

CONCLUSION

One may understand the cosmos, but never the ego; the self is more distant than any star. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God; but thou shalt not know thyself. We are all under the same mental calamity; we have all forgotten our names. We have all forgotten what we really are. All that we can call common sense and rationality and practicality and positivism only means that for certain dead levels of our life we forget that we have forgotten. All that we can call spirit and art and ecstasy only means that for one awful instant we remember that we forgot.

G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

ONE OF THE great, if generally unspoken, tensions represented throughout this book is the anxiety between common sense, rationality, practicality, and positivism on the one hand, and spirit, art, and ecstasy on the other. Folklore, our modern sensibility tells us, is not rational and therefore not real, not verifiable, and not practical. But this is a false dichotomy predicated upon a misunderstanding of both folklore and rationality. Chesterton's reflection on this tension between the "dead levels of our life" and the "awful instant" in which we remember that humanity is on a common quest for its own identity may, if taken out of context, imply a certain kind of despair, yet Chesterton, for his part, sees it rather as the beginning of every fairy story. Every "forgotten name" in human history is also a precious opportunity for an exercise in remembering. This, Chesterton would assert, is the great adventure of every human life: to remember. Such adventures depend upon the act of storytelling, whether in literature, folklore, or even science. There is nothing unromantic about the pursuits of science, Chesterton would say. The scientific treatise has as much wonder and adventure in it as any of the "wonder tales" collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The scientist may compose a different kind of narrative than the novelist, but both tell stories and thus both participate in the great adventure of humanity. All narratives—whether scientific, artistic, religious, political, social, romantic, or whatever else—contribute not only to the remembrances of a single individual identity but also to a broader cultural remembrance in which (or, at times, out of which) the individual must find their place. This cultural remembrance—called "cultural memory" in the present study of Icelandic folklore—develops and changes over time according to the needs of the remembering community, and thus leaves an imprint upon the stories communicated throughout the long development of that culture.

For these reasons, Chesterton aims to illustrate in the above quotation that storytelling and cultural memory are now at a point of crisis. Science and logic can fail to achieve the status of romance for the same reasons that fairy tales and novels can fail: because the human mind can, at those "dead levels of our lives," cease to be awestruck by the parts of the world we do not understand. Only then do we "forget that we have forgotten" and our adventure fails. This type of second-order forgetfulness—which is so common in the modern world not because of our scientific mentality but because of our many and diverse distractions—leads to one of the most profound

and destructive fallacies of the post-Enlightenment mindset: that the worlds of fairy, folklore, and elves (to say nothing of narrative more broadly conceived) must be illogical simply because they are unrealistic, and that they must be unscientific because they are un- (some may prefer to say “super-”) natural. The present book answers this mistaken assumption about folklore by illustrating in five stories that folklore not only maintains an internal logical consistency but, further, that one of its primary functions as “story” is the establishing of a logic of belief. This assertion means more than just that an internal logic prevails in these stories; it means that these five stories provide conceptual and cultural mechanisms in which questions about the logic of beliefs are addressed by their tellers and hearers (whether in literate or oral modalities). In other words, participants who communicate and receive these stories go into their narrative experience with less of an understanding of the logic of belief than they have when they come out, and the process of participating in these stories helps participants formulate a way of understanding their own beliefs about the world around them. This is the cultural mechanism of folklore.

This mechanism may work in folklore upon any number of topics—medical, scientific, religious, sociological, or more. The five stories discussed here were chosen, in part, because they all indicate something about religious developments. These five stories represent the later stages of a long-developing cultural memory of belief that, when traced throughout its history, reveals the changing nature of religious belief in Iceland and beyond. The examination of the literary and folkloric history of “The Deacon of Myrká” illustrates how these developments occurred within a cultural memory of death, mourning, and the afterlife. As the religious climate in the North developed out of paganism and into Christianization and finally Lutheranization, views of the death and the afterlife changed as well. The development of these views in narratives from medieval vernacular texts and later, post-medieval folk narratives reflect not just the changes that took place in the respective religious systems but also an effort within the narratives to understand the changes, logically. The cultural memory imprinted upon these narratives seems unwilling—as Guðbrandur Þorláksson would have wished—“to put away unprofitable songs”¹ of the past and dispense with the “ancient images”² of death and dying evident in the earliest Norse narratives. As is discussed in [chapter 1](#), the cultural memory at play in these narratives works to transform rather than to abandon, as is clear from the pejoration process evident in ATU 365 (The Dead Bridegroom Carries Off His Bride). We must recognize that this process is not a mechanism of Christian teaching but of folklore, narrative, and cultural memory. While the Christianization of the North might have provided the shift in religious belief that provoked such pejoration, the pejoration itself can only have occurred through narrative. The corresponding adjacency pair that sprang from the pejoration process in the history of ATU 365 may likewise

