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POETRY AND PATRIOTISM
THE *IDEALISTIC SUBLIME* IN MACPHERSON'S ROMANTIC NATIONALISM

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> *In the end, people believe what they want to believe—and they wanted to believe in Ossian. The image of an aging, bearded bard crouched on a mountaintop composing tales of vanished heroes, gods, and maidens stirred the eighteenth century imagination (...) and triggered a vogue for all things old and Medieval.* (Herman 251)

The Ossian cycle of poetry by a young James Macpherson changed the eighteenth-century literary landscape with its tales of heroism, fame, and the supernatural. From the Treaty of Union in 1707, the Scottish nation found itself subsumed within a "Greater Britain" and the impassioned struggle of an oppressed Highland culture to preserve its identity occasioned the demand for traditional Scottish literature among British intellectuals. Ossian's epics did not only fulfill their scholarly purposes, but also achieved wide popularity across Europe, giving a new name and face to the nationalist sentiments of the Scottish Highlands. Macpherson's translations were hailed as the Gaelic equivalent of ancient epic and were widely regarded as the national poems of the Scottish people despite accusations of forgery. Macpherson originally wanted Ossian to be spoken of in the same breath as the Classical bards of ancient Greece or Rome. Although his aspirations in that regard may not have been realized, his work, through the revival of Medievalist tradition, had the unique effect of helping to inspire the early stages of the Romantic Movement that would dominate Europe for the better part of the next century. Macpherson established a tangible link between mythology and patriotism due to his obvious yearning for the perceived nobility and purity of his Scottish ancestors in his work, yet it was through his employment of the *idealistic sublime* that he traced Romantic Nationalism back to the early Middle Ages.

James Macpherson is as controversial as eighteenth-century literary figures come. He is accused of fabricating the majority of his

Ossianic poetry and had undeservedly plummeted into the abyss of scholars' collective memories until very recently. Although he died before ever admitting to it, the many embellishments in his verses have since been revealed when compared with Ossianic folklore that preceded Macpherson's translations. Lost in this fact, however, is that Macpherson was so disillusioned with the state of Gaelic folklore at the time, which in his opinion had been corrupted into fanciful depictions of a once-precious heritage and pushed aside as England attempted to instill British identity into the northernmost parts of the British Isles, that he, an obsessive traditionalist, intended to recapture the former glory and virtue of the oral tradition he had experienced first-hand while growing up in the Highlands. In fact, in her essay correlating the idea of Macpherson's reaffirmation of "Scottishness" and modernist Scottish literature, Nancy K. Gish explains that "Because of Scotland's marginalization with Britain, the central debates (...) were carried on in little magazines, newspapers, and short-lived journals" (Gish). This is to say that Macpherson lived in a period where Scottish literature, especially literature that focused on Scotland as a cultural group, was a topic reserved for rigidly devoted Scots and discussed only through the most limited mediums. Empowered by a devotion to his Highland roots and a first-class education in the Lowlands and attempting to create a parallel discourse on what it means to be Scottish, Macpherson's primary ambition was to create a work of art that could be placed beside the ancient epics of Homer and Virgil while staying true to the nature of Celtic oral tradition. This meant deviating from the popularized interpretations of Ossian, to whom, as fellow poet Anne Grant put it, "his successors had appended many extravagant and grotesque ornaments" (Grant).

Macpherson, himself a staunch opponent of the trivialization of Celtic mythology and generally disappointed with the work of his literary contemporaries, concluded that the only poetry that could do justice to the original material had to meet a standard on two levels. In the first, an adequate English translation of the poems should be a tribute to the nobility of Macpherson's understanding of Celtic mythology and should remain true to the somberness of its subject matter, both because the narrative called for it and as a reflection of the current state affairs in Scotland. Secondly, Macpherson was tasked with re-introducing the aesthetic elements that would elevate Ossianic poetry to the heights he had envisioned. This meant emphasizing the *idealistic sublime*, a convention which utilized elements of the supernatural to accentuate the altruism of Macpherson's Celtic heroes within the verses, while elegantly pushing the Highland agenda in Britain. Concerning James Macpherson's ambitious project,

Fiona J. Stafford surmises that his “ideal of restoration was to prove highly creative” (Stafford 84).

