Morris the Skald: Icelandic Translation as Social Liberation

Florence Boos

Abstract: Between 1869 and 1895, William Morris published with his co-translator Eiríkr Magnússon eight volumes of Icelandic translations. Morris's approach to Icelandic translation embodied a form of radical, empowering identification, which moderated over time into a belief that certain aspects of Icelandic culture could provide models for an alternate, less materialistic future society. Morris expressed his intense engagement with the sagas in a series of poems, in which he responded in starkly personal terms to the Icelandic literary past. In addition, Morris inscribed several of his writings in calligraphic manuscripts, merging his skaldic persona, calligraphic renditions, original poetry, and autobiographical expressions. His grasp of the significance of medieval linguistic forms, coupled with a belief in their ability to generate new meanings, anticipated his later view that aspects of a reimagined Icelandic culture provided a salutary antidote to the "infallible maxims" of Victorian industrial capitalism. Morris's immersion in the Icelandic sagas thus provided a form of creative estrangement on several fronts, as he responded variously to the Old Norse tales as imagined skald, time traveler, creative historicist, translator, linguistic wordsmith, critic, poet, and social theorist.

Keywords: William Morris, Victorian poetry, Icelandic sagas, nineteenth-century translations, socialism

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Between 1869 and 1895 William Morris published with his co-translator Eiríkr Magnússon eight volumes of Icelandic translations (*The Story of the Volsungs and the Niblungs*, *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, *Three Northern Love Stories*, and a five-volume compendium, *The Saga Library*), including twenty-three sagas and many Eddic poems, with still other Icelandic translations left unfinished or in manuscript.[1] The majority of the drafts were prepared between 1869 and 1876, a period during which Morris completed several poetic epics and non-Icelandic translations and which directly preceded his active campaigns on behalf of architectural preservation (1877-96) and socialism (1883-96). The content of the Icelandic sagas can seem harsh and contrary to Morris's socialist ideals as expressed elsewhere, at least to a reader of unsanguinary or noncombative tastes, as when the allegedly heroic Grettir kills his first enemy at fourteen or when Howard the Halt slays not only his son's murderer and the latter's kinsmen but unrelated bystanders as well. It seems unlikely, however, that the hundreds, even thousands, of hours Morris spent on his translations would lack some correlation with his socialist convictions and later political writings. What, then, may be the threads, if any, that lead from *Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue* (1869) and *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs* (1870) to "How Shall We Live Then?" (1889) and *News from Nowhere* (1890)? In what follows, I argue that Morris's approach to Icelandic translation embodied a form of radical, empowering identification, moderated over time into social-anthropological reflection. These responses led to divergent, occasionally contradictory evaluations of medieval Icelandic culture but ultimately came to complement

[1] Paul Acker, "A Very Animated Conversation on Icelandic Matters: The Saga Translations of William Morris and Eirikr Magnusson," in *The Routledge Companion to William Morris*, ed. Florence Boos (New York: Routledge, 2020), 332-42. According to Acker, there were more than thirty saga co-translations (338). In "Sympathetic Translation and the 'Scribe's Capacity': Morris's Calligraphy and the Icelandic Sagas," William Whitla notes twenty-seven co-translations and sixteen Morris calligraphic manuscripts in six different scripts based on Icelandic material; see William Whitla, "Sympathetic Translation and the 'Scribe's Capacity': Morris's Calligraphy and the Icelandic Sagas," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 10 (2001): 27-108, at 27. Whitla's "Appendix B: The Old Norse Translations of William Morris and Related Materials" (96-99) provides a helpful list of the translations and original Norse-themed compositions.

one another as he began to trace the outlines of an alternate, less materialistic future society.

Morris as Skald

Morris's previous narrative poems, beginning with *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), foreground the writer as a character in his own works. The "idle singer" of *The Earthly Paradise*, for example, appears frequently as its interpolated author, speaking in the writer's direct voice in the introductory "Apology," monthly lyrics, and the concluding "L'Envoi," in which the "singer" defends his role as poet to a modern world: "No little part it was for me to play– / The idle singer of an empty day."[2] In its successor, *Love Is Enough* (1873), the masque that forms the inner narrative is punctuated by two visitants, "Music" and "Love," who convey their secular theodicy consolingly—if not entirely clearly—in the poet's own voice.[3] Also, many of the shorter poems Morris wrote during this period, some left unpublished during his lifetime, are first-person semi-autobiographical lyrics employing the speaker's persona.[4] All of these may be assumed to present the voice of the Victorian Morris, the writer as his contemporary audience would have known him.

At a certain point, however, Morris made a remarkable leap into identification with poets of the medieval past and their characters, undertaking a form of spiritual time travel. There were personal reasons for the intensity of this identification: estrangement in his marriage, work anxieties, discontent with the poverty-driven ugliness of his environment, and later, his grief at his daughter's progressive illness—in short, an existential alienation and near-depression. Karl

[2] William Morris, "L'Envoi," ll. 111-12, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longman, 1910-15), vol. 6, 433.

[3] William Morris, *Love Is Enough* (London: Ellis, 1873). "Music" appears on pages 5, 11, 27, 50-51, 66-67, 73, 81-84, and 113-14; "Love," on pages 28-30, 52-54, 68-69, 74-85 (as a character in dialogue), 94-98, and 115-21.

[4] Florence Boos, "Unprintable Lyrics: Unpublished Poems of William Morris, 1869-1873," *Victorian Poetry* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 193-227.

Anderson, William Whitla, and others have documented the extent to which Morris not only translated the sagas but attempted in material ways to reinhabit the physical spaces of the ancient Norse bards, or "skalds," most directly through his 1871 and 1873 visits to Iceland but also through replication of skaldic practices through the diction, rhythm, and calligraphy of his prose translations and the content and form of his Norse-themed creative works.[5] In "The Old Norse Sagas and Morris's Ideal of Literal Translation," Ian Felce explains Morris's attempts to employ not only cognates of the words of his source text but, more fundamentally, the principles of the skalds' craft, using both traditional verse forms (*dróttkvaett*) and kennings, a form of circumlocutory metaphor that even for medieval Icelanders would have required interpretation.[6]

Equally striking, perhaps, are a series of poems in which Morris as speaker responds in starkly personal terms to the Icelandic literary past.[7] In sharp opposition to the twentieth-century school of criticism promoting the "death of the author," in such poems Morris's persona vaults across time to speak directly both to the reader and to a historical/literary figure; his imagined singers, speakers, and "own" voices thus enact a *resurrection* of the author—construed as an actually existing person, communing with his fellows across time and space through the frail medium of language. The first instances of such a leap are two sonnets composed to Grettir Asmundson (Ásmundarson in the original), the protagonist of *Grettis saga*, both of which likely constitute drafts for a prefatory poem to Morris and Magnús-

[5] See Karl Anderson, *Scandinavian Elements in the Works of William Morris* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1940); and Whitla, "Sympathetic Translation and the 'Scribe's Capacity.'" Whitla writes, "In his calligraphic texts from 1869 to 1875 he was able to resist for a time the dominance of the commodity-text, and use the scripts of the Italian humanist scholars to preserve and transmit the culture of Iceland in the sagas as the humanists had done with the texts of Greece and Rome" ("Sympathetic Translation and the 'Scribe's Capacity,'" 75-76).

[6] Ian Felce, "The Old Norse Sagas and William Morris's Ideal of Literal Translation," *RES* 67 (2016): 220-36.

[7] In addition to the Norse-themed poems discussed here, similar Icelandic-related topics are explored less personally in "To the Muse of the North" and "Iceland First Seen," both published in William Morris, *Poems by the Way* (Hammersmith, London: Kelmscott Press, 1891).

