THE ICELANDIC JAUNT; A STUDY OF THE EXPEDITIONS MADE BY WILLIAM MORRIS TO ICELAND IN 1871 AND 1873 BY JOHN PURKIS

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Morris in Iceland is an attractive figure, deliberately unlike—with apologies to Mackail—either Johnson in the Hebrides or Byron in Greece. Perched uneasily on his diminutive and long-suffering pony (perhaps the real hero of the expedition, as Morris realised when he gave one of his mounts an honourable retirement at Kelmscott), perpetually losing things which the honest Icelanders invariably return, this strange combination of poet and cook traverses the deserts of lava, plunges into strong-flowing, glacier-fed rivers, crawls painfully through the caves of the Fire Giant, endures sleet, snow, fog and volcanic dust, carefully records all that happens for posterity—and emerges at the end of this physical and emotional purgatory a bigger man, having taken to himself as carapace the craggy unyielding landscape of Iceland, and forming his character thereafter on the model of its courageous and active heroes. The journals, a few letters, and some poems are our record of this transformation.

The journals are obviously of interest to a student of Morris' life and opinions; but they are also of great literary merit. G. D. H. Cole regretted leaving them out of his Nonesuch selection and E. P. Thompson pointed out that they show a change in Morris' style—towards the use of strong active verbs. Philip Henderson claims that the first journal contains some of Morris' finest descriptive writing and is more vivid than Sigurd the Volsung. I would further claim that the journals are one of Morris' great books, great partly by accident: 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—the return to simplicity in furniture design mirrored in the drive to simplicity and virility in words and syntax. There was no need, in a journal describing present-day Iceland, to employ the fake medievalisms which spoil the translations from thirteenth century Icelandic—one is spared the monotonous archaisms "fære", "wanhope", and "lief"—and the desire to avoid Latin words gives us instead conversational idioms and clear, bright English monosyllables.

Why did Morris go to Iceland in 1871 and 1872? The reasons fall into two opposing groups and we can deal with the negative ones first.

There was an arrangement to leave Janey and Rossetti at Kelmscott with himself out of the way; this is indicated by the joint lease of the Manor in the summer of 1871 and certain passages in the letters. Morris was much worried by this situation; we don't know all the facts yet, and can only assume for the moment that Oswald Doughty is substantially correct in his version of the events of that time. Iceland would also provide a release from the tension of appearing good-humoured about the whole affair, which Morris secretly considered to be a deep personal failure. Besides, things had been dragging on long enough without any prospect of resolution one way or the other—Rossetti's amorosity was ever ambiguous and prolonged—and perhaps leaving the two alone together would lead to some kind of definite conclusion.

Morris had been reduced to a state of nullity and despair, amply described in the poems of this time. As he said in a letter of 1872:

"I am going to try to get to Iceland next year, hard as it will be to drag myself away from two or three people in England; but I know there will be a kind of rest in it, let alone the help it will bring me from physical reasons. I know clearer now than then what a blessing and help last year's journey was to me; what horrors it saved me from." Further he felt a need to undergo a "trial by ordeal"—an obvious psychological compensation for his "failure"—as we see from a poem of March 1871:

"Ah, shall Winter mend your case?  
Set your teeth the wind to face.  
Beat down the snow, tread down the frost!  
All is gained when all is lost."

These are different facets of the negative cause of his journey. But they could as easily have been satisfied by a trek across the Sahara or an exploration of Alaska. The positive reason requires more careful consideration—there was a definite quest, a desire to find something in the wilderness of Iceland.

