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Ghostly Repetitions: The Supernatural, Nostalgia and Classical Tradition in James Macpherson's *Ossian*

Ersev Ersoy

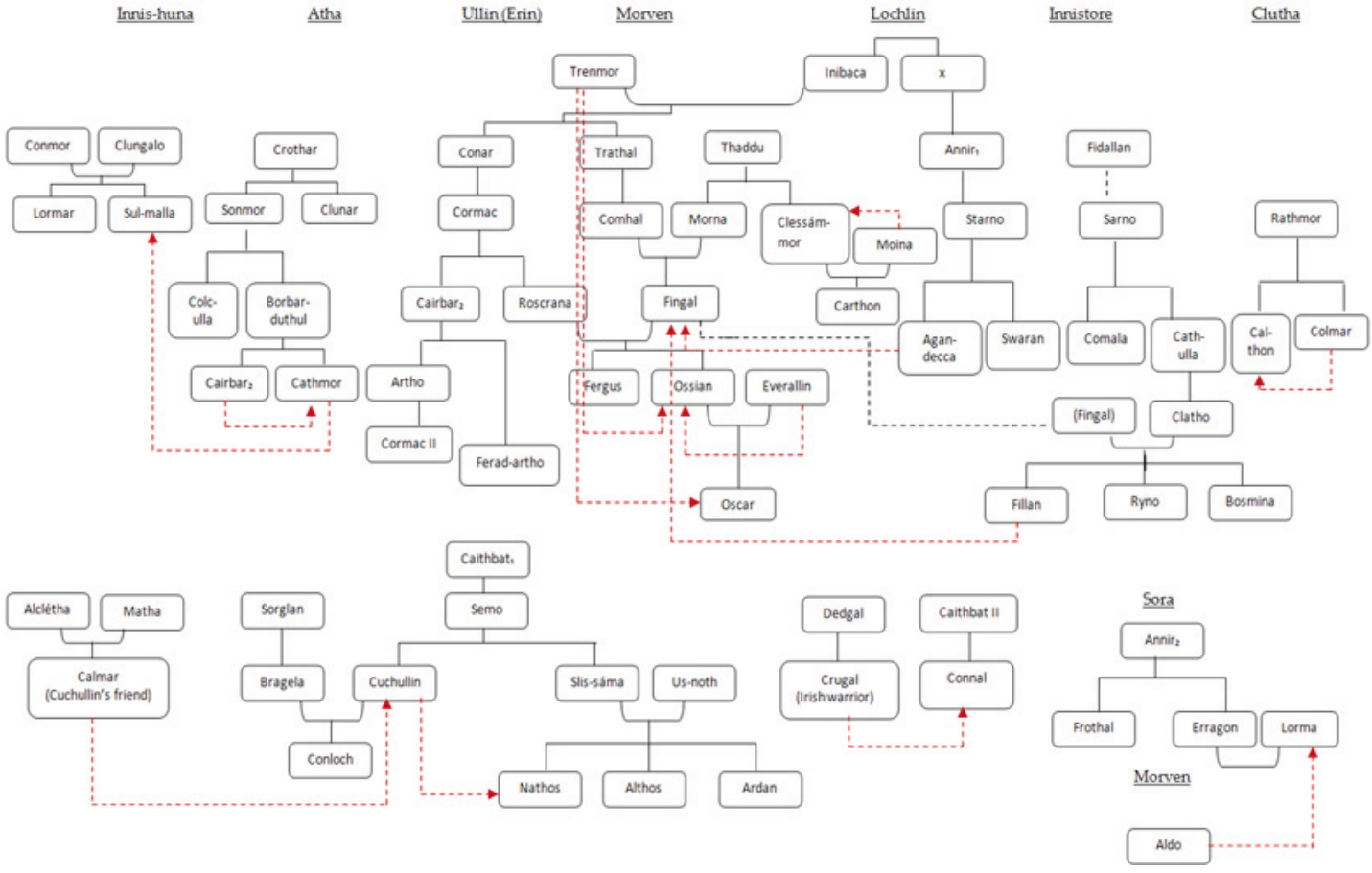
Introduction

The Poems of Ossian, a collection of prose poetry published in 1760–3, proves to be a crucial text marking the beginnings of the eighteenth-century Romantic Movement to which James Macpherson contributes significantly by his construction of a Romanticised image of a heroic past from the Gaelic ballad tradition. The key inspiration behind *Ossian* seems to be the idea of looking at the past with hopes to 'rediscover' what was being neglected in contemporary modernist thought — that is, tradition, which centres on the supernatural and the divine — in order to help construct a common social reality or awareness. This was also a rediscovery or a recreation of a mythic world which could not be detached from its society's knowledge and creation of history, as 'myths express and deal with a people's reality postulates about the world; and mythic truths pertain more to a moral universe than to a "natural" one (in the sense of the physical unitary world of scientists)'.[1] One can observe that the mythic world of *Ossian* is aimed at the creation of a common symbolic universe which is a cohesive collective of the past, present and the future, in order to establish a memory that is shared by all the individuals in the collectivity.

Macpherson makes use of the supernatural or the divine to create the machinery of the epic, which is considered to be of great importance by many critics, including Hugh Blair, who had the chance to discuss the issue with Macpherson before and during the publication of *Ossian* and almost certainly led him to give his translations epic pretensions. It is the repeated occurrence of the supernatural in the poems that provides the focus of this article. I will address these ghostly repetitions in hopes of showing how the poet's 'recreation' of the mythic universe was fuelled by strong nostalgia and how he edited his original Gaelic material using Homer, Milton and Virgil as classical models.

