

## ICELANDIC SUBLIME'S CONNOTATIONS\*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the notion of Icelandic sublime with reference to a number of subjects identifiable or comparable with it including its relation to Romanticism, Cartesian physical-mental schism which tends to be conciliated in Icelandic case, Freudian *pleasure principle* which asserts itself in the elimination of evocatively nature-culture dichotomy, and the 19th century versatile intellectual William Morris for whom Iceland stood as the most exquisite available embodiment of his socialist-medievalist Arcadia. In this respect, the paper displays an interdisciplinary outlook as it draws on various fields inclusive of history, philosophy, folklore, language-literature, and last but not least psychoanalysis.

**Keywords:** Iceland, Sublime, William Morris

## İZLANDA GÖRKEMLİLİĞİNİN ÇAĞRIŞIMLARI

## ÖZET

Bu makale, İzlanda'ya özgü görkemlilik kavramını onunla özdeşleştirilebilecek veya karşılaştırılabilecek farklı açılardan ele almaktadır. Bu bağlamda, İzlanda görkemliliğinin Romantizm'le ilişkisi, Kartezyen bir çatışma olarak da tanımlayabileceğimiz fiziksel-zihinsel ayrımı ve bununla ilgili olan doğa-kültür karşıtlığı konusunda nasıl uzlaştırıcı bir rol oynadığı üzerinde durulmaktadır. Ayrıca, 19.yüzyılın çok yönlü aydınlarından olan sosyalist William Morris'in Sosyalizm ile Orta Çağ'ın özelliklerini harmanladığı ütopyası açısından İzlanda'nın eşsiz önemine dem vurulmaktadır. Bu anlamda makale; tarih, felsefe, halkbilim, dil-edebiyat ve psikanaliz gibi farklı alanlara değinerek disiplinlerarası bir özellik göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İzlanda, Görkemlilik, William Morris

In the 19th century Iceland turned out to be an attractive destination for British traveller for a variety of motives including yet not strictly restricted to entertainment, scientific research, historical interest, husbandry, search for refreshment, and sheer enthusiasm: "By the 1870s people visited Iceland for many reasons – sport fishing, commercial fishing, geology, buying Icelandic horses . . . buying Icelandic sheep, investigating the possibility of producing and exporting sulphur for gunpowder – and some went simply because by the 1870s Iceland became . . . what the lower slopes of the Himalayan mountains have become a century later for the mobile-phonied merchant banker" (Chew&Stead 266). Aho also maintains that an

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upsurge of interest in Iceland among wealthy British travellers was evident in the 19th century as he adduces the main motive for this rise as eagerness to witness natural curiosities of the island: “By 1871 Iceland was finding its way onto the itinerary of many well-travelled and well-off British tourists, most of them drawn to this ultimate isle for its strange of geology, the hope of seeing an active volcano, the certainties of seeing glaciers and the grand and frightening display Geysir regularly spewed and steamed up into the cold and clear air” (Aho 125). No matter for what particular motive(s) Victorian tourist has undertaken the voyage to the “land of fire and ice”, sense of uniqueness as plainly substantiated in travelogues infiltrates all three domains of Icelandic sublime – i.e. physical, cultural, and exotic: “There was no possibility of slipping into the hapless ways of the vulgar tourist; in every respect – climate, landscape, weather, and language – Iceland offered ‘otherness’, ‘marginality’, and ‘resistance to closure’ in abundance” (Wawn 286). Iceland’s fulfilled promise for uniqueness fundamentally consists in its being an open-air venue where nature and culture – which have been increasingly since Age of Industrialism onwards configured to lie in dire strait with each other – are inextricably blended and compliment each other – let alone hamper one another’s existence. Culture has not threatened nature with violation of its order and in return for this nature has awarded culture with durable ‘*material*’ for its due record. Iceland, where antiquity is boldly betrayed through natural objects and residues as indelibly imprinted on landscape rather than human constructions as is the case for most other countries, has endowed travellers with the opportunity of a journey into the core of *mater*: “Iceland . . . offered the ultimate voyage into matter, in all stages of its dynamic history. To assemble mineral samples was to collect natural hieroglyphs, comparable (in some impressionable eyes) with those of runic writing” (Wawn 287).

In his detailed anthropological scrutiny of Iceland with respect to its history, psychological geography, and culture; Hastrup considers travel literature an incarnation of intertextuality proceeding from or at the very least influenced by interpersonal contact between tourists and natives. Accordingly, he maintains that travel writing, as is the case for other countries, has assumed an unmistakably contributory and formative role in the elaboration of Icelandic ‘otherness’: “Travel accounts and literature have portrayed others in ways that have subsequently filtered back into local self-perceptions. In other words, . . . intertextuality plays a major role in shaping local images, even if their substance is drawn from the place itself. . . . In Iceland, this is no less true than elsewhere . . . The gaze of the other premissed the casting of the Icelandic self, and representation became the vehicle of reflexivity as a matter of course” (Hastrup 193). However, the process of otherization can hardly be reduced to a one-sided flow of positioning; on the contrary, as Hastrup states, this is a reciprocal practice.

