Howard Gaskill, »Why Ossian? Why Comala?«

ABSTRACT
The publication of James Macpherson’s Ossianic poetry in the 1760s proved to be a sensation of the first order, coming to exert an extraordinary impact all over Europe and beyond. This paper will attempt to demonstrate that Ossian’s popularity should not be dismissed as a short-lived eighteenth-century aberration, and provides evidence of recent revival of both critical and more general interest in the work. The nature of the phenomenon, its relation to authentic tradition, and some of its intrinsic literary qualities are discussed. The premise that we are dealing here with a worthless hoax which made dupes of its admirers is emphatically rejected. After sketching the pivotal influence on the great German literary flowering of the last third of the eighteenth century the essay moves to a consideration of the appeal of Ossian for composers, making use of the recent findings of James Porter. There appear to be more settings of ‘Comala’ than any other Ossianic poem (listed in an Appendix), and reasons are advanced for this. At the same time it is shown that staged Ossian, whether musical or not, was by no means unusual in the decades following its appearance.

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I make no pretence at being able to give a satisfactory answer to either of these questions, particularly the second. But perhaps I should rather have asked: why not? For implicit in my title is the still widespread assumption that the remarkable success of James Macpherson’s Ossianic poems throughout Europe represents an extraordinary eighteenth-century aberration of taste that needs to be explained and excused – unlike the subsequent eclipse (if indeed that is what it is). In acting the apologist for James Macpherson (1736–96) and his fabrications of ancient (Scottish) Gaelic poetry in English garb (1760–63), I might well appear to be defending the indefensible, and inflating Ossian’s significance well beyond what is warranted for what proved to be no more than an intense, though mercifully brief flash in the pan, an embarrassing but ephemeral episode in literary history, best swept as far as possible under the carpet. However, as I shall argue, no carpet is even remotely big enough to cover what became one of the most hugely influential works of literature ever to emerge from the British Isles.

For those inclined to take notice, the past thirty years or so have seen a marked upsurge of scholarly interest in Macpherson and his Ossian, most of it revisionist in tendency in that it questions conventionally damning judgments of the man and his work, and demands that the literary achievement be taken seriously. There have been important monographs, first and foremost Fiona Stafford’s pioneering *Sublime Savage*.

But given the range of expertise required to tackle the Ossianic phenomenon in its manifold aspects – and omnilingual polymaths being thin on the ground – many of the more substantial contributions have taken the form of compilations. The titles of two of these – *Ossian Then and Now*, and *Ossian in the Twenty-First Century* – might seem to refer primarily to the recent rapid increase in critical activity following many decades of relative neglect. Yet this is in itself significant, even if it is largely a matter of specialists talking to specialists. After all, ... *in the Twenty-First Century* is perhaps not a title one can easily imagine being applied to other works much in vogue in the mid-eighteenth century: Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*? Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock’s *Messias*? Salomon Gessner’s *Idylls*? This is not to disparage such works, merely to indicate that, over 250 years after its first publication, Ossian is capable to an unusual degree of inspiring (or provoking) lively critical debate, some – though nowadays
by no means the greater part – still polemically concerned with its status. But what of Ossian beyond the academic world? He may not exactly be a household name, but there is evidence of gradual emergence from relative obscurity. The aforementioned compilation, *Ossian Then and Now*, consists of the proceedings of a one-day international conference held at the City University of Paris, designed to coincide with the hosting at UNESCO of artist Calum Colvin’s highly successful and much-travelled exhibition, *Ossian: Fragments of Ancient Poetry*. Alexander Stoddart, the Queen's »Sculptor in Ordinary« in Scotland, has mooted various Ossianic projects, the latest of which would involve scooping out a mountain in Morven to house a huge recumbent fallen warrior, Oscar, son of Ossian. Music composer James Macmillan produced his symphonic poem, *The Death of Oscar* in 2012. The following year Classiques Garnier issued a new French translation of Ossian by Samuel Baudry. If Macpherson's bard became the »Homer of the North«, the Austrian poet Oswald Egger has styled himself in the publicity for one of his collections 'ein Ossian des Südens'. Ossian has recently made an unlikely appearance in fantasy fiction, with Petra Hartmann’s retelling of ‘Darthula’, which includes a new translation of one of Macpherson’s most enduringly popular poems. In 2013, as part of his Gothic project, Simon Murphy revived Friedrich Rust’s monodrama *Colma's Klage*, which came out in 1780, the same year as Pietro Morandi’s and Ranieri Calzabigi’s *Comala* and is a kind of opera-cum-Singspiel for soloist and orchestra (now viewable online in a performance). In 2015 l’Opéra-Comique gave a concert performance of Étienne Méhul’s very Ossianic 1806 opera *Uthal* in Versailles.

