Holidays on Ice: William Morris and Lavinia Greenlaw in Iceland

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Abstract: Going away is an essential part of our conception of holidays, which is why *Questions of Travel: William Morris in Iceland* (2011) can help inform a definition of holiday poetics. The book combines large portions of William Morris's *Icelandic Journals*, in particular from the first part which documents his 1871 journey to Iceland, with commentaries of Morris's text by contemporary British poet Lavinia Greenlaw. The work as a whole draws attention to in-betweenness as a central characteristic of holiday writing. Both texts bring to the fore the unstable situation of the holiday-maker who has to find their place away from home while knowing this displacement to be only temporary. In-betweenness is also to be found in how Morris and Greenlaw recount the events of the journey. Calling it an adventure enables Morris to alternate between the sublime and the heroicomical, while Greenlaw oscillates between the universal and the particular in the psychological analysis of Morris's experience. Genre is also considered: journal writing was not a common practice of Morris's, and it is here presented as a freer form of expression than either letter or poetry writing. The generic affiliation of Greenlaw's text is debated as well, given that it is published as non-fiction but is often more akin to free verse. Ultimately, a distinction between travel writing and holiday writing is attempted.

Keywords: Holiday writing, travel writing, in-betweenness, literary genre.

Résumé : Les vacances, c'est avant tout le « départ en vacances », la vacance de son lieu de vie. C'est pourquoi l'étude de *Questions of Travel: William Morris in Iceland* (2011) peut nous aider à élaborer une définition de ce que serait une poétique des vacances. L'ouvrage combine des extraits conséquents des *Icelandic Journals* de William Morris (tirés en particulier de la première partie de ces journaux, celle qui documente son voyage en Islande de 1871) et des commentaires du texte de Morris par la poétesse britannique contemporaine Lavinia Greenlaw. L'œuvre dans son ensemble fait de

l'entre-deux une caractéristique centrale de la littérature de vacances. En effet, les deux parties du texte mettent en avant la situation instable du vacancier qui doit trouver sa place loin de chez lui tout en sachant que cela ne sera que temporaire. L'entre-deux caractérise également la manière dont Morris et Lavinia Greenlaw rapportent les événements du voyage : en faire une aventure permet au premier d'alterner entre les modes héroïcomique et sublime, tandis que la seconde oscille entre l'universel et le particulier dans son analyse psychologique de l'expérience de Morris. On s'intéressera par ailleurs à la question du genre littéraire : Morris n'était pas coutumier de la forme journal, et on démontrera qu'il y voit une forme d'expression plus libre que dans les genres épistolaire et poétique. La catégorisation générique des textes de Lavinia Greenlaw pose également question, puisque l'ouvrage est publié comme un essai mais s'apparente souvent davantage à de la poésie en vers libres. Enfin, on s'efforcera d'esquisser une distinction entre littérature de voyage et littérature de vacances.

Mots-clés : littérature de vacances, littérature de voyage, entre-deux, genre littéraire.

Introduction

In contemporary collective imaginations, the idea of "holidays" is intricately linked to that of "*going* on holiday". In that sense, holidays are better ontologically defined by the American use of "vacation": to be on holiday is to temporarily vacate one's usual place – be it at work, at home, or in one's social circle. French philosopher André Comte-Sponville ponders on that point in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*:

> *Vacance(s)* [i.e. vacancy / vacation]
> In the singular: void, absence, idleness… Daily life must be really hard, or pointless, for the same word – in the plural and contrary to its original void – to suggest the fullness of a life, for once, more or less intense and joyful…What a shame that one must go to that effect! […]
> Alienation is the state of they whose life lies elsewhere – who must leave in order to come home.[1] (2001: 1033, translation mine)

The burden of his daily life is certainly one of the main reasons that led William Morris to leave his family and his newly rented home in Kelmscott during the summer vacations of 1871. As Fiona MacCarthy writes, "Morris's marriage was in disarray. The wife he had married

1. Original text : "*Au singulier : vide, absence, oisiveté… Il faut que la vie quotidienne soit bien dure, ou bien vaine, pour que le même terme, au pluriel et à l'envers de son vide initial, en vienne à suggérer le plein d'une vie, pour une fois, à peu près intense et joyeuse… Et bien triste qu'il faille pour cela partir.* […] *Est aliéné celui dont la vie est ailleurs – celui qui doit partir pour rentrer chez soi.* […]" My thanks to Timothy A. Heron for his help translating the last sentence.

13 years before, the dark, statuesque Jane Burden […] had virtually left him for his friend and brother artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti" (2010). Rather than facing the situation head-on, the poet and designer fled to Iceland, leaving from 6th July to 7th September, the better to come home. He kept a journal of his trip, which has prompted the (quite rare) critics who have taken an interest in it to declare that "[t]o this day, nobody writing in English has better captured the astonishing chill beauty of Iceland" (J. Morris, 1969: xx). However, what makes this text unique is not its masterful descriptions of the Icelandic landscapes, but the honesty[2] and precision with which he records his emotions and impressions every step of the way. It is that specific quality which allows Lavinia Greenlaw to write of the journal as "the document of a journey that becomes a description of all journeys" (Greenlaw, 2011: xxiii), in which she identifies what she calls "questions of travel", a phrase borrowed from Elizabeth Bishop.

One hundred and forty years after Morris went to Iceland, Greenlaw undertook what we could call a literary journey by exploring and commenting on the Victorian writer's text instead of writing down her own impressions of Iceland. The result is a surprising volume, entitled *Questions of Travel: William Morris in Iceland*, which features abundant fragments from the first of the *Icelandic Journals*[3] on its odd pages, faced with Greenlaw's corresponding glosses on its even ones. In her "Note on the text", she explains the process that led to this configuration:

> As I read each passage, a phrase stood out around which a question of travel seemed to formulate itself. I have extracted these, breaking Morris into the relevant sections, and have tried to give that question some room. I am not attempting to answer them more than Morris has. My intention is to direct the reader towards what Morris didn't know he was writing about. (xxiii)

Accordingly, each of her texts bears a short extract of Morris's prose as its title, presenting it as the starting point of her own reflections.

