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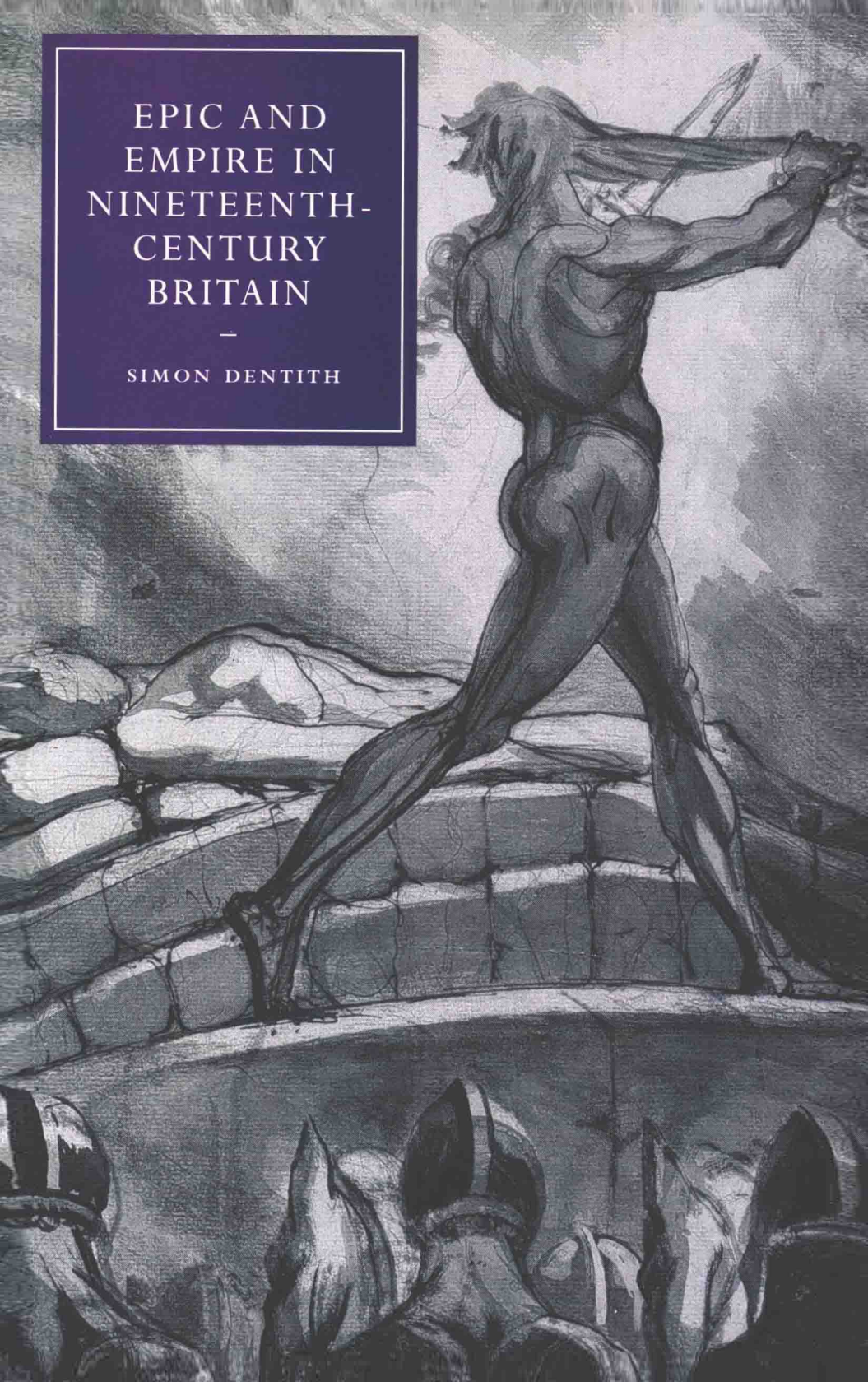
SIMON DENTITH



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Contents

Introduction

> Is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer's bar, hence do not the necessary conditions for epic poetry vanish?[1]