Such anecdotal evidence should serve to give the lie to the notion that Ossian is today ‘almost entirely forgotten’, as visitors to the exhibition of work by the artist Anne-Louis Girodet (1767–1824) at the Musée du Louvre were (mis)informed in 2005. When in the early 1990s I first approached Edinburgh University Press with the proposal for a new edition of Ossian, the suggestion that people might actually want to buy it and read it was met with considerable scepticism. My initial instinct that there would be a demand for an affordable edition of the poetry was rapidly vindicated: within nine months of its appearance, it had to be reprinted. Sales continued to be gratifyingly buoyant for a decade or more, and it is a pity that the price has in the meantime been hiked beyond what readers should be expected to pay for a »classic« in paperback. But that no longer matters very much. Alan and Linda Burnett have since provided a cheaper hard-copy alternative, and the quantity and quality of what is now available online is of course much greater than it was in 1996. Unfortunately, the impression that still tends to prevail is that Ossian, as the
intrinsically worthless product of an obscure and unscrupulous Scottish con-man, is well and truly dead and should be allowed to rot on the dung-heap of literary history. (This is largely attributable to the enduring influence, particularly in the Anglophone world, of Samuel Johnson (1709–84), literary pope and notorious Scotophobe.) Yet for those willing to see, Ossian has in fact proved to be an astonishingly lively corpse, a spectacular case, if you like, of *vigor mortis.*

What precisely are we talking about here? In 1760 the Gaelic-speaking Highlander, James Macpherson, after some arm-twisting from others, it has to be said, produced the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Galic or Erse Language.* Whatever their status as translation, these are prose vignettes of often quite remarkable beauty, as was immediately recognized, and not just in Britain. The first, 'Shilric and Vinvela', a dialogue, or rather duet, of two tragic lovers, was very quickly translated into French by Denis Diderot, who was no doubt attracted to the *Fragments* by the innovative mixing of the genres, the lyric, and epic, and dramatic, all this in a language that hovered tantalizingly between verse and prose. Already we can see in the *Fragments* many of the major elements of the more ambitious later work which was to enjoy such phenomenal success, in Europe and beyond. The fragmentariness, though suggestive of incomplete transmission, is in fact constitutive and remains an essential element of the longer poems into which most of the *Fragments* are eventually integrated. This expresses itself in the syntax, the paratactic breathlessness, the absence of co- and particularly sub-ordination. In 1756 the Perthshire school-master Jerome Stone(s) had published a translation/adaptation of an old Scots Gaelic ballad of unimpeachable authenticity, and remarked of his source that it displayed: ‘simple and unassisted genius, in which energy is always more sought after than neatness, and the strictness of connexion less adverted to than the design of moving the passions and affecting the heart.’ He also compared it to Homer. This sets the tone for many subsequent observations on Macpherson’s Ossianic poetry, in particular those of his mentor Hugh Blair (1718–1800) whose *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763) was immensely influential for its reception: ‘No artful transitions; nor full and extended connexion of parts; such as we find among the poets of later times when order and regularity of composition were more studied and known; but a style always rapid and vehement; in narration concise even to abruptness, and leaving several circumstances to be supplied by the reader’s imagination.’ Blair is soon echoed by Melchiorre Cesarotti (1730–1808) who speaks of ‘the extremely concise, tight and rapid manner’ that is the pervasive character of Ossian’s style, though in practice in his Italian translation the
gaps are occasionally filled and missing motivation supplied. In Germany, this aspect is also repeatedly stressed by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) in his first Ossian essay, which appeared in his manifesto of Sturm-und-Drang values, Von deutscher Art und Kunst (1773), and is occasionally derivative of Blair to the point of plagiarism. Both the genuine article and Macpherson’s re-workings may thus be seen as catering for a taste for the genus abruptum which was beginning to develop in the mid-eighteenth century. Broken expression could be seen as a warrant of true feeling, and Ossian’s poetry as ‘poetry of the heart’, ‘a heart penetrated with noble sentiments, and with sublime and tender passions; a heart that glows, and kindles the fancy; a heart that is full, and pours itself forth.’ At the same time it is not merely a matter of lachrymose effusions, untrammelled emotionalism. Brevity is perhaps not a quality one immediately associates with Ossian, but it is important to realize that the expression of grief in the poetry is often characterized by laconic understatement. Anyone inclined to doubt this should perhaps compare Fingal’s reaction on learning of the death of his beloved Comala – ‘Is the daughter of Sarno dead; the white-bosomed maid of my love? Meet me, Comala, on my heaths, when I sit alone at the streams of my hills’ – with what Calzabigi makes of it in his libretto based on the poem, where Fingal is allowed twenty lines of verse to express his feelings of loss.