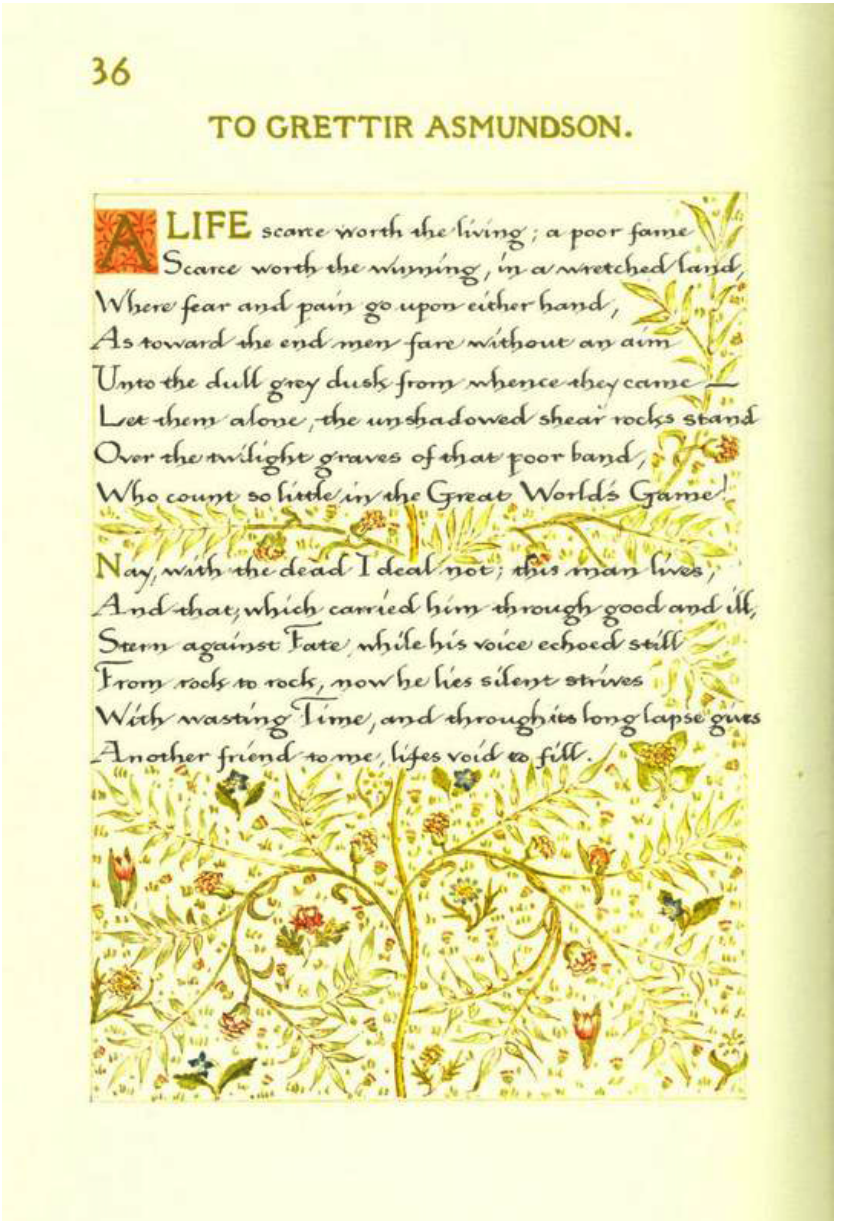
son's 1869 translation, *The Story of Grettir the Strong*. The version ultimately chosen for the published text is the same as that which Morris inscribed in his 1870 calligraphic *A Book of Verse*, prepared as a birthday gift for Georgiana Burne-Jones (see Figure 1):

> A life scarce worth the living; a poor fame
> Scarce worth the winning, in a wretched land,
> Where fear and pain go upon either hand,
> As toward the end men fare without an aim
> Unto the dull grey dusk from whence they came—
> Let them alone, the unshadowed shear rocks stand
> Over the twilight graves of that poor band,
> Who count so little in the Great World's Game!
> Nay, with the dead I deal not; this man lives,
> And that, which carried him through good and ill,
> Stern against Fate, while his voice echoed still
> From rock to rock, now he lies silent strives
> With wasting Time, and through his long lapse gives
> Another friend to me, life's void to fill.[8]

Grettis saga was composed by an unknown skald before 1400 C.E. and reflects back on alleged events that scholars have identified as most likely occurring around 1030-40.[9] Morris's sonnet responds to the circumstances of the saga's protagonist, outlawed first to the gloomy cave of Viðelmir in western Iceland and then driven to a lonely death at the hands of his fellow outcasts on the remote island of Drangey.

[8] William Morris, "To Grettir Asmundson," in *A Book of Verse: A Facsimile of the Manuscript in the Victoria and Albert Museum London* (London: Scolar Press, 1980), 36.

[9] *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, trans. G. A. High, ed. Peter Foote, Everyman's Library (London: Dent, 1965), v. The chronology that precedes Morris and Magnússon's *The Story of Grettir the Strong* gives Grettir's birth date as 997(?) and his death as 1031; see *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, trans. William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon (London: F. S. Ellis, 1869).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TO GRETTIR ASMUNDSON.

A LIFE scarce worth the living; a poor fame
Scarce worth the winning, in a wretched land,
Where fear and pain go upon either hand,
As toward the end men fare without an aim
Unto the dull grey dusk from whence they came —
Let them alone, the unshadowed shear rocks stand
Over the twilight graves of that poor band,
Who count so little in the Great World's Game!

Nay, with the dead I deal not; this man lives,
And that, which carried him through good and ill,
Stern against Fate, while his voice echoed still
From rock to rock, now he lies silent strives
With wasting Time, and through its long lapse gives
Another friend to me, life's void to fill.

Figure 1. William Morris, calligraphic manuscript, "To Grettir Asmundson," in *A Book of Verse* (1870), William Morris Archive.

Intelligent, courageous, and a lifelong stave-poet and epigrammatist, Grettir in adolescence kills a servant who attacks him in a quarrel, for which he is sentenced to a three-year exile from Iceland; after a sojourn in Norway, where he becomes noted for killing dangerous berserkers, Grettir returns home and attempts to aid Thorhall, whose farm has been haunted by spirits, including the evil revenant of the shepherd Glámr (in Morris and Magnússon's version, Glam the thrall). Although Grettir manages to kill Glam's ghost, the latter uses his dying breath to pronounce a curse: Grettir will grow weak, lonely, and fearful of the dark and be outlawed and condemned to an early death, moving toward "the dull grey dusk from whence [he] came." These prophecies unfold as Grettir innocently causes a fire that kills the son of a local chieftain and is sentenced by the Icelandic Althing to nineteen years of exile and stripped of his rights to protection. Though he intermittently continues his career as a slayer of monsters, shortly before the end of his official banishment Grettir is murdered by fellow exiles who have been aided by an enemy's sorcery and is buried where "the unshadowed shear rocks stand / Over the twilight graves of that poor band." Morris and Magnússon's introduction to their translation describes Grettir (in what seem Morris's words) as "a man far above his fellows in all matters valued among his times and people, but also far above them all in ill-luck, for that is the conception that the story-teller has formed, of the great outlaw."[10] For Morris, Grettir also represents perseverance and artistry under torment. Though suffering loneliness and opprobrium without hope of redress, he declaims his poems even to the stone walls that imprison him: "Stern against Fate, while his voice echoed still / From rock to rock."[11] Through the medieval skald's intervention, however, Grettir's words have been enabled

[10] Morris and Magnússon, *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, xiii.

[11] In chapter 3 of *William Morris and the Icelandic Sagas*, "Grettir the Strong and the Courage of Incapacity," Felce concludes that "for Morris, Grettir appears to have been most courageous when most incapacitated, valiantly striving to embrace his circumstances even in the knowledge that victory is impossible." Ian Felce, *William Morris and the Icelandic Sagas* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), 94. This assessment would also fit Howard the Halt, Gunnar of "Of Gunnar's Howe Above the House at Lithend," and other saga heroes to whom Morris responded with personal identification.

to reverberate beyond his confining cave and through the centuries, and by means of Morris's translation they will further speak through a new language and to a new time and, even more personally, from soul to beleaguered soul:

> his voice . . .
> now he lies silent strives
> With wasting Time, and through his long lapse gives
> Another friend to me, life's void to fill.[12]

Paradoxically, only this distance of time, culture, and language can enable such intimacy, allowing Grettir posthumously to overcome Glam's curse.

