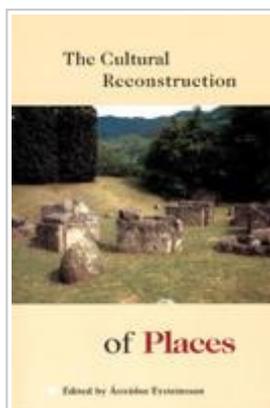




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## New books



### Editor/s Author/s: Editor: Ástráður Eysteinnsson

The eighteen articles in this book focus on and critically explore several manifestations of the ways in which places assume historical and cultural meaning.

Many places we get to know come to us (and we to them) loaded with historical significance, but the ideological and aesthetic construction of the past in relation to the present also often involves concentration on certain places, be they local, native, or foreign. Such places — and they can be anything from a city square to a piece of wilderness to a whole country — are constantly reconstructed by cultural reiterations, renovations or contestations. Places are among the keys to our cultural identities, but this means they are also gateways of the imaginary.

The authors — scholars from Italy, Romania, Slovenia, Iceland, and Britain — demonstrate and discuss how important ideas are grounded on physical sites, be they circumscribed by national interests, urban encounters, historical figures, traumatic events, or mythic notions of landscape. A number of articles dwell on Iceland as a place of the utopian imaginary, as fleshed out for instance by William Morris.

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# Icelandic Stoicism among the Victorians?

*The Legacy of Old Norse Sagas in William Morris's Utopian Views of Humanity*

Paola Spinozzi  
(University of Ferrara)

## THE VICTORIAN QUEST FOR THE OLD NORSE ETHOS

In his 1900 diachronic survey of the reception of Old Norse literature in English culture, Conrad Hjalmar Nordby demonstrated how Icelandic poems and sagas, which in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were known exclusively to erudite antiquarians, were studied, translated, and interpreted in the Victorian age by intellectuals such as George Webbe Dasent, Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, Charles Kingsley and William Morris.<sup>1</sup> While providing historical evidence of a wider circulation of Old Norse culture in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, Nordby does not address the issue of re-writing as an ideological appropriation; indeed, what could be defined as the ‘construed re-construction’ of the North in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was disregarded until twenty years ago. For the last two decades, and thanks to scholars like T.A. Shippey,<sup>2</sup> Maïke Oergel,<sup>3</sup> Andrew Wawn,<sup>4</sup> and Jón Karl Helgason,<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 Conrad Hjalmar Nordby, ‘Thomas Percy’, in *The Influence of Old Norse Literature upon English Literature* (New York: Columbia University Germanic Studies, 1900), vol. 1, no. 3: ‘[...] with the publication of Percy’s Northern Antiquities [...] in 1770, knowledge of Icelandic literature passed from the exclusive control of learned antiquarians. More and more, as time went on, men went to the Icelandic originals, and translations of poems and sagas came from the press in increasing numbers. In the course of time came original works that were inspired by Old Norse stories and Old Norse conceptions.’
  - 2 T.A. Shippey, ‘Goths and Huns: the Rediscovery of the Northern Cultures in the Nineteenth Century’, in *The Medieval Legacy: A Symposium, Proceedings of the Sixth International Symposium organized by the Centre for the Study of Vernacular Literature in the Middle Ages held at Odense University on 16–17 November 1981*, ed. by Andreas Haarder et al (Odense: Odense University Press, 1982), pp. 51–69.
  - 3 Maïke Oergel, *The Return of King Arthur and the Nibelungen: National Myth in Nineteenth-century English and German Literature* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998).
  - 4 Andrew Wawn, ‘William Morris and Translations of Iceland’, in *Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics*, ed. by Shirley Chew and Alistair Stead (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), pp. 254–276; Ibid., *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-century Britain* (NY: D.S. Brewer, 2000).
  - 5 Jón Karl Helgason, *The Rewriting of Njáls Saga: Translation, Ideology and Icelandic Sagas* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1999).

