

# Rediscovering the Topography of Wonder

## Morris, Iceland and the Last Romances

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### I

RECALLING HIS FIRST SIGHT of Iceland from the deck of the steamer *Diana* in July 1871, Morris wrote to his wife, ‘it is no use trying to describe it, but it was quite up to my expectations as to strangeness: it is just like nothing else in the world’.<sup>1</sup> This state of marvelling expectation initiated a journey that, as J. W. Mackail noted, was to assume ‘an importance in Morris’s life which can hardly be over-estimated, and which, even to those who knew him well, was not wholly intelligible’.<sup>2</sup> Writing over forty years after her father’s travels to Iceland in 1871 and 1873, May Morris re-iterated both the ‘strangeness’ and the enduring significance of the country for him, whilst revealing how it evolved its own unique place in the family’s shared imagination: ‘Iceland’, she writes, ‘till then a spot on the map that one often forgot to draw in, it was so tiresomely high up, and so far off it didn’t matter – Iceland became and has been ever since a real thing, at once overpoweringly beautiful and overpoweringly melancholy’; it was, she concluded, a veritable ‘land of wonder’.<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps because Morris’s relationship with Iceland has never been ‘wholly intelligible’ that it has always held a particular fascination for biographers and critics – a fascination that continues to generate book chapters and articles in scholarly journals. As Peter Preston has identified, ‘Morris’s state of mind on setting out has been variously described’, particularly before his first visit in 1871, and both journeys are almost invariably credited with simultaneously alleviating Morris’s marital anxieties, enhancing his appreciation of the Icelandic people and their culture, and shaping his Socialist ideals.<sup>4</sup> Several critics have

also acknowledged the influence of the Icelandic landscape on the literature of Morris's later years, with Jane Cooper in particular providing a detailed and illuminating discussion of the striking similarities between passages in Morris's Iceland journals and the late romances in a previous volume of the *Journal of the William Morris Society*.<sup>5</sup> But whilst I am thus acutely conscious of embarking on well-chartered territory, my intention in this article is neither to rehearse familiar themes nor to replicate Cooper's precise comparative approach. Rather, I wish to suggest in the following pages an alternative means of interpreting Morris's complex relationship with Iceland and its influence on his final narratives by focusing specifically on Iceland as, in May Morris's terms, a 'land of wonder'.

II

In their book *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park chart the development of a tradition in travel writing which flourished most intensely in the Middle Ages and in which 'the margins of the world' were repeatedly depicted as places of 'novelty, variety, and exuberant natural transgression'.<sup>6</sup> These marginal and wondrous topographies allowed the adventurous traveller to make direct contact with the marvellous and the extraordinary in an essentially privileged place. The experience of wonder was thereby articulated in terms of both aspiration and destination: it was endowed with a specific location, travelled to, enjoyed and then relinquished on the inevitable return journey, maintained in a marginalised place set apart from everyday realities. In the increasingly mapped and chartered world of the nineteenth century, however, such privileged wonder-filled places were increasingly hard to find – a fact which might go some way to explain the ascendancy of Iceland in this period as a desirable destination for the more adventurous tourist. For as Andrew Wawn notes in his extensive study of the relationship between Britain and Iceland in the Victorian era, 'at a time when the traditional European tour could seem merely 'insipid', Iceland represented a worthy challenge'; consequently, 'as the Alps became a penny share, Iceland assumed blue chip status'.<sup>7</sup>

Iceland was, after all, a land of fascinating contradictions. It

retained its aura of remoteness whilst becoming a popular tourist destination; it was regarded as a place of contemporary economic and social decline but also functioned as a symbol of the energy and confidence of its Viking past; it now suffered the political indignity of colonisation yet was celebrated as the land where democracy had flourished whilst feudalism still had its grip on medieval Britain; and whilst it appeared culturally irrelevant in contemporary terms, it had produced some of the greatest literature of the medieval period. But Iceland was of interest in the nineteenth century not only as a land of social, cultural and historical ambiguities – it was also a repository of the geographically and scientifically sensational. Its glaciers and its geysers, its volcanoes and its lava beds combined with Ragna-Rök and the Saga heroes to establish Iceland as one of the topographical wonders of the known world, as close to those fantastic medieval topographies discussed by Daston and Park as an existing country was likely to be. Iceland thus continued to fulfil a latent desire in the nineteenth-century traveller to inhabit a marginal and marvellous space.