Given Morris's escapist drive to take this trip, and the relative shortness of the journey,[4] I propose to consider both the journal and its commentary as illustrations of holiday poetics. As a matter of fact and based on the definition given above, I identify *in-betweenness* – the fact of being torn between two places, two modes of existence (the ordinary and the

2. The journal was destined to Georgiana Burne-Jones's eyes only, and Morris refused that it be published before his death (MacCarthy, 1995: 310; 2010).
3. William Morris went back to Iceland in 1873, but the journal documenting this second trip is much shorter and was not included in Greenlaw's work.
4. May Morris, in her introduction to her father's text, remarks that "[a] seasoned traveller would have smiled at the adventure of six days in a small steamer and six weeks' riding among friendly people" (W. Morris, 1911a: xv).

extra-ordinary), fullness and void – as the central seme of the concept of holidays when considered from a philosophical point of view. My point will be to show that in-betweenness is precisely at the heart of both texts: in how they deal with the question of home, homesickness and the unfamiliar; in the way they alternate between the sublime and the comedic, between the universal and the particular in their relation of the holiday experience; and finally in how the writing itself escapes the usual constraints of poetry or essayistic prose.

'Neither staying nor gone' (G 180): the holidaymaker lost in time and place

Going on holiday is experiencing a form of exile, albeit voluntary and temporary. This sense of displacement, of being out of place, is omnipresent in Morris's journal, and Greenlaw regularly brings it to the foreground, making it one of the central themes of the shared volume.

From tourist to skjald: making oneself at home

According to Zoë Kinsley, it is 19th-century travel writing which originated the distinction between travellers and tourists. As she remarks, "while the term 'traveller' offers a positive and independent model of selfhood, 'tourists are never ourselves, always other people' (Thubron, 2012: 58)" (Kinsley, 2015: 237). This is very true of how Morris seeks to perceive himself and construct his image. At the beginning of the journey, the poet and his party spend a day in Edinburgh on their way to Iceland, and he is haunted by the thought that he is nothing more than a tourist, a mere "sightseer" there: "[Faulkner] and I afterwards drove about a bit in an open chaise thing with the uncomfortable feeling that one doesn't know where to tell the driver to drive to, and that he and everybody are pointing the finger of scorn at us for being strangers and sightseers" (M 7[5]), he writes. Greenlaw, on the opposite page, gives a voice to the "finger of scorn":

> – *Strangers and sightseers*[6]
>
> You are out of your life, with time on your hands and no purpose.
>
> You do not belong here and it is not where you are going.

5. All quotations for which the author and date are unspecified are taken from Greenlaw, 2011. When not made explicit, "G" indicates that the quoted text is by Greenlaw, "M" that it is by Morris.
6. The phrases from Morris which Greenlaw uses as titles for her texts will be given in italics (they appear in red in the original text).

> You know there is a life going on here and that you will not enter into it.
> […]
> You know that they know you do not belong.
> […]You get a haircut and look even stranger. (6)

Even though Greenlaw seems to be merely paraphrasing and addressing Morris, the anaphora in "you" conveys a sense of his radical strangeness in that place, while the haircut – she suggests – makes him a stranger to himself. Once in Iceland, Morris continues to fight this representation of himself, hence his reluctance to camp at Geysir where everything seems to cry "You are not the first visitor and you are one of many" (G 80). When faced with the syllogistic argument that "'You must [camp there] […]. All Englishmen do'", he replies: "'Blast all Englishmen!' […] in the Icelandic tongue'" (83), thus doubly reasserting his distinction through his choice of words and language. He had come to Iceland after translating some of the sagas and learning Icelandic with his friend Eiríkr Magnússon, who was also part of the expedition; he therefore had a claim to being recognised for his genuine interest in his place of holiday – as he was, for he reports one of his hosts saying to Magnússon: "'The *skjald* is not quite used to riding then'" (67). The comment contains in a nutshell the essence of William Morris's situation in Iceland: both belonging to the place – he is called *skjald*, meaning "poet" in Icelandic[7] – and foreign to it, someone who doesn't ride in a place where horses are at the heart of everyday life.

Because he is in a place which is both known and unknown to him, he works along the pages of the journal to *domesticate the unfamiliar*. This dialectic between what is familiar and what isn't is brought forward early in the text, when Morris's boat goes through the Faroe Islands and he is moved "to see all the familiar flowers growing in a place so different from anything one had ever imagined" (M 19). Past the first shock of the encounter with otherness, as any holidaymaker, he strives to reconstruct a sense of home away from home. In spite of his first distaste for the popularity of the place, he and his companions camp at Geysir for a few days (waiting for a member of the party to join them), which allows him to write enthusiastically: "I was quite pleased with the homelike look of the camp when I came back to it after a walk and found everything in apple-pie order" (M 91). The choice of the phrase "apple-pie order", evoking a quintessentially British reality, seems a stretch to describe a rustic camp in the Icelandic wilderness, but it brings this very rusticity into the sphere

7. Actually, it is probably a faulty transcription of the old Icelandic *skáld* (*skjald* being its modern Danish equivalent), but I chose to retain Morris's spelling, like other commentators. James Morris explains the word as meaning "travelling poet" (1969, xviii), but dictionaries give no hint of itinerancy being attached to the conception of the word (Cleasby: 1957, 541). MacCarthy mentions that "an Icelandic newspaper had welcomed Morris as the English Skald" (1995, 298).

