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‘She fleets, she sails away’: The Horror of Highland Emigration to America in James Macpherson’s *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*

1

Directly after the publication of James Macpherson’s *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), the first in a series of so-called translations of ancient Gaelic verse, Hugh Blair organized a meeting of Edinburgh literati. The event, a ‘literary dinner,’ was designed to stimulate interest in the idea that Macpherson should further search the Highlands for more ‘genuine remains of ancient Scottish poetry,’ including the epic—*Fingal*—of which the published fragments were supposed to be a part. Of those who endeavoured to ‘put Macpherson on a way of procuring . . . more of these wild flowers,’¹ David Hume stands out for initially supporting the project and later rejecting the final work as forgery. It would appear that Hume’s scepticism escalated in proportion to his acquaintance with Macpherson’s character, and climaxed in 1773 upon his learning that Macpherson had been chosen to undertake a continuation of his *History of Great Britain*. To Adam Smith Hume voiced his disapproval of this scheme, claiming that Macpherson ‘had the most anti-historical head in the universe’ (qtd. in Saunders 225).

Hume’s initial reaction to the *Fragments*—one of surprise and wonder at their ‘regular’ aesthetic—foreshadows my own reading of *The Ossian Poems* as a work designed neither to preserve, museum-like, what Edmund Burke referred to as the ‘last breath of a dying language,’ nor glorify traditional oral culture. Hume writes: ‘I was only surprised at the regular plan which appears in some of these pieces, and which seems to be the work of a more cultivated age. None of the specimens of barbarous poetry known to us . . . contains this species of beauty’ (qtd. in Saunders 86). While most recent critical studies of the *Poems of Ossian* tend to focus on the interface of historical writing and nationalism, this essay proposes an examination of Macpherson’s future orientation, specifically his engagement with various propaganda—advertisements ranging in subject matter from agricultural improvement to military enlistment to the promise of American settlement. Such ads, excluding those that promoted emigration to America, reflect Lowland attempts at *civilizing/modernizing* the Highlands. The pro-emigration work reflects a radically different vision of Scotland’s future—distinctly at odds with notions of Highland development, or, in fact, radically opposed to this Lowland cultural imperialism.

In what follows, I shall argue that *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), Macpherson’s first major work of translation, falls into this category of cultural imperialism, though not solely because it was published to satisfy the burgeoning curiosity of leading Lowland literary figures, including Blair, the instigator of the project. I shall argue that particular *figures of speech*, such as the ‘isolated speaker

pouring out a torrent of emotion to an empty landscape,² reoccur within *Fragments* to form a regular plan of sorts, cooperatively predicting and posing solutions to various unwelcome changes in the material organization of Highland culture. From Shilric's outpouring in *Fragment II*—'she fleets, she sails away; as grey mist before the wind'³—to Macpherson's chronic attachment to a sublime landscape imagery, replete with *wildlife* but void of human inhabitants, it is likely that the *Fragments* were intended to counteract the flow of emigrants to America. In other words, the regularity of such *figures of speech* is one that makes political sense of an otherwise strange coincidence, the simultaneous publication of Macpherson's *Fragments* with an upsurge of Highland emigration,⁴ the organization of which, according to various historians, was unprecedented, prompting widespread fear of depopulation.

2

Of all the technologies which contributed to the Highlands' transformation, perhaps none was as effective as writing. That is, most historians, literary or otherwise, agree that the SSPCK (Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge) played a major role in *civilizing* the Highlands, having instructed an estimated 300,000 students in English literacy by the end of the eighteenth century.⁵ Established by a group of Edinburgh elite, the Society, a firmly Presbyterian organization, was supposed to 'provide schools for teaching the principles of our Holy religion in the English language.'⁶ However, the SSPCK's embrace of English as the language of advancement appears to have been motivated by secular interests as well. Historical records of the 'general meetings' reveal that the SSPCK 'affirmed that failure to learn English excluded the Highlanders from all commerce, conversation, and correspondence with the rest of the nation and debarred them from employments, stations or offices that might afford them advantage.'⁷ In this respect the Society's so-called achievement lay in facilitating the spread of new agricultural knowledge, providing the perfect ideological compliment to General Wade's repressive construction of roadways for the transportation of British military. The SSPCK created channels through which to broadcast Protestant ethics, as well as the spirit of capitalism.

The SSPCK's impact, then, might best be described as a haunting, primarily to emphasize the 'visible invisibility' of literary exchange,⁸ not to mention that it was the propaganda of improvement, a form of *media play*, which gripped landlords, wreaking havoc upon traditional social structures. Alluding to an article of Henry Fielding's describing the havoc realized by dishonest newspapermen who 'set Treaties of Marriage on Foot between Persons, who never saw one another's Face,'⁹ I would define *media play* as, loosely, the havoc created by 'fruitful imaginations.' The word *play* suggests some sort of constant slippage between fact and fiction, to pick up on Michael Taussig's point that 'thinking is, like theater, a configuration of very object-prone exercises in differentiated space, in which the thought exists in imagined scenarios in which the thinking self is plummeted.'¹⁰ However, the word *media* links this slippage, or psycho-dynamic, to print culture, specifically as a process in which the strategic dissemination of alluring artificial realities can be seen to gradually wear away at one's grasp of social reality. Authors and readers both experience this media play as some form of absorption, wherein fictional entities assume the affective power

of organic experience. Taussig—echoing Hume—calls this the ‘magic of sympathy.’¹¹ Moreover, I use *media play* to refer to the way in which propagandists compete for dominance of the reading public’s collective consciousness. In the context of this essay, this aspect of play is particularly important, for the years following the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 mark a particularly contentious period of Highland history, in which numerous visionaries, including land agents and poets, compete at scripting the Highland’s future.

