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OSSIANIC TELEGRAPHY: BARDIC NETWORKS AND IMPERIAL RELAYS

Eric Gidal

I reflect here upon traces of commercial telegraphy and postal relay in the writings of Adam Smith and James Macpherson. With perspectives gleaned from the discourse analysis of Bernhard Siegert and Friedrich Kittler, we can perceive how evolving networks of commerce and communication in the newly-integrated terrain of eighteenth-century Scotland were presciently theorized by Smith and imaginatively enacted by Macpherson in his renditions of Ossianic poetry. I will explore a few select passages from their work as early thought experiments in juridical, economic, and poetic communication and situate these passages as reflexive products of a rapidly expanding global empire.¹ I am building here on ideas and material from my recent study, *Ossianic Unconformities: Bardic Poetry in the Industrial Age*, in which I examine geographical vindications of Macpherson's work in the context of nineteenth-century industrial and environmental history.² In this brief essay, I place more emphasis on technologies of exchange rather than representations of place. The reception of the poems of Ossian

¹ Ian Duncan has identified a "pathos of abstraction" that unites the logic of exchange undergirding Smith's theories of political economy and moral sentiments and the logic of authenticity supporting Macpherson's staging of bardic song and historical reflection. My reading here owes much to his perceptive conjunction of these two authors. "The Pathos of Abstraction: Adam Smith, Ossian, and Samuel Johnson," in Leith Davis, Ian Duncan, and Janet Sorensen, eds., *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 38-56.

² Eric Gidal, *Ossianic Unconformities: Bardic Poetry in the Industrial Age* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

throughout the European continent and beyond offers us a wonderfully rich archive by which to trace not only the advent of literary historicism, cultural nationalism, and ethno-poetics, but also a globalizing network of commerce and surveillance, what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have characterized as “the material constitution of the new planetary order, the consolidation of its administrative machine, and the production of new hierarchies of command over global space.”³ Rather than promoting a return to localized sovereignty and vernacular culture, I argue, the poems of Ossian register increasingly de-territorialized concentrations of capital and power. It is in this sense that we can identify “Ossianic telegraphy” as both a poetic conceit of bardic networks and an operative system of imperial exchange.

Bernhard Siegert, in his 1993 study *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, observes that the Latin *imperium* signifies before all else a chain of command, “a postal frame of fate.” Locke’s conceit of language as a pipeline, “the great conduit,” in his words, “whereby men convey their discoveries, reasonings, and knowledge, from one to another,” cast philosophers as “plumbers” whose mission was to build an empire of semiotic clarity and empirical efficiency. “Thus began,” in Siegert’s synopsis, “an epoch of the postal system that equated transmission channels with language, language with communication, communication with understanding, and understanding with the salvation of humanity.”⁴ Siegert’s ambition, to write a “history of communication as human intercourse from the perspective of postal strategies,” portrays the empire of information as a rationalization of power wherein “the ubiquity and invisibility of the state were...to be found in the representation of the postal system as a medium for private correspondence between cognitive subjects.” The chain of command, the

³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 19. On the reception of Ossian, see Howard Gaskill, ed., *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004).

⁴ Bernhard Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, transl. Kevin Repp (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1-2. Siegert’s quotation from Locke is from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2 vols., ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover, 1959), 2:149. A more capacious historical survey of imperial communication can be found in Harold A. Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950). See also Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets, and Globalization, 1860-1930* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

imperial post, connects those subjects in peaceful commerce and efficient exchange, even as it anthropomorphizes these networks in the figure of the autonomous author and the sentimental reader, producing “the subepoch of the postal system that was literature itself.” Literature, in this analysis, names less a body of works of notable stylistic accomplishment than a receptive conduit in a chain of imperial relays, less, that is, a cultural product than an enabling moment in the expansion of postal networks. Now perceptible in the era of its extinction, literary discourse offered a rationale for a postal strategy that articulated political necessities of state and commerce as the needs and even rights of autonomous individuals. As Siegert puts it, “eighteenth-century poetry was simultaneously a cover-up of the postal service and a delivery of the mail in the production and communication of knowledge.”⁵

