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# **'Thy native Muse regard!':**

## **The Poetics of the Sublime in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland**

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I understood that some time ago. Our thinking is a constant process of abstracting, a turning away from the sensual, an attempt to build a purely spiritual world, whereas you concern yourself with what is most insubstantial and mortal and proclaim the meaning of the world in terms of the ephemeral. You do not turn away from it, you dedicate yourself to it, and through your dedication it achieves the sublime.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Hesse, *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1930) translated by Leila Vennewitz (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), p. 289.

## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to uncover the transmission and development of the sublime throughout the work of the late eighteenth-century Scottish poets, James Macpherson, James Beattie, and Robert Burns. By first offering a modern definition of the sublime based on the meeting of the world, the mind, and the word, this thesis shall look to the sublime's idealisation within eighteenth-century British aesthetic thought, noting its contested, and abstract conceptualisation as 'the true sublime'. Chapter One shall be dedicated to acknowledging Scotland's role in shaping this aesthetic before addressing the problematic nature of the aesthetic ideal of a 'true sublime'. The argument shall then be made that following Edmund Burke's landmark treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, which successfully offered the late eighteenth-century a clear taxonomy of the sublime with poetry as its highest expression, the subsequent poetry of Macpherson, Beattie, and Burns actualised this philosophical ideal of a 'true sublime' into a working, and examinable practice, a poetics of the sublime. Chapter Two shall discuss the rise of the 'Ossian phenomenon' of the 1760s, with constructive analysis of Macpherson's three sets of *Ossian* poems: *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books* (1761), and *Temora: An Epic Poem in Eight Books*. By discussing the development of the poetics of the sublime throughout each set of poems, this thesis shall contend that *Ossian* marks a pivotal moment in literary history for successfully realising the eighteenth-century's theory of the sublime through its poetic coordination of the classical models of the fragment and the epic paired with its decisively Scottish aspect in imagery and character. Chapter Three shall turn to the proceeding decade and the philosophy and poetry of James Beattie. The chapter shall acknowledge Beattie's position within the philosophical discourses of Marischal college during the Aberdonian Enlightenment before suggesting that his influential poem, *The Minstrel* (1771, 1774) presents a more substantial model of the sublime than found in such abstract discourses. The chapter shall note the progression in form from Macpherson whilst noting a similar engagement with the Scottish landscapes that inspire the texts. Central to this discussion of Beattie's *Minstrel*, will be his induction of the 'sublime moment', a crucial development for the poetics of the sublime centred on the subjective and creative experience of the poet. Chapter Four shall examine the work of Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns. In light of such developments from Macpherson and Beattie, this chapter shall note Burns's position as inheritor of a poetics of the sublime that had been familiarised through its allegiance to the sublimity of Scotland and Scottish poesy. This chapter shall then examine Burns's role as innovator, with his characteristic use of form, language, and a pervading spirit of localism from which he achieves a distinct new 'Vision' of the sublime. The final chapter shall offer a summary of the progression of the poetics of the sublime throughout the work of Macpherson, Beattie, and Burns, whilst looking ahead to the Romantic period and the influential stature of each of these late eighteenth-century Scottish poets and their respective legacies.

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To my mother, to whom I owe every shred of determination, and to my father, every faint or vivid wisp of imagination.

Finally, to Fr Benedetto of Jerusalem, who welcomed me at the end of two difficult journeys and who has unknowingly guided my steps on this new journey into the sublime.

### **Declaration of Originality**

I declare that this thesis does not include work forming part of a thesis presented successfully for another degree. I declare that this thesis represents my own work except where referenced to others.

## Chapter One:

### ‘The True Sublime’: Scotland’s Roving Muse

The sublime is an elusive and fluid concept which cannot be confined to either the word or the mind or the world, but which is somehow realised in the meeting of all three.<sup>2</sup>

Any discussion of the sublime must invariably begin by addressing the primary question of definition. However, the sublime, by its very nature, seems ordained to resist such definitive attempts. In the quotation above, the semiologist Stephen K. Land offers an essentially hermeneutic approach at defining the sublime by surmising its principal distinctions as 'elusive', 'fluid', and that 'which cannot be confined' to either language, thought or the world. It is helpful to begin by examining the sublime separately within the context of each of these three modes before discussing its definition in full. With 'the word', the sublime is that which exceeds the bounds of language and the text. The 'elusive' figuration, the indescribable alongside the ineffable. Milton's poetic attempt at description of the 'execrable shape' of Death is sublime, just as Marx's polemic attempt to articulate the growing 'Spectre of Communism' across nineteenth-century Europe is also sublime.<sup>3</sup> Concurringly, to 'the mind', the sublime as sensation or subjective conscious experience has been throughout history linked to amazement, terror, awe, and transcendent experience; mystical, visionary, even spiritual in its excesses of sensation. Finally, within 'the world', the sublime is all around us, it is in the infinitude of the stars, the vastness of the mountains, and the obscurity of tempests. Yet each of these three modes, the word, the mind, and the world, are essential to the 'realisation' of what, since its prodigy as a term some two millennia ago, has been near-universally idealised as 'the true sublime'.<sup>4</sup> Today, we may accurately define this concept or ideal of a 'true sublime' as the world's sublime impression on the mind of the subject, the experience of which, informs the sublime expression of the word. However, our modern perception of such a definition is indebted to the sublime's highly contested formation within eighteenth-century Britain.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen K. Land, *From Signs to Propositions: The Concepts of Form in Eighteenth Century Semantic Theory*, (London: Longman Linguistics Library, 1974), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> These two texts have been selected as they example two of the wider manifestations of sublimity, namely the 'religious sublime' and the 'polemical' or 'political sublime', however this thesis (as shall be argued throughout the chapter) will engage in a more focused practice of the sublime in the 'poetics of the sublime'. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), ed by Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 2003), ll:681, p. 42.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), edited with Introduction and Notes by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> This ideal of a 'true sublime' has been in use and is evidenced from the term's inception with Longinus through eighteenth-century aesthetic theory and indeed poetics (see Burns's use of the term in chapter 4 of this thesis) and is still used in modernity in the works of such critics as Samuel Monk, Thomas Weiskel et. al. (see rest of this chapter for discussion).



The purpose of this introductory chapter shall be to discuss the origins of the sublime, its inception into eighteenth-century Britain and subsequent idealisation as a philosophical concept known as the 'true sublime', and the role of aesthetics in developing this concept. This chapter shall then recognise Scotland's place within this newly developing school of aesthetics before addressing the problematic contingencies relating to aesthetics and the ideology of a 'true sublime'. This chapter shall conclude by presenting the main argument of this thesis, that the sublime is an inherently literary phenomenon, bound to 'the word' and finding its greatest expression in poetry, and that three Scottish poets during the latter half of the eighteenth century helped define the theoretical search for the 'true sublime' by actualising it into a lasting and influential poetics of the sublime.<sup>5</sup>

Published in 1727, the panegyric by the classicist Anthony Blackwater (quoted below) provides an insight into the near-fanatical idealisation of the 'true sublime' that was extant throughout the eighteenth century:

The true Sublime will bear translation into all languages, and will be great and surprising in all languages, and to all persons of understanding and judgement, notwithstanding the difference of their country, education, interest and party[...] it defies opposition, envy, and time; and is infinitely advanced above cavil and criticism.<sup>6</sup>

As studies on eighteenth-century thought regarding the sublime attest to, the subject was treated with such exhaustive interest that it can be readily described as a form of fanaticism. Indeed, the first modern critic to arrange and present the complex history of the sublime, Samuel H. Monk, refers to the eighteenth-century's extreme preoccupation with the concept as the 'cult of the sublime', which given the age of Enlightenment's increasingly secularised rationale of reason and empiricism, seems incongruous if not problematic.<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton offers the solution that during this period the aesthetic of the sublime became 'a suitably secularised version of the Almighty himself', and that by substituting God, the sublime stood 'autonomous, auto-relic and utterly self-determining'.<sup>8</sup> Eagleton's apotheosis of the aesthetic clarifies the hyperbole of Blackwater in highlighting the god-like status of

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of a 'poetics of the sublime' is inspired by Vincent De Luca's monograph *Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), that successfully disentangles the sublime from the variegated discourses on sublimity by maintaining that Blake 'evolved a poetics based on the premises and strategies of the sublime and that this poetics governed his aims and practices as a working poet' (p. 4). Whilst this thesis does not engage with De Luca's study of Blake and the sublime, it is nevertheless indebted to his approach towards a poetics of the sublime that this thesis shall similarly aspire towards.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Blackwater, *The Sacred Classics Defended and Illustrated*, 2 Vols., 2nd edn. Corr. (London, C. Rivington, 1727) Vol. 2, pp. 247-8.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. iii.

Abrams and Galt offer a concise summation of the Enlightenment's 'model of reason' that supports the period's move of 'dissipating the darkness of superstition', and 'freeing humanity from its earlier reliance on mere authority and unexamined tradition', which left a void in which the sublime can be seen to substitute the place of religion or God. In M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 'Enlightenment', in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 10<sup>th</sup> edn. International edn. (Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2005), pp. 106-7.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 35.

the sublime to eighteenth-century intellectual society. It was the *zeitgeist* of the age, the principal point of interest to discussions of nature, art, taste, sense or sentiment, and its range is as startling as its influence - art, landscape gardening, architecture, philosophy, and literature all to some formidable degree pay homage to its dominion over the great minds of the period.

This ascendancy of the sublime began two centuries earlier with the discovery of Longinus's fragmented and found-text *Peri Hupsous*, translated as 'On the Sublime'. Believed to be written sometime in the first or third century AD, in *Peri Hupsous*, Longinus is the first to attempt to provide 'a clear understanding and appreciation of what constitutes the true sublime'.<sup>9</sup> The text remained in obscurity until the celebrated French translation by Nicolas Boileau in 1674 brought the ancient theory of the sublime into circulation. Whilst Boileau is 'still often popularly thought of' as the 'archetypal "neo-classical" rules critic, a "Legislateur du Parnasse" who laid down tyrannical and Procrustean laws for literary composition', Boileau and his translation of the Greek *Peri Hupsous* into vernacular French, was largely responsible for the ensuing popularity of the sublime, that, converse to his 'Procrustean' neo-classical 'archetype', found its apex in the poetic outpourings of Romanticism.<sup>11</sup> Timothy M. Costelloe concurs that 'only after' Boileau's translation in 1674 'does the influence of Longinus begin to be felt and the sublime take root as a feature of the British literary and philosophical landscape'.<sup>12</sup> In Britain, William Smith's English translation of 1739, titled *On the Sublime*, became 'the standard edition for the rest of the century and the period in which Longinus's text reached the height of its fame and influence'.<sup>13</sup> Whilst a treatise on rhetoric, *On the Sublime* provided the definitive desiderata of the sublime- grandeur, loftiness, and transport- to the writers and philosophers of the eighteenth century as Longinus's pursuit of the 'true sublime' became one of the central motivations and 'conceptual base for the entire development' of the newly formed discipline of aesthetics.<sup>14</sup>

As a philosophical school, aesthetics includes any enquiry into the nature of subjective taste and the experience and attempt at objective understanding of such realities as nature, art, beauty, and sublimity. Although aesthetics can be traced as pan-European in identity, Britain is widely

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<sup>9</sup> Longinus, 'On the Sublime', in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. by T. S. Dorsch, (London: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 97-158, p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> David Hopkins, "'The English Homer": Shakespeare, Longinus, and English "Neoclassicism"', in Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Shakespeare and the Classics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 261-276, p. 267.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy M. Costelloe, 'The Sublime: A Short Introduction to a Long History', in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. by Timothy M. Costelloe, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 1-7, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 10.

acknowledged as the dominant place responsible for its formation during the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Until the last few decades, Scotland's central role in the development of this aesthetic theory, and with it, the theory of the sublime, has been critically undermined and repeatedly misplaced. The twentieth-century Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid, who at discovering that eight out of the thirteen 'English writers' on the subject of aesthetics in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* were actually Scots, first (and perhaps most loudly) expressed outrage at 'the monstrous trick of describing Scottish writers as English'.<sup>16</sup> This 'monstrous trick' is prevalent throughout nearly all of twentieth-century criticism on aesthetics. Samuel H. Monk led the way by titling his pioneering work on the theories of sublimity that were produced by a predominantly Scottish cohort in Scotland as *A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*. Correspondingly, in his critically acclaimed work: *The Century of Taste*, George Dickie bases his discussion of aesthetics on the work of the Scottish theorists Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Alexander Gerard, Archibald Alison and on the German, Immanuel Kant. Whilst Dickie recognises Kant as a 'German philosopher', the other Scottish theorists are denationalised as 'English-speaking thinkers'.<sup>17</sup> Terry Eagleton goes a step further by relegating these important Scottish thinkers to what he terms: 'the Gaelic Margins'.<sup>18</sup>

Over the last few decades important work has been done to reclaim Scotland's role and legacy in the development of the sublime under the topic of aesthetics. Jonathon Friday argues that 'modern aesthetics has its origins in eighteenth-century Scotland', by highlighting that 'although England and Ireland produced a small number of significant contributors[...] the vast majority of the important writers on the topic were Scots'.<sup>19</sup> Correspondingly, in *The British Aesthetic Tradition*, Costelloe devotes the first part of his work to giving a systematic account of the importance of Scottish aesthetics in relation to its English and Irish contemporaries during the eighteenth century. Furthermore, in *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, Andrew Ashfield, and Peter de Bolla introduce an impressive collection of work written for the main part by Scottish theorists that is focused entirely on the sublime. However, although these critical studies advocate Scotland's importance, they also show that the 'true sublime' under its treatment as aesthetic remains a contested and amorphous ideal.

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<sup>15</sup> The term aesthetics, based on the Greek word *aisthetikos*, meaning 'sensitive, or 'sentient', was first introduced by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in 1735 but was not widely used until into the nineteenth century. Aesthetics has its origins in Longinus's Greek text but developed as a philosophical school in Germany and France with the greatest developments happening in eighteenth-century Britain. See Costelloe, 'The Sublime: A Short Introduction to a Long History', pp. 2-3, and Abrams and Harpham, 'Aestheticism', in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, pp. 5-7.

<sup>16</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *Aesthetics in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Co. 1984), pp. 54-55.

<sup>17</sup> George Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Friday, *Art and Enlightenment: Scottish Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), pp. 2, 4.

The problem with aesthetics is twofold in that it is a retrospective term for a discipline that was not yet defined during its formation, and secondly; that it envelopes such a heterogeneous collection of work that clear progressions or definitive conclusions, particularly concerning the sublime, are difficult to accurately trace and articulate. This is substantiated by the sheer volume of work produced at this time, as de Bolla estimates: ‘during the course of the eighteenth century some few thousand works were published in Britain on the general topic of aesthetics’,<sup>20</sup> whilst his peer Costelloe suggests a larger figure of ‘some five thousand’.<sup>21</sup> The challenge this presents to scholars of this period and subject is that ‘not everyone had something to say’, and that from the ‘mass of material’ produced there is little in the way of a coherent or linear development of aesthetic theory concerning the sublime<sup>22</sup>. The above collections attempt to deal with this tohubohu of theory through careful sifting and organisation of material at the cost of losing some sense of the original diversity of works dealing with the sublime. Jonathon Friday presents his work chronologically from Francis Hutcheson through to Dugald Stewart. Ashfield and de Bolla sort the main body of their work geographically, whereas Costelloe divides his work into three theoretical subdivisions of aesthetics- ‘Internal Sense Theorists’, ‘Imagination Theorists’, and ‘Association Theorists’. Nevertheless, such difference in structuring techniques belie the fact that there remains no definite and agreed definition of the sublime written during this period. Thus, while Scotland’s position has been established in this maelstrom of aesthetic theory, the ‘true sublime’ remains a continual point of contention and philosophical badinage between an exhausting list of theorists.

Writing amidst such philosophical meanderings, the Scottish intellectual David Hume addresses this fundamental problem with aesthetics:

Just expressions of passion and nature are sure, after a little time, to gain public applause, which they maintain forever. Aristotle, and Plato, and Epicurus, and Descartes, may successively yield to each other: but Terence and Virgil maintain a universal, undisputed empire over the minds of men. The abstract philosophy of Cicero has lost its credit: the vehemence of his oratory is still the object of our admiration.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas the ‘abstract philosophy’ of such as Cicero and Descartes ‘successfully yield to each other’ and eventually ‘lose their credit’, the literary import of their writing is maintained ‘forever’. The ‘just expressions of passion and nature’, and ‘vehemence’ that Hume alludes to is the contemporaneous terminology of the sublime. Here, then, do we finally meet a concrete understanding of the sublime behind the conceptual ideal of the ‘true sublime’. Namely, that whilst it has undergone an intricate

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<sup>20</sup> Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy M. Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition from Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. ix.

<sup>22</sup> Monk, *The Sublime*, p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> David Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, (1757), in *David Hume: Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. by Eugene F. Miller (Indiana: Liberty Classics, 1985) pp. 226-249, pp. 242-243.

and obfuscating process of transmediation from the rhetoric of Longinus to the variegated theories of taste categorised as aesthetic, the sublime remains as a primarily literary phenomenon. As Friday points out: ‘the notion of the sublime was first and foremost conceived as a quality of literature’,<sup>24</sup> and as Ashfield and de Bolla purport- the history of literary criticism, in much regards, began with Longinus’s literary study of the sublime.<sup>25</sup> Longinus had written axiomatically that ‘sublimity consists in a certain excellence and distinction in expression’ and it is from ‘*this source alone*’ that the experience of the sublime is allowed to ‘exert an irresistible force and mastery’ over the subject, in order to ‘transport us with wonder’.<sup>26</sup> Yet, since the circulation of Longinus’s *On the Sublime* in eighteenth-century Britain, focus on the literariness of the ‘true sublime’ increasingly shifted into the perplexing aporias of ‘abstract philosophy’, something that Hume writing in Scotland had acknowledged.

It was in an attempt to ‘correct the confusion and ambiguity’ surrounding theories of sublimity and beauty that the young Irishman, Edmund Burke, wrote and published in 1759, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.<sup>27</sup> Whilst Burke was indebted to Scottish aestheticians such as David Hume and Francis Hutcheson (from whose theory of taste: *Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, (1725) Burke borrowed his title), it was his frustration that there existed ‘no exact theory of our passions, or a knowledge of their genuine sources’, that acted as impetus to his providing a systematic study of the sublime against the ‘inaccurate and inconclusive...confusion of ideas’ that circulated within the discussions of aesthetics during the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Burke’s *Enquiry* set out to avoid the ‘false lights’ of philosophical doctrines in favour of ‘an easy observation of the most common, sometimes of the meanest things in nature’ that provide the ‘truest lights’ in illuminating the ‘true sublime’.<sup>29</sup> By focusing on the sublime as found in ‘the most common, sometimes of the meanest things in nature’, the *Enquiry*’s central claim is that the sublime is ‘the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’, and that terror is ‘the ruling principle of the sublime’.<sup>30</sup> Whatever then induces sensual feelings of terror, astonishment or awe, such as that which in nature is obscure, magnificent or infinite - mountains, tempests, ruins, the stars and so forth, is codified by Burke as being sublime. In his

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<sup>24</sup> Friday, *Art and Enlightenment: Scottish Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Longinus, ‘On the Sublime’ p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> Monk, *The Sublime*, p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> Edmund Burke, ‘Preface to the first edition’, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, edited with introduction and notes by James T. Boulton (1958), (London: Routledge Classics, 2008), pp. 1-2, p. 1. For influence of Hutcheson and Hume on Burke see James T. Boulton’s ‘Editor’s Introduction’ to Burke’s *Enquiry*, in which he suggests Burke’s early reading of Hutcheson alongside Longinus at Trinity College began Burke’s interest in the topic and later the more contemporary theories of Hume influenced the writing of the *Enquiry*, particularly the 2nd edition. pp. xi-cxxx, pp. xii-xiii, xxv-xxxvi.

<sup>29</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 54.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 39, 58.

discussion of the 'true sublime', from Longinus to Burke, and the search for a 'structure beneath the vast epiphenomena of the sublime', Thomas Weiskel notes that 'the encounter with literary greatness... is structurally cognate with the transcendence, gentle or terrible, excited in the encounter with landscape, the "natural" sublime'.<sup>31</sup> This structural link between 'the encounter with landscape' and the encounter 'with literary greatness' is fundamental to the *Enquiry*'s thesis; that words have the potential to be more productive of sublimity than even nature:

Words affect us in a manner very different from that in which we are affected by natural objects, or by painting or architecture; yet words have as considerable a share in exciting ideas of beauty and of the sublime as any of those, and sometimes a much greater than any of them.<sup>32</sup>

For Burke, whilst the mind is capable of admiring and experiencing sublimity as represented in nature, with 'the word', from which he goes on to promote poetry, the imagination becomes more involved, creating a deeper, more subjective and essentially more powerful experience of the sublime: 'eloquence and poetry are as capable, nay indeed much more capable of making deep and lively impression than any other arts, and even than nature itself in very many cases'.<sup>33</sup> Correspondingly, the critic Angela Leighton observes that, while 'the art of the sublime springs from sources which lie behind and before language', poetry remains at the very heart of its development, the breeding ground and continual fount for expressions of true sublimity.<sup>35</sup>

Burke's ordered taxonomy of the sublime centred on nature and poetry 'provided the age with an idea of sublimity... that could easily be comprehended by those who were uninitiated into the deeper mysteries of philosophy'.<sup>36</sup> The *Enquiry*'s accessibility through systematic codification of the sublime and its well-illustrated emphasis on the fundamental relationship between poetics and the sublime, is why, out of the multitude of disparate theories of the sublime produced during this period, Burke's work became 'the most popular treatise of the century'.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it is possible to surmise that Burke's *Enquiry* marks both the apex of eighteenth-century theory concerning the sublime and a watershed moment in which a theoretical understanding of the importance of poetics to the sublime was promoted and widely received.<sup>38</sup> However, if the 'true sublime' was ultimately cognate with

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 61.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>35</sup> Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Monk, *The Sublime*, p. 99.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 93.

<sup>38</sup> This is not to suggest that Burke was alone in promoting a theory of the sublime that promulgated the important role of poetics. Almost all theorists from Longinus through to eighteenth and nineteenth century theorists recognise the primary place of poetry as fount for expressions of the sublime.

poetics it needed contemporary poetic expression to develop from the ruling neoclassical proclivity for the past works of classical literature.

Although extensive work has been undertaken to show the importance of the sublime to aesthetics during the eighteenth-century, and the importance of Scotland's role in developing this discipline, there has yet been no sustained study on the sublime as found in the contemporary poetry written during this period.<sup>39</sup> Subsequently, this thesis shall be directed towards uncovering the transmission and development of a poetics of the sublime that flourished across Scotland in the wake of Burke's 1759 *Enquiry*. Beginning with the Ossian phenomenon of the 1760s, James Beattie's *The Minstrel* of the 1770s, and concluding with the work of Scotland's 'National Bard' Robert Burns in the 1780s, this thesis shall seek to assert eighteenth-century Scottish literature's lasting and influential heritage in developing a poetics of the sublime that actualised that elusive ideal: 'the true sublime'.

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<sup>39</sup> See Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject*, and James Kirwin's *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2005) for two recent and notable examples of the importance of the sublime to aesthetics, and see Jonathon Friday's previously mentioned *Art and Enlightenment: Scottish Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century*, and Alexander Broadie's *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Historical Age of the Historical Nation* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd., 2007) which both offer recent and extensive accounts of Scotland's central position to the foundation and development of eighteenth-century British aesthetics.

## Chapter Two:

### ‘Noblest Themes in Deathless Songs’: *Ossian* and the Sublime

James Macpherson published three collections of poems that together would constitute *Ossian*. In 1760, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* was published, followed by *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books* in 1762, and *Temora: An Epic Poem in Eight Books* in 1763. Each of Macpherson’s collections of *Ossian* poems were met with near-instant and unprecedented acclaim as a review of *Fingal* in 1761 exemplifies: ‘What follows is all greatness, pathos, and sublimity!’<sup>41</sup> Even after Macpherson’s death in 1796, *Ossian* continued in its unparalleled success. In 1805, George Chalmers had remarked on its commercial accomplishment stating that: ‘Except the Bible and Shakespeare, there is not any book that sells better than *Ossian*’.<sup>42</sup> Correspondingly, the celebrated essayist and literary critic William Hazlitt had listed in 1818 the ‘four principal works of poetry in the world’, as being ‘Homer, the Bible, Dante, and let me add, *Ossian*’.<sup>43</sup> The success and influence of Macpherson’s *Ossian* is still largely recognised by critics today. The critic Frank Brady coined the term ‘the Ossian phenomenon’, when he described its success as being ‘the most startling phenomenon in the history of British literature’<sup>44</sup>. More recently, Jerome McGann has suggested that *Ossian*’s ‘influence on the literary scene of the late eighteenth century eclipsed all others.’<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the twentieth century biographer of Macpherson, J. S. Smart, describes *Ossian*’s extraordinary impact on Europe: ‘no English author before him, not Shakespeare, Milton, Addison or Pope, had found such hosts of foreign admirers; no one after him except Byron, hardly even Sir Walter Scott and Dickens, has had a greater fame’.<sup>46</sup> The aim of this chapter is to discuss how the sublime is made manifest in each of these collections, and how it develops and evolves from one to the next in order to assert a clear progression of the poetics of the sublime throughout each of the major Ossianic poems.