1 Guðbrandur Þorláksson, *En nij Psalmabok*, http://baekur.is/is/bok/000603210/0/23/Ein_ny_Psalma_Bok_Bls_23.

2 Hastrup, “Iceland,” 190.

have had its moral and religious roots in Christianity, but the mechanism of developing an adjacency pair functions on a wholly folkloric and narrative level. These narratives become venues of belief in which cultural questions and anxieties about those beliefs are addressed to accommodate both the new, incoming religion (be it Christianity or Lutheranism) and the remembrances of the old religious and cultural world.

Gender, like death, represents a fundamental aspect of human existence. While different cultures may approach gender differently, all cultures must incorporate some understanding of gender into their views of their own past, present, and prospects for the future. This realization makes gender one of the most vital aspects of any study of cultural memory, particularly any study that proceeds diachronically or cross-culturally because it offers a common element of the human experience to examine. In other words, while different cultures will clearly approach gender in different ways, all cultures must approach it in some way. Thus, even apart from its obvious importance to the study of any culture, gender is one of the few human experiences and identities that truly allow for a rich and reliable cross-cultural or diachronic comparison.

The study of gender spheres in Old Norse and later Icelandic folktales—such as “Álfkonan hjá Ullarvötnum,” “Gullbrá and Skeggi in Hvammur,” and stories of female magic users in Iceland—suggests that gender and gender spheres were not passive during the long development of cultural memory throughout the North. Rather, they operated as functional contributors to their own transformation. Post-medieval narratives often rejected the expectation of a female gender sphere that was opposed to Christianity, as was evident in Old Norse sources. The Gullbrá narrative even created a tertiary sphere that took upon itself all of the evil and animosity toward Christianity that might have been perceived in the Old Norse female gender sphere. The Christian “male” sphere, as we might expect in Old Norse sources, is in this narrative occupied by the prominent (female) figure of the settlement period, Auður *hin djúpuðga* (the deep-minded), while the expected pagan “female” sphere is in the post-medieval narrative occupied by a well-known pagan (male) of conversion narratives, Skeggi. It is the troll sphere, occupied by Gullbrá, that takes upon itself the identity of danger, of evil, and of heterodoxy.³ Other post-medieval female figures—such as *Galdra*-Manga (Manga the Sorceress), who turns the pains of childbirth upon an arrogant husband—assert the female sphere by their association with the home and by a certain heterodoxy, yet this heterodoxy does not possess the kind of evil we would expect from the troll sphere. Instead, the female sphere, once perceived as hostile to Christianity, has become in post-medieval tales a subject of conversion, as is evident in the story of the elf woman, Valbjörg. There, another new sphere, the elf sphere, takes shape. Like the troll sphere, the elf sphere represents a sphere of cultural identity that opposes Christianity. These narratives, for all this, sustain a cultural appropriation that can only be called misogynistic. The male, Skeggi, tracks down and kills the female troll, Gullbrá, and a group of males (representative of Christianity) capture and exorcise Valbjörg of her elf-hood. Nevertheless, these

3 Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll Inside You*, 19.

narratives participate in an arc of cultural memory that does not merely “deal with” gender spheres but works through the expectations of gender spheres in the North to make sense of the broader religious changes in the region.

In the study of attendant spirits, *fylgjur*, in [chapter 3](#), a pejoration process once again occurs. This time, the pejoration takes the form of a peculiar demonization of the pagan attendant spirits of Old Norse sources. Though perhaps foreign to our modern minds, this type of supernatural attendance must have been of the most personal and intimate kind of belief. Norse *fylgjur* passed in families from generation to generation and in some instances were equated with the soul itself. Coming to terms with the loss of such an important element of pre-conversion belief must have been a deep and painful process. Here again the cultural memory of the region seems unable to abandon the remembrances of these pagan spirits entirely, opting instead to transform them into something terrifying (in the story *Þiðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls*) and, ultimately in the post-Reformation narratives, into something merely mischievous and destructive. Nevertheless, stories of these supernatural creatures preserve common functional characteristics with their pagan ancestors: inheritance, a soul-function, a (pejorated) assistance, and a propensity to exact punishments as they see fit.