Namely, as a tourist locates an Icelander as an ‘other’ or ‘outsider’, she/he inadvertently thrusts oneself into a status of otherness, too: “Identity and otherness are mutually implicated . . . In Iceland, ‘travellers’ . . . in the very process of othering . . . become spectator to its own self-objectification. In the world of the Icelanders the feature of self-objectification seems remarkably powerful: the representation of self in a language and a literature which is claimed to transcend history and to be almost naturally grown makes the dramatization of the Icelanders tenaciously exclusive” (197).

Unlike the conventional adverse connotation ascribed to it particularly in sociological context, otherness in Icelandic case is apt to exhibit an affirmative prospect confirming Icelandic identity's uniqueness as well as liminality straddling the cultural sphere of intellectual refinement and the natural realm of untrammelled landscape: “In the world of the Icelanders, othering is a continual force of alienation which . . . implies a stress upon Icelandic singularity, as rooted in tradition, landscape, and a sense of communality from which others are excluded. In all of these domains, othering maintains a distinct feeling of a self and as such it permeates the contexture of the Icelandic world” (Hastrup 199-200). And this sense of affirmative unbelongingness covers both time and space: “Ultimately, Icelandicness seems . . . with respect to time . . . a suspension between pastness and presentness, or between antiquity and modernity. In terms of space, the Icelanders live in a liminal area between culture and wilderness, a tertiary zone embracing them both” (200). Oral literary tradition and landscape-consciousness deserve being underlined as the major constitutive elements on which traditional Icelandicness rests. In his introduction to *Njal's Saga* Cook remarks that Icelandic sagas assume a prominent role in demonstrating and upholding the inseparable fusion of national historical consciousness with topography which is barely to be seen that distinctly anywhere else: “With such abundant, palpable evidence to hand it is not surprising that generations of Icelanders regarded the sagas as literally true. Is there any literature as firmly anchored to geographical reality, not to mention socio-historic reality, as the Icelandic sagas?” (Cook xxxiii). This well-established relationship between story-telling and scenery is definitely interdependent as they are inextricably interwoven across time and space by medium of original Norse tongue: “. . . being told and retold, the simultaneity of the Icelandic world becomes transformed into a homogeneous sensation of an all-embracing ‘time’, which, like myth, fuses the story time and the lived time. In the time of telling, Icelandicness is recreated. . . . The poetics of language is matched by a poetics of space, a notion of the landscape connecting people to each other and to the past. If storytelling is vital to Icelandicness, memorizing the landscape is no less so” (Hastrup 204). Hastrup further emphasizes the unifying influence of oral literary tradition as he defines it as a bridge straddling good old days and

modernity, physical surroundings and cultural sophistication, and fictional narration and history-recording: “The times of telling in Iceland suspend the world between past and present, between nature and society, and between story and history” (205).

Immaculate fusion of nature and culture at historical, literary, and socio-psychological levels, as discussed in the paragraph above, constitutes the backbone of Icelandic sublimity and embellishes the island with a rare charm hardly to be met anywhere else in the civilized world for Victorian tourist. Then, what do nature and culture correspond to in the field of ontology? Without hesitation, body and mind respectively. And thus, what does Icelandic sublime fundamentally abnegate? Cartesian body-mind split which presupposes an existence for soul independent of substance: “From that I knew that I was a substance whose essence or nature solely consists in the act of thinking and who, probably, neither has need for space nor depends on anything material. Therefore I, namely the soul owing to which I am who I am, am completely distinct from body. And thus, soul is easier to know than body. Moreover, body does not exist at all and soul cannot help being what it is” (Descartes 67) (My Translation)\*. What Iceland literally and metaphorically epitomizes is a decisive disavowal of this presumable separation between body and mind – i.e. nature and culture respectively – and a redolent reaffirmation of their inseparableness. Actually, in Icelandic case, body and mind “are twined together by common roots and evidently cannot be disentangled without being destroyed” (Lucretius 76). They draw their vitality from a common ‘well’ and need to cooperate unless they intend to wane out into torpor and triviality: “. . . divorced from the body, the substance of the mind cannot by itself produce vital motions; and the body, once abandoned by the spirit, cannot live on and experience sensation” (Lucretius 82).

### **Icelandic Sublime and Romanticism**

In his essay “On Cannibals” Montaigne vigorously vindicates South American natives against the label ‘barbarous’ imputed to them widely by his contemporary European colonizers and mainly argues that – with the reserve of conceding to the undeniable brutality featuring some of their practices like torturous execution they inflict false soothsayers with – the cruelty of European colonizers’ severe treatment of these American natives exceeding to bloody massacres and even their fellow Europeans when they are in inimical terms with each other surpasses the savagery of American natives and deserves to incur harsher censure. Montaigne’s pro-primitivist stance characterizing his essay and leading him to take sides with American natives against European colonizers as the more excusable party in the practice of brutality is amazingly predicated on the ontological grounds of human being’s relation with nature. Montaigne’s conviction consists in that