The second Grettir sonnet is similar in tone, as it confronts the question of whether an obscure and pain-filled life can have meaning beyond its own cessation and whether its struggles can convey a usable message for Morris's own time:

> Grettir, didst thou live utterly for nought?
> Among the many millions of the earth
> Few know thy name nor where thou hadst thy birth—
> And yet, that passing glow of fame unsought,
> That eager life in ill luck's meshes caught
> That struggles yet to gain a little mirth
> Amidst of pain—with less remembered worth
> Great things to little things have great men brought.
> At least thy life moved men so, that e'en I
> Thy mother's wail in the lone eve and drear,
> Thy brother's laugh at death for thee can hear—
> Hear now nor wonder at her agony,
> Nor wonder that he found it good to die—
> Speak, Grettir, through the dark: I am anear.[13]

The British Library manuscript (see Figure 2) preserves two versions of the last line, and the one rejected by Morris's editor May Morris may convey a deeper implication: "Speak, Grettir, through the dark,

[12] Morris, "To Grettir Asmundson," 36.

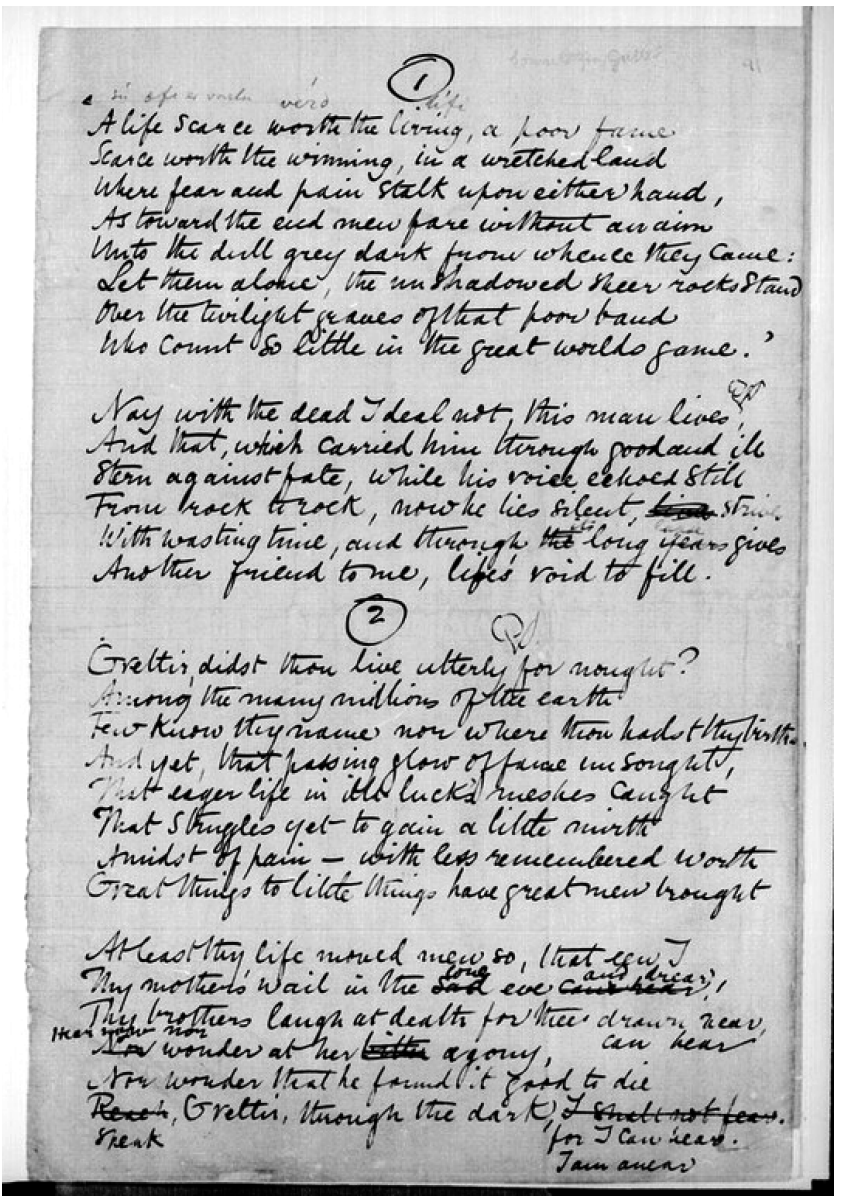
[13] William Morris, "Untitled," in *Collected Works of William Morris*, vol. 7, xix.

for I can hear." If the modern translator is attuned to the living voice of the past, if he can hear "rightly," the poet asserts, his words will likewise retain a healing and prophetic power into the future.

Another arresting instance of time's collapse occurs in "Gunnar's Howe Above the House at Lithend," according to May Morris composed in the early 1870s, in which Morris's speaker contemplates the bleak grave of a tormented hero in the *Njáls saga*. In this highly admired tale of repeated blood feuds, after Gunnar has refused to leave his beloved home in Iceland even though outlawed by the Althing, his enemies surround his house, remove its roof, and burn him alive, though not before he has mounted a strong defense while singing a final stave-poem. Morris would have identified with Gunnar's love of his land, his ill-fated marriage, and his valiant final song:

> 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.
>
> 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.[14]

[14] William Morris, "Of Gunnar's Howe Above the House at Lithend," in *Poems by the Way*, 109-10.



1

A life scarce worth the living, a poor frame
Scarce worth the winning, in a wretched land
Where fear and pain stalk upon either hand,
As toward the end men fare without an aim
Unto the dull grey dark from whence they came:
Let them alone, the unshadowed sheer rocks stand
Over the twilight graves of that poor band
Who count so little in the great worlds game.'

Nay with the dead I deal not, this man lives,
And that, which carried him through good and ill
Stern against fate, while his voice echoed still
From rock to rock, now he lies silent, strives
With wasting time, and through the long years gives
Another friend to me, life's void to fill.

2

Grettir, didst thou live utterly for nought?
Among the many millions of the earth
Few know thy name nor where thou hadst thy birth.
And yet, that passing glow of fame unsought,
That eager life in idle lucklss reaches caught
That struggles yet to gain a little mirth
Amidst of pain — with less remembered worth
Great things to little things have great men brought

At least thy life moved men so, that even I
My mother's wail in the long sad eve can hear,
They brothers laugh at death for thee draw near,
Her grow nor
Nor wonder at her bitter agony, can hear
Nor wonder that he found it good to die
Reach, Grettir, through the dark, I shall not fear.
Speak for I can hear.
I am near

Figure 2. William Morris, autograph draft of Grettir sonnets, British Library Add. MS 45318, f. 91, William Morris Archive.

Not Gunnar's horrific death but his poetic defiance—"the gladness / undying that overcame wrong"—moves the speaker despite the lapse of centuries. A final stanza finds an allegory in Iceland's long summer nights:

> Dusk that shall never be dark
> till the dawn hard on midnight shall fill . . .
> For here day and night toileth the summer
> lest deedless his time pass away.[15]

The doubled day defies the usual constraints of time to herald a more lasting dawn. The "words of a man unremembered" thus grant an epiphany, in which a courageous past reenacts its meaning within a receptive speaker across a near-millennium.

Morris signed only one poem with his Icelandic name, significantly written in Old Icelandic meters and signed "Vilhjálmr Vandraeðaskáld" (William the Troubled Skald; see Figure 3). The poem's autobiographical and personal content explains its author's disappearance behind a skaldic mask and perhaps, by extension, his direct identification with hard-pressed Icelandic protagonists such as Grettir and Gunnar. "O Fair Gold Goddess" is a fifty-six-line poem in Eddic meter, tentatively dated by Ruth Ellison as from 1873, before Morris made his second trip to Iceland.[16] In self-conscious kennings, adeptly used but unexpected in the poem's English context, the Troubled Skald explains to "the fair gold goddess" (a standard kenning for "woman") what motivates him to study a past and foreign culture.

> O fair gold goddess
> As fain as thou mayst be
> That gone I were
> To the white sea's-roof land [Iceland],
> Yet fainer were I
> To leap on the wave-swine [ship]

[15] Morris, "Of Gunnar's Howe Above the House at Lithend," 110.

[16] William Morris, "O Fair Gold Goddess" (1873), William Morris Gallery J150, in Ruth Ellison, "An Unpublished Poem by William Morris," *English* 15, no. 87 (1964): 100-102; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

If God for me
The ghosts would quicken
Of Odin's fellows . . .
Might the world go backwards
Then, Roses' Freyia [beautiful woman],
Soon were I faring
Along the way
That leads to Valhall,
Long rest before me,
And my right hand holding
A story maybe
To give to Odin.[17]

(p. 101)

The motive for Vilhjálmr's journey evokes the desolation of the Anglo-Saxon "Wanderer" and other medieval plaints, as the poet employs a *dróttkvaett* (chant-meter) with internal alliteration and three-stressed third and sixth lines:

For foul is waxen
That world the gods made,
And I help nought
Nor holpen am I.