Naturally, any epic whose primary aim is to be placed alongside the works of Homer would first have to capture the same violent sublimity that characterized ancient epic. These neoclassical aspirations are clear in Macpherson’s idealistic image of Fingal or, as is repeated throughout the texts, “The first of men,” as well as other characters and their obstinate quest for ever-elusive *fame.* The concept of fame is a driving force for most of the heroes presented, from the stubborn Cuchullain to Fingal himself, whose reputation precedes him seemingly regardless of which part of the British Isles he is standing on. Cuchullain, referring to Fingal’s incoming reinforcements for his Irish army that had been left reeling at the hands of Swaran, heaps an inordinate amount of praise on his Scottish ally before he even sets foot on a shore:

> Come to the death of thousands, O chief of the hill of the hinds. Thy sails, my friend, are to me like the clouds of the morning; and thy ships like the light of heaven; and thou thyself like a pillar of fire that giveth light in the night. (Macpherson 68)

However, this passionate quest for fame would be meaningless were it not for the presence of the bards on the battlefield. If fame is a promise of immortality, the songs of the bards were the vessels that carried it from one generation onto the next, thus indicating the value of the bards and the need for them to be exalted. The poets in Macpherson’s work, whom are often shown lamenting the fallen and heaping praise on the victors, add a layer of intrigue to traditional war. It is often mentioned that they are men “of other times,” which means they are the keepers of ancestral mythology. Whereas in previous epic poetry the bard invoked the divine in order to give a larger-than-life implication to his words, here the bard’s role is to transcribe the legends of warriors and their battles, as if there exists a sacred link between the men reciting poetry and the mythical forefathers whose fame is being summoned. In Macpherson’s translations, often a bard sings to mark the beginning or end of the day’s conflict, but, occasionally, the bard’s role was to influence the battle itself. Bards like Carril and Ullin, not to mention Ossian, were poets whose ancestral songs somehow reach remote battlefields and raise the spirits of downcast soldiers, are examples of the inherent importance of poetry and the poet in the crafting of the sublime.

An example of this comes during the death of Oscar, an immediate misfortune within the opening lines of *Temora*, when it is shown how the influence of the bards in battle can work both ways. After Cairbar, a usurper of the Irish throne previously occupied by a distant

relative of Fingal named Cormac, invites Oscar, Fingal's grandson, to a feast in his hall in which the Irish villain had resolved to provoke Oscar into conflict. Olla, Cairbar's bard, ominously sings what could be understood as Oscar's death knell, warning him of his host's ill intentions. However, Olla's song is also successful in informing the far away Fingal, whose army is advancing on Cairbar's heath, of his grandson's imminent demise. Ossian describes the scene as follows:

> Cairbar rose in his arms; darkness gathered on his brow. The hundred harps ceased at once. The clang of shields was heard. Far distant of the heath Olla raised his song of woe. My son knew the sign of death; and rising seized his spear. (Macpherson 229)

Amidst the uproar and the cacophony of weapons, Olla, in this instance, serves as a sort of narrator to Cairbar's crimes. It is almost as if the singing of the words by a bard wills them into existence, thus inserting himself into the narrative and sharing in the fame that may result. The bard's premonitions become inevitability as even the great Fingal and his son are powerless to stop them from taking place. Oscar himself seems resigned to his death as he commits to a fatal bout against Cairbar, in which both characters would perish. He responds, "Tremble I at Olla's song? No: Cairbar, frighten the feeble; Oscar is a rock" (Macpherson 150). The exchange reveals that Oscar considers the bard as an agent of destiny, but would rather succumb to his fate than bring shame upon the memory of Cormac. This is useful in understanding both the reverence for ancestry as well as the at times unlimited power of the bards. Macpherson rarely presents us many objects he considers greater than his Ossianic heroes, but the one thing he places above man is poetry. His respect for the bard's role as the medium between man and song is never more evident than when he bestows to a rival bard equal or greater abilities than his titular poet.

"Haunting" might actually be the most accurate word to describe the poems of Ossian. Macpherson's definition and depiction of the sublime focuses less on the traditional concept of sublimity that so heavily involves theistic bliss or divinity, and instead highlights the natural beauty of the Scottish Highlands and the pervasive altruism of the main characters, namely Ossian, his son Oscar, and the titular Fingal, while mixing in many instances of the supernatural. Surely, the themes of blood and gore comprise a substantial part of the narrative of *Fingal* and *Temora*, but they mostly serve as the scattered remnants of Macpherson's neoclassical aspirations. Dr. Hugh Blair, who in 1763 published *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian*, describes the impression Macpherson's Ossianic poetry has on the reader as follows:

> There we find the fire and enthusiasm of the most early times, combined with an amazing degree of regularity and art. We find tenderness, and even delicacy of sentiment, greatly predominant over fierceness and barbarity. Our hearts are melted with the softest feelings, and at the same time elevated with the highest ideas of magnamity, generosity, and true heroism (Blair).