In lieu of such pejoration, one must wonder whether *fylgja* stories possessed any obvious adjacency pair, such as is observed between “The Deacon of Myrká” and the story of the Reverend Þorlákur, who dies on the same river as the deacon but who is kind and gentle in the afterlife. Here, the answer is ready-made, as Einar Ólafur Sveinsson points out: “Christianity brought to Iceland its own stock of stories to replace the myths and related stories it drove out: stories of angels, of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the apostles and other saints, of their miracles and glorious acts.”⁴ These represent the Christian answer to attendant spirits. However, as this book attests, these Christian stories did not so much drive out those old “myths and related stories” as they did reckon with them. Nevertheless, an understandable anxiety crops up when considering the communication between the two examples of belief, perhaps namely because folk belief cannot be verified by any set doctrine or code (such as the Bible), yet as Tom Shippey notes concerning beliefs in ghosts, “people are perfectly capable of knowing several incompatible theories at once without feeling the need to decide on one or even to notice logical incompatibility.”⁵ In broad terms, too, cultural memory can easily contradict itself, depending upon what version of a tale one hears, and Icelandic folk narratives are no exception to the rule. In folk narratives about *fylgjur*, for instance, the cultural memory represented there might best fit the description of “eclectic,” but a warning should accompany this description. It is fair, and indeed necessary, to say that “eclectic” is the very nature of cultural memory, but in order for a folk tradition to be considered “living,” it must possess this very quality, for only by transmission, shaping,

⁴ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 74–75.

⁵ Tom Shippey, “Afterword: A Chair, A Sock, and Language,” in *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm’s Mythology of the Monstrous* (Tempe: ACMRS, 2005), 382.

and reshaping can folk beliefs come to be representative of the “folk.” As Shippey states, “re-composition and experimentation are the mark of a living tradition, not ... the symptom of corruption.”⁶ This recomposition of cultural memory may lead us to the conclusion that folk belief does not represent a codified religious doctrine, but the notion of a “code” of belief—a set of doctrines or beliefs that has been “codified,” that is to say “written down”—came to Iceland and the rest of Scandinavia only with the introduction of Christianity. Pre-Christian belief itself functioned, it might be said, on the basis of eclecticism. No pagan “bible” or doctrine persisted throughout the pagan world; no universal church dictated what belief should look like. For this reason, too, the connection between folk belief and Christian religion becomes more readily visible in the study of the development of cultural memory in the North and especially in Iceland, where the function of folklore to “recompose,” using Shippey’s term, works not merely to replace old beliefs with new but rather to revise and remember them.

Cultural memories of sacred space display this function perhaps more than any other memories. On the level of religious belief, the changeover from paganism to Christianity and then to post-Reformation beliefs provided a gradual turn inward from the physical spaces of temples and churches to the heart and soul of each individual constituent, creating a new kind of sacred space that functioned on a more spiritual than physical level. This transformation provoked a deep cultural memory of contested sacred spaces in Iceland, which may be represented in four categories: contests between Christian and pagan spaces, contests in which pagan spaces have been defiled (and thus lost their sacredness), contests in which Christian sacred spaces have been defiled and must be cleansed, and finally contests between orthodox and heterodox Christian spaces. As the post-Reformation Lutheran ideas entered cultural memory, the great cosmic war between Heaven and Hell transformed these contested spaces into battlefields. The inward turn of sacred spaces, which focused more upon the internal soul than churches and sacred places, meant that the casualties of the cosmic war that raged upon these battlefields were the eternal souls of individuals, such as *Galdra-Loftur* Þorsteinsson and Sveinn, the boy who wished to become an elf priest. One is lost and the other is saved, we may deduce from the narratives about them.

But the notion of sacred space in a Christian setting means more than just sacred and profane, Heaven and Hell, or the city of God and the city of the world.⁷ Transgression, as it is sometimes called, means going from sacred space into the profane, crossing the line that divides them. Post-Reformation Iceland again seems to have been reluctant to relinquish the diversity of landscapes that persisted in the long cultural memories of its past. Again, a transformation takes place, but in this case we do not observe a pejoration, as with the *fylgjur* and stories associated with ATU 365 (Dead Bridegroom), but rather a mediation, by which Sveinn, in the tale “Tungustapi,” defies the typology of contests

⁶ Shippey, “Afterword,” 382–83.

