hapless shepherd is a particularly haunting aspect of vampirism: the fragile innocents also risk infection of trollishness. Even youngsters and children can preternaturally graduate to an afterlife as frightening ghouls before ever getting the chance to reach their full human potential. The fourteenth-centu-
ry sagas of Guðmundr Arason contain a haunting narrative about an infant who becomes a ghoul: the horror story of Selkolla. A maiden child is born at a small farm and a man and a woman are asked to carry it to the local church for baptism. But, overcome by lust, they stop at a stone called Miklisteinn to copulate (possibly their only chance of such release in a society which expected everyone apart from the ruling class to be more or less celibate) and while they are at it, something seems to come over the infant. When they return to it, it looks “blue, dead and terrible” so they abandon it, but on their way back home they hear a terrible cry and the infant now seems alive but so monstrous that they dare not approach it. The innocent infant betrayed by adults now becomes an ogre threatening the whole region, reminding us that ghost and horror stories are nourished by unhappiness and crime. It becomes the role of the bishop, as exorcist, to drive away this ogre that walks in broad daylight, sometimes looking like a beautiful woman but sometimes with the head of a seal, and in the former guise seduces respectable husbands by taking on the appearance of their wives. In this narrative, it is hard not to discern the guilt of the whole of society that in the end takes on the form of this demon, and we are also reminded that the most terrifying ghoul may originate in a harmless infant.

In the case of the hauntings of Þórolfr, his whole cohort, victims and monsters, all hail back to the original monster whom the vampire hunters must eventually confront. When Þórolfr is dug up much later, he is described as “enn ófúinn ok inn trollsligsti at sjá; hann var blár sem hel ok digr sem naut” (still not rotten and trollish to behold; he was blue as Hell and big as a bull). There is in this case no mention of a foul odour or stench, but most of the other common motifs are present. The corpse has not yet begun to rot, being neither dead nor alive, and yet it is hideous to look upon.
The trollish corpse of the vampire connects the undead with witches, giants, ogres, possessed animals, and heathen gods. The Þórólfr is also as blue as Hell, like Grettir’s nemesis Glámr whose body is also discovered “blár sem hel, en digr sem naut” (blue as Hell, but big as a bull). The colour blue is redolent of the netherworld and its queen Hel, which in Christian times must have somehow become conflated with the Christian Hell. It is in this instance a demonic colour, reminding the audience of the essentially alien nature of the undead, familiar though Þórólfr may have been in life. The undead represent hell on earth and are as demonic as other trolls in spite of their human origins, their intimacy, which may in fact seem to make them all the more frightening.

Hiring a vampire slayer to deal with the undead may also lead to infection, as is the case in Grettis saga. At one point in the saga Þórhallr of Forsæludalr hires a particularly fearless shepherd to deal with an ogre that has been bothering him. This vampire slayer is the infamous Glámr, complete with gusty stench. Though still human he is also already somewhat demonic upon his arrival, but after having fought the ogre to the death, Glámr becomes an even greater threat than the monster he had expelled. Þórhallr then must hire another ghostbuster, the foreign Þorgautr, whom Glámr promptly kills but fails to infect with his inherited trollish nature. Finally, one more expert trollfighter is called in, Grettir the strong. He alone can destroy the ghost but also must pay a price — the eyes of Glámr following him wherever he goes, his nightmares becoming the last vestige of the ghostly infection making its way through Forsæludalr.

This tale of trollish vampirism drives home the commonly uncanny nature of the undead. Formerly human, the ghost is our double, and its own foul fate must be regarded as a threat to us as well. The ridings of the witch and the crazing of the troll both tap strongly into the fear of death that vitalizes ghost stories, while also gaining
some strength from fears of actual kinds of bodily infections, recognisable but seemingly not well understood at the time. The agency of the undead is inexplicable apart from the fact that they are after us and want to make us like them. This is partially a metaphor for the inevitability of death, although here undeath takes the place of death, the latter a phenomenon which utterly resists all representation. The spectral vampire goes beyond physical death, is its negation as it presumably robs its victims of their human souls and denies them the eternal life that is the hope of all mankind. This salvation is never certain, though, and narratives of the parasitic undead tap into those feelings of doubt and uncertainty. The vampire thus functions as a figure of that abyss of nothingness that we fully expect in spite of all our hopes.

PLEASE! LET ME IN!