Marx's question, posed for himself in his notebooks in 1857, trenchantly formulates a characteristic nineteenth-century idea, though this brief quotation gives it an especially technological emphasis. What are the historical conditions which underlie the production of epic poetry, and do the wholly different social circumstances of modernity prevent the writing of further poetry in the same heroic mode? Marx was not alone in assuming the radical historical otherness of the social world from which epic emerged; he was the heir, indeed, of a considerable intellectual tradition, with its roots in the Enlightenment, for which the essential antiquity of primary epics such as Homer's was a central contention.[2] In this tradition, epic becomes the foremost evidence of the historical alterity of the barbaric world; by the same token, it becomes a principal indicator of our own modernity. The implications of this fundamental insight are pursued in what follows.

This book addresses, then, one particular understanding of epic in the nineteenth century, briefly summed up under the phrase 'epic primitivism'. It pursues the consequences of this idea for the meaning of a national poetry in Britain, for the translation of epic, for the possibility of writing a national epic and for the conception of empire and its subject peoples. A principal argument will be that ideas of modernity current in the nineteenth century, though established in the eighteenth, are predicated upon an engagement with the sense of historical distance carried by primary epics, especially those of Homer. This primitivist understanding of epic entailed consequences not only for poetry but also for the

novel, and indeed more widely for ethnology and the relations between the imperial centre and its colonised margins. The book will therefore discuss a series of attempts to write epic poetry; styles of translation; the difficult question of the relation of epic to the novel; and the close cousin of epic, at least as understood in the light of epic primitivism, the national ballad tradition.

This is certainly not the only study that might be written of epic in the nineteenth century, which is a larger topic than might at first appear to readers who are scratching their heads as they struggle to think beyond Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, whose epic credentials are anyway doubtful, or perhaps, in quite a different register, Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. A very different book needs to be written about Milton's epic inheritance for Romantic poetry and subsequently; readers will find no discussion here of Wordsworth or Blake. Equally, there is no attempt here to provide a survey of all epics written in the nineteenth century, many of which persisted in a broadly neoclassical idiom. Innumerable epics or shorter poems written in the high heroic style were composed after 1800, often on topics connected with Britain's military or naval history; these will only appear in what follows when they relate to its central themes.[3] Many such poems were once popular, but their appeal was effectively killed by the social and military history of the twentieth century; they survived only in dusty anthologies in school stock-cupboards into the 1950s and 1960s. It is sufficient now to recall that 'war poetry' means for most people the 'anti-war' poetry of the First World War. That whole, earlier, tradition of poetry, now effectively lost, needs neither revival nor further debunking; I attempt neither, though the connection of epic to empire entails at least some discussion of the anthology of heroic national poetry established in the nineteenth century.

What the book *does* attempt is both a history and a map; indeed, this is an area in which history and geography are inseparable: as we shall see, a map of the world according to epic is at once a history of certain of its peoples. It also attempts a conceptual map; I try to trace out a problematic, an interrelated set of ideas bequeathed to the nineteenth century by the eighteenth, whose consequences are worked out with varying differing emphases by the writers discussed hereafter. These include Walter Scott, whose importance in transforming ideas about epic and ballad can scarcely be overestimated; Matthew Arnold and Thomas Carlyle, for both of whom the question of epic was central to their thinking about national history; the historian George Grote; the lesser-known writers William Maginn and F. W. Newman, translators of Homer; Tennyson and William

Morris, whose *Sigurd the Volsung* is the most sustained attempt at *quasi* primary epic in the nineteenth century; George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who both sought, in different ways, to transform the generic inheritance of epic to contemporary and female ends; Rudyard Kipling, who wrote a demotic and popular version of the epic of empire; and those writers of imperial adventure stories at the end of the century, Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad, for whom epic was the appropriate way of understanding the historical experience of the subject peoples of the empire.

