When an interviewer from *Bookselling* suggested to William Morris that if an edition of Dickens's works was to be published on handmade paper, it might look 'incongruous', Morris, with typical forthrightness, replied, 'I fail to see the incongruity. That arises simply from preconceived notions of the right thing, established by a vicious custom. My purpose is, if possible, to change the viciousness of the custom.' Indeed, not only Morris's Kelmscott publications, but all of his prolific work in design, literature, and politics represents his lifelong attempt to bring people to a consciousness of the ugliness and degradation of nineteenth century culture. In order to develop such an awareness, Morris focused on a twofold, dialectical strategy: he designed patterns, books, and narratives representative of each tradition as it existed before the onset of corruption while, at the same time, he demonstrated that although historical inevitability had determined contemporary conditions, these conditions were not immutable. That is, with a change of perception, the 'viciousness' of existing culture could begin to be ameliorated. As Morris realized, however, the desire for beauty requires a paradigm, and poverty or lack of access denied the working public any conception of the decorative or narrative arts as Morris saw them. But if workers were made aware of the distinction between shoddy and authentic handicrafts, Morris believed that they would direct their skills towards the production of 'a more life-giving art and a truer spirit of craftsmanship'. Likewise, in his 1893 essay, 'Printing', Morris concludes that if bookmakers desired to produce beautiful books, they would choose to do so: 'a work of utility might be also a work of art, if we cared to make it so'.

In his first lecture, 'The Lesser Arts' (1877), Morris discussed two subjects essential for the craftsman: history and drawing. In his own life, history became the search for the authentic origins or 'roots' of art, and drawing translated into his fascination with the line, whether a line in a pattern, a 'well-drawn line' in a woodcut, a line of set type pieces (each letter designed and drawn by him), or a line of print on a page. Morris believed that 'history has become a book from which the pictures have been torn'; his remedy was to recover (in both senses of the word) that book's material structure, illustrations, and narrative - forms which he hoped would foster the desire for the rebirth of art. Whether in the visual lines of book ornament, textiles, stained glass, wallpaper, and carpets, or the verbal lines of poetry, fiction, and essays, Morris traced the history of each craft until he reached the chronological point where its organic, Gothic quality began to show...
The ‘Sympathetic Translation’ of Patterns: William Morris as Singer, Scribe, and Printer

Isolde Karen Herbert

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corruption. Extensive research into materials and techniques allowed him to resume, wherever possible, each art at this point.

Like Ruskin, Morris referred frequently to the architectural quality of books and, conversely, to the ‘legibility’ of Gothic architecture; moreover, Morris insisted that common to all authentic decorative art was its ability to awaken the observer’s reader’s memories of history or nature. This narrative capability of design culminates in the Kelmscott Press where Morris’s research into the traditions of materials, techniques, ornament, and print reveals most concisely his aim to design his own ‘link in the great chain of the evolution of society’. In ontogenetic terms, *The Earthly Paradise* is a ‘link’ connecting Morris’s personal history: from 1865 when he and Burne-Jones planned an illustrated collection of tales (a plan which was never completed), to the separate publication of *Jason* and the rewriting of the prologue in 1867, through the publication of *The Earthly Paradise* in 1868 and 1870, until the Kelmscott eight volume edition in 1896 and 1897 (the final five volumes appeared after Morris’s death), the work linked his enterprises. One such enterprise was his study of Icelandic with Eiríkr Magnússon (starting in 1868), his trips to Iceland in 1871 and 1873 in a search for the geographic and cultural roots of Icelandic literature, and his saga translations. As one link in the cycle of tales in *The Earthly Paradise*, ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ connects Morris’s fascination with the sagas to his view of design and history as these applied to his work at the Kelmscott Press: both the form of the book as an ornamental object and the continuation of the tale’s transmission through time revivify endangered traditions. Morris’s use of this approach of the ‘progressive return’ reflects both the Yggdrasil myth of the development of all history from common roots integrating the past and present into future growth, and, as Morris discovered when he read *Das Kapital* in 1883, the Marxist spiral of historical movement which incorporates past and present in a series of cyclical returns, each progressing to a higher level.

