

OSSIAN'S FOLK PSYCHOLOGY

BY JOHN SAVARESE

This essay takes James Macpherson's Ossian poems as a case study in how early Romantic poetics engaged the sciences of the embodied mind and set the terms that would continue to drive discussions of poetry's origin and functions well into the nineteenth century. When Macpherson turned to the popular literature of ancient Scotland, I argue, he found in it what philosophers now call a "folk psychology": a commonsense understanding of how other minds work. Ordinary non-philosophers generally think that other people's behavior is best explained by referring to mental states, which can be described using concepts like belief, desire, and intention: he raises the glass because he wants to take a sip; Elizabeth refuses Mr. Darcy's proposal because she believes he is an unjust and ungenerous man and wants nothing to do with him.¹ Most philosophers who identify a pre-reflective folk psychology of this kind grant that it is a dependable strategy for explaining human behavior—even if they think that the language of mental states is a vulgar illusion that will ultimately evaporate into the more nuanced language of a mature science.

In his *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), Macpherson uses ostensibly ancient poems to explore such pre-philosophical or naïve theories about the mind.² The first section of this essay frames the Ossianic project as an intervention in what were then current theories of ancient poetry, theories which made the ancient text the site of information about the primitive mind. The Ossian poems purported to survey philosophically impoverished models of mental life; yet, as the second section demonstrates, they also became a source of information about even contemporary people's most basic mental architecture. For a cognate project, I then turn to the philosophy of Thomas Reid, who was the towering figure in Aberdeen's university system when Macpherson matriculated there in the 1750s. While it struck some as baroque, Reid presented his philosophy as a vindication of "common sense," of what the common folk have always, in all ages, believed.³ Macpherson, too, turns to the ideas of the common people and their commonsense notions about other people's minds. Yet that vernacular packaging ultimately delivers a philosophy closer to the more

radically counterintuitive models of mindedness then in circulation: primitive animism, radical materialism, and innate faculties of mind recognition. I turn finally to one of the stranger moments in the 1760 *Fragments*—the death of Morna in fragment 15—as Macpherson’s attempt at a commonsense answer to these more experimental models of embodied mentality. Macpherson not only asserts ancient literature’s usefulness for ongoing debates about materialism. More broadly, he seeks a materialism that might inform literary methodology, and that, in ways that remain relevant today, might situate the literary artifact within a broader, interdisciplinary terrain.

I. ABERDEEN, MENTAL INVESTIGATIONS, AND EMPIRICAL POETICS

In 1759, Macpherson met the poet and dramatist John Home. Home was acutely interested in Scottish tradition and had already instigated William Collins’s *Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland*. When Macpherson claimed to have collected a body of traditional literature in the original Gaelic, Home asked to see a sample. Macpherson reluctantly produced an English “translation” of one of these poems, which Home immediately brought to the attention of Hugh Blair. With Blair’s encouragement, Macpherson published *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and Translated from the GALIC or ERSE Language*, in June 1760. The volume offers brief glimpses of life in the militarized Scottish Highlands during and after the wars of Fingal (the traditional figure Fionn mac Cumhaill, who appears here as a Scottish king). Its final three fragments offer glimpses of a larger epic on these wars, which Blair hints might yet be found and reconstructed.⁴ That poem, *Fingal*, appeared in December 1761 and was followed by another, *Temora*, in March 1763. These latter, epic productions made Ossian world-famous, and obtained the admiration of a public that included Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Napoleon Bonaparte. *Fingal* recounts Danish aggression against the Irish tribes led by Cuchullin and the defeat of those invading forces with the help of Fingal. The earlier *Fragments*, by contrast, had explored the public and private damage that resulted from the wars of Fingal. As a literary persona, Ossian, the son of Fingal, survives his contemporaries and his own son to become a melancholy and nostalgic bard whose poetry alternates between descriptions of military exploits and private affective exchange. Everything about the *Fragments* culminates in trauma and loss, and voices a third-century Highland society already lamenting its own demise.