Consider, for example, how the following advertisement of a *Foot Machine for Breaking and Beating Flax and Hemp* invented by Robert Macpherson (Assistant Secretary to the Commissioners and Trustees for Improvements in Scotland) may have operated on the minds of acquisitive landlords.¹² Appearing in the February 1766 issue of the *Scots Magazine*, the following ad claims the most significant achievement of Macpherson’s invention to be the way in which it reduces not only waste matter, but allows for the beating of flax in-house, so to speak, thus reducing one’s reliance upon outside skilled labour. In other words, the ad proposes a capitalist model of the household as self-interested, simultaneously providing the reader with a detail of the machine’s potential for doubling profit. In addition to this, the engraving itself—which folds out, extending beyond the margins of a normal page—signifies, in a spectacle of excess, huge profit margins. Visual titillation is a material component of the ad’s power to move *both* literate and illiterate audiences.

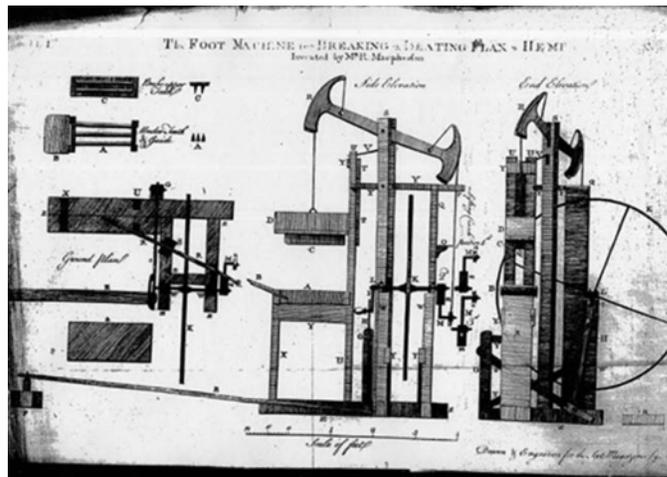


Figure 1. ‘The Foot Machine for Breaking and Beating Flax and Hemp, Invented by Robert Macpherson’, *Scots Magazine* (February 1766)

Such advertisements extended the margins of Lowland influence, which Samuel Johnson, in his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), accurately describes as fragmenting traditional loyalties. He writes: ‘Since the islanders, no longer content to live, have learned the desire of growing rich, an ancient dependant is in danger of giving way to a higher bidder, at the expense of domestic dignity and hereditary power.’¹³ Johnson’s observation invokes an historical circumstance, which TM Devine, alluding to the end of collective farming, refers to as the ‘subordination of the human factor to the new needs of productive efficiency’ (Devine, *Clanship* 35). Whole communities would have to evacuate their farms to make way for the agribusiness of

strangers, individual farmers intent on farming for surplus (profit) not subsistence. Peter Williamson's *New Machine for Reaping of Corns*, as advertised in the August 1762 issue of the *Scots Magazine*, represents this subordination in quite spectacular terms.¹⁴ With blades called 'fingers,' Williamson's device invokes a prosthesis—the man *made* machine.

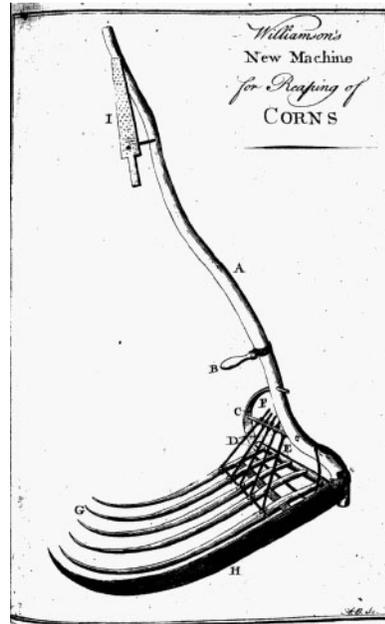


Figure 2. 'Peter Williamson's New Machine for Reaping of Corns', *Scots Magazine* (August 1762)

Combining the work of six ordinary reapers, Williamson's *New Machine* signals an important step in Highland modernization, particularly if one reads the machine as not merely an 'extension of some human faculty'¹⁵—a *medium* or 'intervening thing through which a force acts or an effect is produced'¹⁶—but rather as a singular alternative to multiple human limbs. Williamson's machine, that is, reduces the number of labourers required to cut a 'full quarter of an acre of barley,' forcing five labourers to consider other employment. He writes that the machine 'will, in the hands of a single man, do more execution in a field of oats in one day, and to better purpose, than it is in the power of six shearers to do.'¹⁷

With every blade a substitute for some human body, and the machine's operator simultaneously transformed into a monster of sorts, someone charged with a freakish superabundance of fingers/blades, Williamson's device thus reflects an important structural transformation of the Highland economy. Here, as in the aforementioned advertisement, the machine is touted as the modern antithesis to traditional work modes that, in spite of their inefficiency, tended to reinforce social ties. And, here, we see the relatively new idea (new to the Highlands) of farming for profit not subsistence, an emphasis on spectacular display and, of course, foreshadowing of the division of traditional townships (group settlements of multiple tenant farmers) into single tenant farms.¹⁸

However, one form of propaganda often leads to another. The large-scale unemployment resulting from such agricultural improvements constituted a serious Highland problem, which a second wave of *media players* (land agents, poets, and politicians) competed to solve, occasionally drawing upon the graphic potential of written language to state their cases more effectively. Several solutions manifested immediately.

