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Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem, In Six Books

Macpherson, James

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Berrathon: A Poem.

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B E R R A T H O N :

A P O E M *.

BEND thy blue course, O stream, round the narrow plain of Lutha †. Let the green woods hang over it from their mountains: and the sun look on it at noon. The thistle is there on its rock, and shakes its beard to the wind. The flower hangs its heavy head, waying, at times, to the gale. Why dost thou awake me, O gale, it seems to say, I am covered with the drops of heaven? The time
of

* This poem is reputed to have been composed by Ossian, a little time before his death; and consequently it is known in tradition by no other name than *Ossian's last hymn*. The translator has taken the liberty to call it *Berrathon*, from the episode concerning the re-establishment of Larthmor king of that island, after he had been dethroned by his own son Uthal. Fingal in his voyage to Lochlin [Fing. B. III.] whither he had been invited by Starno the father of Agandecca, so often mentioned in Ossian's poems, touched at Berrathon, an island of Scandinavia, where he was kindly entertained by Larthmor the petty king of the place, who was a vassal of the supreme kings of Lochlin. The hospitality of Larthmor gained him Fingal's friendship, which

that hero manifested, after the imprisonment of Larthmor by his own son, by sending Ossian and Toscar, the father of Malvina so often mentioned, to rescue Larthmor, and to punish the unnatural behaviour of Uthal. Uthal was handsome to a proverb, and consequently much admired by the ladies. Nina-thoma the beautiful daughter of Torthoma, a neighbouring prince, fell in love and fled with him. He proved unconstant; for another lady, whose name is not mentioned, gaining his affections, he confined Nina-thoma to a desert island near the coast of Berrathon. She was relieved by Ossian, who, in company with Toscar, landing on Berrathon, defeated the forces of Uthal, and killed him in a single combat. Nina-thoma, whose love not all the bad behaviour



of my fading is near, and the blast that shall scatter my leaves. Tomorrow shall the traveller come, he that saw me in my beauty shall come; his eyes will search the field, but they will not find me?—So shall they search in vain, for the voice of Cona, after it has failed in the field. The hunter shall come forth in the morning, and the voice of my harp shall not be heard. “Where is the son of carborne Fingal?” The tear will be on his cheek.

THEN come thou, O Malvina †, with all thy music, come; lay Ossian in the plain of Lutha: let his tomb rise in the lovely field.—Malvina! where art thou, with thy songs: with the soft sound of thy steps?—Son || of Alpin art thou near? where is the daughter of Toscar?

I PASSED, O son of Fingal, by Tar-lutha's mossy walls. The smoke of the hall was ceased: silence was among the trees of the

of Uthal could erase, hearing of his death, died of grief. In the mean time Larthmor is restored, and Ossian and Toscar returned in triumph to Fingal.

The present poem opens with an elegy on the death of Malvina the daughter of Toscar, and closes with presages of the poet's death. It is almost altogether in a lyric measure, and has that melancholy air which distinguishes the remains of the works of Ossian. If ever he composed any thing of a merry turn it is long since lost. The serious and melancholy make the most lasting impressions on the human mind, and bid fairest for being transmitted from generation to generation by tradition. Nor is it probable that Ossian dealt much in cheerful composition. Melancholy is so much the companion of a great genius,

that it is difficult to separate the idea of levity from cheerfulness, which is sometimes the mark of an amiable disposition, but never the characteristic of elevated parts.

† Lutha, *swift stream*. It is impossible, at this distance of time, to ascertain where the scene here described lies. Tradition is silent on that head, and there is nothing in the poem from which a conjecture can be drawn.

‡ Mal mhina, *soft or love's brow*. *Mh* in the Galic language has the same sound with *v* in English.

|| Tradition has not handed down the name of this son of Alpin. His father was one of Fingal's principal bards, and he appears himself to have had a poetical genius.

hill.

hill. The voice of the chace was over. I saw the daughters of the bow. I asked about Malvina, but they answered not. They turned their faces away: thin darkness covered their beauty. They were like stars, on a rainy hill, by night, each looking faintly through her mist.