In the Fragments Ossian has not yet acquired the conventional spelling of his name – he is Oscian – nor is he obviously the narrator, but rather the foregrounded figure in some of the poems. As for the name, it seems that Macpherson was searching for an adequate Anglicization of Scots Gaelic Oiséan. I imagine he still intended it to be pronounced the same way, and that when he eventually opted for the double »s« he assumed that a word like »passion« would be the obvious model. In Irish it’s Oisin, but whether Oisín, Oiséan, Oscian, or Ossian, it’s the same legendary bard we’re talking about, the warrior-poet, father of Oscur/Oscar and son of Fingal, or Fionn mac Cumhail, according to Macpherson king of Morven in what is now Argyll on the west coast of Scotland, according to authentic tradition leader of an Irish-based militia under King Cormac in the third century AD. It is obviously impossible here to go into any detail on the precise relationship between Macpherson’s poetry and the traditions within which he was brought up, beyond stressing that they did exist and that he had a legitimate right to them. The Gaels of Scotland and the Irish had a common culture and common literary language until around 1600, though even by then there was already considerable divergence in speech and evidence of independent poetic treatment of familiar material. The charges brought against Macpherson that he stole his Ossian from the Irish or
that he invented it all himself are both manifest nonsense, and of course mutually contradictory (though that doesn’t seem to worry the Johnsonian mafia). But Macpherson naturally knew what he was doing, however justified he might have felt in doing it.

The central and most authentic element of tradition he seizes on is the geriatric bard as the last of his race, the feeble, decrepit remnant of a vanished golden age of heroic vigour and virtue. In a genuine Gaelic ballad he calls himself a ‘pitiful worn out rag of an old man’.21 This is very much in evidence in ‘Fragment’ VIII:

‘By the side of a rock on the hill, beneath the aged trees, old Oscian 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.

‘How hast thou fallen like an oak, with all thy branches round thee! Where is Fingal the King? where is Oscur my son? where are all my race? Alas! in the earth they lie. I feel their tombs with my hands. I hear the river below murmuring hoarsely over the stones. What dost thou, O river, to me? Thou bringest back the memory of the past.’22

According to legend old Ossian miraculously survives the extinction of his race by several centuries, living on to converse about the past with none other than St Patrick. A number of Macpherson’s authentic sources open with framing dialogues between the two, in which they often quarrel, and even threaten to come to blows, particularly when they’ve had too much to drink. The sparring usually results in Patrick prevailing upon Oisean to give him a tale from the old times. There is a reference to one of these poems in Blair’s Preface to the Fragments: ‘In a fragment of the same poems, which the translator has seen, a Culdee or Monk is represented as desirous to take down in writing from the mouth of Oscian, who is the principal personage in several of the following fragments, his warlike achievements and those of his family. But Oscian treats the Monk and his religion with disdain, telling him, that the deeds of such great men were subjects too high to be recorded by him, or by any of his religion …’23

