
Sublime Discomforts and Transformative Milksopishness: William Morris in Iceland

Wendolyn Weber

Iceland occupies a peculiarly important place in the life and work of William Morris. The land, its history and culture are compelling to him, first in his literary dreams, then in his actual experience, and finally in his enduring memories, translated into his later work. Morris's long-running reverence for the medieval is most overtly expressed in his translations of Old Norse poetry and sagas. It appears in the medieval settings of his original poetry and prose romances, but it also informed much of his creative production and his ideas for a reformed modern society. Morris's journeys to Iceland during 1871 and 1873 and his recorded account of them stand at an important moment in his personal life, in his development as a writer and activist, and in the confirmation of his aesthetic identity. Morris himself considered the first journey a transformative experience; his journal reveals, however, the complexity of the process.

Many scholars and biographers have argued the importance of Iceland in Morris's development as both an author and an activist. As E.P. Thompson has put it, stressing the medieval aspect of Morris's engagement with Iceland, '[h]e drew strength [...] from the energies and aspirations of a poor people in a barren northern island in the twelfth century. There can be few more striking examples of the regenerative resources of culture than this renewal of courage and faith in humanity which was blown from Iceland to William Morris, across eight hundred years of time.'¹ Yet Gary Aho has argued, on the other hand, that '[s]uch statements [as Thompson's, above] are extravagant', that Iceland's importance has been overestimated and the precise nature of its influence on Morris, particularly in social terms, misunderstood, owing to his biographers' 'attempts to push Morris's interests and achievements into coherent patterns'.² Aho sees in Morris's Iceland experience, as conveyed through the journals and seen in his translations and treatments of Icelandic literature, an intriguing lack of coherence. Drawing from Raymond

Williams's suggestion that 'the prose and verse romances [...] seem so clearly the product of a fragmented consciousness', Aho emphasises the moments of disjunction and dislocation created by Morris's stylistic and descriptive choices in his translations and in his accounts of his own travels in Iceland, concluding that the journals' 'uncertainties and ambiguities [...] deserve further attention, attention that might lead to more valid conclusions about William Morris and Iceland'.³ Marcus Waithe has more recently suggested that there is a distinct difference between what the Iceland journals convey and 'what the country eventually meant to him'; rather, '[o]nly in recollection [...] did he assemble his memories into the kind of politically symbolic encounter with another culture' that he subsequently describes 'so confidently' in later essays. For Waithe, the journals are better treated 'as an experiential quarry, best considered in combination with later sources, with documents that indicate the uses to which Morris eventually put his memories of the country'.⁴

Waithe argues that the 'tendency to idealize in retrospect, and the occasional discrepancy between the bad-tempered traveller and the wistful socialist of later years, really only indicate that the significance and meaning of Morris's experiences evolved in his mind as he moved through life'.⁵ But we might also see in this suggestion an indication that Morris himself engaged in the practices that Aho accuses his biographers of pursuing: creating coherent patterns out of interests and achievements that were not always entirely coherent at first blush. Without necessarily disagreeing with the preceding scholarship on Morris and his Iceland experience, this article aims to engage with Aho's suggestion that the uncertainties and ambiguities in the *Journals* require greater attention, and to argue that Morris's often profound (and prosaic) discomfort while travelling in Iceland is an essential component of the various forms the Icelandic inspiration took in Morris's later work. The unpleasantnesses and contradictions faced by Morris the traveller also work in dynamic relation to the prodigious talents of Morris the scholar, artist and designer. While Morris's medievalism inspired his travels in Iceland, his great talent for design simultaneously informed and shaped his sense of the medieval. The actuality of Iceland, however, posed jarring challenges to Morris, creating rather a looming spectre of disorder and disjunction across his preconceived notions of the country. Morris's struggles with that disjunction can be read in the journals, and the transformative powers of the journey ultimately lie at least as much in this experience of discomfort and dismay, the dissatisfactions of Iceland, as they lie in the pleasures and wonders of his travels.

In Iceland, Morris struggled with romantic expectations and harsh realities. Awesome and forbidding landscapes, the ghosts of the saga age, the starkness of contemporary Icelandic life, and the frequent rude reminders of his status as a tourist produced in the doughty traveller equal parts elation and melancholy. While his

