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Philippe Laplace

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The Highlands and the Lowlands of Scotland: Transference, Cultural Synecdoche and the Elusive Quest for Identity

Philippe LAPLACE

In the summer of the year 1758 or 1759, Mr Home [Scottish playwright, author of *Douglas*, 1757] met Mr James Macpherson and his pupil (Graham of Balgowan) at Moffat. [...] Conversing with Mr Macpherson, Mr Home found that he was an exceedingly good classical scholar; and was not a little pleased that he had met with one who was a native of the remote Highlands, and likely to give him some information concerning the ancient poetry of his country. Accordingly, when Mr Macpherson was questioned on that subject, he said that he had in his possession several pieces of ancient poetry. When Mr Home desired to see them, Mr Macpherson asked if he understood the Gaelic? 'Not one word.' 'Then, how can I show you them?' 'Very easily,' said Mr Home; 'translate one of the poems which you think a good one, and I imagine that I shall be able to form some opinion of the genius and character of the Gaelic poetry.' Mr Macpherson declined the task, saying, that his translation would give a very imperfect idea of the original. Mr Home, with some difficulty, persuaded him to try, and in a day or two he brought him the poem on the death of Oscar; with which Mr Home was so pleased, that in a few days two or three more were brought to him, which Mr Home carried to Edinburgh, and shewed them to Dr Blair, Dr Fergusson, Dr Robertson, and Lord Elibank, who were no less pleased with them than he had been. In the course of the year, Mr Home carried the translations which Mr Macpherson had given him to London, where they were equally admired¹.

Identity has always been a core issue in Scottish studies and a very touchy subject in Scotland. In 731 AD, the Venerable Bede defined the Scots as Irish

¹ J. Home, testimonial (undated) to *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland appointed to investigate the nature and authenticity of the poems ascribed to Ossian*, edited by H. Mackenzie, Edinburgh, 1805. Cited in D. Moore, (ed.), *Ossian and Ossianism*, London-New York, Routledge, 2004, vol. III, p. 384. See also a letter from Adam Ferguson reporting the Moffat encounter in H. Mackenzie, *The Works of John Home, Esq. To which is prefixed an account of his life and writings in Three volumes*, vol. I, Edinburgh, Archibald Constable, 1822, p. 127-28.

immigrants. He however confessed to having doubts as to where the first settlers in Scotland, namely the Picts, came from; a riddle which has not still been solved. Nearly thirteen centuries later, Irvine Welsh's drug posse ridiculed the mere concept of a Scottish identity in *Trainspotting* and Ken Loach, in his film 'Ae fond kiss' had a Scottish Pakistani Muslim girl in a Catholic school admitting with glee her support for a Protestant football team, thus smashing the mere concept of a Glaswegian/Scottish identity into smithereens.

Even if the question has nowadays indeed moved from purely ethnic grounds to other markers of identity such as sexual orientation, religion or social class, Scottish identity has always been difficult to define for nineteenth and twentieth century nationalists or writers. Such a definition was however felt necessary by many in order to allow the existence of a separate nation and to differentiate Scotland from its southern neighbour. A French traveller had bluntly expressed this lack of a clear distinct identity when travelling to Scotland at the beginning of the seventeenth century: "Quant aux singularités dudit pays [Scotland], outre que c'est une recherche plus curieuse qu'utile, je n'en ay veu aucune, tant pour mon peu de demeure là, que pour l'avoir employé à autre chose"².

I am going to illustrate what Anthony Smith calls the 'cultural matrix of nationalism', that is to say how symbols, myths and most of the constituents of a sense of belonging came into being in Scotland. These were not only invented or 'imagined', as they are for most nations and their nationalist rhetoric, but were borrowed or transferred from one part of the country — the Highlands — to the whole nation. This process paradoxically took place in spite of the scorn and obvious hostility held towards the Highlanders. We can therefore speak of a cultural synecdoche as cultural attributes of the Highlands were made to represent, in popular imagery, the whole of the Scottish nation. This process also corresponds to what has now been described as 'Celticism', that is to say a system of construction and representation which bears similarity to Said's Orientalism. There is however, as Leerssen pointed out, a major difference: indigenous populations were not given a voice in the case of Orientalism, and were indeed often forbidden from complaining against injustice or simply stating their concerns. In the case of Celticism, there were writers from the so-called 'Celtic fringe' who were in fact writing and commenting from the inside and giving thus

² H. Rohan, *Voyage du Duc de Rohan, fait en l'an 1600, en Italie, Allemagne, Pays-Bas Uni, Angleterre, & Escosse*, Amsterdam, Louis Elzevier, 1646, p. 211.

more weight and a different perspective to these mental constructions³. I will study here one particular aspect of this creation and transfer, mainly the first attempt to create the blueprint of a Scottish identity after the 1707 Act of Union and the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion and what could be envisaged as some sort of proto-nationalist discourse: the presence of Macpherson's Bard hovering in the background, a figure recalling the Celtic origin of the nation and suggesting the former literary and cultural grandeur of Scotland.