re-assessing the popularity of Icelandic sagas in the Victorian age has involved questioning why such literary expressions came to be inextricably connected with the retrieval of the Teutonic origins of Northern Europe and the idealization of codes of behaviour followed by ancient heroes and gods. The re-evaluation of Old Norse literature promoted by prominent Victorians must thus be understood as an attempted cultural construction of a historic past to be celebrated as the epoch of heroic Germanic ancestors. The notion of national identity was being defined through the retrieval of Germanic origins.<sup>6</sup>

William Morris ‘discovered’ Icelandic proto-socialism in the late 1880s, fifteen years after his journeys to Iceland, while exploring the map of Europe and giving prominence to the countries in which neither Roman nor Norman colonization had altered the course of autochthonous history.<sup>7</sup> Further insight into the intersections between Morris’s reception of ancient Iceland<sup>8</sup> and his

- 6 Andrew Wawn, ‘Philology and Fantasy before Tolkien’, paper presented at the symposium on *Tolkien, Laxness, Undset*, held at the Nordic House, Reykjavík, September 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> 2002, in <[http://www.nordals.hi.is/Apps/WebObjects/HI.woa/wa/dp?detail=1004490&name=nordals\\_en\\_greinar\\_og\\_erindi](http://www.nordals.hi.is/Apps/WebObjects/HI.woa/wa/dp?detail=1004490&name=nordals_en_greinar_og_erindi)>: ‘[...] in Charles Kingsley’s *Hereward the Wake* (1866), [...] the settled Anglo-Saxon and Viking ways of Fenland England are threatened by Normans; [...] in R.M. Ballantyne’s *Erling the Bold* (1869), [...] Harald Fairhair’s centralising instincts challenge the ancient Norwegian Viking traditions of Halldorstede in Horlingdal; and, lastly, [...] in W.G. Collingwood’s *Thorstein of the Mere* (1895) [...] the Viking-Age rhythms of life in Lake District England are disrupted by royal and episcopal interference from York. By the end of each novel such threats are resolved in suitably optimistic ways—the shires are either transformed for the better by the momentary cultural upheavals, or abandoned in favour of new lands and better prospects. In the case of Charles Kingsley, for instance, Norman invasion is presented as a *felix culpa*, leading to that fusion of Anglo-Saxon and Viking vigour with European discipline which helped to shape the all-conquering culture of the Victorian Empire. In the Ballantyne tale, Erling and his family were able to escape and to establish a potent new colonial ‘shire’ in Iceland. The narrative offers a kind of Darwinian legitimization of ancient and modern colonial expansion.’
- 7 William Whitla, “‘Sympathetic Translation’ and the ‘Scribe’s Capacity’: Morris’s Calligraphy and the Icelandic Sagas”, *The Journal of the Pre-Raphaelite Society*, 10 (2001), pp. 27–108, in particular “‘The Treasure-house of the Mythology of the Whole Teutonic Race’: Iceland, Ideology, and the Sagas’ (pp. 60–61); ‘Free Tribal Customs [...] in that Romantic Desert: The Teutons and Victorian England’ (pp. 61–63), and ‘Old Norse Literature [...] a Good Corrective: Politics and the Sagas’ (pp. 63–66). Starting with the idea that ‘[the] identification of the Gothic tribes and Teutonic peoples with the Anglo-Saxons and their English descendants was a nationalist commonplace among British historians in the nineteenth century’ (p. 62), Whitla explains how, unlike other historians who wanted to legitimate the present social system by locating its roots in the history of Northern countries, Morris wanted to focus on the historical discontinuity between equalitarianism in ancient Iceland and class warfare in Victorian England.
- 8 Morris came to know Benjamin’s Thorpe *Northern Mythology* around 1854 in Oxford, thanks to Edward Burne-Jones. He also read Thorpe’s *Yuletide Stories*, Amos Cottle’s *Mythic Songs of the Edda*, Paul Henry Mallet’s *Northern Antiquities* (1859), and George Webbe Dasent’s *Popular Tales from the Norse*, *The Story of Burnt Njal* (1861) and *The Story of Gisli the Outlaw* (1866). See Jack Lindsay, *William Morris: His Life and Work* (London: Constable, 1975), p. 49; Roderick Marshall, *William Morris and His Earthly Paradises* (Tisbury: Compton Press,

idealised views of communitarian, classless societies established by Germanic peoples can be gained by enquiring how the ethical models he explored while translating and rewriting Icelandic sagas in the 1870s constituted a legacy for the utopian people of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, which William Guest later met in *News from Nowhere*, published in 1890. Indeed, the ethos of the Nordic populations of the early Middle Ages resurfaces in the ethos of English citizens born in Nowhere in the new millennium, at a time in history which Morris hoped would bear witness to the fulfilment of humanity's potential.