[1] Joanna Overing, 'The Role of Myth: An Anthropological Perspective, or: "The Reality of the Really Made-up"' in *Myths and Nationhood* (London, 1997), 12.

Figure 1: A Genealogical Table of the Ossianic Characters[2]



Ghostly Apparitions

A ghost can be defined as a bodiless soul or spirit of a deceased person. It is a common belief held by people from various countries and cultures that ghosts can be seen if and when they haunt certain locations or be seen by people with whom they used to associate before or at the time of death. In *The Poems of Ossian*, ghosts are generally described as thin airy forms — and sometimes with an imperfect form. J. S. Smart, beautifully defines Ossianic ghosts as 'disembodied, though personified, fragments of melancholic memory which float across the imaginative present of the poems'.[3] They appear to people they knew, loved, cared about, had a special connection with or feared in life, 'but their communication with this world can only ever be shadowy'.[4] The departed spirits, in the poems, do have common features such as having a feeble voice, a weak arm and a knowledge that is more than the humans may possess. These visits are precise, lasting only for a few moments; conversations, if present, are short and the language of ghosts is difficult to understand, adding to the solemn gloom of these scenes, which suits Blair's secret of achieving sublimity, in which his own words, is 'to say great things in a few, or in plain words: for every superfluous decoration degrades a sublime idea. The mind rises and swells, when a lofty description or sentiment is presented to it, in its native form'.[5]

Apart from the general mentioning of ghosts and spirits as the souls of dead heroes or enemies, the poet makes use of their appearances more specifically by giving details of such encounters with several heroes. In *The Poems of Ossian*, which includes twenty-three poems (some with several chapters or books), there are fifteen significant instances where a character is visited by a ghost, which gives him/her advice, foretells the coming of a battle, warns about enemy activity or mourns the deaths of heroes. Sometimes, they do not speak at all but their looks pass on information to that person.

Ossianic ghosts are gentle and noble; yet, the news they present to the

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[2] Arrows indicate the ghostly appearance (NB: Caithbath$_1$ was originally from Skye, but was sent to Erin by Trathal).

[3] J. S. Smart, *James Macpherson: An Episode in Literature*, (New York, 1973), 24.

[4] Susan Manning, 'Henry Mackenzie and *Ossian* or, the Emotional Value of Asteriks' in Fiona Stafford and Howard Gaskill (eds), *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (Amsterdam, 1998), 143.

[5] Hugh Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal' in James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, Howard Gaskill (ed.) (1763; Edinburgh, 1996), 394.

characters might not always be as gentle as their appearance. They carry out the same pursuits they used to do before they passed away: ghosts of the bards keep on singing, whereas those of the departed heroes ride on the wind and carry their bows. Connal explains the actions of spirits to Cuchullin in the second book of *Fingal*: 'Ghosts fly on clouds and ride on winds, said Connal's voice of wisdom. They rest together in their caves, and talk of mortal men'[6]. Just as they have varying duties and responsibilities even in the afterlife, the reasons they appear to the mortals differ too: to warn heroes of coming danger, to foretell battle, to mourn the death of a loved one, or to express sorrow for a past event.

Genealogical table below (see fig. 1) summarises and shows the relationships between Ossianic characters, also displaying the occurring ghostly visits.

Ossianic Ghosts and the Past

The other-worldly atmosphere in the poems feeds greatly on these ghostly appearances, while they also contribute to the balance of sentimentality and heroism. The poems combine heroism with elegy, joy with grief, past with present, death with life; emphasising, and constantly reminding the audience of the significance of complementary opposites. Most of the poems are inspired by the existence of darkness and light, which stands for evil and good or happiness and sadness. Ghosts are described as being made of mist, or they are likened to mist, which covers the face of the sun, preventing its light from reaching the earth. In many instances, stars or the moon are said to look dimmer through the mist of a ghost:

> His spear was a column of mist: the stars looked dim through his form. His voice was like hollow wind in a cave: and he told the tale of grief. The soul of Nathos was sad, like the sun in the day of mist, when his face is watry and dim.[7]

The ghosts of Ardven pass through the beam, and shew their dim and distant forms. Comala is half unseen on her meteor; and Hidallan is sullen and dim, like the darkened moon behind the mist of night.[8]

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[6] James Macpherson, *Fingal: Book II* in Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, 66.
[7] James Macpherson, *Dar-thula: A Poem,* in Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, 141.
[8] James Macpherson, *The War of Caros* in Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, 110.

Doubtlessly, recurrence of mist and misty figures highlights the liminality of the poetry as mist stands for the condition between the light and dark. Moreover, underlying the motif of dark against light is sadness and joy. The theme of 'joy of grief' seen throughout the poems also acts as an important constituent of Macpherson-Ossian's transcendent poetry. Ghostly appearances underline this theme as they are the reminders — and the remainders — of the past. They represent memories, which bring joy but grief takes over with their disappearance. The characters either 'covered grief with joy'[9] or joy rises in their faces only to be covered with sadness again, continuously stressing the futility of life: 'She thinks it is Aldo's tread, and joy rises in her face: but sorrow returns again, like a thin cloud on the moon'.[10] Perhaps, one of the best explanations of what joy of grief stands for can be seen in *The Death of Cuchullin*, where Carril says 'the music was like the memory of joys that are past, pleasant and mournful to the soul'.[11] However, above all, 'The joy of grief belongs to Ossian, amidst his dark-brown years'.[12]

