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Coleridge's Debt to Macpherson's Ossian

Since the publication of John Livingston Lowes' *Road to Xanadu* in 1927 the importance of Coleridge's voluminous reading as the genesis of his poetry has been generally recognized. In view of the extensive attempts to supplement and modify Lowes' pioneer study, it is surprising that a large body of poetry that Coleridge read, admired, quoted, and even imitated has been almost totally neglected by recent scholars; only Kathleen Coburn has hinted at the possible importance of his interest in Ossian. In a note on his plan to write an opera based on Macpherson's *Cathbion*, she remarked that "Ossian's poem may have left its mark on more than one of Coleridge's poems, e.g., *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*, even if the opera came to nothing." ¹

My purpose in examining the Macpherson–Coleridge relationship is to remind my reader that Coleridge knew and respected Macpherson's work; furthermore, I shall show that he incorporated Ossianic imagery into his early poetry, and that he continued to do so in passages of his greatest work. An awareness of Ossian as a source in Coleridge's major poetry provides us with a neglected instance of his power to transform his reading into something new and rich and strange.

Coleridge's allusions to Ossian are interesting not only for their content but for their casual quality as well. The very incidental tone of many of the references suggests an intimate knowledge of Macpherson's work. For instance, in the Preface to the first edition of his *Poems* (London, 1793), he used Ossian to illustrate in an almost proverbial manner a personal observation about the nature of poetry:

> If I could judge of others by myself, I should not hesitate to affirm, that the most interesting passages in our most interesting Poems are those in which the author develops his own feelings. The sweet voice of Cona never sounds so sweetly, as when it speaks of itself. ²


Coleridge must have regarded Ossian as almost a prototype of intense personal expression and certainly among the "most interesting" poets.

In 1795, he again used an allusion to Ossian, this time in a political context; the fact that Ossian would occur to him as an illustration in an area remote from literature suggests that Macpherson's work was something that he had thoroughly assimilated; the passage is from the address, "On the Present War":

Father of mercies! if we pluck a wing from the back of a fly, not all the ministers and monarchs in Europe can restore it—yet they dare to send forth their mandate for the death of thousands, and if they succeed call the massacre victory. They with all that majestic serenity, which the sense of personal safety fails not to inspire, can "ride in the whirlwind and direct the storm," or rather like the gloomy spirits of Ossian, "sit on their distant clouds and enjoy the death of the mariner." 8

As I have already noted, Coleridge projected an opera based on Carthon the following year. It was perhaps in the same year that he included Ossian in a "Memoranda for a History of English Poetry, biographical, bibliographical, critical and philosophical." In the fourth of eight projected essays he planned to treat "English Ballads, illustrated by the Translations of the Volklieder of all countries,—Ossian—Welsh—Poets—. Series of true heroic Ballads from Ossian." 4 Although the entire proposal is too long to quote in full, it is significant to note the company that Ossian kept in Coleridge's mind; the other essays were to discuss the work of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton and Dryden; the essay on "Modern Poetry" was to include a consideration of Cowper, Burns, Thomson, Collins, and Akenside.

Coleridge made another casual allusion to Ossian in the Notebooks in 1797; when he was making a transcript of public accounts of Lessing's career, he included the simile, "like Ossian [he] seems to live among little Men" (I, i, 377f13v). Kathleen Coburn noted that this is "Coleridge's interpolation or, less likely, from a source undiscovered" (I, ii, 377f13wn). The line alluded to is from Fingal: "I walk with little men." 8

In 1802, Coleridge wrote to Sotheby of "his intention" to translate Voss's "Idylls" in hexameters. His next remark indicates that he had studied the style of Ossian among others in preparation for his work:

8 Essays on his Own Times (London, 1850), I, 48.


"I have discovered that the poetical parts of the Bible and the best parts of Ossian are little more than slovenly hexameters, and the rhythmical prose of Gessner is still more so." 6

In a lecture delivered in 1818, Coleridge made an aside on Ossian:

Though I profess myself perfectly sceptical, neither decided to the one side nor the other of the great controversy, concerning whether the Iliad of Homer was a poem written by one man or whether it is a choice of an immense number of poems, written upon the same subject, strung together by Pisistratus or some other (in the same manner, though with a worthier motive than Macpherson strung [sic] together a number of Scotch poems and called it the epic poem of Temora) but I can see no probability of Homer being a particular person.7

Judging from this statement, it would appear that Coleridge regarded the individual poems as essentially genuine; he seemed to regard Macpherson's deception as largely a matter of the epic form in which the poems were published.