The theme which links these apparently diverse writers together is a consciousness of the antiquity of epic as a genre. To use a phrase of F. W. Newman's, Homer is 'essentially archaic' – Newman coined the phrase in 1856, contemporaneously with Marx's notebook entry on the *Iliad*. It is not merely that Homer is an old writer in relation to the moment in history which we have now reached, but that he belongs to a phase of human history which we have now definitively surpassed. The same could be said of all the writers of primary epics that were either known about or rediscovered in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. This consciousness of the archaism of epic entails a concomitant consciousness of the modernity of the present era of human affairs; indeed, I assert that an engagement with epic is at the heart of those theories of human progress which take hold in the eighteenth century and continue, in however modified a way, into the nineteenth. Why stop there? However discredited the notion of 'progress' may be, politically as the central notion of 'progressive' politics, or philosophically as the supreme example of a grand narrative which we must now forgo, some such notion must remain in our accounts of human history: the passage from hunter-gathering to globalised late capitalism may not represent any moral progress, but it is certainly a narrative of a succession of extraordinary social transformations, and the dynamics of this progression require explanation. I emphasise this simply to underscore the fact that these apparently faded debates about epic and modernity, which introduce the book and which underlie the writing I discuss, should not be approached as dead letters; there is no readily available contemporary perspective in the light of which these old conundrums can be straightforwardly resolved. Homer remains 'essentially archaic'; we too are the heirs of those Enlightenment philosophers, historians and critics who established that; and the nature of our engagement with his epic writings, and those of others, remains a matter of emotionally and intellectually complex negotiation. I do not write in the spirit of someone who, by virtue of his lucky posteriority, has solved the problems that the book lays out.

The study follows a broadly chronological path through the nineteenth century; it starts with a brief account of eighteenth-century theories of epic primitivism and their relationship to notions of modernity, and then follows through the implications or entailments of those notions at various points in the intellectual and artistic history of the succeeding hundred years. However, there is no sense here that this is a continuously developing or unfolding narrative; on the contrary, what is traced are various reworkings of a problematic, in different contexts and in relation to differing problems, so that an interconnected set of ideas and aesthetic challenges are worked through to sometimes congruent and sometimes opposed or contradictory conclusions. The first half of the book is broadly concerned with poetry: not just with epic poetry, but also with the closely connected history of the ballad. In the second half I pursue the same questions into the history of the novel; I take this to be the characteristic modern form for the nineteenth century, which seeks to assimilate in various ways all the forms and modes of writing which precede it. My discussion of the novel necessarily involves an account of those twentieth-century critics for whom the relationship of epic to novel is crucial: Georg Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin and Franco Moretti. The assimilative capacity of the novel – its power to absorb and subordinate experience understood in epic terms – provides the central question which I address to the novels discussed. Given the nature of epic primitivism, this means that the discussion of the novels will be framed by the question of the representation of barbarous or heroic peoples, or more precisely the appropriate mode or genre in which this representation might be conducted. We begin, however, with the relationship of epic and modernity as it was conceived by the Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century.

EPIC AND MODERNITY

How ought historicist criticism to be conceived? That is to say, what do we take to be the characteristic procedures of an approach to literature which seeks to understand it in its historical context – 'context' here understood to mean not the mere simultaneity of historical events, but the manners, *geist* or social system which that literature is both produced by and illuminates? When did such procedures come to be adopted? The answer to this last question is undoubtedly that the first extensive effort at historicist criticism occurred in relation to the poetry of Homer in the eighteenth century. But the answer to the previous question about the

characteristic procedures of historicist criticism is not so straightforward. It seems right to assume that historicising criticism should start with the history and then proceed to the literature: to the extent that 'history' is the larger category, it must necessarily precede, both logically and in actuality, any literary product that is thought to emanate from it. But that is not the case with eighteenth-century historical understanding of Homer. On the contrary, the literature precedes the history, which is in effect deduced from the literary text and then adduced to explain it. This extraordinary interpretative circle must be the starting-point of any account of epic and modernity.[4]

This productive circularity can be traced back to Vico at the beginning of the eighteenth century, though it was the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment who produced the most accessible and comprehensive accounts of the progress of human society through various stages, in which the reading of epic poetry provides some of the most persuasive evidence. In fact, the history of Homeric criticism in the eighteenth century has been carefully documented; this is how Kirsti Simonsuuri summarises Vico's account of Homer in the *New Science*:

> This Homer was not an individual poet of genius, but could be found anywhere if circumstances sufficiently similar to the Greek heroic age occurred. A people that had created the heroic epic had by this fact also created its thought, its social institutions, its leaders and its entire history. Homer's poems were the myths of their people and their ways of understanding and reacting to the world and the age they lived in; and in a rigorous sense they were fully intelligible only to those who had created and used them. The true Homer was a conglomerate of the myths of the Greek people, an expression in language of their dreams and actions: 'Homer was an idea or a heroic character of Grecian men insofar as they told their history in song'. And Vico's more crucial discovery, implicit in this idea of Homer, was that languages and linguistic forms are the key to the minds of those who use words, and constitute the most profound evidence available of the mental, social and cultural life of human societies.[5]

Vico's *New Science* is not primarily an account of Homer; it seeks to trace the history of human societies through their various stages. But Homer is central to this argument, precisely because, as Simonsuuri indicates, he can be read to reveal the self-understanding of heroic society. Vico's claim to scientificity, however, rests not on the historical taxonomy that is implicit in the book, but on the philological method that sustains this taxonomy. Our knowledge of the heroic world that Homer gives us access to is dependent upon philological method. We can know the

history thanks to appropriate attention to the text; in the light of the history we can reinterpret the text.

The knowledge that is deduced in this way creates the sense of historical specificity, both of the heroic world and of contemporary civil society. Take the case, for instance, of the characters of the Homeric heroes Agamemnon and Achilles, about whom Vico writes thus: 'This is Homer, the incomparable creator of poetic archetypes, whose greatest characters are completely unsuited to our present civilized and social nature, but are perfectly suited to the heroic nature of punctilious nobles!' (p. 357). This indeed is perhaps the central tenet in this mode of reading Homer; it is precisely the ferocity of the Homeric heroes which leads reader after reader in the eighteenth century to repudiate them as poetic models in the neoclassical manner, and to read them instead as symptoms of a previous regime of manners or stage of society. It is in this sense that epic and modernity are interdependent notions from Vico onwards: the sense of contemporary civility is produced out of a repudiation of the heroism celebrated in epic, especially the *Iliad*.

This repudiation is not a straightforward matter, however; Vico again anticipates a characteristic subsequent attitude in the ambivalence with which he regards the ferocious heroism of the characters of primary epic: 'The gruesome atrocity of Homeric battles and deaths is the source of the astonishing power of the *Iliad*' (*New Science*, p. 371). This is not a theme which Vico develops, but it will be developed at length later in the eighteenth century. From the perspective of our modernity we can repudiate the 'gruesome atrocity' of barbarous society, but respond also to its sublimity or its power: we have lost as much as we have gained, or rather, the price of our progress to civility is the loss of power and a world made more pallid. Reading epic is henceforth going to be a complicated matter; the reader will at once respond to its power, and at the same time recognise the pastness of the world which produced such men, such manners and such excitement. The progress to modernity is not unequivocally a positive one.

Vico's *New Science* provides, then – sometimes in unexpected or undeveloped ways – some of the principal terms of the problematic that I am seeking to set forth. It traces the progression of human society through various stages, and in doing so adduces epic poetry as central evidence of the heroic or barbarous stage which precedes contemporary civility. Our knowledge of that heroic stage is produced out of an engagement with epic, especially Homer; our sense of our own modernity is conceived in the same act of engagement. This experience is ambivalent

and does not typically produce a simple repudiation of the heroic past. And finally, this whole historicising mode of reading can be viewed as an interpretative circle in which knowledge of history and text derive from and reinforce each other.