The hostility between the Highlanders and the Lowlanders dates from the Middle Ages, when the so-called 'Highland line', a fictitious border between these regions, was first imagined. This frontier is a mental construction not only due to the geographical disposition of the country or to linguistic or social differences, but also mainly due to ignorance and prejudice⁴. This is how the Scottish historian John of Fordun described his nation in 1385:

The manners and customs of the Scots vary with the diversity of their speech. For two languages are spoken amongst them, the Scottish and the Teutonic [i.e. *Scots Gaelic*]; the latter of which is the language of those who occupy the seaboard and plains, while the race of Scottish speech inhabits the highlands and outlying islands. The people of the coast are of domestic and civilized habits, trusty, patient, and urbane, decent in their attire, affable, and peaceful, devout in Divine worship, yet always prone to resist a wrong at the hand of their enemies. The highlanders and people of the islands, on the other hand, are a savage and untamed nation, rude and independent, given to rapine, ease-loving, of a docile and warm disposition, comely in person, but unsightly in dress, hostile to the English people and language, and, owing to diversity of speech, even to their own nation, and exceedingly cruel⁵.

Fordun's descriptions influenced views and prejudice for centuries to come. Linguistic differences strengthened the opposition and the lack of understanding: Scottish Gaelic was for long considered a backward language with no literature and very little culture. The Highlanders were likewise considered as ignorant barbarians by many in Scotland. These views were reinforced by travel writers from the Lowlands, from England or from the continent who, for the most part,

³ J. Leerssen, "Celticism", in T. Brown, (ed.), *Celticism*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1996, p. 13. See also: M. Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture*, London, Croom-Helm, 1978 and M. Chapman, *The Celts. The Construction of a Myth*, London, Macmillan, 1992.

⁴ See: C. W. J. Withers, *Gaelic Scotland. The Transformation of a Culture Region*, London, Routledge, 1988.

⁵ W. F. Skene, (ed.), *John of Fordun's Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, The Historians of Scotland, vol. 4, Edinburgh, Edmonston & Douglas, 1872, p. 38.

were unable to converse with the locals in Gaelic or understand the social fabric of the Gaelic clannish society. It is however from the Highlands that a European literary revolution broke out in the 1760s. This corresponded, in fact, to an intellectual shift in the second-half of the eighteenth century which meant a reassessment of the periphery. The exploration and understanding of the so-called primitives was advocated by leading intellectuals such as Rousseau, who praised the qualities of the Noble Savage in 1754 and later Herder, who in 1765 considered primitive authenticity and spontaneity as a key to cultural understanding⁶. Even though a young Jerome Stone had started this process by collecting, transcribing and translating oral material in Scots Gaelic in *The Scots Magazine* and had himself praised this material as: "[...] hardly to be equalled among the chief productions of the most cultivated nations" one had to wait for the publication of James Macpherson's works for international recognition and the outburst of a literary fervour never matched before⁷.

Indeed, when Macpherson published his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Galic or Erse language* in 1760, he was probably far from imagining the consequences his mostly spurious translations would have on the British literary scene. Macpherson's poems became an undeniable influence for the later development of the English Romantic movement⁸. Irish and Scottish studies and literature were also likewise undoubtedly boosted by the Ossianic debates. Macpherson's literary forgery also held a long-lasting spell and influence on the eighteenth and nineteenth century European literary scene⁹. Macpherson's so-called translations became indeed highly fashionable in salons and literary circles on the Continent and were, ironically enough, very quickly translated into most European languages. In Germany the 'Sturm und Drang' writers were enthusiastic: Goethe's *Young Werther* abounds in Macphersonian atmosphere and even in Goethe's own

⁶ For Herder, see: H. Gaskill, "Herder, Ossian and the Celtic", in T. Brown, *Celticism, op. cit.*, p. 257-71 and U. Böker, "The Marketing of Macpherson: The International Book Trade and the First Phase of German Ossian Reception", in H. Gaskill, (ed.), *Ossian Revisited*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1991, p. 73-93, especially p. 84-87.

⁷ *The Scots Magazine*, n° xviii, 1756, p. 15-16. Quoted by Stafford, *The Sublime Savage. James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1988, p. 63. Regarding Stone's contribution to the debate, see: *ibid.*, p. 63 and D. Moore, (ed.), *Ossian and Ossianism, op. cit.*, vol. I, p. xxx and *ibid.*, p. 7-27.