Morris had always been interested in Icelandic literature. He read Thorpe's Northern Mythology at Oxford; its influence on the early poems and stories is clear, including of course a direct use in the story of The Linderns Pool. Thorpe gives a clear summary of the beliefs and superstitions of the Scandinavians, together with a collection of anecdotes—but he did not include the historical sagas. Morris revered Carlyle, who had devoted the first of his 1840 lectures On Heroes to Odin and had summoned up this vision of Iceland:

"In that strange island, Iceland—burst up, the geologists say, by fire from the bottom of the sea; a wild land of barrenness and lava; swallowed many
months of every year in black tempests, yet with a wild gleaming beauty in summertime; towering up there, stern and grim, in the North Ocean; with its snow jokuls, roaring geysers, sulphur pools and horrid volcanic chasms, like the waste chaotic battlefield of Frost and Fire—where of all places we least looked for literature or written memorials, the record of these things was written down. On the seashore of this wild land is a rim of grassy country where cattle can subsist, and men by means of them and what the sea yields; and it seems they were poetic men these, men who had deep thoughts in them, and uttered musically their thoughts. Much would be lost had Iceland not been burst-up from the sea, had not been discovered by the Northmen”.

This is in a tradition which goes back to Gray; but it is a tradition that is significantly more interested in the weird legends of Valhalla than in the human beings remembered in the Sagas.

Morris discovered the Sagas while looking for stories to fill out *The Earthly Paradise*. He was introduced to Eiríkr Magnusson in 1868—who looked so like Morris that he seemed an alter ego, an Icelandic blood-brother. Magnusson translated the stories into normal nineteenth-century English which Morris worked up into either verse or Icelandic-English prose. May Morris gives some examples in the first volume of *Artist, Writer, Socialist*. At first Morris medievalised the Sagas, certainly he shifted the emphasis, toning down the harshness and sending a diffuse "poetic" glow over the simple and clear emotional passages. But later he was capable of seeing the real virtues of the Saga writers—"Nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained"—and was better able to imitate these as he emerged from his mental submission to Rossetti’s influence.

For Morris, after Oxford, had moved into a circle dominated by Rossetti; he had taken up painting, for which in his more mature moods he knew he had little talent, and he had even married a girl, selected, one feels, by the master. All this had now changed to disillusion; Morris had had enough; he deliberately chose out an anti-Rossetti landscape (Rossetti disliked the journals as lacking in humour and retaliated with childish jokes about Scalds). There he was determined to recover his own vision.

The Journal of 1871 is, then, a record of this pilgrimage or quest. It was rewritten and finished in June 1873 “with some idea of publishing”—but one copy only was given to Mrs. Burne-Jones in 1873 and the text was not completely published until it appeared in the Collected Works in 1911. It is divided into two parts, a first part of five chapters—indicating some measure of rewriting, as is borne out by the footnotes recording changes from the original notebook—and a second part of continuous narrative containing no chapter-headings, and, one assumes, little change from the original. Each day’s events are of course clearly separated by a date-heading which also records the place where the diary is being written.

Morris tells the story throughout from an apparently extrovert, unsentimental point of view, avoiding vague gush over “the wonders of Iceland”; the Geysers, for example, are deliberately played down, though one senses that Morris was secretly rather impressed. Clearly he wished to avoid writing the usual “travel book” of the time with its tedious descriptions of uninteresting scenes and its list of facts.
and figures. We might perhaps consider this early passage as an example of “anti-travel writing”:

“We were soon fairly out and running north along the Scotch coast, a very dull and uninteresting-looking coast too; there is not much sea and the wind is astern, the day very sunny and bright and I enjoyed myself hugely though I was rather queasy at first; you get lazy and are quite contented with watching the sea on board ship when all is going well and the weather is warm; Faulkner is prostrate now but very resigned, and lies without moving on the platform by the wheel; the day clouded over a little towards evening and threatened rain, but throughout the weather was fair; one amusement was seeing the sailors heave the log, which they do every two hours. I think; it consists of throwing a piece of wood and a long line into the sea, and letting it run out and then winding it up again, whereby (not being scientific, I don’t know why) they find out how fast the ship is going; the coxswain saw to this; he was a queer little man with a red beard, and a red nose like a carrot, and bright yellow hair like spun glass; as they wound the line up they would sing a little sea-song that pleased my unmusical taste” (Journal, p. 9).