In 1762, during the time Edmund Burke was editor of the *Annual Register*, a review appeared there of Macpherson’s recently published *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem*. Scholars of Macpherson, Dafydd Moore and Howard Gaskill, as well as the 1958 editor of Burke’s *Enquiry*, James T. Boulton,

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Review of *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem*’, in *The Critical Review* 12 (December 1761): 405-418, in *Ossian and Ossianism*, edited by Dafydd Moore, 4 Vols., Vol. III, pp. 6-18, p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> George Chalmers, (17 July 1805), quoted in Fiona J. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: A Study of James Macpherson and The Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988) p. 171.

<sup>43</sup> William Hazlitt, ‘On Poetry in General’, in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, 9 Vols., Vol 2., ed. by Duncan Wu (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), pp. 165-180, p. 178.

<sup>44</sup> Frank Brady, *James Boswell: The Later Years 1769-1795*, (London: Heinemann, 1984), p. 71.

<sup>45</sup> Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 33.

<sup>46</sup> J. S. Smart, *James Macpherson: An Episode in Literature*, (London: Long Acre, 1905), p. 11.



all concur that, whilst published unattributed, this review was almost certainly written by Burke.<sup>47</sup> As Boulton explains, after the publication of his *Enquiry*, Burke maintained ‘a lively interest’ on the subject of the sublime and the review itself ‘betrays both his style and his aesthetic principles’:

From the publication of these extraordinary poems, the ingenious editor [James Macpherson] has a double claim to literary applause. One, as having with equal industry and taste recovered from the obscurity of barbarism, the rust of fifteen hundred years, and the last breath of a dying language, these inestimable relicks of the genuine spirit of poetry; and the other, for presenting them to the world in an English translation, whose expressive singularity evidently retains the majestic air, and the native simplicity of a sublime original. The venerable author, and his elegant translator, thus have mutually conferred immortality on each other.<sup>49</sup>

The critic John Vladimir Price has suggested that this review helped popularise *Ossian* by its ‘association of Ossian’s poems with the idea of the sublime’.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the very language used by Burke in this encomium is in itself infused with his typology of the sublime: ‘obscurity of barbarism, the rust of fifteen hundred years, and the last breath of a dying language’, metaphorically alludes to the three key points of the recovery of Ossian’s verse. Firstly, its origins in the ‘obscurity of barbarism’ of Celtic antiquity, then its remarkable preservation from the ‘rust of fifteen hundred years’ and finally, *Ossian*’s original language of Gaelic, which with the fractious events of eighteenth-century Scotland, was very much under threat. In his *Enquiry*, Burke posits that obscurity is a fundamental condition of the sublime: ‘to make anything very [sublime], obscurity, seems in general to be necessary’, therefore by using obscure metaphor and synecdoche to describe the recovery of *Ossian* from antiquity; in this manner, Burke is drawing on his own theory of sublimity to appraise the sublimity of *Ossian*. In the review, Burke goes on to extoll the poetic sublimity of Macpherson’s English translation: ‘whose expressive singularity evidently retains the majestic air, and the native simplicity of a sublime original’. Burke is here commending both the text and the translator by conscribing to them the Longinian tradition of ‘immortality’ by way of sublimity: ‘from that source [the sublime]... the greatest poets and historians have acquired their pre-eminence and won for themselves an eternity of fame’.<sup>51</sup>

That Burke had played the most vital part up until the publication of *Fingal* in formalising and promulgating a clearly defined and decidedly poetic sublime has already been evidenced, but with

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<sup>47</sup> Boulton, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ to Burke’s *Enquiry* p. ix. Also, see: Dafydd Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson’s The Poems of Ossian: Myth, Genre and Cultural Change*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) p. 114, and Howard Gaskill, *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* ed. by Howard Gaskill, (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004) p. 25.

<sup>49</sup> Anon (Widely assumed to be Edmund Burke) ‘Review of *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem*’, in *The Annual Register for the Year 1761*, 4: 267-282, in *Ossian and Ossianism*, vol. III, pp. 50-56, p. 50.

<sup>50</sup> John Vladimir Price, ‘Ossian and the Canon in the Scottish Enlightenment’, in *Ossian Revisited*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), pp. 109-128, p. 126.

<sup>51</sup> Longinus, ‘*On the Sublime*’ p. 100.

the publication of this review we see Burke praising and promoting the contemporary poetry of Macpherson as sublime. Burke, as well as his philosophical peers such as David Hume and Alexander Gerard, had continuously referred to the works of past writers in their appraisal of sublimity. Homer, Virgil, and Milton were the familiar giants, and here was the first and most notable instance of what Barnett Newman would later term ‘the sublime is now’.<sup>53</sup> As Price advances, Burke’s linking of *Ossian* to the sublime was, ‘undoubtedly one of the features that pushed the work, however temporarily, into the canon’.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, it is possible to surmise that in Macpherson’s *Ossian*, Burke found a poetic expression of the principles outlined in his philosophical treatise, and by highlighting and promoting the sublimity of *Ossian*, was in some small part responsible for its success.

In discussing the distinct theoretical and poetic synchrony between Burke’s *Enquiry* and Macpherson’s *Ossian*, Price notes that:

Intellectual history could be nicely codified if one were able to prove that Macpherson had read Burke and had then reconstructed his source material in a way that would make the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Fingal, and Temora* appeal in concrete terms to those readers who had responded enthusiastically to Burke’s abstract discussion of the sublime’.<sup>55</sup>

However, whilst there remains ‘no evidence to prove that Macpherson did read Burke’, there are significant indicators that suggest his familiarity with Burke’s *Enquiry*.<sup>56</sup> Firstly, and perhaps most concretely, is that Macpherson’s mentor Hugh Blair acknowledges his debt to Burke in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*: ‘[Burke] to whom we are indebted for several ingenious and original thoughts’ regarding the sublime, ‘many of whose sentiments on that head I have adopted’, and therefore given the intimacy between Macpherson and Blair that shall be later detailed, we may confidently claim that there was at least some familiarity through proximity.<sup>58</sup> Supporting this, is the intertextual vibrancy between Burke’s philosophical treatise and Macpherson’s poetical assemblage that Burke himself acknowledges in his review. A specific example from *Ossian* that highlights this resonance between the poetry of Macpherson and the theories of Burke is found in what Eleanor M. Sickels has described as ‘the most famous phrase of all’ in *Ossian*: namely, ‘the joy of grief’.<sup>59</sup> The critic Larry L. Stewart has noticed that ‘the idea that joy arises from grief is found in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, specifically in Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry*.’ Stewart contends that ‘Macpherson uses the phrase almost precisely as Burke defines the relationship between joy and grief;

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<sup>53</sup> Barnett Newman, ‘The Sublime is Now’, (1948), in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* ed. by John P. O’Neill (New York: Knopf, 1990), pp. 170-173.

<sup>54</sup> Price, ‘Ossian and the Canon in the Scottish Enlightenment’, p. 113.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 112-113.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, (1783), (London: William Tegg & Co., 1879), p. 32.

<sup>59</sup> Eleanor M. Sickels, *The Gloomy Egoist: Moods and Themes of Melancholy from Gray to Keats* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923), p. 111.

and the poems as a whole appeal to the emotion designated by that relationship'.<sup>60</sup> This instance is only one of many in which the poetry of *Ossian* aligns itself with the aesthetic assumptions of Burke. This thesis, whilst not arguing for a specifically Burkean Sublime, will nevertheless utilise Burke's taxonomy of the sublime, as well as the foundational theory of the progenitor Longinus, in order to identify instances of sublime experience throughout the poetics of *Ossian*.

Whilst Burke was not alone in praising the sublimity of *Ossian*, which as previously mentioned, enjoyed unprecedented success both in Britain and the continent, its reception has continually been tainted by the 'long shadow cast over *Ossian* studies by the "authenticity issue"'.<sup>68</sup> Macpherson's claims to have discovered and translated ancient poetry from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Celtic bard Ossian were treated openly with suspicion and admonition: 'From the beginning, Macpherson's work provoked both enthusiasm and enquiry, with readers divided between admiration for the poetry and suspicion about its antiquity.'<sup>69</sup> The most vehement of Macpherson's detractors was the English lexicographer and critic Dr Samuel Johnson. Johnson, accompanied by his friend and biographer James Boswell, had undertaken a tour of the Highlands and Hebrides of Scotland in 1773. As Donald McNicol wryly observed: 'from the first appearance of Ossian's poems in public, we may date the origin of Dr Johnson's intended tour to Scotland, whatever he may pretend to tell us in the beginning of his tour'.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, much of Johnson's observations during his tour directly addressed Macpherson's claims about the origins of *Ossian* being discovered in Gaelic manuscripts:

Where the chiefs of the Highlands have found the histories of their descent is difficult to tell; for no Earse genealogy was ever written[...] Thus, hopeless are all attempts to find any traces of Highland learning. Nor are their primitive customs and ancient manner of life otherwise than very faintly and uncertainly remembered by the present race[...] I believe there cannot be recovered, in the whole Earse language, five hundred lines of which there is any evidence to prove them a hundred years old. Yet I hear the father of Ossian boasts two chests more of ancient poetry, which he suppresses, because they are too good for the English.<sup>71</sup>

Johnson's *Journey* is telling in that it reveals both his obvious disdain of the Highland people and the Gaelic language: 'it is the rude speech of a barbarous people, who had few thoughts to express, and were content, as they conceived grossly, to be grossly understood',<sup>72</sup> this was further compounded by his unappreciative eye towards Scotland's sublime scenery: 'this wide extent of hopeless sterility...It

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<sup>60</sup> Larry L. Stewart, 'Ossian, Burke and "The Joy of Grief"', in *English Language Notes* 15. (1977), pp. 29-32, p. 30.

<sup>68</sup> Dafydd Moore, 'The Critical Response to Ossian's Romantic Bequest', in *English Romanticism and the Celtic World* ed. by Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rawes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 38-53, p. 39.

<sup>69</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 164.

<sup>70</sup> Donald McNicol, *Remarks on Dr Samuel Johnson's Journey to the Hebrides* (London: T. Cadell, 1779), p. 10.

<sup>71</sup> Samuel Johnson, 'A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland' (1775), in *Samuel Johnson and James Boswell: A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. by Peter Levi, (London: Penguin, 1984) pp. 33-154, p. 114, 117.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* p. 116

will readily occur, that this uniformity of barrenness can afford little amusement to the traveller'.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Johnson is shown to be almost insensate towards the sublime, as Boswell observes: 'I could not help thinking, that Mr Johnson showed a want of taste in laughing at the wild grandeur of nature, which to a mind undebauched by art conveys the most awful, sublime ideas'.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, in describing the primary initiation into the experience of the sublime categorised by Burke of 'terror without danger', Johnson dismisses sublime experience as being 'only one of the sports of the fancy, a voluntary agitation of the mind that is permitted no longer than it pleases'.<sup>75</sup>

There is then a tangible sense that Johnson's dismissal of Macpherson, *Ossian* and indeed, Scotland, in some degree derives from his dismissal of the sublime. Thus, it can be said that the failings to appreciate the sublime in *Ossian* leads to the deprecation of *Ossian* as a text because, as this thesis shall seek to determine, the sublime constitutes the heart of the extensive body of work that composes *Ossian*. As Samuel Monk contends:

For if the sublime is terror, what can be more terrible than the ghosts of Ossian? If it is grandeur, what can be more grand than the armies and their battles, or the nobility and high-thinking of Ossian's heroes and heroines? If it is energy, what can be more energetic than the winds and the storms that blow and roar through Ossian's lays and epics, what more intense and energetic than the expression of passion in the dark words and bright deeds of the ancient heroes? If sublimity resides in words, what can be more lofty than the diction and style of the poems...<sup>76</sup>

Despite *Ossian*'s remarkable success both in Britain and Europe, the authenticity issue coupled with the denegation of the sublime both by Johnson and other detractors, has led to the texts remaining undervalued critically until a recent revival in *Ossian* studies during the last two decades. Critics such as Fiona Stafford, Howard Gaskill, and Dafydd Moore have successfully recovered *Ossian* from the 'marginalising tendency within, in particular, mainstream literary history', that has all too frequently 'paid lip-service to *Ossian*'s role without considering it seriously'.<sup>77</sup> Whilst this thesis is indebted to the recent work of these revisionist critics, there still remains a critical gap in the connection of the sublime with *Ossian* and its significance. Dafydd Moore correctly notices that 'the sublime has for a long time been seen as a key to Macpherson's poetry', and yet recently few have used this 'key' in their attempts at unlocking the text:

Curiously recent *Ossian* studies have placed less emphasis on the Sublime. Samuel Monk's observations on the virtually synonymous association of Burke, Macpherson and ideas of the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. 60.

<sup>74</sup> James Boswell, 'July 6, 1763', in *The Journals of James Boswell: 1762-1795*, selected and introduced by John Wain, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 75.

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, 'A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland', p. 46.

<sup>76</sup> Monk, *The Sublime*, p. 120.

<sup>77</sup> Dafydd R. Moore, 'The Critical Response to Ossian's Romantic Bequest', p. 39.

Sublime in the 1760s is taken as read, but relatively little of the recent body of *Ossian* revisionism has concerned itself with the subject.<sup>78</sup>

Moore's own analyses of the sublime proves problematic in its attempt to connect what he admits as the 'antithetical' worlds of the sublime and the sentimental in order to propound a predominantly Smithian combination of self-control and emotion, politeness and passion.<sup>79</sup> Moore's discussion is impressive in the context of his overall romance superseding epic directive and his emphasis on the importance of the sublime to Macpherson and his peers. However, Moore's argument can be read as obfuscating the now familiar philosophical ideal of the 'true sublime' further in conceptualising sublimity with sentimentality in order to promote a form of theoretically hybrid occurrence that he terms 'the Sentimental Sublime'.<sup>80</sup> As Moore explains:

If the sentimental is part of the modern world of politeness and manners, then the sublime reads like an extrusion of the masculine and active... to choose one is to deny the possibility of the other, those qualities that make something or someone sublime disqualify them from being sentimental and social and vice versa'.<sup>81</sup>

Moore's 'aesthetic, moral and ethical' approach from a Smithian perspective 'ultimately finds the gap too great to bridge', between what his argument deems the sentimental and the sublime, and his conclusion of a 'Sentimental Sublime' is problematic in the sense that for Moore's analysis, *Ossian* is 'self-defeating' in attempting to bring together these two 'irreconcilable' concepts.<sup>82</sup>

Part of the problem faced by critics in discussing *Ossian* and the sublime is that the sublime is often read as a 'generic anomaly'. Price explains that the sublime 'can be either a noun or an adjective, and commentators on *Ossian* refer either to 'the sublime' in it or point out passages which are "sublime"', without undertaking any sustained analysis of what the sublime is and how it functions within the text.<sup>83</sup> Both recent and historical perceptions of the sublime either fall into the indistinct philosophising of aesthetics or is treated *en passant* by critics as a form of otherness party to no specific textual analyses. As such, this thesis shall be committed to analysing the sublime as a textual and poetic occurrence. Before attempting to do so, it is important to notice the decidedly Scottish heritage of the sublime as found in the person of Macpherson, his education, and the allegiances that helped shaped both *Ossian* and the poetics of the sublime.

Born in 1736, James Macpherson grew up speaking the Gaelic tongue native to his homeland the Highlands of Scotland. His experiences during his infancy and adolescence among his Clan, the impressive landscape surrounding Ruthven, his witnessing of the devastation following the doomed

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<sup>78</sup> Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson's Poems of Ossian*, p. 141.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* p. 121

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p. 115

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 135-137.

<sup>83</sup> Price, 'Ossian and the Canon in the Scottish Enlightenment', pp. 113-114.

1745 Jacobite uprising, and the subsequent loss and outlawing of the Highland way of life were all formative in creating the tragic, often violent, grief-filled events of *Ossian*.<sup>84</sup> As his biographer, J. S. Smart notes, the aftermath of the battle of Culloden in 1746 can be read as ‘one event in history by which Ossian was perhaps in some degree inspired’.<sup>85</sup> In the fallout after Culloden, Macpherson as a child had been subjected to ‘not only the humiliation of his Chief and Clan, but scenes of appalling violence carried out by the British soldiers’ under ‘Butcher’ Cumberland.<sup>86</sup> Fiona Stafford notes that ‘*The Poems of Ossian* were rooted in Macpherson’s native culture’, and yet after 1746, Macpherson’s ‘native culture’ was all but obliterated: ‘He grew up under the shadow of this disaster to his race and clan; the final conquest of the Highlands, and the obliteration of their ancient modes of life taking place before his eyes’.<sup>87</sup> Such loss is paramount to the figure of Ossian within the work of Macpherson, whose isolation is concatenated throughout the verse with a continuous lament for the loss of his people:

...But, lonely dweller of the rock! look over that  
 heathy plain: thou seest green tombs, with their rank, whistling grass, with  
 Their stones of mossy heads: thou seest them, son of the rock, but Ossian’s  
 eyes have failed.<sup>88</sup>

The ‘green tombs’ of Ossian’s fallen kinsmen are viewed by the spectator, yet they exist for Ossian whose ‘eyes have failed’, only in grief and memory. The ‘heathy plains’ of the Highland landscapes in the poems are repeatedly represented as a graveyard from which spring the grief-filled songs of heroic deeds and battles long-past, just as Macpherson’s own Highland home had become during his early years. Thus, Macpherson’s upbringing amongst the sublimity of the Highland landscape and the emotional turmoil caused in the wake of Culloden served as an induction to the sublime at a visceral level, something which Stafford terms Macpherson’s ‘education of Nature’. These were the raw materials from which *Ossian* was crafted but for them to succeed they needed to be refined.

In his discussion of the ‘art of the sublime’, Longinus emphasises the importance of knowledge to the formation of the sublime: ‘sublime impulses are exposed to greater dangers when

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<sup>84</sup> Both Smart and Stafford contend that Macpherson's early life and experiences were formative to his production of *Ossian*. The sublimity of Macpherson's home Ruthven (which lies adjacent to the mountainous region of the Cairngorms) is later evidenced by Robert Burns, who described it in contemporaneous terms of sublimity as 'wild and magnificent', see Robert Burns, 'Journal of a Highland Tour' entry [15], in *The Oxford Edition of The Works of Robert Burns, Vol. 1: Commonplace Books, Tour Journals, and Miscellaneous Prose* ed. Nigel Leask (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 146-153. p. 149, and my own discussion of Burns, Macpherson, and the sublimity of the Highlands in chapter 4 of this thesis.

<sup>85</sup> Smart, *James Macpherson*, p. 28.

<sup>86</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 18.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7,

Smart, *James Macpherson*, p. 29.

<sup>88</sup> James Macpherson, ‘The Battle of Lora: A Poem’, in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. by Howard Gaskill, Introduction by Fiona Stafford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), pp. 119-123, p. 119.

they are left to themselves without the ballast and stability of knowledge; they need the curb as often as the spur'.<sup>89</sup> Macpherson's experiences of sublimity from a young age, his 'education of Nature', were cultivated and provided with the 'ballast and stability of knowledge' during his university education at Aberdeen. Macpherson was matriculated at King's college, Aberdeen in 1752, before finishing his degree at Marischal college in 1755. As Stafford highlights, during Macpherson's tenure there, the University of Aberdeen, and in particular, Marischal college, boasted 'many of the leading Scottish academics of this period, such as Thomas Blackwell, Thomas Reid, Alexander Gerard, James Beattie, John Gregory, and George Campbell'.<sup>90</sup> Fundamental to the writings and teachings of these academics were questions of 'Original Genius' and 'Primitivism', both of which pertained to the developing philosophical discourse on the sublime in the proceeding decades. The sublime as read in the work produced by poets of 'primitive' environments, such as Homer in Ancient Greece, was seen as the primary identifying characteristic to the idea of 'Original Genius'. Thomas Blackwell, who served as Principal of Marischal from 1748, had published *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* in 1735, which can largely be recognised as the founding text for the Aberdonian discussions of 'Original Genius', 'Primitivism', and by felicitation, the sublime. Blackwell's *Enquiry* was innovative in his discussion of the genius of Homer as being cultivated by the 'natural and simple manners' of the primitive age in which he lived.<sup>91</sup> These manners arose from the environment and culture of Homer's ancient Greece, which Blackwell argued were decidedly productive of original genius: 'a Concourse of natural Causes, conspired to produce and cultivate that mighty Genius [Homer], and gave him the noblest Field to exercise it in, that ever fell to the share of a poet'.<sup>92</sup> Ronnie Young notices the correlation between Blackwell's naturalistic approach which viewed genius 'according to the inter-play between natural abilities and environment', and Macpherson's own construction of Ossian: 'Ossian is shaped by the manners of his age in much the same way as Blackwell's Homer'.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, like many theorists of the sublime, Blackwell typifies Homer's poetry as the primary example of 'the sublimer kinds of writing', of which he classifies the epic poem as being paramount: 'the *marvellous* and *wonderful* [the sublime] is the nerve of the epic strain'.<sup>94</sup> For Blackwell then, the sublime stands as the essence, or 'nerve' of the epic form, which in turn he promotes as being the 'highest form of poetry'.<sup>95</sup> Correspondingly, Blackwell upheld the converse theory that the civilising impulses of modern society dampen the conditions necessary to produce the sublime: 'what marvellous things happen in a well-ordered state?', leading him to conclude that 'we

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<sup>89</sup> Longinus, 'On the Sublime', p. 101.

<sup>90</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 26.

<sup>91</sup> Thomas Blackwell, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer*, (1735), 2nd Ed. Reprint (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1976), p. 24.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>93</sup> Ronnie Young, 'James Beattie and the Progress of Genius in the Aberdonian Enlightenment', in *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* Vol. 36 No. 2 (2013) pp. 245-261, p. 249.

<sup>94</sup> Blackwell, *Enquiry*, p. 26.

<sup>95</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 31.

may never be a proper subject of an heroic [epic] poem'.<sup>96</sup> Blackwell's emphasis on epic poetry as being the supreme example of sublime writing forged in the primitive conditions of an age such as Homer's, leads Stafford to surmise that the epic was 'the only genre suitable for the great Scottish poem Macpherson hoped to write when he left University'.<sup>97</sup> It can then be construed that Macpherson's affiliation with the work and tutelage of Blackwell acted as an important source of knowledge for him to base the third-century bard Ossian on a foundation parallel to the primitive environment and natural abilities of Blackwell's Homer.

Whilst at Marischal, Macpherson was also taught by Blackwell's pupil and teaching fellow, Alexander Gerard. Gerard replaced David Forsyth as Regent of Marischal in 1752 and under the new curriculum that Blackwell and the faculty had initiated, became the first professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic in 1753.<sup>98</sup> Gerard's *An Essay on Taste*, published in 1759, significantly contributed to aesthetics and the discourse of the sublime. Gerard's *Essay* directly addressed theory of the sublime and like his contemporary, Edmund Burke, argues for the subjective experience of the sublime when confronted with sublime objects:

We always contemplate objects and ideas with a disposition similar to their nature. When a large object is presented, the mind expands itself to the extent of that object, and is filled with one grand sensation [the sublime], which totally possessing it, composes it into solemn sedateness, and strikes it with deep silent wonder and admiration... from this *sense* of this immensity, feels a noble pride, and entertains a lofty conception of its own capacity.<sup>99</sup>

It is this subjective 'sense' of sublimity that is 'appropriated to the perception' of objects possessing sublime attributes that is fundamental to Gerard's theory of sublimity and the refinement of that 'sense' through a 'refinement of taste'.<sup>100</sup> Like Blackwell, Gerard connected his own ideas of 'Original Genius' with the sublime: 'we admire as sublime superior excellence of many kinds, such eminence in strength, or power, or *genius*, as is uncommon and overcomes difficulties...', however, Gerard was theoretically opposed to Blackwell in his views of primitive society and the cultivation of the sublime.<sup>101</sup> Stafford notes that 'rather than exalting the Noble Savage' as Blackwell had, Gerard 'regarded uncivilised man as a coarse, amoral creature incapable of true sympathy'. Importantly for his theory of the poetics of sublimity, Gerard denied 'the association between early man and poetry, seeing the latter not as the spontaneous expression of emotion, but as an art requiring careful

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<sup>96</sup> Blackwell, *Enquiry*, p. 28.

<sup>97</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 31.

<sup>98</sup> Paul Wood, 'Gerard, Alexander (1728–1795), Church of Scotland minister and philosopher', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 2 Feb. 2020. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-10548>.

<sup>99</sup> Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Taste* (London: Kincaid and Bell, 1759) p. 14-15.

<sup>100</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 36.

