

**BYRON AND KAREL HYNEK MÁCHA:  
USES OF OSSIAN AND SUBVERSIONS OF OSSIANISM**

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**ABSTRACT**

The article contrasts Byron's use of Ossianic themes and style with Romantic Ossianism in the work of the leading Czech Romantic Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1836). Although Byron's uses of Ossianic material seem restricted to his "juvenile" poetry (*Hours of Idleness*), it has been argued that features of Ossian poems are employed in Byron's later work. The analysis of Byron's uses of Ossianic material will show their affinity with Romantic Ossianism, especially in proto-existentialist terms, but also in view of hybridization of genres and styles (amalgamating a minuscule story of Ryno and Orla in the fifth book of *Fingal* with the Classical story of Nisus and Euryalus in the *Aeneid*). In the work of Karel Hynek Mácha, often described as the most important Czech follower of Byron, these features are strengthened in contact with a popular form of German Ossianism (Ernst Christoph von Houwald's tale *Madness and Death*) and also in resistance to dogmatic aspects of Czech nationalist ideology. In Mácha's poetry and prose fragments the juvenile features of his Ossianism (analogous to those of Byron) are overcome. Ossianic symbols (the stringless harp, the blind harpist) are used both "against the grain," to deconstruct the nationalist ideology of the Czech "revival" or "resurrection," and creatively – in Mácha's figurative language articulating the tragic temporality of individual and collective existence.

**Keywords:** Lord Byron; Karel Hynek Mácha; James Macpherson; Ossian; Ossianism; Romanticism; genre; style; nationalism; ideology; cycles of history

This article contrasts Byron's early uses of Ossianic themes, imagery and style with the Romantic Ossianism in the work of the leading Czech Romantic Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1836). The sublime qualities of Macpherson's imagination, both of natural environment and of the distant past, had a powerful influence on both authors.

In spite of Byron's complaints about "turgid and bombastic diction" in "some parts" of the Ossian poems (Byron 1980a: 375, note 130 to "The Death of Calmar and Orla"), his imitations reveal a strong spell of the Ossianic sublime connected mostly with visual effects of natural and supernatural forces. Nonetheless, while Macpherson's English mostly keeps within the boundaries of period usage, Byron attempts to escalate the emotional expression to the limits of the sensible and even imaginable. In one of his Ossianic

imitations, the “dark Ghost” of a warrior “gleams on the red streams of tempests” and “[h]is voice rolls on the thunder” (Byron 1980a: 115, “The Death of Calmar and Orla,” lines 120–2). The ambiguity of the word “gleam” (both “bright flash of light” and “brief or dim indication or appearance” gives unusual power to Byron’s synaesthetic metaphor, in which a glimpse of an emerging dark spectre seems to reflect the bright flash of red lightning and its voice assumes the rolling sound of thunder. In contrast to Macpherson, who always clearly distinguishes between different meanings of “gleam”, using qualifiers like “bright” or “dim” or even explaining less typical uses of the verb, such as in the passage “spirits gleamed, at times, with their half-finished forms” (Macpherson 1996: 283; *Temora*, Book VII), Byron’s sublime diction can be said to transform the reader’s consciousness, opening it to non-representable percepts, whose intensity may well gain the momentum of madness.

Byron’s Czech follower Mácha is mostly influenced by Macpherson’s German epigones, whose clichés (especially that of the “mad blind harpist”) he uses expressively, under the influence of Polish Romantic Messianism, to voice his despair at the condition of his oppressed homeland: “I stood insane on a lonely peak / [...] / ‘My father does not hear, and my mother is dying!’” (Mácha 1959: 236).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Mácha treats the popular German representations of Ossian ironically, subverting Romantic dreams of the heroic past, as in this manuscript fragment: “A blind harpist at Kamýk Castle in the country of his youth. Even the loveliest dream does not please when dreamt as a mere dream. – A child plays with the same knife which cut it; so do I” (Mácha 1972: 235).<sup>2</sup> While Byron’s poetry develops the creative potential of Macpherson’s imagination to the limits of madness, Mácha transforms the “mad harpist” produced by Macpherson’s epigones into a subversive and self-alienating figure, which foreshadows Existentialist despair, described a decade later by Søren Kierkegaard.

