Faked Translations

James Macpherson's Ossianic Poetry

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Setting the Scene

In 1760 James Macpherson published translations of old Gaelic poems under the title *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*.[1] They were received with great enthusiasm and further titles followed in quick succession, including the two epic poems *Fingal* (1761 / 62) and *Temora* (1763). Yet, the debate about their authenticity began soon after their publication and was most prominently represented by the English writer and critic Samuel Johnson. He wrote to Macpherson in 1775: "I thought your book an imposture from the beginning, I think it upon yet surer reasons an imposture still. For this opinion I give the publick reasons which I here dare you to refute" (Johnson 2014: 169).

Today, James Macpherson is widely accepted to be the author of these texts, and the poems of Ossian themselves to be pseudo-translations, i.e. "texts which have been presented as translations with no corresponding source texts in other languages ever having existed" (Toury 1995: 40). According to Fiona Stafford "Macpherson drew on traditional sources to produce imaginative texts not modelled on any single identifiable original" (1996: vii). He claimed to have found long lost manuscripts of Scottish heroic poetry from the 3rd century CE and presented them in form of his own 'translations'. Although Macpherson based some of his alleged translations on collected material, no written source text could ever be pro-

1 | I use the phrase 'poems of Ossian' in accordance with Gaskill and others not as the title of the edition of 1773, but as an umbrella term for all the Ossianic poetry by Macpherson. For a quick overview of the publication timeline: *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1st and 2nd edition 1760), *Fingal* (1st edition 1761, 2nd edition 1762), *Temora* (1763), *Works of Ossian* (1765) including the "Critical Dissertation" by Hugh Blair, *Poems of Ossian* (1773), heavily revised edition. The 1996 edition edited by Gaskill is used for all references and citations.

duced in order to refute the accusations of forgery, and in the second half of the 18th century the poems of Ossian became one of the most notorious fakes in literature, sparking an almost unparalleled controversy about their authenticity.

Nevertheless, Macpherson's Ossianic poetry can be read as a translational process on many levels, even though the poems are not interlingual translations in the conventional sense. He not only translated the material he had collected and the stories of his childhood in the Scottish Highlands into the dominant English language, but he also transferred the oral tradition of Scotland into the written tradition of the superstratum. By setting the poems of Ossian in a mythical pre-Roman and pre-Christian period, Macpherson moved the 'epic genesis' of Scotland as a nation into a time predating the British rule and the subsequent loss of nationally distinct identity.[2]

In this paper, I aim to describe Macpherson's poetic strategies and his authenticating methods. Therefore, I will look at the external and internal features that try to make the poems of Ossian appear as if they were genuine interlingual translations from ancient Gaelic sources.

Macpherson as Expert and the Scholarly Edition

Opportunity not only makes a thief, but also a forger. The right opportunity for Macpherson presented itself during his time at the University of Aberdeen and in Edinburgh, where he studied the classics and met scholars and mentors such as Thomas Blackwell, Hugh Blair and John Home. Scottish literature was also beginning to be met with greater public interest, and research into these territories was encouraged. Home, an admirer of Scottish folklore, had to persuade an initially reluctant Macpherson to translate a few authentic pieces of poetry he had collected (Stafford 1996: xii). Blackwell's research was not only focused on the literature of the classical period, but also on the society and the environment that brought about that poetry, and Blair was to become one of the strongest supporters of Macpherson's work and the authenticity of the poems of Ossian. This intellectual climate, combined with the contemporary interest in so-called primitive societies, must have inspired Macpherson to respond to a demand for fresh and equally meaningful northern poetry. This convinced him to compile 'translations' of so-called epic poems in the hopes of creating a national epic for Scotland, such as Milton had done for England.

2 | The characterisation of these poems as epic poetry is already a strong indication of Macpherson's ambition. The idea of nation states is of course a concept of the 18th century and much more symptomatic of Macpherson's own time. The poems of Ossian offered a basis for identification in the sense of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (2006).