European colonizers's conceit about their superiority over American natives, which they essentially rest on cultivation and cultural progress, makes their crimes more appalling and indictable since such a frame of mind presumably betrays their premeditated presumption insinuatingly issuing from joy of victory over and consequently abnegation of nature as an irritating obstacle that needs to be overcome. Namely, to Montaigne, the trait that distinguishes between the essence of violence exerted by European colonizers and American natives and makes the European's violation palpably more 'corrupt' and blameworthy is the former's degenerated view of and attitude towards nature as depicted in its arrogant justification of persecution it imposes. To put in a nutshell, what Montaigne, the precursory Romanticist, stigmatizes is human being's renunciation of and consequently corruption of nature as a pretension to self-assertion: "It is not sensible that artifice should be revered more than Nature, our great and powerful Mother. We have so overloaded the richness and beauty of her products by our own ingenuity that we have smothered her entirely. Yet wherever her pure light does shine, she wondrously shames our vain and frivolous enterprises" (Montaigne 232). What Montaigne laments in this quotation can be paraphrased as human being's alienation from Mother Nature and thereby his call for return to her can be regarded as an expression of pantheistic conviction. In Thoreau's case, a devoted Romantic, presumably pantheistic appreciation of nature seems to be transformed into a wider prospect as he endorses that not only nature in its secluded pastoral state but also universe – even along with its modern ephemeral appearances indicating estrangement from nature – in general be contemplated: "In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us" (Thoreau 63).

Montaigne's appreciation of nature as "our great and powerful Mother" in the paragraph above can be regarded as a motto neatly encapsulating wonted Romanticist stance involving glorification of nature. Nonetheless, the manner in which Romanticists idealize nature is hardly unanimous since there can be identified two major attitudes which bifurcate in their appraisal of nature as gorgeous and fruitful or grotesque and frightful. As is to be demonstrated detailedly in the next chapter, accounts of 19th century travellers abound in portrayals and impressions about Icelandic landscape where these both aspects of Romanticism towards nature manifest themselves. Indeed, several depictions of Icelandic landscape host a blend of these two apparently conflicting contemplations on nature where it is hard to decide whether the narrator stands akin to "Tintern Abbey" or "Kubla Khan/Ozymandias" tradition. Regardless of which tradition the narrator

sympathizes with, what is certain is that Iceland offers a myriad of natural objects, instances, and phenomena which attest to both pastoral repose in Wordsworthian sense and Gothic agitation in Coleridgean sense. In either case, namely in both glory and devastation, Icelandic landscape serves to the rise of what Schopenhauer calls delight derived from nature by human being who is able to take a ‘cool’ glance at nature and delves into rumination as will-less subject of knowing. In this respect, objects or phenomena of natural grandeur which Iceland abounds with liberate human being “from the thralldom of the will” and elevate her/him “into the state of pure knowledge”. “This is why the man tormented by passions, want, or care is so suddenly revived, cheered, and comforted by a single, free glance into nature” (Schopenhauer Essential 137). Then, as can be inferred from Schopenhauer’s pro-Kantian appraisal of natural grandeur’s key-role in the emergence of sublimity, instance of sublime experience can be interpreted as a temporary state signifying the elimination of duality between human being and her/his will rather than an absolute vanishment of will. Actually, what occurs to human being at a sublime encounter is an exhaustive integration of the will and understanding through which will, i.e. *Ding-an-sich*, reveals itself most transparently without need to consort to instrumental devices anymore. However, as explained above, in order to attain this supreme state of immediate revelation, the crucial function assumed by works of nature that leads to the unfolding of will as *Ding-an-sich* is evident. Indeed, these works of nature bear transcendental significance, as Schopenhauer implies, so long as they are conducive to the disclosure of will as *Ding-an-sich*: “As long as they concern will, only *inner* processes have contact with reality and are genuine occurrences since solely will is the thing-in-itself. . . . Plurality is a phenomenon and outer processes are merely configurations pertaining to the world of phenomena and therefore bear no claim to either reality or meaning; but rather they depend on their relation with individual wills to affirm their existence” (Schopenhauer Denken 14) (My Translation)\*\*.

Nevertheless, Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s expositions regarding the transcendental aspect of sublimity do not square with each other completely since whereas the former foregrounds understanding and thus implies soul as the genuine agent of sublimity, the latter’s favour falls on the will which he considers eternal and indissoluble: “To me, what is eternal and incorruptible in human being and therefore what constitutes her/his vital principle is will . . . rather than soul. The so-called soul is a composite formation: It is a combination of will and understanding. Understanding is a secondary quality . . . whereas will is a primary one standing as the prior principle of an organism and organism commands by dint of will” (Schopenhauer Denken 33) (My Translation)\*\*\*. The distinction observed between understanding and will by Schopenhauer here reverberates Berkeley’s definition of understanding and will according to which the former denotes the faculty of conceptualization while the latter is the practical agent realizing what is

conceived: “A Spirit is one simple, undivided, active being – as it perceives ideas it is called the *Understanding*, and as it *produces* or otherwise *operates* about them it is called the *Will*. . . . Such is the nature of Spirit, or that which acts, that it cannot be of itself perceived, but only by the effects which it produceth” (Berkeley 77). However, it is plain that irreligious Schopenhauer stands in stark controversy with devout Christian Berkeley in the roles they assign to the relation between spirit and will since the former argues that will presides over soul whereas the latter maintains that understanding and will are respectively theoretical and practical agents at the service of spirit. For Berkeley, spirit is not simply the governing essence of human being. Indeed, in its capitalized form and as also referred to with the epithets of “Author of Nature” and “Active Principle”, it denotes “that supreme and wise Spirit ‘in whom we live, move, and have our being’ ” (Berkeley 98).