of what Morris considers familiar. In her gloss of the passage, Greenlaw reflects on the little things that participate in the "homelike feeling":

> If the party separates, everyone is out of place.
> And then everything is back in place: your pony, your friend, the fire, the moon, good spirits, the excursion.
> You make clothe pegs, play whist and boil your lamb in a geysir. You are in place. (90)

The epiphora in "out of place" and "in place" points to the fragility of such a state, while the two enumerations bring to light how menial are the details on which our sense of belonging can rely, suggesting that clothe pegs and a good pony can affect our perception of the moon running its due course. Imposing familiar images onto strange realities is again resorted to in a more striking manner further on the way. Before reaching Ingjaldshóll on the 14th of August, the travellers go through a sandy strip of land of the most surprising nature: "ugh! the smallest grain of these sands was as big as the bowl of a wine glass and the biggest was a huge boulder as big as a fourpost bed: as big as an armchair was a favourite size", Morris writes (135). Greenlaw – picking on the phrase "the lack of all things was plenteous" slightly above – constructs the comparisons as the unconscious expression of a lack of comfort, contrasting the images chosen by Morris with the description of the empty shelves in the nearest store:

> You cannot have
> Candles
> Gloves
> Knives (for I had lost three)
> Let alone
> Wine glasses
> Armchairs
> Four-poster beds (132)

However, we could also consider that, instead of insisting on the absence of the said items of domestic comfort (on their *vacation* so to speak), these images domesticate the alien landscape by bringing them closer to Morris's conception of home.

The trick seems to be working, as the end of the journal indicates a reversal of what the travelling poet used to hold familiar and unfamiliar. On the 26th of August, when they meet other Englishmen, he cannot help but remark "the parson looked a queer phenomenon out there" (173). The reversal appears as complete when he arrives in Edinburgh and, having to buy his ticket to London, he finds himself at a loss: "I stood before

the ticket door quite bewildered, and not knowing what to ask for. Lord, how strange it seemed at first!" (191). This remark, which mirrors that made on his first being in Edinburgh about not knowing where to ask to be driven, shows that the *skjald* has now become more accustomed to riding than to taking a train. It only confirms his impression on getting back to Reykjavík, where they have to settle their affairs before embarking for England – a day that he describes as "a day of nothings, inexpressibly dull after our old life" (181). Greenlaw points out the significance of the final phrase, unfolding it as follows: "The journey is already the old life" (180). The use of "already" draws attention to the fact that "the old life", the one that had become familiar, is already over, thus bringing to the fore the essentially temporary dimension of every holiday.

Writing in a void: a journal of absence

The thought of home is everywhere to be found in the pages of the journal, yet "home" there is as much a temporal as a spatial concept, being synonymous with the time of Morris's return. Dreams of home are recurrent throughout his absence, but he only details one,[8] on the 16th of August:

> I dreamed very distinctly this morning that I had come home again, and that Webb was asking me what sort of climate we had in Iceland; I cried out 'atrocious!' and waking therewith heard the rain pattering on the tent […]. Waking again later on and hearing the talk of Eyvindr with some of the countryfolk, I lay for some time puzzled to think where I was, and with an unhappy feeling of being a long way from where I wanted to be, and there and then began an access of homesickness for me. (137-139)

This passage is very telling of the fact that, like Comte-Sponville's alienated holidaymaker, Morris has to go to the end of his absence before he can hope to come home appeased and fulfilled – even in his dreams. Iceland is a necessary detour to Kelmscott. Greenlaw picks up on this dynamic in several places, first remarking "A dream of home helps you on rather than pulls you back" (104), but then insinuating that he might be afraid to go home when, on the 24th of August, they decide to delay the next step of the journey:

8. At least in Greenlaw's selection from the *Icelandic Journals*.

> Is talk of home a way to get yourself to go on?
> Or what slows you down?
> Going on will from now on be going back.
> You don't want to go back? (G 160)

Here, she seems to play the role of Morris's psychologist, asking the thorny questions in between silences (materialised by the blanks on the page) left for him to think. Of course, we can never know the Victorian writer's answers to these questions, but this ambivalence towards home is a feeling with which any holidaymaker can identify.

Writing seems to be Morris's best cure for homesickness – "the rest or something made me homesick again, and I turned over scraps of verse that came to nothing", he writes (149). If poetry is of no avail, and letters are reduced to the bare minimum by the absence of post along the way, the journal itself becomes his best link with those he left behind. Indeed, Morris's writing is caught in a sort of temporal paradox: it is at once retrospective, since each entry is necessarily written *after* the events it relates, and anticipative, for it is destined to those waiting for him at home. He is troubled by the sheer incommunicability of experience to the absent, for which the journal is only a meagre consolation: "I have often noticed in one's expeditions how hard it is to explain to one's friends afterwards why such and such a day was particularly delightful, or give them any impression of one's pleasure, and such a trouble besets me now about the past day" (19). The journal acts as a time capsule in which he keeps the remains of what he has lived to then share them with his loved ones. In that sense, it also assists him in the deliberate construction of memory. Greenlaw underlines how he selects which details to remember: "You know what will strengthen into memory: an eagle, a mountain, a ship" (118). It is noteworthy that she, in turn, operates her own selection within his text and thus informs the reader's memory of the book.