Unlike Mácha’s lifelong attachment to Ossian as a symbol of Romantic madness, self-alienation and ultimate loss of the past, Byron’s Ossianism seems almost entirely restricted to his juvenile poetry (especially to *Hours of Idleness*). Nonetheless, it can hardly be disregarded or dismissed, as Henry Brougham did (anonymously) in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1808, which provoked Byron to write *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*:

If, then, the following beginning of a “Song of bards,” is by his Lordship, we venture to object to it, as far as we can comprehend it. [...] of this kind of thing there are no less than nine pages; and we can so far venture an opinion in their favour, that they look very like Macpherson; and we are positive they are pretty nearly as stupid and tiresome. (Brougham 1808: 288)

In the part of his review dedicated to Byron’s Ossian imitations, Brougham focuses on the same passage that I have discussed earlier and also on the already mentioned features of Byron’s style: its unusual intensity and inventiveness, attacking the limits of the imaginable. He illustrates this by a metaphor which goes beyond the anthropomorphic

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<sup>1</sup> Karel Hynek Mácha, “Hoj to byla noc!” (Ah, what a night!) (Mácha 1959: 236). All English translations from Mácha are my own.

<sup>2</sup> A fragment from Mácha’s MS *Zápisník* (*Notebook*, 1833–1834).

imagination: “to smile through the tears of the storm” (Byron 1980a: 116, “The Death of Calmar and Orla,” line 130).

In spite of Brougham’s severe dismissal, Byron’s Ossianism was further mentioned and discussed. First by John Galt, who in his *Life of Lord Byron* (1830) chose to quote the already discussed passage of Brougham’s review. Later, at the turn of the twentieth century, Ossian’s importance for English and European Romanticism was explored by William Lyon Phelps. In his comparative approach Phelps emphasized the expressive power of Macpherson’s rhetoric: “[i]ts wildness, melancholy, sublimity – entire disregard of conventionality” breaking “fetters both of thought and of language” (Phelps 1904: 153). Highlighting Byron’s Ossianism along with that of Chateaubriand and Goethe, particularly in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, he pointed out an important influence of Macpherson’s poetry on the “sublimity of sentiment” (Phelps 1904: 152) in which – according to Byron’s manuscript note in the 1806 edition of *Ossian* – the ancient Scottish bard is equal to Homer. Phelps’ most important, although reductive, statement makes a direct link between Ossian’s poetry and “subjective Romanticism, which culminated in England in the poet Byron” (1904: 152).

In a more recent approach, R. R. Agrawal notices the mediatory role of Ossian poems in the shaping of the sublime and Gothic features of Byron’s poetry and points out that Macpherson’s poetry, supported by Byron’s reading of Chateaubriand, Sénacour and Goethe, was one of the major influences on Byron’s principal works and in particular on the dark heroes of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, the epic tales and *Manfred*. And he coincides with Phelps’ approach in asserting the importance of the “Ossian feeling” which is “constantly manifest” in Byron’s poetry (Agrawal 1990: 189).

Reading Byron’s Ossianic poetry in this light, I can claim that Macpherson’s influence goes far beyond affecting the Sentimental and Gothic features of Byron’s imagery and style pointed out by Phelps and Agrawal. It can be said to trigger the process of generic and stylistic hybridization typical not only of Byron’s works but of Romanticism in its entirety. It can be argued that even the slighted juvenile poems in *Hours of Idleness* reveal what David Duff has described as “the irreconcilable tension between opposed artistic values and conflicting perceptions of time” (Duff 2009: 136). Rather than pointing to the collapse of the genre system often ascribed to Romanticism, this tension marks the beginning of a significant transformative moment, in which traditional genres, such as the heroic epic, ode, eclogue, elegy or even sonnet are not only subjectivized but also reshaped to form a new genre system characterized by multiple forms and functions of individual genres (e.g., Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” is a synthesis of a Pindaric ode and a sonnet) and their tension in individual works, thus also forming a new consciousness of literature and its uses (Duff 2009: 1–20; 206–211).