PLEASANT * be thy rest, O lovely beam! soon hast thou set on our hills! The steps of thy departure were stately, like the moon on the blue, trembling wave. But thou hast left us in darkness, first of the maids of Lutha! We sit, at the rock, and there is no voice; no light but the meteor of fire! Soon hast thou set, Malvina, daughter of generous Toscar!

BUT thou risest like the beam of the east, among the spirits of thy friends, where they sit in their stormy halls, the chambers of the thunder.—A cloud hovers over Cona: its blue curling sides are high. The winds are beneath it, with their wings; within it is the dwelling † of Fingal. There the hero sits in darkness; his airy spear is in his hand. His shield half covered with clouds, is like the darkened moon; when one half still remains in the wave, and the other looks sickly on the field.

HIS friends sit around the king, on mist; and hear the songs of Ullin: he strikes the half-viewless harp; and raises the feeble voice. The lesser heroes, with a thousand meteors, light the airy hall.

* Ossian speaks. He calls Malvina a beam of light, and continues the metaphor throughout the paragraph. to pursue, after death, the pleasures and employments of their former life. The situation of Ossian's heroes, in their separate state, if not entirely happy, is more agreeable, than the notions of the antient Greeks concerning their departed heroes.

† The description of this ideal palace of Fingal is very poetical, and agreeable to the notions of those times, concerning the state of the deceased, who were supposed See Hom. Odyss. l. 11.



Malvina rises, in the midst; a blush is on her cheek. She beholds the unknown faces of her fathers, and turns aside her humid eyes.

ART thou come so soon, said Fingal, daughter of generous Toscar? Sadness dwells in the halls of Lutha. My aged son* is sad. I hear the breeze of Cona, that was wont to lift thy heavy locks. It comes to the hall, but thou art not there; its voice is mournful among the arms of thy fathers. Go with thy rustling wing, O breeze! and sigh on Malvina's tomb. It rises yonder beneath the rock, at the blue stream of Lutha. The maids † are departed to their place; and thou alone, O breeze, mournest there.

BUT who comes from the dusky west, supported on a cloud? A smile is on his gray, watry face; his locks of mist fly on the wind: he bends forward on his airy spear: it is thy father, Malvina! Why shinest thou, so soon, on our clouds, he says, O lovely light of Lutha!—But thou wert sad, my daughter, for thy friends were passed away. The sons of little men ‡ were in the hall; and none remained of the heroes, but Ossian king of spears.

AND dost thou remember Ossian, car-borne Toscar || son of Conloch? The battles of our youth were many; our swords went together to the field. They saw us coming like two falling rocks;

* Ossian; who had a great friendship for Malvina, both on account of her love for his son Oscar, and her attention to his own poems.

† That is, the young virgins who sung the funeral elegy over her tomb.

‡ Ossian, by way of disrespect, calls those, who succeeded the heroes whose actions he celebrates, *the sons of little men*. Tradition is entirely silent concerning what passed in

the north, immediately after the death of Fingal and all his heroes; but it appears from that term of ignominy just mentioned, that the actions of their successors were not to be compared to those of the renowned Fingalians.

|| Toscar was the son of that Conloch, who was also father to the lady, whose unfortunate death is related in the last episode of the second book of Fingal.



and the sons of the stranger fled. There come the warriors of Cona, they said; their steps are in the paths of the vanquished.

DRAW near, son of Alpin, to the song of the aged. The actions of other times are in my soul: my memory beams on the days that are past. On the days of the mighty Toscar, when our path was in the deep. Draw near, son of Alpin, to the last sound * of the voice of Cona.

THE king of Morven commanded, and I raised my sails to the wind. Toscar chief of Lutha stood at my side, as I rose on the dark-blue wave. Our course was to sea-surrounded Berrathon †, the isle of many storms. There dwelt, with his locks of age, the stately strength of Larthmor. Larthmor who spread the feast of shells to Comhal's mighty son, when he went to Starno's halls, in the days of Agandecca. But when the chief was old, the pride of his son arose, the pride of fair-haired Uthal, the love of a thousand maids. He bound the aged Larthmor, and dwelt in his founding halls.