The *New Science* was published in 1744; twenty-five years later Adam Ferguson published *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, in which the same tropes are rehearsed in a more systematic way. Ferguson carefully distinguishes between the early stages of society: the 'savage' precedes the 'barbarian', with the latter characterised by the presence of property but the absence of the long-settled differences of a monarchy. All these stages are radically different from contemporary civil society. Like Vico, Ferguson was not writing a book about Homer, but, in effect, a conspectus of early human history; it is nevertheless striking how central Homer also is to his arguments about the barbarous stage of mankind. Indeed, many of his accounts of this stage of civilisation are in effect deductions from the text of Homer. On this matter he is explicit:

> It were absurd to quote the fable of the Iliad or the Odyssey, the legends of Hercules, Theseus or Oedipus, as authorities in matters of fact relating to the history of mankind; but they may, with great justice, be cited to ascertain what were the conceptions and sentiments of the age in which they were composed, or to characterise the genius of that people, with whose imagination they were blended, and by whom they were fondly rehearsed and admired.[6]

Homer will be the principal witness of this kind, the behaviour of his heroes being adduced as evidence of the mentality of the stage of civil society from which they came.

This is especially evident when it comes to the matter of warfare; Ferguson uses Homer to point out the differing conceptions of honour, chivalry, respect for one's enemies, and so on, which are evident in Homer's battle scenes. Thus in the following passage the method of historicist deduction is clearly visible:

> If the moral or popular traditions, and the taste of fabulous legends, which are the production or entertainment of particular ages, are likewise sure indications of their notions and characters, we may presume, that the foundation of what is now held to be the law of war, and of nations, was laid in the manners of Europe, together with the sentiments which are expressed in the tales of chivalry, and of gallantry. Our system of war differs not more from that of the Greeks, than the favourite characters of our early romance differed from those of the Iliad, and of every ancient poem. The hero of the Greek fable, endued with superior force, courage and address, takes every advantage of an enemy, to kill

with safety to himself; and actuated by a desire of spoil, or by a principle of revenge, is never stayed in his progress by interruptions of remorse or compassion. Homer, who, of all poets, knew best how to exhibit the emotions of a vehement affection, seldom attempts to excite commiseration. Hector falls unpitied, and his body is insulted by every Greek. (p. 200)

Our sense of distance from the manners of Homer's time, then, is traceable to the very different notions of chivalry and courtesy which have supervened between then and now, and which can in turn be traced in the romances of more modern epochs.

Ferguson provides, in short, a powerful Enlightenment account of the stages through which mankind has passed in the transition from a savage past to contemporary civility. Like Vico again, his account is by no means unambivalent; he finds much to admire in the mentality of barbarous peoples, and in his case his own Highland background lent some of these passages a particular poignancy – though, as we shall see, the association of epic with Highland society or its global equivalents will become much more than a personal matter. We can take Ferguson as providing, in an exemplary way, the general terms in which the transition from barbarity to civility was to be thought in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Central to his account was a reading of Homer: a sense of modernity is in part produced out of a sense of the anachronistic pleasures to be derived from a reading of the *Iliad*.

Ferguson was doubtless the most 'philosophical' of the 'philosophical historians' of the Scottish Enlightenment; in his work the imbrication of notions of modernity with a historicist reading of epic is especially clear. In part cognate with these overarching progressive accounts of human history, and in part independent of them, the eighteenth century also saw the development of a bardic theory with relation to Homer which both reinforces and complicates the general story told by the philosophical historians. Historicism, insofar as it understands culture as expressing in some sense the manners of the social world from which culture emerges, appears to downplay the element of individual genius which produces any cultural object; bardic theory, by contrast, emphasises the central importance of the exalted artist. These potentially contradictory theories, though they were certainly successfully combined, nevertheless provided differing emphases for the understanding of epic origins both in the eighteenth century and later.