At the Kelmscott Press, Morris investigated and, where feasible, adopted traditional bookmaking techniques: he experimented with different blends of handmade paper, searched for suitable mixtures for ink, designed various sizes and forms of type, tried (without much success) to cut woodblocks himself, and selected workers who took pride in their craft. His quest, as William S. Peterson emphasises, was not for the revival of archaic materials and techniques, but for the materials and techniques which were the most suited to his purpose of producing beautiful books. In order to reach to the roots of these printing skills, Morris learned the stages associated with each procedure, as he had done with indigo discharge dyeing at Merton Abbey. Never content with theoretical learning, Morris used a ‘hands on’ approach to teach himself the textures and resistances of materials which, as he explained in his lectures, are crucial aspects of a handicraftsman’s skill. Similarly, as Magnússon remembers, when Morris began his study of Icelandic, he expressed impatience when Magnússon suggested that they begin by learning some grammar: ‘“No, I can’t be bothered with grammar; have no time for it. You be my grammar as we translate. I want the literature, I must have the story.” ’

For Morris, the tale is paramount and theory has relevant value only when it contributes directly to the task at hand – the reason for his rejection (and criticism) of the Chair of Poetry at Oxford in 1877. Magnússon also recollects that Morris displayed an intuitive understanding of Icelandic grammar; whether working with
pattern designs, type founts, paper qualities, or ornament, Morris had an aptitude for mastering the techniques which would give him the freedom to practice the art in question.

Morris's persistent need for narrative – in 1889 he wrote to Jane, 'I must have a story to write now as long as I live' – extended, as Magnússon observed, to an immediate affinity for the Norse sagas. The retelling, or, rather, the continuation of a saga, especially when this is combined with translation, creates a recurring pattern designed over time and amplified by each contributor. Because the sagas were originally oral narratives, the succession of their written transcriptions creates additional links in the chain of transmission. Of interest here is the conjunction of the period of Morris's most prolific work in calligraphy and manuscript decoration with his saga translations (1868–75); hence, he retraced the line of literary history from oral to scribal to printed versions of the sagas. As part of two concurrent narrative patterns (the saga tradition and *The Earthly Paradise*), 'The Lovers of Gudrun' is a poetic version of an oral tale told by a teller who refers to a written source. The tale-teller is in a fictive storytelling cycle of twenty-four tales (two for each month of the year) linked by the audience's responses to each tale, by the narrators' reflections upon the audience, and by the monthly lyrics. The 'Prologue' guides the reader into the work and into Rolf's story of the quest which has led the Wanderers to the storytelling situation; the 'Epilogue' takes leave of the tellers. The poet's opening lyric and l'envoi provide the final link of the chain or garland (*Rose-Garland* is the name of Rolf's ship) of tales. The subject of the tales is self-reflexive: storytelling, whether written or oral.

By its form and content, *The Earthly Paradise* foregrounds visual and verbal designs. The pattern of the return to the scene of the communal storytelling between each tale retains the reader's memory of the work's frame in much the same manner as an observer's eyes move from details in a picture to the frame, from designs on a carpet to the border, or from words on a page to the margin. In an extension of Morris's architectural analogy between a building, a room, and a book, a page is comparable to a decorated wall or to a carpet because each of these is a part of an organic whole; moreover, each encloses a pattern within a frame. From this perspective, lines of print, each divided into words composed of letters, form a recurring pattern on a flat surface, as do the designs imprinted on wallpaper or woven into a carpet. Morris's ability to see letters as patterns temporarily separated from their linguistic function (his ornamental 'bloomers' are tokens of this ability to isolate shape and line from semiotics) enabled him to design pages with the harmonious interaction of type, picture, and ornament described in his lectures on decorative art and printing.

Like visual designs, the verbal/aural designs of oral poetry rely upon patterns which meet the audience's expectations of recurrence. One such pattern is the singer's acknowledgement of his role: Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg point out that as 'the instrument through which the tradition takes on a tangible shape as a performance, the teller considers himself as the narrator rather than as the author of his tale'. Because the singer interacts both with the audience and with previous versions of the story, his recitation refashions narrative, cultural, and political history. Historical facts may be coloured with recurrent patterns of motifs, kennings, and formulas, but if the facts are distorted, the audience corrects the
teller; hence, Morris's adaptation of tradition in the decorative arts, in narrative, and particularly in *The Earthly Paradise*, reflects the qualities of oral poetry. In his lecture, 'The Woodcuts of Gothic Books', Morris connects these communal roots of tradition, design, and oral narrative: in his discussion of the presence of the 'epical and ornamental' qualities of all organic art, he suggests that in the Middle Ages, tradition 'supplied deficiencies of individual by collective imagination (compare the constantly recurring phrased and lines in genuine epical or ballad poetry).'