II

Further indication of Coleridge's admiration of Ossian may be seen in three poems that are permeated with Ossianic diction and imagery: "Anna and Harland" (c. 1790), "Imitated from Ossian" (1793), and "The Complaint of Ninathôna" (1793). A detailed examination of these poems will indicate some of the qualities in Ossian that attracted Coleridge.

Virtually everything in the sonnet, "Anna and Harland," except the form and the proper names is derived from Ossian. The octave describes the narrative action:

Within these wilds was Anna wont to rove
    While Harland told his love in many a sigh,
But stern on Harland roll'd her brother's eye,
    They fought, they fell—her brother and her love!
To Death's dark house did grief-worn Anna haste,
    Yet here her pensive ghost delights to stay;
Oft pouring on the winds the broken lay—
    And bark, I hear her—'twas the passing blast.8

The plight of Anna is identical to that of Colma in *The Songs of Selma*; her lover and her brother quarrel and in the resulting combat both are killed; she dies from grief almost immediately:

I sit in my grief; I wait for morning in my tears! Rear the tomb, ye friends of the dead. Close it not till Colma come. My life flies away like a dream: why should I stay behind? (I, 428)

There are many verbal similarities to Ossian in the octave. The second line is reminiscent of "They shall sigh with the sighs of love" (*Fingal*, II, 358), and the third follows Macpherson very closely. Not only is the basic description of a person rolling his eye on another common in Ossian but also the practice of using an adjective, in this case "stern," where an adverb would normally be placed. This device has an arresting effect and shifts the description back to the subject rather than the predicate. Examples from Ossian are "Mild rolled his blue and smiling eye" (*Fingal*, II, 358), and "Nor careless rolled her eyes, on the rider of stormy waves" (*Catb-loda*, I, 254). "The narrow house" in Macpherson's habitual periphrasis for a tomb, and it bears a general resemblance to "Death's dark house." Winds are often the carriers of elegiac songs in Ossian. They are invoked in *Berrabon*: "Strike the harp, and raise the song: be near, with all your wings, ye winds. Bear the mournful sound away to Fingal's airy hall" (II, 384). More similar to Coleridge's description of Anna is the grief-laden maiden in *Catb-loda*, who "throws a broken song on wind" (I, 230). The verb "pour" is also used in Ossian to give a sense of physical substance to a human utterance: "He poured his voice, at times, amidst the roaring stream" (*Catb-loda*, I, 233-34). In the concluding line of the octave Coleridge introduced a first person speaker, who mistakes the sound of the blast for the voice of Anna's ghost. An identical situation is described in *Fingal*:

"My eyes perceive thee not. Often forlorn and dark I sit at thy tomb, and feel it with my hands. When I think I hear they voice, it is but the passing blast" (II, 340)

In both poems the confusion between the blast and the voice of a ghost implies an habitual contact with the supernatural world; it is always between two familiar sounds that mistakes are made.

In the sestet the speaker expresses a morbid attraction to the dead that is similar to the passage just cited:

I love to sit upon her tomb's dark grass,
Then Memory backward rolls Time's shadowy tide;
The tales of other days before me glide:
With eager thought I seize them as they pass;
For fair, tho' faint, the forms of Memory gleam,
Like Heaven's bright beauteous bow reflected in
the stream.

