William Morris and Translations of Iceland

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On 7 September 1871, a middle-aged Englishman stood on the railway station in Edinburgh. He was short, fat, red-faced, bull-necked, bush-bearded and 'quite bewildered'.¹ He had been away from Britain for the whole summer; everything now looked very strange and he hardly knew where to buy a ticket for. He had been to Iceland and enjoyed it. The last words of his journal account of that visit leave us in no doubt about this: 'Iceland is a marvellous, beautiful and solemn place ... where I had been in fact very happy.' He was still happy enough when he arrived home to write out two short poems about Iceland which he had newly composed. He sent copies² to Jón Sigurðsson, one of the two Icelanders who had stood with him on the railway station, having sailed with him all the way from Iceland. Jón had long been a major philological figure amongst the Copenhagen-based Icelanders; and by this time he was known as forseti (president) as a mark of his hugely influential role over three decades as a parliamentarian, diplomat and lobbyist, as Iceland inched towards a restoration of the national independence which it had surrendered to the Norwegian king in the middle of the thirteenth century.³ The idea was for Jón to have the poems translated into Icelandic and published in Ný Félagsrit, the Icelandic literary journal of which he was editor.

Jón received and read both poems, and then wrote to Eiríkur Magnússon, the other Icelandic who had been with the portly Englishman in Edinburgh—and Iceland. Jón told Eiríkur that he did not much like the poems: the poet 'regards our mother Iceland as rather pale and haggard, dismal and sad'.⁴ He would
have much preferred heroic songs celebrating Iceland's saga-age glories, rather than gloomy lyrics by brooding Englishmen. Out of courtesy he chose to have just one of the poems translated, by Steingrimur Thorsteinsson, a major late nineteenth-century Icelandic poet also based in Copenhagen. This one poem was selected because it seemed marginally less lugubrious than the other, which was unceremoniously rejected.5

The bulky and bearded English poet was, of course, William Morris and the two poems which he sent to Jón Sigúrðsson were eventually published in England twenty years later—one was called 'Iceland First Seen' and the other 'Gunnar's Howe above the House at Lithend'6 'Ílandsýn við Ísland' was duly published in Ný Felafríð in 1872,7 long before British readers set eyes on the English version, in Morris's 1891 collection Poems by the Way;8 but Icelandic readers never saw a translation of the allegedly pallid 'Gunnar's Howe'—that was the one which 'we won't bother with'.

'Gunnar's Howe' has bothered few Morris scholars since its first publication,9 despite the subtle evidence it offers of the celebrated Victorian saga translator's imaginative engagement with medieval Iceland in general, and the epic Brennu-Njáls saga in particular. This essay seeks to examine not only 'Gunnar's Howe', but also a forgotten tribute to Morris written at the time of his death by a leading late nineteenth-century Icelandic poet. I want to suggest that Jón Sigúrðsson may have misjudged Morris's poem; far from being a melancholy response to Iceland, 'Gunnar's Howe' can be seen (for all its surface greyness) as a glowing tribute to the land of lava and lyme grass. Iceland had made William Morris 'very happy' at a time when the relationship between his wife Janet and Dante Gabriel Rossetti at Kelmscott Manor10 continued to offer him every reason to be gloomy, and this happiness shines through the poem. I then wish to comment on Matthías Jochumsson's poetic obituary of Morris. Though written in 1896, 'Víðjalmuir Morris' was not published until 1923; it has, to the best of my knowledge, never been commented on by Morris scholars. The poem voices Icelandic pride at the attention devoted to its medieval literary culture by one of Victorian Britain's greatest Icelandophiles. During his life,

Morris was a tireless translator of and enthusiast for Icelandic sagas and Eddic myth and legend;11 in death he finds himself translated and mythologized, paraded and celebrated in Matthías's poem alongside the great figures of Edda and saga whom he did so much to promote within the English-speaking world, and with whose turbulent lives he so closely identified. Taken together, then, 'Gunnar's Howe' and 'Víðjalmuir Morris' allow us to reflect on what might be termed Morris's translation of Iceland, and Iceland's translation of Morris.

