JAMES MACPHERSON: ROMANCING THE GAEL

THE LITERARY, CULTURAL AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT OF *THE POEMS OF OSSIAN.*

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF Ph.D.

by

DAFYDD R. MOORE

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES,
THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

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ABSTRACT.

This thesis locates James Macpherson's *The Poems of Ossian* (1760–1763) within a range of contexts in order to come to a more fully integrated conception of text in context than has frequently been the case previously. It argues that Macpherson scholarship has been dogged by issues of authenticity and cultural identity one step removed from the works Macpherson wrote. This has led to a situation in which *Ossian* is viewed as an important cultural artefact but one whose textual source, and therefore significance, has frequently been misrepresented and misunderstood. Having delineated the critical heritage of the *Poems* in these terms I shall offer four inter-related contextualised readings of *Ossian* which aim to reconcile and reunite the text and its most valuable contexts.

I locate Macpherson's poems within what I shall argue is their most compelling contemporary aesthetic context, that of the discourse of Sentiment and Sensibility by suggesting that the grand compromise the poems offer between action and sentimental virtue proves an illusion. I then place *Ossian* within the generic context of romance, arguing that current understanding of romance offers compelling ways of understanding both *Ossian*'s relationship to its sources and the world of the poems. In reaching an understanding about why Macpherson was unable to assent to the romance label himself, the chapter discusses the state of scholarship and ideological status of romance at the time.

A historiographical context is offered by an analysis of *Ossian* and Macpherson's more theoretical prose in the light of that of Adam Ferguson in order to define more clearly *Ossian*'s relationship to the Scottish Enlightenment's dominant historiographical paradigms and their ideological significance. Finally a wider cultural context is explored by considering *Ossian* as writing about defeat, and about the formulations of defeat created by both victors and losers. This chapter ties together many of the dimensions discussed in earlier chapters and comes to a subtly articulated conception of *Ossian*'s cultural locale, one which stresses the instability and ambivalence of Macpherson's position.

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A NOTE ON TEXTS AND CITATION.

All references to *The Poems of Ossian* come from *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, edited by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh, 1996). This edition follows the text of the 1765 *Works* with full reference to the revisions of 1773. Within my discussion I follow the convention of referring to *Ossian* when I mean the *Poems of Ossian*, and Ossian when referring to the character and notional author of the poems.

All other works are cited in the bibliography and in footnotes within the text. A first appearance in each chapter merits a full reference and thereafter the work is referred to by author and date. Where possible these future references appear in the body of the text although occasionally a further footnote is used if it proves less cumbersome. Ease of reading and of referencing is the criterion used in each case. On the question of general scholarly debts I should take this opportunity to thank Professor Murray Pittock, Dr Howard Gaskill, Mr Colin Nicholson, Dr Nicholas Phillipson and Dr Kenneth Simpson for their advice about, interest in, and comments on, my research.

INTRODUCTION.

It is just over ten years since Howard Gaskill, in an article which began the process of unsettling many commonly held assumptions about both James Macpherson and *The Poems of Ossian*, offered a scathing critique of a critical tradition which he saw as failing to serve its subject matter in any meaningful way. Gaskill came to the gloomy conclusion that 'there can surely be no other major literary figure about whom so many are inclined to write whilst circumventing the central body of scholarship, and even, in an alarming number of cases, the texts themselves'.[1] Although the intervening period has seen interest in Macpherson rise to a level not seen since the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Gaskill's diagnosis of these past failings has come to sound ever more prophetic. For example, it is apparently still possible to offer opinions on Macpherson's "dishonesty" in his misrepresentation of Gaelic culture while freely and cheerfully acknowledging an ignorance as to whether Macpherson understood the language or not. The justifiability or otherwise of the statement is not the point here, but rather the assumptions that lie behind it, particularly that Macpherson is somehow not worthy to be accorded serious scholarly attention. Elsewhere, revisionism which now sees *Ossian* as an important cultural artefact has not generally been accompanied by any re-evaluation of the nature of the text or examination of the experience of reading that text. Thus a recent collection of essays which claims as its 'primary focus' *The Poems of Ossian* includes only three essays which actually quote from Macpherson (a figure which includes an article outlining the production of the poems that can hardly avoid quoting from *Ossian*).[2] This reluctance to deal with the poems directly is doubly lamentable as it leaves important areas of the revisionist endeavour untapped, and militates against otherwise valuable insights. In short, if Macpherson's profile has been raised by ten years of revisionism, if he has been promoted from the footnotes to the main body of eighteenth-century literary history, this elevation has all too infrequently involved any rethinking of the man and his work. In seeking to discover ways of

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[1] Howard Gaskill, '"Ossian" Macpherson: Towards a Rehabilitation', *Comparative Criticism* 8 (1986), 113–46, (p. 115).

[2] *Celticism*, ed. by Terence Brown, (Amsterdam and Atlanta Ga., 1996).

studying *Ossian* which avoid the necessity of actually reading the poems (a project which in itself demonstrates the assumed logic of many recent efforts), not only has current scholarship frequently misrepresented the textual source but also misunderstood the cultural artefact it has erected in place of that source.

This thesis rises to the challenge of Gaskill's observations in two ways. Firstly, it accounts for the "absent centre" within the critical tradition in terms of a scholarly debate dominated by the twin issues of authenticity and the literary after-life of *Ossian*. These concerns have proved equally damaging to a text-centred approach, since they both discourage the treatment of *Ossian qua Ossian*. It could even be argued that most of the current spate of sympathetic revisionism has in some senses failed to liberate Macpherson from this restrictive past: either it has served in some measure to perpetuate the terms of the debate it is actually denying the validity of, or else it has by-passed *Ossian* more or less altogether in its analysis of Macpherson's place within wider contexts, most frequently that of the Scottish Enlightenment. This latter tendency has been exacerbated by a tradition of scholarship originating in other literary fields and academic disciplines, some examples of which will be discussed at greater length in the first chapter. While this interdisciplinary approach is in many respects highly desirable, it has often meant that a literary – rather than a historical or historio-cultural – approach to Macpherson has been missing, or, if present, has been carried out by those not over-familiar with its subject matter. This is important, since

> there is a considerable difference between the historian's evaluation of the significance of his raw material, which is closely tied to its relevance for or against a general proposition, and the critic's evaluation of a work, which refuses to submit the work to categories outside the work, refuses, that is to say, to use the work as evidence at all, but rather approaches it as a complete structure of meaning which will dictate its own categories.[3]

While perhaps not insisting quite so sharply on the delineation of cultural products implied here, I believe that the 'methodological conflict which seems so often to make historians bad critics, and critics bad historians' (Sanders: 1968, p. 15) is one felt with peculiar force by anyone who has compared Macpherson's output with what has been

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[3] Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea: Studies in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 14.

said about that output by many of those approaching *Ossian* as a historical and cultural artefact.

Secondly, I aim to redress this balance by offering readings of *The Poems of Ossian* which reunite text and context by placing a sensitive and lively response to the text within a number of related contexts. The aim of this interplay is, in David Fuller's striking expression, 'not cultural history but the clearer and more vivid inhabiting of particular works.'[4] As a result these readings do not offer a simple and single line on Macpherson and his activities, at least in part because there are too many lines on Macpherson currently doing the rounds. These lines have a tendency to demand or imply the sort of neat fits and easy statements which have led to the misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the subject they supposedly explain. The chapters which follow are not, however, a series of discrete readings, but are unified by three shared principles, three common claims to originality and value.

II.

Firstly, at every stage the thesis interrogates not only the standard critical tradition within Macpherson studies, but also the revisionism of the last ten years. As such, the arguments presented below undertake a thorough-going revisionism of the critical reading practices and assumptions which have informed the practices and assumptions of *Ossian* scholarship over the last two hundred years. By recentring Macpherson criticism around its supposed subject, the thesis adjusts much current revisionist thinking, or fills in the fine detail of connections and congruencies which have previously been drawn with a broad (and at times none too subtle) brush. Many of the critics who have discoursed on *Ossian* have done so within the context of a wider agenda and argument. This is of course to a degree inevitable, and to insist that everyone know everything is as undesirable as it is naive. The chapters which follow all touch on fields of scholarly endeavour with which my own acquaintance is needs-must far from encyclopaedic: in such a situation I can only hope that I do no violence to accepted scholarship (although the case of Macpherson teaches us above all else that

concepts such as 'accepted scholarship' are highly problematic if not fictional). However, the difference between Macpherson and say Adam Ferguson (the subsidiary subject of chapter four) is that Macpherson scholarship is substantially reliant on those parachuting into the field on their way to fight bigger battles in a way that Ferguson scholarship is not. The thesis addresses this tendency by providing a vital, coherent and text-based approach to *Ossian*, one which begins with the basic assumption that I am first and foremost studying Macpherson, and that the wider fields I introduce into my discussion are introduced in order to illuminate Macpherson, although obviously in as much as he is part of those fields the illumination will in the final analysis be mutual.

As such, and secondly, the thesis builds up incrementally as it were, an image of Macpherson and his activities. *Ossian* is revealed as a portmanteau text, built and animated by a series of clashes of imperative within a variety of discourses. The conflicting pressures bearing on the poems make for an unstable artefact, a testament to a complicated cultural locale. Thus the demand for fresh reading strategies with which to confront the poems on the micro-scale is mirrored by a call to resist the temptation to resolve the ambiguities and tensions inherent in Macpherson's work into a big picture, a single story. In the final analysis the arguments presented below may well pose as many questions as they answer, may well replace or augment the list of Ossianic puzzles. However, in as much as this thesis remains puzzled about Macpherson, it is perhaps at least puzzled about more important things than has hitherto often been the case.

In a third sense the readings are united in their initiating approach and perspective, a desire to come to terms with one of the features central to reading *Ossian*. In a sense this is the textual project by which the first two aims of the thesis are realised. It has long been recognised that *Ossian* is dominated by, in the words of William Hazlitt, a 'sense of privation, the loss of all things', that the poems represent life experienced at 'the lag end of the world'.[5] Adopting one of Northrop Frye's four archetypal literary themes, I will refer to this as the Ossianic ambience of *sparagmos*. *Sparagmos* is the name given by Frye to 'the sense that heroism and effective action are

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[4] David Fuller, *Blake's Heroic Argument* (London, 1988), p. xii.

[5] William Hazlitt, 'On Poetry in General', *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P.P.Howe, 21 volumes, (London and Toronto, 1930), vol. 5, pp. 1–18, p. 18 and p. 15.

absent, disorganized or foredoomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world'.[6] This sense of heroic nihilism or incoherence has a number of implications for current revisionism. Ever since Matthew Arnold picked up this very feature of *Ossian* as epitomising his 'Celtic Titanism', *Ossian*'s 'foredoomed defeat' has been something of a dirty phrase within Macpherson studies, at the vanguard of charges of a cultural misrepresentation which conspires with an ideological agenda of assimilation. This question will be addressed in due course within the chapters that follow, but so will others upon which the Ossianic *sparagmos* bears. In brief, the claims of current revisionism for *Ossian* as some compensatory fantasy for the middling ranks of mid-eighteenth-century society, or as an image of civic virtue reconditioned for polite society, or as a piece of potent literary propaganda, do not adequately confront this central Ossianic reality. Thus my sustained account of the central feature of the poems and their represented sensibility is not only a project in and for itself which has never been attempted on this scale before, but is also one which reunites text and context in a vital relationship to produce a subtly articulated view of *Ossian* that transcends the traditional (and I would suggest critically stale) trench warfare over misrepresentation.

III.

Chapter one justifies my claims about the critical tradition of Macpherson studies by exploring its largest and most important aspects. While the chapter engages with that tradition and points forward to further interrogation of it in later chapters, it is also informed by an awareness that to dwell too long over traditional debates in an effort to demonstrate their spuriousness only gives those debates further life. The second generation of Macpherson scholarship to which the following study belongs is in the fortunate position of being able to side-step this paradox in a way not open to the early pioneers of the field, and we should be wary not to miss the opportunity to do so by refighting old battles.

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[6] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957), p. 192.

Chapters two and three approach the question of heroic failure from a broadly generic perspective. Chapter two is hinged upon the way the imperatives and techniques of the text of Sensibility, the ideologies of Politeness and Sympathy, impact on the heroic epic host form of *Ossian*. It is here that the twin virtues of a critical strategy which reads between text and context in the light of a vital engagement between the two become manifest. On the one hand attention to the ways in which the Cult of Sensibility makes its presence felt in *Ossian* produces both a lively and informed reading of the text and sheds light on a central Ossianic characteristic, that of the hopelessly lost hero; on the other hand, the ramifications of Macpherson's commitment to the ideals of Sentimentalism underline certain aspects of those ideals and cast a side-light on questions of cultural identity posed by *Ossian*. If chapter two suggests that *Ossian*'s relationship with straightforward epic is problematic, that the epic of defeat becomes in some senses entwined with the defeat of epic, chapter three offers a generic alternative to the epic, that of romance. The chapter argues that while it was untenable for Macpherson to put *Ossian* in a romance framework in the eighteenth century, on the grounds of cultural politics, the state of scholarship and because it is necessarily hard to see oneself as a romancer, our own understanding of the form and its "meaning" allows us to see that it offers a valuable handle on Macpherson's activities, his creative relationship with his source material, and on the represented world of *Ossian*. This chapter beyond all others demonstrates the benefits of moving the emphasis away from questions of misrepresentation and fraud.

In claiming that *Ossian* represents eighteenth-century romances of Sensibility or Sentiment, various patterns emerge. We are aware of the first example of a curious paradox about *Ossian*: that it is animated both by a clash between form and content – for example, the Sentimental text to a certain extent undermines the very values it seeks to affirm – and by a correspondence between features of form. That is to say, the Ossianic portmanteau contains elements which are uncomfortable travelling companions in the full sense of the expression: they both sit uncomfortably together and yet are going in the same direction. For example, if the sentimental romance interrogates the ideals of epic, then it is only elaborating on a minor key in the epic

itself (see section IV below). Equally within this generic context we see that *Ossian* has important stories to tell about the cultural-political backdrop to Macpherson's efforts.

Chapters four and five move the analysis of the Ossianic *sparagmos*, the interrogation of the heroic, from the field of literary genre to wider historiographical and cultural discourses. Chapter four analyses the poems in terms of the Scottish Enlightenment's vision of and attitude towards perceived primitive societies, specifically through a close reading of the poems in comparison with the civic thought of Adam Ferguson, Macpherson's friend, fellow Highlander and, along with Macpherson, a figure considered to be one of the Scottish Enlightenment's most confirmed primitivists. Macpherson is revealed as subtly manipulating the rhetorical and ideological formulations of primitivism in order to create a stratified, pan-Celtic cultural identity for the British Isles. The chapter examines who are the winners and the losers along the way to this position, set out most completely in Macpherson's *An Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771/3), but also argues that Macpherson's work ultimately demonstrates the unsustainability of the outright primitivist political discourse, for all its perceived promise as an ideology of opposition.[7]

Chapter five examines the way in which *Ossian* manipulates time and narrative, arguing that Ossianic dysfunction and despair also needs to be read in terms of a disillusionment with the narratives of defeat, the strategies of the defeated to come to terms with their disempowerment. This is focused through an analysis of the way *Ossian* deploys and engages with the rhetoric and iconography of Jacobitism and with the image of the poet as a redemptive figure of cultural protest. The chapter ends by discussing the extent of Macpherson's connivance with the forces of cultural marginalisation, and considers the degree to which *Ossian* may represent both a diagnosis of a cultural malady and a potent furthering of the complaint. This concluding section also reactivates our sense of the Sentimental *Ossian* in order to try to set Macpherson's cultural politics in their correct context.

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[7] I adopt a split dating for the *Introduction* to acknowledge both its first appearance in 1771 and my use of the revised and expanded edition of 1773.

IV.

Much of what follows is reliant on maintaining a subtle but significant distance between the positive and confident dynamism of the traditional heroic epic or ballad, even in relating tragedy, and the thwarted, dysfunctional atmosphere of *Ossian*'s heroic *sparagmos*. It may seem that the tremors I hope to register in the heroic structure are too attenuated by qualification to be worthwhile. While it is true that due diligence must be paid to the complexity within literary portrayals of heroism, nevertheless picking out such moments serves to reveal the strains within the Ossianic construct which allow us to dissect its aesthetic gearing and to reach the heart of its ideological and cultural compromise. While individual instances will be explored as they occur in later argument it is worth laying out some general observations now.

I am not naive enough to believe that epic stories and the national meta-narratives constructed from them cannot be tragic or calamitous. The Norman troops who sang a version of the *Chanson de Roland* before the Battle of Hastings were not, one can presume, attending much to the story of overweening pride leading to annihilation embedded in the poem as they prepared to face the Saxons on a foreign and strategically most unfavourable field. Pointing out that in the American psyche the year 1838 is associated with the defeat at the Alamo not with the substantially more significant victory at San Jacinto, Michael Kammen has suggested that the more driven by a myth of success a nation is, the more likely there is to spring up 'a national tradition in which selected cases of failure or defeat not only are made honourable, but in many instances become more memorable than conventional victories.'[8] Such stories are imbued with a deeper meaning, and one that, as Bruce Rosenberg has put it in describing one of history's more modern Rolands, General George Custer, is not wholly bound up in 'a sacrifice to the gods of manifest destiny':

> Custer is the embodiment of our defiance against those people, societal forces and pressures, those institutions, conventions, obligations, and destinal mazes that always seem to envelope and at least partially to enmesh and suffocate those who live in

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[8] Michael Kammen, *The Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991), p. 9. Of course, Texas was not part of the Union at this point in time, perhaps helping to explain why Texans are more interested in the Alamo than battles in other States. The point holds though given the place of the battle in the wider American consciousness.

> modern society. Custer [...] is that part of us which wants to resist capitulation to these forces and that part of us that defies, or struggles to defy, our society, our environment, our situation in life.[9]

We will witness moments, speeches and stands like this within *Ossian*, but we also and more overpoweringly witness something else, a sense that enmeshment and suffocation are the essence of the doomed antics of Ossian's companions, not what they represent an alternative to. Rather than offering an 'archetype of Camus's existential man who rises above the inevitability of his life and of his death by bravely fighting his inescapable fate to his last breath' (Rosenberg, p. 110) the Ossianic hero is, we shall see, more typically engaged in conspiring with his 'inescapable fate' than in resisting it. We shall return to this point and the Custer paradigm as a way of analysing more closely the dynamics of *Ossian* and of flagging up the particular brand of heroism offered by Macpherson's poems and its implications.

However, this distinction is not quite the end of the story, and criticism of the epic which focuses on the deep ambivalence of the poems towards their paragon figures also needs to be drawn into the equation. An ambivalence towards the ideals and motivations of the traditional epic hero has long been seen as a defining feature of the secondary, consciously constructed epic.[10] This analysis is extended to the poetic posture of the primary epic poet by Martin Kabat (indeed he claims that the interrogation of Homeric heroism is present in the *Aeneid* because Virgil was such a good reader of Homer). Because fulfilling his *arete* is more to do with a willingness to be destroyed than to destroy, the epic hero is ultimately and fundamentally at odds with the society he represents (hence Homer's *arete* becomes Virgil's *furor*):

> Although he may be a model for his society, nevertheless he is also a burden to it. His very excellence threatens the social fabric which he is expected to support and, finally, the absolute stance he takes isolates him and brings ruin to friends and enemies alike.[11]

The epic poet, living into the time of the 'little men' implies an ambiguous perspective (and one to which we shall return, particularly in chapter five): 'perhaps offended by the mediocrity of his own day' he 'apparently glorifies heroic activity', yet cannot shake the feeling that 'the absolute posture of the hero accounts for this current mediocrity; that

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[9] Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Code of the West* (Bloomington Indiana, 1982), p. 110.

[10] See, for example, C.M.Bowra's classic *From Virgil to Milton* (London, 1945), pp. 2–16, for a distinction between the forms of epic driven through this attitude.

is, the hero took with him and buried that very system of values for which he struggled' (Kabat, p. 177). Eugene Vance's reading of *The Song of Roland* proceeds in similar terms. At the conclusion to the poem 'a whole mode of life, a whole system of values, has become exhausted' leaving the 'world bitter and empty':

> Along with Roland and the twelve peers and the twenty thousand knights of the rearguard, a heroic order has perished. Even their glory has perished, in a sense, because the men who remain can remember it but cannot inherit it. In short, of all the stuff that epics are made of, nothing remains.[12]

This is highly suggestive for the reader of *Ossian* and would seem to go some way towards denying the distinction I am hoping to make here. Indeed Macpherson's explicit comments on the epic form suggest he was aware of the sadness at the heart of the heroic endeavour.

It is Macpherson's usual practice throughout *Fingal* to allude to other epics as a way to give pedigree to various elements of the poem. For example, at the opening to book II Macpherson's first footnote quotes Homer and Virgil to show how 'two other ancient poets handled a similar subject' (p. 425, n.1), or early in book IV Macpherson justifies the fact that the Scandinavians fled as Ossian 'hummed [...] the songs of heroes of old' (p. 84) thus:

> Ossian gives the reader a high idea of himself. His very song frightens the enemy. This passage resembles one in the eighteenth Iliad [sic], where the voice of Achilles frightens the Trojans from the body of Patroclus. (p. 430, n.9)[13]

Accordingly, the last line of the poem is glossed:

> It is allowed by the best critics that an epic poem ought to end happily. This rule, in its most material circumstances, is observed by the three most deservedly celebrated poets, Homer, Virgil, and Milton; yet I know not how it happens, the conclusions of their poems throw a melancholy damp on the mind. (p. 435, n. 54 *Deleted 1773*)

This accords with Macpherson's general practice of using footnotes to include additional information or to prompt the reader to think in ways not immediately obvious from the actual poem. Usually this works as a sort of short-hand, as when

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[11] Martin Israel Kabat, 'The Epic Hero: Recurring Patterns and Poetic Perspectives in Epic Poetry' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, New York University 1979), p. 48.

[12] Eugene Vance, *Reading the Song of Roland* (Englewood, 1970), p. 89.

[13] All references are to *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Howard Gaskill, (Edinburgh, 1996; from 'third edition' (first complete) 1765).

Macpherson glosses the character Gaul with the observation that his character 'is something like that of Ajax in the Iliad; a hero of more strength than conduct in battle' (p. 429, n. 52), creating an impression it would otherwise take several episodes (and, one might argue, more skill than that at Macpherson's disposal) to create. But the above comment is an odd one to make at this moment, because if we compare it with the actual end of the poem ('We rose on the wave with songs, and rushed, with joy, through the foam of the ocean' [p. 104]), we find that it is strangely irrelevant. As for the conclusion as a whole, few would disagree with Ken Simpson's assertion that 'after the recurrent sadness of *Fingal* Macpherson opts to end on a note of qualified optimism': even the seemingly terminally gloomy Cuchullin and Swaran have been cheered up by a ferociously good-humoured Fingal.[14] Thus at the end of *Fingal* Macpherson seems anxious to say something about the nature of the epic ending as he understood it, even at the risk of sounding irrelevant, and at the risk of demonstrating that his epic – at least to the inattentive reader – while following the rules of the 'best critics' is out of step with the practice of Milton, Homer and Virgil. A further example reinforces the point. In a note to "Berrathon" Macpherson defends the 'melancholy air' of *Ossian* with some Burkean reflections on those emotions which make most impression on the mind and thus are likely to be transmitted through tradition, claiming that 'melancholy is so much the companion of a great genius, that it is difficult to separate the idea of levity from chearfulness, which is sometimes the mark of an amiable disposition, but never the characteristic of elevated parts' (p.472, n.1). This underlines Macpherson's reading of what constitutes genius and, by extension, the contrived way in which he had made the point in *Fingal* since here the comment arises organically from reading the poem.

This is not to say that Macpherson would or even could have articulated such insights in the terms offered by Vance and Kabat. Nevertheless, *Ossian* can be seen as dramatising a poetic standpoint implied within other epics, the effects of which Macpherson would seem to have been sensible to.[15] In so much as this theme has been

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[14] Ken Simpson, *The Protean Scot: The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen, 1988), p. 54.

[15] Eighteenth-century 'historicist' classical scholarship (such as Thomas Blackwell's *Enquiry into the Life of Homer* (1735)) to which Macpherson was clearly indebted (see chapters 1 and 2 below) was geared towards uncovering the social, economic, political conditions in which Homer was

identified across the genre as a whole, *Ossian* does nothing extraordinary, yet in turning a minor note into the main theme of his poem, in foregrounding a previously inarticulated poetic stance, Macpherson warps the epic universe to the point that a difference in degree becomes something of a substantive difference in kind:

> Dost thou come to the battles of thy people, and to hear the actions of Oscar? When shall I cease to mourn by the streams of the echoing Cona? My years have passed away in battle, and my age is darkened with sorrow. (p.83)

It may be unwise to over-read moments like this. Nevertheless, what status and tone do we assign to that second question and, given Macpherson's usual paratactic style, what weight do we place on the 'and' of that last clause? By suggesting, if only residually, a causal link between the battles of his youth and the sorrow of his age (reasonable in as much as most of his family and friends succumb one way or another), Ossian is figured as the classic epic poet, one who lives to see the dawning of a less noble age brought about by the impetuous actions of his own.[16] The extent of this dramatisation and the warping effect it has on the heroic is illustrated perhaps most completely by the classic Ossianic tableau. Having narrated the arrival of Fingal on the field of battle and his immediate routing of the forces of Swaran, book III of *Fingal* ends, in the words of the "Argument", with 'some general reflections of the poet':

> Many a voice and many a harp in tuneful sounds arose. Of Fingal's noble deeds they sung, and of the noble race of the hero. And sometimes on the lovely sound was heard the name of the now mournful Ossian.
>
> Often have I fought, and often won in battles of the spear. But blind, and tearful, and forlorn I now walk with little men. O Fingal, with thy race of battle I now behold thee not. The wild roes feed upon the green tomb of the mighty king of Morven.——Blest be thy soul, thou king of swords, thou most renowned on the hills of Cona! (p. 79)

It is possible, then, to trace some of the elements of *Ossian*'s epic defeat to antecedents in the epic tradition. However, Macpherson plays on these elements in such a way and to such an extent that they seem to take the form of something different. It is easy to overstate the case for this difference, but it is, I shall argue in the

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presumed to have flourished. In one sense Macpherson can be seen as adding a psychological dimension to this line of inquiry.

[16] cf. Fiona Stafford's last survivor figure who offers an 'ambivalent attitude towards the past' marked by a 'torrent of yearning, hopelessness and resentment' and her characterisation of Home's Lady Randolph and her position in *Douglas* (see *The Last of the Race: The Growth of a Myth from Milton to Darwin* (Oxford, 1994), p. 84).

chapters to come, nevertheless there. If the aesthetic standards and imperatives of his own time led Macpherson to notice and appreciate the doubts which hover around the high ideals of epic heroism, they also drove him to magnify them out of their original proportions, somehow distorting the traditional epic atmosphere in the process. In short, the 'pall of funeral pyre which hovers over the Greek camp' at the end of the *Iliad* which Kabat finds 'peculiarly appropriate' (1979, p. 93) threatens to engulf *Ossian*, to catch in the throat and to pre-empt any efforts to see the redeeming heroic action which, in Homer may – or may not, since the traditional epic seen in these terms does not preclude that possibility – lie behind it.

CHAPTER ONE.

The Making of a Critical Tradition.

This chapter considers the tradition of critical commentary associated with *The Poems of Ossian* and their author with the aim of anchoring this study within the wider field and justifying one of its central claims. The Ossianic critical heritage has been largely organised around and conducted upon certain extra-textual issues, with the result that the poems themselves, and the experience of reading them, has been unduly neglected. The chapter demonstrates this, tries to explain why, and points to the ways that the current study will transcend these inherited terms of reference. For convenience's sake the chapter is split into sections, and as such it ought to be made plain at the outset that such divisions should be (and indeed are) dispensed with as soon as they become inconvenient.

I.

Macpherson studies have from their inception been dogged, by the variety of aspects of the "authenticity debate." That initial scholarship should have been thus preoccupied is understandable, and neither is it an issue which could be resolved overnight: it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that Gaelic scholarship arrived at as close to a definitive answer as we are likely to get on the relationship between *Ossian* and the poetry of the Gaeltachd, and, as we shall see below, even this is still subject to adjustment. That this scholarly tradition exists is not, however, the point: rather it is that this tradition has so skewed Macpherson scholarship as a whole that coming to a decision on this issue, rebutting this or reinforcing that, has taken precedence, indeed at times entirely drowned out, other lines of inquiry.

This thesis talks about *Ossian*, but the poems appeared in three stages over the course of four years: firstly the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), followed by

Fingal (1761/2) and finally *Temora* (1763). The first collected edition of the *Works of Ossian* appeared in 1765.[1] Accordingly, the debate surrounding them altered in emphasis and style as the various portions of the work came on stream. Debate over the epic status, relative age, and origin (Gaelic Scotland or Gaelic Ireland) intensified over the course of the decade, but it tended to lack the vehemence which popular tradition gives to the "Ossian Wars". Indeed Larry Stewart has gone so far as observing (perhaps not entirely convincingly but nevertheless usefully) that, while private doubts and public hints about fraud were heard in the 1760s, one of the biggest ironies of the affair is that the only work of the decade to explicitly bring up the question of authenticity – as opposed to misdesignation or appropriation – in print was the second edition of Hugh Blair's pro-*Ossian* Critical Dissertation.[2] Blair had acted as a response to David Hume's concern about the doubts growing in London and to Hume's request that Blair provide evidence with which Hume and other of *Ossian*'s defenders could retaliate (and satisfy themselves of the unfairness of English accusations). It is also worth noting Hume's assertion that 'the child [the poems] is, in a manner, become yours by adoption, as Macpherson has totally abandoned all care of it.'[3] This relative lack of interest on Macpherson's part is borne out in his published writings. The introductory dissertation to the *Temora* volume did have a more defensive tone, it is true, and the 1765 edition included an 'Advertisement' at the end of the first volume that consisted of a rubbishing of Ferdinando Warner's *Remarks on the History of Fingal and other Poems of Ossian* (1763), a work which had claimed *Ossian* for Ireland (but not as a fraud). Nevertheless, given the atmosphere of suspicion, it is striking how little Macpherson did within the 1765 edition to respond to the doubts cast on his word. Certainly by 1775, Macpherson was telling his publisher William Strahan that 'to [Samuel Johnson's] want of belief on this subject [*Ossian*'s authenticity] I have not the smallest objection', and the general pattern of his behaviour

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[1] Arguably the revisions made to the 1773 *Works* mean that it constitutes a fourth document.

[2] Larry LeRoy Stewart, 'Ossian in the Polished Age: The Critical Reception of James Macpherson's Ossian' (Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Michigan, 1971), p. 136. This paragraph is generally indebted to Stewart's document by document account of the controversy. It is possible to argue, of course, that debates about epic or not epic were implicitly about authenticity.

[3] Letters of 19 September and 6 October, 1763 in *The Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland Appointed to Inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of*

suggests that we should not be too quick to dismiss this comment as self-serving or less than true.[4]

Dr. Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) may not have been the first, and was not the last, assault on *Ossian* as a forgery and its 'editor' as a charlatan, but it is certainly the best remembered, in part because of the more intemperate response it (may have) provoked from Macpherson on the question of Scottish morals (see below). To read Johnson on *Ossian* is to experience a frustrating mix of brilliance and wild inaccuracy (not unlike the experience of reading Macpherson himself). Johnson is not far wrong when he suggests that Macpherson had constructed *Ossian* out of traditional names and 'wandering ballads' and woven them into a whole, but the tone of his comments is unbecoming, and they are at bottom based on some shaky wider assumptions. The suspicion is that Johnson's more perceptive comments come more from a willingness to believe the worst of Macpherson (and Scotsmen in general) than from any understanding of the facts at hand. While a correct assumption made by chance and for less than disinterested reasons is no less true for that, that randomness and those reasons must at least be noted. For example, Johnson's initial supposition that 'there can not be recovered in the whole Earse language, 500 lines of which there is any evidence to prove them a 100 years old' is deeply flawed, and his trip to the Highlands should have told him so.[5] Nevertheless Johnson bequeathed an outlook on *Ossian* which has entered the mainstream of eighteenth century literary history: that the *Ossian* saga represents 'Caledonian bigotry' against English good sense, and that its originator Macpherson was a rogue and a charlatan. That *Ossian* was so well received on the continent has also reinforced a nationalistic position amongst Anglo-Saxon critics of a certain bent which has as its sub-text a story of sturdy English morality and common sense brooking no nonsense from the impostor Macpherson in contradistinction to more gullible, or morally deficient, Scots and Continentals.

Ossian, ed. by Henry Mackenzie (Edinburgh, 1805), pp. 4–10. The quotation comes from the earlier letter.

[4] Letter of 15 January 1775, cited in Fiona Stafford, 'Dr Johnson and the Ruffian: New Evidence in the Dispute between Samuel Johnson and James Macpherson', *Notes and Queries*, vol. 234 (1989) 70–77, (p. 72).

The first worthwhile attempt at investigating and presenting facts rather than merely asserting a polemical position came with the *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland Appointed to Inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian*, commissioned the year after Macpherson's death in 1797 and published in 1805. Although criticised as something of a cop-out, its tentative findings (that Macpherson adapted, arranged, 'completed', and was inspired by authentic ballads, although by the 1790s no direct parallels could be found) have been broadly confirmed by every serious subsequent study (albeit with a more sophisticated interpretation of the nature of those ballads). If the *Report*, edited by Henry Mackenzie, has proved itself something of a double-edged sword for balanced subsequent scholarship, it has been primarily in its tendency to say more about Macpherson than it does about the poems. Too much of what we 'know' of Macpherson's character comes from *Report*-sanctioned hearsay, and there is a tendency to believe that its testimony can be taken on face value and without a full understanding of the complex and dynamic relationship between Macpherson and his contemporaries, a point to which I shall return later in the chapter.

The same year saw the publication of Malcolm Laing's two volume *The Poems of Ossian etc. containing the Poetical Works of James Macpherson, Esq. in Prose and Rhyme: with Notes and Illustrations* (Edinburgh, 1805). As this title suggests, the edition gives the impression of being a work of assiduous scholarship, and has indeed proved widely influential. Laing, a disappointed *Ossian* disciple (this former enthusiasm manifests itself in both the pains Laing went to, and the grudging respect he arrives at) wished to prove that Macpherson had perpetrated a double fraud: one, that no such works as appeared in *Ossian* existed in Gaelic; and two, that Macpherson had systematically plagiarised the greats of Western literature in order to create his forgeries. However, Laing's own methodology was flawed, not to say dishonest: on the one hand, no author could withstand Laing's criteria for what constitutes plagiarism, and on the other (with an irony lost on both himself and those that followed him given Macpherson's actual use of Gaelic material), Laing grossly misrepresented Macpherson's text in order to argue his case. In brief, he produced without

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[5] Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), ed. by Mary

acknowledgement, reasoning or justification a cross between the 1765 and the revised 1773 editions of *Ossian*; he omitted Macpherson's dissertations; he pruned – by suppressing some and truncating others – Macpherson's footnotes as and when it suited his purpose; and he even went as far as to attribute to Macpherson poems written in the 1750s on little (read no) evidence, again in order to suit his own ends. This butchery of Macpherson's poetic output is only the most vivid example of the privileging of polemic over text, the most extreme and literal example of the violence done to *Ossian* within literary historiography. It is entirely in keeping with that historiography that Laing's text became the standard and that, not withstanding Otto Jiriczek's 1940 facsimile edition of the 1762/3 editions (published in Germany but nevertheless not difficult to lay hands on), Laing was still being used as copy text – with the claim that it represents the best available – as late as 1994.[6] It is to be hoped that Gaskill's readily accessible 1996 edition will finally set matters straight in this regard and encourage scholars to use what Macpherson wrote when talking about his poetry. All that said, Laing's edition has its uses for those aware of its pitfalls: for example, so determined was Laing to prove Macpherson's plagiarisms that the edition notes every conceivable echo in *Ossian* (and many that are inconceivable), giving us an insight into Macpherson's potential reading and sensibility.

The trend of not talking about *Ossian* continued through the nineteenth century, with serious scholarship centred upon the analysis of the Gaelic *Ossian* which had finally appeared in 1807, eleven years after Macpherson's death. The status of this text ought to be problematic, given that we cannot be sure how much of it Macpherson was responsible for, and that there is obviously no way he had any control over its published form. But the Gaelic is also obviously fraudulent and as such a valuable weapon for those out to rubbish Macpherson. While few have gone so far as Neil Ross in his daring claim that the Gaelic was in fact published 'towards the end of the eighteenth century' (which implies that Macpherson was still alive at its publication and thus that the text could bear his imprimatur) many critics blur the distinctions between the two *Ossian*s, and thus elide the problems associated with treating the Gaelic as if by

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Lascelles, *The Yale Edition of The Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 9 (New Haven, 1971), pp. 117–18.

[6] Steven Clark (ed.), *Mark Akenside, James Macpherson and Edward Young: Selected Poetry* (Manchester, 1994).

Macpherson.[7] Such manoeuvres are an example of the disregard for normal scholarly practices which approach something like a consistent feature of some areas of Macpherson studies.

The efforts to come to a conclusion about *Ossian* (and particularly the Gaelic *Ossian*) reached their apogee at the end of the nineteenth century in the shape of Ludwig Stern.[8] However, so far divorced from *Ossian* was Ossianic scholarship by this point that Stern's account contains a number of factual errors and a deal of misleading information (for example, his assertion that Macpherson and not Hugh Blair wrote the Preface to *The Fragments of Ancient Poetry*). This century the work of D.S. Thomson has reunited Gaelic scholarship with Macpherson: he has identified the fourteen or so ballads upon which Macpherson directly drew, and suggested not only that *Ossian* shows evidence of Macpherson 'wrestling with his sources' but that it is finally 'not easy to assess what is disingenuous and what is written in good faith and bad judgement.'[9] Following Thomson most Celticists who have had any vital acquaintance with *Ossian* have come to see Macpherson's work in a somewhat more positive light, viewing his reconfiguration of previous matter, for example, in terms of a Gaelic tradition which had always sustained itself by borrowing and refashioning what had gone before.[10] Much of this work, while having little time for Macpherson's pretensions, has managed to combine rigour with generosity. Nevertheless it is fundamentally defensive: in seeking mitigating circumstances for Macpherson's activities and by continually referring back to the troubling question of authenticity, opportunities to explore other aspects of the relationship between *Ossian* and its Gaelic

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[7] Neil Ross (ed.), *Heroic Poetry from The Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh, 1939), p. xxviii.

[8] Stern, 'Ossianic Heroic Poetry', translated by J.L.Robertson, *The Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, vol. 22 (1897–8), 257–325. For a less strident although equally incisive critique see Alexander Macbain's 'The Heroic and Ossianic Literature', *The Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 12 (1885–6), 180–211.

[9] D.S. Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian* (Aberdeen, 1952), p. 26, p. 71. See also his 'Ossian Macpherson and the Gaelic World of the Eighteenth Century', *The Aberdeen University Review*, vol. 40 (1963–4), 7–20; 'Ossian: Ballads to Epics' in *The Heroic Process: Form, Function, and Fantasy in Folk Epic*, ed. by Bo Almquist *et al.*, (Dublin, 1987), pp. 243–65.

[10] Donald Meek, 'The Gaelic Ballads of Scotland: Creativity and Adaptation' in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh, 1991); and Mícheál Mac Craith, 'The "Forging" of Ossian' in *Celticism*, ed. by Terence Brown, (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 125–41. Mac Craith's work on Ossian's parallelism and its Gaelic material usefully complements Robert Fitzgerald's 'The Style of Macpherson's Ossian', *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 6 (1966), 21–33.

milieu go begging. In chapter three I aim to balance these issues by suggesting a model for Macpherson's activities which not only takes account of the most recent scholarship in the field but which moves beyond the question of provenance in its implications for the practice of reading *Ossian*

Recent criticism on the subject has focused on the nature and vehemence of the "Ossianic Wars" and what they might signify in cultural terms. Larry Stewart, in the thesis cited above, has offered a compelling account of the controversy, its combination of personal, aesthetic and cultural roots, and its reconfiguration and polarisation into questions of fraud and moral outrage. Richard Sher has offered further evidence of the deeper roots of the debate, focusing on the tensions in Anglo-Scottish relations in the middle of the eighteenth century.[11] Howard Gaskill and Fiona Stafford have offered revisionist accounts of the general controversy, and have particularly valuable contributions to make in the understanding of Johnson's role in the *Ossian* affair.[12] Most recently Katie Trumpener has interpreted the *Ossian* controversy as a struggle over the identity of the bard figure and the Celtic peoples, and a competition over the cultural significance of antiquarianism, a point also developed by Nick Groom in his work on Macpherson and Percy.[13] One thing to emerge from all these revisionist accounts is a sense that while Johnson had the excuse of heated cultural debate for stitching Macpherson up, the generations of critics who have swallowed the Johnsonian interpretation of events have no such excuse.

While one would be without none of these efforts and their long-overdue correctives to an often ill-informed critical debate, there is a tendency within any such revisionist endeavour to perpetuate in some measure the debate whose terms it seeks to alter. The attention that needs to be given to the non-specialist opinion of Macpherson is thus a moot point, given that silence is likely to be taken for acquiescence. Suffice it

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[11] Richard Sher, '"Those Scotch Impostors and their Cabal": Ossian and the Scottish Enlightenment', *Man and Nature: The Proceedings of the Canadian Society for Eighteenth Century Studies* (London Ont., 1982), vol. 1, pp. 55–65; and his 'Percy, Shaw and the Ferguson Cheat', Gaskill (ed.): 1991, pp. 207–45.

[12] Stafford (1989); Howard Gaskill 'Ossian Macpherson: Towards a Rehabilitation', *Comparative Criticism* 8 (1986), 113–46, and his introduction to *Ossian Revisited* (1991).

[13] Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, 1997), p. 76; Nick Groom, 'Celts, Goths, and the Nature of the Literary Source' in *Tradition in Transition: Women Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-Century Canon*, ed. by Alvaro Ribeiro, SJ and James G. Basker, (Oxford, 1996), pp. 275–296.

to say here that if only commentators gave half the latitude they give to the bigotry of a Johnson to the vain and undoubtedly bombastic outbursts of Macpherson (whose person and race was, after all, on the receiving end of that bigotry) then our view of the *Ossian* affair would be substantially different.[14] That is not to exonerate Macpherson or to advocate a whitewash, merely to enter a plea for the recognition of the play of an Anglocentric cultural agenda within British literary historiography.

A logical extension of this interest in the status of *Ossian* has been a concern with issues of cultural identity and representation. Given that Macpherson did not mediate *Ossian* directly, how did he mould the image of the Gael through *Ossian* and why? These questions refocus the debate about *Ossian*'s provenance on the significations of Macpherson's Celtic creation. Traditionally opinion has been split between those who see nothing but 'spurious and bardic sentimentality' in *Ossian*, a gross misrepresentation of Celtic literature which may have served dubious ideological ends, and those who credit Macpherson for introducing the Celtic world (however sanitised) to Western literary culture.[15]

Matthew Arnold represents perhaps the highest profile defender of *Ossian* in claiming that the poems contain the genuine spirit of Celtic genius, a judgement he insisted must be separated from ideas of forgery. However, critics were not slow to suggest a circularity in the Arnoldian line: since Arnold's idea of what Celtic literature was came substantially (although not as exclusively as has been suggested) from *Ossian*, it is unsurprising that it exhibited Arnold's Celtic qualities. In certain cases the torn opinion of Celtic scholarship has in fact been internalised, producing the sort of schizophrenia on this issue exemplified by Edward Snyder who (despite himself one feels) includes Macpherson as one of the five major figures of his Celtic Revival.

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[14] For an example of such a squint-eyed view of the issue see J.C.D.Clark, *Samuel Johnson: Literature, Religion, and English Cultural Politics from the Restoration to Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 66.

[15] Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880–1980* (London, 1985), p. 20. With Deane we should number, for example: Alfred Nutt, *Ossian and the Ossianic Literature*, Popular Studies in Mythology, Romance and Folklore no. 3, (London, 1903); J.S.Smart, *James Macpherson: An Episode in Literature* (London, 1905), pp. 102–28; Edward Snyder, *The Celtic Revival in English Literature 1760–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1923). Against this should be balanced Matthew Arnold, 'On the Study of Celtic Literature' in *The Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by R.H.Super, vol.3 (Ann Arbor, 1962 (1886)); Magnus Maclean, *The Literature of the Celts* (London, 1926), p. 217; Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Celtic Dawn: A History of Pan-Celticism* (London, 1993), p. 54).

Snyder berates Macpherson as a fraud while regretting that Macpherson missed the opportunity to include Druids in *Ossian*, a curious double complaint explained by Snyder's conflation of Druidism and Celticism and his generally Cymro-centric view of British Celticism rather than any deep animus against Macpherson.[16] In short, Snyder exemplifies – in his strengths and weaknesses – a body of scholarship grappling with the uncomfortable fact that Macpherson both 'set the cultural "bomb" which created a Romantic Pan Celtic Movement' and grossly misrepresented the sources of that revival in the process (Ellis, p. 54). Celtic scholarship has had to come to terms with the fact that Macpherson was 'the defender of the traditions he exploited; though it might be claimed that he exploited them only to defend them' within the context of what is an almost Oedipal angst given that Macpherson – for all his liberty taking – was 'instrumental in bringing into being what we now know as Celtic studies.'[17]

A number of broadly pro-Macpherson critics, in work reflecting advances within cultural studies that suggests that concepts such as 'identity' may bespeak assumptions about cultural values which derive from a mainstream Western tradition and therefore be of limited use in a cross-cultural context, have aimed to show that those who accuse Macpherson of 'cultural bad-faith' may 'be conniving at the kind of English cultural imperialism which, in other contexts, they are all too eager to deny'.[18] Indeed, the fact that Macpherson was dealing with an evolving oral tradition (Meek: 1991) has led critics to question the usefulness of the whole concept of misrepresentation.[19] It is yet to be established whether these insights will liberate the critical debate, or whether the old terms will continue to dominate. Again, chapter

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[16] Of greater value in Snyder's study is its careful citing of the poems, adaptations, versifications, plays and operas based on *Ossian* in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

[17] Murray G.H.Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland* (London, 1997), p. 156; Dáithi Ó hÓgáin, *Fionn mac Cumhaill: Images of the Gaelic Hero* (Dublin, 1988) p. 315. See also Malcolm Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture* (London, 1978), pp. 50–1 for the inextricable ties between *Ossian* and the language of Gaelic scholarship.

[18] Andrew Hook, '"Ossian" Macpherson as Image Maker', *The Scottish Review*, 36 (November, 1984), 39–44 (p. 40). See also, Gaskill (1986), and Stafford, 'Primitivism and the "Primitive" Poet: A Cultural Context for Macpherson's Ossian' in Brown (ed.): 1996, pp.79–96. For this anthropological approach see, for example, David Lowenthal, 'Identity, Heritage and History' in *Commemorations: The Politics of Cultural Identity*, ed. by John Gillis, (Princeton, 1994), pp. 41–61. The dilemma over identity and particularly heritage explored in this volume and by Lowenthal in particular strikes a chord with Macpherson studies.

[19] Leah Leneman, 'Ossian and the Enlightenment', *Scotia*, vol. 11 (1987), 13–29, (p. 28).

three will look to deploy these insights in a concerted way in order to exploit the fresh ground they have broken.

The traditional concern within *Ossian* scholarship with the questions clustered around that of authenticity has, then, had two unfortunate effects. Firstly it has acted as something of a red-herring, making sure that the critical discourse remains more or less subtly polarised into pro and anti Macpherson factions. Secondly it has ensured that *Ossian* criticism is divorced from the text, either through the methodological precedent it offers for discussing matters nothing to do with literature, or in the legacy it bequeaths of a certain condescension towards the poems: somehow *Ossian* is not "real" literature, and can thus be treated in a fashion which owes little to the normative standards of the discipline. These tendencies can be traced in a number of seemingly disparate aspects of the wider field.

The chapters which follow engage with this body of scholarship and obliquely with these issues, but not as an end in themselves. Chapter two will explore more minutely what the 'sentimentalised' *Ossian* actually consists of, insights which in chapter five go towards an analysis of Macpherson's cultural locale. Chapter three will develop a model for Macpherson's activities which accommodates his fraught relationship with his Gaelic sources. These efforts are distinct from the tradition outlines above in as much as they are not concerned with either defending Macpherson or with writing him off, and to the extent that they are motivated primarily with findings ways of coming to terms with the experience of reading *Ossian* rather than these extra-textual issues *per se*.

II.

There are few clearer examples of the hegemony exerted by the circumstances surrounding the publication of the poems than that offered by a consideration of Macpherson biographies. Not counting the assorted pen portraits which have appeared over the last two hundred years, there have been four and a half biographies of Macpherson. To deal with the half first: J.N.M.Maclean's attempt to analyse Macpherson's early life in terms of his later political career offers an oddly refreshing

approach, and the energy and ingenuity he applies to proving that Macpherson was a 'cold and ruthless devil', a villain of Iago-like proportions, is also admirable, if totally misguided.[20] Maclean twists most of the evidence available to him in pursuit of his argument, and his belief that from its inception the Ossianic venture was a ploy by which Macpherson embarrassed the leading lights of the Scottish literati into furthering his political career does not, even in its own terms, hold water.

Thomas Bailey Saunders' *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson* (London, 1894) is both readable and comprehensive: covering Macpherson's life in its entirety (Maclean excepted, he offers the most complete account of Macpherson's activities post-1772), it is nevertheless weighted towards the years of Ossianic production. Saunders is held as an apologist and correctly so to the extent that he gives Macpherson the benefit of the doubt on most counts. However, this so-called bias is frequently due to Saunders' unwillingness to be bullied by the literary hegemony exerted – at least in this instance – by the memory of Johnson, and to his careful sifting of the facts of the case. Naive at times he may certainly be, but one cannot help but wish that those that criticise him had half his knowledge of the subject-matter.

Published eleven years later, and taking issue with Saunders' generous opinion of Macpherson as early as its preface, John Semple Smart's *James Macpherson An Episode in Literature* (London, 1905) would appear on first inspection to be an exercise in rebuttal: 'it is too late' says Smart, 'to maintain [...] that [Macpherson] was injured and calumniated, the victim of prejudice and unreasoning ill-will' (p. vi), as if there was some sort of statute of limitations on historical accuracy. From this unpromisingly reactionary beginning, however, Smart reveals himself to be more concerned with building on nineteenth-century advances in Gaelic scholarship, particularly J.F.Campbell's collection of ballads the *Leabhar na Féinne* (1872) and the work of the likes of Ludwig Stern and Alexander Macbain, than with petty squabbling. Smart succeeds with some aplomb in his attempts to outline the differences between the epics of Macpherson and the ballads which inspired (and are embedded within) them, and in the process offers an example of the way in which Macpherson's relationship to

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[20] J.N.M. Maclean, 'The Early Political Careers of James "Fingal" Macpherson (1738–96) and Sir John Macpherson (1744–1821)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh 1967), p. 513.

Gaelic material is usually only discussed with reference to charges of forgery. Smart's belief that the 'work is really Macpherson's' does not herald a display of scorn: indeed he invokes Shakespeare and Milton as precedents for Macpherson's approach (a little ironically since it was just such analogies which so inflamed the English literary establishment during the 1760s and 1770s), and Smart maintains throughout his assertion that Macpherson possessed a 'genius which sometimes broke into brilliant flame' (Preface, pp. v–vi). Apologist he may not be, apologetic he certainly is.

Paul deGategno in his *James Macpherson* (Boston, Ma., 1989) shifted matters on to what at first sight seems more fruitful ground in a literary biography which not only offers a poem by poem account of *Ossian* but also makes at least some effort to link *Ossian* to Macpherson's earlier poetic efforts and later career as historian, pamphleteer and political fixer. However, too much of his study is taken up with mulling over the authenticity squabbles to no new end, while the readings of the poems themselves seem somehow motivated by a desire to find grounds upon which we can – a little shamefacedly – enjoy Macpherson's work. His commentary is commendable, but this preoccupation with value and justification tends to overshadow a work which provokes enquiry while being in itself somewhat superficial. This is symbolised most obviously in the relatively full and usefully annotated bibliography he provides.

Completing our quintet is Fiona Stafford's *The Sublime Savage: James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1988), which appeared just before deGategno's effort. The pick of the bunch, it is a ground-breaking account which moves away from the obsession with the question of authenticity (and by extension Macpherson's moral character), towards an appreciation of Macpherson in his cultural and intellectual contexts, located through the first sustained reading of Macpherson's poetry as literature since Blair's polemic "Critical Dissertation" in 1763. The decade of interest and revisionism *The Sublime Savage* heralded and greatly facilitated has inevitably developed avenues that Stafford's book could only nod towards, but nevertheless in many respects it remains unsurpassed as a Macpherson-out study, and its achievement must be judged in the context of the state of Macpherson studies on its appearance. As well as other Ossianic contributions in other fields, Stafford also offers

a useful addendum to *The Sublime Savage* in her introduction to Howard Gaskill's recent edition of *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works* (Edinburgh, 1996).

There would of course be more cause for complaint about a critical biography that did not consider the circumstances of the poem's construction or their reception than one that does. The squabbles over *Ossian*'s publication are too striking a feature of the poems' history to be completely ignored and any critical biography worth the name is at least going to allude to it. However, this line of inquiry has come to dominate the tradition both in terms of the amount written on the subject, and in the more subtle way that it has set the terms of the investigation into other areas.

III.

Despite a recent claim that had *Ossian* 'not been thought to be authentic it would have had fewer readers then, and fewer now' it is evident that even after the *Ossian* wars had been settled in favour of those who had cried foul, the popularity and influence of the poems continued undented substantially into the nineteenth century.[21] While between 1765 and 1800 there had been eighteen British editions of *Ossian*, this figure rose to *twenty-seven* between 1801 and 1830, despite the latter period more or less opening with the appearance in 1805 of the two great debunking publications, Laing's edition of the poems and the Highland Society's *Report*.[22] It seems to have been the case from the outset that many readers were able to separate literary appreciation from a judgement about authenticity (Stewart: 1971, p. 23–6), and many readers, particularly outside England, may have been unconcerned with the question of authenticity.[23] For

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[21] Jonathan Wordsworth, (unpaginated) introduction to *James Macpherson: Ossian's Fingal 1792* (Poole, 1996).

[22] For lists of these editions see, John J. Dunn, 'The Role of Macpherson's Ossian in the Development of British Romanticism' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, Duke University, 1965), pp. 107–8.

[23] See Andrew Hook, 'Scotland and Romanticism: The International Scene' in *The History of Scottish Literature; vol. 2 1660–1800*, ed. by Andrew Hook (Aberdeen, 1987), pp. 307–23, p. 313 and *passim*.

Romantic readers, most famously William Hazlitt, the idea that Ossian himself might be 'nothing' only added to the appeal and central, nihilistic message of the poems.[24]

The nature of this popularity and subsequent influence has been the other central concern of *Ossian* scholarship, an interest that has not proved an unproblematic inheritance for unapologetic Macpherson studies. On one level it has tended to be linked to the question of the value and authenticity of the poems in attempts to "explain" *Ossian*'s influence which are more often than not efforts to "explain away" what is assumed to have been an embarrassing lapse into admiration of an undeserved literary curio by someone who should have known better. On a second level, the question of influence – particularly if involved in this process of "explaining away" – offers a way of considering *Ossian* without actually involving the critic in the troublesome occupation of reading the text. With this second point in mind it is worth noting that even in the dog-days of *Ossian* scholarship when interest, at least in English studies, was at its all-time low (roughly between Smart and Thomson), scholars were investigating links between *Ossian* and later figures, creating a tradition that has carried through to the present.[25] These works are legion and I mention only the more prominent and valuable.[26]

Consideration of Macpherson and British writers has generally been limited to the Romantic poetic movement and the esteem Macpherson was held in by the likes of Blake, Byron and Coleridge, although some have addressed Macpherson's impact on the stage.[27] Trumpener's *Bardic Nationalism* (1997) contains a sophisticated account

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[24] See his 'On Poetry in General' in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London, 1930), vol. 5, pp. 1–18 (p.18).

[25] During this period a bibliography also appeared: G.F. Black's 'Bibliography to *Ossian*' in *The Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 30 (1926), 424–39, 508–24. A supplement to this was offered in the same organ by John Dunn (vol. 75 [1971], 465–73). For an indication of how much the forgery question dominated the minds of scholars at the time note that Black's section on secondary material is headed "The Ossianic Controversy", despite containing works on debts to Macpherson and analyses of the classic translations.

[26]For an overview see deGategno's chapter 'The Influence of the *Ossian* Poems' (1989, pp. 112–34).

[27] See Dunn (1965), and his 'Coleridge's Debt to Macpherson' *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 7, 1969, (76–89); R. Flower's *Byron and Ossian* (Nottingham, 1928). Blake and Macpherson are connected by David Punter in his 'Blake: Social Relations of Poetic Form' (*New Literary History* 18 (1982), 182–205) and 'Ossian, Blake and the Questionable Source' in *Exhibited By Candlelight: Sources and Developments in the Gothic Tradition* ed. Valeria Tinkler-Villani *et al* (Amsterdam, 1995), 25–41, by Robert Folkenflik in his 'The Artist as Hero in the Eighteenth Century' in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 12 (1982), 91–108, and there are discussions of Blake's Ossianics in

of the influence of *Ossian*, and the controversy surrounding the poems, on the Sentimental and Romantic novel form without resorting to the anachronistic wistfulness which finds its way into some accounts of Macpherson's proto-Romantic credentials, a wistfulness which tends to set its subject up as some sort of shabby and disreputable John the Baptist. Blake was the first to notice that Wordsworth's critical bashing of Macpherson differed widely from his poetic practice, and this phenomenon has been explored in articles by J.R.Moore and more recently Stafford.[28] Moore goes little beyond pointing out similarities between the writers, while Stafford (in a study which extends to Byron and, more briefly, Tennyson) deconstructs Wordsworth's critique of *Ossian* in terms of his own life, poetry and beliefs. Both suggest that Wordsworth is not entirely straightforward in his public engagement with Macpherson's work.

The impact of *Ossian* on the United States has become well-trodden territory, and most studies of the greats of nineteenth-century American letters mention Ossianism. Frederic Carpenter offers little beyond a brief historical survey (which curiously omits Herman Melville) with a basic concern to suggest that Whitman, otherwise *Ossian*'s closest transatlantic cousin, created something new and distinctly American from his Ossianic raw materials. This may be true, but it tells us little about *Ossian* and offers a conspicuous example of the "embarrassed" tendency within this body of criticism.[29] Andrew Hook has offered a general survey which usefully goes beyond vague talk of Ossianic Sentimentalism and Romanticism.[30] Similarly strong are

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David Fuller's *Blake's Heroic Argument* (London, 1988) and Margaret Lowery's *Windows of the Morning* (Yale, 1940; repr. 1970). For Macpherson on the stage see: James Malek's 'The Ossianic Source of John Home's *The Fatal Discovery*' *English Language Notes*, vol.9, no.1 (September, 1971), 39–42 and 'Eighteenth-Century British Dramatic Adaptations of Macpherson's *Ossian*', *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre Research*, 14 (1975).

[28] Moore, 'Wordsworth's Unacknowledged Debt to Macpherson's Ossian', *PMLA*, 40 (1925), 362–78, and Stafford in '"Dangerous Success": Ossian, Wordsworth and English Romanticism' (Gaskill (ed.): 1991, pp. 49–72).

[29] 'The Vogue of Ossian in America: A Study in Taste' (*American Literature*, 2 (1930–1), 405–17). Carpenter's dating of the first American Ossianics to August 1786 was somewhat pedantically corrected by Lewis Leary who pointed out that Joseph Brown Ladd had been leaking Ossianic poems to the press before his 1786 publication. Leary also observes that Ladd, while claiming that his poems were a translation from the Gaelic (or even *Fingal*), makes no mention of Macpherson or any English model ('Ossian in America: A Note', *American Literature* 14 (1942–3), 305–6).

[30] 'Ossian and American', *Scottish Literary News*, vol. 3, no. 3 (November, 1973), 23–27.

three accounts of Thomas Jefferson's admiration of *Ossian*.[31] Jack McLoughlin usefully introduces Poe into the equation, while deGategno treats *Ossian* seriously enough to suggest that it may have offered Jefferson not merely melancholy sentimentalism, but compelling portraits of civic virtue and of the Great Man in society. Reservations about this reading are due more to the absence of a fully developed argument than to scepticism with regards the overall point. Manning's recent addition to the field is perhaps the most impressive, and is notably successful in removing any sense of the need to excuse Jefferson. McLoughlin, on the other hand, can never quite get away from the sense of finding it all very puzzling, something which perpetuates the assumption that *Ossian* is really, in some trans-historical sense, an embarrassing work to be caught enjoying.

The cult of *Ossian* was not restricted to the English speaking world, and there have been numerous studies on the popularity of Macpherson's work across Europe and its impact on aesthetic and nationalist movements across the continent.[32] There is even a sub-genre of criticism devoted to the standard translations of *Ossian*.[33] Howard Gaskill, one of the leading Macpherson scholars of the last twenty years, approaches *Ossian* from the field of German Literature. In addition to offering, as we have seen, a general reappraisal of Macpherson, Gaskill is concerned with uncovering relations between *Ossian* and German writers which have remained hidden, unsettling the assumption that if Rudolph Tombo did not mention a link in his magisterial work on the subject, then none existed.[34] Gaskill's work highlights, amongst other things, that

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[31] Jack McLoughlin, 'Jefferson, Poe, and Ossian' (*Eighteenth Century Studies*, 26, no 4 Summer 1993, 627–34); Paul deGategno, '"The Source of Daily and Exalted Pleasure": Jefferson reads the Poems of Ossian' (*Ossian Revisited*, 94–108); Susan Manning, 'Why does it Matter that Ossian was Thomas Jefferson's favourite poet?', *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, vol. 1, no.2 (October, 1997), 219–36.

[32] See Rudolph Tombo, *Ossian in Germany* (New York, 1901); Paul Van Teigheim's *Ossian en France*, 2 vols, (Paris, 1917); Martin Prochazka's 'Ossian Revived: Macpherson's "Ossian Poems" and Historical Aspects of Czech Romantic Culture', *Ceska Literatura*, vol. 41 no.1 (1993), 25–47 and Annie Jourdan's 'The Image of Gaul during the French Revolution: Between Charlemagne and Ossian' (Brown (ed.):1996, 183–206). The "Ossian Issue" of *The Scottish Literary News* (vol. 3, no. 3 (November, 1973)) offered a number of national studies, most interestingly (in opening a door on a critical tradition unknown in the West) Paul Dukes' 'Ossian and Russia'.

[33] For example, a back translation of the Abbé Cesarotti's *Historical and Critical Dissertation* (1806); Arnold Chapman, 'Heredia's Ossian Translation' *Hispanic Review* 23 (1955), 231–6; H. Sasse, 'Michel Denis as a Translator of Ossian', *Modern Language Review* 60 (1965).

[34] See his "Herder, Ossian and the Celtic" in Brown (ed.): 1996, pp. 257–71; '"Ossian at Home and Abroad' *Strathclyde Modern Language Studies*, vol. 8 (1988), 5–27; 'German Ossianism:

sinister forces may at times be at work within national literary histories anxious to distance themselves from what they see as the youthful indulgences of their leading figures (in Germany the precedent for this was set by Goethe himself).

All these efforts have a significant value in revising the literary history of the last two hundred years, and could be taken further. For example, the ways that *Ossian* was mediated to its later audiences needs exploring. Yet in its concern with literary archaeology, unearthing otherwise hidden links in the face of a historiography which is (or is perceived as being) sceptical about such claims, this tradition tends only to analyse the nature of the influence as an afterthought. This leads to explanations not grounded in firm and complete (or in some cases credible) readings of *Ossian* or, particularly given the piecemeal nature of the studies of the issue, to contradictions and inconsistencies that a totalising study would do well to address. The question of *Ossian*'s radicalism, for example, needs to account both for Hook's suggestion that the cultured and passive nationalism of *Ossian* explains its appeal to the founders of the United States, a country born of revolution but rejecting radicalism, and the assumptions about a more active radicalism underlying Dukes' analysis of the reception of the poems in Russia and Punter's discussions of Macpherson and Blake. We must, of course, be mindful of Hook's warning in another context that 'a society and a culture take from a work of art what they want to take, find in it what they want to find' (Hook (1984), p. 39) and of the dangers of second guessing the tastes of figures from the past. That said, the suspicion remains that such methodological niceties are not the real stumbling block here. In short, as well as going to illuminate an area of literary historiography which has remained hidden for too long, literary responses to *Ossian* can and should be used to explore qualities of *Ossian* itself rather than, as all too often hitherto, as an excuse not to read the poems at all.

A Reappraisal?', *German Life and Letters*, 42 (1989), 329–41, and '"The Joy of Grief": Moritz and Ossian', *Colloquia Germanica*, 28 (1995), 101–125. His 'Ossian in Europe', in *The Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 21, no. 4 (December 1994), 643–78, offers an overview and contains a full bibliography of studies on *Ossian*'s impact across the world.

IV.

Towards the end of his study of the Moderate Clergy of the Scottish Enlightenment, Richard Sher quotes Walter Scott's experience of the dotage of the literati: 'the subjects of their conversation', wrote Scott, 'might be compared to that held by ghosts who, sitting on their midnight tombs, talk over the deeds they have done and witnessed.'[35] Sher himself notes that towards the end of his life Adam Ferguson wrote at least two philosophical essays which took the form of dialogues between himself and 'friends long since departed', and Ferguson's own nineteenth-century biographer commented that his subject 'was eminently distinguished by a vigour and a simplicity of character which well entitle him, as the last survivor of a galaxy of great contemporaries, to be designated *Ultimus Romanorum*.'[36] Sher also records that in 1797 Alexander Carlyle dreamt, "Berrathon" like, that he had died and was met at the gates of Elysium by the shades of departed friends, including, *inter alia*, James Macpherson (1985, p. 323). Carlyle found his dream something of a joke, and we should not miss the tone of gentle facetiousness of Scott's description of the elder statesmen of the Republic of Letters. Nevertheless these images of the twilight of the Scottish Enlightenment pay tribute to the impact of the Ossianic imagination on the culture that gave it birth. It is perhaps fitting then, that much recent criticism has focused on the relation between Macpherson and such figures.

If Mackenzie's *Report* was a fudge, as has been suggested, then its main (and most insidious) effect is not in providing an alibi for Macpherson (although it may superficially do so) but rather in heaping the blame upon him solely. The *Report* is made up of the testimonies of various parties which relate and interpret the actions of themselves and others at a distance of some 35 years, and in some ways it almost represents a summation, a taking-stock, of the heyday of the great age of the Edinburgh Enlightenment. It is thus a complex document – psychologically and otherwise – and needs to be handled with care. While it would be an exaggeration to see the *Report* as

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[35] *Prose Works*, vol. 19, p. 321, quoted in Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 322.

[36] John Small, *A Biographical Sketch of Adam Ferguson LL.D, F.R.S.E.* (Edinburgh, 1864), p. 67.

some sort of literary Warren Report, it is riddled with the a series of hidden agendas and vested interests which place Macpherson's actions at one remove from the Lowland literati. While the *Report* has not enjoyed the influence that Laing's edition published the same year has had, it is nevertheless an important resource for those examining the *Ossian* affair. As such it needs to be noted that, in its resolute track-covering, the *Report* implies that Macpherson was a literary criminal genius more or less single-handedly responsible for the duping of the great and the good of the Edinburgh Enlightenment.[37]

The example of Hugh Blair is informative, and worth exploring since later chapters will make much of his involvement in the Ossianic project. Blair's testimony to the Highland Society Committee makes no reference to any sort of collaboration beyond the statement (confirming what was common knowledge) that 'I [...] wrote the Preface which is prefixed to [the *Fragments*], in consequence of the conversations I had held with Mr. Macpherson' (*Report*, app. 4, p. 58), and he goes to some (gratuitous?) lengths to mention that Macpherson was 'not very apt [...] to listen to advice' (p. 61). The only hint that Blair's role may, in Gaskill's words, 'have gone appreciably beyond that of midwife' (1988, p. 13) comes in Blair's report of a conversation with Macpherson before the latter's trip to the Highlands to look for *Fingal*. During this conversation Macpherson seemed for the first time hopeful of success and Blair comments that 'hitherto [Macpherson] had imagined they [the hopes of finding an epic] were merely romantic ideas *which I held out to him*' (p. 59, my emphasis).[38]

In contrast to these generally retiring comments, scholars subsequently examining the relationship between Blair and Macpherson have only emphasised the part Blair played in the production of *Ossian*. Saunders suggests that Blair helped in 'arranging the poems and in polishing the English version', and it seems certain that he

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[37] The *Report* does however lend credence to the "Highland Mafia" theory which suggests that Macpherson benefited from the assistance of numerous personages in Gaelic society. Again, while some of this appears to be a matter of historical record the relative emphasis placed upon it, and the motives behind it, are not issues upon which the unwary should tread with confidence.

