

## The Invention of Ossian

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In recent years a number of Homerists have approached the so-called Homeric Question by investigating Homer as author and “inventor” of the poetic tradition that we know as the *Iliad*.<sup>1</sup> Graziosi turns this approach on its head and instead explores how the ancient Greeks invented the figure of Homer in a multitude of ways and in various places and at various points in time (hence her title *Inventing Homer*). In the eighteenth century, however, scholars and translators, most notably Alexander Pope, understood the term invention quite differently, assessing the “genius” of Homer in terms of “fire” and “invention.” Such explorations of the “invention” of Homer at different historical moments raise the question as to whether the “of” in Martin West’s phrase “the invention of Homer” is a subjective or objective genitive. Did antiquity “invent” Homer, or did Homer invent the poetic tradition that is now encompassed by his name? For Martin West, the genitive is both subjective and objective. Homer is indeed the inventor of our *Iliad*, but Homer himself was to some extent invented by his successors, the Homeridai, who are, according to West, responsible for the invention of the very name Homer. In other words, there was a Homer, but his name wasn’t Homer.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I am going to discuss a parallel process of “invention,” the figure of Ossian in the Gaelic traditions of the Scottish Highlands that were made famous by James Macpherson in the 1760’s. In 1760 Macpherson published his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gallic or Erse Language*, followed by *Fingal, An Ancient Epic* in 1761 and *Temora, An Epic Poem* in 1763. Macpherson attributed this body of poetry to a blind third century Gaelic warrior turned bard named Ossian (the son of Fingal, aka Finn Mac

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., B. C. Fenik, ed., *Homer: Tradition and Invention* (1978), M. L. West, “The Invention of Homer” (1999), and B. Graziosi, *Inventing Homer* (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the anonymous formulation from a school essay quoted by Graziosi 2002:235: “Actually, Homer was not written by Homer but by another man of that name.” (Graziosi notes that a similar student remark was apparently known to Mark Twain.) For West’s discussion of the name of Homer and the Homeridai, see West 1999:366–372. For other theories (ancient and modern) about the origin of the name, see Graziosi 2002:51–54 and 79–82 with citations of recent scholarship *ad loc*.

Cumail in Irish myth), whose poetry he translated at the request of intellectuals from Edinburgh. The “poems” (which were in fact rendered in rhythmic prose) were a huge success, enchanting England and Europe, and had a significant impact on subsequent literature, helping to usher in the Romantic Movement. It was soon discovered, however, that Macpherson’s “translations” of Highland epics were largely poems of his own creation, based loosely on the oral songs and tales and manuscripts that he had collected in trips to the Highlands in 1760 and 1761. From their first publication it has been debated to what extent Macpherson invented Ossian and Ossianic poetry, with such well known contemporary critics as Samuel Johnson claiming that the whole of Ossianic poetry was a complete forgery with no basis in tradition.<sup>3</sup>

The similarities between Macpherson’s recreation of the legendary figure of Ossian and the conception of Homer at this time are striking. Both figures were seen by Macpherson and many of his contemporaries to be primitive folk poets of “original genius” whose monumental epic poems were transmitted orally for centuries and became corrupted through time, and both were thought to embody the creativity of a primitive culture. Macpherson saw Ossian as the inventor of the Scottish tradition of heroic poetry, whose works had been corrupted and scattered over time. Likewise, Homer had since antiquity been credited with inventing the Greek epic tradition. Conversely, Macpherson himself was accused of inventing not only an oral tradition, but also a “Homer” behind the tradition. In what follows I attempt to analyze the complex relationship between tradition and innovation (or “invention”) in the poetry of Macpherson by examining some of the intellectual currents and influences that combined for the construction of Macpherson’s Ossian and his Ossianic poetry, and I will focus in particular on the role of Homer and Homeric poetry in this construction.<sup>4</sup>

By exploring the concept of invention by way of Macpherson’s Ossian, I hope as well to reveal some of the many ways in which we ourselves continue to invent Homer even as we attempt to identify and analyze Homer’s invention. It is not my purpose in the present paper to critique, as I have already done elsewhere, the common use in Homeric scholarship of the term invention to refer to supposed mythological or narratological innovations on the part of a master poet.<sup>5</sup> Rather I am here concerned with the process by which we invent the very idea of Homer every time we write about Homeric poetry. I submit that the parallels between Macpherson’s invention of Ossian and the modern inventions of Homer come most sharply into view wherever we find those most vexing terms “orality” and “literacy” deployed,

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<sup>3</sup> For Johnson’s views, see further below.

<sup>4</sup> Macpherson claimed to translating Gaelic verse, but his translations are rendered in rhythmic prose, making the question of what to call Macpherson’s work rather difficult. In this paper I refer to it as poetry, since Macpherson had as much of a creative role in the composition of the “original” verse as he did in the act of translating that verse. Ruthven 2001 has coined the term “Macphossian” to denote the Ossianic works of Macpherson.

<sup>5</sup> For this critique, see at Dué 2002:83–89.

defined, and refined. Remarkably, Macpherson struggled with many of the same problems in connection with Ossian that would ultimately constitute the Homeric Question. The Ossianic controversy helps us to put this Homeric Question in the context in which it was born. We will see that theories about orality and the Homeric epics have always been closely tied to attempts to define the nature of Homer's authorial genius, and, explicitly or implicitly, continue to be today.

## ***The Meaning of Invention***

The complexity of the word invention goes beyond the subjective and objective genitives that accompany it in English. Deriving ultimately from the rhetorical term *inventio*, it was used by Cicero and others up until the sixteenth century to denote the discovery of subject matter and choice of materials. By the sixteenth century the meaning of this word began gradually to move beyond the realm of oratory and became associated with creativity in its various forms. For example, in the 1605 essay *The Advancement of Learning*, Francis Bacon combines the term invention with the following concepts: "inquiry and invention" (I.3), "inventions and experiments" (IV.11), "wisdom, illuminations, and inventions" (VIII.6). We can see that for Bacon the term could refer to things discovered as well as to the process of discovery.

But perhaps the most notable early use of the term invention with reference to Homer is by Alexander Pope, who opens his preface to his 1715 translation of the *Iliad* as follows:

HOMER is universally allow'd to have had the greatest Invention of any Writer whatever. The Praise of Judgment Virgil has justly contested with him, and others may have their Pretensions as to particular excellencies; but his Invention remains yet unrival'd. Nor is it a Wonder if he has ever been acknowledg'd the greatest of Poets, who most excell'd in that which is the very Foundation of Poetry. It is the Invention that in different degrees distinguishes all great Genius's: The utmost Stretch of human Study, Learning, and Industry, which masters every thing besides, can never attain to this. It furnishes Art with all her Materials, and without it Judgment itself can at best but steal wisely.<sup>6</sup>

For Pope, who was endeavoring with his translation to prove that Homer was not merely the rival of Virgil but in fact his superior, the genius of the poet Homer lies in the notion of invention, which he calls "the very Foundation of Poetry." According to the poetics of the day, Virgil was the greater artist, but Pope's assertion that invention "furnishes Art with all her Materials" points ahead to Romantic notions of genius and the eventual supremacy of Homer in conventional assessments of the two poets.

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<sup>6</sup> Pope 1715:§1–5. For this discussion of Pope's use of the terms fire and invention I am indebted throughout to the analysis of Simonsuuri 1979:57–64. Another important eighteenth-century discussion of "Homer's invention" is that of Alexander Gerard (1774).

The term invention, for Pope, comprises many things at once: originality, raw creativity, and what would later be called imagination.<sup>7</sup> Very closely related to it is the term “fire,” which, as he makes clear just a few sentences later in the Preface, Pope uses to denote both the inspiration of the poet and its effect on the poet’s audience, who is to be carried away by the force of the poetry:<sup>8</sup>

It is to the Strength of this amazing Invention we are to attribute that unequal’d Fire and Rapture, which is so forcible in *Homer*, that no Man of a true Poetical Spirit is Master of himself while he reads him. What he writes is of the most animated Nature imaginable; every thing moves, every thing lives, and is put in Action. If a Council be call’d, or a Battle fought, you are not coldly inform’d of what was said or done as from a third Person; the Reader is hurry’d out of himself by the Force of the Poet’s Imagination, and turns in one place to a Hearer, in another to a Spectator. The Course of his Verses resembles that of the Army he describes,

οἱ δ' ἄρ' ἴσαν ὡς εἴ τε πυρὶ χθὼν πᾶσα νέμοιτο

*They pour along like a Fire that sweeps the whole Earth before it.* ‘Tis however remarkable that his Fancy, which is every where vigorous, is not discover’d immediately at the beginning of his Poem in its fullest Splendor: It grows in the Progress both upon himself and others, and becomes on Fire like a Chariot-Wheel, by its own Rapidity. Exact Disposition, just Thought, correct Elocution, polish’d Numbers, may have been found in a thousand; but this Poetical Fire, this *Vivida vis animi*, in a very few. Even in Works where all those are imperfect or neglected, this can over-power Criticism, and make us admire even while we disapprove. Nay, where this appears, tho’ attended with Absurdities, it brightens all the Rubbish about it, ‘till we see nothing but its own Splendor. This Fire is discern’d in *Virgil*, but discern’d as through a Glass, reflected, and more shining than warm, but every where equal and constant: In *Lucan* and *Statius*, it bursts out in sudden, short, and interrupted Flashes: In *Milton*, it glows like a Furnace kept up to an uncommon Fierceness by the Force of Art: In *Shakespear*, it strikes before we are aware, like an accidental Fire from Heaven: But in *Homer*, and in him only, it burns every where clearly, and every where irresistibly. (§12–20)

Here we see that fire too is linked to genius. It represents a force that is both innate in the poet as well as one that can be transferred from the poet to the audience. Pope’s assessment of the relative amounts of fire found in other poets implies that Homer is the supreme genius, because in Homeric poetry fire is found everywhere, undampened by technique or art.

This articulation of the essence of poetry presents an acute problem for the translator. How can a translation, no matter how accurate, convey the original “fire” and “invention” of

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<sup>7</sup> For invention as imagination see Simonsuuri 1979:61.

<sup>8</sup> The term fire, like invention, has roots in antiquity: see again Simonsuuri 1979:60–61.

Homeric poetry?<sup>9</sup> Pope's attempt at a solution was to create a poem of his own invention, inspired and based closely on the Homeric text, but by no means a strict imitation. In this one respect Pope was following in the footsteps of George Chapman, who believed that he had a special connection to Homer, which he articulated in Neoplatonist terms, that allowed him to surpass all other translators that had come before him in revealing the true meaning of the Homeric texts.<sup>10</sup> Chapman produced a draft of his translation of the *Iliad* in only a few weeks, and Pope to a certain extent approved of this method, noting that Chapman worked as Homer himself must have composed:

His own Boast of having finish'd half the *Iliad* in less than fifteen Weeks shews with what Negligence his Version was performed. But that which is to be allowed him, and which very much contributed to cover his Defects, is a daring fiery Spirit that animates his Translation, which is something like what one might imagine Homer himself would have writ before he arriv'd to Years of Discretion. (§208–209)<sup>11</sup>

The “daring fiery Spirit” that suffuses Chapman's translation is indicative of Chapman's own genius as a poet and his connection on that level with Homer. Pope hoped to infuse his own translation with that same fire and invention.

Ironically, one result of this attempt by Pope to instill fire and invention into his translation was an *Iliad* keenly attuned to Pope's own poetics and the poetics of the day.<sup>12</sup> The meter is rhyming heroic couplets, and the poetry is polished, prompting the often quoted remark by Bentley “It is a pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer.” Pope's *Iliad* was greatly admired in its own day but was also to be extremely influential for centuries to come, in many ways forming a new standard by which epic would be judged. In other words, Pope's poem obeyed the rules while at the same time imposing new ones.