Notice how Morris has conveyed by this throwaway attitude the real feeling of lying about on deck; other writers might well give exact details of the speed and so on, but Morris puts on a cavalier Oxford Greats attitude of not bothering about science and mechanical details—“the two cultures” have a long history; yet he is unable to suppress the energy of the born writer which comes out in the similes describing the coxswain.

Out of the general level of narrative on this apparently casual plane, as if from a man saying, “Let’s not be too solemn about this game of travel; I’m a normal sensible chap, not carried away by enthusiasms—you can trust my observation”; the really interesting moments of the journey are made to stand out like beacons. And the narrator, having established his clubman-persona in the early stages, is credible when he tells us of the strange and the unbelievable. (This technique could of course be compared with that of Scott, whose heroes often begin their tale in a comfortable business-man environment, or Conan Doyle’s use of Dr. Watson.)

The first impressive adventure that Morris narrates is of the 12 hours spent in the Faroes. He mentions this as one of the more interesting events in his first letter to Janey—and these letters are a useful check on the longer narrative of the Journal:

“...on Tuesday morning about 7 we reached Thorshaven in the Faroes, and went ashore for 12 hours: we went a long walk over the hills on the most beautiful of days and it was so calm that evening that the captain was able to thread the labyrinth of the islands, and a most wonderful sight it was; I have seen nothing out of a dream so strange as our coming out of the last narrow sound into the Atlantic, and leaving the huge wall of rocks astern in the shadowless midnight twilight: nothing I have ever seen has impressed me so much....” (Letters, p. 42).

This takes up eight pages in the Journal. Morris tells us that on seeing the Faroes he shuddered at his first sight of a really northern land because it seemed so mournfully empty and barren, though on the return journey they seemed a gentle sweet place after
Iceland. They went for a long walk to see the ruined church at Kirkby, and on the walk Morris comments:

"I was most deeply impressed with it all, yet can scarcely tell you why; it was like nothing I had ever seen, but strangely like my old imaginations of places for sea-wanderers to come to" (Journal, p. 14).

The whole day spent there seemed strange, dream-like and unreal, and Morris kept trying in asides to account for it, to rationalise its "romantic" and "poetic" appeal. It was a kind of symbolic reliving of certain aspects of his own poetic past, a kind of writing and living which he knew he was now leaving for a maturer way of writing, and therefore the final dramatic exit from the last channel of the Faroes has a more than literal significance.

"After that on we went toward the gates that led out into the Atlantic; narrow enough they look even now we are quite near; as the ship’s nose was almost in them, I saw close beside us a stead with its home-field sloping down to the sea, the people running out to look at us and the black cattle grazing all about, then I turned to look ahead as the ship met the first of the swell in the open sea, and when I looked astern a very few minutes after, I could see nothing at all of the gates we had come out by, no slopes of grass, or valleys opening out from the shore: nothing but a terrible wall of rent and furrowed rocks, the little clouds still entangled here and there about the tops of them: here the wall would be rent from top to bottom and its two sides would yawn as if they would have fallen asunder, here it was buttressed with great masses of stone that had slipped from its top; there it ran up into all manner of causeless-looking spikes: there was no beach below the wall, no foam breaking at its feet" (Journal, p. 17).

Why call up a picture of a beach and foam at this point, only to deny them? "The foam of perilous seas in fairy lands forlorn" seems the obvious reference, and indeed the passage is shot through with references to a common romantic image—"the happy place once seen, once left from me" by some terrible and inexorable prohibition, Paradise lost and destroyed. The gates have shut to, and there remains only the wilderness, Iceland.

"Iceland first seen" was even more formidable than expected, and is mentioned in a letter and poem besides the Journal, which describes: 

"...a terrible shore indeed: a great mass of dark grey mountains worked into pyramids and shelves, looking as if they had been built and half-ruined; they were striped with snow high up, and wreaths of cloud dragged across them here and there, and above them were two peaks and a jagged ridge of pure white snow: we were far enough presently to look into Berufirth, and to see the great pyramid of Buland-stindr which stands a little way down the west side of the firth close by the sea... the east side... showed the regular Icelandic hillside: a great slip of black shale and sand, striped with the green of the pastures, that gradually sloped into a wide grass grown flat between the hill and sea..." (Journal, p. 19).