stylised saga translations and adaptations demonstrate the romantic ideals he saw in the medieval Icelandic material, the Icelandic journals demonstrate both Morris's enduring reverence for the place and his struggles to reconcile the reality of nineteenth-century Iceland, and the reality of himself as a traveller through it, with his imaginary constructs. Morris wants to position himself, as traveller, as something more than a tourist. His knowledge of the historical and legendary landscape lends a layer of meaning beyond that experienced by those who have merely come to see the geysers; his self-identification as a poet and transmitter of the saga lore lends emphasis to the personal significance of what he sees; and what he sees sometimes strikes him with a deeper understanding of and appreciation for places and situations he had previously known only through texts. Yet for every awesome vista, there seems to be a relatively unimpressive mound near a boggy patch; the great historical figures are brought into sharp, prosaic relief by the example of modern Icelanders demonstrating the life of farmers in unforgiving conditions; and Morris is as often overwhelmed and depressed by the ruggedness of the terrain as he is inspired by it. Moreover, he is constantly faced with the reality of his position, regularly falling out of the sublime and saga-haunted landscape and back into the realm of the tourist: detailing meals eaten, comfort of lodging, conversations with the locals, and the discomforts of the weather or of his companions. Morris is, however, at least sometimes aware of the disjuncture, and some of his best narrative moments come when he seems to recognise himself standing in a liminal space between imagination and reality. For Morris, then, Iceland is both inspiring and unsettling: inspiring in the weight of cultural nostalgia, for great people and events, both real and imagined; inspiring in the spirits and atmosphere that the wild, alien landscape necessarily conjures; and unsettling in its often jarring effects and the struggle it creates in Morris to make sense of it all.

The journey itself, and the effects it wrought, also came at a time when Morris needed a reprieve from a number of stresses. Morris the designer was a creator of beautiful order, his wallpaper designs capturing the organic riot of nature in gorgeously repeating patterns. But throughout the 1870s Morris the man, as husband, as businessman, and as a concerned observer of society, was beset with disorder and disappointment.

Morris's interest in Iceland began when he was already established as both a poet and a designer. In middle age, Morris studied Icelandic with Eiríkr Magnússon, and the two would collaborate on several translations. The year 1869 saw the publication of *Grettis Saga: The Story of Grettir the Strong* and 'The Saga of Gunnlaug the Worm-tongue and Rafn the Skald' (in the *Fortnightly Review*); *Völsung Saga: The Story of the Völsungs and Níblungs, with Certain Songs from the Elder Edda* followed in 1870; and 'The

Story of Frithiof the Bold', parts 1 and 2 (in *Dark Blue*), in 1871. After the visits to Iceland, Morris and Magnússon produced *Three Northern Love Stories, and Other Tales* in 1875, and Morris reworked the Volsung material with *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* in 1877. In this same period, he was also reorganising 'the Firm' into Morris and Company to make it more profitable, and creating some of the textiles and wallpapers that continue in popularity today. The designs, such as *Jasmine*, *Vine*, *Larkspur*, *Acanthus* and *Chrysanthemum*, reveal Morris's love of nature and his gift for creating beautiful patterns.

Morris's Iceland years were personally difficult and seem only to have intensified the issues that drove him throughout his life. Peter Faulkner observes that, despite the achievements of these years, 'Morris was by no means completely fulfilled':

The incompleteness of his marriage, the arguments over the reconstitution of the Firm, the feeling that his products ministered in the long run only to the 'swinish luxury of the rich', Janey's serious illness in the summer of 1876, the lack of response to *Sigurd the Volsung* – these are elements in the more sombre side of Morris's thinking at the time, which occasionally finds expression in his letters.⁶

In 1871, the most immediate source of dismay in Morris's life was the affair between his wife Jane and Dante Gabriel Rossetti; when Morris left for Iceland, Rossetti stayed on as a member of the household. Morris's marriage difficulties have been suggested as the driving reason behind the journey: by simply leaving the scene, Morris was spared the pain of trying to put on a good face about the affair.⁷ But for all that the trip may have presented an opportunity to escape a humiliating domestic situation, there remained the positive set of reasons revolving around Morris's fascination with Icelandic literature. At the same time, Iceland also presented a distinctly non-Rossettian landscape, and Purkis suggests that part of the pilgrimage involved a determination 'to recover his own vision' following his disillusionment with Rossetti and his circle.⁸

Peter Preston notes that the domestic problems and the 'sense of despair, loss and emotional loneliness following the failure of his marriage' were part of a larger set of discontents, 'compounded of a growing dissatisfaction and impatience with the materialism of modern European civilisation, [and] anger at the divisiveness of English society'.⁹ According to Preston, 'Morris travelled to Iceland out of a deep need, compounded of a love for the country, its language, history and literature and the immediate difficulties of his personal life: it was both a geographical exploration and a period of self-discovery, a journey both in the physical world and to the depths

of his own being'.¹⁰ Purkis and Preston alike see Morris's Iceland experience as psychologically restorative, both to his sense of manhood and as a confidence-builder for his subsequent political activism. Iceland thus takes on significance for Morris on several separate, but ultimately interrelated, fronts: at the same time that it offers an escape from his marital disappointments, it also becomes a proving ground for his own reassertion of masculine self-worth; the political heritage of medieval Iceland and the relatively class-free social structure of contemporary Iceland speak to his discontents over modern social inequality and materialism; and the experiences in Iceland, from the models of Icelandic society to the striking natural wonders, speak deeply to his aesthetic sensibilities, reinforcing his design instincts and influencing his later literary work.