⁸ See: F. Stafford, "'Dangerous Success': Ossian, Wordsworth, and English Romantic Literature", in H. Gaskill, (ed.), *Ossian Revisited*, Edinburgh, *op. cit.*, p. 49-72.

⁹ The twentieth-century Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid once remarked: "[...] *Ossian* has been as incomparable a service to pure Scottish and Irish Gaelic literatures as it was a tremendous force in all the literatures of Europe." H. MacDiarmid, *Scottish Eccentrics*. Edited by A. Riach, Manchester, Carcanet, 1993, p. 227.

translations of Macpherson's 'original' text. In France Lamartine, among others, used laudatory terms in his *Confidences* to refer to Macpherson's imagination and literary creation, putting him on an equal footing with Dante and Homer¹⁰. In Italy Cesarotti's translations of Ossian boldly broke with the Italian prosodic tradition and his works had wide repercussions on the subsequent Italian literary scene. By disputing the poetic superiority of the classical world and thus readjusting the cultural centre of gravity towards the northern nations, Macpherson's Ossian regenerated and undoubtedly gave a new and healthy momentum to European literary creation¹¹.

As far as Scotland was concerned, Macpherson, born in the Highlands and having read classics at Aberdeen University, seemed a perfect candidate for the role of spokesperson for a Scottish culture. By collating oral tales he heard in Gaelic in the Highlands and translating them into English he filled a void in the Scottish literary landscape and created a fascination for the Highlands. After the publication of his *Fragments*, Macpherson obtained money from his Edinburgh sponsors to return to the Highlands to collect more tales, in 1760 and 1761, before completing his translations in Edinburgh¹². He eventually published *Fingal* in 1762 and *Temora* in 1763. Scotland had at last a national epic which could be dated to the third century AD and a poet, a bard named Ossian for *Fingal* and *Temora*, who could rival Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. In spite of the Highland origin of these texts, and perhaps because of their somehow exotic origin, Macpherson gave Scotland the literary credentials the country needed in Europe at a time when scottophobia was rife in Britain: the Earl of Bute — the first Scotsman ever to hold the post of Prime Minister (from 1762 to 1763) — was heavily criticized, accused of nepotism and certainly of entertaining pro-Scottish sentiments. It is indeed interesting to see that Macpherson, in a challenging and provocative manner, dedicated *Fingal* to the

¹⁰ "[...] Ossian surtout, ce poète du vague, ce brouillard de l'imagination, cette plainte inarticulée des mers du Nord, cette écume des grèves, ce gémissement des ombres, ce roulis des nuages autour des pics tempétueux de l'Ecosse, ce Dante septentrional aussi grand, aussi majestueux, aussi surnaturel que le Dante de Florence, plus sensible que lui, et qui arrache souvent à ses fantômes des cris plus humains et plus déchirants que ceux des héros d'Homère. C'était le moment où Ossian, le poète de ce génie des ruines et des batailles, régnait sur l'imagination de la France. Baour-Lormian le traduisait en vers sonores pour les camps de l'empereur. Les femmes le chantaient en romances plaintives ou en fanfares triomphales au départ, sur la tombe ou au retour de leurs amants." Lamartine, *Ceuvres de Lamartine. Les confidences*, Paris, Hachette, 1897, p. 117.

¹¹ For a study on Ossian's reception and influence on the Continent, see: H. Gaskill, (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, London, Thoemmes, 2004. Regarding the influence in France, Colin Smethurst highlights Chateaubriand's attraction to Ossian: *ibid.*, p. 126-42. See: Ph. Laplace, "The Shadow of Ossian in Ugo Foscolo's and Vincenzo Monti's Works", in G. Leydier, (ed.), *Scotland and Europe, Scotland in Europe*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, p. 69-79.

¹² For details about Macpherson's trips, see: F. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, *op. cit.*, p. 113-32.

Earl of Bute: thus adding a reminder of the Scottish origin of the epic poem and a further pique for the English elite. Macpherson's opus should also be considered on a larger scale than purely for its contribution to literature or the controversies which arose regarding its legitimacy. As Kristmannsson wrote: "The major problem with many Ossianic debates is that while they seem to focus on the authenticity of a text, they are in fact about the authenticity of nations"¹³.