[38] The role of English antiquarians in the production of *Ossian* is shrouded in obscurity. While never as enthusiastic as Blair, the likes of Walpole and Gray were keen to offer advice and help: as late as the final draft of *Fingal* (which he saw pre-press), Walpole was suggesting alterations to the lay out and organisation of the text (deGategno (1989), p. 32). See also Margaret M. Smith, 'Prepublication Circulation of Literary Texts: The Case of James Macpherson's Ossianic Verses', *The Yale University Library Gazette*, vol.64 nos 3-4 (April 1990), 132–157.

helped Macpherson gather the classical quotations and parallels that adorn the *Fingal* volume (1895, p. 149, p. 305).[39] Smart goes so far as to suggest that Blair's 'very voice and accent may be detected in Macpherson's commentary' (1911, p. 86). Blair's intimacy with the project is symbolised (indeed explained) by the fact that Macpherson worked on *Fingal* literally under Blair's nose, living in rooms below Blair's on Blackfriars Wynd in Edinburgh's Old Town. Beyond this fact we are admittedly in the realm of speculation as to Blair's precise input. However, in the absence of firm evidence, the extraordinary speed with which *Fingal* was produced (a 19 thousand word epic, numerous other poems, a scholarly dissertation and copious extended footnotes in under four months) lends credence to this line (although it should be noted that Macpherson's output was generally prodigious – he produced his prose translation of the *Iliad* in less than twelve weeks).[40] The *Temora* volume, it is worth noting, is considerably lighter in the classical parallel department. The usual explanation for this is Macpherson's desire to make *Ossian* more credible: that while he understood that part of the appeal of *Fingal* lay in the comforting familiarity within the novelty he was also aware that this familiarity also brought with it suspicions of forgery. While this may well be the case, it is perhaps also worth observing that *Temora* was composed in London, away from the influence – and editorial assistance – of Blair.

While reading between the lines enabled Saunders and Smart to suggest the input of Blair, it was not until the early 1980s that Richard Sher convincingly refuted the popular image of Macpherson as literary fraudster, emerging from the Highlands with the *Poems of Ossian* tucked under his arm.[41] While current scholarship is virtually unanimous in offering an almost collaborative model for the genesis of *Ossian*, it should be noted that there is still the odd dissenting voice, even if it seems likely that this dissent comes more from overlooking certain of the salient facts than a convincing

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[39] Cf. Thomson: 'we are left with a strong impression that there had been a close and purposeful collaboration between the Professor of Rhetoric and the young classicist who had produced [*Ossian*]' (1987, p. 259).

[40] The figures come from deGategno (1989, p. 32, p. 140).

[41] Sher (1985), and his article '"Those Scotch Impostors and their Cabal": *Ossian* and the Scottish Enlightenment' in *Men and Nature: The Proceedings of the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 1 (Ontario, 1982), 55–65.

alternative view.[42] What makes Sher's work so important is its suggestion of reasons why nearly every major figure in late eighteenth-century Edinburgh society offered financial help, letters of introduction, publicity campaigns, and intellectual succour to and for Macpherson. Accordingly, various scholars have argued that *Ossian* offered reinforcement for many of the intellectual and cultural battles waged by the literati, from the production of an indigenous Scottish national literary treasure which could be appreciated by the standards of the time; to proof of the validity of the historicist or primitivist view of poetic development (see section V for more on this); to a way of coming to terms with and assimilating the Highlands within modern Scotland; to a pseudo-nationalist document designed to bolster the clamour for a Scots Militia (and the models of citizen virtue which underpin the militia campaign) without stirring up patriotic feelings of a separatist nature.[43]

While all of these interpretations have something to recommend them, two qualifications must be entered. Firstly, there is the suspicion that some of these accounts, particularly those relating *Ossian* to the relationship between the Lowlands and the Gaeltachd, read the extraordinary reception of the poems back into their inception. At times one gets the feeling that Blair would be a little surprised to read about some of 'his' motivations for championing *Ossian*. Similarly, *Ossian*'s influence, and the nature of that influence, was in part dependant on factors beyond the ken of Blair and Macpherson: it is hard to believe that the literati could have envisaged the explosion in the tourist activities of the middling classes which took place in the last

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[42] A recent example is offered by Peter Murphy in his *Poetry as an Occupation and an Art in Britain 1760–1830*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism, 3 (Cambridge, 1993). Murphy is not wholly unsympathetic towards Macpherson and has things of value to say. All the more frustrating that he ignores so much recent work in the field.

[43] See, for example, Gaskill, '*Ossian* at Home and Abroad' (1988); and David Raynor (on Macpherson and Hume), Steve Rizza (on Macpherson and Blair), John Dwyer and John Price in Gaskill (ed.): 1991; Leah Leneman, 'Ossian and the Enlightenment', *Scotia*, vol. 11 (1987), 13–29. Also chapters by Stafford and Luke Gibbons in Brown (ed.): 1996; Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (Basingstoke, 1992), pp. 122 and 128 and *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture* (London, 1978); Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands* (London, 1992); Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford, 1992); Leith Davis's illuminatingly wrong-headed '"Origins of the Specious": James Macpherson and the Forging of the British Empire', *Eighteenth Century Theory and Interpretation*, 34 no. 2 (1993), 132–50; and, by implication at least, Clare O'Halloran, 'Irish Recreations of the Gaelic Past: the Challenge of Macpherson's Ossian', *Past and Present*, vol. 124 (1989), 69–95. Less original but perhaps useful for an overview is Robert Clyde's *From Rebel to Hero: The Image of the Highlander 1745–1830* (East Linton, 1995).

third of the eighteenth century, a phenomenon upon which, at least to some extent, the contributions of, for example, Leneman and Womack rightly rely. There is in short something of muddle between *Ossian*'s place within a wider picture as viewed from our perspective and what *Ossian* meant to those on the ground at the time, a suspicion that late-twentieth-century deconstructions of Macpherson's behaviour have been insinuated as his conscious motivations. The second reservation is the more serious: that while many of these explanations are in essence sound, they tend towards a reductive view of *Ossian*, and one which mask tensions between *Ossian* and the ongoing agendas the poems are claimed to serve; tensions within *Ossian* in carrying out those agendas, and tensions between the agendas themselves. Ultimately this means that the disturbing and subversive notes which do make themselves felt in the poems are silenced.

An example of this is offered by Nicholas Phillipson's observations about the relationship of *Ossian* to the Scottish Enlightenment's on-going concerns.[44] For Phillipson *Ossian* offers newly provincialised Scots a model of stoic virtue 'in the face of the inexorable forces of historical change' and a way to practice that virtue 'by celebrating the triumphs of its heroes in tearful, sentimental songs' (p. 34). This may well be a naive reading of the emotional valency of Jacobite song culture, but that is not my point here, rather I am interested in the tension which emerges later in his argument. Phillipson goes on to discuss the Enlightenment's efforts to instate 'economic engineering and cultural improvement' as the new virtue, valued not merely for its results, but for the 'moral independence' it symbolised. Thus such projects represented a field of activity into which the active citizenship of pre-commercial and pre-Union society could be transferred. Without such activity, Scotland would lose that 'moral independence', leaving it nothing to do but 'respond to its fallen fortunes with sentimental acts of Ossianic resignation' (p. 35). *Ossian* is then the solution to the problem *and* the problem to be resisted. The point is not so much the contradiction, which reveals *Ossian* to be a peculiarly unstable paradigm, but that it is unremarked upon because Phillipson's purpose in writing the article is, quite legitimately, not Macpherson. To return to the point I made in the introduction, what is required here is

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[44] See his 'The Scottish Enlightenment' in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. by R. Porter and M. Teich, (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 19–40. It is testament to the importance Phillipson

a literary approach which can build on the wider historical insights generated by the likes of Phillipson and tussle with their contradictions in terms of Macpherson.

Sher's ground-breaking, long overdue and in many ways inarguable conclusion that 'Ossian [sic] *was* a group effort' and that 'Macpherson was as much the victim as the victimiser of the Edinburgh literary community' (1982, p. 60) has also led to a situation where too close an identification now exists between Macpherson and his Lowland contemporaries. This is most noticeable when consideration turns to the question of Macpherson's politics, and his attitude to Jacobitism and the Gaeltachd. Historically, Macpherson has been viewed as a hard-line crypto-Jacobite, and this is more or less the position taken by Saunders and (to the extent that he concerns himself in such things) Smart. [45] Nevertheless, over the last ten years profitable efforts to tie Macpherson to the Enlightenment programme of Improvement, and, for example, post-colonialist inspired readings of the discourse of the Sublime or primitivism (see Womack [1992] and Stafford [Brown (ed) 1996] for examples) have had the effect of distancing Macpherson from his traditionally subversive role, seeing *Ossian* in terms of a mythology of assent. The crypto-Jacobite has become the sentimental Jacobite, whose engagements with its rhetoric and discourse is motivated by a desire to confirm its passing as a living culture. The problem is though, that there is something subversive in *Ossian*, something recognised by the contradictory edge given to Howard Weinbrot's comments on the subject, and vividly exemplified in Steven Clark's unexamined contention that *Ossian* is a 'founding myth of an independent [Scottish] national culture' whose author also produced 'a series of historical works supporting the Hanoverian dynasty' (Clark (ed.): 1994, p. 76).[46]

The best efforts in the field have managed to capture some of this complexity. For example, Murray Pittock has analysed ways in which *Ossian* is indebted to the discourse and rhetoric of Jacobitism by suggesting the mobilisation of Jacobitism within a 'valedictory school of patriotism' which memorialises a culture and admits its

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ascribes to Macpherson that he makes him such a central figure in this broad-ranging introduction to the field.

[45] For the impact of Macpherson's witnessing various emotive episodes in the '45 see Saunders, pp. 37–9.

[46] See Howard Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 554–6.

defeat.[47] But while Pittock stresses that *Ossian*'s marginalising tendencies render Jacobite history into 'anodyne heritage' within 'the historyless zone of primary epic' he also finds room for the belief that the poems also touch 'a raw cultural nerve': 'to the extent that [*Ossian*] was animated by a real expression not just of nostalgia but also of regret, Macpherson's epic offered a disturbing hint of injustice lingering amid its sentimental treatment of grief and loss'.[48] Notably Pittock arrives at this balanced insight via responding to the text, not just finding what he expects there. Colin Kidd offers another valuable take on the issue, locating Macpherson within the more widespread failure of eighteenth-century Scottish historiography to meet the challenges of Thomas Innes' debunking of the king lists, and the challenge of stadial conceptions of progress in a way which would have allowed the construction of a genuinely British as opposed to Anglo-British identity. Macpherson emerges as a proponent of 'Celtic Whiggism', a system which attempted – and failed – to appropriate Whig values for a Celtic past in order to counteract charges of savagery.[49] This is a valuable insight into Macpherson's cultural locale and offers a way of understanding how a failed attempt at appropriating certain terms and ideas can come to look like connivance and conspiracy in their continuing deployment on behalf of the *status quo*. This is an important notion within the chapters which follow.

A great part of the following chapters will either explicitly or obliquely come to a position on *Ossian*'s relationship to the Scottish Enlightenment and the related issues introduced here. I will engage with existing scholarship more fully as appropriate. Within the current context it is only pertinent to note that this aspect of the *Ossian* inquiry is a classic example of the strengths, weaknesses and frustrations associated with the field as a whole. Too frequently Macpherson becomes a stopping point on a journey elsewhere, an example of this or that which, while more historically informed than in previous generations is no more informed by, or concerned with addressing, the

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[47] See in general Murray G.H. Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland The Stuart Myth and Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present* (London, 1991) and *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1994).

[48] Murray G.H. Pittock, *The Myth of the Jacobite Clans* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 37–9. See also his *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland 1685–1789* (London, 1997), pp. 155–57.

[49] Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689–c.1830* (Cambridge, 1993).

text than before. John Dwyer's observation that exploring Enlightenment contexts may actually provide an excuse for not exploring the text (1991, p. 183) needs to be heeded if the true nature of Macpherson's intellectual and cultural relationships with his contemporaries within the national context is to be fully understood.

V.

A consideration of the generic status of *Ossian* is the closest commentators usually get to the text of the poems. However, these efforts, from the early debates about whether the poems justified the primary epic status claimed for them by Macpherson and Blair, or whether they represented a medieval poetic tradition more akin to the romance, have been concerned primarily with questions of value and authenticity.[50] Subsequent scholarship, rather than using this debate as a starting point for fresh analysis of genre and *Ossian*, has tended to expend its energies on discussing the debate rather than its subject matter.[51]

Selective reference to this body of scholarship gives important access to the theoretical framework within which Macpherson was operating. The strengths and weaknesses of this work are amply demonstrated by Donald Foerster: while his work has not aged well (he misses quite spectacularly the distinction between Savage and Barbarian within eighteenth-century thought emphasised by Mary Margaret Rubel some time later), it still offers some stimulating insights. His 'Scottish Primitivism and the

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[50] This debate was carried on primarily in the pages of the *Monthly Review* and the *Critical Review*, and by Blair's "Dissertation". See Stewart (1971). Stewart points out that this was a debate in the proper sense of the word, and that these writings respond as much to each other as *Fingal* (p. 40). Critics who quote out of context are likely, then, to misrepresent the situation.

[51] See Lois Whitney's 'English Primitivistic Theories of Epic Origins', *Modern Philology*, 21, no.4 (1924), 351–83; H.T.Swedenburg's *The Theory of the Epic in England, 1650–1800* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1944; repr. New York, 1971); Donald Foerster's, *Homer in English Criticism* (New Haven, 1947), 'Mid-Eighteenth Century Scotch Criticism of Homer', *Studies in Philology* 40 (1943), 425–46 and 'Scottish Primitivism and the Historical Approach', *Philological Quarterly*, 29(1950), 307–23. More recently, S.Cristea's 'Ossian versus Homer: An Eighteenth-Century Controversy' *Italian Studies*, 24 (1969); Mary Margaret Rubel's *Savage and Barbarian: Historical Attitudes in the Criticism of Homer and Ossian in Britain, 1760–1800* (Amsterdam, 1978); Kirsti Simonsuuri's *Homer's Original Genius, Eighteenth-Century Notions of the Early Greek Epic, 1688–1798* (Cambridge, 1979); and (a large part of) Howard Weinbrot's *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge, 1993).

Historical Approach' misrepresents the general response of the Scottish Enlightenment to *Ossian* but nevertheless highlights that so-called Primitivism and Neo-Classicism were not mutually exclusive and that aesthetic judgements were still vitally accessed by the likes of Blair through recognisably Neo-Classical traits.[52] The 'historicist' might have brought different standards to bear, but they were standards nonetheless: an obvious point if we only consult what Macpherson himself has to say about the epic form. Mainstream scholars have developed this with reference to the text of *Ossian* and although they often go no further than offering mitigation for Macpherson's approach, they occasionally make more valuable remarks about the effect such expectations have on *Ossian*.[53]

This critical framework allows us to appreciate that the preference for Ossian over Homer expressed in works such as Robert Wood's *Essay Upon the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* (1767 – 1775), was not merely blinkered cultural nationalism, but reflected a change in the way that epic poetry was conceived.[54] Highlighting the 'primitivist / historicist' heritage of *Ossian* (which can conveniently be seen as originating in Thomas Blackwell's *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735)) contextualises both the enthusiasm for *Ossian* and the antipathy of those sections of the literary world who stood in opposition to the new critical values and who, no doubt correctly, identified an Achilles Heel in James Macpherson.[55] Lest we underestimate the size of the stakes in what might otherwise be seen as a literary spat, Rubel yokes aesthetic and sociological theory to highlight how *Ossian* relates to both epic theory and the stadial theory of social development, suggesting that Macpherson's

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[52] He is wrong to suggest that Lord Kames, for example, was anything but a staunch defender of *Ossian*. See Arthur McGuinness, 'Lord Kames on the Ossian Poems: Anthropology and Criticism', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 10 (1968), 68–76.

[53] For the distillation of 'the bright wine of Celtic fantasy into the bottles of Blair' (Smart, p. 102) see: Saunders, p. 188, Thomson (1987), Womack (1989), p. 108; Stafford (1988), p. 125, Sher (1982), p. 59.

[54] Whitney, p. 337. See also John Valdimir Price, 'Ossian and the Canon in the Scottish Enlightenment' (Gaskill (ed): 1991, pp. 109–28) for *Ossian* as 'a concerted, if unusual attempt to expand the literary canon' (p. 109).

[55] Blackwell set, if not delivered, various classes attended by Macpherson when he was at Aberdeen (Whitney, p. 340; Stafford (1988), p. 28). For the tradition of Blackwell, Blair, Macpherson, Wood (and Wolf) see Kristine Louise Haugen, 'Ossian and the Invention of Textual History', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 59, no.2 (1998), 309–27.

work could be seen as a nexus for (at least) two related Scottish Enlightenment discourses.[56]

Valuable as much of this work is in contextualising Macpherson's endeavours and the storm with which they were received it is yet to address the question of the generic reading of *Ossian*. Josef Bysveen has made something of a contribution in this direction, although his workmanlike links between epic theory and the poems themselves tend to simplify matters and offer a reading of *Fingal* which is a little on the naive side.[57] Furthermore, much of the more imaginative work on the implications of Macpherson's aesthetic baggage involves an implied sense of finding something of unintended value or curiosity in *Ossian*, of felicitous incompetence. As such the underlying assumption that the poems are, on their own terms, of little value tends to be left unquestioned. That said, a number of critics, with a degree of sensitivity, have read *Ossian* as legitimate 'memoir-epic' (although not all of them use this expression).[58]

Very little work has been done on the relationship between the nature, atmosphere and meaning of *Ossian* and that of other epic poetry.[59] Indeed any survey of *Ossian*'s wider generic context tells a tale of suggestive leads in *Ossian* criticism and elsewhere not followed through. For example, modern criticism has tended to ignore the romance side of the initial *Ossian* controversy, and the anonymous pamphlet *Fingal King of Morven, A Knight Errant* (London, 1764) stands as the only detailed study of *Ossian* "as" medieval romance. In general scholars have been too quick to adopt Blair's dim view of romance and have casually dismissed the importance of this generic angle.[60] Indeed, the current state of scholarship on both the romance and on forms

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[56] Rubel (1978), *passim*. See also Stafford (Brown (ed):1996).

[57] Bysveen, *Epic Tradition and Innovation in James Macpherson's* Fingal (Uppsala, 1982).

[58] Adam Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca, 1994); Womack (1989); Ian Haywood, *The Making of History: A Study of the Literary Forgeries of James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton in Relation to Eighteenth-Century Ideas of History and Fiction* (Cranbury New Jersey, 1988); Frederic Bogel, *Literature and Insubstantiality in Later Eighteenth Century England* (Princeton, 1984).

[59] But see deGategno (1989), p. 39 for some brief comments.

[60] See Lorna Kahn, 'James Macpherson's "Ossian": Genesis and Response' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, City University of New York, 1989), p. 233; and John Dwyer, 'The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the *Poems of Ossian*' (Gaskill (ed): 1991, pp. 164–99, p. 195).

such as the Gothic constitutes a resource of significant value in understanding the nature of *Ossian* and its place – justified within its own terms – within literary history.[61]

In short, *Ossian* is a text with multiple generic referents, a fact of the greatest significance more frequently ignored than observed. Honourable exceptions to this are offered by Ken Simpson, and David Hall Radcliffe.[62] A tradition originating with Smart notices the generic strains within the work without ever getting to grips with them, embodied at its most extreme in Lorna Kahn's retreat into seeing *Ossian* as a Nirvana of Reader-response theory. While *Ossian* is as amenable to interpretation in such terms as the next work of literature, Kahn's particular justification for this approach smacks less of a positive intellectual manoeuvre than a throwing up of the arms in despair in the face of the difficulty of it all.[63] No work has been carried out on the way Macpherson's footnotes stress a multi-generic reading practice encompassing narrative, lyric and dramatic verse, and the 'dramatic' reading is yet to be carried out.[64] Scholarship needs to come to terms with such aspects and the need to unpack and expand John Price's 'new literary form – one that conflated the epic, lyric, sublime, and dramatic' in such a way as to garner a positive reading strategy and unsettle Price's cosily blasé conclusion that he is 'only too happy to admit' that he gets 'no real literary pleasure from reading the works'(1991, p.125, p.126). Equally such a project is about more than merely finding a secure generic context for *Ossian* since unsettling the monolithic epic view of *Ossian* also involves unsettling, or at least adjusting, our ideas about *Ossian*'s cultural signification:

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[61] See for example: Peter de Voogd, 'Sentimental Horrors: Feeling in the Gothic Novel' and Chris Baldick, 'The End of the Line: The Family Curse in Shorter Gothic Fiction' both in Tinkler-Villani (ed): 1995, pp. 75–88 and pp. 147–57. For hints towards how this might relate to *Ossian* see Potkay (1994), and Stafford, *The Last of the Race; The Growth of a Myth from Milton to Darwin* (Oxford, 1994).

[62] Simpson, *The Protean Scot: The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth Century Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen, 1988); Radcliffe, 'Ossian and the Genres of Culture', *Studies in Romanticism*, vol.31 no.2 (1992), 213–32.

[63] Kahn (1989). Peter Murphy has recently alluded to the 'generic enigmas' of *Ossian*, but sees this merely as a symptom of Macpherson's 'brilliant but utterly unpoetic' genius: 'his contempt for form is a contempt for real literary beauty, and the divine emptiness of Ossian's poems is the result' (1993, p. 47–8).

[64] Haywood (1988) makes a start. In this context it is interesting to note that the Germans, French and Italians, enthusiastic admirers of *Ossian* in a way never matched by British readers, read their *Ossian* in texts that distinguished, metrically and otherwise, narrative from lyric sections of the text. (I am grateful to Dr. Howard Gaskill for this information).

> Mikael Bakhtin [in *The Dialogic Imagination*] has characterised the world of epic as 'an utterly finished thing' which is 'impossible to change, to rethink, to re-evaluate'. For Bakhtin, the epic is 'beyond the realm of human activity', and as such remote from the contemporary world with its jostle of competing literary forms.
>
> (Stafford, Brown (ed.): 1996, p. 85)

This is the theoretical insight behind many of the readings which see *Ossian* as culturally stultifying, replacing a living tradition with a fixed and dead one. There is much in this perspective, but one way this thesis measures the undercurrents of cultural resistance present in *Ossian* is by registering the disruption of the epic monolith by more unruly, questioning and subversive modes.

This discussion of generic issues has omitted that body of scholarship devoted to *Ossian* as Sentimental text on the grounds that it will be discussed below. Needless to say, Northrop Frye's approach – a fundamentally textual one – in the article which declared open season on this issue has not been followed up by his successors in their race to explore the intellectual framework of Sensibility around *Ossian*.[65] For Jerome MacGann this is of a piece with the general tendency of the 'cultural studies' which are largely responsible for re-examination of the poetry of Sensibility 'to evade the question of the aesthetic character and value of the obscured texts'.[66] Whatever, chapters two and three below both attempt to come to terms with the question of *Ossian*'s formal category, and taken together suggest that the Sentimental Epic can perhaps more usefully be described, in modal terms, as an eighteenth-century romance. In this way I hope to marry an understanding of the cultural context of Sensibility with a lively appreciation of the 'reality' of the Ossianic experience.

VI.

When an American academic, in response to *Ossian*'s prominence in Weinbrot's book, wondered electronically 'who is reading Ossian', he received a number of enthusiastic replies. Yet what emerges from a consideration of literary critical heritage of the poems is the strong sense that few are reading *Ossian* with their eyes open. In a way

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[65] Frye, 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility', *English Literary History*, vol. 23 (1956), 144–53.

[66] Jerome MacGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford, 1996), p. 5.

perhaps symptomatic of a tradition that has relied on the kindness of disciplinary strangers and that has been dominated by considerations of authenticity and influence, the critical heritage of *Ossian* has, in general, been one of begged questions and easy answers. The time is ripe for the work by scholars in various fields and with various interests to be built upon by sustained and contextualised readings of Macpherson's texts from a number of related angles, exploring and interrogating the current consensus, and coming to a more subtly articulated position on the issues which cohere around *Ossian*.

CHAPTER TWO.

Ossian and the Epic of Sentiment

I.

The Received and Polite Forms.

One of the few things about which critics agree concerning *The Poems of Ossian* is that they represent an attempt to present the world with the remains of an epic poet. The success of the attempt is, of course, a matter of some dispute: Thomas Gray was perhaps the first to have offered qualifications and disagreements in a tradition which stretches to the present study. Nevertheless, that the attempt was made remains undisputed, and it is necessary to come to some understanding as to why. Macpherson marks *Ossian*'s epic pretensions unambiguously: he subtitled *Fingal* "An Ancient Epic Poem," and was bolder in his first footnote to *Temora*. Commenting that 'the title of Epic was imposed on the poem by myself' he goes on to claim that *Temora* is 'natural' epic, unencumbered by the drier aspects of classical aesthetic theory:

> Tho' this poem of Ossian has not perhaps all the *minutiae*, which Aristotle, from Homer, lays down as necessary to the conduct of an epic poem, yet, it is presumed, it has all the grand essentials of the epopoea. Unity of time, place, and action is preserved throughout.[1]

The *Fingal* edition had anticipated the appearance of *Temora* as a complete eight book epic by including the first book of the poem and a lengthy note to the effect that this represented merely the opening of 'one of the greatest of Ossian's compositions' (p. 456, n.1). And this was not all, as *Ossian*'s first appearance suggested fragmentary traces of other larger narratives: "The Death of Cuchullin" implied another epic relating to *Temora* (and probably encompassing poems such as "Dar-thula") awaiting to be discovered and pieced together. Hints about a fourth long poem on the subject of

Oscar's youth were provided in "The War of Inis-thona", where Macpherson tantalised (or threatened, depending on your point of view) the reader with the suggestion that this poem represented only the opening of an epic and that 'there are some now living, who, in their youth, have heard the whole repeated' (p. 439, n.1). Macpherson's motives for creating this sense of expectation were both entrepreneurial and aesthetic: he was preparing the ground for future discoveries while also creating a patina of desolation and melancholy around the remains of a once thriving tradition.[2] That these further poems never materialised is perhaps significant, although not of particular relevance to the study in hand.

Neither do we need to go far to find reasons for Macpherson's adoption of the epic genre. We might almost say that there was no choice to be made, despite the changes in sensibility and taste which, as we shall see below, were increasingly problematising the epic. In the first instance Macpherson had grown up in a culture which routinely considered its poetic tradition to be an epic one.[3] D.S.Thomson has repeatedly made the point that *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, one of Macpherson's major sources (and one whose Gaelic is notoriously difficult, making it unlikely that Macpherson understood it all), looks, at least superficially, like a fragmented epic poem (and one which ascribes many of its compositions, incidentally, to Oisean). If Thomson is adamant that even if Macpherson thought he had an epic 'it is unlikely that he held such a belief for long', the idea that the Dean's book is somehow older than it appears, and may convey ancient epic material albeit in a later form continues into more critically "responsible" times.[4] Neil Ross, an editor with no time for Macpherson's impositions,

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[1]James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works,* ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh, 1996; from the 3rd ed. of 1765), p.479. All further references will give a page number to this edition.

[2] For Macpherson as self-publicist see Laing (quoted in Gaskill edition, p.439 n.1). But note that Macpherson says quite definitively that the epic that "The War of Inis-thona" represents 'is lost' and, suggesting that Macpherson shuts the door on the possibility of it being found more unambiguously than he might have done had advanced billing been his sole aim. See below for the 'patina of desolation'.

[3] Burt's *Letters* (1730), speak of 'educated Highlanders who knew and admired [Gaelic] poetry and believed it to be of an epic cast' (Thomas Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson* (London, 1894), p. 59). cf. Howard Gaskill's assertion that Medieval Gaelic ballads 'do [...] in the main represent examples of sophisticated literature which has gone demotic. Macpherson knew this' ('Ossian at Home and Abroad', *Strathclyde Modern Language Studies*, 8 (1988), 5–27 (p.18)).

[4] D.S.Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian* (Aberdeen, 1952), p. 83.

nevertheless talks in Macphersonian terms of the ballads of the collection revealing 'the spontaneous working of the Gaelic mind before it was affected by any external influence':

> apart from the language they bear no trace of [the fifteenth century]. The men who put them in metrical form were able to separate themselves from their surroundings and to retain the spirit of the ancient saga. The heroic ballads are unique in presenting us with customs more primitive than those of the Middle Ages.[5]

If the Dean's Book held out the promise of 'fools' gold' to Macpherson, modern scholarship has proved no less susceptible to the same promise, even if it expresses it in more restrained (but no less illogical) ways.

Whatever, Macpherson was not only culturally attuned, 'from the cradle' as it were, to feel that his scraps of ballads represented epic in the raw. His university education, at first King's and then Marischal College Aberdeen would have encouraged Macpherson to think formally about the poetry and culture of the Gaeltachd in these terms. There is a double focus, or time scale to be noted here, firstly concerning Macpherson's theoretical understanding of his sources and secondly of his own poetic temperament, his own qualifications, as it were, to act as mid-wife for Ossian. He would have learnt, for example, that poetry was inextricably tied to the state of society and man, and that epic poetry was the product of vibrant, warring and primitive peoples, of times of 'disorders and public ruin' either before the establishment of civil society or during times of civil war 'which, with all the misery that attends it, is a fitter subject for an Epic poem, than the most glorious campaign that ever was made in Flanders.'[6] While we should be aware that the representation of the Gaeltachd as primitive bandit country in Macpherson's lifetime has more to do with ignorance and Government propaganda than historical reality (the last clan battle was fought in 1688, for example), nevertheless the medieval heroic ballads Macpherson collected do bear the hallmarks of composition in a climate of clan warfare and volatile, blood-feud

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[5] Neil Ross (ed.), *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh, 1939), p. xxvii.

[6] Thomas Blackwell Jnr, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London, 1735), p. 65, p. 27. Blackwell would not have taught Macpherson face-to-face since Greek was a first year course at Marischal and Macpherson did not arrive from Kings until his second year. Nevertheless Blackwell's thinking was widely influential in the city, and the Greek course Macpherson did at Kings had been set by Blackwell and was taught by ex-students of his. See Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime*

driven politics.[7] Furthermore, the young Macpherson personally experienced the events of the Forty-Five and its aftermath, just the sort of time of 'disorder and public ruin' Blackwell suggested was ripe for developing the epic sensibility. Howard Erskine-Hill has suggested that 'if there is an epic moment in eighteenth-century British history it is surely the hopeless charge [of the Jacobites] at Culloden [...] there, in the century of neo-classical epic, was the real thing'.[8]

Social, or geo-political, conditions are not the only aspect of Blackwell's theory of relevance here. Thomson's belief that, however honestly mistaken Macpherson may have been initially, his continued insistence that ballads were broken epics was ultimately duplicitous, ignores the fact that the historicist school of criticism had gone some way to loosening the links between original source composition and received text, had for example, broached the question of whether Homer could write or not.[9] Epic poetry thus becomes susceptible to the degradations of time, and open to, demanding even, restoration. Put altogether:

> [Macpherson] learned from Blackwell that the epic was a natural form for the early bard, so it seemed reasonable to assume that Ossian, too, was an epic poet. The heroes of the existing Highland poems would not be out of place in an epic, but Ossian's great original work must have become scattered through the centuries into shorter poems or 'fragments'. (Stafford (1988), p. 36)

Furthermore, because the Blackwell school stressed the 'surprising resemblance of the oldest writings' across all cultures, similarities which stretched to the use of the 'very same expressions and phrases' (Blackwell(1735), pp. 72–3), it would have been self-evident to Macpherson that the job of completing the Gaelic epic involved making it substantially similar to other examples of the genre. Thus through mutually reinforcing cultural conditioning and education, it is likely and understandable that Macpherson

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Savage: James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 28; Lois Whitney, 'English Primitivistic Theories of Epic Origins', *Modern Philology*, 21, no. 4 (1924), 251–83 (p. 340).

[7] Allan Macinnes, *Clanship, Commerce, and the House of Stuart, 1603–1788* (East Linton, 1996), p. 170. See chapters four and five below for the ideological construction of the Gaeltachd.

[8] Howard Erskine-Hill, 'Literature and the Jacobite Cause: Was There a Rhetoric of Jacobitism?' in *Ideology and Conspiracy: Aspects of Jacobitism, 1689–1759*, ed. by Eveline Cruickshanks, pp. 49–69, p. 59. The hopelessness or otherwise of Culloden is part of the mythology of defeat I explore in chapter five.

[9] Donald Foerster, *Homer in English Criticism: The Historical Approach in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, 1947), p. 35.

would have believed that there was a Gaelic epic somewhere to be found in the Highlands and that he would have known what it should look like once restored.

This means that perhaps Saunders was not altogether fair when he suggested that:

> If Blair, instead of waxing enthusiastic over the fancied discovery of a national epic, had applied [...] but a little poetic genius, with an admixture of common sense, he would never have given Macpherson any ground for supposing that the collection of lyrical pieces which he produced was characterised by any real unity, or possessed any other mark of a true epic' (1894, p. 188)

Nevertheless such an observation moves us to the second set of pressures bearing on Macpherson. In the next chapter I will discuss the process by which 'lyric pieces' become 'national epics', but for the present I want to suggest that a sense of the continued cultural-ideological importance of the epic can also be gained from those who have unpacked Saunders' scathing comment and analysed the aims, ideals, and expectations which lay behind the support for *Ossian* by the Edinburgh intellectual community. As Richard Sher has suggested, *Ossian* represents (in part) an important part of the campaign of the *literati* to raise the literary image of Scotland, a campaign in which 'only a complete Gaelic epic, dressed, of course, in Neo-Classical English garb, could possess the scope and grandeur necessary to elevate Scotland to a new place in the national history of Britain'.[10] A qualification needs to be entered here, since Ken Simpson, writing about the assumptions of the cultural muscle of the epic which lie behind the preface to Wilkie's *Epigoniad*, has suggested that 'it is symptomatic of Scottish nostalgia for a remote and aggrandised past that a Scot should write in such terms when other European nations had mostly discounted the epic form as being in any way appropriate to their needs', and John Price has observed about *Ossian* that 'inside the fat genre of the epic an even fatter genre of historical fiction was struggling to get out'.[11] However, there is a world of distance between Wilkie's neo-classical

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[10] Sher, '"Those Scotch Impostors and their Cabal": Ossian and the Scottish Enlightenment', *Man and Nature: The Proceedings of the Canadian Society for Eighteenth Century Studies* (Ontario, 1982), 55–65 (p. 59).

[11] Ken Simpson, *The Protean Scot: The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen, 1988), p. 86; John Valdimir Price, '*Ossian* and the Canon in the Scottish Enlightenment' in *Ossian Revisited*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 109–28, p. 126. For the problems of the epic in the eighteenth-century, see Weinbrot, below, and also John Lucas,

posturings and self-consciously constructed Epic, and a newly-discovered ancient poetry whose age and naturalness surmounts the sense of provincial staleness and outmodedness Simpson sees represented in a taste for epic writing in the later eighteenth century. Macpherson, Blair and the rest may have been part of a generation doomed to have few successors in their confident appeal to the epic, but they nevertheless did speak from a position which saw the epic, for right or wrong, as the pre-eminent literary and cultural form. The resistance with which the 'Northern Homer' was met, particularly after Macpherson's attempts to Ossianify Homer with his *Iliad* (1774), testify to the continuing cultural importance of the epic beyond Scotland, and the debate over epic and its relevance would continue in modified form, along side the continued production of epics which enshrined personal and national values, well into the next century (for example, the period 1790–1820 saw dozens of epics on religious and national historical themes – such as those of Joseph Cottle – written). All that said, the strategic value of this assumption of epic dominance is not my primary concern. For the moment all that is important is that that assumption was made.

However, there was one problem with producing a national epic which was felt with some force at the time, a dilemma best summed up in Sher's recipe for success: to have the desired effect, the epic needed to combine 'the raw power and majesty of Homer with the moral and aesthetic sensibilities of the Neo-Classical age', producing a document of which Scotland could be justly proud, and feeding the tastes of an audience which, while increasingly disenchanted with the bloody excesses of Homer, still looked towards the epic as the form of the dominant cultural meta-narrative.[12] These 'moral and aesthetic sensibilities' make their presence most obviously felt in what Sher has elsewhere labelled the 'polite veneer of Sentimental neo-classicism' (1982, p. 58). This formulation encapsulates the aesthetic, ethical and ideological agenda of the Scottish *literati*, representing a commitment to the civilising power of moral sentiment, a system of values by which human fellow-feeling could be excited to the highest

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England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry 1688–1900 (London, 1990), *passim* and pp.16, 48.

[12] Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 251. For the helping hand of Blair, Ferguson *et al.*, see p. 254 and also Gaskill (1988), pp. 13–14; and Thomas Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson* (London, 1894), pp. 149–50, p. 305.

degree by exquisite depictions of suffering.[13] This chapter explores this aesthetic formula and its implications, and as such develops in its course a totalising image of Sentimental epic. It is necessary, first of all, to break this characterisation down a little further in beginning to examine this hybrid creature, the Polite and Sentimental ancient epic.

Politeness is a crucial concept here, expressive of both a means and an end of Sentimental ethics: one cultivated acute sensibility in order to become polite by virtue of the fact that that sensibility was, in its finest manifestation, polite. Essential to this concept of politeness, as we shall see, was a stoic ability to marry emotional expression with self-possession:

> Such, Fingal! were thy words; but thy words I hear no more. Sightless I sit by thy tomb. I hear the wind in the wood; but no more I hear my friends. The cry of the hunter is over. The voice of war is ceased. (Fragment VIII, p. 18)

The Ossianic set-piece of blind son sitting at the tomb of his father also represents a classic Sentimental tableau. Grief is the predominant emotion and pity the response required from the reader. Yet it is a basically polite moment. The reader is not made to shift uncomfortably in the presence of this emotion because the understatement of those short paratactic statements not only avoid histrionics but also makes sure that the passage implies but never asserts the *ubi sunt* motifs which animate it, and which in other texts underscore the plangency of the moment with a potentially strident bitterness.

The concentration on poignancy rather than bitterness also suggests how the quotation also exemplifies a third aspect of politeness: its role as an important buffer to ensure that rather than becoming raucous the raised national consciousness of *Ossian* remained "literary" and safely non-explosive. The movement of history described here and symbolised by Ossian's previous assertion that 'Oscur my son was brave; but Oscur is now no more' (Fragment VI, p. 15) is, as we shall come to see, never far from the reader's consciousness, ensuring that *Fingal* is no *Song of Roland*, that the celebration

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[13] For example see Sher (1985); John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1987); Luke Gibbons, 'The Sympathetic Bond: Ossian, Celticism and Colonialism' in *Celticism*, ed. by Terence Brown (Amsterdam, 1996) pp. 273–92. For Moral Sentiment in general see R.S. Crane, 'The Genealogy of the Man of Feeling', *English Literary History*, 1 (1935), 205–30.

is also a lament. The narrative framework of the poems emphasises that we are witnessing a remembrance of things lost, the celebration of a glorious past, but, for all that, a time which is gone forever. Current Scots Gaels are left with an inheritance and can revel in the reflected glory of their ancestors but that is ultimately all (and Macpherson himself makes clear that 'the honour which nations derive from ancestors, worthy, or renowned, is merely ideal' and while it 'may buoy up the minds of individuals [...] it contributes very little to their importance in the eyes of others' (p. 216)). Indeed, as this passage suggests and as we shall see at length below, innate Sensibility, is predicated on this fall from grace: without such a catastrophe these compensatory abilities would not manifest themselves.

At this point, however, we must enter a qualification, one upon which I shall expand in this chapter and elsewhere. Within this discourse at least, Sensibility (albeit emerging from catastrophe) is grounds for cultural superiority, and in these terms *Ossian* makes a play for the cultural superiority of the Gael. As we shall see, a retreat into sentimentalism can be interpreted as a narrative of assimilation and as a mythologising of a status quo to the material disadvantage of the Gael. I do not want to dismiss this, but it may nevertheless be an anachronistic if not naive judgement to make without also suggesting the opposite case: while the nationalism advocated by the *literati* was not an incitement to rebellion, neither was it completely divorced from more worldly concerns. If Sensibility was the new religion (literally, in as much as from the pulpit Blair preached events such as the Passion in terms of the 'gentle melancholy' of 'tender sympathy') then Scotland, said *Ossian*, not only has it in spades but could even be seen as its spiritual home.[14] Equally, there existed in eighteenth-century Scotland from the time of the Union of 1707, a tradition of finding in a lost martial past a conception of nationhood in 'purely moral and spiritual' terms 'without institutional association or application', a redefinition of the state which would find its ultimate expression in Herder's conception of *kulturstaat*, the belief that 'if [the nation] managed to maintain its cultural tradition, it could exist [...] without the apparatus of

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[14] For Blair's efforts to 'reinterpret Christianity in the light of Sensibility' see Dwyer (1987), pp. 59–60.

state'.[15] All this perhaps goes some of the way to explaining the hostility with which Macpherson's efforts were met with in England. After all, one of the great unasked questions about the "Ossianic Wars" is why the great and the good of English letters spent so long rubbishing something they claimed was self-evidently rubbish, and it is worth observing that those who emphasise *Ossian*'s connivance with the Anglo-British cultural juggernaut do so by overlooking that juggernaut's hostile reaction to the poems. This study returns to these questions in a number of forms, and in chapter five the status of the Sentimental *Ossian* is considered at greater length in terms of cultural politics. Equally, chapter four will discuss ways in which *Ossian* relates to Scottish Enlightenment civic thought which will further revise our notions of Macpherson's national consciousness. For the moment all I want to stress is that we should not mistake for a craven surrender to, or complicity in, a cultural mainstream a 'cosmopolitan species of nationalism that sought to raise the status of Scotland in the eyes of the world by demonstrating its superiority according to universally accepted standards of taste and conduct' (Sher (1985), p. 324).

This, as it stands, represents the critical consensus as regards the Polite *Ossian*, whose success is conventionally accounted for in terms of the accommodation of Modern Sensibility with Ancient Epic. Ossian's poems tell of the battles of long ago fought in an age-old landscape, conducted and narrated in terms which would appeal to the reader of Richardson, 'poems that spoke of noble deeds, but little bloodshed, rude manners mixed with lofty sentiments, much weeping and dying but no physical pain' (Sher (1982), p. 58). But at the same time as an account of *Ossian* it is thoroughly unsatisfactory, since any lively reading must come to terms with what Stafford has characterised as the 'misery and frustration' of the Ossianic figures; a represented world which, in the words of Peter Womack, is 'luridly dysfunctional', and in which 'an irresistible tendency is constantly increasing the already excessive spectral population'.[16] In the discussion which follows I shall offer a reasoned account of the epic subversion within *Ossian*, the obsession with defeat, failure and insufficiency which goes to explain why 'the *Iliad* is as full of battles and deaths in battles as is

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[15] John Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 45; William Donaldson, *The Jacobite Song: Political Myth and National Identity* (Aberdeen, 1988), p. 88.

Fingal, without having gained the reputation of being elegiac', why the overriding atmosphere of *Ossian* is of *sparagmos* 'the sense that heroism and effective action are absent, disorganised or foredoomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world.'[17] While this does not make *Ossian* unepic exactly, I would like to argue that, in the course of Macpherson's attempt 'to graft on to the heroism of the traditional epic the compulsive pathos of the age of sensibility' (Simpson (1988), p. 55) the certainties and high ideals of the epic come under more sustained assault and interrogation than is usual in the form. My argument has two strands, one stylistic, and one more substantive. In the sphere of the stylistic, I shall consider the consequences of the polite epic form. From there, a position will have been reached whereby the implications of *Ossian*'s place within a Movement of Sensibility, a system of thought and value with imperatives, structures and motifs inimical to an old-fashioned epic purpose, can be unfolded. These lines of argument will together, and at every turn, suggest that the "polite epic" longed after by the likes of Blair is, in its most exquisite formulation, a fantasy.

II.

> *How can I relate the deaths when we closed in the strife of our steel? O daughter of Toscar! Bloody were our hands.* (Fingal, *Book IV,[p. 87])*

Ossian's question to Malvina here, as he turns from a description of the climactic battle in *Fingal*, represents more than rhetorical cuteness, raising an issue of some significance in eighteenth-century attitudes towards epic poetry. As I touched upon in the previous section, the bloodthirsty behaviour of epic characters (and the delight eighteenth-century readers perceived in the descriptions of that behaviour) threatened Homer's position as the pre-eminent literary figure in the Western tradition: for more

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[16] Stafford (1988), p. 102; Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands* (Basingstoke, 1989), p. 106.

[17] Eleanor M. Sickels, *The Gloomy Egotist Moods and Themes of Melancholy from Gray to Keats* (New York, 1932), p.111; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957), p. 192. For Sickels it is a matter of poetic style, a line she pursues to some profit in a discussion of various versifications of *Ossian*.

civilised times, 'even if heroic grandeur had emerged from unheroic causes, the price of such glory was too high'.[18] In a sense Homer was a victim of his own privileged position, since, as Howard Weinbrot has argued, it was the adoption of the epic as expressive of a cultural and national meta-narrative which led to this examination of the moral and ethical underpinning of its narratives, an examination under which, in an "Age of Refinement", Homer withered (1993, p. 226).

The preference for *Ossian* expressed during the 1760s comes, then, from its satisfaction of certain cultural fantasies. *Ossian* represents Homer only better: he avoids those excesses considered distasteful or questionable by eighteenth-century standards, and he introduces elements which the classical epics had, to the chagrin of eighteenth-century readers, omitted. As Adam Potkay has put it in his study of 'the stylistic and political contradiction of eloquence and polite style' which haunted eighteenth-century – particularly Scots – thinkers, 'like a Sophoclean god, Ossian descends to settle a seemingly insoluble tension': against all the odds, in *Ossian* the full-blooded representation of heroic deeds is shown to have a place within the ideology of politeness.[19] The purpose of this section is to put such claims for *Ossian* on the stylistic level under the microscope in a sustained way.

Macpherson draws readers into making specific comparisons between the moral behaviour of Ossian's characters and their classical antecedents, usually by doing it for them. "Lathmon" offers two examples in as many pages: first, the request of Gaul to be allowed to lead the Caledonian line into battle is glossed with the observation that 'this proposal [...] is more noble, and more agreeable to true heroism, than the behaviour of Ulysses and Diomed in the Iliad, or that of Nisus and Euryalus in the Aeneid' (p. 468, n. 27); and second, Macpherson extemporises on the subject of 'the custom of depreciating enemies', a fault he sees endemic in the modern world and 'one of the capital faults in Homer's characters' (p. 468, n. 35). It is worth noting that in this second instance Macpherson adds a coda to the effect that this lack of decorum 'cannot be imputed to the poet, who kept to the manners of the times in which he wrote', an observation which demonstrates his intellectual debt to Blackwell's

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[18] Howard Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 225.

[19] Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca, 1994), p. 228 and p. 226.

Historicist school of criticism. It is, indeed, something of an irony that the intellectual community which fostered the "Northern Homer" was one which, in its basic principle of judging by the lights of the author's not the reader's time, was designed to defend Homer from the charge of amorality, an irony implicit in the fraught balancing act Macpherson is engaged in here.

The shoddy treatment of vanquished foes seems to have particularly exercised Macpherson in his reading of the classics, for this 'railing disposition' is something he takes them to task for on numerous occasions, perhaps most heatedly in *Temora*:

> This reply of Ossian abounds with the most exalted sentiments of a noble mind. Tho', of all men living, he was the most injured by Cairbar, yet he lays aside his rage as the *foe was low*. How different is this from the behaviour of the heroes of other ancient poems! (p. 491, n. 49)

Macpherson here compares Ossian's actions with those of, for example, Aeneas at the end of *Aeneid*. Where Aeneas had dispatched the fallen Turnus in revenge for the death of a friend, Ossian is willing to perform the funeral rites necessary to satisfy the spirit of the man who has treacherously engineered the death of Ossian's son. In general, Macpherson's comparisons with the Classics proceed on two levels, that of formal poetic technique and that of the propriety of action. While Homer is allowed some excellencies, even superiority in aspects of the former, in the latter case the emphasis is almost exclusively on the more correct and polite course or execution of action within *Ossian*. However, such "proper" action only goes half way to rehabilitating the warrior epic, since the sphere in which Ossian's characters are offered the opportunity to show the 'most exalted sentiments of a noble mind' is still that of arms and brutal, premature death. In short, the question posed by Ossian to Malvina with which we started this chapter remains to be answered. An analysis of how the description of battle unfolds from this point on suggests clues as to Macpherson's solution.

In the first instance, Ossian would appear to solve his dilemma by not describing the battles. In true chivalric fashion the lieutenants of Fingal had vowed to achieve certain deeds on the field of battle, giving Ossian ample opportunity to describe stirring single combats and deeds of derring-do. Yet having addressed Malvina Ossian goes on to comment that 'the gloomy ranks of Lochlin fell like the banks of the roaring Cona.—

—Our arms were victorious on Lena; each chief fulfilled his promise' (p. 87), before launching into an extended simile:

> Thou hast seen the sun retire red and slow behind his cloud; night gathering round on the mountain, while the unfrequent blast roared in narrow vales. At length the rain beats hard; and thunder rolls in peals. Lightning glances on the rocks. Spirits ride on beams of fire. And the strength of the mountain-streams comes roaring down the hills. Such was the noise of battle, maid of the arms of snow.

This is almost copy book Sublime, an angle of the Ossianic aesthetic I shall examine further in the following section. What is to be picked out at the present moment is that the passage describes not actions but a sound, and that while there is no denying that the passage has power and is memorable, it is memorable not of anything concrete but of atmosphere. We witness no acts of valour, none of the promises fulfilled. There is then another return to the listening Malvina:

> Why, daughter of the hill, that tear? the maids of Lochlin have cause to weep. The people of their country fell, for bloody was the blue steel of the race of my heroes. But I am sad, forlorn, and blind; and no more the companion of heroes. Give, lovely maid, to me thy tears, for I have seen the tombs of all my friends. (p. 87)

Having been denied meaningful interaction with the glorious events of the battle, we are thus confronted first with a tableau of Scandinavian widows, and then with the old Ossian. The shift in emotional register contained in this momentary change of perspective is reinforced by the events of the rest of the book. Returning to his story, Ossian finally gets around to describing an individual event:

> It was then by Fingal's hand a hero fell, to his grief.——Gray-haired he rolled in the dust, and lifted his faint eyes to the king. And is it by me thou hast fallen, said the son of Comhal, thou friend of Agandecca! I saw thy tears for the maid of my love in the halls of the bloody Starno. (p. 87–8)

When Macpherson focuses on detail here he does so with some degree of vividness. Yet this particularisation (both of specific incident and the way that incident is described) is to point up feelings of pity and an awareness of tragic waste. Malcolm Laing suspected that this was lifted from *Aeneid X* (although he admits that Macpherson may have changed all the words to 'avoid apparent imitation'), but a more solid Virgilian allusion might be to the dusty death of Troilus as depicted on the

Carthaginian temple mural in *Aeneid* I.[20] As we shall see in chapter five, not for the only time does an allusion to one of the more sombre moments in the *Aeneid* underscore an Ossianic moment of pathos, here with a lurking reference to a previous scene of sorrow and mournful remembrance. The shift from triumphal warring to melancholic reflection is completed by a final switch in focus to Cuchullin, yesterday's man:

> O ye ghosts of the lonely Cromla! ye souls of chiefs that are no more! be ye the companions of Cuchullin, and talk to him in the cave of his sorrow. For never more shall I be renowned among the mighty in the land. I am like a beam that has shone; like a mist that fled away, when the blast of the morning came, and brightened the shaggy side of the hill. (p. 88)

It is easy to forget that this speech ends a book which has seen the total rout of the enemies of Cuchullin. I shall return to this tendency to turn 'away from the military engagement in order to linger among the various half-lights produced by the battle' in terms of the demands of the text of Sensibility for appropriate subject matter, but for now my point is that the eschewal of scenes of glorified violence in favour of scenes of politely rendered pathos has a detrimental effect on the confident dynamism of the warrior epic.[21]

Yet this reticence about violence has been taken to be at the heart of the social and aesthetic compromise offered by *Ossian*. Potkay speaks of poems 'stunted at precisely the point where primary epics are most expansive', presenting a world in which 'primeval force is advertised but concealed; paraded but veiled behind a polite aesthetic':

> Ossian's language purposefully distracts us from the brutality it implies: the metonymic catalogue of martial accoutrements [...] is oddly depersonalised, and blood appears to burst out of no one and no where in particular.[22]

For Potkay this 'literal and figurative mystification of violence' is at one with the 'ethos of politeness' and finds its perfect vehicle in the Burkean aesthetic of the Sublime. In a footnote to *Temora VIII* Macpherson justifies the miraculous mist which descends to veil the combat of Fingal and Cathmor in terms which are instantly recognisable:

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[20] Laing (ed), *The Poems of Ossian*, 2 vols, (Edinburgh, 1805), vol. 2, p. 145 n. 38.
[21] Paul dcGategno, *James Macpherson* (Boston Ma., 1989), p. 79.

> [Ossian's] numerous descriptions of single combats had already exhausted the subject. Nothing new, nor adequate to our high ideas of the kings, could be said. Ossian, therefore, throws a *column of mist* over the whole, and leaves the combat to the imagination of the reader. (p. 526, n. 11)

Concluding with the observation that 'our imagination stretches beyond, and, consequently, despises the description', here as elsewhere Macpherson seems to be echoing Burke's maxim that 'a clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea', and similarly emphasising the infinite as the key to the sublime.[23] This is not the first time this chapter will discuss Macpherson and Burke, but for the moment I want to observe, along with Potkay, that 'the disguising of violence in columns of mist' can also be said 'to define the ideology of manners itself' (1992, p. 124).[24]

Yet, as I have implied in my charting the battle at the end of *Fingal* IV, this veiling not only excites the imagination with obscurity but also denies us access to straightforward action in a world in which it is increasingly seen to be in short supply. Potkay's use of the word 'stunted' is as revealing as it is acute, since this reticence about violence plays a major part in the portrayal of frustrated heroic endeavour in the poems, part of what Potkay has elsewhere termed the 'forceful unreadability' of *Ossian* (1994, p. 213). Not that this does not have its own appeal, but it is not the appeal of primary epic. An analogous point emerges from the polite absence of agency in the appearance of blood as identified by Potkay. While making the actions more "poetic" it also creates a vaguely surreal atmosphere to the poems: Ossian's characters have pitifully thin skin, spilling their life-forces with a nightmarish ease. The discreet nature of violent combat, wounding and bleeding gives a startling illogicality to deaths recounted in a way which gives a peculiar impression that there has been a breach in the train of cause and event. "Dar-thula"'s set-piece climax draws all these elements together:

> Dar-thula stood in silent grief, and beheld their fall: no tear is in her eye: but her look is wildly sad. Pale was her cheek; her trembling lips broke short an half-formed word. Her dark hair flew on the wind. ——But gloomy Cairbar came. Where is thy lover

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[22] Potkay, 'Virtue and Manners in Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian*', *PMLA*, vol. 107 (1992), 120–31 (p. 124).

[23] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford, 1990; from J.T.Boulton's 1958 edition of the second edition, 1759), p. 58.

[24] The association of politeness and the Sublime may seem paradoxical, but see below on the 'Sentimental Sublime' and its connotations.

> now? the car-borne chief of Etha? Hast thou beheld the halls of Usnoth? Or the dark-brown hills of Fingal? My battle had roared on Morven, did not the winds meet Dar-thula. Fingal himself would have been low, and sorrow dwelling in Selma.
>
> Her shield fell from Dar-thula's arm, her breast of snow appeared. It appeared, but it was stained with blood for an arrow was fixed in her side. She fell on the fallen Nathos, like a wreath of snow. Her dark hair spreads on his face, and their blood is mixing round. (pp. 146–7)

The vagueness of the battle descriptions denies us the recompense implicit within the heroic sacrifice, the glorious action which costs the hero(ine)'s life: all we are left with is the dying and, in the transferred eroticism of that final image, we witness the final mockery of fulfilment.

More drastic subversion of the epic form, and a more telling interrogation of its values is to be witnessed in analysing *Ossian* in relation to the structural and emotional economy of the Sentimental Text. However it is already apparent that the 'veneer of sentimental neo-classicism' is a problematic formulation and that the stylistic demands of politeness and the unreconstructed epic are in conflict within *Ossian*. Efforts to make the old-fashioned epic hero acceptable to the age of politeness left him confused and incompetent. While his behaviour and the motive springs of that behaviour are now aesthetically pleasing, it is all too often fatally removed from the world of positive achievement.

III.

Sentimental Aims and Preoccupations.

As the previous section began to imply, the standards and imperatives of the Sentimental movement go beyond presenting heroic behaviour in such a way as to make it acceptable to polite eighteenth-century tastes. It also suggested that if a discreet and polite reticence about violence and death can be considered as alien or unhelpful to a confident heroism, then these imperatives can be interpreted as more thoroughly antagonistic. As such, charting these defines still further the clear water between *Ossian*'s epics of Sensibility and those of his heroic predecessors, and engages

further with the Ossianic temper as described by Stafford, Womack and Sickels in part one and which I have suggested is symbolised by the archetypal theme of *sparagmos*.

It is not my intention to offer another comprehensive description of the Cult of Sentimentality and Sensibility, merely to expand a little on the working definition offered in my opening remarks on the Sentimental Epic. As I suggested earlier, the movement was committed to the workings of moral sentiment, a sympathetic exchange in which benevolent action is the response of the good on witnessing the suffering of the oppressed. A key document here is Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (first published 1759), in which the central tenets of this philosophical tradition were codified, and in which, with its relatively novel focus on the observer within a tri-partite structure of sympathiser, object of sympathy and observer of both, was of crucial importance for literary manifestations of Sentiment.[25] DeGategno has suggested that Macpherson 'had read Smith with great interest', a claim supported by Gibbons' observation that some of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*' 'most complex formulations are worked through the body of Macpherson's text'.[26] If the timing seems a little tight here (although there is no reason why it should, given that it would be over two years before *Fingal* appeared) we should perhaps bear in mind the intellectual melting-pot of pre-New Town Edinburgh in the 1750s, a place where the ideas of the *literati*, including Smith on his frequent visits from Glasgow, mingled and cross-fertilised.[27] Furthermore, Macpherson was exposed to a second route by which the works of Shaftesbury, the theoretical background of Sentiment, were mediated to the eighteenth century: if Smith had been a disciple of Francis Hutcheson, the Ulsterman who did much to disseminate Shaftesbury North of the Border, then so was George Turnbull, a leading influence at the Aberdeen universities during Macpherson's time.[28]

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[25] See Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London, 1986). For Smith's importance to Sentimental literature see Brian Vickers' introduction to Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (London, 1967) p. x.

[26] deGategno (1989), p. 90; Gibbons (1996), p. 287.

[27] For the informal circulation of ideas in mid-eighteenth-century Edinburgh see, for example, Whitney (1924), pp. 346–8. Smith was an inveterate complainer about what he considered to be violations of his intellectual property rights: he claimed that Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) and Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) were lifted from his own material.

[28] For polite learning at Aberdeen, see Paul Wood, *The Aberdeen Enlightenment: The Arts Curriculum in the Eighteenth Century* (Aberdeen, 1993), pp. 49, 60, 113 and 162.

At its simplest, moral sympathy involves being moved to alleviate the suffering of another on account of the pain one feels on that person's behalf. This extends to other, more literary and more nebulous manifestations, however: the sympathetic response could be used to drive home a moral or ethical point; or, more generally still, the text of Sensibility is a celebration of the capacity for benevolent emotional response, a flexing of the sympathetic muscles (and as such is continually on the verge of toppling into self-indulgence). *Ossian* concerns itself with all three of these orders, the first of which is exemplified by the conclusion to "Oina-morul". At the end of a tale of heroic adventuring Ossian discovers that the eponymous heroine he has rescued and been awarded as a prize in fact loves the one from whom Ossian has "rescued" her. Ossian's response is immediate:

> Soft voice of the streamy isle, why dost thou mourn by night? The race of daring Trenmor are not the dark in soul. Thou shalt not wander, by streams unknown, blue-eyed Oina-morul.—Within this bosom is a voice; it comes not to other ears: it bids Ossian hear the hapless, in their hour of woe (p. 324)

Ossian's reaction displays all the positive virtues of the man of feeling, motivated to do good by the dictates of an innate moral sense responding to an image of virtue in distress. Heroically, Ossian proves himself flexible and imaginative in his brief as the upholder of the name of the race of Trenmor. Such moments serve to demonstrate the justice of Dwyer's observation that 'while "vulgar readers might be attracted initially by the martial and the marvellous characteristics of the epic genre, Macpherson obviously wants their attention to be held by its sentimental and moral validity' (1991, p. 196), or of deGategno's belief that the 'essence' of *Ossian* is often 'not political accomplishment but an emotional test of faith' (deGategno (1989), p. 71: see also, p. 55). But these comments, as they stand, are insufficient given that they, particularly Dwyer's, imply that the two ethical orders can work on parallel levels when in fact they needs must interact and impact on each other: it is, I would argue symptomatic of the clash between traditional heroism and Sentiment in *Ossian* that this most positive expression of the latter involves an interrogation of the former. In "Oina-morul" fighting is not only not enough but positively counter-productive. Ossian is admired as man of moral sentiment, but with that admiration comes the acknowledgement that the martial side of the story is redundant, absurdly pointless; that things have turned out for

the best not because of but despite the conventional heroic strivings of Ossian. As we shall see, the re-prioritisation of heroism leaves those in martial heroic poems nowhere, their actions of no relevance to the new moral system.[29]

However, *Ossian* is more generally involved with the second and third orders of sympathy identified above, interests which cohere within the doctrine of 'the joy of grief'. *Ossian* presents both a text of the Age of Sensibility and an age of sensibility in the text: the society of the eighteenth century which values sympathetic tears is offered a precedent for itself in the Celtic past.[30] These features are manifest as early as *Fingal* I. The first inset story offered here is related to Cuchullin as an explanation of the absence of various Irish heroes and recalls a typically murderous Ossianic *ménage à trois* in which the chief's 'friends in battle' die not exactly as Cuchullin envisaged 'striving in the battle of heroes' but in fighting amongst themselves (p. 57). This is not an auspicious start to Cuchullin's defence of his homeland, and the self-destructive trigger-happiness of the Irish heroes has ominous undertones in the context of the decision at hand, whether to fight or wait for reinforcement from Fingal. There is however, nothing self-conscious about this episode, its reflective emotional impact directed at the reader of the poem and not its characters (although there is an ironic lesson in there somewhere if only they could hear it). An inconclusive battle follows, after which Cuchullin lays out his idea of a good evening's entertainment:

> Carril, raise thy voice on high, and tell the deeds of other times. Send thou the night away in song; and give the joy of grief. For many heroes and maids of love have moved on Innis-fail. And lovely are the songs of woe that are heard on Albion's rocks; when the noise of the chace is over, and the streams of Cona answer to the voice of Ossian. (p. 61)

Cuchullin is in effect asking for the sort of entertainment offered by the reader who picks up *Ossian*. This is the first example of the 'joy of grief' expression (at least until Macpherson's re-ordering of the poems for the 1773 edition dropped *Fingal* down the running-order), and it is used within the context of a communal bonding experience

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[29] This prioritisation is shared by *Ossian* with the novel of Sentiment. See R.F.Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (London, 1974), p. 119.

[30] the cultural function of Ossian as mythic text in this sense is beyond our remit here. See Dwyer, 'The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the *Poems of Ossian*' in Gaskill (1991, ed.), pp. 164–99, and John Greenway, 'The Gateway to Innocence: Ossian and the Nordic Bard as Myth', *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, 4 (1974), 161–70.

which strengthens the attachments between the men, and between the men and the area they are engaged in defending against an invading army of superior numbers.[31] By way of a footnote, Macpherson flags up the ethical dimension to Carril's story: the tale of Cairbar and Grudar is 'introduced with propriety' since in dealing with men who 'tho' enemies before, fought *side by side* in the war' it offers a model to Calmar and Connal, two of Cuchullin's feuding captains (p, 424, n. 95). This is an example of what John Dwyer sees as the function of 'the joy of grief':

> moral melancholy was a precise ethical tool. Its purpose was neither self-indulgence not a retreat from the active duties of life. It was a literary device for cooling the often overheated human ego and stimulating a reflection which was simultaneously social and ethical. (Dwyer (1991), p. 182)

But as it stands there is nothing melancholy about Carril's story, which relies on the subsequent return to hostilities of Cairbar and Grudar – the failure of the reconciliatory model it is being evoked to advocate – for it to become a song of woe and to have its ethical message enshrined within an emotional appeal. This sympathetic and narrative economy is of central importance, and is discussed at length later in this chapter.

Within the Sentimental scheme, for grief to have validity as a moral educator it is necessary to distinguish the right sort of grief, in terms of both timing and style. In the above quotation Cuchullin is explicit that the 'songs of woe' are lovely 'when the noise of the chace is over' and more than merely contrasting sounds he is making a point about priorities. Ossianic heroes seem clear in their own minds that the joy of grief is to be enjoyed "out of office hours" (although as we have seen its purpose is far from recreational), as Ossian's response to the death of Oscar illustrates:

> Why, Fillan, didst thou speak of Oscar, to call forth my sigh? I must forget the warrior, till the storm is rolled away. Sadness ought not to dwell in danger, nor the tear in the eye of war. Our fathers forgot their fallen sons, till the noise of arms was past. Then sorrow returned to the tomb, and the song of bards arose. (*Temora* II, p. 237)

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[31] Cf. Ernest Renan's assertion that 'where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort' ('What is a Nation?' transl. by Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi Bhabha (London, 1990), pp. 8–21, p. 19). See also Todd (1986), p. 83 for Sentimental exchange in Rousseau-ean terms as 'emotional public rituals [...] which would serve to unite the participants'.

While this seems unproblematic, this formulation includes an assumption about the sentimental which suggests that it is somehow alien to the practical, a paradox whereby acute sensibility renders one incapable of exercising the powers it should inform.[32]

Self-control is, as we saw in the previous section on politeness, a key concept within the sympathetic exchange. Smith saw the sympathetic grief of the impartial observer as a painful thing, which explains the willingness of that observer to alleviate the suffering it is a response to. If benevolence is to an extent self-interested, however, this leaves open the possibility that one might find it easier to remove oneself from the scene of suffering than to do anything about it. Equally, control was necessary by the sufferer of misfortune since, as we might have it today, it is hard to feel sorry for those we suspect of making a good job of feeling sorry for themselves. Thus in the above quotation, Ossian echoes his own narrative comments and a speech of his father at the end of the previous book which suggest that not only timing but style is important:

> The night would have descended in sorrow, and morning returned in the shadow of grief: our chiefs would have stood like cold dropping rocks on Moi-lena, and have forgot the war, did not the king disperse his grief, and raise his mighty voice. The chiefs, as new-wakened from dreams, lift up their heads around.
>
> How long on Moi-lena shall we weep; or pour our tears in Ullin? The mighty will not return. Oscar shall not rise in his strength. The valiant must fall one day, and be no more known on his hills.—Where are our fathers, O warriors! the chiefs of the times of old? They have set like stars that have shone, we only hear the sound of their praise. But they were renowned in their day, the terror of other times. Thus shall we pass, O warriors, in the day of our fall. Then let us be renowned when we may; and leave our fame behind us, like the last beams of the sun, when he hides his red head in the west.
>
> (*Temora*, I, p. 231)

This speech, combining exquisite pathos with stoic determination, would seem to justify Gibbons' belief that Smith's self-controlled object of utmost sympathy (the model for emulation extolled by *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*) 'could be a character sketch of the Ossianic hero, the new refined expression of Scottish and Celtic sensibility.'[33] We are presented with a clear-eyed acceptance of the eternal facts of human existence as an enabling strategy rather than an enervating one. Such moments help to explain why, for all its apparent Sentimentality, *Ossian* was held in such great esteem by those who had

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[32] For the 'moral defeatism' of Sensibility see Brissenden (1974), p. 126 and *passim*.
[33] Gibbons (1996), p. 282.

no time for what Hazlitt, an *Ossian* fan, called the 'do-me-good, lack-a-daisical, whining make-believe' of the novel of High Sentiment.[34]

To leave it at this is to oversimplify matters however. As the comments of Fingal and Ossian suggest, rather than merely presenting a steady procession of Smithean paragons, *Ossian* also invokes the alternative, constantly worries over the "proper" sort of response:

> thy song is lovely [...] Malvina, but it melts the soul. There is a joy in grief when peace dwells in the breast of the sad. But sorrow wastes the mournful [...] and their days are few. They fall away, like the flower on which the sun looks in his strength after the mildew has passed over it, and its head is heavy with the drops of night.
>
> ("Croma", p. 187)

The distinction between wasting sorrow and gentle melancholy is negotiated – asserted – through a number of poems and is maintained somewhat precariously. Indeed, the fraught nature of *Ossian*'s final position on this question is suggested by the sheer amount of time devoted to refining and worrying over it, and is perhaps symbolised by the similarity of image used signify each: if sorrow is mildew which cankers the flower, then the joy of grief 'is like the shower of spring, when it softens the branch of the oak, and the young leaf lifts its green head' ("Carric-thura", p. 158).[35] Furthermore, to imply a firm distinction between 'grief' and 'sorrow' is to do something the text does not: as the quotation above from *Temora* I demonstrates, Ossian is not beyond using the terms synonymously.