There was the possibility of migrating south in search of employment. However, in spite of the existence of such charitable organizations as the Glasgow Highland Society, the object of which was to educate Highlanders in the ‘different branches of manufactures,’ most Highlanders remained hesitant to seek employment in the market ultimately responsible for driving them to despair in the first place.¹⁹

Indeed, as an alternative solution, William Pitt’s plan to recruit Highlanders for service in the Seven Years’ War would have a huge impact upon Highland culture, primarily in terms of contributing to the phenomenon that today is commonly called ‘Highlandism’ (Devine, *Scottish* 244). Having as much to do with Pitt’s transforming Jacobite rebels into imperial heroes as with the ironic fact that Highland paraphernalia (the ‘ancient dress’) and, indeed, the Highland warrior would become by century’s end the national image of a modern Scotland, Highlandism reflected the synergy of politicians and poets. For no doubt the Highlanders’ valiant military service abroad—an effect of Pitt’s plan—provided Edinburgh literati with the raw material out of which to construct a Scot’s national identity capable of synthesizing traditional political oppositions. That is, while composers of ballads glorified the Highland warrior, William Pitt, to quote TM Devine, ‘for the first time on a systematic basis diverted the martial spirit of the Highlanders to the service of the imperial state’ (Devine, *Scottish* 239).

However, in spite of John Dwyer’s assertion that ‘warfare would long remain the major industry for unemployed Scots,’²⁰ enlistment by no means provided families with any guarantee of a livelihood. Like so many of the warriors represented in Macpherson’s *Fragments*, many of the newly recruited highland soldiers ‘died abroad,’ leaving, according to the author of a ‘Memorial for the Glasgow Highland Society’ (1760), ‘their families at home destitute of everything’ (Anonymous).

Consider, for example, the role that Malcolm plays, as a soldier of fortune, in *Fragment III*. Consider how the following line attaches ‘hope,’ specifically in financial terms, to his military service: ‘Tossed on the wavy ocean is He, the hope of the isles; Malcolm, the support of the poor’ (10). Here the narrator, an isolated speaker, ‘grey-hair’d Carryl,’ seems to be describing an imperial hero in the appropriate terms of socioeconomic stability. Malcolm’s representation as the ‘support of the poor’ may imply that Macpherson understood his work as forging a national identity that would promote military recruitment and thus provide some financial aid to an otherwise dislocated populace. Surely on some level Macpherson’s noble savages played as critical a role in the development of *highlandism* as Walter Scott’s Fergus Mac-Ivor.

However, there is an irony built into Macpherson’s representation of Malcolm, namely that he fails to fulfil his promise. In the interim of his absence, Malcolm’s wife waits ‘sad on the sea-beat shore.’ She is looking forward to his return, but when the ‘time of . . . promise is come,’ ‘no white sail is on the sea; no voice but the blustering wind’ (10). It is soon discovered when Carryl spies Malcolm’s ghost on the

horizon, that all hope of fulfilment has been dashed against a ‘distant rock.’ ‘He is gone,’ mourns Carryl, ‘like a dream of the night . . . Thy spouse shall return no more. No more shall his hounds come from the hill, forerunners of their master’ (10). Thus, while the final stanza is one that serves to remind the reader that while Carryl’s job may be to provide a memorial service for Malcolm, the role of the fragment itself seems that of revealing the false promise of military recruitment. Malcolm’s initial description may resemble the rhetoric deployed by military recruiters, propagandists intent on harnessing martial spirits. However, the fragment’s dire conclusion reveals this rhetoric to be an imperial artifice, a smokescreen concealing certain undeniable risks.

Furthermore, the impersonality of Malcolm’s wife, the fact that Macpherson fails to provide her with a name, may be taken to represent the potential countless other women suffering from similar losses at this time. That is, her nameless-ness may bespeak her interchangeability with any one of the actual widows referred to in the aforementioned plea for charitable donations to support the families of Highland soldiers who have died abroad, not to mention any woman who has *yet* to lose a husband overseas. In this regard, the impersonality of Malcolm’s wife provides an ominous sense of the potential backfiring of military recruitment as a solution to the Highland problem.²¹

Moreover, the Highlander’s service in the British military at this time would have the additional side effect of promoting the affairs of America, especially as ‘ex-officers with land in Nova Scotia, the Island of St. John, New York, and North Carolina, began recruiting settlers in Scotland’ (Bumsted 14). Surely, as JM Bumsted contends, the ‘Old French and Indian War’ (1756–1763) played a major role in familiarizing most Scots with both the geography and history of North America, especially given the numerous soldiers who enlisted as part of Pitt’s plan to redirect the Highlanders’ martial spirit.²² The Highlanders’ involvement gave rise to news reports, which—not unlike the following ‘sketch of Fort Du Quesne, now Pittsburgh’ (1759)—provided the reading public of Scotland with a much broader, and, specifically in this case, visualize-able understanding of America (see figure 3). Published in the January 1759 issue of the *Scots Magazine*, the letter accompanying this map was supposed to have been written ‘upon the spot where Fort du Quesne once stood,’ thus signalling Britain’s ‘peaceable possession of the finest and most fertile country in America’—i.e., western Pennsylvania.