<sup>101</sup> Gerard, *An Essay on Taste*, p. 19.



cultivation'.<sup>102</sup> Unlike Blackwell, who believed that the genius of Homer was developed circumspectly from his innate poetic ability coupled with his primitive pre-civilisation conditioning, Gerard argued that genius and with it sublimity came from a fecundity of sense, taste, and selection: 'A man of genius, possessed of so sublime a standard, endued with such exquisite refinement of taste... will represent his objects, not merely as they are, but like Sophocles, as they ought to be'.<sup>103</sup> Thus, importantly for Gerard, as with Burke, the sublime is realised through conscious, subjective faculty. Between this axis of opposing views, Stafford remarks on the 'confusion of aesthetic theories' that Macpherson was exposed to during his time at university:

Blackwell's emphasis on the spontaneous record of personal experience was completely at odds with Gerard's vision of the artist selecting and rearranging his material according to his specially refined taste. Indeed, any attempt to *account for* great art seemed doomed to failure.<sup>104</sup>

Nevertheless, Blackwell's 'Noble Savage' theory and his advocacy of the epic form as highest expression of sublimity, as well as Gerard's argument for the 'refinement of taste' in selection of sublimity were undoubtedly influential in seeding the development of Macpherson's *Ossian*. Furthermore, it is important to state that Macpherson had received a classicist education of the sublime that differed great from his early 'education of Nature' in the Highlands. Macpherson's introduction to the theory of the sublime was based on Blackwell's Homer and Gerard's discussion of the sublimity of such classical writers as Cicero and Seneca. Macpherson's innovation was to compound the classical model of the sublime as found in such texts with his own Highland heritage, ultimately to create a poetics of the sublime that although robed in classical attire, remained very much Scottish in nature.

Having left Aberdeen in 1755, Macpherson's early attempts at poetry met with limited success. However, in 1759, twenty-three-year-old Macpherson was introduced by Adam Ferguson to John Home, celebrated playwright of *Douglas* (1756). Home was impressed by Macpherson and during their discussions had requested that Macpherson translate some of the Gaelic poetry he had brought with him from the Highlands. Macpherson provided Home with the first of his Ossianic poems, titled: *The Death of Oscur*.<sup>105</sup> As J. S. Smart describes, after Macpherson's first alleged translation of ancient Gaelic verse surfaced in *The Death of Oscur*: 'a ripple of excitement spread among the learned men of Scotland: here, it seemed, was a marvellous unveiling of unsuspected treasure'.<sup>106</sup> Home in turn introduced Macpherson to Hugh Blair, 'the most widely published

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<sup>102</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 36.

<sup>103</sup> Gerard, *An Essay on Taste*, p. 125.

<sup>104</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 37.

<sup>105</sup> For full account of the meeting and beginning of the literary relationship between Macpherson, Ferguson, Home, Blair et al, see Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 242-263.

<sup>106</sup> J. S. Smart, *James Macpherson*, p. 93.

rhetorician of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' who fast became Macpherson's mentor and greatest advocate.<sup>107</sup> Under encouragement and introductions from Blair, Macpherson became acquainted in Edinburgh with the group of intellectuals of whom ranked Scotland's leading historians, philosophers, and social reformers known collectively as the Moderate literati.<sup>108</sup> The critic, Lois Whitney connects the primitivist interests of the Aberdonian school of aestheticians with the Edinburgh literati's own interests in primitivism arguing that Macpherson's early translations of Gaelic verse from 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Scotland landed in fertile soil in Edinburgh being inestimable in potential and taken up by the literati with unmitigated enthusiasm.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, many of the literati were during this period publishing their own philosophical theories of the sublime inherent to their discussions of aesthetics. David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757), Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (1765), Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), as well as Hugh Blair's *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763) and *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783). Richard Sher contends that not only did Macpherson produce the subsequent poems of Ossian at their bequest, but that the Edinburgh 'cabal' were the driving force behind the Ossianic production, providing Macpherson with the 'inspiration, incentive, financial support, letters of introduction, editorial assistance, publishing connections, and emotional encouragement that brought Ossian into print'.<sup>110</sup> There is then a sense that Macpherson's *Death of Ossian* that circulated between these men made such an impression due to the literati's need for a Scottish poetic expression of their values and ideals, or as Moore puts it:

*Ossian's* band of poets and warriors would also reflect, synthesise and mythologise the cultural values they [literati] sought to promote in their writing, teaching, and preaching: polite sensibility and religion, a cultured caste of letters, the literary values of primitivism and the sublime.<sup>111</sup>

Whilst many of these 'cultural values' such as 'polite sensibility', 'religion', and 'primitivism' have been addressed in recent criticism, there is still room to explore the synthesis and mythologising of Ossian's sublime with his own Highland heritage, his Aberdonian education, and the influence of Hugh Blair and the Edinburgh literati. As Sher highlights, the Ossianic project that gained momentum with the publication of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* in 1760, was from its inception, a project of the sublime:

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<sup>107</sup> Stephen L. Carr, 'The Circulation of Blair's "Lectures"', in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2002): pp. 75-104, p. 76.

<sup>108</sup> Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*, pp. 242- 263.

<sup>109</sup> Lois Whitney, 'English Primitivistic Theories of Epic Origins', in *Modern Philology* 21, no. 4 (1924): pp. 337-78, pp. 346-350. Accessed Dec 12, 2019. [www.jstor.org/stable/433604](http://www.jstor.org/stable/433604).

<sup>110</sup> Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*, p. 254.

<sup>111</sup> Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson's The Poems of Ossian*, p.26.

Macpherson knew what the literati wanted was a polished work which exemplified the sublime according to the rules they had formulated from their study of the ancients, and that is what he gave them'.<sup>112</sup>

As such, the remainder of this chapter shall be devoted to analysis and discussion of how Macpherson 'exemplified the sublime' in his poetic practice throughout the Ossianic corpus, beginning with his first collection in *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*.

### *Fragments of Ancient Poetry (1760)*

And with each gust of wind a fragment falls;  
While birds obscene at noon of night deplore,  
Where mighty heroes kept the watch before.<sup>113</sup>

Macpherson's decision to present his first collection of Ossianic poems in the form of fragments is one of deliberate consideration of the past and of the sublime. From the surviving fragments of classical poets such as Sappho, to Longinus's own fragmented *Peri Hupsous*, the fragment form is one that connects itself to the poetic remains of antiquity as well as connoting mutability, survival, and indeed loss, all of which are important thematic strains integral to each of the *Ossian* collections: 'The fragmentary form suggests glimpses of a distant age, which the writer is catching before it disappears completely'.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, in utilising the fragment, Macpherson is borrowing from his classicist education by adhering to the cosmetic of the fragment of 'parts lost through time' that adds authenticity to the poems' alleged origins in third-century Scotland. That this is a deliberate decision is made apparent through the poetic fragment's specific congruence with the sublime.

In *Fragments*, Macpherson arranges a set of poems that appear at first unconnected and dissonant. The characters and events of Shilric and Vinvela in fragments I and II have no reference to that of Ryno and Alpin in XII, and yet Alpin and his son are referenced in VI, VII and XII. Conversely, different characters are at times referred to by the same epithets such as Shilric (I) and Shalgar (X) both denoted as 'son of the hill', creating a semblance of something intricate and connected that is found fragmented. Burke had written of the sublimity of this technique as being that of subjective experience: 'the imagination is entertained with the promise of something more... In unfinished drawings, I have often seen something which pleased me beyond the best finishing'.<sup>115</sup> The

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<sup>112</sup> Leah Leneman, 'Ossian and the Enlightenment', in *Scotia-Interdisciplinary Journal of Scottish Studies* 11. (1987), pp. 13-29, p. 16.

<sup>113</sup> James Macpherson, 'On the Death of Marshall Keith' (1758), in *Ossian and Ossianism* vol 1, ed. by Dafydd Moore, (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 109-112, p. 111.

<sup>114</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 103.

<sup>115</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 77.

form of the fragment allows for subjective experience of sublimity through destabilising the reader's perspective in order to engage their own imaginative powers, as John Dwyer highlights: 'the fragmentary form of the Ossianic poems allowed them to maximise the sublime experiences of the reader.'<sup>116</sup> Thus, Macpherson's selection of the fragment form bolsters the mystique of its alleged antiquity while more concretely adhering to the formal tradition of the poetics of the sublime.

Macpherson further aligns his verse with the conventions of classical poetry and the sublime through the blindness of the central and eponymous bard, Ossian. 'By the side of the 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...'<sup>117</sup> The typology of the blind bard is one that stretches throughout literary history and back into antiquity. In Greek mythology there is Thamyris blinded by the Muses and the blind seers Tiresias and Phineus, whilst the celebrated champion of the sublime, Homer, is also traditionally recognised as being blind. The seventeenth-century poet Milton, whose blindness spawned the great poetic work of the sublime, *Paradise Lost*, identified himself with this genealogy of blind poets: 'Blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides, [Homer] / And Tiresias and Phineus prophets old'.<sup>118</sup> The critic Angela Leighton discusses how Milton was not just the writer who 'fund[ed] the eighteenth century with innumerable sublime quotations' but was rather the poet of the sublime whose 'imaginative sight is directly related to the fact of his blindness'.<sup>119</sup> Macpherson can then be seen to synchronise Ossian with the sublime convention of the blind visionary poet and by doing so, advance the poetics of the sublime as being beyond objective sight and into the realm of subjective poetic vision. Hereby, the physical form of the poems as fragmented in conjunction with the physical condition of Ossian as blind allowed Macpherson to align his works with canonically sublime texts. This can be too easily dismissed as another spurious element to the flagrant forgery of Ossian, without recognising Macpherson's considered approach of mimesis with the past to invoke sublimity; something that Longinus had validated: 'another way that leads to the sublime... It is the imitation and emulation of the great historians and poets of the past... many authors catch fire from the inspiration of others'.<sup>120</sup>

In her discussion of settings in *Fragments*, Fiona Stafford notes that these correlated with the eighteenth-century's awakened predilection for the sublime: 'Macpherson opened a world of stormy

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<sup>116</sup> John Dwyer, 'The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the Poems of Ossian', in *Ossian Revisited*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991) pp. 164-207, p. 184.

<sup>117</sup> Macpherson, 'Fragment VIII.', from 'Fragments of Ancient Poetry' (1760), in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, pp. 1-34, p. 18.

<sup>118</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, III:35-36, p. 53.

<sup>119</sup> Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime*, p. 18.

<sup>120</sup> Longinus, 'On the Sublime', p. 119.

mountain scenery, full of the grandeur and terror demanded by the new taste for the Sublime.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, the natural mountainous landscapes of Scotland depicted in *Fragments*, strongly invoke the sublime through a periphrastic tautology of ‘dark skies’, ‘grey mists’, and ‘roaring winds’ that reads as a sort of palimpsest to Burke’s taxonomy of the natural sublime being found in obscurity, magnitude, power and so on. In his review of Macpherson’s later epic, *Fingal*, Burke commented on the sublime intonation of Macpherson’s repeating natural images:

If in the allusions with which the poem abounds, the images of trees, rocks, waves, storms, beams of fire, and the great luminaries of heaven seem too often repeated; it is because they are at once the most obvious to an unenlightened genius, and the grandest objects in nature’.<sup>122</sup>

As Burke observes, this tautology of ‘the grandest objects of nature’ correlates with Hugh Blair’s assertion that the poems have been ‘handed down from race to race; some in manuscript but more by oral tradition’, signifying repetition as mnemonic aid whilst also creating a semblance of an ancient Highland world unblemished and naturally puissant.<sup>123</sup> ‘The consistency of the natural imagery made an important contribution to the atmosphere of the *Fragments*. In the longer *Poems of Ossian*, the repetition of the same simple images becomes rather tedious, but in the original *Fragments* the effect is strangely hypnotic.’<sup>124</sup> The atmosphere is one of extreme sublimity inhabited by the forces of nature and the ghostly apparitions of the dead, whilst the ‘hypnotic’ repetition of the ‘simple images’ of nature is used as a structural technique in order to frame the events of the separate poems. This is exemplified in fragment II, which opens with an effusion of natural imagery:

I sit by the mossy fountain; on top of the hill of the winds. One tree is rustling above me.  
Dark waves roll over the heath. The lake is troubled below. The deer descend from the hill.<sup>125</sup>

There is melodious rhythm to the short, staccato statements that build on each other to form a collective mosaic of sublime setting. The sublime is further realised through dichotomy of the contrasting forces of silence and sound, darkness and light. The poet tells us that ‘all is silent’, and yet there is sound generated by the phonaesthesia of the tree ‘rustling’ and the ‘dark waves’ rolling on the heath above the ‘troubled lake below’. The poet’s voice conjoins with this wind, beckoning forth the ghostly apparition of Vinvela who appears like ‘a beam of light on the heath, bright as the moon in autumn, as the sun in a summer-storm’, creating a chiaroscuro between the darkness of the opening

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<sup>121</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 4.

<sup>122</sup> Anon, (Burke) ‘Review of *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem*’, p. 55.

<sup>123</sup> Hugh Blair, ‘Preface’ to ‘Fragments of Ancient Poetry’, in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, pp. 5-6, p. 5.

<sup>124</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 103.

<sup>125</sup> Macpherson, ‘Fragment II.’, p. 9.

scene and the iridescent interaction of the portentous ghostly forms of Shilric and Vinvela: ‘Alone I am, O Shilric! Alone in the winter-house. With grief for thee I expired. Shilric, I am pale in the tomb’. In this poem, as in the rest of *Fragments*, the boundaries between the natural world, the living world, and the realm of the dead become isomorphous- the natural becomes supernatural, the dead appear living, the Highland landscape becomes sublime. The darkness and silence of the opening of the poem is then framed by its conclusion in which the speaker is returned to quiescent isolation in nature that tabulates the motif of the ‘paradigmatic figure of the sublime poet is one who stands solitary, powerless, silent and rapt before the object, the landscape or the idea, which first arrests him’.<sup>126</sup> The critic Robert F. Fitzgerald identifies Macpherson’s stylistic technique of bracketing the action of the narrative through cumulative and repeating clauses with that of biblical ‘parallelism’, as the speaker of fragment II is returned to ‘the top of the hill of the winds’. By enveloping the human action of each poem with natural sublimity as found in the landscapes repeated through parallelism, Macpherson is merging the lines between the natural sublime and the human experience of the sublime; the natural invoking through inspiration an experience of sublimity.

Samuel Monk commentated on the sublimity of Macpherson’s pioneering use of the natural sublime: ‘Ossian’s strange exotic wildness and his obscure, terrible glimpses of scenery were in essence something quite new.’<sup>127</sup> What made Macpherson’s verse ‘quite new’ was the move from the natural sublime of past poets, such as the celebrated Scottish poet James Thomson’s *Seasons*, to a more personal subjective sublime focused on the psychology of grief, loss and melancholy provoked by concomitance with the powers of the natural world. This interaction and convergence between the sublimity of nature and personal human experience is enacted out vividly in fragment XI. In this poem, Ossian directly addresses the sublime power of nature:

Rise winds of autumn, rise; blow upon the dark heath! streams of the mountains, roar! howl, ye tempests, in the top of the oak! Walk through broken clouds, O moon! show by intervals thy pale face! Bring to my mind that sad night, when all my children fell; when Arindel the mighty fell; when Daura the lovely failed; when all my children died.<sup>128</sup>

The anthropomorphism of the speaker’s ebullition directs the sublime force of nature through a series of cumulative and tightly sequenced imperatives: ‘Rise...rise; blow... roar! howl... walk... show’, which culminates in the turn of the commands inwards- ‘Bring to my mind that sad night, when all my children fell’. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla describe this process as being conducive of sublimity: ‘Attention shifts, therefore, from the object to our mental processes which react to or

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<sup>126</sup> Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime*, p. 21.

<sup>127</sup> Monk, *The Sublime*, p. 126.

<sup>128</sup> Macpherson, ‘Fragment XI.’, p. 22.

register those qualities delineated by the first approach'.<sup>129</sup> The pathetic fallacy of the 'streams of the mountains' that 'roar', and the 'winds of autumn' that 'blow' is inverted as the speaker's memories of his daughter, Daura, and son, Arindel, inspired by the forces of nature, 'react or register those qualities' of nature first invoked: 'Daura, my daughter! Thou wert fair; fair as the moon on the hills of Jura; white as the driven snow; sweet as the breathing gale. Arindel[...] thy look was like mist on the wave, thy shield, a red cloud in a storm'. Thus, the experience of the sublime is no longer found in the objective landscape and forces of nature, but is instead substantiated through the internalisation of the sublimity of nature into the psychology of the speaker's grief at the memories and loss of his son and daughter, as Longinus states: 'For art is perfect only when it looks like nature, and again, nature hits the mark only when she conceals the art that is within her'.<sup>130</sup>

When the storms of the mountain come; when the north lifts the waves on high; I sit by the sounding shore, and look on the fatal rock. Often by the setting moon I see the ghosts of my children. Half-viewless, they walk in mournful conference together. Will none of you speak in pity? They do not regard their father.<sup>131</sup>

'Fragment XI.' concludes with the speaker once more returned to his solitary post amongst the sublime grandeur of nature. In 1818, William Hazlitt had written of Ossian that: 'There is one impression that he conveys more entirely than all other poets, namely the sense of privation, the loss of all things, of friends, of good name, of country – he is even without God in the world'.<sup>132</sup> The speaker is presented isolated from the human world, 'the loss of all things' made more painful through the nescience of 'the ghosts' of his children who appear in obscurity: 'half-viewless', and who disregard his presence entirely: 'They do not regard their father'. Burke codified this formulation of privation as sublime: 'All *general* privations are great [sublime], because they are all terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence*'.<sup>133</sup> In each of the *Fragments*, Macpherson cultivates this sense of sublime privation by continually presenting the poet-speaker alone, battling with the silence and darkness of grief and melancholy as seen in the end of 'Fragment XI.'

'Time', wrote Byron, 'makes the word "Miltonic" mean "sublime"'.<sup>134</sup> In *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, Macpherson made a forceful and lasting start to making the word 'Ossianic' synonymous with the sublime, in what quickly materialised into its own aesthetic and poetic category

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<sup>129</sup> Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, p. 9.

<sup>130</sup> Longinus, 'On the Sublime', p. 131.

<sup>131</sup> Macpherson, 'Fragment XI.', p. 23.

<sup>132</sup> Hazlitt, 'On Poetry in General', p. 180.

<sup>133</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 70.

<sup>134</sup> George, Lord Byron, 'Don Juan', in *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, Oxford Edition (Oxford: Henry Frowde, 1904), I:X, p. 626.

as the 'Ossianic sublime'. In his preface to *Fragments*, Blair had written that the fragmented poems were 'originally episodes of a greater work' and that the 'three last poems' were fragments of this 'Epic poem'.<sup>135</sup> Moore highlights that Macpherson's first collection of poems are 'shards of an epic tradition, and the tone and subject matter of the collection has clear epic pretensions'.<sup>136</sup> Therefore, in publishing *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, Macpherson and Blair were already setting up the arrival of the sublime epics *Fingal* and *Temora* which presented to eighteenth-century readership a poetics that illuminate vividly Scotland's role in shaping the sublime.

### ***Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books (1761)***

After the publication of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* in 1760, the Ossianic 'production' began in earnest. The immediate success of *Fragments* attracted 'attention throughout Britain', but as Stafford notes 'nowhere was interest more intense than in Edinburgh'.<sup>138</sup> The Edinburgh literati's initial support of Macpherson's translations of Ossianic verse were enthused at the promise of a 'great national epic':

Not only did the *Fragments* show that Scotland had a literary heritage far more ancient than anything England could claim, but the preface hinted that, somewhere in the remote Highlands, the great national epic may be found.<sup>139</sup>

National anxieties about Scotland's place in the literary world feed into the literati's support for Ossian. They sponsored Macpherson to undertake two tours of the Highlands and Hebrides in order to source, compile, and translate what would become *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books*. Richard Sher observes that the urgency with which the Edinburgh literati offered their sponsorship and imprimatur to the production of *Fingal* can be traced to what he terms 'literary nationalism', as Sher explains: 'it was a continual source of embarrassment to Scottish men of letters that their country appeared in the eyes of the world to be an unpoetic nation, incapable of producing a Homer, Virgil, or Milton'.<sup>140</sup> Thus, a solution to Blackwell's commiseration 'that we may never be a proper subject for an heroic poem' had finally been found in the promise of an Ossianic epic, that would through form connect itself with the traditional expression of the sublime, and in substance; fulfil Scotland's need for a national poetic hero imbued with every semblance of the sublime. As Sher surmises: 'Only a complete Gaelic epic, dressed, of course, in neo-classical English garb, could possess the scope and

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<sup>135</sup> Hugh Blair, 'Preface', to 'Fragments of Ancient Poetry', in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, pp. 5-6, pp. 5,6.

<sup>136</sup> Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson's The Poems of Ossian*, p. 3.

<sup>138</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 113.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*, p. 256.



grandeur necessary to elevate Scotland to a new place in the national history of Britain',<sup>141</sup> thus, for *Ossian* to truly 'elevate Scotland', it had to be 'dressed' in the ruling neo-classical styling of the epics of 'Homer, Virgil, or Milton' who were consistently referenced as literary history's great poets of the sublime.

Of all the Edinburgh supporters, Hugh Blair was foremost in his advocacy of *Ossian*, self-titling himself as 'Ossian's champion'. The critic Walter J. Hipple observes of Blair that he was 'of immense importance as a populariser of aesthetic and critical speculation', and that it was his involvement with the Ossianic production and promotion of the poems that earned him this standing.<sup>142</sup> Following the success of the publication of *Fingal* in 1761, Blair published his own 'A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian' (1763) in which he emphasised, above all else, the sublime qualities of Macpherson's *Fingal*, for which he argued that if they 'be not admitted as examples, and illustrious ones too, of the true poetical sublime, I confess myself ignorant of this quality of writing'.<sup>143</sup> Amongst his lengthy discussion on the various aspects of sublimity contained in *Fingal*, Blair gives great weight to the importance of the epic form. Blair shared the neoclassical view that the epic was the supreme form of poetic expression, something that he later detailed in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), stating that: '[the epic is] unquestionably the highest effort of Poetical Genius'.<sup>144</sup> In his discussion of the form, Blair categorises it as demanding 'more strength, dignity, and fire' than any other poetic endeavour, because by generic definition it must contain: 'everything that is Sublime in description, tender in sentiment, and bold and lively in production'.<sup>145</sup> Blair's emphasis on sublimity as definitive for the classification of the epic addressed the contemporary need for categorising the form in clear terms:

By tedious disquisitions, founded on a servile submission to authority, [critics] have given such an air of mystery to a plain subject, as to render it difficult for an reader to conceive, what an epic poem is.<sup>146</sup>

Twentieth-century scholarship has commented on this problem, observing that: 'the literary epic always threads a maze of conventions more elaborate than can be found in any other literary form'.<sup>147</sup> In such a 'maze of conventions' then, 'valid epic theory depends more on the techniques of

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<sup>141</sup> Richard B. Sher, "'Those Scotch Imposters and their Cabal": Ossian and the Scottish Enlightenment', in *Man and Nature: Proceedings of the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 1 (1982) pp. 55-65, p. 20

<sup>142</sup> Hipple also notes of Blair that 'his aesthetic doctrine is less a system than a conspectus of eighteenth-century opinion', so that Blair stands as an important mediator between the aesthetic theory of Burke and his peers, and Macpherson's Ossianic poetry. In, Walter John Hipple, *The Beautiful, The Sublime, & The Picturesque In Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory*, (Carbondale: The Southern Illinois University Press, 1957), pp. 122, 124.

<sup>143</sup> Hugh Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation on The Poems of Ossian', in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, pp. 343-400, p. 394.

<sup>144</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, p. 505.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* p. 517.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* p. 509.

<sup>147</sup> Brian Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and the Epic Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 7.

identification than on those of definition'.<sup>148</sup> As noted before, eighteenth-century theorists such as Thomas Blackwell had codified the sublime as being the primary feature used to identify the epic: 'the *marvellous* and *wonderful* [the sublime] is the nerve of the epic strain'.<sup>149</sup> Blair is similarly promoting Macpherson's utilisation of the sublime in order to cement *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem*'s place within the ranks of the epic canon: 'Throughout the whole of *Fingal*, there reigns that grandeur of sentiment, style, and imagery [the sublime], which ought ever to distinguish this high species of poetry [the epic]'.<sup>150</sup> As Price notes, this canon 'required both stability and innovation, and Ossian could supply both'.<sup>151</sup> Macpherson's innovations in *Fingal* were in producing an epic that synthesised the eighteenth-century's theories of the sublime with his own Highland heritage and poetic capabilities in order to produce a poetics of the sublime that was inherently Scottish in aspect.

The critic Brian Wilkie describes reading the 'great epics' as 'walking through a hall of mirrors' in which the typology of the sublime reflects intertextually throughout each respective epic.<sup>152</sup> From Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, to Virgil's *Aeneid*, synonymous sublime images of provocative landscapes, heroic encounters, and formidable battles are transferred and mirrored. The same holds true between the Ossianic verses, in which the 'roaring winds', 'grey mists' and 'dark skies' of *Fragments* are mirrored throughout *Fingal* (and later *Temora*) in which readers can recognise the familiar topos of the epic, and by correlation, the Ossianic:

'As a hundred winds on Morven; as the streams of a hundred hills; as clouds fly successive over heaven; or, as the dark ocean assaults the shore of the desert: so roaring, so vast, so terrible the armies mixed on Lena's echoing heath.'<sup>153</sup>

This cumulative succession of simile is now familiar to the reader in creating an excess in figurative description based on the powerful forces of the Scottish landscape (Morven) that invokes the sublime through provocation of natural landscape: 'a hundred winds... streams of a hundred hills... dark ocean assaults the shore of the desert'. This culminates in hyperbole, by way of the adjectives - 'so

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>149</sup> Blackwell, *Enquiry*, p. 26.