If *Ossian* is "Sentimental epic", then it is to be more properly read as a prolonged attempt at integrating the mechanisms and aims of moral sympathy with the exigencies of the active world, its epic striving manifested as a determination not to be washed away by a tide of misfortune, a determination to cultivate the proper stoic mind set with which to deal with the ever mounting list of catastrophes and casualties. In *Fingal*, matters are relatively unproblematic, as Fingal's response to the death of his son Ryno illustrates:

> And fell the swiftest in the race, said the king, the first to bend the bow? Thou scarce hast been known to me: why did young Ryno fall? But sleep thou softly on Lena, Fingal

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[34] Hazlitt quoted in Todd (1986), p. 145. See also Jefferson's admiration explained in similar terms in deGategno (1991).

[35] Laing believes this crucial Ossianic distinction in "Croma" to be stolen from Mason and Homer (1805, vol. 1, pp. 541–2).

> shall soon behold thee. Soon shall my voice be heard no more, and my footsteps cease to be seen. The bards will tell of Fingal's name; the stones will talk of me. But, Ryno, thou art low indeed, ——thou hast not received thy fame. Ullin, strike the harp for Ryno; tell what the chief would have been. Farewel, thou first in every field. No more shall I direct thy dart. Thou that hast been so fair; I behold thee not—Farewel. (p. 93)

The emphasis is on Ryno, denied the opportunity to prove himself and who can now only exist as what might have been: Fingal's 'low indeed' emphasises the double misfortune of Ryno's early death and the lack of the tales of glory that would have kept his name alive in posterity. While Fingal articulates his sense of the enormity of the loss through reference to himself, the centre of emotional gravity in the passage remains with Ryno: the juxtaposition of Ryno's unheralded demise with Fingal's own great memory in years to come, engrained into the landscape as it were, and the terms of Fingal's injunction to Ullin only heighten our sense of Ryno's misfortune. This is legitimate sympathy of the best kind, full of poignant equanimity and imbued with a delicate, personal sorrow for that which passes too soon. The reader is never asked to sympathise more with Fingal than with Ryno, although the magnanimity of Fingal's grief in turn garners its own sympathetic tribute from the reader. Above all, it is self-controlled, Smith's 'magnanimity amidst great distress [which] appears always so divinely graceful.'[36] Later, Fingal asks for Ryno, only to remember 'but he is not here—my son rests on the bed of death' (p. 103), a moment picked out by Blair as 'worthy of the highest tragic poet' and which he favourably compares to Othello's 'my wife–what wife?' speech (Act V, scene ii). The features Blair picks out for praise here are highly significant: 'with the dignity of a hero' says Blair, Fingal 'corrects himself, and suppresses his rising grief' ("Dissertation", pp. 397–8).[37]

Elsewhere in the poems, Fingal is frequently given to speculating on the transience of human things. In "Carthon" the description of the ruins of Balclutha prompts him thus (in admiring the sentiment we should ignore the unintentional

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[36] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (6th edition, repr. 1869; first edition 1759), p. 45.

[37] This is praise indeed from Blair, given that he thought that *Macbeth* and *Othello* were Shakespeare's masterpieces (*Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 vols, (Edinburgh, 1783), vol.2, p. 524).

symbolism that the ruins of Balclutha are the direct responsibility of Fingal's father):

> Desolate is the dwelling of Moina, silence is in the house of her fathers. – Raise the song of mourning, O bards, over the land of strangers. They have but fallen before us: for, one day, we must fall (p.128)

In the following chapter I will discuss "Carthon" at length and relate the whole of this speech to the overall meaning of the poem. For the moment, I wish only to stress that this is an exercise in sympathetic imagination, the threat of the vision is held within the bonds of aesthetic contemplation (a fact only emphasised by the arrival of the ruins of Balclutha brought to life, so to speak, in the shape of the avenging Carthon) and leads Fingal to a note of defiance: 'let the blast of the desart come! we shall be renowned in our day.' These are leisurely, controlled speculations – a sort of anticipatory 'joy of grief'– and their phlegmatism contrasts strongly with the desperate immediacy with which Fingal contemplates the fall of his line in *Temora*, a poem in which the balance between melancholic reflection and self-possession proves more allusive. The first book of the later epic climaxes in the death of Oscar, a calamity to which Fingal's response is in marked contrast with his reaction to the death of Ryno:

> When shall joy dwell at Selma ? When shall grief depart from Morven ? My sons fall by degrees: Fingal shall be the last of his race. The fame which I have received shall pass away: my age will be without friends. I shall sit a grey cloud in my hall: nor shall I hear the return of a son, in the midst of his sounding arms. (p. 230)

This time the focus of attention is Fingal himself, and we have seen above the results of this self-obsessed sort of grief ('our chiefs would have stood like cold dropping rocks on Moi-lena, and have forgot the war'), a fact symbolised by the way Fingal here echoes the words of the opposing general Hidalla, spoken just previously:

> Fingal will mourn in his age, and see his flying fame. – The steps of his chiefs will cease in Morven: the moss of years shall grow in Selma. (p. 228)

Ossian is not short of hopefuls predicting dire things for Fingal only to fall at the hands of the great king and his heroes. The difference here is that Fingal is in a similar state of mind, his sensibility conspiring against his best interests rather than reinforcing them.

A formal symmetry within *Temora*, dependent upon the death of Oscar at the outset being mirrored by the death of Fillan at the close of the poem, means that, when it comes to the fortunes of his family, things only get worse for Fingal. Fingal's self-control when faced with these calamities is far less assured and is only achieved through

a withholding of his sorrow: as Ossian says, 'the sighs rose, crowding, from his soul; but he concealed his grief' (p.273). When Fingal does retire to give vent to his feelings, the scene, through its elemental imagery, is touched with Sublime terror:

> The grey skirts of mist are rolled around; thither strode the king in his wrath. Distant from the host he always lay, when battle burnt within his soul [...]Unequal were his steps on high, as he shone in the beam of the oak; he was dreadful as the form of the spirit of night, when he cloaths, on hills, his wild gestures with mist, and issuing forth, on the troubled ocean, mounts the car of winds. (p. 273)

Fingal never breaks down, but as he stumbles along the hill-top he is no more the self-assured demi-god who dominated the landscape in *Fingal*, taking both topography and personal grief in his stride. There is little place for the politeness implied in Smith's 'divinely graceful' composure, and the sense of alienation from his people is striking. Instead we have Blair's Sentimental Sublime, the awe and terror with which we glimpse, through the mist and the night, a human spirit grappling with the strongest of emotions and refusing to buckle.[38]

The Sentimental Sublime inheres, in the words of Larry Stewart, in those 'actions, situations, and states of mind which produced a response in the audience similar to that produced by Sublime physical objects'.[39] This broadening of the Sublime horizons is not in itself problematic. Burke had pushed his analysis of what may be considered sublime as far as his empiricism and the iron law of bathos would allow (into the realm of smells, for example), and Blair himself in the *Lectures* generates a whole series of Sublimes: Virgil's 'philosophical' sublimity, Lucan's 'moral' (or 'Sentimental') sublime, Homer's 'sublimity of action', and Milton's 'sublimity of object'.

Yet this moral or sentimental sublime is problematic in as much as it yokes elements which are more usually treated as separate, if not mutually exclusive. Macpherson's own delineation of *Ossian* as containing 'what is beautiful in simplicity, and grand in the sublime' (p. 52) is closer to the eighteenth-century norm, following Burke, of separating the beautiful and the sublime entirely. Or again, when Macpherson comments about *Temora*:

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[38] See Blair, *Lectures*, vol.1, pp. 52–4.

[39] Stewart, 'Ossian in the Polished Age: The Critical Reception of James Macpherson's Ossian' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 1971) p. 225.

> The transition from the pathetic to the sublime is easy and natural. Till the mind is opened, by the first, it scarcely can have an adequate comprehension of the second. The soft and affecting scenes of the seventh book form a sort of contrast to, and subsequently heighten, the features of the more grand and terrible images of the eighth.
> (p. 522, n. 1)

This puts the cart before the horse somewhat, if Samuel Monk's claim that for the Graveyard school of poetry sublime terror was deployed 'to prepare the mind for whatever moralising the poet might chose to indulge in' is to be believed, and puts Macpherson closer to Monk's conception of the sublime in the Gothic novel, where it exists for its own sake.[40] Nevertheless, this reversal of polarisation within the relationship between the 'sublime' and 'pathetic' does nothing to disrupt the firm antithetical distinction between the 'soft and effecting' and the 'grand and terrible'. Larry Stewart, in his 'Ossian, Burke, and the "Joy of Grief"', points out the congruencies between the Ossianic 'joy of grief' and Burke's thinking particularly in his section on 'Joy and Grief'.[41] In as much as the 'joy of grief' – the Sentimental Sublime – is centrally concerned with the association of pain and pleasure, and contains a doctrinal insistence on the principle of distance (as we have witnessed in the above discussions) this can be seen as broadly justified. Yet the 'joy of grief' is, as we have also seen, 'a precise ethical tool', and as such is not only a useful but a sociable instinct, when Burke had been adamant that usefulness to man is one of the prime factors which count against an object being sublime (second only to clarity as an anathema to terror). Furthermore, Burke makes a prime distinction between the Sublime and Beautiful in terms of the passions of self-preservation (sublime) and those of sociability (beautiful).[42]

In the event, sympathy represents a sort of battleground between the claims of the Sublime and Beautiful within Burke's taxonomy of passions. Sympathy, Burke suggested, 'may either partake of the nature of those which regard self-preservation, and turning upon pain may be a source of the Sublime; or it may turn upon ideas of pleasure' and therefore be of the order of the 'social affections' (I, xiii, p. 45). So sympathy may go either way, but in his discussion of grief Burke had been clear that

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[40] Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII–Century England* (Ann Arbor, 1960), p. 90.

[41] Stewart, *English Language Notes*, 15, 1 (September, 1977), 29–33.

grief was not of the order of positive pain, since the person who grieves 'suffers his passion to grow upon him; he indulges it, he loves it: but this never happens in the case of actual pain' (I, v, p. 37). Add this to the social function inherent in the 'joy of grief' and we see that the Sentimental Sublime exists if not as a contradiction in terms, then as a substantive category in its own right.

Of course, given that there is no incontrovertible evidence to prove that Macpherson was directly influenced by Burke, Stewart may just be misguided in applying one to the other. However, Price suggests that Burke may have been a source for Blair's theories (1991, p. 113), and certainly in the *Lectures* (which although not published until 1783 were, said Blair, substantially the same as those he had been giving since 1759) Blair is fulsome in his acknowledgement of Burke's 'several ingenious and original thoughts upon' the sublime (I, p. 55). Equally, the review of *Fingal* in the *Annual Register* (May, 1762), almost certainly written by Burke himself, picks out the sublime features of the volume.[43] In the absence of a firm link the differences and muddling of categories in *Ossian* may cast little light on Burke himself, but I think the general congruence between Blair, Macpherson and Burke's thought, something which is unlikely to have been independently derived, means that we can legitimately discuss the first two in terms of the third. Such discussion also allows us a handle – if nothing more – on the complicated prism of Sentiment, Sublime and Sociability operating in *Ossian*, and on the irreconcilable elements of Macpherson's project.

The Sentimental Sublime can be seen in the light of an attempt to reinvest the Sentimental, a polite, feminine and, it was feared, feminising discourse with masculine virtues via the heavily masculine-gendered medium of the Sublime. In Tom Furniss' words, the sublime provides the 'aesthetic means through which bourgeois thought establishes itself, in the face of the charges of luxury brought against it by traditional writers, as the locus of individual effort and virtue'.[44] Thus an insistence on Stoic self-control, the object of this emotion, is not merely a procedural concern to guarantee that

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[42] *Enquiry*, pp. 65–6, p. 44.

[43] See Price (1991), p. 113; Stewart (1971), pp. 68–75. I am grateful to Howard Gaskill for the information that Burke, as editor, was also writing the literary reviews for the *Register* at this time.

[44] Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 34.

the instinct for self-preservation does not kick the wrong way, but is an attempt to gain admittance into the rhetoric of Polite Sensibility for seemingly redundant manly virtues. At the same time, with its association with the highest forms of politeness, stoic heroism is reconditioned for the eighteenth century. A measure of Scottish interest in the cultivation of a set of mental attitudes which allow one to integrate oneself with some higher order is provided by noting the appearance of Moore and Hutcheson's translation of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* (1751), and by the reprint in 1759 in the *Scots Magazine* of Winckleman's *Study of the Sculpture of Antiquity*, a study of Sublime Stoic heroism.[45] In the same way Blair talks of the Sublime moral qualities as those 'high and great virtues' which require awesome effort and 'turn upon dangers and sufferings', in short the civic virtues of 'heroism, magnanimity, contempt of pleasures, and contempt of death' (1783, vol.1, pp. 87–8). Here then, and not in the discreet presentation of violence, would we appear to see a more secure integration of ancient and modern value systems, a 'cultural seam between two ethical domains' (Dwyer (1991), p. 169). However, closer consultation with the poems suggests that this too is a false promise.

Fingal eventually comes down from his hilltop to face Cathmor in a shroud of Sublime splendour. I quote at length to convey the mood of the scene:

> silent shone to the morning the ridges of Morven's host, as each warrior looked up from his helmet towards the hill of the king; the cloud-covered hill of Fingal, where he strode, in the rolling of mist. At times is the hero seen, greatly dim in all his arms. From thought to thought rolled the war, along his mighty soul.
>
> Now is the coming forth of the king.—First appeared the sword of Luno; the spear half issuing from a cloud, the shield still dim in mist. 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. The waves sport, unwieldly, round, with all their backs of foam. (*Temora*, VIII, p. 287)

The first paragraph effectively conveys both the expectancy of the waiting army and the brooding majesty of Fingal, and emphasises the distance between the great leader, alone in his grief, and his people. This separateness is confirmed in the second paragraph by the painstaking description of when exactly Fingal becomes not visible but recognisable

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[45] I am grateful here to Dr. Nicholas Phillipson.

to his army: neither his sword nor his spear nor his shield identify him, only his physical presence is enough to raise the shouts of his men. Immediately, this fulfilment is further undercut by the comparison of Fingal to a spirit, whom the (ubiquitous and perennially conveniently passing) traveller only 'thinks he dimly sees', which effectively plays down the concrete sense of unity the arrival of Fingal provokes.

This sense of mystery and separateness is significant in the context of Fingal's otherwise exemplary behaviour in reacting to the death of Fillan, and allows us to unpack Dwyer's suggestive observation that 'Ossian is an eighteenth-century ideal type – the "man of feeling"', and his distinction between Fingal and Ossian: where 'Fingal is awesome, he is amiable', where 'the reader is given many opportunities to get to know Ossian' but 'may never know the distant and solitary Fingal' (1991, p. 187). Ossian, in other words, is Sentimental, Fingal Sublime. Yet *Ossian* posits the Sentimental Sublime as the 'ideal type', and in these terms Ossian comes off particularly badly. If Fingal represents a Smithean ideal, albeit one he struggles to maintain, Ossian offers something more in the line of a certain Duke of Biron whom Smith uses to highlight the worst sort of response to misfortune.[46] In the main Ossian (or at least the old, narrating Ossian) is solipsistic, over-dramatic and makes no attempt at self-control. He continually emphasises his own position, and his advice to Malvina that 'sorrow wastes the mournful [...] and their days are few' is undercut by his subsequent actions and general practice. The classic turn within his thought towards the demand for recognition and pity ('give lovely maid to me thy tears' as he puts it [p. 87]) alienates him from Smith's ideal. The ultimate proof of this, and a reciprocating irony, of course, is the existence of the poems themselves: if Ossian was not given to outbursts of histrionic grief and nostalgia, if he could in Blair's phrase, suppress his rising grief, then there would be no *Poems of Ossian*.

This qualification makes Dwyer's comment all the more significant, if inadvertently so, since it demonstrates how the gearing of the text (he is right to distinguish Ossian and Fingal in this way) runs counter to the theoretical model. Being Sublime in his sentiment Fingal can be no other than a forbidding and distant character

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[46] On the scaffold 'the intrepid Duke' disgraced himself in his weeping 'when he beheld the state to which he was fallen, and remembered the favour and glory from which his own rashness had so unfortunately thrown him' (Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 47).

compared to his son, the point being that *Ossian*, to adopt John Mullan's observation about Smith's doctrine of the impartial and stoically self-possessed observer, pushes 'the discourse of moral philosophy far enough for it to begin to *fail* to explain how members of a society were actually bound together.'[47] Investing the Sentimental with Sublimity needs must distance it from the sociable, since 'to speak of a habitual or fashionable sublime [...] is to suggest a certain logical difficulty' given that 'a major dilemma of the sublime is that of preserving its *difference* from the custom, habit, and fashion [the preserve of the beautiful] which are continually launching insidious assimilative forays upon it.'[48] In short, the price Fingal pays for being the paragon of stoic sentimental virtue is divorce from the social sphere his behaviour is intended as a model for. Again this Sentimental insight is not restricted to *Ossian*: Mullan has pointed out that the result of Richardson's efforts at the 'reconciling of sensibility to power' in *Sir Charles Grandison* is a hero who is a 'strangely absent apparition, his desires ever "secret"'.[49]

The overt aims of the Sentimental text are, then, to provide the reader, and often the characters, with scenes and stories of pathos upon which to exercise their capacities for moral sympathy in the correct fashion, and within those scenes and characters to offer carefully delineated versions of the proper response. These aims constitute a threat to the epic tone of *Ossian* in as much as they necessitate a morbid concentration on the unfortunate, on grief, and shift the locus of heroism moved from scenes of battle to scenes of woe. Furthermore, the model of virtue which replaces outright warring within this system, the Sentimental Sublime, is something of a hollow substitute for confident heroism. Frances Ferguson has described the Sublime as a whole as at times resembling 'a null set, or a category of experience that can be spoken of only elegiacally' (p. 47), a phrase which applies with a degree of force to its Sentimental variations, as witnessed in *Ossian* and captures the diffuseness of *Ossian*'s ideals.

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[47] John Mullan, 'The Language of Sentiment: Hume, Smith, and Henry Mackenzie' in *The History of Scottish Literature Vol. 2 1660–1800*, ed. by Andrew Hook (Aberdeen, 1987), pp. 273–89 (p. 285).

[48] Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York and London, 1992), pp. 46–7.

This is far from the end of the story, however, since the methods used to achieve these aims by the sentimental text also contribute to the overall subversion of the formal and thematic certainties of the high epic. The second half of the chapter thus explores the dynamics and emotional economy of the Sentimental *Ossian* in order to understand further the at times fraught relationship between Macpherson's poems and their epic models.

IV.

The Sentimental Technique.

> *a bunch of little episodes, put together without art, and of no importance on the whole. Henry Mackenzie,* The Man of Feeling *(1771).*

Two abiding principles in the construction of the Sentimental text are fragmentation and repetition, and since Northrop Frye's seminal essay on the Age of Sensibility, they have been the shared principles that have yoked *Ossian* to the Sentimental movement.[50] However, little effort has been made to analyse the forms and effects of *Ossian*'s fragmentation in any depth.

In one sense fragmented and repetitive narratives are pragmatic methods deployed in order to bring about the moral ends discussed in the previous section: fragmentation allows the author 'to depict pathetic scenes without having to worry unduly about the potential distractions of plot' while the repetition of similar situations for the same effect ensures that the emotional tenor remains constant.[51] By downgrading aspects such as plot and character, the text intensifies these effects by

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[49] John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1988), p. 86, p. 83.

[50] See Northrop Frye, 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility', *English Literary History*, 23 (1956), 144–53; Dwyer (1991); Todd (1986); and most recently two articles in the collection *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations*, ed. by Fiona Stafford and Howard Gaskill (Amsterdam, 1998): Tom Keymer's 'Narratives of Loss: The *Poems of Ossian* and *Tristram Shandy*' (pp.79–96) and Susan Manning's 'Henry Mackenzie and Ossian: Or, The Emotional Value of Asterisks' (pp.136–52).

[51] Dwyer (1991), p. 184. cf. 'there are hiatuses, fragmentations, and, especially, repetitions, not in order to state moral truth or to impress a psychological trait, but simply to highlight and intensify an emotional effect' (Todd, p. 92). Of course this comment makes a distinction between moral truth and emotion which Sentimentalism did not recognise.

demanding its own reading strategy: denied 'an identifying fantasy with a character or an author', or indeed many meaningful and clear events to act as signposts, the reader 'must feel his way by sensing the emotional atmosphere of the piece'.[52] *Ossian* is riddled with different types of fragmentation (somewhat paradoxically perhaps, given that it represents poetry reconstructed from fragments), and identifying and analysing them is a valuable exercise in charting of the fate of the heroic in *Ossian*, shading as they do out from pragmatic concerns to reveal a depth signification in their own right.

Firstly we are presented with discontinuity on the macro-scale, a striking example of the paradoxical fact that the closer wholeness is approximated, the more obvious ultimate fragmentation becomes. On the suggestion of Lord Kames, Macpherson rearranged the ordering of *Ossian* for the new edition of 1773, proclaiming that 'one of the chief improvements, on [sic] this edition, is the care taken, in arranging the poems in the order of time; so as to form a kind of history of the age to which they relate' (p. 412).[53] As I suggested earlier, there existed a drift within the original volumes, a vague but visible outline of a larger story (for example in the grouping of "The Death of Cuchullin", "Dar–thula" and the first book of *Temora* together in the *Fingal* volume). Indeed, Macpherson tells us in the *Temora* dissertation that he had omitted a number of poems from the first volume so as 'they might not break in upon that thread of connection, which subsists in the lesser compositions, subjoined to *Fingal*' (p. 215). This thread was, if Macpherson is to be believed, reinforced by the re-ordering to create a fragmentary meta-narrative, cohesive in charting the progression and close of the reign of Fingal.

This rearrangement has been viewed in two ways. Firstly (and this is undoubtedly true) the reordering had the effect of whetting readers' appetites on non-epic poems, rather than plunging them into the more difficult *Fingal* immediately. Secondly, Macpherson's mention of history leads one to suppose that the rearrangement reflects Macpherson's growing interest and efforts in the field of historiography, and *Ossian*'s status as textual source within the British historiography he erected in the 1770s. *Ossian*'s relationship with Macpherson's later antiquarian inquiries will be discussed in chapter four, for now I wish to concentrate on exactly

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[52] Todd (1986), p. 6; deGategno (1989), p. 65.

what 'kind of history' the 1773 *Ossian* offers (for, as detractors never tire from pointing out, Macpherson acknowledged few factual restraints when it came to the production of *Ossian*). It is immediately striking that this 'kind of history' is not strung together in any particular and recognisable chronology in the way we might expect. We should of course be careful not to minimise the differences of historiographical approach between the eighteenth century and our own, but we might nevertheless expect some sort of chronological ordering. After all, Macpherson's own comment that care had been taken in the arrangement leads us far from expecting the seemingly random organisation of the poems we in fact encounter. Certain poems are indeed pushed up the running order (for example "Comala" and "Cath-Loda", the only poems which deal directly with Fingal's youth), but such tidying is more than compensated for by the inversion and separation of poems which had originally been placed together. For example, in the *Fingal* volume "Lathmon" and "Oithóna" are placed consecutively, presumably on the grounds that the events of the latter are dependent on the events subsequent to the former (as Macpherson himself points out [p. 469 n. 1]). In 1773 they are not only separated by eight poems (including the six-book epic *Fingal*) but are inverted in order. Such goings-on moved the anonymous editor of a 1792 edition of the *Works* to comment on Macpherson's claim for historical re-ordering 'that there is not, in the English language, a paragraph in more direct opposition to truth', and to restore the 1765 ordering of the poems.[54]

Such features may just be mistakes, of course, oversights which reflect the growing disillusionment with *Ossian* on Macpherson's part that some have noted in the 1773 edition. Yet it seems unlikely that anyone with enough commitment to undertake a revised edition (and in many respects the 1773 edition represents painstaking revision) would have made such errors out of a lack of interest. A more fruitful way of looking at this inconsistency is Larry Stewart's claim that the 1773 rearrangement 'supplies a framework in which the poetry as a whole becomes, in one sense, a single tale providing the joy of grief' and that each poem owes its particular place to, if anything, its contribution to a gradually darkening emotional history of Fingal's time (Stewart

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[53] For Kames' input see Saunders (1894), p. 239.

[54] Anonymous preface, p. vi, in *James Macpherson: Ossian's Fingal 1792*, introduced by Jonathan Wordsworth [Poole, 1996]).

(1977), p. 32). In the absence of the odd "newly discovered" linking poem, the 1773 'kind of history' is no more – indeed is substantially less – logically coherent than its predecessor. The Ossianic grand narrative, its 'kind of history' is, as it were, a sort of a Sentimental Journey through the history of ancient Caledonia, and the strange contradictions between intention and action are symptomatic of a wider creative tension within the Sentimental text between a sense of fragmentation and a sense of order.

Within the *Temora* volume the use of physical fragmentation becomes bolder as gaps are imagined not merely between poems but within them. The first duan of "Cath–loda" and "Colna–dona" are examples of poems where the text is fissured with actual breaks. This emphasis on incompleteness within the Sentimental Text represents more than just a convenient way of avoiding plot distractions, it also draws attention to the fact that texts are 'physical objects that can be subverted, mutilated or lost': 'stories, fictions or books are revealed to be not mind-possessing alternative worlds but simply vulnerable physical objects, fragments of experience to be buffeted about like the sensibility of the sentimentalist, "the sport of contingencies"' (Todd (1986), pp. 104–5). As Tom Keymer has recently put it, 'fragmentation may incidentally provide means of freezing narrative progress to highlight feeling, but it serves more centrally as a presiding metaphor for the sense of disintegration and loss so pervasive [in *Ossian*]'.[55] Fragmentation of this sort also implies deeper meaning, a sense of cultural alienation, a failure of the tradition to keep its integrity. Although it should be noted that within that failure there also exists the counter 'myth of survival in destruction':

> the artefact represents not only the traces of a larger cultural world but also the tragic trials and triumphant survivals of its history. Made of transient stuff, it survives only brokenly, to serve as a reminder of all that has been effaced or swept away. Yet the fact that it has survived at all [...] suggests the power of culture to endure its vicissitudes with something of itself still intact.[56]

The two epic poems demand a more conventionally unified structure and therefore avoid the more daring physical techniques of textual lacunae. Even here, however, we must confront Macpherson's now almost completely ignored insistence on

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[55] Keymer (1998), p.87. See also Leo Braudy, 'The Form of the Sentimental Novel' *Novel*, 7 no.1(1974), 5–13.

[56] Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, 1997), p. 8, p. 28.

the generic or poetic fragmentation of the text and the careful way in which he observes differences in the type of poetry used in the original: lyric, narrative, and a dramatic form akin to recitative (or as Laing put it, an 'absurd admixture of the past and the present, of epic, lyric, and dramatic poetry' [1805, I, p. 384]). Three times in *Temora V*, for example, (notes 2, 39, and 52) Macpherson talks of the changing nature of the original, a sudden burst of 'lyric measure' (n.2), the beauty of which cannot be rendered in translation (n. 39). The dramatic analogy is particularly revealing in its emphasis on differing priorities of composition:

> I have in a proceeding note, observed that the abrupt manner of Ossian partakes much of the nature of the Drama. The opening of [*Temora* VI] is a confirmation of the justness of this observation. Instead of a long detail of circumstances delivered by the poet himself, about the descent of Cathmor from the hill [...], he puts the narration in the mouth of Fingal. The relation acquires importance from the character of the speaker [...] The apostrophes which are crowded on one another, are expressive of the perturbation of Fingal's soul (pp. 508–9, n. 1)

The dramatic form thus suits two purposes. Firstly it provides an alibi for 'the abrupt manner' of the narrative, and secondly it invests the disjointed narrative with further emotional loading. Drama exists as a shadowy term of reference within the Ossianic aesthetic universe. Malcolm Laing identified borrowings from 14 of Shakespeare's plays, along with ones from the eighteenth-century dramatists Home, Congreve, Addison, Mason and Mallet. Furthermore, the description of early lyric tragedy given by Hugh Blair offers a further suggestive point of contact. Aeschylus, says Blair, is 'bold, nervous, and animated; but very obscure and difficult to read', his plays full of 'fire and elevation' while Sophocles, 'the most masterly of the Greeks', is the 'most just and sublime in his sentiments' (*Lectures*, 46, vol. 2, pp. 515–6). Overall, tragedy has according to Blair a 'force and dignity' of a different order to the 'uniform dignity of Epic' and more in keeping with 'that briskness and ease, which is suited to the freedom of dialogue, and the fluctuations of passion' (*ibid*, p. 513). Within the *Poems of Ossian* drama functions as an aesthetic safety valve, a way of containing the conflicting demands of the sublime and the pathetic for spontaneity and discontinuity on the one hand with those of neo-classical formalism for rigour and unity on the other. It also

suggests the strain placed on that formalism in an age marked by 'a growing taste for mixed genres'.[57]

The least interesting thing to say about Macpherson's insistence on generic heterogeneity is that it has the effect of providing an alibi for Macpherson's artistry, pre-empting negative criticism by intimidating the reader with an unseen and aesthetically complicated and alien original. Unfortunately, this has tended to be the only thing said on the subject as well, and two further points of importance need to be made. Firstly, Macpherson's conception of a literary product understood by formal criticism only as an amalgam of retrospectively formulated genres centres his thinking within the complex primitivism represented by Blair. In his *Lectures* Blair ties the 'separation of the different literary provinces from each other' to the 'separation of the different Arts and Professions of Civil Life' (38, vol. 2, p. 321–2). In the following chapter I shall discuss this separation of history and poetry as conceived by this model, but in the present case I want to note that Blair sees the primeval literary text as one in which we can 'easily discern the seeds and beginnings of genres' although they are as yet to be 'properly distinguished or separated' and as such may be a combination of the central literary genres, for Blair the ode, the elegy, the epic and the tragic or dramatic form (*ibid.*, p. 321). *Ossian* fits this generic heterogeneity perfectly, Macpherson presenting the unseen Gaelic originals as a pre-Babelian ur-genre, more ancient even than the primary epics of Homer, even if its more unruly elements are relegated to the footnotes. We are also being offered an insight into *Ossian*'s (and Blair's) importance for the Romantic sensibility, a legitimisation of generic heterogeneity and a blow against the 'frigid and absurd ideas' of neo-classical theory's rigorous partitions (*Lectures*, II, p.407).

Secondly, Macpherson's image of the Ossianic text could be seen as advocating a different set of reading priorities – ones attending to the ear and the heart more than to the eye or the intellect – and with that in mind he is signifying absence and dissatisfaction. Thus impossibility of the (any) text to convey its emotional meaning completely is symbolised by the failure of neo-classical English forms to encapsulate Macpherson's Gaelic sources. That words fail to describe experience and emotion

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[57] Steve Rizza, 'A Bulky and Foolish Treatise? Hugh Blair's "Critical Dissertation"

satisfactorily, that 'the heart speaks (and needs) a different kind of language' is a suspicion common amongst Sentimental writers in a way that goes beyond commonplace truism.[58] John Mullan has noted that translation is invoked as a metaphor throughout *Tristram Shandy* for the representation of 'the natural articulacy of feeling' in words, the point being that 'Sterne concedes that sentiment can only be glimpsed across the distance between a translator and an "original"' (1988, p. 160). *Ossian* offers, as it were, a literal version of this metaphor: oral Gaelic, a "naturally poetic language", and coincidentally the medium of unmediated feeling, is translated into written English in a way analogous to that by which Tristram translates feeling mediated by non-verbal gesture into words.[59] And in both cases there is a stress on how insufficient the translation process is. Thus for Keymer both Sterne and Macpherson create the narratives of lost pasts, in Sterne's case personal, in Macpherson's cultural: words, says Keymer, 'are rarely more than gloomy acknowledgements of separation from what they describe' (1998, p.89). As such, even Macpherson's sometimes rather priggish sounding assertions that modern tastes are not suited to the elegances of Gaelic take on a deeper and more poignant meaning, mirroring the failure of a literary and personal agenda.

The epics are fissured with discontinuities in other ways as well. Rather than privileging a single continuous narrative line, Macpherson swamps his main narratives with unconnected episodes and digressions. There is of course nothing intrinsic in the fragmentary style to negate the triumphalist epic. Indeed 'paratactic bluntness' is the major constructive principle in heroic poems such as the *Chanson de Roland*, a poem whose narrative, in common with that of early medieval narrative in general, 'strings independent pictures together like beads'.[60] However, there is something more fundamentally deflatory about *Ossian*'s polyphonic narrative of indirection which

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Reconsidered', in Gaskill (ed), 1991, pp. 129–146, p. 144.

[58] Jerome MacGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford, 1996), p. 43.

[59] The idea of primitive language as the purveyor of unmediated feeling is a key one within the so-called Primitivist theory. See, for example, the opening paragraphs of Blair's 'Critical Dissertation'.

[60] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask, (Princeton, 1968; first published 1946), pp. p. 101, p. 116.

fragments the story lines of Fingalian triumph.[61] The long middle books of *Temora*, with their endless digressions on the generations of civil war fought over the Irish throne, play on this technique to the extent that it often becomes impossible to tell whether any given event is happening or being related as having happened. It is just such tendencies within this poem which have (and with a degree of justice) led to its reputation for nigh-on unreadability, a charge many have extended to the *Poems* as a whole. Those defending the poems tend to offer the short sharp shock line, maintaining that, in the words of an early guide, the poems are meant to be read 'not connectedly, or long at one time' and for the 'sentiments'.[62] This might rescue the reading experience, but as a reading strategy goes to undermine the continuity of the narrative and only emphasises the generic distance from the conventional heroic.

Narrative and visual fragmentation is married in the *Temora* volume with Macpherson's increasing habit of placing small fragments of other poems on similar themes or involving named characters in footnotes (for example at the end of book three (p. 250–52)): these scraps, 'just now in the hands of the translator' continually demand us to leave the main poem and read a small emotion-packed vignette. On the whole, it is Gaskill's general practice in his 1996 edition to demote these snatches of poems and plot précis with the rest of the glosses to end-notes on the grounds that it allows the reader to 'savour the text without distraction' (p. xxv). However, it should be pointed out (as Gaskill does) that to do so alters the reading experience (in terms of narrative tension undoubtedly for the better) as in the early editions "getting on with the story" was precisely what was being discouraged.

Fingal keeps these wilder tendencies in check. However, the heroic triumph is still punctured by the compulsive digressions which mark the poem, continually distracting our attention with their stories of death and ill-fortune. Gerald Tyson has suggested that interpolated episodes in *Fingal* rather than 'giving the reader a clearer

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[61] Polyphony is term used to describe the multiple non-subordinated narrative lines of the medieval romance. It was first used by C.S.Lewis.

[62] Anon., *A Second Evening's Amusement in a Library: Extracts from Ossian's Poems, with Cursory Observations, etc., etc.* (undated, in National Library of Scotland bound volume of *Ossianiana*, catalogue number H.31.b29 [1-3]). Internal evidence dates the pamphlet to 1823.

understanding of the action's import, [...] serve a largely affective purpose'.[63] Fiona Stafford takes this remark significantly further in observing that 'after repeated digressions of this sort, the story of Fingal's victory is completely lost' (1988, p. 140). These comments make two important points. Firstly, and again, that *Fingal* needs a different reading practice to that of mainstream epic; and secondly that the digressive approach (and the Cuchullin subplot) fundamentally subvert the supposed paradise of Scottish courage and untrammelled action. In short Frye's formulation that 'the aim [of the Sentimental Text] is not concentration of sense but diffusion of sense' (1956, p. 148) can be applied to *Ossian* in such a way as to equate sense with the cumulative narrative and affirmative action of the triumphal heroic poem.

The representation of character in *Ossian* compliments these narrative fragmentations. It was suggested earlier that the Sentimental text is ruthless in its downgrading of character in the search for emotional epiphanies. In one sense this is then just a by-product of the aesthetic prioritisation of the Sentimental – in a short, one hundred word vignette, characters are no more than names – but it can also be more specific and focused.[64] Leaving aside the faceless characters who flit across the consciousness of Ossian and the reader as their tales of woe are related for emotional effect by some bard, the most clear cut examples of disposable characters, characters who literally have no more substance than their names and the story associated with them, are ghosts. Given that Virgil and Homer set entire books in the kingdom of the dead *Ossian* can not be considered unique among epics in its concern with the afterlife. However, ignoring the fact that *everyone* who appears in old Ossian's stories is dead, there are other important differences in the presentation of the preternatural in *Ossian* and his predecessors, as the example of the visitation of Crugal to Connal in *Fingal* II makes clear. The episode seems modelled, with important differences in presentation, on Hector's visit to Aeneas in *Aeneid* II (lines 270-80):

> Dim, and in tears, he stood and stretched his pale hand over the hero.– Faintly he raised his feeble voice, like the gale of the reedy Lego. (p.65)

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[63] '"The Feast of Shells": The Context of James Macpherson's Ossianic Poetry' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Brandeis University, 1969) p. 56. Tyson goes too far, however, in drawing an exclusive distinction between this and Homer's use of 'organic digression' which 'lends variety or amplitude to the plot'. *Ossian* affords many examples of this Homeric technique.

[64] For this point see Simpson (1988), p. 159.

Stressing weakness at every turn (even in the last clause where the more muscular sound of 'gale' is balanced by the long, slow 'reedy') this offers an emaciated version of the moment of Trojan despair. In noting that Crugal 'is on the verge of dissolving into the Highland landscape' Stafford has suggested that this style 'was inherited directly from the *Fragments*, where the lost voices had drifted vaguely in their mountain settings'(1988, p. 1390. But where she sees this as 'peculiarly appropriate' to the earlier work, its 'contribution to the epic was not always beneficial, and all too often uncertainty becomes confusion'(*ibid*). It seems to me that the 'intangible quality' she sees in the ghostly figures and the effects they have on the 'so-called heroic poem' is in accord with the thinly etched characters deployed by the Sentimental text to convey emotional messages. Macpherson continually creates a diffused air around his heroes through ghosts conveying mood rather than information. In this context it is significant that, unlike the ghost of Hector, Crugal goes unheeded – indeed Cuchullin uses the spirit's weakness as an argument against it: the ghost is a 'dim phantom of the wind', the 'feeble son of the wind' (p.66), and he uses much the same reasoning against the ghost of Calmar in "The Death of Cuchullin" (see page 137). However, purely in terms of the overall effect of such an 'intangible' supernatural world, it becomes clear that these shards of characters, echoes of lost battles, work in the same way as the compulsive digressions that mark the poem, continually distracting our attention and inviting our pity with their stories of death and ill-fortune.

It is not, however, just that characters are one or two dimensional. Occasionally, characters have almost a super-abundance of traits and characterisation seems weak because it is inconsistent rather than non-existent. While it would be, from a generic point of view, wrong to expect there to be too much by the way of psychological grounding to *Ossian*'s figures, we might yet anticipate a certain internal, if albeit narrative-driven, consistency. As it is, however, characterisation is driven less by the plot than by the dictates – and emotional demands – of any particular scene. Of characters who change to fit the moment and needs of the pathetic drive of the text, the Cuchullin of *Fingal* provides an early if limited example. An unreconstructed epic hero at the opening of the poem, Cuchullin, in committing himself to battle against overwhelming odds (but only after the requisite epic war council), demonstrates that

fame through death is his ultimate aim: 'we shall fight [...] and die in the battle of heroes' he tells Connal (p. 66). It seems significant in the light of this that, by the time battle is joined, in a revealing image Ossian pictures Cuchullin as already dead ('the chief moves before in arms, like an angry ghost before a cloud', p. 67). However, the arrival of Fingal denies Cuchullin the personal Thermopylae he engineers for himself, as Swaran turns his attentions to a more pressing foe:

> bending, weeping, sad, and slow, and dragging his long spear behind, Cuchullin sunk in Cromla's wood, and mourned his fallen friends. He feared the face of Fingal, who was wont to greet him from the fields of renown. (p. 75-6)

In the event, this proves only a minor inconvenience for Cuchullin as he overcomes the discomfort of not dying gloriously in battle by pretending to be dead for much of the rest of the poem ('– And thou, white-bosom'd Bragela mourn over the fall of my fame; for vanquished, I will never return to thee, thou sun-beam of Dunscaich', as he puts it on page 88). From this point on Cuchullin becomes, as Josef Bysveen puts it, 'a new type of heroic sentimentality, in the image of wretched, fallen greatness, and the deplorable self-pity typical of wounded pride and ruined fame, now bereft of proud, heroic defiance'.[65] In undergoing this character transplant, Cuchullin becomes the rain on Fingal's parade, a figure of 'sadness, sorrow and shame' qualifying his ally's victory with his own disgrace. Every time the story of Fingal's campaign threatens to become too upbeat we are offered a melancholy news flash from Cuchullin's cave, a vignette of 'fallen greatness'.

If Cuchullin was our only example of such a tendency within *Ossian* it would seem unwise to make too much of it. Cuchullin would appear to function differently in the second half of the poem, to effect a transformation from 'defiant hero-god' into 'tender-hearted man' (deGategno(1989), p. 47), but in as much as Cuchullin is as extreme in his grief as he was in his bellicosity he is arguably very much the same man. At the same time, we should be beware that it is verging on normative heroic behaviour to believe yourself to be 'no more' once your reputation has been tarnished. [66] However, despite the long shadow Cuchullin casts over the tale of Fingal's triumph, he

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[65] Josef Bysveen, *Epic Tradition and Innovation in James Macpherson's Fingal* (Uppsala, 1982), p.71.

is no more than a prototype compared to the most complete example of a character reconstituted to mirror the demands of the text, Fingal himself as we see him in *Temora.*

In this tale of 'last things' the great king is reconfigured from what has gone before (both in what he says and what others say about him) and, along with that reconfiguration, comes the final fracture of the epic/heroic ethos. Within the legendary tradition the death of Oscar at Gabhra spells doom for the *fianna* – indeed only those absent on the day survived the battle. In *Temora* the battle is covered in the first of eight books. Yet to suggest that Oscar's death therefore becomes a temporary setback ignores the fact that his loss – and the response of others to it – sets the tone for a poem redolent with *götterdämmerung.* We have seen in the previous section how Fingal's initial response to his grandson's death threatens his victory and how he divorces triumph in this war from his long-term success, with the implication that whatever happens in Ireland he is still just as likely to be 'the last of his race'. In mourning the passing of Oscar, characters for the first time in *Ossian* contemplate the reality of what his death means, are not satisfied to say, as Cuchullin did in *Fingal*, 'Peace to the souls of the heroes; their deeds were great in danger' (p. 58).

It is not just that characters suddenly have a more responsible attitude towards death, however. Chronic fear of failure and a loss of confidence appear to become endemic to the characters of *Temora*, contributing much to the twilight of the gods feel. In no one is this clearer than in Fingal himself: his new-found self-doubt climaxes in book VIII with a luke-warm message to the king-in-waiting, 'that Fingal lifts the spear, and that his foes, perhaps, may fail', a sentiment repeated a few lines later with: 'if there my standard shall float on wind, over Lubar's gleaming stream, then has not Fingal failed in the last of his fields' (p. 288). This is very different from *Fingal*'s unquestioned assumption that its hero will be victorious (for example, Calmar's matter-of-fact reference to the time when 'Fingal has wasted the field' on p.75) and hits on the major concern of Fingal and Ossian in *Temora*: the need to make a good end. As Fingal puts it in an early rallying cry:

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[66] Of course, within Gaelic legend Cú Chúlain, rather like Achilles of the Greeks, was famous for his preference of early death and glory over longevity and obscurity.

> Fingal is amidst his darkening years. He must not fall, as an aged oak, across a secret stream. (p.234)

A poignant moment, its emotional appeal heightened by the activation of a Jacobite motif in the shape of the oak tree.[67] Macpherson's deployment of Jacobite iconography and narrative tropes for sentimental effect is discussed at length in chapter five, but for now I merely want to note that *Ossian* is full of oak trees, and, like here where the tree is aged and being used in a context of threatened failure, they are rarely portrayed as blooming with health.[68] We should perhaps, given the public nature of a battle-cry, be careful not to take this as a true indication of Fingal's actual state of mind. The fact remains though, that it does lend an air of desperation to proceedings: the 'must' strikes an insistent note, as if Fingal is striving to assert what he no longer has confidence in. And there are the more private utterances, such as Fingal's observation to Fillan that 'I begin to be alone, my son, and I dread the fall of my renown' (p.234). It is one thing to strengthen the devotion of your followers by making yourself an object of pity, quite another to show explicit signs of weakness. 'Fingal begins to be alone; darkness gathers on the last of his days' (p. 237) says Ossian, and this means that his father is perceived less as going out in a blaze of glory, more as scrabbling for all the dignity he can muster. Indeed Ossian is under no illusions about his father. For every 'who but Comhal's son, brightening in the last of his fields?' (p. 245), suggesting an aged ruggedness, we are offered:

> the king is without a son, grey-haired amidst his foes. His arm is not as in the days of old: his fame grows dim in Erin. Let me not behold him from high, laid low in his latter field. (p. 273)

This is not to say that Fingal does not, as we have previously seen, cut an impressive figure in the poem as he grapples with the facts of the fall of his race. But the point is this: in representing a more ambitious attempt at the 'new type of heroic sentimentality', *Temora* is a poem in which Fingal comes to suffer and to be pitied

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[67] Murray G.H.Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 184.

[68] Cf. the description of the fall of the sons of Usnoth in "Dar-thula": 'They fell like three young oaks which stood alone on the hill; the traveller saw the lovely tress, and wondered how they grew so lonely; the blast of the desart came, by night, and laid their green heads low; next day he returned, but they were withered, and the heath was bare' (p. 146). As Pittock says with reference to *Fingal*, 'set in a withered and decaying landscape, [oaks] reflect the epic's central theme, defeat' (1994, p. 184).

rather than to conquer. Macpherson's last epic shares with all Sentimental texts a tendency to owe allegiances to nothing – not even the paragon figure at the centre of the text's world – when it comes to extracting the maximum emotional value from a scenario:

> My son, I hear the call of years; they take my spear as they pass along. Why does not Fingal, they seem to say, rest within his hall? Dost thou always delight in blood? In the tears of the sad? No: ye darkly-rolling years, Fingal delights not in blood. Tears are wintry streams that waste away my soul. But, when I lie down to rest, then comes the mighty voice of war. It awakes me, in my hall, and calls forth all my steel.– It shall call it forth no more. (p. 290)

This displays a degree of inwardness rarely seen in *Ossian*, offering us a glimpse into the cost of being in Andrew Marvell's words, 'the force of angry heaven's flame'. The speech is beautifully weighted, with every word –down to the excruciating 'all' in the last line – counting, as Macpherson offers the full range of rhythmic and rhyming effects within his measured prose. It encapsulates and places a retrospective gloss on what has gone before in the poem and its compulsive mulling over of past events The speech is reminiscent of one Fingal makes at the beginning of "The Battle of Lora", although the ultimate distance between the two is more revealing than any similarity:

> when will Fingal cease to fight? I was born in the midst of battles, and my steps must move in blood to the tomb. But my hand did not injure the weak, my steel did not touch the feeble in arms. —I behold thy tempests, O Morven, which will overturn my halls; when my children are dead in battle, and none remains to dwell in Selma. Then will the feeble come, but they will not know my tomb: my renown is in the song: and my actions shall be as a dream to future times. (p. 120)

In the earlier poem the speech comes at the beginning rather than the end of the action, and the truth of his words is acknowledged, if not a little wearily, then with a resigned equanimity as Fingal sets about the destruction of another young pretender to his mantle. There is none of the self-laceration we witness in *Temora* as Fingal seems content with the thought that his actions will 'be as a dream to other times.' The later Fingal cannot rest there and the confrontational edge to his attempts to salvage something is equally revealing. He only ever defended 'the feeble', and 'never over the fallen did my eye rejoice'. Human nature being what it is though, Fingal immediately finds someone worse than himself to make himself feel better:

> Thou know'st not, feeble wanderer, that fame once shone on Moi-lena. Here Fingal resigned his spear, after the last of his fields. – Pass away, thou empty shade: in thy voice is no renown. Thou dwellest by some peaceful stream; yet a few years, and thou

> art gone. No one remembers thee, thou dweller of thick mist! – But Fingal shall be clothed with the fame, a beam of light to other times; for he went forth, in echoing steel, to save the weak in arms. (p. 291)

This collapses in its own terms. The excoriation of the feeble wanderer sits ill on the lips of the defender of 'the weak in arms' and there is a further contradiction between the beginning and the end of the speech: how famous will he be if this man will not know of him? Yet these contradictions are part of the point, part of the state of mind the reader is being asked to pity, as Fingal recognises that the story of his life might be something different to the one he expected, that it might indeed collapse into contradiction.

The speech also marks precisely the nexus between the vague insufficiency of the primary epic ending discussed in the introduction, and the demands of Sensibility. *Temora* ends on a note of failure and bankruptcy, and, somewhat ironically given its reputation for being unreadable, it gives the impression of suddenly being wise to itself, of reinterpreting its own events so that 'adventures that had seemed when they happened to float in a romance world free of time and space, are suddenly re-visioned as milestones on the one-way road to the "day of destiny."'[69] The result is an oddly "serious" heroic epic, one where the space in which gung-ho actions can be committed "no questions asked", and with no regard to consequences, evaporates.[70] The need to produce emotionally charged scenes interrogates the heroic character and with him the ethos of martial valour to the point that it actually subverts it, the glorious martial past of Morven sacrificed in favour of the depiction of greatness in decline. Character and triumphalist epic theme is driven by the needs of the Sentimental rather than the heroic story.

Fragmentation, then, covers a number of different Ossianic techniques operating on a number of different levels. While there is a danger of broadening the definition beyond its usefulness, within each version the effect is the same: discontinuities interrogate the triumphalist narrative by distracting the reader and preventing

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[69] Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*, ed. Helen Cooper (Oxford, 1998), p. xxii.

[70] This 'unreadability' has perhaps been overplayed. *Temora* is a set text for undergraduates at Virginia Technical College in the United States, where, according to Dr. David Radcliffe, it is received by the students with greater enthusiasm than its companion text, Johnson's *Journey*.

momentum from building up, and by disturbing our grasp on the firm concepts and characters of the heroic world. While at the very least this means that we must read *Ossian* in a way we would not read the *Iliad*, I think we can also claim that the overall effect goes further and actually subvert the glorious martial past the poems ostensibly celebrate.

V.

The Sentimental Economy.

The Chief is sad but lovely
"Calthon and Colmal"

In 1773 Macpherson made a revealing emendation to this description of Colmar, the chief becoming 'sad but stately'. The shift from a vocabulary of outright Sentimentalism to one more in keeping with the grandeur of the heroic narrative is perhaps significant, as if Macpherson too felt the strain between the two literary and social worlds. However, Macpherson made no changes to the story line, one of the most bizarre in all of *Ossian*. Examining this plot and its incongruity leads us further to the heart of the Sentimental text's incompatibility with the heroic.

The topos of the hapless adventurer, the bungling Ossianic hero seemingly incapable of doing his job properly is to be found everywhere in *Ossian*. Agandecca, to whom I shall return, is but one example of the oppressed whom the *fianna* are conspicuous in their failure to protect.[71] Similarly in *Fingal* III, Fingal tells of Fainasollis, a maiden who came for help in fighting off the advances of the king of Sora. Fingal's response is characteristically generous in telling her to 'Rest [...]behind my shield; rest in peace, thou beam of light!' (p. 78), and when the king arrives he too is greeted cordially. Unfortunately, the king has less charitable intentions: as Fingal says, 'the maid stood trembling by my side; he drew the bow: she fell.' Fingal promptly dispatches the king and the story ends, the singular failure of Fingal to carry out his

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[71] Ironically, such lapses on Fingal's part were seen by an early reviewer of *Ossian* as evidence of its unsentimental nature. As we shall see, such lapses make it the quintessential Sentimental text. See Lorna Kahn, 'James Macpherson's "Ossian": Genesis and Response' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, City University of New York 1989), p. 187.

promise passing without comment. Thus, and in a pattern repeated again and again within *Ossian*, victory is qualified and achievement made a mockery of. Stories appear to have their own momentum, propelled towards a scene of pathos and tragedy (a striking example is the murderously pointless "Conlath and Cuthona"). I shall concentrate, however, upon the near farcical "Calthon and Colmal".

The heroine Colmal rescues Calthon from his evil uncle Dunthalmo and persuades him to go to Fingal for help rather than trying to rescue his brother Colmar himself.[72] For once a male character accepts the logic of tactical retreat, which only makes what follows all the more ironic. Fingal, as expected, responds positively and generously, dispatching Ossian with some explicit orders:

> Son of my strength, he said, take the spear of Fingal; go to Teutha's mighty stream, and save the car-borne Colmar. (p. 172)

The opposing armies duly meet, and the sheer oddity of what happens is only emphasised by the echoing of the three elements of Fingal's injunction – Colmar, the river Teutha, and a spear, (although sadly for Colmar, the spear in question is not that of Fingal):

> They brought Colmar to Teutha's bank, bound with a thousand thongs. The chief is sad, but lovely, and his eye is on his friends; for we stood, in our arms, on the opposite bank of Teutha. Dunthalmo came with his spear, and pierced the hero's side: he rolled on the bank in his blood, and we heard his broken sighs. (p. 173)

The death of the man whom Ossian has been expressly sent to rescue does not seem to provoke any professional embarrassment on the part of Ossian. Ossian is not beyond having his professional pride stung, just not here: later in the poem Calthon, spurred by the ghost of his (understandably peeved) brother, starts the following day's fighting without Ossian, much to the latter's dismay. This keenly felt yet relatively minor breach of heroic protocol only emphasises the major but unacknowledged failure at the centre of the poem, and the incongruity of it remaining so unacknowledged. The story just does not add up.

Such inconsistency in narrative logic suggests an aesthetic prioritisation at odds with the tawdry details of who did what to whom – in a sense it might almost be understood as another version of fragmentation. Colmar has served his purpose by

being 'sad, but lovely', and what happens to him from then on is irrelevant, the one coda to that being that the more pathetic his fate the better. Since 'Macpherson's main interest is in the pathos attendant upon the personal situation':

> The appeal to sensibility takes precedence over narration of action and often heroic deed seems of significance not primarily in its own right but rather in terms of the pathetic situation to which it will, sometimes inadvertently, give rise.
>
> (Simpson (1988), p. 56)

So far so good, but the implication of this is that in a fundamental way Colmar cannot be rescued. The heroic narrative is not only subsumed beneath the weight of tragic digressions, but cannot ever reach fulfilment within the scheme of Sensibility: the desire to create the 'moment' for emotional response outweighs any possibility of triumph, martial vigour not merely relegated but subverted.[73]

Sentimental set-pieces seem inimical to a triumphalist narrative then: when faced with the choice between the celebration of a glorious victory or an opportunity to provoke the sympathetic exchange of tears, Macpherson will always engineer the latter. There is the usual rider here to the effect that heroic narratives do, of course, deal with death and tragedy, but rarely do they display the sort of irredeemable clumsiness exhibited by *Ossian*, a clumsiness which suggests failure as an aim of the venture: in traditional epic, valour is asserted in the face of material distress in a way which suggests that the failure, not even a consideration in *Ossian*, needs to be confronted and transcended. This idea that the 'point' of any given story lies away from the sphere of the active and martial is manifested on three levels within *Ossian*, each level contributing to the air of dysfunction undermining the heroic narrative.

On one level we have seen characters not commenting on the seeming contradictions within stories once they have released their edifying message: stories convey a socially or ethically valuable lesson (the importance of laying internecine squabbles to one side in the face of a greater threat, or the importance of a spontaneous willingness to defend the weak) by means of an emotional appeal which (through its reliance on melancholy and pathos-driven reflection) usually vitiates any possibility of

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[72] The similarity of names in *Ossian* implies and symbolises the disposability of character argued in this section.

[73] This is the meat of Brissenden's analysis of the figure of 'virtue in distress' whose continued position of martyr guarantees his sensibility and that of those who respond to him correctly.

that principle having any positive effect. Secondly we have this in operation on a larger scale in "Calthon and Colmar", where the creating consciousness of Ossian observes no disjunction between intention and result in poems where affirmative action is sacrificed to the 'sad but lovely' sensibility: style and intention is important, not results, and to insist on the pragmatic is to read the stories "wrongly". The third level of this reorientation covers the curious and important sense in which *Ossian*'s characters frequently exhibit a kind of self-awareness about the Cult of Sensibility of which they are part. As such the sense of inevitable defeat and dysfunction in the Ossianic world is created by the co-operation of the characters in the aesthetic priorities of their world. It is as if they somehow know they are characters in stories about failure and death.

Ossian's characters cannot, in any meaningful sense, 'know' that they are characters, and we must also take care not to divorce the characters from their generic context. Epic heroes usually behave with more than one eye on a glorious name for themselves in posterity. What marks *Ossian* out however, is the frequency with which characters see the potential for a heroic poem to be composed about a particular action as the *only* motivation for carrying it out, as the opening of "The War of Inis-thona" illustrates:[74]

> I appear and vanish. – The bard will not know my name.– The hunter will not search in the heath for my tomb. Let me fight, O heroes, in the battles of Inis-thona. Distant is the land of my war! – ye shall not hear of Oscar's fall.– Some bard may find me there, and give my name to the song.– The daughter of the stranger shall see my tomb, and weep over the youth that came from afar. The bard shall say, at the feast, hear the song of Oscar from the distant land. (p. 115)

The first half of the quotation illustrates this motivation, while the second (from 'ye shall not hear') suggests the assumptions made by Oscar about the tale that will be told. The whole exemplifies the yoking of the tendency within characters to make stories for themselves with their addiction to an aesthetic which prioritises a sad over a happy outcome. Another example is the series of exchanges between Shilric and Vinvela (*Fragments* I and II, incorporated in "Carric-thura"). In *Fragment* I Shilric departs 'to the wars of Fingal', or as Vinvela puts it, 'the field of graves'. Their parting exchange is revealing. Shilric leaves with this injunction:

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[74] For this point, which develops doubts first raised by Hume and Laing, see Womack (1989), p.100.

> If fall I must in the field, raise high my grave, Vinvela. Grey stones, and heaped-up earth, shall mark me to future times. When the hunter shall sit by the mound, and produce his food at noon, "Some warrior rests here," he will say; and my fame shall live in his praise. Remember me, Vinvela, when low on earth I lie! (p. 7)

Vinvela picks up on the slippage from 'if' to 'when' in her own final words, which end the exchange:

> Yes!—I will remember thee—indeed my Shilric will fall. What shall I do, my love! when thou art gone for ever? Through these hills I will go at noon: I will go through the silent heath. There I will see the place of thy rest, returning from the chace. Indeed, my Shilric will fall; but I will remember him. (p. 8)

Fragment II opens with an unnamed figure sitting by 'the mossy fountain'. There is nothing to explicitly link this poem with the previous one, except to say that it dramatises the situation envisaged at the end of the first fragment. If we are tempted to link the two together, then we are likely to assume that the speaker, with their hope 'didst thou but appear, O my love, a wanderer on the heath', is Vinvela. An apparition appears and the conversation between the two surprises:

> Returnest thou safe from the war? Where are thy friends, my love? I heard of thy death on the hill; I heard and mourned thee, Shilric!
>
> Yes, my fair, I return; but I alone of my race. Thou shalt see them no more: their graves I raised on the plain. But why art thou on the desert hill? why on the heath, alone?
>
> Alone I am, O Shilric! alone in the winter-house. With grief for thee I expired. Shilric, I am pale in the tomb.
>
> She fleets, she sails away; as grey mist before the wind!—and, wilt thou not stay, my love? Stay and behold my tears? fair thou appearest, my love! fair thou wast, when alive!
>
> By the mossy fountain I will sit; on the top of the hill of winds. When mid-day is silent around, converse, O my love, with me! come on the wings of the gale! on the blast of the mountain, come! Let me hear thy voice, as thou passest, when mid-day is silent around.
>
> (p. 9)

So the poems are indeed linked, but it is not Vinvela who mourns Shilric here, but Shilric Vinvela. The heroine has died of grief for a lost love who, it transpires, is not lost at all. The scene encompasses many of the elements we have explored in this chapter, from the minimal characterisation to the understated parataxis. It also shows, in the way Macpherson plays on the new reader's efforts to come to terms with *Ossian* (remember these are the first two *Ossian* poems ever encountered), his sophisticated use of reader expectation as a resource to be exploited for dramatic effect. As with Oscar, however, more than anything we see a vivid representation of the assumptions these characters have about their lives, and the way they act those assumptions out.

And it seems natural that these characters should talk in such terms given the sort of models for emulation he has been offered: he is typical of the way that characters internalise the aesthetic values of their society, turning them into a programme for action and a set of assumptions about their world. The characters thus collude with the need to produce the 'joy of grief' and, as Potkay has it, '"living among the dead" has an odd way of literalising itself' in a 'dialectic of projection and privation' (1994, p. 218). This feeds into the Sentimental trait exemplified by Robert Burns' comment on Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* that, while it is a great and morally edifying book it offers little by the way of good advice. As John Mullan puts it, 'this seems a disabling caveat; what kind of virtue might it be that could not be practised?' (1987, p. 283). Bluntly put, the characters of Sentimental fictions offer very limited models of behaviour, and the danger is that the listener (or reader) may identify more with the object of pity rather than the pity itself, a fact murderously internalised by *Ossian*. If such ideologues of Sensibility as Blair advocated meditating in graveyards as a way of developing Sensibility, then the possibility that one might feel more in common with the dead than the living has to be faced. *Ossian* offers a model society of Sentiment which dramatises the effects of living in the charnel house, and of what happens when a society fatally fails to distinguish the ends from the means of this moral dynamic.[75] We suggested in section III that the epic striving of *Ossian* could be seen as the stoic resolution to give the dead their due while not to be swept away by the tide of misfortune, of cultivating a mindset at one with the higher order. Here we see that the stoic resolution (and its failure in Vinvela), by pre-emptively expecting the worst, actually conspires in that worst coming to pass.[76]

The question of narrative incoherence can be approached in other ways, however. One way of viewing it is to tie the incoherence more closely to the character of the Ossian who speaks these figures and their attitudes into being, a rewarding strategy for interpreting poems in which the venture undertaken is successful in its most immediate terms, but which still manage to interrogate heroic action. A key text here is "Berrathon", a poem which emphasises that in *Ossian* the heroic finds little positive or

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[75] Dwyer (1987, p. 60) discusses Blair's sermon's such as 'On the Benefits to be derived from the House of Mourning' and 'On Death'.

successful expression. The poem recounts the crusade of the Fingalians to restore Larthmor to the throne denied him by his son. They succeed, but the son Uthal is killed. While Larthmor's response to this "makes sense" in its psychological acuteness, it still deflates the triumph:

> – O that I had remained in the cave! that my son had dwelt in Finthormo! – I might have heard the tread of his feet, when he went to the chace of the boar.– I might have heard his voice on the blast of my cave. Then would my soul be glad: but now darkness dwells in my halls. (p. 197)

This is Macpherson at his most powerful, deploying the eloquence of simplicity and capturing with sensitivity a character trying to re-write history in a desperately self-deluding way. The power of those two 'mights' is crushing, not least in the humbleness of Larthmor's wishes.[77] Where does this leave the glory of the military enterprise? Heroic action is cast in a poor light by the narrative interest in the emotional moment, and its obsession with consequences and victims allows no scope for a unreflectingly positive action narrative. Or, to put it another way, the poem ends with a sad old man staring at the prospect of the extinction of his family, rather in the way of the creating consciousness Ossian.

Indeed, *Ossian* seems obsessed by old men and family extinction. The poems are full of old men, their presence made obvious by the fact that, as in the conclusion to "Berrathon", they are dwelt over and given much of the most powerful poetry in their particular poems. In "Croma", Ossian, spurred by the song of Malvina, tells of the aid he gave to Crothar whose son Fovar-gorma had just previously been killed by 'gloomy' Rothmar. As usual the actual fighting barely detains Ossian ('we fought along the vale; they fled; Rothmar sunk beneath my sword') as he moves to the reaction of Crothar at his son's grave:

> Happy are they who die in youth, when their renown is heard! The feeble will not behold them in the hall; or smile at their trembling hands. Their memory shall be honoured in the song; the young tear of the virgin falls. But the aged wither away, by degrees, and the fame of their youth begins to be forgot. They fall in secret; the sigh of their son is not heard. Joy is around their tomb; and the stone of their fame is placed without a tear. Happy are they who die in youth, when their renown is around them!
> (p. 189)

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[76] We are precisely in the territory of the paradox Phillipson alerts us to as explored in chapter one, section IV.

[77] See chapter five below for a discussion of the deeper resonances of this poem and its subversion of heroic dynamism.

Emphasis is again placed not on the military victory but on the facts which no victory will put right, heroic triumphalism sacrificed to the power of a stock Sentimental scene. It is also difficult not to hear the creating consciousness of the now-childless and decrepit Ossian behind these words, particularly given that the opening of the poem had foregrounded the grief of Malvina and Ossian for Oscar. Indeed, in as much as the whole point of the story had been to educate Malvina in the proper sort of grief in mourning Oscar, we cannot help but see the narrated story and the narrative situation in some sort of mutually reflecting relationship. Attention to this slippage, where Ossian only ever really tells one story, that of himself and how he became how he was, allows us to gloss the "knowingness" of Ossian's characters: as Ossian puts it about Oscar, communing with the souls of his ancestors before his first battle, 'he foresaw the fall of his race; and at times he was thoughtful and dark' ("The War of Caros", p. 113).

Ossian the ageing poet must then be seen as a crucial shaping force in the poems he "tells" since there has been something of a cross-over of sensibility from creator to created: characters have been instilled with, as it were, a genetic foreknowledge of their own future doom because Ossian has witnessed their actual doom before he speaks them into being. It is not only that 'as the bardic narrator of his people's former glories, Ossian is obsessed with images of the dead; he conceives of them as more real, more substantial, than the "little men" who surround him in the present', but also that that obsession is carried into his configurations of the 'living past' (Potkay (1994), p. 214). Or as Womack has more damningly put it, 'events are little more than a pretext to substantiate the self-reflexive device' which locates the aged Ossian at the centre of the text (1989, p. 101). I want to dwell on this point briefly now even though I shall return to the figure of Ossian at greater length in chapter five because this tendency aligns Ossian with the classic eighteenth-century authorial personae of Sensibility in a way beyond offering a contrast between past success and present ignominy. In chapter five I will discuss the image of the poet created by *Ossian* and its effect on the narrative in terms of the writing of defeat and the politics of cultural representation. Here I want to suggest that selectivity in a narration governed by the idiosyncratic preoccupations of the narrative persona is a

feature common to many Sentimental texts: fragmentation comes to stand not only for the vulnerability of the sympathetic narrative, but the subjectivity required to view the world through the lens of Sensibility. In this light, Sentimental fragmentation also uncovers the 'illusion of imagination' at the heart of its own method: what A.A. Alvarez has termed a 'delinquent aesthetic' which 'comments, implicitly but nihilistically, on the art-form and the whole choosy business of art.'[78] Nothing exemplifies this better than the activities of that most delinquent of literary personae, the *Sentimental Journey*'s Parson Yorick, and such matter of fact admissions as that 'when I told the reader that I did not care to get out of the *Desobligeant* because I saw the monk [...] I told him the truth; but I did not tell him the whole truth' (p.40). Here, in an episode in which Yorick wryly comments upon the propensity of the sympathetic imagination to be more 'sympathetic' towards young ladies, he significantly also undermines the status of his narrative as in any way an accurate record of events: both sympathy and art are 'choosy', implies Yorick.