Indeed, a survey of articles appearing in the *Scots Magazine* reveals that it was not until after the Paris treaty of 1763, signalling the end of French power in North America, that the reading public became overwhelmingly barraged with information concerning American affairs.²³ 1763 is the year that Spain ceded Florida to Great Britain and the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations gave public notice that East and West Florida would be surveyed and laid out into townships for the ‘convenience and accommodation of settlers.’²⁴ It is the year that an article appeared detailing the appropriation of a large fund to support the settlement of South Carolina’s backcountry—lands which the author describes as ‘inexpressibly rich,’ ‘the finest in the world,’ with a climate ‘more mild, serene, and wholesome, than in our lower settlements.’²⁵ And, coincidentally, it is also the year that an ‘extract’ of Blair’s dissertation on the authenticity of Macpherson’s forgery appeared in the *Scots*

Magazine, not to mention that Macpherson published the third major instalment of the *Poems of Ossian*, the epic poem, *Temora*.

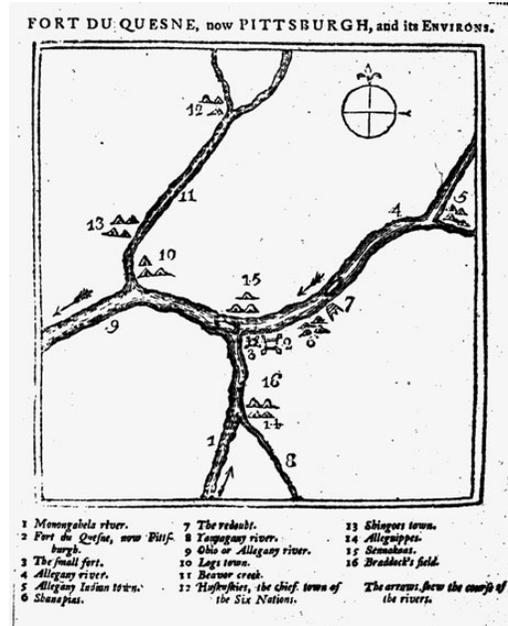


Figure 3. 'Fort Du Quesne, now Pittsburgh, and its Environs', *Scots Magazine* (January 1759)

Thus, at the same time that Macpherson's work appears to have truly captured the reading public's imagination, common Highlanders were beginning to consider America in terms of a manifest destiny or destination, that is, as the most viable solution to their economic despair. In fact, land agents presented so mesmerizing a portrait of the *American dream* that common Highlanders rendered destitute by their landlords' disavowal of traditional agricultural practices sold their belongings to set sail for America collectively. With tacksmen working alongside of ship captains to arrange for the transportation of whole shiploads of persons, the movement resembled a formal protest. And, according to Bumsted, it was precisely this level of organization that led Highland *developers* to consider anxiously the threat of depopulation.²⁶ The authorities, worried that mass emigration would arrest Highland development, reacted with their own propaganda, a gothic literature,²⁷ so to speak, which exaggerated the horrors of transatlantic passage in order to discourage emigration. It is as such propaganda that I wish to consider Macpherson's first major publication, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760).

3

Published during the early stages of economic revolution in the south, Macpherson's first real successful attempt at eliciting the attention of the reading public is a prime example of *media play*, posing counteractive—i.e., emotionally engaging—solutions to the propaganda of American settlement.

Plot-wise, these fragments tend to relate the same story over and over again, of the Celtic warrior's bravery in arms, untimely death overseas and subsequent reincarnation as a ghost and or possible delusion of the grief-stricken bard or widow. Unless the story unfolds in dialogue format,²⁸ the narrator is typically a solitary speaker, whose loneliness is sometimes emphasized by various so-called 'passionate personifications,' the anthropomorphism that, says Lord Kames, one reverts to when he/she lacks the company with which to exchange feelings. Kames claims, in his *Elements of Criticism* (1762), that excessive passions 'cannot be gratified but by sympathy from others' and that 'if denied that consolation in a natural way, it will convert even things inanimate into sympathetic beings.'²⁹ Thus, at first glance, the sociological standpoint of these *Fragments* is by no means ancient, but rather—extraordinarily modern—particularly if the ghosts are read as metaphorical reminders of the disembodied nature ('visible-invisibility') of all literary exchange. However, in addition to conversing with the dead, the isolated speaker is given the important task of surveying the landscape, such that various elemental descriptions of rock, deer, stream, wind, etc., reoccur with what Stafford considers to be a 'strangely hypnotic' effect (Stafford 103).

The intended effect of such repetitions may not have been hypnosis, particularly if one considers the strange fact that Macpherson unfailingly represents the landscape as eerily devoid of human inhabitants. Perhaps the point was to provide a startling prediction of the impact of emigration to America, thereby spreading an illusive fear of depopulation amongst Scotland's reading public. It is, thus, in the process of mourning that the speakers reveal the counteractive potential of the *Fragments* by focusing on various details of landscape. Consider the following excerpt from *Fragment I*, which tells the story of two lovers, Shilric and Vinvela, torn apart by the 'wars of Fingal' and subsequently reunited in the afterlife of Vinvela's fleeting re-emergence as a ghost. Consider how, in Vinvela's eyes, the removal of the hunter affects the evolution of animal life in the Highlands:

The deer are seen on the brow; void of fear they graze along. No more they dread the wind; no more the rustling tree. The hunter is far removed; he is in the field of graves. (7)

According to Vinvela, whom Shilric leaves 'alone on the hill,' every *thing* here is of face value: that is, the rustling tree, which might otherwise signify the presence of a human being, is now simply a rustling tree; or rather, a stark representation of Highland depopulation.

