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Groaning Dwarfs at Granite Doors

Fieldwork in Völuspá

Hvat er með ásom?	What troubles the Æsir?
Hvat er með álfom?	What troubles the Elves?
Gnýr allr iotunheimr.	Giant Realm is all aroar.
Æsir ro á þingi.	The Æsir are in council.
Stynia dvergar	Dwarfs groan
fyr steindurom,	at the granite doors,
veggbergs vísir.	well knowing their immuring rock.
Vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?	Do you still seek to know? And what?
	(Dronke 1997: 20–21) ¹

Scholarship on the mother of all Eddic poems, *Völuspá*, rich and wide-ranging though it is, has overlooked a little reference in the latter half of the poem, which I believe is significant for its elucidation. The reference is in the stanza cited above and invokes a whole field of signification through its description of groaning dwarfs at granite doors — or so I will argue in this paper. Through textual criticism and folkloristic analysis, I hope to contribute a footnote to the interpretation of *Völuspá* and its eschatological narrative.

But first, a little philology: the stanza occupies a different place in the order of the poem in its three main manuscripts. In the *Codex Regius* manuscript (R), it comes after the onslaught of *Kiöll* from the east and *Loki*'s leading the sons of *Múspell* across the sea, both en route to that ultimate battle, *Ragnarök*. It is followed by the attack of the most sinister of giants, *Surtr*, who comes raging from the south, and we are told that at the same time, “*Griótbiorg gnata, / en gifr rata. / Troða halir helveg, / en himinn klofnar*” (Stone peaks clash, / and troll wives take to

¹ All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted — the notable exception being the English version of the stanzas of *Völuspá*, in which I am happy to follow Ursula Dronke 1997. I would like to acknowledge the invaluable advice offered by John Lindow, in whose debt I also am for retrieving the only extant copy of this paper from old piles in his office after I managed to lose all electronic traces of it.

the road. / Warriors tread the path from Hel, / and heaven breaks apart"; Dronke 1997, 21). In the manuscripts of *Hauksbók* (**H**) and *Snorra Edda* (**SnE**), however, we come across the stanza a little earlier, following a stanza that shows the world tree shivering and moaning, and 'the giant' breaking free. After the dwarfs chime in with the tree, the poem goes on to narrate how the wolf Garmr tears loose, and then repeats, in the second half-stanza, a formulaic affirmation of the *völva*'s prophetic wisdom. In the editions of Neckel and Kuhn (1962, 11) and Jón Helgason (1955, 12), the stanza that deals with the dwarfs — the stanza dealt with in this paper — is assigned the number 48, to reflect its place in **H** and **SnE**, but placed after stanza 51, in accordance with **R**. Sigurður Nordal (1952, 127) gives it the same number, but places it according to that number, reflecting the order in **H** and **SnE**. In Ursula Dronke's edition (1997, 20), however — the one I will follow here — the stanza is number 49, and said to follow number 45 in **H** and be assigned that same place in **SnE**.

The text of the stanza holds no great semantic mysteries. The very slight variations in lexical forms do not affect the meaning of the stanza, and the only phrase for which there are multiple contending readings is "veggbergs visir", describing the dwarfs. It is variously glossed as "rulers of the cliffs" (Larrington 1996) or "well knowing the cliffs" (Dronke 1997; Nordal 1952), while a third possible reading would be "the wise ones of the cliffs".

These divergent readings of "veg[g]bergs visir", however, have not had any impact on the interpretation of the stanza and the role assigned to the groaning dwarfs in the larger context of the poem. Most critics concur in their interpretations, with the notable exception of Finnur Jónsson, who found the stanza as a whole objectionable:

As regards stanza 48, I don't believe it is authentic; the forceful foregrounding of the dwarfs, who pretty much take up the entire half-stanza, is not convincing; the first half is jumbled and confused; the questions are not fully answered. Elves would have deserved at least as much attention as dwarfs. (1911, 30)²

Other than Finnur Jónsson, I think it is safe to characterize as a consensus position the notion that the stanza forms an integral part of the

² "Hvad v. 48 angår, betragter jeg det som uægte; den stærke fremhævelse af dværgene, der så at sige fylder hele halvverset, er lidet tiltalende; den første halvdel er uordnet og forvirret; der gives ikke fuldt svar på spørgsmålene. Alverne havde dog vel fortjent lige så megen hensyntagen som dværgene."

völva's eschatological vision and that all its elements refer to the impending doom of the gods and end of time. Sigurður Nordal (1952) and Ursula Dronke (1997) discuss this at some length in their editions of the poem and come to similar conclusions. Nordal's interpretation is as follows (note the sarcastic retort to Finnur Jónsson):