The Victorian responses to Old Norse ethics and customs involved philosophical and anthropological speculations. Not unlike other contemporary intellectuals, Morris imagined ideal human beings who would rise to the stature and reflect the virtues of the saga heroes. However, *The Story of Kormak, the Son of Ogmund*<sup>9</sup> and *The Lovers of Gudrun*, a version of the Icelandic Laxdæla saga included in *The Earthly Paradise*, reveal how Morris's ideas of a society based on Old Norse anthropological and sociological models are founded on assumptions substantially different from the ones expressed by Matthew Arnold in *Balder Dead* and by Thomas Carlyle in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. Morris's aim is not to sing the praises of specific individuals, but to identify values and norms that can be viable for all human beings.

Carlyle's, Arnold's, and Morris's interpretations of Old Norse culture stem from a shared need to criticize the baseness they loathed in Victorian society by praising, and idealizing, a system of values founded on bravery and strength of mind. They are all deeply aware that Old Norse literature celebrates stoicism as the strongest weapon against fate. Conceived of as an inner source of strength, stoic behaviour enables mortals to endure unfathomable events that test self-determination and free will. Stoicism enables mortals to guard their dignity while facing destiny.

Being stoic means enduring fate, not fighting against it, because fate is essential to life itself. It is the condition for existence, as clearly emerges from the lines in *Völuspá* in which the prophetess refers to the first two human mortals, who, 'unfated' before coming to life, are alive only when marked by their fate:

To the coast then came, kind and mighty,  
From the gathered gods three great Æsir;

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1979), p. 168; Edvige Schulte, *Saggi, saghe e utopie nell'opera di William Morris* (Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1987), p. 41.

9 William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, *The Story of Kormak, the Son of Ogmund* [1871], intro. by Grace J. Calder and note by Alfred Fairbank (London: William Morris Society, 1970), p. 5.

On land they found, of little strength,  
Ask and Embla, unfated yet.

Sense they possessed not, soul they had not,  
Being nor bearing, nor blooming hue;  
Soul gave Óthin, sense gave Hönir,  
Being, Lóthur, and blooming hue.<sup>10</sup>

The idea that destiny must not be challenged but accepted in order to allow it to run its course is deeply inscribed in Old Norse cosmogony: the world's conflicting forces will finally confront and annihilate each other. Ragnarök, the gods' fate, the end that is also a beginning, the violent destruction of the world that gives rise to a new one, clearly appealed to Victorian thinkers who were attempting to envisage a future for a society sustained by technological advancement and colonial power but thrown into turmoil by class conflict. Old Norse ethics provided a viable way to overcome the materialistic concerns of Victorian England and to speculate on human existence. The means with which the Old Norse heroic code could be charged with ideal spiritual values is evident in both Arnold's and Carlyle's interpretation of fate and stoicism in Norse mythology.

At the beginning of *Balder Dead*, Arnold emphasises the gods' stoic acceptance of fate through the words of Odin who reminds them all that, even though the death of the young god Balder is the most tragic event ever to have occurred, they must not give themselves over to grief and despair, but master these emotions, because they will have to face their own end, too:

Balder has met his death, and ye survive:  
Weep him an hour; but what can grief avail?  
For you yourselves, ye Gods, shall meet your doom,  
All ye who hear me, and inhabit Heaven,  
And I too, Odin too, the Lord of all;  
But ours we shall not meet, when that day comes,  
With woman's tears and weak complaining cries—  
Why should we meet another's portion so?  
Rather it fits you, having wept your hour,