Macpherson's upbringing put him in the perfect position. He was born in Ruthven, in the Scottish Highlands where he was brought up in a Gaelic-speaking community and accustomed to the oral tradition of the bards of the clans. Yet, he also experienced first-hand the serious effects of British oppression. In 1745, the nine-year-old Macpherson witnessed the Jacobite Rising with all its devastating consequences for the collective identity and the heritage of the Scottish clans. In its wake, many customs and traditions, such as the tartan plaid and playing the bag pipes, were prohibited.[3] However, one of the worst consequences must have been the subsequent ban on using the Scottish Gaelic language. Therefore, Macpherson's forgery can also be considered an attempt to recuperate what was left of the literary tradition of the Highlands and to rehabilitate a people, thought to be uncultured and uncivilised.

These circumstances provided Macpherson with all he needed to produce a successful forgery. He was an insider of Scottish traditions and, at the same time, he had profited from an academic education. He had not only learned how classic works of poetry were studied, but also how they were supposed to be presented. When the scholars in Aberdeen showed interest in this kind of poetry and offered to sponsor an excursion to the Highlands, Macpherson seized the moment and delivered. It was further to his advantage that a nostalgia for a different past and a longing for new points of identification had coincided during the Renaissance and the Scottish Enlightenment. Ossian could draw on both. On the one hand, the poems constructed a past which might have even better suited to the contemporary taste than the real antiquity, because they were composed to exactly please that taste. On the other hand, Ossian provided a new frame of reference that worked as a canvas for projections of romantic longing as well as national identity.

On his excursions to the Highlands Macpherson did, in fact, collect material, on which he later based his alleged translations, but it is "reasonably clear" (Gaskill 1991: 6) that the majority was fabricated by Macpherson himself. Although he never disputed that he had also collected some poems from oral sources, Macpherson insisted that he had found written sources of a previously unknown Scottish epic poem, in worth alike to those of Homer and Virgil. The Gaelic originals were, as reported by Macpherson, not all lost. He even offered to make them accessible to every public library, "but no subscribers appearing", he simply announced their publication without following through in the hopes nobody ever would (*Advertisement* preceding 1st edition of Fingal, 1761 / 62, in Macpherson 1996: 32). This was a very risky move, but anticipating the request for the originals and blaming the lack of interest from libraries apparently worked as a deflection strategy.

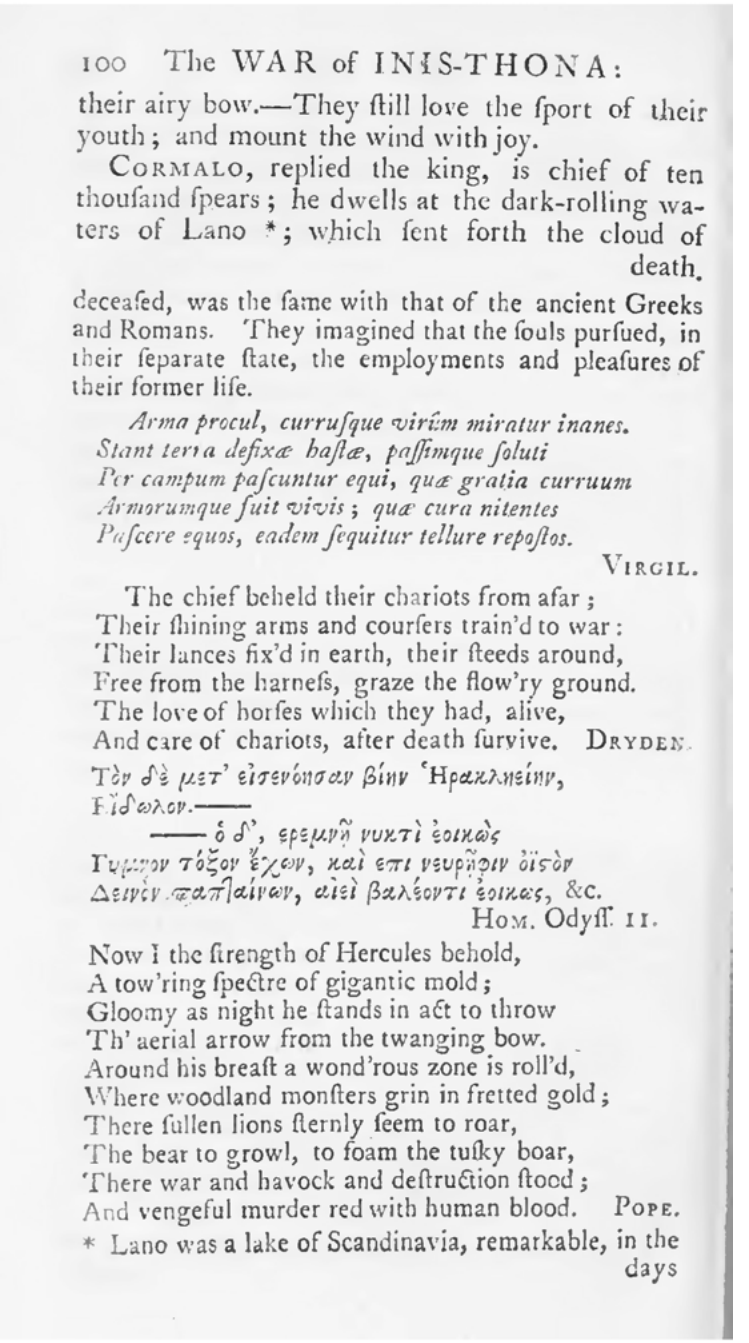
3 | The Jacobite Risings were a series of rebellions between 1688 and 1746 with the aim to return Stuart kings to the throne of England and Scotland. "The Act of Proscription" (1746), especially the Dress Act, were introduced as forms of repression.