Iceland, it should be noted, had become a relatively popular European tourist destination during the nineteenth century. In her analysis of Morris's travels to Iceland, Phillippa Bennett cites the appeal, in certain traditions of travel writing and for certain travellers, of those locations 'at the margins of the world' where 'marginal and wondrous topographies allowed the adventurous traveller to make direct contact with the marvellous and the extraordinary in an essentially privileged place [...]. In the increasingly mapped and chartered world of the nineteenth century', she notes, 'such privileged wonder-filled places were increasingly hard to find.'¹¹ But Iceland, with its remote location and fantastic topography of glaciers, geysers, volcanoes and lava beds, offered such a locale and 'thus continued to fulfil a latent desire in the nineteenth-century traveller to inhabit a marginal and marvellous space'.¹² Morris's special engagement with Iceland was that of the saga-enthusiasts who were 'drawn to Iceland through a profound admiration for its literature and mythology', and 'distinguished themselves from mere sensation-seekers by conceiving their own journeys to the saga-steeds as devotional pilgrimages'.¹³

The fantastically harsh topography lent itself to supernatural interpretations: the volcanic landscape of Iceland had inspired continental European visitors from the Renaissance onward to mark it as the location of the gates to hell. For saga-enthusiasts, moreover, the harshness of Viking Age life amongst the early settlers had left an additionally marvellous legacy, as the country has from its earliest days of settlement been rich with reported hauntings and supernatural manifestations. Morris welcomes such marvels. He notes, for instance, 'the shoulder of Armanfell, the haunt of the land-spirits' (p. 166); the 'Bairn's Force', a landscape feature named for a tale of witchcraft (p. 161); and 'the stead of Fróðá haunted once by those awful ghosts of the pest-slain and the drowned in Eyrbyggja' (p. 135).¹⁴ The sagas offer a number of ghost stories, and Morris relishes the spots attached to them. Of the purported burial mound of the saga-age hero Gunnar he writes: 'that is Gunnar's Howe: it is most

dramatically situated to remind one of the beautiful passage in the *Njala* where Gunnar sings in his tomb' (pp. 48-49). On traversing a particularly impressive landscape in the vicinity of the hero and outlaw Grettir's legendary fight with an undead farm labourer, Morris states: 'so there you have no unworthy background to Glám the Thrall and his hauntings' (p. 88). Glám is an example of the Old Norse *draugr*, a malevolent corpse that refuses to be laid to rest. Morris is far from unnerved by such tales and the spirits attached to them; he conjures the figure of Glám again in relating an occurrence with a 'big carle' he dubs 'Wolf the Unwashed' who, assigned to tend to the horses, instead gets drunk and climbs onto the roof of an outbuilding 'on which he sat astride [like Glám] and presently began to howl out a dismal song' (p. 104). The horrifying spectre of the *draugr* straddling the roof of the hall while Grettir awaits him inside becomes fodder for a comical anecdote about the tippling Icelandic help.

The 'land-spirits' and ghosts of the saga age are likely to have had a limited frightening effect on Morris because they belong within the fantastic, literature-inspired expectations that he carries with him into the land. In stark contrast to such literary cool-headedness, however, Morris records how, 'being moved by silly travellers' tales', he experiences a fear so strong that it 'extinguished curiosity' the first time he is invited into a bonder's house for coffee: 'the house was of turf of course, with wooden gables facing south, all doors very low, and the passages very dark'. And what is the source of his concern? Morris writes that 'my flesh quaked for fear of – the obnoxious animal', refraining even from calling the horrifying creature by name. The source of his terror is the spectre of the louse, assumed to haunt the typical farmer's abode. The episode concludes comically with Magnússon accidentally firing his gun while unloading it, very nearly shooting their host in the head and lodging a bullet in the door beam above him (p. 44).