‘Cool’ glance, mentioned in the paragraph above and given as a requisite for derivation of delight in contemplation on nature, permeates both physical and cultural aspects of Icelandic sublime since, as Wong duly observes, both the cool and the sublime bear a number of noteworthy common attributes involving arcticness, outstanding endowment(s), and a tranquil settled state succeeding the initial outburst of confoundment: “First, both ideas express a sensation of a chill. . . . Second, cool and sublime are both used to describe things of extraordinary quality. . . . Third, both terms can describe a serene, connected state of being. . . . Similarly, to Romantic artists such as Emerson, Wordsworth, and Thoreau, the sublime was the realm of experience of intimate connection with the natural world” (Wong 69). Attributes enumerated by Wong here as associable with the cool and the sublime can convincingly be identified in Icelandic case: Primarily, sense of chill that seizes tourists pertains to the notion of shudder both as a physical response of body to the freezing temperature and as a mental expression of thrill tourists undergo when they face natural wonders landscape and climate host in full majesty. Secondly, ‘frozenness’ in Icelandic case designates not only a physical and tangible state where *material* elements like lava are stored unadulterated but also Norse language and folklore which are preserved in their ‘purest’ form. Lastly, sense of amazement and awe which grip tourists in nature instancing glory and devastation respectively and which eventually resolve into a composed contemplative state of adjustment are not only indications of the sublime but also expressions of shiver which runs through one’s body in her/his initial exposition to coolness until she/he adapts oneself to it. In all three common attributes of the cool and the sublime the governing principle characterizing them indicates the acquisition of unprecedented awareness about *the nature of things*: “To experience insight is exhilarating as we feel that we are seeing something truer and more significant than before. Our ordinary experience sublimates into something

extraordinary. Whether this experience is a brief glimpse, dawning awareness, or sudden awareness, it is sublime and cool” (Wong 74).

Finally, solitude is a significant characteristic of the sublime with respect to its relation to Romanticism. In her early 19th century novel *Zofloya* interspersed with natural Gothic motifs, Burke’s contemporary Charlotte Dacre draws a remarkable analogy between solitude and mental refinement as she exalts solitude as a highly favourable state for an ingenious mind: “. . . ennui began to take possession of her ill-organized and resourceless mind; for it is the pure, intellectual soul alone, that can receive delight from solitude” (Dacre 116). As suggested in Dacre’s criticism of her anti-protagonist Victoria’s ignorance, solitude’s role in the rise of sublime contemplation concentrates on its encouragement of genius and imagination. Quite remarkably, Schopenhauer makes an argument almost identical to that of Dacre confirming the correlation between mental capability and derivation of delight from solitude as he maintains that dearth of intellect constitutes an impediment to enjoy solitude: “Most men . . . entirely lack objectivity, i.e., genius. Therefore they do not like to be alone with nature; they need company, or at any rate a book . . .” (Schopenhauer Essential 138). In this respect, state of solitude in its tangible spatial sense can be likened to a macrocosmic representation of ideas conceived by human mind in its abstract microcosmic domain. In his introduction to Ann Radcliffe’s classic romance *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Terry Castle underlines Romantics’s eulogy of ‘thought’ as the most competent “supernatural entity”, *Ding-an-sich*, and *raison d’être* granting human beings exceptional relief from their physical inadequacies: “For Radcliffe, as for her contemporaries Wordsworth and Blake, the new mysteries are those of the imagination. ‘Thought’ itself is that sublime power, which like a ‘Great First Cause’ allows us to ascend to ‘those unnumbered worlds . . . almost beyond the flight of human fancy’ ” (Castle xxii). In Icelandic case, solitude signifies not only unadulterated nature bolstering imagination thanks to the very limited human interference but also a language and folklore which distinguish themselves palpably from their closest Continental Nordic relatives and remain loyal to primeval Norseness in its purest available practice: “The conservatism of the Icelanders is perhaps best represented by their language, which to this day remains far closer than the languages of continental Scandinavia to the Old Norse of the Viking Age” (Sawyer 58). Taken either literally within its physical context denoting distantal detachedness as well as absence of human infringement on nature or metaphorically within its cultural context signifying folkloric and linguistic uniqueness, *solitude* is a convenient term portraying Icelandic sublime which provokes and promotes cogitation.

