

“THE HOMER OF THE NORTH”

Howard Gaskill

Perhaps I should begin by commenting on my title. It is not intended to be ironic – well, only a little perhaps –, and certainly not derogatory. I do not belong to those who, because they take Ossian (as I shall call him, or it) to be a hoax, think it ought to be treated as a joke. The quotation marks are not there to suggest a sneer, but rather a quotation. It is Mme de Staël who bestowed upon Ossian the title of “l’Homère du nord” in her *De la littérature* of 1800. Or so we are told. In fact, she didn’t, either here or later editions of the work, at least not in so many words. She comes close to it of course (Staël 1959, 178-88; Schmidt 2003-4, 1: 338). What she does do is see Homer and Ossian as the originary models of two distinct types of literature and express a preference for the “Romantic” poetry of the North, of which Ossian is the primary representative.¹ She also suggests, in William Wordsworth’s formulation, that “many of the characteristic beauties of our most celebrated English Poets are derived from the ancient Fingallian” (Wordsworth 1984, 656). It goes without saying that Wordsworth was not best pleased by this. Be that as it may, it seemed to me appropriate to begin with a questionable attribution, and a French one at that.

I should like to continue with two further quotations, both of which can be attributed with some confidence. The first:

Those who have any tolerable acquaintance with the [Erse] language must know there are a great number of poetical compositions in it, and some of them of very great antiquity, whose merit entitles them to an exemption from the unfortunate neglect, or rather abhorrence, to which ignorance has subjected that emphatic language in which they were composed. Several of these performances are to be met with, which for sublimity of sentiment, nervousness of expression, and high spirited metaphor, are hardly to be equalled among the chief productions of the most cultivated nations. Others of them breathe such tenderness and simplicity, as must be affecting to every mind that is in the least tinctured with the softer passions of pity and humanity. Of this kind is the poem of which I [provide] a translation. [...] [L]earned readers will easily discover

¹ “L’on ne peut décider d’une manière générale entre les deux genres de poésie dont Homère et Ossian sont comme les premiers modèles. Toutes mes impressions, toutes mes idées me portent de préférence vers la littérature du nord” (Staël 1959, 180).

the conformity there is betwixt the tale upon which it is built, and the story of *Bellerephon*, as related by Homer; while it will be no small gratification to the curiosity of some, to see the different manner in which a subject of the same nature is handled by the great father of poetry and a Highland bard. It is hoped that the uncommon turn of several expressions, and the seeming extravagance there is in some of the comparisons I have preserved in the translation, will give no offence to such persons as can form a just notion of those compositions, which are the productions of simple and unassisted genius, in which energy is more sought after than neatness, and the strictness of connexion less adverted to than the design of moving the passions and affecting the heart.

The second quotation is shorter:

The productions of our [...] bards exhibit a glow of cultivated genius, – a spirit of elevated heroism, – sentiments of true honor, – instances of disinterested patriotism, – and manners of a degree of refinement, totally astonishing when the rest of Europe was nearly sunk in barbarism.

Despite their hyperbolic claims, neither of these statements emanates from James Macpherson. And both in fact refer to sources of impeccable authenticity. It is true that I have slightly tweaked them, in the first by replacing the word “Irish” with “Erse”, and in the second by removing it altogether. The first quotation is taken from a contribution to the *Scots Magazine*, which appeared early in 1756. It was written by the Dunkeld schoolmaster, Jerome Stone (or Stones), and introduces his translation of a heroic ballad, known in English as the “Lay of Fraoch” (Stone[s] 1756, 15).² He attributes it to a Highland bard, as it now appears with some justification, since, though its distant origins may be Irish, it has not in fact survived in any Irish transcription (Meek 1984, 6). The second quotation is taken from Charlotte Brooke’s *Reliques of Irish Poetry* of 1789, one of the Irish responses to what was seen as the illegitimate Caledonian hijacking of Irish literary culture (Gantz 1940, 146). The reason I quote it is that, with minimal adjustments – notably the omission of the adjective “Irish” before “bards”, this could be Blair or Kames or other prominent Scottish supporters, writing about Macpherson’s Ossian.