The importance of the past remains dominant, as we see heroes seeking inspiration and guidance from their ancestors or past experiences: ghosts are thus understood as part of one's past. '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'.[13]

Considering this, it becomes possible to see Ossianic ghosts as representatives of the past—they may stand for previous mistakes and victories, also emphasising the value of wisdom gained by experience. The superiority of past over present shows itself in an obvious way.[14] This is particularly evident in *The War of Caros*, where the aged father takes his own father's sword to execute his nameless son, who fails to achieve fame in war:

> My son! go to Lamor's hall: there the arms of our fathers hang. Bring the sword of Garmállon; he took it from a foe. He led him to Garmállon's tomb. Lamor pierced the side of his son.[15]

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[9] James Macpherson, *The Battle of Lora* in Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, 120.
[10] Ibid., 122.
[11] James Macpherson, *The Death of Cuchullin* in Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, 136.
[12] James Macpherson, *Temora: Book Seventh* in Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, 283.
[13] Macpherson, *The War of Caros*, 113.
[14] Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1988), 146.
[15] Macpherson, *The War of Caros*, 112.

The fascination of past over present becomes so strong that it turns into a destructive force in this example and continues to exist throughout the poems: we see parents outliving their children in many of the poems, such as Oscar dying before Ossian or Fillan before Fingal.

Looking from another perspective, ghosts can be seen as decayed bodily forms, whereas old age stands for authority, control and knowledge. Although the outcome of old age is desired and respected in all the poems, the physical decay is not denied and in many of the poems it is associated with approaching death:

> 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![16]

In this case, not only the death of one person is in question but also the death of a race; one which according to Ossian is glorious and has no match. Also as pointed out by Nick Groom:

> Ossian is the last of his race and keeps company only with the dead, with memories that remind him of the futility of his persistence: a living bard with dead characters and a dead audience, whose song seeks to summon the dead, whose song seeks to emulate nature, to become indistinguishable from the murmur of the breeze or the clatter of water, and whose dead are likewise indistinguishable from nature and song.[17]

The constant referrals to ghosts may also suggest the poet's loneliness and liminality — his liminality as well as that of his surroundings seems to be an important part of *Ossian*'s success.[18] Macpherson's Ossian lives in the midst of wild nature; he is aged and a survivor of his race, close to death. All these aspects point to his ultimate loneliness and isolation, where he is continuously in contact with ghosts of the past, sending messages from their world to ours.

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[16] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book II*, 79.

[17] Nick Groom *The Forger's Shadow: How Forgery Changed the Course of Literature* (London, 2002), 117.

[18] Joep Leerssen 'Ossianic Liminality: Between Native Tradition and Preromantic Taste' in Stafford and Gaskill (eds), *From Gaelic to Romantic*, 7.

This is what brings him 'back to life' while he wants to bring back the years that have passed so quickly. Mists, clouds, waves that constitute a very large part of descriptions of nature, contribute to the melancholy present in the poems in no small way. Ghostly appearances, alongside dismal portrayals of nature, complete the images of evanescence and create nostalgia. Ossian is trapped in his memories and blurry thoughts, struggling to bring back his youth:

> Light of the shadowy thoughts, that fly across my soul, daughter of Toscar of helmets, wilt thou not hear the song! We call back, maid of Lutha, the years that have rolled away.[19]

However long he thinks of and remembers his past and the heroic age of Fingal, hoping to revive the glorious days, he is only confronted by the irreversibility of his 'loss'. Ossian is haunted by ghosts who are immediate family members and this has an important influence on his hopelessness too. Each time, his grief grows, leaving him incapable of taking any action. While Stafford says that "each poem is a variation on the "ubi sunt" motif, and the very evocation of the past makes the present less and less easy to endure"[20], according to Keymer, there is a big dilemma in Ossian's poems as they express the absence of what is being described — 'the irrecoverability of a heroic past glimpsed only in the solitary incantations of an aged bard and entrusted thereafter to the vagaries of memorial transmission in a declining culture and language'.[21] Stafford, however, provides an explanation for this fragmentary form of a distant age, arguing that 'this lack of definition is essential to Macpherson's Celtic world, in which the reader is invited to become lost'.[22]

In some cases, heroes are likened to ghosts, rather than being visited by them. For example, in the third book of *Fingal*, Fillan and Oscar are referred to as 'two dark clouds that are the chariots of ghosts'.[23] In *The War of Caros*, Oscar is likened to a ghost again, while Gaul is said to rise in wrath like a ghost in the third book of *Temora*:

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[19] James Macpherson, *Oina-morul: A Poem*, in Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, 323.

[20] Fiona Stafford, 'Dangerous Success: Ossian, Wordsworth, and English Romantic Literature' in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh, 1991), 63.

[21] Thomas Keymer 'Narratives of Loss: The *Poems of Ossian* and *Tristram Shandy*' in Stafford and Gaskill (eds), *From Gaelic to Romantic*, 90.

[22] Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, 103.

[23] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book III*, 78.