⁷ As is elaborated by Augustine of Hippo in *The City of God*. See *De Civitate Dei = The City of God: Books XI & XII*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015). See especially bk. 11, in which Augustine discusses the origins of both cities and the fall of the angels.

of space in Icelandic cultural memory to bring some reconciliation to the memories of spaces outside Christendom, such as the elf church, and those inside Christendom, such as the Christian church at Tunga and the monastery at Helgafell. The cost of this type of mediation is great—Sveinn does not survive and thus becomes a tragic mediator—yet the rewards for his mediation are great as well. Though his journey costs him his life, the life of his brother, and eventually that of his father, Sveinn brings an uncommon beauty and wisdom into the world. His beautiful singing of mass and his wisdom that surpasses all others in Iceland indicate what can be gained by entering into the realm beyond Christendom and returning.

A similar function may be observed in the story of “The Stupid Boy and the Devil,” in which a foolish, unintelligent boy unwittingly makes a deal with the Devil for the sake of becoming clever. The story has ancient roots in the history of Proto-Indo-European folklore and maintains over the centuries a multitude of iterations throughout the northern world, yet in the story of the “stupid boy” we also perceive a deeply local, deeply Icelandic experience. Like Sveinn, both the great Icelandic historical figure Sæmundur *fróði* and the stupid boy escape their desperate situation to bring a special skill or knowledge back to their community, yet some stories of Sæmundur at least (we hear nothing of the stupid boy’s death) suggest that those forays into liminal spaces, forbidden knowledge, and heterodox beliefs bring about a beauty and knowledge that is not without a dear cost in the end. While Sveinn faces his death alongside his father upon again seeing the elf priest, Sæmundur (as is the case with other *galdrmenn*, sorcerers) is assailed by demons upon his deathbed. Also like Sveinn, he seems to find salvation in the end. (*Galdra*-Loftur Þorsteinsson was not so fortunate.) The function of the story of the stupid boy and that of the Sæmundur stories again suggests something of the cultural memory of the society that produced them. Again, Icelandic cultural memory was unwilling to ignore heterodox beliefs in forbidden knowledge and journeys into liminal places. Rather, that forbidden knowledge and journeys to the edges of orthodoxy became fundamental to the development of cultural memory of belief in the land—not, in this case, because these stories facilitate a transformation of cultural memory but rather because they became, and perhaps always had been, stories about the transformation of self.

Regarding this transformation of self, we may recall that one of the earliest iterations of the Sæmundur stories includes a deep and meaningful detail about his pursuit of forbidden knowledge: Sæmundur, it is said, has forgotten his name: *Sæmundar þáttr* puts it, “hann týndi allri þeiri er hann hafði á æskualdri numit ok jafnvel skírnamafni sínu” (he had lost everything he had learned in his childhood, even his baptismal name).⁸ Sæmundur’s adventure of remembering, of returning from the liminal space, and of using his forbidden knowledge (in some stories, it is his powerful magic and dominion over the Devil) serves as a prime example of a northern variation on the great adventure to which Chesterton alludes in the epigraph which opens this book. There can be no

⁸ *Sæmundar þáttr*, 339.

doubt that a real danger persists in Sæmundur's story, for there is no guarantee that he will ever remember his name—just as there is a real danger when the stupid boy treats with the Devil for the sake of gaining knowledge and wisdom, or when Sveinn wishes to become an elf priest, or when *Galdra-Loftur* strives (and fails) to wrench the magic book from the hands of Gottskálf *grimmi*, or when Valbjörg (or is her real name Vandráð?) struggles to resolve her own identity through the domination of (and ultimate submission to) Sigurður, or when the deacon (whose has forgotten that he was decent in life) desperately claws at the woman he loves, Guðrún (whose name carries within it the power of God—*Guð*), to join him in the afterlife. In one way or another—sometimes symbolically, sometimes directly—they have all forgotten their name. And when we—readers, listeners, the audience, or the storyteller—participate in their stories, we too internalize the experience of forgetting our own name; or, as G. K. Chesterton would say, “we remember that we forgot” ... and remembering is life's great adventure.