As a reflection of the island's multi-faceted attraction, the Icelandic tourist trade in the nineteenth century accommodated a range of public and personal agendas, each concerned in their own way with the experience of the wondrous. In 1810 Sir Henry Holland, later physician to Queen Victoria, formed one of a group of scientists who travelled to Iceland for an extensive field investigation of the country's volcanic regions, publishing his journal of the expedition in which he celebrated 'the natural wonders of Iceland'.<sup>8</sup> Mid-century, Lord Dufferin breezed briefly through a corner of Iceland on a sight-seeing jaunt of some of the 'wonderful marvels of nature' it had to offer, describing his experiences engagingly in his popular publication *Letters from High Altitudes* (1857), and in 1899 the country was still being conspicuously promoted as 'a promised land of romance' in a joint publication by W. G. Collingwood and Jon Stefansson.<sup>9</sup> Even the reputable Victorian explorer Sir Richard Burton chose to publish his own weighty and sober two-volume account of a summer in Iceland under the title *Ultima Thule* – the End of the World – thereby hinting once more at Iceland's marginal and mythical attributes.<sup>10</sup> Such accounts were just some of the many contributions to what Wawn claims had become an 'ever-more crowded' Iceland travel-book market by the 1880s, all of which actively encouraged increasing numbers of so-called 'cockney'

tourists to flock to see the reputed sensations of Iceland, most often by day-tripping and picnicking at the Geysers.<sup>11</sup>

Morris's 'grey minster of lands' thus offered itself as fertile territory for marvel-seekers of all persuasions, providing several possible answers to his musings over why travellers like himself longed 'to wend forth' over a land 'Dreadful with grinding of ice and record of scarce hidden fire'.<sup>12</sup> But Iceland also had its own distinctive brand of tourist brought to its shores by a fascination with the literature and mythology of the Great Old North. Visitors such as Morris, drawn to Iceland through a profound admiration for its literature and mythology, distinguished themselves from mere sensation-seekers by conceiving their own journeys to the saga-steads as devotional pilgrimages – and indeed this was how Morris chose to articulate his own role in 1871, as 'pilgrim to the holy places of Iceland'.<sup>13</sup> Over twenty years later W. G. Collingwood and Jon Stefansson were to articulate their own visit to the country in similar terms, publishing the account of their travels under the title *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steads of Iceland* and declaring their intention to help contemporary saga readers 'to *stage* these dramas, to *visualise* the actions and events' of these remarkable narratives.<sup>14</sup> The published accounts of such travellers confirm Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter's claim that 'there can be no other national literature where the topographical pilgrimage is so romantically rewarding' as that of Iceland, which provides 'an unmistakable authenticity of background'.<sup>15</sup> This was evidently the type of highly satisfying experience enjoyed by saga-enthusiast Elizabeth Jane Oswald who admitted to her readers that these narratives 'had for years invested Iceland in my mind with such a halo of romance, that it is high praise of the country to say that the reality proved equal to the expectation'.<sup>16</sup>

Morris openly shared such enthusiasm for the sites and scenes of the sagas – an enthusiasm heightened by his collaborative translation project with Eiríkr Magnússon which was to culminate in the impressive *Saga Library*. But for Morris the appellation 'pilgrim' did, I suggest, articulate a more fundamental difference between his own experiences of Iceland and those of his contemporaries who might be more appropriately designated travellers or tourists – a difference evident, for example, in Peter Preston's revealing comparison of Trollope's and Morris's approaches and responses to the country.<sup>17</sup> This was a distinc-

tion that ultimately went beyond concerns for intellectual and cultural gravitas and was fundamental to Morris's lasting interpretation of Iceland as, in the terms of one of his own romances, a wondrous isle. At the heart of this interpretation was a profound understanding of John Gardner's claim that genuine wonderment 'requires of us respect, even reverence', and that, as the philosopher Mary Midgley emphasises, 'wonder involves love', for 'it is an essential element in wonder that we recognise what we see as something we did not make, cannot fully understand, and acknowledge as containing something greater than ourselves'.<sup>18</sup> Thus, whilst other visitors gazed at, rode through, took samples from, sketched and wrote about Iceland, Morris *wondered* at it.

