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# 'A Comparison Similar to this': Ossian and the Forms of Antiquity

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## **‘A comparison similar to this’: *Ossian* and the Forms of Antiquity**

The first note to the 1763 version of *Temora* announced a number of departures from the editorial policy adopted in *Fingal* (1762 [1761]). One concerned the references to other poems that had been a prominent feature of *Fingal*:

If [...] in the form of his poems, and in several passages of his diction, [Ossian] resembles Homer, the similarity must proceed from nature, the original from which both drew their ideas. It is from this consideration that I have avoided, in this publication, to give parallel passages from other authors, as I had done, in some of my notes, on the former collection of Ossian’s poetry. It was far from my intention to raise my author into a competition with the celebrated names of antiquity. The extensive field of renown affords ample room to all the poetical merit which has yet appeared in the world, without overturning the character of one poet, to raise that of another on its ruin.<sup>1</sup>

The reasons given here have dictated critical discussion of the use and subsequent disavowal of the use of paratexts: that their deployment is about demonstrating that Ossian can be favourably compared to Homer; and that Macpherson changes his approach on the grounds that he has overplayed his hand and come close to revealing Ossian as no more than a palimpsest of previous writers. In *Temora*, as a consequence it is assumed, Macpherson restricts himself to a truism of cosmopolitan Scottish-Enlightenment thought about the ‘original’ of nature (a loaded word in the context of the debate, published and otherwise, that followed the publication of *Fingal*), and denies the one-upmanship that had contributed to the vehemence of the poems’ reception. If this second move seems a rather self-denying one it becomes clear as the note continues that he protests a little too much. Equally, Howard Gaskill notes that this is the first of a series of moves suggesting that Macpherson was becoming ‘jealous’ of Ossian: removing references to the classics was not, Gaskill says, ‘so much helping to emphasize Ossian’s authenticity as underlining his own originality’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Macpherson, *Temora, An Ancient Epic Poem in Eight Books: together with several other Poems composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (London: T. Becket and P. De Hondt, 1763), p.3-4 n.\*

<sup>2</sup> Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p.xxiv.

Yet considering these references to other poetry only in these terms involves adopting some rather polarised perspectives on *The Poems of Ossian* as a whole, involving questions of authenticity, originality, conspiracy and fraud; of precedence and of cultural politics. These questions are important, and answering them has enriched our understanding of *The Poems of Ossian*'s place in eighteenth-century letters, but they are not the only questions worth asking about the ways Macpherson uses other texts in the commentary to his poems. This article explores one such alternative dimension. It starts with the *Fingal* volume and some of the occasions when Macpherson makes significant reference to other texts in a footnote. In considering these afresh I hope to rise above the familiar terms of a debate between difference and similarity, about cultural superiority and poetic precedence, by emphasising the process of what David Hopkins has termed 'conversing with antiquity', and adopting Hopkins' sense that 'though acts of reception are necessarily made in and by individual minds, those minds are themselves already full of the imaginings, intuitions, and emotions of *other* human minds.'<sup>3</sup> The second section will consider *Temora*, and suggest that Macpherson does not abandon the tactic of 'conversing' with other literature, just does so in different ways and with different literatures. By way of a conclusion, I will consider a more fugitive and barely acknowledged conversation between *The Poems of Ossian* and one of the forms of antiquity – Tragedy – that was itself undergoing a re-evaluation during the middle third of the eighteenth century, a conversation that sheds useful light on the ways in which literary primitivism was mediated, and Ossian's place within that wider meditation.

### **I *Fingal***

There are eighty-eight significant references to other literary works in the notes to the 1762 edition of *Fingal*. There are twenty-three references to Homer (of which nineteen are to the *Iliad*) and eighteen each to Milton and Virgil. There is then a significant gap to six references to the Song of Songs and five to the Book of Samuel and Ossian himself.<sup>4</sup> References range from significant quotation and analysis to phrases offered without comment and for unspoken comparison. Milton, Homer and Virgil dominate in the epic *Fingal* (all but four of the thirty-four occurrences), while the repertoire widens to include the other, predominately sacred texts, in the shorter poems. In most cases classical texts are accompanied by translations from Pope (Homer) and Dryden (Virgil), though there is a small number of occasions where either the original or the translation is provided alone (the former is, predictably, more common with Latin than Greek writers). Sebastian Mitchell,

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<sup>3</sup> David Hopkins, *Conversing with Antiquity: English Poets and the Classics, from Shakespeare to Pope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.10.

<sup>4</sup> Others are: Job with two; and Strabo, Statius, Isaiah, Judges, Kings, the 18<sup>th</sup> Psalm, and Spenser with one each.

observing the misquotations and inconsistencies in the handling of Latin, Greek and English translation, has noted that 'it was clearly more important to convey a general sense of correspondence between the poems than achieving scholarly exactitude'.<sup>5</sup> This air of broad gesture rather than systematic analysis is exacerbated by the unevenness of distribution: references are clumped together, as if Macpherson is suddenly alert to the question of textual parallels before his attention wanders and he can go pages without feeling the need to draw attention to a similarity (Book 2 of *Fingal* has eight occurrences while Book 3 has only one, even though they are of roughly the same length).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, these instances do reward more serious consideration in terms of the overall experience of reading *The Poems of Ossian* than their apparently random nature might imply.