The conditions of this Romantic genre transformation can be traced back to the latter half of the eighteenth century. In 1762 Richard Hurd, Bishop of Worcester, published his *Critical Dissertations* as part of his Latin edition of Horace’s epistles, including *Ad Pisones (Ars Poetica)* and *Ad Augustum*. In *Dissertations* “On Poetical Imitation” and “On the Marks of Imitation” Hurd maintains that “imitation [...] does not exclude the exercise of [...] invention” which can improve the original. In this way, metaphors of an “excellent poet” can be turned “to another purpose” in a different culture (“nation”) (Hurd 1811: 232–271). And Malcolm Laing points out in his famous “Preface” to the 1805 edition of

the Ossian Poems that “in Ossian, there are some hundred similes and poetical images, which must either be original, or derived from imitation” (Laing 1805: vi). He later claims that the Ossianic imagery is “derived from the classics, scriptures and modern poetry” (Laing 1805: vii). In brief, the Ossian controversy, in which Laing’s edition and its preface played a major part, may now be seen in a different perspective, showing the seemingly rigid Neo-classical notions of imitation and invention open a new creative space for both Macpherson and Byron in *Hours of Idleness*. The most important features of imitation combined with invention will now be traced in Byron’s Ossianic poems included in *Hours of Idleness*. I will also attempt to demonstrate the impact of Byron’s early Ossianism on his major later works.

One of the longest Ossianic poems in *Hours of Idleness* is “The Death of Calmar and Orla: An Imitation of Macpherson’s ‘Ossian.’” Here Byron works very freely with the text of Macpherson’s epic *Fingal*. He completely changes the character and the story of Calmar, linking him with a minuscule story of Ryno and Orla in the fifth book of *Fingal*. More importantly, he amalgamates this yarn with a classical story of the warrior friendship of Nisus and Euryalus in Book IX of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In this way a new, transgeneric and transcultural work emerges: heroic epic is synthesized with elegy and so are the values of friendship and heroism in Antiquity with the modern invention of old Celtic culture.

Byron’s poem in prose is an attempt to radically change the traditional, normative approach to imitation (i.e. poets imitate “beautiful nature” – *la belle nature*, which exists only in the works of the Ancient Greeks and Romans<sup>3</sup>) transforming Macpherson’s expressive language. His transformation mainly develops varied rhythms of short, almost bare sentences and clusters of metaphors. Byron’s phrase “soft was the flow of his yellow locks: they streamed like the meteor of the night” (Byron 1980a: 112, “The Death of Calmar and Orla,” lines 11–12) transforms and expands the sublime metaphor of the chief’s sword in the Fifth Canto of *Fingal*: “his sword is before him as a sun-beam, terrible as the streaming meteor of night” (Macpherson 1996: 92). Byron’s expressive imagery is produced by techniques analogical to those of musical modulation, a change from one key to another, generated by the polysemy of the word “meteor,” meaning both “shooting star” and “aurora borealis.”

Byron’s Virgilian travesty can also be seen in the context of Scottish nationalism: the universal values of Antiquity are appropriated for the benefit of Scottish culture and nationalist construction of history. Byron’s poem emphasizes, to a much greater extent than *Fingal*, the absence of Cúchulainn, the ancient Irish hero, thus transforming the adapted Classical story into a celebration of Scottish heroism.

Another poem in *Hours of Idleness*, “Ossian’s Address to the Sun in ‘Carthon,’” reveals the importance of Macpherson’s poetry for Byron’s later works. The major theme of Carthon, the tragic conflict between father and son, is a prominent feature of Byron’s oeuvre, dominant in *Parisina*, the discarded drama *Ulric and Ilvina*, the Venetian play *The Two Foscari* and the late tragedy *Werner*. In formal terms, Macpherson’s powerful anthropomorphic imagery – e.g. “[mist] came, in the figure of an aged man, along the silent plain” (Macpherson 1996: 129) – often transcends traditional heroic similes, comparing human

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<sup>3</sup> “[L]e vrai qui peut être, le beau vrai, qui est représenté comme s’il existoit réellement, et avec toutes les perfections qu’il peut recevoir” (Batteux 1746: 27).

heroism with the power of natural forces: “Who comes so dark from ocean’s roar, like autumn’s shadowy cloud? Death is trembling in his hand! his eyes are flaming fire! – Who roars along dark Lora’s heath? Who but Carthon, king of swords?” (Macpherson 1996: 133). The impact of this transcendence can be seen not only in “Ossian’s Address” – for instance “Thy face, O Sun, no rolling blasts deform, / Thou look’st from clouds and laughest at the Storm” (Byron 1980a: 4, lines 19–20) – but also in Byron’s *Manfred*, both in the initial scene, where the spirits of the elements appear, and in the “Hymn of the Spirits” to Arimanes, where Macpherson’s sublime is intensified and expanded to cosmic dimensions:

He breatheth, and a tempest shakes the sea –  
He speaketh – and the clouds reply in thunder –  
He gazeth – from his glance the sunbeams flee;  
He moveth – earthquakes rend the world asunder.  
(Byron 1986: 81; *Manfred* 2.4.5–12)

The thematic structure of the poem is based on the tension between the sun as a figure of supreme authority and the impermanence of the star, whose life will repeat the life cycle of Ossian. Developing this imagery in *Manfred*, Byron follows the course of Macpherson’s poetry, but transcends its limits given by the cyclic natural time, moving towards the cyclical nature of historical time (symbolized by the image of the Colosseum in the opening monologue of the final scene of the third act in *Manfred*, 3.4.1–40, which is also prominent in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* IV) and its implications for individual existence.

The last poem from *Hours of Idleness* discussed here is the “Elegy on Newstead Abbey.” Already its epigraph from “Oina-Morul” emphasizes the shift from sublimity and cyclic existence of nature (evoked by the verb “roll” used by Macpherson also for the sound of thunder) to that of historic memory: “It is the voice of years that are gone: they roll before me, with all their deeds” (Macpherson 1996: 323). It is most likely that Byron read the following comment on this passage in Hugh Blair’s “Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian” included in his edition: “under this true poetic inspiration, giving vent to his [Ossian’s] genius, no wonder we should so often hear, and acknowledge in its strains the powerful and ever-pleasing voice of nature” (Macpherson 1996: 356). Whereas Blair emphasizes the divine power of nature underlying Ossian’s poetic inspiration (further quoting the lines from Ovid’s *Fasti* 6: “Est Deus in nobis, agitante calescimur illo” – “there is a god in us, when he stirs, he sets us aglow”; Macpherson 1996: 356), Byron’s poem uses Macpherson’s epigraph to accentuate the themes of the lapse of time, memory and history. Praising the ruinous building of the Abbey,

Yet he prefers thee, to the gilded domes,  
Or gewgaw grottos, of the vainly great;  
(Byron 1980a: 110; “Elegy on Newstead Abbey,” lines 149–150)

the “Elegy” anticipates the famous reflection on Roman ruins in *Childe Harold* IV:

Admire – Exult – despise – laugh – weep – for here  
 There is such matter for all feeling – Man!  
 Thou Pendulum betwixt a smile and tear,  
 Ages and realms are crowded in this span,  
 This mountain, whose obliterated plan  
 The Pyramid of Empires pinnacled,  
 Of Glory’s gewgaws shining in the van  
 Till the Sun’s rays with added flame were filled!  
 Where are its golden Roofs? where those who dared to build?  
 (Byron 1980b: 160; *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* IV, 109, lines 973–981)

In contrast to Ossian’s world, which is safely framed by the vegetative power of nature, expressed in the final line of “Berrathon,” or “*Ossian’s last hymn*”: “my fame shall remain and grow like the oak of Morven; which lifts its broad head to the storm, and rejoices in the course of the wind” (Macpherson 1996: 472; 198), Byron’s microcosm of Newstead is devastated by raging cycles of violence which do not seem to stop:

Time steals along, and Death uprears his dart;  
 Another Chief impels the foaming steed,  
 Another Crowd pursue the panting hart.  
 (Byron 1980a: 109; “Elegy on Newstead Abbey,” lines 134–7)

In the same way, but without the hope in the “meridian ray” of the future sun, the cycles of violence in global history are represented in the Colosseum stanzas of the fourth canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*:

And thus they plod in sluggish misery,  
 Rotting from sire to son and age to age,  
 Proud of their trampled nature and so die,  
 Bequeathing their hereditary rage  
 To the new race of inborn slaves, who wage  
 War for their chains, rather than be free,  
 Bleed gladiator-like, and still engage  
 Within the same arena where they see  
 Their fellows fall before, like leaves on the same tree.  
 (Byron 1980b: 157; *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* IV, 94, lines 838–846)

Departing from the Ossianic sublime, Byron’s poetry here plunges headlong into the maddening vision of the absurdity of history, from which there is no escape but in individual strategies of survival.