The implication of sympathy within this 'delinquent aesthetic' is in fact but playing to its conclusion the concerns with the 'illusion of imagination' (to use Smith's phrase) at the heart of the sympathetic ethos as it was figured in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For Smith, nothing confirms more strikingly that sympathy is an imaginative act and that it is also at bottom a fallacy than our sympathy with the dead. We feel compassion for the dead 'from lodging [...] our own living souls in their inanimated bodies, and thence conceiving what would be our emotions in this case' and as a result 'those circumstances, which undoubtedly can give us no pain when we are dead, make us miserable while we are alive' (p.13). Given the that sympathy relies on the 'illusion of imagination', it follows then that some things appeal more than others, disproportionately so in terms of their real effect. As Smith puts it:

> The loss of a leg may generally be regarded as a more real calamity than the loss of a mistress. It would be a ridiculous tragedy, however, of which the catastrophe was to turn upon a loss of that kind. (p.28)

This might seem some distance from *Ossian*, but it helpfully contextualises, in Womack's phrase, Macpherson's 'sacred texts of pure subjectivity' in terms of the

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[78] Introduction to *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, ed. by G. Petrie,

wider concerns of the Sentimental movement (1989, p. 99). Alvarez has suggested that 'even *The Sentimental Journey's* extraordinary gallery of eccentrics [...].have very little substance of their own; they rely on the author's amused, vague tenderness to make sense of their lives', that 'they are less characters in their own right than *obsessions held together by his indulgence*' (p. 9; my emphasis) and, while the difference in tone and intention is manifest, we should not be blind to the relevance of this diagnosis to Macpherson's death-driven narratives and characters.

A third, and for my purposes final, angle on the question of narrative and heroic incoherence is offered by switching attention to the stylistic and operative demands of the text of Sensibility. We have touched a number of times on how the emotional economy of the Sentimental *Ossian* drives itself through suffering. This is encapsulated in the psychotic destruction of women in the poems, something which usefully encompasses two aspects of the discourse of Sensibility. At the end of *Fingal*, Fingal speaks of the ancient bond between himself and Swaran:

> Raise, to-morrow, thy white sails to the wind, thou brother of Agandecca. Bright as the beam of noon she comes on my mournful soul. I saw thy tears for the fair one, and spared thee in the halls of Starno; when my sword was red with slaughter, and my eye full of tears for the maid (p. 101)

Agandecca, love of the young Fingal, has functioned as an ambiguous figure throughout the poem, representing both the women Fingal has failed to save and the violation of warfare: her ghost had come to him in book IV, a bitter-sweet moment in which she 'mourned the sons of her people that were to fall by Fingal's hand' (p. 84), something he himself was to do at the end of the same book when he realised that he had killed a friend of Agandecca, one who had shed tears for her death 'in the halls of bloody Starno' (p. 88). Now here at the end of the epic it is the memory of Swaran's tears for his sister which comes back to Fingal and motivates his noble actions in victory. This is a complicated sympathetic moment. In that final image of Fingal as a man stained with tears and gore we have a fantasy-figure for the Cult of muscular Sensibility, a man whose tears do not emasculate him but drive him on, recognising and being sympathetic to the tears of another; equally we have the older Fingal, reliving that moment for a sympathetic charge which will motivate a further act of benevolence.

(Harmondsworth, 1967; from 1st edition, 1768), p. 15.

And of course the reader, witnessing all these things, also partakes in the exquisite feelings of all these various moments. Importantly though, this whole complex matrix of feeling relies on the death of Agandecca those years before.

It is presumably such moments which move Potkay to observe that 'strictly speaking [...] Fingal's actions are determined not by the dictates of morality but by the impulses of reminiscence', that 'beauty itself, especially the bright image of a dead woman, anchors the thought and softens the rage of the ancient warrior' (1992, p. 125). In other words the moral dynamic demands a line of dead women to memorialise and whose memories can guide the actions of the main protagonists. So what appears, through Fingal's actions, to be a carefully modulated 'ideal' polite society is fundamentally self-destructive, feeding, as it must, on the sources of its own regeneration. It finds its logical end in the wifeless, childless figure of Ossian, 'the last of his race'.

That the onus for providing the emotional canon fodder for the Fingalian world should fall on women should not come as any surprise, given the wider worries within the discourse of sensibility about the status of the female sex. Potkay diagnoses the killing of women in the text as a result of its being 'animated at a deep level, with male resentment toward the very ideal of polite domesticity [men] help to formulate'(p. 128). Equally, Dwyer has written of (though not in reference to *Ossian*) the curiously reactive pro-activity attributed to the role of women within the Sentimental society: in the words of James Fordyce, 'to command by obeying, and by yielding to conquer'.[79] By relegating women to this subsidiary role, to a '"domestic retreat" which, it was felt, was the proper sphere of influence and environment for their sympathetic virtues men limited the possible threat within this new role for women.[80] *Ossian* takes this to a "logical" (if homicidal end) by dispensing with them altogether, by killing them off so as their memories could do the work their persons might disturb.

Ossian extends this dubious privilege to its male characters. Since Richardson there had been an ongoing procedural dilemma – both philosophical and literary – within the movement of Sensibility over the figure of the virtuous male, given that the traditional masculine virtues were ones at odds with those of the suffering image of

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[79] Cited in Dwyer (1987), p. 133.

virtue in distress. The first step was to "feminise" male characters, a procedure symbolised by the sexual impotency of men of feeling, as if masculine sexuality somehow disqualifies them as men of sensibility.[81] *Ossian* literalises this with the interjection of death between lovers (even rapist and victim in "Oithona"), a tactic which reinforces the Sensibility of the heroes but has an unfortunate effect on their manpower. Yet problems still remain, since while they might be figured in terms of the classic female qualities, Men of Feeling could not be raped, tricked into marriage and ruined in the way that their female counterparts could (Todd (1986), p. 89). The partial answer is to, as *Ossian* does, proliferate the tragic scenes in which they could demonstrate their sensibility by dying beautifully. But this is only a partial solution, since 'the formal exigencies of the moral action [...] exclude any generative relationship between the central character and his unfortunate fate'.[82] Virtue can only be protected in its most extreme form if the character in no way "deserved" or even contributed to his fate. Laura Brown's characterisation of the 'meaningless, almost absurdist disaster' in sentimental dramas which need recourse to a 'formal irrelevance to protect [a] paragon's virtue' thus offers a striking way of understanding an Ossianic world in which pure vicious ill-fortune is continually heading off hopes of a positive outcome; a world where characters are impotent and frustrated in the face of a universe seemingly pathologically opposed to their good intentions.[83]

In a number of different ways then, a downgrading of the importance of the plain outcome of events points to a Sentimental text more interested in promoting the dynamic of moral sympathy and, in the prominence and influence of an "unreliable" Sentimental narrator, its own fictional status, than in the certainties of the heroic narrative. It is not that those heroic certainties are unimpeachable in other epics – Achilles gloomy message for Odysseus in book XI of the *Odyssey* that, contrary to

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[80] Dwyer (1987), p. 119; for this 'she stoops to conquer' ideology see also Todd (1986), p. 20.

[81] The list drawn up by most scholars on the subject includes, for example, such Sentimental luminaries as Edward Harley, Parson Yorick, Uncle Toby Shandy, and Corporal Trim.

[82] Laura Brown, *English Dramatic Form 1660–1760: An Essay in Generic History* (New Haven, 1981), p. 164.

[83] Brown (1981), p. 164, p. 165. cf. '[the] geometrical murderousness [of *Ossian*] directly reflects the formalism of neo-classical tragedies such as Home's [*Douglas*]' (Womack (1989), p. 97). The point is not to suggest that *Ossian* necessarily owes anything to Lillo, but that the poems can be understood in terms of similar procedural problems and solutions. See also Brown's comments on Addison's *Cato* (p. 156).

what the heroic code promises, anything is better than death is perhaps the most famous example of such suspicion – but few if any others question the entire meaning and purpose of heroism in the way that *Ossian* does. That questioning produces some great moments, but in sacrificing those certainties, *Ossian* proves itself to be subverting that heroic narrative and Sentimental ancient heroism is once again revealed as an oxymoron.

VI.

Conclusion

'The Decay of life, and the lag end of the world'
William Hazlitt ('On Poetry in General')[84]

We have seen how the characteristic formal properties of the text of Sentiment make it difficult for the heroic narrative to survive in any recognisable shape. Rather than acting as 'modifiers' of heroic models (as Bysveen suggests), such properties in actual fact effect 'a virtual transformation of the traditional epic into a sentimental tale' (Dwyer (1991), p. 203). We have also seen something else emerging too: to the extent that *Ossian* engages with Sentimental preoccupations, the poems also engage with a discourse worrying over its own fundamental redundancy.

A number of scholars of Sensibility, notably Brissenden and Mullan, have focused on the inherent non-viability of the eighteenth-century discourse of Sensibility. Thus the aesthetic convulsions and formulations – encapsulated most clearly in the idea of "Virtue in Distress" and the challenges it offers – mirror on the creative-procedural plane the tensions felt within the intellectual tradition. Seen in these terms Sentimental text thus engages with the Sentimental concern with its own status as a paradigm of impossibility, in Mullan's phrase, 'a terminal formula': 'fellow-feeling' has, he says in his consideration of *Clarissa*, 'a vocabulary tragically divorced from application; there is no confidence in benevolent sociability'. Instead we are offered, in a phrase which, in its strikingly applicability to *Ossian* suggests the common ground between these otherwise very different works, a 'vision of social relations governed by internalised

regimes of violence and desire' (1988, pp. 80–1). The Sentimental novel from this point on is haunted, for Mullan, by a more or less articulated knowledge of this distance and insufficiency.[85]

Macpherson creates in *Ossian* a meeting between these literary and philosophical discourses. Throughout my analysis of the Sentimental dynamic, from the first observation that the story Carril tells Cuchullin in *Fingal* I only has value to the extent to which it marks – in the death of Grudar – the negation of the values it hopes to inculcate in Cuchullin's feuding officers, it has been clear that in dramatising a world driven by the theoretical principles of moral sentiment, and by dramatising that world driving itself into the ground, the poems articulate the utter impracticality of the system they uphold. These impulses find their apotheoses in royal father and son, Ossian and Fingal. The residue of the Sentimental reaction is most obviously figured in the shape of old Ossian, a man doomed to have no successors because of the rapacious way in which his society's model of virtue had excluded the possibility for regeneration. The Fingal who retires at the conclusion to *Temora* seems somehow aware that he is in some way responsible for the fall of his race. It is significant that Fingal's debate with the unheard voice of reproach as he retires his power comes in the context of his destruction of Cathmor, a hero of whom the first description of him as 'like thy youth, O Fingal, when thou first didst lift the spear' (p. 234) is only reinforced by all descriptions subsequently: in killing Cathmor Fingal extinguishes one who most clearly exemplifies his own codes of behaviour and honour. A concentration on sad old kings and sonless fathers darkens the Sentimental world of Morven in its pomp, and the whimsical self-parody of Sterne is the bitter self-defeat of *Ossian*.

The failure of the heroic to be reconciled with the Sentimental symbolises then on the aesthetic level the failure of Sensibility to find affirmative expression in the world of everyday exigencies. The certainties of the heroic are subverted or quarried by – sacrificed to – a system of thought and value which offers nothing but a terminal suspicion about itself. It is this destruction of the fabric of one world and the erection of another which is inherently frail which manifests itself within the Ossianic text of

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[84] in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P.P.Howe, 21 volumes, (London, 1930), vol. 5, pp. 1–18, p. 15.

Sensibility as William Hazlitt's 'sense of privation, the loss of all things', life experienced at 'the lag end of the world' (p. 18, p. 15).

I shall return to my conception of the Sentimental *Ossian* in chapter five in considering Macpherson's representation of Gaelic cultural identity. There we will see how we must balance the enervating and self-frustrating tendencies within the Sentimental discourse, tendencies which provide ample opportunity for the marginalisation and enervation of Gaelic culture as a whole and which lead to some of the most serious charges of cultural bad-faith levelled against Macpherson, with the sense we have gained in this chapter that *Ossian* makes a serious play for the centre-ground of a dominant literary and ethical discourse. It is an ambiguous and fraught position to be in, laying claim to cultural superiority via a discourse which stresses weakness, distress, and the need to face up to the inevitable, but nevertheless it is the one that Macpherson finds himself in. But that is to come. In the next chapter I want to turn my attention to the way Macpherson creates the sentimental *Ossian* from his Gaelic sources. This enterprise will involve us revising our conceptions of *Ossian* yet again, and will suggest a more secure generic context in which to brace the Ossianic ambience.

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[85] See also Brissenden (1974), pp. 122–3 and p. 135 for the self-parody with commitment of the great Sentimental novelists.

CHAPTER THREE.

'That *old, new, Epic Pastoral*': Macpherson and the Modalities of Romance[1]

I.

This chapter explores *The Poems of Ossian* in relation to the Gaelic sources which inspired them, not in order to come to re-fight old battles over authenticity, but to consider how understanding this relationship can inform our literary reading practices when it comes to *Ossian*. Equally, the chapter will cast further light on the Sentimental preoccupations of Macpherson's text as discussed in the last chapter, underlining for us *Ossian*'s transformation of – for want of a better phrase – the heroic Gaelic into the eighteenth-century English Sentimental. The chapter links the discussion of these Sentimental priorities in chapter two with chapter four's analysis of Macpherson's civic and historiographical thought by suggesting an informing framework which braces these eighteenth-century preoccupations against the material from which Macpherson crafted his poems.

It was suggested in chapter one that the exact relationship between Macpherson's texts and the Gaelic sources which inspired them was difficult to determine with any certainty. At the turn of the century Alfred Nutt, looking back with the confidence of a century of advances in Gaelic scholarship, claimed that, for the student of Celtic literature or culture:

> Macpherson's poems are worthless: they disregard the traditional versions of the legends, they depart from the traditional representation of the material life depicted in

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[1] Charles Churchill, *The Prophecy of Famine* (1763) in *The Poetical Works of Charles Churchill*, ed. by Douglas Grant, (Oxford, 1956), l. 130 (p. 198).

> the old and genuine texts, and they utterly ignore the traditional conventions of Gaelic style.[2]

Ninety years on, informed scholarship is a deal more provisional. As chapter one made clear, Celticists have tussled with the fact that, however 'worthless' *Ossian* might be, at the very least it also inspired the intellectual activity which allowed scholarship to come to that conclusion. Secondly, scholars have come to realise not only that we can identify areas of *Ossian* which follow their Gaelic sources with some, albeit wildly fluctuating, accuracy, but that, in a more general sense, 'aspects of the genuine lore come through.'[3] Thirdly, further advances in scholarship on the fianaigheacht (fian-lore) have come to stress the protean nature of the legends and stories surrounding Fionn and his followers, to the extent that it is difficult to maintain Nutt's confident mantra of 'traditional versions' and 'traditional representation'. For example, Alan Bruford, on his way to suggesting that 'every member of the poetic caste from the twelfth to the eighteenth century must have tried his hand at composing either a ballad [...] or a prose tale about the Fenians', has observed that there exist at least six 'contradictory accounts' of Fionn mac Cumhaill's descent.[4] In such a context even stories stable in their broad details can differ significantly. For example, the seventeenth-century collection the *Duanaire Finn* contains two poems in on the subject of the Battle of Cronnmhóin which both concentrate on the same episode. In the twelfth century 'The Rowan-Tree of Clonfert' Fionn comes across his sleeping enemy Goll mac Morna. Goll awakes with a start and reaches for his weapon only to be told by Fionn to relax since, had Fionn wished to kill the defenceless Goll, he would have already done so. In the fifteenth century 'The Battle of Cronnmhóin' Fionn comes across Goll in identical circumstances but this time would have murdered his enemy while he slept had it not been for the admonishment of Fearghus (who is not mentioned

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[2] Alfred Nutt, *Ossian and the Ossianic Literature*, Popular studies in Mythology, Romance and Folklore no. 3, (London, 1899), p. 2.

[3] Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *Fionn mac Cumhaill: Images of the Gaelic Hero* (Dublin, 1988), p. 314

[4] Alan Bruford, 'Oral and Literary Fenian Tales' in *The Heroic Process: Form Function and Fantasy in Folk Epic*, ed. by Bo Almqvist *et al*, (Dun Laoghaire, 1987), pp. 25–57, p. 26, p. 25.

in the earlier version).[5] Within such a disparate tradition then, which saw 'basic plots [...] recast in new moulds', where stories, characters and events change from writer to writer and century to century, where Fionn may by summoned to battle by a telegram, and where authorship ought to be viewed 'as a rather loose concept which allowed for the growth and development of texts beyond their "original" form', it is highly problematic to build a position on Macpherson around the essentialist terms of a Nutt.[6]

Seen from this perspective *Ossian* represents a recasting of the fianaigheacht in terms of, and in response to, the eighteenth-century social and aesthetic pressures and influences outlined in the previous chapter in a way understandable to the generations of story-tellers who proceeded Macpherson. This is a refreshing approach, but also one in need of certain qualifications. Most obviously, the definition of a tradition cannot be infinitely elastic, and in this instance to accommodate *Ossian* involves taking a change of language in our stride, when Bruford notes that the only consistent thing about the fianaigheacht was that it was mediated in the same language (1987, p. 25). Secondly, there might just be something a little specious about giving Macpherson the benefit of a doubt it has taken scholarship two hundred years to establish, even allowing for a possible instinctive understanding of the traditions he was dealing with (this is doubly disingenuous given that the reverse argument can also be made, that *Ossian* can be seen as the result of Macpherson's genuine misunderstandings of his Gaelic sources). Thirdly, we must insist on the real antagonism displayed by Macpherson towards what he calls the 'puerile, and even despicable' Irish material on Fionn, and towards what he saw as folk corruptions of Ossian's originals, an antagonism absent from other Fenian variations, and which suggests cultural opposition

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[5] See Eoinn MacNeill (ed. and trans.) *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn, part 1*, Irish Texts Society no. 4 (1904), (London, 1908), pp. 102–110. The dating is that of Gerard Murphy in part 3 of the *Duanaire*, I.T.S. no 43 (1941), (Dublin, 1953).

[6] Ó hÓgáin (1988), p. 80; Donald Meek, 'Development and Degeneration in Gaelic Ballad Texts' in Almqvist (ed.), pp. 131–160, p. 145. For Fionn in the Information Age see Ó hÓgáin (1988), p. 298.

not unity.[7] In other words, and somewhat ironically, 'Macpherson's error was not that he usurped the integrity of the original by producing a copy' because there was no such integrity as we understand it, 'but rather that he postulated an original [...] in the first place'.[8] His misrepresentation was to impose a unity and integrity, not to deform a pre-existing one.

What is required then is a paradigm for Macpherson's activities which takes account of the innerness and outerness of *Ossian* in terms of Gaelic culture, which recognises that the poems are both – to a certain extent at least – at one with their Gaelic inspiration and at the same time wholly alien to them. What I am suggesting, in other words, is a legitimate version of Charles Churchill's sneering comment about the 'old, new epic pastoral' *Fingal*. This chapter will argue that current thinking on the romance as a literary form offers one such paradigm. By reading *Ossian* in these terms we are offered a procedural model for Macpherson's activity and a context for reading the poems, a context which flags up issues central to the Ossianic experience. In other words the chapter aims to transcend questions of authenticity and (mis)representation in order to open up the areas of scholarship surveyed but never explored by a debate organised around the demands of claim and counter-claim. In doing so the chapter elucidates a convincing account of Macpherson's writerly activity, one which does justice to the complexities of the issue and which underlines our sense of what Macpherson is doing as explored in the surrounding chapters.

At this point a major objection must be countered. Put simply, to read *Ossian* in terms of romance (the eighteenth century romance of Sentiment, the new chivalry), is to treat *Ossian* in a way which would horrify those responsible for the poems, given firstly their insistence that *Ossian* was epic and secondly their distaste for the romance. After all, according to Hugh Blair, anyone who claims a preference for romance ('a very insignificant class of writings') over epic is either 'void of all Taste, or [...] his

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[7] James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Howard Gaskill, (Edinburgh, 1996 (1765)) p. 525 n.9. For Macpherson's discussion of Irish Fenian stories see pp. 217–22.

Taste is corrupted in a miserable degree'.[9] Given that, as we saw in chapter one, reading *Ossian* gives 'a strong impression that there had been a close and purposeful collaboration between the Professor of Rhetoric [Blair] and the young classicist who had produced [the poems]', it would seem perverse to maintain any affinity between the romance form and the *Poems of Ossian.*[10] Indeed, those revisiting *Ossian* in the last ten years have generally adopted a position on the question which can be traced back to Blair's initial dismissal.[11] That Blair – or even Macpherson – did not think of *Ossian* as romance is, of course, no obstacle to us doing so. Nevertheless the explicit denigration of the form with reference to *Ossian* does need confronting. Thus the first section of this chapter deals with eighteenth century attitudes to romance, the factors which informed them, and where *Ossian* might fit into the picture. Constructions of ancient and medieval past in the eighteenth century have manifold ideological, political and cultural significations, and I shall deal with these to the extent that they impact on the present study in this section. These are, needless to say, deep waters, and it is not my intention to plumb their depths. My aim rather is to capture the complexity of these matters as they directly concern us. That said, understanding *Ossian*'s place within this particular context does more than just explain Macpherson's distaste for romance, and opens up some wider questions about cultural and generic change.

One thing to emerge from the discussion of eighteenth-century romance theory is a sense of the infancy of romance studies at the time. Thus the other point to be made in response to the general objection is that the definitions of romance used in this chapter differ from those understood by Blair and Macpherson. For example, an important development in romance studies in the twentieth century has been the

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[8] Luke Gibbons, 'The Sympathetic Bond: Ossian, Celticism and Colonialism' in *Celticism*, ed. by Terence Brown, (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 273–92, p. 290.

[9] Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 volumes (Edinburgh, 1783), volume 2, p. 303–4, volume 1, p. 28–9

[10] Thomson, 'Macpherson's *Ossian*: Ballads to Epics' in Almqvist (ed), 1987, pp. 243–64, p. 259.

[11] See for example: John Dwyer, 'The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the *Poems of Ossian*' in *Ossian Revisited*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 164–99, p. 195 and Lorna

insistence on the necessity of finding definitions of the form which, unlike most of those in the eighteenth century, are not based upon content. Categories such as chivalric, ancestral, dynastic; sub-divisions which split texts into those dealing with the matters of France, Britain, Rome, England and the Orient: all still have their place and use within Medieval scholarship, but few would exclude a text from the genre on the grounds that it did not conform to some pre-determined conception of what a romance contains. Rather it has been suggested that the romance is more usefully viewed not as a genre at all but as a mode, and that a more solid definition might come from seeing romancing as an attitude to – and a treatment of – one's sources. It is in these ways that I take the term romance. Even the prized distinction between epic and romance has come under revision, if not assault: while a differentiation is still considered valuable, if not necessary, the two genres are 'increasingly recognised as different varieties of the enduring mode of romance' with 'no absolute distinction [...] on the grounds of form and theme': if the epic celebrates where the *roman courtois* projects, 'both acknowledge the challenges of reality in the characteristic manner of the romance mode'[12] At the same time it is worth noting that Gaelic oral ballad tradition does not distinguish epic and romance.[13]

Up until now the closest scholarship has come to a consideration of Macpherson's literary hybrids has been along the lines of Peter Womack's apologetic observation that, as he made his expeditions to the Highlands in search of *Fingal*, Macpherson was burdened with 'a wholly inapplicable set of Augustan assumptions about what literature could be', with the result that he:

> had to find an integral text, in an identifiable genre, with an individual author; what he will have had to go on is a protean tradition in genres quite different from the Graeco-Roman ones he brought with him from Edinburgh.[14]

Kahn, 'James Macpherson's Ossian: Genesis and Response' (unpublished PhD thesis, City University of New York, 1989), p. 237.

[12] W.R.J.Barron, *English Medieval Romance* (London, 1987), p. 58, p. 106.

[13] Joseph Bysveen, *Epic Tradition and Innovation in James Macpherson's Fingal* (Uppsala, 1982), pp. 56–7).

[14] Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands* (Basingstoke, 1989), p.107 and 108.

So just as the last chapter worked at the interface between the polite and the epic in considering *Ossian*'s hybrid forms, this one exploits precisely the interface between aesthetic idioms Womack is identifying, without suggesting that anything of interest in the texts emerges from a felicitous botching of literary traditions.

But this chapter does more than reformulate questions about what Macpherson was up to in producing *Ossian* in the form he did. Since, as John Finlayson has put it, 'our awareness of the total form of the work must control our appreciation of the function, nature and success of individual properties or events', by suggesting that *Ossian* (albeit only to a limited extent) can be accessed via the established critical norms of a parallel literary discourse, I am endeavouring to grapple with the complexities and puzzles of a text too easily dismissed as an interesting aesthetic failure.[15] The chapter revises opinion on *Ossian* on the aesthetic level by suggesting a particular reading strategy and by offering a generic legitimisation for some of the features of the text. Equally, a romance reading of *Ossian* goes some way to unsettling some of the assumptions about Macpherson's portrayal of the Gaeltachd, since the romance can be interpreted as a more subversive, or at least questioning, form than the epic. In making this point, the chapter also prepares the ground for the questions dealt with at greater length in chapters four and five.

II.

Romance in the Eighteenth Century.

Arthur Johnson has observed that 'no literature has needed quite so much to be placed "in a very respectable light" as did the medieval romance in the middle of the eighteenth century.'[16] Little read, little understood and in many cases little known, the romance had suffered the double indignity of first becoming a hack form exploited by

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[15] Finlayson (ed.) *The Morte Arthure* (London, 1967), introduction, p. 11.

[16] Arthur Johnson, *Enchanted Ground: The Study of Medieval Romance in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1964), p. 73.

sensationalists who took on the external adornments of the form without its real meaning and, second, having this bastard tradition mistaken for the authentic article.[17] Without offering an exhaustive survey of eighteenth century thinking on the romance, it is my purpose in this section to place Hugh Blair's comments on *The Poems of Ossian* and the romance tradition in their contemporary theoretical and ideological context in order to contextualise the unwillingness of Macpherson and other Ossianists to align the poems with the romance. The eighteenth-century theoretical context can be examined in roughly two sections: firstly in terms of the state of scholarship, and secondly in terms of cultural and political troping of things medieval.

Towards the end of the "Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian" Blair raises the spectre of the romance in a way which, for all its brevity, is suggestive of his critical assumptions about the form. Throughout his dissertation Blair maintains that *Ossian* represents a Gaelic epic tradition. As well as being the pre-eminent literary genre, the epic was considered the first poetic output of primitive peoples, and in its subject matter and execution redolent with the preoccupations of such people and times. Yet as we saw in the previous chapter, *Ossian* shows evidence of the sort of 'polished' manners not usually associated with a body of literature whose pre-eminent examples were Homer's bloodthirsty epics, and was valued accordingly. But the idea that Fingal 'has all the strength and bravery of Achilles, with the courtesy, sentiment, and high-breeding of Sir Charles Grandison' is a decidedly double-edged one: for every reader relieved to find that 'strength and bravery' and 'courtesy and sentiment' were not, as perhaps they feared, mutually exclusive human characteristics there was one

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[17] 'The progressive trivialisation of the romance in ages which no longer operated the interpretative principles of the twelfth century was to lead to a strong reaction against the perceived "vulgarity" of the genre' (Tony Hunt, *Chrétien de Troyes: Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion)*, Critical Guides to French Texts 55, (London, 1986), p. 15). For the process whereby Medieval romances were 'transformed from verse narratives often running to five thousand lines or more into twenty-four page prose booklets' (p. 123) and the implications of this rise of the chapbook, see John Simons, 'Romance in the Eighteenth-Century Chapbook' in *From Medieval to Medievalism*, ed. Simons, (London, 1992), pp. 122–143.

who, less easily reassured, merely saw this unlikely conjunction as proof of forgery.[18] Thus this polish was both *Ossian*'s greatest selling-point and greatest weakness, and, more than that, the politico-cultural implications of *Ossian*'s Celtic world, where the civic virtues of active citizenship combined with the greatest excellencies of modern manners, were so explosive as to ensure that it needed to be challenged by the hegemonic forces of the day. Chapter four will unpack this Celtic world and its challenge at length, but for now it is the model developed by Blair and Macpherson to defend this central tenet which interests me. In both cases, Blair, in the "Critical Dissertation", and Macpherson in his "Dissertation Concerning the Antiquity, &c. of the Poems of Ossian the son of Fingal", produce the same line of reasoning. They posit an ancient culture and a literary tradition which aspired to certain manners and virtues which it memorialised in verse.[19] Thus poetry could be "better" than the immediate conditions from which it arose, and could in fact help ameliorate those conditions. After all, says Blair, such a system would not be a unique occurrence in the history of European civilisation:

> So far as Chivalry was an ideal system existing only in romance, it will not be thought surprising, when we reflect on the account before given of the Celtic Bards, that this imaginary refinement of heroic manners should be found among them, as much, at least, as among the *Trobadores* [*sic*], or strolling Provençal Bards, in the 10th or 11th century; whose songs, it is said, first gave rise to those romantic ideas of heroism, which for so long a time enchanted Europe.[20]

Having run the risk of letting the *Ossian*-as-romance (and medieval in origin) genie out of the bottle, Blair is quick to insist that *Ossian* should not be considered *as* romance:

> Ossian's heroes have all the gallantry and generosity of those fabulous knights, without their extravagance; and his love scenes have native tenderness, without any mixture of

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[18] Walter Scott, review of the Laing edition and the *Highland Society Report* in *The Edinburgh Review*, vol. 6, July 1805, pp. 429–62, p. 446.

[19] Macpherson and Blair's theorising was not without a sympathetic and wide audience: Thomas Warton, for one, accepted and repeated their line of reasoning (see *The History of English Poetry, from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth*, 3 vols (London, 1840; from the 1824 ed. of Richard Price), vol. 1, p. xli.

[20] "A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the son of Fingal" (1763, rev. 1765) in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 343–400, p. 376.

> those forced and unnatural conceits which abound in the old romances. The adventures related by our poet which resemble the most those of romance, concern women who follow their lovers to war disguised in the armour of men; and these are so managed as to produce, in the discovery, several of the most interesting situations; one beautiful instance of which may be seen in Carric-thura, and another in Calthon and Colmal.
> (p. 376)

As I suggested above, it is striking how this passage has influenced subsequent comparisons of the two. John Dwyer, in discussing *Ossian*'s 'sentimental and chivalric knights errant' distinguishes *Ossian*'s 'enlightened sentiment and humanity' from the empty code of chivalric romance, claiming superiority for the former on the grounds that its virtue springs 'from genuine feeling and conscience – moral sense or sentiment – and not from any set of elaborate rules of conduct' (Gaskill (ed.): 1991, p. 195). In other words we see the same distinction between the natural and spontaneous (good) and the forced or elaborated (bad). However, back with Blair, I am not concerned with the coherence or legitimacy of this contribution to the debate but with the insights into the predispositions of Macpherson's aesthetic milieu towards the romance form they display.

The first issue raised is that of form. Blair, for reasons to do with his overall argument not difficult to understand given that *Ossian* is poetry, is talking exclusively here of metrical romance composed by '*Trobadores*, or strolling Provençal Bards.' The history of the romance he lays out in his *Lectures* accords with this as far as it goes, but in its relative emphasis is closer to the eighteenth-century norm which saw romance as primarily a prose form. While he begins with a primitivist commonplace that the first manifestations of the genre were poetic, Blair swiftly moves (virtually without comment) onto concentrating on the 'voluminous and tedious' romance books of later times (1783, vol. 2, p. 308). This form begot the 'Heroic Romance', a genre which 'dwindled down to the Familiar Novel' (p. 308) before making a return in the shape of the modern novel.' Make what we will of this genealogy of the novel, it is indubitably a prose genealogy, and this places Blair at one with most of his contemporaries. Indeed, so dominant was the idea of romance proper as a prose phenomenon that one of the century's most outspoken proponents of the genre unequivocally defines romance as

'an Epic in prose.'[21] Of course Reeve was not unaware of metrical romances (it is unlikely that she would have claimed epic and romance to have historically been 'continually mistaken for each other' if she had been [p. 16]), but the point is that when she wants to claim aesthetic legitimacy for the genre she does so for its prose form. It is true that Richard Hurd, arguably the greatest apologist for the genre in the 1760s, concentrates on poetry, but by romance he means the renaissance aristocratic romance epics of Ariosto, Tasso and Sidney, not medieval chivalric romances.[22] As the second half of the century progressed, interest in the poetic forms of romance did increase, in part because of an inescapable primitivist logic which considered poetry to be older than prose and, as such, open to some measure of rehabilitation as primitive poetry.[23] Nevertheless Percy, in his "Essay on the Metrical Romances" (1765) demonstrates the mid-century assumption of a prose as the dominant form when he laments that 'it seems not to have been known to such as have written on the nature and origin of books of chivalry, that the first compositions of this kind were in verse, and usually sung to the harp.'[24] Furthermore, the very title of Percy's essay bears out the assumption he is pressing against: he qualifies the term romance with "Metrical", where the modern medieval scholar, I think it generally fair to say, is more likely to feel the need to qualify the term with "prose".

Whichever way one cuts it, it seems broadly correct to suggest that when eighteenth-century critics talked of romance they did not primarily and instinctively mean the sort of medieval poetry we would today, and which provide the most compelling examples of the romancer's art. This is not merely a matter of scholarly semantics, since it also suggests a lack of sophistication in the critical debate and also

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[21] Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance* (London, 1785; repr. in facsimile edition 1980), p. 13.

[22] See Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957), p. 186 for this distinction.

[23] Johnson (1964), p. 115. That verse came before prose was a primitivist commonplace, as self-evidently true (and for similar reasons) as the belief, current well into this century, that if you have an oral and a written version of a tale, the oral one predates the written.

[24] Thomas Percy, *The Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 3 vols, (London, 1845 (1765)), vol. 3, p. 186.

highlights the state of the canon at this time. Put simply, many of the great metrical romances were lost to the eighteenth century. In France while it was known since at least the sixteenth century that Chrétien de Troyes had written a number of poems (although not all of those now attributed to him), it was not until 1777 that any of his romances were published and even then only in an edition so heavily bowdlerised that it makes Macpherson look like a model of editorial propriety.[25] In Britain, Warton in his *History* credits 'Chrestien' as the author of only three romances and his understanding of these is shaky to say the least: contrary to his belief, there is no Chrétien romance on Tristram, and Warton is mistaken in believing the *Launcelot* to be incomplete (vol. 1, pp. 136–7). In terms of native literature, British antiquarian efforts at uncovering the treasures of Medieval verse were taking off roughly contemporary to (and were then greatly fired by) *Ossian*, but it was not until the nineteenth century that the most significant of Medieval MS, the British Library's Cotton Nero x, and with it *Sir Gawain and the Greene Knight* (perhaps the most sophisticated Medieval verse romance written – or yet brought to light), was rediscovered. Percy had access to two alliterative romances but he included neither in his *Reliques* (1765) and they did not see the light of day, and become the first published examples of the form, until Thomas Pinkerton's *Scottish Poems* (1792).[26] The absence of such works from the literary canon meant that the outstanding examples of the classical romance tradition were unavailable to eighteenth century theorists.[27] While credit is frequently attributed to the Ossianic venture for inspiring antiquarian scholarship (if only by creating a commercial market), the significance of the corollary to that fact – that those engaged in the

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[25] See Roger Middleton, 'Chrétien's Erec in the Eighteenth Century' in *The Changing Face of Arthurian Romance*, ed. by Alison Adams *et al.*, Arthurian Studies no. 16, (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 151–66.

[26] For the rediscovery of the poems of the so-called Alliterative Revival, see Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 126–7. Turville-Petre is wrong to suggest that Warton's *History* brought *Sir Gawain and the Greene Knight* to light (p. 127): while Warton knew of the Cotton Nero x MS he did not read or publish its contents, and the *Gawain* ballad he does talk of is a pale sketch (probably a folk re-telling) of the full romance as we know it.

[27] 'The condescension and insecure ignorance that yet pertained in 1810 throw into sharp relief Percy's achievement and the even greater accomplishment of Thomas Warton's *History*' (Stuart

Ossianic project had little access to the medieval canon we today take for granted – is perhaps underrated. It would, of course, be naive to think that, given the prevailing tastes, Blair's opinion would have been considerably different had he had the Gawain-poet rather than his schoolroom chapbook in mind as the pinnacle of the genre's development. Nevertheless, the leap which allows critics to appreciate metrical romances has proved shorter than for their prose counterparts: as late as the 1970s Eugene Vinaver (the most influential Medieval scholar of recent times) felt the need to defend the organisational principles and 'aesthetic idiom' of the so-called Vulgate Cycle of French Prose Romances, while even today, in a literary climate many times more sympathetic to all forms of the romance than the mid-eighteenth century, late medieval and Renaissance prose redactions of romance matter are considered to represent a degenerate leave over from the golden age of the genre.[28] The one exception to this is, of course, Thomas Malory's fifteenth century *Le Morte D'Arthur*, but then Malory was not only undervalued but almost entirely unread in the eighteenth century.[29]

However, the greater part of Blair's description of romance is given over to the question of content. Blair's use of expressions such as 'extravagance' and 'forced and unnatural conceits' echoes his writings on the genre in his *Lectures* when he characterises 'romances of knight-errantry' as having 'carried an ideal of chivalry to a still more extravagant height than it had risen in fact' (vol.2, p. 306). Romances, according to Blair, are filled with 'magicians, dragons and giants, invulnerable men, winged horses, enchanted armour and enchanted castles' and represent, in short, 'adventures absolutely incredible, yet suited to the gross ignorance of these ages, and

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Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford, 1986), p.18). Curran usefully alerts us to the relative belatedness of the recovery of many medieval artefacts.

[28] Vinaver, *Form and Meaning in Medieval Romance*, The Presidential Address of the Modern Humanities Research Association, 1966.

[29] Malory was never abridged for the seventeenth century audience (the fate of many romance cycles) and was not published between 1634 and 1816. See Johnson (1964), p. 29. Hugh MacDougall has suggested that Galfridian foundation myths lost ground in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as their concentration on the 'achievements of kings no longer served the interests of dominant groups' (*Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal, 1982), p. 26). See also James Merriman, *The Flower of Kings: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in*

to the legends, and superstitious notions concerning magic and necromancy, which then prevailed' (*ibid*). As such, they had been rendered obsolete by the development of society and taste. Macpherson himself, in distinguishing the "genuine" remains of Ossian from over a millennium of (mainly Irish) "corruptions" adopts a similar vocabulary (the accuracy of his description not being the point at the moment):

> [The Irish poems'] allusions to the manners and customs of the fifteenth century, are so many, that it is matter of wonder to me, how any one could dream of their antiquity. They are entirely writ in that romantic taste, which prevailed two ages ago.—Giants, enchanted castles, dwarfs, palfreys, witches and magicians form the whole circle of the poet's invention. The celebrated *Fion* could scarcely move from one hillock to another, without encountering a giant, or being entangled in the circles of a magician. Witches, on broomsticks, were continually hovering round him, like crows; and he had freed enchanted virgins in every valley in Ireland. In short, *Fion*, great as he was, passed a disagreeable life.—Not only had he to engage all the mischiefs in his own country, foreign armies invaded him, assisted by magicians and witches, and headed by kings, as tall as the main-mast of a first rate. (*Temora* dissertation, pp. 217–18)

The characterisation of the contents of romance in these terms accords with the critical consensus of the time, exemplified in two obscure but romance-orientated critiques of *Ossian*. Both of these texts demonstrate, to varying degrees, the beginnings of a new and potentially more sympathetic way of considering the romance, and their ultimate hostility therefore bears striking testimony to the deep-seated prejudices against the form. In terms of the way it re-writes certain events of the early 1760s concerning his own part in the *Ossian* project, David Hume's unpublished essay 'On the Genuineness of Ossian's Poems' may represent one of the more dishonest or at least self-deluding pieces of criticism generated by the Macpherson saga (and it is not short of competition).[30] Nevertheless it makes a number of valuable points. Whatever his earlier allegiances and beliefs, by 1775 Hume had no time for the pretensions of

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England between 1485 and 1835 (Lawrence, Kansas, 1973) for the political and ideological reasons for the decline of Arthur.

[30] For example, Hume's essay ends by asking what on earth could have caused Blair to not only be taken in by Macpherson, but to collect evidence in Macpherson's defence when the authenticity of *Ossian* was doubted. The answer, as the *Highland Society Report* made clear, was two letters from Hume, eager for ammunition with which to defend *Ossian* in London and to sell *Ossian* in France (see chapter one, section one above for Hume's letters).

Ossian to represent the epic remains of an ancient Gaelic tradition and, as many had done and would continue to do, he seized on the perceived anachronism of manners as proof that something was amiss.[31] Put bluntly, how could *Ossian* represent primitive epic when 'Fingal carries his ideas of chivalry [...] much beyond what was ever dreamt of by Amadis de Gaul or Lancelot du Lac'?[32] Again, the rights and wrongs of Hume's position are not my concern here, rather his characterisation of the romance qualities. He considers Fingal's habit of retiring from battle until the moment of the utmost danger, wondering rhetorically, 'are these the manners of barbarous nations, or even of people that have common sense?' (p. 474). Of course, 'common sense' is a commodity in short supply across heroic poetry as whole: epic affords as many examples as romance of characters putting a less than pragmatic code of behaviour before their own best interests. Nevertheless, and however unfair it might be to single the form out for particular or exclusive attention, romance has always been susceptible to Hume's charge that the 'affected generosity, and gallantry of chivalry' of *Ossian* and romance in general represent 'artificial modes of thinking' (p. 474). This suggests that Hume is less interested in – and disapproving of – the historical anachronism of *Ossian*'s depicted society and its occupations than he is in the general fallacy of romance chivalry, a system of value and action marked (for him it would appear exclusively) by its disregard for 'probability or even possibility' (p. 474). For Hume such 'violation of nature' would seem to be implicit in the chivalric ideal and exists whether or not Macpherson has removed the more obvious ornamentation of medieval "ignorance and superstition". Ultimately the difference between his negative evaluation of *Ossian* and Blair's positive one in the Dissertation proves to be one of emphasis. Blair disparages Medieval chivalry's 'extravagance' and unnaturalness in the same way as Hume, the difference between them lying in the fact that Blair sees *Ossian* as marrying the ethos of

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[31] For example, Malcolm Laing's observation about the 'anachronism [...] of the epic poem, in ascribing tournaments and the combats of chivalry to the supposed period of Fingal and Trenmor' *The Poems of Ossian*, 2 volumes (Edinburgh, 1805), vol. 1, p. 193.

[32] Hume, 'On the Genuineness of Ossian's Poems' (1775) in John Hill Burton, *The Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, 2 volumes, (Edinburgh, 1846), vol. 1, pp. 471–80, p. 473.

chivalry to the imperatives of naturalism in such a way as to remove the suspicion that the former has no basis in human reality.

Hume's characterisation of *Ossian* as romance is a wholly negative one, but nevertheless does begin to formulate a theory of romance which moves from particular content to general characteristics. This marks something of a move towards more modern thinking, however firmly tied to questions of content Hume remains. However, his thinking had in fact been pre-empted some ten years earlier in a now little-known pamphlet published anonymously and unambiguously entitled *Fingal King of Morven, A Knight-Errant* (1764). Its author starts from the contention (which he proves in numerous ways) that *Ossian* cannot represent any sort of historical record, and therefore cannot be the epic poetry claimed for it by Macpherson. If this seems a somewhat eccentric approach to the question, the link between epic poetry and historical event was routinely made in the eighteenth century. Aristotle's contention that epic was based on historical record, albeit a record moulded into an artistic shape which took epic beyond a chronicle of event, was only reinforced by the growth of historicist or primitivist theory in the middle years of the century. This theory, in the hands of the likes of Thomas Blackwell and Blair stressed the growth of the epic from the need of early, pre-literate societies to record the momentous events of their history and was therefore basically concerned with historical facts. The arrival of "letters", or written communication, had allowed the discipline of history to develop and had freed the poet from the task of recording event, allowing him to appeal to the imagination. At this point the romance is born. Thomas Percy elaborates this model of development succinctly in the "Essay on the Metrical Romances" and uses it to explain why, once freed of the discipline imposed on it by the need to record fact, poetry before the age of refinement succumbs to 'all the monstrous extravagances of wild imagination, unguided by judgement and uncorrected by art.'[33] Richard Hurd works this process backwards in his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), seeking to make the 'extravagances' of

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[33] 'Essay on the Metrical Romances' in part 3 of *The Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (London, 1845; first published 1765), p. 186.

medieval writing acceptable to the modern age in terms of allegory. For Hurd, monsters become explicable as tyrannical overlords fictionalised and allegorised so as to appeal to an albeit untutored imagination, and to a taste for exotic adventure. In other words, Hurd undermines the neat fact/fiction distinction within Percy's model (in fact he goes to some lengths to demonstrate how romance characteristics, read right, can reveal facts about the socio-political climate in which they were written), while nevertheless assuming that historical fact is in deep cover in romance.

It followed from this speculative history of development, then, that more identifiably historical an epic was, the "purer" it was and, of course *vice versa*: Macpherson suggests that 'what renders Temora infinitely more valuable than Fingal, is the light its throws on the history of the times' (*Temora* dissertation, p. 215). The neat circularity of this argument in the hands of Macpherson and Blair, whereby historicity and epic status mutually vouch for and reinforce each other hints at the reasons for the growth and popularity of such models, particularly in Scotland. Hume may have boasted of the Historical Age and the Historical Nation, but the fact was that there was something of a lack of documents from the remotest of historical times on which to practise this newly acquired historiographical self-consciousness. The ancient Scottish King Lists, for example, did not survive the growth of antiquarian scholarship represented by the pioneering work of Father Thomas Innes's *Inquiry into the Origins of the Ancient Inhabitants of Scotland* (1729), while going further back, Classical historians had relatively little to say about the Gaelic world, somewhere they knew and cared little about.[34] For example, Tacitus, who had decided that the Caledonians were of Germanic extraction, offered a troubling legacy to those looking to construct a Scottish ethnic background: on one level it accorded with attempts to Teutonify parts of Scotland (the Lowlands) in the cause of assimilation into Anglo-Britain, but on another level it threatened to blur the distinction between the Teutonic Lowlander and

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[34] For the destruction of 'a formidable ideology of Scottish nationhood' at the hands of seventeenth and eighteenth century theoretical advances, see Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689–c.1830* (Cambridge, 1993). I am also indebted here to Dr. Nicholas Phillipson.

the genetically barbarous Celt, essential for the identification of the Lowlander with the Englishman, and the concomitant creation of a 'tartan bogeyman', one of whose purposes was to 'exculpate Lowland Scotland from the English accusations of Jacobitism.'[35] Teutonic Celts were even more unacceptable to Macpherson, of course, who was attempting to create a pan-Celtic Scottish (in fact, British) past. It is thus no coincidence that early in his *Fingal* dissertation, in what represents the first historiographical statement of his career, Macpherson takes issue with Tacitus by suggesting that Tacitus made the understandable mistake of confusing 'the Germans properly called' with Celtic colonies in what it is now Germany. If any immigrants to Scotland came from Germany (and Macpherson is willing to contemplate the possibility) they were, he is adamant from these Celtic colonies (p. 44).[36] *Ossian* thus reinstates the Celtic origin for the Gaeltachd, although in going to the other extreme, Macpherson's pan-Celticism could (and in some quarters would) prove just as – if not more – problematic than Tacitus' pan-Teutonism. In the event, for *Ossian*'s Scottish Enlightenment supporters, the poems allowed Lowlanders 'to divide themselves into emotionally Celtic and in practice Saxon', while the pan-Celticism was a stick that *Ossian*'s opponents wielded with vigour.[37]

All this suggests that the question of *Ossian*'s place within the historiographical agendas of the Scottish Enlightenment is an involved and debatable one, and chapter four's examination of Macpherson's conception of a primitive past in relation to contemporaries such as Adam Ferguson will consider many of its central issues at greater length. A measure of the complexity of the issue is afforded by Colin Kidd's observation that *Ossian* could be all things to all people; that, for example, 'Blair deals

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[35] Murray G.H. Pittock, *The Myth of the Jacobite Clans* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 32.

[36] Macpherson's vision of Celtic Britain is explored in chapter four below. For *Ossian* and the ethnic competition between Goth and Celt see, for example, Nick Groom's 'Celts, Goths, and the Nature of the Literary Source' in *Tradition in Transition: Women Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-Century Canon*, ed. by Alvario Ribeiro, SJ and James G. Basker, (Oxford, 1996), pp. 275–296.

[37] Murray G.H. Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685–1789* (London, 1997), p. 105. Pittock notes the objections of one such opponent, John Pinkerton.

with aesthetics and conjectural history, but without any mention of Ossianic poetry's historiographical significance, the most prominent feature of Macpherson's own glosses' (1993, p. 228). This distinction between conjectural history and conventional historiography is a vital one, and once again, it will be confronted in depth in chapter four. For the moment, I merely wish to point out that the observation that *Ossian* is located in an age that historians 'considered *terra incognita*' has a greater significance than merely to claim that Macpherson has carefully placed his "forgery" where scholarship could not touch it, a claim as shallow as it is dubious.[38] *Ossian* presents a window on time and a people whose significant events have hitherto been, as Macpherson puts it, 'involved in fables, or lost in obscurity' (p. 43), but a window predicated on the principle that epic represents as close to history as we are likely to get before the arrival of 'the arts of polished life' (*ibid*). Of course that 'as close to' is (or seems) a nigh-on infinitely elastic phrase, and one which allows Macpherson to turn somersaults in his claim that the plot of *Fingal* 'is so little interlarded with fable that one cannot help thinking it the genuine history of Fingal's expedition, embellished by poetry' (p. 37). Indeed, it was precisely this question of embellishment which means that few were willing to go as far as Macpherson and suggest that any more than ideas about the culture and learning of remote peoples was available through poetry.[39] Nevertheless, while Adam Ferguson might have believed it 'quite absurd to quote the fable of the Iliad, or the Odyssey [...] as authorities in matter of fact relating to the history of mankind', he equally saw the 'great justice' in assuming that such relics may help us learn of 'the conceptions and sentiments of the age in which they were composed.'[40]

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[38] Matthew P. McDiarmid, '*Ossian* as Scottish Epic', *Scottish Literary News*, vol.3, no. 3 (November, 1973), 4–9, (p. 8).

[39] Macpherson's own enthusiasm for *Ossian* as historical record in the objective, modern sense seems to have waned by the time he came to write his *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771/3). See chapter four below.

[40] Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. by Fania Oz-Salzberger, (Cambridge, 1995; 1st publ. 1767), pp. 76–7. Ferguson is here observing the distinction Kidd notes between conjectural history and historiography.

Having clarified this relationship between history and epic, the pamphlet's attack on *Ossian*'s historicity seems less obscure. By pointing out the manifest historical absurdities in the poems the author was, by Macpherson's own argument, destroying their claim to be primary epic. Having achieved this, the author turns his attention to addressing the romance elements of *Ossian*. Although the author pays more attention than does Hume to documenting 'combats, tournaments, feasting, invincible champions, the motivation of love' (p. 43) he eventually concentrates his fire on more subtle exegesis. Like Hume and Blair the author finds something ludicrous in the 'all the super-refined courtesy, and fantastic affections of the romance' in *Ossian* (p. 42), and he agrees with Hume in finding the 'hideous delicacy of allowing an unfortunate princess to die of pure love' (p. 43) in *Ossian* as symptomatic of the genre. In fact this 'hideous delicacy' is one of the few things it is possible to definitely identify as a romance trait in *Ossian*. It is arguably the case that commentators are more fanciful than they are willing to admit in their discovery of the furniture of romance in *Ossian*: they make frequent assertions about tournaments and invincible heroes but rarely cite any, for the simple reason that it is hard to find many – which goes to show how tricky it is to base definitions on content alone. This does not invalidate the romance critique, however, and the sense that the chivalry of *Ossian* is an intangible essence, not a matter of paraphernalia, is an important one, and helps account for the appeal and threat of the poems, a point to which I shall return at the close of the section.

However, the pamphlet goes beyond characterising the 'very quintessence of knightly courtesy' (p. 26) in *Ossian* and develops what Hume was to later only imply as a more striking romance characteristic: the lack of any geo-political reality in the poems. The point is made repeatedly in the pamphlet: whether it is likely that Fingal's grandfather Trenmor would, during the Roman campaigns in Northern Britain, have been engaged in hunting expeditions in Scandinavia (even assuming for a moment that a second-century Gael could have sailed that far); whether it is likely that, while Severus was overrunning Caledonia, Fingal was abroad 'engaged in exploits more

sublime' such as 'feasting combating, charming, and, alas, burying the ladies' (p. 29). This second question links the super-refined chivalry of romance with this lack of reality. Indeed, the author even doubts, Severus notwithstanding, that it is likely that anyone in the third century would want to go to the trouble of conquering somewhere as apparently miserable as Morven. This last point leads our author to the more general observation that *Ossian* generally lacks any acknowledgement of the 'means, force and effort' required to mount a military campaign. In short, the author formalises these observations into the dictum that within *Ossian* there is 'seldom any just proportion maintained in the cause to the effect' (p. 39), a distillation of many of the eighteenth-century associations of the term romantic (Johnson (1964), p. 211). That said, the spirit with which this formulation is offered (at this point the author reins in the facetiousness which had marked his earlier observations) means that it can be taken seriously as an analysis of the defining characteristic of romance, and as such compares strikingly with more recent descriptions of the form. For example, Erich Auerbach justifies describing martial actions in romance as 'feats of arms' rather than 'wars' by claiming that they 'do not fit into any politically purposeful pattern', and he distinguishes epic and romance on the grounds that while in the former the warrior ethos serves a politico-historical purpose (however distorted), in the latter the knightly ethos 'serves no political function; it serves no practical reality at all; it has become absolute'.[41]

However, the author is not willing to allow his diagnosis – however disinterested – to remain an unqualified reproach to *Ossian*. Having delineated the nature of *Ossian* he goes on to suggest that such an aesthetic scheme should be viewed positively and might have a legitimate value of its own:

> [*Ossian*] may make very good poetry; but [...] a species of poetry much more strongly marked with the gigantic limbs and Gothic features of the romance, than the natural symmetry, the milder lineaments of the genuine epic muse (p. 10)

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[41] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis; The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard Trask, (Princeton, 1968; first published 1946), p. 140 and p. 134. Like the author of the pamphlet, Auerbach links the absence of 'practical motivation through a political and historical context' with the importance of love as motivation for action and source of value (p. 141).

Thus the author's attempts at distinguishing *Ossian*'s genre are geared towards finding the 'proper light' in which to appreciate poems with 'very high' poetic merit.

However, no matter how hard the pamphlet's author attests his appreciation for the 'epic romantic, or epic Gaelic' (p. 33), his description of knight-errantry, and the facetiousness which marks his actual description of the alternative reality of romance betrays many of his contemporaries' biases against the genre. While at least we can say that he is able to see the need for a sympathetic generic reading, it seems clear that he is in no doubt as to where superiority lies. In short, nothing reveals the deep-seated and prejudicial assumptions underlying romance theory in the eighteenth century than attempts to revise the more obvious of those assumptions which, while making a claim for generic relativism, rarely have the strength of their convictions.

It is not only disinterested scholarly accuracy motivating the pamphlet's efforts to align *Ossian* with the romance tradition. In yoking *Ossian* to the conventional chivalric tradition the pamphlet represents an attempt to appropriate a potent cultural icon, to neutralise the explosive potential of Macpherson's text. This works on three levels. Most obviously, the author of the pamphlet knew full well, despite his own critical enlightenment about the 'epic Gaelic', that to tar *Ossian* with the romance brush was to diminish its status as literature and its power as a cultural symbol. We have already seen how his own professed even-handedness is in practice replaced by a patronising indulgence. In terms of the reception of the poems we enter into treacherous waters here, since broadly speaking *Ossian*'s popularity rested chiefly on the *Fragments* and on the shorter lyrical poems and passages embedded within the epics rather than the epics themselves (witness for example the relative lateness of many of the translations of the epics compared to the lyric pieces, a belatedness which reflects not just the amount of energy required to translate them but a relative lack of demand for the full epics).[42] Nevertheless, as a tool of cultural polemic, the epic's importance to *Ossian* should not be underestimated, something vividly demonstrated by

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[42] I owe much of my awareness of this issue to Dr. Howard Gaskill.

the vehemence of the *Ossian* wars and the resistance to the appropriation of the epic form offered by the anti-*Ossian* faction. Equally, if the extent to which the majority of *Ossian*'s wider readership (as opposed to the self-appointed guardians of high culture) consciously concerned themselves with epic proprieties in their appreciation of Celtic sentiment is a matter for debate, it is nevertheless true that connotations of epic grandeur (particularly when concentrated into four pages) do give *Ossian* an edge over less glamorous literary forms like the ballad, even, I think, for today's readership. On this level the author diminishes *Ossian* in his genre classification. However, the model of romance development suggested by the pamphlet diminishes the cultural significance of *Ossian* in more subtle ways.

In claiming a romance origin for *Ossian* the pamphlet is quite categorical that 'not a single vestige' of the manners and ideals of chivalry and virtue exhibited in *Ossian* appeared in the 'manners, ideas, or poetry of this country, anterior to the Norman conquest' (p. 44) and, as if to prove it, conducts a number of intricate calculations designed to arrive at a date at which such ideas might have arrived in Scotland, that date being the earliest for *Ossian*'s composition. By 'this country' it is unclear whether he means England or Scotland, but it seems likely he means both. This is not just an Englishman's sloppy habit of talking about Britain when he means England, and represents a further symbol of his assimilative agenda: England suffered a Norman conquest, not Scotland, something Scots ideologues from the Wars of Independence on were eager to point out, and their English counterparts equally anxious to paper over. Next, attention is turned to who could have composed the poems, and the author decides, on the grounds that the poems so misrepresent the Gaelic past, and are so imbued with an Anglo-Norman chivalry, that the 'authors, bards, [and] talemakers' responsible for *Ossian* were 'utter strangers to Caledonia' (p. 45). Thus, *Ossian* is reconfigured as a series of chivalric romances set in an ancient Gaelic past and reliant on, and written by ethnic outsiders who had access to the ideals and courtly structure of French romance.

The rights and wrongs of this are not so much the point here as what this line of reasoning reveals about the pamphlet's project. For the record, the sources upon which Macpherson drew are indeed best described as a medieval tradition, in turn drawing on and showing traces of a much older legendary structure. Equally, over its lifetime the stories around Fionn and his band were imbued with elements from Arthurian romance in a two-way process of cross-fertilisation.[43] Nevertheless, there is no evidence to suggest that this tradition owed anything at all in its inception or significant form (in as much as we can talk of such a thing) to the chivalric tradition of South Britain. The point of the pamphlet's position on *Ossian* is to appropriate the Celtic world as presented by Macpherson for a literary and cultural mainstream. After all, the chivalric tradition, closely associated with the Arthurian matter, is a discourse of accommodation to an Anglo-Norman meta-narrative. King Arthur makes gradual progress, from the time of the early Plantaganets, towards being fully Anglicised. Tennyson's essentially English Arthur stands at the end of this process, as does a tradition of literary history which blots out Arthur's Celtic origins. The extent to which Arthur has been de-Celticised in English literary historiography can be gauged from a standard work such as James Merriman's on the Arthurian lore. In distinguishing 'truly' Arthurian texts (whatever they might be) from the false notes sounded by the likes of John Leyden and Reginald Heber, Merriman talks disparagingly of 'Celtic primitivism' or 'Celtic antiquities' intruding on the "true" Arthurian story, the 'chivalric romance of a mythic king' (1973, p. 149, p. 169). The figure of Fionn, however, was subject to no such appropriation, and his appearance in Jacobite iconography (and later as a totem for Irish Nationalism) bears witness to his oppositional status.[44] Without going into this

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[43] An example of this cross-fertilisation. Over time the Fianna became greater hunters of a clearly Norman kind, a development which suggests an input from Arthurian lore. However, the initial association of Arthur with hunting which the Normans had developed and elaborated originally came from the image of Fionn as an individual hunter. (Ó hÓgáin (1988), p. 128). See also Bysveen (1982), p. 56–7.

[44] I am grateful to Professor Murray Pittock for this contrast between Fionn and Arthur as national figures. For the 'Gaelic messianic tradition' of Fionn as associated with a returning Stuart king, see his *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present* (London, 1991) p. 5.

issue any further, it ought then to be possible to see that the pamphlet's attempt to assimilate *Ossian* within the recognised chivalric tradition is an attempt to swallow a rhetoric of cultural difference within the Anglo-British mainstream.

This insistence that *Ossian* was the product of non-Gaels calls to mind Benedict Anderson's analysis of the imperialist motives behind colonial archaeological efforts. While superficially glorifying the past of the subject country, such finds are more significantly either built into a putative historiography of decadence, or claimed as the product of alien expertise. The result is that 'the reconstructed monuments, juxtaposed with the surrounding rural poverty, said to the natives: our very presence shows that you have always been, or have long become, incapable of either greatness or self-rule.'[45] The final act of appropriation is the seeming benevolence towards the colonised this archaeology implies, since in these terms 'monumental archaeology [...] allowed the state to appear as the guardian of a generalised, but also local, tradition' (Anderson (1991), p. 181). While such models may perhaps never satisfactorily account for the specific in its entirety, these observations do sharpen our sense of the assimilative tendencies of the pamphlet's delineation of *Ossian*. In denying that *Ossian* is the individualised product of Celtic Scotland, in insisting that it could not be produced without the outside assistance of Norman mores, the pamphlet defuses *Ossian*'s cultural significance as a Scottish product and legitimises more widespread cultural "integration".

The third and related level of appropriation comes within the very argument which claims that *Ossian* can not have Gaelic creative roots. As we have seen, the author states, as if self-evidently, that chivalry could not have any roots in the Celtic past, an assertion which is not only an error in point of fact (although possibly one made in good faith) but also elides a live debate within the antiquarian circles of the time. For the opposite view one only has to travel as far as Ferguson's *Essay On the History of Civil Society* for the observation that the basics of chivalry (which he defines

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[45] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Rise of Nationalism* (Rev. edition, New York and London, 1991), p. 181.

as a set of established rules of conduct, a 'marvellous respect and veneration to the fair sex' and 'a supposed junction of the heroic and sanctified character') were in place 'among the ancient Celtic nations of Europe' (1995, pp. 191–2). And this reasoning is found beyond Scottish intellectuals. Ferguson's view was derived from those of Mallet and Montesquieu, and Thomas Warton attempts to reconcile the long-standing theory of the spread of romance which posited an Arabian origin with the more recent Northern-origin theories of Mallet and Percy by suggesting that the Scandinavians (whom Mallet felt free to refer to as Celtae) were originally from near Georgia before migrating North, and in turn moving back South (in the shape, for example, of the Normans).[46] Admittedly this Scandinavian theory is more Teutonic than Celtic (Nick Groom has pointed out that Percy busily replaced every mention of Celtic with the word Gothic in his translation of Mallet (1996, p. 294)), but the point is that Warton goes to some lengths to find a place for the Northern theories within the accepted framework. These new theories, by suggesting that the Normans did not rely on contact with the Moors for developing romance, at least raise the possibility that such ideas could have got to Caledonia before the thirteenth century, the possibility that the spread of romance was not, as the pamphlet would claim, an exclusively North-wards migration. Again this is a complex area, but that is precisely the point: what the pamphlet wishes to present as a universal truth is in fact a polemical position within an on-going cultural debate.

The question might be asked why an age which spent so much time denigrating the romance spent almost as much time fighting over its origins. In other words, why was it so important that *Ossian* had to be not only romance but non-native romance at that? Furthermore, it would seem to be something of a paradoxical fact that the routine denigration of artefacts of medieval literary culture seemingly went hand in

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[46] 'Of the Origins of Romantic Fiction in Europe' in *The History of English Poetry, From the Close of the Eleventh Century to the Commencement of the Eighteenth*, 3 vols (London, 1840; from Price's 1824 edition), vol. 1, p. xliv.

hand with the enthusiasm of the "Gothic Revival".[47] Johnson has suggested that part of the appeal of the Middle Ages was just such a paradox, the sense that the times 'attracted by their strangeness while they repelled by their unnaturalness' (1964, pp. 5–6). The paradox was sharpened by an awareness that, for all their strangeness, the ideals of chivalry were the source of the values which, in the words of Gilbert Stuart in 1778, 'discriminate the modern from the ancient world' (Johnson (1964), pp. 56–7). In other words, chivalry, for all its absurdity, affectation and vulgarity was seen as the first gleanings of the sensibility and concepts of virtue which would eventually lead to more polished times. Warton, for example, saw the absurdity of the medieval as that absurdity which 'will always appear at periods when men are so far civilised as to have lost their native simplicity, and yet have not attained just ideas of politeness and propriety' (*History of English Poetry*, vol. 2, p. 126). The crucial point is that this marks an advancement towards 'Polish', and as such the fight over the origins of chivalry and romance (virtually indistinguishable terms at the time) was the fight over the origins of those qualities which eventually civilised society (Johnson (1964), pp. 56–7). Furthermore concepts of chivalry (boiled down in much the same way as Ferguson does above) would from this point on come to play, as Mark Girouard has shown, an ever more important role in the creation of the ideologies of Empire and the Code of the (Anglo-Saxon) Gentleman, from the Young England movement and Digby's *Broad Stone of Honour* via *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and the Boy Scouts to the iconography of Scott and Oates and the 'almost unanimous tendency of Anglo-Saxon witnesses [to the sinking of the *Titanic*] to assume that anyone who behaved badly was an Italian, or some other form of foreigner.'[48] I suggested above that the

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[47] And also went hand in hand with their recovery: see Percy's more than qualified praise of romance in his 'Essay on the Metrical Romances' for an example of this curious conjunction of attitude.

[48] Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven, 1981), p. 14. As I write, an obituary for Colonel Andrew Croft (1906–1998), soldier and explorer, bears witness to the longevity of the Victorian and Edwardian ideals of chivalry. Sir Alexander Glen sums up Colonel Croft as 'true right through, his own man, but with a staunch belief and quality of caring for the weak or vulnerable. He was a great gentleman' (*The Guardian*, Tuesday July 14th 1998).

pamphlet misrepresents *Ossian* by suggesting that it contains more of the outrageous paraphernalia of old-fashioned romance than it in fact does while at the same time being broadly correct in its claim that *Ossian* represents the code of chivalry. As a matter of fact, the stripped-down, low-profile knight-errantry of *Ossian*, conveniently excised of the embarrassing whistles and bells of invisible castles and the like, would seem to provide a convenient originating text for such a movement of spiritual (and Spiritual) chivalry. The pamphlet on one level demonstrates the tensions within a text which is on the cusp of a change in taste, torn between growing admiration and traditional contempt, and on another an effort to appropriate the source of that admiration. In other words, given the growing importance of the traditional chivalric values, presented in a way familiar from *Ossian*, it was insupportable that Macpherson could offer a vision of independent and self-sustaining chivalry originating in Celtic Scotland; a chivalry which furthermore predated the arrival of its more vulgar Norman cousin in Southern Britain by something in the region of seven hundred years.

Analysis of *Fingal King of Morven* has shifted our focus away from issues of scholarship to those of cultural politics. We have seen how Macpherson's resistance to the romance tag can be interpreted as a resistance to the assimilative pressures represented by the pamphlet. To attach a romance label was not only to make *Ossian* a less ancient, non-historically based, imaginatively vulgar, corrupt form, but also to suggest that it could not be a 'natural' product of the Gaeltachd. It is then perhaps as well to end this section with some comment on the wider picture with regards the medieval in the eighteenth century. These comments do not aim at to be all-embracing, but serve to illustrate some of the ways the medieval past was a contested space in the eighteenth century. Perhaps the most important point is that opinions on the medieval past were political: the third of Hurd's *Moral and Political Dialogues*, 'On the Golden Age of Queen Elisabeth' (1759), makes it clear that the feelings evoked by and attitude towards the ruins of Kenilworth Castle very much depended upon one's political persuasion, and that this position informed attitudes towards all aspects of life in

historical times, including the literary.[49] Of course, the 'Golden Age of Queen Elizabeth' was not medieval, but many of the features debated in the Dialogue – for example whether jousting represents a 'very barbarous entertainment' recommended under 'the specious name of gallantry or honour' or 'the best school of civility as well as heroism' (p. 52, p. 55) – suggest a medievalised Renaissance, a concentration on the chivalric revival of Tudor times.[50] Indeed Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* were initially conceived (as their full title-piece makes clear) as a defence and elaboration of the literary opinions expressed by "Arbuthnot" in the earlier Dialogue. Thus the enjoyment associated with viewing ruined castles could be a melancholic (and politically Tory) "joy of grief" for a noble culture now gone, an emblem of human *vanitas* in the face of the inexorable forces of time, and, given Macpherson's use of the form in his poem "On the Death of Marshal Keith", it could have overtones of cultural and national protest less polite than the leisured speculations of holidaying gentleman. At the same time, this enjoyment could just as well be of the order of a certain smugness, the righteousness felt by a (Whig) viewer who sees himself as part of a superior age, looking down on the remains of a prior culture (in this case despotic, superstitious and "tainted" by Catholicism) doomed to and deserving of oblivion.[51] This central ambiguity is, as we shall see in the following chapter, of crucial importance in coming to terms with *Ossian*.