Morris's careful attention to remembrance is also explained by his awareness of living a unique and fleeting experience. The fragility of this time away from home is conveyed through such statements as "we are nearer to it than we have been yet or shall be again" (M 77), in which "yet" and "again" bear all the weight of unchangeable past and future. This sense of writing in a void, on an offbeat, ultimately matches his impression of existing in a place where time seems to have run differently than in England, a place where "it looked as if you might live a hundred years before you ever see ship sailing into the bay there; as if the old life of the Saga time had gone, and the modern life had never reached the place" (M 21). Greenlaw, both in her introduction and in her glosses, pays particular attention to Morris's relation to maps. Quoting one of his unpublished lectures, she wonders: "Why did William Morris want to go to the corner of

the map?" (vii); later, she proposes a more metaphorical definition of the object:

> As a place becomes somewhere you are starting to remember, it empties out and becomes more absolute.
> It becomes the map. (118)

The journal indeed maps out the experience of the holidaymaker: it becomes an abstract materialisation of the land of absence – a "Map of Vacation" in the same way as there is a "Carte de Tendre" – on which Greenlaw's texts point out the main landmarks.

Holiday writing: the sublime, the real, the imaginary, the unconscious

Half the pleasure of going on holiday is the telling of one's adventures – big and small, wonderful, and humorous – when one comes back. The tale of holidays could be an (informal) genre in itself, and its main particularity would probably lie in this very tension between the extraordinary and the prosaic, aimed at prompting envy, laughter and empathy in turn. This fragile equilibrium is seminal to Morris's writing in the journal and greatly contributes to its enjoyment by the reader.

"It looked really like an adventure" (M 63): encountering the sublime

The key word of Morris's experience of his holiday in Iceland is probably "adventure": "I felt happy and adventurous, as if all kinds of things were going to happen, and very glad to be going", he writes as they set off from Reykjavík (13). The word combines the ideas of novelty, excitement, and of risk and danger. To Morris, "physically ill-designed for the environment, and temperamentally, one feels, born to stay at home" (J. Morris, 1969: xvi), the journey certainly encompasses all that.[9] His tale is accordingly informed by his sense of living something extraordinary, and even slightly heroic. It is nowhere more apparent than in his relation of their going through the pass of Búlandshöfdi on the 14th of August.

9. It is noteworthy that, apart from the forewords and introductions to the various editions of the work, one of the most substantial pieces of criticism on the *Icelandic Journals* is to be found in Marjorie Burns's *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth*. As a matter of fact, she devotes a chapter to the influence of the journals over *The Hobbit*, noting how "certain of Bilbo's adventures not only come remarkably close to experiences Morris described during his first Icelandic visit but Bilbo himself, in a number of ways, closely resembles the *Journal* persona that Morris chose to assume" (2008: 75). It is an unexpected origin for one of the most popular epics of modern days.

What makes it "really like an adventure" (M 63) is first that its dangers are anticipated. On the 11th of August, a few days before reaching the pass, Morris writes:

> I must now tell to my shame, how I have had the pass of Búlandshöfdi on my mind for some days and how last night I questioned Thorlacius upon it and his description of it didn't comfort me. 'Tis a narrow road along the face of a steep slip above the sea two days' journey ahead now […]. (123)

By voicing his own apprehensions, Morris builds the reader's expectations, while the sense of the danger ahead is heightened by the choice of the adjectives. The near paronomasia in "narrow road" and "steep slip" phonetically reinforces the abruptness conveyed by the words. When he and his companions finally come into view of the dreaded place, the suspense is conveyed by a sudden switch to the present in the narration:

> Our path holds ever nearer to the edge of the sea-cliffs, and the other cliffs draw ever closer in on us till at last we are at the end of the soft green slope, and there is nothing for our road but to pass over a rugged, steep mass of broken cliff that goes down sharp to the sheer rocks above the sea; this is Búlandshöfdi, a headland that is thrust out by the tumbling mountains that fill all the inside of the peninsula; the steep slopes of this slip are all in grooves, as it were, in and out of which the path must wind, and above them rises a steep crest of this shape so common in Icelandic hills. (127)

The passage constitutes a real hypotyposis, as the landscape seems to become animated under our eyes. The comparative forms ("ever nearer", "ever closer") as well as the verbs of action used in the description of the relief ("thrust out", "tumbling", "rises") create an impression of dynamism, while the sentence itself inflates to the size of a rhetorical period which climaxes in the sententious "this is Búlandshöfdi". The adjectives and verbs chosen convey a general sense of violence, painting a very ominous picture of the way they must take.

In reality, the feeling of adventure that suffuses Morris's experience in Iceland is mainly due to the nature of the landscape in which he travels rather than to any actual danger. His situation then perfectly matches those conducive to the sublime as famously defined by Edmund Burke in 1759:

> The passions which belong to self-preservation, turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger,

> without being actually in such circumstances […]. Whatever excites this delight, I call *sublime*. (Burke, 1998: 47)

The Icelandic scenery seems indeed prone to inspire such ambivalent feelings, as exemplified by Morris's reaction to the view in Thórsmörk[10] on the 22nd of July:

> [...] I could see [the mountain's] whole dismal length now, crowned with overhanging glaciers from which the water dripped in numberless falls that seemed to go nowhere […] and the furious brimstone-laden Markarfljót […] lay between us and anything like smoothness: surely it was what I 'came out to see', yet for the moment I felt cowed, and as if I should never get back again: yet with that came a feeling of exaltation too, and I seemed to understand how people under all disadvantages should find their imagination kindle amid such scenes. (59-61)

This short description in itself contains several of the elements that Burke associates with the sublime: the "dismal length" of the mountain and "numberless falls" participate in the idea of infinity (Burke: 1998, 67-68), while the characterisation of the river (the Markarfljót) as "furious" presents it as powerful (59-65). Accordingly, Morris comments on the mixture of pain and pleasure, of anguish and exaltation that this view provokes in him.