<sup>10</sup> *Völuspá* [*The Prophecy of the Seeress*], in *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. by Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962, repr. 1994). On the *Völuspá* and the Old Norse concept of destiny see Rudolf Simek, *Altnordische Kosmographie: Studien und Quellen zu Weltbild und Weltbeschreibung in Norwegen und Island vom 12. bis zum 14. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1990); and Gianna Chiesa Isnardi, *I miti nordici* (Milano: Longanesi, 1991), in particular pp. 305–306; also fundamental is Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

With cold dry eyes, and hearts compos'd and stern,  
To live, as erst, your daily life in Heaven.<sup>11</sup>

Bravery enables men not only to bear destiny, but also to overcome impending death. While admiring the attitude with which the gods and heroes of Northern mythology face extraordinary adversities, Arnold and Carlyle focus on the idea that stoicism involves displaying superhuman faculties. According to Carlyle, mastering fear empowers the hero to overcome human frailty and impermanence through an imperturbable attitude: this exceptional faculty must be rewarded with hero-worship, which involves not only admiration, but also unconditional submission.

The *Valkyrs* are Choosers of the Slain; a Destiny inexorable, which it is useless trying to bend or soften, has appointed who is to be slain; this was a fundamental point for the Norse believer; [...] these *Choosers* lead the brave to a heavenly *Hall of Odin*; only the base and slavish being thrust elsewhither, into the realms of Hela the Death-goddess: I take this to have been the soul of the whole Norse Belief. They understood in their heart that it was indispensable to be brave; that Odin would have no favour for them, but despise and thrust them out, if they were not brave. [...] It is an everlasting duty, valid in our day as in that, the duty of being brave. *Valour* is still *value*. [...] We must get rid of Fear; we cannot act at all till then. A man's acts are slavish, not true but specious; his very thoughts are false, he thinks too as a slave and coward, till he have got Fear under his feet. [...] Now and always, the completeness of his victory over Fear will determine how much of a man he is.<sup>12</sup>

While resonating with mysticism, Carlyle's idea of transcendence is imbued with a hierarchical view of human beings, divided into exceptional emblems of magnitude and multitudes of obedient adorers.

Carlyle's hero-worship can be considered as a response to the Victorian idealization of the knight of medieval romance: Icelandic sagas, in particular the 'Family Sagas' (*Íslendingasögur*) uphold a heroism which is radically different from the one celebrated in chivalric literature. The knight's *courtesy* synthesises the virtues of *magnanimity*, which means liberality of mind and action; *audacity*, that is courage; *joy*, conceived of as vital fullness and awareness of one's own excellence, and *measure*, namely temperance and self-control. If a Nordic warrior can be defined as magnanimous, audacious and joyous, he is altogether lacking in measure. Nordic warriors are driven by instinct, passions are not mediated, and irresoluteness is abhorred. Male characters woo passionate, even

11 Matthew Arnold, *Balder Dead, An Episode* (1835), in *Poems*, in *The Works of Matthew Arnold in Fifteen Volumes* (New York: Ams Press, 1970), vol. I.

12 Thomas Carlyle, 'I—The Hero as Divinity. Odin. Paganism: Scandinavian Mythology', in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, notes and introd. by Michael K. Goldberg; text established by Michael K. Goldberg, Joel J. Brattin, and Mark Engel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 28.

fierce women who know nothing of the languid female passivity praised by troubadours, trouvères and Minnesingers. While males demonstrate traits of tenderness and even femininity in courtly literature, women exhibit aspects of virility in Old Norse literature. The sagas present human beings that hold personal dignity in the highest esteem, do not tolerate personal offence, and do not stop at violence when pursuing their aim. They express a religion of courage that the Victorians praised as the constitutive trait that has moulded the identity of Northern European peoples throughout the centuries and distinguished them from Mediterranean ones.