This fragment is a particularly good example of what Stafford calls the 'varying degrees of clarity and solidity' with which characters emerge in Macpherson's world.³⁰ Vinvela's existence from the very beginning is shrouded in doubt, particularly as certain similes and, in fact, Shilric's own inability to discern between Vinvela's voice and particular sounds of nature—'nodding rushes' (7)/the 'summer-wind' (7)—stress her peculiarly ethereal existence. 'What voice is that I hear? that voice like the summer-wind' (7), asks Shilric, entirely uncertain of whether that voice is the product of human, animal or mineral exertions (*italics mine*). Were Shilric's question phrased this way—'whose voice is that I hear?'—then it would be evident that he understood the voice to be human. The word 'what' signifies Shilric's

extraordinary confusion. And in *Fragment II* Shilric is even less certain of Vinvela's ontological status, with her figure 'visibly-invisible,' 'like a beam of light on the heath' (9), and her voice increasingly 'weak,' 'like the breeze in the reeds of the pool' (9).

Shilric's confusion stands in stark contrast to Vinvela's rather more lucid comprehension of the sounds filling her environment. Perhaps Shilric's confusion is merely a combination of mourning and melancholia, a delusional remembrance of Vinvela. After all, it is revealed that Vinvela 'with grief [for Shilric] expired,' so that in *Fragment II* she literally evaporates as 'grey mist before the wind' (9). Regardless, these first two fragments establish a neat juxtaposition between the Highland's human culture, which exists in this weirdly fluctuating plane of 'ghosts and solitary speakers,' and its animal and mineral resources, which are as solidly composed as the Outer Hebrides. This juxtaposition is typical throughout the *Fragments* and seems intended to emphasize the Highlands' emptiness.

In other words, Macpherson's decision to boldly project an image of the Highlands as radically deprived of all human inhabitants—save, of course, for the isolated speaker—deserves to be considered as a significant contribution to political debates of the Highlands' future, particularly in terms of fomenting fear of depopulation. The heath is 'silent' (8), the 'mid-day is silent around' (9)—perhaps to illustrate and/or predict grim social realities, either that which the minister of Kilmany in Fife called 'the annihilation of the little cottagers' (qtd. in Devine, *Scottish* 147) or the resulting upsurge of Highland emigration to America. The isolated speaker is, thus, a demographic representation, whose emotional outpouring can be read as an allusion to the fear of depopulation that would, for instance, prompt one churchman in 1770 to regard the flow of Highlanders to America in apocalyptic terms: 'What is a country without inhabitants, what are lands without people, what is . . . a minister's charge without parishioners?' (Richards 188). In addition to this, Macpherson's attention to landscape is one that parallels the propaganda of American settlement. Though some pro-emigration work such as *Seasonable Advice to the Landholders and Farmers in Scotland* (1770) tends to cast the common Highlander's plight in Biblical terms, most articles appearing in the *Scots Magazine* rely on a painterly approach to conveying the promise of America. With land agents providing readers with detailed images of a vast and fertile landscape to compare with large, non-arable tracts of their own native soil, 'America,' to quote Bumsted, 'quickly became both for recruiters and the critics of changing conditions at home the anti-image of Scotland' (Bumsted 14). Consider, for example, the following report identifying the 'advantages of settling in West Florida' (1765).³¹

Prepared by Governor Johnstone himself, the report not only surveys the landscape circumspectly, attentive to the minutiae of seashells and live oaks, but constantly converts natural resource into valuable commodity. Johnstone's gaze is decidedly future-oriented, sublimating the coarsest of raw material into riches: the soil is 'rich, capable of producing wine, oil, silk, indigo, tobacco, rice,' etc. As well, it merits consideration as a form of 'psycho-geography' for constantly invoking the formerly thriving metropolises of Carthage, Palmyra, Amsterdam and Venice alongside of Pensacola, in an effort to illustrate its potential to be a flourishing port city. Johnstone's invocation of an ancient past to script the future bears a distinct resemblance to Macpherson's own apparent glorification of the heroic Celt to reinvent

the Highland soldier's image. Likewise, Johnstone's strategic reformation of the Native American's image bears a striking resemblance to the work of *highlandism*. Leading his readers to believe that the local Indians no longer represented a threat, but, in fact, potential partners in trade, Johnstone claims the Native American is a noble savage, having 'those ideas of justice, which are universal in society, before an advanced state of civility has corrupted the manners of individuals' (Johnstone).

Coincidentally, Macpherson served for a brief spell as Johnstone's secretary, president of the council, and Surveyor General in Florida³²—hence, it is no wonder that his gaze, as a poet, similarly resembles the gaze of a landscape architect. Relying almost solely upon what Edmund Burke refers to as 'aggregate words,' words 'as such represent many simple ideas united by nature to form some one determinate composition,'³³ Macpherson surveys the landscape, sublimely attentive to energetic natural resources and wildlife. Consider the following stanza from *Fragment V*:

Autumn is dark on the mountains; grey mist rests on the hills. The whirlwind is heard on the heath. Dark rolls the river thro' the narrow plain. A tree stands alone on the hill, and marks the grave of Connal. The leaves whirl round with the wind, and strew the grave of the dead. At times are seen here the ghosts of the deceased, when the musing hunter alone stalks slowly over the heath. Appear in thy armour of light, though ghost of the mighty Connal! Shine, near thy tomb, Crimora! like a moon-beam from a cloud. (13)