William Morris's priority when he arrived in Iceland was to visit the southern sagasteads associated with the greatest of all the Icelandic family sagas, Brennu-Njáls saga, or 'The Story of Burnt Njal', as it was known to Victorian readers of Sir George Dasent's pioneering and field-commanding 1861 English translation. Morris viewed the prospect with a pilgrim's excitement, and by his subsequent writings he signalled arrestingly that Brennu-Njáls saga, sites such as Gunnarshaugur (Gunnar's Howe), and Icelandic culture in general were worthy objects of serious philosophical reflection and artistic creativity for literate and sentient Victorians. His knowledge of Brennu-Njáls saga, derived as much from the Icelandic original as from Dasent's Burnt Njal, enabled him to animate every desolate location he visited; and led him to demand this same visionary capacity in others. Whilst still on the outward voyage, peering impatiently through the mist, Morris relates every feature of the emerging Icelandic coastline to the saga: he glimpses Svinafell 'under which Flosi the Burner lived', whilst the Vestmannaejjar lie 'just opposite to Njal's house at Bergthorsknoll'.12 Journeying on horseback to the actual sites, everyone 'at the height of ... excitement',13 it does not take long for Morris's teeming imagination to translate a mound by the house at Bergbórhváli into the site of Njáll's house;14 the next day (21 July) he finds the hollow where Flosi and the hundred burners hid before the final attack on Njáll and his family (there was now room for only a dozen men), notes Morris,15 but is assured by the local farmer that the river has eroded the space once available for the other seven dozen); the pond where Kári doused his burning clothes proves to be little more than a patch of marshy ground overgrown with rushes, but there were signs
that a brook had once flowed from there; more excitingly, the farmer tells the travellers that he had come across a bed of ashes when digging the foundations of a new parlour. Moving inland, Morris reaches Gunnar’s homestead at Hlíðarendi—the Lithe, as he, like Dasent, calls it. Time and (quite literally) tide have ‘sadly wasted and diminished’ meadows which had once been ‘Gunnar’s great wealth’; but Morris is still able to observe the traditional site of Gunnar’s hall, the hollow where Sámr the hound howled his last loyal message of warning, and ‘Gunnar’s Howe’ itself, the subject of his poem.

The saga events which underpin the poem are simple enough: Gunnar Hámundarson, the great but luckless farmer-chieftain, is murdered by vengeful foes who surround his farmhouse at the end of a long narrative sequence spanning the first half of the saga, during which he and his friend Njáll Borgeirsson find it ever harder to contain the social disruptions generated by a witches’ brew of rank misfortune, motiveless malignity, and interfamilial strife. Gunnar defends himself heroically before dying in front of his hard-hearted wife and loyal mother; he is buried in a cairn on the hillside. There are soon tales that the dead Gunnar can be heard singing cheerfully in his grave. We can follow the moment in Dasent’s translation:

Now this token happened at Lithend, that the neat-herd and the serving-maid were driving cattle by Gunnar’s cairn. They thought that he was merry, and that he was singing inside the cairn. They went home and told Rannveig, Gunnar’s mother, of this token ... Now those two, Skarphedin and Hogni, were out of doors one evening by Gunnar’s cairn on the south side. The moon and stars were shining clear and bright, but every now and then the clouds drove over them. Then all at once they thought they saw the cairn standing open, and lo! Gunnar had turned himself in the cairn and looked at the moon. They thought they saw four lights burning in the cairn, and none of them threw a shadow. They saw that Gunnar was merry, and he wore a joyful face. He sang a song, and so loud, that it might have been heard though they had been further off.

William Morris and Translations of Iceland

‘He that lavish’d rings in largesse,
When the fights’ red rain-drops fell,
Bright of face, with heart-strings hardy,
Hogni’s father met his fate;
Then his brow with helmet shrouding,
Bearing battle-shield, he spake,
“I will die the prop of battle,
Sooner die than yield an inch,
Yes, sooner die than yield an inch”.

After that the cairn was shut up again.
‘Wouldst thou believe these tokens if Njal or I told them to thee?’ says Skarphedin.
‘I would believe them,’ he says, ‘if Njal told them, for it is said that he never lies.’
‘Such tokens as these mean much,’ says Skarphedin, ‘when he shows himself to us, he who would sooner die than yield to his foes; and see how he has taught us what we ought to do.’
‘I shall be able to bring nothing to pass,’ says Hogni, ‘unless thou wilt stand by me.’
‘Now,’ says Skarphedin, ‘will I bear in mind how Gunnar behaved after the slaying of your kinsman Sigmund; now I will yield you such help as I may. My father gave his word to Gunnar to do that whenever thou or thy mother had need of it.’

After that they go home to Lithend."

Dasent’s better informed readers, of whom William Morris was certainly one, would have known that any old northern hero smiling in the face of death, before or after it occurred, was guaranteed entry into Valhöll (Valhalla). Thomas Bartholinus’s Antiquitatum Daniarum de Causis Contemptae a Danis adhuc Gentilibus Mortis (1689) is a compendium of instances of the phenomenon, and found a fascinated eighteenth-century European readership; and Gunnar’s last stand and afterlife found an honoured place in the volume.19 His was the ultimate invincible spirit—the distillation of clear-sighted heroic valour in life; coolly defiant at the point of death; good humoured in his grave.
thereafter. It was a medieval subject, anthologized by a humanist, and just waiting for a romantic poet to do it justice.