Leaving Byron’s poetry in the lower depths of despair, let us move to the poetry of his Czech Romantic follower. Mácha’s poetic reflections start where Byron’s Ossianic musings end. The proto-Existentialist features of Mácha’s poetry are nurtured by a popular form of German Ossianism, especially the tale “*Wahnsinn und Tod*” (Madness and Death, 1826) by Ernst Christoph von Houwald (1778–1845). In Mácha’s poetry and prose fragments, the clichés of German imitators of Macpherson, namely the stringless harp, the mad blind harpist and the ruinous ancestral hall are transformed into the

dynamic metaphors of *oxymora*. These ironic figures of speech express the temporality of human existence (both individual and collective) and the loss of historical memory:

The tone of the broken harp, the sound of torn strings,  
[...]  
This is the beautiful childish time of the dead.  
(Mácha 1959: 45)

I am silent as a stringless harp  
Hanging in the vault of departed fathers.  
(Mácha 1959: 191)

Mácha uses these radically transformed Ossianic figures either against the grain, to deconstruct the ideology and major values of Romantic nationalism (the ancient past or the emancipation of the nation represented as the Resurrection), or creatively, to articulate the tragic temporality of individual existence and national history.

The major aim of Mácha's Ossianism is to deconstruct the Romantic ideology of Czech nationalism based on forged medieval manuscripts (*The Manuscript of Dvůr Králové*, 1817, and *The Manuscript of Zelená Hora*, 1818) and imitating, as well as developing, thematic and stylistic features of the Ossian poems. *The Manuscripts* contain historical narratives invented to suit the demands of the nationalist movement. These were presented by nationalists as products of a collective oral tradition and, at the same time, as representations of the wholeness and creative nature of an imaginary ancient Czech language constructed out of disjointed elements of all Slavonic languages. *The Manuscripts* were also used as evidence of the territorial integrity of the Czech state and as the tools of appropriation of historical space by means of linguistic activity.

Responding to this cultural and political manipulation, Mácha repeats the Ossianic clichés adopted by the nationalists "in order to produce a difference." The ideological statements, which were accepted as "natural" by his contemporaries, are "dissolved and reassembled polemically" (Said 1983: 124). Mácha's poetry thus appeals to the active forces of individual and collective memory and succeeds in repossessing history as a fundamental discontinuity. This gesture may be seen as an effort to open a passage beyond the limits of Ossianic madness and Byronic absurdity of history.

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## BYRON A KAREL HYNEK MÁCHA – VYUŽITÍ OSSIANOVSKÉ POEZIE A SUBVERZE OSSIANISMU

### Resumé

Článek kontrastuje vliv ossianovské tematiky a stylu s romantickým ossianismem v díle vedoucího českého romantika Karla Hynka Máchy. Ačkoli se může zdát, že se užití ossianovského materiálu omezuje na Byronovy básnické juvenilie (sbírku *Hodiny zahálky*), někteří badatelé poukazují na to, že rysy Ossianových básní lze nalézt i ve zralém Byronově díle. Rozbor Byronova užití ossianovského materiálu ukazuje na blízkost k romantickému ossianismu, zejména z protoexistencialistického hlediska, ale také vzhledem k hybridizaci žánrů a stylů (např. syntéza drobného příběhu Ryna a Orly z páté knihy eposu *Fingal* s klasickým příběhem o Nisovi a Euryalovi z Vergiliový *Aeneidy*). V díle Karla Hynka Máchy, často označovaného jako nejdůležitější český Byronův následovatel, se tyto rysy zesilují zejména díky kontaktu s populárním ossianismem v díle Ernsta Christopa von Houwalda (např. v jeho povídce *Šílenství a smrt*) a také v odporu k dogmatickým stránkám ideologie českého nacionalismu. V Máchově zralé poezii a prozaických zlomcích je patrné překonávání juvenilních rysů jeho osianismu. Ossianovské symboly („harfa bezestrunná“, „slepý harfeník“) slouží buď k dekonstrukci nacionalistické ideologie českého obrození, nebo jsou využity tvůrčím způsobem k vyjádření tragické časovosti individuální a kolektivní existence.

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