But all are gone by,
And the edge-play is over
And the long frost is fallen upon them.
There the wind wails ever
Without a story;
No whither the sea's way leadeth.

(p. 101)

The brave deeds of saga heroes have not sufficed for the world's betterment ("And lo, the world ever worseneth"), but the "Troubled Skald" hopes that his likewise-beleaguered medieval predecessors may be true friends and, even more, that he may carry back from his

[17] Ellison notes that "rose" does not occur in any recorded kenning and asks whether "it [is] too far-fetched to catch, in this apostrophe to Janey Morris, an echo of her lover's name?" ("Unpublished Poem by William Morris," 101).

inner journey some further literary inspiration, "A story maybe / To give to Odin."

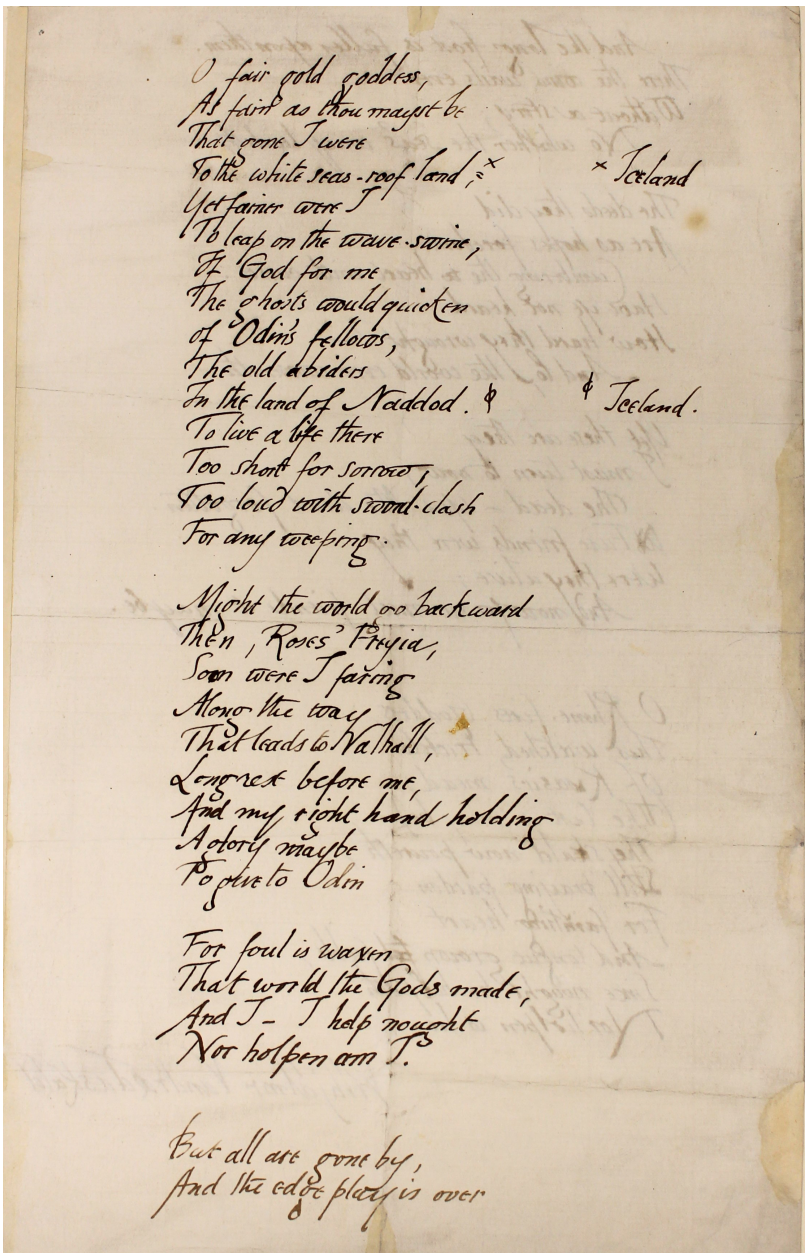
> Yet these are they
> I must turn to now,
> The dead–Yea the dead forgotten.
> Fair friends were they
> Were they alive;
> And now for me meet friends it may be.
>
> (p. 102)

Morris thus seeks an antidote to his anomie and emotional isolation in a counterfactual northern past, in which solitary individuals, such as "Grettir the Strong," could convey forms of wisdom that arguably transcend their messengers and even their cultural contexts:

> O Rhine-fire's goddess,
> This wretched trickle
> Of Kvasir's mead [poetry],
> (The last it may be)
> Thy skald now poureth;
> Still praying pardon
> For fainting heart
> And tongue grown feeble,
> Since nought he helpeth
> Nor holpen is he.
> Vilhjálmr Vandraeðaskáld.
>
> (p. 102)

Notably, though bereft of outward support, the speaker retains his authorial/skaldic identity and purpose.

One can remain skeptical about the realism of this existential historicist approach, but it clearly inspired some unusual thought experiments on Morris's part. As he reached into the past to find instances of extreme pain and resistance, Morris's writings offered otherwise forgotten past sufferers the gifts of belated empathy and recognition. In turn, the example of their courage could validate his own campaigns in support of worthy causes, even if these offended



O fair gold goddess,
As fair as thou mayst be
That gone I were
To the white seas-roof land, ×
Yet fairer were I
To leap on the wave-swine,
If God for me
The ghosts would quicken
Of Odin's fellows,
The old abiders
On the land of Nodfod. ϕ
To live a life there
Too short for sorrow,
Too loud with sword-clash
For any weeping.

× Iceland

ϕ Iceland.

Might the world go backward
Then, Roses' Freyia,
Soon were I faring
Along the way
That leads to Walhall,
Longest before me,
And my right hand holding
A glory maybe
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For foul is waxen
That world the Gods made,
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But all are gone by,
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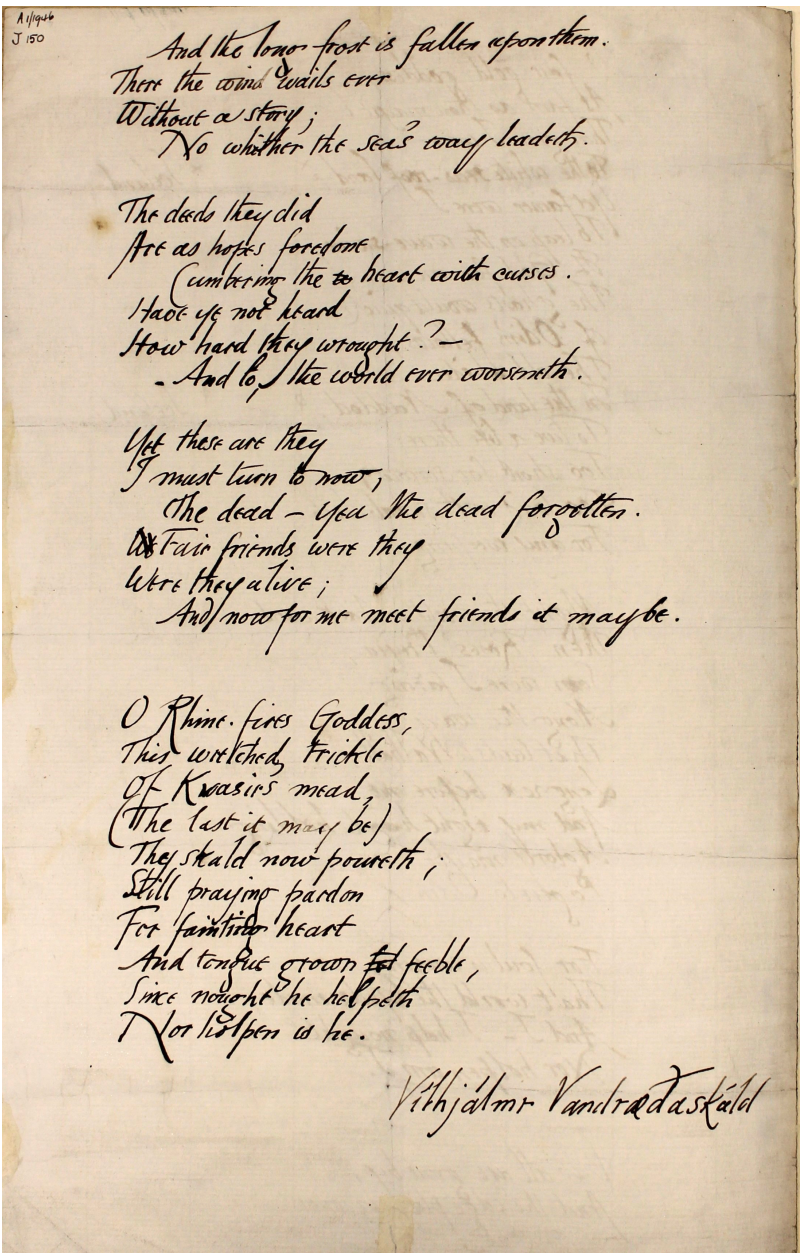