There is something sufficiently deadpan in Morris's account of his lice-fears and the mortification he and Magnússon feel over nearly shooting their host, that one cannot be entirely certain that he is himself entirely aware of the comedy – or all of the layers of the comedy – in the situation. Yet Morris certainly has his humorous moments and frequently engages in earnest self-deprecation, a tone that resonates with his well known appreciation for jests and joking. If we think him insensitive for his jokes at the expense of the Icelander he dubs 'Wolf the Unwashed', we may also recall that Morris himself was no stranger to being the object of ridicule. May Morris observes that the tale 'has been told time and again' of the boisterous and welcoming character of Morris's Red House, where regularly 'laughter sounded from the fragrant little garden as the host, victim of some ingenious practical joke, fulfilled the pleased expectation of his guests by conduct at once vigorous and picturesque under the

torment'.¹⁵ George Henry Blore speaks of the jokes 'of which Morris, from his explosive temper, was chosen to be the butt, but which in the end he always shared and enjoyed', further adding that in the face of the 'relentless humour' of his friends, '[in] all, Morris was the central figure, impatient, boisterous, with his thickset figure, unkempt hair, and untidy clothing, but with the keenest appreciation and sympathy for any manifestation of beauty in literature or in art'.¹⁶ Morris's natural sense of humour must lead him to recount a potentially fatal accident as a remarkably funny incident, but that keenness of sensibilities noted by Blore also seems to surface here, where Morris is left to his own devices to lampoon himself. Instead of performing a picturesque response to a targeted jest, here he captures a more poignant comedy of ridiculousness in lived experience. A great deal of the charm of the Iceland narrative comes in Morris's willingness to reveal such moments, particularly when he admits to his own 'milksopishness' even as it is a source of disappointment in himself.

Morris unfailingly records his tendency to lose things, from the strap that tied a beloved tin pannikin '(which made such a sweet tinkle)' (p. 33) to his saddle bow, to the pannikin itself (ill-tied with a piece of string whose knot came undone), to a slipper hastily shoved into a pocket and subsequently dislodged; pannikin and slipper both are miraculously returned by the good Icelanders who later happened upon them. He chastises himself for failing to complete a difficult hike in a cave and thus having missed the sight of a great frozen waterfall at the end (p. 84), and, on riding in a difficult rainstorm, notes: 'I don't like to confess to being a milksop: but true it is that it beat me: may I mention that I had a stomach-ache to begin with as some excuse' (p. 87). Likewise Morris records that his explanation to a priest who has joined them on an excursion, that he is winded from hiking because he is 'heavily clad and booted', is met with a tap on the belly and the response, stated 'very gravely': '[b]esides you know you are so fat' (p. 161).

Yet Morris also steadfastly refuses to see himself as a mere tourist. On arriving at Geysir, one of the more popular sights for European visitors, he notes disappointedly: 'this [...] is our journey's end today, and I feel ashamed rather that so it is; for this is the place which has made Iceland famous to Mangnall's Questions and the rest, who have never heard the names of Sigurd and Brynhild, of Njal or Gunnar or Grettir or Gisli or Gudrun' (p. 66).¹⁷ The natural wonder of the impressive geyser is subsumed, for Morris, under the sign of Geysir as a prime tourist destination for those merely visiting Iceland for its natural wonders. Strewn with the litter of countless previous visitors, the place grates on Morris's sensibilities: '[s]o there I sat on my horse, while the guides began to bestir themselves about the unloading, feeling a very unheroic disgust gaining on me'; 'quoth I, "we can't camp in this beastly place"' (p. 66).

Morris complains of the Geysir-viewers who come to the place yet 'have never

heard the names of Sigurd and Brynhild, of Njal or Gunnar or Grettir or Gisli or Gudrun' because he himself has heard of those names and knows them well. His quest in Iceland is one of excavating and experiencing the past by means of historical locations and antiquities, from decorative belt buckles to pewter porridge pots. He appreciates the Icelanders' enduring knowledge of the details of their past and regularly presents the travel itinerary in terms of the saga-age inhabitants of the land. For instance: 'Biorn the boaster of the Njala lived in one of three steads called the Mark on the south side of this grim valley, Kettle of that ilk on another: and a little way north of it is Thorolfsfell where Kari lived after marrying Njal's daughter' (p. 56); or 'this is Grettirs-head where he lived at the time he slew Thorir Red-beard his would-be assassin' (p. 85). Preston suggests, moreover, that not only does Morris's knowledge of the Icelandic past inform his apprehension of the sights, but also 'Morris reveals his sense of the Icelandic past largely by the way in which he maps onto its modern landscape the characters and events of the sagas'.¹⁸ Sometimes he creates a degree of remove, with qualifying phrases such as 'it is said', or 'by tradition', but, according to Preston, '[e]lsewhere he makes a more direct identification, so that whatever there might be of myth in the sagas takes on the certainty of history by its unequivocal topographical placing'.¹⁹