The first two lines of the sester bear a resemblance to Ulfin's lament for
Connal and Crimora; the latter also died from grief at the death of her lover:

Earth here incloses the loveliest pair on the hill. The grass grows
between the stones of the tomb; I often sit in the mournful shade,
The wind sighs through the grass; their memory rushes on my mind. (Carlo-world, I, 292)

There is little personification in Ossian, but the description of water
"rolling" is a stylistic mannerism of Macpherson's. Its metaphorical use
is usually in connection with "battle." "They came, and saw the tide of
battle, like ocean's crowded waves; when the dark wind blows from the
deep, and rolls the billows through the sandy vale" (Fingal, II, 335-36).
Coleridge's phrase, "the tales of other days" is similar to Macpherson's
"A tale of the times of old" (Cath-loda, I, 225) and "The deeds of days
of other years" (Carthom, I, 292). Coleridge's description of the poet as
an intermediary who is able to revitalize the intense emotional experi-
ences of figures of the past is probably derived from Ossian. The role
of the poet is primarily passive; through abandoning his narrow sense
of self-identity and meditating on the suffering of past heroes, he attains
a visionary insight into another age. The act of creativity becomes the
process of seizing the vision in language before it once again slips back,
into the irretrievable past: "then comes a voice to Ossian, and awakes
his soul! It is the voice of years that are gone! they roll before me, with
all their deeds! I seize the tales, as they pass, and pour them forth in
song" (Oins-world, I, 319).

The concluding simile of "Anna and Harland" compares the nature
of remembered "forms" with the indistinct beauty of a reflected rainbow
upon a stream. A similar image is found in Cath-loda: "I look into the
times of old, but they seem dim to Ossian's eyes, like reflected moon-
beams on a distant lake" (I, 251). Macpherson had used a simile identi-
cial to the one in "Anna and Harland" to suggest the composure and
grace of Ryno: "He was like the bow of the shower, seen far distant on
the stream, when the sun is setting on Mora" (Fingal, II, 349).

"Anna and Harland" suggests a number of things about the young
Coleridge's view of Ossian. That he derived his poem largely from Mac-
pherson's work implies considerable esteem, for a poet rarely imitates
an artist whom he does not consider to be of the first order; furthermore,
the eclectic nature of Coleridge's borrowing suggests again that he had
assimilated large portions of Macpherson's work. It is also the first instance of Coleridge's use of a dramatic narrator; the choice of a simplified diction largely derived from Ossian suggests that this poem is an early experiment in telling a tale from the point of view of a primitive, a bard like Ullin or Ossian. The casual acceptance of the supernatural, in this case a ghost, and the reliance on visionary experience as the major source of poetic creativity are later transformed into major themes in Coleridge's great work.

Coleridge's continued interest in Ossian is evidenced by the fact that he wrote two avowed imitations in 1795. The first was entitled simply "Imitated From Ossian"; the first three stanzas follow Macpherson closely:

The stream with languid murmure creeps,
In Lumin's flowery vale:
Beneath the dew the Lily weeps
Slow waveling to the gale.

'Cease, restless gale!' it seems to say,
'Nor wake me with thy sighing!
The honours of my vernal day
On rapid wing are flying.

'To-morrow shall the Traveller come
Who late beheld me blooming;
His searching eye shall vainly roam
The dreary vale of Lumin.

These lines are derived from the beginning of Berrabon:

Bend thy blue course, O stream! round the narrow plain of Lutha
. . . The flower hangs its heavy head, waving at times, to the gale. 'Why dost thou wake me, O gale? it seems to say, 'I am covered with the drops of heaven. The time of fading is near; the blast that shall scatter my leaves. To-morrow shall the traveller come; he that saw me in my beauty shall come. His eyes will search the field, but they will not find me.' (II, 371)

Coleridge's concluding stanzas bear a general similarity to Ossian:

With eager gaze and wetted cheek
My wonted haunts along.
Thus, faithful Maiden! thou shalt seek
The Youth of simplest song.