Note the prevalence of aggregate words in the above passage, words such as 'dark,' 'mountains,' 'grey,' 'mist,' 'hills,' 'whirlwind,' 'heath,' 'dark,' 'river,' 'plain,' 'tree,' 'hill,' 'grave,' 'leaves,' 'grave,' 'heath,' 'tomb,' 'moon-beam,' and 'cloud.' The important value of such concrete language, suggests Burke, lay in its ability to inspire real ideas and thus elicit emotional responses from readers. As it were, the most affective language raises images and/or to pick up on Taussig's notion of 'sympathetic magic' once more, such visual language lends itself to the 'self-sculpting' theatre of thought. However, Burke retreats from this original point. After providing his reader with a characteristically descriptive passage of aggregate words, Burke claims that, due to the speed of delivery in verbal communication, even aggregate words may affect without raising images. 'Indeed,' writes Burke, 'it is impossible, in the rapidity and quick succession of words in conversation, to have ideas both of the sound of the word, and of the thing represented' (Burke 152). For Burke the affect of words is largely a poetic phenomenon, deriving from the association of sounds and ideas. Yet what Burke fails to consider here is what Macpherson takes particular advantage of, the fact that written language may be lingered over, slackening the pace with which words proceed in conversation and, thus, making language, at least from a visual standpoint, more affective. Furthermore, Macpherson famously repeats certain aggregate words—such as hill, heath, grave, whirl and wind in the above passage—adding to the overall affect and imaginative authority of his *Fragments*.

Of course, such repetition is not uncommon amongst oral cultures, serving, as a mnemonic device, to ensure the accurate transmission of information through the ages.³⁴ However, in the print culture of Macpherson's day, such repetition is excessive

and would appear to be intended as a political agitation of the sort described by Abner Cohen.³⁵ Macpherson utilizes repetition to manipulate the reading public's perception of the Highlands, projecting dynamic images of its natural resources to counteract the mesmerism of the American dream. Consider, for example, the opening stanza to *Fragment II*:

I sit by the mossy fountain; on top of the hill of winds. One tree is rustling above me. Dark waves roll over the heath. The lake is troubled below. The deer descend from the hill. No hunter at a distance is seen; no whistling cow-herd is nigh. (9)

Though there is 'no hunter' to be seen here, no human beings whatsoever, this scene is still one of remarkable activity. Macpherson's eye is particularly intent on tracing the wind's interaction with the following objects—tree, heath and lake. As such, his vision is one that considers the landscape as sublime, which, according to Burke, is 'always some modification of power' (Burke 59). The wind is, of course, a profoundly useful source of mechanical energy, the strength of which Macpherson emphasizes throughout: the wind 'resounds' in *Fragment III*, 'roars' in *Fragment X*, and 'lifts the waves on high' in *Fragments XI*, etc. In the above stanza, Macpherson's 'hill of winds,' a testament to the Highland's extraordinary abundance of this powerful source of energy, ought to be ranked alongside of Robert Macpherson's *New Water-Mill for dressing flax and hemp* (1766) for harnessing nature in the interests of industrialization, veritably a form of sublimation. Moreover, it is essential that the winds assume the rather more tangible shape of the hill to facilitate readers' private visualizations.

In other words, there is an interesting connection to be drawn between Macpherson's poetic survey of various natural resources and the surveys conducted by landowners in the interest of agricultural improvement. According to Eric Richards, such land surveys represented a necessary first step in Highland development—an ominous indication of what lay in store for the little cottagers, so to speak.³⁶ Of course, in addition to this, Macpherson's romantic treatment of the landscape can be seen as contributing to the development of a tourist industry, anticipating the era of tourism so often attributed to Thomas Penant's *Tour of Scotland* in 1769. However, the most salient point is this: the wildly energetic life of Macpherson's landscape represents a radical departure from a tradition of depicting the Highlands as barren wasteland—or rather radically counteracts the propaganda of American settlement by alternatively painting the Highlands as equally worthy of investment.³⁷

Perhaps Macpherson's most poignant engagement with American propaganda occurs in *Fragment XI*. Here, simultaneously as the horror of depopulation looms largely in the isolated speaker's final emotional outpouring, the symbolism is such that the dream of American settlement is revealed to be replete with insurmountable and unexpected hardships, or 'unalloyed horror' (Richards 192). Like numerous other fragments, the narrative here is one that focuses on the disintegration of a social unit. This is made clear to the reader in the second stanza, when the isolated speaker, Armyrn cries out, 'O moon! Show by intervals thy pale face! Bring to my mind that sad night, when all my children fell!' (22). Here is another example of

anthropomorphism emphasizing the isolated speaker's loneliness: the moon is a substitute for sympathetic ears, not to mention an incredible visual metaphor for the projecting of images onto a blank slate or mind, thus invoking the work of poetry. Or, perhaps, the 'pale face' of the moon is supposed to symbolize a blank leaf of paper, thus making Armyn's loneliness analogous to the private realm of reading and writing.