The strongest and most remarkable point of the stanza is, nevertheless, the description of the dwarfs. Nothing makes it more evident than their fear that the foundations of existence are slipping away. These beings, who reside in stones and cliffs (*veggbergs visir* = familiar with the cliffs) and otherwise hardly make an appearance, now stand groaning outside their doors of stone and have no shelter where they might be safe. It has been said that the dwarfs are too insignificant to be described in greater detail than the elves. That would be some socialism! Precisely because the dwarfs are so lowly that they live in stones, and earth is *supported by stone*, this description has greater implications than if the fear of those who live in high palaces were recounted. (128, emphasis in original)³

Sigurður Nordal prefers the placement of this stanza in H and SnE, as he finds it "unthinkable for the Æsir to be in council after their enemies have arrived" (127). To Ursula Dronke, however, "the reason for leaving 49 where it is in R seems good",

In R the relentless sequence of attack:

Hrymr ekr austan ... (47)

Kiöll ferr austan ... (48)

Surtr ferr sunnan ... (50)

is interrupted by just before the climax of Surtr's coming, and the consequent collapse of the rocky world, by a 'stanza of consternation' (49) ...

She goes on to give us this elegant reading of the stanza:

There is no mistaking the roar from Jotunheimr (49/3). The dwarfs in the stone can tell that the earth's last hour has come (49/5-7). Their

³"Merkasta og sterkasta atriði vísunnar er þó lýsing dverganna. Ekkert sýnir betur, að grundvöllurinn er að skriðna undan tilverunni, en ótti þeirra. Þessar verur, sem annars koma varla í ljós, heldur hafast við í steinum og hömrum (*veggbergs visir* = kunnugir í klettum), standa nú stynjandi úti fyrir steindyrum sínum og vita sig hvergi óhulta. Það hefur verið sagt, að dvergarnir væru of litilmótlegir til þess að vera lýst nákvæmar en álfunum. Skárri væri það nú jafnaðarmennskan! Einmitt af því, að dvergarnir lúta svo lágt að byggja steina, en fold er *steini studd*, felst meira í þessari lýsingu en þótt sagt væri frá ugg þeirra, er í háreistum höllum búa."

fears — in 49 — are fulfilled in 50 — *gríotbiorg gnata* (50/5). The poet has deliberately set the coming of Surtr (50/1–4) within a frame (49/5–7 and 50/5–8) of the collapse of the physical earth and the ending of its hidden life — of the dwarfs and the trollwomen inside the hills and the heroes underground in Hel. (It can hardly be [an] accident that the poet chose the subterraneans to point his intention.) (69–70)

While I am made slightly uncomfortable by Dronke's allusions to authorial intent,⁴ I wholeheartedly agree with her interpretation. My only question is how *we* can tell that the dwarfs "can tell that the earth's last hour has come." Nordal interprets their groans as signs of fear, and that is certainly a possibility, though groaning or sighing, "stynja", is perhaps not most immediately associated with fear of all feelings. Dronke, however, has a different take on this: "No other occasion, no other trouble was like this one. . . . Even the dwarfs come to the doors of hated daylight, forced by one terror to face another — to be turned into stone" (58).

Dronke is doubtless thinking of the dwarf Alvið, as well as an assortment of supernatural creatures in medieval literature and younger legend collections, who turn to stone when forced to face the light of day or the rays of the sun (for some examples, see references in Boberg's 1966 *Motif-Index*, F451.3.2.1 and F451.2.3.1.1). However, it is unclear — to me at least — why she would allot this fate to the dwarfs of *Völuspá*. All the poem actually mentions is their groans and the fact that they are by the doors of stone (not the doors of daylight), that they have, in other words, left or that they are leaving their dwellings. Nor are there, as far as I can tell, any contextual clues which might lead to us this conclusion — Nordal may be right that the dwarfs are afraid, but that's not quite the same as saying they are petrified. In fact, a few stanzas earlier, we learn that before these fated events take place, the beams of the sun turn black, eliminating, one would assume, the source of danger for dwarfs: "Svort verða sólskin / of sumor eptir, / veðr oll válynd. / Vituð ér enn — eða hvat?" ("Black become the sun's beams / in the summers that follow, / weathers all treacherous. / Do you still seek to know / And what?"; Dronke 1997, 18).

As I say, I find both Sigurður Nordal and Ursula Dronke convincing when they claim that the allusion to the dwarfs makes it apparent

⁴ Assuming, along with most scholars, that *Völuspá* was in oral tradition before it was committed to parchment, the order of stanzas is likely to be attributable to the tradition community, rather than an original author.