This attention to the sublime is sometimes heightened by Greenlaw. During the crossing from Edinburgh to Reykjavík, Morris gives an impressive description of the ship caught between huge waves,[11] before deflecting it with the somewhat self-conscious conclusion: "it was all very exciting and strange to a cockney like me, and I really enjoyed it in spite of my sickness" (17-19). On the opposite page, Greenlaw's text bears no mark of such restrictions but on the contrary emphasises the sublime elements of the scene:

> The loss of ground beneath your feet. No landmarks or horizon.
> Sick and frightened but overtaken by wonder. This is not curiosity but a condition in which you do not know and forget yourself. (G 16)

Decided to "direct the reader towards what Morris didn't know he was writing about" (xxiii), she brings to the foreground the experience of infinity entailed by the act of sailing. The power of the sea becomes a

10. "Thorsmark" in the *Journals* (W. Morris: 1969, 53-55).
11. "There seemed to be a great glittering green and white wall on either side of us, and the ship staggering down the trough between them; […] then I went to the little platform astern and lay about there watching the waves coming up as if they were going to swallow us bodily and disappearing so easily under her […]" (M 17).

mirror for the strength of "wonder" as an emotion, while its depth points to that of the psyche.

(Heroi)comedy and pragmatism

Though Morris appears to romanticise his holidays by calling them an "adventure", this construction also allows for a lot of self-mockery on his part, much of the adventure being told in the heroicomical mode. This places the *Journals* in a phase of transition between Romantic and 20th-century travel writing aesthetics: while emphasis on the sublime was a prominent feature of 18th-century and much of 19th-century travel literature, it tends to fade away towards the end of the Victorian era to give way in the early 20th century to the figure of the "comic, self-deprecating, anti-heroic traveller" (Ouditt, 2019)[12]. Morris, without completely renouncing the sublime, seems to anticipate that second trend. This ambivalence is nowhere more apparent than in the way he justifies his reluctance to camp at Geysir:

> […] and – I must say it – the place seemed all too near to that possible column of scalding water I had heard so much of: understand I was quite ready to break my neck in my quality of pilgrim to the holy places of Iceland: to be drowned in Markarfljót, or squelched in climbing up Drangey seemed to come quite in the day's work; but to wake up boiled while one is acting the part of accomplice to Mangnall's Questions[13] was too disgusting. (81)

The comedy springs from the contrast between Morris's fantasies of dying a hero's death in the terrible Icelandic landscape and the ridicule of the danger that appears to threaten him in actuality – a ridicule which is heightened by the fact that the danger in questions seems to be mainly a figment of his faint-hearted imagination.

Here as elsewhere, he paints himself as an anti-hero, whose main traits are cowardice and indolence,[14] forgetfulness (he keeps losing things) and a hearty attention to meals. He is the party's cook, and so records "every significant meal along with every significant mountain", as pinpointed by Greenlaw in her introduction (xiii) – but the former tends to

12. It should be mentioned, however, that the example provided by Sharon Ouditt seems to be a depreciation the landscape rather than of the person of the traveller, something which is not to be found in Morris's account of his journey.
13. A famous 19th-century textbook.
14. At one point, he laments his "*lâchesse*" (103), a Middle French word for "indolence" which is etymologically connected to later French *lâcheté* or cowardice. The use of the word is interesting in that, being Middle French, it evokes a medieval setting reminiscent of chivalric romances while deflecting by its meaning the construction of Morris as a heroic figure.

draw him away from the latter, as evidenced by the entry of the 18th of August:

> I confess I was a coward enough to feel dashed by this, and as if I should never get away home again: please to allow something to a woeful grey day and this terrible though beautiful valley. However whatever forebodings and sentimental desires I may have, I have to indulge them over the kitchen fire and under its shiny black rafters, for the others are hungry, and Evan's ptarmigan are waiting a stroke of my art. (145)

Once again, he is brought back from the imagination of his tragic fate by very pragmatic, down-to-earth concerns. The rupture between the two facets of his character and experience are the source of irresistible amusement. In her biography of Morris, MacCarthy remarks "It is curious how often Morris thinks of himself in terms of a Burne-Jones cartoon" (1995: 293), but it can probably be explained by the fact that the journal was destined to Georgiana, his friend's wife, and self-mockery is always an efficient way of creating a sense of connection, empathy and belonging. By mocking himself, he recreates the familiar circle of intimacy[15] – and eventually draws the reader within it. Indeed, it implies distancing himself from himself, thus looking at his situation from the same standpoint as his reader. While he is aware that the humour of some of his anecdotes might not resist the telling – "it doesn't sound very funny to tell of but amused us very much at the time to the extent of setting us into inextinguishable laughter" (99), he writes about one of the boxes containing their belongings flying open on the back of a galloping horse – self-mockery allows him to commune with the reader in laughing at himself from a distance.

Humour is almost entirely absent from Greenlaw's comments, with one notable exception. When Morris and his companions go back on board the *Diana* on the 1st of September, they meet "a friend of Evans, who after having been three weeks in coming here from Glasgow and walking about Reykjavík in the wet for an hour or two yesterday afternoon, is going back this morning with us to England" (185). This is echoed by Greenlaw as follows: "The failed traveller: turning back already. // Or perhaps all he needed to do was deliver a letter" (184). This reads as a witticism destined to the discerning reader, hinting at Morris's remark that the boat stopped to deliver "*one* letter" (185, Morris's emphasis). It works as some sort of a private joke bringing Greenlaw, Morris and the reader together in a circle of connivance. Because it comes towards the end of the volume, it confirms the feeling of familiarity – with both authors, Iceland and the

15. Although MacCarthy shows how the constant teasing – especially on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's part – was sometimes akin to bullying, something in which Georgiana Burne-Jones would have no part (1995).

text – experienced by the reader. Yet, even though she does not generally use it as a comedic tool, Greenlaw does share Morris's attention to prosaic details, and to objects in particular: "blankets and water bottles" (2), "hats and ponies" (24), "locks" and "taps" (32), "slippers and a pannikin" (44), "socks", "guns" and "nets" (106), "boxes" (120) all participate in anchoring her condensation of Morris's holiday experience in a sensible reality. Objects vie with feelings in the construction of holiday memories, as suggested by one of her glosses in which "The group // The laughter // The frying pan" (140) are equated by the layout, with the last item being given more lasting significance by its being placed in ultimate position. Thus, both layers of the text mix observations of the aesthetic sublime and the prosaically material.