In any case, the unusual feature of this fragment is the very way it deals with the power of misrepresentation—particularly as the disintegration of Armyn's family is revealed to be the product of a deceit played out between his daughter, Daura, and Earch, the son of Odgal. 'Disguised like a son of the sea,' Earch convinces Daura that she should leave her native soil to join her lover on an island of plenty, so to speak, a 'rock not distant in the sea,' replete with glorious red fruit. Earch's description of the island is remarkable for invoking the promise of American settlement:

Lovely daughter of Armyn! A rock not distant in the sea, bears a tree on its side; red shines the fruit afar. There Armor waiteth for Daura. I came to fetch his love. (22)

The horror, of course, lay in Earch's deceitful misrepresentation of the island. Instead of plenty, Daura discovers an infertile rock and is left to fend for herself without shelter from the horrible storm:

Loud was the wind; and the rain beat hard on the side of the mountain. Before morning appeared, her voice was weak. It died away, like the evening-breeze among the grass of the rocks. Spent with grief she expired. (23)

Daura's fate predicts the fate of various Highlanders misled by advertisements heralding America as a land of promise. The point here is similar to the one made by John MacDonald, the lay leader of a settlement on St. John's Island, that 'the seeing and trying of any country produces a different effect from reading a description of it' (Bumsted 60). In fact, Daura's victimization is one that actually foreshadows the experience of settlers at St. John's Island, the apparent heartbreaking fact that 'advance talks of grain yields . . . had been exaggerated,' leaving many who were, to quote father James MacDonald, 'in a tolerable good condition before they left Scotland' on the 'brink of the greatest misery and poverty' (Bumsted 60).

In addition to this, Macpherson carefully juxtaposes the alluring 'fairness' of Earch's skiff—perhaps a reference to the spectacular, visual titillation of propaganda—with Armor's boat, an otherwise unremarkable vessel save for the fact that it sinks. Indeed, unlike Daura, Armor drowns while attempting to make the same overseas voyage. His 'boat is broken in twain by the waves' (22). He 'plunges into the sea, to rescue his Daura or die.' But 'sudden a blast from the hill come over the waves' (22). Thus, while Daura's horrific fate can be blamed on a misrepresentation—Earch's enticing propaganda—Macpherson's highlighting of Armor's tragic passage at sea merits consideration as propaganda designed to discourage emigration. Relying on yet another sublime representation to sway public sentiment, Macpherson represents the ocean as wildly unpredictable—a 'surgy deep'

(22)—leaving readers with a rather exaggerated impression of the dangers of the transatlantic passage. Again Macpherson relies on aggregate language to raise images in his readers' minds. This time the emphasis is laid on the ocean's sublime power to break boats. In *Fragment VIII* we find a similar image. Here the field of battle, specifically the clashing of Oscur's rigid body against Fingal's, is compared with the ocean's power to wreak havoc: 'Their bones crack as the boat on the ocean, when it leaps from wave to wave' (18).

Such compelling images act like contagion in spreading irrational fears of transatlantic passage and, of course, Highland depopulation. In other words, the tragedy depicted in *Fragment XI* is threefold: Daura falls prey to false advertising, Armor drowns while attempting to cross the 'great divide,' and Armin, the isolated speaker, is left to recollect these woeful transactions alone, the sole survivor of Highland depopulation.

4

Ultimately, then, Macpherson's achievement—an *advertise-mental* scripting of Scotland's future—primarily occurs as a twofold operation of emotional engagement. Providing two rather different surveys of the Highland landscape—one that is sociological, the other geographical—the *Fragments* appear to have been designed to elicit passions particular to the realization of a modern Scotland, that is, one allied harmoniously with the industry of England.

From a sociological standpoint, Macpherson's eye is foreboding. The demographic value of the isolated speaker cannot be underestimated: it is intended as an apocalyptic nightmare of utter loneliness (not unlike the opening scenes of Danny Boyle's recent horror film, '28 Days Later' [2003]), to raise widespread fear of depopulation. However, from a geographical standpoint, Macpherson can be seen as attempting to manipulate the reading public's perception of the Highlands with compelling images of a sublime landscape, ripe for development. The so-called hunter's removal or absence from the Highlands serves only to reinforce the landscape's innocence, its as-yet untapped potential to supply both the British Empire with valuable natural resources and perhaps even a burgeoning tourist industry with attractive representations of natural splendour. Macpherson's eye offers a radically new view of the Highlands—alive with a variety of energetic natural resources, replete with both aesthetic and commercial value—largely to counteract the impact of the American dream as represented by the enticing propaganda of land agents. And, to capture the power of this landscape most memorably, he relies on aggregate description and repetition of certain stock images—such as the 'rustling tree.' He acknowledges, in other words, the graphic potential of print culture, utilizing repetition to facilitate visualization.

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NOTES

¹ David Hume, quoted in Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson: Containing a Particular Account of His Famous Quarrel with Dr. Johnson, and a Sketch of the Origin and Influence of the Ossianic Poems*, 1894 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 92.

² Fiona J. Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: A Study of James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), 107.

³ James Macpherson, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, The Poems of Ossian and related works*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 9. Further citations will be parenthetical.

⁴ Various historians, including TM Devine, claim that the Highlands experienced an upsurge of emigration to America at this time, beginning in the 1760s and climaxing around 1775. For more information on this subject see Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War: The Social Transformation of the Scottish Highlands* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Devine, *The Scottish Nation: 1700–2000* (New York: Penguin, 2001); JM Bumsted, *The People's Clearance: Highland Emigration to British North America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992); and Eric Richards, *A History of the Highland Clearances, Volume 2: Emigration, Protest, Reasons* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).

⁵ Janet Sorensen, *The Grammar of Empire in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 33.

⁶ RA Houston, *Scottish Literacy and the Scottish Identity: Illiteracy and Society in Scotland and Northern England 1600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 78.

