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## Travels Abroad in Iceland and Paris: Morris's Utopian Mapping

Morris's two visits to Iceland (1871 and 1873) may be considered as his perceptual "mapping" of a country which, for him, was a "Holy Land" (LeMire, 181) or, potentially, an unexplored utopia. Yet, curiously, in the *Journals* and contemporary letters, Morris's anticipations, impressions, and recollections disclose an underlying dialectic of desire and dread. As Morris's "writing out" (Kelvin, 149)—to use his expression—of notes written while he was in Iceland, the format of the 1871 *Journal* complicates this tension between hope and fear: the *Journal* not only charts Morris's topographical and subjective landscape, but it also "rereads" and revises the original "chronicle," the brief written record of immediate events. In turn, the 1873 *Journal* rethinks (that is, it either confirms or amends) both Morris's lived experience of Iceland and his transcription of that experience.

If read symbolically, Morris's descriptions of his river fordings reflect this revisionary sequence. In the 1871 *Journal*, Morris's fear of the crossing disorients his perception: the horses appear to be moving backwards. However, on July 26, 1873, Morris writes, "I had little of my old nervousness left about this river work, except that the *horses* would seem to be backing when we went down stream" (8: 201).<sup>1</sup> On July 28, a relieved Morris announces, "I have quite lost all nervousness in the rivers now, and strange to say I can *see* the horses really going forward when the stream is running with them. . ." (8: 206; emphasis added). "See" is the crucial word here, as it is in "Iceland First Seen": "What came we forth for to see. . .?" (9: 125).<sup>2</sup> Two variants of this line, preceded by "surely" and "certainly" (8: 54, 77), appear in the 1871 *Journal* as Morris's reminders to himself to "see" with the utmost possible clarity. His "instinct" (Kelvin, 198) is a desire for a change in his way of seeing, a change initiated by visual sight and leading to an imaginative and empathetic insight into the historical consciousness of

the ancient tale tellers. In an 1870 letter to Jane, Morris describes this perceptual clarity as those "supreme moments. . .when something pierces through the crust of dullness and ignorance. . ." (Kelvin, 128). Pertinently, Morris has such a moment at the "most storied place of Iceland," the plain of the Thingmeads, where he experiences "that thin thread of insight and imagination, which comes so seldom to us. . ." (8: 168).

This insight results from Morris's developed sense of identification with the Icelandic landscape and the history it embodies. His empathy begins in the Faroes where, as he reflects, "the old life of the saga-time had gone, and the modern life [had] never reached. . ." (8: 15). Here, his impression is of timelessness and of the absence or "silence" of contemporary culture. Because in Iceland "there is no art. . .at all" (Kelvin, 132), nothing intervenes between Morris and "the background of the stories" (Kelvin, 132) of the saga tellers. During his encounter with this "background," or Iceland's timeless natural map, Morris hopes to "have a part," as he writes in "To the Muse of the North" (9: 116), in the creative imagination of the original mythmakers. Thus, the strange will become familiar while retaining its strangeness; like Richard in *The Pilgrims of Hope*, Morris will see "things clear and grim" (24: 381). Iceland will become familiar while, at the same time, England and Kelmscott will be "made clear/Made strange" (24: 376).

Isolation, dreaded though desired, enables Morris to involve the past (both historical and personal) with the present in a symbiosis akin to Hans Robert Jauss's three reception levels of understanding, interpretation, and application.<sup>3</sup> The 1871 journey, together with the "expectations" developed by his familiarity with saga literature, is Morris's first reading or "mapping" of Iceland. At this first level, reception, as Jauss explains, is a perceptual act of anticipation which "sees" the text (for Morris, the "text" of Iceland and its literary heri-