Despite their broad success and the emphatic support of Scots like Blair and David Hume, doubts about the authenticity of the poems arose from their first publication. Macpherson was reluctant to produce his translations, and he repeatedly refused to show his Gaelic originals. Thomas Gray was one of the first to voice his suspicions, and scholars of Welsh and Irish literature soon became skeptical about Macpherson's scholarly and editorial methods. While these doubts briefly were put to rest by Blair's *Critical Dissertation* and the appendix to the 1765 *Poems of Ossian*, the next decade saw the controversy renewed. In 1775, Hume reluctantly confessed his doubt at the poems' authenticity. In the same year, Samuel Johnson published his *Journey to the Western Isles*, which boasted of firsthand investigations that proved the Ossian poems to be total fabrications. After Macpherson's death, *The Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland* officially concluded that he had not in fact translated particular poems but rather had creatively reimagined a body of traditional motifs and characters.⁵ Like the *Report*, the poems' reception down to the present day has remained curiously divided between aesthetic appreciation of the poems—which remain crucially important to the development of British nationalism and what used to be called the transition from Sensibility to Romanticism—and an ambivalent stance toward Macpherson himself as a kind of literary opportunist, riding the coat-tails of his country's famed philosophers. The poems' philosophical impact has thus been seen as largely indirect, mediated by Blair in Britain and Johann Gottfried Herder in Germany.⁶

It is not usually emphasized, however, that Macpherson's poetry was actively engaged with the ideas of that broader philosophical environment. This environment, of course, consisted of the network of Scottish learning centered in the major university towns, especially the ancient universities at St. Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh. Macpherson spent time at the latter two universities. He began his studies at King's College, Aberdeen in 1752, when the university was freshly reformed on the basis of Enlightenment principles and invigorated by a philosophical society that included curriculum reformer Alexander Gerard and land reformer William Ogilvie, as well as the philosopher Reid.⁷ Macpherson matriculated at King's in the first year of the new curriculum: students now began with concrete, empirical subjects like history and geography, then worked their way up to the more abstract sciences. The next year—when Macpherson began the second-year course in philosophy—Reid became Regent.⁸ There he

conceived, presented, and worked out with students what became his *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*.

On the received account, Macpherson was a disaffected student: little inclined to strict study, he preferred the pleasures of imaginative poetry. Thus Thomas Bailey Saunders, writing in 1894 and evincing his own nostalgia for the age of Reid, suggested that while at King's, Macpherson "showed no inclination to philosophy," and so "neglected the special opportunities of the place."⁹ Fiona Stafford concurs: Reid's philosophical scrupulousness would have repelled Macpherson, and so his "creative talents" received "no formal encouragement."¹⁰ Nevertheless, as nearly all his critics have acknowledged, Macpherson's writing bears strong marks of the Scottish Enlightenment's empirical poetics: the preference for a simple, concrete language; a turn to sentiment; and an interest in the earliest ages of humanity. On most accounts Macpherson carved out a special, sequestered niche for himself within this intellectual culture: one which, while it was shaped by Thomas Blackwell's poetic theories and publicly defended by Blair's critical writings, remained primarily a space of aesthetic enjoyment, sublime experience, and cultural nostalgia. On my argument, however, the Ossian poems—especially to the extent that they are acts of forgery—explore and test the limits of the Scottish Enlightenment. Specifically, they engage the philosophy of mind that framed theories of ancient poetry, casting it as a laboratory in which to observe the mind's early, pristine stages.

Inquiries into brains, nerves, and vital spirits were in full force at the time, and the mind's operations formed the basis of study across the Aberdeen curriculum. For Reid and his colleagues, empirical investigations of the mind were more difficult than those of the body. Gerard, for instance, notes the comparative ease of anatomy:

We can put *bodies* in any situation that we please, and observe at leisure their effects on one another; but the phenomena of the *mind* are of a less constant nature; we must catch them in an instant, and be content to glean them up by observing their effects, as they accidentally discover themselves in the several circumstances of life.¹¹

Though Gerard was at least nominally a dualist, the salient aspect of the mind for him is its fleeting nature, its tendency to elude observation. The mind is "less constant" than the body and harder to pin down. He describes the mind's obliqueness in a language of "accidental discover[y]"—of reasoning backward from effects to causes—that would have been second nature to him. A professor of natural philosophy

and then divinity, Gerard outlined Aberdeen's new curriculum as a progression from sensory concreteness toward the abstract principles of logic and "natural theology."¹² From its humble beginning in "pneumatics" (which Gerard defines interchangeably as the study of "spirits" as well as "the phenomena of the *mind*"), the curriculum reflected the Enlightenment project of deriving all knowledge from sensation.¹³ In Gerard's words, a course of knowledge must begin with "the constitution of man, and his several active powers."¹⁴ Yet knowledge about the mind, the foundation of the empirical sciences, remains dependent upon indirect strategies, secondary circumstances, and the instantaneous "glean[ings]" of the observer.