This is taken up, expanded and meditated upon in the poem:

"Toothed rocks down the side of the firth
on the east guard a weary wide lea,
And black slope the hillsides above,
stripped adown with their desolate green:
And a peak rises up on the west
from the meeting of cloud and of sea,
Foursquare from base unto point
like the building of Gods that have been...";
Iceland has all the appearances of a dead land, but the
pyramid shape of the mountain calls up the associations
of a tomb containing a treasure:
"O land as some cave by the sea
where the treasures of old have been laid".
The treasures are connected with heroic people, and
consist of a sword, a staff and a ring which have magi-
cal powers. Although nothing fertile grows above the
tomb and the sailors who travel by take it to be only a
gave, it is in fact preserving these creative and potent
resources for the future when the world shall awaken.
Morris is going to Iceland to find these immortal
treasures which are of course the stories of the sagas:
"...there 'mid the grey grassy dales
sore scarred by the ruining streams
Lives the tale of the Northland of old
and the undying glory of dreams."
People may wonder why the settlers came to Iceland
and may dismiss the sagas as records of
"...feasting amidst of the winter
when the fight of year had been fought,
Whose plunder all gathered together
was little to babble about";
but Iceland answers that her time will come later
when riches and established values have been over-
thrown:
"Not for this nor for that I wrought
Amid waning of realms and of riches
and death of things worshipped and sure,
I abide here the spouse of a God
and I made and I make and endure".
In a series of paradoxes which look forward to

T. S. Eliot, Iceland's qualities are described:
"O Queen of the grief without knowledge,
of the courage that may not avail,
Of the longing that may not attain...
More hope than of pleasure fulfilled
amidst of thy blindness is set".
She seems to be passively and eternally enduring pain
and punishment with a courage which knows that the
world is doomed and yet holds out—a true Saga vir-
tue: but there is hope, says Morris. Balder will return
from the heart of the sun bringing life and healing and
we will then remember Iceland for holding out so
long to make this possible.
We don't know the exact date of this poem except
that it is presumably later than the first writing of the
Journal. If it was written many years later, then we
would be justified in reading a political allegory into
it, but I think it is probably written quite soon after
the event. The mere fact that the version of the 1871
Journal which we have contains at least two refer-
ences to the phrase "came we out for to see" indicates
that the poem was probably written before 1873. I
think therefore that the poem must be read as an
account of Morris' personal revitalisation as a result
of the journey.
They landed at Reykjavik, which was a disap-
pointment: "not a very attractive place, yet not very bad,
better than a north-country town in England" (Jour-
nal, p. 23). It certainly wasn't what Morris had come
out to see, being the usual wooden commercial town,
probably priding itself on its approximation to Anglo-
Saxon civilisation: "The town itself might be in
Canada, and is quite commonplace" (Letters, p. 43).
Morris soon tired of waiting there, and the Journal
dwindles to a few notes, but as soon as they start his excitement rises:

"I find my pony charming riding and am in the best of spirits: certainly it was a time to be remembered; the clatter of packs and box-lids, the rattle of the hoofs over the stones, the guides crying out and cracking their whips, and we all with our faces turned towards the mountain-wall under which we were to sleep tonight" (Journal, p. 28).

Everywhere he noticed the barrenness of the country they passed through—"strange and awful", "a doleful land"; we shall see a complete contrast to this in the 1873 Journal. Riding conditions were terrible even on the so-called roads: "...a waste of loose large-grained black sand without a blade of grass on it, that changed in its turn into a grass plain again but nor smooth this time; all ridged and thrown up into hummocks as so much of the grassland is in Iceland, I don't know why: this got worse and worse till at last it grew boggy as it got near another spur of the lava-field, and then we were off it on to the naked lava, which was here like the cooled eddies of a molten stream: it was dreadful riding to me..." (Journal, p. 29).