Of course, Patrick isn’t named here, and he isn’t named in the poetry either. But he is there nonetheless, albeit in disguise. The seventh ‘Fragment’, apparently the first to be composed or at least displayed, begins: ‘Why openest thou afresh the spring of my grief, O son of Alpin, inquiring how Oscur fell?’ He is thus addressed quite frequently, both in the Fragments, and in the longer poems, also as the druidic ‘son of the rock’, including in ‘Comala’.24 And it is indeed St Patrick, the ‘son of Calpurnius’, ‘MacAlpuirn, or indeed ‘MacAlpine’, who is behind this shadowy figure.25 That perhaps gives some indication of
the kind of oblique relationship to authentic sources we’re often dealing with here.

It is widely assumed that Macpherson claimed to have translated his Ossian from manuscripts he didn’t have. Rather the reverse is true. He had manuscripts, but didn’t claim to have translated from them – or at least not much.26 Following the success of the Fragments Macpherson’s backers raised money for him to be sent on a prospecting trip to the Highlands and Islands in search of the greater whole of which the Fragments were supposedly part, and he returned with a rich harvest, mostly in the form of transcriptions from oral recitation. Any manuscripts he collected, then and perhaps earlier, may now be viewed in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, the most relevant here being the so-called Book of the Dean of Lismore that contains a wealth of heroic poetry in Scottish Gaelic, including substantial ballads attributed to Oisín in the heading.27 But that’s about as much as Macpherson could read because of the phonetic spelling conventions employed, which have challenged many better Gaelic scholars and continue to do so. But he would have been able to identify names and pick up the gist of plots already known to him from oral sources. However, the trouble with this material was that it wasn’t good enough for him. Most of it had assumed the form in which he found it in late medieval times, and though it might have originated with professional trained bards, by the time Macpherson encountered it it had gone popular and demotic. He rightly suspected behind it a tradition of far greater antiquity and dignity. So he set about reconstructing it as he thought it might once have been, using methods that range from something approaching orthodox translation – he can indeed be found wrestling with his genuine sources – through free adaptation, loosely based on authentic plots and incidents, to complete fabrication. By these means he is able to create – at least in Fingal, the first of the major poems – a synthetic epic whole which is in part a collage of more or less genuine elements, in part free invention.28 Needless to say, all the ribaldry, crudity and humour of the original sources has been ruthlessly expunged, and a scholarly apparatus added such as should grace any classical work. A large gap in Scottish pre-history is exploited to conjure up a fantasy third-century Gaelic world with its own customs, traditions and endless genealogies. And the composer, both of the eponymous epic and all the lesser poems, is now Ossian himself whose presence as narrator serves to hold the rambling episodic work together. The foregrounding of the bard as central figure is of course a proto-Romantic feature, and also perhaps reminds us that the appearance of the Ossianic poetry coincided almost exactly with that of Tristram Shandy, with which it has more than a little in common.29
Macpherson succeeded in producing a remarkably versatile work, managing to combine the attraction of the ancient with the shock of the new. It is both primitive and sophisticated, naïve and sentimental in Schiller’s sense, though that is also to some extent a quality of the sources. There is a pronounced elegiac weepiness in the Scottish Gaelic material which is not present to anything like the same degree in the Irish, certainly if one compares the Book of the Dean with Duanaire Finn (the book of the lays of Fionn, compiled by Aodh Ó Dochartaigh in 1627). But of course the tearfulness of Ossian went down extremely well in an age of sensibility. One of his ‘most remarkable expressions’, according to Hugh Blair, is the ‘joy of grief’ (this, together with the most common German rendering, ‘Wonne der Wehmuth’, serves as motto for the Salzburg Whitsun Festival in 2017). But there is more to this than mere modish melancholy. At its best Ossian evokes genuine pathos, and this has to do with Macpherson’s first-hand experience of the plight of the Scottish Gael, on whom in the wake of the Jacobite wars something approaching cultural genocide was being practised. Like Hölderlin’s Empedokles, he has felt the departing god of his people. ‘His race came forth, in their years; they came forth to war, but they always fell’, this line from ‘Cath-loda’ would later seem to Matthew Arnold to encapsulate the essence of the Celts and their ‘Titanism’. In the mid-eighteenth-century Highlands of Scotland it was particularly acute. The vein of piercing regret, thematization of loss, historical defeat and inexorable national decline is an essential feature of the Ossianic poetry, and that did of course also resonate strongly in a number of European countries whose self-confidence took a battering, particularly around the turn of century.