“that the foundations of existence are slipping away” (Nordal) and that it signals the world’s final hours and impending doom (Dronke). However, I think there is a missing link in this interpretation; I’m pretty sure that the pertinent lines refer to a traditional story, familiar to at least some, and perhaps many, participants in the oral tradition of which the poem was a part (or, if you prefer, to the poet and medieval audiences/readers). It is my contention that once this reference is pointed out it renders apparent the import of these lines in the context of Ragnarök. I submit that the motif of dwarfs leaving their abodes had a special traditional significance and that this significance may be attested in other texts, modern as well as medieval. The motif hints at a migratory legend, which tradition participants in the Germanic tradition area have used for remarkably similar ends for a considerable length of time.

Before examining intertextual evidence at greater remove from this stanza, however, some remarks are in order concerning dwarfs in medieval Scandinavian tradition and in *Völuspá* in particular. One might begin by remarking that mythological sources depict dwarfs as an all-male race of supernatural beings, residing in cliffs and stones, created asexually from the bones and blood of the primordial giants, according to *Völuspá* (we learn from *Vafþrúðnismál* 21 that these are also the ingredients of the cliffs and the sea). In the grand dichotomy, dwarfs appear to be more closely aligned with giants, in opposition to gods and mankind. Nonetheless, the role usually assigned to them is that of donors to the two latter races. Thus, the sources attest that dwarfs created the most powerful weapons and prized possessions of the gods. They are reluctant donors, however, and the gods generally obtain the goods through deceit, threats, or bribery. While the poem *Alvíssmál* attributes occult knowledge, and even a whole occult lexicon, to dwarfs, they appear more often to be rather gullible and are always short-changed when dealing with the gods. On the other hand, they can get the better of humans, as may be seen from the story of king Sveigðir. This story is known to us from the poem *Ynglingatal* and from Snorri Sturluson’s prose account in *Ynglingasaga*, the first book of *Heimskringla* (a legendary history of the kings of Norway). The former, *Ynglingatal*, is ascribed to Þjóðólfr of Hvin, a late 9th and early 10th century poet in the south of Norway, and traces the genealogy of Rognvaldr heiðumhæri — whom it honors — back to the legendary Ynglingar of Uppsala. The second stanza tells of king Sveigðir:

En dagskjarr	But the daylight-wary —
Durnis niðja	of the kinsmen of Durnir —
salvorðuðr	warder of the hall,
Sveigði vélti	tricked king Sveigðr,
þás í stein	when into a stone
enn stórgeði	the great
Dusla konr	kinsman of Dusli
ept dvergi hljóp,	ran after the dwarf;
ok salr bjatr	and that bright hall
þeira Soknímis	of Soknimir,
jotunbyggðr	built by giants,
við jofri gein.	swallowed the king.

In his prose account in *Ynglingasaga*, which is dependent on *Ynglingatal*, Snorri Sturluson tells the story of king Sveigðir (ch. 12), who made a vow that he would search for the the world of the gods (*Goðheimr*) and Óðinn the old. Snorri recounts how Sveigðir met his end in the eastern part of Sweden, at a large farm appropriately named Stone:

There is a stone there, as great as a house. In the evening, after sunset, when Sveigðir walked from the party to the sleeping quarters, he noticed that a dwarf was sitting by the stone. Sveigðir and his men were very drunk and ran to the stone. The dwarf stood in the doorway and called to Sveigðir, invited him to walk in if he wanted to meet Odin. Sveigðir ran into the stone, and the stone immediately closed, and Sveigðir never emerged. (ÍF 26, ch. 12)⁵

The image of the dwarf in the doorway (“Dvergrinn stóð í durum . . .”) bears some resemblance to *Völuspá*’s dwarfs, groaning by the doors of stone. In the *Ynglingatal*, the dwarf is referred to as the “salvorðuðr” of “Durnis niðjar”, the guardian of the halls of the kinsmen of Durnir, the latter doubtless a *heiti* for dwarfs. Bruno Sjöros has argued that the dwarf-names Durnir and Durinn are derived from the word “dyrr”, door, and that both mean something like doorkeeper (Sjöros 1911).⁶

Be that as it may, it seems clear that the dwarf acts as some kind of

⁵ “Þar er steinn svá mikill sem stórt hús. Um kveldit eptir sólarfall, þá er Sveigðir gekk frá drykkju til svefnbürs, sá hann til steinsins, at dvergr sat undir steininum. Sveigðir ok hans menn váru mjök drukkniir ok runnu til steinsins. Dvergrinn stóð í durum ok kallaði á Sveigði, bað hann þar inn ganga, ef hann vildi Óðinn hitta. Sveigðir hljóp í steininn, en steinninn lausk þegar aprt, ok kom Sveigðir aldri út.”