² For Stone, or “Stones” as he signed himself as a St Andrews student, see Crawford (2001, 31-42) and Ferguson (1998, 212-22).

What I am trying to indicate is that a fair number of the qualities of the work which sceptics seized on as proof of its fraudulence, for example, the “sublimity of sentiment”, the “tenderness”, the “elevated heroism” and so forth, may be seen – and certainly were seen – in authentic examples of the same literary tradition from which it was claimed Ossian had emerged. Clearly people knew in advance what they were looking for and, unsurprisingly, what was looked for was found – but what was found was actually there, in the genuine as well as the more spurious productions.

Jerome Stone’s introduction is quite remarkable for anticipating in so many respects the terms in which later debate was to be conducted. Besides comparing his Highland bard to Homer, he presents the poem itself as the product of “simple and unassisted genius, in which energy is always more sought after than neatness, and the strictness of connexion less adverted to than the design of moving the passions and affecting the heart.”

June 1760 saw the anonymous publication of Macpherson’s *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Galic or Erse language*, and already in September of the same year Turgot remarked on what he calls their “style oriental”, though like Hugh Blair after him he regards it as characteristic of a certain stage in human development, rather than the product of a particular region (and, incidentally, someone else who was also quick off the mark ought perhaps to be mentioned here: Diderot’s translation of the first and second *Fragments*, ‘Shilric and Vinvela’, went on sale in Paris before the end of 1760).³ Turgot draws attention to “cette marche irrégulière, ces passages rapides et sans transition d’une idée à l’autre” [this irregular progression, these rapid leaps, without transition, from one idea to another] (Van Tieghem 1917, 1: 114). And Macpherson’s mentor, Hugh Blair, was to find in Ossian “a style always rapid and vehement; in narration concise even to abruptness, and leaving several circumstances to be supplied by the reader’s imagination” (Gaskill 1996, 354). From here it is not of course very far to Herder’s later highlighting of “Sprünge und kühne Würfe”, the leaps and gaps and sudden transitions which are for him characteristic of the poetry of ancient peoples – this in his seminal essay on Ossian of 1773, part of that manifesto of *Sturm und Drang* values, *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* (Gaskill, 2003). The *genus abruptum* (Quintilian) has a long pedigree, but that a taste for it was rapidly developing in the mid-eighteenth century is evidenced by the growing fascination with Pindar. Adam Smith comments on the “loose and broken manner” of Ancient Greek poetry, with Pindar, “the most rapturous of all” being “the most unconnected”. For “[t]he higher the Rapture the more broken is the expression” (Smith 1985, 121). It would be tempting to suggest that if Ossian had not existed it would now have been necessary to invent him.

³ For the efforts of high-profile French translators such as Diderot, Turgot and Suard, see Heurtematte (1990).

But Ossian is not an invention, or at least, not James Macpherson's. As a Highlander with Gaelic as his mother tongue he would have been familiar from an early age with ballads and oral prose tales celebrating the heroic exploits of the legendary third-century Fionn and his militia, the Fian. Many of these were attributed to the son of Fionn, the warrior-bard Oisín, as he is called in Irish, or Oisean, as he is called in Scots Gaelic (and we are dealing here with a common literary culture). He usually features in the poems which bear his name as the last of his race, a feeble, decrepit, "pitiful worn-out rag of an old man" ["im giobhal truagh senórach"] (Ross 1939, 36), lamenting the times that are past. The pathos is thus built in from the very beginning. Contrary to the impression which is often given, Macpherson does not in fact directly ascribe the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* to Oisian (as he is still called at this stage), though he is presented as the "principal personage" in several of these remarkable prose poems. Nor is there any attempt to date them precisely. The Preface to the *Fragments*, written by Hugh Blair on the basis of information provided by Macpherson, merely stresses their antiquity:

The public may depend on the following fragments as genuine remains of ancient Scottish poetry. The date of their composition cannot be exactly ascertained. Tradition, in the country where they were written, refers them to an æra of the most remote antiquity: and this tradition is supported by the spirit and strain of the poems themselves; which abound with those ideas, and paint those manners, that belong to the most early state of society. The diction too, in the original, is very obsolete; and differs widely from the style of such poems as have been written in the same language two or three centuries ago. (Gaskill 1996, 5)

This distancing of the poetry from more recent Gaelic productions is interesting and is later echoed by Macpherson himself when he refers slightly to Ossianic poems of "a very modern period":

Every stanza, nay almost every line, affords striking proofs, that they cannot be three centuries old. Their 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. (Gaskill 1996, 217; cf. 222)

And yet if one does look at them, it is actually a matter of greater wonder that Macpherson could be so sure about their dating on the basis of internal evidence alone. And of course he couldn't.

It is an irony of literary history that Macpherson is widely thought to have claimed that he translated his Ossian from manuscripts which he didn't have. Rather, the reverse is true. He had manuscripts, but he didn't claim to have translated from them, at least not to a significant degree.

Already in Blair's Preface to the *Fragments* we read that the poems were handed down from race to race; "some in manuscript, but more by oral tradition" (Gaskill 1996, 5). And in Macpherson's own dissertation preceding the epic *Fingal* we read that "the translator collected from tradition, and some manuscripts, all the poems in the following collection, and some more still in his hands, though rendered less complete by the ravages of time" (Gaskill 1996, 51). One of the manuscripts he certainly did have, a prize find whose preservation we certainly owe to him – it is now housed in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh – is known as *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, compiled in Perthshire between 1512 and 1542 and containing a wealth of traditional heroic verse (Ross 1939). But Macpherson was unable to do very much with it, and not simply because he was not very literate in classical Gaelic and could not read Irish characters. It is not written in Irish characters but in perfectly legible secretary hand. However, it uses an eccentric phonetic spelling based on Middle Scots which has defeated much better Gaelic scholars than Macpherson. Nevertheless, he would have been able to read the dates in the manuscript and certainly recognize some of the names and titles, perhaps having a vague idea of the gist of the narrative from versions he was familiar with from other sources, for instance 'The Lay of Fraoch' as published by Stone. He would also have noted with interest that a fair number of the poems are attributed to Oisean. Because the insistence on the fifteenth-century origin of these ballads occurs as early as Blair's Preface to the *Fragments*, I think it fair to assume that Macpherson acquired the *Book of the Dean* before he began to be feted by the Edinburgh literati and a subscription was raised to send him on his prospecting trips to the Highlands and Western Isles.⁴ The ballads contained in the *Book*, and those he collected from other sources, are late medieval reworkings of traditional material common both to Ireland and Gaelic Scotland. This is the form in which he encountered his authentic sources – and it wasn't good enough for him.

These compositions, though for the most part probably originating with professional literary men, familiar with sophisticated bardic conventions, display relative formal simplicity and use a diction not too far removed from ordinary speech; they were thus easily assimilated into the vernacular, and their adaptability ensured their survival beyond the breakdown of the bardic system in Ireland and Gaelic Scotland and the consequential decline of knowledge of the classical literary language. These ballads were still popular in Macpherson's day, although he had every reason to assume that the changes being wrought in the Highlands and Islands, particularly in the wake of the defeat of the Jacobite forces at the battle of Culloden (1746), would lead to their rapid disappearance. One of his motives was undoubtedly the preservation of the literary patrimony of the Gael. But beyond this, he

⁴ This is argued in greater detail in Gaskill (1990, 75-77).

wished to restore some belated glory to a shattered people, by having its culture recognized by an outside world for whom Highlander was synonymous with savage. He was also an ambitious poet in his own right who desired fame and money. He would have assumed, no doubt rightly, that the material he collected would not, in its raw and undiluted form, be sufficient “to please a polished age” (Gaskill 1996, 50). He may also have managed to convince himself that the material in his possession consisted of the corrupt remnants of a literary tradition of far greater dignity and antiquity (in this he would not have been wholly mistaken), perhaps stretching back to the legendary Ossian himself; and that he was therefore justified in attempting to reconstitute it as it might once have been, “restoring a work of merit to its original purity” (Mackenzie 1805, 44 [quoting Andrew Gallie]).