Inside the holidaymaker's psyche: the imaginary, the real and the unconscious

> […] every now and then, we would pass little valleys leading down to [the sea] that had a most wonderfully poetical character about them; not a bit like one's idea of Scotland, but rather like one's imagination of what the background to the border's ballads ought to be: to compensate, the weather was exceedingly like my idea of Scotland, a cold grey half-mist half cloud hanging over the earth. (M 5)

Imagination is the yardstick for every one of Morris's experiences in Iceland. It is the degree to which each landscape or happening matches his anticipation of it that determines whether it will be depicted in the epic or the comic mode. After the pass of Búlandshöfdi, another high point of the journey is Thingvellir, "the heart of Iceland" (M 163) and the place of the first democratic parliament (MacCarthy: 1995, 306). It is a place for which the English poet had great expectations, but most of his pleasure in seeing it comes from the confirmation of his insight: "Once again, that thin thread of insight and imagination, which comes so seldom to us, and is such a joy when it comes, did not fail me at the first sight of the greatest marvel and most storied place of Iceland" (167), he writes to conclude his first description of the site. Greenlaw's gloss details how sight and imagination intermingle in this instance:

> – *The reality of the sight*
> For once, you are heading towards things whose shapes you know.
> […]
> You also see what you know is there.
> […]

> That thin thread of insight and imagination. Not just seen in the mind but seen into. (164)

Imagination acts as a conscious remodelling of vision which increases the aesthetic pleasure of the sight by giving it a comfortingly familiar aspect.

However, Greenlaw is interested in more than what Morris consciously expresses of the workings of his psyche. Her aim is to unveil what the stories he tells reveal about his unconscious. For example, when the Victorian writer relates that he has undergone "a series of losses" (45) – losing first the strap holding his pannikin to his saddle, then the pannikin itself – Greenlaw comments: "You let go. // Discarding" (44), thus turning the losses into Freudian slips.[16] She actually uses the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, as when she discusses Morris's writing of first seeing Iceland: "The unanchored self is conscious of the hinge of simile: a distant connection, *as if*" (22, Greenlaw's emphasis). This psychoanalytical take on the journal allows her to identify universal psychological mechanisms under Morris's particular anecdotes. Indeed, her commentary gives a strikingly undetermined vision of the poet's experience:

> – *First sight*
> Somewhere constructing itself for you.
> Your idea of a place is built and half ruined as you enter it.
> The eye adjusting, filling form with colour.
> The moving picture of travel.
> The unanchored self is conscious of the hinge of simile: a distant connection, as if. (22)

The text starts with the undefined "Somewhere", but the idea of a specific context is sustained by the address to "you". However, the personal pronoun, as well as conjugated verbs, gradually disappear to be replaced by impersonal noun groups (the eye, the self) and the abstract present of -ing forms. The result is that, in this essentialised form, Morris's experience can match any traveller's. The address to "you", which is to be found in all of Greenlaw's glosses, is in itself ambiguous. It can be construed either as meaning Morris – Greenlaw's second-person pronoun being a direct answer to the Victorian poet's I in a dialogue across centuries – or as a general address, you being taken as a "non-referential you" which is "used to talk about people in general" (Stirling and Huddleston, 2002: 1467-68). What is certain is her will to translate Morris's particular adventures into something with which anyone can identify. This process can be seen at work from the very first of her glosses: "You make rapid new attachments:

16. This passage probably also attracted Greenlaw because it brought to her mind Elizabeth Bishop's "art of losing" presented in her famous "One Art" poem (Bishop, 1991: 178).

to each other, to blankets and water bottles, to whatever is going with you" (2). The blankets are a direct reference to Morris's entry on the opposite page, but the water bottles seem to come from her own experience – they are not mentioned in the journal and the term better applies to a modern reality than to a Victorian one – while "whatever is going with you" opens the door to the reader's own appropriation of the matter. This book about a poet's holidays thus becomes an essay on the psychology of all holidays.

A writer's holiday: language on vacation

Both the *Icelandic Journals* and *Questions of Travel* are exceptions in the works of their respective writers. Morris and Greenlaw have both written various kinds of texts: Morris had mainly published poetry at the time of his journey to Iceland, but he then went on to write essays and novels, among which the dystopian *News from Nowhere* (1890); as for Greenlaw, she has written poetry, novels and two collections of autobiographical essays, *The Importance of Music to Girls* (2007) and *Some Answers Without Questions* (2021), but *Questions of Travel* stands apart in her literary production, as underlined by the fact that it is the only one of her books to be published by Notting Hill Editions (which specialises in non-fiction) instead of Faber & Faber. The journal and its commentaries thus constitute spaces of freedom for their writers, away from the constraints of their usual modes of writing.