⁶ While I have no idea whether that etymology is tenable, it seems to me that “Durnir” is close enough to “dyrr”, that the selection of this particular *heiti* for a “salvorðuðr” might at any rate make for a pun.

gatekeeper in this text, as he invites the king to visit Óðinn, and by extension the world of the gods, which, we were told, had been the king's ambition in life.⁷ The poem tells us that the king is swallowed by "that bright hall of Sokmímir built by giants". These lines probably say that king Sveigðir, instead of going to the world of the gods, wound up in giantland. Either way, the boulder opens into an Otherworld, is a boundary stone of sorts, and the dwarf is the gatekeeper of the spatial-ontological boundary marked by the boulder.

Hávamál provides a third example of the dwarf in the doorway, marking a passage. In the Rúnatal of Hávamál, towards the close of the poem, we find the following strophe (160):

Pat kann ek it fimtánda	Fifteenth, I know that
er gól Þjóðrörir,	which Þjóðrörir chanted,
dvergr, fyr Dellings durom;	the dwarf, by the doors of Dellingr
afl gól hann ásom,	he chanted power to the Æsir,
en álfom frama,	success to the Elfs,
hyggio Hroptatý.	wisdom to Hroptatýr.

Again, we have a dwarf by a door, but this time it is not said to be a door of stone, but the door of Dellingr. We know from *Vafþrúðnismál* 25, as well as *Snorra-Edda* ch. 10, that Dellingr is the father of Day, so his doors may be read as the dawn — another transition, this time across temporal boundaries. It is also a transition with which dwarfs are all too familiar, according to tradition, since it marks the break of day and sunrise, which they must avoid at all costs.

While I would not wish to base an entire argument on these rather vague analogues from medieval tradition, they do portray dwarfs as border patrols, marking a boundary and its passage. That supports in a general fashion the interpretation I will propose for the groaning dwarfs of *Völuspá*. It may be of more immediate relevance to this analysis, however, to note that dwarfs stand at either end of the history of the world and mankind as presented in *Völuspá*, appearing exclusively in the creation and in Ragnarök. In a sense, they mark the beginning of time: as soon as the primordial game of chequers is broken off and an end is put to the original state of bliss, in stanza 8, we are introduced to the dwarfs, in stanzas 9–16. Those stanzas also immediately precede the creation of

⁷ Of course, Odin himself was thoroughly euhemerized in Snorri's *Ynglingasaga*. Notwithstanding, he was still very much a euhemerized *god*, so, in spite his human characteristics, I think it makes a good deal of sense to read a meeting with Odinn as an otherworldly encounter.

mankind, for the gods stumble upon its progenitors, Askr and Embla, in stanza 17, and it may even be, as Gro Steinsland has cogently argued, that the dwarfs took part in the genesis of humans (1983).

The only other stanza where dwarfs figure is at the center of attention in this paper. As we have seen, this “consternation stanza” interrupts the sequence of attacks, which usher in the end of times, “just before the climax of Surtr’s coming, and the consequent collapse of the rocky world . . .” (Dronke 1997, 69). In the grand scheme of *Völuspá*, therefore, dwarfs are once more found marking the boundaries; the tradition participants (or poet and audience, if you prefer) use them to signal a temporal break, to distinguish the mythic past, present, and future.

There is a longstanding tradition of folkloristic approaches in modern scholarship on medieval Scandinavian literature. Various scholars have successfully combined folklore and philology in their work and shed light on a diverse array of medieval texts through comparison with other texts as far removed in time as 19th and 20th century cognates and analogues — it is enough to invoke the name of Dag Strömbäck here. It is into this tradition that I would like to inscribe the argument of this paper. While the idea of fieldwork in *Völuspá* will seem preposterous to some and far-fetched to many, I believe the connections I’m suggesting are pretty persuasive. My argument will unfold in the following pages in a parade of legends from relatively recent times, which I believe are cognate to the groaning dwarfs in *Völuspá*. If this identification is accepted, I argue, moreover, that considerable consequences follow for our understanding of the stanza in question.

The *Motif Index of Folk-Literature* enumerates, among motifs associated with dwarfs, their emigration (F451.9.), attested in Germanic-language sources, primarily in German folklore collections, but also in Dutch and Danish (and one Hawaiian!) collections from the 19th and 20th centuries (Thompson 1955–1958). The most common legends corresponding to this motif account for the motivation of the dwarf’s departure. The greater part of the legends may be interpreted as marking a change of times by the dwarf exodus, their motivation comprising the feature of contemporary society that the legend contrasts with days of yore.