Any man or woman of particular vision and insight, claimed Benjamin Scott, has at some point 'stood abashed in wonderment before the awful majesty of life'.<sup>19</sup> Morris certainly stood 'abashed in wonderment' before 'the awful majesty' of Iceland. His journals repeatedly bear witness to this as they attempt to capture with the utmost accuracy and immediacy the effects of 'a wonderful fiery and green sunset', the 'wonderful sight' of a great valley and the sheer exhilaration at what was, on one occasion, simply 'a wonder of a day'.<sup>20</sup> These attempts are invariably dependent on a vocabulary of wonderment, with variations of the word 'wonder' appearing with notable frequency throughout the 1871 journal and recurring regularly in the briefer one of 1873 – for on returning after two years to 'that terrible ice-capped wall' which had to be traversed to reach Markarfljót, Morris was quick to emphasise that 'though I remembered it so well from last time my wonder at it had lost none of its freshness'.<sup>21</sup>

This is not to suggest that Morris had sole claim to such a vocabulary in attempting to communicate his response to Iceland through the written page. Many other nineteenth-century travellers employed similar language in an attempt to describe scenes and landscapes which bore no relation to the familiar ones of home. Frequently, the reader senses that these writers' literary abilities were stretched to the limit – a problem openly admitted by Lord Dufferin who, in his prefatory comments to his description of Thingvellir, concluded: 'I suppose I shall come to grief in as melancholy a manner as my predecessors, whose ineffectual pages whiten the entrance to the valley they have failed to describe'.<sup>22</sup> But none of these writers, I would argue, uses

the vocabulary of wonderment with quite the same purpose or significance as Morris. Notably, John Purkis declares that Morris's journals avoid 'vague gush over "the wonders of Iceland"'.<sup>23</sup> This statement makes a valid distinction between what Morris found to wonder at in Iceland and what many of his contemporaries found worthy of a marvelling response – most notably Geysir, which Morris approached with an almost vehement contempt. But we cannot ignore the proliferation of wonder-derived terminology in the journals, nor the importance of this terminology to our understanding of Morris's response to the country. For Morris, the predominance of such language was a genuine attempt to articulate in his own terms the emotionally and psychologically complex relationship he developed with the Icelandic landscape during his tours of 1871 and 1873, for whilst he did eventually make a fair copy of his 1871 journal for Georgiana Burne-Jones, he did not keep either journal with the intention of publishing it, and was thus liberated from the constraints and expectations incumbent on those writing for a public readership. Wonder, writes R. W. Hepburn, is 'non-exploitative' and 'non-utilitarian'; with no public audience or financial gain in mind, Morris was able to wonder at and write about Iceland authentically and honestly, free from the need to exploit its geological sensations and to mould its landscape to the contours of both his own and his readers' expectations.<sup>24</sup>

One of the most remarkable demonstrations of this freedom occurs in Morris's 1871 journal entry on his visit to Thingvellir. Approaching this hallowed site of Iceland's early democracy, Morris recorded in his journal how 'all the infinite wonder, which came upon me when I came up on the deck of the *Diana* to see Iceland for the first time comes on me again now'.<sup>25</sup> On arriving in the Thingmeads, Morris explored further the nature of that 'infinite wonder', writing how 'that thin thread of insight and imagination, which comes so seldom to us, and is such a joy when it comes, did not fail me at this first sight of the greatest marvel and most storied place of Iceland'.<sup>26</sup> He experienced a similarly powerful moment of clarity and inspiration at Halldorsstadir in 1873, writing in his journal that 'there was something eminently touching about the valley and its nearness to the waste that gave me that momentary insight into what the whole thing means that blesses us sometimes and is gone again'.<sup>27</sup> These moments of 'infinite wonder' are a direct echo of those 'spots of time', identified by Wordsworth,

‘Which with distinct pre-eminence retain / A vivifying virtue’, and they were all the more memorable for Morris because they were uncontrived and unsolicited, all the more rewarding because they were liberated from seeking or intention.<sup>28</sup>

III

Such moments ensured that Iceland remained Morris’s personal ‘Holy Land’ to the end of his life, though he did not return to the country after 1873, and it is their remarkable potency that helps to explain the prominent influence of Iceland’s landscape on the prose romances he began writing nearly twenty years after his final visit.<sup>29</sup> For it is the predominance of wonderment in Morris’s own response to Iceland that is of primary significance in the use he makes of its landscape in his final narratives – a consideration suggested by Jane Cooper’s comment that ‘many of the passages in his diaries which are echoed in the romances are ones where he comments on strangeness, wonder, excitement or terror’.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, I would argue that it was through the imaginative terrains of his last romances that Morris ultimately found his most effective means of communicating both the nature and the far-reaching implications of his experience of this topography of wonder.