Adam Smith draws similar connections between empire and postage in the 1766 report of his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* where he notes the importance of post offices for balancing the power of nations and promoting a peaceful economy. Reflecting on the laws of nations, Smith emphasizes the historical novelty of resident ambassadors, whose status as permanent fixtures at court became necessitated by the extension of regular commerce beyond national borders. Smith dates the practice to the seventeenth century and the innovative ambitions of the Spanish court. “The custom of sending ambassadors preserves peace,” Smith argues, “and, by giving intelligence, prevents one country from being invaded by another without temeous notice.” “Post offices too are of great importance for procuring intelligence,” he adds, “as communication is open thro’ all these countries both in peace and war, which makes commerce easy and gives notice of every movement.”⁶ For Smith, communication is a tool of commerce and security, concerned as he is throughout this section of his lectures to ensure the free flow of goods and services across national borders, even in times of military conflict. And, as organized in his lectures, commerce is simply an extension of the police by more efficient means. “Nothing tends so much to corrupt mankind as dependency, while independency still encreases the honesty of the people,” he argues; “the establishment of commerce and manufactures, which brings about this independency, is the best police for

⁵ Siegert, *Relays*, 8, 12, 13.

⁶ Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R.L. Meek, D.D. Raphael, and P.G. Stein [Glasgow Edition, vol. 5] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978; repr. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 551-54.

preventing crimes” (*ibid.*, 486-87). Thus, to send, either communications or goods, is both a foundation of liberty and a far more efficient guarantor of peaceful order than any overt mechanism of state power. The post office provides the technology whereby both commerce and surveillance, the “notice of every movement,” can be most efficiently insured. As a political and technological relay of an imperial discourse network, the post office unites police and commerce through a mechanism whose *raison d’être* is its usefulness to a population of newly-minted private citizens.

This conjunction of commerce and communication as the imperative for expanding power above and beyond national boundaries finds another telling expression in Smith’s early draft for *The Wealth of Nations* that grew out of the economic material in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. Here he reflects that money, whose only function is to “circulate commodities ... may very properly be compared to a high road,” insofar as it helps to distribute goods and thereby contribute indirectly to material production. But since the ever more rapid and efficient circulation of products is always to be desired, banks and bank notes are superior to money and function as a direct counterpart to the postal system. “They enable us,” Smith writes, “as it were to plough up our high roads, by affording us a sort of communication through the air by which we do our business equally well” (Smith, *Jurisprudence*, 576). This remarkable conceit of banks as relays in a network of commercial telegraphy offers us a highly suggestive image for understanding the expansion and transformation of empire enabled in the “epoch of the postal system.” For if we can characterize the development of Smith’s thinking from his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* to *The Wealth of Nations* as the sublimation of the law under the aegis of the free circulation of goods and information, then we can understand his fantasy of “communication through the air” as a new postal medium that liberates the progress of wealth from the very earth itself, creating a new marketplace whose stated rationale is nothing other than the growth of its own systematic reach. Put another way, we can witness in Smith’s conceit a premonition of commerce and communication as the empires of the future whose power would be at once disseminated among an ever-wider population and reconsolidated in the networks by and through which they were conducted. Transcending first national boundaries, and then earthly terrain altogether, these imperial structures of exchange redistribute power as a system of relays authorized by the very subjects of their control.