William Morris was not, in fact, the first English writer to sense the scene’s poetic potential. Richard Hole’s ‘The Tomb of Gunnar’, published in the Gentleman’s Magazine in 1789, announces itself as ‘a free translation, or rather imitation [from] ... an old Gothic romance’, with Bartholinus’s volume as the direct source. Hole had neither read the saga nor visited the region. There was no readily accessible edition of the saga for a late eighteenth-century British reader; Hole could not have read the Icelandic of the 1772 first edition; and no Latin translation of Njála appeared until Jón Jónsson’s Copenhagen version of 1809. As for visiting the Njála sagasteads, this was out of the question—no-one visited sagasteads in 1789. There had, in fact, been a British expedition to Iceland that very year, led by John Thomas Stanley, a young Edinburgh-educated scientist. Yet for all the young Stanley’s own lifelong fascination with old northern myth and legend, during his Iceland travels he had eyes only for the unfathomable mechanics of the hot springs at Geysir—then regarded as one of the wonders of the natural world. The Njála country was within comfortable riding distance for Stanley and his young colleagues—but it would never have occurred to them to seek out the haunts of a saga about which they knew little or nothing. Thus Hole’s necessarily armchair engagement with the old north finds him taking the narrative skeleton of the Njál saga scene from Bartholinus, deriving the mood music from Thomas Percy’s canonical Five Pieces of Runic Poetry (1763), and from Thomas Gray’s hugely influential ‘The Descent of Odin’ and ‘The Fatal Sisters’ (1768), and adding the familiar poetic paraphernalia of the late eighteenth-century British sanguinary sublime—the gloom of night, the spectral presences, the banquet for the beasts and birds of battle. The sylvan shepherd and his Augustan sheep soon retreat in horror from the scene:

‘What mean those awful sounds that rise
From the tomb where Gunnar lies?’
Exclaims the shepherd in affright;
As by the moon’s uncertain light,

Sarhedine and Högni (the nearest that the poet comes to the unfamiliar saga names of Skarphéðinn and Högni) are made of sterner stuff, however. With Hole now into his stride, the gluttonous noun phrases flow like lava, and a crisp and cloudy late summer evening in Iceland re-emerges as a dank and vaporous British autumnal night—the intrepid heroes head for the tomb ‘While darkly-rolling vapours hide/ In their dun veil night’s glittering pride.’ The ‘fearless’ pair are suddenly confronted with the ghostly Gunnar, clad in his battle-gear and in high good humour. Picked out by the moonlight and with a smile playing across his ‘awful brows’, the hero speaks in suitably Baroque tones:

‘Unmanly flight the brave despise;
Conquest of death’s the warrior’s prize;
The strife of spears disdain to shun,
Nor blast the fame by Gunnar won!’

The saga goes on to reflect on whether the vision is to be believed; Högni’s self-doubt is voiced, as is Skarphéðinn’s loyal support. No such thoughts find a place in Hole’s robust reimagining of the scene—Gunnar’s call to arms and vengeance is immediate:

‘Grasp the sword, and gird the mail!
Scorning alike to yield or fly,
Resolve to conquer, or to die!
A banquet for the wolf prepare,
And glut the ravenous birds of air!’

By such means a late eighteenth-century poet translates the (as yet) unfamiliar world of the Icelandic family saga into the (then) fashionable sensibility of Eddic poetry.

Morris’s response to this same saga scene in ‘Gunnar’s Howe’ could hardly be more different. There was much Augustan grime to remove from the canvas, but every encouragement to do so in mid-Victorian Britain. George Dasent’s translation was one of
Translating Life

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The great books to emerge from the Victorian rediscovery of the European Middle Ages and steamship technology and travel industry now made the prospect of travel to Iceland a real and practical possibility. Though engrained in the Viking Age, the Icelandic language had developed beyond the confines of the medieval period. The works of Snorri Sturluson and Snorri the Younger, in particular, had become widely known and appreciated in the English-speaking world. The first translation of Snorri's History of the Norwegian Kings, for example, was published in 1840, and a translation of Snorri's Prose Edda followed in 1856. These works, along with others by Snorri and other Icelandic writers, were eagerly read by English readers and admired for their linguistic beauty and historical accuracy.

The work of Snorri Sturluson, in particular, was seen as a perfect model for the translation of Icelandic literature into English. Snorri's works were known for their rich language and vivid descriptions of the Icelandic landscape, and his approach to historical writing was seen as a model for the translation of other Icelandic literature. The first edition of Snorri's Prose Edda, for example, was published in 1840, and it quickly became a bestseller. The work was praised for its linguistic beauty and historical accuracy, and it was seen as a model for the translation of other Icelandic literature.

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seems more appropriate—and more accurate—than the busyness of ‘drove’, and the drama of Dasent’s ‘all at once’ has no textual authority. On the other hand, Morris’s eagerness to swim against the tide of colloquial expectation, his insistence on the closely cognate nature of the two languages, could lead to unwonted eccentricity—Dasent’s pragmatic ‘every now and then’ for *stundum* re-emerges as the aggressively archaic ‘whiles’; the impersonal Icelandic *þeim syndisk* might be better served by Dasent’s ‘they thought they saw’ than by Morris’s ‘them seemed’, more a transliteration than a translation; and what is a reader who knows no Icelandic to make of Morris’s ‘[Gunnar] lay meeting the moon’? With other elements the contest is more even: ‘exceeding glad of countenance’ sounds distractingly biblical as a rendering of med gledimóti miklu, yet Morris would have had little patience with Dasent’s ‘wore a joyful face’, with its ‘beastly’ French loan word and its failure to signal the intensifying *miklu*. It may be fair to conclude that at every point Dasent, a pragmatic proselytizing Icelandicist, has a discernible readership in mind, for Morris translation was more a private philological reverie. Certainly Dasent’s translation was still winning new readers for the saga as an Everyman paperback in the 1970s, whereas the Morris/Eiríkur Magnússon translations, which preached opaque to the converted, have long been unavailable.