It is in the mountainous regions of the last romances that the nature of Morris’s engagement with the Icelandic landscape is most dramatically demonstrated. This is by no means surprising in the context of the marvelling responses that mountains have for centuries evoked in the human mind as geological structures representative, in Ruskin’s words, of ‘a link between heaven and earth’.<sup>31</sup> It was, however, surprising for Morris. ‘I rather miss the mountains I must say’, Morris confessed to Louisa Baldwin on his return from Iceland in 1871, ‘which is not what I expected, for I use [sic] to consider myself a hater of them’.<sup>32</sup> Later in 1877, describing his approach to Ireland from the sea for Georgiana Burne-Jones, he noted how ‘a thickish mist hid all the feet of the mountains, while a cloud or two was lying on top of them: it looked very like Iceland and quite touched my hard heart’.<sup>33</sup> As a consequence of the surprisingly tenacious impact Iceland’s mountains maintained on his imagination, mountains also provide some of the most remarkable landscapes of Morris’s final narratives – and none

more so than the Great Mountains in *The Well at the World's End*.

At a crucial point in this narrative, the protagonist Ralph and Otter, a captain in the Lord of Utterbol's army, survey the terrible range of Icelandic-inspired mountains which rear up in the distance as they travel to Utterbol. Gazing at this appalling wall of rock, Otter confides to Ralph:

'Whiles I deem that if one were to get to the other side there would be a great plain like to this: whiles that there is naught save mountains beyond, and yet again mountains, like the waves of a huge stone sea. Or whiles I think that one would come to an end of the world, to a place where is naught but a ledge, and then below it a gulf filled with nothing but the howling of winds, and the depth of darkness. Moreover this is my thought, that all we of these parts should be milder men and of better conditions, if yonder terrible wall were away. It is as if we were thralls of the great mountains.'<sup>34</sup>

In Otter's description, Morris demonstrates not only the ambivalence of response that mountains engender in the human observer but also the magnitude of their psychological and emotional impact. For Otter, the mountains generate the most potent effects of astonishment identified by Burke as the highest experience of the sublime, 'that state of the soul, in which all motions are suspended, with some degree of horror' – the visual impact of the mountains is overwhelming, even hallucinatory, as his mind contemplates the nihilistic abyss that potentially lurks behind their slopes.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Ralph contemplates that same 'huge wall of mountains, black and terrible, that rose up sharp and clear into the morning air' with significantly different thoughts and emotions:

Now Ralph, though he were but little used to the sight of great mountains, yet felt his heart rather rise than fall at the sight of them; for he said: 'Surely beyond them lieth some new thing for me, life or death: fair fame or the forgetting of all men.' And it was long that he could not take his eyes off them.<sup>36</sup>

Here instead is the experience of the sublime as defined by Ruskin in the first volume of *Modern Painters*, in which he insisted that:

it is not the fear, observe, but the contemplation of death; not the instinctive shudder and struggle of self-preservation, but the deliberate measurement of the doom, which is really great or sublime in feeling. It is not while we shrink, but while we defy, that we receive or convey the highest conceptions of the fate.<sup>37</sup>

Ruskin's definition integrates the dynamic of wonder within the experience of the sublime, for 'wonder retains an element of detachment or ideation,' writes Howard Parsons, 'a minimal curiosity, a control of emotion that gives psychic distance to the event and permits at least in some small degree the play of imagination'. In contrast, Parsons asserts, 'when detached imagination is overcome by emotion, such as great fear or terror, wonder disappears.'<sup>38</sup> Ralph's wondering response thus defies the paralysing fear that the mountains instil in Otter; his undeterred curiosity and imagination enable him to comprehend them in terms of access and progression rather than impediment and stasis, even though this might only be progress towards death. Instead of wishing them away, he welcomes the Great Mountains as an essential element of the quest terrain, and far from being their thrall he judges himself worthy of the challenge they present. The 'shudder and struggle of self-preservation' is thus dispelled through the essentially motivational influence of wonder as Otter's perceived barrier transmutes into Ralph's perceived passage.