But my primary concern in this essay is Ossian, and so I hope that the reader will indulge me, at least provisionally, in drawing a connection between these odd asides in Smith's early works and an intriguing passage from James Macpherson's Ossianic epic "Fingal," also, like the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, presented in various iterations during the early 1760s.⁷ It is a passage that comes in the very first book of "Fingal" and that offers us perhaps a literary performance of Smith's networked *imperium*. I refer to Moran's striking of the shield of Cabait, a call to arms for the Irish warriors in the face of the invasion of Swaran and his Scandinavian armies. "Go," Cuchullin commands Moran, the son of Fithil, "take my spear: strike the sounding shield of Cabait. It hangs at Tura's rustling gate; the sound of peace is not its voice. My heroes shall hear on the hill":

He went and struck the bossy shield. The hills and their rocks replied. The sound spread along the wood: deer start by the lake of roes. Curach leapt from the sounding rock; and Connal of the bloody spear. Crugal's breast of snow beats high. The son of Favi leaves the dark-brown hind. It is the shield of war, said Ronnar! the spear of Cuchullin, said Lugar. — Son of the sea, put on thy arms! Calmar lift thy sounding steel! Puno! horrid hero, rise: Cairbar, from thy red tree of Cromla. Bend thy white knee, O Eth; and descend from the streams of Lena. — Ca-olt, stretch thy white side as thou movest along the whistling heath of Mora: thy side that is white as the foam of the troubled sea, when the dark winds pour it on the murmuring rocks of Cuthon (*Poems*, 55).

In his footnote to this passage, Macpherson glosses his imaginary geography of heroic relay with a brief account of the shield and the horn as sonic precedents to the bagpipes.⁸ The sounding of the shield thus

⁷ Sections of "Fingal" were first presented by Macpherson in his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1760). The full epic version was first published in *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem, in Six Books* (London, 1762), and then in revised versions in *The Works of Ossian* (London, 1765) and *The Poems of Ossian* (London, 1773). Citations in this essay are from James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1996), which follows the 1765 version.

⁸ "Cabait, or rather Cathbait, grandfather to the hero, was so remarkable for his valour, that his shield was made use of to alarm his posterity to the battles of the family. We find Fingal making the same use of his own shield in the 4th book. — A horn was the most common instrument to call the army together before the invention of bagpipes" (*Poems*, 420).

offers Macpherson's readers both an aural experience evoked but excluded from the apparatus of the text and a technological precedent to the volume at hand. For if the shield of Cabait represents an ancestor of the bagpipes as a call to arms among the ancient Caledonians, it also represents a medial precedent of the book that now transmits Moran's *alarum* across an even wider range.

James Mulholland has recently emphasized Macpherson's adaptation of the modern codex as a technological innovation whereby the passion and authenticity of oral culture might be preserved and disseminated within a modern information network.⁹ Macpherson's copious annotations on matters etymological, archaeological, historical, and poetical, with which he underscores his poetry on the pages of his books, construct episodes such as this as both figurative reproductions of the soundings of heroic ancestors and stagings of the triumph of literacy within a progressive history of commercial society. As Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs have argued, Macpherson and the Edinburgh literati who sponsored and promoted his publications represent the voices of tradition as measures of an anterior culture that are both surpassed and incorporated in the circulation of modern print.¹⁰ Ossian himself follows

⁹ James Mulholland, *Sounding Imperial: Poetic Voice and the Politics of Empire 1730-1820* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 93-119. Mulholland's framing of Ossian as part of a trans-national trans-mediation of oral poetry in the distributive technologies of modern print is of clear relevance to my inquiries. But I depart from Mulholland's interpretation of Macpherson's poems as reconstructions of oral traditions, "restored voices" as he puts it, which aim to approximate the immediacy of aural reception through innovations in textual mediation. Rather, I read Macpherson's project as a reflexive measure of cultural and technological obsolescence that registers silence and dislocation as much as it evokes an antiquarian fantasy of bardic recitation. In this respect, I follow Celeste Langan and Maureen McLane and their emphasis on the dialectic between "immediacy" and "hypermediacy" in Ossian and romantic poetry more generally; see their "The medium of Romantic poetry," in James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 239-262; and cf. also McLane's extensive reflections on ballads, antiquarianism, and remediation in *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

this account of the shield's sounding with a typical retrospection—"Now I behold the chiefs in the pride of their former deeds; their souls are kindled at the battles of old, and the actions of other times" (*Poems*, 56)—that moves both poet and reader back in time to witness and respond to the call-to-arms even as it foregrounds the lapse of years and movement of ages that have silenced the shield forever. If, as Macpherson has it, "Cabait, or rather Cathbait, grandfather to the hero, was so remarkable for his valour, that his shield was made use of to alarm his posterity to the battles of the family," that line of posterity has been sundered even as the shield has been remediated in the mechanisms and conceits of the epic work. These thematic allusions and paratextual features position both the book and its readers as the apex of a cultural and technological progress that resounds, figuratively, both along the hills and valleys of the Ulster coast and throughout the print networks of an expanding British imperial order.