There is therefore a dynamic relationship between Morris's knowledge of Icelandic history, his imaginative engagement with the saga material and the landscape itself. And the impressiveness of that landscape, for all that it invites scorn when he considers that some travellers might come to Iceland solely to see its natural wonders, also plays an important role in Morris's apprehension. Morris frequently notes how the sights stir his imagination: strolling about the stead at Bergthorsknoll, he comments that a knoll behind the present house 'to my excited imagination looked like the fallen-in walls of the stead of the Sturlung period' (p. 41). Describing a vista of mountains, a lava plain, 'tumbling peaks' lit by the sun shining through rain and 'over this wall a boundless waste of ice all gleaming', Morris adds that 'just over this gap is the site of the fabulous or doubtful Thorisdale of the Grettis-Saga; and certainly the sight of it threw a new light on the way in which the story-teller meant his tale to be looked on' (p. 77). He comments often on the extraordinary and wonderful qualities of the land: '[t]he day, though still raining softly, got very wonderful as we rode on' (p. 85); he sees rainbows 'beyond everything of the sort I ever saw' (p. 85); 'I got an impression of a very wonderful country' (p. 88); 'like a piece of another world it looked' (p. 197). Sometimes, however, the landscape is overwhelming. Soon after his arrival, Morris comments, '[m]ost strange and awful the country looked to me as we passed through, in spite of all my anticipations' (p. 28); elsewhere, he admits to 'feeling tired and a little downhearted with the savagery of the place' (p. 54); and yet

elsewhere, ‘the whole place had a softness about it that saddened one amidst all the grisliness surrounding it, more than the grimmest desert I had seen’ (pp. 161-62). On viewing the purported location of Grettir’s lair, he comments: ‘[i]t was such a savage dreadful place, that it gave quite a new turn in my mind to the whole story, and transfigured Grettir into an awful and monstrous being, like one of the early giants of the world’ (p. 149).

This sense of monstrosity is notable, given that the sagas tend to serve as Morris’s compass throughout his Icelandic travels, and given that his general struggle tends to be with reconciling present-day Iceland with the heroic images of it that the sagas have provided. Morris notes, for instance, that the apparent intelligence of a bonder, who has been to Scotland and thus seen something of life beyond Iceland, is not much to his benefit, since he is now discontented with Iceland (p. 94). Similarly, Morris is impressed with the Icelanders’ general good humour, but also struck by their laziness. These observations are in direct tension with Morris’s idealised reading of the Icelandic people, as they served to inspire his own socialist beliefs.

Preston notes rather that in Morris’s praise for the present-day Icelandic people he focuses on ‘their courage and contentment in spite of their hard lives. The main immediate lesson he seems to have drawn from the experience concerned the fortitude and lack of resentment he required to face his own personal difficulties.’²⁰ Here one can see the blending and merging of Morris’s personal struggles with his social convictions. Preston also cites a telling passage from one of Morris’s letters: “‘Then the people’”, he wrote in his letter to Norton, “‘lazy, dreamy, without enterprise or hope: awfully poor, and used to all kinds of privations – and with all that gentle, kind, intensely curious, full of their old lore [...] and so contented and merry that one is quite ashamed of one’s grumbling life’”.²¹ There is a distinct note of criticism in some of Morris’s descriptors; he finds many of the Icelanders to be ‘lazy’, ‘dreamy’ and unenterprising, but they redeem themselves with the fact that they persist in existing – and cheerfully, at that – under circumstances that boggle his mind. There is a necessary disjunction between the socially-minded individual who himself enjoys significant material comfort and those members of society who do not. Indeed, the safer mental path for such an individual when faced with such a contrast is to focus on the emotional states and personal constitutions of all involved, on laudable good humour as against his own ‘grumbling life’.

Ultimately, however, the reality of Icelandic life is often unnerving to him and creates a strong sense of melancholy:

Just think, though, what a mournful place this is [...] how every place and name marks the death of its short-lived eagerness and glory; and withal so

little is the life changed in some ways [...]. But Lord! what littleness and helplessness has taken the place of the old passion and violence that had place here once – and all is unforgetten; so that one has no power to pass it by unnoticed: yet that must be something of a reward for the old life of the land, and I don't think their life now is more unworthy than most people's elsewhere, and they are happy enough by seeming. Yet it is an awful place: set aside the hope that the unseen sea gives you here, and the strange threatening change of the blue spiky mountains beyond the firth, and the rest seems emptiness and nothing else: a piece of turf under your feet, and the sky overhead, and that's all; whatever solace your life is to have here must come out of yourself or these old stories, not over hopeful themselves.

(p. 108)

Morris concludes these thoughts with a declaration of homesickness and asks, of his readers or himself, 'I hope I may be forgiven' for it (p. 108).