Equally, writers emphasised different aspects of a medieval past. David Punter has contrasted the 'mainstream Gothic' of Hurd and Walpole, a 'Chivalric Gothic',

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[49] Hurd, 'Dialogue III; On the Golden Age of Queen Elisabeth: between the Hon. Robert Digby, Dr. Arbuthnot, and Mr. Addison. Occasioned by a view of Kenilworth Castle, in the year 1716', ed. by Edith J. Morley, (London, 1911; first edition 1759).

[50] And of course the eighteenth-century had a tendency, in one sense at least, to tar everything before 1688 with the same medieval brush.

[51] For the use of the "Gothic" as a totem of opposition mobilised by the Country party in the early part of the century, the echoes of which are in "Arbuthnot"'s position, see Christine Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and National Myth 1725–42* (Oxford, 1994); for an interpretation of the enthusiasm for ruins as a culturally antagonistic one see David Stewart, 'Political Ruins; Gothic Sham Ruins and the '45', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 55, no. 1 (Dec. 1996), 400–11. Ronald Paulson has recently pointed out the negative association of the chivalric past with Jacobitism in his *Don Quixote in England: The Aesthetics of Laughter* (Baltimore, 1998), p. 47.

with the altogether darker 'Heroic Gothic' represented by *Ossian* and lauded by Blair. The choice was between Hurd and Tasso and Blair and Rodnar Lodbrog, and to prefer the latter was to privilege 'the Dark Ages, the forgotten corners of Britain, the shadows, over the bright daylight colours, the trysts and troubadours, the jousts and joyings, of Hurd's chivalric medievalism'.[52] For Punter this is more than a matter of taste, since these medieval preferences suggest differing priorities: 'the chivalric search of Hurd is for evidence of continuity, whereas the heroic search of Blair is for evidence of difference' (1995, p. 29), the former looking to underpin and validate contemporary society, the latter the opposite, uncovering evidence of how 'the passions maintain their disruptive existence despite the veneering of civilising norms' (1995, p. 30). This might hold true for Hurd (and Blake, and even, conceivably, Macpherson), but it is more difficult to see Blair, the ideologue of the polite Republic of Letters, the civilising effect of properly moderated emotion, and the "Middling Ranks" of Edinburgh society generally, in quite such revolutionary terms. A symptom of this tension might be that Blair only quotes Lodbrog to suggest how much more gentle, polished and altogether more like the polite literature represented by Hurd's preferences *Ossian* is ("Critical Dissertation", p. 349). Nevertheless, whatever reservations exist about his final position on Blair and *Ossian*, Punter gives some indication of the competing interpretations of the past, and functions of those interpretations.

William Dowling has suggested that the medieval past represented by the *ancien regime* which Burke saw threatened in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) represents another construction of the eighteenth century of a lost age of chivalry for its own purposes. Although this is obviously not of immediate relevance to the climate of the 1760s, it is worth mentioning to illustrate the continuing ambiguities and delicate negotiations within which the romance is enmeshed through the second half of the century. For men such as Burke (and, says Dowling, Hume and Hurd) this chivalric past offers a 'sustaining vision of an heroic age in human society, a

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[52] David Punter, 'Ossian, Blake and the Questionable Source' in *Exhibited by Candlelight: Sources and Developments in the Gothic Tradition*, ed. by Valeria Tinkler-Villani *et al.*, (Amsterdam,

time when, there having occurred no fateful cleavage between the rational and the emotional, man's nature was yet whole'.[53] Thus chivalry can be reconfigured as more a state of mind, a transhistorical ideal of social cohesion (p. 124) than code of action tied to a place-when, and thus romance can be justified by seeing it not in terms of external events (as Hurd had attempted to do by analysing the geo-political background of the late Middle Ages and therefore having eventually to fall back on allegory) but as a moral imitation (p. 113–4). And so, while romance might have been dead since the attentions of Cervantes as a serious literary genre capable of speaking to people, it does not follow that chivalry, conceptualised in these terms, was. Burke was in fact, as David Duff has shown, part of a complex and contradictory debate between radical and reactionary writers in which both sides used the rhetoric of romance and chivalry both positively and negatively: both camps typed their respective bogey men as romance necromancers and monsters, the peddlers of ludicrous, Quixotic, and dangerous delusions, while simultaneously typing themselves as either knights delivering the weak from oppression (a radical view) or, as Burke does, defending the ideals of social cohesion represented by chivalric virtue.[54]

What is notable about all these deployments of medievalism, whether to confirm the superiority of, mythologise the origins of, or express dissatisfaction with, modern society is that they represent an ethos extracted from the artefacts and/or historical reality of the past. As such, they were rarely concerned with the "reality", and indeed could hold it in contempt. Kenilworth Castle, it might be recalled, owes its present dilapidated state not only to the ravages of time and the Civil War, but also to the attentions of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century: various small parts of the already ruined castle were demolished in order to make the whole vista more pleasingly ruinous for visitors, to ensure that the "reality" lived up to the image. In literature the same process was working in reverse: Percy when pressed by Joseph Ritson was unable

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1995), pp. 25–41, p. 28.

[53] William C. Dowling, 'Burke and the Age of Chivalry', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 12 (1982), 109124 (p. 109).

to produce the original and wholly genuine MSS behind his *Reliques*, since to do so would have been to admit the degree to which he "edited" his sources for an eighteenth century audience; Chatterton made the mistake of producing the Rowley poems in a form of cod Middle English which not only made their deception more transparent but also had an adverse effect on their reception. In short, the medievalism enjoyed by the eighteenth century was fundamentally secondary, and an admiration of this reconditioned past was a long way from an appreciation of the genuine artefacts of an era little valued for and in itself.

Eighteenth century medievalism is then an involved and complex area. It has been my purpose in this section not to pretend to any answers or conclusions, but merely to point out the intricacies involved and to suggest that behind the self-evident dismissal of the romance form in Blair's aesthetics lie an involved series of disputes and cultural competitions, not to mention a fair dousing of ignorance. The section has also shown already the value of considering the question of *Ossian's* relationship to the romance in allowing us a fresh insight into *Ossian*'s cultural significance. The pamphlet *Fingal King of Morven*, understood in terms of the contemporary cultural politics represents a response to the challenge offered by *Ossian* to the cultural hegemony of the Anglo-British state, a challenge often not recognised by those cultural historians eager to castigate Macpherson for enervating Gaelic culture for assimilative purposes.

In discussing *Ossian* in terms of a romance tradition I may then appear to be conspiring with the hegemonic forces behind *Fingal King of Morven.* However it should be stressed at this point that my purpose is far from such. On the one hand I am not suggesting that *Ossian* "is" romance, merely that it may be illuminated by the norms of scholarship in that field, neither am I denying the individuality of Macpherson's productions. Indeed it could be argued that the conspiratorial drive of Macpherson scholarship has come full circle since the days of the pamphlet, with a

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[54] See Duff, *Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of Genre* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 13–34.

modern scholar more likely to write *Ossian* off not as something else but as a freak, a work so unlike anything else as to make it unresponsive to conventional literary approaches and therefore (or so the argument goes) worthless. On the other hand, it ought to be possible today to discuss such generic matters as scholarship with no particular axe to grind. With such comments in mind, it is appropriate to turn our attention to outlining the "romance *Ossian*".

III.

Conte and *Conjointure*: "The Battle of Lora".

There are two modern romance paradigms which bear particularly on Macpherson and *Ossian*. They are inter-related, but taking them in turn one can be seen to operate on the procedural level, the other on the level of represented Sensibility, the imaginative conventions of the form. This section considers the first of these and its impact on our reading of *Ossian* by relating Macpherson's practice to currently established romance models.

Nathaniel Griffin is not a name particularly noted within romance scholarship. Nevertheless, in an perceptive early article Griffin lays out a useful romance model, all the more valuable to us because he uses a vocabulary not dissimilar from Macpherson's. Griffin suggests that romance was simply 'the product of an attempt to make the ideas of an epic story [...] intelligible and significant' to a culturally alien people.[55] The epic is, he suggests, 'the characteristic product of a people that has lived an isolated existence cut off from contact with other peoples' (1923, p. 57) and flourishes in 'a community of understanding' (1923, p. 58). The romancer, denied that perfect interpretative community, has to work hard in weaning his audience onto alien matter, interpreting ideas in the light of his own 'later more advanced and sophisticated ideas' and replacing the totally foreign with the familiar (1923, p. 58). This can be a delicate

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[55] Nathaniel E. Griffin, 'The Definition of Romance', *P.M.L.A.*, 38 (1923), 50–70, (pp. 66–7).

process, what with the general if not specific expectations most readers have about epic, and one much aided by the "lost source" device (1923, p. 59–60). For Griffin the hallmarks of romance are anachronism (which 'may be looked upon as a well nigh invariable accompaniment of romance' (1923, p. 63)) and the invention of new material 'of which little or no warrant exists in the older epic recital' (1923, pp. 63–4), both of which he sees as vital in assimilating an ancient story into a new setting. By way of example, Griffin argues that Geoffrey of Monmouth recreates King Arthur as a European Emperor to appeal to the expansionist aspirations of Henry II, while the fact that Chrétien's Arthur is synonymous with *fins amour* reveals an appeal to the more courtly priorities of Eleanor of Aquitaine (1923, pp. 64–5). The disjunction between cultures is especially marked because it often involves an interface between oral and written literature (primary epic is meant to be recited, romance read in private), or between a sophisticated, polite culture and one perceived as being more primitive.[56] Such thinking is developed by Leslie Topsfield in his account of the roots of Chrétien's art in the glories of twelfth century New Learning, the brilliance of Cistercian thinking, finding, through the literary genius of Chrétien and his now-lost contemporaries, imaginative release in a suggestive Celtic tradition.[57]

These thoughts on the romance strike a chord with the Ossianic project, both as we understand it and as Macpherson himself portrays it, at least on some occasions. Macpherson justifies the unlikelihood of *Ossian*'s survival (and, given that survival, its obscurity to the present date) by painting a picture of an isolated race, detached from the world of progress, which had preserved the language, manners and tales of ancient times (*Temora* dissertation, pp. 205–6). Macpherson also comments on the dilemma for those who would make this literature known to the wider world when he observes that 'it was the locality of his description and sentiment, that, probably, kept Ossian so long in the obscurity of an almost lost language' (p. 214). As we have seen, modern scholarship has established that Macpherson overcame the problem of bringing forth

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[56] Eugene Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford, 1971), p. 4.
[57] Leslie Topsfield, *Chrétien de Troyes* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 1–10.

these obscure gems in such a way as they would not be 'received, with coldness, in an English dress' (p. 214) in ways that Griffin would have recognised. Macpherson himself goes so far as to say that he 'reduced the broken members of [*Temora*] into the order in which they now appear' (p. 215) and he acknowledges the help of other scholars who enabled him to 'compleat' *Fingal* (p. 36).[58] Equally, while the Scottish Enlightenment project was more self-consciously "historical", and *Ossian* more self-consciously enquiring and documentary than anything we might read in Medieval romance, there is nevertheless something of a similarity in situation: the confrontation of the new with the old in such a way that the old becomes a method for the new to imaginatively explore its own preoccupations, as we shall come to see.

Griffin suggested then that romance represents existing but culturally alien stories adapted to fit a new cultural setting, a process of adaptation which involves reading contemporary concerns into those stories. In reflecting the concerns of the present by reconstructing in a past which never existed as such, scholars see embellishment as the defining characteristic of the romance as literary genre. The word romance literally means 'in the vernacular', but is set above translation in the way it reconditions the past by rearranging it in the image of the present (and is also not reliant on the single source implied by "translation"). Eugene Vinaver has provided the moist succinct summary of this in his explanation of Chrétien's claim, at the opening of *Erec et Enide*, to be making a *conjointure* out of a *conte* in the interests of a *sens*. The difficulty lies in the virtual synonymity of the first two terms in Old French, something which makes elegant translation impossible and Chrétien's meaning unclear. Vinaver argues that Chrétien means he has arranged a romance (the *conjointure*) out of a story or adventure (the *conte*) in order to elucidate an underlying meaning (or *sens*), leading Vinaver to propose that romance is the result when a poet 'elaborate[s] a traditional tale in a direction which might be thought to have been implied in it from the beginning'

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[58] Of course elsewhere Macpherson is capable of claiming that it was only his 'business to lay [*Fingal*] before the public as [he] found it' (p. 36), and he goes out of his way to say that the poor state of the genuine *Ossian* when he found it was down not only to the 'ravages of time' but also the

(1971, p. 23). The romancer makes a diagnosis of aesthetic potential via the ongoing concerns and priorities of the romancer's culture, and moulds, suppresses and elaborates elements of the story in order to make clear a *sens* which in any case only existed in the interpretation of that story by the romancer himself. A confusion in Macpherson's case, which we should not allow to distract us from this model, is that one of the priorities of Macpherson's culture was the neo-classical epic, the production of an epic being part of the direction Macpherson assumed was implied in his Gaelic material (as we saw in chapter two). However, that Macpherson's *conjointure* was an epic is something of a red-herring, and example of 'the expressive accidentals rather than the essential nature' of the *Ossian* (Barron (1987), p. 58).

The main thrust of my argument here is that Macpherson elaborated a Gaelic *conte* into a Scottish Enlightenment *conjointure* (as it happens, a neo-classical epic) in the interests of the *sens* elaborated in chapters two and four of this study. However, we can also mobilise our sense of the protean Gaelic tradition as touched upon in the opening section of this chapter to reinforce this model. There is evidence to suggest that the fianaigheacht was, in its popular form (as opposed to the more rigorously formalised and lapidary Bardic/Classical Gaelic tradition) in a continual state of revision and recreation from one generation to the next. A key text in understanding this has been one of Macpherson's key source texts, *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* which, in its perpetual scorings out, over-writings, adding of stanzas and corrections represents 'a continuing process of adjustment which has a very long history' (Meek (1987), p. 145). Equally the pairing of poems in the Dean's book suggests, according to Donald Meek, the tentative outline of a 'wider sequential frame' (1987, p. 160). It is to Macpherson, of course, that we owe the preservation of the Dean's book, and for Meek at least, Macpherson's eighteenth-century efforts are one with the Dean's in the sixteenth (and indeed the *Agallamh Na Senorach*'s in the twelfth-century) as a 'manifestation of the urge to create, and to recreate, the tradition' (1987, p. 160).

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attentions 'of those who thought they mended the poems by modernising the ideas' (p. 51). The point is though, that given our understanding of what he did, his own comments in agreement are a bonus.

Equally, some of the sea-changes in sensibility encompassed within this process were hardly less dramatic than that which occurs in between the *Book of the Dean* and *Ossian*. Bruford has observed that the *Agallamh* represents a new note in Gaelic poetry, a pivotal point in Gaelic cultural tradition, since if in a previous poem a hero 'sees a strange bird, he tries to kill it, rather than write poetry about it' (1987, p. 35). Similarly, Murphy has observed about the development of the Fionn tradition represented in the *Duanaire Finn*:

> [the] Irish change from the strongly constructed, closely knit, twelfth-century Abduction of Eargna to the fifteenth and sixteenth-century poems like the lay of the Bird Crib [...] corresponds roughly to the change that took place in France from the *Chanson de Geste* to the *roman*. (1953, pp. xcvii–xcviii)

Furthermore, the reconstructions and adaptations of the fian-lore seem to have functioned in a way similar to that of Anglo-French romance modelling. Ó hÓgáin has suggested that the image of Fionn and his band was in part created as a way of social control and stabilisation (1988, p. 36). While early Irish society needed the armed militia represented by the fianna bands it also needed to control their excesses: the moulding of the tutelary figure Fionn and the ideals gradually associated with him offered a way of stabilising the militia in the same way as the chivalric code divined in Arthurian lore offered a way of giving marauding French knights a socially beneficial ideal to which to aspire. All-in-all then, if we combine the dynamics of the Gaelic tradition to which Macpherson was exposed with the cross-cultural dimension of the Ossianic project highlighted with reference to Griffin and Vinaver, we see that in two ways *Ossian* is understandable as the product of the romance processes of *conte* and *conjointure*, whether we view them as operating in the Fian-lore or in Macpherson's eighteenth-century mediations, or indeed, a combination of both.

How then, might this reading strategy and procedural understanding inform our approach to *Ossian*? The rest of this section applies the above thinking to "The Battle of Lora" in order to demonstrate a more subtle understanding of the relationship between *Ossian*'s Gaelic and 'Graeco-Badenoch' (as D.S.Thomson called Macpherson's imagination) sources. In "The Battle of Lora" Fingal responds to a plea

for help by the recalcitrant Aldo who has run off with the wife of his host Erragon. Although the story is one which exists in Gaelic tradition, Macpherson made it his own in a number of ways. The opening image of Ossian's is a common one in the poems, and is the first point of contact between Gaelic and English Ossians:

> lonely dweller of the rock! look over that heathy plain: thou seest green tombs, with their rank, whistling grass, with their stones of mossy heads: thou seest them, son of the rock, but Ossian's eyes have failed. (p. 119)

We saw in the previous chapter that the figure of the aged Ossian represents a number of – at times ambivalent, even contradictory – aspects of *Ossian*'s role as a text of Sensibility with a distinctly Scottish provenance. Yet at the same time the figure of Ossian mulling over the times that have passed did not spring fully formed in some autochthonous way from the fertile soil of Enlightenment Sentiment, and is to be found throughout the finnaigheacht. Our conception of romance 'embellishment' allows us to mediate a third way between the two schools of thought which currently exist on this issue. On the one hand we have those who point out that overpowering melancholy of *Ossian* is a misrepresentation of "the Celtic spirit"; and on the other we have those who, with equal justice, claim that the 'pervasive note of elegy' in *Ossian* echoes the elegiac strain which entered the Gaelic tradition with *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* (c. 1500).[59] Indeed, as early as the twelfth century *Agallamh na Senorach*, the majority of the finnaigheacht is structured as the reminiscences of Oisin and Caoilte, the last survivors of the order, but it is certainly the case that the *Book of the Dean* is dominated by elegy (over half the poems in the collection) and particularly by the four tragic stories "The Lay of Diarmaid", "The Lay of Froach", "The Death of Conloach" and "The Death of Oscar" which appear both as poems and as prose tales.[60] Even this opening reference to the graves on the hill is a trope familiar within the Gaelic tradition, for example in the poem 'The Battle of Gabhair' (c. 1400) from the *Duanaire Finn* which opens with the question, 'Oisín, what sad mound is this that holds the long

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[59] Mícheál Mac Craith, 'The "Forging" of Ossian' in Brown (ed), 1996, pp.125–41, p. 138.

[60] Meek, 'The Gaelic Ballads of Scotland: Creativity and Adaptation' in Gaskill (ed): 1991, pp. 19–48, p. 37.

grave?'.[61] However, the tone with which the medieval Gaelic tradition handles the Ossianic themes of death and the raking over of past glories is in general distinct from that of Macpherson. Within this tradition we are told of Oisin's attempts to regain his youth, and in the *Agallamh* Oisin and Caoilte conduct fresh adventures within the narrative framework of reminiscence.[62] Number VIII of the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* offers the image of the last survivor, but significantly the tone is somewhat different from that we have encountered in *Ossian* thus far:

> Feeble tonight is the strength of my hands; there is not on earth my fellow in years; it is no wonder that I am sad, a pitiful worn-out rag of an old man.[63]

In the early twelfth century Irish poem 'The Bathing of Oisín's Head' we are offered the same matter-of-factness in Oisín's descriptions of his decline ('these eyes [...] though they are the roots of blood tonight, they were once thin pearly gems'), joined with a vividness which is absent from *Ossian*. The closest Ossian comes to describing his physical condition, other than references to his blindness (not a major theme in the Gaelic tradition) is in his inability to wield his arms of old, as in the opening to "Calthon and Colmar":

> I stretch out my hand to the spear, as in the days of other years.—I stretch out my hand, but it is feeble; and the sigh of my bosom grows. (p. 171)

But this is a poetic commonplace, far removed from Oisín's lament that 'these legs below, nothing could have wearied them: tonight, they are bowed and bent, pitiful, shrunken-sided'.[64] Thus at his most poignant, the Gaelic figure has a solid, everyday

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[61] Murphy (ed) (1933), no.39, pp. 33–57.

[62] This distinction was first drawn by Alexander Macbain in his 'The Heroic and Ossianic Literature', *The Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 12 (1885–6), 180–211, (p. 203). When he was not engaged in such enterprises, he was vigorously 'disputing with [Patrick] as to whether the Fiana were in heaven or not'. See *Book of the Dean*, no.XX. For *Agallamh* see Joseph F. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), p.5.

[63] *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore*, ed. and trans. by Neil Ross, (Edinburgh, 1939) p. 37. All future references give page numbers for this edition. I preserve the denomination 'Oisean' in my discussion to distinguish the Scots Gaelic figure from both the Irish 'Oisin' and Macpherson's Ossian.

[64] 'The Bathing of Oisín's Head', *Duanaire Finn* (ed. Mac Neill), 1904, p. 112.

feel to him, a tendency to understatement which makes his predicament all the more pathetic:

> I have seen the household of Fionn, it was no faint nor feeble band; and I have beheld you, I who am of the followers of the man of yesterday. (Ross (ed.), no. III, p. 7)

This calm balance can occasionally spill into pride and defiance on Oisean's part, even in (in both senses) his extreme state. Oisean, rather than being a broken shell, fundamentally passive and put upon, is frequently presented more in the character of an irascible old rogue. As he puts it to Patrick, 'if the clans of Morni lived, your order would not be powerful; | you would be put under restraint, you folk of the deceiving crosiers' (Ross (ed.), p.177). That such a taunt is empty is irrelevant: we can barely imagine Ossian saying such a thing since any defiance he might have is swallowed in self-pity and his efforts to make his audience pity him. This strain of antagonism developed in the Gaelic tradition from the *Agallamh*, where the Fenian heroes show nothing but deference to the Saint, through to the sixteenth century, by which time the nostalgic and defiant warrior and an increasingly tetchy Patrick can spend entire poems trading insults. The dynamic in such poems is one where 'the audience is expected to simultaneously admire the might of Oisín's comrades, and to laugh at his naive obstinacy in the face of spiritual truth' (Ó hÓgáin (1988), p. 251).

Macpherson smoothes out almost all this tension. Macpherson's prose apparatus mentions at times the 'disputes' between Ossian and the Culdee figure (see, for example, p. 46), and Blair's preface to the *Fragments* tells how 'Oscian [sic] treats the Monk and his religion with disdain, telling him, that the deeds of such great man were subjects too high to be recorded by him' (p. 5), but the poems themselves contain little evidence of such conflict. Ossian may talk vaguely of the 'feeble race' who have replaced the age of heroes, men who 'mark no years with their deeds, as slow they pass along' (p. 319), but direct confrontation is absent. Ossian is not actually alone, but he may as well be. He shares his grief with his son's widow Malvina and with the Culdee, a religious figure who replaces Patrick. The lack of antagonism between Ossian and the latter is partly due to Macpherson's excising of anything he deemed 'unseemly'

from his Gaelic sources and partly, I think, to the ideological importance of the Culdee figure. Culdeeism is the mythical source of an independent Celtic Church, formed by missionaries fleeing Roman persecution as early as the fourth century. Travelling 'beyond the pale of the Roman empire' certain missionaries settled amongst the Caledonians, a people 'more ready to harken to their doctrines, as the religion of the druids had been exploded long before' (*Fingal* dissertation, p. 46). In effect, *Ossian* represents not the cultural fracture between the pagan Oisín and the Christian Patrick (whose debates in the Gaelic poems demonstrate nothing so much as a comprehensive mutual misunderstanding) but an accommodation, as Ossian passes on his tales to the early representative of the ancient Celtic Church. This validates that Celtic Church as repository of ancient culture, and prepares the ground for Macpherson's characterisation of the Caledonian as a monotheistic proto-Christian in his *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771/3), of which more in the next chapter.

This has taken us some way from our starting point, and into areas considered at greater depth in the following chapters. For the moment, the point is that where Oisean/Oisín is rarely alone, and his stories are told at the prompting of Patrick, and have an explicit point, Ossian is a mad old man sitting in a graveyard haunted by the ghosts of his past. In short, Oisean/Oisín, unlike Ossian, owes nothing to Edward Young, Robert Blair, James Thomson or Thomas Gray. [65] This is not to say that Macpherson's Ossian wholly suffers in the comparison. *Fragment VIII*, for example, stands in its own terms with its Gaelic models, and in the later *Ossian* poems Macpherson builds on hints within suggestive Gaelic material that this reminiscence is pointless ('many vain thoughts have I entertained: I delight not in pleasure nor in drinking since the Fian has gone into oblivion' (MacNeil (ed.), p. 98)) to create a more subtle and troubled relationship between Ossian and his past than that found in his

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[65] W.B.Yeats' Oisin, whose wanderings end with the muscular, upbeat vision of the Fenian's storming Heaven, fired up by "the war-song that roused them of old" (l. 221), represents a rendering of this more affirmative strain. Ossian rarely sings songs of current defiance or even remembers such

sources. Furthermore, such differences bespeak more than just an inept handling of a model for more crude ends and hint at a change in cultural as well as aesthetic context. To use a rough and ready, but nevertheless valuable, distinction, the poems such as those in the Dean's book represent elegies of continuation or affirmation, written within and for a secure cultural context – Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington", or Charles Wolfe's "The Burial of Sir John Moore" or indeed "Lycidas", or "Adonais" – whereas Macpherson's elegies are those of separation and deracination, the salvaging of something from the teeth of cultural annihilation, closer in spirit, perhaps, to the opening sections of *In Memoriam*.

In chapter five I shall return to elements of this distinction between Ossian and Oisean in order to sharpen up our understanding of the nature of Ossian's story telling and his relationship with his past. We have seen, however, that Macpherson takes a germ of Gaelic narrative situation and character and elaborates it into the Sentimental Ossian he presents in precisely the romance way suggested by our models. However, it is not only the narrative framework that Macpherson is adapting in this poem. The most immediate source for "The Battle of Lora", which is also in plot vaguely reminiscent of the *Iliad*, is the Gaelic *Teanntachd Mhór na Feinne* which Macpherson followed 'with some considerable fidelity' and indeed acknowledged by name in a letter to Maclagan.[66] While almost all the details in Macpherson's poem can be traced to one version or another of the Gaelic, there are some striking exceptions, all of which can be traced to Macpherson's informing aesthetic principles of sensibility and taste. I want, however, to concentrate on one addition which shows Macpherson elaborating his source to his own ends.

Aldo throws himself on the mercy of Fingal to protect him from Erragon. Fingal's reply is Macpherson's addition to the story, one which spells out the Fingalian ethics. He begins with introducing moral flavour absent in the original:

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war songs of the past. "The Wanderings of Oisin" in *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, (London, 1984) 355–86.

[66] D.S. Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian* (Aberdeen, 1952), p. 42, p. 47. My discussion of the poem's relation to its source owes much to Thomson's analysis, pp. 42–47.

> Aldo of the heart of pride! said the rising king of Morven, shall I defend thee from the wrath of Sora's injured king? who will now receive my people into their halls, or give the feast of strangers, since Aldo, of the little soul, has carried away the fair of Sora? (p. 120)

The answer to the question is yes, for reasons ironically present in Fingal's words here. On the one hand Aldo is a Caledonian (which is also why Fingal is so annoyed he has let the side down), and on the other, and even if he were not, Fingal prizes highly the principles of hospitality. A third reason hovers in the background, namely that Aldo is weak, and Fingal is duty bound to help the 'feeble' against the strong.

The idea that the Fianna band represent some ideal of heroic virtue dedicated to defending the weak is found to an extent in the Gaelic material, although it is in no way formalised in such a rigorous way as in *Ossian*, whose code warns that:

> if the blood of the weak has stained [the] swords [of warriors]; the bards shall forget them in the song, and their tombs shall not be known. (p. 163)

Neil Ross might suggest that in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* 'the code of chivalry is high' (1939, p. xxiv), but it is easier to sympathise with Alan Bruford's observation that while 'the knightly virtues were not so far removed from the world of Cú Chulainn [...] there are quite a few passages in the Irish romances which might have shocked Froissart.'[67] Certainly 'the ideals of a foreign military class which was never much admired in Ireland', as Bruford coolly describes the Chivalric Code (1969, p. 25), are never any more than hinted at, and Fionn himself is just as likely to advocate treachery as he is the rules of fair play. This partly because the Fenian matter owes as much (some would claim more) to the 'trickster tradition' of Gaelic folk-culture as it does to the high ideals of a warrior aristocracy. Ó hÓgáin suggests that the informing dichotomy across the entire matter of Fionn in that 'Fionn is capable of not only great magnanimity but also of great pettiness' (1988, p. 121), and the great Fenian virtues of self-sufficiency, co-operation and magnanimity which descend in folk-saying such as 'Fionn never fought a battle without offering terms' are conspicuously absent from

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[67] Alan Bruford, *Gaelic Folktales and Medieval Romances: A Study of Early Modern Irish 'Romantic Tales' and their Oral Derivatives* (Dublin, 1969), p. 26.

many of the poems (1988, p. 299).[68] When a poem wants to praise a figure (usually Fionn, less frequently Goll) it usually appeals to the values of magnanimity and humanity, often presenting its subject as a patron of the liberal arts (see Ross (ed.), no. 20, pp. 125–35, and no. 10, pp. 61–9), but these values seem highly disposable when push comes to shove. For example, in the story "The Maiden and the King of Sorcha" (Ross (ed.), p. 137–47), a tale incorporated into *Fingal*, Oisean says that fifty of the greatest fians were present, men whose 'strength prevailed over every land' (p. 137). This boast is not borne out in the poem as they tackle the king, something Oisean is cheerfully willing to admit:

> Had there not been fifty warriors under arms, a sufficient number to meet him, we had been helpless under his power, had he received fair play from us. (p. 147)

So much for the 'cothrom na Feínne'.

Back with Fingal, his speech is more than a scolding of Aldo, and leads into some more general speculations:

> Go to thy hills [Aldo], thou feeble hand, and hide thee in thy caves; mournful is the battle we must fight, with Sora's gloomy king.——Spirit of the noble Trenmor! when will Fingal cease to fight? I was born in the midst of battles, and my steps must move in blood to my tomb. But my hand did not injure the weak, my steel did not touch the feeble in arms.—I behold thy tempests, O Morven, which will overturn my halls; when my children are dead in battle, and none remains to dwell in Selma. Then will the feeble come, but they will not know my tomb: my renown is in the song: and my actions shall be as a dream to future times. (p. 120)

Fingal here alludes to the circumstances of his birth, Macpherson glossing 'I was born in the midst of battles' with the explanation that 'Comhal the Father of Fingal was slain in battle [...] the very day that Fingal was born' (p. 441 n.15). In fact, Fionn was originally said to have been conceived nine hours before Cumhaill's death (Ó hÓgáin (1988), p. 20), although this became increasingly flexible and the telescoping may not be Macpherson's. This is a common romance motif (Arthur and Percival share similar circumstances, for example), one which symbolises the chaos which proceeded and

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[68] Howard Gaskill has pointed out that 'cothrom na Feínne' is still proverbial Gaelic for 'a sporting chance' (see '"Ossian" Macpherson: Towards a Rehabilitation', *Comparative Literature* 8 (1986), 113–46, (p. 139)).

foreshadows the chaos that will follow the flowering of his reign, a chaos vouched by Fingal's failure (like Arthur) to establish a line to outlive him.

The element of prophecy in this speech is also strongly present in the Gaelic matter. Fionn was originally a 'divine figure symbolising wisdom', whose name suggests both one 'bright with the lustre of wisdom' and one gifted with 'fios', the mystical knowledge of the seer. As Ó hÓgáin puts it, Fionn's 'typical action and his own personality, are one – he sees and is a seer, he knows and is a symbol of knowledge' (1988, p. 52). Fionn becomes the fully blown figure of the prophet poet, and over the centuries comes to prophecy everything which has (and from his point of view will) come to pass, from the coming of Christianity to English oppression of Ireland (Ó hÓgáin (1988), p. 133). Fingal is too apolitical a figure to prophecy explicitly anything so sensitive (whatever meanings Macpherson may imply in his discursive apparatus), and his premonitions are only ever to do with his own demise and the end of his line.

This foreknowledge of doom would seem then to be a twisting of the Fionn-as-seer image to create a gloom which mars the general buoyancy of the Gaelic matter. That is not quite the case, however, since there exists a body of Gaelic poems, those which deal with Gabhair and its aftermath, imbued with much the same gloominess. Gabhair was the climatic battle of Fionn's forces, in which his warrior band broke its own strength in defeating the army of the High King Cairbre. The catastrophic nature of this most pyrrhic of victories was most readily symbolised in the death of Oscar mac Oisín, the future hope of the order. Scott considered this story a potential end for the Fenian matter comparable with Camlann and Roncesvalles, and observed that Macpherson had 'totally altered this conclusion, and thereby laid the foundation for the succeeding events in *Temora*' (1805, p. 444). While scholarship has failed to find any substantial sources for *Temora* beyond its first book, it is nevertheless the case that Macpherson did not entirely make up the aftermath to Gabhair he presents. Despite its apocalyptic overtones, Fionn is not present at Gabhair, but arrives in time to witness the death scene of Oscar (as he does in *Temora* I). It is Fingal's reaction to Oscar's

death, as I argued in chapter two, that sets the tone for the rest of the poem, is present in the Gaelic poems Macpherson saw. In no. 23 of *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* Fionn talks of the curse which 'has this day come upon my host; it has followed me ever, until the day when I shall be nought', and the narrator himself comments that 'Fionn had no joy or peace from that hour to the night of his death' (Ross (ed.), p. 165, p. 167). It could be argued that *Temora* represents an extrapolation of these observations, culminating in Fingal's retirement speech in book 8 in which he lays bear the emptiness of his life's work. This glossing of Fingal's life may owe everything to an eighteenth-century wish for pathos, and an awareness of the hollowness of the martial life, but it is nevertheless grafted onto suggestive moments in the existing tradition.

In this way 'The Battle of Lora' represents the framework of a Gaelic ballad adopted and elaborated by Macpherson. The result is that the poem reflects the aesthetic and social priorities of his own culture. The Sentiment tableaux of the decrepit *Ossian* and the pining lover who, at the end of the poem dies of grief appeal to the polite tastes of an eighteenth-century audience, and the proto-chivalry of the Fenian motif of defending strangers and the weak is codified into a Fingalian system of social value in which martial virtue and active citizenship is united with 'the emerging discourse of passion, benevolence, and humanity' (Dwyer, 1991, p. 169). But at the same time, and in a way we have come to expect from the previous chapter, doubts hover at the edge of this rosy picture. Fingal reconciles himself to his future failure through a confidence that his present actions, particularly in defending the 'feeble in arms', will guarantee some place in posterity for him. Yet Macpherson has placed this confidence in the same speech in which he has had Fingal rebuke Aldo and make clear his distaste for the latter's actions, the cause of the current bloodshed. In other words, if Fingal fatalistically foresees a career of fighting with no lasting monument to leave behind (in 1773 his last line read that his renown 'is only in song') we here witness, given the first half of Fingal's speech in which he reveals himself to be fighting for a cause he holds no sympathy for and he knows to be morally distasteful, the mechanism

whereby he is trapped into this state of affairs. Fingal is placed within a system of value which relies on him defending even the unworthy 'feeble in arms' in order to make a name for himself, an imperative which goes to create the life he is lamenting. His actions are the solution to a problem they themselves are in some measure creating. This perhaps explains the full significance of why exactly the battle he 'must fight' will be 'mournful' and the general tone of weariness in Fingal's words. This is finally symbolised by Ossian's unwillingness to demonise Erragon as revealed in Fingal's dirge on the latter's death, a speech which recalls his earlier speech foreseeing his own fall:

> —Mighty was he that is now so low! and much is he mourned in Sora! The stranger will come towards his hall, and wonder why it is silent. The king is fallen, O stranger, and the joy of his house is ceased (p. 122)

This sense that the world we are witnessing does not quite add up to a sustaining programme for life, that the mythic solution to contemporary anxieties is somehow infected with those anxieties it was meant to resolve is both familiar from the previous chapter and leads us to our second romance paradigm. This model will firm up our sense of this lack of confidence and provide a secure generic context for the doubts and insecurities we have explored in chapter two and will uncover further within chapter four.

IV.

'The bitter-sweet ambivalence': "Carthon"

The procedural model spelled out in the previous section puts great emphasis on a change of material, cultural and intellectual conditions between romances and the epic matter on which they are based. As A.C.Spearing has put it in updating Griffin, epic represents a 'restricted code', that is to say, one constructed within a secure cultural context amongst an audience which will immediately recognise and feel reassured by the values and situations it presents to them; whereas romance, reflecting the move from a "we" culture to an "I" culture, is an 'elaborated code' which needs to spell out,

to mediate and to meditate upon its values. This difference means that while the epic poet presents the 'unanalysed assumptions of his culture' the romancer 'far from silently accepting and transmitting communal values, brings them into conflict among themselves'.[69]

This idea that the defining characteristic of romance might be conflict within its own value structures is central to our second paradigm. Although partly based in the material change in conditions between epic and romance which led to this questioning pose, the paradigm is also based upon Northrop Frye's theory of mythic criticism – an attempt to divide literature into 'four narrative pregeneric elements' – in which romance represents an attempt 'to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to "realism", to conventionalise content in an idealised direction', a process whereby legendary figures become human and human values are mythologised in a form of cultural or social wish fulfilment.[70] Yet as soon as we confront that word aspiration we hit on what takes romance away from the realm of pure fantasy: if, in terms of mode, romance is mid-way between the mythic and the mimetic then there is within romance a mimetic backwash, an acknowledgement of the world as it is.

This accounts on a theoretic level for the ambivalence and tension critics see as central to the romance mode in a variety of forms, and which unite romance texts in a way that the 'conventions of genre', things which are merely 'the accident of mode', do not (Barron (1987), p. 178). Arthurian texts as disparate as the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, a strident dynastic romance 'undercut by the certainty of the death of kings', the genteel stanzaic *Morte Arthur*'s 'troubled dream of the golden age of a nation brought to an end by inherent contradictions in the ideals on which it was built' and Malory's 'display of chivalry so comprehensive as to contain its own critique of the code', are driven by the desire 'to find meaning in the failure of an ideal' which they are

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[69] Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 22–23. Spearing borrows his terminology from the sociologist Bernstein. One can read the same analysis in different terms in the work of Auerbach, Vinaver and Hunt.

[70] Frye (1957), p. 162, p. 137, p. 186.

nevertheless glorifying in its failure.[71] Historicist readings of many of these romances reinforce the theoretical point. For example, it is necessary to balance Elisabeth Salter's interpretation of the late fourteenth century outpouring of English romance now known as the Alliterative Revival as demonstrating the 'sophisticated taste', the 'moral and historical preoccupations' and the 'maturing sense of Englishness' of the Northern aristocracy with Russell Peck's claim that the period's 'disenchantment with virtually every institution invented by man' is demonstrated by the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*'s with its 'deep concern about what constitutes virtuous behaviour'.[72] Thus, in Frederic Jameson's phrase, romance represents a 'protopolitical response to a historical dilemma', an 'imaginary "solution" to [...] contradiction' whether it be historical or ideological.[73]

If this characterisation of romance mood strikes a chord with the readings of *Ossian* offered in this study, then this cultural perspective is even more suggestive. Eighteenth-century scholars point to a similar tension within Macpherson's Scotland, and Richard Sher has driven his ground-breaking analysis of the context of *Ossian*'s appearance through a notion of a Lowland Scotland on the one hand rediscovering its vigour for the first time since the Union and one the other still victim to the patronising attentions and infuriating neglect of Big Brother.[74] Thus like those romances, *Ossian* can been seen as representing an attempt to create a confident Scottish literary voice distinct from that of England; a working through, as we saw in chapter two, of the moral priorities of the age of Sentiment; and an ambivalent response to the ethical dilemmas of an eighteenth century trying to recondition the principles of traditional

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[71] Barron (1987), p.141, p. 143, p. 148, p. 142.

[72] Elisabeth Salter, 'The Alliterative Revival I', *Modern Philology* vol. 64 no. 2 (Nov. 1966), 146–50; Russell Peck, 'Wilfulness and Wonders: Boethian Tragedy in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*' in *The Alliterative Revival in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. by Bernard S. Levy and Paul E. Szarmach, (Kent Ohio, 1981), pp. 153–82, p. 153.

[73] Jameson, 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre', *New Literary History*, 7, no.1 (Autumn, 1975), 135–64 (p. 157, p. 161).

[74] See generally, Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1985); and more specifically, '"Those Scotch Impostors and Their Cabal": Ossian and the Scottish Enlightenment', *Man and Nature: The Proceedings of the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies* (Ontario, 1982), pp. 55–65.

civic humanism in the face of commercial and provincialising pressures (as we shall see chapter four); all within the context of a literary form which presents a vision of 'how life might be or might once have been not wholly contradicted by life as it is' (Barron (1987), p. 177).

The story told in "Carthon" is an old and familiar one, that of the *bel inconnu*, or fair unknown. Such stories recount the coming a mysterious stranger who proves himself within the social hierarchy by acts of valour before being revealed as a lost member of the higher ranks of the society in question. As such the story-line relies on an inverse generative relationship between recognition – or naming – and violence.[75] In other words, the violence which makes up the narrative and the proving relies on the hero remaining unknown, and the narrative has a vested interest in delaying the moment of recognition which, depending on whether the version in question is a comedy or a tragedy, may come before or after a fatal blow is struck. "Carthon" is not the only time Macpherson used the formula: his early and interminable poem *The Highlander* used just such a narrative device, but where in the earlier poem Macpherson creates from it a (very Jacobite) story of personal and national renewal, in "Carthon" the tragedy is unremitting. Macpherson adds substantially to the basic story-line, giving his version a particularly eighteenth-century provenance.

Most notably Macpherson adds a series of images of time's destruction which hedge the main action and which enter into a dialogue with the action through Fingal's attempts to find a redemptive vision of human endeavour in the face of this threat. The poem begins and ends with images of that menace, the ageing Ossian, mouldering tombs, the image of a ruined city, and Ossian's address to the sun. All these features were added by Macpherson. The poem opens with Ossian directing Malvina's attention to two old tombs, followed by switch of scene (and time, although this is not immediately apparent and we have to surmise it for ourselves) as Ossian describes the triumphant return of Fingal from overseas. Clessámmor is introduced via a general

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[75] I owe this observation to Mr. James Simpson of Girton College, Cambridge. See also relationship between, naming, otherness and evil in Jameson (1975).

reflection on his age and grief for (the yet to be introduced) Moina, and tells of his doomed love for Moina. Years previously he has been forced to leave her behind when he had fled after killing the local favourite, the jealous Reuda. It is, we might say, a typical Ossianic story of the fatal entanglement of the marital and martial. This story prompts Fingal into the famous description of the ruins of Balclutha which provides the climax to the first movement of the poem:

> —I have seen the walls of Balclutha, but they were desolate. The fire had resounded in the halls: and the voice of the people is heard no more. The stream of Clutha was removed from its place, by the fall of the walls.—The thistle shook, there, its lonely head: the moss whistled to the wind. The fox looked out, from the windows, the rank grass of the wall waved round his head.—Desolate is the dwelling of Moina, silence is in the house of her fathers. (p. 128)

Passing over the fact that the desolation of Balclutha was the direct responsibility of his own father, Fingal is moved to speculations of a more general kind:

> They have but fallen before us: for, one day, we must fall.—Why dost thou build the hall, son of the winged days? Thou lookest from thy towers to-day; yet a few years, and the blast of the desart comes; it howls in thy empty court, and whistles round thy half-worn shield.—And let the blast of the desart come! we shall be renowned in our day. The mark of my arm shall be in the battle, and my name in the song of bards. (p. 128)

At this last turn the speech reveals itself to be not merely a testament to human *vanitas* but an admirable facing down of the facts of human transience, an attitude which 'exalts human nature and encourages men [...] to build a new and highly idealistic gospel of progress upon it'.[76] In short it is the positive 'joy of grief' we explored in the previous chapter, an exercise in self-controlled sympathy which provokes not melancholic introspection but the grand virtues of civic activity. As Steven Clark says, the 'text displays a stoicism in the face of personal mortality and a cultural solidarity, a respect for enclaves of human community amidst a bleak expanse of secular time.'[77] Fingal is an Enlightenment hero in his acknowledgement of 'the blast of the desart' and his determination to continue regardless, in his glorious dancing before the storm. But

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[76] Paul deGategno, '"The Source of Daily and Exulted Pleasure": Jefferson Reads the *Poems of Ossian*', in Gaskill (ed): 1991, pp. 94–108, p. 106.

[77] S.H.Clark, *Mark Akenside, James Macpherson and Edward Young: Selected Poetry* (Manchester, 1994), introduction, p. 79.

at the same time the gloomy context of Clessámmor's story is not wholly dispelled by Fingal's rhetoric, and offers an oblique commentary on the code he seeks refuge in: after all, the need to make the mark of one's arm in battle had been the cause of a lifetime's unhappiness for Clessámmor, and the very ruins of Balclutha represent the mark of Comhall's arm in battle.

The most famous of Macpherson's additions is the conclusion to the poem, the address to the sun, one of the most anthologised pieces of *Ossian*, and a passage which reiterates, after the action, the transience of all things and the appropriate way to deal with this fact. That it owes more to *Paradise Lost* than to any extant Gaelic source is neither here nor there; if anything, that it is Macpherson's addition is for our purposes crucial. Ossian initially sees the sun as the only symbol of stability in a world in which he believes (with a degree of geomorphological prescience remarkable for the eighteenth let alone the third century) that even 'the mountains themselves decay with years'. However, another idea suddenly occurs to him:

> But thou art perhaps, like me, for a season, and thy years will have an end. Thou shalt sleep in thy clouds, careless of the voice of the morning.——Exult then, O sun, in the strength of thy youth! Age is dark and unlovely; it is like the glimmering light of the moon, when it shines through broken clouds, and the mist is on the hills; the blast of the north is on the plain, the traveller shrinks in the midst of his journey. (pp. 133–4)

In its dialectic scope the speech thus echoes Fingal's meditation on the ruined city, facing down the oblivion of eternity with a determination to 'exult' the strength of youth. The poem thus ends with Ossian still trying to come to a position with regard to the remorseless passage of time which may eventually efface all, and it is perhaps significant that the poem ends with an act of poetry, not the physical actions suggested by Fingal's response to mortality.[78]

The middle sections of the poem concern themselves with the actions of the Fingalians to erect something of value to withstand the remorseless passage of time, whose reminders hedge the poem. As in "The Battle of Lora", the Fingalians put their faith in heroic actions committed in a righteous cause. But, to briefly anticipate at this

point the issues addressed in the next chapter, this reliance on the values of an active civic virtue are not unproblematic for an eighteenth-century readership concerned that the commercial and, in Scotland's case, increasingly provincial world contains no scope for such a release of virtue. Thus "Carthon" adapts the warrior honour code and military ethos in such a way as to suggest, in its constant negotiations on who ought to fight whom, an 'inculcation of the heroic life which is not incompatible with a democratic society' and, by foregrounding a Fingal who meditates on the passing of all things the poem creates a 'hero has been made accessible, his greatness democratised' (deGategno (1991), p. 105). In other words, (and in an echo of what we saw in the previous chapter) it is the mental attitude and intention which is crucial, and which could be adopted by anyone, even those unable to conduct great deeds in response, not what actually happens. This is symbolised most clearly by the fact that Carthon and Clessámmor spend 17 lines of the Gaskill edition discussing whether the latter is the sort of opponent the former can make his name against, compared to the 7 quoted above they spend fighting. The battlefield is thus transformed into an 'intricate system of recognition and exchange of compliment' (Clark (ed.), p, 78).

Which is just as well, since, in true romance fashion "Carthon" contains enough material to undermine this system in its very formulation. Firstly, while it is true that the poem suggests a participatory system of social value in which Carthon differs in degree but not kind from Fingal, the Great King never loses his basic mystery. This is suggested by Fingal's vatic speeches on Balclutha (as Ossian himself says, 'lovely were thy thoughts, O Fingal! why had not Ossian the strength of thy soul?—But thou standest alone, my father; and who can equal the king of Morven? (p. 128)), and in the business of the apparition he witnesses before the main action of the poem. This episode importantly increases the air of mystery surrounding Fingal:

> The king alone beheld the terrible sight, and he foresaw the death of the people. He came, in silence, to his hall; and took his father's spear.—The mail rattled on his breast. The heroes rose around. They looked, in silence, on each other, marking the eyes of Fingal.—They saw the battle in his face: the death of armies on his spear. (p. 129)

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[78] More will be said about this speech in chapter 5 below.

Fingal is gradually depersonalised in this description, or at least becomes somehow 'other', external to the narrative perspective. He is inscrutable, legible only in terms of the death he brings. There is a greater identity at this point between Fingal and the apparition than between Fingal and his army, a fact underlined by his speech to the latter:

> battle darkens near us; and death hovers over the land. Some ghost, the friend of Fingal, has forewarned us of the foe.——The sons of the stranger come from the darkly-rolling sea. For, from the water, came the sign of Morven's gloomy danger. (p. 129)

It is the final masterstroke on Macpherson's part to make this terrifying vision 'the friend of Fingal'. Fingal is very much Fionn-the-Seer here, the possessor of arcane and supernaturally derived wisdom, rather than the Patriot King, the 'shield of his people', 'an enlightened hero, one whose benevolence and civic duty served as principles for a new public religion' (deGategno (1991), p. 104).

Even more alarming for the system the poem advocates is the fate of Carthon himself. DeGategno's comments about the poem's final confrontation between father and son offer the positive interpretation of this reconditioned heroic code. The actions of the protagonists represent, he says:

> an agreement to rely upon feelings as guides to truth and conduct. They reveal the realities of human existence as Macpherson sees it: 'the meaning of excellence, the nature of friendship, the necessity of loyalty and courage, the tragic solitude of our condition and the inevitability of death.' (1991, p. 105)

An apt comment, but one which raises important questions. Put simply, it is notable that the 'agreement' has no impact on the inevitability of death, in fact, might even be seen as hastening it. Carthon relies on 'feelings as guides to truth and conduct', is struck by the suspicion that this man he fights may be 'the love of Moina; the father of car-borne Carthon' (p. 131). However, Clessàmmor dismisses his inquiries to that effect:

> I have been renowned in battle; but I never told my name to a foe. Yield to me, son of the wave, and then thou shalt know, that the mark of my sword is in many a field.
> (p. 131)

This situation is an interesting change from Macpherson's Gaelic stories (Thomson (1952), p. 50). These too have Conloach (the Carthon figure) intuiting the identity of his foe. For example, in the *Book of the Dean*, Conloach describes his enemy as 'on*chú* áigh na hÉireann' ('the battling hound of Ireland'; emphasis added), this phrase echoing both Cú Chulainn's name and the nickname ('the hound') derived from it (Ross (ed.), p. 173). However, in these other versions it is the father figure who asks the question and the son who refuses to reveal his identity, a logical inconsistency cleared up by the introduction of some sort of oath, binding Conloach never to reveal his name (as in, for example, Yeats' 'Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea'). By removing this vow and making the son request the identity of the father rather than vice versa, Macpherson makes the story simpler and more psychologically consistent, but also changes the meaning of the final tragic encounter:

> They fought, like two contending winds, that strive to roll the wave. Carthon bade his spear to err; for he still thought that the foe was the spouse of Moina.——He broke Clessámmor's beamy spear in twain: and seized his shining sword. But as Carthon was binding the chief; the chief drew the dagger of his fathers. He saw the foe's uncovered side; and opened, there, a wound. (p. 132)

This business of the provenance of the dagger, the ancestral knife in the back as it were, might be considered a gilding of the lily. Nevertheless, by inverting the attitudes of the men, if not the outcome of the battle, Macpherson places the tragic hubris not with the desperate need of youth to live up to the honour code (a youth the tragic victim of a binding oath) but the stubbornness of old age. Or to put it another way, the story becomes Clessámmor's tragedy, not Carthon's.

"Carthon" becomes then a tragic story of misunderstanding and conspiracy of event which is driven by the clash of the martial honour system with the world of love and family relations. The deadly combat between father and son is foreshadowed in the details Macpherson adds about Clessámmor's abandonment of Moina: on two occasions Clessámmor is shown to bring about tragedy through his adherence to the demands of the honour code. At the very least we might argue that the unreconstructed Clessámmor represents the world as it is or has been, destroying the

world as it might be represented by Carthon, but I think it is also possible to suggest that overall the poem presents a self-fulfilling cycle, whereby the system by which these heroes hope to secure a lasting name for themselves in the hereafter and outface the ruin of time directly contributes to their misery in the present. DeGategno describes Ossian's address to the sun as a 'sublime articulation of grief, a disappointment of thoroughly human proportion at being deprived of those who have suffered greatly before us and like us' (1991, p. 105), but the poem suggests that if the first half of this equation can provide the enabling perspective for great deeds 'amidst a bleak expanse of secular time', it might also contribute to the suffering and disappointment.

"Carthon" thus exemplifies the romance mode in both the ways suggested in this chapter. Macpherson's poem elaborates on the bare bones of the Gaelic original, "completing" the poem by giving it a meaning, underlined by those elements he adds, barely – if at all – discernible in the original but which is tied to the preoccupations about the nature of virtue and heroism in Macpherson's own time. More than that, in creating a noble heroism which is haunted by the suspicion that it cannot surmount its own contribution to the transience it hopes to offer resistance to, the poem partakes of the 'bitter-sweet ambivalence of the romance mode which, while acknowledging a world unchanged, can still imagine what a better world might be' (Barron (1987), p. 215). The poem offers a mind-set, a mental attitude of stoic sentimentalism but one that does not ultimately add up to a sustaining programme for life.

V.

This chapter has demonstrated that the romance, as constructed by modern scholarship, offers suggestive way of understanding *Ossian*. In suggesting that Macpherson's own reluctance to use the term is of little direct relevance to our purposes I have stressed two things: firstly, that romance is most profitably understood not as a consciously adopted genre but as a mode, descriptive of a certain form of literary creation and a certain type of literary experience; secondly, that the application of the term as it has

been used here was not current in the eighteenth century. Ironically, we have also seen that *Ossian* afforded scholars such as the author of *Fingal King of Morven* the opportunity to practise new critical approaches to literary traditions not immediately recognisable in the neo-classical terms previously available. The author of the pamphlet may have wanted to appropriate *Ossian* for an Anglo-Norman literary tradition and deny its Celtic separateness by so carefully dating the poems to the growth of chivalry in the British Isles in the hundred or so years after the Norman Conquest of England, but his model for the relationship between *Ossian* and a prior Gaelic tradition is nevertheless a sophisticated one and, I suggest, recognisable to a modern medieval scholar.

However, the value of this approach has been in the illumination it helps cast on the poems themselves. In the first instance we are offered a parallel methodological precedent for the interpretation of texts which allows us to transcend the debate over providence as it now stands. Thomson's observation that it 'is contrary to Macpherson's principles to tell a plain tale in a plain way' (1952, p. 49) has been expanded into an explanation of the process by which Macpherson:

> transformed the figure of Fionn into a vehicle for conscious literary expression. The figure of Fingal personified the taste of the eighteenth-century literati, being a hero overwhelmed by the massiveness of space and time but none the less noble and high-minded for that. (Ó hÓgáin (1988), p. 315)

This takes us to out second crucial point, that Macpherson's Ossianic romances reveal far more about the priorities and tensions within his own background than they do about their Gaelic inspiration. Nutt after all might be right to say that for the Celticist *Ossian* is 'worthless', but it is worthless in the same way as Chrétien's interpretation of Arthurian lore is worthless for anyone who wishes to learn about the historical reality of Arthur's realm.

Finally, the romance paradigm which reads intimations of redundancy into the values it upholds is a suggestive one for the present study. The suspicion that the sentimental stoic attitude might actually conspire in creating the situations in which it manifests itself is a familiar one from the previous chapter. Equally, the notion that

active civic virtue, in reconditioning itself, only confirms its own redundancy is one which the following chapter will explore at length.

Finally, the romance framework also casts light on our central procedural dilemma since it allows us to give play to the doubts about the world of the heroic expressed in the poems without suggesting an overt antagonism. *Ossian* worries over, subverts, but never rejects the martial ethos, can not finally decide whether martial heroism is 'proud energy or destructive lawlessness' in poems which, in true romance style express 'the splendour and the sadness of the heroic life' (Spearing (1987), p. 165). Catching this balance is a crucial one as we turn from the modalities of romance aesthetics to Macpherson's historiographical and civic thought, a jump which, we will find, is not so far as we might have imagined.

CHAPTER FOUR.

Ossian, Primitivism, and Cultural Identity

I.

Thus far my discussion of *The Poems of Ossian* has proceeded in broadly literary terms. In the final two chapters I want to shift attention to Macpherson's place within contexts less strictly literary in focus. Accordingly, this chapter explores *The Poems of Ossian* in relation to one of the central Scottish Enlightenment concerns – the nature of primitive society, its relation to the modern, and the patterns of thought and anxieties which lay behind this concern – and is focused through a consideration of the relationship between Macpherson and Adam Ferguson, the so-called "father of modern sociology." Within this discussion I shall also have recourse to Macpherson's *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771/3), a move which both underlines points I which to make in relation to *Ossian* and also places *Ossian* within the wider context of Macpherson's intellectual career. By reading Macpherson through the framework of Ferguson's views on the nature of society, its development, the forces which threaten and reinforce society, it is possible to establish the extent of Macpherson's debt to Enlightenment discourse and also to mark his distinctiveness. The chapter refines our image of Macpherson and his cultural locale and brings into focus dimensions of Enlightenment thought as experienced in the Macpherson paradigm.

As I suggested in chapter one, arguably the major concern of Ossianic scholarship in recent years has been to explain the poems and their popularity (and less frequently, the hostility with which they were greeted) in terms of the prevailing cultural trends of the late 1750s and early 1760s. I also suggested one result of this

attention:

> *The Poems of Ossian* have been recruited to support cultural explanations of the development of Scottish society, the programme of the Edinburgh literati, and the need to incorporate the Highlands within a modern Scottish nation. There is nothing intrinsically invalid about such approaches, but they do tend to relieve scholars from the task of actually reading and analysing the textual source.[1]

This is precisely the scholarly tradition which would like to treat *Ossian* as a cultural artefact but is less enthusiastic about the idea of the poems themselves. The result is that by not 'reading and analysing the textual source' not only has *Ossian* continued to be misunderstood, misrepresented and undervalued, but the cultural artefact erected in its place has all too often proved to be a scholarly fiction.

Luke Gibbons has recently remarked that Ferguson's 'complex intellectual fusion of primitivism and progress is an abiding presence in Macpherson's work', and in a sense this chapter is in large part about unpacking this pregnant but thus far unexplored observation, an attempt to define accurately the nature of this 'presence'.[2] The first section sets the scene by exploring the personal connections, such as can be ascertained, between Macpherson and Ferguson. This is followed by a section laying out a framework of Ferguson's civic theory which in section three is used to read not only *Ossian* – both prose framework and poems – but also Macpherson's *Introduction*. The third section will argue that while Macpherson's prose discussions out-do Ferguson in the "primitivist" stakes, the *Ossian* poems themselves are characterised by – and often out-strip – the ambivalence inherent within Ferguson's writing towards a past of noble savagery. The conclusion suggests a cultural context for both Ferguson and Macpherson, and suggests reasons for the tensions the chapter reveals between Macpherson and Ferguson, and indeed between various aspects of Macpherson's own thinking when viewed through Fergusonian spectacles. As always the emphasis is placed on recentring the texts within a wider discussion, proving that setting

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[1] John Dwyer, 'The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the *Poems of Ossian*', in *Ossian Revisited*, ed. Howard Gaskill, (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 164–199, (p. 183).

[2] Luke Gibbons, 'The Sympathetic Bond: Ossian, Celticism and Colonialism' in *Celticism*, ed Terence Brown, (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 273– 92, p. 284.

Macpherson within a wider cultural context need not necessitate the elision of the poems themselves, and that in the final analysis they demand attention if that wider discussion is to have any validity.

II.

Ferguson and the Production of *The Poems of Ossian.*

Despite the continuation of the myth of Macpherson as solo literary opportunist within popular literary history, the last ten or so years have seen a general revision upwards of the tentative conclusion of Macpherson's first biographer that 'it was probably to the assistance of [...] eminent men of letters that some of the success of Macpherson's work was due.'[3] Although many Scottish (and indeed English) men of letters were involved in paving the way for *Ossian*, the spotlight has fallen on two in particular who did more than most: Hugh Blair, whose involvement was discussed in chapter one, and Ferguson. Ferguson was responsible for giving Macpherson his introduction to John Home at Moffat, the meeting which launched Macpherson into the consciousness of the wider Edinburgh Enlightenment (Saunders, p. 64). In short, 'without the string-pulling of Ferguson and the dynamism of Blair with his constant cajoling, there would have been no *Fingal*, of that we can be certain.'[4]

Ferguson was certainly intimate with the nuts and bolts of the production of *Ossian.* Blair reported to the Highland Society investigation into Macpherson's activities that as he himself was 'entirely ignorant of the Gaelic language' he relied on the opinion of Ferguson, amongst others, with regards to the faithfulness of Macpherson's translations. Ferguson had, according to Blair, seen 'old manuscripts' and that 'in comparing [Macpherson's] version with the original, they [Ferguson and

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[3] Thomas Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson* (London, 1894), p. 150.

[4] Howard Gaskill, 'Ossian at Home and Abroad', *Strathclyde Modern Language Studies*, 8 (1988), 5–27 (p. 14).

others] found it exact and faithful, in any parts which they read'.[5] Ferguson's own testimony bears this out, if somewhat uneasily. Ferguson admits that at the early stages he was 'far from apprehending any imposture' even going as far as to recognise a passage as similar to one he himself had taken down from a Gaelic source in 1740. Once he had read the finished product, however, Ferguson revised his opinion, believing that there had been certain 'liberties taken in piecing together what was found in separate or broken fragments' (Appendix 4, p.63, p.64). That notwithstanding, Ferguson was still willing to repeat the reasoning of supporters of *Ossian* in enlisting the precedent of Homer to justify such compilational 'liberties' (Appendix 4, p.64).[6] Certainly some of *Ossian*'s most vitriolic critics of the 1770s and 1780s had no doubt about Ferguson's involvement at a significant level: in an era when it was a widespread belief among English writers that 'the Scots constituted a conspiracy or a cabal to advance their own interests at the expense of all others, and, if need be, [...] of the truth itself' (Sher (1991), p. 213) it was insupportable that a man such as Ferguson (particularly given his knowledge of Gaelic) could have been the innocent victim of a 'hoax'.

While Ferguson's precise attitude towards Macpherson and *Ossian* is difficult to gauge with any accuracy, on the whole it seems to have been guardedly enthusiastic. As well as justifying Macpherson's activities with reference to Homer Ferguson's testimonial to the Highland Society Committee talks of the 'genius, learning, and courage of James Macpherson' in championing a literature whose 'greatest elegancies were to be learned from herdsmen or deer-steelers [sic]' in a language which was 'connected with disaffection, and proscribed by government' (Appendix 4, p. 65). Such glowing praise for Macpherson is unusual enough at any time after 1760, but especially so in 1798 given that over the course of a controversial life Macpherson seems to have alienated many of those at one time close to him. Blair, for example, in his testimony to

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[5] Henry Mackenzie (ed.), *The Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland Appointed to Inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1805), Appendix 4, 56-62, p. 59.

the Highland Society rather bitterly defends Macpherson's character from charges of fraud on the novel grounds that he was too 'proud, high-spirited, and disdainful' to carry off such a ruse. However, there are other suggestions that relations between Macpherson and Ferguson seem to have remained cordial throughout the former's life. When Macpherson finally got around to the question of publishing the Gaelic *Ossian* (it remained no more than a question through his life), Ferguson was one of those he corresponded with, correspondence which hints at a cooling in relations with Blair.[7] It is true that Ferguson's opinion of *Ossian* was perhaps subject to change: September 1781 finds him telling Blair that he thought *Ossian* to be a 'matter of some curiosity in the history of mankind, but very little as matter of vanity to one corner of this island, much less of jealousy to any other corner of it'.[8] Nevertheless this rather defensive and perplexed observation was made during the bitter war of words which broke out between Ferguson and Percy (via Blair) over Ferguson's role in a deception Percy claimed had been practised on him in Edinburgh some 20 years early, and in which Ferguson was on the receiving end of some highly damaging slurs (even if one was not a Professor of Moral Philosophy). Little wonder that the baffled and hurt Ferguson affects a dismissive opinion of *Ossian*. Furthermore two months earlier, Ferguson had written to Bishop Douglas on the question of *Ossian* in a rather different vein, declaring that 'the Specimens I have seen apart from the curiosity of them are very interesting as Efforts of the Imagination and the heart equal to any Poetry I know, and whether genuine or spurious I shall never be ashamed of having mistaken them for Originals'.[9]

If we return to his testimony to the Highland Society, it is significant to note that Ferguson's admiration for Macpherson revolves around the service (at least in

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[6] See Sher, 'Percy, Shaw, and the Ferguson "Cheat"' in Gaskill (ed):1991, pp. 207–45, p.236 for the raising of the cultural stakes implied in this 'reasonable' position.

[7] Saunders (1894), pp. 293–9. The men also entered into a rather dubious collaboration in a parliamentary election campaign in 1780. See John Robertson's *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 175.

[8] Letter of 15th September 1781, cited in Sher (1991), p. 233.

[9] Letter of 21 July 1781, quoted by Gaskill, introduction to *Ossian Revisited*, pp. 1–18 (p. 15).

Ferguson's opinion) done by Macpherson to Gaelic culture.[10] Much has been made of Ferguson's unique position as a Gaelic-speaking Highlander within the intellectual community of which he was a part, and it has become a virtual commonplace to ascribe Ferguson's particular take on some of the issues central to the Scottish thinkers of his time to his upbringing. It has been suggested, for example, that Ferguson 'knew intimately, and from the inside, the two civilisations which divided eighteenth century Scotland: the *Gemeinschaft* of the clan, belonging to the past, the *Gesellschaft* of the "progressive", commercial Lowlands'.[11] In these terms at least, this inside angle spells the difference between Ferguson and Adam Smith. Where the latter knows 'only the external bonds of the clan system', the author of the *Essay* 'knew the inner bonds, the loyalty to the clan and to the chief who was the symbol of its unity' (Forbes (1966), p. xxxix), speaking the ideology of the clan as he criticised it. As Ferguson himself put it:

> If I had not been in the Highlands of Scotland, I might be of their mind who think the inhabitants of Paris and Versailles the only polite people in the world. It is truly wonderful to see persons of every sex and age, who have never travelled beyond the nearest mountain possess themselves perfectly [...] This is seldom seen in our cities, or in our capital; but a person among the mountains, who thinks himself nobly born, considers courtesy as the test of his rank.[12]

This appreciation of the Highlands has been read into the *Essay on the History of Civil Society* itself. Forbes, amongst others, has suggested that the Highlands take their place in the work, albeit 'clothed in the fashionable garb' of Ancient Sparta and the Native American tribe. He cites the passage where Ferguson follows the visit of an imaginary traveller to an ancient Greek city. The visitor is appalled by the conditions, 'many features of which,' according to Forbes, 'incidentally have an obvious resemblance and conscious or unconscious reference to the Highlands of Scotland'

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[10] D.S.Thomson describes Ferguson, mainly on account of his assistance in the *Ossian* matter, as 'a seminal influence in that remarkable resurgence of interest in the Gaelic verse tradition which we see in the third quarter of the eighteenth century.' ('Macpherson's *Ossian*: Ballads to Epics' in *The Heroic Process: Form, Function, and Fantasy in Folk Epic*, ed by Bo Almquist *et al*, (Dublin, 1987), pp. 243–65, p. 251)

[11] Duncan Forbes, introduction to Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1966), pp. xxxviii–ix.

(1966, p.xxxix, p.xxx). Ferguson frequently uses the word 'clan' when describing primitive social units, but we should beware of leaping to too strong conclusions: the Oxford English Dictionary cites four examples, pre-1732, of its use 'extended to similar groups in other countries' although one of the Dictionary's examples of this extended usage does come from Gavin Douglas's translation of the *Aeneid* which perhaps suggests that this extended use could be part of an attempt to domesticate the alien for a British (or in Douglas's case Scottish) audience.[13] Whatever, it does seem unlikely that Ferguson would have used the word without being conscious of its Highland overtones.