### **Icelandic Sublime and Sensual vs Intellectual Conflict**

Another topic of debate which the reflection on the relationship between Romanticism and depiction of Iceland's physical sublime engenders is the discussion about whether primary sensual impressions or intellectual processing of these 'raw' data are more influential in the emergence of sublime notion. As regards this discussion, in his monumental study of human thought *New Science* Vico shows sympathy for the Aristotelian principle granting sequential priority to sense over intellect in the acquisition of ideas about things. He asserts that without senses's picking up images from objects surrounding them as well as phenomena attending them yet in crude form, it is beyond intellect's capability to reflect on them and then process them into well-established units of knowledge: "[T]he human mind can only understand a thing after the senses have furnished an impression of it, which is what today's metaphysicians call an occasion. For the mind uses the intellect whenever it 'gathers' something insensible from a sense impression" (Vico 136). It is plausible to suggest that Vico's assessment of the hierarchical scale of wisdom stands in conformity with that sketched by Plato in *Republic*. Nevertheless, it is barely possible to make mention of Vico's categorization being concerned with demoting primary sensory impressions to an inferior status which is an inclination arguably visible in Plato. On the contrary, Vico's scale tends to interpret and locate the relation between sense and intellect in horizontal rather than vertical order. Thereby, in Vico's observation, sensory impressions assume a sequential priority which enables them to be favoured with the appellation 'primary' rather than be discredited with the label 'primitive'. This sequential order between sense and intellect stretches out into Vico's identification of them with poetry and philosophy respectively. Vico, who regards poetry as the initial and sole immaculate exposition of human being's notion of sublimity, associates poetry with the sensory and philosophy with the intellectual: "We may say, then, that the poets were the *sense* of mankind, and the philosophers its *intellect*" (136). Vico's reflection on the relationship between sense of sublime and primitiveness locates them in a proportionally affirmative connection as he firmly establishes that the sublime has found its incomparably unadulterated and vibrant articulation in poetry of early human beings whose keen preoccupation with sensuality, exacerbated by their lack of drawing abstractions due to retardedness in scientifically acquired knowledge, has led them to develop an advanced sense of wonder in response to natural objects and phenomena. In this respect, for Vico, poetry issuing from this ancient over-sensitivity to senses as peculiarly epitomized by Homer, towers as the most vigorous expression of the sublime: "In their robust ignorance, the earliest people could create only by using their imagination, which was grossly physical. Yet this very physicality made their creation wonderfully sublime, and this sublimity was so great and

powerful that it excited their imaginations to ecstasy. By virtue of this imaginative creation, they were called poets, which in Greek means creators” (145). In a later comment Vico indubitably confirms his approval of poetry as the supreme state of sublime statement thanks to its being destitute of obstructions posed by ratiocination – namely, a favourable destitution which breeds bewilderment and allows full vent to emotional inundation: “[P]oetry was born sublime precisely because it lacked rationality. This is why no later discipline – philosophy, poetics, or criticism – ever equalled or surpassed the sublimity of poetry” (149). Relevantly, almost two milleniums before Vico, in his dialogue *Ion* Plato fervently dismisses rationality as a hindrance impeding the composition of sublime poetry. Arguably set against a background of the dichotomy between numinous nature and cultivated culture, Plato dubs the former as the genuine spring of lofty literary creation while he discredits the latter by condemning it – let alone as ineffective – as an obstacle for the emergence of artistic grandeur. The essence of Plato’s elaboration on the origin of sublime artistic creation is predicated on his conviction that divine possession – in which an artist is apparently reduced to an instrument of deity – rather than individual craft – which is imbued with a secular aspect emphasizing human will and endeavour – generates grandiosity in art: “[A] poet is a light and winged and sacred thing, and is unable to compose until he is inspired and out of his mind and his reason is no longer in him. So long as he has his reason, no man can compose or prophesy. Since, then, it’s not skill, but divine dispensation that enables them to compose poetry” (Plato 5-6). Considered in terms of nature-culture dichotomy, Plato’s championing of divine ordinance against secular endeavour is amazingly thought-provoking in terms of demonstrating the dramatic distinction between Classical attitude and Enlightenment’s attitude as regards their appraisal of artistic grandeur’s origin since in case of the latter not only human subject but also that presumable divinity – whom Plato ascribes the ability of somewhat deifying a poet by infiltrating into her/his ‘nature’ – is somewhat secularized and relocated to a status of supreme craftsmanship. To synopsise Enlightenment’s relation with divinity briefly, Enlightenment’s overall attitude towards the idea of deity tends to be irreligious – if not antireligious – rather than atheistic – let alone be antitheistic. To expound in plainer terms; average Enlightenment appraisal does not deny or at least is not concerned with the (non)existence of a god. What it stigmatizes consists in the oppressive authority religion exerts on individual’s intellect by curbing her/his liberty of inquiring into the nature of things. To make a little exaggerative claim, average Enlightenment intellectual seems to be interested in disentangling god from inveterate religious context it is stuffed within and arguably set it in a relatively secular framework where it is cured of its austere punitive image and restored as a somewhat nonchalant artist content with its work and reluctant to interfere with the ‘daily’ hubbub

veining its work: “Central to the Enlightenment agenda was the assault on religious superstition and its replacement by a rational religion in which God became no more than the supreme intelligence or craftsman who had set the machine that was the world to run according to its own natural and scientifically predictable laws” (Kramnick xii).