Susan Stewart has observed that "the problem of authenticity arises in situations where there is a self-conscious perception of mediation,"¹¹ and some of the most engaging reflections on this passage as a medial event emerge out of the broader contentions over the nature and provenance of Macpherson's alleged translations. The Scottish historian Malcolm Laing, one of Macpherson's most notorious and prolific critics, would later mock this entire passage and Macpherson's annotations in his own revisionary edition of *The Poems of Ossian* (1805).¹² Laing suggests that Macpherson is simply reworking the sounding of the patriarchal horn in "Hardyknute," Lady Elizabeth Wardlaw's earlier eighteenth-century imitation of ancient Scottish poetry, with the horn transformed into a shield to hide the source.

Then red, red grew his dark-brown cheeks,
 Sae did his dark-brown brow;
 His looks grew keen, as they were wont
 In dangers great to do;
 He's ta'en a horn as green as glass,
 And gi'en five sounds sae shrill,

¹¹ Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 105.

¹² Malcolm Laing, ed., *The Poems of Ossian, containing the Poetical Works of James Macpherson, Esq. in Prose and Rhyme with Notes and Illustrations*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: J. Ballantyne for A. Constable, 1805), 1:12.

That trees in green wood shook thereat,
Sae loud rang ilka hill.

His sons in manly sport and glee
Had passed that summer's morn,
When low down in a grassy dale
They heard their father's horn.
"That horn," quo' they, "ne'er sounds in peace,
We've other sport to bide."
And soon they hied them up the hill,
And soon were at his side.¹³

Many of Laing's allegations of plagiarism in Macpherson's works strain credulity, but in this case he is likely correct. Macpherson's first rendition of this scene, which appeared in the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), has Cuchulaid, later Cuchullin, say of the shield that "it never rings in peace." The later extended version in "Fingal"—"the sound of peace is not its voice"—seems as much a masking of its source in Wardlaw's popular pastiche as an addition of a foot for metrical consistency. Macpherson's subsequent alteration of Cabait to Semo in the text (but not, tellingly, the note) of his 1773 edition achieves an alliterative euphony but exposes the arbitrary invention all the more. And yet, by Laing's estimate, both of these literary forgeries derive their *alarums* from the sounding of Allecto's horn in the seventh book of the *Aeneid*, broadcast in order to instigate conflict between the Trojans and the Latins:

And now the goddess, exercised in ill,
Who watched an hour to work her impious will,
Ascends the roof, and to her crooked horn,
Such as was then by Latian shepherds borne,
Adds all her breath: the rocks and woods around,
And mountains, tremble at the infernal sound.
The sacred lake of Trivia from afar,
The Veline fountains, and sulphureous Nar,
Shake at the baleful blast, the signal of the war.
Young mothers wildly stare, with fear possessed,
And strain their helpless infants to their breast.

¹³ Lady Elizabeth Wardlaw, *Hardiknute. A Fragment of an Old Heroick ballad* (Edinburgh: s.n., [1719]). On the bibliographical issues surrounding this often-reprinted work, see G. Ross Roy, "Hardyknute: Lady Wardlaw's Ballad?," in H.W. Matalene, ed. *Romanticism and Culture: A Tribute to Morse Peckham and a Bibliography of His Works* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1984), 133-46.