However, such a view of the influence of the Highlands on Ferguson is problematic if we bear in mind recent work which, applied to this case, suggests that the description of the Scottish economic and social situation inherent in Forbes's analysis of Ferguson's background is a flawed one. Allan Macinnes' has recently argued that the 'idea that clanship was monolithic, static, and undeveloped prior to the Forty-Five' is a myth born of 'a potent cocktail' of 'Whig ideology, British patriotism and imperial security', obscuring the fact that the clan elite 'subscribed to two of the three principal Whig ideological props – the belief in property and progress, of which commercial enterprise within an imperial framework was an integral aspect'.[14] To settle too quickly for the *Gemeinschaft /Gesellschaft* distinction is then not merely an inaccurate reading of the situation, but also swallows what was originally a campaign of 'disinformation [which] facilitated eradication', aimed at justifying a programme of 'assimilation through repression' which Macinnes has described as 'systematic state terrorism, characterised by a genocidal intent that verged on ethnic cleansing' (p. 205, p. 211).

But it precisely in such vexed areas of the historiography of the Highlands that this chapter, which centres around the abiding concern of Macpherson and Ferguson

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[12] Cited in John Small, *A Biographical Sketch of Adam Ferguson LL.D, F.R.S.E* (Edinburgh, 1864), p. 4.

[13] *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for clan, definition 1 (c).

with (perceived) primitive cultures, operates. From his opinion of *Ossian* at least, Ferguson appears to demonstrate both the affinity to Gaelic culture and the condescension towards it that characterises Macpherson's own work: Ferguson understands the difficult position of the Gael in the 1750s while still characterising him as a 'deer-steeler'. Yet this recurrent theme is one which, I shall argue, also reveals a potential for conflicting stances. Tracing these conflicts allows us to understand more clearly aspects of cultural agenda both of the Scottish Enlightenment and of one of its looser canons, and warns against easy determinism with regards to *Ossian*, its place within the Scottish Enlightenment canon, and the Highland experience of the eighteenth century.

III.

The Ferguson paradigm: *An Essay on the History of Civil Society.*

The purpose of this section is to erect a Fergusonian context against which to read Macpherson's work. Since the aim of what follows is to create a sense of not only Ferguson's theories but also his characteristic turn of thought, the ambience or sensibility of his work, it offers more examples than would have been necessary had laying out the relevant theory been my sole concern. Catching this ambience is crucial to understanding Ferguson, and his importance for Macpherson studies, and it is best caught through the accretion of a number of examples. That said, it is not an exhaustive reading of Ferguson, and is a means not an end in itself. The crucial Ferguson text for our purposes is the one for which he is best known, the *Essay on the*

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[14] Macinnes, *Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart, 1603–1788* (East Linton, 1996), p. 210, p. 160, p. 172.

History of Civil Society.[15] Published in 1767, the work nevertheless had a long gestation period: we know that the *Essay* existed in manuscript form (provisionally entitled 'A Treatise on Refinement') as early as 1759, when Ferguson offered it to David Hume for his perusal and comments (Small (1864), p. 11). The exact contents of this early manuscript are unknown to us, but it is generally assumed that it was substantially the same as the published version. For example, the main explanation advanced for Hume's change of heart regarding the work (enthusiasm in 1759 gave way to advice not to publish), that Hume felt that Ferguson's Montesquieu-driven social analysis was passé by the middle 1760s (Small (1864), p. 11), assumes that taste rather than the *Essay* had changed. It is cannot be proved that Macpherson was aware of its contents, although the general drift of this chapter implies that, from a congruence of thought (and at times expression), it seems likely that Macpherson knew of the *Essay*'s central concepts, if only through conversation with its author.[16] The following reading of the *Essay* lays out the central concerns of the *Essay* as are pertinent to Macpherson and is descriptive since the third section of the chapter deals with interpreting the signification of these concerns.

Throughout the *Essay* Ferguson creates an image of primitive *noblesse oblige* as a participatory structure of social value and action within the context of a wider argument which attempts to reconcile, via a two-way process, the old ideals of civic virtue with the contract-driven commercial world of the eighteenth century. The relationship between early tribe leaders and their followers was a fluid one, Ferguson suggests, with the chief seen as a 'common bond of connection', not the 'common

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[15] Ferguson's other major publications include *The Morality of Stage-Plays Seriously Considered* (1757), *The History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (3 vols, 1783), and *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (2 vols, 1792).

[16] It is both convenient and infuriating that the Edinburgh *literati* spent a lot of time talking to each other. While modern scholarship is perhaps rightly less keen on assuming conversational cross-fertilisation than that of previous generations, it that it must have occurred nevertheless needs to be recognised. For a tussle with this issue on the question of Scottish Enlightenment poetic primitivism, see Lois Whitney, 'English [sic] Primitivistic Theories of Epic Origins', *Modern Philology*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1924), 337–78, (pp. 346–48). The point of the present chapter is not, however, to demonstrate debts but to link affinities.

master'.[17] He has the tribe's support on account of both taking the 'principal share in their troubles' (p. 99) and by doing nothing to earn their resentment (p. 123). The crucial point is that this relationship is a voluntary one, and the system a self-regulatory social contract:

> The sovereign wishes to give stability and order to administration, by express and promulgated rules. The subject wishes to know the conditions and limits of his duty. He acquiesces, or he revolts, according as the terms [...] are, or are not, consistent with his sense of his rights. (pp. 158–9)

In this organic society the rule of law is established 'without any settled form of government, or any bond of union' other than that of 'instinct', with Ferguson observing that 'the absence of vicious dispositions, is a better security than any public establishment for the suppression of crimes' (p. 85). Disorder does occur, however, particularly 'in times of debauch' when 'intoxicating liquors' (to which Ferguson notes, savages 'are extremely addicted') get the better of the savages' usual restraint, and such disorders usually end in bloodshed. In such cases, the long memories of the wronged and blood-feuds passed through generations make for a revenge principle with no statute of limitations:

> These considerations render [savages] cautious and circumspect, put them on their guard against their passions, and give to their ordinary deportment an air of phlegm and composure superior to what is possessed among polished nations. (p. 86)

It is vital to note here that Ferguson's praise of savage 'phlegm and composure' comes not from an idealism about innate qualities, but a belief that men are motivated to act in one way through the fear of the consequences of any other course of action.

That notwithstanding, it is easy from a cursory examination of the *Essay* to see from whence the myth of Ferguson the ardent and unqualified primitivist springs. 'If the savage,' he declares, 'has not received our instructions, he is likewise unacquainted with our vices' and in 'forming his sentiments' the savage 'knows all that the heart requires to be known'; it is the heart which allows the savage to 'distinguish the friend

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[17] *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. by Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge, 1995; from 1st ed., 1767), p. 99. All future references to the text of the *Essay* are to this edition.

whom he loves, and the public interest which awakens his zeal' (p. 178). This emphasis on heart would seem to contradict his earlier belief in the pragmatic nature of social behaviour, but Ferguson has bigger fish to fry at this point. Put bluntly, enthusiasm for the public interest is a Fergusonian ideal without equal, and this 'zeal', coupled, for reasons we shall discuss shortly, with an addiction to warfare make early societies a model of civic virtue.

The Native American tribes, Ferguson notes, are 'engaged in almost perpetual wars, for which they can assign no reason' (p. 27). Ferguson gives the impression of whole-heartedly approving of this state of affairs, since war, he claims, satisfies two fundamental human needs. Firstly it 'furnish[s] a scene for the exercise of our greatest abilities', allowing man to fulfil his potential, since 'he who has never struggled with his fellow-creatures, is a stranger to half the sentiments of mankind' (p. 28). Secondly it allows society to develop, since 'without the rivalship of nations, and the practice of war, civil society itself could scarcely have found an object, a form' (p. 28):

> Could we once [...] extinguish the emulation which is excited from abroad, we should probably break or weaken the bands of society at home, and close the busiest scenes of national occupations and virtues. (p. 29)

Without war to exercise the sinews and virtues of the nation, 'sensibility and delicacy' replace true-hearted spirit and endeavour and 'mankind generally flatter their own imbecility under the name of *politeness*' (p. 242, his emphasis).

Two things stop this view sounding shallow. Firstly Ferguson has sense that war in some way represents inescapable human destiny. This point needs making with care since Forbes has argued that Ferguson's theory of the value of conflict is the 'most profound and disturbing' of all those of Enlightenment thinkers who were aware of the creative potential of war precisely because it is presented 'utterly matter of fact, dry and secular in tone, without the slightest hint of "destiny" or "tragic conflict at the heart of things"' (1969, p. xviii). But to say as much is to be deaf to the rhetoric of destiny which makes itself heard in Ferguson's prose, even if its examples are drawn from the secular. Man is born to be in conflict, Ferguson claims, how else can you explain the games man devises which 'anticipate, in play, the conflicts [he is] doomed to sustain'?

Truly says Ferguson, man 'was not made to live forever, and even his love of amusement has opened a path that leads to the grave' (p. 28). Of course Hawks always point to "human nature" to justify violence, but what sets Ferguson apart is the wistfulness of moments like this, a rhetoric of destiny which is hard to dismiss as fatuous, even if we cannot assent to its conclusions.

Secondly, Ferguson has no misty-eyed vision of the great game of war as practised by primitive people. Because to the primitive world conflict was a matter of 'popular animosity' rather than 'an operation of policy' (p. 184), 'cities were razed or enslaved; the captive sold, mutilated, or condemned' (p. 189). Such behaviour is unacceptable to the modern:

> who profess to carry the civilities of peace into the practice of war; and who value the praise of indiscriminate lenity at a higher rate than even that of military prowess, or the love of their country. (p. 189)

Ferguson deplores savage war on one level, but quotations like this suggest at least some sense in which Ferguson regrets this change, particularly when it produces the conflict of interest we see here. Furthermore:

> If [the ancient's] animosities were great, their affections were proportionate: they perhaps, loved, where we only pity; and were stern and inexorable, where we are not merciful, but only irresolute (p. 189)

It seems to be an essence, a spirit of life and human potential – ultimately for good – which Ferguson sees in this savagery. 'Every age hath its consolations, as well as its suffering', he points out, and while not minimising that suffering he suggests that the consolations to be gained from the veneration of large-scale violence and brutality include 'certain maxims of generosity and honour, that tend to prevent the commission of wrongs' (p. 104). Thus it is not the principle of giving quarter which Ferguson objects to (although he does admit to seeing the advantages of having no choice but to fight to the last man), but its codification into an empty rhetoric, one which flatters us into feeling that we are inherently superior to our forebears. We witness here an example of Ferguson's recurring critique of the modern world: the ossification of vital

principle into unthinking code, the removal of the opportunity for mankind to do what is right and virtuous out of choice rather than out of observance of an ethos which, in other circumstances, may allow for a shirking of responsibility and civic corruption.

So what of the modern? Traditionally Ferguson is seen as one of the more extreme Enlightenment critics of the commercial age, although the most recent scholarship is revising that opinion: as the introduction to the latest edition of the *Essay* argues, 'Ferguson saw in eighteenth-century Britain a uniquely endowed, a well-advanced, and in many ways a good polity' (p. xxi). However, Ferguson is nevertheless willing to question some of the most sacred cows of the commercial age. A striking example comes in his attitude to learning and the arts. Defenders of the commercial age presented the modern state as one in which the fruits of refinement – sensibility, politeness, learning and the arts –provided the moral stays traditionally looked for in the ethics of civic virtue and active citizenry.[18] Literary Primitivism – the belief that the greatest poetry comes in early society and as a result of war not peace – is thus problematic in terms of the mainstream eighteenth-century Whig ideology, and in its most forth-right forms positively antagonistic. A brief comparison between Ferguson, Thomas Blackwell, Hugh Blair and Edmund Burke makes the point succinctly.

In his exploration of the social and political conditions suitable for the production of epic poetry, Blackwell is clear that 'the things that give the greatest lustre in a regular government; the greatest honours and highest truths, will scarcely bear poetry' and that 'what we call polishing diminishes a language'.[19] Furthermore, his comparison between Homer and Virgil, between a natural poet who speaks of 'violent passion' and 'human frailties' and a poet who writes poetry 'formed and regulated' for a 'people deeply disciplined' complements the natural manners of the former over and above the 'haughty [...] shew of virtue' in the latter (1735, pp. 327–9) shades into a moral critique. Against this, Blackwell's insistence that the indissoluble

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[18] See section five below for more on the clash of these ideologies.

'connection between *Liberty* and learning' is best demonstrated by the happy state of affairs in Great Britain as he writes (p. 61) does not lessen what appears to be a violent critique of the modern. As I shall explore below, this is the quintessential primitivist dilemma, one felt with particular force by those who elsewhere are engaged in upholding the culture of the modern.[20] Blackwell's response to this demonstrates one way around the problem. Firstly, he invisions a Homeric (and pre-Homeric) world of cross-fertilising ideas, cultures and ways of life in which Phoenician and Egyptian leaning and trade enrich the cultural fabric of the times, as if Blackwell cannot help but tie, at some level, poetry with certain recognisable advancements. Secondly he turns Homer into a historical fluke – 'fortunate' is the adjective most frequently attached to him – in effect the conjunction of several chance happenings which make his poems something which 'should appear but once in three or four thousand years' (p. 335). By apotheosising Homer in this way Blackwell on some level negates the implied critique of later social conditions and times in his own theory, and clears the way for the literary endeavours of those who ought not to be compared with an unprecedented and unrepeatable master whose greatness lay beyond anyone's, including his own, control.

Burke and Blair take less drastic measures when confronted by a similar dilemma. Both suggest that human sensibility is at its most lively in early stages of society, not the later. 'The languages of the most unpolished people', says Burke, 'have a great force and energy of expression' and such people 'express themselves in a warmer and more passionate manner'; in contrast, 'very polished languages, and such as are praised for their superior clearness and perspicuity, are generally deficient in strength.'[21] Because primitives have few words for things, their imagination is more

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[19] Thomas Blackwell Jnr, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London, 1735), p. 27, p. 58–9.

[20] Since the turbulent events of the Fifteen the political affiliation of the Aberdeen colleges was a moot and heavily scrutinised point. Paul Wood suggests that Blackwell preached 'an ideological gospel inspired by Shaftesbury and the Old Whigs'. See his *The Aberdeen Enlightenment: The Arts Curriculum in the Eighteenth Century* (Aberdeen, 1993), p. 60.

[21] *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by James T. Boulton (Oxford, 1987; from second edition of 1759), p. 176.

exercised in finding ways of describing their surroundings. Thus it stands to reason, in the words of Blair:

> In the progress of society, the genius and manners of men undergo a change more favourable to accuracy than to sprightliness and sublimity. As the world advances, the understanding gains ground upon the imagination; the understanding is more exercised; the imagination, less. Fewer objects occur that are new or surprising. Men apply themselves to trace the causes of things; they correct and refine one another; they subdue or disguise their passions; they form their exterior manners upon one uniform standard of politeness and civility. Human nature is pruned according to method and rule. Language advances from sterility to copiousness, and at the same time, from fervour and enthusiasm, to correctness and precision. Style becomes more chaste; but less animated.[22]

Blair then goes on to suggest that 'the progress of the world in this respect resembles the progress of age in man' (p. 346), an analogy Burke too draws:

> In the morning of our days, when the senses are unworn and tender, when the whole man is awaken in every part, and the gloss of novelty fresh upon all the objects that surround us, how lively at that time are our sensations, but how false and inaccurate the judgements we form of things? (*Enquiry*, p. 25)

And he goes on:

> I despair of ever receiving the same degree of pleasure from the most excellent performances of genius which I felt at that age, from pieces which my present judgement regards as trifling and contemptible. (*Enquiry*, p. 25)

Blair and Burke settle the development of language and perception into a relatively stable binary opposition, and one in which they know where their allegiances lie. While both men are in the potentially uncomfortable position of praising an aesthetic mode of representation – the Sublime – which values the primitive, spontaneous, simple and imaginative, any latent contradiction is solved by their positions as theoreticians. Burke's inquiry is into the concept – 'ideas' – of the Sublime, a project only possible within the discriminating, rational world of the modern: Ossian may *be* sublime, but he can have, and for the very reason of his sublimity, no ideas *about* the sublime.

On the one hand then Blair and Burke water down the critique of the modern represented by the primitivist view of the arts and will, like Wordsworth, 'grieve not,

rather find | Strength in what remains behind' by placing the primitive and modern within a value-laden relationship in which, the aesthetics of the sublime notwithstanding, no right-thinking person would do anything other than perhaps a little wistfully, opt for the latter. On the other hand, they in effect psychologise the issue, resolving matters into this linguistic distinction between youthful fire and vigour, and mature accuracy and polish. Indeed this removal of the entire discourse away from the social and political is symbolised and most readily exemplified by these analogies to life-span and personal experience.

This contrasts strongly with Ferguson, who is determined to relate every field of human endeavour to the civic ideal. Ferguson sees literature mainly as a way of transmitting civic values during times of inactivity, and times of what the rest of us would call civilisation. In a polished society Ferguson sees nothing wrong with the '*remains* of an active spirit' being nurtured by 'literary monuments, and by the history of transactions that preserve the examples and the experience of former and of *better* times' so long as it is the 'qualities of fortitude and public affection' which are stressed and not 'the mere attainments of speculation' (p. 171, emphasis added). Furthermore, Ferguson is doubtful that this last slippage can be prevented since in the modern world book-learning, or 'wading for instruction, through dark allusions and languages unknown' as he puts it (p. 171), tends to take the place what we should learn from 'the animated spirit of society' (p. 34). In short, 'we read of societies, but do not propose to act with men: we repeat the language of politics, but feel not the spirit of nations' (p. 34). This scepticism places Ferguson outside the drive of commercial ideology, since his doubts are based in the presupposition that the arts can provide a stop-gap while the fundamental values remain the same, where commercial ideology suggested that the arts and "polish" actually superseded the traditional values. Where Burke and Blair imply an exchange of qualities in which, on balance, the modern gets the better end of the deal, for Ferguson at least on this issue, the modern can only be a pale imitation of

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[22] Hugh Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian' (1763, rev. with appendix 1765), in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Howard Gaskill, (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 346.

the old. Such are the subtleties within what has too often been seen as a monolithic discourse of primitivism, and it is one of several such distinction this chapter will make.

Yet such doubts about the modern do not lead Ferguson to wish for a return to the primitive past. While superficially the primitive seems to have the advantage in every department, Ferguson is in little doubt as to where the ultimate superiority lies, as his overall view of warfare makes clear. As we have seen, Ferguson was a great admirer of the primitive soldier (in the terms of his day, he would have had first hand experience in the shape of the Highlanders of the Black Watch he ministered to), yet his comparison with the civilised is decisive:

> in the course of a continued struggle, [primitives] always yield to the superior arts, and the discipline of more civilised nations (p. 94)

In a wider sense, Ferguson saw the situation of the modern in similar terms to that of the primitive: if the primitive emerges with certain qualities against the odds of his background, then commercial society, for all its flaws and failings both real and potential, offers the best chance for a nation to develop and reach its potential.

The commercial nation is identifiable from the primitive, argues Ferguson, in its relative size and in its construction around concepts of property and interest, both intimately concerned with the notion of the Division of Labour. In Ferguson's eyes, these four aspects are both crucial to the success of any people and are also precisely those things which ultimately threaten the health of the nation. To take them in order. A successful military state increases in size, even if it has no ostensible imperial ambitions: it finds itself in possession of the lands of vanquished enemies, while strategy demands that it ensures its security by pushing back its borders. Yet expansionism, essential if the nation is to match the growth of its neighbours and not become a 'wretched corner of [someone else's] great empire', a small 'shrub[s] choked by the neighbourhood of more powerful states' (p. 61), is also poisonous. Firstly it has the potential to remove 'emulation from abroad', extinguishing the healthy rivalry which keeps the citizenry honest and involved in public life. Of course, the eighteenth century had seen the European powers of France and Great Britain rapidly expand their empires

while not destroying each other, but Ferguson had an answer to this too. Even if this expansionism does not result in the removal of ones enemies it is still unhealthy, as Ferguson makes clear in lamenting the loss of identity and unity within large states. Lacking a sense of belonging and therefore of civic duty, the nation ultimately falls victim to 'ages of languor, if not of decay' brought on by the 'tendency of enlargement to loosen the bands of political union' (p. 208). In a national context, again Ferguson seems to be at odds with the prevalent Unionist/Imperialist ideologies of his time, since suggestion casts doubt upon the ultimate success and indeed meaning of the "triumph" of 1707. Indeed this passage in the *Essay* is one of the most striking of those in which we feel that Ferguson has the now-provincialised Scotland in mind. In a wider context, Ferguson's diagnosis of this dilemma bears out J.G.A. Pocock's observation that from Machiavelli onwards the civic humanist tradition implied the 'disturbing suggestion that since virtue was action, it must sooner or later alter the conditions on which it rested and so render itself impossible'.[23]

The advent of property and interest turns the savage, a hunter-gatherer, into a barbarian, at which point concepts of wealth and poverty are established (p. 81) and the long trek to polished society begins. Before (and it would appear at the outset of) the establishment of concepts of property, men are, in a phrase Ferguson borrows from Tacitus, 'more lavish of their blood than of their sweat' (p. 96). Indeed indolence is a key concept in Ferguson's notion of early lifestyles. Property gives the individual an incentive to engage in activities other than those of the moment, creating a habit of mind which allows him to 'apply his hand to lucrative arts, confine himself to a tedious task, and wait with patience for the distant returns of his labour' (p. 95). As Ferguson's language of indolence and instant gratification on the one hand and assiduous labour and patience on the other suggests, he sees this as an improvement. Yet the motivation behind such labours – self-interest – is a double-edged sword, and

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[23] Pocock, 'Modes of Political and Historical Time in Early Eighteenth-Century England' in *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 91–102, p. 97. See also Jeffrey Hart, *Viscount Bolingbroke: Tory Humanist* (London, 1965), p. 121.

as Ferguson makes clear in talking of commerce, 'the mighty engine which we suppose to have formed society, only tends to set its members at variance' (p. 24).

These powerful catch-22's, whereby that which is essential for progress and greatness sows the seeds of demise, are summed up in the question of 'the separation of arts and professions'. Ferguson is categorical:

> however urged by a sense of necessity, and a desire of convenience, or favoured by any advantages of situation and policy, a people can make no great progress in cultivating the arts of life, until they have separated [...] the particular tasks, which require a peculiar skill and attention. (p. 172)

Efficient production creates wealth, and wealth 'may procure, by its treasure, that national consideration and power, which the savage maintains at the expense of his blood' (p. 173). But within the civic tradition the willingness to expend blood is the ultimate proof of virtue and social cohesiveness, so this efficiency comes at a cost, serving 'in some measure to break the bands of society' (p. 207): the citizens of the state stop thinking of themselves primarily as citizens but as professionals, divorced from the workings of the civic community. Worse still, the formalisation of trades creates a sort of closed shop in which professionals substitute 'form in place of ingenuity' (Ferguson's suspicion of institutionalisation again) and in which the many come to rely on the expertise of the few. This is particularly pernicious in the case of the matters of war: standing armies might themselves be superior in terms of discipline to their more impromptu predecessors, but the 'vigour of the nation' as a whole, relieved of the need to fight, decays and is replaced by 'weakness and effeminacy' (p. 216).

Progress for Ferguson is then a sort of tragic progression, one in which the struggles of the rise to civilisation provide a better context for virtue than civilisation itself:

> The virtues of men have shone most during their struggles, not after the attainment of their ends. Those ends themselves, though attained by virtue, are frequently the causes of corruption and decay. (p. 196)

Forbes has denied any cyclical theory of history within the *Essay* since 'Ferguson does not believe in the inevitability of decadence' quoting Ferguson's own dictum that to

'plead a supposed fatality in human affairs is a sign of weakness and folly' (1969, p. xv, p. xxxviii). This may be the case, yet at every point in the *Essay* Ferguson suggests that the mechanisms of civilisation do inevitably undermine the qualities which brought them into being. Indeed Forbes is himself responding to this very insight when he observes that for Ferguson 'human nature [...] is like a meteor, which shines only when it is in movement a as a result of friction' and that man is happy 'when all his powers are called forth and stretched to the utmost in and for his community' (1969, p. xxix), and we have seen how at every stage Ferguson's analysis of the growth of civilisation tends to remove that friction and to 'loosen the bonds of society'. As Forbes himself has put it elsewhere, creating civilisation for Ferguson comes at a high cost:

> In creating the complex structure of civilisation, man has created something, without anyone willing it, which is no longer a society in which he shares, but something which stands over and against him, alien to him; and if he is divided against his community he is divided against himself, and no longer whole.[24]

So what do we make of this seeming contradiction between the follies of 'supposed fatality' and inevitably high cost of progress? To use any analogy, Ferguson seems to be saying that while none of us is so vain as to think themselves immortal, it is 'weakness and folly' not to undergo life-saving surgery on the grounds that it is inevitable that we should die sooner or later. David Spandafora has suggested that the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment produced no 'clearly formulated cyclical theory of the development of art and science' but rather a 'non-cyclical mixture of advancement and retrogression', a sort of elliptical view of progress, retaining its optimism in the face of the inevitable peaks and troughs through a faith in the possibility that good management and social reform could put off what to some extent, and taking a broad enough perspective, was inevitable.[25] History provides proof of the paradoxical accuracy of this view: the Roman state, republic and empire self-evidently flourished for many hundreds of years, testament to the potential for society to stave

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[24] Forbes, 'Adam Ferguson and the Idea of Community' in *Edinburgh in the Age of Reason*, ed. by Douglas Young *et. al.*, (Edinburgh, 1967), pp. 40–47, p. 46.

off the inevitable, while equalling self-evidently it eventually collapsed, proof that entropy is the way of the world. The two halves of this equation are in absolute balance, hence Ferguson's belief that over-eager resignation to the latter prospect is 'weakness and folly'.

Thus history is viewed by Ferguson as the continuum of human experience. His 'History' is of Civil Society as a human universal, allowing him scope to see the decay of one society to be a temporary set back along the path of the gradual amelioration of the human condition:

> The pavement and the ruins of Rome are buried in dust, shaken from the feet of barbarians, who trod with contempt on the refinements of luxury, and spurned those arts, the use of which it was reserved for the posterity of the same people to discover and admire. The tents of the wild Arab are even now pitched among the ruins of magnificent cities. [...] The chieftain of the Arab tribe, like the founder of Rome, may have already fixed the roots of a plant that is to flourish in some future period, or laid the foundations of a fabric, that will attain to its grandeur in some distant age. (p. 108)

As we have seen, there is too much of the Harringtonian about Ferguson for him to assent to any shallow idea of the Wheel of Fortune, a simplistic vision of what goes up must come down. He does however conceive of history in something akin to typological terms, holding past greatness, the current condition and future glory together in this remarkable snap-shot of place through time.

So what, finally, of the relationship between the primitive past and the present? We have seen that Ferguson seems determined to give both periods their due, to refuse easy categorisation. There is an intellectual honesty about the *Essay* which allows him to observe the in any inquiry we 'encounter with facts which we cannot explain; and to bear with this mortification would save us frequently a great deal of trouble' (p. 37). More seriously he acknowledges the impossibility of an objective stance within such an inquiry, an acknowledgement which, it is worth noting, almost always works to the advantage of the modern. He points out that 'every age, compared to its predecessors, may have appeared to be ingenious; compared to its followers, may have appeared to

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[25] David Spandafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, 1990), p. 286, pp. 296–7.

be dull' (p. 174). He is categorical that the literature of the past is good only to teach us the manners and customs of its times (p. 76-6), but even here he is not completely satisfied. Ancient nations, he informs us, are indebted to men who:

> could make us forget the horrors of a vindictive, cruel, and remorseless proceeding towards an enemy, in behalf of the strenuous conduct, the courage, and the vehement affections, with which the hero maintained the cause of this friend and of his country. (p. 185)

This strikes at the heart of Ferguson's own qualified glorification of primitive life and warfare, and he is willing to problematise the basis of his own theory from the other direction as well. As we might expect from the man dubbed the Scottish Cato, Ferguson has some damning things to say about the nature and evils of luxury. Put simply, although the acquisition of luxury is what drives men to act in the good of the polity, it is the effects of the once-gained luxury that Ferguson holds at least partly responsible for the corruption and eventual decline of nations. But how can we judge what counts as "luxury", asks Ferguson, when human nature 'admits the reasonableness and the utility of what is already familiar; and apprehends an excess and corruption, only in the newest refinement of the rising generation' (p. 233)? His hypothetical Traveller to Greece (p. 185–8) encapsulates and dramatises this complicated conception of the nature of social inquiry: ostensibly showing us the savagery of ancient civilisation, stripped of its heroic glories, Ferguson's allusion to Swift ('I do not mean [...] to vie with the celebrated author of the voyage to Lilliput', [p. 186]) perhaps alerts us to the possibility that the Traveller's words tell us as much about his own prejudices as they do about the things he comments on.

But Ferguson's delineation of the primitive is more than a plea for historical even-handedness; it is intended to highlight certain values threatened in and by the modern world. Ferguson believes it a mistake and an arrogance of the modern mind to feel that primitive man has nothing desirable in him, while also recognising that what is good about primitive society is held on to in the teeth of the most appalling savagery. I suggested earlier that the typical Ferguson movement is 'if the savage has not received our instructions, he is likewise unacquainted with our vices' (p. 178), but the weight of

such criticism falls on our vices as the things that make the primitive appealing and the solution is, accordingly, to reform those vices, not to become like the savage.

Peter Womack has argued that while some aspects of primitive life, particularly the 'indissolvable union of public and private commitment' represented by society before the Division of Labour, appeal to Ferguson, he cannot ultimately assent to them because they are 'embedded in an argument to the effect that the miseries of perpetual feuding outweigh the felicity of communal self-reliance'. Moreover, the very production of such insights on the primitive militate against their offering an viable alternative. As we have seen above:

> The warrior idyll remains a dream, not because the verifiable circumstances of traditional Highland life necessarily fail to confirm its details, but because it is generated within an assumption that the "separation of arts and professions" is rational and inevitable.[26]

But the Noble Savage is more than a compensatory fantasy for Ferguson, and I think we are looking in the wrong place if we think so. Oz-Salzberger has suggested that the *Essay* represents 'a bid to reclaim the idea of civic virtue on behalf of the modern, commercial state' (introduction, p. xvii), and I think the crucial word here is idea: it is the idea of community, the spirit of active citizenship in which law, duty, love and benevolence are observed and upheld through choice, through an active commitment to those ideals, which are important, and they are opposed by Ferguson to the empty customs and meaningless rituals such words are in danger of becoming, to the detriment of all, in the modern world. To see that spirit, that ideal as the crucial thing, and to see the physical manifestations of it as somehow accidental is to cut through the contradictions of subjectivism to something of real and lasting value. Ferguson may offer no coherent answers, but nevertheless (and perhaps as a result) he formulates the questions in an insistent – if not altogether consistent – and though-provoking way

I shall return to such issues in section five. First, having dwelled over Ferguson, I want to interrogate Macpherson's prose writings, and the *Poems of Ossian*

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[26] Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands* (Basingstoke, 1989), p. 43.

themselves in terms both of his social theories about progress and civilisation and the characteristic tenor of his thought. As suggested earlier, the next section is split into two parts, one addressing Macpherson's prose, the other his poetry. This is to an extent a false dichotomy, since most of the prose discussed was intended to be read in conjunction with the poetry. However, the distinction is not merely one of convenience since I do feel that some of the differences to be noted between the discursive and the imaginative are down to the aesthetic pressures explored in the preceding chapters. There will be more said of this as the analysis progresses.

III.

Macpherson and the Civic Tradition.

i The Prose Writings.

In keeping with the overarching focus of this thesis the main focus of attention here is on the discursive prose apparatus which ornaments *The Poems of Ossian*. However, various aspects of Macpherson's thinking in *Ossian* can be glossed and clarified with reference to his other significant work of early history, the *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771/3).

Macpherson creates an image of primitive *noblesse oblige* which chimes in detail with Ferguson's, as laid out in the previous section. According to Macpherson, very early Caledonian society had been ruled by the order of Druids, priest-leaders who, mindful 'of preserving their character of sanctity [...] so essential to their influence' took care 'that they never broke out into violence or oppression'.[27] However, continuing wars with the Romans led to the growth and pre-eminence of a

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[27] *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh, 1996; from 3rd edition, 1765), p. 45.

warrior aristocracy uninitiated in the order, and unimpressed by the Druids' claims to leadership:

> Garmal, the son of Tarno, being deputed by [the druids], came to the grandfather of the celebrated Fingal, who was then Vergobretus [chief magistrate], and commanded him, in the name of the whole order, to lay down his office. Upon his refusal, a civil war commenced, which soon ended in almost the total extinction of the religious order of the Druids. (p. 45)

Since the druids were 'the declared enemies to their succession in the supreme magistracy' it is little wonder, says Macpherson, that Fingal and Ossian make little reference to them (p. 45), an act of historical chicanery I will return to in my final section. For the moment, suffice it to say that the line of Fingal restored and observed the principle of consensual rule, in the guise of a hereditary monarchy which took care not to abuse and to justify its position by its acts of valour.

The system of clanship which came to dominate the Highlands was equally scrupulous, at least according to Macpherson, in obeying these precepts. As in the *Essay*, the chief owed his position and power to beneficent rule:

> if individuals were oppressed, they threw themselves into the arms of a neighbouring clan, assumed a new name, and were encouraged and protected. The fear of this desertion, no doubt, made the chiefs cautious in their government. As their consequence, in the eyes of others, was in proportion to the number of their people, they took care to avoid every thing that tended to diminish it. (p. 511)

Macpherson stresses that the civil affairs of the clan were governed not by the chief, but by the '*Clechda*, or the traditional precedents of their ancestors', while the authority of the chief merely enforced (and was reinforced by) this rule. Only in matters of war was executive authority exercised more actively by the chief:

> even then he seldom extended it to the taking the life of any of his tribe. —No crime was capital, except murder; and that was very unfrequent [sic] in the highlands. [...] The memory of an affront of this sort would remain, for ages in a family, and they would seize every opportunity to be revenged. (p. 512)

This is the same conception of the legal system in an archetypal organic society envisaged by Ferguson, even down to precisely this point about the disincentive to violent crime represented by a penal code based upon the implacable will for revenge. I will return to this image of the clan when I discuss Macpherson's reasons for

presenting the Highlands this way. For the moment I want to move onto the social systems Macpherson braces this organic past against. Macpherson has a far simpler conception of the nature of modern society and its development than does Ferguson. In particular, Macpherson is unable to maintain Ferguson's balance between the need for, and positive benefits of, progress, and a regret for the current absence of some noble characteristics that have been lost along the way.

It is the advent of property that, for Macpherson spells not just the growth of commercial society but an inevitable weakening of the human spirit. In the dissertation preceding *Temora* Macpherson demonstrates his general thinking on this subject with the – for all the world self-evident – assertion that after the Romans left Britain the Britons were unable to defend themselves on account of being 'enervated by the slavery of several centuries, and those vices, which are inseparable from an advanced state of civility' (p. 212). He holds forth on this subject yet again in a lengthy footnote in *Temora* IV:

> Whatever a philosopher may say, in praise of quiet and retirement, I am far from thinking, but they weaken and debase the human mind. When the faculties of the soul are not exerted, they lose their vigour, and low and circumscribed notions take the place of noble and enlarged ideas. Action, on the contrary, and the vicissitudes of fortune which attend it, call forth, by turns, all the powers of the mind, and, by exercising, strengthen them. Hence it is, that in great and opulent states, when property and indolence are secured to individuals, we seldom meet with that strength of mind, which is so common in a nation, not far advanced in civilisation. (p. 500)

While this might sound something like Ferguson's praise of a vigorous lifestyle, it is crucial to note that there is no accompanying sense here that the removal of 'vicissitudes' might not, on balance, be a good thing. Macpherson is also willing to strike deeper than is Ferguson to the heart of commercial ideology when he also suggests that the propertied world is not characterised by the growth of the liberal arts but by outright philistinism:

> When property is established, the human mind confines its views to the pleasure it procures. It does not go back to antiquity, or look forward to succeeding ages. The cares of life increase, and the actions of other times no longer amuse. (p. 51)

All, however, is not lost, as Macpherson envisages a third stage in human development. 'Laws and subordinations of government' can, it would appear, take the place of 'consanguinity and the natural affection of the members of a family to one another', a state of affairs which allows for 'leisure to cultivate the mind' thus giving men the opportunity 'to restore it, with reflection, to a primeval dignity of sentiment' (p. 211).[28] But before we are tempted to see this three stage model as accommodating the Whig ideology of commercial humanism, a number of points must be stressed. In the first place the positing of the middle stage of development in his three stage model, 'the region of compleat barbarism and ignorance' allows the myth of the primitive natural state, where man is at his 'most disinterested and noble' (p. 211) to flourish without qualification in a way unheard of in Ferguson. Everything unappealing and distasteful about the primitive is thus hived off, leaving the savage unsullied in his nobility. Put it another way, the highest stage of civilisation is recognisable as such, according to Macpherson here, because it involves a return to nature, to an almost pre-lapsarian state, with no suggestion that, while early society has at least something to recommend it, it also had much about it that is thankfully a thing of the past. Secondly, Macpherson maintains throughout the prose writings that civilisation has a weakening and debasing effect on the human spirit, even though it apparently allows leisure for this return to nature.

This is of course an unstable if not untenable position to find oneself defending. Lacking the subtlety of Ferguson, Macpherson's anathemisation of the modern world contradicts the power that world has to put things right. And the strain shows:

> the Belgae of Britain [...] were a commercial people; and commerce, we might prove, from many shining examples of our own times, is the proper inlet of arts and sciences, and all that exalts the human mind. (p. 520)

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[28] For the 'first return to nature' see Mary Margaret Rubel *Savage and Barbarian: Historical Attitudes in the Criticism of Homer and Ossian in Britain 1760–1800* (Amsterdam, 1978). Rubel claims that this passage by Macpherson represents the first appearance of the three stage chronological synopsis of development (as opposed to Adam Smith's now more famous four-stage theory), one which 'from then point of view of its clarity of exposition remained unsurpassed by any other historian during the following forty years' (p. 34).

This is the sort of flagrant contradiction which tends to leave those looking for intellectual coherence, rigour and consistency in Macpherson's work with their heads in their hands. But what can be made of such a remark? Firstly, it represents the fact that an educated eighteenth-century writer, however ardent a primitivist, cannot at bottom believe that his own intellectual endeavours are fundamentally inferior to the spontaneous and disordered intellectual and cultural endeavours of the noblest of primitives. The need for intellectual pursuits, like the need for law, might to the fundamentalist primitivist represent a declining from the savage state of grace, yet it is difficult to write them off as without value: Macpherson presumably would not have put pen to paper had he thought that, and he would not have seen the value and point of resuscitating *Ossian* in the terms he does, a text on which the primitivist system relies. Thus we witness here the paradox central to the primitivist critique of society revealed when it is pushed to an unreflecting extreme. Secondly, this contradiction marks the tensions between incompatible elements of Macpherson's wider discourse. Exploring this contradiction rather than just dismissing it offers the opportunity to get a firmer grasp on Macpherson's cultural agenda behind *Ossian*. Other than the sudden praise of the commercial world, the most strikingly incongruous thing about Macpherson's comments about the Belgae is that, after assiduously cultivating a pre-commercial, pre-propertied ancient Britain, Macpherson suddenly populates parts of Britain with commercial Celts. This is perhaps easiest cleared up with reference to the vision of Celtic Britain Macpherson would lay out in the *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland.*

Macpherson believed that the Celtic population of Britain was split into three identifiable groups, each representing a successive wave of emigrants to the islands. The first Celtic inhabitants were the Gaels who settled Britain from mainland Europe some time before the foundation of Rome (i.e. 736 BC). They were followed by Celts from modern day Germany, the Cimbri who settled the Southern parts of the island in the third century BC, pushing the Gaels northwards. A third wave of Celtic immigrants, the Belgae, arrived some fifty years before Caesar, and in settling the

Southern parts of the country pushed their fore-bears northwards. Hence the Gaels were in possession of Scotland, or Caledonia (and as a consequence of their being pushed ever Northwards, Ireland); the Cimbri of the West, Cornwall and the lands between the Humber and the Tweed; and the Belgae the Southern lands.[29] Each wave of immigrants, due to the time of their relative departure from the Celtic homelands, represent an advancement in society corresponding to the three stage model Macpherson sets out in the *Ossian* volume. The Gaels, leaving Europe at an early date and ending up in a land (Caledonia) which was not fertile ground for 'internal civilisation' and possessing a temperament which prevented 'the introduction of the arts of civil life from abroad' (p. 42), represent the earliest stage of society, retaining the 'unimproved language of their ancestors, together with their rude simplicity of manners' (p. 35); it is this people that time forgot, as it were, who are the forebears of 'the race of Morven'. Macpherson has little to say about the Cimbri, but they appear to have advanced to the state of barbarity (p. 33), that unfortunate stage where savage purity has been sacrificed without the benefits of polish having been achieved. The Belgae represent a 'superior civilisation', practising 'the arts of civil life which had made a considerable progress in Gaul before they left the country' (p. 33), and it to these that Macpherson is referring in his *Temora* footnote above. I shall return to this picture of the earliest known inhabitants of Britain, 'our ancestors' as Macpherson is significantly given to refer to them, in the final part of my argument in this chapter. Suffice it to say for now, that the contradiction marked in the *Temora* footnote marks the presence of Macpherson's bold if problematic vision of a stratified Celtic identity of relevance to the British state of the eighteenth century, and provides proof for Colin Kidd's contention that a 'belief in the whig values residing in the Celtic past is consistently maintained' in Macpherson's work'.[30] Ultimately it is not so much that

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[29] *An Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, 3rd 'revised and expanded' edition, (Dublin, 1773; first edition 1771), pp. 25–33.

[30] Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689–c.1830* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 234.

Macpherson is unthinking but that he is trying to yoke together concepts which in the final analysis just will not cohere.

As we have seen, Macpherson's writing seems to be pushed to contradiction because he lacks the balance and subtlety deployed by Ferguson. This is symbolised and partly explained by noting the lack of an understanding of the subjective nature of this sort of inquiry, in Ferguson closely associated with the practice of hedging one's bets. At times Macpherson's writing approximates the Fergusonian perspective, and the ultimate gap between them usefully encapsulates the differing agendas of the two men. Macpherson writes:

> If we err in praising too much the times of our forefathers, it is also as repugnant to good sense, to be altogether blind to the imperfections of our own. If our fathers had not so much wealth, they had certainly fewer vices than the present age. Their tables [...] were not so well provided, neither were their beds so soft as those of modern times; and this, in the eyes of men who place their ultimate happiness in those conveniences of life, gives us a great advantage over them. (p. 36)

The impression of a careful weighting of argument is reminiscent of Ferguson, as is the placing of two times and cultures in a vital relation to each other, while at the same time acknowledging that our judgement of both may be flawed. Macpherson's second sentiment here has the easy good sense of many of Ferguson's own formulations, and the final point at least pretends to be discerning enough to suggest that not every member of modern society shares the views Macpherson describes. But the drive of Macpherson's argument from an initial position of seeming uncertainty is to praise the primitive at the expense of the modern: while it may be possible to 'err', Macpherson seems to be saying, at least in doing so one is not falling victim to the debauchery of modern life. This is a long way from Ferguson's tussles with arriving at an objective opinion, many of which as we have seen stem from a half-unarticulated suspicion that he is may be doing the modern a disservice and falling for the image the classical world created of itself. Furthermore, given the barely concealed contempt in references to the softness of beds and the like, it is difficult to seriously maintain that Macpherson's balance is anything other than ironic. Here, as always, the imperative to laud the rustic

drowns out the potential tone of good sense exemplified by Ferguson's handling of a similar style.

It seems then that Macpherson's discursive prose offers a relatively untroubled "Primitivist" interpretation of progress. The lack of any internalisation of – or reflection about – the problems within the discourse are never more apparent than when they surface as unexamined contradictions. Having said that, the poems themselves do internalise the dilemmas and contradictions, the tragic paradoxes and blind alleys which Ferguson worries over and which Macpherson attempts to suppress in his polemical prose. Such a reading of the poems also helps to further contextualise the represented sensibility of the Ossianic world, haunted as it is by a vague sense of its own insufficiency and doom, and facilitates a more accurate placing of Macpherson within his intellectual and cultural context.

ii. *The Poems of Ossian.*

> 'Once land and Commerce were placed in historical sequence, civic man found himself existing in a historical contradiction.'[31]

The *Ossian* poems try hard to live up to the image of kingship offered by the prose theory surrounding them. Not only is Fingal the exemplary warrior monarch, but like a true Patriot King he is scrupulous in acknowledging that the deeds which ensure his name are not possible alone:

> —Faint glimmers the moon on Moi-lena, thro' the broad-headed groves of the hill: raise stones, beneath its beams, to all the fallen in war.—Tho' no chiefs were they, yet their hands were strong in fight. They were my rock in danger: the mountain from which I spread my eagle-wings.—Thence am I renowned: Carril forget not the low.
>
> (*Temora* III, p. 249)

By 'low' in his final injunction Fingal primarily means the dead, but in this context it also carries its secondary weight of 'lowly'. *Ossian* incorporates such moments with relative ease on the whole: while it is unusual for epic heroes to make such statements

and their treatment of their followers more typically ranges somewhere between the contempt of familiarity and criminal negligence (if not culpable homicide), any anachronistic clunk we feel here does not disrupt a confident warrior ethos, and this is one of the few occasions when it is possible to genuinely say that *Ossian* blends modern manners with ancient virtue successfully. This is also precisely the Ossianic chivalry, the participatory heroism explored in the previous chapter, which had the potential to appeal to so many socially conscious writers at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of nineteenth centuries, and which would be important in forming the taste whereby an image of a 'familial and patriarchal past', home of a chivalric virtue which 'bridges the gap between the leaders and the led' in the face of an 'alienated and divisive atmosphere of an increasingly urbanised and industrialised society' could be formulated and popularised.[32]

Similarly, ancient Caledonia is conspicuously non-commercial, and such is the consistency with which her king and people are designated 'of the desert' that there appears little chance of any change. As Fingal puts it to Swaran:

> 'Nor ship [...] shall Fingal take, nor land of many hills. The desart is enough to me with all its deer and woods' (p. 101)

That said, it is perhaps not insignificant that Morven does undergo a degree of "improvement" in the revisions of 1773: Macpherson plays down the 'desert' adjectives, and replaces them with 'heath', 'hill', or a place name. This is by no means universal (indeed in the opening reference to the eponymous hero of *Fingal* Macpherson alters 'king of the lonely hills' to 'Fingal, king of deserts' (p. 55, p. 420 n. 9)), but does slightly soften the overall image we have of Morven. However much we are inclined to make of this, it is fitting that any cultivation of Fingal's homeland comes from the efforts of the translator rather than the Caledonians.

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[31] J.G.A.Pocock, *The Machievellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1973), p. 499.

[32] Alice Chandler, *The Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth–Century English Literature* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1970), p. 3, p. 38. See chapter three above, for the romance of sentiment.

In the same way, Fingal's kingdom, in common with those of all romance kings, is non-institutional, and the poems are unencumbered by any sense of the workings of state. In doing this Macpherson is conspicuously plays down the reputation of Fionn/Fingal as a great law-giver, and for two good reasons. Firstly it accords with the general drive in Scottish Enlightenment thinking to debunk the myth of the Great Legislator (exemplified by Lycurgus) as a source of social institutions.[33] Secondly, Macpherson's brand of primitivism saw law as a necessary innovation not a given. In other words, as he put it in the *Introduction*, 'it is the corruption of civil life which proliferates law' claiming that 'those who have the best laws, often need them the most' (p. 250). In the heroic Celtic past, the dictates of the heart are enough and matters are solved either through spontaneous moral sympathy, or by the sword. Thus to have Fingal dispensing laws to his people for posterity would be, or so the logic goes, to deny that for the ancient Celt 'the unbiased feelings of the mind uncorrupted by selfish passions supply the place of civil regulation, and are even better than the coercive power of laws' (*Introduction*, p. 250).

So in turning down Swaran's offer of reparation at the end of *Fingal*, Fingal vouches the non-propertied, non-acquisitive, non-expansionist nature of his society, and defends his status as a noble savage. For Ferguson to be in such a position was (with certain qualifications) to be envied, but to be envied precisely because it was fleeting, and to hold out against such things was ultimately detrimental. Macpherson, it will be recalled, had no such doubts about the felicity and sustainability of the primitive way of life if left to its own devices. The poems themselves follow Ferguson. Fingal is himself haunted by the idea that his ideal warrior world is self-obsolescent and that his is a world doomed to have no successors. As he puts it, notably just after his refusal of Swaran's lands as reparation and his statement of non-progression:

> to-day our fame is greatest. We shall pass away like a dream. No sound will be in the fields of our battles. Our tombs will be lost in the heath. The hunter shall not know the place of our rest. (p. 101)

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[33] Cf.: 'The Legislator myth flourished in the eighteenth century, for a variety of reasons, and its destruction was perhaps the most original and daring *coup* of the social science of the Scottish Enlightenment' (Forbes (1966), p. xxiv).

As we have seen, here and elsewhere, Fingal suggests that his time leaves no lasting monument of its existence, nothing but voices on the wind, and fragments of dimly remembered song. Macpherson explained this himself in the *Introduction* on the only occasion he makes mention of *Ossian*. Fingal, says Macpherson, demonstrates that 'the personal virtues of an individual avail little to perpetuate the fame of an uncultivated nation':

> no dignity of character, no greatness of soul, can rescue the prince from the oblivion which must involve his unpolished and illiterate people. Fingal passed away unnoticed in Caledonia, at the time that Heliogabalus employed the page of the historian at Rome.
> (1773, p. 213)

Lest we suspect that by the time of the *Introduction* Macpherson had softened his line towards the world of civility, that the rabid primitivist had gone soft in his middle age, at least as far as the advent of the arts was concerned, we should remember that in this same work he equates the civil life of Southern Britons with Roman conquest, 'slavery and a consequent imbecility of mind' (1773, p. 43).

The Fingalian world is, in effect, stuck in limbo, corrupted if it does, and consigned to oblivion if it doesn't. The choice of the latter option removes any possibility of a sustained polity or any regenerative powers. This is reflected in the personal sphere as what Womack has memorably labelled the 'suppression of the genital', a complete lack of rejuvenating forces within poems where the erotic is unshakeably linked to death: Ossian and Malvina are, he says, 'typical [...] in being at once erotically charged and sterile, aroused by every association, the two of them wait for death', while on the whole *Ossian* posits an 'ancestral culture [...] totally incapable of transmission' (1989, pp. 106–7). Yet it lacks these powers precisely because it lacks a political structure, and any sense of economic or commercial advancement: as Ferguson makes clear, those societies satisfied with the desert are doomed to wither and fail. To take the steps necessary to insure survival and memorialisation is to compromise the very values upon which greatness is predicated.

In a similar way *Ossian* glorifies the heroic life of active citizen virtue while at the same time worrying over its viability and consequences. *Ossian*'s heroes, like

Ferguson's Native Americans (it is worth noting the commonplace comparisons between Scottish Highlanders and Native Americans which have littered writings on both from the eighteenth century on), spend their time engaged in perpetual wars, the most climactic of which began many years before the birth of the oldest participants.[34] As such they exhibit 'the most respectable attributes' of the human spirit in adventuring seemingly undertaken on many occasions simply for the sake of it. This makes them both archetypal savages and archetypal models of active civic virtue since, as we are reminded by Ferguson, the 'intermission of national and political efforts is [...] sometimes mistaken for public good; and there is no mistake more likely to foster the vices, or flatter the weakness, of feeble and interested men' (*Essay*, p. 242). Yet we noted an ambivalence in Ferguson's attitude to the human need for conflict which, if never modulating into regret (to say so would be to misread him), stresses the agency beyond our control. This ambivalence is also present in *Ossian* as many of the stories, by virtue of their spontaneous and seemingly unmotivated acts of violence, take on the characteristics of those games Ferguson sees as typical of our obsession with active and martial virtue, and many of them have indeed in *Ossian* 'opened a path that leads to the grave'. However, the extreme incompetence with which many of these ventures are carried out smacks of a suspicion towards, and disillusionment with, martial prowess, and the murderous cost of this world of spontaneous public virtue poses demanding questions: does conflict, by means of the values it inculcates, provide an end in itself, and if so, how great a cost can that end justify? The twilight of the Ossianic world seems suddenly aware of the emptiness of its own behaviour: I have discussed previously the Sentimental charge released by figuring the Fingal of the last books of *Temora* as haunted by the hollowness of the life of civic virtue, but it is worth stressing again this moment in terms of the Fergusonian model. The games are revealed to be

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[34] Murray Pittock has traced comparisons between Highlanders and Native Americans to at least 1973: see his *The Myth of the Jacobite Clans* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 10–11. For similar links see also two recent articles, one of which with a explicit *Ossian* focus: Susan Manning, 'Why does it Matter that *Ossian* was Thomas Jefferson's Favourite Poet?', *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, vol.1, no.2 (October, 1997), 219–236, and Daniel Carey, 'Reconsidering Rousseau:

serious as the, we assumed, inexhaustible line of heroes destined for an early grave gives way is replaced, almost without anyone noticing it until too late, with a harsh sense of reality and of finality.

One of the contributing factors to the muted feel to *Temora*, one of the reasons why the poem seems weary – perhaps even suspicious – of heroic formalities is found in the amount of time devoted in the poem to characters telling Fingal's young son (and after the death of Oscar in book one the last great hope of the Caledonians) Fillan not to be a hero. In fact, and however paradoxical it might be to suggest it, *Ossian* as a whole displays something of a suspicion towards individual acts of valour throughout: whether it be the Irish in *Fingal*, Nathos and his brothers in the face of the 'thousand bows' of Cairbar in "Dar-thula", or Oscar in *Temora* I, the message is always the same: the powers that be are always on the side of the big battalions. This interrogation reaches its climax in the career of Fillan, through which much of the rest of the story is told, as he goes through an accelerated progression from callow youth to fearsome warrior. It is a threatening acceleration, a symptom of a newer order, one desperately short of active heroes. This is underlined in book III where the actions of Fillan are counter-pointed with the death and eulogies for the veteran Connal. In this context it is significant that the episode of Connal's life picked out for particular praise concerns his devotion to his father's body (p. 248-49). We draw two things from the story of Connal: we see a man who has lived his whole life fighting Irish wars and who dies in one as his did father before him; and we witness the proper dues paid to a father by his son in the natural order of things. There is a striking difference between this heroic golden age and the current world of untimely death in which Fillan has to make his mark, where the more frequent occurrence is the burial of son by father.

Fingal's address to Fillan at the end of book III demonstrates the caution which creeps into *Temora* and exemplifies the wider debate the poem sets up between the virtues of *mesure* and *demesure*:

Sociability, Moral Sense and the American Indian from Hutcheson to Bartram', *The British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol.21 no.1 (Spring, 1998), 25–38.

> Thou art brave, son of Clatho; but headlong in the strife. So did not Fingal advance, tho' he never feared a foe.– Let thy people be a ridge behind; they are thy strength in the field – Then shalt thou be long renowned, and behold the tombs of thy fathers.
>
> (p. 250)

By way of illustration Fingal tells of his first campaign in Ireland, concluding:

> He is renowned, O Fillan, who fights, in the strength of his people [.....]But he who fights alone; few are his deeds to other times. He shines, today, a mighty light. Tomorrow he is low. One song contains his fame. His name is on one dark field.
>
> (p. 256)

This realpolitik is unexpected within a society driven by the great deeds of the ancestors and poses as many questions as it promises to solve. Of course, heroic literature is not without reproaches for foolhardiness – much is made of Roland's vainglorious refusal to sound the signal of battle which leads to his defeat and death – but Fingal's words are of a different order. Perhaps it is that Fingal speaks as the voice of ultimate authority, stating this as an outright truth rather than as a dissenting voice; or that there has been an almost imperceptible slip from belief in notoriety to obscurity for the foolhardy. For his part Fillan remains unimpressed as he carves a name for himself amongst the enemy. Ossian records the 'hundred voices of death' that are heard counselling caution:

> Stay, son of Fingal, stay thy speed. Beholdest thou not that gleaming form, a dreadful sign of death? Awaken not the king of Alnecma. Return, son of blue-eyed Clatho.
>
> (p. 266)

The tension between this ethos of self-constraint and the epic normative is encapsulated by the way even Fingal, at the crucial moment, forgets his own good advice, and 'rejoiced in his son' (p. 267). That said, Fingal's wish to hear a song in Fillan's praise 'while yet he shines in war' (p. 267) acknowledges that Fillan may not be shining for long. Certainly this moment, which goes against the tide of pragmatism preached hitherto, never attains the stature of heroic transcendence which in other heroic poems overcomes the worldly concerns of those who cast doubt upon the heroic code. In the opening sections of *The Battle of Maldon* the author accuses the hero Byrhtnoth of 'ofermod', of having too much pride, in allowing the Vikings to cross onto dry land in

order to engage them in battle. But who remembers this after the stirring words of Byrhtwold at the conclusion to the poem?:

> Mind must be firmer, heart the more fierce,
> Courage the greater, as our strength diminishes.
> Here lies our leader, dead,
> An heroic man in dust.
> He who now longs to escape will lament forever.
> I am old. I will not go from here,
> But I mean to lie by the side of my lord,
> Lie in the dust with the man I loved so dearly.(ll. 312–19)[35]

Arguably this is no less vainglorious than anything we encounter in *Ossian*. The difference between this moment and words of, say Oscar at the opening of 'The War of Inis-thona' discussed in chapter two, is that here we get a sense of values at stake, not a heroic action carried out for the sake of it. Certainly, it means that the doubts about the heroic are silenced or pushed into the background in a way that never occurs in *Temora*.

Fillan is meanwhile well on the way to both great glory and an early grave. Fingal's exhortation to his troops, though, contains a new note, that they must 'bring [Fillan] back with glory: hereafter he may stand alone' (p. 263). In this atmosphere of doubt, and in the new suddenly serious world where there seems no place to play at war, Fingal is suddenly interested in the mechanisms whereby Fillan will survive and secure Fingal's line. Book VI opens with Fingal chafing at his inability (because of the customs of honour) to help his son, and resolving to send Ossian to 'defend the young in arms'.[36]

Ossian fails and Fillan falls by the hand of Cathmor. This in turn stirs Fingal who defeats Cathmor and brings the war to an end. If this sounds simplistic and formulaic then that is the impression conveyed by the poem. As for Fillan, his career follows a set pattern, a sort of tragic growth curve which pits him against increasingly

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[35] In *The Battle of Maldon and Other Old English Poems*, trans. by Kevin Crossley-Holland, ed. and intro. by Bruce Mitchell (London, 1965), p. 38.

[36] Cf., here and more generally, Fingal's behaviour with Erich Auerbach's designation of the 'passive, martyr-like, and somnambulistically paralysed traits' of romance kings in *Mimesis: The*

more severe opponents. One might well be inclined to assign this rigid progression to imaginative failure or a lack of vital interest on Macpherson's part, but nevertheless the effect is to suggest some sort of conveyer belt, a process beyond the control of participants and one which rarely works in their best interests. The emptiness at the end of the poem has partly to do with Fillan's death, it seems clear. Victory is achieved on the field, but Fingal has suffered a more fundamental reversal, one from which his line will be unable to recover.

The one character in *Temora* who would seem at first sight to escape the ambiguity which comes to haunt the progress of the others is Fillan's nemesis Cathmor. In book IV he is confronted by the ghost of Cairbar and hints at his imminent demise. Cathmor responds with the classic heroic position:

> Shall Cathmor soon be low? Darkly laid in his narrow house? where no morning comes with her half-opened eyes.—Away, thou shade! to fight is mine, all further thought away! I rush forth, on eagle wings, to seize my beam of fame.——In the lonely vale of streams, abides the little soul.—Years roll on, seasons return, but he is still unknown.—In a blast comes cloudy death, and lays his grey head low. His ghost is rolled on the vapour of the fenny field. Its course is never on hills, or mossy vales of wind.——So shall not Cathmor depart, no boy in the field was he, who only marks the bed of roes, upon the echoing hills. My issuing forth was with kings, and my joy in dreadful plains: where broken hosts are rolled away, like seas before the wind. (p. 258)

Yet even here a tension is revealed. Cutting away the layers of the extended simile, the crux of the speech comes at 'Away [...] fame', with a balance between 'thought' and 'rush' which goes to imply an inspired madness within warfare, or an imperative beyond the rational. Whatever, Cathmor's resolve is immediately tested by the discovery of Sul-malla amongst his camp:

> What should Cathmor do?——His sigh arose: his tears came down. But straight he turned away.—This is no time, king of Atha, to wake thy secret soul. The battle is rolled before thee, like a troubled stream. (p. 259)

Is Cathmor talking to himself here? Or is Ossian providing a commentary? If the latter this may imply something beyond Cathmor's control, the decision symbolically taken for him as we see how much it is based in a received code. Sul-malla then offers her

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Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard Trask, (Princeton, 1968; first publ. 1946; this trans. 1953), p. 101.

vision of the outcome to the war: 'I behold my warrior low; for the broad-shielded king is near; he that overcomes in danger; Fingal of the spears' and she envisages a time 'when the king is low on earth; for then I shall be lonely in the midst of woe'(p. 259). This is a downbeat, pragmatic prediction which contrasts with Cathmor's more transcendental vision of posthumous glory for himself. A delicate balance, redolent of the romance posture outlined in the previous chapter (and one which any exegesis has a tendency to unsettle) is achieved in this episode, one where the heroic determination of Cathmor is undercut, although not completely subverted, by presenting the other side of the equation, forcing the 'bride-widow of a lost cause' (to borrow a phrase of William Faulkner's) Sul-malla into the reader's consciousness.

Fingal's decision to retire (see page 290) marks the final indictment of the Fergusonian ideal model of active citizenship, and indeed a retreat from it. Yet the indictment comes with full commitment, as Ossianic history plays out the – from the Fergusonian point of view – inevitable slide from this point on into corruption and decay: Ossian chooses to tell no tales of adventure post-dating Fingal's retirement, and Ossian's own kingship leaves nothing of value to posterity. The Fergusonian warrior idyll (which might have been a nightmare all along) declines to one blind old man living in a world which no longer has a place for his kind, a fact bemoaned but also shown to be inevitable. Ultimately what we witness in the poems is the acknowledgement of the Fergusonian discovery that 'the polis was built up by the very forces that must destroy it' (Pocock (1973), p. 491).

The forgoing comparison of Macpherson and Ferguson has made two related points: one, that Macpherson offers a much more strident version of the primitivist model than does his more famous contemporary, a model which must ultimate collapse into contradiction; and two, that the *Ossian* poems dramatise the dilemmas and paradoxes at the centre of the Fergusonian ideal, signalling its redundancy in the act of its most perfect evocation. In this we also see the classic romance posture we explored in the previous chapter. It remains therefore to relate these points to the wider cultural and ideological agendas in which the primitivist discourse must be understood.

IV.

A Cultural and Ideological Context.

One way of understanding the discourse of primitivism in eighteenth-century Britain is that it arises out of the anxiety caused by changes in the way society was organised in the wake of the Financial Revolution and the subsequent rise of the commercial state. According to this view, the rise of a political class which could owe its status – at least in theory – not to its possession of old money and land but to a paper fortune gained and maintained through commerce threatened the civic humanist model of public virtue based upon the autonomous action of the independently wealthy individual. Within the civic tradition, 'the capacity to bear arms in the public cause was an end of [the citizen's] property, and the test of his virtue' but the commercial man, who typically pays someone to bear arms on his behalf and uses his property – now a mobile commodity – either for his pleasure or to make more wealth, was seen as a corrupt and a corrupting element within the polity.[37] According to the logic of the civic tradition, once denied of an opportunity to exercise his virtue by professional politicians and soldiers, the citizen would descend into a state of lethargy, vice and, in the vocabulary of the day, effeminacy, leaving the affairs of the polity to be run by a bourgeoisie whose dependence on commerce – and therefore each other – meant that, without the disinterest vouched by landed wealth, corruption and mismanagement was inevitable. This is the crux of the Fergusonian and Macphersonian positions laid out above.

There were, of course a number of political factions and ideologies to whom this explanation and critique of society particularly appealed. Accordingly, the rhetoric and central paradigms of progress inherent in primitivism, with its stress upon the inextricable link between commerce and corruption and the passing of the virtue that had initially created and sustained the state, are associated with the eighteenth-century

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[37] Pocock, 'The Mobility of Property and the Rise of Eighteenth-Century Sociology', in 1985, pp. 103–232, p. 109, p.110.

Jacobite discourse of protest against the political status quo, and its mainstream cousin, the broad-based Patriot Opposition to the Walpole administration. Public and private corruption and the mismanagement of the state were decisively tied to the Whig Financial Revolution, itself inextricably linked by Whig, Tory and Jacobite alike to the Revolution of 1688 (the differences, of course, arose on what spin each of them put on this conjunction of event). In terms of a noble past, the Jacobite ideology of dispossession presented, Murray Pittock has argued, Charles I's reign as an earthly paradise, defended in turn by Charles II:

> Such imagery was to provide a continuum for Jacobite complaint after the Revolution of 1688: and the memory of the lost Eden, or a lost vision of Eden, haunts Jacobite thought thereafter.[38]

This political dimension to the primitivist discourse is important in marking the differences we have noted between Macpherson and Ferguson. Macpherson's clear-cut primitivism, with its generally blunt criticism of the modern world, seems more directly inherited from the Jacobite critique of the Hanoverian world of commerce developed over the preceding eighty or so years than the characteristic mode of thought of the Presbyterian Ferguson.[39] However, while Ferguson can in no way be considered a Jacobite, his attitude towards Jacobitism is a somewhat different matter. As Fania Oz-Salzberger suggests, 'although Jacobitism was not a political option for the likes of Ferguson, some of its emotional triggers were deeply felt even by its opponents' (1996, p. ix).[40] The degrees of differentiation in Macpherson's and Ferguson's attitudes to primitive societies perhaps then reflect differing degrees of adherence (neither completely absent nor fully committed but a differing balance of both) to the

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[38] Murray Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present* (London, 1991), p. 13.

[39] For Macpherson's Jacobite critique of the coming of commerce, see Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 184. Another symptom of Macpherson's allegiances might be the way he introduces the idea of hereditary rule into his vision of primitive *noblesse oblige* (see the opening of section III above).

[40] Ferguson's attitude to Jacobitism could do with adjustment. For example, his anti-Jacobite sermon, preached in Gaelic to the Black Watch in France at the height of the Forty Five and published at the request and expense of the Dowager Duchess of Atholl, given its historical context (and the Regiment's mutinous past), is surely not watertight evidence that he was rabidly anti-Jacobite.

intellectual heritage of Jacobitism, even if in the case of Ferguson the political dimension is absent.

The forces of the new commercial ideology responded to this Jacobite-cum-Patriot critique by redefining virtue 'with the aid of the concept of manners':

> [the individual] was more than compensated for his loss of antique virtue by the indefinite and perhaps infinite enrichment of his personality, the product of the multiplying relationships, with both things and persons, in which he became progressively involved.[41]

Indeed this Whig ideology of politeness did not merely talk of compensation, but went on to argue the obsolescence of old-style civic virtue by reinterpreting it as born of necessity. From this position, defenders of commerce could argue that 'ancient virtue was warlike because it was economically primitive, and that a productive market economy had no need of virtue in this sense and would not be corrupted by its disappearance'.[42] Thus the eighteenth century was torn between two incompatible systems of moral and state virtue, and found itself 'hanging between a neo-classical paradigm not wholly tenable and a modern ideology whose implications had yet to unfold.'[43] This situation, it has been argued, was felt with particular force in Scotland. The debate over the Union, which effectively opposed (or was at least perceived as opposing) the forces of commerce and free-trade against an older definitions of what constitutes nationhood and freedom, and the removal of the systems of government to a distance in London as a consequence of the Union, meant that 'in responding to the pressures of political events, the Scots found that they were groping for an alternative to a political language [civic humanism] which did not make sense of their own political predicament.'[44] For the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, the choice, it appears, was clear:

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[41] Pocock, 'Virtues, Rights, and Manners' in 1985, pp. 37–50, p. 18, p. 49.

[42] Pocock, 'Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and the World View of the Late Enlightenment' in 1985, pp. 143–56, p. 148.

[43] Adam Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca, 1994), p.9.