> Oscar is like a beam of the sky; he turns around and the people fall. His hand is like the arm of a ghost, when he stretches it from a cloud: the rest of his thin form is unseen: but the people die in the vale.[24]

> As the sudden rising of winds; or distant rolling of troubled seas, when some dark ghost, in wrath, heaves the billows over an isle, the seat of mist, on the deep, for many dark-brown years: so terrible is the sound of the host, wide-moving over the field. Gaul is tall before them: the streams glitter within his strides.[25]

Creating the Sublime

Sublimity in the poems is sustained by the emergence of ghosts, increasing the obscurity of the landscape with their features of darkness, murkiness and ability to cause fear. Edmund Burke finds fortitude, justice and wisdom in the sublime [26] and he regards magnificence, which is created by a 'great profusion of things which are splendid and valuable, in themselves' as a source of sublimity.[27] Blair uses the term extensively, mostly referring to an 'air of solemnity and seriousness' where the poet 'moves perpetually in the high region of the grand and the pathetick'.[28] He emphasises that the poet does not speak of anything cheerful, reporting only the events that are serious and grave where the scenery is always wild and romantic.[29] While doing this, he points out that beauty is an outcome of using an ornamented language, which may reduce the level of sublimity:

> But no sooner does the poet attempt to spread out this sentiment or description, and to deck it round and round with glittering ornaments, than the mind begins to fall from its high elevation; the transport is over; the beautiful may remain, but the sublime is gone.[30]

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[24] Macpherson, *The War of Caros*, 113.
[25] Macpherson, *Temora: Book Third*, 245–6.
[26] Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757; Harmondsworth, 1998), 145.
[27] Ibid., 119.
[28] Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation', 356.
[29] Ibid., 356.
[30] Ibid., 394.

Dafydd Moore observes a connection between the sentimental and the sublime.[31] Even if it is possible to see this relation in *Ossian*, it does not provide the poet with complete reconciliation, as the awareness of the sublime, 'which in its ideological and cultural formulation might offer something of means of reconciliation, a masculine discourse of feeling'[32] reminds him of his past days, causing the gap between the past and present to become impossible to close. He becomes the melancholy old man, looking back at the scenes of happier times. Living in a world populated by ghosts, the characters, simply, cannot escape the tragic past. Whenever the opportunity arises, days of old are celebrated and the bravery of today is thought to be of no match to that of the past. This can be seen when Oscar addresses his ancestors in *The War of Caros*, hoping they will provide him with guidance:

> Come, said the hero, O ye ghosts of my fathers! ye that fought against the kings of the world! Tell me the deeds of future times; and your discourse in your caves; when you talk together and behold your sons in the fields of the valiant.[33]

On the other hand, it is possible to say that the sublime provides the necessary wisdom and positive heroism for the occurrence of sentimentality. It is accompanied by humanism, which can be seen in many of Fingal's actions, such as when he shows Swaran mercy at the end of the sixth book of Fingal, sending him and his army back to Lochlin:

> King of Lochlin, said Fingal, thy blood flows in the veins of thy foe. Our families met in battle, because they loved the strife of spears. But often did they feast in the hall; and send round the joy of the shell. Raise, to-morrow, thy white sails to the wind, thou brother of Agandecca.[34]

Blair is the greatest admirer of the sublimity of Ossian's poetry, even saying that no literature can match his sublime descriptions. He believes that the most impressive evidence of his mastery over this can be observed where we see godlike opponents, misty ghosts and a harsh nature. He goes on to say that

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[31] Dafydd Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson's The Poems of Ossian*, (Aldershot, 2003), 136.

[32] Ibid., 137.

[33] Macpherson, *The War of Caros*, 112.

[34] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book VI*, 101.

'His poetry, more perhaps than that of any other writer, deserves to be stiled, *The Poetry of the Heart*. It is a heart penetrated with noble sentiments, and with sublime and tender passions; a heart that glows, and kindles the fancy'.[35]

The existence of such sentimentality and desire for the past has its downsides for the characters, since 'present' successes can never be fully celebrated and younger heroes cannot reach the fame of their fathers. This is because even if their actions are very promising for building a new heroic age, they (their actions and victories) only release the memories of an 'old' one. The burden of the past is too much for the new generation, despite the inspiration it may provide. Stafford raises a very good argument about Ossian, saying he, himself, may also have been sucked into this burden of older times, as his character tends to be double-sided: a Romantic hero attempting to solve an impossible situation by his poetry, isolating himself from the rest of the world. He remains a blind bard living under the shadow of his father, passively repeating past deeds rather than achieving anything new.[36]

The implied superiority of the old generation over the young one is portrayed in the third book of *Temora* and can clearly be seen in the episode where even though Fingal is proud of his son, Fillan, for his actions in battle, he begins telling a heroic story from his own youth.[37] This seems to mirror the eighteenth-century literary world, in which, writers or poets felt the pressure of having to equal the literature of the past. According to Stafford, this could be seen especially in Scotland, as 'the self-consciousness about the Scottish language meant that many writers sheltered behind imitations of English masters, just as Macpherson had in his earlier attempts at poetry. Past masters could provide inspiration, but they could just as easily lead to depressing feelings of inadequacy'.[38]

One memorable point Moore makes is the idea of 'reverse typology' seen in *Ossian*, suggesting that the world of the poems is haunted not only by ghosts of the past, but also ghosts of future. That is to say, current victories are not regarded as the bringer of a glorious future as much as they are seen as a threat that might cause obscurity and weakness in the future. Moore points out that 'the present is located within the context of a wide-turning circle of events which means that the downtrodden of today will be tomorrow's conquerors; while on the other hand, the events of the present form part of

[35] Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation', 356.
[36] Fiona Stafford, 'Dangerous Success', 63–4.
[37] See Macpherson, *Temora: Book Third*, 250.
[38] Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, 149.