Despite the admiration that he earned for his inventive translation, Pope was nevertheless quickly accused of invention in the negative sense of forgery—a charge that would be echoed against the work of Macpherson half a century later. In 1785, two decades after the publication of *The Works of Ossian*, the poet William Cowper wrote of Pope's translations: “The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, in his hands, have no more of the air of antiquity than if he himself had invented them.”<sup>13</sup> Cowper, of course, went on to publish his own translations in 1791, in English Blank verse, thereby continuing the cycle of inventing Homer for the next

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<sup>9</sup> On this point see Simonsuuri 1979:62.

<sup>10</sup> On Chapman's translation see Underwood 1998, 16–28.

<sup>11</sup> On Pope's approval of Chapman's method see also Simonsuuri 1979:60.

<sup>12</sup> See Simonsuuri 1979:58–59 and Underwood 1998:29–42.

<sup>13</sup> From Cowper's essay entitled *Critical Remarks on Pope's Homer*. Originally printed in *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1785 under the pseudonym Alethes (“Truth”), the essay can now be read in Webb 1982:174–179.

generation. His aim was to restore the Homeric “simplicity” that he felt was lacking in Pope’s translation.<sup>14</sup> As we shall see, this emphasis on Homer’s simplicity was as rooted in conceptions about Homer in Cowper’s day as Pope’s heroic couplets were rooted in the poetics of his.

## ***Inventing Ossian***

I propose to turn now to Macpherson’s (shall we say again) inventive translations of Highland poetry and his alleged invention of the figure of Ossian. In a letter of 1763, David Hume describes to Professor Hugh Blair (author of a *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* that asserts the authenticity of Macpherson’s poetry) the reception that Macpherson’s work was having in England in the years immediately following its publication:

I have the pleasure of frequently hearing justice done to your dissertation, but I never heard it mentioned in a company, where some one person or another did not express his doubts with regard to the authenticity of the poems which are its subject, and I often hear them totally rejected, with disdain and indignation, as a palpable and most impudent forgery... My present purpose is to apply to you... to give us proof that the poems are, I do not say so ancient as the age of Severus, but that they were not forged within these five years by James Macpherson.<sup>15</sup>

Hume’s letter cuts to the heart of the questions that even today to some extent haunt Macpherson’s poetry.<sup>16</sup> What is the nature of the material Macpherson was claiming to translate, and what is the relationship between the poems he produced and the traditional material on which it was based? Did Macpherson “invent” Ossian and Ossianic poetry any more than Chapman or Pope invented the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*?

James Macpherson was born in 1736 and raised in the Scottish Highlands not far from Ruthven Barracks, a fortress erected by the British army after the 1715 Rising, in which Scottish (and later English) Jacobites rebelled against King George I. Macpherson was well

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<sup>14</sup> See Webb 1982:172–173.

<sup>15</sup> For more on Hume’s letter, see Wordsworth 1996.

<sup>16</sup> The *Works of Ossian* continue to be cited everywhere as the premier examples of literary forgery. Much of the first 16 pages of Ruthven’s 2001 book, *Faking Literature*, is devoted to Macpherson’s work as a kind of test case. While conceding that “its mixture of Ossianic residues with Macphossianic embellishments results in a textual hybridity which destabilises the commonsense notion that a literary text is either genuine or bogus,” Ruthven nevertheless refers to the *Works* as “the canonical texts for anybody interested in either committing or studying literary forgery” (5), “bogus Ossian” (7), “the key text for analysts of literary forgery” (13), and a “richly foundational episode in the annals of modern spuriousity” (15). On Macpherson’s work as an act of literary forgery see also the discussions of Trevor-Roper 1983, Grafton 1990, Haywood 1993, and Groom 2002.

versed in the Gaelic mythological traditions that were still vibrant during his lifetime even as the English were vigorously attempting to suppress Highland culture. During much of Macpherson's childhood and adolescence, the members of his clan (led by Macpherson's uncle, Ewan Macpherson of Cluny) participated in the violence surrounding Charles Edward Stuart's failed attempt in 1745 to claim the British throne. After the ultimate defeat of the Highland rebels the victorious British army imposed strict measures designed to wipe out Highland traditions, such as the wearing of tartan plaid and the playing of bagpipes. In 1752, at the age of sixteen, Macpherson went to study at the University of Aberdeen. There he studied with professors who were themselves the students of Thomas Blackwell, who was the principal of Marischal College in Aberdeen at the time.<sup>17</sup> Blackwell's extremely influential book, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735), attributed Homer's genius to the environment in which he lived and, in connection with that environment, his life's experiences. As we shall see, Blackwell's theories about Homer would play an important role (whether directly or indirectly) in shaping Macpherson's ideas about the figure of the bard and warrior Ossian and his relationship to Ossianic poetry.

Macpherson returned to Ruthven in 1756 and became a school teacher. At the same time, he was attempting to publish his own poetry, and between 1755 and 1760 published several poems in *Scots Magazine*.<sup>18</sup> He also apparently collected some manuscripts of Highland poetry at this time. Much of Macpherson's early poetry celebrated Highland traditions, including the unpublished poem, "The Hunter," and Macpherson's first epic, *The Highlander*. *The Highlander* does not purport to be a translation of traditional Highland poetry, but does in fact owe much to traditional material and points ahead in many ways to his Ossianic poems.<sup>19</sup> In 1759, Macpherson met by chance the Scottish playwright John Home, who first asked Macpherson to translate Highland poetry. Home then introduced Macpherson to Hugh Blair, a prominent professor at the University of Edinburgh (soon to be the Regius Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres), who likewise eagerly sought translations of Highland poetry. Macpherson seems to have been reluctant at first, arguing that it would not be possible to reproduce the "spirit and fire of the original."<sup>20</sup> Macpherson soon complied, however, and produced a poem entitled "The Death of Oscur." As would be the case with his subsequent Ossianic poetry, "The Death of Oscur" contains characters familiar from Scottish mythological traditions, but otherwise departs dramatically from traditional material and does not seem to be based on any single Gaelic original. In the following year, Macpherson published his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the Gallic or*

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<sup>17</sup> For more on Macpherson's professors, the curriculum of the University of Aberdeen at this time, and Blackwell's influence, see Stafford 1988:24–39.

<sup>18</sup> For more on Macpherson's early poetry, see Stafford 1988:40–60.

<sup>19</sup> See Stafford 1988:67–70.

<sup>20</sup> See Stafford 1988:78.

*Erse Language* (among which was included “The Death of Oscur”), a collection of fifteen unconnected prose pieces, together with a preface written by Hugh Blair.

Despite their loose relationship with the surviving Gaelic poetry of the time, the *Fragments* were never presented as anything other than direct translations of manuscripts collected by Macpherson. A second edition of the fragments (published in the same year as the first) asserts: “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.” Nevertheless, at least in scale and scope, the *Fragments* were far more accurate renditions of Highland poetry than *Fingal* and *Temora* would be, and for this both Macpherson and Blair were almost apologetic. For Macpherson and Blair, the short fragments were disappointing in that they were not recognizable as part of an epic poem akin to the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*.<sup>21</sup> Blair, influenced by Macpherson’s theories, spoke of the *Fragments* as the trace remains of a lost epic that Macpherson believed must have existed.<sup>22</sup> It is worth excerpting a significant portion of the preface here:

The public may depend on the following fragments as genuine remains of ancient Scottish poetry. The date of their composition cannot be exactly ascertained. Tradition, in the country where they were written, refers them to an era of the most remote antiquity: and this tradition is supported by the spirit and strain of the poems themselves; which abound with those ideas, and paint those manners, that belong to the most early state of society. The diction too, in the original, is very obsolete; and differs widely from the style of such poems as have been written in the same language two or three centuries ago... Though the poems now published appear as detached pieces in this collection, there is ground to believe that most of them were originally episodes of a greater work which related to the wars of Fingal. Concerning this hero innumerable traditions remain, to this day, in the Highlands of Scotland. The story of Oscian, his son, is so generally known, that to describe one in whom the race of a great family ends, it has passed into a proverb; “Oscian the last of the heroes.”

There can be no doubt that these poems are to be ascribed to the Bards; a race of men well known to have continued throughout many ages in Ireland and the north of Scotland. Every chief or great man had in his family a Bard or poet, whose office it was to record in

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<sup>21</sup> See Stafford 1988:97.

<sup>22</sup> It is more accurate to say that Blair and Macpherson each supported the belief system of the other. Blair was already working on his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (published 1783) when he met Macpherson in 1759. These lectures included “The Origin and Nature of Figurative Language,” “The Sublime in Writing,” and the “Nature of Poetry—its Origin and Progress.” In his biography of Blair, R. Schmitz puts it this way: “Macpherson’s stuff was meat for Blair’s theories, and Blair’s theories were... the food on which Macpherson’s poetical efforts throve and fattened” (Schmitz 1948:44).



verse, the illustrious actions of that family. By the succession of these Bards, such poems were handed down from race to race; some in manuscript, but more by oral tradition. And tradition, in a country so free of intermixture with foreigners, and among a people so strongly attached to the memory of their ancestors, has preserved many of them in a great measure incorrupted to this day...

Of the poetical merit of these fragments nothing shall here be said. Let the public judge, and pronounce. It is believed, that, by a careful inquiry, many more remains of ancient genius, no less valuable than those now given to the world, might be found in the same country where these have been collected. In particular there is reason to hope that one work of considerable length, and which deserves to be styled an heroic poem, might be recovered and translated, if encouragement were given to such an undertaking... The last three poems in the collection are fragments which the translator obtained of this epic poem; and though very imperfect, they were judged not unworthy of being inserted. If the whole were recovered, it might serve to throw considerable light upon the Scottish and Irish antiquities.

It was here in the final sentences Blair's preface that the theory of a lost Highland epic was first articulated. He speaks of an oral tradition and a "race" of Bards, who transmitted the poetry from the remote past to the current day. He suggests that this epic, "which deserves to be styled an heroic poem," could be recovered, an undertaking to which he would not only give encouragement, but which he would finance as well. Blair does not discuss in detail the presumed author of this epic, Ossian, who is the speaker of several of the fragments; he refers only to "the Bards" as authors. But Ossian was a traditional figure in Celtic myth, the son of the hero Fingal, and many Gaelic ballads are put in the mouth of Ossian, who is imagined, as Blair points out, as "the last of the heroes." It would be the publication of *Fingal, An Epic Poem* (which was explicitly attributed to Ossian) in 1761 that would establish for non-Gaelic speakers the primacy of Ossian as author and primitive bard *par excellence*.