⁷ The minutes of the general meetings of the SSPCK, 1709–1837, quoted in Houston, *Scottish Literacy*, 79.

⁸ Benedict Anderson uses this phrase to describe how readers relate to one another in nationally imagined communities. In this essay the term is intended to emphasize the author's invisibility and corresponding reliance upon graphic language, from the woodcut to various concrete 'figures of speech,' to effect emotional responses in readers. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 44.

⁹ Henry Fielding, 'The Untruthfulness of Newswriters,' *The Craftsman No. 546* (18 December 1736).

¹⁰ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 1993), 33.

¹¹ For Hume this magic consists of the following, the conversion of the 'ideas of the affections of others' into the 'very impressions they represent.' Taussig, echoing Hume, refers to this as the copy's assumption of the character and power of the original. See David Hume, 'Book II: Of the Passions,' *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 275–454; Michael Taussig, *Mimesis*, xiii.

¹² Robert Macpherson, 'Advantages of the new flax-dressing machinery,' *Scots Magazine* (February 1766).

¹³ Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. Mary Lascelles (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 86.

¹⁴ Peter Williamson, 'An account and description of a reaping machine,' *Scots Magazine* (August 1762).

¹⁵ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *the medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2001), 26.

¹⁶ 'Medium,' *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Encyclopedic Edition in Two Volumes* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1964), 914.

¹⁷ Williamson, 'An account,' *Scots Magazine* (August 1762).

¹⁸ For a discussion of the traditional township's demise, see Devine, *Clanship*, 32–53.

¹⁹ See Anonymous, 'Memorial Of the Glasgow Highland Society,' *Scots Magazine* (Edinburgh: January 1760).

²⁰ John Dwyer, 'The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the Poems of Ossian,' *Ossian Revisited*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1991), 170.

²¹ Adam Potkay reveals how this question of mourning and the domestic woman lends itself to Macpherson's Ossianic confusion of gender roles, his infusing of men with feminine affections, in Chapter 5 of his book, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,

1994), 189–225. The question I raise here is concerned not with the cultivation of so-called ‘feminine’ sensibilities, but rather Macpherson’s use of the mourning woman to foreshadow family disaster and thus instill fear.

²² Apparently, Pitt’s plan proved so successful that, according to Devine, ‘recruitment multiplied to extraordinary levels during the Napoleonic Wars when, on one estimate, the Highlands supplied around 74,000 men for regiments of the line.’ Devine, *Scottish*, 184–85.

²³ The indices of the *Scots Magazine*, from 1760 to 1770, reveal how the prospect of settlement in America boomed in the collective imagination of Scottish readers. By the decade’s end, no subject looms larger than ‘affairs in America,’ save for the index to new books.

²⁴ Anonymous, ‘Proceedings in relation to North Briton, No. 45,’ *Scots Magazine* (Nov. 1763).

²⁵ Anonymous, ‘Affairs in Portugal and the Plantations,’ *Scots Magazine* (May 1763).

²⁶ It is worth noting that ‘investors’ were reacting to figments of their imagination—that proponents and opponents of Highland emigration to America fought over the fictional enterprise of Scotland’s future. That is, the number of persons to emigrate in the 1760s was by no means sufficient to generate a legitimate fear of depopulation. What struck rulers as so frightening was that the nature of emigration had changed to become more organized and or systematic.

²⁷ I use the term ‘gothic’ somewhat loosely, to describe a literature, not unlike the American news media of the 21st century, oriented towards the cultivation of fear.

²⁸ Only three of the sixteen fragments rely on such a format. These are fragments I, IV and XV.

²⁹ Lord Henry Home Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 1762 (New York: Garland, 1972), 2: 230–33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Governor George Johnstone, ‘Affairs in North America,’ *Scots Magazine* (February 1765).

³² I have found little information detailing Macpherson’s service in Florida. Saunders mentions that he was absent from Britain for nearly two years, but spent only a ‘portion’ of this time in Florida, ‘for he soon quarrelled with his chief [Johnstone], and departed on a visit to some of the other provinces,’ including the West Indies. Saunders, *Life*, 213. Robin Fabel, in *Bombast and Broadsides: The Lives of George Johnstone*, mentions only that it was Johnstone who found Macpherson this employment. See Robin F. A. Fabel, *Bombast and Broadsides* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 27.

³³ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 149.

³⁴ For an excellent discussion of the psycho-dynamics of oral culture, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1999), 31–77.

³⁵ Cohen argues that ideas at the ‘ideological pole’ are too abstract to induce a person to take political action, that ‘it is only when [a person] is emotional agitated . . . that he [she] will be moved to action.’ See Abner Cohen, ‘Symbolic Action and the Structure of the Self,’ *Symbols and Sentiments: Cross-Cultural Studies in Symbolism*, ed. Ioan Lewis (London: 1977), 121.

³⁶ See Richards, *History*, 179–200.

³⁷ Over the course of the eighteenth century there is marked transformation in travel writing on Scotland. Consider Edward Burt’s ethnocentric *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland* (written in the mid-1720s, but published in 1754), Thomas Pennant’s highly popular *Tour* of 1769, and Thomas Thornton’s representation of the Highlands as a ‘sportsman’s paradise’ in 1804. Within this relatively short period readers witness the Highlands transformed for the sake of a burgeoning tourist industry. See A.J. Youngson, *Beyond the Highland Line: Three Journals of Travel in Eighteenth Century Scotland, Burt, Pennant, Thornton* (London: Collins, 1974).