In Ralph's reaction, Morris anticipates Robert Macfarlane's proposition that what we call a mountain is actually 'a collaboration of the physical forms of the world with the imagination of humans – a mountain of the mind'.<sup>39</sup> This interplay between the actual and the imaginary is, as Parsons identifies, integral to a state of wonderment and Morris explores its dynamic influence once again through Ralph and Ursula's subsequent response to this intimidating Wall of the World which must be traversed if they are to reach the Well at the World's End. As they draw closer to the mountains with their guide, the Sage of Swevenham, he warns them, "if your hearts fail you, there is yet time to turn back", to which a smiling Ralph responds: "Master, no such sorry story shall I bear back to Upmeads, that after many sorrows borne, and perils overcome, I came to the Gates of the Mountains, and turned back for fear of that which I had not proved". Nonetheless, as they move towards them over the plain Ralph and

Ursula feel 'as if the mountains and their terror hung over their very heads', and on reaching their lower outcrops of rock 'they gazed awhile and their hearts were in their mouth'.<sup>40</sup> In their decision to proceed, Ralph and Ursula enact once more wonder's impetus from momentary paralysis to vital action; though temporarily astonished they are able to maintain wonder's 'psychic distance' and engage imaginatively with what lies beyond the mountains, contemplating the potential rewards that crossing them offers.

The incident echoes Morris's own response at Híardalur in 1871 when, after noting the various 'forebodings and sentimental desires' that had troubled him before dinner, he recorded in his journal:

but when I went out afterwards in the dead of night, and looking up at the black mountains opposite, thought the moon lay on them brightly high up, and found presently that it was snow that had fallen since we came in, halfway up them, a sort of pang shot through me of how far away I was and shut in, which was not altogether a pain either, the adventure seemed so worthy.<sup>41</sup>

Wonder's objects must, Hepburn writes, be 'judged in some way worthy of wonder'; both Morris's Icelandic 'adventure' and Ralph and Ursula's adventure of the Well at the World's End are thus judged by the adventurers not only to be worthy of wonder but also worthy of the risks and sacrifices which that judgement implies.<sup>42</sup> Sublime objects, argued Kant, when viewed from a position of personal security, 'raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind'.<sup>43</sup> Morris recognised that a profound experience of wonder raised those energies and faculties even – and perhaps most particularly – when such personal security could not be guaranteed.

This 'faculty of resistance' is powerfully demonstrated in *The Story of the Glittering Plain* when the protagonist Hallblithe struggles for survival in the mountainous wastes that border the plain. Bereft of strength and 'faint with hunger and thirst', Hallblithe surveys the terrain around him 'and saw that he was high up amongst the mountain-peaks: before him and on either hand was but a world of fallow stone rising ridge upon ridge like the waves of the wildest winter sea'.<sup>44</sup> The sterility and oppressive repetition of the scene gestures at the traditionally wondrous terrain of fantasy identified by Rosemary Jackson –

a terrain which, Jackson argues, generally relies on ‘relatively bleak, empty, indeterminate landscapes, which are less definable as places than as spaces, as white, grey, or shady blankness’.<sup>45</sup> But in Iceland, Morris had experienced the reality of fantastic landscapes, meaning that his wondrous spaces are invariably an accurate representation of specific places. Journeying to Vatnsdalur on his 1871 Icelandic journey he had recorded a notably similar landscape to that in which Hallblithe finds himself stranded, ‘a mass of bare jagged mountains, all best with clouds, that, drifting away now and then show dreadful inaccessible ravines and closed up valleys with no trace of grass about them among the toothed peaks and rent walls’; it was, Morris concluded, ‘the most horrible sight of mountains I had the whole journey long’.<sup>46</sup>

His last romances provided Morris with an imaginative context in which to reconstruct such ‘horrible’ sights, and the effectiveness with which he managed this was explicitly acknowledged by Collingwood and Stefansson after their own visit to Iceland in 1899. Attempting to describe the astonishing highway they had traversed beyond Hrítafjord, they declared of its ‘impressive’ and ‘bewildering’ aspect: ‘It has hardly been suggested in writing – unless in the fancied terrors of the passage beyond the Uttermost House in the “Glittering Plain” of William Morris.’ But this acknowledgment goes beyond a mere appreciation for topographical verisimilitude. ‘One realised what folk meant once when they talked of the horror of the hills’, continued Collingwood and Stefansson; ‘here we saw travelling as it used to be; and it was a wet and weary couple that came down the pass that afternoon’.<sup>47</sup> Like Morris, they had experienced what it meant not only to gaze at but to traverse such hostile landscapes – an experience which brought the traveller into a much more direct and compelling relationship with that landscape than could ever be achieved through the voyeuristic frisson engendered by a detached aesthetic enjoyment of its sublime qualities.