*Fragments of Ancient Poetry* was a great success, and, aided by the fundraising efforts of Hugh Blair, Macpherson set out in August of 1760 to collect more fragments of Gaelic poetry, in search of Scotland's lost epic. But, as with the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, Macpherson soon came to believe that the short ballads and prose narratives he was able to collect were only the last remaining vestiges of an epic that had disintegrated over the many centuries since the lifetime of Ossian. He therefore felt compelled to reconstruct this epic based on the sum total of his knowledge of the tradition—though Macpherson himself would never acknowledge that he had done so. The result was *Fingal, An Ancient Epic*, published in 1761, followed soon after by *Temora, An Epic Poem* in 1763. Both were accompanied by Macpherson's notes on the material. An expanded edition of the two poems was published in 1765 as *The Works of Ossian*. Included in this edition were Hugh Blair's defense of Macpherson, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of*

*Ossian*, and, as an appendix, letters that had been collected by Blair testifying to the accuracy of Macpherson's translations.<sup>23</sup>

For the next several decades, even as poets and artists were being inspired to create their own Ossianic compositions, scholars published vehement attacks against and defences of Macpherson's work. Experts in Irish and Welsh language, literature, and history, English critics, and other interested learned people questioned the authenticity of the poems on various levels and sought proof of the poems' antiquity and the accuracy of the translations.<sup>24</sup> Samuel Johnson, who was one of Macpherson's fiercest critics, went so far as to go on a tour of the Highlands in an attempt to prove that Ossianic poetry did not exist before Macpherson.<sup>25</sup> The debate continued until Macpherson's death in 1796, at which point the Highland Society of Scotland initiated a comprehensive investigation into the controversy. The *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland, Appointed to Inquire into the Nature and Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian*, published in 1805, concluded that while Macpherson had indeed made use of Gaelic originals for the plot of his poems and had even translated many passages directly from Gaelic exemplars, his epics were largely the products of his own imagination.<sup>26</sup> Even after the publication of this authoritative report, editions of *Ossian* continued to be published for decades to come by scholars arguing for or against their "authenticity."<sup>27</sup>

## Macpherson's Ossian

Macpherson's *Ossian* is thus a complex blend of traditional figure, the legendary bard and hero of Scottish myth, and a poet of Macpherson's own invention. What was Macpherson's *Ossian* like? As we have seen, Hugh Blair's preface to *Fragments of Highland Poetry* said little about the alleged composer of the poetry. Fragment VIII, however, provides a clear picture of the bard:

By the side of a rock on the hill, beneath the aged trees, old Ossian sat on the moss; the last of the race of Fingal. Sightless are his aged eyes; his beard is waving in the wind. Dull through the leafless trees he heard the voice of the north. Sorrow revived in his soul: he began and lamented the dead.

These words were quite literally translated into a pictorial form on the front page of *Fingal*. There too *Ossian* sits among the rocks with his long flowing beard and mountains in the

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<sup>23</sup> As Stafford points out, however, these letters were not as supportive of Macpherson's work as Blair's *Dissertation* asserts. See Stafford 1988:169. For more on the publication history of the Ossianic corpus see the edition of Gaskill 1996.

<sup>24</sup> For an overview of the debate see Stafford 1988:163–178.

<sup>25</sup> He published his findings in *Journey to the Western Isles* (1775).

<sup>26</sup> In 1952, D.S. Thomson identified the Gaelic poems used by Macpherson and published them as *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1952). For more on the relationship of Macpherson's work to traditional Gaelic poetry see Bysveen 1982.

<sup>27</sup> See especially the editions of Macfarlan 1807, Campbell 1822, and Clerk 1870.

background. Macpherson's Ossian is a blind old man, full of sorrows, who laments the heroes of the past in a first person narration.



**Figure 1**

**Detail of the front page of Macpherson's *Fingal* (1761)**

The retrospective quality that pervades the works and that is evident here seems to have been an integral part of the character of Ossian in Gaelic tradition long before Macpherson, as were his age and blindness.<sup>28</sup> But as Fiona Stafford points out, these qualities inevitably linked him with poet/prophets like Homer and Milton.<sup>29</sup> In antiquity Homer was consistently portrayed as blind and this conception of Homer persisted into the eighteenth century.<sup>30</sup> The belief in a blind Homer derives at least partially from the Homeric texts themselves, most notably the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, in which the narrator proclaims that he is a blind man from Chios, and *Odyssey* book 8, in which the blind poet Demodokos entertains the feasting Phaeacians: "him the muse had dearly loved, but she had given to him both good and evil, for though she had endowed him with a divine gift of song, she had robbed him of his

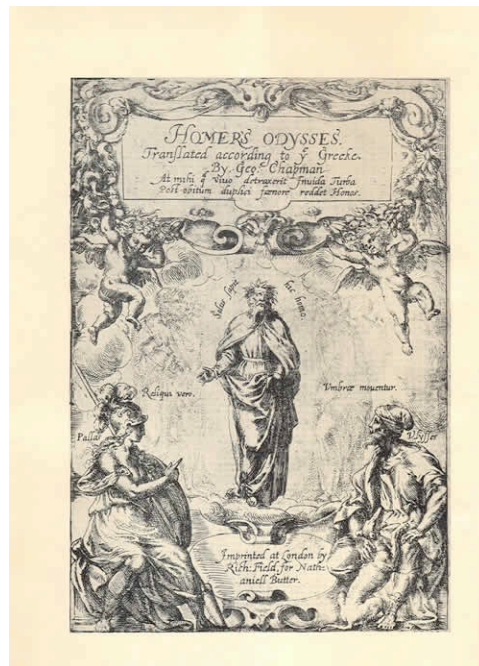
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<sup>28</sup> Stafford 1988:142, compares the Ossianic poetry contained in *The Book of the Dean of Linsmore*, a collection of Gaelic poetry compiled between 1512 and 1526 by James and Duncan MacGregor. For the Homeric *Odyssey* as a poem about the end of the heroic tradition see Martin 1993.

<sup>29</sup> Stafford 1988:143–144, who argues that blindness serves quite a different purpose in Macpherson's poetry than in these other works.

<sup>30</sup> For ancient views of Homer's blindness Graziosi 2002:125ff. By the eighteenth century the "Homeric Question" was beginning to be articulated, and such scholars as D'Aubignac, Perrault, Bentley, and Vico had begun to question traditional views about Homer as poet, arguing that the Homeric poems were composed orally and transmitted over the course of many generations by rhapsodes. Nevertheless, the traditional view of Homer as blind bard persisted and was espoused by such scholars as Parnell (whose 1715 life of Homer accompanied Pope's translation of the *Iliad*) and Blackwell (1735).

eyesight” (*Odyssey* 8.63–64). But an equally important blind figure in Homer is Teiresias, the “seer” and prophet of Apollo whose ability to know the past and future and to interpret the will of the gods was directly linked to his blindness. Robert Lamberton has pointed out how the frontispiece to Chapman’s 1615 translation of the *Odyssey* equates the blind Homer with the visionary Teiresias.<sup>31</sup> A comparison of this image of Homer with Macpherson’s own depiction of Ossian on the frontispiece of *Fingal* shows how intertwined the three figures—that is, Homer, Teiresias, and Ossian—have become in the hands of Macpherson.



**Figure 2**  
**Frontispiece to Chapman’s *Odyssey* (1615)**

Unlike Teiresias, however, Ossian’s visions are only of the past, not the future, and in this respect he shares the function of Homer, who recalls the glory of the heroes who died long ago. Fragment VIII continues:

How hast thou fallen like an oak, with all thy branches round thee! Where is Fingal the King? where is Oscur my son? where is all my race? Alas! in the earth they lie... What dost thou, O river, to me? Thou bringest back the memory of the past.

<sup>31</sup> See Lamberton 1986:8–9.

Ossian takes his inspiration from nature: he hears the “voice of the North” through the trees, which activates his sorrow, and the river activates his memory. The heroes of the past, including his father, Fingal, and even the next generation, his own son Oscur, have fallen like oak trees. Ossian is the last of these heroes, and all he can do is lament past glory.

In just this brief excerpt, we can see how Macpherson’s conception of Ossian, despite having roots in Highland heroic traditions, owes a great deal to the intellectual and literary trends of the mid-eighteenth century, particularly as they relate to Homer. To begin with the literary, we can see Macpherson’s use of Homeric similes to give the poetry an epic flair: the comparison of fallen heroes to trees is frequent Homeric image, sometimes elaborately drawn out.<sup>32</sup> But even Macpherson’s insistence that Ossianic poetry constitute epic betrays an eighteenth century worldview, one in which epic is considered simultaneously the highest and most primitive form of expression.<sup>33</sup> As we have seen, the *Fragments* were presented in their very title and in Blair’s preface as excerpts of a grander, epic whole. In fact, it would be Macpherson’s recasting of Highland poetry into an epic form that would most offend his Highland compatriots.<sup>34</sup>

Macpherson’s debt to Greek and Latin epic is not limited to the mere use of similes; the similes themselves have affinities everywhere with those of Homer and Virgil. Malcom Laing produced an annotated edition of Ossian in 1805 with parallel passages from Virgil, Homer, and Milton, but, remarkably, these similarities are often signalled by Macpherson himself in the notes.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, this phenomenon alone, as I now propose to show, gives us great insight into Macpherson’s understanding of the nature of epic and the primitive bard. As we shall see, many of the literary aspects of Macpherson’s work cannot in fact be separated from the intellectual environment in which Macpherson lived and was educated.

Kirsti Simonsuuri has gone so far as to say: “It is not entirely cynical to say that if the poems of Ossian had not existed, it would have been necessary to invent them.”<sup>36</sup> We have already seen that Macpherson studied under the students of Thomas Blackwell, whose *Enquiry*

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<sup>32</sup> See especially the description of the death of Sarpedon in *Iliad* 17.49–60.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Stafford 1996:xiv: “he had succeeded in bringing together apparently contradictory aesthetic ideals with remarkable harmony. The traditional neo-classical view of the epic as the highest form of poetry had been combined, through the development of the bard figure and his personal memories, with the newer demands for originality, individuality, and spontaneous composition.”

<sup>34</sup> See Stafford 1988:169: “Above all, it was the pseudo-epic form that most disappointed the Highlanders. Even James Macdonald, who admired *Fingal* and *Temora* greatly, wished that ‘Mr. Macpherson had not given them in that form for it is not the natural dress of Ossian’ and the same objection has always been raised by any reader familiar with genuine Gaelic ballads.”

<sup>35</sup> See Stafford 1988:137–139.

<sup>36</sup> Simonsuuri 1979:111.

into the *Life and Writings of Homer* argued for a close connection between the environment in which a poet lived and the notion of “genius.” Homer was able to compose works of genius because he lived in a primitive historical period most conducive to experiencing and observing the kinds of events that make up great poetry. In the eighteenth century it was being argued that every culture proceeds through the same stages of development, and that it is only in the earliest stages that poetic genius can flourish.<sup>37</sup> In his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian*, Hugh Blair argues:

Hence we may expect to find poems among the antiquities of all nations. It is probable too, that an extensive search would discover a certain degree of resemblance among all the most ancient poetical productions, from whatever state they have proceeded... it is characteristical of an age rather than a country; and belongs, in some measure, to all nations at a certain period. Of this the works of Ossian seem to furnish a remarkable proof.<sup>38</sup>

This conception of the nature of epic, established well before Macpherson began his series of translations, was so powerful that, as Margaret Rubel has noted, the composition of epic poetry had virtually ceased in Britain by the 1760’s. Epic was understood to be the natural and spontaneous expression of the culture that produced it, in either the so-called “Savage” or “Barbarian” phase.<sup>39</sup> In fact, as Rubel’s study documents, the works of Homer and Ossian came to be regarded as the quintessential examples of the Barbarian and Savage periods respectively in the history of societies. This tendency to interpret poetry as a witness to and product of the time period in which it was composed gained momentum after the publication of the *Works of Ossian*, but had its roots already firmly established in the work of Blackwell on Homer, and is most evident in Blair’s *Dissertation*, which was first published in 1763 and accompanied Macpherson’s translations in editions published from 1765 onward.<sup>40</sup>

Blair’s *Dissertation* applies Blackwell’s and his own similar theories about Homer to Ossianic poetry in a comprehensive fashion in order to assert the antiquity and authenticity of Macpherson’s material. It is worth analyzing this *Dissertation* in some detail for the light it sheds on contemporary theories about the nature of epic and what are likely to have been Macpherson’s own assumptions about Ossian. The *Dissertation* begins with an analysis of one of the more striking features of the poems that I have already mentioned, the presence everywhere of simile and metaphor. The frequent use of simile and metaphor—particularly when those same similes and metaphors can be found in the poetry of Homer, Virgil, and

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<sup>37</sup> For more on the intellectual history of these ideas see Rubel 1978.

<sup>38</sup> Blair 1765/1996:347.

<sup>39</sup> Rubel 1978,

<sup>40</sup> Important early articulations include those of Vico 1730, Sharpe 1755, and Young 1759. Not long after the publication of the *Works of Ossian* were published the essays of Duff 1767 and 1770 and Wood 1769/1775.