The clowns, a boisterous, rude, ungoverned crew,
With furious haste to the loud summons flew.¹⁴

Allecto's *pastorale signum*, Keeley Cathleen Schell has argued, fuses pastoral and military instruments. Virgil describes the horn alternately as a *cornu recuruum* (traditionally used to sound the *classicum signum* or signal for attack) and a *dira bucina* (an oxhorn-shaped instrument associated with herding). Allecto's choice of instrument, in Schell's reading, thus echoes Virgil's portrait of Aeneas as a "Shepherd of the People" who will unite bucolic pastoral with martial landscape over the course of the imperial epic.¹⁵ The echoing horn's airborne communication is an instrument both of agriculture and of war as well as a divine intervention that propels the forward march of Roman history, a march that, in the immediate context of the battle at hand, commences the dispossession of the native Latins by the Trojan armies. Ironically, by Laing's estimate, both Lady Wardlaw and James Macpherson adapt this imperial fantasia for the purpose of reasserting an indigenous tradition within the communicative print networks of British commerce. "But a shield," Laing reflects, "resounding, when struck, like an alarm bell...could have been suggested only by an Indian gong."¹⁶

This final quip extends the range of Laing's comparative poetics considerably, reminding us of the confluence of the ascendant British and the declining Mughal empires during the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁷ It also reminds us of the significant presence of Scots in the Indian campaigns, particularly the Mysore Wars, as well as the ever-expanding commerce that offered many adventurers at least the promise of increased wealth and status back home.¹⁸ Macpherson himself helped

¹⁴ Vergil, *Aeneid*, Bk. 7, 512-522, from Vergil, *Aeneid and Fourth ("Messianic") Eclogue in the Dryden Translation*, ed. Howard Clarke (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 198.

¹⁵ Keeley Cathleen Schell, "Allecto's Trombone: On the Meaning of *pastorale signum* (*Aeneid* 7.513)," *Social Sciences Research Network*: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1608060.

¹⁶ Laing, *Poems of Ossian*, 1:12.

¹⁷ On the interdependency of these two imperial structures during the second half of the eighteenth century, see P.J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c.1750-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 207-272; and Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750-1850* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005) 17-114.

¹⁸ On the Scots in India, see T.M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600-1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 250-70; Devine, *Scotland's Global Diaspora 1750-*

send numerous kinsmen and associates from his native Badenoch to India in the 1770s where Sir John Macpherson, son of the Rev. John Macpherson of Sleat and, following the fall of Warren Hastings, governor-general of British India, helped to situate them advantageously, establishing a network of imperial gain between the halls of Parliament and the East India Company in Bengal.¹⁹ Technically, there is no such thing as an “Indian gong,” but Laing may be referring to the cymbals of the imperial Naubat ensembles of Mughal India, or perhaps the Mysore shields of the south.²⁰ For our purposes, it does not really matter, for in the pages of Laing’s edition of *Ossian*, the term “Indian gong” stands in for an ever-expanding range of cultural cross-currents between Scotland and India. Ironically, Naubat ensembles in south Asia came to adopt the Highland bagpipes as a replacement for the oboe in the years during and following the British raj, adding a surprising quality of prophecy to Macpherson’s fanciful annotation.²¹ Taken as a whole, Laing’s pointed observations of instrumental anachronisms and literary displacements reveal the shield of Cabait, later Semo, as a product of the eighteenth century, a collage of sources from imperial networks whose soundings reverberate along modern routes and presses.

Seventy years after Laing, Peter Hatley Waddell, in his ethno-geomorphological fantasia *Ossian and the Clyde. Fingal in Ireland. Oscar in Iceland. Or, Ossian Historical and Authentic* (1875), would return this passage in both time and place to the Irish coast of the third century, insisting on an exact correspondence between the place names associated with each hero and the railway and telegraph lines between Belfast and Larne. Countering Laing’s assertion that the names of the heroes, “Crugal, Lugar, Favi, Puno are fictitious names of the translator’s invention,” Waddell asserts “not only that the various points enumerated occur along the Belfast range as regularly as the stations on a line of

2010 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2011); and Martha McLaren, *British India & British Scotland, 1780-1830: Career Building, Empire Building, and a Scottish School of Thought on Indian Governance* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2001).

