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Peter T. Murphy

Burns, Ossian and Real Scottish Genius

While I have published on both James Macpherson and Robert Burns, I discovered, when I began to think about the subject of this essay, that in many years of work on these writers I had not ever thought, in a directed way, about the influence of Macpherson on Burns. By “influence” I mean, broadly speaking, a consideration of what difference it made for Burns that Macpherson had published before him. The first somewhat disappointing fact I encountered in the course of this project was that Burns refers clearly to the Ossian poems only once in all of his poetry, and there are only a few references elsewhere in all his writings. At this point I began to feel as I assume our students feel after we have given them an especially clever comparison-style paper topic: what can one say when the primary evidence is negative, a description of an absence? A few steps further, and I began to feel much better. There is not only real reason to talk about what difference it made to Burns that Macpherson came before him—reasons that are, I think, primarily cultural rather than directly literary—but in fact the one clear reference to Ossian in Burns’s poetry also turns out to be an especially interesting and expressive one. Putting Ossian and Burns next to each other can indeed tell us things of interest about both.

Macpherson’s Ossian books rank among the most popular books of the second half of the eighteenth century, but if we measure influence by the presence of imitators and direct reference, the Ossian poems are not, curiously enough, deeply influential writing, at least in English. In Europe they were enormously influential—Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*, for instance, quotes Ossian for pages and pages at a central moment in the story—but it is

rare to find a place in English literature that wants to follow the style or even the subject of Macpherson's work. What we see instead, in English, is reference of the broadest sort, and instead of imitators Ossian inspires a general upsurge in interest in the Highlands in general. Writers tend to think of themselves as parallel to Ossian rather than descended from him.

It is interesting that this should be so; it is interesting primarily because the Ossian books were so popular, and figured so heavily in literary talk and general cultural life for so long. Almost all writers of any consequence for the seventy or so years after 1760 declare, at some point in their careers—usually some young point—their real love of the Ossian poems. Burns's case illustrates some features of why this is, and I will come to this illustration. A secondary feature that I find interesting, and which I mention simply for its own sake, is that many of the Ossian texts are really very interesting themselves—beautiful even. If we leave aside *Fingal* and *Temora*, which are turgid and impossible, and concentrate on Macpherson's first little book, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, published in 1760, we find small and delightful prose lyrics of an individual and lovely cast: prose pieces of real originality and real beauty.¹ That this beauty should not have led writers in English to imitation is curious, and would be worth a separate discussion.

Robert Burns is one of those writers of consequence who declare their love for Ossian. He does so a couple of times, but the most remembered moment is in a letter to his former schoolmaster John Murdoch in 1783. In that letter Burns declares that his

favorite authors are of the sentimental kinds, such as Shenstone, particularly his Elegies, Thomson, Man of feeling, a book I prize next to the Bible, Man of the World, Sterne, especially his Sentimental journey, M^cpherson's Ossian, &c. these are the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct²

It is interesting, and symptomatic, that Burns talks about his conduct instead of his writing here. After saying this he goes on to describe his sentimental alienation from the manners and concerns of the marketplace, his poetic distance from "the paulty [*sic*] concerns about which the terra-filial race fret and fume" (*Letters*, I, 18). Since we know, looking back, that "paltry concerns" and the trials of the everyday are the things that call out Burns's greatest poetry, the first fundamental fact of the relationships between the Ossian books and Burns

¹At this writing, there is still no "authoritative" edition of the Ossian poems. The *Fragments* can be found in *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, Augustan Reprint Society Publication No. 122 (Los Angeles, 1966). My edition for the general works is *Poems of Ossian* (Boston, 1860). Henceforth *Ossian*.

²Quoted from *The Letters of Robert Burns*. 2nd edn, ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 17. Henceforth *Letters*.

is that Ossian presides, with others, over a phase we are glad Burns leaves behind.

