A Plain of Soft, Sweet Grass

Let me demonstrate what I mean with a typical passage, a description of the first camp site on the 1871 journey:

I wandered about up the hill spurs and looked about me: just at the foot of the hills there was a space of bog which caught the little brooks that ran from the hills till they could gather into the streams bounding our camp; but above this the slopes were mostly covered with sweet grass, and sank into little hollows every here and there, where the flowers grew very thick, notably the purple cranesbill aforesaid. Again I felt I don’t know what pleasure at the sight of the little camp where the guides had gathered the horses now: it was on the chord of the arc of a big semi-circle of flat ground, some three miles at its deepest, I should think: a grassy plain saved out of the waste of lava, that rolling down from the mountains on either side, spread out grey for many a mile about. . .

William Morris (1834 – 1896), an eminent Victorian poet, designer and craftsman, one of the fathers of British socialism and founder of the Kelmscott press, was also an ardent admirer of Iceland and its ancient literature.

In 1868 he met Einar Magnússon who taught him Icelandic and with whom he translated into English several of the sagas; a few of these and the complete Heimskringla appeared in the six-volume Saga Library edition. Magnússon was also Morris’ guide on an 1871 journey to visit saga sites in Iceland. Morris returned in 1873 for a similar pony trek. His evocative and colourful record of these two journeys has recently been reissued as a volume in the Travelers Classics series.

Morris’s description not only precisely locates the camp on a sort of island between streams that cross a small plain, itself an island within the vast lava fields; it also registers his delight at their camp, doubly enfolded into a soft, green, flowered, safe centre, an island within an island, a circle within a circle. I can understand and appreciate Morris’s responses. Any camper, even today and in terrain less strange, has had similar feelings: Look what I have carved out of the wilderness. That it is still out there, greyly looming in, adds to the honest pleasure of the camp-site. At times, his responses are more somber. Here, for instance, is a description of cliffs that Morris found, most unimaginably strange: they overhung in some places much more than seemed possible: they had caves in them just like the hell-mouths in 13th century illuminations; or great straight pillars were rent from them with quite flat tops of grass and a sheep or two feeding on it, however the devil they got there: two or three tall ends of glacier too dribbled over them hereabout. . . one could
see its spikey white waves against the blue sky as we come up to it: but ugh! what a horrid sight it was when we were close...

Morris's moods aerate, bubble through, the descriptions, evoking for me a special sense of place.

Memorable Characters

Though these Journals are most memorable for their descriptions of scenery or saga site, they also contain some commentary on the Icelanders Morris met. Here, for instance, is an aging Icelandic priest, who gets a horseback: he is a very tall thin old gentleman in breeches and purple stockings and skin shoes; he is on a capital pony which turns out to be too much for him, so he changes with Magnusson, saying as he does so: "All comes to an end: who would have believed I should ever have to ride a dull beast like this instead of a brisk horse?"

The details suggest a striking individual, and the priest's sad question confirms it. The surprise and chagrin in the question and the laconic preface to it, "All comes to an end" move the vignette away from pathos and toward something both humorous and heroic, something that reminds me of saga rhetoric.

Another priest is presented in a similar way, given a few phrases to speak that suggest a keen and interesting personality. This is the priest at Gilsbakki; at one point he climbs up a steep bank ahead of Morris who blames his slowness and shortness of breath on his heavy boots. The priest responds: "Yes, and besides you are so fat."

Nothing more is said. Morris thus evokes some laughter at his own expense, while characterizing the priest as bluntly forthright, very much his own man. This is the same priest who insists that they "come and see where I take my trout in autumn." Morris's description affirms that they were all pleased with the sight of a "bubbling spring that came out of the lava and made a big pool...very deep, some thirty feet the priest said, but you could see every point of rock at the bottom all bright blue in the sunny day." This priest delays them a bit longer, saying he wants them to come with him to a birch glade within the lava because he thought it "was good to take leave in a pretty place." Obviously a lively and sensitive man. And Morris's description of that "pretty place" does not disappoint us:

a grass-grown space quite smooth and flat, with a clear streamlet running level with the grass at the end of it we come in by, and all round it otherwhere a steep green bank crested with thick-growing birches smelling most sweet in the sun.