The expedition progressed eastward for some days in the direction of the Njala country, its first objective, Morris all the time recording the strangeness of the country and getting involved in quixotic adventures with horse and gear. But occasionally he paused for a moment to comment on the poverty of the land and therefore of the people, realising that the landscape had to be lived in and wasn't just a scenic display for tourists:

"...I went into the little grass-garth at the back of the house and watching the fowls scratching about, felt a queer feeling something akin to disappointment of how like the world was all over after all..." (Journal, p. 37). As they approached Berghórsknoll, Morris looked about him continually for scenes of historical grandeur, though in fact they seemed to be riding over "the deadest of dead flats", but to Morris "the whole scene was most impressive and exciting... there was nothing mean or prosaic to jar upon one in spite of the grisly desolation". He found three mounds in the middle of the ploughed-up marshes and tried to sketch something, but soon gave up. It was a poor place. The next day the bonder showed them the traditional places round the stead where the Burners lay in ambush; he even told them that when digging to extend his house he came upon a deep bed of ashes, which Morris noted as an indication of how much the Icelanders believed the old stories.

Then they went on to Gunnar's house at Lithend, the next point of pilgrimage. This was a richer place, but here too the meadows were being ruined by the sand and stones brought down by the streams. They were again shown the traditional sites, last of all Gunnar's bowe or barrow, a big mound dramatically situated which stayed in Morris' memory.

The next day's entry, taken as a whole, is one of the best written in the Journal (July 22nd). Magnusson, Evans and Morris set off with a local guide to make the difficult and dangerous journey up the valley of the Markflee to Thorsmark. A shut-in, dead-end valley, terminating in a glacier, and yet even here are learned Icelanders; the guide knows German, Danish and English, and is anxious to converse about Shakespeare and Chambers' Miscellany; the river is "ugly-looking... quite turbid and yellowish-white, smelling
strongly of sulphur, and running at a prodigious rate”—and this they must cross because a cliff comes to the river’s edge and cuts off their path. Morris has to be led across and even Magnusson stumbles. The rocks are red with burning, and Morris himself soon brings in the obvious parallel to the legendary scenery of Hell:

“... the cliffs were much higher especially on this side, and most unimaginably strange: they overhung in some places much more than seemed possible; they had caves in them just like the hell-mouts 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...” (Journal, p. 52).

They climb on to a glacier, with a cold wind blowing across it in the middle of the hot day, and finish their journey in a little grassy valley with a peaceful idyllic birch-wood, a most unexpected place for refreshment; they unsaddle the horses and Morris looks back over the whole scene—the labyrinthine valley of “the furious brimstone-laden Markiefeet”:

“... surely it was what I came out for to see; yet for the moment I felt cowed, and as if I should never get back again: yet with that came a feeling of exaltation too, and I seemed to understand how people under all disadvantages should find their imaginations kindle amid such scenes. So when I had looked my fill I went down through the fragrant birch-boughs on to the grass and lay down there...” (Journal, p. 54). The journey back seemed just as perilous, they stopped at many historical steads, returned home to Faulkner’s dinner, “and I slept like a stone all night”.

Having made this Aeneas-like pilgrimage to the gates of Hell, Morris was then exposed to the phoney glamour of the Geysers; worse still, Faulkner was very ill and they had to wait at the Geysers for him in a camping-place strewn with the refuse of previous tourists; they might have had to abandon the expedition completely, but luckily Faulkner recovered.

The next part of the journey was through the wilderness between the Geysers and the northern valleys; they stumbled up cliffs in “a solemn place... the gate of the wilderness”, which was “a great plain of black and grey sand, grey rocks sticking up out of it; tufts of sea-pink and bladder campion scattered about here and there, and a strange plant, a dwarf willow, that grows in these wastes only, a few sprays of long green leaves wreathing about as it were a tangle of bare roots, white and blanched like bones...” (Journal, p. 75).