Such a relationship is necessarily ambiguous, as exemplified by Hallblithe’s varying responses to the rocky waste. Contemplating what he at first believes will be his inevitable demise Hallblithe accepts the landscape as an unconquerable adversary against whom it is no shame to admit defeat. In his ‘deliberate measurement of [the] doom’ that awaits him, he enacts what Ruskin declared to be the true experience of sublime emotion, neither shrinking from nor avoiding his own

death but calling instead upon his kindred to grant “a blessing on this man about to die here, doing none otherwise than you would have him”. Nor is Hallblithe prepared to await his demise passively: “Death tarries; were it not well that I go to meet him?” he calls aloud as he forces himself ‘painfully’ down the mountain slopes. This physical and emotional resilience resurfaces with renewed vigour when he is restored to consciousness by the assistance of the three Wayfarers who find him in the wasteland. “I have an errand in the world”, Hallblithe tells them, asserting a renewed sense of personal purpose and integrity which achieves its most defiant expression when, still trapped in the wasteland and ‘beset with famine’, he sees two ravens ahead of him. Interpreting this manifestation of his kindred’s totem as a symbolic indication of his assured survival, Hallblithe’s heart rises and ‘he smote his palms together, and fell to singing an old song of his people, amidst the rocks whereas few men had sung aforetime’.<sup>48</sup>

In this seemingly incongruous conjunction of hostile landscape and celebratory song, Morris offers a glimpse of the exhilaration and inspiration that accompany an intense state of wonderment, a wonderment consequent on the experience and survival of the type of terrible country he himself had confronted, if on less drastic terms, in Iceland. Notably, two of the letters Morris wrote prior to his second visit in 1873 reveal his having contemplated the potentially fatal dangers and hardships that, as Andrew Wawn has noted, Iceland still presented in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup> Writing to Aglaia Coronio in January 1873 Morris admitted: ‘I fancy the Iceland voyage will be necessity to me this year: sometimes I like the idea of it, and sometimes it fills me with dismay: but I think ’tis pretty certain to do me good if I come back safe from it’.<sup>50</sup> It was an ambivalence that remained with him until the morning he sailed, when he confided in a letter to Philip Webb: ‘I feel grave enough and not much as if this were a pleasant trip, but hope to get something out of it all; and (though you may think that unreasonable) to come back again at last’.<sup>51</sup> Yet amidst the hesitations and uncertainties evident in these extracts Morris consistently affirmed the regenerative trust he placed in the experience of the Icelandic landscape and which he later articulated in Hallblithe’s shifting response to the mountainous waste. In consequence Iceland’s topography becomes a crucial element in determining the success of the quests of the protagonists of the last romances – quests which, as

Carole Silver has emphasised, are themselves ‘metaphors for the process of regeneration’.<sup>52</sup>

If I can only get away in some sort of hope and heart’, Morris wrote to Aglaia in anticipation of his 1873 Iceland tour, ‘I know it will be the making of me’.<sup>53</sup> In the last romances the re-imagined landscape of Iceland is also the making of Morris’s protagonists. The challenges it presents inspire a respect and reverence that is the foundation of a relationship based on wonder and which relates to Kant’s assertion that the experience of the sublime ‘does not so much involve a positive pleasure as admiration or respect’.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the act of wondering is essentially the contemplation and interrogation of possibilities – for as the philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven writes, ‘wonder that a thing is so is motivated by a possibility that it might be different’.<sup>55</sup> Morris’s last romances are structured through such contemplation and interrogation, processes frequently enacted through the interaction between protagonist and topography. This is perhaps articulated most explicitly in Osberne’s question to Elfhild across the torrents of the eponymous river that divides them in Morris’s very last narrative, *The Sundering Flood* – a river which falls in ‘swirling and gurgling eddies’ of ‘black water’ through ‘a wall of sheer rock’ flanked by ‘rent and tumbled crags’.<sup>56</sup> It is amidst what Florence Boos has identified as this ‘essentially Icelandic landscape’ that Osberne explains to Elfhild his decision to leave Wethermel and join forces against the Baron of Deepdale, calling to her:

‘Must I not take chancehap and war by the hand and follow where they lead, that I may learn the wideness of the world, and compass earth and sea till I have gone about the Sundering Flood and found thy little body somewhere in the said wide world? And maybe this is the beginning thereof.’<sup>57</sup>

The Sundering Flood thus asserts itself from the very beginning of the romance as a topographical wonder, not only because of its compelling Icelandic details and its suggestions of non-traversable space, but also because through its autonomy and vitality it gives physical expression to the dynamics of wonder, hope and desire that inspire Osberne and Elfhild’s quest to be united.