So Little Has Changed

It was descriptions like this that caused me, a few summers ago when I spent ten days near Reykhol, to attempt on a few of those
days to find and follow part of the 1871 route of Morris's party through the Borgarfjardarsyla, using his *Icelandic Journals* as my main guide. I wanted to stand on some of the same spots where Morris had stood, to consider his descriptions and to compare his responses to mine. I thought that our responses might be similar, partly because so little has changed. But someone interested in, say, *Moby Dick* would find dramatic changes if he travelled to New Bedford today to see the chapel in which Ishmael heard Father Mapple preach. That chapel has been painted, varnished, gilded with signs — tarted up for tourists. And those tourists have arrived in cars that are everywhere, jamming the narrow streets near the whaling museum and chapel, now about the only attractions in a blighted section of what was once a busy whaling centre. So much has changed over the past century that someone interested in Melville and his masterpiece might be more disappointed than otherwise by a visit. But in the one hundred years since William Morris walked up the slope at Gilsbakki, since he looked down over the rippled lava criss-crossing the valley of Hvítá or at the milky, glacial river flowing swiftly west, almost nothing has changed. I thus found myself saying, "yes, of course, that broadening expanse of the valley is grim after the quiet warmth of an enclosed birch glade; and, yes, the river does narrow in just the way he says, and yes, . . ."

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**To Step Back in Time**

There are changes, of course; a few of them, like the prosperity of the farms, Morris would approve of; others would puzzle or anger him. In the latter category might fall the few cars one sees on the gravelled roads, and the electrical lines carrying power to the small farms, power to run both milking machines and TV sets. But these changes do not intrude. In the nine or ten hours that I hiked on those roads I saw only one bus and three or four cars — a far cry from the traffic noise and stench of New Bedford. The improved roads and the electricity have come in only the past few decades. When Thorsteinn Jónsson — my host at Ulfstadir — was growing up, the farms and surrounding country were just as they were in 1871 and in fact not much different from the way they were in the thirteenth century when Snorri lived at Reykholt. And even the name of Thorsteinn's farm — Wolf-place — has not changed since saga times. So not only did I enjoy the vast natural splendor and the tonic of the crystal air; I also enjoyed a sense that I had stepped back in time. For these are the same vistas that Morris saw; these are the same horse-tracks he rode over. And he recognized the vistas and tracks as those that Snorri and other saga writers described. He felt an excitement of identification. So did I, but mine was double-bar-velled, for I could feel both the association with scenes from sagas and also with William Morris. I could in a sense look over his shoulder, and think of him as he pondered saga scenes and characters conjured up by the terrain.

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**Rough Terrain**

Two days after my long walk up the Hvítá to Gilsbakki, I went on horseback over some of the same track Morris had followed when his party left Reykholt. They made it from Reykholt, where they had lingered an extra day waiting for the weather to improve, to Thingvellir in one day. It took me three hours to make it only up to the high heath south of the Reykjadalur. A tenderfoot, I went very slowly, but still the Morrisean party must have made extremely good time, for this is very rough terrain. The horse track — and it is the same one Icelanders used for centuries to get to Thingvellir — had boulders on it the same size as those off it, the clattering and slippery shale was as abundant on the track as everywhere else on the steep slope. But my horse kept climbing steadily up it, keeping a small stream to his left. Very soon this stream disappeared into a deep canyon, and the so-called track wound dangerously close to its edge a few times. I wanted to take a picture of the stream winking along far below in the deep shadow of the canyon, but I feared that the click of my camera might spook the horse — already nervous because he had such a know-nothing on his back. As I climbed, I could look back down into the valley of Reykholt and there, several miles off, the white houses of the farmyard and the Gilsbakki were visible. Morris described this same sight, from relatively the same spot:

we had mounted so high that we could look into both White-water-side and Reykholt's dale, and could see the scar on the hill-side of the former where Gilsbank lay.