<sup>150</sup> Blair bases his discussion of *Ossian's* epic form on Aristotle's theory and offers a long comparison between Homer's epics and Ossian's, repeating throughout the sublime features of both. In Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation of *The Poems of Ossian*', p. 360.

See also Baum and Briggs discussion of Blair and *Ossian* in which they connect the epic form beyond the sublime to nationhood, noting that Blair's '*Critical Dissertation* is analogous to Blackwell's *Enquiry*' as both act as 'guides to the reading and interpretation of particular works of epic poetry as expressions not only of their individual authors, but of nations in history'. In Richard Baum and Charles L. Briggs, *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 130.

<sup>151</sup> Price, p. 118

<sup>152</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and the Epic Tradition*, p. 14.

<sup>153</sup> Macpherson, 'Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books' (1761), in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, pp. 53-104, p. 77.

roaring, so vast...' - followed by a concluding description which lands on terror - 'so terrible' - the principal emotion responsible for the Burkean sublime. This passage distinctly exemplifies Macpherson's poetic process and focus on the sublime, in that the excesses of the landscape are subsumed by the excesses of the language in order to articulate the near-indescribable and excessive sublimity of battle: 'the armies mixed on Lena's echoing heath'.

The passage also illustrates the important interplay between Scotland and Ireland. The battle takes place on Lena - Moilena in Ireland - but is introduced and described through reference to Morven, the eponymous hero Fingal's kingdom on the west coast of the Scottish Highlands. This is an important feature of Macpherson's development of the sublime as being not only a poetic phenomenon but a Scottish one. The sublime is shifted from Homer's fabled Greece and walls of Ilium, and from Milton's allegorical landscapes of Hell and Eden, to the historical landscapes of the Celtic world in Ireland and Scotland. Whilst the narrative action takes place in Ireland, Scotland remains the heart and homeland of the poem. This, again, is concomitant with the epic tradition to which Ossian was compared at the time.<sup>154</sup> Homer's Greek warriors leaving their homeland to travel to war at Troy is mirrored by Ossian and Fingal's mission to Ireland, with Scotland continually referred to throughout the poem with similar romanticising as the *Iliad's* heroes and their Hellenic home. There is then a sense of a specific homeland to the epic, and indeed, to the sublime tradition. The homeland is where heroic action springs from and is continually referred to nostalgically as representative of the essence of that people, the source of inner strength, and fount for sublime experience. In the poetic history of the sublime, this is perhaps most notably read in Milton's *Lucifer*, whose hellish homeland the poet relates:

The Hell within him, for within him Hell  
He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell  
One step no more than from himself can fly  
By change of place[...].<sup>155</sup>

Similarly, in *Fingal*, the characters of Scottish heroes are imbued with the sublime aspect of their homeland, Scotland. In *Fingal*, Ossian is continually referred to as not only 'king of songs', indicating his bardic role, but as the 'voice of Cona' Glencoe, and as such, his role as bard and narrator of the event, the sublime is invoked through descriptions of Scotland, not Ireland. In this sense then, the

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<sup>154</sup> For the most notable of these comparisons see Hugh Blair's previously mentioned emphatic and exhaustive comparison of Homer and Ossian in which he surmises that 'both [Homer and Ossian] are originals; both are distinguished by simplicity, sublimity and fire', in his 'A Critical Dissertation on The Poems of Ossian', pp. 357-399, p. 390.

<sup>155</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, VI:20-24, p. 74.

‘echoing heaths’ of Lena, Ireland, then are just that: a poetic echo-chamber used to invoke the sublimity of Scotland.

As began in *Fragments*, the sublime topography of *Fingal* continually merges with the human, as Stafford highlights: ‘Place and race are inseparable’.<sup>156</sup> This is achieved through poetic instrumentation as displayed in Fingal’s exhortation to his Scottish warriors during the fight against the Swedish king Swaran: ‘Be thine arm like thunder. Thine eyes like fire, thy heart of solid rock’.<sup>157</sup> Here the blazon technique of comparing physiological features through figuration that is traditionally associated with beauty is remodelled by Macpherson to connote sublimity. ‘Arm’, ‘eyes’, and ‘heart’ are concatenated through simile to naturally sublime features of ‘thunder’, ‘fire’ and ‘solid rock’. Throughout *Fingal*, strength in nature becomes a conduit to express physical strength in character as in Macpherson’s depiction of Fingal’s rallying cry to his army:

The king stood by the stone of Lubar; and thrice raised his terrible voice. The deer started from the fountains of Cromla; and all the rocks shook on their hills. Like the noise of a hundred mountain-streams, that burst, and roar, and foam: like the clouds that gather to a tempest on the blue face of the sky; so met the sons of the desert, round the terrible voice of Fingal.<sup>158</sup>

The ‘terrible voice’ of Fingal startles the deer – the traditional epic topos of arcadian fauna has little place here - from the ‘fountains’ or waterfalls of the landscape, which in turn is provoked into action by the voice of Fingal: ‘all the rocks shook on their hills’. Fingal’s voice is then likened to the cacophony of a ‘hundred mountain-streams’, and the successive verb choice of ‘that burst, and roar, and foam’ are consistent in numeracy of three and sublime effect with Fingal’s ‘thrice raised’ voice. The Scottish army alluded to with the simile of clouds gathering ‘to a tempest’ and metaphorically denominated as ‘sons of the desert’ align around the ‘terrible voice of Fingal’. Macpherson’s reiteration of Fingal’s voice as ‘terrible’ seals the sublime strength and power of the passage, as Burke had theorised: ‘wheresoever we find strength, and in what light soever we look upon power, we shall all along observe the sublime the concomitant of terror’.<sup>159</sup> The sublime is consistently initiated through its auxiliary of Burkean terror as Fingal’s strength and power is depicted. Macpherson is here inverting the traditional orientation of the natural sublime; the sublime found in nature brings about the subjective experience of the sublime to the observer, just as the sublime found in poetry anticipates the sublime experience of the reader. However, in *Fingal*, and in *Ossian* throughout, the human character becomes the vehicle of sublimity in which landscape and characters and reader are equally affected by the sublime force of his ‘terrible voice’.

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<sup>156</sup> Fiona Stafford, ‘“Dangerous Success”: Ossian, Wordsworth, and English Romantic Literature’, in *Ossian Revisited*, ed. by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp.49-73, p. 64.

<sup>157</sup> Macpherson, ‘Fingal’, p. 86.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* p. 85.

<sup>159</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 66.

In his discussion of the use of setting within the epic tradition, Wilkie contends that the relational structure between human life and setting, is ‘almost always’ lineal, that life ‘derives urgency and poignancy from the darkness or vastness which surrounds and impinges on it’.<sup>160</sup> However, throughout the Ossianic corpus, Macpherson restructures this lineal hierarchy of the epic tradition so that landscape and human life continually coalesce, and from such, it is repeatedly life that is reconfigured as the ‘darkness or vastness’ of the sublime. In *Fingal* this is most notably read in the climactic battle between the two opposing kings, Fingal and Swaran:

There was the clang of arms! there every blow, like the hundred hammers of the furnace!  
Terrible is the battle of the kings; dreadful the look of their eyes. Their dark-brown shields are cleft in twain. Their steel flies, broken, from their helms. They fling their weapons down. Each rushes to his hero's grasp; their sinewy arms bend round each other: they turn from side to side, and strain and stretch their large-spreading limbs below. But when the pride of their strength arose they shook the hill with their heels. Rocks tumble from their places on high; the green-headed bushes are overturned. At length the strength of Swaran fell; the king of the groves is bound.<sup>161</sup>

The sharp staccato syntax of ‘clang of arms’, ‘hundred hammers’, ‘shields cleft in twain’, and ‘steel flies, broken’, are onomatopoeic, creating the effect of strong, sensory violence at the meeting of kings that is further rendered sublime through the Burkean principle of terror: ‘terrible is the battle of the kings’. Having each discarded their weapons, the kings meet in physical contest and sibilance is used to create a sense of movement as the two heroes ‘rush’ to each other and grapple, their bodies ‘straining and stretching’ as they wrestle. The onomatopoeia and sibilance of the passage enacts out the hyper-masculinity of the sublime encounter: as Moore explains about *Ossian* as a whole, ‘the sublime reads like an extrusion of the masculine and active’.<sup>162</sup> However, this ‘extrusion’ is internalised from the physical aspect of each warrior’s strength into an emotional strength of ‘pride’ as the narrator Ossian iterates, ‘But when the pride of their strength arose’, only then is Macpherson’s inversion of the natural and subjective sublime achieved; ‘they shook the hill with their heels. Rocks tumble from their places on high; the green-headed bushes are overturned’. This final contest of the kings is then immediately succeeded by a concatenation of the physical, emotional, and natural sublime of the passage with the metaphorical depiction of the Scottish landscape of ‘Cona’:

Thus, have I seen on Cona: (but Cona I behold no more) thus have I seen two dark hills removed from their place by the strength of the bursting stream. They turn from side to side, and their tall oaks meet one another on high. Then they fall together with all their rocks and trees. The streams are turned by their sides, and the red ruin is seen afar.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and the Epic Tradition*, p. 9.

<sup>161</sup> Macpherson, ‘Fingal’, p. 91.

<sup>162</sup> Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson's The Poems of Ossian*, p. 115.

<sup>163</sup> Macpherson, ‘Fingal’, p. 91.

The characters of Fingal and Swaran are here metaphorically transfigured into the sublime imagery of 'two dark hills' with 'tall oaks' that 'fall together with all their rocks and trees' causing an ambiguous 'red ruin', replicating in natural sublimity the martial contest. What is significant about this passage is that the speaker steps out of the temporal sequencing of the narrative indicated by the direction in parenthesis '(but Cona I behold no more)'. This can be read as alluding to Ossian's blindness but also more aptly to the great Ossianic theme of memory. For Ossian, the experience of the sublime is provoked by the historical battle of the kings, which is then furnished by the memory of the epic's homeland, Scotland, by way of a metaphorical analogy which, in itself, is invocative of the sublime. Thus, for both Ossian as bardic narrator, and the reader, Scotland and the sublime are therefore represented as one, irrevocably united throughout Macpherson's great epic *Fingal*.

### ***Temora: An Epic Poem in Eight Books (1763)***

In 1763, Macpherson, again with the extensive aid and support of the Edinburgh literati, published the second and final Ossianic epic, *Temora: An Epic Poem in Eight Books*.<sup>164</sup> *Temora* proved the critical tipping point for Macpherson's *Ossian*. Suspicions about the legitimacy of the Ossianic translations became outright accusations. Close supporters such as David Hume withdrew their advocacy whilst the more abject declaimers of the poetry became even more incensed. Hugh Blair curtailed, however lightly, his support of the Ossian production and after the publication of the complete works of Ossian *The Poems of Ossian* in 1765, Macpherson travelled to London and 'more or less abandoned' his poetry to pursue a career in politics and historiography.<sup>165</sup> The main point of contention with *Temora* was not with the poetry itself, which in sublime theme and description mirrored that of *Fingal*, but with the 'sentimentalism' it appeared to profess. For many of Macpherson's critics, such as Malcolm Laing, who presented the 'most crushing attack' on the authenticity of the poems in his 'Dissertation of the Supposed Authenticity of Ossian's Poems' (1800) and his later two volume edition of *The Poems of Ossian* (1805), it was too obviously a product of the polite manners and the 'sentimental affectation of our [Laing and Macpherson's] present times'.<sup>166</sup> Whilst he reluctantly admitted in *Ossian*, 'an occasional sublimity', Laing believed that within *Temora* 'in particular', Macpherson's 'sentimental

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<sup>164</sup> *Temora*, like *Fingal*, was published with a subsidiary collection of shorter poems which the scope and direction towards the epic form of this thesis will not permit discussion of.

<sup>165</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 151

<sup>166</sup> Kristine Louise Haugen, 'Ossian and the Invention of Textual History', in *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 59, No. 2 (April, 1998), pp. 309-327, p. 310.

Malcolm Laing, 'Dissertation of the Supposed Authenticity of Ossian's Poems', in *The History of Scotland: From the Union of the Crowns on the Accession of James VI. to the Throne of England, to the Union of the Kingdoms in the Reign of Queen Anne*, (1800) Third edition, corrected, 4 Vols. (London: J. Mawman, 1819) Vol. IV., pp. 427-522, p. 450.

descriptions stripped his characters of any semblance of historical realism or authenticity'.<sup>167</sup> Such sentimentalism that was evident in *Fingal*, such as the mercy shown to Swaran at the end of the narrative, is developed, and to the critics' eyes, more prevalent in *Temora*. Fingal's grief at the loss of his son in the sixth book of *Temora*, and the prevailing mist that cloaks the violence of the poem were read as overly polite aversions too much aligned with the sentiments of the day. In recent decades, *Temora* still proves a problematic text with critics such as Dafydd Moore largely dismissing it as ending on 'a note of failure and bankruptcy', whereas Fiona Stafford in her otherwise exhaustive monograph, *The Sublime Savage*, avoids any sustained discussion or analysis of the poetry of *Temora*.<sup>168</sup> Coupled with the authenticity issue, such misgivings obstruct a holistic understanding of the sublimity that is developed throughout the entire corpus of *Ossian*. With *Fragments* and *Fingal*, the sublimity of Ossian had been established and thus by the time *Temora* had been published, critics had essentially moved on. This chapter shall conclude then with an attempt to refocus a critical reading of *Temora* in light of the poetics of the sublime that has been developed throughout Macpherson's Ossianic oeuvre.

In *Temora*, Fingal, Ossian and their Scottish warriors return to Ireland in order to avenge the Irish king's murder at the hands of the usurper Cathmor. Macpherson's concentration on the human as vehicle for the sublime that his earlier epic *Fingal* had modelled is notably extended. Once more, it is the voice of the hero Fingal that this concentration focuses on:

Dost thou hear the voice of the king? It is like the  
 Bursting of a stream, in the desert, when it comes between its echoing rocks,  
 To the blasted field of the sun.<sup>169</sup>

The sublime force of 'the voice of the king', Fingal, is again linked with the sublime force of nature through simile. The description of the 'bursting of a stream, in the desert' is significant given the developed metaphorical topos of *Fragments* and *Fingal*, in which Scottish heroes are depicted as sublime features of the landscape, and the figuration of the 'desert' has been repeatedly used to signify the heroes' homeland and fount for sublime expression, Scotland. Therefore, the 'echoing rocks' become the rocky slopes of Cormal, in Ireland where the action of the narrative takes place and the 'blasted field of the sun' anticipates the approaching battlefield. The bardic figure of Ossian is then situated within the sublimity of Fingal: 'Stand, Ossian, near thy father, by the falling stream. – Raise the voice, O bards; Morven, move beneath the sound. It is my latter field, clothe it over with

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid. p. 462,

Dwyer, 'The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the Poems of Ossian', p. 167.

<sup>168</sup> Stafford discusses *Temora* only in a contextual vein in Macpherson's historical debate with Irish critics, whereas Moore offers a compelling analysis of the isolation of Fingal yet ultimately focuses on the poem's shortcomings, emphasising its reputation as 'unreadable', in Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance*, p. 132.

<sup>169</sup> Macpherson, 'Temora: An Ancient Epic poem in Eight Books', in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, pp. 225-292, p. 245.

light.<sup>170</sup> The voice of the bardic figure of Ossian is united to that of Fingal's through the correlating imagery of the 'falling stream' synonymous to the 'bursting of a stream' of the king's voice as both voices unite so that Scotland, 'Morven', may 'move beneath the sound'. The 'blasted field of the sun' is then reiterated as the 'latter field' of battle, and Fingal's directive towards Ossian as bard to 'clothe it over with light' creates an intricate connection between the sublimity of Fingal's voice and that of Ossian's as speaker. There is then a sense that Macpherson is interweaving the direct sublimity of the narrative with a more hermeneutic sublime that includes the very act of this narration. This is finalised by the proceeding consequence of both Ossianic and heroic voice:

As the sudden rising of winds; or distant rolling of troubled seas, when  
Some dark ghost, in wrath, heaves the billows over an isle, the sea of mist,  
On the deep, for many dark-brown years: so terrible is the sound of the host,  
Wide-moving over the field.<sup>171</sup>

Burke had theorised that 'the noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind [the sublime]': and in the above passage, Macpherson builds a crescendo of 'noise', typically for *Ossian*, based on the powers of nature with the inclusion of the supernatural.<sup>172</sup> The metaphorical constellation of 'sudden rising of winds' and the 'distant rolling of troubled seas' is preconditioned by the supernatural element of 'some dark ghost, in wrath' and thus, the 'sound of the host' of the Scottish armies moving over the 'field' of battle becomes otherworldly and further aligned with the Burkean theory of sublime terror: 'so terrible is the sound'. Therefore, Fingal, Ossian, and the army of Scotland, are all united through a sublimity of sound metaphorically both borne of, and superseding nature, that conspires, in turn, to affect the reader.

In the proceeding battle, Fingal remains behind, and at the death of his son Fillan, his 'terrible voice' is silenced in what the critic Paul DeGategno identifies as Macpherson's 'sublime articulation of grief'.<sup>173</sup> The Scottish army, now characterised by their grief as they gather in silence round Fingal: 'Distant round the king, on Mora, the broken ridges of Morven are rolled. They turned their eyes: each darkly bends, on his own ashen spear. – Silent stood the king in the midst.'<sup>174</sup> The silence of the army and their king is then mirrored by the silence of Ossian who is unable to tell Fingal the news of his son's death: 'no voice of mine was heard'.<sup>175</sup> Ossian's silence signals the death of Fillan to the king: 'Where is the son of Selma [Fillan], he who led in war? He fell;- for ye are silent'.<sup>176</sup> Macpherson's

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. pp. 245-6.

<sup>172</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 82.

<sup>173</sup> Paul DeGategno, "'The Source of Daily and Exalted Pleasure": Jefferson Reads *The Poems of Ossian*', in *Ossian Revisited*, pp. 94-108, p. 105.

<sup>174</sup> Macpherson, 'Temora', p. 273.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.



focus here on the grief of Fingal, Ossian, and the Scottish warriors can be read as sentimental in that it sharply contrasts with the sublime sound of the triptych's preceding move into battle. However, in light of Macpherson's correspondence with Burkean theories of sublimity, the 'sudden cessation of sound' from the Scottish heroes, is again invocative of the sublime: as Burke had theorised, 'A sudden beginning or sudden cessation of sound of any considerable force, has the same power [the sublime]'.<sup>177</sup> Therefore, rather than a delineation into a sentimentalised tableau of grief, Macpherson is instead demonstrating that the sublime comes from within his characters. Just as the force of the army moving into battle following the impassioned voice of Fingal and Ossian, the grief felt by the king and his warriors is 'articulated' as sublime through Macpherson's convergence on silence.

In the penultimate book of *Temora*, Fingal's silence has remained until the appearance of the ghost of Fillan at night in his tent. At this junction, the extended metaphor of mist which throughout *Ossian* is carefully connected to the human sense of memory is brought to the fore. The narrative opens with a description of the 'grey-bosomed mists' that appear at lake Lego at night: 'when the gates of the west are closed on the sun's eagle-eye'.<sup>178</sup> From this mist, described as a 'vapour dark and deep', the 'spirits of old' bring forth the ghost of Fillan: 'He poured his deep mist on Fillan, at blue-winding Lubar.- Dark and mournful sat the ghost [Fillan], bending in his grey ridge of smoak'.<sup>179</sup> Fillan's melancholic aspect of 'bending' is reiterated in his 'slow-bending eyes: and dark winding of locks of mist'. The sublimity of this passage is realised through the concatenation of the 'dark and deep' configurations of nature and night with the supernatural apparition of Fillan whose 'grey ridge of smoak' and 'dark winding', 'locks of mist' coalesce with the 'grey-bosomed mists' of the lake and 'blue-winding' of the river Lubar. As John Dwyer observes 'misty memory and ethereal spirits merge in the twilight world of the Ossianic poems'.<sup>180</sup> This emphasis on mist-borne memory is consolidated in the dialogue between Fingal and the ghost of Fillan, who asks: "'Am I forgot in the folds of darkness; lonely in the season of dreams?'"'.<sup>181</sup> The memory of his son and his heroic 'path of fire in the field' of battle, is what ends the silence of Fingal and awakens his 'wrath': 'Can I forget thee, my son, or thy path of fire in the field?[...] I remember thee, O Fillan, and my wrath begins to rise.'<sup>182</sup>

The rising wrath of Fingal is then iconised by the striking of his shield three times, echoing his 'thrice raised voice' in *Fingal*. In a footnote to this scene, Macpherson states that:

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<sup>177</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 83.

<sup>178</sup> Macpherson, 'Temora', p. 279.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Dwyer, 'The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the Poems of Ossian', p. 190.

<sup>181</sup> Macpherson, 'Temora', p. 279.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

Ossian always throws an air of consequence on every circumstance that relates to Fingal. The very sound of his shield produces extraordinary effects; and these are heightened, one above another, in a [sublime] climax.<sup>183</sup>

This directly corresponds with Burke's theory that a 'single sound of some strength, though but a short duration, if repeated after intervals, has a sublime effect'.<sup>184</sup> It is then the 'extraordinary' and 'sublime' effects of the shield being struck that Macpherson is directing the reader towards. At the first striking of the shield the effect is upon the supernatural: 'Ghosts fled on every side, and rolled their gathered forms on the wind'.<sup>185</sup> Once Fingal has 'struck again the shield', the effect is upon his sleeping army and their dreams: 'battles rose in the dreams of his host. The wide-tumbling strife is gleaming over their souls'.<sup>186</sup> This anticipates the climactic battle of the following day, whilst also emphasising the 'extraordinary effects' of Fingal's action in scattering the ghosts and influencing the dreams of his army. The 'sublime climax' of the third strike of the shield is then described:

But when the third sound arose; deer started from the clefts of their rocks. The screams of fowl are heard, in the desert, as each flew, frighted, on his blast. – The sons of Morven half-rose, and half-assumed their spears.<sup>187</sup>

For Dwyer, Ossian's mastery of the sublime 'is evidenced[...] in those passages in which he demonstrates the force of nature or *nature's man*, the mighty Fingal'<sup>188</sup>. Here, both nature and the human are once again shown to be under the sublime 'force' of 'the mighty Fingal'. The startled deer and the 'screams of fowl' that 'each flew, frighted on [Fingal's] blast' emphasises the Ossianic construct of Fingal as 'nature's man' from whom the sublime is repeatedly invoked through his various actions; such as the sound of his voice or the striking of his shield. Furthermore, what is also highlighted is the connection between the sublimity of Fingal and the sublimity of the Scottish landscape. The fowl that scream are told to be heard 'in the desert', which as previously established, signifies Scotland, and the deer and fowl that are startled by the third strike of Fingal's shield are mirrored by the 'Son's of Morven' awakened from their sleep in a state of uncertainty: 'The sons of Morven half-rose, and half assumed their spears'. Thus, throughout Macpherson's development of natural and supernatural forces that conspire around the heroic figure of Fingal, the sublime is intrinsically linked to the hero's homeland in Scotland.

*Temora* concludes with the final battle between the Scottish warriors and the Irish rebels in book VIII. Macpherson once more merges Fingal with the sublimity of nature in describing how he appears 'in the rolling of mist', as 'King of Morven of streams': 'A rock he seemed, grey over with

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<sup>183</sup> Macpherson, footnote to 'Temora' in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, p. 515.

<sup>184</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 83.

<sup>185</sup> Macpherson, 'Temora', p. 279.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> John Dwyer, 'The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the Poems of Ossian', p. 177.

ice, whose woods are high in wind. Bright streams leap from its head, and spread their foam in blasts'.<sup>189</sup> As seen throughout Macpherson's work, metaphorical allegiance with the sublimity of nature is again used as the vehicle for meaning, the description alluding not only to the physical 'hardness' of Fingal who appears as a 'rock', but also to his status as foundation stone for the narrative. The 'woods' that are 'high in wind' alludes to the 'ridges of Morven's host' his army, and the 'bright streams' that 'leap from [his head], and spread their foam in blasts' connote the concurring imagery of Scotland as 'Morven of streams'.