Evidence of lucid arguments about cultural specificities, and diversities, in Northern and Southern European countries can also be found in Morris's writings. In an 1883 letter to Andreas Scheu, who wished Morris to provide an autobiographical outline based on his cultural background, Morris addresses his interest in Old Norse culture which dates back to the 1870s. The direct access to primary sources had disclosed to him a code of behaviour based on free will and bravery, which cannot be found in chivalric literature:

I had about this time extended my historical reading by falling in with translations from the old Norse literature, and found it a good corrective to the maundering side of medievalism [...]; the delightful freshness and independence of thought of [the works of that literature], the air of freedom which breathes through them, their worship of courage (the great virtue of the human race), their utter unconventionality took my heart by storm.<sup>13</sup>

Morris regards the synthetic, fluid, and poignant narrative mode of the sagas as perfectly suited to express spontaneous thought, courage and respect for freedom. However, a comparative reading of his translations and creative writings based on Icelandic lore reveals an unresolved tension between the ethical code inscribed in the sagas as opposed to that of romances. While Carlyle and Arnold wanted to stress superhuman faculties, Morris attempted to fuse the unforgiving strong-mindedness of the saga hero with the gentility and refinement of the knight. A stoicism that blends the endurance and strength of will of the warrior-hero with the magnanimity and pity of the knight could, in his utopian perspective, help human beings to counteract fate, the shortness of life, the bitterness of love, and sorrow and rage.

13 William Morris to Andreas Scheu, 15 September 1883, in *The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends*, ed. by Paul Henderson (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1950), pp. 186–187; see also William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. by Asa Briggs (London: Penguin Books, 1962, repr. 1986), p. 31.

*THE STORY OF KORMAK, THE SON OF OGMUND* (1871)

*The Story of Kormak, the Son of Ogmund*<sup>14</sup> is a translation of *Kormáks saga*<sup>15</sup>, in which the biography of Kormak, a 10<sup>th</sup> century skáld appreciated as the best Icelandic love poet and celebrated for his adventurous life and loves, intermingles with the life of the Norwegian settlers of Iceland, their social system, law, and folklore. ‘Thou shalt never have any joy of thy Steingerd’,<sup>16</sup> the curse that Thorveig the witch puts on Kormak who killed her evil sons, causes the emotional paralysis that prevents Kormak from reaching the church where Steingerd, his bride-to-be, is vainly waiting. Kormak will feel hatred for her mingled with longing, a feeling expressed in poems and through heroic deeds. He renews his vow of love to her before dying: ‘Straw-dead I lie before thee’.<sup>17</sup>

For Morris, who re-read the sagas intent on finding behavioural models for his own epoch and, above all, for future ones, *Kormáks saga* leads to a discussion of the Woman Question. Far from acting as the passive recipient of her lover’s vows, Steingerd asserts her own will—while the ladies of romance follow the deeds of the knights who want to win their favour with trepidation, women in Old Norse sagas participate in events and try to alter them according to their own wishes.<sup>18</sup> Steingerd does not shy away from emotional outbursts, as courtly love dictates ladies should, and responds to Kormak’s love with intensity:

O wert thou blind, ring-breaker,  
None would I wed but thee,  
If the Gods to me were go  
And the great Fate of the wise-ones.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, she can master her passions, as when she decides that they will spend the night ‘with the panel of the bed between them, each on their own side’.<sup>20</sup> Kormak writes verses full of desire but, since she holds him responsible for the failure of their love, she fiercely rejects him: ‘Nay it shall never be, if I may have my will: time was when thou thyself didst cut the thing asunder; and

14 After completing the translation in 1870, Morris did not publish it but made an illuminated manuscript that was first published in 1970 by the William Morris Society.

15 The introduction by Grace J. Calder in William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, pp. 1–44, provides exhaustive philological data: ‘*Kormáks Saga*, written probably in the early thirteenth century, is one of the oldest of the Family Sagas. [...] [it] is preserved in the great vellum manuscript *Mödruvallabók*, written in the first half of the fourteenth century’ (p. 3).

16 William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, p. 85.

17 William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, p. 134.

18 Steingerd’s resolute behaviour is most evident when she prevents her father from taking part in the fight against Kormak: see William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, p. 85.