Milton—might suggest a kind of poetic refinement that is antithetical to the notion of the primitive, savage bard. Blair argues that, “in the infancy of societies,” the reverse is actually the case:

Their passions have nothing to restrain them: their imagination has nothing to check it. They display themselves to one another without disguise: and converse and act in the uncovered simplicity of nature. As their feelings are strong, so their language, of itself, assumes a poetical turn. Prone to exaggerate, they describe everything in the strongest colours; which of course renders their speech picturesque and figurative. Figurative language owes its rise chiefly to two causes: to the want of proper names for objects, and to the influence and of imagination and passion over the form of expression. Both these causes concur in the infancy of society. Figures are commonly considered as artificial modes of speech, devised by orators and poets, after the world has advanced to a refined state. The contrary of this is the truth. Men have never used so many figures of style, as in those rude ages, when, besides the power of a warm imagination to suggest lively images, the want of proper and precise terms for the ideas they would express, obliged them to have recourse to circumlocution, metaphor, comparison, and all those substituted forms of expression, which give a poetical air to language. An American chief, at this day, harangues at the head of his tribe, in a more bold metaphorical style, than a modern European would adventure to use in an Epic poem.<sup>41</sup>

This passage, which appears near the beginning of the essay, sets up an important premise that operates throughout Blair’s *Dissertation*: the authentic language of a primitive bard is naturally simple, that is, without artifice and ornament, but also “poetical” and “metaphorical,” because language has not yet advanced far enough to describe things in direct terms. Primitive poetry is likewise by definition full of undisguised emotion and unrestrained passion (in other parts of the *Dissertation* this is called “fire”) because primitive peoples have not learned to restrain their emotions. The “uncovered simplicity of nature” was, as we have seen, something often admired in Homer’s language and a point on which Pope was criticized. Blair, too, faults Pope for his overly ornate and metered translations, arguing that through prose is the only way to capture Homer’s simplicity: “Mr. Pope’s translation of Homer can be of no use to us here. The parallel is altogether unfair between prose, and the imposing harmony of flowing numbers. It is only by viewing Homer in the simplicity of a prose translation, that we can form any comparison between the two bards.”<sup>42</sup>

From here, Blair sets up Homer and Virgil as two consecutive steps forward on a kind of evolutionary course, with Ossian as the more primitive and therefore the more “authentic” poet, the more “original” genius. A demonstration of this principle can be found slightly later

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<sup>41</sup> Blair 1765/1996:345–346.

<sup>42</sup> Blair 1765/1996:386.

in the *Dissertation*. Blair commences an extended comparison of Homer and Ossian that comprises the bulk of the essay:

As Homer is of all the great poets, the one whose manner, and whose times come the nearest to Ossian's, we are naturally led to run a parallel in some instances between the Greek and the Celtic bard. For though Homer lived more than a thousand years before Ossian, it is not from the age of the world, but from the state of society, that we are to judge of resembling times. The Greek has, in several points, a manifest superiority. He introduces a greater bariety of incidents; he possesses a larger compass of ideas; has more diversity in his characters; and a much deeper knowledge of human nature. It was not to be expected, that in any of these particulars, Ossian could equal Homer. For Homer lived in a country where society was much farther advanced; he had beheld many more objects; cities built and flourishing; laws instituted; order, discipline, and arts begin. His field of operation was much larger and more splendid; his knowledge, of course, more extensive; his mind also, it shall be granted, more penetrating. But if Ossian's ideas and objects be less diversified than those of Homer, they are all, however, of the kind fittest for poetry: The bravery and generosity of heroes, the tenderness of lovers, the attachments of friends, parents, and children. In a rude age and country, though the events that happen be few, the undissipated mind broods over them more; they strike the imagination, and fire the passions in a higher degree; and of consequence become happier materials to a poetical genius, than the same events when scattered through the wide circle of more varied action, and cultivated life.<sup>43</sup>

This passage illustrates well the approach that Blair takes throughout. Homeric poetry is more sophisticated than Ossianic poetry because Homer's society is more advanced than Ossian's. But Ossian's ideas are better suited to poetry, and, as a poet in a more primitive society, Ossian has more "fire" and is closer to "genius" than Homer. In Blair's critical framework, the very things that make Homer and Virgil more sophisticated are their downfall:

The simplicity of Ossian's manner adds great beauty to his descriptions, and indeed to his whole Poetry. We meet with no affected ornaments; no forced refinement; no marks either in style or thought of a studied endeavour to shine and sparkle. Ossian appears every where to be prompted by his feelings; and to speak from the abundance of his heart.<sup>44</sup>

Wherever Ossian and Homer are compared, it is found that Homer is *technically* superior, but Ossian is nevertheless the better poet. Ossian is better *because* he is rougher, cruder, simpler, less refined and ornate, and above all, because he is more impassioned and unrestrained in his emotions. A similar comparison can be made between Homer and Virgil. Whereas Homer is merely "affected," Virgil is downright lifeless. There is an inverse relationship between

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<sup>43</sup> Blair 1765/1996:357.

<sup>44</sup> Blair 1765/1996:381.



artistry and emotion, with the result that Virgil's poetry, composed in a far more advanced stated of society than Homer's or Ossian's, cannot possibly inspire emotion in the reader: "His perfect hero, Aeneas, is an unanimated, insipid personage, whom we may pretend to admire, but whom noone can heartily love."<sup>45</sup>

To return once more to simile and metaphor, Blair explains the many parallel passages between Ossian and Homer this way:

As it is usual to judge of poets from a comparison of their similes more than that of other passages, it will perhaps be agreeable to the reader, to see how Homer and Ossian have conducted some images of the same kind. This might be shewn in many instances. For as the great objects of nature are common to the poets of all nations, and make the general storehouse of all imagery, the ground-work of their comparisons must of course be frequently the same...<sup>46</sup>

For Macpherson and Blair, echoes of Homer in his Ossianic poetry are not evidence of poetic artistry, designed allusions, or, as Macpherson's critics would attempt to show, plagiarism and forgery. They were instead proof of Ossian's—and Homer's—primitive genius and connection to nature. It is presumably for this very reason that Macpherson does not hesitate to point out what are for us revealing similarities between passages in his Ossianic translations and the poetry of Homer and Virgil.

As I have noted already, the bulk of Blair's *Dissertation* consists of an extended comparison of Ossian and Homer, designed to assert not only the antiquity and authenticity of the Ossianic material, but also to demonstrate its relative superiority. Composed in a more primitive state of society, it is even more natural in its simplicity, more spontaneous, and more vibrant than Homeric poetry and therefore inherently superior. Blair's efforts in this regard, are telling, because they point to both the prestige of Homeric poetry at this time as well as the current scholarly views of Homer himself. Homer was the standard by which Ossian would necessarily be judged. Macpherson's Ossian, at least partly through Blair's efforts, became the Original Genius that was the obsession of the second half of the eighteenth century, supplanting in that role Homer, who had been the obsession of the seventeenth and early eighteenth.

It is interesting to note therefore that, in addition to a comparison of Ossian to Homer, a large part of Blair's *Dissertation* consists of an analysis of *Fingal* in relation to Aristotle's

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<sup>45</sup> Blair 1765/1996:364. Cf p. 374: "Let him read the story of Pallas in Virgil, which is of a similar kind; and after all the praise he may justly bestow on the elegant and finished description of that amiable author, let him say, which of the two poets unfold most of the human soul." See also p. 390.

<sup>46</sup> Blair 1765/1996:386.

*Poetics*. Blair finds that *Fingal* conforms remarkably well to the Aristotelian precepts. As with the use of figurative language, Blair's take on this conclusion is, from a modern perspective, almost comically counterintuitive, and yet completely in keeping with contemporary theory:

To refuse the title of an epic poem to *Fingal*, because it is not in every little particular, exactly conformable to the practice of Homer and Virgil, were the mere squeamishness and pedantry of criticism. Examined even according to Aristotle's rules, it will be found to have all the essential requisites of a true and regular epic; and to have several of them in so high a degree, as at first view to raise our astonishment on finding Ossian's composition agreeable to the rules of which he was entirely ignorant. But our astonishment will cease, when we consider from what source Aristotle drew those rules. Homer knew no more of the laws of criticism than Ossian. But guided by nature, he composed in verse a regular story, founded on heroic actions, which all posterity admired. Aristotle, with great sagacity and penetration, traced the causes of this general admiration. He observed what it was in Homer's composition, and in the conduct of his story, which gave it such power to please; from this observation he deduced the rules which poets ought to follow, who would write and please like Homer; and to a composition formed according to such rules, he gave the name of an epic poem. Hence his whole system arose. Aristotle studied nature in Homer. Homer and Ossian both wrote from nature. No wonder that among all the three, there should be such agreement and conformity."<sup>47</sup>

Aristotle's ideas about good poetry are derived from Homer, because Homeric poetry is by definition good poetry. And Homer is guided by nature alone, as is Ossian. Therefore Ossianic poetry, is not surprisingly, good poetry according to the rules of Aristotle. Blair's *Dissertation* therefore is not a rejection of Homer and the Classical standards that still very much governed criticism in the 1760's. Who Homer was and how he operated had changed since the early days of the Renaissance, but he was nevertheless the *poeta sovrano* (as Dante had called him), the man to beat.

Blair concludes his *Dissertation* by once again invoking the "fire" of Ossian, his connection to nature, and the emotions his poetry inspires as the keys to his "poetical genius":

Upon the whole; if to feel strongly, and describe naturally, be the chief ingredients in poetical genius, Ossian must, after fair examination, be held to possess that genius in a high degree. The question is not, whether a few improprieties may be pointed out in his works; whether this, or that passage, might not have been worked up with more art and skill, by some writer of happier times? A thousand such cold and frivolous criticisms, are altogether indecisive as to his genuine merit. But, has he the spirit, the fire, the inspiration of a poet? Does he utter the voice of nature? Does he elevate by his sentiments? Does he interest by

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<sup>47</sup> Blair 1765/1996:358.

his descriptions? Does he paint to the heart as well as to the fancy? Does he make his readers glow, and tremble, and weep? These are the great characteristic of true poetry.<sup>48</sup>

If Blair's *Dissertation* is any indication of current thinking about the nature of epic and its composition, we can see that for Macpherson, who studied Greek and read Homeric poetry at the University in Aberdeen and Marischal College in the 1750's (around the same time that Blair was beginning to deliver his lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres), Homer served as the blueprint for the primitive bard of "original genius." Nowhere in Blair's *Dissertation* is the existence of such a figure at the origin of the Greek epic tradition (or the presumed Scottish one) questioned or defended. When Macpherson was asked to translate Highland poetry for the Scottish *literati*, Ossian did not need to be invented out of thin air, he only needed to be conjured in Homer's image. The idea of Homer as primitive bard in the earliest phases of Greek civilization had been universalized for all civilizations to such an extent that it is even possible that Macpherson himself did not consciously choose to model his Ossian on Homer. He may simply have interpreted the song and story-telling traditions familiar from childhood within the framework of contemporary theory, and, when faced with the task of translating those traditions for a British audience, he, consciously or unconsciously, exaggerated those aspects of the traditions that would have the greatest impact.<sup>49</sup>

When we turn to Macpherson's own *Dissertation* (*Dissertation concerning the Antiquity, &c. of the Poems of Ossian the Son of Fingal*, written to accompany the publication of *Temora* in 1763), we find, amazingly, almost no mention of Homer himself, but his presence is nevertheless everywhere felt. Macpherson's arguments concerning the oral transmission of Ossian's poems echo those of Blair's preface to the *Fragments* as well as his *Dissertation*.<sup>50</sup> It is here, in the complicated nexus of questions concerning orality, literacy, and the transmission of the poems, that, I submit, the intersection between Macpherson's conception of Ossian and eighteenth century theories about Homer comes into highest relief for the modern scholar of Homer. Macpherson writes:

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<sup>48</sup> Blair 1765/1996:398.

