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# EPIC AND EMPIRE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as ‘background’, feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field.

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## WRITING A NATIONAL EPIC: TENNYSON VS. MORRIS

Insofar as anybody might wish to promote any of these stories *as they stood* as the basis for a national epic, this matter of the national and historical location of the narratives was clearly important. But what of those poets who wished to write an epic poem of their own? Does the relative antiquity of the narratives seized upon make much of a difference? Perhaps we should think of the stories themselves as indifferent or entirely malleable and conclude that, for those who sought to write an epic poem in the nineteenth century, it was all a question of the manner or idiom that the poet managed to forge. This was, indeed, the opinion of Matthew Arnold. As we saw in the previous chapter, he conceded that the historical Nestor, for example, may not have been much different from a sixteenth-century moss-trooper celebrated in the Border Ballads but powerfully asserted that Homer's manner had decisively elevated his heroes above the level attained by the balladeers or their nineteenth-century imitators. If, on the contrary, one takes the theories of epic primitivism seriously – that epic emerges from a distinctive barbaric or heroic stage of society – then one would be inclined to argue that chivalric romances come marked with their historical location also. In this case, that material would be far from plastic or indifferent, and whatever the manner adopted, no nineteenth-century poet could make the story of Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere into an epic equivalent to the story of the *Iliad*, or make the narrative of Sigurd, Regin and Fafnir the Serpent into a romance.

A whole series of issues are raised here. One concerns the very possibility of an heroic idiom in nineteenth-century poetry. There was, after all, no shortage of models for such an idiom, including the neoclassical heroic couplet, Miltonic blank verse and, as we have seen, the so-called national ballad metre, the vogue for which flowed strongly from Percy's *Reliques* in the eighteenth century through Walter Scott and his successors. A second issue concerns the historic weight or centre of gravity of distinctive genres – epic or romance – and the persistence of generic meanings beyond their moment of origin. These avenues are pursued elsewhere in this book; here I contrast the use made of all this potentially epic material by Tennyson and William Morris in, respectively, *Idylls of the King* and *Sigurd the Volsung*.

*Idylls of the King* is widely familiar and has a substantial scholarly literature devoted to it; Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung* has had less of a readership since its publication in 1876. The following extracts provide a good idea of the contrasting aesthetics ruling both poems. The first

passage is from the first of the *Idylls*, 'The Coming of Arthur'; somewhat uncharacteristically, it describes a battle scene (most of the fighting in the poem-sequence concerns either jousts or single combat):

Thereafter – as he speaks who tells the tale –  
 When Arthur reached a field-of-battle bright  
 With pitched pavilions of his foe, the world  
 Was all so clear about him, that he saw  
 The smallest rock far on the faintest hill,  
 And even in high day the morning star.  
 So when the king had set his banner broad,  
 At once from either side, with trumpet blast,  
 And shouts, and clarions shrilling unto blood,  
 The long-lanced battle let their horses run.  
 And now the Barons and the kings prevailed,  
 And now the King, as here and there that war  
 Went swaying; but the Powers who walk the world  
 Made lightnings and great thunders over him,  
 And dazed all eyes, till Arthur by main might,  
 And mightier of his hands with every blow,  
 And leading all his knighthood threw the kings  
 Carádos, Urien, Cradlemon of Wales,  
 Claudias, and Clariance of Northumberland,  
 The King Brandagoras of Latangor,  
 With Anguisant of Erin, Morganore,  
 And Lot of Orkney. Then, before a voice  
 As dreadful as the shout of one who sees  
 To one who sins, and deems himself alone  
 And all the world asleep, they swerved and brake  
 Flying, and Arthur called to stay the brands  
 That hacked among the flyers, 'Ho! They yield!'  
 So like a painted battle the war stood  
 Silenced, the living quiet as the dead,  
 And in the heart of Arthur joy was lord<sup>6</sup>

Compare this with another bloody extract taken from *Sigurd the Volsung*; this also comes from near the beginning of the poem, but this time it concerns a king's last battle, not his first. The king in question is Sigmund, Sigurd's father; he has just got married (though he is old) but an ousted suitor is angered and wants to win the bride by force; a battle ensues:

White went his hair on the wind like the ragged drift of the cloud,  
 And his dust-driven blood-beaten harvest was the death-storm's  
 angry shroud,