Macpherson's use of metaphor has in recent years been critiqued as an overly sentimental distraction from the bloody nature of the battlefields he attempts to portray.<sup>190</sup> The final battle between Fingal and Cathmor epitomises this perspective in its bloodless, mist-obscured and essentially, actionless combat. However, in light of Macpherson's development of the sublime and his reliance on sublime theory from Longinus to Burke, the final battle can be read as the apex of *Temora* and indeed the entire Ossianic corpus in its metaphorical construction of sublimity:

Slow rose the blue columns of mist, against the glittering hill. – Where are the mighty kings?  
– Nor by that stream, nor wood, are they! – I hear the clang of arms! – Their strife is in the  
bosom of mist. – Such is the contending of spirits in a nightly cloud, when they strive for the  
wintry wings of winds, and the rolling of the foam-covered waves.<sup>191</sup>

Once more, the metaphor of 'blue columns of mist' signals the sublimity of the scene, as 'the mighty kings' now having met in combat become obscured from Ossian's vision, with only the 'clang of arms' being heard. Ossian, unable to accurately describe this climatic encounter, turns again to metaphor with the kings being compared to 'the contending of spirits in a nightly cloud' which is transfigured into natural sublimity with the cumulative consonance of 'wintry wings of winds', and the 'foam-covered waves'. In a footnote to this final scene, Macpherson explains the purpose of this extension of the mist: '[Ossian] throws a column of mist over the whole, and leaves the combat to the imagination of the reader[...] Our imagination stretches beyond, and, consequently, despises, the description'.<sup>192</sup> It is then a deliberate effort by Macpherson to conscript the imagination of the reader into creating the sublimity of the scene. As the critic Adam Potkay highlights, this attempt 'derives its aesthetic power from Edmund Burke's sublime of obscurity':

The literal and figurative mystification of violence derives its aesthetic power from Edmund Burke's sublime of obscurity, according to which "a clear idea is ... another name for a little idea" (63). The absence of precise definition allows the reader's imagination, in Macpherson's

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<sup>189</sup> Macpherson, 'Temora', p. 288.

<sup>190</sup> See Adam Potkay's discussion of the polite sensibility of 'bloodless violence' of Ossian, in Adam Potkay, 'Virtue and Manners in Macpherson's Poems of Ossian', in *Modern Language Association* Vol. 107, No. 1. (Jan. 1992) pp. 120-130, p. 126, and Dafydd Moore's previously mentioned discussion of the 'Sentimental Sublime' in *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson's The Poems of Ossian*, pp. 113-139.

<sup>191</sup> Macpherson, 'Temora', p. 290.

<sup>192</sup> Macpherson, footnote to 'Temora', in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, p. 526.

formulation, to stretch beyond the words on the page, presumably into a subjective realm of associated impressions and affects.<sup>193</sup>

By conforming to Burkean obscurity, Macpherson can thus be seen to provoke through metaphor the reader's imagination into a subjective, and personal experience of a 'subjective realm of associated impressions and affects' that is the realm of the sublime.

Macpherson's reliance on metaphor here, and throughout *Ossian*, is indicative of his reliance on not only Burke's theory, but the Longinian tradition of the sublime also. As the critic M. H. Abrams observes: 'Longinus attributes a particularly bold and frequent use of metaphors to the promptings of passion in the speaker'.<sup>194</sup> More recently, Katherine Wheeler has commented directly on this 'close relationship' between metaphor and the sublime:

Metaphor is both the record and the vehicle of knowledge, whether art or science. Metaphor is so closely related to[...] sublimity as to create another network of relationships[...] a breakthrough into awakened participation involves the transport of the sublime, as the mind transports itself across the grave or abyss separating, terrifyingly, the text from reader.<sup>195</sup>

Therefore, through his repeated use metaphor, Macpherson is not evading the violence of the battlefield for some lesser, conscientious sentimentalism, but is rather emphasising the sublime discordancy of battle, the obscurity of action, the vastness of armies, the confusion, terror, and indescribable chaos of martial encounter and in doing so, creates a 'breakthrough into awakened participation'. The reader is drawn across the 'abyss' of millennia, that separates 'the text from reader' into the action of the battle which is inherently sublime, through the very mediation of sublime transport, it like metaphor, is both the record of and vehicle to knowledge.

The poem closes with Fingal presented as being 'clothed with fame', 'a beam of light to other times' that in many ways predicts the success of the Ossianic sublime. Scotland's role in Fingal's fame is also foregrounded in this final passage:

Brightening in his fame, the king strode to Lubar's sounding oak, where it bent, from its rock, over the bright tumbling stream. Beneath it is a narrow plain, and the sound of the fount of the rock. – Here the standard of Morven poured its wreaths on the wind [...]<sup>196</sup>

Fingal, 'brightening in his fame' appears next to Ireland's 'oak' that is described as 'bent'. The significant connection here is on the word 'bright', Fingal's fame being described as 'beam of light', as he is shown 'brightening' and thus the 'bright tumbling stream' metaphorically aligns with Fingal as 'rock' and 'King of Morven of streams'. Therefore, Ireland, 'bent' in its defeat is juxtaposed against

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<sup>193</sup> Adam Potkay, 'Virtue and Manners in Macpherson's Poems of Ossian', p. 124.

<sup>194</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and The Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 73.

<sup>195</sup> Kathleen M. Wheeler 'Classicism, Romanticism, and Pragmatism: The Sublime Irony of Oppositions', in *Parallax*, (1998), 4:4, pp. 5-20, p. 19.

<sup>196</sup> Macpherson, 'Temora', p. 291.

the 'bright' fame of Fingal and Scotland, with the final depiction of the 'the standard of Morven' that 'poured its wreaths on the wind' sealing this final patriotic and sublime tableau.

From her extensive study of *Ossian*, Stafford surmises, 'Above all, Ossian was the poet of the Sublime'<sup>197</sup> and yet to its contemporary readership, *Ossian* was not just the paramount poetic expression of the sublime but also a 'symbol of Scotland'.<sup>198</sup> Therefore, with Macpherson's *Ossian*, the sublime and Scotland became merged in the eyes of the eighteenth-century reading public. With the publication and success of *Ossian*, the century's interest in the sublime heightened and brought new developments, and with it, a fresh interest in Scotland also emerged. As Nigel Leask observes, Ossian in many regards 'validated the Highland landscape' and the 'landscape, in turn, seemed to authenticate the poem,' so much so that Leask argues that the Ossianic poems were largely responsible for the birth of tourism in the Scottish Highlands.<sup>199</sup> In conclusion, Macpherson had begun the important work of wresting the sublime from the esoteric circles of philosophers and men of letters, he had brought about an international interest in the sublime found in his poetic expression of contemporary aesthetic ideals. He had effectively nationalised it, bringing the sublime to Scotland. Here eighteenth-century Scotland, not Greece or Rome, became the home of the sublime, and the prodigious landscapes of his youth in the Highlands and Hebrides were now synonymous with it. Though Scotland's place as home of the sublime had thus been established in the work of *Ossian*, that sublime still remained a part of the classical world in many respects, particularly through Macpherson's adherence to the classical form of the epic and its traditional model of the sublime as located in the heroic action and battlefields of *Fragments*, *Fingal*, and *Temora*. For the poetics of the sublime to progress it needed further poetic innovation and a form that freed it from labouring under the critical baggage of the epic.

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<sup>197</sup> Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, p. 173

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.* p. 164.

<sup>199</sup> Nigel Leask, 'Fingalian Topographies: Ossian and the Highland Tour, 1760-1805', in *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vo. 39. Iss. 2 (June, 2016), pp. 183-196, pp. 184-5.

### Chapter Three:

#### ‘Standing Sublime’: James Beattie and *The Minstrel*

Born just a year apart, James Macpherson and James Beattie, were, as Dafydd Moore highlights, ‘near exact contemporaries’.<sup>200</sup> In terms of proximity, Beattie was born in 1735 at Laurencekirk, which lies almost directly parallel to Macpherson’s Highland home of Ruthven across the mountainous region of the Cairngorms. Furthermore, both Macpherson and Beattie attended Aberdeen university at Marischal college under the influence of the same aesthetic ‘luminaries’, as the previously mentioned Thomas Blackwell and Alexander Gerard, although as Moore notes, Macpherson and Beattie’s respective careers ‘could not have been more different’.<sup>201</sup> Beattie graduated from Marischal in 1753, with a five-year interval at Fordoun, near Laurencekirk, during which time he ‘developed a love of hills, nature, and solitary places’ that would later define his aesthetic and poetic output.<sup>202</sup> After this period, Beattie returned to Marischal and was appointed to Gerard’s former chair as Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic in 1760, a post which he maintained until his death in 1803. In 1761, Beattie, at the invitation of Gerard, joined the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, known as the ‘Wise Club’. Ronnie Young observes that within the club, ‘discussion ranged across the whole spectrum of Enlightenment thought, and within this it is significant to note that “literary” and aesthetic questions feature regularly alongside philosophical and scientific problems’.<sup>203</sup> Indeed, from the members of this club came some of the most important works on aesthetics and the theory of the sublime of its day, including Thomas Reid’s *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), and Gerard’s previously mentioned *An Essay on Taste* (1759), and *Essay on Genius* (1774).<sup>204</sup> Amongst this strong academic field, Beattie earned himself the title of ‘the great philosopher of his generation’,<sup>205</sup> from his ‘common sense’ refutation of Humean scepticism in *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism*, and the later compiling of his lectures; *Dissertations*

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<sup>200</sup> Dafydd Moore, ‘The Ossianic Revival, James Beattie and Primitivism’, in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature: Enlightenment, Britain, and Empire (1707-1918)* vol. II. ed. Susan Manning et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 90-98, p. 90.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Roger J. Robinson, ‘Beattie, James (1735-1803), poet and philosopher’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 21 Sep. 2020. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-1831>.

<sup>203</sup> Ronnie Young, ‘James Beattie and the Progress of Genius in the Aberdeen Enlightenment’ in *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* Vol. 36 No. 2 (2013) pp. 245- 261, p. 254.

<sup>204</sup> This is evidenced by Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, who include both Reid and Gerard’s essays in their work *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (1996), and by Timothy Costelloe who gives recognition to the respective works of both Reid and Gerard in his editorial collection *The Sublime: From Antiquity to Present* (2012).

<sup>205</sup> William Walker, ‘The Bards of Bon-Accord 1375-1860’ (Aberdeen, (1887), quoted in E. H. King’s ‘James Beattie’s Literary Essays (1776, 1783) and the Evolution of Romanticism’, in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, Vol. 11, Iss. 4, pp. 199-216, p. 200.

*Moral and Critical* (1783) which included his critical theory of the sublime: 'Illustrations of Sublimity'.

Crucial to Beattie's theory of the sublime is the assertion in 'Illustrations' that: 'The most perfect models of the sublime are seen in the works of nature' and as such; 'without the study of nature, a true taste in the sublime is absolutely unattainable'.<sup>206</sup> However, Beattie goes on to add the significant caveat: 'And yet, the true sublime may be attained by human art'.<sup>207</sup> Beattie here makes the important connection between the philosophical ideal of the 'true sublime', to him, most readily found in nature, being 'attained' or actualised by 'human art', and whilst he offers some recognition of the mediums of music, architecture and painting, in 'Illustrations' his greatest emphasis is on the poetics of the sublime. Unlike the work of his contemporaries Reid and Gerard, Beattie's 'Illustrations' has been largely dismissed by modern critics such as Samuel Monk, for being 'one of the least original essays on the sublime'.<sup>208</sup> However, Beattie's unoriginality in 'Illustrations' is as Monk states the 'very reason it becomes of use as a summary of its decade', in that the theoretical development of the sublime from Longinus to Burke and to Beattie's own peers at the Wise Club can be traced and summarised in 'Illustrations'.<sup>209</sup> Nevertheless, what distinguishes Beattie from his fellow Wise Club members is his poetical work *The Minstrel, Or the Progress of Genius*, (1771,1774), that successfully addressed the "'literary" and aesthetic questions' of his time, bringing together a far greater semblance of a 'true sublime[...] attained by human art' than the borrowed ideas of 'Illustrations'.<sup>210</sup>

Recently, critics have traced the connection between James Beattie's philosophy, the poetry of *The Minstrel*, and his shared interest in the sublime with that of his contemporary, James Macpherson. Moore emphasises the influence on both of their time at Marischal in his connection of the primitivist ideologies of Macpherson and those of Beattie, stating that *The Poems of Ossian* and *The Minstrel* stand as 'two of the most important and influential primitivist works of the eighteenth century'.<sup>211</sup> As discussed in the preceding chapter on *Ossian*, primitivism is closely related to the theory of the sublime which Moore recognises in his discussion: 'most great statements of primitive aesthetics are also statements about the sublime as an aesthetic idiom'.<sup>212</sup> Correspondingly, Young builds on Moore's approach, noting the 'peculiar links' between Macpherson and Beattie, and in particular, their 'strong connections' with Marischal, and how 'this nexus created a complex yet

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<sup>206</sup> James Beattie, 'Illustrations on Sublimity', in *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, (1783) printed in *The Works of James Beattie*, 10 Vols. introduced by Roger Robinson, (London: Routledge/Thoemmes, 1996) Vol. 5. pp. 605-655, p. 617.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Monk, *The Sublime*, p. 129.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Young, 'James Beattie and the Progress of Genius in the Aberdeen Enlightenment', p. 254.

<sup>211</sup> Moore, 'The Ossianic Revival, James Beattie and Primitivism', p. 90.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. p. 91.

surprisingly localised context for the development of critical discourses on poetic genius'.<sup>213</sup> This development of 'critical discourses on poetic genius', Young links to Aberdonian discussions of 'Original Genius' that tie in with Moore's analysis of primitivism, stating that Beattie's *Minstrel* 'synthesises the aesthetics of the sublime with the conjectural approach to genius and [primitive] environment initiated at Aberdeen'.<sup>214</sup> Whilst both Moore and Young respectively highlight the interconnection between primitivism, genius, and the sublime through incisive analysis of *The Minstrel*, Beattie's poetic treatment of the sublime remains critically overlooked, superseded by theoretical discussions of the analogous philosophical ideas of Macpherson and Beattie's day. The critic Ian Robertson cautions against the 'dangers in automatically conflating Beattie the philosopher and Beattie the poet', for as he notices Beattie himself 'tried hard not to do so'.<sup>215</sup> This is evidenced in a letter written from Beattie to Charles Boyd in 1766 in which he describes the 'incompatibility of philosophical and poetical genius':

A little philosophical acquaintance with the most beautiful parts of nature, both in the material and immaterial system, is of use to the poet[...] but this acquaintance, if it is anything more than superficial, will do a poet rather harm than good[...]<sup>216</sup>

Given the clear philosophical and didactic slant of *The Minstrel's* second Canto, Robertson admits that 'in practice' Beattie 'found it difficult to hold this position'.<sup>217</sup> However, in reference to the *Minstrel's* first Canto, in which the poet records the early experiences and affinity with nature of young Edwin in 'Scotia's hills', Robertson also argues for the importance of *The Minstrel's* autobiographical nature, that crucially for this thesis, highlights Beattie's development of the sublime in conjunction with the significance of his Scottish heritage: 'Into the illusory Scottish scenery sublimated by his imagination, Beattie decanted his own Scottish youth'.<sup>218</sup> Robertson's statement can be supported by his fellow critic Roger Robinson's summation from the letters of Beattie, that:

Edwin's response to nature, especially in the sublime aspect, his thoughts and feelings, his tendency to melancholy and love of solitude, his early attachments to poetry and music, and his encounters with Homer and Virgil, *all* record Beattie's own experience as a boy.<sup>219</sup>

Thus, both Robertson and Robinson respectively note the autobiographical importance of Beattie's 'Scottish youth' in shaping the 'sublime aspect' of the poem. Like Stafford's appraisal of

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<sup>213</sup> Young, 'James Beattie and the Progress of Genius in the Aberdeen Enlightenment', pp. 245-6.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.* p. 248

<sup>215</sup> Ian C. Robertson, 'Beattie's *The Minstrel*: A Missing Link in Scottish Poetry', in *Studies in Scottish Literature* Vol. 43. Iss. 2. (2017), pp. 237-254, p. 251.

<sup>216</sup> Beattie to Hon Charles Boyd, November 16, 1766, 'Letter XIV' in Sir William Forbes, *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie*, Vols. 1-2, of *The Works of James Beattie* 10 Vols. intro by Roger Robinson, (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996) Vol. 1, pp. 92-95, pp. 94, 95.

<sup>217</sup> Robertson, 'Beattie's *The Minstrel*: A Missing Link in Scottish Poetry', p. 251.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.* p. 248.

<sup>219</sup> Roger Robinson, 'The Origins and Composition of James Beattie's *Minstrel*', in *Romanticism* Vol. 4. Iss. 2. (1998), pp. 224-240, p. 227.



Macpherson's 'natural education' in the Scottish Highlands, Beattie's Scottish heritage is also highlighted in his 'sublimation' or rendering sublime of the 'Scottish scenery of his youth'. Therefore, there is a sustained connection between Scotland and the formation of the sublime shared by both Macpherson and Beattie.

Macpherson's *Ossian* from its outset was regarded by many as a 'symbol of Scotland', whilst Beattie's *Minstrel* earned him similar patriotic fame with the historian and critic John Pinkerton writing to him in 1782 to compliment him as the 'living ornament of poetry in Scotland'.<sup>220</sup> In 'Illustrations', Beattie connected poetry and the sublime with patriotism: 'Poetry is sublime, when it awakens in the mind any great and good affection, as piety, or patriotism.'<sup>221</sup> This crucial link between the sublime of *The Minstrel* and patriotism has, as Robertson recognises, been undervalued, or indeed, overlooked: 'anthologists and critics often seem to forget the extent to which [*The Minstrel*] was also an authentically Scottish poem'.<sup>222</sup> Unlike the abundance of topographical references to Highland and Hebridean place names that characterised *Ossian*, *The Minstrel* is less distinct in its geographical directives, but as Robertson notes: 'below the surface are distinctly Scottish features'.<sup>223</sup> The poem is set in 'bleak and barren Scotia's hills', with reference to an ambiguous 'North Country'.<sup>224</sup> In a letter to Thomas Percy, Beattie explained the ambiguity of the poem's setting: 'By the words North Country, in the poem, I meant not the northern part of the island, but the southernmost part of Scotland[...]'.<sup>225</sup> Given the dramatic landscapes of the poem in which 'Rocks, torrents, gulfs, and shapes of giant size' feature, the poem at times feels more suited to the Ossianic Highlands.<sup>226</sup> However, Robertson explains that:

Beattie was at liberty to toughen up the conceptual topography of the South of Scotland by adding sublime elements of mountainous and marine scenes and, apparently, some landscapes from his own locality in the North East.<sup>227</sup>

In this sense then, Beattie provides a less regional model of Scotland than Macpherson in utilising the 'sublime elements' of the Highlands and his home in the 'North East', to present a vision of the 'southernmost part of Scotland' imbued with a more aggregate sublime composite with Scotland. Further distinction between the Ossianic vision of Scotland and Beattie's is made in stanza VI. in which the poet compares the landscape of Scotland with that of Chile:

With gold and gems if Chilian mountains glow,

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<sup>220</sup> John Pinkerton to Beattie, November 28, 1782, quoted in Robertson, p. 238.

<sup>221</sup> Beattie, 'Illustrations', p. 625

<sup>222</sup> Robertson, 'Beattie's *The Minstrel*: A Missing Link in Scottish Poetry', p. 237.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.* p. 246.

<sup>224</sup> James Beattie, 'The Minstrel; or, The Progress of Genius', (1784) in *Poetical Works*, printed in *The Works of James Beattie*, 10 Vols. Vol. 9. Pp. 1-64, I: VI., XI., pp. 4, 6.

<sup>225</sup> Beattie to Thomas Percy, May 4, 1772 quoted in Robertson, p. 246.

<sup>226</sup> Beattie, 'The Minstrel', I: LIII., p. 28.

<sup>227</sup> Robertson, 'Beattie's *The Minstrel*: A Missing Link in Scottish Poetry', p. 247.

If bleak and barren Scotia's hills arise;  
There, plague and poison, lust and rapine grow;  
Here, peaceful are the vales, and pure the skies,  
And freedom fires the soul, and sparkles in the eyes.<sup>228</sup>

The alliteration of 'gold and gems if Chilean mountains glow' is collated with the plosive alliteration of 'bleak and barren' which then merges into the softer sibilance of 'Scotia's hills arise', suggesting that Scotland's imagery supersedes the riches of the Chilean mountains in sublimity, which is then nuanced by the use of sibilance to suggest a less superficial wealth than 'gold and gems'. This is completed in the subsequent lines in which 'plague and poison, lust and rapine' is conjoined with the malignant sound of 'grow' concatenating in rhyme with the 'gold and gems' that 'glow'. Thus, the pestilence and vice of foreign lands are set in opposition to the 'peaceful vales, and pure the skies' of the 'Here' of the poem in Scotland. Furthermore, this line emphasises the distinction between the perpetually 'dark skies' and turbulent battlefields of *Ossian* with the 'peaceful' valleys and 'pure' skies of *The Minstrel*. The 'zealous' spirit of the poem is then felt when the landscape is eclipsed by an internalisation of a sublime 'freedom' that 'fires the soul, and sparkles in the eyes'. Scotland, to Beattie, is characterised then both by a sublimity of 'barren and bleak' hills, but also by its qualities of peacefulness, purity and an inward form of freedom that clearly distinguishes the poem from its predecessor. In his discussion of primitivism, Moore underlines this distinction: 'Where Macpherson seeks to posit a specific Scottish primitive culture existing in a specific time and (Scottish) place, Beattie reaches for a more "internalised" form of expression'.<sup>229</sup> Throughout *The Minstrel*, Edwin relies on the 'external stimulus' of the 'sublime Scottish landscape', with the focus not on the 'historical schema of development' ordained through reference to a specific historical era and geographical places, but rather, 'everything to do with the development of the individual'.<sup>230</sup> Whereas Ossian's focus was on the people and warrior culture of ancient Scotland and the sublimity surrounding and provoked by these Ossianic features, Beattie's focus is on the interaction between the sublime and the poetic individual, a personal, subjective experience of the sublime that would become the hallmark of the sublime for the Romantic poets. Thus, while both Beattie and Macpherson are shown to tincture the sublime through depiction of the Scottish landscape, Beattie is clearly developing this poetics of the sublime for his own poet-centric perspective, something that is structurally evidenced in Beattie's use of form.

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<sup>228</sup> Beattie, 'The Minstrel', I: VI., p. 4.

<sup>229</sup> Moore, 'The Ossianic Revival, James Beattie and Primitivism', p. 96

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

The critic E. H. King writes that the Spenserian stanza ‘found its best eighteenth-century theorist and practitioner in Beattie’.<sup>231</sup> In his preface to the first Canto of *The Minstrel*, Beattie, implicitly theorises the correlation between the Spenserian form and the sublime, explaining that:

It pleases my ear, and seems, from its Gothic structure and original, to bear some relation to the subject and spirit of the Poem. It admits both simplicity and magnificence of sound and of language, beyond any other stanza that I am acquainted with.<sup>232</sup>

Moore notes that for Beattie: ‘sublimity might be best vouched for by simplicity’,<sup>233</sup> and Beattie’s correlation of ‘magnificence’ (by which we may infer the sublime) and simplicity, is supported by his assertion in ‘Illustrations’ when he comments directly on the ‘language’ of poetry, stating that it is sublime when it ‘makes us conceive a great object, or a great effect, in a lively manner; and this may be done, when the words are very plain and simple’.<sup>234</sup> The Spenserian form is then theorised by Beattie as being ‘beyond any other stanza’ in its ‘admittance’ of the formation of the sublime. If the ‘subject’ of the poem is the poetic development of Edwin, or as the subtitle states, his *Progress of Genius*, then the ‘spirit’ of the poem may be consequently reasoned as the sublime, and Beattie’s linking of the subject and spirit of the poem with its ‘Gothic structure and original’ shows an acknowledgement of the poetic tradition of the form, subject and spirit of the Spenserian stanza in a parallel, although crucially different, vein to Macpherson and the epic.

Moore notes that the Spenserian stanza was ‘revived[...] most famously by Beattie’s fellow-Scot James Thomson in *The Castle of Indolence* (1748)’.<sup>235</sup> Thomson’s influential poem, *The Castle of Indolence* charts the conquest of ‘Indolence’, a bewitched castle in which the ‘Outcast of Nature, Man!’ resides in idleness and apathy, by a young boy grown to be the ‘Knight of Arts and Industry’.<sup>236</sup> The poem’s didacticism combined with the development of the Knight shows clear similarities to Beattie’s *Minstrel*, but Thomson’s influence on Beattie can be more readily traced to the poet’s earlier work *The Seasons*. In ‘Illustrations’, Beattie ranks Thomson alongside Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare ‘from whom instances without number might be brought of imagery as vivid and particular, as it is in the power of language to convey’, for as previously mentioned, Thomson had provided the eighteenth-century’s earliest and most lauded example of the natural sublime in his poem *The Seasons*.<sup>237</sup> Indeed, Beattie acknowledged his debt to Thomson when he wrote in a letter to his critic Robert Arbuthnot, ‘if I have any true relish for the beauties of nature, I must say with truth, that

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<sup>231</sup> E. H. King, ‘James Beattie’s Literary Essays (1776, 1783) and the Evolution of Romanticism’, p. 211.

<sup>232</sup> Beattie, ‘Preface to The Minstrel’, in *Poetical Works*, pp. xi-xii, p. xii.

<sup>233</sup> Moore, ‘The Ossianic Revival, James Beattie and Primitivism’, p. 96.

<sup>234</sup> Beattie, ‘Illustrations’, p. 630.

<sup>235</sup> Moore, ‘The Ossianic Revival, James Beattie and Primitivism’, p. 96.