<sup>49</sup> Simonsuuri 1979:112–113 has a slightly more sceptical interpretation of Macpherson's participation in the intellectual debates of his day concerning Homer than I offer here: "Macpherson had been influenced by the ideas current in primitivist circles in the 1750s and 1760s, but his own arguments, it must be remembered, remained naively non-theoretical... Macpherson's idea that Homer was a poet who had lived and worked in a society similar to the third-century Ossian's was derived from his own experience as a translator of early Gaelic poetry rather than from study or understanding of the nature of the Homeric epic."

<sup>50</sup> Macpherson's *Dissertation* and the first incarnation of Blair's *Dissertation* were both published in 1763, and there was almost certainly cooperation between the two. The appendix to the 1765 version of Blair's *Dissertation*, which I quote below, does not specify the source of Blair's information about the Scottish oral tradition, but it may well have been Macpherson himself.

[Ossian's] poetical merit made his heroes famous in a country where heroism was much esteemed and admired... Every chief in process of time had a bard in his family, and the office became at last hereditary. By the succession of these bards, the poems concerning the ancestors of the family were handed down from generation to generation.

Macpherson goes on to compare the oral transmission of Ossianic poetry to the oral traditions of other cultures. Interestingly enough, he cites the transmission of Greek law as an example of a body of material that was preserved orally for many centuries, but not the Homeric epics. Is this omission an indication that Macpherson did not think of the Homeric poems as having been handed down in the same way? Certainly Blackwell, whose published writings on Homer seem to have played an important formative role in Macpherson's education, had no knowledge whatsoever of an orally composing, illiterate Homer. His account of Homer's life takes pains to demonstrate the means by which Homer's impoverished mother secured him an education, so that he could ultimately write the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—for how could they have come into existence otherwise?<sup>51</sup>

Yet, as I have noted, it is difficult not to find Homer at every turn in Macpherson's enterprise. In the passage I have just cited and in other comments about oral transmission Macpherson implies an integrity and epic quality to the corpus of Ossianic poetry that it clearly did not possess in Macpherson's day or in any other. We see here as well an emerging concept of authorship, coupled with the idea of a poet who surpasses his fellow bards in "poetical merit," much as Homer is imagined still to this day by many scholars who wish to reconcile notions of authorship and genius with oral tradition. We have seen too that Macpherson conceived of the poetry he was able to collect as "fragments" of a whole. How are we to reconcile the implied integrity of an Ossianic epic corpus, faithfully transmitted over the centuries, with the necessarily fragmentary and non-epic nature of Macpherson's sources?<sup>52</sup> A perfect reconstruction of Macpherson's thoughts and intentions on this point is impossible, of course, but it seems likely that Macpherson conceived of himself as a kind of Peisistratus in the reconstruction of Ossian's lost epics. Ossian's poetry, like Homer's, had once been a unity and epic in form, but was scattered and nearly lost in the centuries after Ossian's death. It was only through Macpherson's efforts to collect and assemble the scattered fragments that the epics of Ossian were saved.

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<sup>51</sup> On this point see also Haugen 1998, 316. As she points out, Blackwell's book is entitled *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer*.

<sup>52</sup> I must point out here that Macpherson himself never publicly admitted to not having complete manuscripts on which he based his *Fingal* and *Temora*. These were never produced and almost certainly did not exist. Macpherson went so far as to literally retranslate the poems into Gaelic in a failed attempt to prove their authenticity, and it is here that most modern scholars would draw the line between creative reconstruction (of an original that did not exist, but that Macpherson at least believed existed) and outright forgery.

As early as 1665 the Abbé d'Aubignac, following ancient sources, had argued that the Homeric poems were composed orally and had been (imperfectly) transmitted by rhapsodes. Other early theories about the oral transmission of Homeric poetry were postulated by Perrault in France, Vico in Italy, and Bentley in England.<sup>53</sup> The theory of orally composed songs being handed down and corrupted over time would be articulated most forcefully by Villoison (1788) and Wolf (1795) after the discovery of the Venetus A manuscript of the *Iliad* with its wealth of ancient scholia. Villoison writes:

For it is evident that the Homeric *contextus*, which was recited by the rhapsodes from memory and which used to be sung orally by everyone, was already for a long time corrupt, since it would have been impossible for the different rhapsodes of the different regions of Greece not to be forced by necessity to subtract, add, and change many things.<sup>54</sup>

Wolf, writing seven years later, argues likewise: “the ancients themselves ascribed the origin of variant readings to the rhapsodes, and located in their frequent performances the principal source of Homeric corruption and interpolation.” Wolf postulated, based on comments made by Pausanias, Josephus, and Cicero, that Peisistratus “was the first to set down the poems in writing and to have put them in the order in which they are now read,”<sup>55</sup> Wolf is usually credited as the most influential modern proponent of this theory. But already in 1769, very shortly after the publication of the *Works of Ossian*, Robert Wood had suggested that Lycurgus, Peisistratus, or a similarly influential figure was responsible for the first written text of the poems. Wood compares that massive editorial project with the work of none other than Macpherson himself:

[Josephus declares] that the works of Homer, the oldest known production of Greece, were not preserved in writing, but were sung, and retained in memory. If then, with Josephus, we suppose that Homer left no written copy of his works, the account we find of them in ancient writers becomes more probable. It is generally supposed that Lycurgus brought them from Ionia into Greece, where they were known before only by scraps and detached pieces. Diogenes Laertius attributes the merit of this performace to Solon: Cicero gives it to Pisistratus; and Plato to Hipparchus... If therefore the Spartan Lawgiver, and the other personages committed to writing, and introduced into Greece, what had before been only sung by the Rhapsodists of Ionia, just as some curious fragments of ancient poetry have been lately collected in the northern parts of this island, their reduction to order in Greece was a work of taste and judgment: and those great names which we have mentioned might

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<sup>53</sup> See Perrault 1688-1697, Bentley 1713, and Vico 1744. For attestations of even earlier arguments along these lines see Grafton, Most, and Zetzel 1985:5.

<sup>54</sup> The translation is that of Nagy 1997:101.

<sup>55</sup> Wolf 1795/1985:137 (chapter 33).

claim the same merit in regard to Homer, that the ingenious Editor of Fingal is entitled to from Ossian.<sup>56</sup>

Wood imagines a Homer whose epics had disintegrated into scraps before they were reconstituted by an important figure like Lycurgus, Solon, or Peisistratus. Wood envisions for Homer the very process that Macpherson claimed for Ossian. It is partly on the basis of this passage that Kristine Haugen has recently argued that Wood and Wolf formed their theories about the transmission of Homer within the context of the Ossianic phenomenon and were directly influenced the arguments of Macpherson and Blair.<sup>57</sup>

But Wood was by no means the first to revive the notion of a Peisistratean recension from antiquity. In 1743 Bentley had argued similarly. Where Bentley and Wood seem to differ is in their understanding of the integrity of the Homeric corpus. Bentley writes:

Take my word for it, poor *Homer* in those circumstances and early times had never such aspiring thoughts. He wrote a sequel of Songs and Rhapsodies, to be sung by himself for small earnings and good cheer, at Festivals and other days of Merriment; the *Ilias* he made for Men, and the *Odysseis* for the other Sex. These loose songs were not collected together in the form of an Epic Poem till *Pisistratus's* time.<sup>58</sup>

Bentley's Homer never was an epic poet; that genre was imposed on his work by others. We can contrast Bentley now with Villoison, writing a few decades later, who, like Wood, imagines a Homer who composed the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as epics, orally. These poems were memorized and orally transmitted through the generations largely intact but with the inevitable corruption, additions, and variations creeping in. In his introduction to the Venetus A manuscript of the *Iliad*, Villoison expresses the belief that the ancient scholia will allow scholars to recover the original text as Homer sang it. Wolf denies that such a recovery is possible, giving up any hope of determining Homer's own text, and instead argues, like Bentley, that the transmitted *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the product of a later age.<sup>59</sup>

How do Macpherson's and Blair's arguments about the oral transmission of Ossianic poetry fit into these debates about the text of Homer that ranged in the decades before and after the publication of the *Works of Ossian*? The question is not a simple one to answer. To begin with, whereas Villoison and Wolf focus on corruption and variants in the transmission of the Homeric texts, Macpherson, at least in his published writings, spoke of the Ossianic poems' preservation over time and the handing down of the poetry "with great purity." He argues that the rhythmic nature of the Gaelic verse discouraged disintegration:

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<sup>56</sup> Wood 1775:278–279. See also Wood 1769:lxiv–lxv.

<sup>57</sup> Haugen 1998:315.

<sup>58</sup> Bentley 1713:18.

<sup>59</sup> See Nagy 1997:102–112.

Their poetical compositions... were adapted to music; and the most perfect harmony was observed. Each verse was so connected with what preceded or followed it, that if one line had been remembered in a stanza, it was almost impossible to forget the rest. The cadences followed in so natural a gradation, and the words were so adapted to the common turn of the voice... that it was almost impossible, from similarity of sound, to substitute one word for another. This excellence is peculiar to the Celtic tongue, and is perhaps to be met with in no other language.<sup>60</sup>

In his own *Dissertation*, Blair likewise speaks of “preservation” by the “oral tradition” and emphasizes the exalted position of the Bards in Celtic society, contrasting them with the “strolling songsters” “in Homer’s time.”<sup>61</sup> In emphasizing the integrity of the surviving Ossianic poems Macpherson and Blair were attempting to counter a prevailing distrust in oral tradition. Macpherson writes in his *Dissertation*:

The strongest objection to the authenticity of the poems now given to the public under the name of Ossian, is the improbability of their being handed down by tradition through so many centuries. 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.<sup>62</sup>

Macpherson’s *Disseration* was written in 1762 to accompany the publication of *Temora* in 1763. Macpherson was thus already aware of the sceptism with which his translations were being met. For many, the chief grounds for denying their authenticity centered around the problem of transmission.<sup>63</sup>

In the appendix to his *Dissertation* published with the 1765 edition of the *Works of Ossian*, Blair confronts this sceptism directly and discusses why Ossian’s poems have survived almost to the exclusion of other poets:

“With regard to the manner in which the originals of these poems have been preserved and transmitted, which has been represented as so mysterious and inexplicable, I have received the following plain account: That until the present century, almost every great family in the Highlands had their own bard, to whose office it belonged to be master of all the poems

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<sup>60</sup> Macpherson 1763/1996:49. Cf. Rosalind Thomas’ strikingly analogous arguments concerning the memorability of Homeric poetry and verse in general: “it is a commonplace in the study of oral tradition that anything passed on in verse has a better chance of accurate transmission... Poetry was itself also memorable and memorizable” (Thomas 1992:114).

<sup>61</sup> See Blair 1765/1996:350. See also above on Blair’s comments about the oral tradition in his preface to *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* as well as Haugen 1998:317.

<sup>62</sup> Macpherson 1763/1996:48.

<sup>63</sup> See Stafford 1988:164.

and songs of the country; that among these poems the works of Ossian are easily distinguished from those of later bards by several peculiarities in his style and manner; that Ossian has always been reputed the Homer of the Highlands, and all his compositions held in singular esteem and veneration; that the whole country is full of traditionary stories derived from his poems, concerning Fingal and his race of heroes, of whom there is not a child but has heard, and not a district in which there are not places pointed out famous for being the scene of some of their feats of arms; that it was wont to be the great entertainment of the Highlanders, to pass the winter evenings in discoursing of the times of Fingal, and rehearsing these old poems, of which they have been enthusiastically fond; that when assembled at their festivals, or on any of their publick occasions, wagers were often laid who could repeat most of them, and to have store of them in their memories, was both an honorable and profitable acquisition, as it procured them access into the families of their great men...”