When the summer sun is departing in the first of the night of wrack;  
 And his sword was the cleaving lightning, that smites and is hurried  
 aback  
 Ere the hand may rise against it; and his voice was the following  
 thunder.  
 Then cold grew the battle before him, dead-chilled with the fear and  
 the wonder:  
 For again in his ancient eyes the light of victory gleamed;  
 From his mouth grown tuneful and sweet the song of his kindred  
 streamed;  
 And no more was he worn and weary, and no more his life seemed  
 spent:  
 And with all the hope of his childhood was his wrath of battle blent;  
 And he thought: A little further, and the river of strife is passed,  
 And I shall sit triumphant and the king of the world at last.  
 But lo, through the hedge of the war-shafts a mighty man there came,  
 One-eyed and seeming ancient, but his visage shone like flame:  
 Gleaming-grey was his kirtle, and his hood was cloudy blue;  
 And he bore a mighty twi-bill, as he waded the fight-sheaves through,  
 And stood face to face with Sigmund, and upheaved the bill to  
 smite.  
 Once more round the head of the Volsung fierce glittered the  
 Branstock's light,  
 The sword that came from Odin; and Sigmund's cry once more  
 Rang out to the very heavens above the din of war.  
 Then clashed the meeting edges with Sigmund's latest stroke,  
 And in shivering shards fell earthward that fear of earthly folk.  
 But changed were the eyes of Sigmund, and the war-wrath left his  
 face;  
 For that grey-clad mighty helper was gone, and in his place  
 Drave on the unbroken spear-wood 'gainst the Volsung's empty  
 hands:  
 And there they smote down Sigmund, the wonder of all lands,  
 On the foemen, on the death-heap his deeds had piled that day.<sup>7</sup>

The contrast between the two poems is, evidently, very considerable, most visibly concerning such technical matters as diction and versification. These, however, are manifestations of a profound contrast: Morris is seeking to provide a nineteenth-century equivalent of the poetry of the heroic ages, while Tennyson is seeking to provide a highly moralised story or set of stories which can prove exemplary in the present day. Tennyson's poetry is mellifluous, aristocratic and melancholy; Morris's is rugged, popular (in a very special sense), and tragic.

As efforts at epic poetry, those technical matters certainly merit attention. Tennyson opts for the 'natural' verse-form for high matter in English, the iambic pentameter; despite his many experiments with quantitative metre, he distrusted the hexameter and wrote a burlesque of the attempts at hexameter translations of Homer which were made after Arnold had recommended the form in his lectures 'On Translating Homer'.<sup>8</sup> Morris by contrast opts for the hexameter, but it is basically dactylic; in addition he makes heavy use of alliterative formulations, which contribute to the archaic impression created by the poetry. Indeed his diction altogether is extraordinary; he naturally eschews latinate vocabulary where possible, but also produces many coinages of his own, most visibly those noun phrases such as 'death-storm', 'war-shaft', 'fight-sheaves', 'spear-wood' and 'death-heap', which are partly nonce coinages, but also allude to Old Norse and Old English poetic kennings. Tennyson's verse, in short, while wonderfully accomplished, basically remains within the predominant tradition in English poetry as it was available in the nineteenth century; Morris was clearly attempting a radical break with that tradition (in this poem at least) and sought to found his poetic practice on allusions to an older and more popular (i.e. not learned) style.

A further contrast is immediately apparent if we compare the two poets' alternative uses of the epic simile. Thus Tennyson seeks a simile to enhance the force of Arthur's command to his knights to stop pursuing the defeated enemy:

Then, before a voice  
 As dreadful as the shout of one who sees  
 To one who sins, and deems himself alone  
 And all the world asleep, they swerved and brake  
 Flying, and Arthur called to stay the brands  
 That hacked among the flyers, 'Ho! They yield!'

Though this has the outward form of an epic simile, nothing could be more unheroic; the allusion here is to conscience and the moral world, to the inward life of moral decisions, sin and guilt. Morris's similes, by contrast (in the first five lines of the extract), though scarcely developed to the extent usually characteristic of 'the epic simile', nevertheless seek unequivocally to heighten and elevate Sigmund's battle-prowess by allusions to the dramatic phenomena of the natural world; it is not that Sigmund has no inner life but that Morris seeks to find the grounds of comparison from within the heroic world he is seeking to recreate.