Traditionally, the relationship between *The Poems of Ossian* and the classics has been seen through one of two opposing positions. On the one hand, the supposed remains of the third-century Celtic poet Ossian presented to the modern world offered an entirely new frame of reference for the understanding of literature and of literary achievement. Across Europe, *The Poems of Ossian* provided an imaginative world, a cast of characters, a literary idiom and even a blind bard that could all be used to challenge the cultural hegemony of the classics.<sup>7</sup> The 'Northern Homer' sanctioned an interest in the indigenous literature of nations and cultures previously accustomed to consider themselves as being inferior to those of the classical world; and Ossian also increased the momentum behind historicist and primitivist understandings of Homer himself as primitive bard, rather than a source of timeless neo-classical truths and excellences.<sup>8</sup>

The alternative perspective accounts for Macpherson's activities through a more complex understanding of mid-eighteenth-century classical theory, and the role of the Edinburgh literati who sponsored the project (and in particular Hugh Blair). J. S. Smart claimed that Blair's 'very voice and accent may be detected in Macpherson's commentaries', noting that 'it was not easy to pour the bright wine of Celtic fantasy into the bottles of Blair.'<sup>9</sup> Bailey Saunders, a Macpherson apologist, was damning of Blair's role: 'if Blair, instead of waxing enthusiastic over the fancied discovery of a national epic, had applied to an examination of the poems, not any formal rules of criticism, but a little poetic genius, with an admixture of common sense, he could never have given Macpherson any

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<sup>5</sup> Sebastian Mitchell, 'Macpherson, Ossian and Homer's *Iliad*', in Howard Gaskill and Gerald Bär (eds), *Ossian and National Epic* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), p.56.

<sup>6</sup> It is possible that this betrays the involvement of Hugh Blair in the reference hunting.

<sup>7</sup> The most comprehensive account of Macpherson's impact is to be found in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Mary Margaret Rubel, *Savage and Barbarian: Historical Attitudes in the Criticism of Homer and Ossian* (Amsterdam and New York: North-Holland Publishing, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> John Semple Smart, *James Macpherson: An Episode in Literature* (London: D. Nutt, 1905), p.86, 102.

ground for supposing that the collection of lyrical pieces which he produced was characterised by an real unity, or possessed any other mark of a true epic.'<sup>10</sup> This is part of Saunders's wider attempt to rehabilitate Macpherson, but the mismatch of expectations that he articulates has been identified by other, less sympathetic critics too. Peter Womack has suggested that when Macpherson made his expeditions to the Highlands he was lumbered with a 'wholly inapplicable set of Augustan assumptions about what literature could be.'<sup>11</sup> Dispatched by the great and the good of the Edinburgh Enlightenment to find their epic poet, Macpherson knew exactly what was required of him:

an integral text, in an identifiable genre, with an individual author; what he will have had to go on is a protean collective tradition in genres quite different from the Greco-Roman ones he brought with him from Edinburgh.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, Macpherson may have been a Gaelic-speaking Highlander, but the frame of reference through which he understood the tales of his childhood and the further stories he collected, completed and invented, was that of mid-eighteenth-century classical theory as represented by Thomas Blackwell the Younger and others at Aberdeen, and Blair at Edinburgh, complemented by the Biblical investigations of Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753).

Such interpretations understand Macpherson's achievement as emerging by default, or by fortuitous accident, and, by extension, see the relationship between the Celtic and Classical in Ossian as the product of confusion. It ignores the fact that, as a number of Gaelic scholars have shown, the protean collective tradition does leave its mark on *The Poems of Ossian*, and that whatever readers thought they were encountering when they read *The Poems of Ossian*, they did not generally think that they were merely reading tartan-clad Homeric epic.<sup>13</sup> Equally, the eighteenth-century Hellenism that emerged around this time was itself a response to conventional Classicism, based around Latin culture, which makes any claim for a straightforward binary opposition between Celtic and Classical misleading.<sup>14</sup> Consideration of the ways in which forebears figure in the footnotes can take us in

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1895), p.188.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.108.

<sup>12</sup> Womack, *Improvement and Romance*, p.108.

<sup>13</sup> The most compelling account is provided by Donald Meek, 'The Gaelic Ballads of Scotland: Creativity and Adaptation', in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p.19-48.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Stafano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (London: Palgrave, 2009); David Ferris, *Silent Urns: Romanticism, Hellenism, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

more fruitful directions than this emphasis on uncomfortable and dissatisfactory accommodation. Macpherson was eager to stake out Ossian's place in the literary canon through a process of understanding the similarity and difference between Ossian, Homer, Virgil and Milton (and others) as one of relative emphasis, rather than total opposition, and by bringing Ossian into conversation with other epics.