To return to the discussion of sensual/irrational versus intellectual/rational conflict, Plato is not alone among the ancients in his endorsement of irrational ingenuity as (if) engendered by divine possession as an imperative endowment for the composition of penetrating poetry marked by a streak of sublime influence it imparts to the audience. In his monumental work *Poetics* Aristotle champions innate knack for artistic creation along with an apparently conscious state of delirium as requisites either of which must be fulfilled for the composition of poetry. As is the case for Plato, Aristotle does not even mention, if not wholly discredit, the cultivation of skill as a favourable byway which it would be commendable to resort to unless a would-be-poet either had inborn gift at her/his disposal or were gripped by a fit of frenzy: “[P]oetry is the product either of a man of great natural ability or of a madman; the one is highly responsive, the other beside himself” (Aristotle 79). Though not as emphatically advanced as is the case for Plato or Aristotle, it is still available to trace out an argument affirming the indispensability of irrationality for the emergence of lofty composition that would engulf and transport the audience in Horace's *Ars Poetica*, too: “It is not enough that poems should have beauty; if they are to carry the audience with them, they should have charm as well” (Horace 101). In this quotation, the distinction Horace makes between beauty and charm can convincingly be projected onto the one made between beauty and sublime by Burke in the sense that, just like literary/poetic grandeur rather than literary/poetic beauty, natural grandeur rather than natural beauty triggers ‘transport’ on the part of a spectator. Namely, the word “charm” given in the quotation amounts to the notion of “enchantment” one is seized by in the face of sublime spectacles encountered in nature.

The discussion given above regarding sensual (irrational) / intellectual (rational) dichotomy within the framework of poetic creation is highly relevant to Iceland’s grandeur since the sensual and the intellectual can be argued to correspond to physical and cultural aspects of Icelandic sublime respectively. Actually, what imbues Iceland with the sense of uniqueness consists in the striking coalescence of uncultivated nature and cultivated mind at neither’s expense.

### **Icelandic Sublime and *The Pleasure Principle***

A frequent motif that appears in travelogues regarding the depiction of Icelandic sublime – particularly with respect to its physical aspect – is one that can be termed as *Arcadian* and/or *Pre-Adamite*, the observation of

which denotes or at the very least implies a location in concrete terms or a semblance in abstract terms featured by primeval intactness. This location or semblance shaped by works of nature – usually due to the interaction of conflicting primary elements water and fire – recurrent in travelogues connotes a state of uchronic stability which has remained unimpaired since (before) the emergence of organic life on Earth. The sense of perplexing delight that is described in travellers’ descriptions of such places and the strange aura they impart can be traced back to the idea of pristine and imperishable existence permeating them. The inorganic ‘coolness’ of these places infuses the notion of permanence which coincides with Freudian assertion of constancy as the source of pleasure: “The pleasure principle follows from the principle of constancy” (Freud 6). The inorganic stable state characterizing most of Icelandic landscape evokes grandeur thanks to the austere glory of its call presumably demanding that human being be restored to that primordial inorganic existence from which she/he has originated and has gradually been alienated from. Freud defines this basic regressive impetus thus: “*It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces*” (43). Freud details that there is no need to search the motive for this regressive instinct in human being anywhere else beyond the very state of coming into organic existence: “The attributes of life were at some time evoked in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception. . . . In this way the first instinct came into being: the instinct to return to the inanimate state” (46). This presumable will for the reinstatement of the inorganic state from which a human being has been detached due to her/his transubstantiation into organic form can be speculated to be the subconscious rationale in which Iceland’s physical sublime consists. Henceforth, one can further surmise that Icelandic landscape’s bewildering charm which is ‘consciously’ felt and noted by travellers ‘basically’ rests on a subconscious instinct: “[T]he ego-instincts arise from the coming to life of inanimate matter and seek to restore the inanimate state” (52). Icelandic sublime, not only physically but also culturally, lies at the delicate intersection where primeval inorganic state and primordial inanimate *material* converge and infuse into one another in a way as to stagger the organic being – i. e. human – into a cognizance of her/his origin in a Kantian manner.

### **Icelandic Sublime and William Morris**

In *The Painter of Modern Life* Baudelaire phrases the supposed characteristic of modern art as to “distil the eternal from the transitory” as far as possible: “Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable” (Baudelaire 17). Baudelaire’s definition of modern art, as indicated in this statement, squares