But I along the breeze shall roll
The voice of feeble power;
And dwell, the Moon-beam of thy soul,
In Slumber's nightly hour. (I, 39)

The passage from Berrathon that follows the one just cited also com-
paries the plight of the poet-speaker to that of the flower. Coleridge changed the character who is parallel to the traveller from a hunter to a "faithful maiden"; but the presence of Malvina may have suggested such a change:

So shall they search in vain, for the voice of Cona, after it has failed in the field. The hunter shall come forth in the morning, and the voice of my harp shall not be heard. "Where is the son of car-borne Fingal?" The tear will be on his cheek! Then come thou, O Malvina; with all thy music come! (II, 371-72)

The other imitition, "The Complaint of Ninathóma," was first sent to Mary Evans during the time that Coleridge was at Cambridge. He expressed a plan to have his composer friend, Charles Hague, set the poem "to wild music" and that he would sing it and accompany himself on the violin.†

As in the case of the earlier imitation, the opening lines are the closest to Macpherson:

How long will ye round me be dwelling,  
O ye blue-tumbling waves of the sea?  
Not always in caves was my dwelling,  
Nor beneath the cold blast of the tree;  
Through the high sounding halls of Cathloma  
In the steps of my beauty, I strayed;  
The warriors beheld Ninathóma,  
And they blessed the white bosom’d Maid! (I, 39)

The corresponding passage from Ossian is found in Berrathon:

How long will ye roll around me, blue tumbling waters of ocean?  
My dwelling was not always in caves, nor beneath the whistling tree. The feast was spread in Torthoma’s hall. My father delighted in my voice. The youths beheld me in the steps of my loveliness. They blessed the dark haired Nina-thoma. (II, 377)

In the version sent to Mary Evans there followed:

By my Friends, by my Lovers discarded  
Like the Flower of the Rock now I waste,  
That lifts its fair head unregarded,  
And scatters its leaves on the blast.

These lines were deleted when the poem was published in 1796, probably because the central image is the same as the one used in the other imitition.

The concluding stanza is more freely adapted from Ossian, and Coleridge again took the opportunity of introducing a supernatural

element into this primitive setting, though there is no ghost in Macpherson’s treatment of Nina-thoma:

A Ghost! by my cavern it darted!
In moon beams the Spirit was drest
For lovely appear the Departed
When they visit the dreams of my rest!
But disturb’d by the tempest’s commotion
Fleet the shadowy forms of delight:
Ah cease, thou shrill blast of the ocean!
To howl through my cavern by night. (I, 39, 40)

A number of these lines bear a general resemblance to Ossian. Macpherson’s cave becomes a cavern, and the clouds that usually dress his ghosts are changed into moon-beams. In Beraathan the sight of the ghost is described: “Thou art fallen on thy plains, and the field is bare. The winds come from the desert! there is no sound in thy leaves! Lovely art thou in death ...” (II, 380). In Ossian the activity of the spirit world is consistently associated with storms. The Spirit of Morn is asked, “Or ridest thou on a beam, amidst the dark trouble of clouds? Pourest thou the loud wind on seas, to roll their blue waves over isles?” (Temora, II, 123). Coleridge’s phrase, “the shrill blast,” echoes a line from Cath-loda: “Shrill sounds the blast of darkness” (I, 234). The concluding lines are also reminiscent of “I might have heard his voice on the blast of my cave” (Beraathan, II, 382).

Before turning to Coleridge’s major poems, it may be noted that although Ossian did not exercise any direct prosodic influence on these poems, Macpherson’s work certainly stimulated his interest in diverse, flexible measures. His study of the metrical structure of Ossian in 1802 has already been noted, but Coleridge could hardly have failed to notice the prosodic characteristics of the poems before that time; in fact, as Peter Thorslev noticed in The Byronic Hero (Minneapolis, 1962), Coleridge used “Ossianic prose” in the fragment, “The Wanderings of Cain,” the poem that he abandoned to write “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

One of the structural techniques that Macpherson used to give his verse a more regular rhythmical quality than we ordinarily find in prose consisted of balancing phrases and clauses by means of rough accentual equivalence and parallel construction; a passage from Cath-loda illustrates this quality in Ossian:

“Son of daring Comhal,
Shall my steps be forward through night?
From this shield shall I view them,
Over their gleaming tribes?
Starno, king of lakes, is before me,
And Swaran, the foe of strangers.
Their words are not in vain,
By Loda's stone of power." (I, 228)

A passage from "The Wanderings of Cain" shows a similar quality:

"Abel, my brother, I would lament thee
But that the spirit within me is withered,
And burnt up with extreme agony.
Now I pray thee, by thy flocks, and by thy pastures
And by the quiet rivers which thou lovedst,
That thou tell me all thou knowest.
Who is the God of the dead?
Where doth he make his dwellings?
What sacrifices are acceptable unto him?" 10

It is clear from these examples that Coleridge's lines do not form pairs as Macpherson's often do, but the general structure and the simplified diction are reminiscent of Ossian.