In other words, Burns summons up Ossian as so many writers do: as an atmosphere, a presence, but not as a literary model or a direct inspiration. I want to address what it means to summon Ossian in this way, what it means for Burns to refer to Ossian; it turns out that the best way of doing this is to follow the single thin but strong thread that leads from Macpherson to Burns. That thread is made from one word—the word “duan,” an Ossianic term for book or canto—which appears, along with a footnote to Macpherson, in that most interesting and flawed poem, “The Vision,” in the Kilmarnock edition of 1786. Following that thread requires starting with some descriptions of James Macpherson and his Ossian project.

These days we tend to know of the Ossian phenomenon, but we tend not to know what was really inside it; we tend, especially, not to know what the works themselves are really like.³ These texts—we could call them prose poems—are often described as “forgeries.” This is true in a legal sense: they are attributed by Macpherson to someone who didn’t write them (actually, he attributes them to someone who didn’t exist, a mythic figure from Gaelic tradition). As a description, though, it does not help us understand the interest or charm of these works. For instance, I think someone could produce them in our time and generate very little complaint. They could be labeled poems “inspired by” the classical tradition of oral Gaelic verse (the Ossianic ballads), and they would likely be received with little fanfare and some pleasure.

Macpherson started by showing small pieces to the Edinburgh elite, published as the “fragments,” and he finished by constructing longer pieces, *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763), which he called epics. As I have argued elsewhere, what Macpherson wanted above all was to get famous, and the making of epics was an important part of that task; and they accomplished this task very effectively. Macpherson did indeed become famous, and rich too. His career, which was various, but ended with him buying a Highland estate and settling in as a Highland squire, was based almost entirely on his essentially unscrupulous relationship to writing, a characteristic that made him, for instance, an obedient and effective writer of political propaganda.

Here is an extract from the *Fragments*:

Why openest thou afresh the spring of my grief, O son of Alpin, inquiring how
Oscur fell? My eyes are blind with tears; but memory beams on my heart. How can
I relate the mournful death of the head of my people! Prince of the warriors, Oscur
my son, shall I see thee no more! He fell as the moon in a storm; as the sun from the
midst of his course, when clouds rise from the waste of the waves, when the black-

³A good introduction can be gained by reading the Macpherson chapter in my book *Poetry as an Occupation and an Art* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 9-48. I refer there to many sources for further exploration.

ness of the storm inwraps the rocks of Ardannider. I, like an ancient Oak on Morven, I moulder alone in my place.⁴

These are in fact the founding lines of the Ossian phenomenon, the first lines of the first fragment Macpherson showed to John Home in 1759.

What contemporary and near-contemporary readers saw in this writing can be put in three main categories. The first is, again, the arresting, occasionally quite beautiful prose style, which got Macpherson the immediate attention he needed. The second is Ossian himself, the melancholy singer, wrapped up in his lonely, self-absorbed remembering of past glory. Here is a dark and evocative version of the sentimental hero. This figure was another source of the immediate appeal of these works; it is also, interestingly enough, one of the features most closely related to the oral ballads that Macpherson drew inspiration from: here I am thinking of the Ossianic ballads of the sort found in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, for instance, which contain a melancholy singer of a very similar sort.⁵ The third main category is the vague presentation of a national voice, which we see here in the reference to the “head of my people,” and which is a constant feature of all Macpherson’s Ossian works. These works constantly suggest that Ossian is a figure for Scottish glory and even Scottish nationalism itself—a suggestion that offended the people who knew that Macpherson’s source was actually pan-British Gaelic culture, and that Ossian would be better described as Irish. However unfounded, this suggestion quickly found fertile Scottish soil in the leftovers of Jacobite enthusiasm, and this enthusiasm became involved in and supported the so-called “Ossianic controversy.” During this protracted debate over the status of Macpherson’s work, a debate that drew considerable attention from Samuel Johnson, among others, people who knew better defended the Ossian poems primarily because the people who attacked these works often seemed to be motivated by a kind of prejudice, by an insistence that Scottish culture was simply and by definition not capable of the brilliance the Ossian poems claimed for themselves.

