2001

Ossian and Cesarotti: Poems and Translations

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The 1707 Act of Union brought together, after troubled debate in the Scottish Parliament, a smaller and poorer population with a larger and wealthier one. Scotland had always been considered by the English as a remote and isolated region, and this opinion increased after the events of 1707. Even though the two kingdoms were united under the title great Britain, this antagonism was carried forward by succeeding generations on both sides of the border. The Union did offer Scotland, however, new opportunities and benefits. It is possible to distinguish two different but related reactions to the Union on the cultural side.

The first was a patriotic nostalgia and the second was a determination that Scotland's thinkers and scholars should show the English and the world that it could represent Britain proudly and beat the English by producing works of international importance written in a pure and elegant English style. The first of these reactions produced antiquarianism; collecting, editing and imitating of older Scottish poetry. It looked back to a time when Scots was a full-blooded literary language of its own, not merely a group of northern dialects of English, and it resulted not only in collections and editions of ancient Scottish poetry, but also in imitations of such poetry, particularly of ballads and folksongs. James Watson was the earliest collector who published in 1706 the three parts of *A Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems both Ancient and Modern* (1706, 1709 and 1711), followed by Allan Ramsay's collections *The Ever Green* (1724) and *The Tea-Table Miscellany* (1723-1737). Ramsay introduced patriotic poems of his own, written in an archaic style, to attack the Union and preach Scottish independence. Robert Fergusson, Robert Burns, and

later Sir Walter Scott were other representatives of this vernacular humanism who tried to restore Scottish cultural pride after the Union. As a result, eighteenth-century Scottish nationalism became more and more associated with antiquarianism.

The second cultural reaction to the Union created that learned movement of historians, philosophers, literary critics and scholars, the Scottish Enlightenment. In Edinburgh the leaders of this movement, the philosopher David Hume, the economist Adam Smith, the critic Hugh Blair, and the historian William Robertson (the Edinburgh Literati), one of whose aims was to assert their country's claim to greatness. The Edinburgh Literati published scholarly literary, historical, philosophical, and technological work in standard English. While they rid themselves of Scotticisms in their writing, they retained a distinctively Scottish form of speech. Eighteenth-century Scots had degenerated from a rich literary language with a close relationship to the spoken language that it once had to a group of regional spoken dialects.

James Macpherson was the first writer to use British and Scandinavian elements as subject matter in his quest for new sources of poetic inspiration. The Pre-Romantics claimed full freedom of poetic expression in following their own imaginations. Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) gave his explanation of the sublime in poetry:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.[1]

Burke joined the emotions joy and grief to demonstrate how aesthetic pleasure can be gained through the contemplation of painful objects or situations.

James Macpherson used the phrase "joy of grief" referring to a specific kind of pleasure which results from recalling and reliving the pleasures of the past, not to a vague mixture of happiness and sadness. Macpherson's *Ossian* was the expression of sentimental primitivism, one of the aspects of cultural primitivism.

In 1760 Macpherson, at that time an unknown Scottish writer, published *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Galic or Erse Language* (Edinburgh; a 2nd enlarged edition was also published in Edinburgh in 1760). It introduced characters and stories which were enlarged in the epic poems *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem, in Six Books; together with Several Other Poems, Composed by Ossian the Son*

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[1]Quoted in Margaret Omberg, *Scandinavian Themes in English Poetry, 1760-1800* (Upsala, 1976), p. 64.

of Fingal. Translated from the Galic Language, by James Macpherson (London, 1762). and *Temora, an Ancient Epic Poem, in Eight Books together with Several Other Poems, Composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal. Translated from the Galic Language by James Macpherson* (London, 1763) and continually revised until the first complete edition entitled *Poems of Ossian* (2 vols. London, 1773).