As Blair points out, the immensity of a text that would elegantly parallel the current plight of the Scots was not lost on Macpherson. However, sheer brutality was not a quality that Macpherson had in mind when he envisioned his heroes, and this is never more evident than in Swaran's defeat at the hands of Fingal. As the mythological Scottish hero invites his fiercest opponent to a feast in his own hall, the Viking warrior can only assume that it will be his final meal before execution for the crimes of invading Scottish land and inflicting numerous casualties among Fingal's men. Then, just as Swaran finds himself bargaining for his life by offering Fingal his entire fleet and promising land, Fingal, to the reader's surprise, decides to forgive him and let him off with a warning:

> Nor ship, replied the king, shall Fingal take, nor land of many hills. The desart is enough to me with all its deer and woods. Rise of thy waves again... Spread thy white sails to the beam of the morning, and return to the echoing hills of Gormal. (Macpherson 101)

In a perfect example of the idealistic sublimity displayed by Macpherson's prose, his warriors are not only endowed with superhuman abilities and his bards are not merely an omnipotent presence in the battlefield; they are humanized with the sort of chivalry popularized during the Middle Ages yet not commonly found in the works of Milton, Homer, or Virgil he so vehemently tried to emulate. Fingal exemplified this notion best when he offers counsel to his own son on the rules of engagement, as he advises Ossian to "Never seek the battle, nor shun it when it comes" (Macpherson 78). It may be that Macpherson feared his British audience, although eager to be included into the arcane elements of Highland thought, might consider the content of his poetry too primitive for their sophisticated tastes, but what he could not predict was the overwhelmingly positive reception even the most barbaric of his verses would garner.

Delving deeper into the aspects that made the poems of Ossian so appealing to an audience that had supposedly grown obsessed with logic in reason during the years encompassing the Age of Enlightenment; Adam Potkay explains that "The Enlightenment was fascinated with the 'savage' state of society" (Potkay 120). He asserts that while contemporary authors were researching Oriental literature, in essence the same practice of uncovering and exposing an unseen society in the context of eighteenth-century Europe, Macpherson was

successful in introducing the similarly striking mysticism of his native land to the refined palate of the Western European market, with the main difference being that this particular culture he spoke of was a mystery much more closer to home. In his opinion, Ossian's popularity is "derived in part from his representation of archaic modes of thought and uncorrupted ancient manner," which made his poetry "a palimpsest of savage and enlightened knowledge and manners; (...) it is a tale of two consciousnesses" (Potkay 121). James Macpherson allowed for his characters to reach levels of civic virtue and chivalry, almost to the point of chauvinism, that were considered unheard of in a Britain caught in the midst of a widespread societal tendency towards lucidity; so much so that it created at sense that the material itself was not purely Medieval, but instead Middle Age tales retold through a strictly proto-Romantic lens, which both exemplified and served as a precursor to the naturalism, tenderness, and even melodrama that would characterize the British Romantics that would follow, and draw inspiration from, Macpherson's collections.

Macpherson's frequent recourse into sentimentality amidst an atmosphere of rampant savagery is both a product of his refinement as a literary scholar and his own dejection at the state of his native land. He balances the generous spirit of the Ossianic heroes with their prowess in battle, without devolving into the "Gothick" style that would grow in popularity only a few years after the publication of his epics. It takes a particular command of words to turn the Herculean figures of the Scottish Highlands into thinking, feeling human beings without detracting from their god-like physical attributes, but in his prose Macpherson mastered the syntax he deemed most appropriate to describe his ancestors beautifully. In an article titled "The Lawless Language of Macpherson's Ossian," author Corinna Laughlin tackles the subtle quirks of Ossianic verse:

> Ossian's words are decidedly emotional; and yet it is hard to pinpoint the emotion, which is everywhere and nowhere. Not a single word describes feeling directly. We get no adjectives like 'sorrowful,' 'dreadful,' 'gloomy', no nouns like 'grief' or 'anguish.' (Laughlin)

The theory behind Macpherson's Romantic portrayal of a decidedly Medieval subject is that, although he had certain biases toward manufacturing a Gaelic-centric narrative, the literary devices he employed were a product of similar oral poetry translations and transcriptions that had been sweeping throughout Europe at the time. The demand for Romantic Nationalism in literature rose exponentially during the eighteenth century in art as well as society, stemming from the teachings of Rousseau and Kant and leading to a continental call for a revolution of the mind that would ideally precede a revolution