Figure 3. William Morris, "O Fair Gold Goddess," William Morris Gallery MS J150, William Morris Archive.

his associates or contemporaries (such as his pioneering advocacy of early socialism). The faith that through sensitive historical re-creation we can most closely approach human fellowship—a humanist variant of the "communion of saints"—appears many times, not only in Morris's poems but in his views of the importance of translation and in his translation practices. That Morris selected *Howard the Halt* as the first tale of his twenty-one-translation sequence and the subject of special commentary suggests the importance of its theme—a middle-aged man's attempt to turn humiliation and loss into ultimate gain and renewed purpose.

The Skald as Interpreter

One of Morris's most direct responses to the sagas has lain unremarked for decades in the Founder's Library of Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum—hidden in plain sight, as it were, in one of the lovely calligraphic manuscripts Morris gave to Georgiana Burne-Jones. Burne-Jones entrusted her collection of many of Morris's finest illuminations to Morris's co-executor Sydney Cockerell, who as later director of the Fitzwilliam Museum and Library deposited them in his institution. The latter's restrictions on visitation and photography have long shrouded them from popular interest, and when examining Morris's calligraphic manuscript of his translation of *Howard the Halt*, I was surprised to find a previously unknown poetic gloss inserted not by the original compiler and saga composer but by Morris as latter-day skald (see Figure 4). In this context, Morris's tribute embodies his aspiration not only to preserve the memorials of a previous Icelandic transcriber-cum-poet but to assume for himself the skaldic persona—to embed his observations and emotions directly and physically within the medieval text he had both translated and rendered in artistic form.

Howard the Halt is the first story included in volume 1 of the *Saga Library*. With characteristic ambition Morris initiated a hand-illuminated version of what would later become the six-volume printed version of the *Library*, and by including his commentary on the first

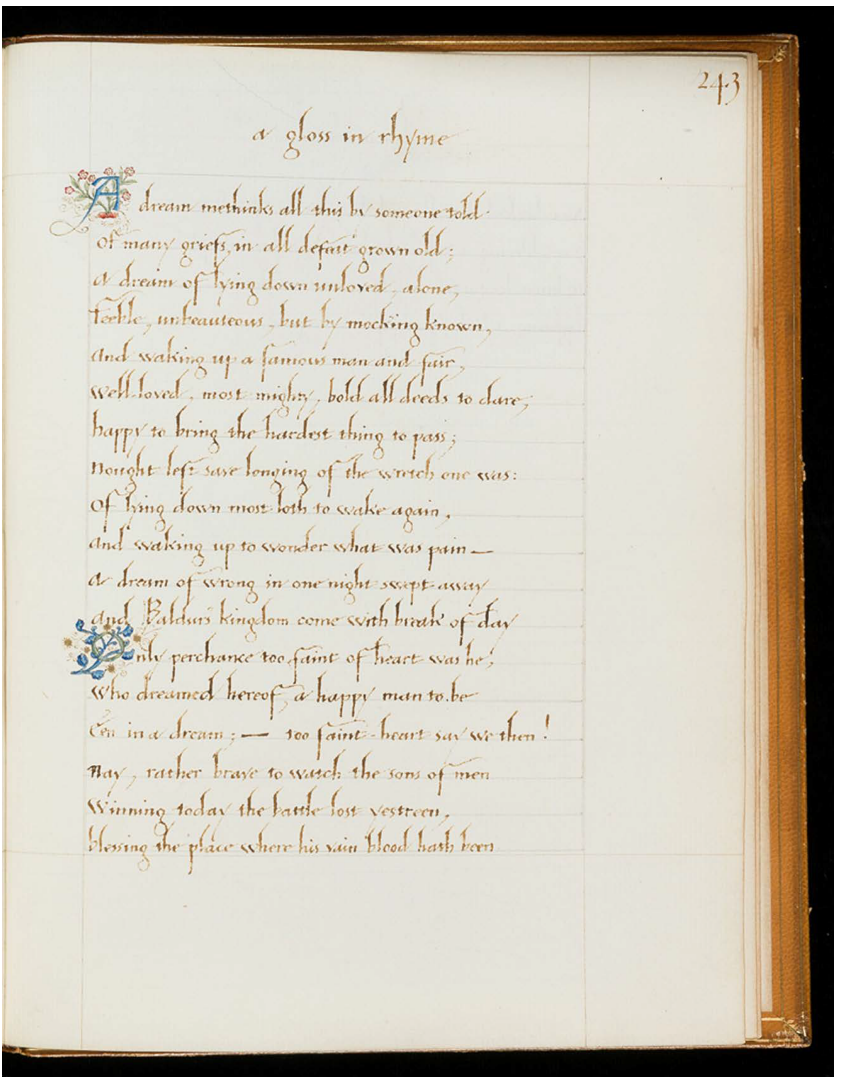

Figure 4. William Morris, "A Gloss in Rhyme," after *The Story of Howard the Halt*, Fitzwilliam MS 270, f. 243, William Morris Archive.

selection he would have been proclaiming his intention to follow the precedent of earlier scribes. Like Grettir and several other saga protagonists, Howard is a sometime poet who responds to the events of his life through spontaneous rhythmic declamations. A former warrior of distinguished lineage, happily married to Biargey, and extremely attached to their sole offspring, a promising, strong, and good-hearted youth named Olaf, Howard has been lamed in a fight, hence his sobriquet "the Halt." Far worse, however, is the psychological blow when an influential neighboring thug, Thorbiorn, along with his henchmen, ambushes and murders Olaf from jealousy at the youth's popularity and good reputation; after this violent deed Thorbiorn crushes Olaf's skull and preserves the jawbone and teeth in a sack. So grieved is Howard at his son's brutal death and the shame heaped on his memory that he loses all interest in life and takes to his bed for the better part of three years. Biargey urges him to ask for compensation from Thorbiorn at the annual Thing, or Law Court, as was the Icelandic custom after an unprovoked slaying, but when he does so, Thorbiorn instead opens the sack and throws his son's jaw and teeth into the bereaved father's face.

At this further affront Howard is stung to action, and with Biargey's assistance he gathers their relatives and mounts a counterattack. In addition to killing Thorbiorn, he and his kindred also slay certain of the latter's attendants and family members, and the account of these counterattacks consumes ten of the saga's twenty-four chapters. Such mayhem at last arouses protest (though not as much as it might reasonably have done), and the relatives of the slain and others, among them the elderly priest Thorarin, bring the case to the Thing's highest judge, Guest Oddleifson. The latter rules that Howard's killing of those known to cause mischief, including Thorbiorn, was justified; on the other hand, Howard's party has also killed two innocent men, and these deeds are to be balanced against the murder of Olaf. Nonetheless, all those involved at any level are to be exiled from the region during the elderly Thorarin's lifetime, so that the latter need not fear any recurrence of blood feud. Ironically Howard prospers in his new Icelandic homestead and later benefits from emigration to

Norway, where he settles in peace; befriends the renowned new monarch, Olaf Tryvison; and converts to Norway's newly proclaimed religion of Christianity. At his request, after his death his kinsman Thorhall builds a church in his memory, using wood Howard has brought from Iceland.[18]

What Morris writes in response to this tale of bloodletting and survival is not literary criticism proper but, rather, a testimony to what for him were the saga's enduring themes. These include a middle-aged man's attempt to overcome inaction, depression, and crippling loss, exhibiting what Ian Felce has called "the courage of incapacity":[19]

> [241] Old Haward lived belike in yore agone
> no life of dreams, but joys enow he won
> and joys he lost within the fire-wrought isle. . . .
> [243] A dream methinks all this by someone told
> of many griefs, in all despair grown old;
> a dream of lying down unloved, alone;
> feeble, unbeauteous, but by mocking known,
> and waking up a famous man and fair,
> well-loved, most mighty, bold all deeds to dare;
> happy to bring the hardest thing to pass;
> nought left save longing of the wretch one was:
> of lying down most loth to wake again,
> and waking up to wonder what was pain—
> a dream of wrong in one night swept away
> and Baldur's kingdom come with break of day[.]
> Only perchance too faint of heart was he;
> who deemed hereof, a happy man to be
> e'en in a dream;—too faint heart say we then!