"The best prose Morris ever wrote" (MacCarthy: 1995, 281)

In her introduction, Greenlaw notes that "Morris's writing here is unlike anything else he produced" (xi). An effective way of putting this assertion to the test is to compare an extract from the journal to its equivalent in verse and in Morris's correspondence. The first sight of Iceland constitutes an interesting case study. To Janey, his wife, he writes in a letter of the 16th of July:

> […] on Thursday morning about three Magnússon called me up to see Iceland. I think I told you we were to go to Berufirth in the east first of all; and we were just at the entrance to it now; it is no use trying to describe it, but it was quite up to my utmost expectations as to strangeness: it is just like nothing else in the world; it was a wild morning too, very black out to sea, and very bright sun under a sort of black canopy over Iceland. (W. Morris, 1911a: xvii)

Here, he forsakes any attempt at description and only gives a very brief account of how the sight affected him. That the impression was strong, though, is demonstrated by the fact that he devoted a whole poem to it, entitled "Iceland First Seen", published in the collection *Poems on the Way* (1891). This long poem, made of six seven-line stanzas, consists mostly in an address to Iceland with references to Icelandic mythology. The first stanza, however, attempts the description from which Morris refrained in his letter:

> Lo from our loitering ship a new land at last to be seen;
> Toothed rocks down the side of the firth on the east guard a weary wide lea,
> And black slope the hillsides above, striped adown with their desolate green:
> And a peak rises up on the west from the meeting of cloud and of sea,
> Foursquare from base unto point like the building of Gods that have been,
> The last of that waste of the mountains all cloud-wreathed and snow-flecked and grey,
> And bright with the dawn that began just now at the ending of day.
> (W. Morris, 1911b: 125)

Most of the elements he mentions, and the images he uses (the pyramid, the wreath of clouds) can be traced back to the journal's entry for the 13th of July:

> So I have seen Iceland at last…[17] It was about three a.m. when I went up on deck for that great excitement, the first sight of new land. The morning was grey still, and cloudy out to sea, but though the sun had not yet shone over the mountains on the east into the firth at whose mouth we were, yet patches of it lay upon the peaks south-west of where we were […] and beyond that we saw the mainland, a terrible shore indeed: a great mass of dark grey mountains worked into pyramids and shelves, looking as if they had been built and half-ruined; they were striped with snow high up, and wreaths of cloud dragged across them here and there, and above them were two peaks and a jagged ridge of pure white snow… (23)

Comparing both texts fully demonstrates the validity of Greenlaw's observation that "[u]nlike Morris's poetry, the journal is not constrained by an idea of style" (xiv). His language avoids the circumvolutions that complicate his verse – a pyramidal form is called a pyramid, and not likened to "the buildings of the Gods that have been" – and gains fluidity

17. The ellipses indicate Greenlaw's cuts.

from this increased simplicity. Delivered from the constraint of the versified line, his sentence freely expands to gigantic dimensions, while double punctuation marks offer breathing spaces.

The freedom from the codes of poetry and the pressure of publication[18] also enables Morris to mix different styles of writing: he sometimes uses orality markers such as "I can tell you" or "as I live by bread" (95) and at other times poetically personifies the moon: "Then the moon rose big and red, the second time we had seen him so in Iceland […]: he scarcely cast a shadow yet though the nights were got much darker" (93). One same page can combine unpolished syntax and alliterative prose, as in the first entry of the journal:

> […] we droned away as usual in such cases, though I for my part was too excited to sleep, though we made ourselves comfortable with two of the huge blankets that were to be our bedding in camp.
> Day dawned, dull and undramatic as we left York, over the dullest country in England, striking neither for build of earth, nor for beauty of detail… (5)

The first sentence, with its repetition of "though" seems to have been written without a second thought, whereas the second one is chiselled by a strong alliteration in [d] – plays on sounds being indeed ubiquitous throughout the text. Hence Morris's writing itself appears to be on holidays, in an undefined space between the poetic and the epistolary genres where it can spread to its fullest.

"A longish essay about questions of travel"? (MacCarthy, 2010)

To my knowledge, Greenlaw hasn't made public the date of her own journey to Iceland, but one can infer it happened around the middle of the 2000s, based on the online publication of a poem entitled "A Broader Question" on the 31st of December 2008. Surprisingly, whereas poems about her trip to the Arctic Circle in Finland and Norway figure prominently in her 2003 collection *Minsk*, "A Broader Question" does not appear in her next collection, *The Casual Perfect*, published in 2011. It might be that by the time she organised the collection, the poem seemed to her only an imperfect expression of what she had felt in Iceland. It is however interesting to observe that her first production on the subject is

18. He insisted that the text should not be published in his lifetime (MacCarthy, 1995:310), but in her "Note on the Text", Greenlaw reminds us that he still revised his notes to make his fair copy for Georgiana Burne-Jones, "add[ing] introspection, cut[ting] gossip […] and eas[ing] up on the practical detail" (xxv).

already a composite, hybrid, undefined piece of writing. The poem is made of two stanzas: the first one comprises an extract from Louis MacNeice's "Eclogue from Iceland" (lines 73 to 78) from his and W. H. Auden's *Letters from Iceland* (1937), followed by a few lines of commentary; the second starts with biographical details about Morris,[19] segues into the main part of "Iceland First Seen"'s second stanza – duly referenced in the text, like the "Eclogue" – and concludes with "As the lights go out, perhaps we will see further into the dark" (Greenlaw, 2008). Hence her poem consists mostly in extracts from other poems to describe the views of Iceland – seemingly confirming James Morris's assertion that "the astonishing chill beauty of Iceland […] is in a way more a literary than a living beauty" (1969: xx) – interspersed with prose commentaries on her part. Her own words focus more on the inner experience than on exterior landmarks: "I heard no harmoniums, ate no pancakes and wore no beret, but the landscape and twenty-hour nights disarranged my vision and so my economy" (Greenlaw, 2008), she answers MacNeice. Already, her text is organised around the idea of the journey as a transformative experience, one that raises "broad questions". Although it is evident from the subsequent publication of *Questions of Travel* that she felt she needed more space than that of a single poem to explore these questions, that first attempt reveals two issues which are fundamental in the longer volume: that of the nature of the relation between her words and Morris's text; that of the definition of her writing in terms of genre.[20] In reality, both considerations are closely intertwined.