19 William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, p. 86.

20 William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, p. 117.

now there is no hope for thee'.<sup>21</sup> She also divorces her first husband Bersi when she feels contempt for him and repulsion for his maimed body:

But because of these matters grew Steingerd to loathe Bersi, and will depart from him [...]. And therewith she declared her divorce from him. So Steingerd went north to her kin, and met Thorkel her brother, and bade him claim her money of Bersi, both jointure and dowry, saying withal, that Bersi maimed she would not have.<sup>22</sup>

When Steingerd's second husband, Thorvald, offers her to Kormak who has rescued her from pirates and is very willing to accept the prize, she rebels against their decision.<sup>23</sup> Steingerd's divorce is accepted in a social system in which marriage is regarded as a contract that can be rescinded when acceptable conditions for common life disappear; moreover, her own will is not disregarded.

Deconstructing the conception of a wife as a 'commodity' was a major goal in Morris's critique of Victorian patriarchal society. His attempt to compare the social role of Icelandic and Victorian women, motivated by his engagement with the Woman Question, is a prominent feature of his 1887 lecture on Icelandic literature and culture:

The position of women was good in the society, the married couple being pretty much on an equality: there are many stories told of women divorcing themselves for some insult or offence, a blow being considered enough excuse. I am bound to say too that the women claimed and obtained immunity for responsibility of their violence on the score of their being 'weak women' in a way which would offend our comrade Bax seriously.<sup>24</sup>

By stating that Old Norse women could divorce an abusive husband, Morris draws a comparison between ancient Iceland and Victorian England, where a heated debate concerning equality between the sexes, and divorce, was taking place. According to the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, grounds for divorce differed for men and women: a wife had to prove that her husband had committed not just adultery but also incest, bigamy, cruelty, or desertion.

While choosing to examine controversial aspects of the Old Norse notion of womanhood, Morris is well aware that female immunity is ambiguously connected with frailty and implies that women are weak juridical subjects, because they cannot be held entirely responsible for their actions. From a

21 William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, p. 118, and also p. 119, where she rejects the ring he offers as a token of faithfulness: 'The trolls take thy gold and thee both!'

22 William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, p. 105.

23 William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, p. 132.

24 William Morris, 'The Early Literature of the North-Iceland', in *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. by E.D. LeMire (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), p. 185. The lecture was held on 9 October 1887 at Kelmescott House, Hammersmith, London.

subjective point of view, however, he is fascinated by female heroines who respond to betrayal with fierce, even lethal, revenge; who punish men with eternal hatred or transform them into obedient executors of their will. In Morris's late romantic perspective, female power, even if destructive, is another aspect of fate.

*THE LOVERS OF GUDRUN* (1870)

*The Lovers of Gudrun*, a poetical work that testifies to Morris's desire to interpret a saga according to his own ideas, shows a deep humanization of the characters from *Laxdæla Saga*. While conveying the awe-inspiring Old Norse ethics of endurance, Morris also wants to render the psychological complexity of the protagonists. In the saga, when Kjartan tells Gudrun that he is about to leave for a long journey abroad, and she eagerly tries to persuade him to change his mind or to let her join him, a few lines suffice to sketch their strong personalities and focus on their different expectations:

Kjartan said, "That cannot be, your brothers are unsettled yet, and your father is old, and they would be bereft of all care if you went out of the land; so you wait for me three winters."  
Gudrun said she would promise nothing as to that matter, and, each was at variance with the other, and there-with they parted.<sup>25</sup>

In Morris's lines, instead, their reactions are prompted by a long, poignant dialogue that ends with a strong emphasis on Kjartan's stoicism, tinged by self-confidence and longing for fame.<sup>26</sup>

Kjartan, bright-eyed and flushed, restless withal,  
As on familiar things his eyes did fill,  
Yet eager to be gone, and smiling still,  
For pride and hope and love his soul did fill,  
As of his coming life he thought, and saw  
In all the days that were to be, no flaw.<sup>27</sup>

Kjartan's stoic behaviour is again emphasised when, while staying at the court of the King of Norway, he must cope with Bolli's departure for Iceland:

25 *The Laxdale Saga*, ed. by Peter Foote, trans. by Muriel Press (London: Dent, 1964), 'Chapter XL, Kjartan and Bolli Voyage to Norway, A.D. 999'. The author of the saga, written in Old Norse around the year 1245 A.D., is unknown.