The notes in *Fingal* draw attention to how Ossian and Homer had much in common with each other as natural, original geniuses. In this, Macpherson was balancing a cosmopolitan Scottish Enlightenment perspective – the one that in 1735 had allowed Thomas Blackwell to suggest that there was 'no greater proof of the power that *Manners* and the *Publick* character have over poetry, than the surprising resemblance of the oldest writings' (something, he thought could be observed in the use of the 'very same expressions and phrases') – with an attraction to the nascent Romantic idea that the earliest genius of a people represented something uniquely embodied in that people.<sup>15</sup> According to Macpherson, Ossian and Homer share an artistic sensibility that is drawn to particular episodes and events. However, they represent those episodes quite differently and in ways that reveal differences in their respective national tempers, as Macpherson puts it in the opening footnote to Book 8 of *Temora* (which echoes, even to the use of the same words, a point made by Blair in his *Critical Dissertation*):

The [Greeks] were lively and loquacious; and manly conciseness of expression distinguished the [Celtae]. We find, accordingly, that the compositions of Homer and Ossian are marked with the general and opposite characters of their respective nations, and consequently, it is improper to compare the minutiae of their poems together. There are however, general rules, in the conduct of an epic poem, which, as they are natural, are likewise, universal. In these the two poets exactly correspond.<sup>16</sup>

This is the informing insight of Macpherson's comparisons. For example, at the opening of Book 2 of *Fingal* the ghost of Crugal visits the sleeping Connal, an episode compared to similar moments in Homer and Virgil; or in Book 5, when the duel between Fingal and Swaran is compared with the wrestling match between Ulysses and Ajax in Book 23 of the *Iliad*.<sup>17</sup> Considering the second of these, Mitchell suggests that the key difference is in the way figurative language is used by Ossian and Homer, with Ossian merging 'literal and figurative imagery so that the simile conveys the central meaning of the passage, rather than illustrating an aspect of a given episode.'<sup>18</sup> The first of these is

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Blackwell, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London, 1735), p.72-3

<sup>16</sup> Macpherson, *Temora*, p.137, n.\*.

<sup>17</sup> Macpherson, *Fingal and Other Poems* (London: Becket and de Hondt, 1762), p.21,n.\*, p.62,n.\*.

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell, 'Macpherson, Ossian and Homer's *Iliad*', p.57.

an archetype of the way Ossian replaces the vivid, muscular, no-nonsense aesthetics of the classical writers with an altogether more ephemeral evocation of a dim shadow. Where the classical revenants are to all intents and purposes reanimated corpses, with the physicality they enjoyed in life and evidence of the wounds they suffered in death, Crugal is little more than a voice on the mountain air, 'the shadow of mist' as he describes himself to Connal.<sup>19</sup> That said, the fact that Macpherson quotes beyond Virgil's initial description of Hector's ghost offers another point of comparison:

Unlike that Hector, who return'd from toils  
Of war triumphant, in Æacian spoils:  
Or him who made the fainting Greeks retire,  
And launch'd against their navy Phrygian fire.  
His hair and beard stood stiffen'd with his gore;  
And all the wounds he for his country bore.<sup>20</sup>

While the final couplet is a-piece with Virgil/Dryden's representation of Hector's physicality, the intermediate lines heighten the emotional charge of the scene in ways that are more comparable with those found in *The Poems of Ossian*. Hector's wounds mean he is 'unlike that Hector' who in his pomp had won victories for the Trojans. It is as if Macpherson has made literal the weakness and the emotions the passage generates, objectifying the sentimental impact of the moment:

Dim, and in tears, he stood and stretched his pale hand over the hero — Faintly, he  
raised his feeble voice, like the gale of the reedy Lego.<sup>21</sup>

This sense of similarity in difference and difference in similarity can operate in more intricate ways still as Macpherson suggests a complex echo-chamber of texts. An example in Book 1 takes care to point out that Homer has 'very happily' been imitated by Statius and quotes Statius too. At this point, the reader is confronted with Ossian, Homer, Statius (as inspired by Homer), Pope's Homer (who could have read Statius but not Ossian), and Milton (who could have read Homer – though not Pope's Homer – and Statius, but not Ossian). Similarly, the 'address to the sun' that ends 'Carthon' (a passage that would become an Ossianic touchstone) is introduced with reference to its similarity to Satan's address to the sun in *Paradise Lost* IV, but also contains a reference to Virgil both in Latin

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<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed comparison between these, see Dafydd Moore, 'James Macpherson's *Iliad* and the Logic of Literary Primitivism', in Dafydd Moore (ed.), *The International Companion to James Macpherson and Ossian* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, forthcoming in 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Macpherson, *Fingal*, p.22, n.

<sup>21</sup> Macpherson, *Fingal*, p.22.