Morris's saga-informed appreciation for Iceland thus entails a balancing act. The contemporary Icelanders disappoint him with the prosaic reality of their existence and force him to find comfort in their cheerful endurance and the traces of their history yet to be found in their lifestyles and their memories. The landscape sometimes inspires him with newfound understanding and appreciation for the sagas, but at other times leaves him feeling threatened and exhausted. When Grettir becomes a monstrous being, seen in the context of the unforgiving landscape he reportedly inhabited, Morris allows his apprehension of the land to overwhelm the very thing that lends structure to his travels, his imaginative connection to the saga literature.

There is a telling moment relatively early in the journal of 1871 when Morris describes the extreme anxiety experienced when fording a river on horseback: 'the water seemed coming in a great hill down on us, running so fast by us that I quite lost any sense of where I was going, and felt no doubt that the horses were backing'; the disorientation only abates once they reach the shallows 'with a curious sensation of having suddenly in one stride gone many yards, and there we were again safe on dry – stone' (p. 52). From here they traverse a landscape of cliffs 'most unimaginably strange' (p. 52) with 'caves in them just like the hell-mouths in 13th century illuminations' (p. 53). Morris shifts from one source of disorientation to another as he struggles to articulate the look of the land, resorting to comparisons like that of the hell-mouths, or 'a Robinson Crusoe hut with an over-hanging roof to it' (p. 53), or, in describing the look of clefts in the rock wall, 'a horrible winding street with stupendous straight rocks for houses on either side' (p. 53). Morris projects a vision of civilised order, a street lined with houses, onto the landscape in an effort to make

it comprehensible, yet that vision becomes grotesque, the street ‘horrible’ and the houses ‘stupendous’, because the land defies his efforts to categorise it.

Bennett argues that Morris consistently engages with Iceland in a state of wonder, and with ‘a vocabulary of wonderment’ that marks ‘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’.²² Travel through the wonders of Iceland affords him an immediate experience of the sublime, mediated through the state of wonderment and then transmitted, especially through the late romances, such as *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889) and *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1891) and *The Well at the World’s End* (1896). Bennett argues 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’.²³ We ought also to consider the lag between the *Journals* and the last romances, the element of terror encompassed in that initial experience of the sublime, and how the deployment of wonderment might serve to mitigate the sense of awfulness Morris so often experiences in Iceland.

Jane Cooper, in her work on ‘The Iceland journeys and the late Romances’, notes the general consensus that the Icelandic landscape influenced Morris’s later writings and offers a detailed, close comparison of the romance descriptions and Morris’s landscape descriptions in the *Journals*.²⁴ She adds, however, that Morris’s imagination also played an important role in the descriptive process. Cooper cites May Morris, in one of her introductions in the *Collected Works*, on ‘the influence of mediaeval manuscripts and Morris’s own illuminating work on the descriptions of towns in his poems’: “‘one is tempted to say that the visualization of [them] is made up of three elements: of the poet’s vision, of the memory of the places actually seen, and of the picture of them by the mediaeval artist’ (IX, xviii)”.²⁵ Here we can see the important element of design in the transition from the *Journals* to the romances, as the descriptions are clearly informed by a combination of personal memory of actual landscapes, medieval models and Morris’s personal artistic sensibilities.

Morris the designer consistently engages in a re-imagining of his materials, and that includes his experience of Iceland itself. May Morris, writing the introduction to the *Journals* for the *Collected Works* and remembering from ‘the child’s point of view’, recalls that, prior to the journeys, ‘Iceland had begun to be one of the familiar fairy-land places in our imagination [...]. The wonder side of it we knew something of already, through the legends of Iceland and through our own Storyteller [Morris]’.²⁶ Through Morris’s letters home, ‘Iceland became and has been ever since a real thing, at once overpoweringly beautiful and overpoweringly melancholy’, and yet even this ‘real thing’ is transmitted through the perspective of Morris the ‘Storyteller’.²⁷