The first person narrator of Morris’s ‘Gunnar’s Howe’ is thus addressing a very different audience from Richard Hole’s omniscient third person figure—and a markedly different tone is soon established:

*Ye who have come o’er the sea to behold this grey minster of lands,*
*Whose floor is the tomb of time past, and whose walls by the toil of dead hands*
*Show pictures amidst of the ruin of deeds that have overpast death,*
*Stay by this tomb in a tomb to ask of who lieth beneath.*

The language is carefully archaized—‘Ye’, ‘o’er’, ‘behold’, ‘lieth’—but the present tense suggests immediacy and even

urgency. We may take it that Morris is addressing modern travellers, with the plurality suggested by ‘ye’ rather than ‘thou’. The tone suggests a solemnity in tune with the respect and awe that such travellers ought to be feeling as they move through the sagasteads. The imagery in the first verse is, we may assume, exactly that which Jón Sigurðsson had found unsympathetic. Iceland is a ‘tomb’ (three instances), it is linked with ‘death’ and ‘dead hands’ and ‘ruin’, and, recalling ‘græslit’, it is ‘grey’. Jón seems to have misunderstood Morris’s sense of that adjective, for it was his favourite when describing Iceland. It occurs four times in this poem, twice in ‘Iceland First Seen’, it is ever present in ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ in *The Earthly Paradise*, and in *Sigurd the Volsung*, and it can be found over a hundred times in his Iceland journals, in describing lava, moss, streams, clouds, cliffs, plain, sky, seas, and slopes. But ‘grey’ was not a dull colour for Morris. It was important for his view of Iceland and, at much the same time, it was important for his work with fabric design. In 1875, whilst hard at work on *Sigurd the Volsung*, Morris wrote to Thomas Wardle his Staffordshire-based colour technologist, and it is clear that achieving the ‘required shade’ in ‘the battle about the “Grey”’ was causing them a good deal of trouble, and that Morris would not be satisfied until a solution was found. It was, after all, only against a correctly dyed dark grey background that the rich foreground colours of curtain or carpet could show up properly. So it is in the Iceland journals. We find no ‘monotony of grey’ there, but rather ‘grey’, ‘dark grey’, ‘not very dark grey’, ‘dark ... and dreadful grey’, ‘lightish grey’, ‘dark ashen grey’, ‘light green and grey’, ‘greyer than grey’, ‘light grey-blue’, ‘yellowish grey’, ‘ragged grey’, ‘inky grey’, ‘woeful grey’, ‘spotted grey’, ‘dark grey bordered with white’, ‘heavy grey’, ‘cold-grey’, light grey becoming ‘greyer and greyer’, and many other shades. When he returns home to England, it is on a ‘soft warm grey morning’, sailing on a ‘calm and grey sea’, that he spots the ‘long grey line of Scottish coast’. Awaiting him back in Oxfordshire was the light grey stone of his old college and of the newly rented Kelmscott Manor. Writing to Georgiana Burne-Jones from Verona in 1878 we find Morris confessing to feelings of boredom with the local buildings: ‘even in these magnificent
and wonderful towns I long rather for the heap of grey stones
with a grey roof that we call a house north-away’. Grey, then,
was a fundamental colour for William Morris—solemn, dramatic,
everchanging; and in the Iceland journals it is the essential back-
ground against which the stunning primary colours of Iceland
flicker across page after page like northern lights. Small wonder,
when Morris can find so much colour amidst the greys of a
modern Icelandic landscape, that he has no trouble in finding the
appropriate shade of grey for his old northern sagasteads, for
their interior decorations, and even for the eyes of the heroes and
heroines in his narrative poems.

Morris’s ‘Gunnar’s Howe’ landscape is not just ‘grey’—it is a
‘grey minster of lands’. Morris knew all about grey minsters from
his familiarity with Oxford college chapels, London abbeys,
European cathedrals and, not least, the many churches all over
England for which his firm had supplied stained glass windows
and other fittings during the prosperous 1860s. The dedicated
Victorian travellers and tourists whom Morris addresses in the
poem—those whose over-familiarity with the sultry south of
Europe tempted them to turn to the ‘costes colde’ of the north—expected to visit minsters. If Iceland’s ecclesiastical
architecture fell short in this respect, the silk purse of a cathedral
could be created out of the sow’s ear of a rural church by deft
pencil and brush work (as the Illustrated London News artist
showed in Reykjavik in the summer of 1874), or cathedrals
could simply be imagined. Morris’s Iceland journals sometimes
view rockscapes with the eye of an ecclesiastical architect: ‘ruined
minster looking rocks’; one mountain ‘like a huge church with
a transept’, and another ‘just the shape of Castle St Angelo in
Rome’. In the poem the travellers are invited to view the lava-
strawned ground of Iceland as a minster floor; its pictured walls
can be imagined, thanks to the ‘toil of dead hands’ (saga writers) who
tell of (ruined) deeds whose fame lived on for Victorian enthusi-
asts through saga translations. Morris’s copy of the poem sent to
Jon Sigurdsson shows that he is thinking of sagas—for ‘deeds’ in
the 1891 printed text, the manuscript reads ‘great tales’. Gunnar’s
‘Howe’ is, thus, a small tomb within the great minster of the
Icelandic land and landscape. It is a tomb within a tomb; a place

of awe and mystery and history and romance and beauty and
solemnity; it is not at all ‘haggard, dismal and sad’.