By publishing the poems as a translation Macpherson styled himself as a legitimate intermediary and interpreter of the originals. He claimed that the poems would not have found an audience in their original language. Therefore, Macpherson reasoned, they had to be translated into English to make them accessible and further their reach. If there were some irregularities within the work, they could be easily explained and openly addressed, because the texts were allegedly transferred not only from another era but also from another language. Textual authority is even further displaced from Macpherson himself through the narrator figure of Ossian, who is named as the author of the poems on several occasions. It is Ossian who relates the battles and adventures of his father Fingal and his son Oscar. But Ossian is blind, so his account cannot come from his eye-witness testimony, creating yet another margin, another space, through which contradictions or inconsistencies could be explained or justified.

> The ideas, it is confessed, are too local, to be admired, in another language; […] It was the locality of his description and sentiment, that, probably, kept Ossian so long in the obscurity of an almost-lost language. (Macpherson 1996: 214)

As Macpherson explained, the reason why this discovery had been only made so recently and how the poems could have been lost for such a long time despite their importance to the history of Scotland and Ireland, is their style. The translation would also never do justice to the beauty of the original, but Macpherson argues it to be his scholarly and patriotic duty to the Highland tradition to make them available to the public.

Macpherson claimed to have only found fragments at first before 'discovering' the longer epic poems *Fingal* and *Temora*. So, it would be fitting that such old and recently-resurfaced manuscripts would need to be put in context. Typically, a forger must choose between either rejecting the canon or integrating their own forgery into it (Grafton 1990: 59). Macpherson fully embraced the latter. He created a corpus of references and commentary embedding Ossian's poems deeply into the canon of classic European literature. Macpherson not only offered his own commentary to the poems and the events related in them, but he also added passages most notably from the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and *Paradise Lost* in the original language as well as in translation. Additionally, he provided advertisements, prefaces, announcements and dissertations by himself and Blair. The consequence of this elaborate corpus of references was that the editions using footnotes for all the annotations and comments were full of Macpherson, Homer, Virgil and Milton, and sometimes very little poetical text (Gaskill 1996: xxv). This strategy, to almost cover the text with quotations and further information, continued to divert the focus from Macpherson and towards the authors he used as his sources. The difficulty was to do so without revealing these prescursors to be, in fact, part of the sources of the Ossianic poetry.



100 The WAR of INIS-THONA:

their airy bow.—They ſtill love the ſport of their youth; and mount the wind with joy.

CORMALO, replied the king, is chief of ten thouſand ſpears; he dwells at the dark-rolling waters of Lano *; which ſent forth the cloud of death.

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.

Arma procul, curruſque virûm miratur inanes.
Stant terra defixæ haſtæ, paſſimque ſoluti
Per campum paſcuntur equi, quæ gratia curruum
Armorumque fuit vivis; quæ cura nitentes
Paſcere equos, eadem ſequitur tellure repoſtos.