The contrast between the two poets extends far beyond these two poems; I have chosen not to counterpose, for example, Morris's 'Defence of Guinevere' with Tennyson's 'Guinevere' from the *Idylls*, though the contrast is striking and both poems were written within a couple of years of each other (Morris's was written first). But their opposite attitudes to Guinevere's transgression is only symptomatic of a whole range of differences, above all in their politics, where Tennyson's conservatism contrasts with Morris's revolutionary socialism (though he was still only an 'advanced liberal' when he wrote *Sigurd the Volsung*). This has a bearing on their choice of a national epic; but it would be possible also to compare the two poets in a different way by considering, instead of *Sigurd the Volsung*, Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*, the massive rescension of poetic stories which include many retold romances as well as some Northern narratives. Nevertheless, the differences between the two poets are strikingly evident when they attempt specifically epic poems.

Yet it may be objected that *Idylls of the King* neither is nor was intended to be an epic poem. It is true that Tennyson himself wished to play down the idea that it might be. He wrote to his American publishers shortly before the publication of the first four poems in the series thus: 'I wish that you would disabuse your own minds and those of others, as far as you can, of the fancy that I am about an Epic of King Arthur. I should be crazed to attempt such a thing in the heart of the 19th century.'<sup>9</sup> This view is the exact corollary of epic primitivism; it partly reflects the impact of a review of 'Morte d'Arthur' by James Sterling in the 1830s. This latter poem had been prefaced by a mock-serious introductory poem called 'The Epic', in which the Arthurian fragment is supposed to be merely one book snatched from the bonfire of a whole twelve-book epic on Prince Arthur, a project hedged about with uncertainty also:

'Why take the style of those heroic times?  
For nature brings not back the Mastodon,  
Nor we those times; and why should any man  
Remodel models? These twelve books of mine  
Were faint Homeric echoes, nothing-worth'<sup>10</sup>

For all its self-deprecation, these lines here do actually amount to saying that 'Morte d'Arthur' is a fragment of an epic. Tennyson's very uncertainty about styling the poem an epic, then, is based not upon modesty about his own powers but about the anachronism of such a project.

On the other hand, Hallam Tennyson unequivocally referred to the whole sequence as an epic in his chapter on the *Idylls* in the *Life*, while

Tennyson's brother-in-law, the classical scholar Edmund Lushington, was unhappy with the designation 'idylls' and suggested 'epylls or little epics' instead.<sup>11</sup> The question is partly complicated by the protracted composition history of the poems (which extended more or less across the whole of Tennyson's poetic life, since 'Morte d'Arthur', which eventually became the final book, was one of his earliest poems). This in turn is related to the fact that the poem obviously brings together a number of different stories which can be quite successfully read on their own. I do not wish to enter the scholarly controversy over the 'unity' or otherwise of the poem-sequence, since the question of the poem's 'epic' status certainly does not depend on this (that is, 'epic' poetry is not usefully defined as being long and consisting of a unified action – though some of the accounts of the relation between epic and the presumed pre-existing constituent lays would push you in this direction). It is, however, the case that Tennyson was interested in the unity of the whole action, a concern visible in his desire to include stories from the innocent phase of the Round Table to balance out the later stories – a problem for him since 'Guinevere' was one of the first *Idylls* published as such in the late 1850s. In other words, as he continued with the project and tried to weld his disparate narratives together, he was very conscious of the overall narrative shape of the sequence and wanted to ensure that the reader emerged with an appropriately balanced sense of one single progression or direction in the way the successive stories were placed.

It does, nevertheless, seem useful to me to consider the poem as a national epic and ask what consequences flow from viewing it as such. This question can be approached by pointing to those aspects of the poem which do not appear to be 'epic'. I have already alluded to one: that if anything Tennyson is rather embarrassed about the heroic (understood as the martial) virtues. Heroism is constantly to be redefined in moral terms. This leads us to some of the biggest questions about the poem, which are to do with its Christian, theological and allegorical aspects. In fact these turn out to be closely related. The Arthurian cycle becomes thoroughly Christianised by Tennyson – though this was a process which was already underway in the medieval world. We have already seen something of this at work in that short extract quoted earlier, insofar as the poem is centrally concerned with matters of individual moral choice. Still more, there is an understated Christian allegory at work in the poem, by which the figure of Arthur is quietly proposed as a Christ-figure whose ability to redeem the world is betrayed by the treachery of those he loves. This makes the whole poem into a theodicy, an attempt to explain man's

fallen state and the presence of evil in the world. Another argument might – instead of comparing *The Idylls of the King* with nineteenth-century efforts to create a national epic from primary epic materials – compare the poem with *Paradise Lost*.