against the State. With this in perspective, Macpherson had no choice but aggrandize or beautify what little actual traditional poetry he stumbled upon, and he had no choice but to lace his original verses with the type of patriotism that predominated in popularized works such as the *Nibelungenlied* of Germany, the *Poema del Mío Cid* of Spain, and, although published nearly a century later, the *Kalevala* of Finland. As John Savarese concluded, “Macpherson worked at a moment when two conceptions of literature were diverging, both of which saw the poem as the source of real knowledge about the mind” (Savarese). Macpherson’s works were an attempt to impart the archaic wisdom of folk psychology a time where modern psychological criterion was a concept that had yet to be devised. Savarese later posits that the verse paragraph model Macpherson employs works as a sort of “storytelling” device, the same a parent would employ in advising a child, which is similar to oral narratives in the sense that each story has a moral, or life lesson, to be learned. He explains that, in functioning as one of the few remaining links between the Gothics and the Romantics, Macpherson’s Ossian provided a platform for the virtuous Highlander philosophy of life to reach a willing audience, much like the recently published national epics of Scotland’s neighboring countries.

Though the poems’ status as “recovered works” has since been disproven, Macpherson’s choice of words clearly reflected a reverence for the subject matter. Of course, the eccentric nature of his prose also led to critics like Samuel Johnson pointing out that the text felt too modern to be an accurate account of a 3rd-century mythological character. On the other hand, it also caused Thomas Jefferson to proclaim, “I am not ashamed to own that I think this rude bard of the North the greatest poet that has ever existed;” and it is rumored that Napoleon took his Italian-language Ossianic translations on many of his conquests throughout Europe. Ossian was a flash in the pan—a literary supernova that had the unprecedented effect of cultivating a renewed interest in the Medieval, specifically the Gaelic oral tradition that long toiled in the then-obscure and foreign Highlands. It could be theorized that while Macpherson was attempting to provide a translation faithful to the source content, he also made use of stylistic alterations in order to cater to an audience that was unfamiliar with the mythology, but nevertheless interested in lightly-ornamented, evocative prose. To this end, Macpherson’s collaborator Andrew Gallie remarked, “I think great credit is due to him who restores a work of merit to its original purity” (Gallie).

Ashley Chantley, in her book *English Romanticism and the Celtic World*, contributes to the cause of Macpherson enhancing his

understanding of Gaelic folklore by apologizing for him, and blaming his audience for not supporting the greater idea that Scotland's colonial issue warranted an outlet of epic proportions. "The problem with cases such as *Ossian*," she writes, "is that Macpherson has had too few fighting his corner; there have been too few telling the story from an Ossianic starting point" (Chantley). As so often happens with traditional Gaelic literatures, their origins are sometimes accompanied by a fabric of doubt, since foreign critics usually do not fail to scrutinize the Irish, Welsh, and Scottish tendency to romanticize their heritage in writing. In his book covering the Gaelic literary revival in Ireland, John Hutchinson elaborates on the delicate issue of a foreign language in serving as a vehicle for the championing of a nation's cultural identity by likening the Scottish plight to Ireland's. He observed that while the "Gaelic consciousness generated by the literary nationalists in English-speaking Ireland could act as a 'halfway' house in the battle against anglicization," the demolition of language barriers did little to "construct a new united nation synthesizing the Gaelic and English heritages" (Hutchinson 120). The revelation that Macpherson's "translations" were almost entirely fabricated only fueled the anti-Scottish sentiment pervasive with the British Isles at the time, the underlying merit of his artistic prowess notwithstanding. The *idealistic sublime* that Macpherson tried to convey, as inoffensively as possible, became a symbol of anti-imperialist propaganda in the eyes of many, whose only unfortunate remedy was to be shunned from readership, both by scholars and recreational readers alike. Of the Ossianic project and Macpherson's nationalist aspirations, James Porter points out:

> It is at [the intersection between Macpherson's treatment of Gaelic song and prose material and its folkloric accuracy] that the conflicting claims of the antiquarian and the artist meet and collide, and in Macpherson they were never entirely resolved even though the poems themselves became widely celebrated. (Porter)

Regardless of Macpherson's reputation as a forger, the fault lies on the author and not his work's capacity to inspire. Macpherson's Ossianic cycle of poetry attempted to go above and beyond the existing oral tradition because its place in English literary history demanded it, not because of an author's desire to fool his audience. The crafting of ancient Celtic heroes as idealized *men* who could do no wrong; the depiction of poets as superhuman beings who could control the outcome of battles not through their physical attributes, but through their mastery of text and speech; and finally, the idea of mythical fame as a means of instilling pride in an oppressed culture was lost on many critics who became entangled with the issue of the poems' authenticity and neglected the creation of an unofficial

yet much-needed national epic for the Scottish people. Macpherson presented eighteenth-century readers a savagery disguised as sublimity through the clever use of language and endeared its skeptical audience to the prospect of Scottish inclusion into “Greater Britain,” while simultaneously consolidating the Scottish identity that had long been condemned to wallow in obscurity.

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