¹⁹ Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 125-34.

²⁰ John Baily and Alastair Dick, “Naqqārakhāna,” *Grove Music Online: Oxford Music Online* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), accessed September 26, 2015:

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/51719>.

²¹ *ibid.*

railway, but that the sound of the shield at Tura must have traversed them all with the precision and speed of a telegraph.”²² In Waddell’s estimate, the sounding of Cabait’s shield allows the modern reader to triangulate numerous other passages in the poetry so as to locate Fingal’s Irish campaigns at Lough Larne and the Antrim Hills, a region reconnected in the middle of the nineteenth century through new industrial networks of transport and communication.

The correspondence between these heroic and modern relays, in Waddell’s argument, put to rest any doubts of the authenticity of Ossian. “Laing,” he concludes, “if it had been possible for him in 1805, might as well have asserted that Fingal was to be a prophecy, and that the poor young schoolmaster of Ruthven, in his dreams of the future, had foreseen the days of electric telegraphy” (*ibid.*). Waddell’s assertion of technological connections between the sounding of the heroic shield and the unification of the Antrim Plateau under the signal of the electric telegraph is, in some respects, no less fanciful than Smith’s conceit of bank notes as “a sort of communication through the air,” both emphasizing, in their ways, the networks of a new imperial order. And the Gaelic connections between Irish and Scottish poetry, which came under scrutiny during the contentions over the provenance of Ossian, would find new expression in the Electric Telegraph Company of Ireland, founded in 1851, which laid lines below the Irish Channel, insulated with Malaysian gutta-percha, for a distance of over 21 miles to connect Port Patrick in Scotland to Donaghadee on the Irish coast. The company’s seal, which reproduced the Irish harp as an instrumental connection between the old and the new, had for its motto, “*Per mare, Per terras, Mobilitate viget*,” adapted from Virgil’s personification of *Fama* in the fourth book of the *Aeneid*, “By land, by sea, thriving on movement.”²³

²² Peter Hately Waddell, *Ossian and the Clyde. Fingal in Ireland. Oscar in Icelenad, or Ossian Historical and Authentic* (Glasgow: James MacLehose, 1875), 135. On Waddell, see Gidal, *Ossianic Unconformities*, 125-54.

²³ Steven Roberts, *Distant Writing: A History of the Telegraph Companies in Britain between 1838 and 1868* (2006; A Nineteenth Century Site., December 4, 2012): <http://distantwriting.co.uk/competitorsallies.html>. On the early history of the telegraph, see Geoffrey Wilson, *The Old Telegraphs* (London: Phillimore, 1976). On the Virgil’s poetic conflation of rumor and tradition, see Philip Hardie, *Rumour and Renown: Representations of Fama in Western Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 78-125.

What is gained by this relay of rather free associations from Smith's juridical and economic reflections on postal peace and commercial telegraphy through the hazy realms of Ossianic poetry and the elaborate and ingenious theories of its detractors and defenders? Following Siegert's ruminations, we can posit that both Smith and Macpherson's fusions of integrated networks and moral sentiments offer a conjectural mapping of a new subject of literature whose free participation in a postal exchange relocates power from a relationship between the state and the population to their identification under the sign of first the nation, then humanity, and finally, in our own day, the world wide web of information and commodity exchange. The shield of Cabait, when sounded as an *alarum*, unites Cuchullin's warriors in shared purpose for battle just as it unites Macpherson's readers through Ossian's bardic mediation with the sounds and sentiments of a heroic age. "The great pleasure of conversation and society," wrote Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, "arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain harmony of minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another."²⁴ Samuel Morse and other developers and promoters of the early telegraph would seek to extend the reach of such synchronic correspondence and sympathetic vibrations in an ever-widening neural network of simultaneous transmission.²⁵ It was part of Macpherson's perverse genius that, in attempting to reproduce the localized sentiments of an ancient warrior culture in the cadences and figures of his paratactic and "measured" prose, he also highlighted emergent communicative protocols and technologies of a modern society. "No reader can rise from him," observed Hugh Blair, in his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763) "without being warmed with the sentiments of humanity, virtue, and honor" (*Poems*, 399), suggesting how the effusions of Gaelic verse

²⁴ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie [Glasgow Edition, vol. 1] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976; repr. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 337.