Macpherson's texts soon rallied a lot of intellectual support in Edinburgh from figures such as the playwright John Home, and as mentioned above, the philosophers Adam Ferguson and David Hume, the latter being at first enthusiastic about Ossian before confessing some doubts as to the authenticity of Macpherson's find¹⁴. It is interesting to consider John Home, one of Macpherson's most eager patrons, in the eighteenth-century Scottish context: Home, first a Church of Scotland minister, volunteered in a loyal corps to defend Edinburgh against the Jacobite rebellion. Home then left the ministry and became a playwright before working as private secretary to the Earl of Bute from 1757 to 1763; the latter, in a letter dated 5 October 1770, even referred to him as "my worthy bard"¹⁵. In 1763 Hugh Blair, Professor of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres at the University of Edinburgh, wrote a very influential and vehement defence of Macpherson's originals and of Macpherson's skills which was added to the *Works of Ossian* in the 1765 edition:

Though unacquainted with the original language, there is no one but must judge the translation to deserve the highest praise, on account of its beauty and elegance. Of its faithfulness and accuracy, I have been assured by persons skilled in the Galic tongue, who, from their youth, were acquainted with many of these poems of Ossian. To transfuse such spirited and fervid ideas from one language into another; to translate literally, and yet with such a glow of poetry; to keep alive so much passion, and support so much dignity throughout, is one of the most difficult works of genius, and proves the translator to have been animated with no small portion of Ossian's spirit¹⁶.

¹³ G. Kristmannsson, *Literary Diplomacy. The Role of Translation in the Construction of National Literatures in Britain and Germany 1750-1830*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2005, vol. I, p. 89.

¹⁴ See: F. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, *op. cit.*, p. 113-15; *ibid.*, p. 167-69.

¹⁵ See: H. Mackenzie, *The Works of John Home, Esq.*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 5; p. 49-50 and p. 149. Home wrote tragedies and Mackenzie says that one of them, *The Fatal Discovery*, was directly inspired by Macpherson's *Fragments*. H. Mackenzie, *ibid.*, p. 109. For an analysis of Home's play *Douglas* in a Macphersonian context, see: G. Kristmannsson, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 111-13.

¹⁶ H. Blair, "A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal", in H. Gaskill, (ed.), *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996, p. 399. For a short history of the publication of Blair's dissertation, see footnote 1 p. 542 in *ibid.*

A complex and sensitive issue was soon raised which clouded most of the debates on *Ossian's* literary value. Macpherson never managed to prove the genuineness of all the poems and tales he said he collected in the Highlands. The task the young schoolteacher had set himself — spurred by Home and the Edinburgh literary elite — was indeed a daunting one: Macpherson first had to collect the manuscripts from those who possessed them or take down the recitations that were made to him before translating from Gaelic and then — as he clearly admitted — adapt his material to suit the tastes of an English-speaking audience. Place-names and the names of many heroes were anglicized. Some of the plots were altered and Macpherson had to resort to creating a romantic and sentimental imagery adapted to his time. His fraud quickly became obvious to Gaelic and Celtic scholars and he soon got entangled in a web of lies and deceit concerning so-called manuscripts he was then asked to provide as proof to his claims regarding the authenticity of his discoveries; H. Gaskill remarks: "The answer to the question as to why he did not publicly display the old manuscripts seems, then, to be the obvious one that he had not translated from them"¹⁷. The literary controversy which ensued is then well known: Samuel Johnson accused him of merely fostering an illusion. Johnson, known for his Scottophobia, was also keen to place Macpherson's forgery into a national perspective: Scotland and the Highlands of Scotland: "[the] nation was wholly illiterate. Neither bards nor Senachies could write or read [...]. The bard was a barbarian among barbarians, who, knowing nothing himself, lived with others that knew no more. [...] If we know little of the ancient Highlanders, let us not fill the vacuity with Ossian"¹⁸. These debates still cause a lot of ink to flow, despite the scrupulous and rigorous scholarship initiated in the nineteenth century. The word 'Revisionist' has for instance often been used when Macpherson and his works are reassessed in a more positive light, focusing for instance on the influence he exerted on European literature rather than on the purely spurious side of his translations. The rows between 'Johnsonians' and 'Revisionists' are sometimes still acrimonious¹⁹. Evidence however shows that Macpherson had indeed used some first-hand authentic material, genuine Gaelic ballads he had heard recited when travelling to the Islands and Highlands or knew from his childhood. He had however adapted

¹⁷ H. Gaskill, (ed.), *Ossian Revisited*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁸ S. Johnson / J. Boswell, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland / The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Peter Levi, London, Penguin, 1984, p. 114-17.