This national voice, and its parallel claim (however confused) for a deep and legitimate Scottish literary heritage, are the only really enduring contributions of the Ossian books. The appearance of this voice created and sustained an upsurge of interest in Highland culture, and helped support the growing realization, in England especially, but also in the Scottish lowlands, that Highland culture had more to it than filth, poverty and the continuing threat of violence. The Ossian poems suggested, in sum, that it was possible that there

⁴This is from Fragment VII, found on p. 31 of the *Fragments*, referred to above. Interestingly, this text does not re-appear in later re-workings. *Temora*, for instance, contains a different description of the death of Oscur.

⁵For translations of poems from this book, see Neil Ross, ed. *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh, 1939).

was a Scottish *genius loci* to be found: that a deep literary culture could in fact spring from Scottish soil, and the Ossian poems made this suggestion at a crucial time, when Scottish culture in general was just beginning to make such claims to the outside world and needed all the support it could get. The irony of the enthusiasm with which Edinburgh literati greeted this claim is, of course, that they themselves had no use for the Highlands before Ossian made them notice, and especially before they felt the need to defend Ossian and Scotland from English critique.⁶

This is the atmosphere that Burns summons when he refers to Ossian, and the atmosphere he breathes when he reads Ossian and waxes enthusiastic. If we ask what was important to him in this atmosphere, we can say, first and immediately, that the Ossianic style, as a literary and expressive mode, has nothing for him at all, as interesting as it is. It is not a poetic style. That is, it has nothing to do with verse, and Burns was above all a poet, concerned with meter and rhyme and the closeness of effect that verse makes possible. On the other hand, in the early 1780s, Burns was in fact very attracted to the interesting combination of sentimental singer and national hero that he found in Ossian. This is because he knew already that he wanted, in some way, to speak in a national voice himself. At this point he doesn't quite know how. We hear his first efforts at producing his national voice in poems like "The Cottar's Saturday Night, and, especially, "The Vision."⁷

"The Vision" is a kind of workshop for the forces I have been discussing. As I mentioned, the connection between Ossian and this poem is made for us by Burns himself, who refers us, in a footnote at the beginning, to Macpherson's "Cath-Loda"; in that text Macpherson himself footnotes the word these works have in common, "Duan" (*Ossian*, p. 189). The *OED* cites "Cath-Loda" as the first use of this term in English, and "The Vision" as the second. It comes from a Gaelic word for "poem," and Macpherson uses it to divide "Cath-Loda" (which is about the death of Ossian's son Oscur) into sections; this is what Burns imitates, giving "The Vision" two "duans." In Burns's poem, it is not immediately clear that this division is necessary. It divides the poem, roughly, into a section about Scottish accomplishments and one about Burns himself (or, alternately, into sections comprised of the poet's voice and that of the muse) but that division is not a particularly powerful one. I think the best explanation for the division is simply that Burns wanted to use the word "duan" in order to conjure up the Ossianic national voice. That voice

⁶As G. Ross Roy reminded me, Burns himself adopted this same contradictory posture. During his Highland journey of the summer of 1787, for instance, he remarked in letters and in verse upon the misery of Highland life.

⁷My text for this poem comes from *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 103-113. As always, Kinsley's notes to the poem provide an invaluable introduction to its form and reference. Henceforth *Poems*.

serves as context or support for a specifically Scottish *genius loci*, “Coila,” who appears to the poet as his muse on a drear winter night.

Critics have often noted that “The Vision” is a kind of anthology of literary voices, from Ferguson to Thomson, and have either praised it or critiqued it from that point of view.⁸ Most plainly, and most obviously, it is an example of the divided, schizoid style of the early Burns, in which wonderful, muscular, primarily Scottish stanzas work hand in hand with paler and entirely English stanzas. The first three—again, as has often been noted—are quite wonderful. This is the third:

There, lanely, by the ingle-cheek,
I sat and ey'd the spewing reek,
That fill'd, wi' hoast-provoking smeeke,
 The auld, clay biggin;
And heard the restless rattons squeak
 About the riggin (*Poems*, I, 103).