[18] Ingrid Hanson argues that Morris's literary works reflect a commitment to the transformative power of violence. Ingrid Hanson, *William Morris and the Uses of Violence, 1856-1890* (London: Anthem, 2013). Though this argument neglects Morris's many literary works centered on more peaceful themes, it is hard to ignore the relentlessly violent content of the Icelandic literature to which he was deeply attracted.

[19] See Felce, *William Morris and the Icelandic Sagas*, chap. 3. Felce notes other saga heroes who fit this description, among them Gunnlaug of *Gunnlaugs saga* and Kormak of *Kormáks saga*; one might also add both Kiartan and Bodli of Morris's "The Lovers of Gudrun" and, with some qualifications, Sigurd, Gunnar, and even Brynhild of *Volsunga Saga: The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs*.

> nay, rather brave to watch the sons of men
> winning today the battle lost yestreen,
> blessing the place where his vain blood hath been.
> [243v] Yea, lacked he all good hap whose fond desire
> smoldering a while, broke out at last in fire
> to burn long after all his woe was done,
> lighting a little space of yore agone.[20]

Morris here engages in "strong interpretation," even (to use Harold Bloom's term) "misprision," since the saga does not present Howard as suffering romantic loss ("a dream of lying down unloved, alone") but, rather, the death of his son. Moreover, though as a former warrior Howard may have taken satisfaction in revenge and a restored reputation, these could scarcely resurrect his heir, sweep wrong away in one night, or bring him or the world closer to Baldur's kingdom of justice.

As we have seen in his other poems, Morris extends the fellowship of sympathy toward the desperately isolated of the past—tormented men of action, wronged and (to this modern commentator) wronging. Forgoing judgment, Morris has instead responded to his hero with deep empathy for the latter's sense of personal loss, finding in Howard's sudden transformation from immobility to action a fable of the possibility of finding renewed purpose in later life. Morris's approach to *Howard the Halt* might be described as one of personal application. He takes the saga to heart as a model for emulation and reflection, rather as a nineteenth-century reader or auditor might have absorbed a sermon. Even if one's utopian desires are only fleetingly realized, the poem asserts, these give intensity to one's life and linger after death, irradiating one's struggles with retrospective

[20] William Morris, "A Gloss in Rhyme," after *The Story of Howard the Halt*, Fitzwilliam MS 270, William Morris Archive. The final line here reworks a line from Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. Morris illuminated two manuscripts of this poem, one finished in 1872 as a gift to Georgiana Burne-Jones and the other completed later. FitzGerald's line, which carries the opposite sense from Morris's, reads, "Lighting a little hour or two, is gone" (stanza 14 of the first edition of 1859). I am grateful to Erik Gray for noting the echo.

meaning and, for one's successors, "lighting a little space of yore agone."

The Skald as Wordsmith

We have seen that in Morris's skaldic persona, calligraphic renditions, original poetry, autobiographical expressions, and translations merge to varying degrees. The Morris-Magnússon versions of the sagas were largely approved by their educated Victorian audiences,[21] who may have shared Morris's desire to discern ethical intentions in their cultural ancestors as well as an interest in new forms of language, especially if rhythmically and dramatically expressed. Such ideals seem consistent with Morris's identification with the role of modern skald, obligated both to transmit and to create, rendering his source language literally while fashioning a new artwork through his elaborate coinages, kennings, rhyme forms, and plot twists. For a modern translator-poet, to return with intensity to one's linguistic origins was to assume new powers. His translations are thus acts of historical linguistic empathy, much as his recasting of the tales of Grettir and Howard provided a modern interpretation of the significance of past conflicts.

Some reviewers found the diction of the translations inappropriately distancing, and later translators have adopted a starker, more bluntly modernist style. Nonetheless, Scandinavian scholars have generally defended Morris against the charge of creating an imagined or faux medieval language. In "William Morris and Saga-Translation: The Story of King Magnus, Son of Erling," James Barribeau examines a text first translated by Magnússon with Morris's corrections (Huntington Library HM 6463) and observes Morris's preference for mirroring Old Norse syntax, desire to reproduce the word order of the original, and selection of less commonly used cognate English

[21] E.g., *Saturday Review*, July 16, 1870; *The Critic*, January 31, 1891; *New York Times*, January 22, 1901; *The Spectator*, February 10, 1906. For a hostile review, see G. A. Simcox, in *The Academy*, August 13, 1870.

words.[22] Similarly, in a study of Morris's premodern diction in the saga translations 1869-72, Karl Litzenberg finds that virtually all such usages have their counterparts in Chaucer, Malory, Froissart's *Chronicles*, the King James Bible, Scottish border ballads, or Morris's own writings; even the few neologisms are translations or adaptations of Norse words or formed by analogy with well-known English words.[23] Litzenberg concludes that although "one will like Morris's language of translation only *if he likes Morris's writings in general*," in comparison with predecessors such as Samuel Laing and George Dasent, these translations "tower over the rest, like 'Sigurd over Gjuki's sons' in at least one respect. They have strength and life."[24] Moreover, as the translations progressed, Morris became less indebted to Magnússon for original drafts of content, and as a craftsman, he increasingly aimed to imitate the elaborate metrical forms of the original.

Two recent critics have offered further insights into the effects of Morris's unique linguistic choices. In *William Morris's Utopia of Strangers*, Marcus Waithe notes that although Morris wished "to make the invigorating strangeness of heroic society known to his readership[,] . . . he was also conscious of the risk that his material would be sanitized in the process, brought into line with the expectations of a British audience." As a result, he

> adopted strategies designed to refuse translation in the total sense. The mere fact that he believed it possible to represent the preserved remnants of a prior "untranslated" strangeness announces the utopian character of his activities in this area, the strength of his faith in . . . an outside, of an alternative to prevailing forms.[25]

[22] James Barribeau, "William Morris and Saga-Translation: The Story of King Magnus, Son of Erling," in *The Vikings*, ed. R. Farrell (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 239-55.

[23] Karl Litzenberg, "The Diction of William Morris," *Arkiv für Nordisk Filologi* 9 (1937): 327-63, at 357.

[24] Litzenberg, "The Diction of William Morris," 362.

[25] Marcus Waithe, *William Morris's Utopia of Strangers: Victorian Medievalism and the Idea of Hospitality* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 90.

Icelandic scholar Ian Felce cites Waithe's metaphor of the target language as a host who welcomes a guest ("the source-text") into his home, confident that the latter can both retain its integrity and resist assimilation, and suggests instead an image of "the meeting of two distant relatives at a guesthouse somewhere between the modern traveller's crumbling home and his ancient cousin's native country."[26] To me, both descriptions seem consistent with an ideological purpose, in Felce's words, to bring "the progenitor-text at least part of the way to his readers, who, trapped as they were in a corrupted post-Conquest post-Renaissance industrialized idiom of English, might be enthused to meet their ancestor part of the way, as though embracing a relative they had not seen for some time."[27] This would seem creative *estrangement*, jolting the reader into a recognition of kinship within difference.