(available to Milton), and as translated by Dryden. Ossian is then being placed in relation and conversation with a series of connected and parallel poetic voices and is substantiated as a poetic voice himself through a process of 'socialisation', as it were, which is more thoroughgoing than at first sight.

This process of socialisation within the corpus of heroic literature generates meanings not necessarily apparent from the main body of the text. It is part of the way that, as Fiona Stafford has observed, Macpherson is able to 'introduce more complicated ideas, without sacrificing the simplicity of the poetry itself.'<sup>22</sup> The final book of *Fingal* is a case in point. Swaran is defeated in Book 5, and the business of the sixth is reconciliation, the settling the terms of his honourable defeat and cheering up both Swaran and the commander of the Irish forces, Cuchullin, who had been moping around since his own defeat earlier in the poem. These tasks accomplished, the Caledonians 'rose on the wave with songs, and rushed, with joy, through the foam of the ocean'.<sup>23</sup> Macpherson's footnote directs readers to the conclusion of *The Iliad*, *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost*:

It is allowed by the best critics that an epic poem ought to end happily. This rule, in its most material circumstances, is observed by [...] Homer, Virgil and Milton; yet, I know not how it happens, the conclusions of their poems throw a melancholy damp on the mind. One leaves his reader at a funeral; another at the untimely death of a hero; and a third in the solitary scenes of an unpeopled world.<sup>24</sup>

This feels at odds with the joyfully singing Celtic warriors taking to their boats to return home. Reconciling the contradiction involves re-reading what has just gone before with this idea of 'melancholy damp' in mind. Chances are that readers will light on a single comment a few paragraphs back, which undermines the optimism of the close of the poem with a familiar Ossianic prolepsis:

Ullin gave the song, and Carril raised the voice. I, often, joined the bards, and sung of battles of the spear — Battles! Where I often fought; but now I fight no more. The fame of my former actions is ceased; and I sit forlorn at the tombs of my friends.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the conversation with the classics joined by Macpherson in this footnote leads to a reorientation of the emotional tenor of the end of *Fingal*. Furthermore, it collectively allows

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<sup>22</sup> Fiona Stafford, 'Fingal and the Fallen Angels: Macpherson, Milton and Romantic Titanism', in Fiona Stafford and Howard Gaskill (eds), *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), p.168.

<sup>23</sup> Macpherson, *Fingal*, p.85.

<sup>24</sup> Macpherson, *Fingal*, p.85, n.\*.

<sup>25</sup> Macpherson, *Fingal*, p.84.



Macpherson to reinforce his own critical perspective in a debate with ‘the best critics’ on the endings of epic poems, namely that superficial joy masks disturbing undercurrents of a more profound sadness. In this way, Ossian speaks to antiquity, and antiquity speaks to, or perhaps for, Ossian .

## II *Temora*

When what became the first book of *Temora* appeared in the *Fingal* volume it was accompanied by two references to passages of Homer and Virgil. In a move consistent with the foreswearing of such things, these are removed in the eight-book version of 1763. Instead, the reader is treated to the expansion of a note concerning the events of the poem within the Irish historical tradition. This involves offering a précis of a Gaelic poem ‘just now in my hands’, and quoting 8 lines of Gaelic verse.<sup>26</sup> This is a sign of things to come, as across the 8 books of the epic *Temora* Macpherson references and quotes from Gaelic verse on nineteen occasions: fifteen translations of Gaelic poems and 4 instances when he directly quotes Gaelic. These do not replace the classical references of the earlier poem in terms of volume or level of engagement, but they do perform substantially the same function, engaging *The Poems of Ossian* in a literary conversation with congruent literary and poetic practices. These Gaelic poems fall into two categories: firstly, five fragments Macpherson claims to be by Ossian himself but which are not complete enough to justify inclusion in their own right (the qualification for inclusion being, he says, ‘compleat poems, or independent episodes’).<sup>27</sup> The second, broader, category includes poems or fragments Macpherson claims to be from traditions, ancient and somewhat less so, inspired by Ossian. There is also a poem by one Colgan, who is termed a contemporary bard.<sup>28</sup>

The fragments that are ascribed to Ossian perform a function consistent with what Kathryn Temple calls ‘the authenticity effect’ in the apparatus surrounding *Ossian*, as Macpherson weighs up options and exerts quality control.<sup>29</sup> Equally, in the light of Gaskill’s comments about the way in which Macpherson gradually repositions himself in terms of the relative status of poet and translator/editor, they underline the importance of the translator in rescuing Ossian from ruin. They mark a partial scholarly failure on Macpherson’s part – in that his researches have not turned up

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<sup>26</sup> Macpherson, *Temora*, p.13, n.†

<sup>27</sup> Macpherson, *Temora*, p.104, n.\*

<sup>28</sup> Macpherson, *Temora*, p.60.