However, these specifically nineteenth-century aspects of the *Idylls* are precisely what make it unlike ‘epic’ in the heroic sense; and therefore Tennyson’s attempt to recast his material in these Christianising and ‘moral’ ways makes the project of a national epic (if it is such) inevitably into a moral and individualist one.<sup>12</sup> The nation is to form itself not around a martial-heroic sense of its past, or at least only in a very subsidiary way; rather its national story tells of moral heroism but also of the inevitable defeat of high endeavour.

Turning to Morris and *Sigurd the Volsung*, it is easier to make the claim that the poem is to be conceived as a national epic, if only because, though not quite directly in relation to his poetic version of the story, Morris said as much. Before writing the poem, he translated in 1870 the prose *Volsunga Saga*, including in the translation some versions also of relevant Edda where necessary. In the Preface to the translation, he referred to the story as the ‘great Epic of the North’, and concluded his introduction with the following interesting comments:

In conclusion, we must again say how strange it seems to us, that this Volsung Tale, which is in fact an unversified poem, should never before have been translated into English. For this is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks – to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been – a story too – then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.<sup>13</sup>

Morris offers here a characteristically straightforward assertion of epic primitivism and with it the assertion that this primary epic should have the same significance for ‘us’ that the Tale of Troy had to the Greeks – though he immediately qualifies this with an extraordinary anticipation of ‘our’ eventual disappearance. This raises the question of who the race is exactly that Morris imagines this story to fit. It is the Great Story of the North – so perhaps it is the common heritage of all the Northern peoples, starting with the Icelanders themselves, in whose language the story is preserved, and extending outwards to include all the Germanic peoples. In case this makes you feel a little queasy, the final anticipation of ‘our’ eventual disappearance may perhaps restore your equilibrium; the Great Story of the North will in some scarcely imaginable future become the

common inheritance of humanity, just as the Tale of Troy has now become. Nevertheless, Morris is certainly intent on offering the story as the material for a national epic, and *Sigurd the Volsung* is his attempt to versify what he describes here as ‘an unversified poem’.

What then would it mean for this story, versified in the way that Morris undertakes in *Sigurd the Volsung*, to become a national epic? As I suggested in looking at the extract from the poem, Morris is here attempting something quite different from Tennyson; he is trying to give readers some sense or experience of antique or barbaric poetry. He is, for example, rigorously self-denying in the references he makes to the contemporary (nineteenth-century) world; there is only one moment in which he alludes to the modern age as a comparison. And his poetic practice, as we saw, emphatically eschewed the predominant traditions of English heroic poetry. This is not to say that in any way he is providing, or could provide, the same experience as reading the original Saga or the Edda which it partly incorporates; Morris’s poetry can only ever allude to or suggest the poetic practices which they naturally include. But we could nevertheless sum up the differences between the two poets’ epics by saying that Tennyson wants his *Idylls* to be morally exemplary, while Morris evokes the barbaric world to insist on its historic distance from modernity.

So while Morris’s claim that this is the ‘Great Story of the North’ would appear to suggest some continuity between that distant past and the present, in fact the almost ethnographic care he takes to recreate the atmosphere and mentality of the heroic age leads, on the contrary, to a sense of its difference, even of its exotic strangeness. Indeed, when the poem was published, the reviews commented overwhelmingly on its violence, finding it more like the stories that were becoming known from different parts of the empire than the dignified epic material with which classically trained nineteenth-century scholars were familiar. And the effect of that exotic strangeness is for the poem to act in some way as an implicit critique of the paltriness of modernity, a standing rebuke to the outcome of the national story whose beginning the poem recounts. The cultural politics of such a gesture, as I have described it, are perhaps ambiguous; shortly after the publication of *Sigurd the Volsung*, however, Morris would commit himself to a revolutionary socialism largely inspired, as he himself admitted, by a hatred of the modern world, and inspired also by the social forms which the barbaric world suggested were at least possible.

‘The leading passion of my life has been and is a hatred of modern civilisation’; looking back on his conversion to socialism in the 1890s, Morris would thus describe the state of mind that underlay his

rediscovery of hope in a possibility of a transformed future. This is his sense of that modernity:

Think of it! Was it all to end in a counting-house on top of a cinder-heap, with Podsnap's drawing-room in the offing, and a Whig committee dealing out champagne to the rich and margarine to the poor in such convenient portions as would make all men contented together, though the pleasure of the eyes was gone from the world, and the place of Homer was to be taken by Huxley.<sup>14</sup>

I take that closing opposition as more than a casual one; here is another statement of the opposition of epic to modernity, this time with a more thoroughly positive valuation on the epic side of the opposition. It is a moot point whether Morris's understanding of the epic past is properly dialectical – that is, whether his understanding of the passage to socialism via the barbaric past can be genuinely thought of as a dialectical advance or whether it is really no more than an impossible act of nostalgic return. We can nevertheless see the outline of an aesthetic for *Sigurd the Volsung* here, insofar as Morris's evocation of the epic past stands as the positive pole against which 'modern civilisation' is measured and found wanting.