Thus, in one legend the dwarfs emigrate “because they dislike peasants’ dancing and loud music” (F451.9.1.9.) and in another “because mortals desecrate holy day” (F451.9.1.10.), these being signs of the moral degeneration of the community. Yet another text makes Frederick the Great responsible for driving the dwarfs out (F451.9.1.13.):

Als aber der alte Fritz zur Regierung gekommen ist, hat er sie nicht länger in seinem Lande leiden wollen und hat sie übers schwarze Meer verwiesen; da sind sie denn alle ausgewandert und seit der Zeit hat man nichts mehr von ihnen gehört. Früher aber wußte man noch manches von ihnen zu erzählen. (Kuhn and Schwartz 1848, 163)

This legend is a particularly striking depiction of historical change, as Frederick II (1712–1768), king of Prussia, is one of the dominant figures in European history. Generally considered second to none as a military commander, he greatly extended the Prussian territories and made his country Europe's most important military power. He is simultaneously recognized as a great statesman, who professed the ideals of enlightened monarchy and did much to spread them throughout Europe. Enlightenment is mentioned by name in a learned report from the Vogtland region of Saxony:

Die fortlaufende Zeit und die zunehmende Aufklärung habe endlich diese guten Wesen vertrieben; traurig und mit wehmüthigen Blicken nahmen sie von den Umwohnenden Abschied und ließen sich Alle auf einmal eine ganze Nacht hindurch unweit Köstritz durch einen Fischer über die Elster setzen. Seit ihrem Abzuge nun, sagt das Volk, sei für die Gegend die glückliche Zeit vorüber. (Eisel 1871, 17)

While intellectual currents are not usually this palpable in folk narratives, and there is good reason to doubt the popular currency of this variant, enlightenment has certainly figured prominently among characteristics claimed by Europeans in the last few centuries — one that is frequently contrasted with the ignorance and superstition of former generations.

Some of the most common legends, however, posit one of two epoch-making social and cultural changes as the cause of the dwarf's emigration: the advent and spread of Christianity (F451.9.1.6.) or industrialization (F451.9.1.4.). The following text from Lower Saxony blames the former:

Die Zwerge haben lange im Löhberg gelebt. Als aber die Menschen in der ganzen Umgegend Christen wurden, da sind sie ausgezogen. Sie haben sich nach der Weser gewandt. und niemand hat sie wieder gesehen. (Peuckert 1968, 461)

Other narratives, widely attested, claim that the bells of the local church drove dwarfs away from the parish — apparently they couldn't tolerate

the sound (e.g. Kühnau 1911, 69, 74–76). One such story, from Bad Lausick in Saxony, even lays down the conditions for the dwarf's return, which amount to nothing less than a reversal of historical time, stressing two aspects that seem to set the past apart from the present:

Die Querre sagten beim Abschiede: dann würden sie wiederkommen
wenn die Glocken wieder würden abgeschafft sein und
wann Sachsenland
wieder käm' an Böhmerland.

Dann, meinten sie, würden auch bessere Zeiten sein. (Haupt 1862, 36)

Other legend tellers, however, attribute responsibility to a different source of noise pollution, the growth of industry. In *Deutsche Sagen*, for example, the Grimm Brothers published this item from local tradition around Erzgebirge, a range of hills on the German-Czech border:

Im Erzgebirge wurden die Zwerge durch Errichtung der Hämmer und Pochwerke vertrieben. Sie beklagten sich schwer darüber, äußerten jedoch, sie wollten wiederkommen, wenn die Hämmer abgingen. (1865, 40)

The name of these hills, "Ore Mountains", refers to the great wealth of minerals found in the range, which allowed the creation of a mining economy in the surrounding area — hence the "Hämmer und Pochwerke" that drove the dwarfs away (see also Panzer 1848, 129–130; and Grimm 1865, 37–38).

In a recent article, I made similar claims concerning contemporary reports about the departure of elves in Iceland (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 2000).⁸ I think they express the tradition community's concern with social change. On one level, at least, they constitute a commentary on the conflict between pastoral rural tradition and industrial urban modernity, and on the rapid progress of Icelandic society from the former to the latter. The departure of the elves, associated with the old order, is a sign of the times; the expansion of the industrial and the modern — urban sprawl, if you will — destroys their homes and habitat in rocks, cliffs, and hills and chases them away. The legends provide tradition participants (through newspaper and television reports, as well as

⁸ This article is based on fieldwork that I conducted in Iceland in 1995 and 1996 with 35 elf-harried roadworkers and other participants in projects with which elves are supposed to have interfered. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my informants, without whose generosity I never would have made the connections which the present paper seeks to lay bare.

oral transmission) with a narrative framework for negotiating the significance and import of these changes for the cultural system of values and identity.