In her 2010 article, Fiona MacCarthy, with whom the female poet collaborated, declared that Greenlaw was working on "'a longish essay about questions of travel'". To anyone who has had the opportunity to open the book, the phrase is surprising: Greenlaw's text does *not* look like "a longish essay". On the page, her commentaries are strikingly short and fragmentary, and the layout makes them visually more akin to free verse than to essayistic prose. This doesn't apply to all of them, however. The first text in the volume is probably the longest, and its central paragraph is characterised by hypotaxis:

> As anticipation of the journey gives way to its actual start, you become fidgety. There is growing tension between the part of you that wants to be off, moving and gone, and the part that wants to stay at home, even in bed. You conjure the sudden event that would force

19. "William Morris made two crotchety, determined journeys around the country in the 1870s, which he documented in his remarkable Icelandic Journals. His biographer Fiona MacCarthy describes how he 'returned to England with an altered sense of scale'" (Greenlaw, 2008).
20. The reference to *Letters from Iceland* is a meaningful one in that respect, the book consisting in a combinatin of prose and poetry of various sorts and written, according to Auden in his 1965 "Foreword", "in a 'holiday' spirit" (Auden, MacNeice, 1985, 10).

> you to cancel – illness, accident, death – even as you fret about the taxi being late, the train delayed, that the boat will sail without you. (2)

This extract really works as a gloss, in as much as it paraphrases Morris's discourse while explaining and expanding it to evoke a more generic or contemporary situation. Such a piece of psychological analysis, developed over several long sentences, could indeed be termed essayistic. This is nonetheless not the model on which most of her texts in the volume are built. At the other end of the spectrum, the passage entitled "Poor spirits" (68) looks unmistakably like a poem with its four stanzas of two or three lines. Besides the "title" of each comment – the phrase she has decided to "extract" from Morris's prose to make it a "a question of travel" –, it is noteworthy that Greenlaw includes other quotations from the corresponding page(s) of the journal, which she reworks into her own writing. What is interesting is that there seems to be a correlation between the amount of quoted text she uses and the generic affiliation of her pieces: the less she quotes, the more essayistic the result; the more she appropriates from Morris, the more poetic her writing. In the paragraph from the first gloss cited above, she only borrows a few words ("fidgety", "accident", "at home") which can barely be held quotations. On the contrary, some of her shortest texts appear as poetical recompositions of Morris's words:

> *– The astounding nature of the road*
> When you consider what the road is made out of,
> it becomes impossible.
> The loose, jagged, rent, tumbling impassible.
> You pass.
> The faraway clear. (94)

Apart from "impassible" and "clear", all the adjectives used here come from Morris, where they are spread over a page and a half of description. Having thus extracted and accumulated them is a tribute to Morris's style in the *Journals*, which is characterised by a lavish use of adjectives. "Impassible", that Greenlaw adds to the list, cleverly creates a bridge between its paronomastic double "impossible" and the idea of passing over or across an obstacle. While Morris in the corresponding entry grumbles about the quality of the road and describes the landscape as far as meets the eye, Greenlaw offers a symbolic journey across the impossible in haiku-like form. Morris's words, extracted from their context, gain in weight and meaning by existing in the void of the page rather than lost in the fullness of the text. In that sense, she takes them *on vacation*, displacing them to make them exist differently.

Conclusion

Morris's *Icelandic Journals* and Greenlaw's take on them in *Questions of Travel* help us define a holiday poetics based on in-betweenness and freedom from the codes that rule the major literary genres of poetry and essay. Yet what would distinguish holiday writing from travel writing? Firstly, it should be said that both are intimately connected: holiday writing (at least in the sense in which it has been studied in this article) would constitute a subgenre of travel writing. Indeed, the displacement from home and the consciousness of its brevity that we have deemed characteristic of holiday literature are also central to travel writing, of which Simon Cooke writes that it is "a genre which, almost by definition, documents experience away from the trappings of one's 'normal' life" (2015: 19). I would however argue that neither Morris's journal nor Greenlaw's commentaries fully fit in with travel literature as a whole. It is perhaps obvious of Greenlaw's glosses, but less so when it comes to Morris's text.

As a matter of fact, the choice of the journal as a form is in keeping with the codes of travel writing, in which the epistolary and journal modes have had an enduring success from the late 17th century onward (Kinsley, 2019: 408). The use Morris makes of the form, though, differs from the main trends of the genre, which fall under two categories. Kinsley reminds us that until the end of the 18th century, "[p]lain and direct writing was preferred, and discussion of self was to be avoided wherever possible, in favour of objective delineation" (2019: 415). After what is generally called the "inward turn" of the late 18th century, travel journals on the contrary tend to focus more on introspection, in texts where "the autobiographical experience of the journey itself is inextricable from the view it affords over the life as a whole" (Cooke, 2019: 20). Neither modality seems to apply to the *Icelandic Journals*, for factual objectivity clearly isn't Morris's object, but neither is transformative meditation on life as a whole – which is why Greenlaw had the opportunity to reveal the psychological depth that was hidden in between his lines. Morris uses the journal form to record his impressions of the Icelandic landscape (in the purest travel writing tradition) but also to tell all the minute, insignificant and amusing happenings of his journey. This lightness of tone is precisely what makes his journal a piece of holiday writing rather than travel writing.

As for Greenlaw's interpolations, it would be difficult to call them travel literature, in as much as they give no account of her own journey to Iceland, no information about how she travelled, the experience she had, or the land she crossed. In that respect, her work would indeed more rightly be called an essay: using Morris's particular journey as a starting point, she offers a meditation on what it means to travel. Nevertheless, it *is*

holiday writing not in the sense of writing about a holiday, but of writing itself being *on* holiday. Her writing in *Questions of Travel* shows unusual freedom, ranging from reflection on Morris's prose to paraphrase to mere quotation, from psychological analysis to poetic attention to words and details. It is playful in the way it recomposes text and meaning, sometimes lazy in its commentary. As such, it offers a different take on holiday poetics, defining it not thematically, but metapoetically.

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