There is an obvious danger of pastiche inherent in the manner that Morris chooses to recreate the epic past. As we have seen, that is a danger which is inherent in the very problematic of epic primitivism as it comprehends the production of new poetry; Morris, perhaps more than any other nineteenth-century writer, was involved in the 'manufacture of modern antiques'.<sup>15</sup> This is less of a risk for Tennyson, largely because he writes in a manner in the *Idylls* which is the continuation of the predominant tradition of educated English poetry. By contrast, Morris's choice of verse-form, his attempt to recreate the effects of an antique mode, inevitably involves him in the problem of pastiche, understood as the imitation of a style without critical distance from it. His consistent refusal to acknowledge the modernity of the moment of composition adds to this sense of the poem as a sustained imitation or recreation of one that should have been written as a primary epic but unfortunately never was. In this respect only, *Sigurd the Volsung* resembles the elaborate pastiches of Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*.

Nevertheless, Morris inevitably transforms his source material in ways that go beyond the evident necessities laid upon any writer who expands a prose saga into an epic-length poem. This involves both some rationalising and softening of his barbaric material – though the poem remains an extremely bloody one which retains much of the mythic material

preserved in the saga. Thus the killing of the nine brothers of Sigmund by a she-wolf as they are held in stocks attached to a massive oak is retained by Morris, along with the eventual killing of the she-wolf by Sigmund. However, this latter is given a more plausible explanation in *Sigurd the Volsung*; whereas in the saga Sigmund kills the wolf by biting her tongue and eventually ripping it from her throat, in the poem the deed is accomplished by simple brute strength. More generally, the poem has a sustained psychological power which is not one of the saga's characteristic effects. So the mutual jealousy and hostility of Brynhild and Gudrun is kept up over a whole book of the poem's four books; this is present in the saga but is scarcely developed as more than a necessary element in moving the plot forward. I am reluctant to say that the poem is therefore 'novelised'; however, it does sustain a sense of psychological depth and complexity which are more characteristically novelistic than epic effects.

This is evident, for example, in the changes that Morris makes to the story in the concluding book, 'Gudrun'. This deals with the slaying of the Niblungs by Atli, and the part played in the slaughter by Gudrun herself, the Niblungs' sister and wife of Atli. In the saga her role is scarcely ambivalent: she is on the side of her brothers, to the extent of arming herself and actually fighting with them against Atli's warriors. In *Sigurd the Volsung*, however, her motivation is far more ambivalent: she continues to harbour massive resentment against her brothers for the slaying of Sigurd, and presides stony-faced over the battle with, and eventual massacre of, the Niblungs. It is not therefore that Morris has modernised the poem by introducing anachronistic psychological motives; rather he has expanded the material to make for artistic effects that are certainly not present in the saga and for which the model could be Shakespeare as much as Homer.

Another aspect of Morris's transformation of the saga is the way that his poem supplies at least suggestions of the society and the economy from which the epic has emerged. In this respect Morris is certainly the heir of the historicising tradition of epic criticism which began in the eighteenth century. Morris supplies a landscape and an implicit ethnography for the people of his poems, both features which are of course absent from the saga. Consider, for example, the following passage, in which Morris imagines a winter landscape and call to arms:

Now gone is the summer season and the harvest of the year,  
And amid the winter weather the deeds of the Niblungs wear;  
But nought is their joyance worsened, or their mirth-tide waxen less,  
Though the swooping mountain tempest howl round their ridgy ness,