with his description of beauty according to which it is featured by both constancy and temporality: “Beauty is made up, on the one hand, of an element that is eternal and invariable . . . and, on the other, of a relative circumstantial element, which, we may like to call, successively or at one and the same time, contemporaneity” (Baudelaire 4). Although Baudelaire does not employ the term *sublime* explicitly, it would be plausible to argue that the permanent and pristine core of art which remains unimpressible by the interference the passage of time poses corresponds to the sublime element embedded in it. This is the very element which William Morris considered to be impaired and subjugated by the Utilitarian rationale of Industrial Age and therefore yearned to resuscitate. Morris’s attention across the wide range of arts and artisanships – including architecture, design, printing, translation, fiction, and poetry – he assiduously ‘laboured’ in throughout his life was concentrated on this revitalization process. Morris contemplated the only truly efficient antidotal cure, which could bear a claim to counterbalance – if not totally cancel out – Utilitarian engrossment demoting individual to a mere unfeeling cog in a wheel, as a recourse to the spirit of Medieval Gothic art which he eulogized as a due combination of practicality and aesthetics: “[U]ntil the rise of modern society, no Civilization, no Barbarism has been without it [Harmonious Architectural unit] in some form; but it reached its fullest development in the Middle Ages, an epoch really more remote from our modern habits of life and thought than the older civilizations were” (Morris Useful 32). As given in this quotation, quest for harmony between nature and individual – i.e. culture – has been a lifelong eager occupation for Morris. Therefore, his admiration for the decent agrarian Medieval life revolving around the principle of labour rather than that of toil of the 19th century can be regarded as a declaration of longing for restoration of that primeval Arcadian hilarity radiating from unity with nature and alluding to a spiritualized mutation of libido: “For the most part the praises of a frugal life and of hard work in the fields are not based on the delights of simplicity and labour in themselves, nor on the security and independence they seemed to confer; the positive content of the ideal is the longing for natural love. The pastoral is the idyllic form assumed by erotic thought” (Huizinga 134). As properly justified with reference to Huizinga’s argument, Morris’s endeavour to revive the artistic *Zeitgeist* of Medieval Age, when the distinction between art and artisanship was barely noticeable, was “a craving to reform life itself. It does not stop at describing the life of shepherds with its innocent and natural pleasures. People want to imitate it, if not in real life, at least in the illusion of a graceful game” (Huizinga 134).

John Ruskin, whose ideas exerted a profound influence on Morris, definitely contributed to Morris’s elaboration on the restoration of concordance between human beings and nature from which she/he has been

wrenched away with the rise of commercialism. Amazingly, what human being's detachment from nature connotes for Ruskin and Morris can be formulated as the dissociation of matter from intellect – i.e. Cartesian body-mind split – as succinctly expressed by Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*: “Now it is only by labor that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labor can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity” (Norton 1351). As Kumar observes in his “Introduction” to *News from Nowhere*, Morris's endeavour to eliminate the separation of mind and body, or in other words intellect and instinct, bears the imprint of his theory about beauty according to which genuine beauty that would infuse both the artist/artisan and public with delight is solely accessible by the due amalgamation of practicality and aesthetics as mentioned in the paragraph above (xxi). Moreover, Morris does not discriminate between rural and urban by favouring one over the other as the more convenient realm for application of beauty since he considers that anywhere that human presence transpires – i.e. whether in the jungle of nature or in the jangle of cities – deserves being glamorized: “Everyday activities and objects must for Morris be suffused with beauty or else lose their distinctively human quality. Beauty is not just an ornament, the sugaring of the pill of an otherwise mundane existence. It is not something apart from life; its expression, art, *is* life, is human existence” (Kumar xxi).

What Iceland and – in a wider sense – Norse culture tangibly epitomize for Morris can be asserted to be that anti-Cartesian unity of utility and beauty achieved under rather adverse socio-economic as well as climatic conditions. This unity, in which the coherence and collaboration of human (as the agent of culture) and landscape (as the personification of nature) is embedded, constitutes the core of Icelandic sublime for Morris. In this respect, the following comment Cole makes in his preface to Morris's *Selected Writings* regarding the motive attracting Morris to Iceland is relevant: “When he went to Iceland, nothing struck home to him so much as the contrast between the small lives men lived now amid those cold, bleak hills, scratching a bare living from an unfriendly soil, and the greatness of the past. . . . His Utopia was to be a place of smooth and easy living; but those old heroes had lived greatly under conditions whose very hardness and roughness had been the stuff of which greatness is made” (Cole xv). As also implied by Cole in this quotation, the very contradiction of decency characterizing rural 19th century Icelanders and the glory of good old days still alive in the nation's well-preserved literary heritage also inscribed in landscape objects squares with the idea of Medievalism Morris has cherished all his life. In the adventurous spirit of Icelanders, like Medieval Normans, “danger was the incentive, novelty the recompense, and the prospect of the world was decorated by wonder, credulity, and ambitious hope” (Gibbon 1023). Morris's thirst for such a vigorous will to assert one's identity and