May Morris also comments, rather romantically, on the greater detachment of the second *Journal* of 1873 (which, unlike the first, Morris did not return to later but left in its unfinished state), suggesting ‘that he had withdrawn into a frame of mind in which he saw the wilderness in its real loneliness’ and whereby ‘the elemental horrors had seized upon him and perhaps he saw sights and heard sounds from another world than that in which he and his fellow-travellers were moving – who knows indeed where the poet wanders when he withdraws into his own country?’²⁸ This seems to encapsulate Morris’s Icelandic experience in its entirety, as Morris the poet and artist struggles to incorporate and adapt his apprehension of (and about) Iceland in accord with his preconceived notions and desires for the country. That lonely wilderness and its elemental horrors are transformed by Morris’s withdrawal ‘into his own country’; as a poet, he makes the country his own, according to his needs and designs. In more prosaic terms, May Morris quotes a letter from Morris to his wife Jane from the first Icelandic excursion (11 August 1871): ‘[y]ou’ve no idea what a good stew I can make, or how well I can fry bacon under difficulties. I have seen many marvels and some terrible pieces of country.’²⁹ That sense of accomplishment permeates the second journal, where much of the anxiety of the travel has disappeared. Morris notes, for instance, ‘I have quite lost all nervousness in the rivers now’ (p. 206), and does not lose his bearings anymore. Following a deep river fording, he remarks, ‘[n]evertheless the whole thing had got unfrightful to me now and I crossed it pipe in mouth, not troubling myself at all’ (p. 225).

Victorian medievalists like Morris sought links to nature, the sublime and the supernatural in much the same manner as had the earlier writers of the romantic era. Alice Chandler comments: ‘[j]ust as medievalism was very much a part of the desire to give man a sense of social and political belonging, so it was an attempt, in the decline of any transcendental order, to naturalize man in the universe and make him feel related to it’.³⁰ As Chandler further notes: ‘what was a living faith for the Middle Ages can be only the memory of a myth for contemporary [i.e. Victorian] man’.³¹ Morris seeks an authentic encounter with his medieval Iceland but discovers the impossibility thereof. In the *Journals*, he struggles with unexpected spectres of disorder in the social realities of the Icelandic people and in the overwhelming natural features of the land, which also recast his understanding of his medieval sources in sometimes overwhelming ways. His experience of the sublime in nature is as harrowing as it is wonderful. As Morris details his travel experiences – wondrous, disappointing and prosaic alike, vacillating between rainbows, rocks and bacon – he often finds himself wobbling, disoriented, in a space where imagined expectations (of both Iceland and himself as traveller) and actual experience clash.

That experience of disorientation also leads to surprising moments of honesty

and clarity. Purkis argues that the *Icelandic Journals*, though never published in Morris's lifetime, should be regarded as one of his greatest works, though 'partly by accident'.³² Most importantly, 'there was no attempt to invent a special kind of style as in the saga translations and the later romances, and yet it is here that we find the most successful application of his principles in writing English prose: clarity and the dislike of the ornate'.³³ Purkis compares the 'drive to simplicity and virility in the words and syntax' in the prose of the *Journals* to Morris's turn to simplicity in furniture design; but the prose of the (unpublished) journal is of course bracketed by that of his literary endeavours in the translations and romances, and the simplicity of furniture bracketed by the splendour of his wallpapers.³⁴ We might therefore see here the signs of a 'fragmented consciousness', as argued by Williams and Aho. But we might also see in these stylistic vacillations a remarkable flexibility and willingness by Morris to entertain disjuncture across his own work – or, put another way, to explore multiple artistic and interpretative possibilities in the face of creative and intellectual challenges.

Kristin Ross has remarked on Morris's tendency in his lectures 'to call his references to ancient Iceland or to the ancient Teutons a "parable"'. 'A parable', Ross adds, 'is not about going backwards or reversing time but about opening it up – opening up the web of possibilities'.³⁵ Waithe suggests that Morris's ultimate attitude towards the past and its artifacts 'involved a delicate balancing act: the past was to be used, but not stolen; studied, but not imitated; preserved, but certainly not "restored"'.³⁶ Both Ross and Waithe speak to Morris's awareness of instability, of indirect as opposed to direct connections, and of a need, we might say, for conscious, flexible deployment of the imagination, particularly if one aims to build models for the future out of examples from the past. Might we not see a measure of Morris's Iceland experience in these observations? Whatever his original desires or intentions for his travels in Iceland, in spite of his assiduous efforts to map his journey, the place and its inhabitants, onto his saga-informed expectations, Morris finds himself thwarted. His experience is fragmented, often uncomfortable. If nineteenth-century Iceland perplexes him, then his own moments of 'milk-sopishness' as a traveller also highlight, on a personal level, the frequent disjuncture between ideals and realities. Yet Morris does not attempt to hide his failings or his distress; he inhabits them, and he records them.

It is undoubtedly important that Morris ultimately gained significant personal confidence during his Icelandic travels. But if we focus solely on how Morris may have poured that confidence into his subsequent public speaking endeavours or into wrestling the sublime landscape into the descriptive passages of the later romances, we risk eliding the enduring impact of the uncertainties and ambiguities he encountered. The *Icelandic Journals* alone cannot convey how Morris ultimately brought his artistic and political sensibilities to bear on his experience of Iceland or

the symbolic significance it came to hold for him. But the *Journals* do preserve a crucial element that does not necessarily appear in Morris's direct later uses of Iceland, its landscape or its past, so much as in his attitude towards how one should engage with the past, or indeed project possibilities for the future.