Though a house of the windy battle their streeeted burg be grown,  
 Though the heaped-up, huddled cloud-drift be their very hall-roof's  
 crown,  
 Though the rivers bear the burden, and the Rime-Gods grip and strive,  
 And the snow in the mirky midnight across the lealand drive.  
 But lo, in the stark midwinter how the war is smitten awake,  
 And the blue-clad Niblung warriors the spears from the wall-nook take,  
 And gird the dusky hauberck, and the ruddy fur-coat don,  
 And draw the yellowing ermine o'er the steel from Welshland won.  
 Then they show their tokened war-shields to the moon-dog and the  
 stars,  
 For the hurrying wind of the mountains has borne them tale of wars.  
 Lo now, in the court of the warriors they gather for the fray,  
 Before the sun's uprising, in the moonless morn of day;  
 And the spears by the dusk gate glimmer, and the torches shine on the  
 wall,  
 And the murmuring voice of women comes faint from the cloudy hall:  
 Then the grey dawn beats on the mountains mid a drift of frosty snow,  
 And all men the face of Sigurd mid the swart-haired Niblungs know;  
 And they see his gold gear glittering mid the red fur and the white,  
 And high are the hearts uplifted by the hope of happy fight;  
 And they see the sheathed Wrath shimmer mid the restless Welsh-  
 wrought swords,  
 And their hearts rejoice beforehand o'er the fall of conquered lords:  
 And they see the Helm of Aweing and the awful eyes beneath,  
 And they deem the victory glorious, and fair the warrior's death.<sup>16</sup>

Initially we can notice the sheer pleasure in landscape that such writing expresses; it is a tour-de-force on Morris's part that he can find a suitably archaic idiom to evoke the winter landscape. In particular, the success of such conceits as the burg being the location for a 'windy battle', and the landscape being in the grip of the 'Rime-Gods', is dependent on the reader's sense at once of these being archaic ideas, and also of them genuinely evoking the harshness of the winter season. Set in this landscape, Morris is careful to indicate or suggest a particular social organisation, with its appropriate architecture of hall and burg. Even that classical marker of elevated diction, noun plus epithet ('dusky hauberck', 'ruddy fur-coat', 'yellowing ermine'), is used to specify some ethnographic detail, as in the 'tokened war-shields' seized by the Niblung warriors.

Implicit throughout Morris's version of the poem, then, is an understanding of the social roots of primitive epic, an understanding which is visible not in any modern framing device but in the social landscapes that are included in the poem, and in a thousand unobtrusive details of

vocabulary. However, while the poem is deeply 'historical' in this respect, it eschews that simpler historicism which seeks to trace a real history behind mythical or legendary events. You could not tell from Morris's version where in the world the poem is set, nor that the story has been identified with the migrations of the Burgundians, nor that the characters of Gunnar, Atli and Jormunrek can be identified with the historical Gundaharius, Attila and Ermenrichus.<sup>17</sup> It is as though Grote's belief that you cannot trace any historical actuality 'behind' the mythical material of ancient Greece had here been acted upon by Morris in the way that he translates this ancient Germanic material. This is a historicism which seeks to recreate a *geist*, not one which is especially interested in tying the poem down to a 'real' history. Morris even goes so far as to exclude those references which in the saga can be used to give the story more precise geographical locations.

Morris's effort to rewrite the 'Great Story of the North' for the nineteenth century, and thus to provide a national epic, was fraught with difficulties created by the story's antiquity. On the one hand, Morris's hatred of modern civilisation led him to propose the values of epic barbarism as a counterweight to the paltriness and ugliness of the contemporary world. On the other hand, his unwavering historicism led him into a kind of pastiche of primary epic; the poem is undoubtedly a virtuoso exercise in an astonishing idiom, but it is both wonderful and a poetic dead-end. Oddly enough, the embarrassments attendant upon the poem do not accompany Morris's translations (he is the nineteenth century's most prolific translator). Just as in the parallel case of Newman's translation of Homer, the reader can negotiate the archaism of the translations as providing an equivalent of the 'absolutely antique' character of the original poems. But in the case of an original epic, the reader has to understand the archaism as emerging from a particular stage of society and at the same time recognise it as an elaborate exercise in historical reconstruction. There is no doubting the energy and élan, and the extraordinary facility, of Morris as he writes in this mode; it is just that the mode itself is almost self-defeating; no one in the nineteenth century can write a primary epic, just as no one now can be a skald. *Sigurd the Volsung* springs out of this fundamental impossibility, as though the whole poem were in inverted commas or was prefaced by an 'as if'. Later in his life Morris was amused to receive a letter from a German scholar who wanted to know what were his sources for the prose romance *The House of the Wolfings* (1889). Morris was doubtless right to be amused; yet a similar anthropological premise, that this is how matters might have been, underlies the poem as it does the romance, and suggests both its strength and the ambivalence of Morris's achievement in it.