VIRGIL.

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. DRYDEN.

Τὸν δὲ μετ' εἰσενόησαν βίην Ἡρακληείην,
Εἴδωλον.——
—— ὁ δ', ερεμνῇ νυκτὶ ἐοικὼς
Γυμνὸν τόξον ἔχων, καὶ επι νευρῇφιν ὀϊστὸν
Δεινὸν παπταίνων, αἰεὶ βαλέοντι ἐοικως, &c.

HOM. Odyſſ. 11.

Now I the ſtrength of Hercules behold,
A tow'ring ſpectre of gigantic mold;
Gloomy as night he ſtands in act to throw
Th' aerial arrow from the twanging bow.
Around his breaſt a wond'rous zone is roll'd,
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. POPE.

* Lano was a lake of Scandinavia, remarkable, in the days

Figure 1: Facsimile scan from The Works of Ossian, *page 100.*

The annotations and commentaries were meant to suggest a serious scholarly interest in and debate of his material. By setting the whole project in the framework of a scholarly translation Macpherson created a context that was easily recognised by his intended audience. In addition to the footnotes in the text, Macpherson wrote two dissertations, which were added to the editions, as well as "A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal" by Hugh Blair.[4] The Scottish author and critic seems to have been Macpherson's partner in crime. He came to the poems' defence and wrote his "Critical Dissertation" to support their claim of authenticity, which was included in every edition after 1765. The cooperation of Blair and Macpherson contributed widely to the perception of the poems as 'genuine translations'.

These paratexts contributed to the work's appearance as a well-researched and investigated publication in the tradition of contemporary editions of classic texts. In doing so Macpherson tried to situate Ossian's poems before some of their sources. He established a timeline that created an interior logic, which supported the narrative of a vivid literary tradition in the Highlands, 'primitive' but comparable to other ancient writing. With this twist, Macpherson was then able to suggest that analogies between Ossian and Milton are based on Milton's knowledge of Ossianic poetry and not the other way around.[5] Milton, the epic poet of the British Empire, becomes by implication the imitator of Ossian.

Macpherson's marketing strategy was, as we can see, just as important as the structure of the poems themselves. Apart from his upbringing and educational background, Macpherson continued to work on his image. He established himself as an expert and gave the poems the look of a proper historical edition. In the paratexts Macpherson went to great lengths to supply the reader with a lot of detail. In the advertisement to the second edition of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, Macpherson noted:

> In this edition some passages will be found altered from the former. The alterations are drawn from more compleat copies the translator had obtained of the originals, since the former publication. (1996: 3)

By adding this kind of information and by repeatedly discussing specific translation decisions in his footnotes, Macpherson created the impression of himself as a diligent researcher and translator, concerned with taking great care and willing to revise his translations based on new developments and discoveries made in his

4 | It is not clear if or to what extent Blair knew that the poems were a forgery. Even Johann Gottfried Herder defended the poems authenticity in "Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Oßian und die Lieder alter Völker" ([1773] 1968).

5 | References to Macpherson's literary precursors can only be found in the epic poem *Fingal* and the poems that were published alongside it.

field. But Macpherson also informed his audience in detail about the process of his editorial and translational work. He continued in the advertisement with the following announcement:

> It may be proper to inform the public, that measures are now taken for making a more full collection of the remaining works of the ancient Scottish Bards; in particular for recovering and translating the heroic poem mentioned in the preface. (3)

His confident manner was not only boastful behaviour but also a way of measuring the interest of his audience and canvassing for sponsors for his next excursions.