For Blair, just as Macpherson, the existence of an oral heroic song tradition was not enough to ensure the preservation of Ossian’s poetry. It was Ossian’s superiority as a poet, “held in singular esteem and veneration,” that caused his songs in particular to be remembered. Here Blair makes the comparison with Homer directly: Ossian’s epics were preserved because he was the “Homer of the Highlands.” His poetry spawned competitions at festivals that ensured that the texts of these poems remained fixed over the centuries. Both Blair and Macpherson seem to have felt that by articulating a theory of text fixation through memorization and performance in a regulated setting they could assure their readers of the authenticity of the material that Macpherson was claiming to translate.<sup>64</sup>

But despite these assertions to the contrary, Macpherson himself clearly believed that the original texts of *Fingal* and *Temora* composed by Ossian had been corrupted and fragmented by later singers and the editors who recorded the songs. As Haugen points out, Macpherson’s accompanying notes to *Fingal* and *Temora* refer to suspected interpolations and question the authenticity of various fragments, and within the texts themselves he indicates lacunae.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Here I call attention to Gregory Nagy’s arguments over the past two decades concerning the text fixation of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Nagy argues that text fixation of the two poems took place not through writing but in the context of increasingly regulated performance at the Panathenaic festival. As the poems passed through this “Panathenaic bottleneck” the degree of variability became increasingly limited until the point at which we find them in the Ptolemaic papyri. This is a more sophisticated and developed theory than the one offered by Macpherson of course, and it is interesting to note that despite the apparent similarities, the goals of Nagy and Macpherson could not be more antithetical. Whereas Macpherson is seeking to assure his readers of the preservation of a master poet’s composition through memorization and continual performance, Nagy seeks to explain how a performance system that was at one time multiform became uniform. On the “Panathenaic bottleneck” see Nagy 1990:23, 1996a:43, 1996b:77, and 1999.

<sup>65</sup> Haugen 1998:320.



Fiona Stafford has pointed to an anecdote recorded in the letters of the Reverend Andrew Gallie, with whom Macpherson worked on the Gaelic manuscripts that he collected during his tour of the Highlands in 1760: "I remember Mr. Macpherson reading the MSS. found in Clanronald's, execrating the bard himself who dictated to the amanuensis, saying, 'D—n the scoundrel, it is he himself that now speaks, and not Ossian.'" <sup>66</sup> As Stafford points out, this anecdote reveals a great deal about Macpherson's attitude towards the poetry he had collected. He shared the same distrust in the oral tradition that he was trying to combat with his arguments about the integrity of the Ossianic material. Macpherson clearly felt that it was up to him to decide what was Ossianic and what was not. In this way Macpherson's attitude foreshadows in a striking way the arguments of Wolf and the subsequent analytical approaches to Homeric poetry in the nineteenth century.

I think we can see now how Macpherson's efforts in the 1760's to collect, assemble, and translate the lost epics of Ossian reflect in remarkable ways the developing "Homeric Question" that would preoccupy scholars of the next century. As I noted above, Kristine Haugen has recently argued that the "Ossianic Question" played an important role in the evolution of the Homeric one; but it seems clear that the reverse is also true, and that Macpherson was more theoretically informed than he is usually given credit for. Macpherson seems to have modeled himself on Peisistratus, and his Ossian is the quintessential primitive bard of original genius. In fact, Macpherson managed to capture the scholarly interests of the day so effectively that Wood compared Peisistratus to *him* (rather than the other way around), and Ossian surpassed Homer, for a brief period at least, as the poet closer to nature and therefore even more "original" in his genius.

## Macpherson's Homer

The invention of Ossian by James Macpherson, which was predicated on the invention of Homer by Macpherson's eighteenth century contemporaries, came full circle when, in the 1770's, Macpherson turned his translation efforts from Ossian to Homer himself. Once the figure of Ossian had been presented to the world and explicated within the framework of contemporary theory concerning the primitive bard, and once the inevitable comparisons began to be made between Homer and Ossian, Macpherson took it upon himself to make accessible a more accurate English text of the Homeric *Iliad* than had ever been available before. We have seen that Blair had already pronounced Pope's translation "of no use" for the purposes of comparing the two bards, since he had obscured Homer's natural simplicity by imposing a meter. (Macpherson had of course translated Ossian's verse into simple prose.) Macpherson addressed this difficulty by creating his own prose translation of the *Iliad*.

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<sup>66</sup> Stafford 1988:124.

In the preface to his *Iliad* translation Macpherson makes clear what his goal is in translating Homer: “The extent of his [Macpherson’s] design has been, to give Homer as he really is: And to endeavor, as much as possible, to make him speak English, with his own dignified simplicity and energy.”<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere in the preface we see even more clearly what Macpherson means by “Homer as he really is”:

He seems to have trusted to the immediate resources of his genius, for the means of carrying him, through his journey. He advances, with apparent ease: Nor seems he ever to exert all his strength. He never deviates from his course, in search of ornament. In sublimity of expression and language he may be equalled: In simplicity and ease, it is difficult to ascend to his sphere.<sup>68</sup>

Macpherson’s Homer is once again a direct reflection of the contemporary conception of the primitive bard in his natural glory, unfettered by technique or art and sublime in his simplicity. But this conception, of which Homer was initially the defining example, is, amazingly, here being reapplied to Homer by Macpherson, precisely because Ossian has supplanted Homer as the primitive bard *par excellence*. Now that Ossian had been so successfully invented in Homer’s image, Homer could now be reinvented in Ossian’s.

## Invention and Authenticity

Macpherson’s poems are unquestionably forgeries in the sense that they are not translations of Gaelic originals. That has been clear since 1805, when the Highland Society of Scotland published its report. Instead, they are the epics that Macpherson felt should have existed or in fact did exist at one time. To his mind, Macpherson was merely, like Peisistratus, bringing together the scattered fragments of a lost genius. But Macpherson’s “translations” were much more than that, because they evoked Highland heroic legend in a form and style that appealed to the poetic sensibilities of contemporary Europeans. They tapped into a growing interest in so-called “primitive poetry” and “original genius,” and they did so in a tone that has been called wistful and elegiac, and in a style that was, by its very primitiveness, modern.<sup>69</sup>

The question of authenticity, which is so closely bound up with any discussion of the Ossianic poems, has, as we have seen, many points of contact with the Homeric Question, which has dominated Homeric scholarship ever since Wolf. The complex notion of authenticity operates with regard to the *Works of Ossian* on many levels. When people questioned the authenticity of the *Works*, they were first and foremost questioning their antiquity. It was important to scholars of the eighteenth century that Macpherson’s epics were

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<sup>67</sup> Macpherson 1773:xx.

<sup>68</sup> Macpherson 1773:x–xi.

<sup>69</sup> Stafford 1996:xiv.

in fact as old as they claimed to be, because genius was thought to reside only in the infancy of societies. Closely related was the question of accuracy. Did Macpherson faithfully translate the ancient Gaelic originals? The notion of an accurate translation has changed considerably since the eighteenth century; few would now deem Chapman's or Pope's translations of Homer accurate in any scientific sense. But in Macpherson's day a translation could be termed authentic if it reflected what readers believed to be true about the poetry in its original language. Thus, a prose translation could claim to be superior to verse if it conveyed the original "simplicity" of the poet. In this sense a translation is as much an act of reception and can tell us as much about the poetics of the time in which it was produced as an ancient life of Homer can tell us about the reception of the Homeric tradition in the time and place in which it was composed. Macpherson's *Iliad*, like Cowper's or for that matter Fagles' prize-winning *Iliad*, delivered the Homer that its audience wanted to hear.

Last but not least, in debating its authenticity Macpherson's contemporaries were questioning the authorship of the Ossianic poetry: was Macpherson working with Ossian's texts, or severely distorted, imperfectly remembered versions of his texts? The very question reveals a great deal about eighteenth century attitudes towards oral tradition, and about how little has changed since then. The idea of Ossian as both primitive bard and at the same time author and originator of an entire epic tradition has its roots in Scottish legend but is very much Macpherson's and Blair's own invention. Ossian is certainly not the only narrator of Scottish traditional song and tales nor is he the "Homer of the Highlands," even though, as the son of Finn/Fingal, he plays an important role in Scottish mythological traditions in which he is both a bard and warrior hero. For the Greeks of the archaic period and well into the Classical, Homer really is the inventor of Greek heroic epic and he is credited with the authorship of not only the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* but even the entire Epic Cycle. Macpherson and Blair attributed the same kind of authorial status to Ossian beginning with the publication of *Fingal*, turning him into a Homer. Macpherson and his audience required a genius to which they could attribute the primitive poetry Macpherson was claiming to translate. The idea that an oral tradition could exist independently of such a genius was simply not conceivable in the 1760's, nor would it be for nearly two more centuries.

The search for an "authentic" text presupposes an author of that text. For Macpherson, that search did not presuppose literacy. He believed it possible that Ossian's poetry could be composed and fixed orally and handed down in memory by generations of bards. In this sense the oral tradition of Ossian's poetry was in Macpherson's mind little different than the textual transmission of a literate author whose texts were copied and and recopied with the inevitable mistakes, omissions, and interpolations that accompany such a process. This same model was postulated for Homer, and versions of it continue to this day to be postulated for Homer, because scholars are still unwilling to let go of the genius at the beginning (or, according to some, the end) of the tradition. The quest for the authentic text of Homer continues, with new, "definitive" texts being produced. The methodologies behind these editions continue to

reflect the disagreements about the nature of the received text that emerged in the eighteenth century: Van Thiel's editions do not attempt to reconstruct a Homeric text that is earlier than the earliest medieval manuscripts; Martin West, on the other hand, believes it possible to recover the *ipsissima verba* of a *maximus poeta*.<sup>70</sup> These editors share with Macpherson the belief that there is an authentic text of Homer. Where they disagree is in the extent to which that text is recoverable.

It is indeed remarkable, given attitudes toward oral tradition at the time and Macpherson's belief in Ossian's authorship of Scottish epic, that Macpherson was comfortable in asserting that Ossian could not write. Homer was still understood by many at that time to have been literate. As we have seen, Macpherson attempted to combat this attitude by emphasizing the preservation of the poetry in festival settings and by means of a system of high ranking, specially trained bards. But he never attempted to show that Ossian could write. The prestige and superior quality of Ossian's poetry were enough to ensure its preservation amidst a flourishing oral song tradition. Today, even while living oral traditions are becoming better and better documented and understood, some modern scholars are once again trying to invent a Homer who can write. An alternative to this (re-)developing theory is of course the by now well established "dictation theory," which likewise attributes the successful preservation of Homer's texts to the technology of writing.<sup>71</sup> Both theories allow for an authentic text and its preservation in writing, but even more fundamentally, allow for an authorial genius as the creator of that text. In the next section I will explore briefly these latest inventions of Homer.

## ***Inventing Homer in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century***

Barbara Graziosi's book, *Inventing Homer*, explores ancient inventions of Homer but, as she herself suggests, her work should impel us to look at the way that we continue to invent Homer in modern scholarship. She writes "By focusing on the earlier representations of Homer, I hope to show that the modern formulation of the Homeric Question is based on a conception of Homer very different indeed from that of our early sources: in those sources, Homer is the object of invention, not of discovery."<sup>72</sup> In other words, if I read her correctly, ancient sources invented Homers, whereas we try to find the real one. The answers we come up with, however, are as inextricably bound up in our own cultural assumptions and values as the ancient lives of Homer. Because I cannot possibly cover all of the 20<sup>th</sup> (or even 21<sup>st</sup>) century inventions of Homer, I am going to compare and contrast two that I feel are particularly relevant to the Ossianic phenomenon and that draw together many of the points I have

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<sup>70</sup> On West's edition, see below.