As I hope to have made clear, the authenticity question is an extremely complex one, and it would be unreasonable to expect an eighteenth-century audience to be able to answer it. On the other hand, it is perhaps worth making the point that many of the most ardent Ossian enthusiasts amongst Macpherson’s contemporaries, including Herder and Cesarotti, had a reasonably shrewd notion of his procedure as editor and translator, and if they tended to overestimate what was authentic in his work, they were still more nearly right about him than many a modern commentator. And it is a persistent fallacy to suppose that admiration for Ossian as a literary achievement is always predicated on unqualified belief in its authenticity as third-century epic.

I mention Cesarotti here, and as is well known, his translation of Ossian had enormous impact within Italy, and beyond (in the Spanish-speaking countries and Greece, for instance), but not with the two-volume Padua edition of 1763. This contains a translation only of the Fingal volume, and not even all
of that (it omits two of the lesser poems). But in the same year Macpherson had published an even bulkier tome, *Temora*. In the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a complete Italian Ossian had to wait for several years, in fact until 1773 when the 4-volume Padua edition finally appeared, dated 1772, after which sales took off. Until then they had apparently been miserable. *Temora*, it should be said – apart from the first book of the eponymous epic, which had already been included in the *Fingal* volume – seems to be almost entirely fraudulent. Unless, of course, one is prepared to allow that it was part and parcel of the Gaelic tradition to attribute one’s own poetry to Ossian, and that Macpherson was only continuing this, albeit in a different language. Perhaps also wanting to take his revenge on perfidious Albion.

The impact of Ossian, if not immediate, was eventually enormous and ubiquitous. However, it achieved its greatest significance in Germany, where it coincided with and decidedly influenced a remarkable literary efflorescence. We all know about Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), who helped publish a pirated reprint of the bard, was probably the first German to try his hand at the translation of a Scottish Gaelic text, and in 1774 produced in *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* a novel which was deservedly a huge hit all over Europe and fully seven percent of which is a brilliant translation from two of Macpherson’s lyrically most beautiful poems. But it is not just the generation born in the 1740s and 50s – Herder, Goethe, Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz (1751–92) (who translated the whole of *Fingal*), Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), for whom Ossian was important – but also the following, possibly even more gifted one, born around 1770, of whom I shall only name here the greatest of them all, Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843): he learnt Ossian virtually by heart in adolescence and remained an enthusiastic admirer right up until the collapse of his mind in 1806. It is a measure of the long-term myopia of specialist literary scholarship, particularly with regard to German Romanticism, that the first comprehensive survey of Ossian in Germany did not appear until 2003, takes up four volumes, and is only just shy of three thousand pages long. It doesn’t even deal with music.

The influence of Ossian in music is perhaps not as obvious as in literature, or indeed art. It is nevertheless substantial, and probably a great deal more so than most music historians would have us believe. As a relative ignoramus in this area, I’m happy to acknowledge my debt here to the distinguished ethno-musicologist, James Porter, who has recently completed a scholarly study of musical incarnations of Ossian and has generously shared his findings with me. As Porter is able to show, the enthusiastic response of musicians and composers to the Ossianic poems never really waned significantly; nor
has that enthusiasm ever been comprehensively analysed, this
despite the fact that the poems themselves are redolent of musical
activity: think, for instance, of all the bardic harp-playing
and singing. He contends that the number of meritorious works
based on Ossian is remarkable, having himself been able to
identify more than three hundred, over sixty for the operatic
stage, in addition to cantatas, lieder, symphonic poems, and
instrumental pieces. Porter has recently revised the Ossian
entries for *Grove Music Online* and, despite numerous exci-
sions, the overall number has more than doubled as a result.