<sup>236</sup> James Thomson, ‘The Castle of Indolence: An Allegorical Poem’ (1748), in *The Complete Poetical Works of James Thomson*, ed. with notes by J. Logie Robertson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 251-308, I: XI., II: VII. pp. 256, 281.

<sup>237</sup> Beattie, ‘Illustrations’, footnote to p. 642.

it was from Virgil, and from Thomson, that I caught it',<sup>238</sup> and as E. H. King notes, for many, Beattie's *Minstrel* was seen as the 'culmination of the nature poetry of Thomson's *The Seasons*'.<sup>239</sup> Therefore, Beattie's use of the Spenserian form reveals a concomitance with not only the tradition of the poetics of the sublime but with the tradition of a Scottish poetics of the sublime. However, Beattie's innovation with this Scottish tradition can be seen in his use of the Spenserian form to promulgate his own poet-centred casting of the sublime that combines the tradition of individual development with a focus on nature that is clearly distinct from Macpherson and his use of the epic. As the critic John Dwyer notes, for Macpherson 'sublimity may be seen in the entire machinery of the epic', from its towering warriors, obscure battles and heroic deaths, the classical model of the epic affords an already clearly established palimpsest of sublime topology.<sup>240</sup> Therefore, in utilising the Spenserian form, Beattie essentially frees the sublime from the formulaic topos of Macpherson's classical model, allowing him to focus on the relationship of the poet with nature and explore the contemplative and psychological experience of the sublime.

This resistance to and breaking away from the Ossianic grip of the heroic epic strain on sublimity to 'deep untrodden groves' is foregrounded in the opening stanzas of the poem in which young Edwin is characterised:

The exploit of strength, dexterity, or speed,  
 To him nor vanity nor joy could bring.  
 His heart, from cruel sport estranged, would bleed  
 To work the woe of any living thing,  
 By trap, or net; by arrow, or by sling;  
 These he detested, those he scorned to wield:  
 He wished to be the guardian, not the king,  
 Tyrant, far less, or traitor, of the field.  
 And sure the sylvan reign unbloody joy might yield.<sup>241</sup>

For Edwin, there is no vain pride or joy to be found in exertions of 'strength, dexterity, or speed', typical to the epic tradition, nor the 'work of woe of any living thing', brought about by weapons 'he detested' and 'scorned to wield'. 'Far less' is his ambition to be characterised by the epic roster of

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<sup>238</sup> Beattie to Robert Arbuthnot, July 22, 1778, 'Letter CXXII', in Forbes, *An Account of The Life and Writings of James Beattie*, 2 Vols. Vol. 2. of *The Works of James Beattie*, pp. 21-25, p. 21.

<sup>239</sup> E. H. King, 'James Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771, 1774): Its Influence on Wordsworth', in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, Vol. 8, Iss. 1, pp. 3-29, p. 4.

<sup>240</sup> Dwyer, 'The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the Poems of Ossian', p. 178.

<sup>241</sup> Beattie, 'The Minstrel', I: XVIII., p. 10.

kings, tyrants, and traitors, instead the kingship or 'reign' is transferred to and personified by nature: 'the sylvan reign unbloody joy might yield'.

In the proceeding stanzas, nature is subsequently crowned in 'majestic scene' in which Edwin, the 'stripling, wrapt in wonder, roves':

Lo! where the stripling, wrapt in wonder, roves  
Beneath the precipice o'erhung with pine;  
And sees, on high, amidst the encircling groves,  
From cliff to cliff the foaming torrents shine:  
While waters, woods, and winds, in concert join,  
And Echo swells the chorus to the skies.  
Would Edwin this majestic scene resign  
For aught the huntsman's puny craft supplies?  
Ah! no: he better knows great Nature's charms to prize.<sup>242</sup>

The alliteration of the soft 'w' of the opening and middle lines combined with the assonance of consecutive long vowel sounds creates a phonaesthesia that configures Edwin 'wrapt in wonder' of the 'waters, woods, and winds' of the natural world around him. This is embellished with the sense of movement formulated by the cumulative effect of encompassing verbs: 'o'erhung with pine' 'encircling groves', and anthropomorphic constellations: 'While waters, woods, and winds, in concert join,/ And Echo swells the chorus to the skies'. There is a distinct harmony created by the rhythm and sounds of the stanza that is then interrupted by the jarring loss of rhyme in the line 'Would Edwin this majestic scene resign' which is then sustained in the enjambed completion of the question 'For aught the huntsman's puny craft supplies?'. The switch in lexicon of 'resign' and 'puny' is at odds with the sublime imagery of 'the precipice o'erhung with pine' and the 'foaming torrents' that 'shine', whilst there is a further binary created between the huntsman's sublunary 'craft' and the 'concert' and 'chorus' of nature that 'swells' and merges with the celestial in the 'skies'. The enjambed question acts as a momentary caesura before the poet returns to his encomium on 'great Nature's charms', in which he disrupts the iambs of the iambic pentameter with the exclamatory spondee 'Ah! No', in a rallying cry that shows the superiority of Edwin and his 'prize'.

In the subsequent stanza there is a return to a harmonious tableau of 'great Nature's charms' with the poetic vision focused on temporal and spatial concurrences of sublimity.<sup>243</sup> The advance of the 'kindling dawn' is depicted through a configuration of colour: 'The crimson cloud, blue main, and

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid. l: XIX.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

mountain grey' which reflect 'dim-gleaming on the smoky lawn' creating a unity between sky, landscape, and lake.<sup>244</sup> The measurement of distance is expanded by the central line 'Far to the west the long, long vale withdrawn', the assonance and repetition of 'long' conspiring with the 'vale' of the setting sun 'withdrawn', to create a sense of spatial extension beyond the bounds of language.<sup>245</sup> The enjambment of this line into a rumination on a 'twilight' that 'loves to linger for a while' signals Edwin's witnessing of the movements of time and space that is digressed from to acknowledge the 'bounding fawn' and 'villager abroad at early toil' who share the landscape with him yet he only 'faintly kens'.<sup>246</sup> The concluding line of the stanza mirrors that of the preceding stanza which opens with a corresponding spondaic exclamation 'But, lo!' which signals the rising of the sun and a return to a unity of 'heaven, earth, [and] ocean' who 'smile'.<sup>247</sup>

Both stanzas act as preliminary contemplations to the third stanza in the sequence which can be read as the focal point on the sublime of the entire two *Cantos of The Minstrel*:

And oft the craggy cliff he loved to climb,  
When all in mist the world below was lost.  
What dreadful pleasure! there to stand sublime,  
Like shipwrecked mariner on desert coast,  
And view the enormous waste of vapour, tost  
In billows, lengthening to the horizon round,  
Now scooped in gulfs, with mountains now embossed!  
And hear the voice of mirth and song rebound,  
Flocks, herds, and waterfalls, along the hoar profound!<sup>248</sup>

All three stanzas are linked by the harmony brought about through poetic figuration and with the situating of Edwin 'on high'; the anaphora of the subsequent stanza promoting this: 'And oft he traced the uplands, to survey', 'And oft the craggy cliff he loved to climb'. This considered positioning of Edwin in an elevated state confers with Beattie's opening remarks on the sublime in 'Illustrations', where he states:

Great depth[...] because it astonishes and pleases the imagination, is also to be considered as sublime. For, if we be ourselves secure, everyone must have observed, that it is agreeable to look down, from a mountain, upon the plain[...] upon the various objects below[...] it is

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid. I: XX., p. 11.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid. I: XXI. p. 11.

pleasant to look down from an elevated situation, because here too there is greatness and delightful astonishment.<sup>249</sup>

There is clear borrowing from Burke's taxonomy here, with Beattie's alternation of 'delightful' or 'pleasurable astonishment' being used to describe the sensation of the sublime: 'In general, whatever awakens in us this pleasurable astonishment is accounted sublime'.<sup>250</sup> This culminates in the verse when Edwin, standing above 'the world below' in which 'all is lost in mist', exclaims: 'What dreadful pleasure!'. This oxymoron intertextually links with Beattie's theory of 'delightful' or 'pleasurable astonishment' in the same manner as Macpherson's famous 'joy of grief', whilst further introducing the apogee of Beattie's development of the sublime: 'there to stand sublime'. In 'standing sublime', Edwin is very much standing apart, for here at last is presented in poetic form, not the Greek or Ossianic warrior, nor Milton's fallen angel, but the poet, the 'paradigmatic figure of the sublime poet', standing 'solitary, powerless, silent and rapt' before the 'object, the landscape or the idea which first arrests him'.<sup>251</sup> The sublimity of the 'enormous waste of vapour' and 'mountains now embossed!' is eclipsed by this pivotal moment of the poet standing sublime, 'like shipwrecked mariner on desert coast', and his experience, awareness, and appreciation of the natural sublimity around him.

Thomson had provided the eighteenth century with the descriptive and objective sublime found in nature. Macpherson had brought new and distinctly Scottish life into the classical model of the sublime. However, here, Beattie brings about the 'essence' of what would later become 'the Romantic Sublime', in what Thomas Weiskel terms the 'sublime moment'.<sup>252</sup> For Weiskel, the Romantic Sublime converges around this instance of the 'sublime moment' that acts as a 'metaphorical substitution of a "power within" for the external power'.<sup>253</sup> This dialectic between the 'power within' and the 'external power' is brought about through expression. It is the impression of the 'external power' of sublimity as found in 'billows, lengthening to the horizon round', that brings about the expression of Edwin who 'stands sublime', allowing the 'voice of mirth and song' to 'rebound' in his hearing and 'along the hoar profound'. As Weiskel notes: 'The power within[...] is greater far than the external power- to which, however, we remain subject as natural beings'.<sup>254</sup> This can be clarified by the distinction between Macpherson's reliance on the metaphorical use of mist to connote the subjective experience of memory, with the natural and real phenomena of mist in Beattie's stanza that directly provokes the sublime moment. Figurative orchestration is superseded by psychological examination, as Weiskel notes: 'The sublime makes everyman his own

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<sup>249</sup> Beattie, 'Illustrations', pp. 606-607.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid. p. 610.

<sup>251</sup> Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime*, p. 21.

<sup>252</sup> Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*, (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 95.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

psychologist',<sup>255</sup> in so far that it elicits a psychological response and therefore a subsequent enquiry into the emotion produced within, from which we attain the poetic expression that Wordsworth later immortalised as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'.<sup>256</sup>

The remainder of the first Canto is dedicated to Edwin's individual growth amongst the solitude and sublimity of nature, and his role is repeatedly characterised through his attentiveness and appreciation of the 'changeful scenery ever new', surrounding him:<sup>257</sup>

The lone enthusiast oft would take his way  
Listening with pleasing dread, to the deep roar[...]<sup>258</sup>

Meanwhile, whate'er of beautiful, or new,  
Sublime, or dreadful, in earth, sea, or sky,  
By chance, or search, was offered to his view,  
He scanned with curious and romantic eye.<sup>259</sup>

Edwin's 'Genius' lies in his responsiveness to the 'pleasing dread' of the sublime experience within him that progresses as he listens and watches 'with curious and romantic eye' the 'Sublime, or dreadful, in earth, sea, or sky', which is the double intuition of nature's impression and the poet's expression that defines the 'sublime moment'.

In *The Minstrel's* second Canto, Edwin is presented matured with 'downy cheek and deepened voice', and having now expanded his wanderings: 'walks of wider circuit were his choice/ And vales more wild, and mountains more sublime', in which he 'frames his careless rhyme'.<sup>260</sup> Whilst age brings with it the increased ability to go further afield and the experiences of more of nature's wonder, the 'careless rhyme' of the poet requires instruction in order to progress, something that Beattie foreshadows in the Canto's epigraph from Horace: 'Instruction enlarges the natural powers of the mind'.<sup>261</sup> Here, Young's analysis of the influences of Blackwell's theory of the 'spontaneity and expressivity of bardic genius' and the 'emphasis on taste and judgement' of Gerard, comes to the fore.<sup>262</sup> Blackwell's observation of the 'pleasure which we receive from a representation of *natural* and *simple manners*' found in the primitive environments productive of 'Original Genius'

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid. p. 83.

<sup>256</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems' (1802), in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, edited with introduction and notes by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) pp. 595-615, p. 611.

<sup>257</sup> Beattie, 'The Minstrel', I:LIII., p. 28.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid. I: LIV.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid. I: LVIII. p. 30.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid. II: VI., p. 36.

<sup>261</sup> Beattie, 'The Minstrel', p. 32.

<sup>262</sup> Young, 'James Beattie and the Progress of Genius in the Aberdeen Enlightenment', p. 255.



is polarised by his lament ‘what marvellous [sublime] things happen in a well-ordered state?’, relating to his theory against the ‘felicity’ of civilisation, that ‘clips the wings of [its] verse’.<sup>263</sup> Blackwell’s influence is felt in the instructing monologue of the Hermit who becomes Edwin’s tutor, when he compares the ‘vanity’ of civilisation and its destructive influence against the simple virtues of nature:

Let Vanity adorn the marble tomb  
With trophies, rhymes, and scutcheons of renown[...]  
Mine be the breezy hill that skirts the down’.<sup>264</sup>

The Hermit’s raillery against ‘wealth and fame, of pomp and power possessed’, is heard by the listening Edwin, who is distressed by this newly imparted knowledge:

‘And is it thus in courtly life,’ (he cries)  
‘That man to man acts a betrayer’s part?  
‘And dares he thus the gifts of heaven pervert,  
‘Each social instinct, and sublime desire?  
‘Hail Poverty! if honour, wealth, and art,  
‘If what the great pursue, and learned admire,  
‘Thus dissipate and quench the soul’s ethereal fire!’<sup>265</sup>

‘Courtly life’ is presented as the perversion of that which in the first Canto had been extolled; the ‘sublime desire’ linked through rhyme to the ‘soul’s ethereal fire’. Edwin’s oxymoronic decree ‘Hail Poverty!’ is juxtaposed against the ‘honour, wealth, and art’ which ‘the great pursue, and learned admire’, that dialectically correlates to Blackwell’s admonitions against the dampening conditions of civilisation that ‘dissipate and quench’ the conditions and ability for sublime poetic expression.

In contrast to this is Blackwell’s pupil, and Beattie’s tutor, Gerard, whose influence can be read in the latter part of the second Canto in the Hermit’s role of ‘refining Edwin’s poetic composition’ through instruction. As Young surmises:

Edwin is able to improve on nature by means of the judgement he has gained through learning- and this sits nicely with Gerard’s views on taste and genius and Beattie’s own later critical writing both of which emphasise the need to refine what nature provides.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Blackwell, *Enquiry*, pp. 24, 28.

<sup>264</sup> Beattie, ‘The Minstrel’, II: XVII., p. 41.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.* II: XXII., p. 44.

<sup>266</sup> Young, ‘James Beattie and the Progress of Genius in the Aberdeen Enlightenment’, p. 256.

Gerard's theory that a 'man of genius', must be possessed of 'so sublime a standard' and 'endued with such exquisite refinement of taste'<sup>267</sup> is evident in the closing of the poem with the 'refinement' of Edwin's 'sublime standard' iterated in verse:

Of late, with cumbersome, though pompous show,  
Edwin would oft his flowery rhyme deface,  
Through ardour to adorn; but Nature now  
To his experienced eye a modest grace  
Presents, where Ornament the second place  
Holds, to intrinsic worth and just design  
Subservient still. Simplicity apace  
Tempers his rage: he owns her charm divine,  
And clears the ambiguous phrase, and lops the unwieldy line.<sup>268</sup>

Whilst Young has read this passage as suggesting the influence of Gerard's 'refinement of taste' theory on Beattie's ideas about developing 'genius', Beattie's respective theory concerning the sublime as detailed in his 'Illustrations' remains unacknowledged by critics. Writing on the composition of poetic expression of the sublime, Beattie states:

Yet he, who aims at the sublime, must not trust so implicitly to the grandeur of his thoughts, as to be careless about his expression. Well chosen words, and an elegant arrangement of them, are justly reckoned by Longinus among the sources of sublimity. Even when the thought is both good and great, the greatness, or the elegance may be lost or lessened by an unskilful writer.<sup>269</sup>

Edwin's 'rage' and 'ardour', defined in Beattie's theory as 'grandeur' and 'greatness' of thought, must be tempered by 'well chosen words, and an elegant arrangement of them'. Subsequently, in order to not 'deface', his sublime impression of 'Nature', Edwin must not be 'careless about his expression', and forego 'cumbersome', 'pompous' or 'flowery rhyme' for 'intrinsic worth and just design'. Thus, while the Hermit can be read as representative of the influence and teachings of Marischal college, it is Beattie's own voice that speaks through the Hermit, directing Edwin in his 'aim at the sublime'. It is this 'aim at the sublime' that, as has been evidenced, characterises *The Minstrel* as a whole.

With some fifty-one editions being produced from the first Canto's initial publication in 1771 until the 1820s, the 'phenomenal appeal' of *The Minstrel* to late eighteenth-century readership can be

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<sup>267</sup> Gerard, *An Essay on Taste*, p. 125.

<sup>268</sup> Beattie, 'The Minstrel', II: LIX., p. 62.

<sup>269</sup> Beattie, 'Illustrations on Sublimity', p. 639.

seen to be matched only by its Scottish precursor with the 'Ossian phenomenon'.<sup>270</sup> Whilst *Ossian* had been pivotal in shifting the classical domain of the sublime to the Highland landscapes of Scotland, coupled with its Burkean focus on the subjective experience of the sublime, Beattie had drawn upon both aspects before bringing about a crucial new development to the poetics of the sublime, one that was centred on the sublime experience of the poet. E. H. King contends that *The Minstrel* stands as 'the first attempt in English to trace the development of the poet's own mind' and intrinsic to this 'development' is Edwin's formative experience of the sublime that is iconised by Beattie's induction of the sublime moment.<sup>271</sup> From King's eventual conclusion about *The Minstrel's* influence on Romanticism, that 'Wordsworth, Coleridge and the others were given full credit as the originators of ideas propagated by Beattie', it is possible to contend that one of these ideas, and what has been argued as the central idea to *The Minstrel's* treatment of the sublime, is this instance of the sublime moment which proved momentous for the development of Romantic poetics in conjunction with the Romantic sublime.<sup>272</sup> Whilst Beattie's influence on the English Romantic poets has been well documented by both King and critics of the Romantic period, Robertson has justly argued that this influence, before reaching across the border, began in Scotland, stating that 'of all the poets inspired by *The Minstrel*, Burns was the first'.<sup>273</sup> Consequently, the following chapter shall be devoted to a discussion and analysis of the work of Robert Burns in light of the developments to the poetics of the sublime made by Macpherson and Beattie so as to reach an understanding of Burns's own 'Vision' of the sublime.

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<sup>270</sup> E. H. King, 'James Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771, 1774): Its Influence on Wordsworth', p. 3.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.

<sup>272</sup> King, 'James Beattie's *Literary Essays* (1776, 1783) and the Evolution of Romanticism', p. 202.

<sup>273</sup> Robertson, 'Beattie's *The Minstrel* as Missing link', p. 241.

## Chapter Four:

### 'Nature's Design': Robert Burns and a New 'Vision' of the Sublime

The Simple Bard, unbroke by rules of Art,  
He pours the wild effusions of the heart:  
And if inspir'd, 'tis Nature's pow'rs inspire;  
Her's all the melting thrill, and her's the kindling fire.<sup>274</sup>

Unlike James Macpherson and James Beattie, Robert Burns received no formal university education. From an early age, Burns's life was shaped by his position as labouring Ayrshire farmer which he described in disconsolate terms as 'the cheerless gloom of a hermit with the unceasing toil of a galley-slave'.<sup>275</sup> Whilst Burns, more so than Macpherson or Beattie, was, through this everyday engagement with the Scottish landscape, conspicuously exposed to 'a' the learning' gleamed from 'Nature's fire', the notion of Burns as 'simple', 'heaven-taught', or 'essentially untutored rustic poet' has as, Gerard Carruthers explains, 'gradually receded' in the wake of criticism that has concentrated on 'a more literary Burns'.<sup>276</sup> As Burns's most recent biographer, Robert Crawford, highlights; in his youth Burns had received private tutoring from a young teacher, John Murdoch, who described Robert and his brother as 'his best Alloway pupils' and whose highly literary tutelage 'confirmed Robert as a lifelong voracious reader'.<sup>277</sup> Furthermore, throughout his adult life Burns maintained a strong autodidactic impetus in his reading of the works of the 'luminaries of the Scottish Enlightenment Blair, Robertson, Hume, and Mackenzie', as well as being 'extremely well versed in the English and Scottish poets, essayists and novelists'.<sup>278</sup> That his reading from an early age included a distinct interest in the sublime is evidenced by Burns's recollections of this reading detailed in his correspondence. In a now famous autobiographical letter to Dr John Moore, Burns describes his critical engagement with a favoured book of songs in 'carefully noting' the 'true sublime':

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<sup>274</sup> Anonymous, although widely attributed to Burns, 'Epigraph' to 'Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect' (1786), in James Kinsley (ed.) *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, Vol. 3: Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 970.

<sup>275</sup> Robert Burns 'Letter 125. (4) to Dr John Moore (Edinburgh, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 1787)', in *The Letters of Robert Burns, Vol. 1: 1780–1789, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn*, ed. by J. De Lancey Ferguson, and G. Ross Roy (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1985), pp. 135-147 p. 138.

<sup>276</sup> Gerard Carruthers, *Robert Burns* (Horndon: Northcote House, 2006) p. 43.

<sup>277</sup> Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, a Biography* (London: Pimlico, 2010), p. 38.

<sup>278</sup> Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 33, 41.

I pored over them, driving my cart or walking to labor, song by song, verse by verse; carefully noting the true tender or sublime from affectation and fustian.—I am convinced I owe much to this for my critic-craft such as it is.<sup>279</sup>

Therefore, Burns's contradictory self-fashioning as 'simple bard, unbroke by rules of art' guises a more astute, even shrewd, composer of poetry, who, however 'unbroke', was nevertheless consciously aware of conforming to, and in his own singularly successful way, reworking the 'rules of art' of both his poetic predecessors and his contemporary theorists and critics. That this self-fashioning is aligned with the progressing interest in the sublime of the late eighteenth century is supported by the germane conformities between the sublime, primitivism, and original genius that connects Burns with both Macpherson and Beattie through their shared bardic constructs.

Nigel Leask contends that in his role as 'Simple Bard', 'Burns astutely played to the taste for poetic primitivism', and that his poetic ordination by Henry Mackenzie as 'Heaven-taught Ploughman' had 'immediate appeal' to the 'sentimental cult of Natural Genius'.<sup>280</sup> As discussed in previous chapters, questions of 'Natural' or 'Original' genius and its coordination with primitive environments conducive of sublimity had fermented in the wake of the Aberdonian Enlightenment and had been actualised in poetry by the work of Macpherson and Beattie. Indeed, Mackenzie's epigraphic adage for Burns as 'Heaven-taught Ploughman' was itself directly gleamed from the following lines in Beattie's *Minstrel*:

No; let thy heaven-taught soul to heaven aspire,  
To fancy, freedom, harmony, resign'd;  
Ambition's groveling crew for ever left behind.<sup>281</sup>

Adjacent to Mackenzie's promotion of Burns as Beattie's 'heaven-taught soul' or 'Ploughman' who has left behind 'Ambition's groveling crew', lies a paradoxically 'ambitious' and yet successful effort by Burns to model himself after Beattie's *Minstrel*. Edwin's characterisation as young, rustic bard, maturing in poetic potential amidst the natural sublimity of the Scottish landscape served as Burns's well-suited match, with Robertson and other critics recognising that 'there is no doubt that *The Minstrel*, and, in particular, the character of Edwin in Book One, as the budding uneducated minstrel brought up in Nature, made an indelible mark on Burns's concept of himself as poet'.<sup>282</sup> Therefore, Burns's self-fashioning as 'Simple bard', or as he states elsewhere 'obscure, nameless bard', reveals

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<sup>279</sup> Burns, 'Letter 125. (4) to Dr John Moore (Edinburgh, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1787)', pp. 139-40.

<sup>280</sup> Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral*, pp. 3-4, 43.

See also Carruthers who notices that: 'an opportunity was being presented by Burns for Scotland to add to its canon of primitive literary output', and that Burns throughout his early career can be seen to be 'collaborating with [the primitivist] project', in *Robert Burns*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>281</sup> Beattie, *The Minstrel*, I:VII., p. 4.

<sup>282</sup> Robertson, 'Beattie's *The Minstrel* as Missing link', p. 240. See also Carol McQuirk who observes that *The Minstrel* 'offers some fascinating parallels to Burns's career as a bard', in Carol McQuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 1997), p. 144.

a concerted attempt to fashion for himself a bardic role or ‘name’ that is sutured through his felicitous upbringing amongst the ‘obscurity’ and ‘simplicity’ of rural, labouring, Scottish life to rival that of Edwin’s, and indeed Ossian’s.