One should, however, emphasize the significance of Morris's additions as a poet experienced in crafting emotion-laden poetic epics. His versions routinely heighten and compress the language of Magnússon's original drafts, as Magnússon first wrote out a literal translation, after which Morris prepared a literary version; later as Morris gained greater knowledge of the language, he composed the initial version, with Magnússon modifying errors. We can see this process in the Huntington Library manuscript draft for *The Story of King Magnus the Son of Erling* (see Figure 5). Magnússon had written: "To this many gave good cheer. Erling answered: From what I hear it seems that most who have been counselled on this matter, would rather to back out of the hard trouble." Morris slightly condenses and heightens this to "Many took well to this rede. Erling answered: So hear I herein as if most who have been sought to on this matter, had rather excuse them of the trouble." As the collaborators continued, it was Morris who wrote the first draft, emphasizing poetic sections and taking increasing care to replicate the intricate forms of the

[26] Felce, "Old Norse Sagas and William Morris's Ideal of Literal Translation," 236, citing Waithe, *William Morris's Utopia of Strangers*, 94.

[27] Felce, "Old Norse Sagas and William Morris's Ideal of Literal Translation," 236.

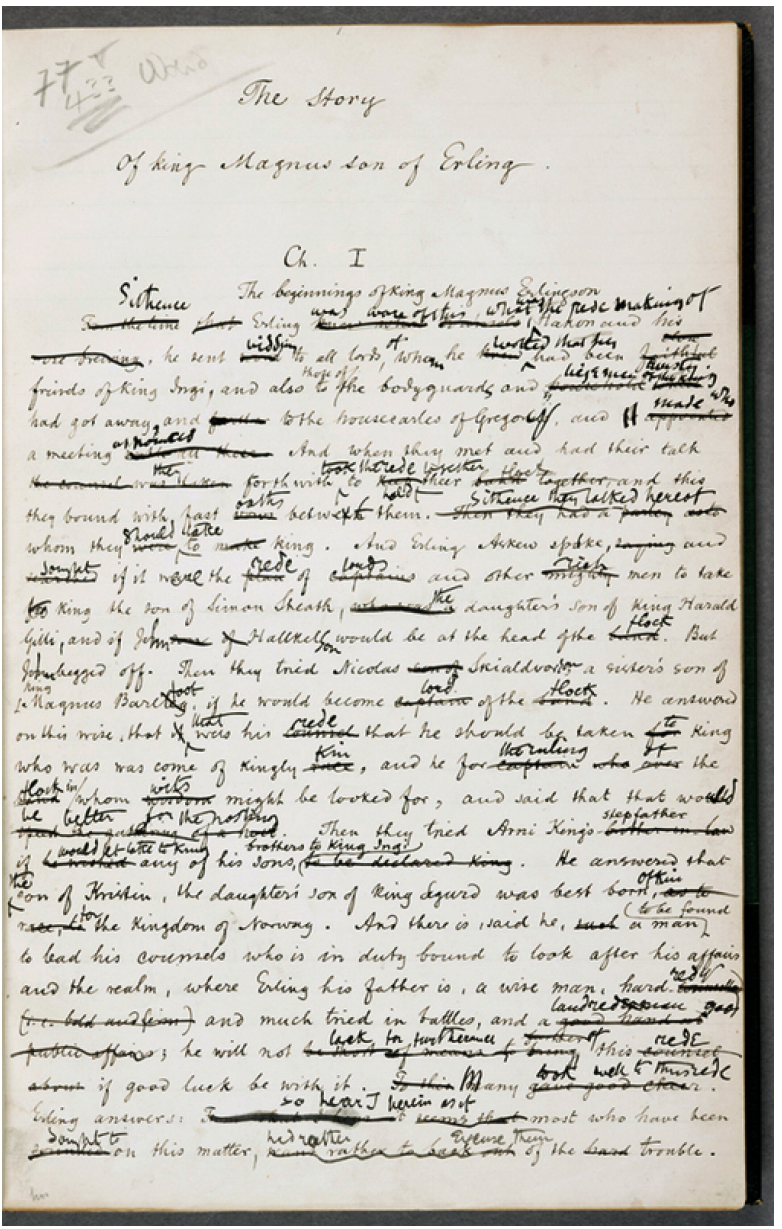

Figure 5. Eiríkr Magnússon, Autograph MS, ***The Story of King Magnus the Son of Erling***, with corrections by William Morris, Huntington Library HM6463, William Morris Archive.

original. Although later readers have often found this historicized diction circumlocutory, it should be noted that Morris generally compresses locutions, removes repetitions, adapts Magnússon's language to contemporary British prepositional usage, imparts a firmer rhythm, and inserts elements of irony or distancing.

Morris's word choices also pay tribute to the emotions behind what can seem the overly stark statements of the original. In compiling the oral records of a turbulent culture two centuries before their time, the original saga writers had been less invested in the emotional lives of specific actors than in the unification processes leading to the formation of what they would have viewed as their own more peaceful, centralized, and Christianized social order. Yet the psychological motivations of historical personages were exactly the saga elements central to Morris's literary concerns. Although the Icelandic-derived locutions of the translations are often opaque to the modern reader, especially in their descriptions of concrete actions and physical activities (boating, house building, fighting), Morris's inserted poems humanize the speakers, and the passages that describe emotions are clear and sympathetic. Here is Brynhild's speech to her husband, Gunnar, in *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs*, as she lies sickened after learning that Sigurd had wooed her deceitfully by entering the ring of fire in Gunnar's guise: "I made a vow unto my father, that him alone would I love who was the noblest man alive, and that this is none save Sigurd, lo, now have I broken my oath and brought it to naught, since he is none of mine, and for this cause shall I compass thy death."[28] And in *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, the ghostly Glam delivers his curse to his conqueror: "An outlaw shalt thou be made, and ever shall it be thy lot to dwell alone abroad; therefore this weird I lay on thee, ever in those days to see these eyes with thine eyes, and thou wilt find it hard to be alone—and that shall drag thee unto death."[29] Finally, Morris's numerous metrical interventions insist that the sagas are, after all, poetry and should be appreciated as such. They thus

[28] *Volsunga Saga: The Story of the Volsungs and the Niblungs*, trans. William Morris (New York: Collier, 1962), 182 (chap. 29).

[29] *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, trans. Morris and Magnússon, 109.

invite the reader into an alternate imaginative realm existing both in harmony with and beyond the plots themselves. This grasp of the significance of medieval linguistic forms, coupled with a belief in their ability to generate new meanings, anticipated Morris's later view that aspects of a reimagined Icelandic culture could provide a salutary antidote to the "infallible maxims" of Victorian industrial capitalism.[30]

Morris as Social Anthropologist

For Morris, Iceland represented radical newness, even as its historical roots satisfied his desire for a kinship and fellowship across time. As we have seen, he responded deeply to its non-English landscapes—at once barren and sublime—and to its language forms and historical myths, which for him evoked enduring qualities of creative resistance. As he had selected from the saga narratives themes with application to his own life and contemporary society, his visits to Iceland helped prompt his recognition that, in the social sphere, "another world is possible."[31] Morris's commentaries, both on the sagas and on modern Iceland, interweave these responses to suggest that the ideals of a preindustrial society at its best—relative simplicity, equality, and freedom—might inspire emulation in a yet-to-be-realized postcapitalist society based on human mutuality and shared ideals.

In his lecture "The Early Literature of the North," delivered in 1887, seventeen years after the first Morris-Magnússon translation, Morris outlines his reflections on Iceland.[32] The sheer power of Iceland's landscape, he says, is imprinted with a "terrific and melancholy beauty," and though "awful looking are these Icelandic wastes," they are "yet beautiful to a man with eyes and heart."[33] Iceland's

[30] Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 210.

[31] Unattributed anarchist slogan, now the motto of the World Social Forum, founded 2001.

[32] William Morris, "The Early Literature of the North—Iceland," in *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene LeMire (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 179-98.

[33] Morris, "The Early Literature of the North," 180.

history is deeply important, as its inhabitants are the descendants of refugees from a colonial power (Norway), and they have preserved some of the courage and individuality of their ancestors, as well as "the records of the traditions and religion of the Gothic tribes." Notably, "the instrument of this preservation is the language of their fathers, which is still current among them almost intact."[34] This unique environment and language have been a political laboratory, cultivating specific social patterns and individual traits:

> These homesteads are very populous, and more than one family commonly lives in each including possibly paupers. . . . Of the people there is little to be said save praise: they are kind, hospitable, and honest, and have no class of degradation at any rate, and don't take kindly to bullying: they are quick-witted, very talkative when they get over their first shyness, and mostly well-educated as things go: a friendly and refined people in short.[35]

Morris especially notes the absence of a "class of degradation"—Marx's *lumpenproletariat*—the hopelessly impoverished whose plight had helped motivate Morris's embrace of socialism. Presumably there might have been poor or helpless individuals, but their condition was not intensified by squalid and life-threatening surroundings. Moreover, the preservation of the medieval language forms permitted the wide dispersion of the older literature among Iceland's people: "The most illiterate are absolutely familiar with the whole of the rich literature of their country."[36]

Morris concedes that that literature often represents the people as violent or in other ways disagreeable, yet he finds extenuations:

> A hard and grasping side to the character of the heroes is not uncommon, and this especially in money matters, which contrasts disagreeably enough with the heroes of Arab romance: something at least may here be put down to the harshness of the northern climate and the hard fight for life there; and after all a good deal to the love of realism which distinguishes the tellers of the stories themselves. Yet there are plenty of examples of generosity and magnanimity too.[37]

[34] Morris, "The Early Literature of the North," 181.