LONG pined the king in his cave, beside his rolling sea. Day did not come to his dwelling; nor the burning oak by night. But the wind of ocean was there, and the parting beam of the moon. The red star looked on the king, when it trembled on the western wave. Snitho came to Selma's hall: Snitho companion of Larthmor's youth. He told of the king of Berrathon: the wrath of Fingal rose. Thrice he assumed the spear, resolved to stretch his hand to

* Ossian seems to intimate by this expression, that this poem was the last of his composition; so that there is some foundation for the traditional title of *the last hymn of Ossian*.

† Barrathón, a promontory in the midst of waves. The poet gives it the epithet of sea-surrounded, to prevent its being taken for a peninsula in the literal sense.

Uthal.



Uthal. But the memory * of his actions rose before the king, and he sent his son and Toscar. Our joy was great on the rolling sea; and we often half-unsheathed our swords †. For never before had we fought alone, in the battles of the spear. Night came down on the ocean; the winds departed on their wings. Cold and pale is the moon. The red stars lift their heads. Our course is slow along the coast of Berrathon; the white waves tumble on the rocks.

WHAT voice is that, said Toscar, which comes between the sounds of the waves? It is soft but mournful, like the voice of departed bards. But I behold the maid ‡, she sits on the rock alone. Her head bends on her arm of snow: her dark hair is in the wind. Hear, son of Fingal, her song, it is smooth as the gliding waters of Lavath.—We came to the silent bay, and heard the maid of night.

How long will ye roll around me, blue-tumbling waters of ocean? My dwelling was not always in caves, nor beneath the whistling tree. The feast was spread in Torthóma's hall; my father delighted in my voice. The youths beheld me in the steps of my loveliness, and they blessed the dark-haired Nina-thoma. It was then thou didst come, O Uthal! like the sun of heaven. The souls of

* The meaning of the poet is, that Fingal remembered his own great actions, and consequently would not fully them by engaging in a petty war against Uthal, who was so far his inferior in valour and power.

† The impatience of a young warrior, going on their first expedition, is well marked by their half-drawing their swords. The modesty of Ossian, in his narration of a story which does him so much honour, is

remarkable; and his humanity to Nina-thoma would grace a hero of our own polished age. Though Ossian passes over his own actions in silence, or slightly mentions them; tradition has done ample justice to his martial fame, and perhaps has exaggerated the actions of the poet beyond the bounds of credibility.

‡ Nina-thoma the daughter of Torthóma, who had been confined to a desert island by her lover Uthal.

the



the virgins are thine, son of generous Larthmor ! But why dost thou leave me alone in the midst of roaring waters. Was my soul dark with thy death ? Did my white hand lift the sword ? Why then hast thou left me alone, king of high Finthormo * !

THE tear started from my eye, when I heard the voice of the maid. I stood before her in my arms, and spoke the words of peace.—Lovely dweller of the cave, what sigh is in that breast ? Shall Ossian lift his sword in thy presence, the destruction of thy foes ?—Daughter of Torthóma, rise, I have heard the words of thy grief. The race of Morven are around thee, who never injured the weak. Come to our dark-bosomed ship, thou brighter than that setting moon. Our course is to the rocky Berrathon, to the echoing walls of Finthormo.—She came in her beauty, she came with all her lovely steps. Silent joy brightened in her face, as when the shadows fly from the field of spring ; the blue-stream is rolling in brightness, and the green bush bends over its course.

THE morning rose with its beams. We came to Rothma's bay. A boar rushed from the wood ; my spear pierced his side. I rejoiced over the blood †, and foresaw my growing fame.—But now the sound of Uthal's train came from the high Finthormo ; they spread over the heath to the chace of the boar. Himself comes slowly on, in the pride of his strength. He lifts two pointed spears. On his side is the hero's sword. Three youths carry his polished

* Finthormo, the palace of Uthal. The names in this episode are not of a Celtic original ; which makes it probable that Ossian sounds his poem on a true story.

† Ossian thought that his killing the boar, on his first landing in Berrathon, was a good omen of his future success in that island. The present highlanders look, with a degree of superstition, upon the success of their first action, after they have engaged in any desperate undertaking.



bows : the bounding of five dogs is before him. His heroes move on, at a distance, admiring the steps of the king. Stately was the son of Larthmor ! but his soul was dark. Dark as the troubled face of the moon, when it foretels the storms.