Waithe remarks on the special place Morris occupies in the history of utopian literature, with the publication in 1890 of *News from Nowhere*:

It invites participation, and frustrates closure, in such a way as to leave its readers considerable interpretative leeway [...]. His contribution to utopian literature is distinguished by an apparent willingness to entertain conflict. He allows the imperfect to intrude upon and unsettle the perfect with startling regularity. He demonstrates an unflagging taste for the disruptive, a consistent unwillingness, in the words of C.S. Lewis, to institute 'world-without-end fidelities'.³⁷

Morris accepts, even invites, imperfection and entertains conflict – with an eye, perhaps, for the inevitability of disruption and impossibility of perfection. Failures and discomforts can prove transformative in positive ways. Perhaps Morris's encounters with the jarring disjunctures of Iceland were ultimately far more valuable than a more smoothly-flowing and ideal-affirming experience would have been. The coherent meaning that Morris ultimately forged over time out of the entirety of his engagement with Iceland, past and present, literary, prosaic, topographical, social and of himself as a traveller across its layered landscapes, might seem rather fragile, fragmentary, under closer scrutiny of its individual component parts. There are weaknesses and contradictions. Morris the milksop, sitting sodden and miserable atop his pony or dejected and short of his hiking goal, terrified of lice, alarmed and disoriented by frightening river crossings and stark landscapes, may invite laughter and pity. His struggles in Iceland might seem in some respects to undermine his later displays of confidence, but his *Journals* also preserve an important record of Morris as a man engaging head on with discomfort and uncertainty, relaying those discomforts alongside the wonders of Iceland, conveying the states of ambiguity and liminality that result – and, in the end, becoming comfortable with it all.

NOTES

1. E.P.Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Merlin, 1977), p. 176.
2. Gary L.Aho, 'William Morris and Iceland', *Kairos*, 1.2 (1982), 102-133 (pp. 102-103).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 105, citing Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), p. 155; Aho, p. 128.
4. Marcus Waithe, *William Morris's Utopia of Strangers: Victorian Medievalism and the Ideal of Hospitality* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), p. 75.

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5. *Ibid.*
 6. Peter Faulkner, *Against the Age: An Introduction to William Morris* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980), p. 85. Many thanks to my colleague Gloria Eastman for this reference (and that to Alice Chandler's work in notes 31-32) from her contributions on Morris within the broader context of Victorian England, originally for an unpublished essay on 'Morris's Haunted Iceland', written for inclusion in a prospective volume on haunted travel writings; this article derives from my original analysis of Morris's *Icelandic Journals* in that unpublished piece.
 7. John Purkis, *The Icelandic Jaunt: A Study of the Expeditions Made by Morris to Iceland in 1871 and 1873* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1962), p. 6.
 8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 9. Peter Preston, "'The North Begins Inside': Morris and Trollope in Iceland", *JWMS* 14:2 (2001), 8-28 (p. 8). (Afterwards Preston).
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
 11. Phillippa Bennett, 'Rediscovering the Topography of Wonder: Morris, Iceland and the Last Romances', *JWMS* 16: 2-3 (Summer-Winter 2005), 31-48 (p. 32). (Afterwards Bennett).
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
 14. *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. by May Morris, 24 vols (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1910-1915), VIII, pp. 166, 161, 135. Page references appear in brackets in the body of the text. (Afterwards CW). Morris's *Journals* can also be consulted in William Morris, *Icelandic Journals*, with an introduction by James Morris (Fontwell: Centaur Press, 1969).
 15. CW, I, p. xiv.
 16. George Henry Blore, *Victorian Worthies: Sixteen Biographies* (Oxford: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 308.
 17. 'Mangnall's Questions' is a shortened title for a popular school book at the time: Richmal Mangnall, *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions for the Use of Young People*, first published in 1800.
 18. Preston, p. 9.
 19. *Ibid.*
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. Bennett, pp. 35-36.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
 24. Jane Cooper, 'The Iceland Journeys and the Late Romances', *JWMS* 5: 4 (Winter 1983-84), 40-59. Cooper notes that '[m]any writers have commented on the effect Morris's Icelandic experience had on his descriptive writing in the later prose romances' (p. 41).
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
 26. CW, VIII, p. xxvii.
 27. *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.
 28. *Ibid.*
 29. *Ibid.*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.
 30. Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1970), p. 7.
 31. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 32. Purkis, p. 5.
 33. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 35. Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 75.
 36. Waithe, p. 72.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. xi.