III

Coleridge was interested in Ossian throughout the five or six years previous to the period of his greatest poetic achievement. "Anna and Harland," written around 1790, already reflects a thorough familiarity with Macpherson's work. Some three years later, he made an allusion to "the voice of Cona" in the Preface to his poems, and that same year he returned to Ossian to write two imitations. In 1795, he drew upon Ossian for an illustration in a political address. The following year, he projected an opera based on Cartgon, and at about the same time, he planned to include an essay on Ossian in a projected history of English poetry. Perhaps it was in connection with one or both of these plans that he took both volumes of Ossian from the Bristol Library for a seven week period from January 6th to February 24th.11 For the text of Cartgon, he would have needed only the first volume, so presumably he still had a general interest in re-reading Ossian at that time. It is evident then, that Coleridge was repeatedly attracted to Macpherson's work during the years previous to the inception of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," and "Kubla Khan."

The poetry of Ossian and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" both convey to the reader a sense of the strangeness and mystery of the world

10 I, 292. I have written both passages as free verse in order to call attention to the underlying balancing.

as viewed by a primitive and superstitious narrator. Since the first instance of Coleridge’s experimenting with such a dramatic narrator was in the Ossianic “Anna and Harland,” it would not be surprising if he read Ossian as a manifestation of the workings of a primitive mind. His lecture comment, already cited, suggests that he considered the individual Ossianic poems authentic, and his continued admiration of them demonstrates that he found them poetically moving. They were therefore relevant examples of what he set out to do.

Coleridge’s poem shares with Ossian a narrative technique that is both rapid and abrupt. Hugh Blair observed this quality in Ossian in his well-known *Dissertation*:

> The manner of composition bears all the marks of the greatest antiquity. No artful transitions; nor full and extended connection of parts such as we find among the poets of later times, when order and regularity of composition were more studied and known; but a style always rapid and vehement; in narration concise even to abruptness, and leaving several circumstances to be supplied by the reader’s imagination.\(^2\)

It is just such a narrative quality that Coleridge ingeniously achieved, and it is the same quality that rendered the poem incomprehensible to many of his contemporary readers. The *Critical Review* found “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” “perfectly original in style as well as in story. Many of the stanzas are laboriously beautiful, but in connection they are absurd or unintelligible.”\(^3\) It was precisely to compensate for the lack of “artful transitions” and “full and extended connection of parts” that the gloss was added in 1815-1816. Ossian was obviously not the only work that had such characteristics, but it seems one of the likely sources for Coleridge’s narrative style.

Both Coleridge and Macpherson used their primitive dramatic narrator for the plausible introduction of the supernatural. In “Anna and Harland” the poet-speaker’s confusion between the sound of the blast and the voice of a ghost was a means of suggesting his thorough familiarity with both. A similar suggestion is found in this passage:

> And now the spell was spent: once more
> I viewed the ocean green,
> And looked afar, yet little saw
> Of what had else been seen—
> Like one, that on a lonesome road
> Doth walk in fear and dread,
> And having once turned round walks on,


\(^3\) XXIV (October, 1798), 197.
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread. (I, 203)

What gives the second passage its powerful and arresting quality is not only the precise simplicity of the description, but also the unusual function of the image of the fiend. We habitually expect a simile to present a familiar experience to help us to understand a strange one. What lends an eeriness to this passage is that this is exactly what it sets out to do, but the familiar world of the narrator is alien to our common experience.