WE rose on the heath before the king ; he stopt in the midst of his course. His heroes gathered around, and a gray-haired bard advanced. Whence are the sons of the strangers ! begun the bard of the song ; the children of the unhappy come to Berrathon ; to the sword of car-borne Uthal. He spreads no feast in his hall : the blood of strangers is on his streams. If from Selma's walls ye come, from the mossy walls of Fingal, chuse three youths to go to your king to tell of the fall of his people. Perhaps the hero may come and pour his blood on Uthal's sword ; so shall the fame of Finthormo arise, like the growing tree of the vale.

NEVER will it rise, O bard, I said in the pride of my wrath. He would shrink in the presence of Fingal, whose eyes are the flames of death. The son of Comhal comes, and the kings vanish in his presence ; they are rolled together, like mist, by the breath of his rage. Shall three tell to Fingal, that his people fell ? Yes !—they may tell it, bard ! but his people shall fall with fame.

I STOOD in the darkness of my strength ; Toscar drew his sword at my side. The foe came on like a stream : the mingled sound of death arose. Man took man, shield met shield ; steel mixed its beams with steel.—Darts hiss through air ; spears ring on mails ; and swords on broken bucklers bound. As the noise of an aged grove beneath the roaring wind, when a thousand ghosts break the trees by night, such was the din of arms.—But Uthal fell beneath my sword ; and the sons of Berrathon fled.—It was then I saw him in
his

his beauty, and the tear hung in my eye. Thou art fallen *, young tree, I said, with all thy beauty round thee. Thou art fallen on thy plains, and the field is bare. The winds come from the desert, and there is no sound in thy leaves ! Lovely art thou in death, son of car-borne Larthmor.

NINA-THOMA sat on the shore, and heard the sound of battle. She turned her red eyes on Lethmal the gray-haired bard of Selma, for he had remained on the coast, with the daughter of Torthóma. Son of the times of old ! she said, I hear the noise of death. Thy friends have met with Uthal and the chief is low ! O that I had remained on the rock, inclosed with the tumbling waves ! Then would my soul be sad, but his death would not reach my ear. Art thou fallen on thy heath, O son of high Finthormo ! thou didst leave me on a rock, but my soul was full of thee. Son of high Finthormo ! art thou fallen on thy heath ?

SHE rose pale in her tears, and saw the bloody shield of Uthal ; she saw it in Ossian's hand ; her steps were distracted on the heath. She flew ; she found him ; she fell. Her soul came forth in a sigh. Her hair is spread on his face. My bursting tears descend. A tomb arose on the unhappy ; and my song was heard.

* To mourn over the fall of their enemies was a practice universal among Ossian's heroes. This is more agreeable to humanity, than the shameful insulting of the dead, so common in Homer, and after him, servilely copied by all his imitators, the humane Virgil not excepted, who have been more successful in borrowing the imitations of his beauties. Homer, it is probable, gave the manners of the times in which he wrote, not his own sentiments : Ossian also seems to keep to the sentiments of his heroes. The reverence, which the most barbarous highlanders have still for the remains of the deceased, seems to have descended to them from their most remote ancestors.

M m

R E S T,



REST, hapless children of youth! and the noise of that mossy stream. The virgins will see your tomb, at the chace, and turn away their weeping eyes. Your fame will be in the song; the voice of the harp will be heard in your praise. The daughters of Selma shall hear it; and your renown shall be in other lands.—Rest, children of youth, at the noise of the mossy stream.

Two days we remained on the coast. The heroes of Berrathon convened. We brought Larthmor to his halls; the feast of shells is spread.—The joy of the aged was great; he looked to the arms of his fathers; the arms which he left in his hall, when the pride of Uthal arose.—We were renowned before Larthmor, and he blessed the chiefs of Morven; but he knew not that his son was low, the stately strength of Uthal. They had told, that he had retired to the woods, with the tears of grief; they had told it, but he was silent in the tomb of Rothma's heath.