At the heart of the poem is Morris’s fascination with the idea
of the spirit of Iceland’s heroic past living on in the straitened
circumstances of Iceland’s nineteenth-century present. It was a
past which Morris rarely sought to recall with scholarly object-
ivity; his demands on it were insistent and revealingly personal.
He wanted to ‘have a part’ in that great sorrow of thy children
dead; he wanted the great outlaw Grettir as a ‘friend to me
life’s void to fill’; and, ever the unfulfilled lover, he wanted
Iceland, as mother, sister and lover ‘all in one’, to ‘wrap me in
the grief of long ago’. He was eager for his fellow English travellers,
whether on horseback in Iceland, or in library armchair back in
Britain, to ‘have a part’ in the tale of Gunnar and Æol. The
heroes of the sagas were long dead; as were the sagamen who
recorded their heroics so memorably; so, too, were the genera-
tions of scribes who copied the saga manuscripts. Dead, too,
were those Eddic heroes whose deeds begat the tales told at
banquets and woven into the tapestries at Hjarðarholt (‘The
Lovers of Gudrun’), and Lyndale (Sigurd the Volsung). Yet,
through the ‘toil’ of forgotten hands, whether those of minstrel
on harp, weaver on loom, scribe on vellum, or (in Morris’s own
lifetime, as never before) translator and poet on paper, the past
could be substantially repossessed by the present. In ‘Iceland
First Seen’, the continuity and survival of that lonely volcanic
outcrop is celebrated ‘amid waning of realms and of riches and
death of things worshipped and sure’. The personified Iceland
voices the explanation—‘I abide here the spouse of a God, and I
made and I make and endure’. If ‘making’, in either the medieval
sense of poetic creativity, or in its later less specialized meanings,
could help to fill the silences of ‘life’s void’, then the workaholic
Morris, ‘the Thor of the Library’ (in Eiríkur Magnússon’s
phrase) had nothing to fear. He could ensure the survival and
transmission of old northern literary culture single-handedly.

As the poem develops, Morris’s anxiety (insistence even) that
all should share his own fervent engagement with that saga-age
culture is soon emphasized:
Ah! the world changeth too soon, that ye stand there with
unbated breath,
As I name him that Gunnar of old, who erst in the
haymaking tide
Felt all the land fragrant and fresh, as amidst of the edges
he died.
Too swiftly fame fadeth away, if ye tremble not lest once
again
The grey mound should open and show him glad-eyed
without grudging or pain.
Little labour methinks to behold him but the tale-teller
laboured in vain.

For all its gothic filigree Richard Hole's poem had followed the
saga's narrative line doggedly; whereas with his reference to
Gunnar falling 'in the haymaking tide,' Morris here touches the
events of the saga for the only time. The tone seems feverish and
impatient. What happens if someone comes to Iceland and fails to
feel the spell of Gunnar when visiting Hliðarendi. It could
happen. By the 1870s people visited Iceland for many reasons—
sport fishing, commercial fishing, geology, buying Icelandic
horses to work down the coal mines in Britain, buying Icelandic
sheep, investigating the possibility of producing and exporting
sulphur for gunpowder—and some went simply because by the
1870s Iceland became, for the nineteenth-century trendy traveller,
what the lower slopes of the Himalayan mountains have become a
century later for the mobile-phoned merchant banker.52

Morris went to Iceland at a time when the northbound trav-
eller had never had it so good. Creature comforts abounded.
Travel book advertisements confirm that, amongst the quayside
merchants ministering to the Iceland traveller at Leith, it was the
age of ladies' inflatable baths, specially prepared food hampers,
and odour-free leggings and overalls 'specially adapted for
Travellers in Iceland'; the steamship service (£8 return, first class)
boasted 'superior accommodation' in well-ventilated staterooms;
and, awaiting the weary traveller in Reykjavik, was its oldest
established hotel, 'thoroughly renovated and enlarged', with 'new
commodious dining room', and (even better news) a 'billiard and
smoking room have just been added'.53

Morris's poetically expressed fear of the insensate traveller,
obessed with odour-free leggings, and deaf to the sound of
sagas, was well founded: witness the leaden-souled response of
Anthony Trollope's fellow travellers to the elegiac lyricism of
Gunnar's famous description of his Hliðarendi homestead with
its 'bleikir akra og slegin tun' (in Darsen's translation, 'the corn-
fields are white to harvest, and the home mead is mown').54 This
scene, which has moistened the eyes of Icelandophiles for a
hundred years and more, is cited solely as proof of the existence
of corn in medieval Iceland.55 Such breezy heedlessness could
lead to cultural oblivion, as Morris reminds us in a memorable
passage in Sigurd the Volsung in which Regin tells the youthful
Sigurd how he had taught mankind to reap, sow, sail, sing and
weave—only to find, within a generation, that these gifts were
now attributed to the gods Frey, Thor, Bragi and Freyja.56