Thomas Blackwell's *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735) provides one important source for the bardic theory of epic

origins – and we can take it as the exemplary scholarly instance in the eighteenth century, though of course there was a massive poetic interest also in the figure of the bard.[7] For Blackwell, Homer was simply a bard, at once a 'stroling [sic] indigent Bard' and a member of a profession of great '*Dignity*'.[8] Bardic theory had at its heart an imaginary scene of recitation. This is how Blackwell describes the 'daily life of the AOIΔOI' (which Blackwell translates as 'Bards'):

> The Manner was, when a Bard came to a House, he was first welcomed by the Master, and after he had been entertained according to the ancient Mode, that is, after he had bathed, eaten, and drank some ΜΕΛΙΝΔΕΑ ΟΙΝΟΝ, *heart-chearing wine*, he was called upon to entertain the Family in his turn: He then tuned his *Lyre*, and raised his *Voice*, and sung to the listening Crowd some Adventures of the *Gods*, or some Performance of *Man*. (p. 116)

This is a scene which will be constantly reimagined for the next 150 years. The extent of the dignity attached to such figures will be a matter of intense debate throughout that period; the aptness or otherwise of the implicit comparison between Homer and the myriad bard-like figures to be found in the present or in recent history will also be a matter of controversy. But the origins of epic in the recitation of some ancient bard becomes a central element in notions of the genre as 'essentially archaic', both in popular and scholarly conceptions.

The most important popular conduit for bardic ideas into the nineteenth century, as we shall see in the following chapters, will be Walter Scott, whose *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) is effectively a dramatisation of the scene of recitation imagined by Blackwell. On a more scholarly level, the Homeric controversy, which was conducted from the late eighteenth century through to the late nineteenth century (and arguably has never been resolved), took some of the elements of bardic theory and sought to argue them through in technical philological terms. That is to say, some scholars began to dissolve the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into pre-existing 'lays' – of presumed bardic (and hence non-literate) origin – and to use the methods of philological criticism to determine the activity of some subsequent literate editor in transforming them into connected and coherent narrative wholes. The most famous scholar in this vein was the German F. A. Wolf, whose 1795 *Prolegomena to Homer* became the most notorious item in the controversy. I discuss the Homeric (or sometimes 'Wolfian') controversy briefly in the next chapter; the point here is that some proponents of Bardic theory (such as Walter Scott) could be

strongly antipathetic to Wolfian views because they appeared to downgrade the 'original genius' of Homer himself. The instability introduced into historicist accounts of epic, and the now related forms of romance, lay, and ballad, remains the same in both popular and scholarly accounts: the original genius of the bard threatens to outweigh or unbalance the original historicising impulse which consigns traditional forms to their originating social moment.

'Epic primitivism' was thus a powerful if potentially unstable concatenation of ideas that came to be established in the late eighteenth century. I shall refer to this nexus of notions – combined in differing ways – as a 'problematic'; that is, a connected set of ideas which can be pushed to differing conclusions, but which provides the same epistemological horizon for disparate-seeming arguments. It took as its model the poetry of Homer rather than his neoclassical imitators, and it sought the origins of epic verse in the barbaric or 'heroic' stage of society. The very sense of modernity or contemporary civility was constructed out of the contrast with the manners to be deduced from the Homeric poems. The appropriate comparison for early epic poetry was therefore not the finished poetic products of the modern world but traditional and popular poetry, traces of which were still to be found, especially in rude or undeveloped regions. The originators of this early poetry, or bards, had their historic equivalents in many societies, though their status was a matter of controversy. But the scene of bardic recitation linked together both theories of epic origins and ballad performance.

THE ENTAILMENTS OF EPIC PRIMITIVISM

The problematic of epic primitivism entailed for the nineteenth century a series of consequences not just for the understanding of epic poetry, but for its translation and composition also; these consequences extended equally to the writing of other forms of poetry, notably the ballad. Subsequent chapters of this book will explore these entailments as they work themselves through a range of nineteenth-century writing.

Epic primitivism suggested, in the first place, an equivalence between the surviving traditional balladry of the contemporary world and the ballad or popular sources of the epic in both the ancient world and other barbarous or heroic societies. This suggestion was most strongly followed through in both the poetry and the critical writings of Scott and his successors; in Britain it had particularly important consequences for the translation of Homer, for which it began to seem that some version of

ballad metre might be more appropriate than the various kinds of neoclassical or educated metres available after Pope or Cowper. Elsewhere in Europe, this equivalence was to have explosive consequences in the context of the various national revivals that convulsed the Continent in the course of the nineteenth century; country after country discovered an authentic national epic in the previously overlooked or slighted ballad traditions in which their newly coined 'national stories' were told.