Translation Method and *Translatese*

Disguising his poems as translations provided Macpherson with the opportunity to realise another authentication method within the text. He had to make the poems look and sound like they were from the 3rd century, but by offering himself as an interpreter (in both senses), Macpherson constructed a narrative that allowed for a much greater margin of variation and cross-referencing. Simply imitating an older language could have made Macpherson's texts much more vulnerable to being discovered as fakes. By admitting his involvement in the texts as a translator, however, he had an already rich tradition of translation strategies to use and to learn from at his disposal. Chapman's, Pope's and Dryden's then already famous translations of epic poetry had a great influence on Macpherson. Not only did they serve as a tool of validation and authentication for the poems through references in the paratexts, but they were also part of the canon of important translations into which Macpherson wanted to integrate his Ossian. Furthermore, openly naming his sources created a self-referencing logic that, at first, dispersed any accusation of forgery. Any similarities between Ossian and their translations that could be argued, were a) due to the Scottish bards having the same level of literary sophistication as the Greeks and Romans, and b) because of completely justifiable translation decisions based on the study of predecessors in the field of literary translation.

Ossian's poetry is set in a pre-Christian era, but the poems are still full of spiritual and transcendental episodes, such as ghost appearances and nature intervening in the fate of the heroes. Ossian was not only meant to tell a Highland story, but to create the legitimate historical and literary backdrop for the projection of a sophisticated and cultured Scottish nation before the invasion of foreign powers. The epic poems of *Fingal* and *Temora* even deal with the defence of Scottish territory against invaders. Appearing to be the sole translator also allowed Macpherson to tell a story of heroic resistance. Consequently, the poems had a much more significant message to convey. Macpherson claimed no less than that they "might serve

to throw considerable light upon the Scottish and Irish antiquities" (1996). To give the poems the necessary *gravitas* for the task, he drew on religious traditions, and especially the conventions of Bible translations.

Jerome, the translator of the *Vulgate*, famously coined the phrase: "non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu", which has often been understood as a general rule for translation. Nonetheless, he made an important exception for the translation of the Bible: "absque scripturis sanctis, ubi et verborum ordo mysterium est."[6] In religious texts the word order is part of the divine message and should not be altered. While the translations by Chapman, Pope and Dryden are more focused on literary and aesthetic aspects, they are much freer and took much greater interpretative liberties regarding the source texts. They did not have to adapt their translation methods in accordance with theological dogma.

In the preface to *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, Macpherson alleged that his translations are "extremely literal" and that "even the arrangement of the words in the original has been imitated" (1996: 6). By claiming to apply this method of translation, Macpherson positioned his poems in a religious context. Hugh Blair supports Macpherson's claim in his "Critical Dissertation" as follows:

> 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 Gaelic 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 spirit. (1996: 399)

Blair praised Macpherson's approach even though he must admit that he does not know Gaelic. He stressed Macpherson's ingenuity to remain truthful to the 'original' and simultaneously create superb poetry. Not only did Blair consider the poems a work of genius, but he went so far as to suggest Ossian might be speaking through Macpherson.[7]

6 | "to render not word for word but sense for sense"; "except in the case of holy scriptures where even the order of the words is a mystery" (Jerome, 395 BC: "Letter to Pammachius. On the best Method of Translating", my translation).

7 | This remark by Blair, however, seems like a very broad hint at his involvement in the forgery.

Based on these two premises, the canonical translations of epic poetry and the biblical translation theories, Macpherson created a form of *translates*.[8] *Translatese* has gained quite a few connotations, predominantly negative ones. The OED — for example — defines the term as: "The style of language supposed to be characteristic of (bad) translations; or unidiomatic language in a translation." Wiktionary offers: "awkwardness or ungrammaticality of translation, such as due to overly literal translation of idioms or syntax." Macpherson described and explained his method of translation to justify the outcome, which is — as I want to show — a kind of deliberately employed *translatese*.

The consequences of Macpherson's intention and method on the language of the poems can be seen in the following example. It is a dialogue from the beginning of *Fingal*, Book II, but it is worth keeping in mind that it is still related by the narrator Ossian. The passage is a typical example from Ossianic poetry. The ghost of the recently killed chief Crugal appears to Connal and reveals to him the outcome of the next battle. Connal asks for his spiritual support. Both paragraphs are in direct speech, yet this is not indicated by quotation marks. Instead, Macpherson used variable length-dashes as rhythmic punctuation:

My ghost, O Connal, is on my native hills; but my corse is on the sands of Ullin. Thou shalt never talk with Crugal, nor find his lone steps in the heath. I am light as the blast of Cromla, and I move like the shadow of mist! Connal, son of Colgari, I see the dark cloud of death: it hovers dark over the plains of Lena. The Sons of green Erin shall fall. Remove from the field of ghosts.––– Like the darkened moonii he retired, in the midst of the whistling blast.