Contrast this with one of the later “English” stanzas:

'All hail! *my own* inspired Bard!
'In me thy native Muse regard!
No longer mourn thy fate is hard,
 Thus poorly low!
I come to give thee such reward,
 As *we* bestow (*Poems*, I, 109).

The poem really has three main parts: it opens with punchy self-description, in the best Burnsian mode; this authenticity is interrupted by the entrance of a quasi-classical presence, the muse “Coila,” who turns Burns aside into the second part. This part is a meditation upon and praise for his larger cultural context, in the form of an annotated description of local scenery and, after the 1787 edition, a listing of well-known (but still local) personalities of the Scottish Enlightenment, with a sprinkling of older heroes like Wallace. Among these personalities are people, or their relatives, who already were or would be important to Burns: Mrs. Dunlop, for instance, and Dugald Stewart. These things are seen in Coila’s mantle, and this catalogue presents Burns taking up a national voice, vaguely like a Highland bard singing the accomplishments of his clan. It is poetry of local celebration, laureate poetry, and shares the artificiality of that mode. We can recognize in it Burns’s (remarkable, under the circumstances) declaration that he is more than a peasant poet, that he sings for Scotland and participates in its glory. All laureate poetry is highly artificial,

⁸Two sources can serve as an excellent summary of discussion: Thomas Crawford, in *Burns: A Study of the Poetry and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1994), pp. 182-92; and Carol McQuirk, in *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens, GA, 1985), pp. 37-44.

and consists of the poet taking on a larger persona. It is ironic, of course, that the moment Burns assumes this apparently Scottish voice he begins speaking in high literary English, but this irony should at least be a familiar one. It is Burns's typical artificial voice—the way he speaks when he wants to be “fancy”; it is also what the Edinburgh elite do (think of Hugh Blair), at this period, when they adopt a national voice.

In the second duan Burns adopts, still very artificially, the already artificial machinery of *The Rape of the Lock* in order to sing his own praises. Coila recounts the trials she has had in watching over him, compares him to other poets, and ends by crowning him with her laurels; all of this is done, again, in highly “literary” verse of a mostly unmemorable sort.⁹ In these stanzas, the extremely interesting and authentic self-examination of the opening runs out in much less authentic self-aggrandizement, where Burns presents himself as the “rustic bard” that Edinburgh would very shortly and very artificially celebrate.

What I have said of “The Vision” describes a common eighteenth-century literary object: the patronage poem, a poem that, quite literally, advertises the poet, demonstrates skills, flatters the people who count, and asks for recognition. Described this way, it makes perfect sense that Burns would have added the list of luminaries when the poem moved into the larger context of the Edinburgh edition. It is a matter of business. In 1787 Burns was still pursuing his dream of a regular literary fame; the notice and patronage of the elite was crucial to this plan, and this is not the only poem of this type that he wrote.

Once we see “The Vision” as patronage poetry, we can make sense of the appearance of Ossian in it. “Duan,” the Ossianic word, is meant to conjure up a broad, atmospheric commitment to Scottish unity or patriotism, and is meant to tag this poem as sung in a national voice. As is often true in the earlier poetry, this atmosphere sits uneasily with the authentic Burns, the rustic but dignified and genuine note we hear in the opening stanzas. It is a difficult trick, to be both locally authentic and nationally representative. Ossian, Macpherson's mythic poet, is just this sort of figure, and Burns wants Ossian to hover in the background of his poem. Burns is here gesturing towards an imagined bardic role for himself, a role he hoped would appeal to the educated great, and he provides his poem with the trappings of this imagined role. Burns hasn't yet learned, in “The Vision,” that Ossian can pull this off cleanly because he is a virtual poet, not burdened with any unpleasant attachment to reality.