Whatever his motives, and whatever the role (which still remains to be fully investigated) of his supporters, particularly Hugh Blair and the Gaelic-speaking Adam Ferguson, the procedure he adopted seems reasonably clear. It ranged from something approaching conventional translation – Macpherson can indeed on occasion be found “wrestling with his sources” (Thomson 1952, 26) – through free adaptation, loosely based on authentic plots and incidents, to complete fabrication. By these means he is able to create, in *Fingal* at least (which appeared at the very end of 1761 and identifies both poet and translator), a synthetic epic whole which is in part a collage of more or less genuine elements, in part free invention. In his use of his authentic sources he is of course selective, ruthlessly pruning anything suggestive of humour, ribaldry, superstition, anachronism, or indeed Irish origins. He exploits a large gap in Scottish pre-history to conjure up, Tolkien-like, a fantasy third-century Gaelic world with its own customs, traditions and endless genealogies. And in order to underline the significance of his text as both a literary and historical document, he supplies it with an extensive editorial apparatus of learned dissertations and scholarly footnotes, such as should grace any classical work. This tendency is accentuated in the second epic, *Temora* (of March 1763), which, it should be said, is almost entirely fraudulent, the only part with any basis in authentic tradition being the first book which had already been included in the *Fingal* volume as originally published.⁵

A word about the subsequent publication history: in 1765 the *Fingal* and *Temora* volumes, containing both the major epics and the numerous shorter prose poems accompanying them, were brought together in a popular octavo edition as the *Works of Ossian* and supplemented by Hugh Blair’s massively influential *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (this was incidentally translated by Suard in 1766, possibly with a little help from David Hume who was in Paris at the time). In the 1773 *Poems of Ossian* Macpherson submitted the whole to a thorough-going stylistic revision in which the

⁵ For the above paragraph in a broader context, see Gaskill (1994, 645-46).

staccato effect, the asyndetic abruptness already abundantly in evidence, is systematically intensified.

The results were not to everyone's liking, and many translators into various European languages continued to work with the 1765 edition – for instance, Le Tourneur's *Poésies galliques* of 1777. And the most popular nineteenth-century French translation, by Christian Pitois, which apparently went into eight editions between 1842 and 1910, is, despite its claims, essentially a modest reworking of Le Tourneur. But it also includes another Ossian, translated from a collection which appeared in 1780, entitled: *Galic Antiquities consisting of a history of the Druids, particularly those of Caledonia; a Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian; and a Collection of Ancient Poems, Translated from the Galic of Ullin, Ossian, Orran etc. By John Smith, Minister at Kilbrandon, Argyleshire*. Interestingly enough, Chateaubriand, who claims to have translated virtually the whole of this when in London in 1793, in a rather snooty introduction to three of the poems written over thirty years later, assumes the name to be a pseudonym.⁶ But the translator really was called John Smith, and he really was a Presbyterian minister, though he tends now to be better known as the Reverend John Smith of Campbeltown. He was in fact a very good Gaelic scholar, whose excellent knowledge of indigenous tradition enabled him to form a shrewd impression of Macpherson's procedures with his sources. These he effectively copied in his own work, providing a similar mixture of the authentic and the spurious, underpinned by equally fanciful speculation. In 1787 he also published the Gaelic originals of the translated poems (and whatever their origin they probably were first composed in Gaelic). The whole undertaking was intended to raise money for his Bible translations, but proved to be a financial disaster – when he came across a copy some twenty years later, he used it to paper “a dark closet”: “I question if any other copy of the book has ever done so much service”, as he wrote in 1802 (Mackenzie 1805, Appendixes, 79).