The driving rain and the ground a mass of stones about “twenty-inch cube” meant that they had to get off the horses and walk—and yet it was marked as a road on the map. To one side was the Thoris-dale of the Grettis-saga, and that story became more real to Morris. Though conditions seemed so bad, yet they were dominating even the worst that Iceland had so far offered, and Morris rejoiced in it:

“Certainly this is what I came out for to see, and highly satisfactory I find it, nor indeed today did it depress me at all” (Journal, p. 77). They went on for several days, making slow progress. At one point they came to the cave of Surshelleir, and then had to press on through hail and sleet to find pasture for the horses through terrible country, the “background to Glam the Thrall and his hauntings”; at last they came to a
gorge from which "the wind blew up like knives" and descended to the valley and a house "with real beds"; they had managed to cross the wilderness.

The next part of the Journal is about their progress along the northern coast, and is full of saga-references; the country is not so alarming to look at, but the weather is not so good; everywhere the same contrast between the heroes of the past and the poverty of the present-day Icelanders who inhabit the same sites. Or perhaps Morris had romanticised the sagas too much, and the heroes were still heroic in spite of material conditions. He is obviously not sure, and writes after looking at the historical places in Laxdale:

"Just think, though, what a mournful place this is—Iceland I mean—setting aside the pleasure of one's animal life there: the fresh air, the riding and rough life, and feeling of adventure—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: Olaf Peacock went about summer and winter after his live-stock, and saw to his haymaking and fishing just as this little peak-nosed parson does; setting aside the coffee and brandy, his victuals under his hall, 'marked with famous stories,' were just the same as the little parson in his ten-foot square parlour eats: I don't doubt the house stands on the old ground. But Lord! what littleness and helplessness has taken the place of the old passion and violence that had place here once—and all is unforogotten; 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 over head, that's all; whatever solace your life is to have here must come out of yourself or these old stories, not over hopeful themselves" (Journal, p. 108).

Admittedly written in a moment of depression, this is nevertheless Morris' longest statement about his feelings towards the places he was seeing; he still sees something "poetic" about the "old passion and violence" because he hasn't truly realised the stories to himself—but the sight of the actual places is making them more real. They no longer exist in a never-never land and the present-day people are performing the same basic actions of making a living from the earth. The next stage—of seeing the ordinary people of the present-day as potential heroes of a new society—is in the offing but Morris hasn't quite caught sight of it yet.

The expedition wound on round the north coast—with one more "ordeal" in traversing the cliff-edge path of Bulandshöfdi—and then headed south, passing the euphemistically-named Fairwoodfell ("a savage dreadful place...the haunt of Grettir once"), and arrived at its final point of pilgrimage, Thingvellir. Here Morris, brought up on what we are taught to sneer at as "the Whig interpretation of history", rejoiced to see the place where Northern democracy reached its highest level.

"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 up 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... (Journal, p. 166).

They arrived late at night and Morris, though tired, was pleased that "...once again that thin thread of insight and imagination, which so seldom comes to us, and is such joy when it comes, did not fail me at this first sight of the greatest marvel and most storied place of Iceland" (Journal, p. 168). He went to "sleep with happy dreams enough, as almost always in Iceland".

They spent two days exploring the natural architecture of this open-air parliament, Morris obviously feeling very much at home. When he had had enough sight-seeing he wandered off on his own, lying down in the mossy grass of the Hill of Laws "in a strange lazy sort of excitement", upon which Magnusson comments: "He sat about the rocks and ate blueberries till he could find no more and then remembered about the dinner" (Journal, p. 176).

After this climax the rest of the Journal gives a summary and speedy account of their return home, adding as a last thought that Iceland was a place where he had in fact been very happy. It had been a holiday after a period of great tension, and that alone was worth-while:

"There, it was worth doing and has been of great service to me. I was getting nervous and depressed and very much wanted a rest, and I don't think anything would have given me so complete a one" (Letters, p. 47).