¹⁹ See for instance: T. Curley's introduction to his *Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 1-21.

them to suit his own literary agenda and also remorselessly added a fair amount of his own poetic creation²⁰. Macpherson had for instance, when he was a student in Aberdeen, written and published some poems, notably one called 'The Highlander'. Critics were keen to point out the similar vocabulary and phraseology used by Macpherson as a poet and as Ossian's translator²¹. One of the most convincing accusations, and probably the one which put the last nail in Ossian's coffin, came from one of Macpherson's countrymen: Malcolm Laing, as a native Scotsman, understood perfectly well Macpherson's national pride and ambitions:

The origin of the poems may be distinctly traced. On awaking from a long lethargy that succeeded the Union, the Scots, with their national ardour, sprung forward towards industry and commerce, and began to vie with the English in every literary pursuit. [...] nothing was wanting but an epic poet to emulate Milton. We know that Homer and Milton were blind, but a third blind bard, like them the author of two epic poems, must be ascribed to imitation, not to accident²².

The fact that the attack came from one of his fellow-countrymen was significant, even though some of Macpherson's supporters were keen to point that Laing was neither a Highlander nor a Lowlander but an Orcadian²³. Nationality, as in the case of Johnson, or pseudo-ethnicity — as for Laing — muddled the debates²⁴.

²⁰ See: D. Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's 'Ossian'*, Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1952; D. Meek, "The Gaelic Ballads of Scotland: Creativity and Adaptation", in H. Gaskill, (ed.), *Ossian Revisited, op. cit.*, p. 19-48; D. Thomson, "Macpherson's Ossian: Ballads to Epics", in B. Almqvist, S. Ó Catháin, P. Ó Héalaí, (eds), *The Heroic Process. Form, Function and Fantasy in Folk Epic*, Dublin, The Glendale Press, 1987 and D. Thomson, "James Macpherson: the Gaelic Dimension", in F. Stafford & H. Gaskill, (eds), *From Gaelic to Romantic. Ossianic Translations*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1998, p. 17-26.

²¹ For Macpherson's early poems, "juvenilia" as he called them in his preface to the *Poems of Ossian*, (p. 410), see: D. Moore, (ed.), *Ossian and Ossianism, op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 31-118.

²² M. Laing, "Dissertation on the supposed authenticity of Ossian's poems", in M. Laing, *The History of Scotland*, London & Edinburgh, J. Mawmam & A. Constable, 1804, vol. 4, p. 434-35.

²³ One of Macpherson's friends, also one of his staunchest supporters, Revd Gallie, wrote: "[...] the attempt could not come more naturally than from Orcadians. Perhaps the severe checks given by the ancient Caledonians to their predatory Scandinavian predecessors raised prejudices not yet extinct." *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland, op. cit.*, p. 39.

²⁴ For instance the Englishman Thomas Gray, the author of a seminal poem called "The Bard" which predated Macpherson's works, wrote in a letter to Mason, 7 August 1760: "The Erse Fragments have been publish'd five weeks ago in Scotland. [...] I continue to think them genuine, th' my reasons for believing the contrary are rather stronger than ever: but I will have them antique, for I never knew a Scotchman of my own time, that could read, much less write, poetry; & such poetry too!" Cited in F. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage, op. cit.*, p. 163. Gray wrote to Macpherson for details, and he noted to his friend Wharton, 20 June 1760: "The letters I have in return are ill-wrote, ill-reason'd, unsatisfactory, calculated (one would imagine) to deceive one, & yet not cunning enough to do it cleverly. In short, the whole external evidence would make one believe these fragments (for so he calls them, tho' nothing can be more entire) counterfeit: but the external

Twentieth-century researches showed that Macpherson had indeed recourse to some Gaelic material, especially in *Fragments* and in *Fingal*, but that he adapted most of it²⁵. His work cannot then be considered as that of a translator in the modern sense of the word — not to mention the borrowings from classical literature and Macpherson's own poetical creation as pointed out by Laing²⁶. As critics have remarked, the style used by Macpherson and the way he introduces Ossian to the reader do also echo Thomas Gray's introduction of his Welsh Bard in his Ode²⁷.

As indicated by the title, Macpherson's first publication, *Fragments*, consists of different poems from different bards assembled together. Even though Ossian, the blind bard, does appear as a narrator in *Fragments*, he is not the main voice. This polyphonic discourse gives credit to Macpherson's image of the Highlands as a repository of ancient traditions and as a seat of culture more developed than previously presented. However, with the demand from the Edinburgh literati being for the discovery of an epic poet, Ossian becomes the main and only narrator in the following works. In *Fingal* and *Temora*, the bard tells the story of Fingal, his father, and the heroic battles which oppose Fingal's clan and the Northmen. A struggle for land possession of course, but also, from an allegorical point of view, a struggle to prove the existence of a Scottish historical significance, published fifty-five years after the Union and sixteen years after the battle of Culloden which sealed the fate of Scottish independence. The choice of a blind bard as narrator is not innocuous. Unable to describe the present he can only dwell in the past and evoke the former great deeds of his countrymen through his memories. Macpherson is also keen, throughout his writings, to insist on the isolation of the Highlanders: not only is Ossian blind and therefore incapable of

is so strong on the other side, that I am resolved to believe them genuine, spite of the Devil & the Kirk. It is impossible to convince me, that they were invented by the same man, that writes these letters. On the other hand it is almost as hard to suppose, if they are original, that he should be able to translate them so admirably." P. Toynbee and L. Whibley, (eds), *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*. Edited by in 3 volumes, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1935, letter 313, p. 680.