<sup>29</sup> Kathryn Temple, *Scandal Nation: Law and Authorship in Britain, 1750-1832* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p.97. For the seminal importance of Macpherson combination of primitive poet and scholarly apparatus, see also Robert Crawford, *The Modern Poet: Poetry, Academia and Knowledge since the 1750s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.53.

more complete versions of these treasures – but in doing so remind the reader what does exist of Ossian is exclusively down to Macpherson’s scholarship and fieldwork.<sup>30</sup> Of the Gaelic poems not ascribed to Ossian himself, some are explicitly referred to as an ‘imitation’ of Ossian; others merely as part of ‘tradition’; some are described as ancient, some of a much more recent vintage. They are rendered into Macphersonian/Ossianic prose-poetry. These work to create a poetic tradition and a body of verse that is both anchored around Ossian and instantiates Ossian as the origin of such a Gaelic corpus. Macpherson implies that this cultural inheritance owes its existence to Ossian, underlining his importance. Positing an Ossian-inspired tradition also internalises the question of authenticity; acknowledging and accommodating the notion of ‘Ossian’ poems from a later age that can act, negatively, as lightning rods, or, more positively, as relative measures of the real Ossian’s substance and value.

In *Fingal*, Ossian is in conversation with texts recognisable from the classical and wider English tradition. In *Temora* that conversation is conducted with a Gaelic tradition that Ossian is envisaged as having developed. It is notable that, despite Macpherson’s increasing interest in the historical evidence about ancient Britain Ossian supposedly provides, relatively few of these engagements with literary artefacts are to do with historical matters. The *Temora* dissertations are full of ethnic and aesthetic slurs upon the Irish and their literary traditions, but the notes accompanying the poems are relatively (though not entirely) free of such point scoring. Instead, they concern themselves with aesthetic, and more particularly sentimental matters, offering further examples of Gaelic poetry’s interest in lament, in night pieces, and in melancholy natural description. These literary parallels and discussions also add something significant to the reader’s overall sense of Ossianic poetry in formal terms. Over half of the examples, and all the more significant ones, are either dialogues or monologues (so speech acts rather than passages of narration). They offer important reinforcement to an idea that emerges ever more insistently across the volume, namely the generic or poetic fragmentation of Ossian’s Gaelic, and Macpherson’s careful observation (he says) of the differences in the type of poetry used in Gaelic: lyric, narrative, and dramatic. Three times in *Temora* V, for example, Macpherson talks of the changing nature of the original, a sudden burst of ‘lyric measure’, the beauty of which cannot be rendered in translation.<sup>31</sup>

The idea that *The Poems of Ossian* might be better classified as lyric drama than epic poetry has some pedigree. Horace Walpole advised, on seeing the manuscript of *Fingal*, that Macpherson turn

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<sup>30</sup> It is easy to sneer, but as Thomas McKean reminds us, Macpherson was pioneering in his methods. See his ‘The Fieldwork Legacy of James Macpherson’, *The Journal of American Folklore* 114:454 (2001), 447-63.

<sup>31</sup> See *Temora*, p.83n.\*, 92n.\*, 95n.\*.

the text 'dramatic' through the addition of character names next to speeches.<sup>32</sup> Malcolm Laing was responding to something similar when in 1805 he characterised Ossian, with his characteristic combination of perspicuity and acerbity, as an 'absurd admixture of the past and the present, of epic, lyric, and dramatic poetry.'<sup>33</sup> More recently, Gerald Tyson observed that 'Macpherson's adoption of an antiphonic verse structure for Ossianic poetry emphasised the oracular and dramatic qualities which formed part of his conception of primitive poetry', and Ian Haywood has suggested that from the first of the *Fragments*, 'the dramatic nature of the poetry was established', claiming that "The Songs of Selma" represents the dramatisation of various of the *Fragments* in as much as they are 'transformed into felt experience'.<sup>34</sup> This dramatic nature goes beyond poems that advertise themselves as such (as it happens "Comála: A Dramatic Poem" is oddly unimpressive as a dramatic exercise). "Croma" may be one of Ossian's poems, but it begins with a 300-word lament by Malvina (which in itself evokes another voice and directly represents a third) before Ossian himself speaks. Equally "Dar-thula" only really comes alive when the reader tunes their ear to the lyric eddying of time and event, the confusion of the present with images of past and future, the use of refrain and counter-refrain (in particular 'the winds deceive'). Read as such, it reminds one of nothing so much as the choral ode, a point to which this article shall return.

For Macpherson, the analogy with drama accompanies discussion of differing priorities of composition, as in this note to Book 6 of *Temora*:

I have in a preceding note, observed that the abrupt manner of Ossian partakes much of the nature of the Drama. The opening of is a confirmation of the justness of this observation. Instead of a long detail of circumstances delivered by the poet himself, about the descent of Cathmor from the hill [...], he puts the narration in the mouth of Fingal. The relation acquires importance from the character of the speaker [...] The apostrophes which are crowded on one another, are expressive of the perturbation of Fingal's soul.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Cited in Paul deGatigno, *James Macpherson* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), p.32. See also Margaret M Smith, 'Prepublication Circulation of Literary Texts: The Case of James Macpherson's Ossianic Verses', *The Yale University Library Gazette* 64 (April 1990), p.132-57.