Stay, said the mighty Connal, stay, my dark-red friend. Lay by that beam of heaven, son of windy Cromla! What cave of the hill is thy lonely house? What green-headed hill is the place of thy rest? Shall we not hear thee in the storm? In the noise of the mountain-stream? When the feeble sons of the wind come forth, and, ride on the blast of the desart? (1996: 65)

In the poem's case, the layout is of interest, because of the importance Macpherson put on the appearance of the text, including the typeset of the poems themselves. There are frequent exclamations, invocations and apostrophes, such as "O Connal" in the first line. Epithets, like "son of windy Cromla", repetitions and rhetorical questions serve to authenticate the oral tradition and the epic style. The focus on the bardic figure and the oral tradition of the Highlands was certainly part of Macpherson's agenda to promote his Scottish heritage. Yet, it also worked to highlight the

8 | I use the term *translatese*, the OED and Wiktionary both use *translatese* and *translationese* synonymously.

similarities to his predecessors, like Homer, Virgil and Milton, in whose tradition Macpherson tried to locate Ossian, and whose epics were also narrated by bardic figures.

The choice of words is rather limited, but Macpherson managed to create an air of otherness and 'raw' tradition at the same time. The imagery of the passage works with very few variations but creates a mystical and strange scenery, especially through its use of colour terms. Darkness ("dark", "darkened", "dark-red") and light are contrasted as metaphoric conflict between life and death. The green landscape of Ossian's heroes provides the backdrop to their actions. It is the reason and support for their battles. The repetitions of certain colour terms and the use of hyphenated compounds, such as "green-headed" and "dark-red" could point to the difficulties the translator encountered during his work. As perhaps the precise colour term could not be found or was not available to the translator, he chose to approximate it by using a compound. Occasionally, it seems like Macpherson styled himself as a worse translator than he might have been, to lend credibility to the poems' authenticity.[9]

On the other hand, hyphenated colour terms are a very familiar sight to readers of translated versions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in English. It became a feature closely identified with Homeric style. The interplay of apparently helpless translation decisions and the (apparently) involuntary references to characteristics of epic poetry run like a common thread through Macpherson's whole project. The assertion Grafton makes in regard to the Renaissance forger Giovanni Nanni, therefore, seems to apply to Macpherson's strategy, too. The intricate web of references paradoxically gives the "texts an air of moral as well as factual superiority" (Grafton 1990: 61).

It is obviously possible to read the use of unidiomatic idioms and imagery, such as "shadow of mist" and "What cave of the hill is thy lonely house?", as another factor pointing to the texts being a translation. They give the impression of being overly literal and seem to struggle with the conventions of their supposed target language, English. The structure and the concept of the similes are common enough for the reader to get the meaning Macpherson tries to convey. Yet, their choice of comparison carries enough foreignness and cause to question their meaning for them to bring across the intended mystic remoteness of an old and strange text in need of explanation. Macpherson provided this in his ample commentary on the poems.

The passage quoted above, for example, has two footnotes. In the first, Macpherson elaborated on the relation of names and epithets; thus, giving his readers more

9 | In the revised edition of 1773 Macpherson put a much greater focus on his influence on the texts. It might be an indication that he, indeed, felt like selling his genius short by remaining in the shadow reserved for a translator.

background information and raising the impression of scholarly effort and personal insight into Highland conventions. The second footnote is even more telling of Macpherson's strategy. He added a quote from Pope's translation of Homer, suggesting a connection between this passage and Crugal's ghost retiring like the moon: "Like a thin smoke he sees the spirit fly,/ And hears a feeble, lamentable cry" (Macpherson 1996: 425 n.8). Macpherson succeeded in placing his Ossianic heroes alongside the Homeric pantheon, and subsequently invoking their shared 'primitive' but pure origins.