Morris had not expected to return to Iceland, but the letters of 1872, especially one already quoted, show that the strains and stresses were again building up, and it seemed that only another expedition could cure him. On the 18th July, 1873, he is again at Reykjavik, and writes to Jane:

"It is all like a kind of dream to me, and my real life seems set aside till it is over" (Letters, p. 57). Obviously the element of escape from "real life" is predominant this time as a motive—"I was more unhappy on the voyage out than I liked to confess in my letters" (Letters, p. 58). He didn't begin to write a journal this time until July 24th, when they were well on their way. We have a direct transcript from the notebook, as opposed to the written-up version of the 1871 Journal. After a time, probably because there were only two on this journey to do all the work of cooking and other duties, the diary becomes little more than notes, and breaks off altogether in Northdal on August 19th. The route taken was different, a wider sweep to the east being included, but at first we have the impression of an unwinding of the spool taken on the first expedition:

"My spirits... rose again when I was once in the saddle and on the path made more familiar to me by the one intense sight of it than many years might have made another place... I felt quite at home... as if there had been no break between the old journey and this... The first day's journey was our last day last time" (Journal, p. 188). The place is not so forbidding as the first time, and Morris is able to accept it whole-heartedly: "at last I remembered all I had come to see and the land conquered my misgivings once for all, I hope".

The Thingmesteads are visited first this time; once again they arrive late, but Morris sleeps without dreaming—a trivial point to which I don't want to attach any psychological weight except to say that it
bears out the main difference between the journals in atmosphere. This time all the vague dreaminess of the Earthly Paradise, which still welled up in Morris' mind from time to time in 1871, has now gone for good; he writes like an active wide-awake man who has realised that time is beginning to run out and is fully engaged in realising the present moment. This time he notices the fertility of the country rather than its desolation and the similes refer to the earth and its life; May Morris seems to state the contrary when she comments on the extreme detachment of the second journal, observing that not so much notice is taken of people, and implying that her father was fully submerged in a dream-Iceland of his own. In the first place there were very few new people to be described, and secondly the greater emotional detachment brings with it a truer insight into the real Iceland, which is seen through the eyes of a re-integrated man in good psychological health.

There are many illustrations of these new attitudes in the imagery and scenic descriptions. On the first page the sea-birds are "as thick as bees about a hive" and lie on the slopes "like great masses of white flowers". After the Thingmeads they come to the most desolate heath one can imagine and yet here there are some green slopes "quite covered with sheep and lambs...some coal black, some sheered or spotted, some a rich brown, and all most beautiful delicate little beasts" (Journal, p. 190). Next they come to a great plain of grass with many horses resting; there are many hot springs, regarded benevolently this time. Later they made a second journey up the valley of the Markflee to Thorsmark; the caves are less terrible, the sheep are beautiful and they all drink

Madeira at the journey's end. At Lithend Morris wandered round Gunnar's Howe and at first:
"...all looked somewhat drearier than before, two years ago on a bright evening, and it was not till I got back from the howe and wandered by myself about the said site of Gunnar's hall and looked out thence over the great grey plain that I could answer to the echoes of the beautiful story—but then at all events I did not fail" (Journal, p. 207).

"The beautiful story" is in chapter 78 of Njal's Saga: "One night, Skarp-Hedin and Hogni were standing outside, to the south of Gunnar's burial mound. The moonlight was bright but fitful. Suddenly it seemed to them that the mound was open; Gunnar had turned round to face the moon. There seemed to be four lights burning inside the mound, illuminating the whole chamber. They could see that Gunnar was happy; his face was exultant. He chanted a verse so loudly that they could have heard it clearly from much farther away..." (Magnusson and Palsson translation, p. 73), and Morris did not fail to produce a poem about this figure of joy and immortality—Gunnar's House above the house at Lithend, which appears in Poems by the Way.