An example from my fieldwork from 1996 took place in the town of Kópavogur, adjacent to the capital, Reykjavík. When, in February of that year, a bulldozer operator ran into repeated trouble in Leirdalur, a green valley bordering on another suburban town, Garðabær, it was all over the media. The valley had been designated to become a cemetery for the capital area in the year 2001, so trucks brought in loads of soil and bulldozers were used to level it. A hill in the valley seemed to present special problems. When in its vicinity, Hjörtur Hjartarson, the operator, told me the wheels of the bulldozer just would not spin, even though the blade was not moving any weight of consequence. Each time he was working around the hill, he added, he had a sensation that he could not quite place, “ekki neinum ónotum eða svona, svona einhverri smá hræðslu svona eitthvað” (“not any discomfort or anything, but a sort of a fear or something”).

This sensation began, he said, “löngu áður en þeir töluðu um að það ætti eitthvað að vera þarna. Svo náttúrulega bara fer maður að heyrja þessar sögur” (“long before they spoke about anything being supposed to be there. Then, of course, I just start hearing these stories”). He learned from the project’s supervisor, Jón Ingi Ragnarsson, that there was a local tradition among the neighbors about elves or hidden people living in the hill. After that, the two bulldozers in use both broke down by the hill, each one more than once. On one occasion it took an entire day for a dealer representative to figure out what had gone wrong. Apparently, Hjörtur informed me, the mechanic was astonished by the nature of the failure and considered it something that in theory should not happen.

As might be expected, this reinforced the notion that supernaturals were obstructing the work in Leirdalur, and the word spread like wildfire. Soon, the press began paying visits to the site of construction to interview the workers and to film the hill in question. But even the media crews ran into trouble. Reporters covering the story for a TV news magazine on Stöð Tvö (‘Channel Two’) described how their camera had repeatedly failed to record anything at all when pointed at the elfhill, but worked fine when used elsewhere.

Eventually, Jón Ingi, the project supervisor, decided to take a break. He explained the situation to inquiring journalists, who quoted his words with some relish: “Við ætlum að vita hvort við getum ekki náð sáttum við álfana með því að færa okkur um set um tíma. Ég hallast helst

að því að þarna sé eitthvað sem við getum ekki útskýrt” (*Morgunblaðið* February 7, 1996; “We’re going to see whether we can’t reach an understanding with the elves by moving elsewhere for a while. I tend to think there’s something there that we can’t explain”). Sure enough, when Hjörtur returned to the hill, after a period of grace, the difficulties had subsided: “Núna finnur maður ekki fyrir því, sko. Ég get keyrt upp á hólinn, þess vegna. Það er skrítið með það” (“Now, I don’t feel a thing. I can drive up on top of the hill, for that matter. It’s strange”). When I inquired about possible explanations for this reversal, Hjörtur said “Ja, ég vil meina það að, ja hvað sem að er þarna, huldufólk eða álfar, það sé bara búið að sætta sig við þetta og flutt þarna í burtu. Ég vil meina það” (“Well, in my opinion, well whatever is there, hidden people or elves, it has just accepted this and moved away from there. That’s my opinion”). Further support for this opinion is derived from visions reported by a second sighted woman to Hjörtur’s mother, who was also his employer and the contractor for the project in question. According to two of my informants, Hjörtur and Jón Ingi, this woman saw elves moving out of the hill in the previous fall. In light of ensuing events, she surmised that some might have stayed behind and that they were protecting their home. Consequently, when work could go ahead without trouble, these, too, were taken to have emigrated (for a full discussion of this incident, refer to Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1998).

Another contemporary text, perhaps more directly analogous to other texts under discussion, is the following first-hand account from a man in his forties. It was transcribed by phone by Hallgerður Gísladóttir, the head of the Department of Ethnology of the National Museum of Iceland.⁹ The man called in after reading about a questionnaire on elves that the Department of Ethnology was distributing:

He said that in the early sixties, when he was still a child (8–9 years old), he had seen elves move. He lived in an uncompleted house where Langafit in Garðabær is now [a suburb of the capital]. There was a grassy hill by the house. One day when he was playing with his friend and was on the inland side of the hill, but the friend on the side facing the highway to Hafnarfjörður, he saw a line of short (about the height of a grown man’s knee), grayish people (9–10 persons) come out of the hill