Because of the lack of impact in Britain, the *Antiquities* have received scandalously little attention, either in terms of their influence or as a literary achievement in their own right. Yet shortly after Chateaubriand translated from them, a complete French version appeared in 1794 or 1795 under the pseudonym of “Hill” (in reality David de St Georges and Griffet de Labaume); this went into a second edition almost immediately, and only three years later it was issued in combination with Le Tourneur's Macpherson. The practice of publishing the two Ossians together was resumed in 1810 and continued throughout the nineteenth century; as already mentioned, Pitois also has them both (316 pages of Macpherson to 155 of Smith), though only Macpherson's name is featured on the title-page. *Ossian* in France is then essentially Macpherson-Smith. According to Van Tieghem in his magisterial

⁶ For Chateaubriand and Ossian, see Van Tieghem (1917, 2: 182-210) and particularly Smethurst (2004). The translations from Smith are now available online at eBooksLib.com: <http://www.ebookslib.com/?a=sa&b=2891>. [July 2007]

two-volume *Ossian en France* of 1917, Smith's Ossianic poetry was widely imitated in France, and concentrating only on *Le Tourneur* produces a badly skewed view of French reception.⁷ Something similar occurred in Italy, where Michele Leoni's translation of Giovanni Smith's Ossianic poetry was first published in 1813, then again in 1817, 1818, and in 1827 was united in a single edition with Cesarotti's Macpherson. Leopardi knew it well.⁸

Chateaubriand has some tart things to say about Smith's adventurous syntax, and in particular the difficulty of preserving the sense when confronted with the most audacious inversions: "nous voulons en France des choses *qui se conçoivent bien et qui s'énoncent clairement*."⁹ It is interesting that he should mention the use of inversions. Already in his Preface to Macpherson's *Fragments* Blair had observed that "The translation is extremely literal. Even the arrangement of the words in the original has been imitated; to which must be imputed some inversions in the style, that otherwise would not have been chosen" (Gaskill 1996, 6). This is echoed by Macpherson himself at the end of the 'Dissertation' preceding *Fingal*: "And all that can be said of the translation, is, that it is literal, and that simplicity is studied. The arrangement of the words in the original is imitated, and the inversions of the style observed" (1996, 52). And there are indeed bold liberties taken in *Ossian* with the conventions of word-order in English prose. These are clearly designed to suggest Gaelic (which is a verb-subject-object

⁷ "Celui qui ne lit *Ossian* que dans *Le Tourneur* ou dans l'édition anglaise courante se trouve singulièrement dépaycé dans une grande partie de la prose ou de la poésie ossianique de l'Empire et de la Restauration" (Van Tieghem 1917, 1: 429).

⁸ For the significance of Leoni's translation of Smith for Italian letters, see Broggi-Wüthrich (2004).

⁹ In context: "C'est pour l'art une bonne étude que celle de ces auteurs ou de ces langues qui commencent la phrase par tous les bouts, par tous les mots, depuis le verbe jusqu'à la conjonction, et qui vous obligent à conserver la clarté du sens au milieu des inversions les plus audacieuses. J'ai fait disparaître les redites et les obscurités du texte anglais: ces chants qui sortent les uns des autres, ces histoires qui se placent comme des parenthèses dans des histoires, ces lacunes supposées d'un manuscrit inventé peuvent avoir leur mérite chez nos voisins; mais nous voulons en France des choses *qui se conçoivent bien et qui s'énoncent clairement*. Notre langue a horreur de ce qui est confus, notre esprit repousse ce qu'il ne comprend pas tout d'abord. Quant à moi, je l'avoue, le vague et le ténébreux me sont antipathiques: un nominatif qui se perd, des relatifs qui s'embarrassent, des amphibologies qui se forment me désolent. Je suis persuadé qu'on peut toujours dégager une pensée des mots qui la voilent, à moins que cette pensée ne soit un lieu commun guindé dans des nuages: l'auteur qui a la conscience de ce lieu commun n'ose le faire descendre du milieu des vapeurs, de crainte qu'il ne s'évanouisse" (Chateaubriand 2001-2, 4-5). Chateaubriand is here paraphrasing Boileau's proverb, 'Ce qui se conçoit bien s'énonce clairement / Et les mots pour le dire arrivent aisément'.