Macpherson used the supernatural in a similar way:

But when the stride of the king came abroad, with all his grey dewy locks in the wind; then rose the shouts of his host, over every moving tribe. They gathered, gleaming round, with all their echoing shields. So rise the green seas round a spirit, that comes down from the squally wind. The traveller hears the sound afar, and lifts his head over the rock. He looks on the troubled bay, and thinks he dimly sees the form. (Temora, II, 228)

In a more compressed image, the traveller is described as looking back and experiencing fear, in terms very close to Coleridge's image:

Gathmor raises, at times, his terrible voice. Erin, abashed, gathers round. Their souls return back like a stream. They wonder at the steps of their fear. He rose, like the beam of the morning, on a haunted heath: the traveller looks back, with boding eye, on the field of dreadful forms! (Temora, II, 188)

Lowes discussed the passage in question and suggested lines 19-25 of Canto XXIII of the Inferno as the possible source; he cited Carlyle's prose translation because of its fidelity to the original. "Then I turned round, like one who longs to see what he must shun, and who is dashed with sudden fear, so that he puts not off his flight to look; and behind us I saw a black Demon come running up the cliff." Coleridge, however, had read Boyd's translation in 1796, and Lowes pointed out that this elegant translation certainly did not suggest "Coleridge's vivid lines." Whether Coleridge had read Dante in the original before the writing of "The Ancient Mariner" is not certain. In any event, the special power of the image is derived from the glimpse that it gives us of the demon-haunted world of the narrator, an implication that is found in Ossian but not in Dante.

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., pp. 526-28.
In addition to the general simplicity of diction that is appropriate to the dramatic narrators of Macpherson and Coleridge, a few specific phrases are similar. In the opening of "The Ancient Mariner," the wedding celebration is described:

'The B ridegro o m's d o or s a re o pened w id e,
A nd I am n ex t o f k in;
The gues ts a re m et, t he f east i s s et;
M ay'st h ear t he m e r ry di n.' (I, 187)

These last two lines echo one of the few exuberant passages in Ossian:

"The feast is spread. The harp is heard;
and joy is in the hall" (Gr om a, I, 350).

The situation, the mood, and even the meter are identical, and the phrases themselves are quite similar.

Coleridge had used the word "blast" four times in his Ossianic imitations, and the descriptions in "The Ancient Mariner," "loud roared the blast," and the "storm blast roared" (I, 188) bear a close resemblance to the many "blasts" in Ossian: "Shri l l soun ds t he blast" (C ad b -l o da, I, 234), "My voice remains, like a blast that roars (The S ongs o f S el ma, I, 436), and "The roar of the blast is around me" (Da r -h u l a, II, 25).

"Christabel," which is also told from the point of view of a primitive bard, derives a number of stylistic devices from Ossian. The most frequent is the use of "roll" in describing the motion of a person's eyes, usually during a time of intense emotional stress. Coleridge had used such a description, as we have seen, in the Ossianic "Anna and Harland": "But stern on Harland roll'd her brother's eye" (I, 16).

In "Christabel" Coleridge used this technique to describe both Geraldine and Sir Leoline at a time of emotional crisis. Just before Geraldine casts her spell she "slowly rolled her eyes around" (I, 224). This line resembles "the slow rolling eyes of Comala," and the "maid of the slow-rolling eye" (Carri c -b u ra, I, 283, 287). Just after her "serpent eyes" have disappeared,

She rolled her large bright eyes divine
Wildly on Sir Leoline. (I, 233)

These echo two passages in Ossian: "Lorna shall roll her bright eyes in thy halls" (The Battle of Lora, I, 63), and "His eyes rolled wildly round" (Fingal, I, 273). The two descriptions of Sir Leoline are of the same general nature: "his eye in lightning rolls," and "He rolled his eye with stern regard" (I, 229, 235). It may be noted that Coleridge had also used "stern" in a similar passage in "Anna and Harland."
Coleridge’s haunting lines,