<sup>33</sup> Malcolm Laing, *The Poems of Ossian*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1805), vol. I.384.

<sup>34</sup> Gerald P. Tyson, "'Feast of Shells": The Context of James Macpherson's Ossianic Poetry' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Brandeis University, 1969), p.119; Ian Haywood, *The Making of History: A Study in the Literary Forgeries of James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton in Relation to Eighteenth-Century Ideas of History and Fiction* (Cranbury N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1986), p.78, 95. See also James Mulholland, 'James Macpherson's Ossian Poems, Oral Tradition, and the Invention of Voice', *Oral Tradition* 24:2 (2009), p.393-414.

<sup>35</sup> Macpherson, *Temora*, p.99, n.\*.

This emphasis on a quasi-dramatic form moves quickly then from being a question of the accurate rendering of an original, via the lauding of Ossian's literary genius, to be a suitable way of representing the actual and psychological drama of the narrative as it unfolds. And the effect of this representation is the vivid articulation of what Hugh Blair calls in his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763) 'the moral or sentimental sublime' that is central to the Ossianic effect.<sup>36</sup>

Macpherson maintains throughout a commitment to the epic as the appropriate generic framework for understanding Ossian's work: as he put it in the first footnote to the poem, he 'imposed' the 'title of epic' on a collection of 'broken fragments' that he was able 'to reduce [...] into that order in which it now appears'.<sup>37</sup> This language of imposition and reduction is interesting, and the measured prose of *The Poems of Ossian* masks a consistent investment in the idea that Macpherson was dealing with Gaelic texts characterised by formal heterogeneity and abrupt transitions in which a reference to lyric drama is never far away. It is as if he is maintaining a commitment to a form the limits of which his own poetic practice was otherwise intuiting, but which he could only address in fugitive ways. It certainly suggests another reason why Macpherson felt that references to the recognised greats of epic were not always suitable for his purposes.

To arrive at such a point is, however, to arrive at a rather old-fashioned "pre-Romantic" Macpherson, a representative of a poetic moment in which writers reached for forms of expression almost in spite of themselves. We are back with Bailey Saunders blaming Hugh Blair for blighting Ossian with the dead-hand of neo-classicism. But there are other ways of thinking about the oblique association of Ossian with a Gaelic form closer to lyric drama than epic poetry in the light of the period's changing perceptions of tragic drama itself. This is not a question of precedence, influence or inspiration, and it works by suggestive parallels, and a shared critical vocabulary rather than direct connections. Above all, it is an example of what Hopkins calls 'the processes of self-transcendence, self-discovery, meeting and mingling, both in and out of time, that are involved in all acts of literary reception.'<sup>38</sup> So by way of conclusion, I want to explore further the idea that this more dramatic Ossian was instrumental in allowing Blair (and perhaps others) to evolve a discourse of primitivism that could accommodate early classical drama in the shape of Aeschylus.

### III Primitivism and Drama

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<sup>36</sup> Blair, *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian*, in Gaskill (ed.), *Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, p.395 (and passim).

<sup>37</sup> *Temora*, p.3 n.\*

<sup>38</sup> Hopkins, *Conversing with Antiquity*, p.36.

In *The Dunciad* one of the abortive works committed to the flames by the ‘industrious bug’, Cibber, is ‘his own cold Aeschylus’.<sup>39</sup> The ‘anti-Christ of wit’ has managed to turn the ‘fire and boldness’ associated with Aeschylus since antiquity ‘cold’. But the placing of Aeschylus amongst the ‘nonsense precipitate’ of Cibber’s garret is revealing of an attitude to the Athenian himself, and it would be fifty years before anyone did bother to publish an English translation of Aeschylus, Thomas Morrell’s *Prometheus Bound* (1773). It was not until 1777 that Robert Potter published a translation of all his extant plays (and that remained the only one until the 1820s). Early Modern criticism was similarly ambivalent about Aeschylus. Of the 127 Greek, Latin and parallel text editions of Greek plays in sixteenth-century Cambridge, only four were of Aeschylus.<sup>40</sup> Two hundred years later, when Lord Bolingbroke reported that ‘Athenians are said to have been transported into a kind of martial phrenzy by the representation of the tragedy of Aeschylus, and to have marched under this influence from the theatre to the plains of Marathon’, he was being entirely complimentary.<sup>41</sup> Aeschylus was notably missing Elizabeth Montagu’s claim that ‘the period when Sophocles and Euripides wrote was that in which the fine arts, and polite literature, were in a degree of perfection which succeeding ages have emulated in vain’.<sup>42</sup> He was credited for formalising Athenian theatre and was compared favourably with what was understood to have come before; but comparisons with what came afterwards were usually less flattering. Summarising their reception in post-Restoration England, Paulina Kewes has suggested that while Euripides’ ‘mastery of the passions answered the period’s obsession with sentiment and sensibility’, and Sophocles was available as ‘a stalking horse for political innuendo’, Aeschylus had to wait until the later eighteenth-century’s interest in the primitive and unruly to gain more unambiguous critical appreciation.<sup>43</sup> In 1750 the *Biographica Classica*’s survey of opinions, from the positive (Longinus) to the ambivalent (Rapin), offers an equation that

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<sup>39</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad Variorum*, Book 1, ll.210 and note, in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt, (London: Routledge, 1992), p.366.