There, in Burns's conjuring of Ossianic atmosphere, ends the description of Ossian's influence on Burns; but the real interest of placing Macpherson and Burns side by side lies one step further on. I think we actually come upon a very interesting cultural moment, or knot, and I hope that in this small space I can do some justice to it. I have said that if we define what Burns wanted from

⁹With one famous exception: “But yet the *light* that led astray/ Was *light* from Heaven” (*Poems*, I, 112).

“The Vision” as the notice of patrons, then he was entirely right to refer to Ossian in it. This is the more true because Macpherson wanted exactly the same thing: the Ossian poems are, simply put, an enormous and extended bid for the patronage of the great, made by an isolated but exceedingly ambitious young man from the Highlands. We can go further: the Ossianic ballads themselves, upon which Macpherson built his fortune, grew out of a classical tradition of the patronage poetry of clan bards. Macpherson was keenly aware of this, and was also exceptionally smart about the courting of praise, and exceptionally good at turning praise to account as cash and employment. In his savvy way Macpherson knew he could not sell himself as a kind of Highland oddity: Burns could sell himself as a rustic bard because he was actually a poet, but Macpherson was mostly a clever adapter, a gatherer of interesting things. And so Macpherson knew he wanted to sell a highland oddity that was not himself, in the form of re-invented highland culture, re-invented so as to appeal directly to contemporary British taste. By inventing the sentimental figure of Ossian, Macpherson allowed himself to disappear behind his product, behind his own voice, and that in turn allowed the product and the noise it generated to carry him out of the Highlands, all the way to London. His lack of poetic ability notwithstanding, in Macpherson’s world it would have done him no good to actually be the melancholy Ossian, or to be a Scottish national bard: the world that would reward such a singer was still at least thirty years off. He needed, instead, to get to London, to leave the Highlands behind, to get a job and a non-literary career, and he did that by sponsoring a national bard instead of being one himself. It helped that Ossian was a bard who was not only dead but mythic anyway, and not in need of any of the profits the venture generated.

Burns’s world, and Burns himself, were very different. By 1786 the place for the national voice, if not actually created, had been sketched out (with Macpherson’s help), and Scottish culture was on the lookout for its spokesman. At the same time, the Scottish world had grown rapidly more complex, and more mercantile, and the array of tastes and interests Burns had to appeal to was much broader than the array Macpherson faced; you can see this variety in the catalogue, both material and literary, of “The Vision,” and in the array of styles we find in the Kilmarnock and Edinburgh editions.

If we remember that “The Vision” actually begins with stanzas of real strength, and recognizable identity, we can remember the other real difference we are dealing with in our comparison: Burns is actually a poet, a born poet, a literary genius instead of the strategic and mercenary genius that Macpherson was. This is why “The Vision” is disturbed, why its parts don’t match and its voice changes tone. It conjures the national voice in its summoning of the voice of Ossian, but Burns’s own voice competes with Ossian’s, and renders the texture of the poem uneven, even confusing.

Burns’s deep egotism, the egotism that is the natural by-product of his genius, disturbs the poem too. Though he sometimes thinks otherwise, Burns is far from wanting to disappear behind the national voice, as Macpherson so

cannily does; indeed, in "The Vision" he steps right up and crowns himself with the national laurels. This would seem, in a patronage poem, to be a mistake. The supplicant poet should seek recognition, not bestow it upon himself; Burns, in all his natural dignity, often makes this mistake, which is borne of his inability to stoop low enough to play the role.

Holding Ossian next to Burns shows Burns to us in all his clear, invigorating reality. Burns would in fact become the real thing, the Scottish national voice, by abandoning the gestural and artificial conjuring of voice that Ossian represents, and by turning back to the things of the marketplace that he scorns while under Ossian's influence. He would become that voice by refusing, in the end, to strive for it, or to ventriloquize it; he would become it by speaking in his natural voice, which was not only authentically Scottish but authentically poetic as well. In sum, since that is true, I think we should not only be unsurprised that Ossian appears in Burn's poetry just once, but that we should also be pleased.

Williams College



A Highlandman my love was born -----
A Gray 1996