⁹ The Department of Ethnology of the National Museum of Iceland maintains a folklife archive, in which I discovered this text. The archive consists largely of letters that regular informants have written in reply to qualitative questionnaires on various topics, garnered over three and a half decades, while some of the documents record telephone conversations with informants.

and head for the edge of the lava. The people carried bags on their backs and shoulders, but Kjartan did not see anything precisely about their costume or the shape of the bags. Kjartan watched this a short while but then looked away to get his friend and show him. Then the elves vanished completely. Kjartan said he had gone up to the edge of the lava and searched carefully because he could not believe he wouldn't find the elves again. Shortly thereafter, the hill was leveled to the ground when properties were developed in this area. Kjartan considered that on this occasion he had seen the elves moving out of the hill, because they had known what's good for them. Kjartan never saw elves another time, neither before nor after this event. (National Museum, Department of Ethnology: File no. 10849)¹⁰

The significance of this narrative, as well as of the German legends, is perhaps revealed most clearly when set next to a variant from medieval Icelandic legend tradition. The variant is given in “Þáttur Þiðranda ok Þórhalls” (“The Story of Þiðrandi and Þórhallr”), a brief story thought to go back to a lost manuscript from the former part of the 13th century (Strömbäck 1970, 168–170). The story is recounted in “Kristni þáttur” (“The Story of Christianity”), which, in turn, forms part of a saga about Ólafur Tryggvason, king of Norway and the mastermind behind Iceland's conversion to Christianity. It is one of four long Kings' Sagas in the large and eclectic manuscript GkS 1005 fol., *Flateyjarbók* (“The Book of Flatey”), compiled by two Icelandic priests in 1387–1390 (Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir 1993, 197–198). The story is set toward the end of the 10th century, shortly before Iceland's official conversion in the year 1000. The variant is as follows:

One time at Þvottá, Þórhallr prophet was there visiting with Hallr. Hallr was lying in the bedcloset and Þórhallr in another bed, and there was a window in the bedcloset. And one morning when they were both

¹⁰ “Hann sagði frá því að í byrjun sjöunda áratugarins þegar hann var barn að aldri (8–9 ára) hefði hann séð álfa flytja. Þá bjó hann í ófullgerðu húsi þar sem nú er Langafit í Garðabæ. Þar var grasivaxinn hóll við húsið. Einn daginn þegar hann var að leika sér með vini sínum og var staddur landmegin við hólín en vinurinn þeim megin sem veit að Hafnarfjarðarveginum, þá sá hann röð af lágvöxnu (nálægt hnehæð á fullorðnum manni), gráleitu fólki (9–10 manns) koma út úr hólunum og stefna í átt að hraunjaðrinum. Fólkið bar pinkla á baki og herðum en ekkert sá Kjartan nákvæmlega um klæðnað eða lögun pinklanna. Kjartan horfði á þetta smástund en leit svo af þeim til að sækja vin sinn og sýna honum. Þá hurfu álfarnir gjórsamlega. Kjartan kvaðst hafa farið upp að hraunjaðrinum og leitað nákvæmlega því hann hefði ekki viljað trúá því að hann fyndi álfana ekki aftur. Skömmu seinna var höllinn jafnaður við jörðu þegar lódir voru lagaðar á þessu svæði. Kjartan taldi að hann hefði þarna séð álfana flytja úr hólunum því þeir hefðu vitað hvað til sins friðar heyrði. Aldrei sá Kjartan álfa í annað sinn, hvorki fyrir né eftir þetta atvik.”

awake, Þórhallr smiled. Hallr said, “Why do you smile now?” Þórhallr answers: “I smile because many a hill is opening, and every living thing, both small and large, is packing its bags and moving.” And shortly thereafter those events came to pass which will now be related. (Sigurður Nordal 1944–1945, 1: 468)¹¹

The text of *Flateyjarbók* goes on to relate the coming of Christianity to Iceland. Þórhallr’s vision, we are given to understand, forebodes the Christianization, presumably because the supernaturals know what’s good for them.

When the modern and medieval versions are set alongside each other, we see that the only significant variation occurs in the social changes prompting the emigration of the Icelandic elfs. The comparison reveals that, in legend tradition, urbanization is as anathema to modern day elfs as Christianity was to their pagan forebears. Both are clearly criteria setting the present state of affairs off from that of the past. In other words, they mark boundaries, they signal a temporal break, and distinguish the past from the present. This, you may recall, is precisely the role so skillfully performed by dwarfs in *Völuspá*, as well as in a number of other texts from medieval Scandinavia, discussed earlier.