a continuum, the way things were 'meant' to be and over which we have little or no control'.[39]

The return of the dead helps make the gap between their and our world smaller. In other words, it reduces the fear of the unknown, also making death seem like a fulfilling solution to achieve peace. In a way, death is the means to gain immortality. Therefore, it is possible to say that Macpherson's *Ossian* makes death look appealing, which can be seen in Ossian's own words: 'Happy are they who fell in their youth, in the midst of their renown!'[40] It is too painful for him to remember old times in his isolation, so death may serve as a way out of this misery. What bring him close to his loved ones, who are long dead, and their memories, are ghosts. The joy of dying in battle is also expressed by Fingal's words where he calls for the ghosts of his fathers to come and take his brave men who have fallen. It is expected that they will be accepted to the Otherworld joyfully, just like the way they have died:

> O ye ghosts of heroes dead! ye riders of the storm of Cromla! receive my falling people with joy, and bring them to your hills. And may the blast of Lena carry them over my seas, that they may come to my silent dreams, and delight my soul in rest.[41]

Nevertheless, Ossian's ghosts are not portrayed as happy. They are also looking back to older times with longing, while trying to warn their friends and family about coming disasters using their wisdom. They are trapped in a world where they cannot fight their enemies, no matter how strong or vigorous they are; but only know about the future and guide the next generation, brothers or their fellow warriors — which also increases their despair. In a way, they are preoccupied with their 'past' too, carrying the burden of the need to save the loved ones.

The Ghosts of Ossian Compared with those in Homer, Virgil and Milton

The first edition of *Fingal* (1761–2) contains footnotes that refer directly to particular extracts from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid* and Milton's

[39] Dafydd Moore, 'James Macpherson and William Faulkner: A Sensibility of Defeat' in Stafford and Gaskill (eds), *From Gaelic to Romantic*, 196.

[40] Macpherson, *The War of Caros*, 113.

[41] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book IV*, 85.

Paradise Lost. One of the reasons Macpherson did not try to conceal the similarities between his and the classic epics is because his aim was for *Ossian* to be seen as a rival to them. However, in *Temora* (1763) and in the later editions of *Fingal* (1765 and after) most of these notes were omitted, most likely due to the controversies regarding the authenticity of the translations. Despite this, Macpherson, and especially Blair, never retracted their claims about Ossian's poetry being as impressive as these Classic works of literature. In fact, Milton's *Paradise Lost* might have inspired and raised the need for an ancient 'Scottish bard' and an epic that could be compared to the greatest poets of the West, as 'never could the idea of a Scottish epic have been more welcome than in 1760'[42] at a time when 'a Scottish nostalgia for a remote or aggrandising past' was dominant.[43]

From Classics to Ossianic: Homer and Virgil

Blair chose to compare *Ossian* with Homer, as to him, 'Homer is greatest of all the great poets, the one whose manner, and whose times come the nearest to Ossian's'.[44] Macpherson, on the other hand, resurrects Ossian in the eighteenth century in a way that he thinks will bring out what is best in Homer, leaving out what he thinks would not suit the Ossianic story-line.[45] According to Blair's observations, Macpherson-Ossian follows quite a similar path when creating his machinery — Homer blended his country's legends about the gods to create his epics just like Macpherson, who found the tales of his country inspiring and amusing 'the fancy'.[46] His comparisons of the representation of spirits and ghosts in the works of the two poets constitute an important part of Blair's *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (DATE). He makes them only to establish that, although the two poets' idea of ghosts seems to be quite alike, Macpherson's descriptions are 'drawn with much stronger and livelier colours than those of Homer. Macpherson-Ossian describes ghosts with all the particularity of one who had seen and conversed with them, and

[42] Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, 113–14.

[43] Kenneth Simpson, *The Protean Scot: The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen, 1988), 86.

[44] Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation', 357.

[45] It is safe to assume that Macpherson's relationship to Homer was not only mediated by Blair but also by Thomas Blackwell, a leading authority on Homer, who was his teacher in Aberdeen.

[46] Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation', 365.

whose imagination was full of the impression they had left upon it'.[47] Homer's descriptions are more extended, adding a greater variety of incidents, whereas Ossian's are precise, only sufficient to make the reader visualise the scene. Still, Macpherson emphasises in a note to *The War of Inis-thona* that 'the notion of Ossian concerning the state of the deceased, was the same with that of the ancient Greeks and Romans. They imagined that the souls pursued, in their separate state, the employments and pleasures of their former life'.

Ossian	**Virgil**	**Homer**
King of Inis-thona, said Oscar, how fell the children of youth? The wild boar often rushes over their tombs, but he does not disturb the hunters.[13] They pursue deer[14] formed of clouds, and bend their airy bow.—They still love the sport of their youth; and mount the wind with joy.[48]	The chief beheld their chariots from afar; Their shining arms and coursers train'd to war: Their lances fix'd in earth, their steeds around, Free from the harness, graze the flow'ry ground. The love of horses which they had, alive, And care of chariots, after death survive.[49]	Now I the strength of Hercules behold, A tow'ring spectre of gigantic mold; Where woodland monsters grin in fretted gold, There sullen lions sternly seem to roar, The bear to growl, to foam the tusky boar, There war and havock and destruction stood, And vengeful murder red with human blood.[50]

The similarity of Macpherson's expressions, especially with Virgil's, strikes the eye.[51] Much like Ossianic ghosts, Homer's are not totally incorporeal, looking like thin airy forms; they can appear and disappear whenever they want, their arm is weak, yet they ride on winds and clouds. While the ghosts of the bards

[47] Ibid., 366.