Gerard was almost certainly in the audience when Reid first lectured on the principles of common sense. "All that we know of the body," Reid explains, "is owing to anatomical dissection and observation, and it must be by an anatomy of the mind that we can discover its powers and principles" (*I*, 12). Reid is writing figuratively here. An "anatomy of the mind" would not explain the mind by turning to physiology but would seek the mind's own constitutive principles. This is possible, Reid thinks, only through introspection. He notes that while an anatomist can study a wide variety of cadavers, the anatomist of the mind has only himself: "It is his own mind only that he can examine. . . . He may, from outward signs, collect the operations of other minds; but these signs are for the most part ambiguous, and must be interpreted by what he perceives within himself" (*I*, 13). However intimate the connection might be between mind and body, mental investigations do not happen in the laboratory. They are restricted to the kind of armchair philosophy practiced by John Locke, that mental anatomist who was his own best subject, and who turned to introspection to "catch" or "glean" the mind's inner workings.

But introspection is impressionistic. The mind is unwieldy; it often appears as one big, slippery entity, and resists being parceled out into analyzable units. This is what René Descartes described as the unity of the mind: the mind appears to be one "indivisible" thing, with no physical extension.¹⁵ It cannot be divided into parts. The body, on the other hand, has a physical extension, and consequently it can be divided into many parts. Furthermore, introspective studies of the mind do not permit the scientific method. Good science would entail the comparison of "bodies of all different ages," as Reid notes, as well as those in variously "defective," "obscure," or "perfect" states (*I*, 13). Such standards of comparison elude the anatomist of the mind.

Students of poetry, however, do have access to more than their own minds. Belletristic writers on ancient poetry frequently cast it as evidence from the past, ripe for comparison with the present. For many of the period's leading lights, poems were textual artifacts by which voices reach out into futurity and through which future readers encounter, in spectral form, the expressive content of the past. In fact, poetry from earlier ages offers a particularly helpful kind of reportage, since the primitive mind was taken to be free of those cultural accretions with which centuries of development had covered over our original constitution. In the Enlightenment's early version of the debate between nature and nurture, primitive society offered subjects closer to the mind's natural condition.

Thus, for a host of writers—Robert Lowth and Herder on Hebrew poetry, Paul Henri Mallet on Scandinavian poetry, and Herder and Blair on Ossian in particular—ancient poetry offered a special kind of language.¹⁶ This is the sensuous language of thought that Herder praised as not yet doomed to the “dead letter” of abstraction.¹⁷ Primitive poets had only concrete language derived from the senses. Mallet thus resembles Herder in his discussion of ancient Icelandic poets. Mallet points to “[t]he paucity of their ideas and the barrenness of their language,” which “oblige them to borrow from all nature, images fit to cloath their conceptions in.”¹⁸ Antiquarians like Mallet took the texts they studied for remnants of a primitive, philosophically impoverished era. That explained both the simplicity and concreteness of the poets' diction and their penchant for analogies and metaphors in lieu of complex concepts. For Mallet, as later for Herder, the benefits of philosophical impoverishment were primarily aesthetic: “How should abstract terms and reflex ideas, which so enervate our poetry, be found in theirs?”¹⁹ Primitive poetry—and, by extension, the best modern poetry—was thus far better at expressing sensuous particularity and emotional excess than philosophical nuance. At Aberdeen, the major proponent of this poetic school was Blackwell, who tutored Gerard and perhaps Macpherson himself.²⁰ Certainly Macpherson retained Aberdeen's focus on what he termed a “sentimental” aesthetics, one focused on the language of primitive sensation and feeling.