In 'Gunnar's Howe' it seems unthinkable, or at least intoler-
able, to Morris that the ancient 'tale-teller laboured in vain'; yet
he was himself to discover just how fragile could be the 'thin
thread of insight and imagination'57 which linked saga past to
Viktorian present. Sometimes restoring the thread required much
labour. In 1873 he visited the 'Howe' again; the bright evening of
1871 had given way to a wet and 'melancholy' morning two years
later. He himself seems to have found it 'some labour' to achieve
the longed-for sense of bated breath: 'it was not until 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.58 In 'Gunnar's Howe' the 'thin
thread' is still strong and taut, with strong philological support.
In the second stanza tide, edges and methinks echo Old Icelandic
forms: the conscientious Victorian reader would have discovered
that tō is glossed in the 1874 Richard Cleasby–Guðbrandur
Vigfússon *Icelandic–English Dictionary* (the ultimate scholarly
resource for the Victorian translator of Iceland) as 'tide, time,'
and egg as 'an edge'; and, unlike many other Victorian visitors to
Hliðarendi, Morris knew well that 'methinks' lay comfortably
along the grain of the Icelandic impersonal form þykktir mín.
celebration of the defeat of death by the power of Gunnar's song, recorded in a saga by 'man unremembered', and passed down the ages so as to bridge 'all the days that have been', or at least nine hundred years' worth of them:

Little labour for ears that may hearken to hear his death-conquering song,
Till the heart swells to think of the gladness undying that overcame wrong.
O young is the world yet, meseemeth, and the hope of it flourishing green,
When the words of a man unremembered so bridge all the days that have been.
As we look round about on the land that these nine hundred years he hath seen.

Here is just the life-affirming optimism that Jón Sigurðsson missed, but which Morris seemed always to be able to find in Iceland. His Hlitharendi experience was about life, about 'gladness undying', about 'youth', about 'hope', about Gunnar singing after his death, and about the noble saga of Gunnar and Njáll, told in the words of a long-forgotten sagaman, yet still alive in the minds of true travellers and pilgrims nine hundred years later. If the sagaman's fragile witness could sound so loud generations later, after damp, decay, fire, loss, theft, and relocation had wrought their random havoc on written records, then the world was indeed still young, and hope still green (the only other colour to be found in the poem), and the human heart could properly 'swell' with pleasure. So it is that the last verse returns from broad humanitarian musings to the dusk of the summer evening of 21 July 1871 which, Morris recalls in the poem, never quite grows dark and which finds nature bustling with activity:

Dusk is abroad on the grass of this valley amidst of the hill:
Dusk that shall never be dark till the dawn hard on midnight shall fill
The trench under Eyjafell's snow, and the grey plain the sea meeteth grey.
White, high aloft hangs the moon that no dark night shall brighten ere day,

For here day and night toileth the summer lest deedsless his time pass away.

The three stages of an Icelandic summer circle of the sun are here linked by alliteration. Dusk dissolves first into dawn and then day, which eventually drifts into dusk. Night is banished before dark has a real chance to take hold; no intervention of the moon is required. Just as there are no sharp divisions between day and night, so the demarcation line between land and sea is unclear from a distance. The one runs into the other which runs into the one again. All the time the sense is of process and continuity, and the final line highlights the energy, progress, vitality, activity—the making and enduring—of a summer season not wishing to leave without having done something. The poem began with ancient 'deeds' preserved through the words of a saga; in July 1871 new deeds were being done in Iceland, and two new poems were forming in the mind of a sagastead pilgrim. Gunnar sang of doing brave deeds irrespective of death—and, for Morris, those brave deeds still spoke their message through the subsequent good desktop heroism of saga writer, scribe, editor, and a great English translator. In writing 'Gunnar's Howe' Morris, like those before him, was 'making' in order that the saga and its heroic vision might 'endure'.

Indeed, though Morris was not to know it, his own death was to bring him an heroic new life, linked to the noble Gunnar of Hlitharendi. Gunnar, together with Njáll and many another worthy of Edda and saga, can be found paying tribute to Morris, the English 'skald', in a remarkable but neglected poetical obituary. Morris's celebrity in Iceland as a champion of their old literature led to several generous tributes being published in Iceland at the time of his death. Matthías Jochumsson's poem 'Viljálmur Morris' represents an additional laudatory voice, unaccompanied by Morris scholars, and an almost forgotten work even in Iceland.59 Matthías Jochumsson knew Morris long before his death. Visiting London in 1874 he asks Eiríkur Magnússon to 'greet on my behalf the great troll, the living, lion-strong, Welsh Volsung'.60 By 1876 Morris could lay even stronger claim to the sobriquet 'Welsh Volsung', for he had followed up his 1869 translation (in collaboration with Eiríkur Magnússon) of
Völsunga saga with his vast poetic paraphrase Sigurd the Völsung. It seems entirely fitting, therefore, that Matthías should have portrayed Morris as the mighty dragon-slaying Sigurðr, with his victim Fáfnir presented as a monstrous personification of the inequalities of wealth which held London in thrall at the time of the poet's death. The 1996 Morris centenary may have concentrated on Morris's domestic griefs, and the ambiguities—for some the glaring hypocrisies—underpinning Morris's distinctive blend of private capitalism and public socialism. For Matthías Jochumsson in 1896 the picture was much less complicated: Morris was a hero, an Islandsvötnur (friend of Iceland), and a doughty champion of the poor in Britain. If his death was a source of grief, his life was cause for celebration, and the creation of new myth.