In this poem Iceland is seen as a ruined cathedral, the floor containing the buried dead of past time and the walls displaying pictures of undying deeds. Within the cathedral is one special tomb: Morris introduces the traditional "Siste viator" formula:
"Stay by this tomb in a tomb to ask of who lieth beneath".

It is inevitable that the name of Gunnar calls up no associations, not even the fear that the tomb should open again and show him
“glad-eyed without grudging or pain”. But if we listen to the saga-writer we can hear “his death-conquering song
Till the heart swells to think of the gladness
undying that overcame wrong”.
This momentary vision of Gunnar makes nine hundred years seem a little time, and Morris is heartened to realise that the world is still young
“and the hope of it flourishing green”.
(He was often himself complaining of the onset of old age to his friends in England, and we can feel that this poem is an attempt to explain the renewed youth and energy which Iceland gave him.)
The poem concludes with a picture of the midnight scene at the Howe, which cannot be dark because it is illumined by the midnight sun.
“For here day and night toileth the summer
lest deadless his time pass away”.
The transference of this to Morris is obvious—there is no time now for petty grudging, worries over personal matters (Gunnar could even forgive his killers); there are more important things to be done: the external world needs changing, and this kind of work will throw “personal failures” into insignificance:
“...the glorious simplicity of the terrible and tragic, but beautiful land with its well-remembered stories of brave men, killed all querulous feeling in me, and have made all the dear faces of wife and children, and love, and friends dearer than ever to me” (Letters, p. 58).
The final part of the 1873 Journal deals with another crossing of the wilderness; this time there is no “terrible gate”, but a brook and “a very pretty waterfall on it where it splits round a little grass-
grown island where the birch-trees grew prettily overhanging the water” (Journal, p. 212).
In their journey they meet with a stream “as wide as the Thames at Maidenhead”, and everywhere Morris sees sheep and swans, heath-plants and green pasture, and observes carefully “two little brooks on the sides of which were a few stalks of angelica; and I noticed a tuft or two of cranesbill, and tried my horse at some dandelions that grew in the black sand. Over the first of these brooks, by the way, hung a few terns looking after worms, and a little past the second a stone-bunting flew up into the air...” (Journal, p. 219). The background of the waste and the tumbled mountains is still there of course, but even this is made light of and compared to homely things: some rocks, for example, are “like organ-pipes with wool atop”.
The contrast between the two Journals is clear; by the end of the second Morris has achieved his quest: Iceland has been wrestled with and conquered—now it is like a friend to be treated familiarly and without fear. In the process Morris has worked out a neurosis, and so his writing changes from the distorted vision of depression to the clear sight of health and normality. He comments in letters written on his return:
“Do you know I feel as if a definite space of my life had passed away now I have seen Iceland for the last time: as I looked up at Charles’ 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: surely I have gained a great deal and it was no idle whim that drew me there, but a true instinct for what I needed... I am wanting to settle down now to a really industrious
man: for I do not mean to go to Iceland again if I can help it” (Letters, p. 59).

For some time after, Iceland was a perpetual subject of alarm to his friends. “Morris has come back smelling of raw fish and talks more of Iceland than ever”, says Burne-Jones in a letter with a caricature of the fur-hatted Morris eating the said fish. Rossetti, who couldn’t stand the subject, left Morris and Co. in 1874 and their friendship was broken off completely. Morris remembered what he had seen in Iceland for years: in a letter of 1882 he refers to it as the place where he learned “that the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared to the inequality of classes”, and in 1889 he can still recall the Icelandic cloud-scapes. (Letters, pp. 187 and 307.)

The expeditions to Iceland, then, came at a crucial stage in Morris’ development, and the Journals have great importance to a biographer as the record of a formative experience. But in the rehabilitation of Morris’ literary works which is now in progress they are assessed at a higher value than many of his more widely known writings. They show him grappling with facts instead of turning away from experience, and using his own instead of a borrowed style. If Morris had written more often like this, the rescue operation of the past ten years would not have been necessary.

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