26 William Morris, *The Lovers of Gudrun*, in *The Earthly Paradise. A Poem. III*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, with Introductions by his Daughter May Morris, 24 vols (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), V, pp. 283–286. Morris chose to 'translate' the name of Kjartan as Kiartan.

27 William Morris, *The Lovers of Gudrun*, p. 286.

But Kiartan, left behind, being such a man  
 As through all turns of fortune never can  
 Hold truce with fear and sorrow, lived his life  
 Not ill content with all the change and strife.<sup>28</sup>

A comparison between the Old Norse saga and Morris's poem shows substantial differences in the part devoted to the warrior-hero's return to Iceland, when he is told that Gudrun has not waited for his return and is now Bolli's wife. Morris transforms Kiartan's self-control into unrestrained despair:

He now heard of the marriage of Gudrun, but did not trouble himself at all over it; but that had heretofore been a matter of anxiety to many.<sup>29</sup>

He turned and staggered wildly from the place,  
 Crying aloud, "O blind, O blind, O blind!  
 Where is the world I used to deem so kind,  
 So loving to me? O Gudrun, Gudrun,  
 Here I come back with all the honour won  
 We talked of, that thou saidst thou knewest well  
 Was but for thee—to whom then shall I tell  
 The tale of well-doing?<sup>30</sup>

What makes Kiartan in *The Lovers of Gudrun* so different from Kjartan in *Laxdæla Saga* is not intensity of passion but rather his response. The saga indirectly reports Kjartan's deep, silent suffering for the loss of Gudrun through his sister Thurid's words.<sup>31</sup> Morris, instead, illustrates Kiartan's inner turmoil by focusing on the clash between the hero's social status, that demands endurance and self-control, and his soul, haunted by deprivation and discontent.

#### SAGA AND ROMANCE: CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

Whether a new humanity can be born through the acquisition of Old Norse values remains a crucial question for Morris, who never stopped pondering how to channel outbursts of passion, how to master human emotions and prevent them from undermining social order and cohesion. The passages in *News from Nowhere* in which he outlines the new, utopian society of the future are highly resonant with these problematic, unresolved issues.

28 William Morris, *The Lovers of Gudrun*, p. 303.

29 *Laxdale Saga*, 'Chapter XLIV. Kjartan comes home, A.D. 1001'.

30 William Morris, *The Lovers of Gudrun*, p. 320.

31 *Laxdale Saga*, 'Chapter XLV. Kjartan marries Hrefna, A.D. 1002': 'Thurid, his sister, went to talk to him, and said, "It is told me, brother, that you have been rather silent all the winter, and men say it must be because you are pining after Gudrun [...]. Do now the good and befitting thing, and don't allow yourself to take this to heart, and grudge not your kinsman a good wife".'

But you must know that we of these generations are strong and healthy of body, and live easily; we pass our lives in reasonable strife with nature, exercising not one side of ourselves only, but all sides, taking the keenest pleasure in all the life of the world. So it is a point of honour with us not to be self-centred [...]: we are no more inclined to eke out our sentimental sorrows than to cherish our bodily pains; and we recognise that there are other pleasures besides love-making. You must remember, also, that we are long-lived, and that therefore beauty both in man and woman is not so fleeting as it was in the days when we were burdened so heavily by self-inflicted diseases. So we shake off these griefs in a way which perhaps the sentimentalists of other times would think contemptible and unheroic, but which we think necessary and manlike. [...] The folly which comes by nature, the unwisdom of the immature man, or the older man caught in a trap, we must put up with that [...] my friend, I am old and perhaps disappointed, but at least I think we have cast off SOME of the follies of the older world.<sup>32</sup>

Compared to the manifold expressions of the Victorian revival of Icelandic culture, Morris's re-reading and re-writing of Old Norse literature is characterized by a peculiar endeavour that must be ascribed to his utopian intentions: re-designing the concept of stoicism by taking into account the anthropological diversity of mankind.

According to Andrew Wawn, 'Old Icelandic texts had certainly provided Morris with a set of narrative moulds into which he could pour his molten narrative material—journeys, famous weapons, non human foes, ancient traditions, threatened communities and the like'.<sup>33</sup> Besides offering narrative patterns, these texts solicited Morris's reflections on the origins and destiny of humankind and stimulated his enquiry into the nature of men and women.