I’ve extracted from the list some twenty works based on
‘Comala’ (see Appendix). This certainly shows it to be one of
the most popular Ossianic poems for composers, along with
‘Darthula’ and the ‘Songs of Selma’. It also demonstrates well
the longevity of fascination with Ossian, which, as is also
the case with literary treatments and translations, endures
right through the nineteenth century and appears to show
no obvious falling away of interest until after the First World
War – and even that is relative. Porter observes that cantatas
based on Ossian began to supersede opera after 1850, and
became almost, in some cases like »concert opera«. As for
‘Comala’, Morandi of course heads the list, but note Harriet
Wainewright (c1763–c1843), who inevitably had to contend
with current prejudice about women composers. She had no
luck in persuading London impresarios to stage her opera,
and in 1792 had to make do with a concert performance in
the Hanover Square rooms. This seems to be one reason she
went to Calcutta where she was able to put on full stage
performances, singing the main part herself (and seems to have
been endorsed by Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington).
According to Porter, the opera is rather good and Wainewright
herself unjustly neglected. Her libretto is remarkably faithful
to Macpherson, even to the extent of publishing some of his
footnotes.\(^{39}\) Not so faithful is Jørgen Malling (1836–1905),
despite attempting a Danish phonetic spelling of the Gaelic for
Comala (given in parenthesis), which he seems to have derived
from Nils Arfìdsson’s Swedish translation of the pseudo-Gaelic
Ossian that had been published in London in 1807.\(^{40}\) Interest-
ing is the substitution of Culma and Malwina for Dersagrena
and Melilcoma, the slaying of Comala by Hidallan in a cave
where he skulks after Fingal’s return, and his suicide when
confronted (rather than, as in the original, being banished by
Fingal and then slaughtered by his own father Lamor in the
next poem, “The War of Caros”). Any liberties taken by Cesarotti
and Calzabigi pale in comparison.

Morandi’s *Comala* was the first of a procession of around
twenty stage productions drawn from Ossian in Italy alone, and
this included ballet as well as opera. What were the attractions
of Ossian for composers, and why ‘Comala’ in particular?
According to James Porter, the main themes that composers seem to have responded to are: the gentle melancholy, the ‘joy of grief’ that suffuses the poems; the loneliness and isolation of Ossian (read ‘the artist’), as the last of the bards; the character oppositions as manifest in gender roles, male emotionalism, female warriors; and finally, untamed Nature, natural phenomena (sun, moon, stars, meteors), the settings in liminal areas (beaches, forests, gloomy moors). The latter is undoubtedly a major factor in Ossian’s appeal: Macpherson’s remarkable ability to evoke the gloom and grandeur of a landscape of awesome beauty and bleakness that tends to dwarf the merely human into parasitic insignificance. It is here above all that he shows himself to be a genuinely gifted poet. At the same time, the elements so succinctly summarized by Porter may not seem significantly different from what also attracted poets and painters, not to mention the public at large. As for ‘Comala’ itself, the poem, which comes immediately after the epic ‘Fingal’, though undoubtedly very popular and displaying many of the typical features associated with Ossianic poetry – including the cross-dressing heroine following her lover to war – remains unusual in one obvious respect. It is actually styled ‘a dramatic poem’, and is set out as drama with a dramatis personae and a bardic chorus. According to Macpherson’s note: “The variety of the measure [in the putative original] shews that the poem was originally set to music, and perhaps presented before the chiefs upon solemn occasions.” Elsewhere he points to the beautiful lyric pieces ‘scattered throughout the poems of Ossian’, regretting that in translation they must appear much to their disadvantage when ‘stripped of numbers, and the harmony of rhime’. This is contrasted with the ‘recitative or narrative’ parts in which ‘the original is rather a measured sort of prose, than any regular versification’. Following hints of this kind, European translations of Ossian often emphasized the distinction between lyrical set-piece (corresponding to aria) and recitative by making it visible in the page layout: in prose versions by interpolating verse, in verse translations by varying the metre and using a shorter line. In ‘Comala’, of course, the narrative element is incorporated into the lyricized dialogue, mainly between Dersagrena and Melilcoma. Macpherson’s note about the original poem’s having been ‘set to music’ is tantamount to an invitation to convert it into singspiel or opera. In ‘Comala’ a level of reflection on the action is provided by the other female characters and the bardic chorus (not to mention Macpherson’s running commentary at the bottom of the page). But the poem lacks the constant refractive presence of the reminiscing narrator, creating his Chinese boxes of memories, even seeing the future in terms of anticipated acts of remembrance. It thus lends itself particularly to staged performance. Yet though ‘Comala’ might seem the most likely...
and promising candidate for such treatment, it is by no means the only Ossianic poem to receive it. What is perhaps surprising is that, as Dafydd Moore points out, referring particularly to the London stage, towards the end of the eighteenth century dramatic versions of Ossian ‘ran the gamut of plays, closet dramas, pantomimes and operas’. Nothing, not even dramatizations of gothic novels such as the Castle of Otranto, rivals Ossian for the number and range of versions. And, in English at least, it requires only slight alterations of the original text to fit a verse line, as is demonstrated by the libretto for Barthéléémon’s opera Oithôna of 1768 (for which the music hasn’t survived). That ‘suggests the lyrical/dramatic nature and potential of Macpherson’s poetry, which here slips into strophe and antistrophe, ode and recitativo, with a minimum of strain.’ Admittedly, Moore also observes that most of these instances of performed Ossian were unremittingly bad, but the fact they were given at all, their number and variety, from music-hall knockabout to polite gathering, illustrates the wide social appeal of the poems, in Britain at least, and shows there was an audience and appetite for staged Ossian. They also suggest that what people saw in the work was indeed a lyric, performable text that entered the cultural bloodstream in diverse ways, and not just via ponderous epics and antiquarian disputes.45