[35] Morris, "The Early Literature of the North," 180-81.

[36] Morris, "The Early Literature of the North," 181.

[37] Morris, "The Early Literature of the North," 186.

Moreover, Morris observes that Iceland's special circumstances enabled its social-political structure, as embodied in the sagas—a government he finds largely mediated through direct human relationships and public opinion:

> This state of things was really so very different from ours. . . . Political society was not yet founded; there was no political territorial unit to which loyalty was exacted. Crime in our sense of the word was not taken cognizance of: violence was an offense not against a state but against a person: protection of persons or goods had to be sought from the blood relations who were bound to proceed against the injurer. . . . All this you must understand was not mere private war and revenge and consequent confusion but simply a different system to our politico-territorial system, and was based as I said on the equal personal rights of all freedmen.[38]

As a culture organized in small units, feudal Iceland thus lacked the complicated tyrannies of an elaborately indirect class system, with its economic inequities created by industrial wealth. Morris here takes the sagas on their own terms—in historical Iceland, what was to prevent one marauder from inventing or exaggerating the crimes of another group in order to seize land? Did the larger groups never prey on the smaller? Did the thralls never rebel? Was the Althing always just? Felce provides a modern-day corrective when he notes of the sagas, "Many of their plots revolve around the maneuverings of the most powerful regional leaders and bloodshed across classes that ensues. Far from being classless, there is a clearly demarcated social hierarchy in the sagas with slaves at the bottom, and influential chieftains (in Iceland) and royalty (abroad) at the top."[39]

But whatever the historical accuracy of Morris's judgments, for him a pre-nation-state society suggested possibilities for local self-government. The first beneficiary might be modern Iceland itself, at that time under foreign domination and suffering from famine:[40]

[38] Morris, "The Early Literature of the North," 183-84.

[39] Felce, *William Morris and the Icelandic Sagas*, 164.

[40] Iceland achieved independence from Denmark in 1944.

> I cannot help thinking that in spite of that they could live there very comfortably if they were to extinguish individualism there: the simplest possible form of co-operative commonwealth would suit their needs, and ought not to be hard to establish; as there is no crime there, and no criminal class or class of degradation and education is universal: . . . the only persons who would be losers by it would be the present exploiters of this brave and kind people.[41]

This outline for a proposed small-scale, egalitarian social order—characterized by community ethics, widespread education, and limited violence—suggests the features that later characterize the society of *News from Nowhere* and remained integral to Morris's brand of antiauthoritarian, democratic communist socialism, variously described by later commentators such as Lyman Sargent, John Bellamy Foster, and Michael Martel as anarcho-socialism, eco-socialism, or community-based localism.[42] The Socialist League broke up as a result of conflicts between its parliamentarian and anarchist factions, and although Morris did not side with the anarchists, neither did he accept the more controlling, statist goals of the Social Democratic Federation or those of the meritocratic and less communitarian Fabians.[43]

Morris's reflections on Icelandic society thus provide a structuralist view of its political relations. Although neither their climate nor their linguistic history could be preserved in entirety, aspects of their social organization could be reenacted, although in new forms: in particular, with a less individualistic, more communitarian ethos; noncapitalist economic relations; limited material aggregation; and

[41] Morris, "The Early Literature of the North," 198.

[42] William Morris, "Our English Socialism," in *William Morris on Socialism: Uncollected Essays*, ed. Florence Boos (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 271-72; Lyman Tower Sargent, "William Morris and the Anarchist Tradition," in *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, ed. Florence Boos and Carole Silver (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 61-73; John Bellamy Foster, "An Earthly Paradise," in *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 137-70; Michael Martel, "Romancing the Folk Mote," *Useful and Beautiful* 1 (2018): 7-17.

[43] See Florence Boos, "The Socialist League, Founded 30 December 1884," in *BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. Dino Felluga, April 2015, https://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=florence-boos-the-socialist-league-founded-30-december-1884.

government by consent. These features bind the society of Nowhere, with its absence of competitive politics (chapter 13), direct voting on administrative issues at the Mote (chapter 14), elimination of crimes of property (chapter 12), and individual liberties, an absence of hoarding, and adequate provision for all (chapter 20).[44]

Morris's socialism required the heroism of those willing to accept near-impossible odds, as he argues in his eloquent commentary on the Paris Commune in 1887[45]—in short, identification with the brave of the past who saw no immediate outward personal gain in reward for their commitment. Yet this identification, like linguistic allegiances, required an upgrading for the modern world. As Vilhjálmr, the latter-day Skald, had spoken his own truth as both interpreter and wordsmith, so likewise the Icelandic social structure Morris viewed as a forerunner and Blochean "novum" of future times would need to be modified;[46] men once willing to kill and be killed for merely tribal aims, largely related to acquisition, would instead resolve their conflicts through communal habits, fellowship, and a shared social ethics. As Morris asserts in his 1887 lecture, "The Society of the Future," under such conditions

> we know that men in general will feel the obligations of Society much more than the latter generations have done, that the necessity for co-operation in production and life in general will be more consciously felt than it has been; that the comparative ease of life which the freeing of labour will bring about will give all men more leisure and time for thought; that crime will be rarer because there will not be the same temptation to it. . . . In short, that the world cannot take a step forward in justice, honesty and kindliness, without a corresponding gain in all the material conditions of life.[47]

[44] William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, in *Collected Works of William Morris*, vol. 16.

[45] William Morris, "Why We Celebrate the Commune of Paris" (March 19, 1887), in *William Morris, Political Writings: Contributions to* Justice *and* Commonweal *1883-1890*, ed. Nicholas Salmon (Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Press, 1994), 232-35.

[46] Ernest Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

[47] William Morris, "The Society of the Future," in *William Morris on Art and Socialism*, ed. Norman Kelvin (New York: Dover, 1999), 174-75.

If, in Hegelian terms, medieval Germanic and Scandinavian societies constituted the thesis whose antithesis was the industrialized capitalism of the present, their final synthesis would be less a society of laws and restraints than one created through an internalized ethos of shared obligation and community. Morris enforces this distinction:

> Political society as we know it will have come to an end: the relations between man and man will no longer be that of status or of property. It will no longer be the hierarchical position, the office of the man, that will be considered, as in the Middle Ages, nor his property as now, but his person. Contract enforced by the State will have vanished into the same limbo as the holiness of the nobility of blood . . . every case of clashing rights and desires will be dealt with on its own merits—that is, really, and not legally.[48]

Such an imagined future offers an eloquent critique of Morris's own world:

> It is a society which does not know the meaning of the words rich and poor, or the rights of property, or law or legality, or nationality: a society which has no consciousness of being governed; in which equality of condition is a matter of course, and in which no man is rewarded for having served the community by having the power given him to injure it.
>
> It is a society conscious of a wish to keep life simple, . . . divided into small communities varying much within the limits allowed by due social ethics, but without rivalry between each other, looking with abhorrence at the idea of a holy race.[49]

In conclusion, Morris's immersion in the Icelandic sagas provided a form of radical, creative estrangement on several fronts: linguistic, personal, artistic, and political. As we have seen, Morris responded variously to the Old Norse sagas as imagined skald, time traveler, creative historicist, translator, linguistic wordsmith, critic, poet, and political theorist. Synergistically, these mutually reinforcing roles helped inform both the language and settings of his later prose romances and the communitarian-localist political views embodied in Morris's *News from Nowhere* and his other socialist writings.

[48] Morris, "The Society of the Future," 179.

[49] Morris, "The Society of the Future," 183.

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