²⁵ Laura Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 120-46. On the literary influence of the telegraph, see also Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-line Pioneers* (New York: Walker and Company, 1998); and Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

could be efficiently translated into new media enabling of universal aesthetic admiration. While Robert Crawford and Nick Groom have proposed variants of an “archipelagic Ossian” that might buttress either an assimilationist or devolutionary cultural moment, we should recognize that Macpherson offers us as much a mythos of globalization as a paradoxical celebration of vernacular space.²⁶

But these are spectral media, and Friedrich Kittler’s observation that “the realm of the dead is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a given culture” suggests reading the ghostly traces of Ossianic telegraphy as the necessary counterpart of its sympathetic network.²⁷ The etymological and ethnographic annotations that accompany Macpherson’s translations on almost every page—like cairns and tumuli amidst a deforested and depopulated landscape—evoke an oral transmission within a localized setting at the same time as they testify to its reincorporation within an integrated network of surveillance and exchange. Analogously, the machinery of Ossian’s poetry, as Blair notes, “turns for the most part on the appearances of departed spirits...The ghosts of departed bards continue to sing. The ghosts of departed heroes frequent the fields of their former fame” (*Poems*, 366). These ghosts, like Ossian himself, can be understood as a kind of feedback within the machine, repetitive soundings within the channels of a text that claims to reproduce them in a new medium. Again citing Kittler, we can apprehend how Macpherson’s Ossianic poems, like all media, “always already provide the appearances of specters,”²⁸ and return to the first book of “Fingal” where Cuchullin and his warriors repose after the battle of the first day:

The hero struck the shield of his alarms—the warriors of the night moved on. The rest lay in the heath of the deer, and slept amidst the dusky wind.—The ghosts of the lately dead were near, and

²⁶ Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Nick Groom, “Archipelagic Ossian: Macpherson and Representations of the British Isles,” unpublished paper, Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society Conference, Aberdeen 7-10 July 2011.

²⁷ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 13. On the spectral nature of telegraphic communication, see also John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 137-76. On specters and mediation, see Brian Rotman, “Ghost effects” *differences* 18.1 (2007): 52-86.

²⁸ Kittler, 12.

swam on gloomy clouds. And far distant, in the dark silence of
Lena, the feeble voices of death were heard (*Poems*, 62).

Now Cuchullin's *alarum* speaks not of potential battle but of fallen warriors whose "feeble voices" seem to echo amidst the silence, received by a passive and anonymous receptor.

Almost a century before the advent of telegraphic spiritualism, with its coded rappings and possessed mediums, Macpherson's remediation of oral poetry as a printed index asserted a myth of a unified author and a sympathetic reader as relays for the systematic reach of a new imperial network. "The genius of the highlanders has suffered a great change within these few years," he famously argued in his prefatory "Dissertation concerning the Antiquity...of the Poems of Ossian," emphasizing the benefits of his novel publication, "the communication with the rest of the island is open, and the introduction of trade and manufactures has destroyed that leisure which was formerly dedicated to hearing and repeating the poems of ancient times" (*Poems*, 51). As leisure gives way to trade, repetition gives way to open transmission, and the agency of such telegraphy becomes grammatically detached from any discernable subject. "The feeble voices of death were heard." If Smith's operating system is grounded in a faith that "all commerce that is carried on betwixt any two countries must necessarily be advantageous to both" (*Jurisprudence*, 511), Macpherson may have arrived at just the right time to offer a haunting mythology for "this new conquering empire of light and reason."²⁹

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²⁹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1968), 171.