ON the fourth day we raised our sails to the roar of the northern wind. Larthmor came to the coast, and his bards raised the song. The joy of the king was great, he looked to Rothma's gloomy heath; he saw the tomb of his son; and the memory of Uthal rose.—Who of my heroes, he said, lies there: he seems to have been of the kings of spears? Was he renowned in my halls, before the pride of Uthal rose?

YE are silent, ye sons of Berrathon, is the king of heroes low?—My heart melts for thee, O Uthal; though thy hand was against thy father.—O that I had remained in the cave! that my son had dwelt in Finthormo!—I might have heard the tread of his feet, when he went to the chace of the boar.—I might have heard

his



his voice on the blast of my cave. Then would my soul be glad :
but now darkness dwells in my halls.

SUCH were my deeds, son of Alpin, when the arm of my youth
was strong ; such were * the actions of Toscar, the car-borne son of
Conloch. But Toscar is on his flying cloud ; and I am alone at Lutha :
my voice is like the last sound of the wind, when it forsakes the
woods. But Ossian shall not be long alone, he sees the mist that
shall receive his ghost. He beholds the mist that shall form his
robe, when he appears on his hills. The sons of little men shall
behold me, and admire the stature of the chiefs of old. They shall
creep to their caves, and look to the sky with fear ; for my steps
shall be in the clouds, and darkness shall roll on my side.

LEAD, son of Alpin, lead the aged to his woods. The winds
begin to rise. The dark wave of the lake resounds. Bends there
not a tree from Mora with its branches bare ? It bends, son of
Alpin, in the rustling blast. My harp hangs on a blasted branch.
The sound of its strings is mournful.—Does the wind touch thee,
O harp, or is it some passing ghost !—It is the hand of Malvina !
but bring me the harp, son of Alpin ; another song shall rise. My
soul shall depart in the sound ; my fathers shall hear it in their airy
hall.—Their dim faces shall hang, with joy, from their clouds ;
and their hands receive their son.

† The aged oak bends over the stream. It sighs with all its moss.
The withered fern whistles near, and mixes, as it waves, with
Ossian's hair.—Strike the harp and raise the song : be near, with

* Ossian speaks.

his poems.—It is set to music, and still

† Here begins the lyric piece, with song in the north, with a great deal of
which, tradition says, Ossian concluded wild simplicity, but little variety of sound.



all your wings, ye winds. Bear the mournful found away to Fingal's airy hall. Bear it to Fingal's hall, that he may hear the voice of his son; the voice of him that praised the mighty.—The blast of north opens thy gates, O king, and I behold thee fitting on mist, dimly gleaming in all thine arms. Thy form now is not the terror of the valiant: but like a watery cloud; when we see the stars behind it with their weeping eyes. Thy shield is like the aged moon: thy sword a vapour half-kindled with fire. Dim and feeble is the chief, who travelled in brightness before.—

BUT thy steps † are on the winds of the desert, and the storms darken in thy hand. Thou takest the sun in thy wrath, and hidest him in thy clouds. The sons of little men are afraid; and a thousand showers descend.—

BUT when thou comest forth in thy mildness; the gale of the morning is near thy course. The sun laughs in his blue fields; and the gray stream winds in its valley.—The bushes shake their green heads in the wind. The roes bound towards the desert.

† This magnificent description of the power of Fingal over the winds and storms, and the image of his taking the sun, and hiding him in the clouds, do not correspond with the preceding paragraph, where he is represented as a feeble ghost, and no more the TERROR OF THE VALIANT; but it agrees with the notion of the times concerning the souls of the deceased, who, it was supposed, had the command of the winds and storms, but took no concern in the affairs of men.

It was the immoderate praise bestowed by the poets on their departed friends, that gave the first hint to superstition to deify the deceased heroes; and those new divinities owed all their attributes to the fancy of the bard who sung their elegies.

We do not find, that the praises of Fingal had this effect upon his countrymen; but that is to be imputed to the idea they had of power, which they always connected with bodily strength and personal valour, both which were dissolved by death.