<sup>71</sup> E.g. Lord 1953, Jensen 1980, Janko 1982 and 1998, West 1990, and Powell 1991 and 1997. For a summary and discussion of the various dictation theories see Nagy 1996:30–35.

<sup>72</sup> Graziosi 2002:6.

already discussed, especially when it comes to the process by which oral poetry is transmitted and eventually committed to writing in a canonical form. We will see that these more recent Homers reveal the same quest for authenticity, authorship, and poetic genius that marked the debates of the eighteenth century and that shaped Macpherson's invention of the figure of Ossian.

## Albert Lord and the "Yugoslav Homer"

Albert Lord, author of the itself canonical *Singer of Tales* and the invaluable assistant of Milman Parry during his fieldwork in the former Yugoslavia, is often credited as the inventor of the modern Homeric "dictation theory." Reduced to its essence, this theory posits that Homer, a master composer who could not write, dictated the *Iliad* and/or the *Odyssey* to someone who could, thereby creating an authoritative text on which all others are ultimately based.<sup>73</sup> To the extent that this attribution is correct—and as we will see there are good reasons to revise this uncritical assessment of Lord's work on the subject—it seems obvious why he thought along these lines. He himself had been present at countless dictation sessions. I would like to take this opportunity therefore to explore some of Lord's earliest, unpublished writing about his experiences. I will then contrast this essay and other early articles with something he wrote at the very end of his life, more than fifty years later.

Albert Lord (1912-1991) went to Yugoslavia for the first time at the age of 22, from June 1934-September 1935. Parry described his activities as follows:

...my assistant, Mr. Albert Lord, is shortly leaving for a month in Greece. His help has been altogether indispensable to me, and I may say that I have done twice as much work since I had his very able assistance. He has relieved me altogether of the very long labeling and cataloguing of the manuscripts and discs, has helped me with the keeping of accounts and the presentations of reports, has typed some 300 pages of my commentary on the collected texts, and most particularly he has ably run the recording apparatus while we are working in the field, this for the first time leaving me free to be with the singer before the microphone, and to oversee and take part in the putting of questions to the singers [...] I myself feel the greatest gratitude to him for the help which he has given me and the expedition is under the greatest obligation to him.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Lord 1970:13: "For the purposes of this paper I am assuming that the Homeric poems are oral traditional songs, that they were written down from a traditional oral poet in a living and very rich tradition of song in ancient Greece." See also the citations in note 69, above.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted by S. Mitchell and G. Nagy in their introduction to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of Lord's *Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2000). The quotation comes from M. Parry, "Report on Work in Yugoslavia, October 20, 1934-March 24, 1935," Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, p. 12.

Albert Lord took photographs throughout the trip and kept a record of his experiences with a view to submitting them to a popular magazine such as *National Geographic*. The essay that he wrote, dated March 1937, was entitled “Across Montenegro: Searching for Gúslé Songs” and was never in fact published.<sup>75</sup>

We can see already in this early essay a fascination with two singers in particular that would shape much of Lord’s subsequent professional scholarship on the the creative process of oral tradional poetry and the analogy between the South Slavic and Homeric song traditions. The first is known as Ćor Huso (“Blind Huso”), a singer of a previous generation who was credited by many of the singers Parry interviewed as being the teacher of their teacher, and the source for all the best songs. Lord recounts one of these interviews (conducted by Nikola Vujnović) as he describes their initial attempts to find singers in Kolashin:

In Kolashin we got to work. During the last century this was the home of one of the greatest singers. The name of old One-eye Huso Husovitch was a magic one in those days, and still is among the Turks (Moslems) in the region further east where the old masters of Kolashin now dwell. We sought eagerly for every trace of his tradition. What was he like? How did he sing? How did he make his living? How did he die? And so on. We had heard of him first from Sálíh Uglian [*sic*] in Novi Pazar. From Huso Salih had learned his favorite song about the taking of Bagdad and its queen by Djérdjelez Aliya, hero of the Turkish border. In Salih’s own words, caught by our microphone, we have a bit of the tradition of the blind singer’s way of life.

Nikola: From whom did you learn your first Bosnian songs?

Salih: I learned Bosnian songs from One-eye Huso Husovitch from Kolashin.

N: Who was he? How did he live? What sort of work did he do?

S: He had no trade, only his horse and his arms, and he wandered about the world. He had only one eye. His clothes and his arms were of the finest. And so he wandered from town to town and sang to people to the gusle.

N: And that’s all he did?

S: He went from kingdom to kingdom and learned and sang.

N: From kingdom to kingdom?

S: He was at Vienna, at Franz’s court.

N: Why did he go there?

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<sup>75</sup> I am grateful to Stephen Mitchell, curator of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, for providing me with a copy of this essay.

S: He happened to go there, and they told him about him, and went and got him, and he sang to him to the gusle, and King Joseph gave him a hundred sheep, and a hundred Napoleons as a present.

N: How long did he sing to him to the gusle?

S: A month.

N: So there was Dutchman who liked the gusle that much?

S: You know he wanted to hear such an unusual thing. He had never heard anything like it.

N: All right. And afterwards, when he came back, what did he do with those sheep? Did he work after that, or did he go on singing to the gusle?

S: He gave all the sheep to his relatives, and put the money in his purse, and wandered about the world.

N: Was he a good singer?

S: There could not have been a better.

(Trans. by Milman Parry)

Lord later wrote that for Parry Huso came to symbolize “the Yugoslav traditional singer in much the same way in which Homer was the Greek singer of tales par excellence.” He continues: “Some of the best poems collected were from singers who had heard Ćor Huso and had learned from him.”<sup>76</sup> Interestingly enough, Parry and Lord do not seem to have questioned the existence of Huso, though, as John Foley has demonstrated, he is clearly legendary or “at most... a historical character to whom layers of legend have accrued.”<sup>77</sup> So taken was Parry with the analogy between Homer and Huso that before his death he planned a series of articles entitled “Homer and Huso” which Lord completed based on Parry’s abstracts and notes.<sup>78</sup>

The second singer highlighted in the essay is the one whose picture would grace the cover of Lord’s 1960 work *The Singer of Tales*, that is to say, Avdo Mededović. *The Singer of Tales*, which publishes the results of Parry and Lord’s investigation of the South Slavic song tradition and applies them to the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, was Lord’s fulfillment of Parry’s own plan to write a book of that title.<sup>79</sup> The singer referred to in the title is of course generic, because much of what was groundbreaking about Parry and Lord’s work was their demonstration of the

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<sup>76</sup> Lord 1948b:40.

<sup>77</sup> Foley 1998:161.

<sup>78</sup> Lord 1936, 1938, 1948a; see also Lord 1948b and 1970.

<sup>79</sup> Parry was able to complete only 12 pages of this book before his death. They are published in Lord 1948.

system in which traditional oral poetry is composed, a system in which many generations of singers participate. But Lord's essay makes clear (as does, to a lesser extent, *The Singer of Tales*) that there is also a particular singer behind the title that Parry and later Lord used to denote their work. That singer is simultaneously Avdo and Homer himself.

Just as Ćor Huso embodied for Parry the Yugoslav traditional singer, Avdo was for Lord on a practical level a living, breathing example of a supremely talented oral poet to whom Homer could be compared. Lord's *Singer of Tales* is remarkable for its straightforward exposition of the practical workings of the traditional system in which poets like Avdo composed their songs; it is no surprise therefore that he found a great deal of power in the concrete example that Avdo provided. Avdo dictated songs, was recorded on disk, and was even captured on a very early form of video called "kinescope." After their initial encounter in the 1930's, Lord found him and recorded him again in the 1950's. He was in many ways the test case for Lord's theories about the South Slavic (and by extension the Homeric) poetic system.

The photograph of Avdo that was featured on the cover of *The Singer of Tales* was one that Lord had taken on his first trip to Yugoslavia and was included among the images that were to accompany his unpublished essay (figure 3). The caption reads:

"Avdo Medjedovitch, peasant farmer, is the finest singer the expedition encountered. His poems reached as many as 15,000 lines. A veritable Yugoslav Homer!"





Fig. 29 Avdo Medjedovitch, peasant farmer, is the finest singer the expedition encountered. His poems reached as many as fifteen thousand lines. A veritable Yugoslav Homer!

### Figure 3

#### Avdo Međedović

Here is Lord's fuller description of Avdo in the essay:

Lying on the bench not far from us was a Turk smoking a cigarette in an antique silver "cigárluk" (cigarette holder). He was a tall, lean and impressive person. At a break in our conversation he joined in. He knew of singers. The best, he said, was a certain Avdo Medjédovitch, a peasant farmer who lived an hour way. How old is he? Sixty, sixty-five. Does he know how to read or write? *Nézna, bráte!* (No, brother!) And so we went for him...

Finally Avdo came, and he sang for us old Salih's favorite of the taking of Bagdad in the days of Sultan Selim. We listened with increasing interest to this short homely farmer, whose throat was disfigured by a large goiter. He sat cross-legged on the bench, sawing the gusle, swaying in rhythm with the music. He sang very fast, sometimes deserting the melody, and while the bow went lightly back and forth over the string, he recited the verses at top speed. A crowd gathered. A card game, played by some of the modern young men of the town, noisily kept on, but was finally broken up.

The next few days were a revelation. Avdo's songs were longer and finer than any we had heard before. He could prolong one for days, and some of them reached fifteen or sixteen thousand lines. Other singers came, but none could equal Avdo, our Yugoslav Homer.

In these excerpts I think we can see how important Avdo was for Lord's earliest conception of Homer as oral poet. Whereas Parry's never completed articles comparing the South Slavic and Homeric traditions focused on the hazy figure of Ćor Huso, Lord, when invited to give a lecture on *La poesia epica e la sua formazione*, entitled his talk "Tradition and the Oral Poet: Homer, Huso, and Avdo Medjedović."<sup>80</sup> As early as his 1948 article, "Homer, Parry, and Huso," Lord links Avdo directly with Parry's Huso: "During the summer of 1935, while collecting at Bijelo Polje, Parry came across a singer named Avdo Međedović, one of those who had heard Ćor Huso in his youth, whose powers of invention and story-telling were far above the ordinary."<sup>81</sup>

Lord's comments about Avdo, especially in these earliest descriptions of him, focus on his excellence as a composer (despite the weakness of his voice), his superiority to other poets, and the length of his songs. It is not insignificant that in his unpublished essay Lord misestimates the length of Avdo's song at 15,000 to 16,000 verses, the approximate length of the *Iliad*, whereas in fact the longest song that Avdo recorded was 13,331 verses long. By 1948 Lord was careful to report the accurate total of Avdo's verses, but he was also careful to point out how extraordinary the length of Avdo's songs were in comparison with his fellow singers, whose songs averaged only a few hundred lines. Clearly it was Lord's first impression that Avdo provided the answer to the still hotly debated Homeric Question.

In these earliest descriptions too we find traces of a much earlier kind of criticism, reminiscent in fact of the 1760's. In the caption to Avdo's picture, Lord notes first of all that he is a "peasant farmer" and then that he is a "veritable Yugoslav Homer." It seems likely that Lord has in mind here, whether consciously or unconsciously, the notion of "primitive genius." At the very least he seems struck throughout the essay by the conditions under which poetry and song flourished in Yugoslavia. I note as well that when describing Avdo in his 1948 article Lord praises his "powers of invention." Parry too seems to have begun his research with an interest in primitive genius. His first study of Homeric style, his 1928 doctoral thesis, began with a quote about originality and primitive literature from Ernest Renan: "Comment saisir la physionomie et l'originalité des littératures primitives, si on ne pénètre la vie morale et intime de la nation, si on ne se place au point même de l'humanité qu'elle occupa, afin de voir et de sentir comme elle, si on ne la regarde vivre, ou plutôt si on ne vit un instant avec elle?"<sup>82</sup> Long before he embarked upon his collecting trip to Yugoslavia, Parry was imagining himself as an anthropologist, describing the literature of a primitive people whose way of life he had come to know.