As the tales are passed from singer to singer through time, they are repeated, but vary according to the individual techniques of each *skald*; similarly, Morris varies his repeating patterns by using different colourways and by adapting each pattern according to its space and medium - textiles, wallpaper, carpets, embroidery to name a few. Also, the sagas and Morris's handicrafts share a similar historical and domestic purpose by creating an artistic record of tradition while, at the same time, they provide domestic entertainment or ornament. Pertinently, Morris describes visual and narrative art in very similar terms: whereas a recurring pattern should tell a story and have a 'definite form bounded by firm outline', the sagas developed organically during oral transmission until they 'took a definite shape in men's minds'. Because, as Magnússon remembers, Morris allowed 'The Lovers of Gudrun' to acquire a 'clearly definite shape in his mind' before he began to write, Morris continued the traditional method of the *skald*. Morris's emendations contribute a narrative pattern to the structure of the written saga which, as Morris explained to William Bell Scott, lacked artistic unity because of its generic quality of a chronicle. Sections of the sagas appeared 'bald' or incomplete to Morris; accordingly, he revised the saga, as he would a visual pattern, by adding harmonious details which converted the tale into an 'architectural' or organic narrative. The saga's original defects, suggested Morris, 'joined with the magnificent story made it the better subject for a poem as one could fairly say that that story had never been properly told'.

Morris's translation (actually a twofold translation from Icelandic into English and from prose into poetry) of the Gudrun sections of the *Laxdale Saga* retains the objectivity of the original *scap*, but interpolates descriptions of events, characters, and locations which enhance the design of fateful actions, intense emotion, and tragic outcomes. These techniques concur with the historical role of the singer: as Albert B. Lord explains, the singer is 'at once the tradition and the individual creator' who continues the chain of civilisation's stories through time. Morris's most powerful innovation is the development of Gudrun, Bodli, and Kiartan from rather flat and lifeless characters who respond placidly to their fate, into people whose passions prevent them from responding differently than they do; Gudrun responds as she does despite being forewarned by dream prophecy about her inevitable role in the tale of the people. The narrator foregrounds the relevance of the tale in the opening line of 'The Lovers of Gudrun': 'Herdholt my tale names from the stead'. Repeatedly throughout his performance, the narrator cites the tale as the source of his authority (for example, 'my story saith', 'the tale saith' [316, 393]) thereby acknowledging that he is its current singer or artist, but not its author. Like Morris, he consults a written version of the tale; thus, as the latest in the succession of singers, Morris retains historical accuracy because the
sagas began to be transcribed following the arrival of Christianity in Iceland, the era of ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’. Each of the main characters continues this focus on the tale by referring to their lives as episodes, whether honourable or dishonourable, which will appear in future versions of the tale. For instance, Kiartan’s father predicts that ‘then shall come/A dreadful tale on this once happy home’ (333) if Kiartan pursues his plans for vengeance.

As in Sigurd the Volsung, a design of threshold motifs marks moments of change which acquire meaning only when they are viewed from the saga’s retrospective point of view. As well as representing a material, architectural framing object, the threshold motif frames the tale as a whole. In the opening stanzas, Gudrun stands at the ‘threshold stone’ (254) as she waits for Guest who, subsequently, interprets her four dreams; in the concluding stanzas, Kiartan’s body is carried out of Bathstead across ‘the threshold of the door, That once had been the gate of Paradise/Unto his longing heart’ (390). Outside this framing design, the narrator concludes with a reference to the tale as ‘history’ and with a final ‘picture’ of an aged Gudrun (391, 393). Thus, Morris’s use of a recurring pattern of verbal design, together with his revision of the saga heritage, restores the pictures to his book of history.

In the outer frame of The Earthly Paradise, Rolf’s ‘Prologue’ explains how history and art create desire – in this case, the desire for eternal life. Here, Morris represents his conviction that together, history and art are able to generate the desire for change. The immediate, empirical, and historical reason for the quest is the arrival of the plague in Norway; the aesthetic reason is the narrative art of the heroic and mythical tales told to Rolf when he was a child and, currently, by Nicholas and Lawrence. However, because Rolf misinterprets fiction as fact or literal truth, his search for paradise is also Morris’s cautionary tale: as Rolf becomes aware, the Wanderers’ function in future stories will be that of misguided protagonists who sought perfection beyond, rather than within, society. The Elder expresses this relation between the Wanderers and the tale when he refers to them as a ‘living chronicle’ which will contribute pleasure, instruction, and an historical record to his society’s communal storytelling.22

The cycle of narratives in The Earthly Paradise, together with the pattern of monthly lyrics and the singer’s acknowledgement of the inevitability of change (hope and fear, loss and gain, youth and age, triumph and defeat) in the outermost framing sections, fulfils a purpose similar to that of the pattern of threshold motifs in ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’. These motifs identify a moment of irrevocable personal and historical change which, at the time, appears to be without purpose because the pattern of the larger scheme is not yet apparent. An organic design, with its ‘satisfying mystery’ and ‘rational growth’, orders these parts into a coherent whole.23 Without the pattern in its entirety, isolated parts appear to be random or lacking in significance. Much the same is true about the letters of the alphabet: individually, they convey little meaning, but when they are arranged in a pattern of words which conforms to a community’s semantic rules, their message appears. Morris’s refashioning of traditional lines in designs, type, and narrative reflects his desire to invest the past and present with visual and verbal coherence in order to ready them for future audiences: ‘no age can see itself: we must stand some way off before the confused picture with its rugged surface can resolve itself into its
due order, and seem to be something with a definite purpose carried through all its details'. Hence, he reorganised the discrepancies and omissions in his source for ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ into a narrative line which includes meaningful and pleasing pattern of detail. As he writes in an 1876 letter to an unidentified correspondent, ‘I entreat you ... to think that life is not empty nor made for nothing, and that the parts of it fit one into another in some way’.25