[48] Ibid., 116.

[49] Dryden, *The Aeneid: Book VI*, 181: 651–5.

[50] Alexander Pope, *The Odyssey of Homer, Volume Two* (Philadelphia, 1828), Book XI, 210–11.

[51] It should be kept in mind that what we have here are three translations from three different people, all of which are from separate texts. Dryden, Pope and Macpherson, all had their own ideas as to what literary translation should be.

continue singing, those of departed warriors wander the battlefields. The image of spirits displayed when Ulysses visits the land of the dead in the eleventh book of the *Odyssey* is a good illustration of this similarity[52]:

> When lo! appear'd along the dusky coasts,
> Thin, airy shoals of visionary ghosts;
> Fair, pensive youths, and soft enamour'd maids;
> And wither'd elders, pale and wrinkled shades;
> Ghastly with wounds the forms of warriors slain
> Stalk'd with majestic port, a martial train
> These and a thousand more swarm'd o'er the ground,
> And all the dire assembly shriek'd around.[53]

It is also interesting to see that Ossianic ghosts can be damaged by a man, like those of Homer. When Ulysses travels through Hades in the eleventh book, he meets the shade of Elpenor, who is mournful and crying. They have a short conversation, in which the ghost tells him how he ended up in the land of the dead and asks for a tomb. Even after his request is fulfilled he keeps groaning and Ulysses sends him away with his sword:

> Due to thy ghost, shall to thy ghost be paid.
> Still as I spoke the phantom seem'd to moan,
> Tear follow'd tear, and groan succeeded groan.
> But as my waving sword the blood surrounds,
> The shade withdrew, and mutter'd empty sounds.[54]

Although we do not come across an occasion where a spectre is hurt by a hero, Cuchullin implies that he would be able to hurt Crugal's ghost if he had drawn his sword through its form: 'My sword might find that voice, and force his knowledge from him. And small is his knowledge, Connal, for he was here today'.[55] Ulysses tells the ghost of Achilles and Patroclus that he is lost to his country and friends in their conversation and the fact that Ulysses goes to the Otherworld in search of information about the future and advice from the Gods he worships might be related to Ossian's Oscar, who also seeks guidance

[52] Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation', 366.
[53] Pope, *Odyssey: Book XI*, 191.
[54] Pope, *Odyssey: Book XI*, 192.
[55] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book II*, 66.

from his fathers who are in the Otherworld.[56] The passage from Homer is given below:

> To whom with sighs: I pass these dreadful gates
> To seek the Theban, and consult the fates:
> For still distress'd I rove from coast to coast,
> Lost to my friends, and to my country lost.
> But sure the eye of Time beholds no name
> So bless'd as thine in all the rolls of fame;
> Alive we hail'd thee with our guardian gods,
> And dead, thou rul'st a king in these abodes.[57]

Besides their ghostly features, the ways they disappear show certain resemblances — for instance, in the twenty-third book of the *Iliad*, the ghost of Patroclus, after visiting Achilles, vanishes almost exactly like one of Ossian's ghosts (Crugal); with a feeble cry, dissolving like smoke into nature:[58]

> Like a thin smoke he sees the spirit fly,
> And hears a feeble, lamentable cry.[59]

> Like the darkened moon he retired, in the midst of the whistling blast.[60]

One of Ossian's most remarkable expressions, 'joy of grief', is also seen by Blair as being paralleled by this specific appearance of Patroclus in the *Iliad*; similarly, when Ulysses meets his mother in the shades in the *Odyssey*, signifying the delight of seeing a loved one and the sorrow brought by the realisation of their eternal absence: 'Or has hell's queen an empty image sent, / That wretched I might e'en my joys lament.'[61] It is again Blair who points out that in both these occasions the heroes melt with tenderness, lament their not having

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[56] 'Come, said the hero, O ye ghosts of my fathers! ye that fought against the kings of the world!—Tell me the deeds of future times; and your discourse in your caves'. Macpherson, *The War of Caros*, 112.

[57] Pope, *Odyssey: Book XI*, 206.

[58] Macpherson draws attention to this similarity in his notes to the *Poems* quoting from Homer. See Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, 425, note 8.

[59] Alexander Pope, *The Iliad of Homer: Volume One* (London, 1809), Book XXIII, 241: 117–18.

[60] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book II*, 65.

[61] Pope, *The Odyssey, Book XI*, 197.

it in their power to throw their arms round the ghost and 'in a mutual embrace, enjoy the delight of grief'.[62]

Ossian combines conjugal love with heroism, without letting sentimentality take control of the scene or the characters; and 'since conjugal love is a common theme in Homer, particularly in the *Odyssey*, Macpherson again ties his own epic to the classical tradition'.[63] An example of this can be seen when Ossian follows the instructions from Everallin's ghost, pointing out that the enemy is threatened by even his song. Here, we also see that Macpherson acknowledges the resemblance of the passage to one of Homer:

> My spear supported my steps, and my rattling armour rung. I hummed, as I was wont in danger, the songs of heroes of old. Like distant thunder Lochlin heard; they fled; my son pursued.[64]
>
> Forth march'd the chief, and distant from the crowd,
> High on the rampart raised his voice aloud;
> With her own shout Minerva swells the sound;
> Troy starts astonish'd, and the shores rebound,
> As the loud trumpet's brazen mouth from far
> With shrilling clangour sounds the alarm of war,
> Struck from the walls, the echoes float on high,
> And the round bulwarks and thick towers reply;
> So high his brazen voice the hero rear'd:
> Hosts dropp'd their arms and trembled as they heard:[65]

Spirits and deities are observed to inspire the warriors in both *Ossian* and the *Iliad*. However, Ossianic spirits are never presented as being able to interfere with battles; whereas, the gods of Homer frequently do so. Macpherson notes that 'it was the opinion then, as indeed it is to this day, of some of the highlanders, that the souls of the deceased hovered round their living friends; and sometimes appeared to them when they were about to enter on any great undertaking'.[66] It is reasonable to think that this belief might be Macpherson's starting point when he brings down the spirits of the departed to encourage Ossian's heroes. Cuchullin says:

[62] Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation', 381.

[63] Josef Bysveen, *Epic Tradition and Innovation in James Macpherson's Fingal* (Uppsala, 1982), 122.

[64] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book IV*, 84.

[65] Pope, *The Iliad: Book XVIII*, 150: 255–64.

[66] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book* I, 422.

> Peace to the souls of the heroes; their deeds were great in danger. Let them ride around me on clouds; and shew their features of war: that my soul may be strong in danger; my arm like the thunder of heaven. But be thou on a moon-beam, O Morna, near the window of my rest; when my thoughts are of peace; and the din of arms is over. Gather the strength of the tribes, and move to the wars of Erin.[67]

Even though the ghosts of Ossian do not affect the events directly, they do have indirect influence, which gives them similar functions as the gods of the *Iliad*. Since Ossian does not paint a picture of a world full of gods like Homer or Virgil, he has the spirits of fallen heroes fulfil their function — their actions are magnified, respected and taken for granted. Macpherson provides an explanation: 'Had Ossian brought down gods, as often as Homer hath done, to assist his heroes, this poem had not consisted of eulogiums on his friends, but of hymns to these superior beings'.[68]

Crugal's ghost appearing to Connal is paralleled with that of Virgil's Hector, while Swaran is associated with Achilles. Macpherson draws attention to these resemblances, in an attempt to show how Virgil handled the subject in a similar manner.

> When Hector's ghost before my sight appears:
> A bloody shroud he seem'd, and bath'd in tears.
> Such as he was, when, by Pelides slain,
> Thessalian coursers drag'd him o'er the plain.
> Swoln were his feet, as when the thongs were thrust
> Through the bor'd holes, his body black with dust.
> Unlike that Hector, who return'd from toils
> Of war triumphant, in Æacian spoils:
> Or him, who made the fainting Greeks retire,
> And launch'd against their navy Phrygian fire.
> His hair and beard stood stiffen'd with his gore;
> And all the wounds he for his country bore.[69]

The way the two ghosts are described and introduced show certain similarities,

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[67] Ibid., 58.

[68] James Macpherson, *The Antiquity &c. of the Poems of Ossian* in Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, 46.

[69] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book II, PO* 425. See also Dryden, *The Aeneid: Book II*, 43, 273–84.

nevertheless, Crugal has a less horrifying image. The gruesome look of Hector's ghost is due to his humiliating defeat and although Crugal's ghost is also wounded, his 'feeble voice' and 'decaying' bodily features give him an otherworldly appearance:

> My hero saw in his rest a dark-red stream of fire coming down from the hill. Crugal sat upon the beam, a chief that lately fell. He fell by the hand of Swaran, striving in the battle of heroes. His face is like the beam of the setting moon; his robes are of the clouds of the hill: his eyes are like two decaying flames. Dark is the wound of his breast.[70]

However, like the Ossianic Crugal, Hector serves the role of a messenger by warning the hero about the coming disaster.

References to Virgil's Troy can be related to the Jacobite Rebellion since 'Macpherson consistently deploys Jacobite iconography in such a way as to stress its play on slippage and diaspora, to the point of creating what amounts to an admission of defeat'.[71] Although Fingal gains an epic victory, the hidden remnants of despair remain. The table below summarises the similarities between Crugal's ghost and those of Homer's Patroclus and Virgil's Hector:

Crugal	**Patroclus**	**Hector**
He appears to Connal as he rests alone.	He appears to Aeneas at night when everyone is asleep.	He appears to Achilles while he is away from his men at the shore.
He tells Connal that his body is not buried yet: "but my corse is on the sands of Ullin" (*Fingal: Book II, PO* 65).	Patroclus visits Achilles because he still has not buried his body: "Let my pale corse the rights of burial know, / And give me the entrance in the realms below" (*The Iliad: Book XXIII* 240).	He appears in tears as his body was dragged in the ground and slain.

[70] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book II*, 65.

[71] Moore, 'James Macpherson and William Faulkner', 188.

Conversation continues until the ghost vanishes having delivered his message.	Only after their dialogue comes to a conclusion, the ghost disappears.	Leaves when he delivers his message. Their conversation comes to an end upon hearing noises from afar.