Recently, the critic Liam McIlvanney has noticed the influence of *Ossian*’s ‘champion’ Hugh Blair’s relationship with Burns.<sup>283</sup> As McIlvanney details, Blair was involved (however slightly) in the selection of Burns’s poems for the Edinburgh edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1787), and suggests that prior to this, Burns was distinctly engaged with Blairite theories of primitivism and the ‘early bard’ following Blair’s extended curation and championing of the Ossianic sublime in the 1760s.<sup>284</sup> Throughout his discussion, McIlvanney highlights ‘the centrality of Blairite aesthetic ideas’ to Burns’s first publication of poems, the Kilmarnock edition:<sup>285</sup>

Burns’s epigraph to the Kilmarnock volume, which speaks of the “simple Bard” who “pours the wild effusions of the heart,” echoes Blair’s remarks on the “early bard” in the Lectures[quoting Blair]: “He sung indeed in wild and disorderly strains; but they were the native effusions of his heart”.<sup>286</sup>

McIlvanney further contends that the poetry of Burns displays ‘the vehemence and the muscular linguistic energy, the “mighty force or power”, that Blair praises in sublime poetry’.<sup>287</sup> There is then, a noticed connection between Burns’s poetry and the larger impulses of primitivist ideals centred around the sublime theorists of Blair and others who promoted this essentially Longinian notion of ‘mighty force or power’ that identifies the sublime in poetry.<sup>288</sup>

However, McIlvanney precedes this observation with the significant, and somewhat myopic caveat- that Burns’s poetry: ‘witty, social, intimate - is not “sublime” in its subject matter (it does not describe grand, imposing spectacles, such as battles or turbulent natural forces)’. Here, McIlvanney is limiting the ‘subject matter’ of the sublime to the Ossianic model of ‘grand, imposing spectacles, such as battles or turbulent natural forces’. McIlvanney is not alone in echoing this sentiment. The critical silence surrounding Burns and the sublime suggests that Burns’s poetry remains eclipsed by the Ossianic in terms of sublimity with there being little or no sustained critical analysis of the sublime in Burns’s texts. Whilst Burns’s oeuvre falls short in Ossianic terms of the sublimity of ‘battles’, Burns

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<sup>283</sup> Nigel Leask observes that despite ‘serious reservations about the passages of “indecency” and “licentiousness”’, Blair ‘championed’ Burns. In, Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral*, p. 47-8.

<sup>284</sup> See also Ralph Maclean’s most recent discussion of the relationship between Burns and Blair where he mentions that Burns in his letters references Blair’s *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, Son of Fingal* and goes on to suggest that ‘in Blair’s eyes, Burns himself was a discovery as valuable to national literature as the epic poetry of the third century bard [Ossian]’, in ‘Hugh Blair and the Influence of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres on Imaginative Literature’, in *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture* ed. by Ralph Maclean, Ronnie Young, and Kenneth Simpson (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2016), pp. 137-152, pp. 137-143.

<sup>285</sup> Liam McIlvanney, ‘Hugh Blair, Robert Burns, and the Invention of Scottish Literature’, in *Eighteenth-Century Life*, Vol. 29, No. 2, (Spring 2005), pp. 25-46, p. 42.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 40-1.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>288</sup> See Longinus, *On the Sublime* pp. 100, 139.

throughout his work actively engages with the ‘turbulent natural forces’ of the Scottish landscape that typifies Macpherson’s sublime. Indeed, following the success of the Kilmarnock and Edinburgh editions, Burns in 1787 had undertaken a Highland tour, the late eighteenth-century tourist model born from Ossianic interests in the sublime. During his tour of the Highlands, Burns had visited Ossian’s grave and Macpherson’s hometown of Ruthven which he described in his tour journal with contemporaneous sublime description as ‘wild and magnificent’.<sup>289</sup> Whilst his surviving tour journal is, as Leask notes, ‘disappointing’ in its lack of appreciation of the ‘Ossianic sublime’, (Leask points out that this perhaps is due to its ‘fieldwork’ like brevity in sketching out details), Burns’s visiting of the grave of Ossian and the sublimity of ‘Ossian’s country’ had indelibly left its mark: ‘warm as I was from Ossian's country where I had seen his very grave, what cared I for fisher-towns and fertile Careses?’.<sup>290</sup> The ‘warmth’ felt by Burns of what can be liberally surmised as ‘Ae spark o’ Nature’s fire’, or the sublimity of the Highlands, is captured throughout his poetry produced during this time, which in description and depth far outstrip his journal in recording his ‘savage journey’ and depicting the sublime moment of the poet ‘Admiring Nature in her wildest grace’.<sup>291</sup> Poems such as ‘The Humble Petition of Bruar Water to the Noble Duke of Athole’, ‘Verses written with a Pencil at Taymouth’, and ‘The Falls of Fyers’ (quoted below) show Burns grappling with the ‘grand imposing spectacles’ and ‘turbulent natural forces’ of sublimity that typify the Ossianic which he encountered throughout his tour:

Among the heathy hills and ragged woods  
 The roaring Fyers pours his mossy floods;  
 Till full he dashes on the rocky mounds,  
 Where, thro' a shapeless breach, his stream resounds.  
 As high in air the bursting torrents flow,  
 As deep recoiling surges foam below,  
 Prone down the rock the whitening sheet descends,  
 And viewles Echo's ear, astonished, rends.  
 Dim-seen, through rising mists and ceaseless show'rs,

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<sup>289</sup> Robert Burns, 'Journal of a Highland Tour' entry [15], in *The Oxford Edition of The Works of Robert Burns, Vol. 1: Commonplace Books, Tour Journals, and Miscellaneous Prose* ed. Nigel Leask (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 146-153. p. 149.

<sup>290</sup> Nigel Leask, 'Introduction' to 'Journal of a Highland Tour', pp. 139-146, p. 143.

Robert Burns, 'Appendix 1. RB's Narrative of the Highland Tour in his Letter to Gilbert Burns, 17 September 1787 (L. I. 156-7)' in *The Oxford Edition of The Works of Robert Burns, Vol. 1: Commonplace Books, Tour Journals, and Miscellaneous Prose* p. 154.

<sup>291</sup> Robert Burns, 'Written with a Pencil over the Chimney-piece, in the Parlour of the Inn at Kenmore, Taymouth', in James Kinsley (ed.) *Burns: Poems and Songs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) pp. 279-280, p. 279.

The hoary cavern, wide surrounding lours:  
Still thro' the gap the struggling river toils,  
And still, below, the horrid cauldron boils<sup>-292</sup>

The 'mossy floods', 'bursting torrents' and 'ceaseless show'rs' of the verse saturate the reader in the sublimity of the 'roaring' waterfalls at Foyers and show Burns distinctly engaged in capturing the 'turbulent natural forces' of 'Ossian's country'. That Burns was successful in this endeavour has been evidenced in Nigel Leask's recent monograph on the Highland tour, *Stepping Westward: Writing the Highland Tour, C. 1720-1830*. In his discussion of John Stoddart's *Remarks on Local Scenery and Manners in Scotland* that was written during the subsequent 'peak of Highland tours' in 1801, Leask notes that 'the Falls of Foyers above Loch Ness represents the aesthetic highlight of Stoddart's tour: [quoting Stoddart] 'no spot. . .which I have seen, is at all comparable to this, in the strong and sudden impression which it produces'.<sup>293</sup> The 'strong and sudden impression' which the Falls produce on Stoddart is the 'affected state' of the sublime and in his encounter with the 'sublime and terrific scene' of the Falls, Stoddart misquotes lines from Burns's poem: 'As high in air the bursting torrents flow, / As deep recoiling surge foam below'.<sup>294</sup> That itinerant writers of the Highland Tour who followed from Burns should turn to his poetry when faced with the sublimity of the Highlands, and the subsequent and enduring interest in sublime topography such as the Falls of Foyers and Bruar water that Burns's poetry popularised, show that the poet not only engaged with the Ossianic sublime, but in many regards matched Macpherson in rendering the Scottish Highlands sublime to the late eighteenth-century traveller and reader.

As the critic Thomas Crawford highlights, 'it was always Burns's method to "string his rustic lyre" with emulating vigour', and whilst his emulations often 'surpassed his models', it was his innovations that set him apart as Scotland's national bard.<sup>295</sup> In 1785, Burns had written in his commonplace book about his respect for 'the work of our Scotch poets' but also for the need for a local Ayrshire poet to celebrate his 'dear native country' of 'Carrick, Kyle and Cunningham'.<sup>296</sup> He laments:

I am hurt to see other places of Scotland, their towns, rivers, woods, haughs, &c.  
immortalized in such celebrated performances[...] Yet, we have never had one Scotch poet of  
any eminence, to make the fertile banks of Irvine, the romantic woodlands and sequestered

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid. 'Written with a Pencil, standing by the Fall of Fyers, near Loch-Ness', p. 285.

<sup>293</sup> Nigel Leask, *Stepping Westward: Writing the Highland Tour, c. 1720-1830*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) pp. 179, 185.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid. pp. 184-5.

<sup>295</sup> Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd Ltd., 1960) p. 185.

<sup>296</sup> Robert Burns, 'First Commonplace Book, 1783-1785', entry [36], in *The Oxford Edition of The Works of Robert Burns, Vol. 1: Commonplace Books, Tour Journals, and Miscellaneous Prose*, pp. 40-70, p. 65.



scenes on Aire, and the heathy, mountainous source, & winding sweep of Doon emulate Tay, Forth, Etrick, Tweed &c.<sup>297</sup>

Unlike Macpherson's ancient topography of the sublime or Beattie's more holistic yet peculiarly ambiguous Scottish sublime, Burns's ambition, alluded to above, was to present a localised form of sublimity that would set him apart from his predecessors. As Carol McGuirk surmises: 'The major difference between Burns and other eighteenth-century bards is that he was really from the Scottish culture his bardic personae speak for. Other poets who used bards appropriated them from historically remote or exotic cultures'.<sup>298</sup> Consequently, the 'major difference' that Burns offers to the development of the sublime is his charismatic cultivation of a localised sublime that stands apart from Macpherson's 'historically remote' Ossian and the ambivalently placed *Minstrel* of Beattie.

In his song 'The gloomy night is gath'ring fast' of the following year, 1786, Burns is seemingly conscious of the 'exotic', 'remote' or ambiguous sublime and repeatedly undermines this sense of displacement by tying sublimity back to his own locality in Ayrshire. Burke's *Enquiry* augmented by the success of *Ossian* was still the reigning theory of Burns's day, and in the opening verse Burns depicts a landscape of Burkean sublime filled by the obscurity of the 'inconstant blast', 'murky cloud' and 'gloomy night' of a storm 'gath'ring fast'.<sup>299</sup> Amidst this tempest, the Burkean sense of 'privation' or isolation is realised by the Ossianic topos of the 'hunter' having 'left the moor' and the birds 'scatt'ered' to meet 'secure' elsewhere.<sup>300</sup> The ambivalence of this now ubiquitous sublime scene is then dispensed by the introduction of the Edwin-like speaker, alone, who 'wanders, prest with care' and whom Burns situates 'along the lonely banks' of his own local 'Ayr'.<sup>301</sup> Subsequently, each of the four stanzas is balanced between creating a sense of the sublime through natural depiction of 'scowling tempest', 'surging billows', and 'heathy moors' before switching to the psychology of the speaker in the act of contemplating such sublimity: 'I think upon the stormy wave', and the emotion's provoked by this configuration of the sublime moment: 'the bursting tears my heart declare, / Farewell, the bonie banks of Ayr!'.<sup>302</sup> In his letter to John Moore, Burns explains that this was to be his 'last song' composed in Scotland before embarking across the Atlantic to settle

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> McGuirk, *Robert Burns and Sentimental Era*, p. 107.

<sup>299</sup> It is important to note here that Burns was writing during the rise of the 'picturesque', a third aesthetic category combining sublimity with beauty. This largely began with William Gilpin, whose various works between 1782 to 1792 formed the basis of the theory and subsequent popularity of the aesthetic. However, Burke's theory of the sublime was still dominant until well into the nineteenth century and as James T. Boulton explains, Gilpin and the other theorists of the picturesque (Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight et al.) used Burke's *Enquiry* as the 'authoritative source' for their own discussions on the picturesque and the sublime. The poems and songs that have been selected during this thesis deal almost exclusively with the aesthetic of the sublime, thus the picturesque is occluded from further discussion or representation. See James T. Boulton 'Editor's Introduction' to Burke's *Enquiry* pp. xciv-cii.

Burns, 'Song' or 'The gloomy night is gath'ring fast', in *Burns: Poems and Songs*, pp. 234-235, p. 234. lines 1-3.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid. 5-6.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid. 7-8.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid. pp. 234-245, lines 12, 17, 26, 14, 31-32.

indefinitely in Jamaica: 'I had taken the last farewell of my few friends; my chest was on the road to Greenock; I had composed my last song I should ever measure in Caledonia, "The gloomy night is gathering fast"''.<sup>303</sup> Correspondingly, in an intertextual link to *The Minstrel's* juxtaposition of 'Scotia's hills' with Chile, Burns emphasises through anaphora that 'tis not the surging billow's roar/ 'tis not the fatal, deadly shore' of the 'exotic' Jamaican destination that are sublime, but the subjective, emotional leave-taking of the speaker that is mirrored in sublimity by the objective landscape of 'old Coila's hills and dales'.<sup>304</sup> Thus, the natural is countered by the psychological just as the exotic is eclipsed by the local, showing Burns to be developing the poetic instance of the sublime moment from Beattie to his own locally centred cause. The song, believed by Burns to be his last amongst his 'dear native country', presents in *esquisse* the major concerns of his career in the championing of his local Ayrshire, the development of the poetic sublime, and the inclusion of Scots vernacular that set him apart from both Macpherson and Beattie. No poem of Burns's exemplifies these concerns more so than 'The Vision'.

Gerard Carruthers has praised Burns's 'Vision' as 'arguably, the most ambitious creative experiment in the Kilmarnock edition',<sup>305</sup> whilst Thomas Crawford similarly recognises it as 'one of Burn's highest achievements'.<sup>306</sup> The poem was first published in the Kilmarnock edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* and then was notably extended by some fifty lines or so and published in the subsequent Edinburgh edition of 1787. 'The Vision' deals with the sublime encounter between poet and muse who appears and extolls both bard and nation. The poem, like the muse herself, is dressed in Burns's own singular style, with Burns employing the standard habbie form paired throughout with his synthesis of Scots vernacular and English. Burns's use of the Scottish contemporary standard habbie highlights his distinction from both Macpherson, whose influences in form were classical, and Beattie, whose choice of measure, whilst revived by Thomson, still originated in late-Renaissance England. Thomas Crawford comments that should Burns have opted for 'heroic couplets' as found in *Ossian*, or 'neo-Spenserian stanzas' such as in *The Minstrel*, then 'Burns would not have been nearly so successful'. Instead, Crawford contends that 'The Vision' is successful because it is written in standard habbie, 'with all the vernacular and national associations of that measure'.<sup>307</sup> Burns's use of this form signals his own distinctly national and literary heritage within the Scots vernacular tradition of the eighteenth century. Carruthers observes that Burns's successes with the habbie form meant that 'during the nineteenth century and continuing down to the present, the stanza comes to be known as the "Burns" stanza'. However, Carruthers goes on to

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<sup>303</sup> Robert Burns, 'Letter 125. (4) [DR. JOHN MOORE LONDON]', p. 144.

<sup>304</sup> Beattie *The Minstrel*, VI.

Burns, 'The gloomy night', p. 235. Lines 17-18, 25.

<sup>305</sup> Carruthers, *Robert Burns*, p. 15.

<sup>306</sup> Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*, p. 191.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

highlight that ‘this renaming is typical of the amnesia that has been engendered with regard to Burns’s forebears in the eighteenth-century Scots poetic tradition’.<sup>308</sup> This ‘amnesia’ typically forgets Burns’s inheritance of both the standard habbie and the use of vernacular Scots from his Scottish precursors Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson.

In the Kilmarnock edition, Burns had acknowledged his indebtedness to both Ramsay and Fergusson, asking that for his poetry, he wished ‘a spunk of Allan’s glee, Or Fergusson’s the bauld an’ slee’, whilst, the very title of Burns’s poem signals his debt to Ramsay, being directly lifted from Ramsay’s ‘The Vision’ of 1724.<sup>309</sup> However, whilst Ramsay and Fergusson’s Scots heritage helped shape the ‘vehemence and muscular, linguistic energy’ that characterises Burns’s poetry, McGuirk describes how ‘The Vision’ and the rest of the poetry including in the Kilmarnock edition ‘surprised Scotland’ by ‘steering literary Scots in a different direction’.<sup>310</sup> Under Burns, vernacular Scots and the standard habbie became ‘no longer chiefly the argot of urban riot or rustic pastoral’ that Ramsay and Fergusson had professed, but instead, ‘[became] again, for the first time since the Makars, a means of searching a poet’s own soul’.<sup>311</sup>

Longinus had first pronounced the sublime as ‘the image of greatness of soul’, yet in a typically self-effacing manner, Burns opens ‘The Vision’ with the ‘image’ of the poet questioning the very ‘greatness’ of his soul.<sup>312</sup> The sublime is seemingly absent from the opening stanzas in which the sublunary setting of a winter’s evening is depicted with ‘Curlers’ having quit their ‘roaring play’ and a ‘hunger’d Maukin’ off to find ‘Kail-yards green’.<sup>313</sup> Yet behind the mundanity of the sportsmen, hare, and speaker worn out from his labours at ‘the Threshers weary flingin-tree’, Burns is creating a sense of privation that foreshadows the ‘lanely’ poet’s encounter with the sublime.<sup>314</sup> There is a synaesthesia of sight, smell, and sound cultivated from inside the speaker’s dwelling; the ‘mottie, misty clime’ and ‘reek’ of the smoke, the sound of the ‘restless rattons’ above who ‘squeak’, as Crawford notes ‘everything that he can see or hear or sense fits the pattern of his brooding’.<sup>315</sup> As such, the turbid setting mirrors the ‘brooding’ of the poet who in a state of ‘pensivelie’ and wearied dejection, ruminates on the ‘wasted time’ of his ‘youthfu’ prime’ spent in ‘stringing blethers up in

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<sup>308</sup> Carruthers, *Robert Burns*, p. 10.

<sup>309</sup> Burns, ‘Epistle to J. Lapraik, An Old Scotch Bard’ in *Burns: Poems and Songs*, pp. 65-69, p. 68, lines 79-80.

<sup>310</sup> Carol McGuirk, ‘Burns’s Two Memorials to Fergusson’, in *Studies in Scottish Literature* Vol. 37: Iss. 1, pp. 5–23, pp. 17-18.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18.

<sup>312</sup> It is interesting to note that the poem concludes with Coila’s epiphonema to the speaker being to ‘Preserve *the dignity of Man, / With Soul erect*’. This figure of ‘Soul erect’ concurring with Longinus’s statement: ‘the true sublime uplifts our souls’. See Longinus, *On the Sublime* pp. 107, 109.

<sup>313</sup> Burns, ‘The Vision’, in *Burns: Poems and Songs*, pp. 80-90, p. 80, l:2,4.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.* l:7,12.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.* l:19,14,17.

Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*, pp. 183-184.

rhyme / For fools to sing'.<sup>316</sup> Leask describes the 'Ben Spence' room in which the speaker muses as a 'theatre for reflection' and 'a site for cultivating poetic inwardness', yet Burns depicts the poet 'half mad, half fed', and 'half-farket', who in 'cultivating poetic inwardness' is railing against these same poetic propensities of his that have left him poor and dejected:

All in this mottie, misty clime,  
I backward mus'd on wasted time,  
How I had spent my youthfu' prime,  
An' done nae-thing,  
But stringing blethers up in rhyme  
For fools to sing.

Had I to guid advice but harket,  
I might, by this, hae led a market,  
Or strutted in a Bank and clarket,  
My Cash-Account;  
While here, half-mad, half-fed, half-farket,  
Is a' the' amount.<sup>317</sup>

In these opening stanzas, Burns's genius with the standard habbie form and his own distinct blending of Scots vernacular and English is shown, which, whilst appearing 'natural', is, as McGuirk highlights, a 'designed and invented' diction that combines a 'mixture of local dialect, archaic Middle Scots, dialect words of regions other than his own, sentimental idioms, and "high" English rhetoric'.<sup>318</sup> The iambic tetrameter of the quoted habbie stanzas accommodate this synchrony of English and lilting Scots that Burns juxtaposes against the abrupt, conclusionary dimeter of unpoetic statements throughout that reflect the speaker's bitterness at his impoverished situation: 'My Cash-Account;', 'Is a' th' amount'. There is a self-deprecating humour found in the speaker, unable to excuse his own situation at the fault of his poetic sensibilities, who then stands to 'swear by a' yon starry roof', some 'rash' oath: 'That I, henceforth, would be rhyme-proof / Till my last breath-', itself a contradictory act of poetic sensibility.<sup>319</sup>

At this pivotal juncture in which the speaker is about to relinquish all poetic ambitions in 'reckless vows', a 'tight, outlandish Hizzie, braw' appears in the doorway, and the poet's 'infant aith, half-form'd, was crusht'.<sup>320</sup> From the 'Hizzie's' appearance as 'Green, slender, leaf-clad' with 'Holly-boughs', 'twisted, gracefu', round her brows', the speaker rightly surmises her to be 'some

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<sup>316</sup> Burns, 'The Vision', p. 81.l:11,20,21,23,24.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid. l:19-30.

Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral*, p. 100.

<sup>318</sup> McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era*, p. xxii.

<sup>319</sup> Burns, 'The Vision', l:33-36.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid. l:41,44.

SCOTTISH MUSE'.<sup>321</sup> By nationalising Coila, Burns distances himself from the oblique medieval topos of the poetic muse whilst also foregrounding the link between Scotland, poetry, and the sublime that the ensuing stanzas promulgate. Crawford observes of Coila that 'as usual, [Burns] is following literary sources', before tracing these sources from an undefined 'work by Wollaston', to Abraham Cowley's 'The Complaint'.<sup>322</sup> However, Crawford and other commentators fail to notice that the appearance of an otherworldly muse or spirit falls within the category of the Ossianic sublime.<sup>323</sup> Throughout the entirety of *Ossian*, spirits or ghosts repeatedly appear to the heroes to offer admonition or wise council (Coila offers both). Indeed, the muse's appearance in the Highland garb of a 'tartan sheen' support this reference to the highlander Macpherson's work as do the poem's structural pairing into two Duans, an important intertextual link that is signalled in an explanatory footnote: 'Duan, a term of Ossian's for the different divisions of a digressive Poem. See his Cath-Loda, Vol. 2. Of McPherson's Translation'.<sup>324</sup> The critic Carol McGuirk reads in the 'diorama of local scenery and history that whirls around Coila's mantle', an 'attempt at such epic digressions as Homer's description of the shield of Ajax or Virgil's description of the gates at Carthage'.<sup>325</sup> However, as noted in the explanatory footnote, Burns use of the 'epic digressions' of the 'digressive poem' comes from *Ossian*. In his own footnotes to 'Cath-Loda', Macpherson had defined the Gaelic etymology and bardic origins of the term: 'The bards distinguished those compositions, in which the narration is often interrupted, by episodes and apostrophes, by the name of *Duan*'.<sup>326</sup> Therefore, Burns in using Macpherson's arrangement connects the poem to Scotland's bardic tradition promoted by *Ossian*, whilst allowing for the two main digressions, or 'visions' of the poem. First is the vision seen through Coila's mantle of the local topography and historic figures of the district of Kyle. Then, in the second Duan, reflexively switching to the muse's own vision of the bardic role of the poet. The use of Scots and the humour in which the muse is described, and the distinction from Macpherson's epic in form and locality shows Burns to be in the act of steering past the Ossianic whilst offering a salutary nod of recognition to its influential legacy.

Whilst the speaker's appraisal of the muse is distinguished by the solemn observations in English of her '*modest Worth*', 'wildly-witty, rustic grace', and eye that beams 'keen with *Honor*', Burns also notes a 'hare-brained sentimental trace', 'strongly marked in her face' that may implicitly read as a jesting acknowledgement of the ongoing authenticity issue circulating around the previously

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid. 1:49-50.

<sup>322</sup> Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*, p. 184.

<sup>323</sup> McGuirk collects perhaps the most extensive list of sources, noticing the influence of *Ossian* in the poem's divide into Duans, Alexander Ross's 'Scota' from his poem *Helinore* in the muse Coila, Ramsay in the habbie form, Thomson in the natural images, and Henry Mackenzie in the poem's mood of 'tearful sentimentality'. McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* pp.38-9.

<sup>324</sup> Footnote to Burns 'The Vision', p. 80.

<sup>325</sup> McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era*, p. 39.

<sup>326</sup> James Macpherson, footnote to 'Cath-Loda' in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, p. 534.

discussed 'sentimental traces' that are seen as too 'strongly' marking the 'face' of *Ossian*.<sup>327</sup> Burns undercuts such allusions with a burlesque blazon of the muse's leg: 'And such a *leg* / [...] Sae straught, sae taper, tight and clean, / Nane else came near it'.<sup>328</sup> The broad Scots of the stanza and the humorous hyperbole make more striking the switch in tone and diction of the subsequent stanza in which the speaker describes Coila's mantle:

Her Mantle large, of greenish hue,  
My gazing wonder chiefly drew;  
Deep light and shades, bold-mingling, threw  
A lustre grand;  
And seem'd, to my astonish'd view,  
A well-known Land.<sup>329</sup>

In preparation for the sublime vision of the poet's '*well-known Land*' seen through Coila's 'Mantle large', Burns employs the rhetoric of sublimity in describing the 'Deep *lights* and *shades*, bold mingling' and the 'lustre grand' of the mantle. Burns then configures the poet in the act of the sublime moment pioneered by Beattie's Edwin: 'seem'd to my astonish'd view', with the corresponding line 'My gazing wonder chiefly drew;' signalling that the speaker holds the same poetic capacity as Edwin to appreciate the sublime, ('my gazing wonder'), and that for him, the sublime supplants all other observations concerning the apparition of the muse, ('chiefly drew').