Although Macpherson owed much to his literary predecessors, he did not imitate their versification. Homer and Virgil wrote in hexameter, Milton in blank verse and Dryden used heroic couplets for his translation of the *Iliad*. Macpherson's use of metric prose, on the other hand, was a rather modern feature. Kirby-Smith describes it as a kind of proto-free verse on several occasions, which is itself indebted to a translation tradition (1996: 260). It is a form that can also be found in Psalm translations and the King James Bible. Therefore, it is not surprising that the poems of Ossian have a similar rhythm. Again, Blair supported Macpherson's choice:

> The measured prose which he has employed, possesses considerable advantages above any sort of versification he could have chosen. While it pleases and fills the ear with a variety of harmonious cadences, being, at the same time, freer from constraint in the choice and arrangement of words, it allows the spirit of the original to be exhibited, with more justness, force, and simplicity. (1996: 399)

Yet, sometimes the poems tend to drone on. Macpherson's syntax is paratactic, with rarely more than ten words per phrase, and the rhythm is mostly created by the interjections, repetitions and the regularity of apostrophes and epithets. The freedom Blair mentions was something Macpherson made ready use of. By occasionally using awkward word order, such as beginning phrases with a verb, Macpherson could further create the impression of a translated text. In doing so, he indicated that the source language had different syntactical rules than English.[10] The 'translator' simply complied with his own translation theory, in which he clearly states his commitment to being as literal as possible, thus making them sound strange and unusual. At the same time these stylistic features tried to subtly locate the poems in a tradition not at all uncommon to the readers of Ossian. Macpherson's use of the outdated pronouns "thy" and "thee" (Lass 1999: 153), also typical of the language of the King James Bible, served to make the poems sound archaic, but also established a connection to well-known texts. It is worth remembering here, that 'thou' and 'thee' were, of course, not

10 | Scottish Gaelic has a verb-subject-object word order.

in use in the 3rd century either. Macpherson positioned his poems consciously in a religious context, specifically the Bible of a Scottish king who became the king of England and Ireland as well, making his political agenda a part of his 'translation' strategy.

The language of Macpherson's poems could well be described as 'awkward or ungrammatical', but above all their 'idioms and syntax' give the impression of an 'overly literal translation'. Through Macpherson's creative use of language and his systematic mimicking of translation, he indeed developed a form of *translatese*, a language that does not affect the reader through structural complexity but through its expressiveness.

Summing Up

Today, Macpherson's translations seem to imitate their predecessors quite obviously, and yet, they created a whole universe around the bard Ossian and the epic battle of bringing about the Scottish nation. Presenting the poems as translations and framing them with quotations from Homer, Virgil and Milton, and comments by Macpherson himself as well as by his ally Blair, gave the publication the same look as any other edition of a translation of classics. The use of Macpherson's *translatese* and the advertised method of literal translation placed the texts in a para-religious context and gave them gravity. At the same time, this constructed language worked to imitate an allegedly primitive source language.

Macpherson negotiated between many different layers and various forms of translation. Sometimes he even managed to unite seemingly obvious contradictions, such as imitation and creative invention. He did so by distributing them between different layers and weaving a complex net of references. All these aspects were designed to prove the poems' authenticity and, according to Grafton, contradictions such as these can paradoxically give "texts an air of moral as well as factual superiority" (1990: 61). The poems, certainly, gained a lot of attention and a widespread audience. The fact that their melancholic longing seems to have struck a chord in a period that would soon birth Romantic poetry, similarly concerned with this sense of loss, has also been in their favour.

Macpherson mediated between a supposedly primitive culture of the past and the sensitivity of his own age. With the help of his bard Ossian, Macpherson managed to satisfy the growing aesthetic demand for original genius and, by imitating an allegedly primitive source language without many descriptive passages, he was able to paint a surprisingly vivid picture of the 'times' of his bard.

Macpherson's strategies worked like Edgar Allen Poe's purloined letter. Even with all his sources and literary predecessors so obviously laid out, no-

body noticed. In his prefaces and dissertations, he addressed his own shortcomings, trying to anticipate any criticism so as to deflect it pre-emptively, causing many to overlook what was right in front of them. This method, paradoxically, worked extremely well. The sympathetic reader wanted to see the connections and recognise the canonical similarities as much as the idiosyncrasies of ancient Gaelic poetry. Therefore, the referencing and paralleling of other works created a tactical diversion that seemed to verify the authenticity of the poems.

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