THE MOUNTAIN TROLL

A prose translation
by Per Pippin Aspaas

See northern lights glow
with flames red
on the black bow.
Hear storms howl
and trunks of spruce trees
creak as they bend.

The sons of Niord are rising.
Flocks of snow, stars
are shimmering, dimly bright.
And nothing protects against
the might of the storm
on the mountains of Norway.

Svanhild the White
wanders around lost,
around midnight,
alone and desperate,
in fearful thoughts
amongst brushes and branches
in the fog of the night
where spirits are awake.

Suddenly the storm ends.
Spruces creak no more.
However, stones rumble
and the mountain’s armour
bursts with a horrible sound.
And ugly and grim
a Finn rises
out of the dark cave
causing the nightly Thule
to shiver with sighs.

1 This translation follows the first printed version of Adam Oehlenschläger’s Biergtrolde, as published in Digte (Poems, 1803). Comments in the margin have been kept to a minimum. For further commentary, see the modern editions by Povl Ingerslev-Jensen (Oehlenschläger, Digte, Oehlenschläger Selskabet, 1979) and Johan de Mylius (Oehlenschläger, Digte, Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturstiftelser, 2019). For a succinct overview of the slight variations in punctuation and wording across the various nineteenth-century editions, see the collection of Oehlenschläger’s Poetiske Skrifter (Poetic Texts, vol. 24, 1861, Anmærkninger, pp. 367–68).
`‘Who dares in dark nights when the cock crows to enter black forests where tall giants hiss in the dark, like when monstrous whales fizz underneath the Arctic Ocean; when urns shiver in the hour of death; when spirits are rising; when wolves in the grove swallow their prey; when old dragons are alert in the pitch darkness; when bad consciousness is gnawing; when innocents are crying; when the murderer is acting; and the night is throwing its clothing upon the damp blood?’

With red eyes in the frightening forehead he peers piercingly amongst masses of spruce; his gaze turns in all directions except for the direction of the sky, where the northern lights sparkle.

With cunning glances he sets forth with his hairy feet from the sinuosity of the rock. ‘A drink would please me!’ his voice declares, ‘I smell, I smell human blood!’

And he hastens towards the shivering young woman. His eye, shimmering of wrath, throws a glance on the graceful, but immediately it turns milder; her gracefulness makes his eye suddenly confused; and flames of lust rise from their sleep. They ignite in full force – and Svanhild shakes from fear."
‘Fear not, o Beauty!’
Thus he cunningly speaks,
‘I am the uncontested overlord
of all trolls.
Come, join me in my cave
where a hundred dwarves
forge yellow bracelets
as well as the armour of giants;
where red-coloured gold
in the veins of the mountain
glitteringly greets you,
come, forget your tears!’

‘Thou strong giant!
If indeed you possess power,
then show your might
through the victory of piety;
and kill my pain
by bringing me, wretched that I am,
to the heart of Harald;
stifle the wrath of the night.
Darkness led us apart.
Like me, the Brave One
has gone astray
amongst the trolls of the dark’.

‘I possess treasures!
This you shall witness yourself.
I shall wreathe in gold
the forehead of your Harald;
of that we shall drink
our festive beer,
in accordance with the ancient
customs of the mountain trolls’.

Young Svanhild turns pale
and shivers sorely;
stoops to the ground
with heavy tears.
With loathsome glance
and lips smiling
he drags the pale woman
with him down into the cave.

She shivers, falters,
and fear rises.
In dark grooves
with cheerful tones,
she hears the songs
of female giants.
And behold, ten beautiful
girls with torches in their hands
draw closer with a smile,  
with golden locks and a white skin;  
each of them smiling gracefully,  
while darkness swiftly flees.

   And proudly the high halls 130  
    lift themselves;  
in crevices of the cliffs  
rubies brag;  
the gold shimmers strongly  
in the hillside of the mountain,  
silver glints palely  
in the white marble.

   And the light blazes 140  
    and darkness makes way,  
and in a chamber  
three other girls  
are weaving a dress,  
utterly splendid and wonderful,  
but Svanhild shivers. 145

   ‘Behold’, the giant shouts,  
‘your wedding dress!  
Forget the one on the heath.  
How can you cry?  
Soon it will be ready.  
Let us hasten.  
You are worthy of me;  
join me to the rest place!  
Where roses smell,  
where harps chirp,  
where ethers breathe,  
there shall you adorn  
the proud bed.  
My heart is raging!  
I want to possess you  
in spite of all Æsir’. 160  
Æsir: the gods in Norse mythology

   What power seethes?  
What boulders alarmingly?  
Behold, lightning fizzes!  
Listen, thunder roars! 165  
And the storm is crying  
as it whiningly makes way,  
the night departs in haste,  
and the sun is smiling.

   From the bow in the sky 170  
by the glow of Hlidskialf  
the god Odin caught sight  
of the tears of the Noble One.  
Hlidskialf: the high seat of Odin
He seized his sceptre, and pitted sorely, and cried: 'Aukathor! take your hammer. Kill the darkness of the night with the flames of the day, and slay your enemy! And cool my wrath! Save him and her, by the hands of a God!'

And Thor obeys. Turn pale, thou Monster! With his he-goats he breaks the cloud; and his reins he guides towards the sighs of Innocence.

Then he sees Harald among the trunks of spruce, in search of Svanhild, with wails of passion. His heart shivering, his eye ablaze, his voice rises: ‘Where are you, Svanhild? O answer me, Svanhild! In vain he shouts, In vain he hopes, the wanderer at midnight’.

‘Here, take my hammer! Go, save your girl yourself! When it hits where it should, life gives up. Go down into the cave where the rock arches, in the cave of the robber. But shiver not. When the heart shakes and seethes from fear, Miølner rises and breaks the skull. The hammer demands to be soaked in the blood of trolls’ hearts without any fear whatsoever’. ‘Thank you!’ shouts Harald, ‘I cool down my anger’. And swiftly he seizes the great Miølner,
and unafraid hastens
to the places
where trolls find their rest
and Svanhild sobs.  

In dark grooves
he hears the songs
of female giants
with their ugly tones.
And without fear
he beholds trolls
banging their swords
on shields of flint
that emit
sparks so great
that the cave every once in a while
loses its darkness.
The walls squeeze him
rough and narrow as they are.
Bits of rock, hanging
from the ceiling above, shiver.
And the red blood
of the unavenged dead
trickle out from the crevices;
and lightning blinds him
and dragons in the thickets of thistles
rush past him.

Yet, unafraid Harald
with the hammer of the god
hastens to his goal,
he knows it will not fail.

And lightning shimmers
with bloodlike flames,
and in a chamber
where darkness gives way,
he beholds without fear
three female giants.
Without bones in their spine
they shiver as they stoop
on iron chairs,
and spool and weave
with skinny arms
a wedding dress
made from the intestines of humans.

Yet, unafraid Harald
with the hammer of the god
hastens to his goal,
he knows it will not fail.
And the barking of a dog
drowns the song!  
He walks on the skin 
of the Midgard Serpent.  
Light fades, 
torches blaze, 
the mouth of Fenris is gaping –

The giants faint!

Yet, unafraid Harald 
with the hammer of the god 
hecstasy to his goal, 
he knows it will not fail.

And indeed it does not!

In the crevices of the rock 
where the night never 
switches places with the day; 
see how the giant bleeds!

But behold, on the mountain 
in the red of dawn 
by the silver ore 
the Loved Ones smile. 
And with arms woven together 
and bosoms tightly bound 
they hasten towards 
the rustic barn.