Both critics and the general public were happy to have made available, as they thought, ancient Gaelic poetry in English, a poetry rich in lyricism. Macpherson's claim to have discovered an old manuscript and to have translated it into English immediately raised suspicions about its authenticity. According to Macpherson, Ossian was a third-century bard, the last of a race of heroes, old and blind singing the warlike exploits of his ancestors. Macpherson borrowed names and facts from the Ulster and Fenian epic cycles (V-XII centuries), creating a romantic, refined prose and poetry, too affected to be the product of the barbaric society of the third century. The *Poems of Ossian* were not a translation, nor pure invention, but a forgery. Macpherson was inspired by ancient Gaelic tradition and created a lyrical work in accord with contemporary poetic taste. It was, I believe, a stroke of genius to claim them to be translations, but despite the great interest of many readers, Samuel Johnson was immediately suspicious of them. He was quoted by Bailey Saunders:

> I suppose my opinion of the poems of Ossian is already discovered. I believe they never existed in any other form than which we have seen. The editor, or the author, never could show the original; nor can it be shown by any other; to revenge reasonable incredulity, by refusing evidence, is a degree of insolence, with which the world is not yet acquainted; and stubborn audacity is the last refuge of guilt.[2]

In 1805 the Commission of the Highland Society, composed of the best scholars of Celtic literature and chaired by Henry Mackenzie, published its report which introduced for the first time, precise conclusions about the affair: that the legends of Fingal and Ossian had existed in Scotland, but were apparently not discoverable, and that Macpherson has inserted passages of his own; he had added tenderness and sublimity to the work by omitting and shortening some incidents and refining the language.

The Ossianic poems are a mixture of lyric and epic tones (from sensibility to primitivism). The *Fragments* area more elegiac and immediate, while *Fingal* and *Temora* have tedious introductions to the main actions to which Macpherson attempted to give an epic aspect. Female characters are creatures of great beauty and sensibility, fearless but also cruel and extremely ruthless, whereas male characters in *Ossian* are warriors who are strong, bold and generous. In *Fingal* the hero possesses polished, chivalrous manners as Macpher-

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[2]Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson, Containing a Particular Account of his Famous Quarrel with Dr. Johnson*, 2 vols. (London, 1805), I, 191-2.

son introduced the heroic age to eighteenth-century society. According to one strain of eighteenth-century thought only a savage could be a true citizen; thus Macpherson's Celtic citizen-warriors became the incarnation of the ideal—the males sternly masculine, females possessed of natural delicacy of sentiment. Macpherson achieved this in part through his measured style, with elements taken from ancient Gaelic poetry, from popular traditional ballads and from the rhythms of the Authorized Version of the Bible. Thus Macpherson believed that he could capture the wild excesses of the Celtic temperament while at the same time appropriating its storehouse of energy and emotion. He frequently used short clauses as a unit, repeating words or syntactic structures in succeeding phrases to re-create an archaic sense of primitivism, and he rarely used the coordinating conjunctions or the relative pronouns. Frequent in Celtic poetry, we find the repetition of words or syllables beginning with the same letter or sound. In *Temora* we read "As meet two troubled seas, with the rolling of all their waves, when they feel the wings of contending winds, in the rock-sided firth of Lumon."[3] The first alliteration is the sound "t" (two, troubled) and the second is the "w" sound (with, waves, when, wings, winds).

In Macpherson's writing there are other peculiarities derived from Gaelic, for example the epithet "son of" from the Gaelic "mac," such as we find in *The Death of Cuthullin*, where he is addressed thus: "Why dost thou delay thy coming, son of the generous Seme?" (*Ossian*, I, 353).

From Gaelic poetry Macpherson also borrowed the compound adjective, which he used to create various effects in his rhythmic prose-poetry. These fall into the following categories:

— the double adjective (dark-brown, dark-blue, dark-red);
— the adjective together with the present participle of the verb (slow-sailing, soft-rolling, white-bubbling);
— the adjective together with the perfect participle of the verb (low-laid, half-formed, white-sailed);
— the adjective together with a false perfect participle of the verb (blue-eyed, fair-haired, soft-voiced);
— the adverb of manner together with the present participle of the verb (deeply-sounding, darkly-rolling, wildly-bursting).