Art makes life comprehensible by showing how events ‘fit’ into an overall scheme. The ontogenetic tales of each individual life contribute to the phylogenetic design in the history of civilisation. The communal ‘ownership’ of decorative art and oral narrative makes them valid historical records. Within this larger context, each of Morris’s patterns functions, as Norman Kelvin argues, as a moment ‘framed by what went before and what will follow’.26 In ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’, Morris retains the traditional reticence and objectivity of the skald, but emphasises the moments of human passion which, in retrospect, give history its momentum. For example, in the original prose saga, Gudrun’s response to Bodli’s killing of Kiartan is (unrealistically) matter of fact: ‘I have spun yarn for twelve ells of homespun, and you have killed Kiartan’;27 in Morris’s version, Gudrun’s gesture and enigmatic silence eloquently express her moment of climactic agony:

She reached a hand
Out toward the place where trembling he (Bodli) did stand,
But touched him not, and never did he know
If she had mind some pity then to show
Unto him . . . (383)

This decisive moment, with the pictorial quality of a Pre-Raphaelite painting, has a sequel in the tale’s last line which Morris retained from his source: again reaching out, a now blind Gudrun replies to her son, a second Bodli and a symbol of the future, ‘“I did the worst to him I loved the most” ’ (395). Silent in the first moment and sightless in the second, Gudrun nevertheless epitomizes Morris’s verbal and visual designs wherein the configuration of lines in a story or ornament transfers meaning from the past through the present to the future.

In his ‘Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press’, Morris explains: ‘it was the essence of my undertaking to produce books which it would be a pleasure to look upon as pieces of printing and arrangement of type’; in ‘Some Hints on Pattern-Designing’, he explains how decorative art should ‘tell a story in a new way, even if it not be a new story’.28 These two excerpts demonstrate Morris’s conception of the interchangeability between the designs located within the visual and verbal popular arts – popular in Morris’s sense of the word, meaning art which is of and for all the people. Whether visualising individual type pieces as designs, patterns as stories, sagas as patterned moments, or manuscript pages as ornament, Morris’s perception is aesthetically and politically dialectical. A stained glass window designed by Morris for the Firm, a block printed wallpaper sample issued at Merton Abbey, and an ornamented page pulled at the Kelmscott Press testify to Morris’s unique ability to see design and narrative together, yet apart – in the context of perceptual psychology, the ability to combine the sense of order and the sense of meaning (the rabbit/duck duality).29
Symbolically, May Morris’s publication (1915) of Morris’s handwritten and orally delivered lectures carries the historical movement of the oral, scribal, and print traditions into the next century. The reproduction of designs by computer graphics is a development that Morris, no doubt, would accede to, provided that the technician/artist had studied the traditions behind the lines he/she manipulates.

For Morris, tradition and art were the only antidotes to the ‘viciousness’ of his era; in order to perpetuate the chain of cultural traditions, he attempted to remedy fraudulence and ‘sham’ by replacing these with art as it would/should be if it had been allowed to grow organically from its roots in nature and in the popular consciousness. To conclude with a visual metaphor, Morris’s artistic, social, and political objective involves a method akin to that of the indigo discharge process: the erasure of any unwanted background followed by the application of the lines and colours of a repeating pattern with narrative potential.

NOTES
2 At times, Morris’s conviction that art could effect any immediate change wavered and he emphasised that contemporary art must die before any genuine art could redevelop; however, his unceasing artistic output reflects his enduring determination to present authentic art to the public.
3 For instance, Morris’s Socialist society would ‘have a public library at each street corner, where everybody might see and read all the best books’. The Ideal Book, op. cit., p. 92.
4 ibid., p. 108.
5 ibid., p. 66.
10 Eiríkr Magnússon, Preface to William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon (eds. and


22 ibid., III, p. 80.


28 The Ideal Book, op. cit., p. 75. 'Some Hints on Pattern-Designing', op. cit., p. 182.


30 The psychological effects of 'computer assisted learning' on children who learn
to recognise or to form alphabet letters by pushing keys rather than by shaping
or ‘drawing’ letters manually is an area which will require more extensive
research in the future. Cognition, as well as the perceptual ability to create visual
art, may irrevocably change if the keyboard replaces the pencil as a tool for
composition in primary school classrooms.