Written in traditional fornryðislag metre, and drawing heavily on a richly allusive reservoir of Eddic vocabulary, ‘Víðjamur Morris’ begins by reminding the reader that Morris fell in love with the idea of the north from an early age—he drank from the sacred vessels of Icelandic poetry when still a ‘møjolkurbarn’ (literally, a milk child); and claims that Iceland (‘Snælands dóttir’) never set eyes on a greater poetic genius (‘snjalljar snilling’). A parade of revered medieval Icelandic historians and saga heroes, each of whose words and works was known well to Morris, then express their tributes. Ari Þorgilsson60 rejoices that Icelandic history now has an authoritative voice in England; Egill Skallagrímsson62 says that his old adversary King Adalsteinn of England63 valued no warrior more than Iceland treasures William Morris; Snorri Sturluson64 and Þeimundr fröði65 salute the English hero; and, lastly, a group of saga worthies appears, each from a work (Laxdæla saga, Gunnlaugs saga ormrungu and Breim-Njáls saga) which Morris had either promoted in Britain by translation or paraphrase, or for which he had a special fondness:

Maltu orðhelli
þrum gesti
einn ok sérvverr
afreksmanna:
Gunnar ok Gestr,

Good report they gave the glorious guest—each and all of the action men:
Gunnar and Gestur,

Gizur ok Hjâli,
Einar ok Kjartan,
Ormrungu, Njáll.66
Gizur and Hjâli,
Einer and Kjartan,
Wormtongue and Njáll.67

Morris's doctor claimed that Morris died 'of simply being William Morris, and having done more work than most ten men',68 Matthías Jochumsson mythologizes the moment, by drawing parallels with Morris's Sigurd. He thus enables Morris to participate in the Völsung legends which he had devoted as a young reader, and which he had served so loyally as translator and poet. There were, indeed, parallels between the way the workers left the 'plough alone in the furrow' to watch Sigurd's triumphant return to the Niblung court69 and the similar levels of curiosity exhibited by nineteenth-century Icelanders at the progress of the English skald around their country. Yet Matthías prefers to equate Morris's tireless work amidst the warisome world of metropolitan revolutionary socialism, with Sigurd's attack on Fáfnir:

Liggr linni
um Lundúnaborg;
þá vitum meinvætt
mesta í heimi,
eyr hrælogum
á hremmdar dröttir
gandr þusundað
grænbyröða.

Lies the serpent round London;
know we that fearsome creature, foulest in the world,
sprays with destructive fire
the fettered folk,
the monster of a billion burdens of Grani.70

Morris's path lay not to the greyness of Gnutheiiði but rather to the drafty and dispiriting committee rooms of Farringdon Road—but, unlike Sigurd, his all-conquering hero, he did not live to ride home in triumph with the hoard of gold:

rðð svá Vafurlogann
vann á Jörmungand;71 [he] rushed thus into the flames
Dundi vitt í verold
orri. þar fell Morris—
Resounded wide in the world
Of us all. There fell Morris.

But the Englishman's own brand of heroic sacrifice will, Matthías hopes, earn him lasting fame in modern Iceland:

{...}
Translating Life

Hátt í lófi lifi
listfagr ástvin Braga, 72
—maðr kenni þat manni!—
May high in praise live
Bragi's art-rich hero,
Morris á foldu Snorra!
-may man teach this to man—
Morris in Snorri's land.

Matthias's wish has certainly been granted, even if (ironically) his own poem has played little part in the process. Morris's life and works certainly excited much interest in 'Snorri's land' during the 1996 Morris centenary celebrations. We may claim at least this for Matthias's neglected tribute—it is there that the great translator of Iceland finally finds himself translated by Iceland; it is there that the myth-maker is mythologized; and there that the loyal skald becomes a skaldic kenning. How Morris would have relished the completion of this fine philological circle.

NOTES
In this essay I adopt Icelandic spelling for Icelandic names and texts, for example, Njáll. Morris, like Dasent before him, modernized and Anglicized these spellings, for example, 'The Saga of Burnt-Njal'.


2. MS Lbs. [Landsbókasafn Íslands] J 143.


5. 'I think that poem about Gunnarshóli is even more [gloomy] in nature, and I think we won't bother with it' (kveðið um Gunnarshóla er þó enn meira í þau stefnu, og ég hyn við reynum ekki við það).

6. The title of the poem in the holograph manuscript copy (see note 2) sent to Jón Sigurðsson is simply 'Gunnar's Howe'.


8. 'Iceland First Seen' in Poems by the Way (London: F. S. Ellis, 1891); see Collected Works, IX, 125.


11. The fruits of his joint labours with Eiríkr Magnússon are to be found in the six volumes of translations published in the Saga Library (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1891–1905), and in Three Northern Love Stories (London: Ellis and White, 1875). An insightful recent discussion of Morris the saga translator can be found in Gary Aho's introduction to the William Morris Library series reprint of Three Northern Love Stories, Second Series, 11 (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1996).