Moina's ghost, on the other hand, who is seen by Clessámmor, in *Carthon*, can be associated with Virgil's Phoenician Dido (in terms of description, appearance and way of introduction). The way Macpherson and Virgil play with the words 'light and night', as well as the correspondences made with moon, mist and the ghosts' appearances show great similarities.[72]

> Nor Clutha ever since have I seen: nor Moina of the dark brown hair. She fell in Balclutha: for I have seen her ghost. I knew her as she came through the dusky night, along the murmur of Lora: she was like the new moon seen through the gathered mist: when the sky pours down its flaky snow, and the world is silent and dark.[73]
>
> Not far from her wound, her bosom bathed in blood;
> Whom when the Trojan hero hardly knew,
> Obscure in shades, and with a doubtful view
> (Doubtful as he who sees, through dusky night,
> Or thinks he sees, the moon's uncertain light).[74]

Ossian's Miltonic Paradise

Alongside such classical allusions, Ossian's Cuchullin can be linked with Milton's Satan. Although the connection is not immediately obvious, it is made clear in Macpherson's notes to the 1762 edition of *Fingal*. Milton's description of the falling angels applauding Mammon: 'such murmur filled/ The assembly, as when hollow racks retain / The sound of blustering winds,'[75] is imitated by Ossian's 'What murmur rolls along the hill like the gathered flies of evening? The sons of Innis-fail descend, or rustling winds'.[76] Instead of comparing the

[72] Macpherson has also pointed to this connection in his notes. James Macpherson, *Carthon* in Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, 446.

[73] Ibid., 128.

[74] Dryden, *The Aeneid: Book VI,* 174: 454–59.

[75] John Milton, *Paradise Lost: A Poem in Twelve Books*, (New York, 1868), II, 284–6.

[76] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book I,* 58.

satanic forces of *Paradise Lost* to the Scandinavian army — who are pictured as the enemy — the poet in *Ossian* chooses to liken Cuchullin's warriors to the fallen angels. Thus, the reference to Milton contributes to notions of defeat and symbolises a heroic culture where heroic grandeur is balanced by feelings of loss.[77]

The image of Ossianic warriors as doomed spirits from Milton's Hell recurs, symbolising their ultimate defeat even at moments of victory, for Ossian knows life is fleeting and death is certain. Ossian reminds the reader of the impending disappearance of Fingal and his men, as well as his eventual isolation:

> But sit thou on the heath, O Bard, and let us hear thy voice. It is pleasant as the gale of spring that sighs on the hunter's ear; when he wakens from dreams of joy, and has heard the music of the spirits of the hill.[78]

Macpherson relates this to a passage from *Paradise Lost* in his notes[79]:

> Others more mild,
> Retreated in a silent valley, sing
> With notes angelical. —
> The harmony,
> What could it less when spirits immortal sing?
> Suspended hell, and took with ravishment
> The thronging audience.[80]

Therefore, the relation between Ossianic Highland spirits and those of Milton's Hell is significant since it displays Macpherson's understanding of his native tradition, as well as pointing to a rather deeper cultural association: 'For in Highland folklore, the fallen angels were said to be living beneath the hills as fairies or "sìth"'.[81]

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[77] Fiona Stafford, 'Fingal and the Fallen Angels: Macpherson, Milton and Romantic Titanism' in Stafford and Gaskill (eds), *From Gaelic to Romantic*, 169.

[78] Macpherson, *Fingal: Book V*, 96.

[79] Ibid., 433.

[80] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I, 546–5.

[81] Stafford, 'Fingal and the Fallen Angels', 171.

Conclusions

> Ghosts are everywhere: on the weeping wind, on the airs that Ossian draws from his lyre, on the waves and storms and tempests. The ghosts outnumber the living.[82]

Without doubt, returning souls play a very significant role in Ossian's poetry. The repeated ghostly visits are inspired by Macpherson-Ossian's never-ending nostalgia and longing for the past. Thus, they contribute to the nostalgia evinced in the poems. It may even be argued that they are the essence of the sublime, the sentimental, the melancholy and of primitivism. Macpherson masks some aspects of native Gaelic superstitions and beliefs with his Ossianic ghosts, which he considers as suiting the contemporary trend better. As also clearly stated by him, he achieves this by imitating and drawing from the Classical tradition which is especially evident in the episodes of ghostly appearances. He replaces the primitive elements of his epic models with the polished manners of the eighteenth century; so that, in his *Ossian*, ancient heroism meets modern politeness. The ancient bard was primitive but eloquent, stricken but honourable: he was even blind like Homer and Milton; all in all, he was everything the enlightened population wanted. [83]

It seems that the Ossianic poems should not only be seen as a representation of loss or defeat — against time, bringing old age and solitude — but also as an expression of its results and the circumstances for such consequences. In Stafford's words 'on the surface of the text, Ossian seems a helpless observer, whose own vulnerability in the face of relentless passing in time is projected onto the sun itself'.[84] However, the world evoked has a destructive side which cannot be overcome, neither by him nor his characters. Associations between *Ossian* and Milton's Satan may lead us to the conclusion that the nature of Ossianic heroes causes their collapse, which has led them to chase the memories of their ancestors, without any true desire for revival.[85] Therefore, we see that to Macpherson-Ossian, memory becomes a form of afterlife. The blind bard is left in constant admiration of the legend created by him, doomed by what he values the most, which is the

[82] Groom, *The Forger's Shadow*, 117.
[83] Stuart Kelly, *Scott-land: The Man Who Invented a Nation* (Edinburgh, 2010), 25.
[84] Stafford, 'Fingal and the Fallen Angels', 181.
[85] Ibid., 182.

'ancient' past. Yet, this fascination provides him with enough wisdom and sentiment to create his poetry that portrays him as the 'decaying' bard, whose poems can 'raise the dead'.

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