BUT there is a murmur in the heath! the stormy winds abate!
I hear the voice of Fingal. Long has it been absent from mine
ear!—Come, Ossian, come away, he says: Fingal has received
his fame. We passed away, like flames that had shone for a season,
our departure was in renown. Though the plains of our battles are
dark and silent; our fame is in the four gray stones. The voice of
Ossian has been heard; and the harp was strung in Selma.—Come
Ossian, come away, he says, and fly with thy fathers on clouds.

AND come I will, thou king of men! the life of Ossian fails.
I begin to vanish on Cona; and my steps are not seen in Selma.
Beside the stone of Mora I shall fall asleep. The winds whistling in
my grey hair, shall not waken me.—Depart on thy wings, O
wind: thou canst not disturb the rest of the bard. The night is
long, but his eyes are heavy; depart, thou rustling blast.

BUT why art thou sad, son of Fingal? Why grows the cloud of
thy soul? The chiefs of other times are departed; they have gone
without their fame. The sons of future years shall pass away; and
another race arise. The people are like the waves of ocean: like
the leaves † of woody Morven, they pass away in the rustling blast,
and other leaves lift their green heads.—

DID

† The same thought may be found almost in the same words, in Homer, vi. 46.

Οἷη περ φύλλων γενεή, τοιήδε καὶ ἀνδρῶν.

Φύλλα ταμὲν τ' ἀνεμὸς χαμάδις χέει, ἄλλα
δε θύλλῃ

Τηλεθόωσα φύει ἔαρος δ' ἐπιγίγνεται ἄρη.

Mr. Pope falls short of his original; in particular he has omitted altogether the

beautiful image of the wind strewing the withered leaves on the ground.

Like leaves on trees the race of men are found,

Now green in youth, now with'ring on the ground;

Another race the following spring supplies;

They fall successive, and successive rise.

POPE.

Ryno,



DID thy beauty last, O Ryno *? Stood the strength of car-borne Oscar? Fingal himself passed away; and the halls of his fathers forgot his steps.—And shalt thou remain, aged bard! when the mighty have failed?—But 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.

* Ryno, the son of Fingal, who was killed in Ireland, in the war against Swaran, [Fing. b. 5.] was remarkable for the beauty of his person, his swiftness and great exploits. Minvane, the daughter of Morini, and sister to Gaul so often mentioned in Ossian's compositions, was in love with Ryno.—Her lamentation over her lover is introduced as an episode in one of Ossian's great poems. The lamentation is the only part of the poem now extant, and as it has some poetical merit, I have subjoined it to this note. The poet represents Minvane as seeing, from one of the rocks of Morven, the fleet of Fingal returning from Ireland.

SHE blushing sad, from Morven's rocks,
bends over the darkly-rolling sea. She
saw the youths in all their arms.—Where,
Ryno, where art thou?

Our dark looks told that he was low!
—That pale the hero flew on clouds!
That in the grass of Morven's hills, his
feeble voice was heard in wind!

And is the son of Fingal fallen, on Ul-
lin's mossy plains? Strong was the arm that
conquered him!—Ah me! I am alone.

Alone I will not be, ye winds! that lift
my dark-brown hair. My sighs will not

long mix with your stream; for I must
sleep with Ryno.

I see thee not with beauty's steps return-
ing from the chace.—The night is round
Minvane's love; and silence dwells with
Ryno.

Where are thy dogs, and where thy
bow? Thy shield that was so strong?
Thy sword like heaven's descending fire?
The bloody spear of Ryno?

I see them mixed in thy ship; I see them
stained with blood.—No arms are in thy
narrow hall, O darkly-dwelling Ryno!

When will the morning come, and say,
arise, thou king of spears! arise, the hun-
ters are abroad. The hinds are near thee,
Ryno!

Away, thou fair-haired morning, away!
the slumbering king hears thee not! The
hinds bound over his narrow tomb; for
death dwells round young Ryno.

But I will tread softly, my king! and
steal to the bed of thy repose. Minvane
will lie in silence, near her slumbering
Ryno.

The maids shall seek me; but they shall
not find me: they shall follow my depart-
ure with songs. But I will not hear
you, O maids: I sleep with fair-haired
Ryno.

F I N I S.