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<sup>80</sup> See Lord 1970.

<sup>81</sup> Lord 1948:42.

<sup>82</sup> Parry 1928, 1, quoting Renan 1890, 292. See Lord 1948b:34.

Little seems to have changed then between the 1760's and the 1930's. Parry and Lord, at least at the very beginning of their careers, believed in a Homer—nor is their oral Homer vastly different than the Homer that had previously been imagined by James Macpherson and others. They were able to synthesize the pathfinding results of their fieldwork, which uncovered a complex system of oral poets composing over hundreds if not thousands of years, with much earlier ideas about individual genius, and they were able to do this in part because of the Huso myth (which was interpreted as fact) and because of Avdo. Equally important, however, was the technology that allowed Parry and Lord to record vast stretches of song on aluminum disks and (via the process of dictation) on paper. It was no doubt his own experiences with dictation that led Lord to argue, in a brief article in 1953 entitled “Homer’s Originality: Oral Dictated Texts,” that Homer composed orally and dictated his poems to someone who could write. Lord suggested that the process of dictation, since it is slower than a live performance, allowed for a more original and poetically superior text. This argument is somewhat surprising given Lord’s own descriptions of the difficulty, for most singers, of the dictating process.<sup>83</sup> Few singers could perform without the gusle, and many were so flustered by the unusual performance circumstances that they would often cease abruptly, claiming to have forgotten the rest of the song.<sup>84</sup>

It seems obvious that Lord invented a dictating Homer because he was imagining him in Avdo’s image. The technology used to record Avdo was cutting edge at that time, and Lord would never have been so anachronistic as to suggest that Homer was recorded on audio disk. But to assume the technologies required for writing (pen, ink, loose or bound sheets of readily available paper, skilled scribes, etc) for “Homer’s time” is an equally anachronistic projection. As much as Lord’s work is responsible for the paradigm shift in Homeric studies that has allowed many scholars to abandon the Homer as original genius genre of criticism, he himself had his blind spots on this crucial point. Like Macpherson, Lord could have his Homer and his oral tradition too.

Few people seem to be aware, however, that Lord all but retracted his dictation thesis in his 1991 collection of essays, *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*. There, together with the 1953 article, he included an addendum, from which I quote here:

As I reconsidered very recently the stylization of a passage from Salih Ugljanin’s “Song of Bagdad” that was found in a dictated version but not in two sung texts, I was suddenly aware of the experience of listening to Salih dictate... the pause interrupted neither Salih’s thought nor his syntax... One might think that dictating gave Salih the leisure to plan his words and their placing in the line, that the parallelism was due to his careful thinking out of the structure. First of all, however, dictating is not a leisurely process... I might add that

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<sup>83</sup> See, e.g., Lord, 1948:41.

<sup>84</sup> See Vidan 2003:10.

not all singers can dictate successfully. As I have said elsewhere, some singers can never be happy without the gusle accompaniment to set the rhythm of the singing performance.<sup>85</sup>

Lord himself as far as I am aware never, in print, discussed the implications of this important revision of his 1953 argument. (Lord died in the same year that *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition* was published.) But it is also true that Lord never speculated about the historical circumstances under which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* might have been dictated. For Lord, the question of the text fixation of the Homeric poems was not essential; rather he was concerned with the dynamic process, that is to say their on-going recomposition in performance.

## The Literate Homer

Where are we now? Seventy years after Parry and Lord's first trip to the former Yugoslavia, forty-five years after the publication of the *Singer of Tales*, and for that matter, almost 245 years since the publication of *Fingal*, to what extent have we abandoned the notion of Homer's primitive genius? Well, we don't use the word primitive anymore of course. And though it has been resisted, debated, and clarified, Homerists have come to accept the basic conclusion of Parry's research and Lord's amplification of it, namely that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* derive ultimately from an oral traditional performance system. But attempts to construct a bard of exceptional genius (whether named Homer or not) continue to be made. Richard Martin (1993, 223) is right to point out that a kind of "quest for the primitive" is made whenever one tries to identify the "original" form of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* or tries to make a judgment between older, genuine, "Homeric" strata and later accumulations.<sup>86</sup> Some of the most recent quests for Homer, however, do not primitivize his genius but rather civilize it, attributing to him the techniques of a literate poet. Homer's genius lies not in his primitive expression of the world around him, his traditional language and tales, but rather in his ability to manipulate that tradition and break free of it (it does indeed seem to be imagined as a prison break) by means of the technology of writing.

Martin West's 1998-2000 Teubner *Iliad* promises to be and is widely considered the latest, greatest, and perhaps even definitive Homer. And yet his text of the *Iliad* is based on his conception of Homer, the poet and the man. In other words, Martin West has, like editors before him, invented a Homer in order to establish a definitive text of his work. What is West's Homer like? West gives us an indication of the kind of Homer he envisions on the first page of his introduction to the Teubner text: *Ilias materiam continet iamdiu per ora cantorum diffusam, formam autem contextumque qualem nos novimus tum primum attinuit, cum conscripta est; quod ut fieret, unius munus fuit maximi poetae*. West acknowledges the oral tradition that furnished material on which the *Iliad* is based, but then says that our *Iliad* took its form when it was first

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<sup>85</sup> Lord 1991:47-48.

<sup>86</sup> Martin 1993:223.

written down. This was the work of a *maximus poeta*, a genius, it is implied, who could write. That the poet was also the writer is made clear as West continues: “per multos annos, credo, elaboravit et, quae primum strictius composuit, deinceps novis episodiis insertis mirifice auxit ac dilatavit.” The insertion of “credo” here is telling. West is forced to admit, already on the first page, that his conception of Homer is a matter of faith.

In the past five years West has promulgated this image of Homer in a variety of scholarly and popular publications, and in several of the modern languages. Unlike Lord, who, though seeming to have found the answers to the Homeric Question he was looking for in his dictation theory, never articulated a specific scenario for the construction of the Homeric text, West’s publications provide details about Homer’s composition process and even what his life was like:

“In the case of the *Iliad* I have no doubt that the process of composition extended over many years, perhaps decades, and that the majority of analysts since Hermann have been right to suppose that there was first a much shorter poem which then underwent a series of expansions. I do not, as many of them did, think it necessary to assume a different poet for each stratum of composition. I envisage one great poet, living in different places at different times, carrying with him a collection of papyrus roles and adding to them over the years.”<sup>87</sup>

In an exhibition catalogue entitled *Troy: Dream and Reality* (*Troia: Traum und Wirklichkeit*), West explains it for the lay person:

“Jede [Papyrusrolle] konnte mehrere hundert Verse fassen. Um alle 15,000 Verse der Ilias aufzuschreiben (ohne den später eingefügten 10. Gesang), brauchte er eine ganze Menge Rollen. Das bedeutete eine sehr lange Arbeit. Der Dichter hat das riesige Werk offenbahr nicht in einem Zug von Anfang bis zum Ende produziert, sondern einen kürzeren Entwurf viele Jahre hindurch erweitert und ausgearbeitet; bei dieser Annahme erklären sich manche Eigentümlichkeiten des Aufbaus. Die Anzahl Rollen, die der fahrende Sänger mit sich führen musste, wuchs ständig.”<sup>88</sup>

West’s Homer backpacks around Greece, occasionally coming up with new ideas and making corrections in the margins. Hence even the variants and apparent inconsistencies in the texts that have come down to us can be explained within a literate model of authorship.

West’s model depends on the idea that a master oral poet can become a literate one, and for this he is indebted to recent work that questions an often assumed dichotomy between orality and literacy. In fact as Rosalind Thomas’s work and that of others has shown, orality

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<sup>87</sup> West 2000:487.

<sup>88</sup> West 2001:108.

and literacy cannot be diametrically opposed in the way that they are sometimes alleged to be.<sup>89</sup> Literate cultures are inevitably also oral. I am skeptical of the logic that posits the reverse, namely that oral poets can become literate ones in the course of an individual's lifetime, but it is not my purpose here to refute such logic. Rather, I am interested in the Homeric subtext behind these kinds of arguments. Thomas writes:

The use of writing in early Greece, when seen in the wider context, more probably duplicated the activity of the oral bards rather than suppressing it. It is even conceivable that the poet of the *Iliad* could have used writing to record his poetry, or more likely part of it. Memorization was also possible.<sup>90</sup>

Without addressing the question of whether or not Thomas' argument is valid, let me just observe that, like Macpherson in the case of Ossian and West in the case of Homer, Thomas is concerned to show that it is possible that a composition by a single bard was transmitted largely intact over many centuries. Thomas' reasoning here and in her other published work allows for the genius model of Homeric composition; the extent to which her Homer differs from other scholars is in her willingness to attribute orality, literacy, or some combination of both to the genius composer. It is my suspicion, however, that the real agenda behind the recent proliferation of studies like that of Thomas's, studies which stress the interdependence of oral and literate forms of communication, is in fact to create a space in which the genius of Homer can continue to flourish in a way with which we (21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, Canadians, and Europeans) can feel comfortable. All in all, though we cannot deny the formative role of an oral tradition in the creation of the Homeric epics, in today's hyperliterate and hypercivilized world we academics would prefer to have a Homer who can write.

### ***The Dream of Ossian***

I would like to conclude this exploration of tradition and invention with a return to Ossian by way of West's *Traum* of Homer (or is it *Wirklichkeit*?). As I observed at the outset of this essay, my title, "the Invention of Ossian," and its counterpart, "the Invention of Homer," contain both a subjective and objective genitive. We can use the word "dream" in a similar way, and the beautiful thing about the word dream is that it can be both a noun and a verb. It can, moreover, be an object, a thing one has seen in one's sleep, or it can have a creative and even inventive connotation, a thing one has "dreamed up." Dreams, as we find in Homer, are notoriously tricky things. Some have substance and reveal important truths; others are insubstantial yet deceive you with their verisimilitude. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, a Neo-

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<sup>89</sup> See Thomas 1989. For a critique of the term "orality" see Bakker 2005.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas 1992:50.

Classical painter working on the cusp of the Romantic Movement, captures the ambiguity that I have traced in this essay with his 1813 painting, *The Dream of Ossian* (figure 4).



Ossian, slumped over his lyre asleep, dreams of the heroes of the past. Are the heroes that he dreams of depicted pale and almost as if asleep themselves because they are receding from the reach of memory, or are those heroes, as we would say, “just a dream,” a figment of the poet’s own invention? The figure of Ossian himself embodies this question, for he is both the alleged poet and at the same time hero and subject of the songs attributed to him. Did Ossian dream up his heroes, only to have that dream nearly forgotten over the course of time and then revived by James Macpherson, or was he himself dreamed up by Macpherson and Macpherson’s contemporaries?

In this paper I have tried to suggest that (1) not unlike James Macpherson do we dream up Homer even as we dream of him, and that (2) no less than in the 1760’s do we continue to obsess over the question of Homer’s genius (termed, in the earliest discussions of it, “invention”). That we cannot separate the poetry from the man is signified by the existence of at least ten titles published in the last fifty years or so in English that consist of simply that magical name, Homer.<sup>91</sup> Our evidence is such that however we dream up Homer it is of

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<sup>91</sup> See, e.g., Rouse, 1939, Michaelopoulos 1966, Hainsworth 1969, Bowra 1972, Griffin 1980, Vivante 1985, Bloom 1986, King 1994, Rutherford 1996, McAuslan and Wolcott 1998, and Powell 2004.

necessity a matter of faith and will always be rooted in current conceptions of poets and poetry. Unlike Macpherson, most of us do not compose “Homeric” poetry. But we all compose lives of Homer, and each one says far more about the poetry and scholarship and the preoccupations of our own time than it does about Homer’s.

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