Despite contemporary concerns about their authenticity, the popularity of the work continued unabated. Ossian led to a greater understanding of Gaelic culture on the part of Lowland Scots; Macpherson's work was eagerly accepted because it agreed so well with Enlightenment ideas about primitive societies and because it fulfilled a genuine need by transforming a hitherto little-

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[3]*The Poems of Ossian, &c. Containing the Poetical Works of James Macpherson In Prose and Rhyme*, ed. Malcolm Laing. 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1805), II, 244-5. Henceforth *Ossian*.

known section of the Scottish population into the one which was universally admired. This transformation, of course, had an influence far beyond Scotland; it should be recalled that while the *Fragments* were published in Edinburgh, both *Fingal* and *Temora* were published in London. Today what is best remembered about the Ossian poems is that people argued so much about them; the fascination of the Ossianic controversy has all but pushed aside the poems themselves, and one might argue that this has happened because the controversy is more interesting than the poems. Macpherson's activity stands as a symbol for the movement of his culture into mainstream Britain, and although his work anticipated many of the concerns of the Romantic Movement, the words of the third-century bard today hardly seem revolutionary, but the melancholic preoccupations of the Celtic bard attracted the sympathy of eighteenth-century audiences. The combination of the subjective poet and the wise prophet was perfect for the Romantic period, where the image of the poet as an isolated genius emerged, again and again. As sole survivor of a greater world, Ossian commanded the perennial fascination of the self-exiled Romantic, enduring a perceived exclusion from Paradise. Less fortunately, Macpherson's work contributed to the construction of a fictitious Gaelic identity, centered upon a symbolic identification with a totally mythical Highland past and its heroic protagonists.

The development of Ossianism in Europe became one of the principal ways through which British literature exercised an important influence on the Romantic Movement. There is no doubt that the translation of Macpherson's work played an appreciable role in the survival of the Ossianic vogue in later years. At first Ossian was widely read in English, with editions published in Darmstadt (1773-5), Paris (1783), Nuremberg (1784), Göttingen (1788), and there were early translations of *Carthon* into French (1762), of *Fingal* into German (1764), and *Temora* into French (1774). There were also translations of *The Poems of Ossian*, although not always complete, as follow: German, 1768-9; Finnish, 1775; French, 1777; Spanish, 1788; Danish, 1790-91; Russian, 1792; Dutch, 1793; and Swedish, 1794-1800. After German the next foreign edition of *Ossian* was the Italian one by Melchiorre Cesarotti in 1763.[4]

Translation was a widespread activity among Italian writers and scholars in the eighteenth century: the originals were mainly from Latin and Greek, but translations from modern languages, French and English in particular, were becoming increasingly popular. With the spread of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the emphasis on a process common to all mankind favored a general interest in ideas which were not just the product of a single nation, but which reflected a more European attitude toward literature. Italian literature had gone through a crisis in the seventeenth century and in spite of the efforts

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[4]Most of this information has been taken from George F. Black's "Macpherson's Ossian," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 21 (1926).

of the Arcadian Movement to restore balance it took a few decades for it to gain respectability. In the eighteenth century, Italian scholars struggled to give their language a national identity and made use of translations to give a clear view of what were the limits of their own mother tongue and to show what improvements they could expect from such a comparison. The "questione della lingua" appeared to have been settled in the sixteenth century by Pietro Bembo (1470-1547), when he supported the use of the Italian vernacular by Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio. However, in the eighteenth century a quarrel broke out once again between classicists and modernists. The modernists, whose ideas were close to those of the Enlightenment, felt that Italian had inadequacies when it came to translating from foreign languages, and it was Cesarotti (1730-1804), literary critic, philologist, poet and translator, who proposed a solution to these debates. He was opposed to a purist approach, believing that a language is always changing as it reflects the progress of society. Italian Enlightenment scholars and writers recognized that their literature needed to change, since the literatures of England, Germany and France were more appealing because of their Pre-Romantic tone. As a result Italian writers became the promoters of these new sources.

One of the reasons for the vogue of translation literary works into Italian was the belief that this would be the most immediate way for Italian culture to become up-to-date. Translators were little recognized in Italy at this time, and the reading public was puzzled by the Romantic melancholia of English and German works. Cesarotti played an important role in forming Italian taste at the time when he published at Padua in 1763 his verse translation of Macpherson, entitled *Poesie di Ossian, Figlio di Fingal, Antico Poeta Celtico*. The work was enormously popular, and there were further editions as follow: Padua, 1772; Bassano, 1782; Bassano, 1783; Bassano, 1795; Pisa, 1800-1813; Pisa, 1801; Florence, 1807; Bassano, 1810; Milan, 1810; Piacenza, 1811; Florence, 1813; Naples, 1819; Venice, 1819; Milan, 1820-21; Milan, 1826-7; Florence, 1846; and quite possibly others. Cesarotti knew there would be many linguistic problems in translating Macpherson's measured prose, and he commented on this in his Discorso Preliminare to the 1772 edition:

Di un così grande originale ebbi l'arditezza di fare un dono all'Italia. Senza un esempio che mi servisse di scorta, con una lingua feconda sì, ma insterilita dalla tirannide grammaticale, a guisa di un atleta mediocre costretto a lottare con un gigante, a fine di non restarvi appresso dovetti ricorrere ad uno schermo particolare, ed inventare scorci ed atteggiamenti di nuovo genere.... Io non avea per istrumento della mia fatica che una lingua felice a dir vero, armoniosa...ma assai lontana (dica pur altri checchè si voglia) dall'aver ricevuto tutta la fecondità, e tutte le attitudini di cui è capace, e per colpa de' suoi adoratori, eccessivamente pusillanime.

Aggiungesi anche la natura del metro, che quantunque sembrasse il più acconcio, pure non si accordava molto collo stile del mio originale.[5]

* * *

I determined to give to Italy this lofty original work. I had no example to resort to and had at my disposal a language which, though itself fecund, is hindered by the tyranny of grammar—somewhat like a mediocre athlete who is obliged to fight with a giant—and so as not to be constrained into meek submissiveness, I resolved to take on the work at hand from an entirely new approach.... I had no other tools for my labors but a language which, though undeniably fine and harmonious, is—let others say what they will—far from subtle and productive, because its devotees are so timid. Add to all this the nature of the meter employed, which though the most fitting, was not ideally suited to the original [my translation].

Cesarotti did not believe that the translator needed to produce a literal rendition of the text; on the contrary, he felt that there were elements in every language which could not have precise equivalents in other languages. And since these elements constituted the aesthetic quality of a literary work, the translator had to create them independently in his own language: a literal translation could be of no help in trying to reproduce them. The question of the freedoms which were allowable in translation was the subject of lively discussions in Italy at this time; the main concern of Italian translators was to avoid poor translations, no matter whether free or literal. According to Cesarotti the major consideration was that the translator be a poet:

d'essere più fedele allo spirito che alla lettera del mio originale, e di studiarmi di tener un perso—naggio di mezzo fra il traduttore e l'autore (Cesarotti, I, 3).

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...to stick to the spirit, not to the letter, of such a lofty original, I resolved to be a poet more than a grammarian [my translation].

To render the sharpness of Macpherson's measured prose Cesarotti chose a very versatile metrical foot, the unrhymed sciolto, or blank verse, as we see in the invocation to the moon at the beginning in the "Songs of Selma" ("Canti di Selma"):

Stella maggior della cadente notte,
Deh come bella in occidente splendi!
E come bella la chiomata fronte
Mostri fuor delle nubi, e maestosa
Poggi sopra il tuo colle!... (Cesarotti, III, 221).

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[5]*Poesie di Ossian*, trans. Melchior Cesarotti, 4 vols. (Padua, 1772), I, 5-6. Henceforth Cesarotti.

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Star of descending night! fair is thy light in the west! thou liftest thy unshorn head from thy cloud: thy steps are stately on thy hill. What dost thou behold in the plain? The stormy winds are laid (*Ossian*, I, 451-52).

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...   Addio, soave
Tacito raggio: ah disfavilli omai
Nell'alma d'Ossian la serena luce (Cesarotti, III, 223)

* * *

The waves come with joy around thee: they bathe thy lovely hair. Farewell, thou silent beam! Let the light of Ossian's soul arise! (*Ossian*, I, 452-53).

It will be seen from this short quotation how Cesarotti strayed from the original.

The problem of the authenticity of the poems was not of great importance to Cesarotti, because he found in Ossian a powerful source of new inspiration for Italian mid-eighteenth-century poetry that lacked in imagination. James Macpherson may have created a literary forgery, but Melchiorre Cesarotti's translation was a major work of art. Both were faithful to the lyrical authenticity of the Ossianic fragments and brought a new sensitivity to the writing of the period.

Como