Wawn maintains that eventually the dreamlike quality of romance proved more suited to Morris's speculations on the nature of mankind than the hyper-realistic narrative mode of the sagas. By the time he was writing the late 1880s romances, he was no longer interested in the narrative realism of the sagas, which he had rendered in his translations and re-interpreted in his early narrative poems such as *The Lovers of Gudrun*.

We can see this in *The Glittering Plain*. The skeletal story is straight out of a standard Victorian saga novel: Viking raiders seize the hero's girl; the hero undertakes a quest to rescue her; he has many trials and adventures along the way; eventually the lovers are reunited and return home. But by the 1880s Morris's narrative instinct led him to cut back on the saga and saga-novel realism, and to medievalise and universalise his treatment of the story. Thus his hero quests as much through dreamscapes as landscapes, as when he finds his beloved on the glittering plain itself. The names of both places and characters edge towards allegory, reminiscent of both the romances of Chretien de Troyes, and also of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* [...]. Morris's hero and heroine eventually reject life in an environment in which

32 William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. by Krishan Kumar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 60.

33 Andrew Wawn, 'Philology, and Phantasy before Tolkien'.

there is neither toil nor loss nor death. They return to their shire, and to a life of change, loss, vulnerability and contingency; they rejoin the human race.

In both these late romances, then, we find Morris exploring a pre-saga, pre-sagastead, pre-Icelandic old northern world, voicing his narratives in the archaised language of an author sensitive to the philological drum-beat of Old English and Old Icelandic.<sup>34</sup>

Wawn's statement that Morris's medievalization must be regarded as a form of universalization of his themes provides clues to exploring why Morris's evaluation of the sagas gradually changed. He must have realized that the sagas are too rooted in the culture and history of their country of origin while romances depict less identifiable settings. However, far from drawing boundaries between the two literary genres, he demonstrated that sagas and romances undergo processes of cross-cultural fertilization. The 'Preface' to his translation of *Grettis saga*, published in 1869, offers an argument in support of this inter-cultural perspective. The story of Thorstein and Spes, whose deep but adulterous love caused first treachery and elopement, then penitence through separation, allows Morris to make perceptive critical remarks about the fusion of sagas and romances in Europe:

[...] the epilogue of Spes and Thorstein Dromund [is] steeped [...] with the spirit of the mediæval romances, even to the distinct appropriation of a marked and well-known episode of the Tristram; though it must be admitted that he [the saga-teller] had probably plenty of opportunity for being versed in that romance, as Tristram was first translated into the tongue of Norway in the year 1226, by Brother Robert, at the instance of King Hakonson, whose great favourite Sturla Thordson was, and whose history was written by him.<sup>35</sup>

It is my opinion that Morris went back to romance because he wanted to explore the theme of the quest, that is, in utopian terms, the search for an ideal society unburdened by concerns about historical verisimilitude and realism. More importantly, the narration of a mythical past distances Morris's narratives from straightforward political messages, such as in the utopian history of *Nowhere*. It would enhance Morris's perceptiveness to contend that the return to romance in his later years testifies to his awareness that the Aryanism lurking in the revival of Old Norse culture could give rise to ideological fanaticism. The ideological components in Morris's late romances are still largely unexplored; deeper enquiry can be developed by arguing that romance was the literary genre he chose for his later works because the non-realistic setting provided him with a different speculative space through which he could still investigate issues he had tackled while writing and re-writing sagas. In the last years of his life he was still concerned about the primeval strength of a social body in which

34 Andrew Wawn, 'Philology, and Phantasy before Tolkien'.

35 Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris, Preface to *Grettis Saga: The Story of Grettir the Strong* [1869], trans. by Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, VII, pp. xlv-xlv.

consanguinity nourishes ethical principles of community, heroism and stoicism. *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1890)<sup>36</sup> is emblematic: in the end, Hallblithe's and the Hostage's return to their community after their stay at the Glittering Plain testifies to the acceptance of their fate. Being human, fated, they are able to endure fate.

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36 William Morris, *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, XIV.

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