attachment to life as he considered to be embodied by Icelanders as the most 'intact' inheritors of Medieval Norse spirit towers as a definite impetus for his worship of Iceland. He adored the Iceland of the 19th century as vehemently as the Iceland of Medieval Age, "his interest keenly aroused by a place which the current of commercial life swept by leaving it unchanged, whose arts and small industries grew simply and naturally out of the needs and fancies of the people" (Morris v.VIII xxi). And needless to mention, he was grossly irritated by capitalist vision of Victorian England which had been shrinking and shrivelling human being to a mere cog sapped of her/his life-zest in the chain of mass production barring and marring any prospect of individual edification: "What shall I say concerning its [capitalism's] mastery of and its [capitalism's] waste of mechanical power, its commonwealth so poor, its enemies of the commonwealth so rich, its stupendous organization – for the misery of life!" (Norton 1524). What Morris metaphorically hankered after was the Well of Mimir lying under the ash tree which symbolized for him the genuine source of knowledge: "Under the root that goes to the frost giants is the Well of Mimir. Wisdom and intelligence are hidden there, and Mimir is the name of the well's owner" (Sturluson 24). Norse wisdom which finds its figurative representation in the Well of Mimir is 'literally' evidenced in Eddas – i.e. that collection of poems and prose texts which communicate Norse mythology, philosophy, and *Weltanschauung*: "Along with their truly awe-inspiring heroism, these men of the North had delightful common sense. The combination seems impossible, but the poems are here to prove it" (Hamilton 465). The Norse spirit which incorporates apparently contradicting characteristics of intrepidity and prudence, as also noted by Cole previously, thoroughly appealed to Morris's libertarian frame of mind.

Besides Eddas, and indeed even more than Eddas, Icelandic Sagas – which Morris counts among staples of literary "furniture" peculiar to Gothic Architecture (Morris Useful 46) – stood as a splendid source of stimulation for Morris. His indulgence in the translation of Icelandic Sagas is an infallible manifestation of his attachment to Iceland's culturally sublime image enshrined in his mind: "It may be fair to conclude that . . . for Morris translation was more a private philological reverie" (Chew & Stead 262). Despite instances of abject suffering narrated in them, Sagas still virilely echoed back the Medieval dream Morris was cherishing due to the libertarian spirit inherent in them which also stood for Norwegian settlement of Iceland as well as birth of Icelandic Commonwealth in the 9th century: "I think he found in the sagas . . . compensation for his mind, the vision of another part of life he was conscious of leaving out in his earlier tales and romances. There was realism here, an imaginative realism of high living under hard conditions that formed no part of the Utopia of which he dreamed, and yet had in it a fineness and heroism that compelled his

imagination” (Cole xiv-xv). Just like Vestmannaeyjar archipelago resembling “the broken-down walls of castles in the sea” (Morris v.VIII 21), Sagas were robust pillars of wisdom still upholding those “castles” of Medieval Age in the 19th century and thus accentuating Iceland’s cultural distinctiveness as well as grandeur. As is the case for metaphorical role ascribed to Vestmannaeyjar, ragged Icelandic landscape, rather than monuments of human construction neatly yet artificially arrayed in the Crystal Palace of Victorians, functioned as a vivid natural inventory exhibiting nation’s literature. This live open-air-museum outlook redounded palpably to the accentuation of Iceland’s physical and cultural sublime as it enabled the integration of nature with culture. There is no doubt that this union proved to be a major impetus for Morris’s adoration of Iceland who visited the land “to make pilgrimage to the homes of Gunnar and Njal, to muse on the Hill of Laws, to thread his way round the historic steads on the Western firths, to penetrate the desert heaths where their outlaws had lived” (Morris v.VIII xx).

To wrap up, “Iceland, which is a marvellous, beautiful and solemn place, and where I had been in fact very happy” (Morris v.VIII 185) succinctly communicates the overall meaning of sublime Iceland for Morris. As disclosed in his translation and interpretation of *Gunnar’s Howe* where wombic imagery significantly prevails, Morris’s romantic devotion to Iceland is evident. He contemplated Iceland “as mother, sister and lover ‘all in one’, to ‘wrap me in the grief of long ago’ ” (Chew & Stead 265). And Iceland seems to have fulfilled her pledge to Morris as *mater* ‘all in one’.<sup>1</sup>

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## <sup>1</sup> NOTES

\* “ . . . je connus de là que j’étais une substance dont toute l’essence ou la nature n’est que de penser, et qui, pour être, n’a besoin d’aucun lieu, ni ne dépend d’aucune chose matérielle. En sorte que ce moi, c’est-à-dire l’âme par laquelle je suis ce que je suis, est entièrement distincte du corps; et même qu’elle est plus aisée à connaître que lui, et qu’encore qu’il ne fût point, elle ne laisserait pas d’être tout ce qu’elle est.” (Descartes 67).

\*\* “Nur die *innern* Vorgänge, sofern sie den *Willen* betreffen, haben wahre Realität und sind wirkliche Begebenheiten; weil der Wille allein das Ding an sich ist. . . . Die Vielheit ist Erscheinung, und die äußern Vorgänge sind bloße Konfigurationen der Erscheinungswelt, haben daher unmittelbar weder Realität noch Bedeutung, sondern erst mittelbar durch ihre Beziehung auf den Willen der einzelnen.” (Schopenhauer Denken 14).

\*\*\* “Bei mir ist das Ewige und Unzerstörbare im Menschen, welches daher auch das Lebensprinzip in ihm ausmacht, nicht die Seele, sondern . . . der Wille. Die sogenannte Seele ist schon zusammengesetzt: Sie ist die Verbindung des Willens mit dem Intellekt. Dieser Intellekt ist das Sekundäre . . . Der Wille hingegen ist

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primär, ist das Prius des Organismus und dieser durch ihn bedingt." (Schopenhauer Denken 33).

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