language), and caused Thomas Percy to mock what he called a studied affectation of Erse idiom.¹⁰ The implication is of course that it is precisely because the work was not what it purported to be – a translation – that Macpherson was at pains to suggest that it was, by doing violence to accepted conventions of English usage. And leaving aside whether this should in itself be considered evidence of fraudulence, it is quite clear that Percy is right in the sense that Macpherson – and following him Smith – is deliberately writing a kind of ‘translatorese’. An illustration of what Percy might have been thinking of is provided by the following passage from *Temora*:

Now is the coming forth of Cathmor, in the armour of kings! Dark-rolled the eagle’s wing above his helmet of fire. Unconcerned are his steps, as if they were to the chace of Atha. [...] Sudden, from the rock of Moi-lena, are Sul-malla’s trembling steps. (Gaskill 1996, 271)

Interestingly, if it were indeed strictly literal (and nowadays nobody would claim that it is), this would make it a very early example of foreignizing, as opposed to domesticating, translation: in other words, rather than aiming for naturalness in the target language, the exoticism and alterity of the original is preserved by the adoption of deliberate “translatorese”. It has led Robert Crawford to give Macpherson pride of place as a precursor of modernism, with some justification, I think (Crawford 1992, 142). And Ezra Pound certainly knew his Ossian – he sees Romanticism as beginning with it (Crawford 2001, 63). A pioneer in the use of translatorese for literary effect was Johann Heinrich Voß, the first translator of Homer into German (1781/93, by which time, incidentally, three complete translations of Ossian had already appeared). He it is who went on record as saying that Ossian was the greater poet of the two: “Der Schotte Ossian ist ein größerer Dichter, als der Ionier Homer” (Schmidt 2003-4, 4: 495). Another Homer translator to think the same was Melchiorre Cesarotti (Cristea 1969). But the *Iliad* was also translated by one James Macpherson in 1773.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the notion of fragments. By giving his first Ossianic publication this title, Macpherson was suggesting that there was, or rather had been a whole of which they were part. As Blair writes in his Preface: “Though the poems now published appear as detached pieces in this collection, there is ground to believe that most of them were originally episodes of a greater work which related to the wars of Fingal” (Gaskill 1996, 5). This “greater work” was

¹⁰ “An affectation of Erse Idiom is too generally studied, so as to betray (I think) a consciousness that the piece is not what it is made to pass for” (to Evan Evans, February 1762; quoted in Marwell 1934, 394).

subsequently produced, but the fragmentary quality was maintained, both on the stylistic level, through the insistent parataxis, the striking absence of linking conjunctions and syntactic subordination, and also in terms of the constant fragmenting of the overall narrative by episodic tales within tales. Any impression of wholeness is further undermined by the frequent editorial reminders of the dilapidated state of the tradition which the translator has tapped and of his own role in piecing together the shattered shards. Take for instance his comment in the Preface to the first edition of *Fingal*: “Several gentlemen in the Highlands and isles generously gave me all the assistance in their power; and it was by their means I was enabled to compleat the epic poem” (Gaskill 1996, 37). Also his note to the second epic: “By means of my friends, I collected since all the broken fragments of *Temora*, that I formerly wanted; and the story of the poem, which was accurately preserved by many, enabled me to reduce it into that order in which it now appears. The title of Epic was imposed on the poem by myself” (Gaskill 1996, 479, n.2). ‘Cath-loda’, a shorter epic in three duans is not only notable for giving Byron a rhyme for Don Juan, but also for the breaking off of the narrative at various gripping points and the insertion of Shandyesque asterisks (cf. Gaskill 1996, 308-9, 328). At the same time, whatever justified reservations one might have about Macpherson’s character and motivation, it seems to me that his work does embody a powerful lament for the breakdown through neglect and willful ruination of a culture of great intrinsic value. Like Hölderlin’s Empedokles, Macpherson has felt the departing god of his people, and this lends a note of genuine pathos to his work:

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. (Gaskill 1996, 128)

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