There may not seem to be so much trace of the blind old bard in the cultural bloodstream now of course, but events such as this symposium, and its occasion, surely show that attempts to write him off – and there are those who would like nothing better – have failed miserably. As the Germans are fond of saying: ‘Totgesagte leben länger’.

--- APPENDIX: ‘COMALA IN MUSIC’ ---
(List compiled from the work of James Porter)

Comala (music drama), Pietro Morandi, 1780
Comála, A Dramatic Poem from Ossian (opera), Harriet Wain(e) wright, 1792
Comala (dramatic poem), Ettore Romagnoli, 1798
Comala (opera), Thomas Busby, 1799 [untraced]
Comala (incidental music), F.G. Fletcher, late eighteenth century [untraced]
Fingallo e Comala (music drama), Stefano Pavesi, 1805
La morte di Comala, recitative and aria (soprano, orchestra), Georg Gerson, 1813
Comala is no more (glee), Thomas Miles, 1815
Szene aus Ossians Comala (voice, accompaniment), Friedrich Kuhlau, 1820
Comala (opera), Luigi Gordigiani, 1822
Comala (soli, chorus, orchestra), Niels W. Gade, 1846
Comala (orchestra), William Howard Glover, c1850
Comala (opera), Karl Hoffbauer, 1872
Comala (soli, chorus, orchestra), Karl Emanuel Klitzsch, 1888
Comala (orchestra), John Blackwood McEwen, 1889 [MS]
Comala (symphonic poem), Alexandre Levy, 1890
Comala (soli, chorus, orchestra), Joseph Jongen, 1897
Comalas Sang paa Høien (voice, piano), Jørgen Malling, 1897
Kyvala [Gaelic = Caomh-Mhalla] (soli, chorus, orchestra),
Jørgen Malling, 1902
Comala (soprano, orchestra or piano), François Rasse, c1913
Comala (opera), Joseph Weston Nicholl, 1920
Comala (overture), Ian Whyte, 1929

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ENDNOTES
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1 This essay originated as a paper delivered in Vadstena on 6 August 2016 at the symposium ‘Comala and Nina: Operatic Performance in the Age of Sensibility’, which followed the performance of both operas the previous evening; it was intended to provide background for Morandi’s Comala (1780).


4 Occasionally to the point of obsession – see, for instance, Thomas M. Curley, Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud, and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).