So, secondly, such traditional balladry became in effect the 'national song' of the peoples to whom it was attributed. This is a relatively clear process in the very differing national contexts of France, Germany, Spain, Finland or even the United States: the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Nibelungenlied*, the ballad of the *Cid*, the *Kalevala* and, in imitation, Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, were all advanced as expressions of the national spirit of varying degrees of relevance to the contemporary world. But in the British context the search for a traditional national epic was complicated by the complexity of the national question in these islands, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter on Tennyson and Morris. At all events, one tradition of criticism in the nineteenth century advanced the 'national ballad metre' as the authentic British prosody.

The belief in the essential antiquity of epic and its related traditional forms meant, furthermore, that the exercise of writing an epic in the modern world was always going to be a matter of pastiche. Since this is an important notion for what follows, it is worth briefly dwelling on 'pastiche'; it is here understood to mean the effort to imitate a manner or a style without hostile intent. It is thus to be distinguished from parody, which in most usages is presumed to have a mocking or polemical relationship to whatever is being imitated.[9] Pastiche became inevitable because the antiquity of epic, and other forms now understood as premodern, meant that the poet who wrote in these forms, or the translator of them, sought to reproduce in the modern reader the kind of effect that reading an essentially archaic poem would have: an experience which itself entailed some sense of the presumed original experience of the first listener. This is a problem that beset the writing of many kinds of poetry from the late eighteenth century onwards, and it affected the translation and composition of epic, ballads and romances, all of which became classified as antique forms. The problem provoked a range of responses, from forgery through imitation to the invention of antiquated-sounding prosodic forms. This fundamental sense of the archaism of epic, and with it other traditional forms of popular poetry, was the ultimate ground for the range of forged or imitated poetic productions which were associated

with the rediscovery of epic and ballad from the outset in the 1760s; the same problematic continued to entail pastiche upon the poets of the nineteenth century. Consider the following list: Macpherson's *Ossian* poems in the 1760s; Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) with its range of imitated ballads; Chatterton's 'Rowley' poems, also written in the 1760s; Cowper's toying with the idea of translating Homer into Chaucerian English; Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–3), with its creative editorial practice and its forged and imitated ballads. Forgery; imitation; pastiche: all were endemic to the problematic of epic primitivism, and all entail a complex negotiation between text and reader, in which there is a simultaneous recognition of the supposed antiquity of the verse form coupled with a knowledge of its actual contemporaneity (in the case of forgery, this knowledge is restricted to the author). The many nineteenth-century poems to be discussed in this volume had different ways of staging this negotiation, with more or less reference to the moment of actual composition, and more or less complete attempts at direct imitations of antiquated diction and prosodic forms. Epic primitivism resulted in epic pastiche.

But a further result springs from the ambivalent attitude to the heroic past that is built into the whole problematic – the sense that contemporary civility marks a real progression from the barbarous past, but also that there is a real loss of glamour, heroism or straightforward poetic interest in the decorous rationality of the present. A straightforward repudiation of the barbaric stage of society which produced epic poetry might result in a wholly rational poetry, but not a very exciting one; what epic primitivism tends to suggest, on the contrary, is the problem of the unsuitability of the modern world to poetry more generally. This will be a matter of dispute throughout the nineteenth century, but the difficulty of writing a modern epic when the form is strongly marked by its barbaric origins is one which will beset many poets; in this study I discuss *Aurora Leigh*, in which Barrett Browning vehemently repudiates the idea that the modern world cannot sustain heroic treatment. The structure of feeling, given its most powerful embodiment by Scott, by which the grandeur and affective power of epic and its close cousin romance are relegated to the past while modernity gets the prosperity without the affective glamour – this structure of feeling will create particular problems throughout the century for those who wish to find heroism in the contemporary world. Carlyle, as we shall see, will solve this problem in an influential but idiosyncratic way; William Morris will transform the whole problematic by a dialectical inversion which makes the epic appeal of barbarism the