<sup>40</sup> See Tanya Pollard, ‘Greek Playwrights and Dramatic Forms in Early Modern England’, in Allison Deutermann and Andreas Kisey (eds), *Forms of Early Modern Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p.99-123. The prime point of reference for work in this field is Rudolph Hirsch, ‘The Printing Tradition of Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles and Aristophanes’, *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* 39 (1964), p.138-146.

<sup>41</sup> *Letters on the Study and Use of History by the Late Right Honourable Henry St John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke* (London, 1752), p.96.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare, compared with the Greek and French Dramatists* (London, 1785), p.14.

<sup>43</sup> See Paulina Kewes, ‘Drama’, in Stuart Gillespie and David Hopkins (eds), *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English, vol. 3 1660-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.241-52; David Stoker, ‘Greek Tragedy with a Happy Ending’, *Studies in Bibliography* 46 (1993), p.282-302; Penelope Wilson, ‘Classical Poetry and the Eighteenth-Century Reader’, in Isobel Rivers (ed.), *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982); Malcolm Kensall, ‘The Classics and the Eighteenth Century Theatre’, in David Hopkins and Charles Martindale (eds.), *Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature vol. 3 (1660-1790)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.447-76; Penelope Wilson, ‘The Place of the Classics in Education and Publishing’, in Hopkins and Martindale (eds), *Oxford History of Classical Reception*, p.29-52.

balances 'noble boldness of expression', the air of the 'lofty and heroic', 'bold and daring' epithets with a degree of pomposity and bombast: a 'sense too often obscured by figures', a concentration on words not thoughts and the frankly discouraging statement that 'one can scarce understand anything of his Tragedy of Agamemnon'.<sup>44</sup> By 1793 Thomas Francklin was characterising Aeschylus as:

A bold, nervous, animated writer: his imagination fertile, but licentious; his judgement true, but ungoverned, his genius lively but uncultivated; his sentiments noble and sublime, but at the same time wild, irregular and frequently fantastic.<sup>45</sup>

Where the earlier writer had ascribed Aeschylus's stylistic excesses as a matter of rhetorical choice (pomposity, an addiction to figurative language over sense), Francklin's formulation echoes the literary primitivism that in the preceding thirty years had identified in the earliest of literary productions a primitive energy and spontaneous lyricism indivisible from a rudeness of execution. Equally, when in 1786 Richard Polwhele yoked together Aeschylus, Sophocles and Ossian as warrior-poets responsible for stoking the martial temperament of their respective societies it was without the facetious tone that had marked Bolingbroke's comment a generation earlier.<sup>46</sup>

Potter was key to bringing this critical perspective to bear, as was Hugh Blair, co-sponsor (at least) of *The Poems of Ossian* and one of the most influential rhetoricians of the age. Blair's exact role in the production of Ossian will never be known: David Raynor was almost certainly right in suggesting that 'we have reason to be pessimistic about the possibility of ever untwisting the aesthetic principles of Hume and Blair from Macpherson's fancy'.<sup>47</sup> Blair, writing and delivering his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* at the same time as he was helping Macpherson bring at least the *Fingal* volume of *The Poems of Ossian* to life, is key here, not only because he describes Aeschylus in a way reminiscent of his description of Ossian, but also because he describes Ossian in a way that is alive to the dramatic qualities this article has sought to identify. It is true that the *Temora* volume was prepared for the press after Macpherson had moved to London and, therefore, beyond Blair's immediate influence (though that influence had also by that time crystallised into Blair's *Critical Dissertation*, so in a very literal sense Macpherson was able to carry Blair's thoughts on Ossian with him). Macpherson's relocation to London may account for some of the differences of emphasis noted in this article, though it is difficult to believe that Macpherson's view of his material substantially changed, or that he was not expressing that view to Blair, even if it only finds explicit

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<sup>44</sup> *Biographica Classica: The Lives and Characters of all the Classical Authors* (London, 1750), p.76-8.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Francklin, *The Tragedies of Sophocles* (London, 1793), p.50.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Polwhele, *The Idyllia, Epigrams, and Fragments, of Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus, with the Elegies of Tyrtaeus* (Exeter, 1786), p.223

<sup>47</sup> David Raynor, 'Ossian and Hume', in Gaskill (ed.), *Ossian Revisited*, p.161.

printed expression in *Temora*. Yet whether Blair's thinking about Aeschylus is influenced by his interactions with Macpherson about Ossian, vice versa, or whether indeed Ossian and Aeschylus exist in a reciprocal relationship is less important than noting the moment of literary conversation this represents.