12. Morris, Icelandic Journals, p. 21. Early in his voyage, when sailing near the Shetland Isles, Morris seeks to identify the place where Kari Solmundarson undertakes the saga's final act of vengeful violence (p. 10).


15. Icelandic Journals, p. 45.

16. The name means 'slopes or mountain end'. OED lists sb.2 reminds us of the parallel Old English form, and its presence in post-medieval English place-names and dialect.

17. Icelandic Journals, p. 47.


25. On Victorian cultivation of the old north, see Andrew Wawn, The


28. *Icelandic Journals*, pp. 48–49; for his second visit, see p. 207.

29. See, for example, the country looked 'strange and awful' (*Icelandic Journals*, p. 28) and the mountains 'very awful and mysterious' (p. 154), the 'terrible gorges' (p. 41) and 'this terrible though beautiful valley' (p. 150), and the 'dreadful lonely place' (p. 113), the 'dreadful upper valley' (p. 114) and the 'dreadful looking rift' (p. 170).


31. Thomas Ellwood, *The Landnámabók of Iceland as it illustrates the Dialect, Place Names, Folk Lore, and Antiquities of Cumbreland, Westmorland, and North Lancashire* (Kendal: T. Wilson, 1894), p. 58.


33. *Icelandic Journals*, p. 49. The equivalent Icelandic text is in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslensk Forriti, XII, pp. 192–93.

34. Only sometimes—spinn is an adjective, and not the past participle which Morris appears to take it as.

35. I have learnt much about Dasent's approach to translation in discussions with Professor Robert Cook of the University of Iceland.

36. Though see above, note 11.

37. I quote from *Collected Works*, IX, 179.


43. *Illustrated London News*, 29 August 1874; front page, and p. 206; 5 September 1874, p. 216; 12 September 1874, pp. 253, 256–57, 274; 19 September 1874, p. 271. The occasion for this extensive coverage was the visit to Iceland of the Danish King, to commemorate the thousandth anniversary of the arrival of the first settler.

44. *Icelandic Journals*, p. 151.

45. *Icelandic Journals*, p. 37.

46. *Icelandic Journals*, p. 131.

47. 'To the Muse of the North' in *Collected Works*, IX, 116.


49. 'To the Muse of the North' in *Collected Works*, IX, 116.

50. *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (London: Ellis and White, 1877), p. 173; the wall hangings of the Niblung hall (p. 217) have images of Viking vessels, the Valkyrie, Mimir's fountain, and Miðgarðsljóms.


54. Íslensk Forriti, xii, 182; Dasent, *Burnt Njal*, p. 236.


56. Sigurd the Volsung, p. 111.

57. *Icelandic Journals*, p. 168.

58. *Icelandic Journals*, p. 207.

59. Written in 1896, the poem was first published in *Einreiðin* 29 (1923), 257–61, together with a prose tribute by Matthíás. The text had been discovered by the poet's son. The text cited in the present article derives from Matthíás Joðumsson: *Ljósmynd*, ed. Ærni Kristjánsson, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Ósafoldarprentsmiðja, 1956–58), I, 557–71.


61. Ari Porgilsson (1067–1148), Icelandic historian.


63. Aðalsteinn reigned 924–39; his many dealings with Egill are described in Egils saga.

64. Snorri Sturluson (1178–1241), author of *Heimskringla* which Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon translated.

65. Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056–1133), historian.

66. Gestr Oðleifsson and Kjartan Olafsson from Laxdæla saga and hence 'The Lovers of Gudrun' (1869); Gunnlaugr 'Worm-tongue' from
Aesthetics in Translation: Henry James, Walter Pater, and Theodor Adorno

RICHARD SALMON

Truth still lives in fiction, and from the copy the original will be restored

Friedrich Schiller (tr. Thomas Carlyle)

Schiller’s celebrated defence of the redemptive social value of art as autonomous aesthetic illusion (Täuschung, translated as ‘fiction’ by Carlyle)\(^1\) offers a suggestive preleptic commentary on the close relationship between late nineteenth-century aestheticism and a certain logic of translatability. Whilst this defence alludes to a familiar mimetic conception of the relationship between art and life—between the ‘copy’ and its ‘original’—it also enacts a striking defamiliarization of this paradigm by claiming for aesthetic illusion a truth which is lacking from its ostensibly reflected source. Art, Schiller would seem to say, offers a truth which is lacking from truth; only within the translated form of the copy is the language of the original preserved. Aesthetic illusion thus acquires autonomy from objects in reality not so as to abandon mimesis (not for art to become wholly separate from life), but, rather, in order to redeem it. The value of art for social critique resides precisely in its function as a repository for those hypothetically mimetic truth-claims (however ‘illusory’, in a negative sense, their embodiment) which can no longer be located within existing socio-historical conditions.

In aestheticist writings of the late nineteenth century, similar questions concerning the translation and/or transposition of ‘art’ and ‘life’, ‘original’ and ‘copy’, and ‘truth’ and ‘illusion’ are raised