²⁵ "We can prove, in most cases conclusively, that Macpherson in the course of his writings made use of some fourteen or fifteen Gaelic ballads, and these cases will be examined. The use he makes of his material varied from ballad to ballad. In one of two instances there is little more than a passing reference; at the other end of the scale he works with a very close eye (albeit at times short-sightedly) on the ballad in question, and we can point with some degree of confidence to the exact source or sources which he used." D. Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's 'Ossian'*, Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1952, p. 9-10.

²⁶ See G. Kristmannsson, *Literary Diplomacy. The Role of Translation in the Construction of National Literatures in Britain and Germany, 1750-1830*, 2 vols, Frankfurt-am-Main, Peter Lang, 2005.

²⁷ F. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage, op. cit.*, p. 144-45. See "The Bard. A Pindaric Ode", in Th. Gray, *The Complete English Poems of Thomas Gray*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by J. Reeves, London, Heinemann, 1973, p. 77-82.

witnessing changes, but the community to which he belongs is also, because of its geographical location, immune to any possible contamination from the outside world, therefore stressing the primitive and pristine features of Ossian's community:

If tradition could be depended upon, it is only among a people, from all time, free of intermixture with foreigners. We are to look for these among the mountains and inaccessible parts of a country: places, on account of their barrenness, uninviting to an enemy, or whose natural strength enabled the natives to repel invasions. Such are the inhabitants of the mountains of Scotland. We, accordingly, find that they differ materially from those who possess the low and more fertile part of the kingdom. Their language is pure and original, and their manners are those of an antient and unmixed race of men. Conscious of their own antiquity, they long despised others, as a new and mixed people²⁸.

Indeed, what I want to emphasize it that besides their literary significance, Macpherson's writings should be read for their ideological significance. The very word he uses to describe his so-called discoveries, "Fragments" reminds us of a world having been broken apart and lying in tatters. It may well have been a gloomy reference to the post-Culloden Gaelic world well-known to Macpherson and to the disintegration of the Gaelic social system. Born and bred in the Highlands, Macpherson grew up in the vicinity of Ruthven barracks, a Hanoverian military stronghold victoriously assieged by the Jacobites in February 1746 when he was only a child²⁹. But the word 'Fragments' is also a call to study the empty spaces between each work, the vacuum and what lies hidden or semi-hidden between each poem and between all the subsequent works Macpherson produced. This allows us to highlight Macpherson's hidden agenda. Indeed, Macpherson felt the need to explain his so-called translation techniques in what Genette called paratexts, that is to say prefaces and dissertations meant to guide the reader through the text itself³⁰. These paratexts are also to be considered as a defensive measure, allowing him to fend off any possible attacks concerning the authenticity of his material. This is, for instance, how Macpherson explains the disconcerting absence of any religious, druidic or symbolic element in Ossian's epic poems:

²⁸ J. Macpherson, 'A Dissertation', in H. Gaskill, (ed.), *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works, op. cit., Temora*, p. 205-06.

²⁹ See: F. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage, op. cit.*, p. 18.

³⁰ G. Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, Paris, Seuil, 1982, p. 10.

It is a singular case, it must be allowed, that there are no traces of religion in the poems ascribed to Ossian; as the poetical compositions of other nations are so closely connected with their mythology. It is hard to account for it to those who are not made acquainted with the manner of the Scottish bards. That race of men carried their notions of martial honour to an extravagant pitch. Any aid given their heroes in battle, was thought to derogate from their fame; [...] 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 beings³¹.

But Macpherson also allows his proto-nationalist feelings and tendencies to surface. *Ossian's* function is to endow Scotland with the attributes the nation had longed for: the construction of a national cultural identity. Macpherson thus provides Scotland with what Smith called the "cultural matrix of nationalism"³².