If Morris had had clearer weather that day, he might have seen the farmhouse and tiny church. I did. There are more houses now, and the old church and farmhouse have been replaced, and there are tractors pulling mowers and side-reel rakes that have widened that scar, but only a fraction of an inch, barely to be noticed. The farm is more distant than it seems, so close does the clear air move far
away objects toward us. This unchanging land somehow also moves men and events distant in time nearer to us. The priest whose frankness evidently appealed to Morris: ("and besides you are so fat"), he lies buried in the churchyard over there. And also over there up those gray ravine-ripened slopes rode Illugi the Black and his famed son Gunnlaug. Nearly a thousand years ago. Yesterday.

The Landscape Inspires Awe and Wonder
I rested at the top of this southern ridge of the Reykjadalsá, letting my horse graze on the lush grass around a marshy bog. The presence of these bogs on such high heaths puzzled me. There must be a simple explanation: so much rain and snow, little porous soil below, whatever. But as I laid back in a small, soft hollow, quite pleasantly warm, out of the wind, looking at the glacier, Ok, just across from me, other puzzles came to mind. What is it about Iceland that is so fascinating and haunting, responsible for that malady that Burton called "Iceland on the brain"? There is first of all the land. Its savage and barren harshness, the topography of a Stephen Crane poem, inspires awe and wonder. And that men have lived here, have created in fact a society that endures — and thrives — adds to the wonder. So, the harsh land, its hardy people. Yes. But there is more; the ideas that accompany these cliches do not seem too helpful in untangling the puzzle. I think a partial answer lies in what we know — or in our way of knowing — about this land and its people. This is the only country anywhere whose entire human history is known. We have the names of the first settlers in the ninth century, they survive in written records from only a few hundred years later. We thus know of their struggles with the land, and with each other, from the very beginning. And this was a true beginning.

The Land Was Utterly Empty
These were the first people to live upon these shores. A few Irish hermits had preceded them, but here there was no indigenous population. Other Europeans who sailed west and stayed on had to come to terms with the Indians whose land it was, and the settlers' attitude to the land and to themselves on the land became inextricably mixed with their attitudes to the peoples they displaced. But here in Iceland there were no Indian trails, no sense at all of a human presence that had moved across the land, working and living upon it, giving names and traditions to hill and slope, river and mountain. This land was utterly empty and therefore unutterably strange. The settlers, using the religious and historical traditions they had brought with them from Norway and Ireland, did come to terms with the
land, but, free of king and bishop for many decades, those traditions were changed and recharged under the influence of this silent land. The ways its cold vastness touched human psyches are suggested in the Family Sagas. These narratives are both realistic and bizarre, populated not only with credible men and women but also with ghosts and monsters. And these sagas are full of visions and dreams, sacred mounds and mountains, manifestations of the land working upon the imagination. The flat realism of stories of feuding farmers mixes with myth and legend and lore to yield narratives as unique as the land they spring from. Perhaps the term "land-námsmenn" — land-taking men — is misleading, because in subtle but important ways this raw and open land was more dominant than the men who settled it.

Now I Know What He Meant

William Morris certainly felt the importance of these strange landscapes, and he tried to gauge the ways their stark beauty and fearful associations intruded upon his consciousness. No passage from his *Icelandic Journals* suggests this more than the following one, his excited thoughts as the party approaches Thingvellir:

> My heart beats, so please you, as we near the brow of the pass, and all the infinite wonder, which came upon me when I came on the deck of the Diana to see Iceland for the first time, comes on me again now, for this is the heart of Iceland that we are going to see: nor was the reality of the sight unworthy; the pass showed long and winding from the brow, with jagged dark hills showing over the nearer banks of it as you went on, and between them was an open space with a great unseen but imagined plain between you and the great lake that you saw glittering far away under huge peaked hills of bright blue with gray-green sky above them... once again 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 sight of the greatest marvel and most storied place of Iceland.

That "thin thread of insight and imagination" is not explained. But now I think I know what he meant. And I am convinced that that "thread," or feeling, has everything to do with the land, that indeed it is caused by, rooted in, speculations about this ultimate island, the ways that men have tried to rationalize their presence in this place. Thinking about the sagas, looking out upon this savage land, echoes from the days of settlement beat back, scarcely diminished by time.

Morris's *Icelandic Journals* appear in his Collected Works, and they have been re-issued as a volume in the Travellers' Classics Series. (Sussex: Century Press, 1969).

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