The Fragile State of Humanity

Among the famous undead of the Sagas of Icelanders is Sóti the Viking whom Hrœður Grímkelsson encounters in Götland, when enlisted to break the Viking’s mound. Sóti is said to have been “mikit tröll í lífinu, en hálfu meira, síðan hann var dauðr” (a great troll in life but even more since he was dead). The word troll, as usual, is not defined explicitly here but witchcraft is seemingly implied. In life Sóti was clearly a hostile user of magic and in death he is an undead, a zombie, a greater evil still. Like Þórólfr twistfoot, but presumably unlike the shepherd he had attacked and the others in his entourage, Sóti does not become a troll in death but is already trollish while he lived. His metamorphosis from witch to undead is thus one of degree rather than nature as he remains a troll throughout the transformation. The same applies to the aforementioned Víga-Hrappr of Laxárdalr (see “Troll on Your Doorstep”) who is said to be difficult in life but even harder to deal with in death. The undead are often more potent in death than in life, and it must be stressed that their powers are entirely malicious and can only be used to kill, maim, and destroy.

As revealed in the aforementioned story of Örvar-Oddr’s nemesis Ögmundr Eyþjófsbani, who was “trolled” by the Permians, one’s trollishness may be a dynamic state. This is particularly evident in the use of the verb trylla (tryllask, tryllldr), suggesting—to borrow a phrasing from Simone de Beauvoir—that one is not born, but rather becomes, a troll, often in un/death but sometimes while still living, presumably through the use of magic. When
“trolled” the human transforms and is no longer the same recognisable being they had been before. In some cases a metamorphosis into a bestial form signifies the transformation from human to troll.\textsuperscript{285} In other cases, a more subtle transmogrification is implied, the troll is “eigi einhamr” (not of one body),\textsuperscript{286} which may indicate a similar state of witchcraft as that depicted in the following description of Óðinn’s sorcery:

Óðinn skipti hóum. Lá þá búkrinn sem sofín eða dauðr, en hann var þá fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr, ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lónd at sínum ørendum eða annarra manna.

(Óðinn could switch shapes. Then the body lay as sleeping or dead, but he was then bird or beast, fish or worm, and could in one moment go to remote countries to do his business or that of others.)\textsuperscript{287} 

In spite of this description, there is often considerable ambiguity about what shape-shifting actually entails. Indeed, the word hamr, like the aforementioned móðr, has an ambiguous sense in the Old Norse texts, and there is also comparable ambiguity about the concept of fylgjur, those paranormal beings who have an undefined, possibly even parasitic rather than symbiotic, relationship with their human counterparts, and whether or not bestiality is a necessary part of that particular metamorphosis.\textsuperscript{288} 

The state of being or becoming “trolled” is symptomatic of the uncanny nature of the troll. Much like a human transformed into a dragon — such as the evil Fáfnir\textsuperscript{289} — zombies were all once humans, fairly normal or particularly evil, and witches still remain so, though partly transformed by magic into something non-human. Thus it could be argued that the troll always retains a past that links it to normality. Even Þórólfr twistfoot was not always a twistfoot, and thus there is in the very concept of the troll an element of
corruption. Much like the death the undead simultaneously negate and confirm, the troll, having been at some point “trolled,” is a somewhat devastating reminder of the fragile state of humanity, originally created in god’s own image. Humans cannot deny the troll as an image of their own possible future, and so the troll, the very antithesis of humanity, is still an essential part of humanity.

Its dynamic state is essential to the troll—as integral as are magic and malevolence. Witches, ghouls, possessed animals, even nebulous mountain-dwelling ogres, are neither discrete species of the otherworldly nor even are they firmly separable from humanity. They are, in a sense, all or any of us, which means, of course, that we are also, in a sense, them. These two states of being, human and troll, are separated only by magic and the passage of time, the former a somewhat obvious but the latter a no less essential element in the cultural myth of the troll.