Macpherson's rhetoric is brilliantly exposed: the tormented landscape of the West coast of Scotland, and Ossian/Macpherson's 'écriture' which of course often tends towards the sublime, is used as a poetic space to stir emotions. Integrity was the moral code of the Gaelic heroes he describes: Ossian's tales are very moralistic indeed. That period is undoubtedly cloaked in mythical and sensational attributes: it becomes a Golden Age one can only aspire to redeem and recover, as suits all nationalist rhetoric. Macpherson's nationalist ideology, even if he never expresses it explicitly, always lurks somewhere in the background. Commenting on Ossian's lays, the so-called translator declares:

Ages of barbarism some will say, could not produce poems abounding with the disinterested and generous sentiments so conspicuous in the compositions of Ossian; and could these ages produce them, it is impossible but they must be lost or altogether corrupted in a long succession of barbarous generations. These objections naturally suggest themselves to men unacquainted with the ancient state of the northern parts of Britain. [...] When virtue in peace, and bravery in war, are the characteristics of a nation, their actions become interesting, and their fame worthy of immortality. A generous spirit is warmed with noble

³¹ J. Macpherson, "A Dissertation concerning the Antiquity, &c of the Poems of Ossian the Son of Fingal", in H. Gaskill, (ed.), *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works, op. cit.*, p. 45-46.

³² "[...] intelligentsias sought to construct cognitive maps of a world of nations and to incalculable expressive moralities for collective emulation. To these ends they employed two main strategies: the use of landscape or poetic spaces and the use of history or golden ages. In fact, these strategies were rooted in popular attitudes to space and time and to popular attachments to home and fathers. It was these ancient beliefs and commitments to ancestral homelands and to the generations of one's forefathers that nationalists made use of in elaborating the new ideology, language and symbolism for a complex abstraction, national identity." A. Smith, *National Identity*, London, Penguin, 1991, p. 78.

actions, and becomes ambitious of perpetuating them. This is the true source of that divine inspiration, to which the poets of all ages pretended³³.

Macpherson also very skilfully tries to construct a pseudo-historical narrative in Ossian. The paratexts allow him to construct and defend his reading of Scottish history and this illustrates the process of transference at the heart of his ideological motivations. Indeed he more than once argued that the origin of the Celtic myths surrounding Fingal was Scottish and not, as scholars widely acknowledge, Irish. The Scots themselves were not, as Bede, Buchanan had said, Irish settlers³⁴. On the contrary, the Scots were Caledonians who had crossed the Irish Sea and settled in Ireland. Macpherson uses Ossian to support these claims. *Fingal, an Epic Poem* tells the story of how the Irish hero Cúchulainn calls Fingal and the Scots for help in order to overcome northern invaders (Lochlinns in *Fingal*). The anachronistic and historical dimensions of this episode certainly do not matter, as Ossian's lay is part of a mythical texture and Macpherson is a mythmaker³⁵. However Macpherson is at pains to explain in his paratexts, using pseudo-historical arguments, the historical validity of Ossian's poems. We now clearly see why Macpherson felt the need to anglicize place-names and the names of heroes, like Ossian for Oisín, Fingal for Fionn, Darthula for Deirdre or Cuchullin for Cúchulainn: it was an attempt to sever any umbilical cords with Irish mythology and place Scotland as the origin of Celtic myths and of both nations, his ideological ambition being the creation of a national epic, historical transference. We could of course call this 'distortion', and it was central to his forgery: "From internal proofs it sufficiently appears, that the poems published under the name of Ossian, are not of Irish composition. The favourite chimaera that Ireland is the mother-country of the Scots, is totally subverted and ruined"³⁶.

The validity of this process of transference and plundering is well illustrated by Roland Barthes' work on myths: a myth is a speech or discourse first stolen and then restored. According to him myths are to be treated as a

³³ J. Macpherson, "A Dissertation concerning the Antiquity, &c of the Poems of Ossian the Son of Fingal", in H. Gaskill, (ed.), *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works, op. cit.*, p. 48-49.

³⁴ See Buchanan, *History of Scotland in Twenty Books*, The Third Edition, Revised and corrected from the Latin original, in Two Volumes, London, 1773, vol. 1, p. 63-64.

³⁵ The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Annals of Ulster*, give 790 as the initial date of the Viking raids in Ireland, Scotland and England; however, Macpherson has placed Ossian in the IIIrd century. The Irish cycles also do sometimes refer to northern invaders, but certainly not to the same extent as Macpherson's *Ossian*.

³⁶ J. Macpherson, "A Dissertation", in H. Gaskill, (ed.), *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works, op. cit.*, p. 217.

semiological system and are therefore elements whose transfer, that is to say theft and restoration, is a natural phenomenon in narrative discourse³⁷. This is of course especially true when one considers Scotland's symbolic and mythical texture and the narrative relationships between Scotland, Ireland and the various regions of Scotland.