    Her gentle limbs she did undress
    And lay down in her loveliness (I, 223),

are suggestive of Ossian. Macpherson frequently coupled an abstract noun, often grief or beauty, with the preposition “in” to suggest a quality of physical emanation: “From her cave came forth, in her beauty, the daughter of Torcul-tormo” (Cath-loda, I, 235) and “I sit in my grief” (The Songs of Selma, I, 428). On occasion this aura is specifically associated with “light”: “She came in all her beauty, like the moon from the cloud of the east. Loveliness was around her as light” (Fingal, II, 307), and “Of Evarallin were my thoughts, when, in all the light of beauty she came” (Fingal, II, 326). Coleridge echoed the latter line in “Genevieve”: “In Beauty’s light you glide along” (I, 19). Coleridge’s phrase from “Christabel” is nearly identical with Macpherson’s address to the moon, “Thou comest forth in loveliness” (Dar-thula, II, 21). The final evidence that suggests that Coleridge’s “in her loveliness” was adapted from Ossian is found in a footnote appended to “The Complaint of Ninathóma” in 1796. In citing the parallel passage from Beraithin, Coleridge quoted the sentence, “The youths beheld me in the steps of my loveliness,” inaccurately; in his note it read, “The youths beheld me in my loveliness” (I, 39).

An undercurrent of Ossian is found in two lines from “Kubla Khan”:

    And mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
    Ancestral voices prophesying war! (I, 298)

Since these lines have received considerable attention from several scholars, it will be helpful to note the parallels that have been cited before examining similar passages in Ossian. Lowes quoted a passage from Purchas that states of the Tartar priests, “No warres are begunne or made without their word.” From Bruce he noted “all the hermits and holy men on our side, that can prophesy, have assured him that he is to beat the rebels this month at Serbraxox.” A more remote similarity to VATBEK is observed. Vathek looks in the abyss into which the Giaour had vanished: “One while, he fancied to himself voices arising from the depth of the gulf . . . but, all was no more than the hollow murmur of waters, and the din of the cataracts that rushed from steep to steep, down the sides of the mountain.” 17

Elisabeth Schneider felt that these passages did “not suggest very vividly the prophetic ancestral voices,” 18 and proposed another group of sources. After remarking that ancestors play a significant part in

17 Ibid., pp. 397-99.
Gebir and that on one occasion ancestor is "used close to prophetic as in Kubla Khan" she noted,

He thought he sometimes heard a distant voice
Breathe through the cavern's mouth, and further on
Faint murmurs now, now hollow groans reply.

He entered; and a mingled sound arose
Like that— . . .

Of birds that wintering watch in Memmon's tomb.  \footnote{Ibid., p. 124.}

Another similarity is summarized: "At length Gebir finds himself embraced by the ghost of his father, who now utters bitter repentance of the vow he had once extracted from Gebir, the vow to make war upon Egypt" (p. 127). She also noted that in a Thalaba a building which is reminiscent of the "pleasure dome" is under a prophecy of woe, though not from ancestors.

In Ossian ancestral spirits frequently foresee the coming of war. Larthon is visited in a dream by the "seven spirits of his fathers": "He heard their half-formed words, they dimly beheld the times to come. He beheld the kings of Atha, the sons of future days. They led their hosts, along the field, like ridges of mist . . . " (Temora, II, 222). There is a suggestion that the ancestors foresee war because they instigate it: "He thinks them ghosts of the aged, forming future wars" (Catb-loda, I, 244). At any rate, they gather before a battle: "Darkness filled Selma's hall, when he stretched his hand to his spear: the ghosts of thousands were near, and foresaw the death of the people" (The Battle of Lora, II, 64). A passage in The War of Caros brings together the four elements in Coleridge's lines; (1) ghostly (2) ancestors (3) foresee (4) war: "Oscar goes to the people of other times; to the shades of silent Ardren; where his fathers sit dim in their clouds, and behold the future war" (I, 281). Such passages as these are certainly an important background for Coleridge's lines in "Kubla Khan."

Macpherson has a place in the heterogenous list of writers whose works formed in Coleridge's mind that "incongruous, chaotic, and variegated jumble"\footnote{Lowes, p. 4.} from which his greatest poetry emerged. Kathleen Coburn's suspicion was largely accurate; Coleridge's reading of Ossian, though not particularly Cartbon, left its mark on his major poems.

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