Biodiversity among the emigrants in these traditions — 10th–14th century Iceland, 20th century Iceland, and 19th–20th century Germany — need not concern us too much. The elfs in modern-day Iceland, the German dwarfs, the “kvikindi”, living things or beings, of Þátrr Þiðranda ok Þórhalls are all functionally equivalent, as are, I argue, the dwarfs of *Völuspá*. The living things of which the prophet Þórhallr speaks are sometimes identified as *landvættir* (e.g. Ólafur Briem 1985, 100–101), and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson has compared Þórhallr’s words to a similar sentence in *Heimskringla*: “Hann sá að fjöll öll og hólur voru fullir af landvættum, sumt stórt, en sumt smátt” (“He saw that all mountains and hills were full of *landvættir*, some large, and some small”; 1988, 350–351). Whether or not that reading is accepted, it is at any rate hard to distinguish *landvættir* from elfs (consider the *álfablót* of *Kormáks saga*, ch. 22), and elfs from dwarfs (consider Snorri’s comments, that Óðinn sent *Skirnir* “ofan í Svartálfaheim til dverga nökkurra” (“down to Black-Elf-World to some dwarfs”; *Snorra-Edda*, ch. 34) and his notion that “Dökk-

¹¹ “Það var einn tíma að Þvottá, þá er Þórhallur spámaður var þar að heimboði með Halli. Hallur lá í hvilugólfi, en Þórhallur í annarri rekkju, en gluggur var á hvilugólfinu. Og einn morgun, er þeir vöktu báðir, þá brosti Þórhallur. Hallur mælti: “Hví brosir þú nú?” Þórhallur svarar: “Að því brosi eg, að margur hóll opnast og hvert kvikindi býr sinn bagga bæði smá og stór og gera fardaga.” Og litlu síðar urðu þau tíðindi er nú skal frá segja.”

álfar búa niðri í iörðu" ("Dark-Elfs live down in the ground"; *Snorra-Edda*, ch. 17)).

This categorical ambiguity holds true even in medieval Iceland alone, and is all the more relevant when considering texts as distant from each other historically and geographically as those presented here. The beings go by various names, but the different denominations take turns playing the part of the supernaturals in standard legends and the boundaries between them seem blurry and flexible. Partly, this can be explained by the well-documented folkloric processes of ecotypification (formation of local variants) of the legends through adaptation to tradition dominants (characters or motifs that figure prominently in the traditions of a certain region). To some extent, it probably reflects the inherent obscurity and general liminality of supernatural beings.

It is tempting to add trolls to this enumeration of functional equivalents. When Surtr comes tearing in from the south in *Völuspá* 50 (Dronke's numbering), the second half of the stanza depicts the sorry state of the world as history draws to a close:

Griótbiorg gnata,
en gifr rata.
Troða halir helveg,
en himinn klofnar.

Stone peaks clash,
and troll wives take to the road.
Warriors tread the path from Hel,
and heaven breaks apart.
(Dronke 1997, 21)

Ursula Dronke reads the first line as the realization of the dwarfs' fear in 49, with "the collapse of the physical earth and the ending of its hidden life" (69). That seems entirely plausible; bearing in mind the functional equivalency of supernaturals, so does her interpretation of "gifr rata". Her translation of "gifr" as troll wives is in keeping with general convention and "rata" is usually glossed as wandering, roaming, rambling, or something of the sort (note that *SnE* has the form "hrata", which translates as topple or fall). The parallel which she offers as a basis for an interpretation is the passage from "Þiðranda þátrr ok Þórhalls" quoted above. The beings, she notes, "are moving out before Christianity comes, as they would before an earthquake . . ." (148).

I have tried to make the case that, in the various examples cited here, the departure of the supernaturals marks a temporal break. This motif is used within folk tradition to comment on historical change, to contrast the past with the present state of affairs. Surely then, adducing this motif in the eschatological narrative of *Völuspá* is a comment on impending

changes, viz., Ragnarök. The groaning dwarfs outside their rocks (and, quite possibly, the rambling trolls of the following stanza) evoke a whole discourse on transitions, temporal boundaries, and change. In *Völuspá*'s eschatological context, this reference betokens the end of time — and its new beginning.

A further corollary may be ventured, if one admits the common wisdom that the poem dates from the late 10th century, and the equally common interpretation that an important part of the poem's meaning (at the time of its composition, as well as for the community that orally transmitted it in the next couple of centuries) relates to Iceland's conversion to Christianity. Given these conditions, it follows that the groaning dwarfs in *Völuspá* — much like the "kvikindi" of Þátrr Þiðranda og Þórhalls, and many German dwarfs of 19th century folklore — mark the boundary between a Christian present and a pagan past.

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