[44] Nicholas Phillipson, 'The Scottish Enlightenment' in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. R. Porter and M. Teich, (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 19–40, p. 26. See also on this point, John Robertson's 'The Scottish Enlightenment at the Limits of the Civic Tradition' in *Wealth and*

> The civic values had to be radically adjusted to the new ethics of sociability, commerce and freedom under the law; or else new proof was required for their relevance to the modern state.
>
> David Hume, and more decisively Adam Smith, chose the first of these solutions. Adam Ferguson opted for the second. (Oz-Salzberger (1996), p. xvi)

Adam Potkay has in effect argued that *Ossian* too represents an example of the latter approach in its attempt to reconcile 'the heroic age of Fingal to an eighteenth century commercial society notoriously lacking in heroes'.[45] *Ossian* can therefore be viewed, according to Potkay and in a way which is familiar from our analysis of the Ossianic style in chapter two, as cultural wish fulfilment, solving in one stroke the 'troubling ethical dialectic of progress and civic "corruption"', which 'routinely viewed politeness and civic virtue as antithetical' (1992, p. 122): the poems 'bridge the gap separating the emerging "feminism" of polite society from the male "chauvinism" of both the ancient polis and its modern apologists' (1992, p. 121). Yet as we also discovered in an earlier chapter, politeness and polish is demonstrated as having an unfortunate effect on martial vigour in *Ossian*. Furthermore, in dramatising the flaws Ferguson saw within a civic system with which he was otherwise enamoured (Potkay betrays a lack of understanding for Ferguson in grouping him indiscriminately as a straightforward modern apologist for ancient virtue), the poems are as troubled by the 'ethical dialectic of progress and civic corruption' as any of its contemporaries.

In any case, the ideological war between these latter-day ancients and the moderns cannot be boiled down into such a simple opposition between straight-forwardly positive or negative interpretations of what the civic past represents. In reconditioning the civic past in the light of modern manners, reclaiming and proclaiming active civic virtue in such a way as to make it acceptable to the modern, Primitivism must perforce internalise the values of modern manners it ostensibly criticised. This situation, wherein the primitive is praised for values which, although

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Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment, ed. by Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 137–79.

[45] Adam Potkay, 'Virtue and Manners in Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian*', *P.M.L.A.*., no. 107 (1992), 120–31, (p. 122).

arguably absent in the modern are only intelligible to the modern, means that primitivism paradoxically validates rather than undermines the modern world:

> When Ferguson analysed the citizen in such a way as to reduce him to the clansman, he knew perfectly well that the citizen could only be explained in terms of progressive emergence from the world of the clansman. (Pocock (1973), p. 503)

This is precisely what we noted earlier in looking at Ferguson, and I have argued that if the 'editor' of *Ossian* did not accept the logic of this, its 'author' Ossian certainly did. Furthermore this implied logic was exploited by those who wished to deny the traditional civic ideals. In other words, and to add a complication to the schema I have outlined above, the defenders of the new order *also* summoned a vision of an antique, pre-commercial society within an ideological polemic 'which clearly implied that the ideal of patriot virtue was being abandoned as historically unreal':

> The relegation of that unity [implied in the autonomous patriot personality] to a barbaric or economically primitive past, in which it must itself disintegrate and seem never to have existed, was a powerful critical weapon in the hands of the modernist.[46]

> The idea that the ostensibly primitivist might actually be summoning up a past in order to demonstrate either its failings or ultimately fictional nature has been explored in relation to the Highlands and to *Ossian*, most notably by Peter Womack. He sees the stadial model of social development, implicit in all primitivism arguments, as creating a grand history which is both legitimist and reconciliatory to the colonial agenda of Improvement:

> Instead of an executive intention to stamp out the pretensions of the chiefs and the idleness of their followers, there is now a historical narrative in which they are stamped out impersonally by the progress of civilisation. (1989, p. 25)

Colin Kidd is in broad agreement with this general line in his exploration of why the 'formidable ideology of Scottish nationhood, which as it stood, would have been capable of nourishing a future liberal nationalism' in place in early modern Scotland did not bequeath a sustainable Scottish past into the eighteenth century: amongst other assaults on this edifice came one from a 'sociological whiggism' which maintained that

'because the savage mind was incapable of political philosophy, ancient constitutions had to be retrospective fictions' (1994, p. 29, p. 117). Elsewhere Kidd has argued that 'the ideological status of Scottish Gaeldom, unlike that of its Irish relation, was dramatically lowered by the Enlightenment' because in stadial models of society 'non-commercial cultures were classified pejoratively as backward within value-laden taxonomies of socio-economic development.'[47]

Both Womack and Kidd see *Ossian* as according in detail with such an agenda. Kidd notes that the fact that the refinement of the Ossianic hero is emotional rather than 'institutional, material, artistic or intellectual' both vouches for *Ossian*'s authenticity and reinforces Enlightenment ideology with regards to the primitive (1994, p. 1205). *Ossian* represents for Womack the 'acme of imperialist ideology' in as much as it creates, in accordance with the Improvement image of the Highlands, a world '*not* cultivated, *not* populous, *not* rationale, *not* regulated – above all, *not* extant', a landscape and a people 'exotically and poignantly doomed', in such a way as to read 'its extinction back into its very origins' (1989, p. 108–9). In less controversial terms, Fiona Stafford has suggested that within the primitivist dynamic 'the apparent reaction against contemporary society is [...] a means of finding that society and of acknowledging that, for all its deficiencies, it is not only alive, but also represents the future', suggesting that the Ossianic project should be seen as part of a 'desire to render the Highlands safe forever – a development imagined in the transformation of the heroic poetry of the North West into the epic form of a lost world.'[48] All these interpretations accord with the reading of the *Ossian* poems I advanced in the previous section, Macpherson (and Fingal come to that) 'abetting an account of the past which marginalises the very subject that he claims for the centrepiece of his epic' (Pittock (1995), p. 37). All that said, the danger with highlighting the reactionary or conspiratorial undertones to what has hitherto been seen as a radical position is that we

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[46] Pocock, 'The Mobility of Property' (1985), p. 111, p. 119.

[47] Kidd, 'Gaelic Antiquity and National Identity in Enlightenment Ireland and Scotland', *English Historical Review*, vol. 109, no. 434, November, 1994, 1197–1215 (p. 1205).

lose the concomitant sense of protest which still exists. Bearing this in mind, it is useful to also add the comments of Katie Trumpener here. She too sees the 'nonsynchronous and separate stages of an impersonal, apparently inevitable evolutionary process' of stadial theory in terms of an ideological ploy, although she puts a slightly different spin on things:

> Far from linking the prosperity of the Lowlands or of London to the depletion of the Highlands, and seeing these places as parts of a single economic system, the model detached them one from the other.

But she also sees that this 'progressive and expansionist rhetoric of imperialism' simultaneously gives birth to 'defensively nationalist and conservationalist rhetoric of cultural separatism'.[49] Similarly, Susan Manning has suggested that *Ossian*:

> gestures towards an implicit anti-imperial polemic within the progressive ethic, a ghostly echo of reproach translated from beyond the grave [...] a voice articulating its own extinction from within a framework devised by the dominant discourse which was responsible for that disappearance. (1997, p. 225)

This indeterminacy of interpretation at the very least suggests that there is a need to come to a more subtly weighted opinion of Macpherson's cultural politics than has previously been the case.

The picture of *Ossian* as conspiring with a Scottish Enlightenment 'historiography of accommodation within Britain', a colonialist logic which implied that 'if the romanticised Highlands belonged to the past, what was happening to them in the present lost its force' also needs to be balanced against the disjunction between the discursive framework and the poetic world witnessed in the above sections, a disjunction which comes from Macpherson's willingness to question many of the central tenets of Anglo-British national identity.[50] It will be recalled that Macpherson's apology for the organic society represented by the clan went to outspoken lengths. Furthermore, Macpherson drops enough hints to suggest the motives about this

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[48] Stafford, 'Primitivism and the "Primitive" Poet: A Cultural Context for Macpherson's Ossian' in Brown (ed), 1996, pp.79–96, p. 84, p. 86.

[49] Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Yale, 1997), p. 72.

evocation of the Highland past: 'it is', he suggests, 'a vulgar error, that the common Highlanders lived, in abject slavery, under their chiefs' before going on to dissect the legal systems of Highland society (p. 511). The past tense of this observation is of note here, and accords with the general sense in which Highland life has suffered a diminution recently. Yet:

> [Highlanders] have not, however, thrown off the good qualities of their ancestors. Hospitality still subsists, and an uncommon civility to strangers. Friendship is inviolable, and revenge less blindly followed than formerly. (p. 52)

Macpherson is here as elsewhere defending the Gael from the popular eighteenth-century image of despotic clan chiefs and servile, semi-human commoners, addicted to cattle-stealing and general banditry. Yet he is at the same time responding to certain changes within Highland society. Womack has suggested that 'Highland social relations were not liberalised by the advent of market forces: on the contrary, there are indications that they *became* archaic, tending towards a baronial caricature' and the years following the '45 produced a 'bastard feudalism' to replace 'the kindly bond between chief and clansman' (p. 117). Equally Allan Macinnes, within an argument which places the commercialisation of the Highlands at a time prior to the Forty-Five and subsequent Improvement, has claimed that Jacobitism itself 'masked the social tensions between the clan elite and the ordinary clansmen' created by the transformations of the chief into commercial man (p. 171). Macinnes implies that the Cause's image as 'a corrective to political, social and commercial deviations from custom' (p. 188) must be seen in the light of the elite's own activities which represented a number of just such deviations.

It is against this ideological background that Macpherson's insistence of the ruinous effect of 'the advent of property' on the Highlands (an "official" Jacobite critique), coupled with his insistence on the simple glories of Highland life, still discernible beneath the evils of commerce and to those not 'unintelligent' (p. 511) must be understood. It also offers a compelling sidelight on Macpherson's own retirement, a

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[50] Murray G.H.Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland 1685–1789* (London, 1997), p. 140, p. 41.

period of his life which suggests that his vision of a Highland past went beyond theory and wishful-thinking. In recognition of his political services, Macpherson was offered the lands belonging to the Clan Macpherson that had been confiscated *in absentia* from his uncle, the prominent Jacobite Ewan Macpherson of Cluny, only to turn them down in favour of the rightful clan heir. When Macpherson did retire to live the life of the Highland laird, it was very much that of the beneficent and kindly patriarch – living in a kind of 'rural magnificence' at 'a distance from the seat of government' (*Fingal* dissertation, p. 213) – that he nostalgically evokes in his dissertation: Saunders gives numerous examples of James's acts of kindness, from overlooking rent defaulters and remembering those who had shown him kindness in his more indigent youth, to aiding the poor and throwing generous parties (1894, pp. 282–3, p. 300). Macpherson was, it seems, consciously or otherwise re-establishing the bonds of organic society, although in life as in theory he could not escape the irony of the fact that his ability to disconnect the pernicious forces of contract society came through his whole-hearted engagement with the forces of commerce.[51]

As we have seen, however, integral to the defence of the primitive in Macpherson's prose writings is the supposition that everything of value in the modern world, even down to the fruits of commerce, was accessible in the world in which Fingal plays his part. The distinction in Macpherson's thinking on this point is made, albeit unwittingly, by Kidd, in his comparison of Ferguson and the Irish historian Sylvester O'Halloran:

> O'Halloran, unlike the Scottish Highlander [...] Ferguson, had no sense that the heroic age was different from the age of commerce, and incongruously combined martial valour and the mechanic arts among the glories of ancient Ireland. (1994, p. 1211)

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[51] Macpherson's most minor biographer, J.N.M.Maclean, interprets these acts of benevolence as without exception Macpherson's coded revenge on the Highland society. Maclean he claims that the Clan elite earned Macpherson's undying enmity in its attitude to the scion of an illegitimate wing of the clan. It is a reading which, I think, owes more to *King Lear* and Maclean's demonisation of Macpherson leading to his need to find a motivation for this Satanic energy than any historical perceptiveness. See his 'The Early Political Careers of James "Fingal" Macpherson and Sir John Macpherson' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh 1967), pp. 21–5.

Of course, Macpherson and his Irish contemporaries had their differences of opinion over *Ossian*, centred upon Macpherson's characterisation of third-century Ireland and Macpherson's repeated claim (to be made at quite some length in his *Introduction*) that the Irish represent the descendants of Caledonian Gaels and Southern British Belgae (his Fir-bolg).[52] That said, that Macpherson's Celtic world picture represented, as far as Irish antiquarians were concerned, 'part of the established British tendency to depict the Irish as barbaric' (O'Halloran (1991), p. 184) should not blind us to the fact that Macpherson's vision of the Scottish Celtic homelands represents an attempt to do for Scotland, and a Celto-centric picture of the British people, what the Irish were themselves attempting to do for Ireland.

If Macpherson's vision of the Celtic past in *Ossian* was rather piece-meal, built out of parts of dissertations and scattered footnotes aimed at satisfying a number of different agendas, it was codified into a more thorough-going system in his *Introduction*. Macpherson scholars from Saunders on have suggested that the *Introduction* represents 'a mere glorification of the Celts, and its aim was to show, what Macpherson unquestioningly believed, that most of our early civilisation might be traced to their institutions' (*Life*, p. 217). In the *Introduction*, the tendency in the discursive *Ossian* to suggest that the fruits of commerce merely allow a return to a 'primeval dignity of sentiment' rather than holding anything of intrinsic value in themselves is completed in an intellectual manoeuvre designed to appropriate everything good about the modern world for the Celtic past. To make such a claim is to pull the rug out from under the feet of those (including Ferguson) who would point to the recompense of advancement in exchange for that which has been lost; and of those defenders of credit politics who would claim that the values of civic humanism were irrelevant to a modern world in which commerce had replaced not the grounds for action, but the need. In a wider sense, Macpherson's prose attempts to refurbish Celticism in such a way as to counteract claims of primitive redundancy as a

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[52] See Clare O'Halloran, 'Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate on the Celtic Past in Ireland and Scotland in the Eighteenth Century' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of

justification for cultural repression, and sets itself up in opposition to the 'historiography of accommodation' by appropriating for the Celt the qualities of those who would claim to supersede him.

To recount all the instances in which 'the glories of English constitutionalism' (Kidd (1993), p. 234) and the values of Whig ideology are appropriated by Macpherson for the Celtic nations of Britain would be to labour the point.[53] Instead I shall briefly discuss a few examples of the turn of Macpherson's argument. Macpherson goes to some lengths to describe the living habits and dress of the Celts. There is no denying that, compared to modern standards, living conditions were poor, but Macpherson to an extent counteracts this by domesticating the scene, by making it familiar to us through his descriptions of the activities of this world. This makes the ancient Celt more accessible to us, certainly when compared with the representation of the Anglo-Saxon who, described solely in terms of his religion and government, is only ever a distant barbarian. The point is sharpened with reference to the norms of eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse. Elizabeth Bohls has argued that 'land shaped by people and serving their needs through agriculture, or even industry, is not the stuff of picturesque description' in the eighteenth century precisely because such descriptions are part of 'an ideological strategy that [Mary Pratt] calls the "anti-conquest."'"[54] In other words, by denying the utilitarian aspect of the landscape, and by denuding it of people, descriptions of foreign parts offered a striking legitimisation for the colonial enterprise.

This may shed light on a dispute between two of *Ossian*'s closer readers. Womack's comment on the colonial 'not-landscape' of *Ossian*'s negative sublime – 'as the country was emptied, its emptiness was mythologised as part of its aboriginal character' (1989, p. 86) – which he sees as legitimating the clearances which depopulated the landscape, has been indirectly challenged by Trumpener, who

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Cambridge, 1991).

[53] See also Pittock (1995), pp. 103–4 for a variety of 'Jacobite Whiggism'.

[54] Elizabeth Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716–1818* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 95, p. 92

compares the activities of Macpherson in turning 'the Highlands into one enormous echo-chamber' with those of the confirmed colonialist Samuel Johnson, who 'insists on the desolation of the Highlands [...] the silence of its landscape, empty of history and cultural reference' (1997, pp. 70–71). On the evidence of *Ossian* alone, it may be argued that Trumpener is slightly naive in her belief that animating a landscape with the ghosts of the dead is not in itself part of an ideology of assimilation, but if we add the domestic tendencies of the *Introduction* into the equation her notion of Macpherson's cultural politics is considerably bolstered.

Whatever, Macpherson ends his description of Celtic homelife with the triumphant claim that as the Celts were 'particularly fond of cleanliness' they bathed every day, summer and winter. He then compares this Celtic cleanliness with the 'nastiness' of the Sarmatean (Teutonic) nations, 'whose dirty and ragged posterity crowd, at this day, the streets of the most opulent cities in Europe', concluding:

> The cleanliness of modern nations proceeds from luxury, and is not general; it was the result of nature among the Celtae, it was universal. Beggary and rags are the improvements of advanced society. (p. 233)

Such comments speak for themselves. The only more breath-taking moment in the *Introduction* is provided by Macpherson's attempt to prove that Celtic was once the universal language of Europe and that Gaelic and Latin are not dissimilar versions of that ur-tongue. This allows Macpherson to suggest that French is a branch of Celtic derived from a branch of Celtic, namely Latin, and makes him a latter-day equivalent of James IV and his belief that Gaelic represented the language of Eden.

On the question of religion, Macpherson is adamant that the Celts were naturally a monotheistic people, believing in a universal spirit whose most obvious manifestations were the great physical elements. That said Macpherson admits that the ignorance of the multitude 'almost corrupted into polytheism the philosophical opinions of the Druids concerning God' (p. 163), an observation which demonstrates the sort of worries about a Romantic landscape animated by the spirit of God which would ultimately preoccupy Coleridge in 'The Eolian Harp' (1796). Macpherson also

maintains that the Celts believed in the immortality of the soul, important according to Macpherson because this represents a sophisticated philosophical position which 'requires the leisure of speculative enquiry' and which tends to come to society under normal circumstances at a relatively late stage (p. 180). Macpherson explains this anomaly in terms of the order of the Druids, devoted to study and contemplation, who were able to propound the immortality of the soul 'as the first principle of their faith' (p. 185).

However, the primary feature of the Celtic nations was that, contrary to the eighteenth-century commonplace which held Celts as slavish and their leaders despotic, they 'were extremely fond and very tenacious of their political freedom' (p. 246). The Celts created the offices necessary for civil society but made sure that the power of those in office 'was very much circumscribed' (p. 246). Military and therefore state leaders were appointed only in times of war and only on merit, and neither leaders nor men were paid, a state of affairs to make the most ardent civic humanist glow with delight. Increased populations were absorbed by the system in the creation of the 'conventions of the states', which Macpherson explicitly defines as the 'democratical meetings of the Celtic nations' (p. 249). All of this insistently revises the general portrayal of the Celt in the eighteenth-century as genetically despotic, the enemy of constitutional freedoms embodied in Anglo-Saxonism.

This leads us to the question of the Druids themselves. The figuring of druids in *Ossian* as the dark forces of religious and political tyranny sits ill with the image of the druids in the *Introduction* as the source of Celtic philosophical and religious enlightenment. Even here though there is a certain ambivalence: Macpherson notes that 'the moral character of our ancestors owed more to the compositions of the bards than to the precepts of the Druids' since the latter tended to keep the populace in the dark as to their speculations as 'darkness was favourable to the continuance of the their power' (p. 210). It is strange that Macpherson finds Druids so troublesome given that they were elsewhere such a staple part of the Celtic revival. Perhaps it was contrariness on Macpherson's part that led him to tinker with such a pro-Celtic symbol, but perhaps it

was also to do with certain ambivalent meanings inscribed in the druid figure in the eighteenth century. The positive image of the druid lies very much in the rehabilitation of the druid/bard figure from blood-thirsty heathen to 'an idealised amalgam of the patriotic oppositional philosopher-poet', the intellectual guardian of ancient wisdom and virtue.[55] Yet Christine Gerrard has also noted that Hanoverian appropriation of Stuart and Tudor mythology included some identification of the Hanoverian monarch with the learning of the druids (1994, pp. 142–3). Perhaps it is as a result of this slightly troubling inheritance that Macpherson's druids are ambiguous figures, repositories of great wisdom perhaps ill-deployed, and ultimately in opposition to the full freedom of the polity. As 'enthusiasts on the article of public freedom' the ancient Celts ultimately got rid of the druids in *Ossian*, although their learning and beneficial philosophy lived on in the (more ideologically unambiguous) bard.

Macpherson even offers the barbaric counter-image to the Celt, heading off modernist configurations of the antique past by offering a race of not-so-noble savages whom he analyses in precisely the modernist terms. The fall-guys, inevitably, are the Anglo-Saxons. The important point here is not that Macpherson delights in, and derives a deal of amusement from concentrating on the heathenish blood-thirstiness and down right crudeness of the early Anglo-Saxon compared to the enlightened and proto-Christian Celt (although he does so at length), but that he subtly discredits many of the positive virtues traditionally associated with the Saxon. The *Introduction* does end with a relatively glowing account of the forms of government and judiciary established by the Saxons in Britain, but at the same time Macpherson also uses some of the modernist arguments against the ancient constitution ideal. For example, although Macpherson says that Anglo-Saxon kings 'derived their authority more from election than from birth' (p. 362) this is nothing like the *noblesse oblige* of Celtic society: rather than a 'love of liberty' this system was motivated by a 'haughty ferocity of manners', and Macpherson notes that 'rude liberty degenerated sometimes into licence in the

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[55] Christine Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and National Myth 1725–42* (Oxford, 1994), p. 141.

extreme' (p. 360) with kings deposed on the flimsiest of provocation. It is the same story with the rule of law in early Anglo-Saxon societies, where enthusiastic punishment of crimes led to barbaric extremes (p. 307). Macpherson's observation that 'such were the rude elements which time has improved into the present constitution of English government' (p. 308) thus stresses the improvement of time, the fact that the English constitution did not exist in the – Teutonic – past in anymore than crude outline.

In contrast, Macpherson powerfully reconfigures the Celtic past for the British present in terms of political freedom, advanced religious conceptions, and an innate sense of polish: all whig values. Not only does Macpherson place these values in the Celtic past but he uses them to explain parts of the image which he would otherwise struggle over, particularly the question of the innate laziness of the Celt and his economic backwardness. This is no obstacle to Macpherson's vision of things: apparently so humane was the Celts' religion and ideas about the afterlife that they could not motivate themselves to improve the material conditions of this life. Similarly, so liberty-loving was the ancient Celt that he took steps to make sure that he did or achieved nothing which would give any man the power to enslave him, hence his disdain for the hard-work of achieving property. This might all sound rather ridiculous, but it demonstrates a thorough working-through of competing cultural identities and political discourses, and Macpherson's triumphant ability to have his cake and eat it means that even indolence can be reconfigured as a proof of virtue.

The key to this Celtic identity is that it is fundamentally but subtly stratified. As I suggested earlier, in the opening sections of the *Introduction* Macpherson takes care to lay out the various Celtic nations and their variety. Yet in describing their government, manners, religion, occupations and the like Macpherson talks of 'the ancient British Celtic Nations' or 'our ancestors', a neat piece of syndochic footwork which allows various comments to stand for as much or as little of Celtic Britain as is required on any given occasion. In an important sense the contradiction between the Ossianic vision of Celtic Caledonia and the wider Celtic perspective of the *Introduction*

vanishes: both are true and strangely complimentary, although the enterprise of the *Introduction* perhaps helps explain the back-pedalling Macpherson to an extent engaged in over *Ossian* in the 1773 revisions. In the precarious balance of his Celtic world-picture Macpherson could not afford to be too committed to the out and out primitive.[56] Macpherson offers us as many different Celtic types as we could want, from the warrior of *Ossian* (whose descendants were proving their value as he wrote in acts of unlikely bravery in far flung corners of the Empire) to the limited mercantilism of the Belgae (a sort of pre-1688 and Financial Revolution commercial people) in order to create a British pan-Celticism which answers the needs of all but the most depraved and corrupt of the moderns.

V.

Sustained analysis of Macpherson's engagement with the discourse of primitivism has shed a revealing light not only on Macpherson and his activities but also on that discourse and the wider agenda to which it belongs. Macpherson's writings show a split response to the primitivist agenda and demonstrate the shading which lies within the scope of "primitivism". They also show an ambiguity which it proves impossible to resolve.

Macpherson's prose writings represent, in their reactionary image of the noble past, a denial the assimilative tendencies within the wider primitivist discourse which create a noble savage merely to mourn his passing and to suggest such a passing as

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[56] We noted above that the only time Macpherson uses *Ossian* is implicitly to criticise Caledonian society. The cooling towards *Ossian* has been noticed by Gaskill amongst others in noting the tendency of revisions in the 1773 edition:

> The last three changes [to the preliminary note to "Dar-thula"] are consistent with a general tendency in the revised edition, particularly evident in the *Dissertations*, to downplay the significance of Ossian himself. Macpherson was perhaps motivated by professional jealously. (p. 452)

In the context of the present argument this also suggests an eagerness not to be too extravagant in his claims for what is now only one aspect of the more universal Celtic vision Macpherson developed between 1765 and 1773.

inevitable in the face of the modern. More specifically, this noble Celtic past is constructed in order to counter-act the prevalent image of the Gaeltachd in the eighteenth century, and to create a British Celtic identity of relevance to eighteenth century society. Both of these aims represent a direct challenge to the cultural forces which were involved in creating a Celtic 'other', a perspective which, even as it glamorised the Highlanders, condemned them to an outmoded past. But while the content of Macpherson's prose primitivism, particularly in the *Introduction*, could refurbish a discourse increasingly malleable to the ends of those who were looking to marginalise the Celtic, it could not logically escape from the paradox of a modern lauding and exploring the primitive in ways the primitive would not recognise. Even in the *Introduction*, Macpherson's sustained attempt to create a pre-modern modern world, complete with liberal arts, there can be only momentary avoidance the fact that 'the great channel of corruption which pollutes the human mind in an advanced stage of civility' (*Introduction*, p. 209) is part and parcel of a civil life in which 'speculative inquiry is the first fruit' (*Introduction*, p. 180). Thus two statements are reiterated throughout both the *Introduction* and the *Ossian* writings: firstly that modern life is corrupt and secondly that the redeeming but vanished past lies lost precisely because it lacks the arts which eventually corrupt. Macpherson's personal career inscribes these paradoxes: he learnt the theoretical appreciation he has for the Highland lifestyle only having stepped outside it and into the academic world in Aberdeen. While Aberdeen might not represent a Lowland metropolis such as Edinburgh, Macpherson's part in the academic life is many miles away from the Highland lifestyle he praises. Similarly, it was the fruits of commercial advancement (English money, as today's more sneering critics still delight in pointing out) which allowed Macpherson to "retrieve" the culture of his homeland.

While this paradox remains as separate statements, unreconciled points of view in the discursive prose they are melded together in the actual poems. Rather than offering a direct opening to a world of civic felicity, *Ossian*, at least in terms of its represented world, suggests that the mistake, the severing of the link between heroic

past and civilised present was inevitable. In pushing to an extreme the dogma of ancient civic felicity, Macpherson's romances of primitivism reveal themselves as being as unviable in, and alien to, the modern as ever. And in internalising the dilemma faced by the likes of Ferguson, *Ossian* also aligns itself to a primitivist discourse which is inimicable to the rehabilitation of the Gaelic Macpherson is elsewhere putting forward. Seeing matters in such terms allows at least some understanding of the odd paradox by which Macpherson has been lambasted for 'Celtic impertinence' (Saunders (1894), p. 218) by the dominate Anglo-British cultural establishment and at the same time gone down in the eyes of the Celtic world as some sort of cultural Quisling. In his attempt to build a Celtic Whiggism (Kidd's term) that would constitute an indigenous British identity on the terms of Celtic Scotland (or in terms in which a Celtic Scotland could take part), Macpherson fell spectacularly between two stools.

The question remains why *Ossian* should not repeat the message of the theoretical prose writings. A natural extension of the foregoing argument would suggest that for all its ostensive promise and background, by the 1760s the assumed logic of primitivism's civic thought mitigated against Macpherson's purpose. Yet this does not explain why it is the poems that reveal the stress. Perhaps an answer here is offered by returning the concept of the Ossianic portmanteau: in writing *Ossian* in terms of prevalent aesthetic trends – Sensibility and the Sublime, both of which can be interpreted as varying degrees of ideologies of assimilation rather than difference – and in a romance mode which interrogates the values it propounds, Macpherson is forced creatively into the expression we witness in *Ossian*. Both the Sentimental *Ossian* and the Civic Patriot *Ossian* represent attempts to appropriate a prevailing cultural discourse for the Celt, but in each case the discourse in question implies a marginalisation and ephemeral quality which counteracts potential empowerment.

This chapter has also helped us to further contextualise the Ossianic mood. Understanding what a primitivist poem and world-view looks and feels like helps us to place the experience of reading *Ossian*, to account for the Ossianic *sparagmos*, in terms of a civic discourse which, at least in one important respect, reads demise and

insufficiency into its very glory. It also points us onto the next chapter, since one way of viewing Macpherson's tussles with primitivism is to suggest that while Macpherson tries to circumvent the discourse's central paradox, he still falls victim to a tendency inherent within redemptive ideological strategies to conspire with the forces of suppression they are formulated to resist. In the following chapter I will explore how else the *Ossian* project might offer us a picture of the what happens to narratives of dispossession when they become divorced from their immediate context and are forced into expression under creative conditions which deform their message.

CHAPTER FIVE.

The Ossianic Narrative of Defeat

One of the things to emerge from the previous chapter was the idea that we witness, especially in the poems themselves, a rhetoric of dissent towards the current social climate slipping into an ideology of accommodation. Macpherson's primitivism was tied to stadial concepts of social development to the extent that its critique of the modern would seem to have been negated, and that it runs the risk of merely confirming the obsolescence of the past as retrospectively predicted for it by the apologists of the modern, commercial world. In other words, while creative literary primitivism, which was after all greatly fired by *Ossian*, was still in its infancy and would continue to offer a vehicle for dissatisfaction with the modern world, the traditional civic humanist past of patriot virtue was defused as a viable alternative model for civic and social life. The price of Macpherson's confident – and therefore extremist – primitivism in his Ossianic dissertations and the *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* is ultimate incoherence and contradiction, while the *Ossian* poems themselves are haunted by the fate of those societies which fail to obey the dictates of progress, however lamentable and unpalatable those demands might be. Alice Chandler has charted the absurdities and tragic failures of the primitivist ideal in nineteenth-century primitivist, or primitivist-inspired works such as William Cobbett's *History of the Protestant Reformation* or Henry Adam's *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*.[1] It is testament to the rigorous workings out of the primitivist discourse offered by Macpherson that these absurdities and tragic failures are all contained within his works, works which themselves represent some of the earliest texts of primitivism.

Dissatisfaction with the present in favour of a lost past would, of course, continue to be a potent literary resource. The implied critique of the present such a

position contains would remain, but as a viable alternative political language, primitivism cedes too much ground (and logical coherence) to its opponents. At the same time, primitivism would express itself in an increasingly personal and psychologised way (as we saw in Blair and Burke's linguistic primitivism in the previous chapter), and would increasingly derive its potency (as *Ossian* does in the civic sphere) from the very fact of its impossibility of realisation. Wordsworth's 'thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears' represent, at least on one level, a celebration of the capacity if not to return to then at least to remember innocence; the ability to mull over and feel melancholy about a time of lost innocence and wonder is configured as evidence of a 'human heart by which we live' whose continued existence redeems the present.

To pursue this line, and the place of Macpherson's 'joy of grief' in it, is, as Wordsworth might have put it, another race. This chapter discusses *Ossian*'s relationships with some other discourses of opposition, again with the notional aim of contextualising the Ossianic *sparagmos*. It will also allow us to tie together a number of the elements identified in previous chapters and to clearly demonstrate how the *Ossian*-effect derives from its positioning at a cultural and aesthetic cross-roads. In other words, more than in any other chapter we will witness here the results of clashes of imperative within the Ossianic project. That said, a further and seemingly paradoxical message emerges from the arguments below. Not only is the *Ossian* text generated from a clash of imperatives, it also plays on complimentary elements within these competing discourses.

This chapter explores *Ossian* in terms of an expression of both commitment to, and disillusionment with, the myths and modes of thinking and feeling mobilised by defeated peoples by suggesting that *Ossian* can be read with reference to a particular 'sensibility of defeat'. The claustrophobia, the nightmarish muddle of time and event which is so evident in a lively reading of *Ossian* is on the one hand a version of the

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[1] See Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (Lincoln Nebraska, 1970).

typological model of history deployed by those coming to terms with their own marginalisation; on the other hand, the 'luridly dysfunctional' Ossianic world of which this claustrophobia is a part is similarly a manifestation of the cultural condition which inscribes catastrophe as an innate quality of a race, thereby mythologising defeat as a natural, and infinitely more attractive state of affairs.[2] I will suggest that *Ossian* represents a text of inherited defeat, by which I mean a state of affairs where a living and sustaining idiom and culture of the defeated, one which had offered an active and vibrant mode of expression for resistance to the current *status quo*, is giving way to an ossified, stultifying and generally self-destructive adherence to a world of the past and its failures. *Ossian* marks the battleground between two competing narratives of defeat, one a typological and one a teleological (albeit an inverse teleology), and signals a change in the way that the Gaeltachd in particular is portrayed within British culture.

The first section of this chapter discusses the fate and deployment of a Jacobite rhetoric and iconography of dispossession within *The Poems of Ossian*, arguing that this discourse warped in two ways. Firstly, Macpherson undermines Jacobite tropes by setting them in a context of despair and by displaying a scepticism towards the claims of the cyclical view of history upon which they rely. Secondly, Macpherson is capable of overcoming this scepticism, but only in a nightmarish vision deeply disturbed by the implications of cyclical history for the generations which have to live within its turnings. Overall we see the impact of a second narrative of defeat, one which looks towards predetermination, in the production of this inverse typology. Section two extends the chapter's exploration of the deformation of the means of cultural protest in *Ossian* by focusing on Macpherson's use of the Ossian figure, the epic poet of defeat. This section discusses the extent to which Ossian-as-poet has an input in the production of the Ossianic sensibility and his impact on the poems we read, an issue touched on previously in chapter two. The third part of the chapter considers the 'new' ideology of defeat found in depictions of the Gaeltachd from the 1770s onwards, suggesting

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[2] Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands* (Basingstoke, 1989), p. 106.

Ossian's role in its production. The only definitive conclusions the chapter draws is a stress on the inherent and unresolvable ambiguity of *Ossian*, and the necessity of assigning careful qualifications to any description of Macpherson's cultural role. For example, we must recognise the fact that *Ossian* encodes the cost of being the victim of a sensibility which the poems themselves ironically further, that the text is in some way both a diagnosis and the disease. Or at least we must recognise that some of the features of the Celtic world Macpherson presents, and is today excoriated for, are read into that world precisely because they are elements of a prevailing cultural and aesthetic discourse Macpherson hopes to appropriate for his Celtic world. In this I want to mobilise Katie Trumpener's sense of the 'double bind' confronting nationalist-leaning writing of this period as it attempts to claim value for its subject within discourses whose ultimate logic is antagonistic towards that subject.[3] Without recognising this we are in danger of making anachronistic judgements and of conspiring ourselves with the colonising pressures we are hoping to reveal.

There are passing allusions to the culture of defeat and its writers to be found in the American South through-out the chapter. Without being too precious about this, the hope is that these allusions, particularly the textual quotations, flag up certain Ossianic moments and convey a sense of those moments inaccessible through more conventional exegesis. That said, there is a story to be traced about the celebration of catastrophic defeat in two Celtic homelands, a continent and a century apart, of importance to both, but it is not a story with a place in this context.

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[3] *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, 1997), pp. 142–3. Trumpener sees this dilemma encapsulated by a text such as Sydney Owenson's *O'Donnel* which 'at once parodies and promotes a touristic view of Ireland' (p. 143).

I.

The Jacobite Rhetoric of Defeat.

i. "The past is never dead. It's not even past"

(William Faulkner, *Requiem For a Nun* (1950))

The above quoted comment of Gavin Stevens could stand as a paradigmatic statement not only for the world of Faulkner's South as presented to the reader in novels such as *Requiem for a Nun*, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), but also for the Caledonian world depicted in *The Poems of Ossian.* In both cases the distinctions between past, present and future have been flattened; history seems, as it were, to have ground to a halt. This section will explore the extent to which such a state of affairs can be considered consistent with so-called typological models of history, as opposed to the developmental, progressive and accumulating history of the grand, teleological narrative, and to what extent *Ossian* may be read as a savage parody of such a vision.

Typological history is marked by an emphasis upon 'recurrence, myth, archetype and image': it is 'the history sought by the defeated, whose linearity and incrementality have been exiled into colonialism or absorbed into the greater identity.'[4] It was a history of peculiar appropriateness to the exiled Stuarts, to the extent that by the end of the seventeenth century the Stuart cause was:

> habitually expressed in a language of typology, with metaphors of prophecy and recurrence-salvation history, and not without its messianic force. This offered a profound and rich political analysis of the realms they had lost, won, and lost again in the course of half a century. (Pittock (1994), p. 9)

The appeal of such a history to the defeated and dispossessed is obvious – as Murray Pittock goes on to say, 'no disaster is irreversible in a history which repeats itself' – and it finds its most famous statement in British literature in the inscription on the tomb of

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[4] Murray G.H.Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1994), p.16.

King Arthur: 'Hic Iacet Arthurus, Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus'. As Gavin Stevens puts it in Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*:

> 'It's all *now* you see. Yesterday wont [sic] be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago. For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on the July afternoon in 1863 [...] and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against that position and those circumstances'[5]

This description of the moment before Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg is the impossible romantic dream of recurrence history, of capturing the moment of splendour, of high hopes and noble aims before the reality of what is to be takes over. Or to put it another way, 'typological history does not evolve along time scales: it takes a mythic or remote historical era, and glorifies it either to lament its passing or praise its return' (Pittock (1994), p.10).

However, cyclical history is at least open to interpretation another way. Trumpener, for example, has argued that circularity implies a fatalism alien to the nationalist who believes in the 'contingency and therefore also the mutability of history.' She suggests that there is a distinction to be made between a position which 'concedes circularity as the only possible modality of history and thus remains trapped in the cycles it describes' and a nationalist one which 'identifies the cycle in order to break it forever' (1997, p. 56).

Although both seem valid, the model laid out by Pittock would seem to have the weight of examples on its side. Or rather, Trumpener seems to be focusing on a later historical moment, one in which positive typology becomes deformed into a negative or reverse version which traps its participants. *Ossian* operates at precisely this shift in cultural signification, disrupting the positive paradigm laid out by Pittock both by encoding the passing into the glorification so that the sustaining past is haunted by what is to come, and by recreating this historical model as a deeply disturbing and suffocating model of life. This section takes these two characteristics in turn, beginning

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[5] *Intruder in the Dust* (Harmondsworth, 1960), pp. 187-8.

with this sense that the knowledge of the passing of the remote era is so encoded into the text that it threatens the very glorifying process and countenances no return.

The clearest examples of this reverse circularity come at those moments when characters envisage the future: circular history is envisaged as not replacing current hardship with the promise of future glory but as threatening present triumph with future weakness and obscurity. As Fingal says in his pomp:

> I behold thy tempests, O Morven, which will overturn my halls; when my children are dead in battle, and none remains to dwell in Selma. Then will the feeble come, but they will not know my tomb: my renown is in the song: and my actions shall be as a dream to future times.[6]

This may well be perfectly in tune with eighteenth-century moral sentiment, and demonstrate a commitment to what Henry Mackenzie would later call 'the philosophy of time', a moral understanding that 'it will be all the same in a hundred years hence' which tempers our pride in our achievements and succours our distress, but it is also the inverse circularity of *Ossian* writ large.[7] In 1773 Macpherson underlined the point still further by emending 'my renown is in the song' to 'my renown is only in song', and, as we shall come to see below, he held out little expectation for song.[8]

Within *Ossian* the travestying of authentic typology and, by extension, a specifically Jacobite typology is carried out on a number of levels. We have seen in the chapters preceding this one how Macpherson uses the image of the shattered or withered oak at moments of high stress within the poems (for example at the end of "Dar-thula"), the reference to an important part of Jacobite iconography only heightening the Sentimental charge of the moment.[9] The image structures of *Ossian*

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[6] James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Howard Gaskill, (Edinburgh, 1996; from 3rd edition 1765), p. 120.

[7] *The Lounger*, no. 48 (Saturday December 31st, 1785) in *The Lounger*, 3 vols, (6th edition, Edinburgh 1804), vol.2, pp. 113–120, p. 119. See chapter two for Macpherson and Stoic moral sentiment.

[8] See textual note, *Works*, p. 441.

[9] The oak tree was part of the clan badge of the Stuarts and took on further mystical significance after a convenient oak provided refuge for Charles II after Worcester. It also enters the ancient British and Aenean matrix of Jacobite iconography as both the sacred tree of the Druids and the branch by which Aeneas enters the Underworld in book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*. See, Pittock, 'The

carry out a subversion of a positive returning history on a larger scale, perhaps most obviously in the consistent allusions to the *Aeneid*, particularly in *Fingal*. Epic precedents echo through *Ossian* and their presence has been recognised as contributing to the down-beat feel of *Fingal* in particular. Drawing our attention to the fact that the *Aeneid* is, for its immediate protagonists, an unfulfilled epic, beginning with defeat and, with final victory deferred into prophecy, ending inconclusively, Fiona Stafford has commented that 'the evocation of Virgil's Troy, rather than Homer's, gives an ominous undertone to the Celtic war: despite Fingal's epic victory, the underlying notes of despair are never completely silenced.'[10] This aspect of Virgil's poem is emphasised by Macpherson's choice of passages to which to allude, by his representation of the Virgilian moment (as we saw in the watery ghosts of chapter two), and in the context into which he sets them. The visitation of the ghost of Crugal to the sleeping Connal reminds us not of the eventual glory of the Roman empire but of the moment when Hector tells Aeneas that Troy is finished and that his long years of exile are to begin; Agandecca's mournful appearance to Fingal in IV echoes Aeneas' painful and reproach filled encounter with Dido in the Underworld. At every turn, Macpherson offers us the defeat and the cost of adventuring, not the recompense. Pittock has expanded on this by drawing attention to the Jacobite overtones gathered within translations of the poem which stress elements of exile and return from the middle of the seventeenth century through the eighteenth:

> The Jacobite reading of the *Aeneid* came culturally to prevail, as is evident in works like *Ascanius and his Two Sons* (1746) or the particularly popular *Ascanius, or the Young Adventurer* (1746). It seems to have become engrained to the extent of being a standard code of allusion. (Barnard and Clark (ed.), 1995, p. 241)

Understood in these terms, Macpherson's selection of those parts of the poem which stress the exile rather than the return are revealed as not merely an artistic device to emphasise weakness and insufficiency, but as a take on the recurrence-history motif

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Aeneid in the Age of Burlington: A Jacobite Text?' in *Lord Burlington: Architecture, Art and Life*, ed. by Toby Barnard and Jane Clark, (London, 1995), pp. 230–50.

[10] Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 138.

something akin to inverse or reverse typology, what Pittock has termed 'a literary typology, an ideology of nostalgia', and it is in these terms that the full implication of his observation that *Fingal* represents 'an *Aeneid* of the first four books when the last eight are already over' can be appreciated.[11] This is best summed up by Pittock's own analysis of the *Dunciad* as some sort of anti-*Aeneid*, an analysis which resolves itself into a series of *ubi sunts*:

> the deliberate echoes, mainly from the less optimistic books of Virgil's poem, are a perpetual reminder of the discontinuity of tradition in this modern epic, leading of necessity to mock epic: where is the golden age, [...] where is Aeneas, where is kingliness, where is the king? (Barnard and Clark (ed.)1995, pp. 244–5)

If *Ossian* is not a mock epic, it has nevertheless, as we have seen, internalised these very doubts: while we are ostensibly presented with a golden age and an ideal king, everything tends to the remoteness and insubstantiality of both.

Central to the meaning of the Aeneas metaphor for Jacobites (one reinforced, for example by Dryden's rendering of the first lines of the poem), is the reassertion of hereditary continuity, and its disruption and potential reassertion also plays a part in wider Jacobite rhetoric.[12] *Ossian* stresses hereditary lineage within and across the poems in both the line of Fingal and in countless minor family histories. However, as is particularly noticeable in the case of Fingal, Ossian and Oscar, this ideal is alluded to only in its ultimate subversion, honoured only in a final breach. The "last" of the Ossianic poems, "Berrathon" offers a specific example of such a flirting with the ideal Jacobite trope. A father Larthmor is usurped by his son (rather than son-in-law), an identifiable Jacobite configuration which troped the "Glorious Revolution" as heinous not only because it represented the removal of a God-ordained monarch but because it

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[11] Pittock (Barnard and Clark (ed) 1995), p. 248; and 1994, p. 185.

[12] See Howard Erskine-Hill, 'Literature and the Jacobite Cause: Was There a Rhetoric of Jacobitism?' in *Ideology and Conspiracy: Aspects of Jacobitism, 1689–1759*, ed. by Eveline Cruickshanks, (Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 49–69. It is the stress on 'success, family, and the line of father, son and grandson' that Howard Weinbrot sees as symptomatic of *Ossian*'s 'Jacobite alternative history' (*Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 531) – but see discussion below.

represented the betrayal of a father by his son-in-law.[13] In as much as Larthmor is restored to his throne by the Fingalians this "putting things right" by Ossian represents a piece of Jacobite wish fulfilment. Yet the emotional gearing of the story hardly enforces the point, and in fact runs contrary to this interpretation since, as we saw in chapter two, Larthmor sees the death of his son as an unsatisfactory outcome to his predicament. He is left wishing that he could have stayed in exile, and we are left to reflect that "restoring" Larthmor proves only an empty parody of the situation before his son took power – nothing will ever make it right again. The restoration is not only bathetic but pointless. What goes around does seem to come around in "Berrathon", as the typological view promises, but the outcome is unexpectedly downcast, the return deflated.

Across the poems as a whole there is a wider sense in which *Ossian*'s narratives offer little opportunity for second chances. Every time the Fingalians sally forth to right wrongs we are reminded that life, even for third-century warriors, is rarely that simple. The eponymous heroine of "Oithona" believes that she is ruined, that nothing will restore her name, and the arrow that finds her at the end of her tragic tale comes as a blessed release.[14] *Temora* represents this insight writ large: the military "victory" of the Caledonians in the teeth of overwhelming losses is rendered meaningless by the scale of those losses, and is crystallised in the death of Cathmor, Fingal's enemy and a symbol of everything Fingal fights to uphold. In chapter two I analysed this narrative logic in terms of the procedural demands of the Sentimental text for the provision of suitably lachrymose tableaux. Another way of putting the priorities I identified earlier – the sad over the happy outcome – is to see that tragic finality is always preferred to comic renewal. Jacobite play on the emotional potential of past suffering as a spur to action leads into a sensibility which would prefer to celebrate a defeat than a victory,

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[13] For the Jacobite tradition which played on the 'deposing [of] the father-king' see Paul Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People 1688–1788* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 56.

[14] This, with Oithona as a sort of Celtic Clarissa Harlowe, is in one sense the conventional sexual politics of Sensibility. David Fuller has pointed out that, when Blake took the poem on in the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* he transcended this ending with an unrepentant Oothoon (*Blakes's Heroic Argument* (London, 1988), p. 41).

'contemplation of the apocalypse too readily becomes a substitute for constructive thought or action'.[15]

In a wider sense *Ossian* plays on the Jacobite myth of diaspora with a travestying effect. Paul Monod has stressed the emotional power of the motif of the 'man of tears' (Charles I or James II) within Jacobite iconography while at the same pointing out the complementary messianic figure of life represented in the pseudo-Christian typology by James III (Monod (1989), pp. 62–72). It is in this redemptive sense that the Fenian myth of the sleeping king became associated with Jacobite myth since "'the Gaelic messianic tradition" of Fionn suggested that the Stuart king would one day return to bring light and fecundity to the land'.[16] On the one hand, *Ossian* lacks any such redemptive figure (as we shall see in terms of the sleeping king myth below) and the Jacobite play on slippage and diaspora comes to sound like an admission of defeat in poems full of men of tears with no compensatory promise of return. On the other hand, Fingal is notably lacking of the fertility symbolism of his previous manifestations, a striking example of how the primitivist agenda, associated with a sublime barrenness, circumvent the vigour of the oppositional figure. Furthermore the very barrenness of the landscape through which Fingal moves reads like a symbol of 'the failure of Celtic heroic support for the Cause': 'the cairn of dead and unsuccessful heroes is a sign that the land has lost its chance of regeneration' (Pittock (1991), p. 77).

These various strands can be drawn together in a consideration of the way that the opening books of *Fingal* play with the iconography of the messianic return in what are recognisably Jacobite terms. The Irish forces spend much of the first two books of the epic looking for and expecting the eponymous 'king of the lonely hills' (p. 55). Fingal is envisaged by Cuchullin's men very much as the "king across the water" who

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[15] Ken Simpson, *The Protean Scot: The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen, 1988), p. 46.

[16] Pittock, *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and The Scottish Identity, 1638 to the Present* (London, 1991), p. 5. Fionn as a Sleeping King is a particularly Scottish Gaelic feature, little found in Ireland: see Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *Fionn Mac Cumhaill: Images of the Gaelic Hero* (Dublin, 1988), pp. 309–13. See below for more on this motif.

will come and deliver them from their troubles: as Connal puts it at the end of book I, 'I am for peace till the race of the desart come; till Fingal come, the first of men, and beam, like the sun, on our fields' (p. 62). This image of the sun is suggestive. The figure of Fionn is associated within Gaelic tradition with the sun (his name means fair or bright/shining one and is possibly identifiable with the Celtic sun-god Lugh, whose name translates the same way), and the emblem of the sun was the standard of the Fianna in both *Ossian* and Gaelic ballads. For example, Ossian talks of how they 'reared the sun-beam of battle' (*Fingal*, IV, p. 87), and Donald Meek has related Ossian's description here of his father's standard with Gaelic descriptions of the 'Image of Sun | the banner of great Fionn of the Fian'.[17] Equally, Gaelic poets associated the bright swords of the Fianna with sunbeams, and while Macpherson lacks this particular link, it is notable that Fingal's mightiest sword Luno (whose name is identifiably similar to one belonging to his Gaelic forebear) has somewhat mystical connotations (Fingal only used it when hard pressed and it had the reputation of killing a man with only one blow), perhaps revealing a link to the quasi-mystical lightening brands of the Fianna. Jacobite iconography from the time of James VI and I had represented the Stuart monarch as a messianic sun-god (the Stuarts were not the only monarchy to develop such an image of course), with the implications of the Christian overtones to the symbol played on first by James in his role as Arthur Returned and, in the troubled years which followed, by those looking for restoration from across the water. Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's 'Oran a Rinneadh`Sa Bhliadhna 1746' ('Song Composed in the Year 1746') demonstrates the longevity of the image:

> This is the wonderful year
> When the sun with soft and fertile warmth
> His lovely beams shall shed on us;
> Dew shall cover the grass,
> Milk and honey shall be had unasked,
> Silver and gold. (ll. 25–30)[18]

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[17] 'The Gaelic Ballads of Scotland' in Gaskill (ed), 1991, pp.19–48, p. 43.

[18] John Lorne Campbell, (ed. and transl.) *Highland Songs of the Forty-Five* (Edinburgh, 1933), pp. 96–7.

Thus the image of the sun provides a useful nexus between the Gaelic and Stuart messianic traditions, a nexus which also stops us from coming to any firm conclusions about Macpherson's use of the image: it is impossible to decide where and in what degree Macpherson is getting his messianic imagery. It seems difficult to believe however, that even if Macpherson was merely re-using what was within the Gaelic traditions surrounding Fionn, he would have been unaware of the Jacobite overtones to his figuring of Fingal as the returning sun-god.

If the opening two and a half books of Macpherson's first epic can be subtitled "Waiting for Fingal", it is entirely fitting that, his corporal presence being absent, the Irish summon him via a story of his youth at the opening of book III. This is a striking symbol of the place he has in the consciousness of all concerned, echoing the way that throughout book I Fingal (and that which belongs to him) seems to be the gold-standard against which everything is measured, a common term of reference as a superlative even among Swaran and his men.[19] However, Fingal eventually arrives in person, and the almost immediate success of his proto-Highland Charge in routing Swaran fulfils the confidence placed in him in the early books. It is along these lines, picking up the latent Jacobite rhetoric in the early books, that the Jacobite reading of the poem emerges: Fingal as the sun-god who delivers a beleaguered land from the forces of a frankly Teutonic foe. Yet attention to the tone and feel of the poem, as discussed in chapter two, (and the Virgilian allusions discussed above) undermine any claim for straightforward Jacobite wish fulfilment. This is symbolised in a telling passage as Fingal arrives. Put simply, the Fingalians arrive too late for the hapless Cuchullin and the Irish army who had looked in vain towards Scotland (as they will again, with more dire results for all concerned, in *Temora*). As Cuchullin surveys the devastation of the lost battlefield we are left in doubt as to the catastrophic nature of the Irish defeat:

> How many lie there of my heroes! the chiefs of Innis-fail! they that were chearful in the hall when the sound of the shells arose. No more shall I find their steps in the heath, or

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[19] For example: 'thy arms are like two white pillars in the hall of the mighty Fingal' (p. 57); 'Were it Fingal himself my soul should not darken before him' (p. 59).

> hear their voice in the chace of the hinds. Pale, silent, low on bloody beds are they who were my friends! (p. 76)

And Fingal echoes his words when he lands just a few lines later:

> The battle is over, said the king, and I behold the blood of my friends. Sad is the heath of Lena; and mournful the oaks of Cromla: the hunters have fallen there in their strength; and the son of Semo [Cuchullin] is no more (p. 76)

This last statement is not of course true, although it pleasingly echoes Cuchullin's own last sentiment ('Mourn me with the dead, O Bragéla! departed is my fame'). As we saw in chapter two, Cuchullin's story becomes the tragic minor key to the poem from this point on in *Fingal*, the memory of the misfortunes with which the poem opened shadowing the triumph of Fingal. Thus across the whole poem we witness a glorious coming of Fionn tinged with an awareness that all such longed-for returns come at a cost and that they must always be in some measure disappointing. If *Fingal* represents a breed of vicarious, Sentimental Jacobitism it is one which refuses to allow us to forget that some things can never be put right, that the coming of the deliverer does not always ensure success.

Macpherson's ambivalent attitude towards the efficacy of deliverance history is summed up in his use of the topos of the sleeping king. Like that other returning Celtic hero Arthur, Fingal, it seems, will have to settle for a literary reincarnation. Indeed we see the acknowledgement of this in "Colna-Dona". Ossian dedicates a memorial with the exhortation:

> Oozy daughter of streams, that now art reared on high, speak to the feeble, O stone, after Selma's race have failed!— Prone, from the stormy night, the traveller shall lay him, by thy side: thy whistling moss shall sound in his dreams; the years that were past shall return— (p. 326)

But the memorial guarantees no remembrance in itself: recognition only comes when the traveller 'ask[s] about the stone, and the aged [...] reply, "This grey stone was raised by Ossian, a chief of other years!"'(p. 326). Read one way this business of unmarked tombstones foreshadows Wordsworth's celebration of communal memory in poems such as the (highly Ossianic) 'The Brothers' and offers justification for

Trumpener's claim, discussed in the previous chapter, that *Ossian* fills the Highland landscape with significance and cultural referents. But read another way, it also suggests a tension, since the organic ideal is introduced only in its threatened failure: the place of the Fingalians in posterity is conceived of by Ossian as precarious, and the mechanisms of cultural memory are as delicate as they are fussy in this painstaking description. At the very least there is the suggestion that Fingal will be remembered only illusively, marginally, in dreams and with no reference to the everyday. In other words, does this passage confidently describe the mechanisms of cultural continuation or does it, in the context of an *Ossian* 'rescued' from the teeth of cultural oblivion and the negative sublime of the broken Ossianic landscape, ironically represent a 'semiotically arid world' in which 'history and culture no longer define what it meaningful' because 'specific places of memory *do not simply arise out of lived experience*'?[20] Certainly Fingal's own prognosis is notably gloomy:

> We shall pass away like a dream. No sound will be in the fields of our battles. Our tombs will be lost in the heath. The hunter shall not know the place of our rest. Our names may be heard in song, but the strength of our arms will cease. (p. 101)

He hints at some sort of place in posterity, but that 'may' is revealing, as is the balanced contrast between the strength of now and the weakness to be. It is poor recompense, he seems to be suggesting, an implication bolstered by a revision in 1773 which replaces the understated balance of the earlier version with the more blunt: 'Our names may be heard in song. What avails it, when our strength hath ceased?'[21] *Ossian* makes this point determinedly. In the famous address to the sun which concludes "Carthon", Ossian's final turn away from the sun as an emblem of steadfastness and continuation ('But thou art perhaps, like me, for a season, and thy years will have an end' [p. 133–4]) can be read in terms of the aged bard's self-projection into the landscape, with particular resonance given the sun/son play. However, the sun is also, we recall, the emblem of Fingal: to undercut the eternal presence of the sun is thus to

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[20] Thomas Laqueur, 'Memory and Naming in the Great War' in *Commemorations: The Politics of Cultural Identity*, ed by John Gillies, (Princeton, 1994), pp. 150–68, p. 160. My emphasis.

[21] See note 24 in *Works*, p. 434.

deny any latent sense that Fingal too has any permanence, and to provide a nasty twist, as it were, for those reading this passage as a coded Jacobite evocation.

The Fingalian retreat into a less-than-satisfactory literary future can be interpreted in a number of ways. A historical precedent is offered by the Arthurian tradition: Arthur as future literary figure becomes prevalent in Arthurian texts from the thirteenth century on, in part as a symptom of literary self-consciousness but also in response to the "discovery" of Arthur and Guinevere's grave at Glastonbury in 1191, a find which, while at least in part motivated by commercial opportunism, was equally designed to scotch trouble amongst the Welsh. It is possible to interpret this twist in the story, turning Arthur from physical to cultural icon, as an attempt to head off these forces of assimilation, a plea for a less literal-minded approach to the question of Arthur's return. But equally, such a move can be interpreted as conspiring with the forces of cultural imperialism and, given the accommodatory leanings of the Galfridian narrative as a whole, is perhaps to be interpreted with more justice as a deactivation of an oppositional totem, writing-off the return of the Celtic warrior as "just a story" far more effectively than mere denial ever could.

Ossian suggests a similar dilemma, particularly given claims that Fionn as sleeping king was 'derived in Scotland from Arthurian lore' and that it is 'hardly feasible' that the story was borrowed before the sixteenth century' (Ó hÓgáin, p. 313). The question is, what sort of response to the threat of the reality (that if Charles Edward Stuart was the embodiment of Fionn – or one of his glorious sons – then 'the '45 was an inadequate return of the Fianna, a failed deliverance') does the text represent?[22] On the one hand the refiguring of Fingal as a snatch of a dream is part of an ongoing agenda to defuse the political potency of the 'Gaelic-Messianic tradition' and simultaneously inscribe the demise of Highland culture as inevitable and irreversible. Yet on the other hand Macpherson's triumphant reconstitution of Ossian's poems, activities which against all the odds resuscitate Fingal in the very midst of the

eighteenth century, suggest that Fingal and Ossian are proved strangely both wrong and right in their own half-hearted predictions. In other words, any reply to Fingal's rhetorical question 'what avails it, when our strength has ceased?' must take into account not only the fact that 'the power of the ancient Celts was sufficiently broken to require a Lowland subscription for [*Ossian*'s] recovery' but also that in his reincarnation (as we have seen) as an eighteenth ideal, Fingal returns as the would-be presiding – if troubled – cultural icon for a practical Republic of Politeness, with a potential importance and significance beyond his wildest dreams.[23] If as pre-literate savages Fingal and Ossian understandably underestimate the cultural importance of song, we need to be more careful. It may even be argued that the extent to which song alone avails is the central and most important question posed by *Ossian* as a whole.

ii.

As I suggested at the outset, *Ossian* does more than exhibit a scepticism towards the claims of circular views of history to put matters right. What really holds our attention, and what gives *Ossian* its distinctive feel, is the way the text sees such circularity as profoundly disquieting. To the extent that recurrence history does operate in *Ossian* it is figured as imposing a heavy burden on those who must live within its turnings. Rather than acting as a liberating force it is reconfigured as a life-denying and constrictive one which bequeaths a crippling lack of space in which the current generation can operate. To borrow a phrase of Cleanth Brooks, in *Ossian* the 'past [is] experienced not only as a precious heritage but as a crippling burden.'[24] The Faulknerian analogy is apt, given Gavin Stevens' further, bitter analysis of the cyclical mind-set in *Intruder in the Dust*. Stevens' evocation of the mythic moment before Pickett's Charge quoted earlier gives way to a bitter disagreement with the poetic

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[22] Pittock (1991), p. 75. One also thinks of the folk-lore encounter between a shepherd and the sleeping Fianna whom he disturbs 'too soon': sleeping kings, as we might expect, have something of a vested interest in endlessly deferring their return.

[23] Stafford, introduction to *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, p. xiii.

conceit that 'the scattered tea goes with the leaves and every day a sunset dies' as he laments that, for those burdened with the typological, recurrence-myth idea of history in which today and tomorrow can be yesterday, such comforting linearity is not an option:

> 'yesterday's sunset and yesterday's tea both are inextricable from the scattered indestructible uninfusable grounds blown through the endless corridors of tomorrow, into the shoes we will have to walk in and even the sheets we will have (or try) to sleep between: because you escape nothing, you flee nothing; the pursuer is what is doing the running and tomorrow night is nothing but one long sleepless wrestle with yesterday's omissions and regrets' (pp. 188-9)

For Macpherson's characters no less than Faulkner's we see the cost of living in 'a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago', the cultivation of a mind-set which produces only 'a kind of entailed birthright [....] of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forevermore as long as your children's children produce children you wont [sic] be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manamass'.[25] This could almost be a description of the Ossianic situation whereby a travesty of typological history means that the whole work predicated upon the catastrophe which "authentic" typological texts set out to circumvent. In *Ossian* the battery has gone flat, or at the very least the Ossianic world spins on the spot, with no forward momentum whatsoever. History ends with the extinction of the aged bard himself.

In *Ossian* (and Faulkner for that matter) this atmosphere is at least in part brought about by the continual interlayering of other stories within the main narrative. Again, while chapter two discussed the aesthetic priorities behind such constructions and their effect on the heroic narrative, it is also necessary to interpret the effect of such digressions in terms of the long shadow of cyclical history. In other words, while

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[24] *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County* (New Haven, 1963), p. xi.

[25] *Absalom, Absalom!* (London, 1960; first published 1936), p. 361. Pickett's charge, as Quentin points out to the speaker Shreve here, was at Gettysburg. The ultimate irony in all this being that Shreve cannot even remember where this line of nothingness which so comes to dominate the lives of the present, began.

Sentimentalism provides an aesthetic and procedural context, the typological interpretation goes towards explaining Macpherson's enthusiasm for the dynamics of Sentimentalism.

Overall we feel that in *Ossian* the present is constantly on the verge of being choked in the morass of the past in a way which suggests that a kind of inverse typology is at work. Nobody does anything without that action calling to mind some previous encounter, and in this way the stories continually loop back on themselves. The distant past which haunts the ancient Ossian and forces him into song is in itself continually menaced by a still more distant past. At its most minor, in poems such as *Fingal*, stories of past despair, premature death and tragic love, compulsively revisited by Ossian and his characters, impinge on the would-be buoyant mood of the main narrative. More sinisterly, those past stories can bequeath expectations and precedents for a current generation seemingly doomed to follow the same line. This is most clearly exemplified in *Temora*, where the characters are presented as trapped within a set of inherited circumstances, hopelessly ill-equipped to do anything other than follow the pattern of every other young warrior consumed by the bloody civil war in Ireland in which the Caledonians have been intermittently embroiled (through their support of one of the Irish factions) since time immemorial.

Ossian's characters live in a world populated by ghosts, real or literary, pointing ever backwards towards previous tragedies. A frequent insight of *Ossian* would seem to be that the actions of youth have the capacity to remind older onlookers of their own youths. If there is nothing very original in this in itself, neither is there anything particularly menacing about it. However, this insight is writ so large in *Ossian*, is a lesson repeated so frequently, that it seems a symptom of a more profound non-progression. In *Temora* III Fingal is proud of his son Fillan when he sees his actions in battle. Ossian says:

> Joy like the rustling gale, comes on the soul of the king. He remembers the battles of old; the days, wherein his fathers fought. The days of old return on Fingal's mind, as he beholds the renown of his son. (p. 248)

When speaking to Fillan a little later Fingal articulates this sentiment when he proclaims that 'the fame of our fathers [...] bursts from its gathered cloud' (p. 250) and he launches into a story of his own youth ('the memory of the past returns, my deeds of other years'). Fingal has a point in mind for this story, but nevertheless overall one impression is given, that the bravery of today does not usher in even the promise of a new golden age, but merely releases the old. Of the vision of heaven in "Berrathon", Peter Womack acutely points out that 'paradise consists simply of having everything just as it used to be', and that in *Ossian* 'there is no revelation, and no transcendence; there is only the ubiquitous and impalpable presence of the past, into whose illusive whirlings everything is constantly slipping' (1989, p. 102). In fact some ghosts do provide moments of revelation, but then, what do they reveal? Whether it is Crugal in *Fingal* II with his message that the 'sons of green Erin shall fall' (p. 65) or Cairbar in *Temora* IV with his gloomy prediction for his brother Cathmor (p. 258), the premonitions ironically confirm that positive action is unattainable, that defeat is predestined, that transcendence is out of the question.

It is a paradoxical fact that when ghosts arrive with a particular message, no one ever takes any notice of them, paradoxical because in its more nebulous manifestations the past holds a vicious grip on the imaginations and actions of the Ossian's characters. As we have seen previously, the past offers a rich store of social meaning for the Fingalians, compelling precedents to guide the actions of the present: 'so Trenmor lived; such Trathal was; and such has Fingal been' as Fingal puts it in an exhortation to Oscar to live up to the family code of sparing 'the feeble hand' (p. 77). In short there is a widespread belief, as "Cath-loda" has it, that 'the deeds of old [...] are like to paths to our eyes (p. 313). Unfortunately for its characters however, the text would seem to problematise the question of where exactly those paths might be leading. In *Temora* II Ossian attempts to instruct Fillan on the proper time for grieving (see above, chapter two) with the story of Trenmor and his son Colgar. Unfortunately Fillan is more interested in the glory of Colgar's life than anything else (forgetting, as Macpherson puts it in a footnote, the latter's 'untimely fall', p. 489), and so Ossian

unwittingly only fires up his brother's enthusiasm for reckless acts of war, something everyone else (including Ossian) is advising him against, and which will lead to his demise. The actions of the past ignite those of the future, and, not necessarily in the ways those who deploy the past intended: as Yeats says (in a phrase it has been suggested he borrowed from Macpherson via Blake), in unleashing the forces of history 'a terrible beauty is born', one which very much has a life of its own. The double-edged sword of the past is also marked on the formal level: the stories told by a range of bards, by Fingal and by Ossian, often to make an ethical point, threaten to swamp the actions of the here and the now. If Fillan receives conflicting messages and confusing models from the stories he hears it is equally confusing for readers who have to negotiate their way through the mass of extraneous material and episode.

It is possible to go further and suggest that *Ossian* generates its tragic charge less from a clash of generations and ideals but from a situation where a reflexive allegiance to the past, its battles (and more often its defeats), subsumes the rising generation. We have already seen one manifestation of this in our analysis of the aesthetic which governs the lives of the Fingalians and the way in which they seem to conspire in a tragic aestheticisation of their lives. A similar phenomenon is to be observed on a more historicised level. A key text here is the poem "The War of Caros", another one of Macpherson's strangely incongruous minor masterpieces, in which Oscar faces the might of Caros 'alone' (an ambiguous word, as we shall see). On the night before battle Oscar communes with the shades of his ancestors who 'sit dim in their clouds, and behold the future war'. Ossian then intervenes with a small editorial:

> It was then [...] my son begun first to be sad. He foresaw the fall of his race; and, at times, he was thoughtful and dark (p. 113)

The story recommences with the battle, provoked by Oscar paying an early morning visit to the army of Caros as they camped around 'a tomb which arose in the times of old'. This does not improve Oscar's prospects:

> "Am I alone", said Oscar, "in the midst of a thousand foes?—Many a spear is there!—Many a dark-rolling eye!—Shall I fly to Ardven?—But did my fathers ever fly!—The

> mark of their arm is in a thousand battles.—Oscar too will be renowned.—Come, ye dim ghosts of my fathers, and behold my deeds in war!–I may fall; but I will be renowned like the race of the echoing Morven." (p. 113)

Soon afterwards the noise of battle reaches Oscar's followers over the hill and they arrive, putting the army of Caros to flight. Of course tactical retreats are not to be expected from would-be epic heroes, indeed the decision of the hero not to take the option of retreat is 'crucial to our esteem for the hero, for it distinguishes the man who is merely trapped from the one who has chosen to endure adversity: there and not in victory lies the truest nobility' something which suggests that 'heroism is not compatible with rescue and safety'[26] That said, the text does produce a readerly double-take when we learn that Oscar's reinforcements are within earshot of battle, as if the poem, filtered through Oscar at this moment, is not being quite straight with us. It is as if Oscar has chosen not to tell us of the whereabouts of his men, making his speech seem, retrospectively, to suggest an unnatural willingness to go the way of his dead forebears.