Both Potter and Blair define tragedy in relation to epic. Potter starts with a description of tragedy traditionally ascribed to Aeschylus himself as 'a single dish taken from the great feast of Homer.'<sup>48</sup> This is not a statement of modesty. It represents a decision to represent and to ventriloquize the action through the deployment of voices, rather than through narration (that is, the distinction we have seen Macpherson articulate above). 'Tragedy' is, Potter says, 'one point of place, and one point of time', and that concentration of focus, that command over one episode means that tragedy is able to 'advance with rapidity, and seize the heart at once.'<sup>49</sup> Blair echoes this notion that the expansiveness of the epic in terms of subject matter, feeling and scene is in tragedy traded for an intense focus on the 'knowledge of the human heart': 'Sentiment, Passion, Pity and Terror, should reign throughout a tragedy.'<sup>50</sup> In his *Lectures*, it is tragedy, not epic, that provides 'the mirror in which we behold ourselves', and which offered greatest evidence of the 'ancient's profound knowledge of the human heart.'<sup>51</sup> This echoes Blair notion of the 'the sentimental sublime' in Ossian, the key vehicle through which Ossian explores 'the mythology of human nature'.<sup>52</sup> This intense focus on one theme is highlighted and described as 'dramatick' by Blair in his *Critical Dissertation* (one of two occasions where he identifies *Ossian* with the rules of drama rather than epic). Notably, Blair's *Lectures* make no mention of Ossian in his discussion of epic. He had already published what was his lecture on Ossian as the *Critical Dissertation*, but it is nevertheless striking that the printed *Lecture* that most closely echoes Blair's views on Ossian as expressed in the *Critical Dissertation* is the one on tragedy, not epic.<sup>53</sup>

Blair and Potter both adapt the conventional wisdom about Aeschylus via a language of literary primitivism familiar from Blair's *Critical Dissertation*. Potter talks of the 'free scope' Aeschylus gives to 'his unbounded imagination', the manner in which he 'exerted the strength and ardour of his genius with a wild and terrible magnificence.'<sup>54</sup> Blair is more qualified, but the equation is the same:

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Potter, *The Tragedies of Aeschylus* (London: W. Strahan & T. Cadell, 1779), p.xiv.

<sup>49</sup> Potter, *Tragedies of Aeschylus*, p.xvi

<sup>50</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 volumes, (Edinburgh, 1783), vol II.478, 492-3

<sup>51</sup> Blair, *Lectures*, vol. II.478.

<sup>52</sup> Blair, *Critical Dissertation*, p.368, 394-5.

<sup>53</sup> See Yoshiaki Sudo, 'An Unpublished Lecture of Hugh Blair on the Poems of Ossian', *The Hiyoshi Review of English Studies* 25 (1995), p.160-94.

<sup>54</sup> Potter, *Tragedies of Aeschylus*, p.xxiii

Aeschylus is 'bold, nervous, and animated; but very obscure and difficult to read', his plays full of 'fire and elevation.'<sup>55</sup> In such descriptions Blair echoes what he had said about Ossian:

Has he the spirit, the fire, the inspiration of a poet? Does he utter the voice of nature?  
Does he elevate by his sentiments?[...] Does he make his readers glow, and tremble,  
and weep?<sup>56</sup>

The suggestion here, then, is that Blair's interest in ideas of the original, the sublime and the primitive can be traced in his response to Ossian and to Aeschylus (and perhaps in *The Poems of Ossian* themselves). Recovering the lyrical and dramatic Ossian as emphasised by Macpherson in his parallels and allusions sharpens our appreciation of this and to the wider importance of *The Poems of Ossian*, in this case in the creation of a critical discourse around the primitive style that accompanies the re-visioning of Aeschylus.

This essay has considered Macpherson's engagement with other literatures in the *Poems of Ossian*, not as a question of source-hunting or quasi-plagiarism, but as a mutually illuminating conversation with other traditions, languages and forms. In going beyond the conventional heroic genres this conversation is committed to the formulation and reformulation of different ways of writing. Macpherson reads (and creates) Ossian in the light of the texts of the past, and those texts in the light of Ossian, reaching for a way of writing that contains the conflicting demands of on the one hand, the bardic, the sublime and the pathetic for spontaneity and discontinuity, and on the other hand, those of neo-classical formalism for rigour and unity. In doing so, he provides an instrument of thought and aesthetic sense that contributes to the evolving discourse of poetic genius and literary primitivism in unexpected ways, and which suggest new ways of thinking about the relationship between the Gaelic and Classical worlds in the eighteenth century.

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<sup>55</sup> Blair, *Lectures*, vol. II.515-16.

<sup>56</sup> Blair, *Critical Dissertation*, p.398.