8 Petra Hartmann, Darthula, Tochter der Nebel: Ein ossianischer Roman (Bickenbach: Saphir im Stahl, 2014). The perennial attraction of ‘Darthula’, particularly for composers (operas by Pavesi and van Milligen), is largely evidenced in a remarkable number of settings of Johann Gottfried Herder’s translation (via Michael Denis) of ‘Darthulas Grab(es)gesang’ – Johannes Brahms’s is the best known, but mention should also be made of Arnold Schönberg’s sketch of 1903. This information, and much else in my essay, is derived from Professor James Porter, who has recently completed a comprehensive study of Ossian and music, and to whom I owe an immense debt of gratitude.

9 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9L7-Op_9Q.


12 Blind Ossian’s Fingal: Fragments and Controversy: Compiled and Translated by James Macpherson, ed. by Allan Burnett and Linda Andersson Burnett (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2011). An exceptionally valuable online resource is being developed at the University of Galway by Justin Tonra, Rebecca Barr, and David Kelly – see http://ossianonline.org/.


14 Scots Magazine, 18 (1756), pp. 15–17. The poem itself, which is entitled ‘Albin and the Daughter of Mey’, is a loose rendering of ‘Bás Fhraoich’ (‘Death of Fraoch’).

15 The Poems of Ossian, p. 354.

16 ‘la manera estremamente concisa, serrata, e rapida’. See Melchiorre Cesariotti, ‘Comala, poema drammatico’, in Poesie di Ossian figlio di Fingal, antico poeta celtico, ultimamente scoperte, e tradotte in prosa inglese da Jacopo Macpherson,
Howard Gaskill, »Why Ossian? Why Comala?«


18 Blair, Poems of Ossian, p. 356.

19 Poems of Ossian, p. 109; Calzabigi, Comala, azione teatrale (Senigallia: Stella, 1780), pp. 16–17.

20 For a recent survey, taking in the most significant specialist literature on the subject, see Lesa Ní Mhungaile, ‘Ossian and the Gaelic World’, in Companion to James Macpherson, ed. by Moore, pp. 26–38.


22 Poems of Ossian, p. 18.

23 Poems of Ossian, p. 5.


26 See Gaskill, ‘The Manuscript Myth’, in Ossian Revisited, ed. by Gaskill, pp. 6–16; also Howard Gaskill, ‘What did James Macpherson Really Leave on Display at his Publisher’s Shop in 1762?’, Scottish Gaelic Studies, 16 (1990), 67–89.

27 As I first argued (to no great effect) in ‘What did James Macpherson …’, there seems to be good circumstantial evidence that Macpherson acquired the Dean’s Book before he went on his first prospecting expedition. However little he could make of its contents, he would have been able to work out from the dates mentioned in it when it was compiled (1512–42), therefore mainly from late medieval sources, as mediated by strolling bards. In order to underline the great antiquity of the poetry he claims to be translating, Macpherson makes slighting references to inferior products of the ‘fifteenth century’ (Poems of Ossian, pp. 48, 217, 223). The first such reference in fact occurs in Blair’s Preface to the Fragments (which is of course based on information supplied by Macpherson): ‘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’ (p. 5). Since the Fragments appeared in June 1760, and there is little intrinsic to the poems that would otherwise suggest they were produced in the fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries, I conclude that Macpherson had already had access to the Dean’s Book from at least the late 1750s.
Howard Gaskill, »Why Ossian? Why Comala?«

28 *Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem, in Six Books, together with several other Poems, composed by Ossian the Son of Fingal, Translated from the Galic Language by James Macpherson* (London: Becket and De Hondt, 1762 [December 1761]).


33 *Temora, an Ancient Epic Poem, in Eight Books; together with several other poems, composed by Ossian, the son of Fingal; Translated from the Galic language by James Macpherson* (London: Becket and De Hondt, [March] 1763).


39 The only detailed consideration of Wainewright’s life and work is to be found in Porter, *Beyond Fingal’s Cave*, chapter 4.


*Poems of Ossian*, p. 436.

*Poems of Ossian*, p. 492.