The problem with being too ingenuous about moments such as these is that as like as not they arise from Macpherson's sloppy plotting and expression. However, in this case the presence of the business of the ancestral visitation and its effects on Oscar's sensibility does give a curious suggestiveness to the moment. Emulating his forefathers primarily means, for Oscar at least, to be dead: after all, Trenmor as described by Ossian on page 112 has a sublime awesomeness about him which he can only have as a ghost (Fingal has to all intents and purposes to pretend to be a ghost in *Temora* to achieve a similar effect). Equally, to be 'renown like the race of [...] Morven' is to be what exactly in the light of Oscar's new-found knowledge of 'the fall of his race'? We know that he now knows what we know about the fate of the Fingalians. Thirdly there is the question of Oscar's psychotic precipitation of the battle, creating the odds he glories in within his speech: even the most *arete*-driven of epic heroes usually needs some sort of ulterior motivation (for example, the death of a close

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[26] Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Code of the West* (Bloomington Indiana, 1982), pp. 106–7.

friend or dissatisfaction with the high-handedness of the Almighty) before starting such conflagrations. Again with reference to Rosenberg, it is notable that while hubris plays its part in the fall of many epic heroes – Roland's refusal to sound his horn at Roncevalles might be a comparable situation here – this hubris usually combines with either pure ill-fortune or, more importantly, 'treason or cowardice among one or more of his men' (Rosenberg, p. 102) to cause the downfall of the Roland or Custer figure. None of these conditions applies to Oscar's situation, indeed, he would appear to have deliberately engineered a situation with no hope of success: his rites-of-passage test is a willingness to die in a hopeless, pointless cause.

It is perhaps not unusual for rites-of-passage dramas to involve the dawning and acknowledgement of a sense of mortality. But for the Celtic warrior, the wisdom of adulthood would seem to be almost entirely made up of a knowledge that one belongs to a doomed race. Oscar here acquiesces in the history of the Celt which in the years following the publication of *Ossian* would be constructed to mythologise and thereby legitimate the suppression of the race, and will be examined at greater length in the third section of this chapter. Ossian's heroes know what history has in store for them and are hell-bent on following the agenda. This point marks the intrusion of another sort of narrative of defeat as Reverse Typology seem to come about due to the proximity, perhaps combination of two incompatible narratives of defeat. On the one hand, the present is located within the context of a wide-turning circle of events which means that the down-trodden of today will be tomorrow's conquerors; while on the other, the events of the present form part of a continuum, the way things were "meant" to be and over which we have little or no control. Forced together in *Ossian* these models conspire to create an image of a world in which doom is predestined and in which future defeat is inscribed into national beginnings. This perhaps has something to do with the instability of the 'wheel of fortune' paradigm: those on the down curve as well as those in the ascendancy are likely to fall victim to teleological delusions, even if they are travelling in opposite directions towards a manifest destiny. However,

before I turn to this further ideology of defeat in the final part of the chapter I want first to turn to the image of the poet as memorialiser of defeat offered by *Ossian*.

II.

> His very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts. (William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*)

The figure of the narrating Ossian dominates the poems that bear his name. In chapter two it was suggested that, in common with other Sentimental narrators, Ossian orders the poems around the salient points of his own existence, witness his narratives' obsession with sonless fathers and aged heroes. This section puts the figure of Ossian (or perhaps it might be more accurate to say Ossian-Macpherson) under more sustained analysis, this time from the starting point that he represents a poet of defeat, the figure who memorialises his failed culture. Throughout we see how manoeuvres which in other situations may promise a redemptive strategy are in the case of Ossian twisted into the sense of foreboding and predestined defeat which is so strong a mark of *Ossian*'s world.

It is frequently noted that the distinction between the living and the dead, the here and the now, is muted to the point of non-existence within *Ossian*. As just one critic has put it:

> Ossian elegises; therefore he is. Not suprisingly, he observes no steadfast distinction between reminiscent voices and the sounds of the present. [...] For Ossian, as for the characters he laments, the past is as likely to speak as the present.[27]

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[27] Adam Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca and London, 1994), p. 220. Ossian's 'memoir epics' could stand analysis ideologically and aesthetically in terms 'memory texts' as understood by cultural anthropology and could be usefully explored as a nexus between memory, history and mythology as witnessed in C. Vann Woodward's observation that 'the twilight zone that lies between living memory and written history is one of the favourite breeding places of mythology' (1955) quoted in Michael Kammen, *The Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991), p. 32.

David Radcliffe has interpreted this effacement of the distinction between time-now and time-then as a redemptive strategy. He sees the 'visionary spectacle' created by Ossian as an aesthetic 'which overlooks the effects of time on material life: the lyric imagination restores youth to Ossian and virtue to society.' This process is for Radcliffe completed in the aesthetic economy advocated by Wordsworth in his 'Lines Written on a Blank Leaf of Macpherson's *Ossian*':

> Wordsworth's elegiac rhetoric overgoes even Macpherson, placing *Ossian* [...] entirely beyond the reach of time's baleful tooth. It is an open-handed gesture which places all times and all societies on a level.[28]

Such a project accords with more general conceptions of the poet of defeat, the artist who can escape the 'tyranny of history' by seeing it not chronologically but in 'cyclic, holistic terms.'[29]

The problem with such interpretations with reference to *Ossian*, however, is that they are too close to the redemptive history of typology, when Macpherson's vision is far more troubled, and far darker. There are two aspects to this dark vision, roughly paralleling the twin deformation of wider redemptive history we saw in the previous section. On the one hand these efforts to keep all societies on a level results in the implication of Ossian in the collapse of a coherent, linear time in the poems, while on the other we see our reverse-typology in action as Ossian reads the eventual decline of his race into his descriptions of their pomp. A clue to the divergence between this reading of the poems and Radcliffe's is offered by the differing interpretations open to Radcliffe's observation that '*Ossian* does describe a fall from grace in as much as Ossian is left in a little world, and the corruption of his body parallels the corruption of the body politic' (1992, p. 222). In an important sense this formulation is the precise reverse of the Ossianic situation: the Ossianic body politic is corrupted because Ossian's body is corrupted, not vice versa. There is no hint of regeneration for the age of heroes because Ossian can see no hope for the regeneration

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[28] David Hall Radcliffe, 'Ossian and the Genres of Culture', *Studies in Romanticism*, vol.32 no.2 (1992), 213-32, p. 222, p. 231.

[29] Charles Moorman, *The Celtic Literature of Defeat* (Lampeter, 1994), p. 120.

of himself. Ultimately the world Ossian creates is in the image of himself – reliant on the past, going nowhere fast, and haunted by the knowledge of what is just around the corner:

> Of Fingal's noble deeds they sung, and of the noble race of the hero. And sometimes on the lovely sound was heard the name of the now mournful Ossian. Often have I fought, and often won in battles of the spear. But blind, and tearful, and forlorn I now walk with little men. O Fingal, with thy race of battle I now behold thee not. The wild roes feed upon the green tomb of the mighty king of Morven.—Blest be thy soul, thou king of swords, thou most renowned on the hills of Cona! (*Fingal* III, p. 79)

Thus Ossian's most high-flown visions of future fame contain the undeniable fact – or is it pre-condition ? – of extinction cast within the formulation and prediction that 'the sons of the feeble [...] shall admire the chiefs of old, the race that is no more'.

Many of these features can be seen in action in "Dar-thula". The poem is based upon the Gaelic legend of Deirdre. Although the poem is numbered amongst those with an identifiable Gaelic source, it is generally considered to suffer in any comparison:

> the fine clear colours of the original are gone [...] at times, indeed, the course of the story becomes hard to follow. In this telling the tale has lost its tragedy, its pathos, its dignity, and practically all its meaning.[30]

While I would not presume to quibble with this comparison with Gaelic versions about which I cannot comment in a meaningful way, the following reading is in part intended to demonstrate how a lively reading of 'Dar-thula' employs strategies which circumvent some of the objections raised by Thomson.

The temporal structure of the poem is created through the image of the moon. "Dar-thula" opens with the aged Ossian addressing the 'daughter of heaven', the moon (p. 140). In a passage reminiscent of the conclusion to "Carthon" Ossian turns from celebrating the celestial body to projecting his grief onto her:

> Dwellst thou in the shadow of grief? Have thy sisters fallen from Heaven? Are they who rejoicest with thee, at night, no more?– Yes!–they have fallen, fair light! and thou dost often retire to mourn (p. 140)

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[30] D.S.Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian* (Aberdeen, 1952), p. 55.

These speculations remind Ossian of something else, and gradually, in what is an almost cinemographic technique, the scene changes:

> Thou art now clothed with thy brightness: look from thy gates in the sky. Burst the cloud, O wind, that the daughter of night may look forth, that the shaggy mountains may brighten, and the ocean roll its blue waves in light.
>
> Nathos is on the deep, and Althos that beam of youth, Ardan is near his brothers; they move in the gloom of their course. The sons of Usnoth move in darkness, from the wrath of car-borne Cairbar.
>
> Who is that dim, by their side? the night has covered her beauty. Her hair sighs on ocean's wind; her robe streams in dusky wreaths. She is like the fair spirit of heaven, in the midst of his shadowy mist. Who is it but Dar-thula, the first of Erin's maids?
>
> (p. 140)

This opening to the story proper magnificently evokes the confusion and darkness besetting Dar-thula and her companions: witness the lack of any obvious link between the first and second paragraphs and the rhetorical questions in the third paragraph. Equally it is a forceful reminder that we are witnessing the exposition of an imaginative vision on the part of Ossian, and if one thing is clear from this giddy opening it is that the poem to come will be a dramatic performance by the aged bard.

Ossian brings his characters to life *in medias res* (after all, he is a natural epic poet), and fills in the important preceding events for us in a series of lyric addresses spoken by a number of characters (most prominently Dar-thula herself). It adds considerably to the growing sense of foreboding that at every turn her attempts to cheer up Nathos (the ostensible reason for her stories) is frustrated by the doom-laden story Dar-thula is forced to tell in each case. This is a paradigmatic position for an Ossianic hero, one which sums up the relation between past and present in the poems. However, the *coup de theatre* for the narrating Ossian and the ordering of time and event in the poem comes as the story winds to its climax. Nathos foresees his imminent doom and wishes that Ossian, 'the voice of Cona' could memorialise him. The narrative then jumps completely into the "present" for the equivalent of an editorial comment ('And my voice shall praise thee, Nathos'), before returning to the story, although this time to Morven, where the Fingalians receive a premonition of the death of Nathos and his companions, a sound 'mournful and low, like the song of the tomb'

(p. 145). Time flows forwards and backwards at this point with the important effect that the protagonists are "dead" before their deaths are related in the story. Furthermore, the inverted commas around "present" a few lines earlier alert us to a further time frame and the fact that this present is still the distant past to us as we read the poem. The real present is represented, as it were, in the text by Macpherson's footnotes, the first of which relates the whole story of Dar-thula and the sons of Usnoth 'as it is handed down by tradition' (p. 451, n.1), including the death of all four of the heroes. Here again then we are offered a narrative technique which pre-empts legitimate action since we, no less than Ossian, know what is going to happen, that the protagonists have already fallen by the hand of Cairbar before they are introduced to us. Such moments also serve to remind us that reading an Ossian poem requires a set of priorities and strategies alien to the expected: we do not read to find out what happened, but how it happened and how, in this particular rendering, it is described as happening.[31] The effect of the jumble of time-frames is something akin to the claustrophobic hysteria of a Pre-Raphaelite painting. Everything – past (death of Dar-thula's brother and father), present (the conversation of Dar-thula and Nathos), near future (their deaths) and distant future (Ossian relating all the preceding) – exists 'flat' as it were, with no depth of field, and certainly no sense of progress. Quentin Compson describes the lyric flow of Rosa Coldfield (herself the poet of a bitter defeat) in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* in strikingly similar terms:

> It (the talking, the telling) seemed (to him, to Quentin) to partake of that logic – and reason –flouting quality of a dream which the dreamer knows must have occurred, stillborn and complete, in a second, yet the very quality upon which it must depend to move the dreamer (verisimilitude) to credulity – horror or pleasure or amazement – depends as completely upon the formal recognition of and acceptance of elapsed and yet-elapsing time as music or a printed tale. (p. 22)

It is notable that in describing this quality Quentin (and the narrative voice which is somewhat unhelpfully clarifying this description) falls into a similar rhythm. It perhaps comes as no surprise then that Quentin's own monologue in the chronologically later

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[31] This is, of course a feature of the romance reading strategy, each individual work being a

The Sound and the Fury (though written before *Absalom, Absalom!*) could be described in the same way, and indeed has been by Jean-Paul Sartre. Faulkner has within this monologue, Sartre claims, 'decapitated' time, 'depriving' it 'of its future, that is, its dimension of deeds and freedom'. Sartre arrives at a reason behind this by worrying at a seemingly insurmountable flaw in the narrative situation. Quentin relates the story of his last day in the past tense, as a memory, which leads Sartre to ask who is remembering 'since the hero's last words coincide approximately with the bursting of his memory and its annihilation'. The answer, Sartre suggests, is that Quentin's narrative occurs at 'the infinitesimal instant of death', 'thus, when Quentin's memory begins to unravel its recollections [...] *he is already dead.*'[32] It is this which produces and explains this decapitation of time within Quentin's monologue. This conception of narrative situation chimes with the features of "Dar-thula", while the notion of decapitation, the removal of 'freedom' illuminates on the personal level the closed-endedness of the Ossianic event discussed in section one, a history doomed from its inception.

A possible objection to this reading of "Dar-thula" comes from its implication that the poem represents merely a stream of consciousness, and that the disruption to time and event is caused by a narrative which mirrors Ossian's thoughts as they occur to him. This would be problematic because we are in fact made aware throughout the poem that "Dar-thula" is a consciously constructed literary artefact. For example, two refrains run through the poem and across all the characters: 'Why art thou sad, O Nathos?', and the observation of all the characters – beginning with the narrating Ossian – that 'the winds deceive thee/us'. The effect is the same in each case: to build tension and a foreboding of doom, and to deny the characters, who never fully emerge from the fabric of the poem, any vital individuality. In short *Ossian* partakes of the strange quality of lyric drama, and is reminiscent at times of nothing so much as the

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version of a well-known story, often engaging with other versions.

[32] Jean-Paul Sartre, "On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner", transl. Annette Michelson (1955), in *The Sound and the Fury A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. David Minter, (New York and London, 1987), 253–9, pp. 257, 258.

lyric odes of the Greek Tragedy. I briefly want to explore how far such a generic analogy for the Ossianic giddying of time and event might go, and indeed where it might take us.

As chapter two made clear, Macpherson's primary critical reference is to the standards of epic poetry. That said, we also saw in chapter two how in stressing the formal heterogeneity of his Gaelic sources (a passage of narrative interspersed with lyric addresses is the impression of the text conveyed) Macpherson frequently compares Ossian's technique with that of the dramatist (and of course certain of the poems were explicitly presented as dramas: the unimpressive "Comála: A Dramatic Poem" is the most obvious example, but "Carric-thura" and the "Songs of Selma" also fit into this category). The dramatic qualities of *Ossian* were felt by many of the poems' early readers: Horace Walpole, when he saw the pre-press manuscript of the *Fingal* volume, effectively advised turning the text 'dramatic' by suggesting to Macpherson that he add character names next to speeches, and many of the stage adaptations which flourished in the final years of the eighteenth century did little more than take Walpole's advice and divided the poems into speeches.[33] More recently Gerald Tyson has observed that 'Macpherson's adoption of an antiphonic verse structure for Ossianic poetry emphasised the oracular and dramatic qualities which formed part of his conception of primitive poetry', and Ian Haywood has suggested that from the first of the *Fragments*, 'the dramatic nature of the poetry was established', claiming that "The Songs of Selma" represents a dramatisation of various of the *Fragments* in as much as they are 'transformed into felt experience'.[34]

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[33] For Walpole's input, see Paul deGategno, *James Macpherson* (Boston, 1989), p. 32. For these dramas see Edward Snyder's *The Celtic Revival in English Literature 1760–1800* (Cambridge Ma., 1923) As a taster we are offered: David Erskine Baker's *The Muse of Ossian: A Dramatic Poem of Three Acts, Selected from the Several Poems of Ossian* (1763); *Oithona*, an opera with music by F.H.Barthelemon (1768); John Reedel's [?] *Malvina: A Tragedy* (1786); James Mylne's *Darthula* (1790); *Oscar and Malvina*, a 'ballet pantomime' (1791, 4 editions by 1792); and *Comala: A Dramatic Poem* [...] *Set to Music by Miss Harriet Wainwright* (1792).

[34] Gerald P. Tyson, '"Feast of Shells": The Context of James Macpherson's Ossianic Poetry' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Brandeis University, 1969), p. 119. Ian Haywood, *The Making of History: A Study in the Literary Forgeries of James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton in Relation to Eighteenth-Century ideas of History and Fiction* (Cranbury N.J., 1986), p. 78, p.95. "Berrathon",

It is notable that the dramatic adaptations, sticking close to Macpherson's originals, did not (unlike the craze for *Ossian* itself) outlive the eighteenth century (although the practice of excerpting and anthologising particularly emotional speeches, particularly eulogies, continued well into the nineteenth century and into the era of Tennyson and Browning).[35] Yet this tells us something about the dramatic quality of the poems, since, like many Romantic and nineteenth-century poetic dramas, their dramatic quality is that of the unperformable closet drama, never convincing in performance because the characters never fully have a life of their own, are ultimately not distinguishable from the creative consciousness of the would-be playwright. A poem like "Dar-thula" is ultimately not a drama but an act of ventriloquism. Or if drama, it is of the order of Northrop Frye's 'Myth-Play' or Romantic drama, the latter of which while related to tragedy by virtue of the hero's death 'in itself is neither tragic nor comic, being primarily spectacular'.[36]

In chapter two I discussed Macpherson's dramatic vocabulary and the similarities with primitivist descriptions of early Athenian drama, and suggested that the dramatic form both gives leeway for what Hugh Blair called the 'fluctuations of passion' and gives rein to the unmalleable, irreducible aspects of Macpherson's material and sensibility. Here we see the liberties the dramatic rendering gives Macpherson for eddying time and event, for confusing the present with images of past and future which disrupt the rational progression of the present. Tragic drama works in the fissures epic poetry leaps over or attempts to seal up, worrying to breaking point the stresses more affirmative modes of representation are designed to reinforce. Equally, Blair contrasted

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Haywood notes (p.96), sees Ossian dramatising his own death, and he asks the same question Sartre asks of Quentin Compson's narration, discussed above.

[35] See for example, *A Second Evening's Amusement in a Library: Extracts from Ossian's Poems, with Cursory Observations, etc., etc.* (undated [1823?], in National Library of Scotland bound volume of *Ossianiana*, catalogue number H.31.b29 [1–3]). The pamphlet offers dramatic extracts from *Ossian* along with advice for appreciating their 'profound impressions of moral sentiment' (p. 3), mainly by reading 'not connectedly, or long at one time' (p. 10). The usual suspects provide the extracts: the death of Oscar; the addresses to the moon and sun; Ossian's tale of his wooing of Everallin.

[36] *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 282–3. Interestingly Frye uses the example of two big *Ossian* fans – Goethe and Schiller – to describe the Romantic drama.

the 'uniform dignity of Epic' with 'that briskness and ease, which is suited to the freedom of dialogue', an observation which emphasises that the dramatic also represents the effacement of a single narrative voice.[37] I have argued that the typical Ossian narrative represents less dialogue than it does an act of ventriloquism, a symphonic dramatic monologue, but the point remains valid. The cost for Ossian in celebrating the past he evokes in his poems is a dissolution of self, a confident epic poetic voice giving way to fractured lyric drama.

Ultimately, whether we see Ossian's narratives as process or consciously constructed poetic artefacts is perhaps neither here nor there. In the first place, the literary primitivism of a Macpherson or a Blair effectively denies such a distinction, in the second, the effect is the same: to reinforce and convey the central Ossianic message, that defeat and death are foredoomed. A clue to the psycho-pathology behind this engraining of defeat and the disruption of narrative associated with it is offered by comparing the endings of two minor *Ossian* poems. The conclusion to "The War of Inis-thona" demonstrates the constraints Ossian places on linear time and its flow. I quote at length as the rhythms of Ossian's jumps in time as he brings the story to a close are important to the effect:

> We brought [the successful Oscar], with songs, to Selma's halls. Fingal ordered the feast of shells to be spread. A thousand bards raised the name of Oscar: and Morven answered to the noise.[...]
>
> O lay me, ye that see the light, near some rock of my hills: let the thick hazels be around, let the rustling oak be near.[...]. Daughter of Toscar, take the harp, and raise the lovely song of Selma; that sleep may overtake my soul in the midst of joy; that the dreams of my youth may return, and the days of the mighty Fingal.
>
> Selma! I behold thy towers, thy trees, and shaded wall. I see the heroes of Morven; and hear the song of bards. Oscar lifts the sword of Cormalo; and a thousand youths admire its studded thongs. They look with wonder on my son; and admire the strength of his arm. They mark the joy of his father's eyes; they long for an equal fame.
>
> And ye shall have your fame, O sons of streamy Morven.—My soul is often brightened with the song; and I remember the companions of my youth.——But sleep descends with the sound of the harp; and pleasant dreams begin to rise. Ye sons of the chace stand far distant, nor disturb my rest. (p. 117)

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[37] *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1783), vol. 2, p. 513.

As his story ends, Ossian begins to shift time between the remembering now and the remembered then (until this point the action had been continuously narrated as a reminiscence) until we settle finally back in the 'present', leaving the Fingalian past at the moment of Oscar's greatest triumph, forever frozen with that sword upraised in celebration, as the old man slips into sleep. In that joyous address to Selma Ossian demonstrates the redemptive potential of his lyric vision. Yet in its ultimate non-progression the narrative breaks off at this point, significantly denying any 'future' to its characters, in Sartre's words, 'decapitating time'. This is, if we like, another version of the frozen moment of civic felicity we saw in the previous chapter, felicity vouched and doomed by its non-advancement.

A negative version of this is found at the conclusion to "The War of Caros": again the narrative breaks off but this time rather than in order to preserve a dream the abrupt ending suggests disgust with the whole poetic venture. Ossian winds towards a climax:

> Now dark and deep, with all his steeds, Caros rolled his might along: the little streams are lost in his course; and the earth is rocking round.——Battle spreads from wing to wing: ten thousand swords gleam at once in the sky.——But why should Ossian sing of battles?—For never more shall my steel shine in war. I remember the days of my youth with sorrow; when I feel the weakness of my arm. Happy are they who fell in their youth, in the midst of their renown!—They have not beheld the tombs of their friends: or failed to bend the bow of their strength.——Happy art thou, O Oscar, in the midst of thy rushing blast. Thou often goest to the fields of thy fame, where Caros fled from thy lifted sword (p. 113)

Thus the poem comes to an end not with the description of a glorious Fingalian triumph, or even with the comforting straightforwardness of a description of mass organised violence, but with the image of Ossian wishing he was dead. Telling the story simply becomes too difficult, too pointless for Ossian, who chooses not to continue with a story which signifies little but pain under current circumstances.

Such moments also serve to underscore the troubled relationship the narrating Ossian has with his own poetic endeavours. There is some doubt as to whether Ossian finds his poetry a help or a hindrance in coming to terms with his reduced position, whether his poeticising is admirable or merely pitiable, a debate Fiona Stafford has

addressed at some length.[38] In "Conlath and Cuthóna" the tales Ossian sings are spurred by the ill-commemorated spirits of the participants: Ossian is performing a duty and, judging by his final cry of 'O that I could forget my friends; till my footsteps cease to be seen! till I come among them with joy! and lay my aged limbs in the narrow house' (p. 126), one that he finds painful. "Berrathon" contains lengthy passages where Ossian debates the usefulness of what he is doing, memorialising those who will be forgotten on his death, while at the same time "Oina-morul" and "Cathlin of Clutha" seem to suggest the therapeutic advantages of the ancient tales, bringing back deeds of the past. The tussles over the value and meaning of the poetic exercise only heighten the sense of dysfunction at the text's core: no positive action (not even the talking about action) is of use, no achievement of real value.

How might we interpret this poetic figure and the vision of stasis he produces? I shall end this section with four interpretations which can be broadly classed as aesthetic, epistemological, sociological, and politico-cultural. I shall tackle them in that order. Stafford's analysis of the ambivalent status given to the poetic endeavour in *Ossian* – the text can never decide whether Ossian is a 'Romantic hero, solving an impossible situation by creating poetry' or 'the mere shadow of his father; incapable of action' (pp. 63–4) – lends itself very obviously to seeing Macpherson as prefiguring debates over the cultural position of the poet in the Romantic and post-Romantic ages. This image of the bardic chronicler of his people's fate who cannot escape that fate in glorifying their heyday does seem a prescient one. Christine Gerrard, in charting the fate of the political 'Patriot Gothicism' in a post-Walpole generation draws attention to Gray and Collins' 'doubts about the poet's social function' to explain how the Druid-bard as vibrant image of Patriot Opposition became increasingly associated with the margins, with history's victims.[39] *Ossian* represents the end-point of that process, a mirror image of the two worlds: in the Ossianic past we have Blair's bards as

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[38] See Stafford, '"Dangerous Success": Ossian, Wordsworth, and English Romantic Literature' in Gaskill (ed), 1991, pp. 49–72, pp. 63–4, and *The Last of the Race: The Growth of a Myth from Milton to Darwin* (Oxford, 1994, pp. 102–5.

repositories of social value and action, in the Ossianic present we have the Byronic poetic outcast.

Frederic Bogel has offered an epistemological interpretation of Ossian in an undeservedly overlooked contribution to Macpherson scholarship. Within *Ossian*, and through the Ossianic narrator, Bogel suggests that we feel the past with an unusual immediacy: we hear it, not merely about it. This calls for an effort on the part of the characters which takes a terrible toll, not least because when they are not remembering they are 'curiously disembodied, deprived of immediate background and significant locatedness.'[40] The emphasis on voice, increased by the prose rhythms of the text, 'results in an undermining of significant action, even when it is narrated, and of dramatic character as well' (1984, pp. 128–9). Thus the 'primary function' of the characters is 'to signify rather than to act or speak or be' (1984, p. 129). Such a destiny might be easier to live with if the immediacy of the past they are sacrificed to was unambiguous, and was not simultaneously accompanied by a sense of distance created by the constant references to a still more heroic past, and by 'the sheer amount of time [the characters] devote to the act of recalling' (1984, p. 98):

> an effect of this simultaneous immediacy and distance is to weaken the very idea of temporal locatedness and to identify a heroic or substantial past as a mode of existence that is always out of reach (1984, p. 100)

In this way, we move quickly 'to a conception of the heroic past as a time when men and women could freely *imagine* a heroic past' (1984, p. 100, Bogel's emphasis). Within such a vision, a 'past of large scope and real substance' is 'ever out of reach, receding into the mists of the archaic, tied firmly to no historical era, not even unequivocally temporal' (1984, p. 101). The insubstantiality of the heroic in *Ossian* is for Bogel a symptom of wide-ranging phenomenological uncertainties in the eighteenth century. For us, it chimes nicely with the hard-line literary primitivism of Macpherson,

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[39] Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and National Myth 1725–1742* (Oxford, 1994), p. 148.

[40] Fredric V. Bogel, *Literature and Insubstantiality in Later Eighteenth Century England* (Princeton, 1984), p. 128.

which carries with it the implication that poetry of vim and vigour is impossible in the modern world.[41]

The sociological – for want of a better word – interpretation of Ossian and his narratives is offered by attending to the situation of the poet who recounts the deeds of ancient times in a modern and reduced setting, the realm of the 'feeble' who 'mark no years with their deeds, as slow they pass away' (p. 318). Within Moorman's positive conception of the 'literature of defeat' is the assumption that the central concern of such a literature is a concern to 'extol those beliefs and values that they have lost, or are about to lose, those traditions they have shored against their ruin and for the protection and preservation of their identity' (1993, p. 52), a venture most obviously symbolised by a stress on a Golden Age 'in which values seemed clearer and issues more sharply defined' (1993, p. 67). But no sooner as he said as much than he must introduce complications familiar from our romance discussion in chapter three, admitting that the narrative tension of many such stories comes from the antagonism between the time of the compiler and the hero: the *Táin Bo Cuilagne*, in which we see the conflict of the individual hero with the 'moral entanglements and complexities' of the compiler's society; or more damningly, the first four branches of the *Mabinogion* in which the past is presented not as 'an age of incorruptible heroes, but a time of moral chaos and indecisive conflict much resembling, and hence offering little comfort for [the compiler's] own' (1994, p. 67). Passing over the similarities with the Ossianic situation, the major weakness in Moorman's approach is that he tries to internalise and explain such paradoxes rather than run with them. On the one hand he believes that all our Golden Ages are to an extent ironic because, in an argument that strikingly (though unwittingly) combines the primitivist and romance logic we have already explored, 'the embodiments of our dreams of glory [are] undercut somehow by our self-knowledge' (1994, p. 49): somewhere deep down we know that our heroes come from our fantasies, fantasies inspired by the troubles of now. On the other hand Moorman

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[41] See chapter four above, for the hard-line primitivism of Macpherson and Ferguson compared to the more whiggish primitivism of Blair and Burke.

suggests that any past is worth saving in and for itself merely because it is *ours*: 'the past, however cruel, lawless, bloody, must be preserved because it [...] provides identity and meaning in chaotic times among alien overlords' (1994, p. 69). The extent to which such a position can come to conspire in the ideological reconstructions of a past by those looking to cement their hegemony in the present – the alien landlords – will be considered in the following section. However, Moorman's tangles here usefully illustrate both the strength and flexibility of the primitivist and romance interpretative frameworks as established for *Ossian* in chapters three and four and also the problems presented by the heroic as a medium of opposition, since these features he finds problematic are those common to the epic narrative. To return briefly to Martin Kabat's analysis of epic heroism:

> The poet describes man's heroic effort, the brief interlude of civilisation that effort accomplishes, and the destruction which follows. And because the poet belongs to a later age, one that is more civilised if not more grand, it must seem to him that this process of rise and fall, of creation and destruction, is somehow intrinsic to the heroic age.[42]

In other words there is a sort of retrospective causality inherent in the epic vision which produces the bloody, lawless past of only secondary use to the poet of defeat, and which comes about because the poet implicitly knows what is commonplace to twentieth century anthropologists, that the heroic age is 'not a stable or self-sustaining social order' but a 'temporary effect of the process through which civilisation incorporates tribal society.'[43] In *Ossian* this insight becomes, in one guise or another, the poems' major organising principle.

A final angle ties Ossian, and the price the Ossianic world pays within his narratives to questions of cultural identity, specifically those surrounding what is known as 'Laura Ashleyfication.' This is Murray Pittock on the representation of time and action in *Ossian*:

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[42] Martin Israel Kabat, 'The Epic Hero: Recurring Patterns and Poetic Perspectives in Epic Poetry' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, New York University, 1979), p. 157.

[43] Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (Basingstoke, 1992), p. 269.

> [It] is the process of forging heritage from history: the replacement of the exploration of other events and times as contextualising and being contextualised by one's own, with a historicity which discretely reproduces detached packages of the past, fictively arranged to occupy the present only in the scope of time taken for their presentation as entertainment. (1994, p. 185)

This containment of the past might initially sound like the opposite of all we have isolated about *Ossian* above, insofar as we have been concentrating on the encroachment of the past into the present. The difference, however, is more one of perspective. Where my analysis reveals the ways *Ossian* is internally organised in order to illustrate the cost of such a process, Pittock has stepped back from *Ossian* and is judging it from the point of view of what it signifies in an eighteenth-century context. What I mean becomes clearer if we make one final comparison between Ossian and the Gaelic Oisean.

It was observed in chapter three that the Gaelic Ossianic tradition presents its narrator Oisean in terms not immediately recognisable in *Ossian*. Another measure of this is that Oisean, by introducing distinction and readmitting causal links is contextualising and being contextualised by his history, while Ossian is wading around in a morass of jumbled times and events, a past kept alive in opposition to all else and constantly toppling into an unsustaining heritage. For Oisean the wind in the trees brings no ghosts, and his memories of his past life are exactly that: they are an effort of memory, or more often as we saw in chapter two, the response to a question of Patrick's. The previously quoted refrain of poem IV in *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* that 'time passes wearily in Elphin tonight' brings the further reflection that 'it was not so we used to be.'[44] Ossian, on the other hand, has his evenings festooned with spectral appearances, echoes in the wind and the remembrance which comes with the sight of an old tomb. This has the effect – and to an extent this is precisely the point – of making everything as it used to be (although as we have seen that 'used to be' is coloured by what is). The Dean's Book maintains the distinction between then and now, liberating history to exist between the two and illustrating an apparently

paradoxical point: that by not burdening the present by being at a manageable distance, the past can have a real and useful place in the present, things can make sense. In no. VIII Oisean relates how Fionn had prophesied, provoked by Oisean's arrogance, that one day he would be reduced to this position. Oisean goes on to describe his own war band, and says:

> Those were then at peace with me, it is for lack of them that I am feeble.
> I was the Fian's valorous counsellor in the battle of Crunnmhoin. Many a one was slain there, after whom I am left feeble. (Ross (ed.), p.39)

There is a re-assertion of positive connectedness between the two times, logical strength to Oisean's language, which is absent from *Ossian*. We see it again in the debate between Oisean and Patrick in which Oisean claims that had 'the clans of Morna lived' the Christian missionaries 'would be put under restraint' (Ross (ed.), p. 177). Previously we noted the effect this has on the representation of the Oisean figure, but it is worth also pointing out that this is a debate, not one of Ossian's ecstatic dream-visions. In it we see a reusable history, with a form which allows it to ballast Oisean in his arguments with Patrick: the past is alive not as a threatening force but as a sustaining image of a better time. Lacking the bracing effect of the Patrick figure, Ossian's narratives take on a different form. We must not forget Malvina, of course, but in not doing so we are doing more than Ossian himself, who barely ever acknowledges her existence as he compulsively reminisces.[45]

The slippage from vibrant past to heritage zone can be linked to the warping of Jacobite iconography. Pittock has charted the fate of Jacobite ideology in the eighteenth century in ways suggestive in terms of the above, particularly when he argues that the Hanoverians attempted to usurp the typological terms of reference of Jacobite rhetoric. He describes the identification of William with the sacred and political images of the Stuarts, and the way William is emphasised at the expense of the archetype. In this

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[44] *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore*, ed. and trans. by Neil Ross, (Edinburgh, 1939), p.9. All future references are to this edition.

[45] Cf. Trumpener's comments on the 'potentially solipsistic' nature of the rhapsodic state, the bard's 'inability to distinguish the landscape from his own subjective memory processes' which undermines his position as a positive cultural paradigm (1997, pp. 107–8)

scheme William 'doesn't confirm [his predecessors] eternal validity so much as he makes them fade into history' (1994, p. 30), and such 'planned obsolescence' replaces typological history with a linear model. The features of *Ossian* discussed here could then be contextualised as the result of sticking a very large stick in the spokes of the wheel of returning history. Macpherson feels the death of history as the Ossianic world knows it, and *Ossian* stands as the product, as Ossian as the representative, of the past running into the back of a present that has suddenly found itself standing still with nowhere to go.

Exploring Ossian in terms of the removal of the past from the flow of history illustrates an important point about *Ossian* as a whole, namely that a distinction needs to be made between inner and outer, *The Poems of Ossian* as an eighteenth-century artefact, and the represented world the poems convey. In other words Macpherson's text seems to warn of the dangers of a cultural malaise it in itself furthers. Ossian and his characters are trapped in the nightmare of a heritage zone of their "own" making. This is an idea which will recur as I turn my attention towards the third part of this chapter in which I want to consider *Ossian* in terms of Celtic Titanism, the narrative of dispossession I suggested earlier is the result of Macpherson's inverse typologies.

III.

"Celtic Titanism" is a broad title covering the cult of sentimental Celticism which predominated through the nineteenth century, and for which Macpherson has been seen as a major source of inspiration. Its most famous expression in English comes in Matthew Arnold's "On the Study of Celtic Literature" (published 1866), which not only distilled the essence of Celtic Titanism for a Victorian readership but which firmly tied it to Macpherson.[46] Arnold chose for his epigram the quotation from "Cath-

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[46] Ernest Renan, who greatly influenced Arnold, is of course the other major name associated with the formulation of the Celtic Titan.

Loda", a phrase he repeats again in his description of the 'colossal, impetuous, adventurous wanderer, the Titan of the early world':

> For ages and ages the world has been constantly slipping ever more and more, out of the Celt's grasp. "They went forth to war," says Ossian most truly, "but they always fell".[47]

The Celtic spirit is then an indomitable raging against what Arnold refers to as the 'despotism of fact' a heroic striving against the predetermined forces of history which have doomed the Celt to marginalisation and virtual extinction. *Ossian* contains the 'very soul of Celtic genius' (p. 370), in so much as it matches this image of the Celt.

Arnold's writing on Celticism has come in for trenchant criticism, and, as I discussed in chapter one, the logic of his position on *Ossian* has come under particular assault. Any view of Macpherson which is willing to separate 'what is forged, modern, tawdry, spurious' about *Ossian* from the effect the poems had and the importance which should be assigned to them as they swept 'like a flood of lava through Europe' (p. 370), is a threatening one for the enforcers of a literary historiography which seeks to marginalise Macpherson and his significance, for whom the charge of forgery has always been the weapon of choice. Accordingly, it has been suggested that since Arnold had received his idea of the Celtic muse *from* Macpherson, it is little wonder that he found it *in* Macpherson. From this position it has been possible to retrospectively implicate Macpherson in Arnold's project of cultural imperialism by misrepresentation. While not disputing that *Ossian* represents a false image of Celticism, or that there are some highly dubious implications to Arnold's writing on Celticism, or even that *Ossian* and Arnold exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship, such an argument is flawed on a number of counts. Firstly, Arnold did have a knowledge of other Celtic literature, and it is this other literature – for example the Welsh Llywarch Hen's *Address to his Crutch* – which Arnold uses, not *Ossian*, when directly speaking of the Celt's 'passionate, turbulent, indomitable reaction against the

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[47] Matthew Arnold, 'On the Study of Celtic Literature' in *The Complete Prose of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by R.H.Super, vol. III (Ann Arbor, 1962) p. 346. Quotation appears as epigram to collection on p. 291

despotism of fact' (p. 372). Secondly, we ought to recognise that within that description, 'passionate, turbulent, indomitable' is a formulation which offers the opportunity for a more flattering image of the Celt (and Arnold ties this qualities at this point to Byron). And thirdly, we need to find an approach subtle enough to recognise that Arnold's praise of *Ossian* places the poems' Celtic consciousness at the centre of European literary culture. In short we need to recognise that we run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water and conspiring with the marginalising pressures we are supposedly resisting if we do not find some way of rising to the challenge offered by Arnold's reading of *Ossian* and Celticism that is more meaningful than a mere dismissal. Arnold is beyond the remit of this chapter and all that really needs to be said is that the grounds on which he is used as a stick to beat Macpherson are highly dubious. However, I have laboured the point slightly because the issues involved in what we are doing in demythologising what we see as a false cultural consciousness, as raised by the Arnold question, are precisely those addressed with reference to Macpherson in the rest of this chapter.

The key to the cult of defeat exemplified by the Celtic Titan is a predetermined and fixed sense that the roles occupied by various interest groups now were fixed by certain inevitable forces and will by just such inevitability remain fixed in the future. It is, in other words, a classic whig historiography, 'a history which conditions its interpretation of the past by what it has produced in the present: it is thus quintessentially a history written to glorify victors and marginalise losers, in the process writing a narrative whose ultimate end is the explanation and through that the justification of whatever society is its present'.[48] The purpose of this section is to examine *Ossian* in terms of the claims of this view of history, one I argued in the opening section was the result of the reverse typological troping of *Ossian*, the state of affairs whereby future defeat is read back into the actions of past glory. I approach the question from two very obvious, if diametrically opposed angles.

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[48] Murray G.H.Pittock, *The Myth of the Jacobite Clans* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 4–5.

As Pittock's above formulation makes clear, it is history's winners which have, in concrete terms, most to gain by a historiography which mythologises both past events and future ones as manifest destiny. In terms of past events, blind chance, the incompetence of one's opponents and, most usefully, one's own brutality and ruthlessness, are elided into a smooth flow of inevitability, an impersonal progress of national history which writes the ways things are as the way they were meant to be. It is, however, as justification for what is to come that the teleological cult of (someone else's) defeat has greatest use. The claim of historical redundancy for one's opponents (since if we are the coming-men of history, they must be yesterday's people) is traditionally the claim made by those in the process of marginalising, or exterminating that people. Our focus is the fate of the Gaeltachd in the second half of the eighteenth century, but as an ideological manoeuvre such claims to redundancy are by no means a one off: the representation of the fallen (and, incidentally, largely Celtic) South in the United States 'as a place where history *had* been, had already fulfilled itself, had died' is matched by characterisations of Southerners as 'graceful but emasculate [...] child[ren] in the practical matters of life, particularly in things financial, commercial, industrial.'[49] And this is not just an Anglo-Saxon/Celtic phenomenon: Eric Davis has suggested that the use of the museum of folk-life by the Ba'thist regime in modern Iraq is not only a way of creating a unified Iraqi identity in the face of Kurdish and Shi'ite separatist claims, but also a way of marginalising – indeed anathematising – any faction which opposes the Ba'thist vision of modernisation and development. If you adhere to the old ways, you belong stuffed in a museum.[50]

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[49] Robert Penn Warren, 'Faulkner Past and Present' in *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Robert Penn Warren, (Engleswood, N.J., 1966), pp. 1–22, p. 4; Ursula Brumm, 'William Faulkner and the Southern Renascence [sic]' in Marcus Cunnicliffe (ed.) *American Literature Since 1900* (Harmondsworth, 1993), 173–205, p. 176. For the Celtic background to the Southern States see James Michael Hill (cited below) and the work of Grady McWhinny. See for example his *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1988). Faulkner's Compsons and Sutpens, two of his most famous, and famously doomed families are, according to the genealogical additions to *The Sound and The Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* respectively, of Scottish descent.

[50] Eric Davis, 'The Museum and the Politics of Social Control in Modern Iraq' in Gillies (ed), 1994, pp. 90–105.

Ossian fits this picture on account of archetypal theme of *sparagmos* that has been so central to this thesis. By creating a doomed world, driven to that doom by the self-destructive energies of its greatest heroes, 'in an editorial gesture which is the acme of imperialist ideology, the *Poems of Ossian* idealise Highland culture by reading its extinction back into its very origins' (Womack (1989), p. 109). Whether it is Cuchullin and his Irish generals in *Fingal* I and II, Oscar in "The War of Caros" previously discussed or *Temora* I, or the many other faceless figures whose tragic fates the poems relate, *Ossian* is stuffed with examples of wayward and self-destructive energies, a people seemingly genetically predisposed to waste themselves in pointless heroic folly. But in the case of the Gaeltachd there was more to this imperialist ideology than "mere" grounds for eradication, since the Gaeltachd was, from the middle of the eighteenth century on, providing a valuable if highly disposable resource for the imperialist venture, troops.[51] Thus the Forty-Five became Celtic history in miniature, the Rising troped as doomed to failure in its inception in interpretations where the failures of 1746 'so eclipse the successes of 1745 that defeat appears as the object of the exercise' (Womack (1989), p. 54). The only thing which explains this sort of behaviour is unquestioned loyalty, redeemed from its traditional association outside the Gaeltachd with the slavish oppression of despotism by a close identification with failure. Thus, 'the Highland image expounds a glamorous futility, a ritual of duty which ratifies authority even, or rather especially, at the expense of practical effectiveness' (Womack (1989), pp. 54–5). The message for the greater British public is that Highland loyalty and dynamism can be harnessed for the state and made useful rather than futile through the addition of Anglo-Saxon leadership and organisation.

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[51] Between 21 and 24000 Highlanders served during the American War of Independence (Allan Macinnes, *Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart, 1603–1788* (East Linton, 1996), p. 217). Of course, given the disproportionate numbers of Highland casualties in imperial adventures such as the Seven Years War, it has been suggested that Highland recruitment was little more than eradication by other means, killing two birds with one stone as it were. See Pittock (1995), pp.40–1, particularly his quotation from Bruce Lenman.

The links with the Ossianic world view and sensibility are by this stage I hope clear. Womack's description of the eighteenth-century idea of the Highlands as a whole could just as easily be one of the Ossianic scene:

> violent acts cease to serve as real historical intentions and conflicts, and become a part of Highland identity, *as natural and as timeless as the hills*. Fighting is situated in the cultural construct of the Highlands, not simply as something that happened there, *and certainly not as the index of any kind of historical change*, but as the expression of an essence. (1989, p.38, emphasis added)

This is almost exactly the scenario in *Ossian*, a world peopled with characters who are, and somehow know they are, 'an ethos, extracted from [...] material history to be set as a pseudo-nature *against* history' (Womack, p.45). We see it in action not only in the action of the poems, those pointless narratives which engender violence for no purpose, but in the very landscape, littered with tombs, the visible reminder of the violent past. Having said that, we need to enter a vital qualification. It should be noted that Ireland provides the backdrop to much of this violence, and it is the long middle books of *Temora* which most strikingly fit Womack's image of the Highlands. It is in Erin that, in a denial of the Irish ideological formulation of Ireland as the land of Saints and Scholars, 'battle on battle comes, blood is poured on blood' and it is Erin's clouds that are 'hung with ghosts'. But it is equally notable that those doing the killing and dying are Caledonian as well as Irish Celts. At such moments then Macpherson is negotiating a delicate position. In characterising his Celts in this way he is offering a legitimising myth for the Anglo-Saxon management of the self-destructive dynamism of Fingal's world, one being given striking contemporary corroboration on the killing fields of the Seven Years War; yet in his characterisation of place Macpherson distances the Scottish Gaeltachd from the worst excesses of violence. Any careful reading of *Ossian* notes how few stories are set in Morven, and those that are usually depict the entirely justified defence of the homeland from foreign aggressors. As we saw in the previous chapter, here again Macpherson is both complicit with and resisting various elements of the eighteenth-century construction of the Gaeltachd in order to create an image of British mainland Celticism which would partake of the "reconciliatory" elements of the

Anglo-British mainstream without bowing to its demonifying aspects. Equally, as we saw before, Macpherson uses Ireland and Irish history as the disposable tool with which to achieve this end. It is Ireland, not the Highlands as is often maintained, that Macpherson "sells out" in pursuit of a British agenda to which he can assent and take part in.

A Scottish military historiography, a past of noble deeds and noble deaths, originally in response to English imperialist ambitions can then, it is clear from *Ossian*, be subverted into a legitimisation of those ambitions. For Macinnes the image of the Highlands stuffed full of savage men armed to the teeth is part of a Whig polemic designed to obscure the fact that clanship, rather than a deviant, backward and anti-commercial system ripe for eradication actually 'placed ultimate priority on the peaceable and productive settlement of land within a hostile environment' *and* is also something played upon by Jacobite iconography as a repository of civic value and independence (1996, p. 170). With the threat of the clans diminished, this Hanoverian polemic could afford to idealise that very militarism. However, this idealisation, which Macinnes sees *Ossian* as a part of, functioned 'more to anaesthetise than revitalise Gaelic tradition' (Macinnes (1996), p. 220) by creating a Celtic role in the British venture, a curiously ambiguous image of both assimilation and distinction.

Ossian can then be seen as partaking in ideological manoeuvres to legitimate the suppression and exploitation of the Gaeltachd. But at the same time the poems also attempt to reconfigure that ideological construct in ways that prove somewhat more favourable to the Scottish Celt. The question that asks itself at this point, is why Macpherson should feel that this Celtic meta-narrative could offer redemption, why it could have appealed. The answer, other than it was the dominant one at the time, is that the cult of predoomed defeat offers the defeated a way of understanding their loss, a way which ostensibly offers a redemptive vision of recent history even if it ultimately results in complicity with the narrative of marginalisation.

The major difference between the teleology of defeat constructed by winners and that constructed by losers is its orientation: where that of winners points towards

justifying the present and future, that of those on the receiving end looks to justify the present and the past in a way which effectively (though perhaps unintentionally) denies a future. Beyond this though there are many similarities in outlook in these two narratives of marginalisation: no less than for the victors, the victims of reverses find solace in interpretations of events which take responsibility out of the hands of human providence, but this time incompetence and misjudgement are the factors in defeat mythologised into inevitable fate. This version of defeat has an older, nobler way of life making one last doomed stand against the forces of modernity. Pittock offers an example of this in his observation that at Culloden battlefield while the Government battle line is given in regimental order, the Jacobite army is identified by clan:

> In this way, a domestic, essentially Kailyard veneer is given to an international political movement: families fight regiments. How brave, how foolish, how sad. (1995, p. 8)

Of course the victors have much to gain by diffusing an 'international political movement' in this way, but the central and powerful appeal of this interpretation – and what accounts for its presence on Culloden battlefield presumably – is to those whose emotional loyalties lie with the defeated. Within this myth the sanctity of the organic, chivalric past is vouched in its very passing, its contempt for the powers that be demonstrated in its defeat. As Womack puts it, for those of the periphery 'pride rests on freedom from the vulgarity of the world's winners; their virtues are nourished by bad times; they are never more magnificently themselves than when their cause is hopeless' (1989, p. 168).

An example of the ends to which this idea of a romantic and out-of-touch past giving way to an efficient but soulless present can be deployed, and the breadth of the appeal of such a vision of marginalisation and defeat is afforded by James Michael Hill's analysis of 'Celtic warfare'. Building on the fact that in 1790 Celts outnumbered Anglo-Saxons in the Southern States of the United States by a ratio of two to one, Hill suggests that the tactics of the Confederate army during the war of 1861–5 represent

the last flourishing of an identifiably Celtic form of warfare.[52] This in turn allows him to formulate a neat diagnosis of the eventual defeat of the Celtic peoples. Hill's account of the fortunes of Celtic fighting forces portrays the Celtic warrior (Irish, Scottish or American) as reckless, unruly, and easily disheartened; a soldier of infinite bravery whose own acts of bravura were directly linked to his fall. All this is familiar from our encounters with Oscar, Fillan and their compatriots. An air of tragic inevitability is introduced into the account with the further characterisation of the Celt as innately unable to change his ways and adapt to the exigencies of modern military tactics and technology:

> The British developed a war machine that was better equipped, trained and led, and the Gaels lagged behind because of their inability or at any rate their refusal, to modify their primitive way of fighting. Modern warfare had arrived, and the Gaelic people were not equipped to deal with it. They continued to view war as an art, while the British had begun to view it as a science. Against such opponents the Gaels bled themselves to death during the first half of the [eighteenth] century. (p. 3–4)

Thus we arrive at Culloden, where infantry 'training and discipline' (Hill, p. 146) in standing firm before the Highland charge meant that Charles Edward's ploy of 'simply turning loose his seemingly invincible Highlanders to win the day' ends in catastrophe (Hill, p. 149). Between Falkirk and Culloden Moor history has passed the Gaels by, without anyone noticing. But this analysis makes a false distinction between tactic and enthusiasm: I do not think one needs to be either a military historian or extremely literal-minded to see that the Highland Charge is, after all, a *tactic* designed, like any tactic, to play to one's strengths and hide one's weaknesses. Furthermore, in the campaign of 1745-6 this tactic was being deployed by a non-Highland commander in the shape of Lord George Murray. And again, Hill's own accounts of the Jacobite successes at Prestonpans and Falkirk stress the organisation and tactics crucial to victory and make clear that 'simply turning loose' the Jacobite army was not how those battles were won any more than such a tactic would have prevailed at Culloden (that, in the event, it nearly did is not the point). But such elisions are precisely the point, and

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[52] James Michael Hill, *Celtic Warfare 1595–1763* (Aldershot, 1993; first published 1986),

suggest the mass appeal of such a narrative. Within these depictions, in which the honorifics are all piled up in favour of the defeated, the inconvenient fact of failure can be explained away as a matter of principle, and the staff failings, tactical ineptitudes and petty internal rivalries which proved so costly at Culloden can be reconfigured in terms of the inevitable failure of an tragically anachronistic heroism in the face of a competent bayonet drill which is somehow not quite fair. Ultimately, Hill asks us to believe that 'to fight a good fight, win or lose, was often more important to [the Celt] than to stain his honour by fighting in the distasteful fashion of his well-supplied, but socially inferior, adversary', something which beggars belief (p. 4). In general, only losers (or conversely those who win without breaking sweat) claim that style is more important than result, because to do so is to reinterpret what was at stake and to imply victory on some higher level. Now Hill's military history may be shakily pro-Celt, and his perspective extreme. That however is not the point (or perhaps it is precisely the point): in creating a glorified pan-Celtic military identity Hill creates a historical model almost identical to the models developed by those who would praise the Celt only as a means of justifying his suppression.

Needless to say neither Culloden nor its aftermath were memorialised and interpreted in such terms in the Gaeltachd at the time. A passing acquaintance with Gaelic Jacobite song culture demonstrates the justice in J.L.Campbell's claim that 'the most striking feature of [such poems] is the entire absence of [...] fatalistic gloom [...] nowhere is there a sign that the Highlanders were prepared to consider the defeat at Culloden as anything more than a prelude to the renewal of hostilities' (1933, p. xxiv). Symptomatic of the lack of eschatological significance attributed to Culloden at the time is the lack of significant reference to the battle in the strident, often very bloodthirsty poems of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, poems that look to a renewal of the campaign. Something of the reverse can be observed too: in "Latha Chuil-Lodair" ("Culloden Day"), John Roy Stewart offers various exculpatory reasons for the Jacobite reverse, from the wiles of the English, to the wind, rain and supposed

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174–79.

treachery of Lord George Murray, before ending with images of a fertile land laid waste and of a people who 'as long as we live, till our days' end, | We'll lament for the men that we lost'.[53] Thus there does seem to be some relationship between dwelling over, and looking to apportion blame for, Culloden with a more passive acceptance of fate. Nevertheless as late as 1788 William Ross in his elegy for Charles Edward talks of the 'many a hero mighty, brave [...] who would have followed thee' (Campbell (ed.), 1933, pp. 286–91, ll. 25–8). Now the truth of that statement is not the point, rather the image of the Gaeltachd which lies behind it. The contrast with the image offered by Macpherson in his "On the Death of Marshal Keith", published some thirty years before, could not be stronger:

> See! the proud halls they once possessed, decayed,
> The spiral tow'rs depend the lofty head;
> Wild ivy creeps along the mould'ring walls,
> And with each gust of wind a fragment falls;
> While birds obscene at noon of night deplore,
> Where mighty heroes kept the watch before. (ll. 53–8)[54]

But to say that Macpherson, in obscure poems such as the above and on a much grander scale in *Ossian*, peddles a distorted view of the Gaeltachd, a 'spurious and bardic sentimentality' which leads straight to Arnold's wish to see Welsh eradicated as a living tongue but a chair of Celtic established at Oxford to study the remains of the newly-dead language is not, in the end, to say very much.[55] We misrepresent the Keith poem – and *Ossian* – if we do not recognise the tone of reproach, the elegy for a culture which regrets rather than merely sentimentalises. As Pittock has put it:

> To the extent that [*Ossian*] was animated by a real expression not just of nostalgia but also of regret, Macpherson epic offered a disturbing hint of injustice lingering amid its sentimental treatment of loss and grief. (1995, pp. 38–9)

Equally, we must also recognise the strength of the emotional appeal of this myth of defeat, a myth represented by the hopelessly lost Ossianic hero mourned by old Ossian

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[53] In Campbell (ed), 1933, pp. 168–75.

[54] In *The Poems of Ossian, Etc. Containing the Poetical Works of James Macpherson Esq. in Prose and Rhyme*, ed. by Malcolm Laing, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1805), vol. 2, pp. 587–9.

[55] Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature, 1880–1980* (London, 1985), p. 20. See Arnold 'On Celtic Literature', p. 297 and p. 385–6.

from the perspective of a reduced, less heroic time, for the very people it in the end serves to marginalise. After all, William Donaldson has suggested that acceptance of the excellence of Jacobite songs – which he defines as characterised by 'wild landscapes, the preoccupation with defeat, and the pervasive ambience of exile and loss' – 'was a touchstone of [Scottish] national awareness and pride', a cornerstone of 'Scottish claims to cultural and ethnic superiority'.[56]

Macpherson's heroically doomed Celtic world cannot then exclusively be seen in terms of conspiring with the hegemonic forces of the Anglo-British state. It might be more accurate to say that he is an early example of a tradition which stretches into our own time of furthering a *status quo* he hopes to unsettle. The moral victory is claimed, something that the Powers-that-Be are more than happy to allow since it does nothing to threaten their material victory and indeed ultimately conspires with their own marginalising historiography. But there is still more to be said about the resistance Macpherson is trying to offer in an interpretation of history we now see almost totally in terms of accommodation.

We have seen above how Macpherson's Jacobitism, and his image of Celticism, has been termed sentimental for reading its failings back into its origins. But it may be that this represents something of a misreading of Jacobite discourse. I mentioned earlier that *Ossian* represents a Jacobite rhetoric that has slipped into a vocabulary of destiny and defeat, but it is important to see this in terms of a discourse which constantly flirts with this very possibility. Pittock, while observing that the Stuarts had no sense of fated defeat, points out that the Cause did have 'a strong sense of history and hindsight': as he puts it, 'nostalgia characterises lost causes: but in Stuart ideology it was an antecedent fact' (1991, p.9). Similarly, the antiquarian and classical scholarship which offered a potent base for Jacobite critique in the seventeenth century when denied its proper context can, and has, been misinterpreted as escapism. In similar terms, one of the most influential commentators on Bolingbroke has seen the

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[56] William Donaldson, *The Jacobite Song: Political Myth and National Identity* (Aberdeen, 1988), p. 3, p. 79, p. 4.

abandonment of Harringtonianism in favour of Machievellian idealism inherent in the *Idea of the Patriot King* as symptomatic of the 'moral defeatism' of the Patriot Whig-cum-Jacobite 'politics of nostalgia'.[57] Finally, Monod has pointed out that Hamilton's portrait of Charles Edward in 1785 represents a return to 'the most venerated of Stuart myths' and recalls 'the image of the "man of sorrows", the royal martyr Charles I', but this time, in the portrayal of Charles as sad and tired, a beaten man.[58] These examples suggest that Jacobite rhetoric from its inception contained a strong appeal to the emotions, particularly those associated with the past, and trod a delicate line between a positive deployment of the past and its injustices and a concentration on defeat and wallowing.

That Jacobitism declined into Sentimental Jacobitism as the eighteenth century wore on would seem to be approaching a commonplace. It is difficult to argue that, as the likelihood of the return of a Stuart monarch dwindled with an increasingly dissipated Charles Edward, Jacobite feeling became anything other than more backward looking and divorced from the exigencies of political reality. I suggested in section one that *Ossian* can be read as the Jacobite appeal to the man of tears lacking any sense of a redemptive future. Yet the term "Sentimental" is a slippery one, and when applied to Macpherson's Jacobitism can mean a number of things. Howard Weinbrot suggests the poems represent a Sentimental Jacobite position because they present a 'Scottish soldiers' lost paradise [which] could not be regained, but [...] could be memorialised, romanticised, and mourned' (1993, p. 530). Thus "sentimental Jacobitism" is equated with a crude wish fulfilment or alternative history in which (Stuart) succession is affirmed and defended by brave deeds of derring-do, a world of brave men and beautiful maidens untouched by the exigencies of the 'real world'. As I suggested earlier, this fails to account for the dysfunction which is so prominent a feature of the text, since the failure and defeat encoded at every level of *Ossian* must mute this

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[57] Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and his Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Cambridge Ma., 1968) *passim*.

sentimentalising celebration. In other words Macpherson's admiration for a people and an age he holds up as an ideal becomes problematised by the text in all the ways we have explored above: Sentimental rather than sentimental, *Ossian* is far too "knowing" to maintain the unreflecting romanticisation claimed for it and the mourning, and the need to mourn, overpowers all. A symptom of this incompatibility is found in the rather strange claim made by Weinbrot that the 'Ossian poems generally assume succession, family, and the line of father, son, and grandson, excluded from the diminished modern world' (1993, p. 531). The Jacobite wish fulfilment he posits for *Ossian* would expect such a situation, yet it is hard to square this statement with any accurate account of reading the poems.

On the one hand then *Ossian*'s Jacobitism is sentimental because it reads its failure into its motivating principles (*pace* Womack), and on the other because it offers a wish fulfilment which pointedly refuses to acknowledge reality (*pace* Weinbrot). The answer to this dual accusation, a harsh one even for Macpherson to be on the receiving end of, is perhaps found within the logic of Sentimentalism as a literary movement. Understanding Macpherson's activities in relation to the norms, conventions and perspectives of the Cult of Sentiment as we did in chapter two makes it possible to see the Celtic past created, for better for worse, by Macpherson in terms of the 'necessary fictions: imaginative attempts to order and interpret historical realities' represented by the discourse of Sentiment.[59]

We saw in chapter two how the logic and economy of Sentimentalism tends towards playing on melancholy to the exclusion of more positive emotions and outcomes. As such it seems clear that *Ossian*'s engagement with and subversion of the modes of defeat outlined above can be seen in terms of the Sentimental dynamic, the 'sad but lovely sensibility'. However, Sentimentalism, particularly its presiding image of virtue in distress, has been assigned a further significance of relevance here. Put

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[58] *Jacobitism and the English People*, p. 91. Monod's dating of the slide of Jacobitism into a rhetoric of destiny begins perhaps a little early for our purposes with the failure of the Atterbury plot, representing his focus on English Jacobitism. On this theme see also, Erskine-Hill (1982), p. 55, p. 60.

simply, the retreat into an hermetically sealed unit removed from the contingencies of the everyday can be viewed in the order of a defensive strategy for Sentimental writers, a way of preserving the integrity of that which was too good for this world: incompleteness, fragmentation, insufficiency of execution somehow all guarantee the sincerity and value of that being undertaken. Leo Braudy has argued that the fragment and incomplete forms should be seen as 'statements of literary good faith', expressing the sincerity of feelings which could not be encompassed in 'formal aesthetic creation' and he sees this tendency transferred to the man of feeling himself: 'all he aspires to must never be achieved, or it would be lost forever'.[60] Boswell records that Macpherson once told him much the same thing, that 'to retain our high ideas of anything, we should not see it', which is perhaps the most telling comment never made on *Ossian*.[61] The very failure of the Ossianic hero to do what he intends to do vouchsafes his good intentions, the unconsummated nature of his love, cut off by death, underwrites the purity of what has been lost.

Ossian's Sentimental romances are thus exquisitely ambivalent, privileging a Highland Jacobite culture within a dominant discourse, but a discourse whose operative demands mean that crucial to the privileging is an admission of defeat. Pittock has come as close as anyone to grasping its fundamental properties in his contention that within *Ossian* 'heroic Celticism is iconised'. However, he rightly points out that the 'knowledge of what really happened is present as a foreboding of loss', since such foreboding is 'the price of romance, and the price paid by all metonymic icons'.[62] In the same way as does the romance mode, the Sentimental derives its power and magic

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[59] Andrew Hook, 'Scotland and Romanticism: The International Scene' in *The History of Scottish Literature: volume 2, 1660–1800*, ed. by Andrew Hook (Aberdeen, 1988), pp. 307–23, p. 307.

[60] Braudy, 'The Form of the Sentimental Novel', *Novel*, vol. 7, no.1 (1973), 5–13, (p. 7, p.11). See also Jerome MacGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford, 1996), p. 164 for Sentimental poetry's shunning of all 'myths of perdurance' as a way of preserving their 'theoretical power of absolute truth-telling'.

[61] *London Journal 1762–3*, cited in Simpson (1988), p. 253. Whether Macpherson was being poignant or mischievous here, it is difficult to determine, but the men were talking about the charms of the opposite sex at the time.

[62] 'Forging North Britain in the Age of Macpherson', *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 93 (Spring, 1995), 125–40 (p. 136).

from an unresolved tension between actuality and ideality, the world as is and the world as might be. *Ossian*'s dramatisation of the potentialities and limitations of a world governed by the dictates of moral sentiment, most obviously symbolised by the fate of positive achievement and the fulfilment of aims in the poems, suggests that, at least here, "Sentimental Jacobitism" is a troubled and a complex formulation which should only be aired with full reference to and understanding of the discourse of Sensibility. In other words, Weinbrot speaks truer than he believes in ascribing the term "Sentimental", but it is the mid-eighteenth not twentieth-century definition which needs to be attended to.

While the Sentimentalism exemplified by *Ossian* might have accorded with a national agenda far distanced from an indigenous Scottish culture, and while it may have furthered a potent ideology of assent to the Anglo-British super-state, it also needs to be related to an aesthetic movement which has standards and terms of its own and needs must be understood in those terms. Furthermore, this ideology of assent is also a forceful compensatory ideology of undefeat. We are not in the territory of Weinbrot's unreflecting wish fulfilment, but in that of a sensibility which privileges the visions of the lost. Put crudely, Macpherson might, from our perspective, have enervated Gaelic culture but he did so through a commitment to a philosophical and aesthetic discourse which valued those qualities and failings he assigns to, and are inseparable from the enervation of, his culture. Furthermore, Macpherson was looking to appropriate a prevailing cultural discourse for the Celtic past and in doing so – almost as a by-product we might say if it was not so crucial to the project – produced the image of Celticism he has subsequently been reviled for. In 1760 the price probably seemed worth paying, but once removed from the aesthetic and philosophical context against which it was braced and within which it was making a claim for pre-eminence, that price has come to seen as increasingly extortionate.

This chapter has discussed Macpherson, his cultural locale, and the Ossianic *sparagmos* as it can be accessed through an understanding of his engagement with various narratives of defeat. We have seen that *Ossian* represents an expression of a

mind coping with the failure of military enterprise and the disappointment of a fabled return of Fionn which went off at not even half-cock; a sensibility which can not help but write grown-up adventures in which the cost of valour and victory is always too high, and one which encodes into the characters it creates a knowledge of ultimate defeat. This shattered idealism can only accept those elements of the myths of a lost cause which see defeat as inevitable and it warps those structures which provide the recompense and promise of renewal. Even, perhaps especially, the poet is no match for the history he has witnessed. In suggesting this we have also seen how such a sensibility is in constant danger from slipping into an accommodatory relationship with the hegemonic power structures it might otherwise hope to subvert. Macpherson is understood more completely, however, if we bear in mind the priorities and values of the discourse of Sentiment and if we are alert to the way that *Ossian* in certain ways describes, and offers implicit protest against, the cultural malaise it has helped to inscribe. *The Poems of Ossian* offer eloquent warning of their own seductive enchantments.

Linda Colley has suggested that 'quite as much as any other human activity, the patriotism of the past requires flexible, sensitive and above all, imaginative reconstruction' and this holds particularly true of Macpherson[63]. In other words, we must separate Macpherson's 'sophisticated ambivalence', with its undertone of cultural nationalism, from the 'more nerveless sentimentalism' which followed it, while at the same time also recognising that if 'the journey from heroism to atavism took no more than sixty years' *Ossian* did much to prepare the way for the transition (Pittock (1997), p. 158). The challenge is to give full weight to both sides of this position, to not resolve the ambiguity. If my reading has seemed sympathetic it is because the balance needs to be redressed in that direction. Macpherson was a cultural double agent in the fullest sense of the term and his text is as Janus-faced a cultural as it is an aesthetic bequest. If Macpherson's engagement with various ideologies of defeat 'on one level

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[63] Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (London, 1996), p. 392. It ought to be noted that Colley's centralist perspective would have no room for this interpretation of Macpherson.

[is] reducible to anodyne heritage, on another [touches] a raw cultural nerve' we must find a way of demythologising *Ossian* without merely creating 'an inequality of misrepresentation' (Pittock (1995), p. 38, p. 118). If we do not recognise this need, we run the risk of falling into what should by now be a familiar cultural trap, of 'unwittingly [...] conniving at the kind of English cultural imperialism which, in other contexts, [we] are all too eager to deny'.[64] In that case it is perhaps with us, not Macpherson, that the charge of cultural bad faith should reside.

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[64] Andrew Hook, '"Ossian" Macpherson as Image Maker', *The Scottish Review*, no. 36 (November 1984), 39–44, (p. 39).

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