Macpherson had however opened up a new debate: from initially being a Scottish-English controversy based on the authenticity of the originals and the literary value of Ossian, the row quickly involved Ireland whose role as the cradle of Celtic mythology was called into question. David Hume in a letter to Blair confessed that the Irish, in the person of Edmund Burke, had been from the start suspicious of Macpherson's assumptions³⁸.

Macpherson was indeed a mythmaker. His work created a repository for a region, the Highlands, and Macpherson himself was very keen to have this synecdoche, this transfer from the region to the nation, in order for Scotland to be part of a literary pantheon and also, through a common culture, to define and to locate a sense of national identity. Macpherson's *Fragments* and his later writings were the first opus to start a transference of culture and of identity that was to play a major part in the subsequent cultural life of Scotland. Sir Walter Scott, despite having often confessed his lack of faith in Macpherson's spurious declarations, admitted however that Scotland needed Ossian for a poetic awakening. More than the blatant literary fraud and the subsequent wave of hysteria, Macpherson had started a fascination for the Highlands and for their symbols which went on for centuries, actively reinstated by Walter Scott himself in his Waverley novels for instance. But Scott, like Macpherson, also used the Highlands' symbolic imagery for political reasons, even though these reasons were opposed to Macpherson's nationalist interests. Scott was a Unionist, and he gave official status to Macpherson's cultural synecdoche when, as one of the main organizers of George IV's visit to Scotland in 1822, the first visit of a British

³⁷ "[...] le mythe est un système particulier en ceci qu'il s'édifie à partir d'une chaîne sémiologique qui existe avant lui: c'est un système sémiologique second. Ce qui est signe (c'est-à-dire total associatif d'un concept et d'une image) dans le premier système, devient simple signifiant dans le second. [...] le mythe est une parole volée et rendue". R. Barthes, "Le mythe aujourd'hui", in R. Barthes, *Ceuvres complètes*, tome 1, nouvelle édition revue, corrigée et présentée par Eric Marty, Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 828; *ibid.*, p. 838.

³⁸ "I was told by Bourke [sic], a very ingenious Irish gentleman, the author of a tract on the Sublime and Beautiful, that on the first publication of Macpherson's book, all the Irish cried out, *We know all those poems; we have always heard them from our infancy*;" Letter dated 19 September 1763, in D. Moore, (ed.) *Ossian and Ossianism*, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 128. Cited in M. Mac Craith, "We know all these poems': The Irish Response to *Ossian*", in H. Gaskill, *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

monarch since the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion, Scott insisted the King wore a Stuart tartan and a kilt, the kilt now regarded as the most conspicuous Scottish symbol being itself an invention which fits in perfectly well with the Celticist interpretation³⁹. Scott, using then a motif of the Highland social fabric, declared Scotland's allegiance by proposing a toast to "The Chief of the Clans... the King"⁴⁰. Transference and cultural synecdoche were by then given an official status which Scott pursued with avidity in his ballads and novels and which the Scottish Celtic Twilight writers, notably Fiona Macleod, raised to a distinctive status at the end of the nineteenth century⁴¹. Macpherson's poetical and aesthetic genius was more significant than the conclusions on the spuriousness of Ossian's poems⁴². That was the poetical vein that the Celtic Twilight poet was keen to stress.

³⁹ Voir: "The Felie-Beg, no part of the Ancient Highland Dress", Ivan Baillie of Aberachan, 22 March 1768, in: *The Edinburgh Magazine or Literary Miscellany*, vol. 1, March 1785, p. 235. See also: H. Trevor-Roper, "The Highland Tradition of Scotland", in E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 15-41.

⁴⁰ R. Mudie, *A Historical Account of His Majesty's Visit to Scotland*, Second edition, Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1822, p. 286. See also: *The Scotsman*, 31 August 1822, vol. vi, n° 293, p. 275. For an analysis of Scott's symbolic use of the Highlands imagery, see: Ph. Laplace, "L'institution du corpus imaginaire gaélique dans la littérature écossaise: de Macpherson à Scott; entre idéologie et synecdoque culturelle", *Etudes écossaises*, n° 6, 2000, p. 129-45

⁴¹ See: Ph. Laplace, "La représentation des Highlands par le 'crépuscule celtique': idéologie et synecdoque culturelle chez William Sharp / Fiona Macleod", *Triade*, n° 8, 2003, p. 67-81.

⁴² See: F. Macleod's introductory note in his edition of Ossian: W. Sharp, (ed), *The Poems of Ossian, Translated by James Macpherson with notes and with introduction by William Sharp*, Edinburgh, John Grant, 1926, p. ix-xxix, especially p. xxiii-xxiv.