IV

In confronting and accepting the challenges of the various Icelandic-inspired landscapes that permeate these narratives, the protagonists of Morris's last romances experience that expansive and stimulating sense of 'infinite wonder' with which Morris had himself been gifted in Iceland, and are thus privileged, momentarily, with that same 'thin thread of insight and imagination' which enables them to proceed in their various quests. Iceland's distinctive presence in the last romances thus not only fulfils that 'longing for the landscape of Iceland' that lingered with Morris long after his last voyage but is also his means of honouring the simultaneously clarifying and motivational influence of that 'most romantic of all deserts'.<sup>58</sup> In these final narratives he thereby found his most potent means of articulating the imaginative and emotive effects that this alien and remarkable landscape had had upon him – effects captured in a letter written after his return from Iceland in 1873 in which he described: 'as I looked up at Charles's Wain tonight all my travel there seemed to come back on me, made solemn and elevated in one moment, till my heart swelled with the wonder of it'.<sup>59</sup>

It was through the agency of wonder that Morris anticipated, experienced and remembered Iceland – a process re-enacted through the protagonists of his final narratives who, like Carlyle's Teufelsdröckh and like Morris himself, are both 'wonder-loving and wonder-seeking'.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, as exemplified in Osborne's words to Elfhild across the Sundering Flood, it is through the conjunction of these wonder-loving protagonists and the Icelandic-inspired landscapes of the last romances that Morris anticipates Howard Parson's claim that 'the will to wonder' is essentially 'the will to consider great alternatives' and 'the will to try them out'.<sup>61</sup> In this way, the idea of wonder as critical and transformative experience offers a connecting thread which can be traced from Morris's journeys to Iceland through his later commitment to Socialism before achieving valedictory expression in his last romances. Hence, whilst there is no space here for any detailed consideration of the impact of Iceland on Morris's political activism, I suggest that it is in what Hepburn has called wonder's 'questioning and questing aspect' that we find the most compelling link between Morris the Icelandic pilgrim, Morris the Socialist and Morris the romance writer.<sup>62</sup> For it is amidst the Icelandic-derived topographies of the last

romances that Morris's protagonists are invariably forced both to question their own resources and capabilities and to assess the value of the goals they pursue, and it is in confronting terrible mountains, wastelands and impassable rivers that they invariably make the uncompromising commitment that is essential for the completion of their quests.

If therefore, as Mackail claimed, the impact of Iceland on Morris's life can never be 'wholly intelligible', I think Morris at least came closest to making it intelligible in his final narratives, in which the wondrous landscapes of Iceland and the wondering interrogation of humanity's possibilities combine. In consequence, the last romances remain the most persuasive testimony to Morris's success in fulfilling the longing he expressed in his 1871 Icelandic Journal – a longing 'to get an impression of the place into me'.<sup>63</sup> For it is surely as much Morris as it is Ursula that we hear in the words spoken to Ralph amidst the Icelandic wastes in *The Well at the World's End*:

'Three months ago I lay on my bed at Bourton Abbas, and all the while here was this huge manless waste lying under the bare heavens and threatened by the store-house of the fires of the earth: and I had not seen it, nor thee either, O friend; and now it hath become a part of me forever.'<sup>64</sup>

#### NOTES

1. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1984–1996), I, p. 141.
2. J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899), I, p. 240.
3. *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. by May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910–1915), VIII, p. xviii.
4. Peter Preston, 'The North Begins Inside': Morris and Trollope in Iceland', *Journal of the William Morris Society* 14: 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 8–28 (p. 8).
5. Jane Cooper, 'The Iceland Journeys and the Late Romances', *Journal of the William Morris Society* 5: 4 (Winter 1983–84), pp. 40–59.

6. Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), p. 25.
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