The influence of Beattie that is apparent throughout the poem is particularly conspicuous in the following stanza, which in imagery and end-rhyme, almost exactly mirror that of *The Minstrel's* central stanza XXI. Beattie's stanza reads as follows:

And oft the craggy cliff he loved to climb,  
When all in mist the world below was lost.  
What dreadful pleasure! there to stand sublime,  
Like shipwreck'd mariner on desert coast,  
And view th' enormous waste of vapour, tost  
In billows, lengthening to th' horizon round,  
Now scoop'd in gulfs, with mountains now emboss'd!  
And hear the voice of mirth and song rebound,  
Flocks, herds, and waterfalls, along the hoar profound!<sup>330</sup>

Whereas, Burns's corresponding stanza reads as such:

Here rivers in the sea were lost;  
  
There, mountains to the skies were tost:

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<sup>327</sup> Burns, 'The Vision', l: 47,57,60,55-56. The statement is in quotation marks, showing Burns using the technique of palinode in quoting his verse epistle 'To J. S.'.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid. l:63,65-66.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid. l:67-72.

<sup>330</sup> Beattie *The Minstrel*, XXI.

Here, tumbling billows mark'd the coast,  
With surging foam:  
There, distant shone *Art's* lofty boast,  
The lordly dome.<sup>331</sup>

Each of Burns's sublime images of 'rivers in the sea', 'mountains to the skies', 'tumbling billows' and 'surging foam' appear directly lifted from Beattie's 'waterfalls', 'gulfs', 'mountains now emboss'd' and 'vapour, tost / In billows'; the identically shared end-rhymes of 'lost', 'tost' and 'coast', emphasising Burns's intertextual borrowing. However, Burns signals to the reader that this stanza should be compared with the proceeding one as both are linked by the shared anaphoric opening word of 'Here':

Here, Doon pour'd down his far-fetch'd floods;  
There well-fed IRWINE stately thuds;  
Auld hermit Aire staw thro' his woods,  
On to the shore;  
And many a lesser torrent scuds,  
With seeming roar.<sup>332</sup>

With these comparative stanzas, Burns sets up '*Art's* lofty boast' of the ambivalent sublime of Beattie only to override it by championing the localised sublime of his native rivers- Doon, Irwine and Aire. This refocusing of the sublime to the local is strengthened by his switch to vernacular Scots when depicting 'Auld hermit Aire staw thro' his woods'. As the critic Robertson observes of the initial stanza, 'he first adopts Beattie-like language, as if to say that his home scenery is as grand as that portrayed in any high-sounding poem in English', before relinquishing generic imagery and English in favour of his own local scenery and diction.<sup>333</sup> Here, Burns seems to anticipate Sir Walter Scott's oblique derision that 'the sublimer passages of his 'Saturday Night', "Vision", and other poems of celebrity, always swell into the language of classic English poetry', with the reverse being shown in these connected stanzas.<sup>334</sup> Burns foregrounds 'The Vision' and its treatment of the sublime with his use of Scots and his localising directive that sets him apart in the developing discourse of the sublime. Whilst Burns eventually 'drops the Scots vernacular of the opening verses', and 'swells into the language of classic English poetry', as Leask notes, 'the standard habbie stanza keeps the reader in

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<sup>331</sup> Burns, 'The Vision', p. 82, l:73-78.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid. l:79-84.

<sup>333</sup> Robertson, 'Beattie's *The Minstrel* as Missing link', pp. 247-248.

<sup>334</sup> Sir Walter Scott, Review of Cromek's '*Reliques of Burns*', in *Quarterly Review* (1809), quoted by Andrew Noble in 'Robert Burns', *Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*, Gen ed. Ian McCalman, pp. 439-440, p. 440.

touch with the vernacular tradition',<sup>335</sup> because it signals through form the sense of localism that is upheld throughout.

The Ossianic strain of the verse becomes at its most pronounced in Burns's treatment of the historical figures of his local Kyle. The speaker's 'heart did glowing transport feel' as he describes his 'COUNTRY'S SAVIOUR' William Wallace and his kin: who 'brandish round the deep-dy'd steel, in sturdy blows; / While back-recoiling seem'd to reel / Their Suthron foes', with the bloodless martial elements and focus on 'nobler virtue bred, And polish'd grace' imitating the heroic themes of Macpherson's epics.<sup>336</sup> Equally, in his reference to the 'sceptr'd Pictish shade' of Coilus, King of the Picts, 'from whom the district of Kyle is said to take its name', Burns seems to vie with *Ossian's* Celtic heroes in describing his native Kyle's.<sup>337</sup> The critic Andrew Noble notes the distinction between *Ossian's* 'ghostly landscape littered with the Celtic warrior dead', a culture described as 'irretrievably lost', and Burns's glorification of Kyle, a 'landscape energised by the power and beauty of its rivers and its organic, living connection with its heroic dead',<sup>338</sup> so that what becomes apparent is Burns's recalibrating of the Ossianic obsession with the distant past, to his own championing of the landscapes and history of his local Ayrshire.

Recently, the critic Peter de Bolla has differentiated between the 'discourse of the sublime'-relating to works that are sublime, such as the texts covered in this thesis, and the 'discourse on the sublime' relating to works about the sublime, such as Longinus's *Peri Hupsous*, literally translating to 'On the sublime'.<sup>339</sup> The two composite Canto's of Beattie's *Minstrel* encapsulate de Bolla's theory, and in 'The Vision', Burns remodels Beattie's (and de Bolla's) demarcation with the first Duan presenting in Burnsian manner a 'discourse of the sublime', the second Duan articulating a 'discourse on the sublime'. In this sense then, Burns's muse Coila can be read as wholly representative of the sublime-garbed in raiment of the sublime and inspiring and instructing on the sublime.

Coila's proclamation 'All hail! My *own* inspired Bard! / Thy native Muse regard!' in which she claims the poet for her own and defines her relationship with him, shifts the focus away from the sublimity of the landscape and history to the sublime role of the muses, her position within their ranks, and the correlative sublime mode of the poet. As Leask notes, Burns borrows the 'machinery' of the 'light ariel band' from Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (1712) to describe the celestial-like

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<sup>335</sup> Nigel Leask, 'Burns, Wordsworth, and the Politics of Vernacular Poetry', in *Land, Nation and Culture, 1740–1840: Thinking the Republic of Taste*, ed. Peter de Bolla, Nigel Leask, Kenneth Simpson, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 202–222, p. 208.

<sup>336</sup> Burns, 'The Vision', pp. 82–83, l:97,103,99–103,89–90.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.* p. 84, l:109, and footnote.

<sup>338</sup> Editors- Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg, *The Canongate Burns: The Complete Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), p. 70.

<sup>339</sup> Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (London: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 8, 19.



ranks and dominions of the muses.<sup>340</sup> In describing the role of the higher rostra of muses, Coila effectively presents the eighteenth-century's theory of the sublime in standard habbie form. Burns's anaphoric sequence, 'Some fire', 'Some rouse', 'Some teach' elicits the principal features of the theory of the sublime; that which fires the soul, rouses the passions, and instructs the participant to nobler virtue and poetry.<sup>341</sup> Burns expands upon this in the proceeding stanza:

'And when the Bard, or hoary Sage,  
 'Charm or instruct the future age,  
 'They bind the wild, Poetic rage  
 'In energy,  
 'Or Point the inconclusive page  
 'Full on the eye.<sup>342</sup>

Here Burns differentiates between the poetics of the sublime and the aesthetic sublime in marking the roles of 'Bard' and 'Sage' or alternatively, poet and theorist. The poet's role is to 'charm' and 'bind the wild, Poetic rage' of the sublime, whereas the theorist's role is to 'instruct the future age' and to highlight the 'inconclusive' page or supposition.<sup>343</sup> Burns's choice of Beattie to illustrate this point is significant. As discussed in the previous chapter, Beattie straddles both poles of 'Bard' and 'Sage', which is recognised by the muse: 'Hence, sweet harmonious BEATTIE sung / His "Minstrel lays;" / Or tore, with noble ardour stung, / "The *Sceptic's* bays'.<sup>344</sup> The 'harmonious' 'lays' of *The Minstrel* are praised in equal terms with the 'noble ardour' which 'stung' the '*Sceptic's* bays' alluding to Beattie's acclaimed defamation of the sceptical views of David Hume.

In a predictably self-effacing manner, Burns through the muse claims neither the role of sage or theorist, or of 'higher' poetic order, such as the eminent poets 'Thomson', 'Shenstone', or 'Gray'.<sup>345</sup> Instead, Coila explains that she is of the 'lower Orders' of muses, to whom the 'humbler ranks of Human-kind' are assigned, such as the 'lab'ring Hind', the 'Artisan', and the poet's own position as 'rustic Bard'.<sup>346</sup> Given Coila's figurative status as representation of and on the sublime that this thesis contends, here, Burns can be seen to draw upon his 'reputation as poet of the common man' and as 'heaven-taught' – 'the light that led astray / Was light from Heaven', to dissociate himself from his

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<sup>340</sup> Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral*, p. 103.

<sup>341</sup> Burns, 'The Vision', p. 87, ll:152-153,155.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.* ll:163-168.

<sup>343</sup> See Burke's directive as theorist against the 'inaccurate and inconclusive...confusion of ideas' circulating around the theory of the 'true sublime'. Burke, 'Preface' to *Enquiry*, p. 2.

<sup>344</sup> Burns, 'The Vision', p. 87, ll:171-174.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.* ll:247-252.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.* ll:175-178.

learned forebears, claiming instead 'the loves, the ways, of simple swains'.<sup>347</sup> Within 'the humbler ranks of Human-kind', Burns speaks of a 'lowly' sublime that is 'common' to all, which next to the monarchical 'forest' of poetry and theory, 'grows' just as strong.<sup>348</sup> In his later verse epistle, 'Epistle to Dr. Blacklock' (1789), Burns would articulate this sentiment:

To make a happy fireside clime  
To weans and wife,  
That's the true *Pathos* and *Sublime*  
Of Human life.-<sup>349</sup>

Here, the opening stanzas of 'The Vision' are seen in a new light. The dejected speaker sitting by the 'fireside clime' is unhappy with his life and thus is failing in his poetics just as he is condemning them. Therefore, the muse exhorts the speaker to 'no longer mourn thy fate is hard / thus poorly low!', precisely because this '*humble sphere*' is the threshold to which the poet gains access to the sublime and is able to achieve his 'true', non-monetary, but poetic '*reward*'.<sup>350</sup> Thus, can Burns be seen to promote a new, egalitarian 'vision' of the sublime that supplants the esoteric dominancy of lofty poets and 'hoary Sages'. As evidenced throughout this thesis, during this period Edmund Burke remained the principal 'Sage' of the discourse on the sublime, yet as Terry Eagleton notes Burke also promoted the sublime as a divisively 'aristocratic, elitist ideology'.<sup>351</sup> Correspondingly, Dafydd Moore contends, that the sublime and the 'cultural movements it privileges', such as 'literary primitivism and noble savagery' - the 'cultural movements' incumbent to the sublime that the Aberdonian school of Blackwell, Gerard and Beattie, and the Edinburgh literati and Blair had promulgated - 'condemn themselves to obsolescence'.<sup>352</sup> Moore goes on to explain that their treatment of the 'true sublime' by 'its very wildness and lack of positive definition mean it is of limited relevance to the world of "everyday reality": against all the odds it becomes a luxury'.<sup>353</sup> Yet Burns in his preface to the Kilmarnock edition speaks out against the same 'elegancies and idlenesses' of 'the upper life' and

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid. II:239-240,242.

For Burns's 'reputation as poet of the common man' see Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral*, p. 20.

<sup>348</sup> Burns, 'The Vision', p. 89, II:255-257.

<sup>349</sup> Burns, 'Epistle to DR. Blacklock', in *Burns: Poems and Songs*, pp. 388-390, p. 390, lines 51-54.

<sup>350</sup> Burns, 'The Vision', p. 90, II:260.

<sup>351</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 68.

See also Tom Furniss's similarly Marxist perspective in reading Burke's theory of the sublime as an 'aesthetic means through which bourgeois thought establishes itself', Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 34.

<sup>352</sup> Dafydd Moore, *Enlightenment and Romance*, p. 118.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

literati that have made it into a luxury and reflexively offers 'the everyday reality' of his 'humble sphere' as a means to achieving 'true pathos and sublime'.<sup>354</sup>

Inherent to this vision of a sublime achieved through the 'rustic' and 'lowly' life, is Burns's own qualification of the local. As discussed before, Burns, throughout his career as poet maintained a directive to render sublime his own locality, that as Penny Fielding observes, fostered his 'growing status as an icon of locality', which in turn 'drew attention to the place of Scotland in the national cultural geography of Britain and to places within Scotland as forms of the local'.<sup>355</sup> Burns' championing of the sublimity of his locus was foundational to his status as 'local icon' and in turn, Scotland's national Bard. Correspondingly, in the denouement of 'The Vision', Coila cements her position as both 'lowly' and local muse in her proclamation: '*Of these am I – Coila my name; / 'And this district as mine I claim*'.<sup>356</sup> Whilst the poet's 'fame extends', the emphasis throughout the poem on all aspects of sublimity is sutured through Coila's status as decisively local muse, as Leask explains: 'By means of Coila, Burns carefully figures his poetic consecration in deferential terms emphasising that it's a local, before it's a national, event'.<sup>357</sup> 'The Vision' then, can be read as prophetic; that Burns's status as national bard of Scotland is eventually achieved through his championing of the local scenes and sublimity of his home in Ayrshire. However, as this thesis has discussed, Burns throughout his career actively sought to bring about a new 'vision' of the sublime, one that was rooted in his own 'lowly', local life as self-proclaimed 'Rustic Bard', and thus, 'The Vision', reads more as a focused statement of intent rather than blind prophecy.

Crawford has praised 'The Vision' as being 'the very summit of Burns's work as national poet', in so far that it stands above the rest of the poetry and songs included in the Kilmarnock and Edinburgh editions in proclaiming Burns's love and poetic allegiance to 'the Genius of the land' of his 'dear native country'.<sup>358</sup> 'The Vision' can also be seen as the 'the very summit' of Burns's engagement with the poetics of the sublime. Other poems such as 'Tam o' Shanter', which enters into the developing supernatural mode of the sublime, or 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', which turns towards a more religious form of sublimity, show Burns's flexibility with the theory, yet Burns's 'Vision', with its self-reflective concentration on the figure of the poet, poetics and sublimity, reveals Burns at the height of his engagement with the sublime. The poem also brings together many of the preoccupations and themes of Burns's that are celebrated throughout his corpus; his use of vernacular Scots and the standard habbie, his dry, often self-deprecating humour, and a humble acknowledgement of the poets

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<sup>354</sup> Burns, 'Preface' to Kilmarnock edition of 'Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect', in James Kinsley (ed.) *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, Vol. 3: Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 971-973, p. 971

<sup>355</sup> Penny Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain, 1760-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 40.

<sup>356</sup> Burns, 'The Vision', p. 88, ll:199.

<sup>357</sup> Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral*, p. 103.

<sup>358</sup> Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*, p. 192.

and people who have inspired him paired with an ambitious drive to rework and innovate Scottish poesy towards new horizons. However, above all, 'The Vision' speaks of Burns's proud recognition and celebration of his own Ayrshire roots as local poet and 'Rustic Bard', and as has been seen, these are roots that are firmly planted in the Scottish poetic tradition of the sublime.

## Chapter Five:

### The 'Great Shadow': The Poetics of the Sublime

This thesis began with a definition of the sublime based on a modern hermeneutic approach in which 'the world', 'the mind', and 'the word' are each prefigured as essential to the realisation of the concept of the sublime.<sup>359</sup> It was then evidenced that our understanding of such a definition is indebted to the formation and development of the philosophical ideal of a 'true sublime' within eighteenth-century Britain, and in particular, Scotland. The argument that was then made was that out of these three modes, the world, the mind, and the word, the latter was of the upmost importance in actualising this theoretical concept into a practice, one that, as was evidenced by Edmund Burke in 1759, has traditionally been aligned with poetics: a poetics of the sublime. The course of this thesis has been an attempt to trace the transmission and development of this poetics of the sublime throughout the three decades following from Burke's *Enquiry*, in which the poetry of James Macpherson, James Beattie, and Robert Burns was written and published in Scotland. Subsequently, this thesis shall conclude by summarising the principal developments of the poetics of the sublime that each of these three poets brought about and how Scotland for them and for others became the great muse of the sublime- 'thy native Muse regard!'

In 1818, William Hazlitt had written of the enduring impact of *Ossian* as being 'a feeling and a name that can never be destroyed in the minds of his readers'.<sup>360</sup> Concurringly, in his seminal work on the theory of the sublime, Samuel Monk surmises that *Ossian* 'was a sublime, original genius. As such, he would be read and valued, and as such he would become a guide to the [sublimities] of storms and mountains and the ocean and the wild, uncultivated heath'.<sup>361</sup> This notion of *Ossian* as 'guide' is an important one. Whilst Burke's *Enquiry* had provided the eighteenth century with a landmark theoretical understanding of the sublime which promoted poetry as its highest expression, Macpherson's *Ossian* can be seen to guide the way of the sublime by illustrating these same principles in practice. Not only did the Ossianic poems act as a guide to the natural sublime as found in the 'storms and mountains and the ocean and the wild, uncultivated heath' of the Highland landscapes that populated the texts, but through its use of metaphor and distinct characterisation coordinated towards its thematic strains of grief, loss, and memory, *Ossian* guided the progression of the sublime from an objective representation as found in 'the world', to the subjective experience of the sublime as found in 'the mind'. Coupled with Macpherson's repurposing of the classical poetic forms of the fragment and the epic, *Ossian* marks a pivotal moment in the formation and development of the poetics of the

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<sup>359</sup> Land, *From Signs to Propositions: The Concepts of Form in Eighteenth Century Semantic Theory*, p. 38.

<sup>360</sup> Hazlitt, 'On Poetry in General', p. 180.

<sup>361</sup> Monk, *The Sublime*, p. 126.

sublime, with *Ossian's* singular style of sublimity earning itself a new category of both poetic and aesthetic identification, as the 'Ossianic sublime' took an unprecedented hold of the eighteenth-century's imagination.

Nearly a decade later Macpherson's contemporary, James Beattie, had brought about a new development to the poetics of the sublime, one that was tintured through his similarly sublime portrayal of the Scottish landscape, and one that was centred around the figure of the poet. Beattie's career as both philosopher and poet and his exemplary position amidst the theoretical discourses of the Aberdonian Enlightenment led to an original and influential insight into the poet's experience of the sublime. *The Minstrel's* presentation of the young poet, Edwin, 'standing sublime' amidst the sublimities of another, more aggregate Scottish landscape can be seen to pioneer the instance of the 'sublime moment' which was crucial for the development of the poetics of the sublime to its recognised apex within the Romantic period. Furthermore, Beattie's use of the Spenserian stanza that tapped into the Scottish natural tradition of his forbear, James Thomson, brought contemporary expression through form to the sublime, effectively freeing it from the classical models relied on by Macpherson. E. H. King has looked ahead to the Romantic period whilst noting the influence of *Ossian* and Thomson, in stating that *The Minstrel* '[strikes] a balance between the imitation and crystallisation of earlier models and trends and the suggestion of a new visionary view of man and nature now almost entirely associated with later Romanticism'.<sup>362</sup> This 'new visionary view' of man and nature, or rather, poet and nature, was to bear great fruit in Scotland before reaching across the border to *The Minstrel's* Romantic inheritors, as Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns, presented his own poetic 'Vision' of the sublime.

In 1818, the same year that Hazlitt was writing in praise of *Ossian* during the height of the British Romantic movement, a young John Keats had visited the grave of Robert Burns and ruminated with sublime incantation about the 'Great Shadow' of Burns' that was still felt during his time. Dying in 1796, just two years short of what is traditionally deemed the 'beginning' of Romanticism,<sup>363</sup> the 'Greatness' of Robert Burns's 'Shadow' stretched across the period, inspiring the two generations of poets who have been consistently cited as literary history's great 'poets of the sublime'.<sup>364</sup> Burns's rendering of a sublime based on local scenes, language, and poetic form heralded a new dawn for the sublime as it transitioned from a theoretical ideal endlessly contested by philosophers and men of letters to the everyday reality sought out by the Romantics. However, during the twentieth century,

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<sup>362</sup> King, 'James Beattie's Literary Essays (1776, 1783) and the Evolution of Romanticism', p. 203.

<sup>363</sup> The beginning of the Romantic period has traditionally been linked to either the start of the French Revolution in 1789, or the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 (two years after Burns's death). See Abrams and Harpham, 'Neoclassic and Romantic', in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p. 236.

<sup>364</sup> See James Kirwin's discussion of the sublime and Romanticism in 'The Literature of Power', in *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics*, pp. 119-139 and Thomas Weiskal's seminal work on the topic, *The Romantic Sublime*.

the critical evaluation of Burns's significant influence on the poetry of the Romantics has waned, divesting him of his greatness and leaving him as little more than Keats's shadowy figure, or as Murray Pittock has aptly put it: 'the invisible man' of British Literature.<sup>365</sup> In recent decades critics such as Murray Pittock, Carol McGuiirk, and Nigel Leask have sought to re-establish the connections between Robert Burns and the 'father', or 'paramount poet' of British Romanticism, William Wordsworth.<sup>366</sup> Wordsworth, who from the outset of his career as poet, correlated the sublime with poetics in what he termed 'the sublime notion of Poetry', also advocated the essentially Burnsian notion, or 'vision', that 'low and rustic life' is the 'condition' requisite to best convey the sublime expression of the 'essential passions of the heart'.<sup>367</sup> Correspondingly, Pittock reads in Burns's poetry and songs the essence of Wordsworth's three great axioms of Romantic thought stated in his *Preface*, namely: "the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation" combined with "emotion recollected in tranquillity" in pursuit of a "revolution, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself".<sup>368</sup> In adding, perhaps, Wordsworth's most famous axiom on poetry, that 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' we invariably arrive at the representative essence of the Romantic sublime.<sup>369</sup> Thus, the 'Great Shadow' of Burns' influence materialises in the work of Wordsworth and the British Romantic poets who followed as the ever-ineffable shape and substance of the sublime.

In conclusion, the three decades of the late eighteenth-century that follow from Burke's landmark theory of 1759 represent a momentous period for the development of both the sublime and poetics. Within the influential work of Macpherson, Beattie, and Burns it is possible to read the formation and blossoming of a poetic tradition that bridges the gap between the strictures of neo-classical thought and the passionate outpourings of Romantic expression. Each of the poet's respective texts exemplify how the age's theoretical ideal of a 'true sublime' became realised as the force majeure of poetry: the poetics of the sublime. In the subsequent decades, the sublime continued in its dominion over both aesthetics and poetics, irrevocably bound through expression in 'the word'. The Romantic period was dominated by the sublime, with poets from William Blake through to Walter Scott being recognised by critics in modernity as championing the sublime through their poetry, whereas the German philosopher Immanuel Kant became Burke's successor in aesthetics, as the nineteenth century

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<sup>365</sup> Murray G. H. Pittock, 'Robert Burns and British Poetry' in *Proceedings of the British Academy, Volume 121, 2002 Lectures*. ed. P. J. Marshall, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) pp. 191-211, p. 195.

<sup>366</sup> Leask, 'Burns, Wordsworth, and the Politics of Vernacular Poetry', p. 219.

See also Murray Pittock, 'Robert Burns and British Poetry', and Nigel Leask who observes Burns 'establishing the romantic localism later mined by Wordsworth, Scott, Clare, Hogg and many other writers of the Romantic age' in Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral*, p. 74, and Carol McGuiirk, who notices Wordsworth's 'partial emulation of Burns' through Burns's 'partial emulation' of Robert Fergusson, in McGuiirk, 'Two Memorials to Fergusson', p. 22.

<sup>367</sup> William Wordsworth, '*Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems*' (1802), in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, pp. 597, 607.

<sup>368</sup> Wordsworth quoted by Murray Pittock in 'Burns and British Poetry', p. 42.

<sup>369</sup> Wordsworth, '*Preface*', p. 611.

took over as the 'great age of aesthetic theory'.<sup>370</sup> Whilst critics have rightly acknowledged that eighteenth-century Britain is the terrain in which the sublime crystallised and took hold, this thesis, throughout, has aspired to evidence by analysis and careful perquisition of the poetic techniques employed by Macpherson, Beattie, and Burns, that Scotland remains the heartland of this terrain, the mountainous muse standing sublime and casting its 'Great shadow' that continually provokes greater expression through a distinct poetics of the sublime.

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<sup>370</sup> Monk, *The Sublime*, p. 1.



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