Macpherson would later retail much of this theory as his own, including the assertion that primal, sensory language told readers about the basis of their own, modern minds. As he writes in his *History of Great Britain and Ireland*, “The sentimental is peculiar to no age; it suits the inherent feelings of the human mind.”²¹ Because it spoke from what Blair called humanity's “most artless ages,” primitive poetry revealed the

mind at its barest: stripped of the accretions of culture and closer to its natural state.²² In his *Critical Dissertation* on Ossian, Blair writes that “mankind will never bear such resembling features, as they do in the beginnings of society,” though what we would now call cultural difference “divert[s] into channels widely separated, that current of human genius and manners, which descends originally from one spring.”²³ This theory, known as the stadial model of sociocultural development, came to prominence at the hands of Scottish Enlightenment writers like Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith. Since all minds begin identically, the story goes, each society looks the same at its beginnings. Societies then progress from primitive hunting groups—the earliest stage, in which Blair sets Ossian’s Highlanders—through pastoral life, agriculture, and ultimately commercial society. Since each individual is born with a Lockean blank slate, culture drives or constrains development. Moreover, since societies modernize at different rates, it is possible for vast populations mature quickly, entering by adulthood into the highest forms of commercial modernity, or for whole societies to languish in the earliest, most primitive ways of living and thinking.

Stadial theory became most closely associated with a particular genre, the narrative mode Dugald Stewart called “conjectural history.”²⁴ Historians of the distant past, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, wrote speculative, imagined explorations of what life might have been in the earliest ages. Even as they explored cultural difference, such histories also claimed to discover humanity’s common, underlying mental architecture as it becomes fitted to different cultural settings. Conjectural histories ultimately tell us about the “inherent” properties of our own minds. I want to suggest that we read Macpherson’s forgery as conjectural history of this sort. By offering “evidence” of what life was actually like in foreign settings, Macpherson reframed the primitive poem as a venue for experimental engagement with the primitive mind. As such, the Ossian poems pave the way for what Noel Jackson has called “the experimental lyric of early Romanticism.”²⁵ On my argument, this model of poetry has its origins in an antiquarian turn to the poetic mind and concerned not just the primitive mind’s empirical makeup but its habitual, even superstitious modes of thought. Collins had already, in 1748, turned to Highland superstitions for their aesthetic value. In the *Fragments*, popular superstitions offer more than aesthetic gains. They embed within the poems a primitive philosophy of mind.

II. MACPHERSON'S PHANTOM LYRICISM

Macpherson models his first two fragments after the *Song of Songs*, but moves the lovers' dialogue to a new historical setting, one on the point of being torn apart by the "the wars of Fingal" (*F*, 7).²⁶ In the volume's recurrent pattern, the poems move between private affective exchange and public catastrophe. The plot is simple: Shilric must go off to war, and knows he will likely die. Vinvela speaks as if Shilric's death is inevitable, and promises that he will live on in her memory:

Yes!—I will remember thee—indeed my Shilric will fall. What shall I do, my love! when thou art gone for ever? Through these hills I will go at noon; I will go through the silent heath. There I will see the place of thy rest, returning from the chace. Indeed, my Shilric will fall; but I will remember him. (*F*, 8)

Vinvela's preemptive lamentation—and later the posthumous regret she expresses from beyond the grave—gain their cultural efficacy from their claim to be records of sentiment that speak to modern readers. Fragment 2 dramatizes this by beginning with a nameless speaker who seems to be Vinvela mourning for Shilric ("I sit by the mossy fountain; on the top of the hill of winds" [*F*, 9]). Part of the real confusion produced by this poem is whether we are supposed to read it as a continuation of the first fragment at all. We only find out for sure when Shilric is named. A great deal goes into the production of this initial perplexity. For instance, when the second fragment's nameless speaker says, "no hunter at a distance is seen" (*F*, 9), he echoes Vinvela's description of his absence in the first fragment: "The hunter is far removed" (*F*, 7). The reasonable inference is that Shilric has not returned from the wars. In fact, though, it is Shilric who is speaking and who is about to see a ghost. The fragment's framing makes the reader's encounter with him similarly phantasmal, as if he is a voice from beyond the grave.

Macpherson occasionally sought to explain his supernatural content by turning to the poetic theory in which he had been educated. In his *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* he claims:

In the infancy of philosophy it is difficult for the human mind to form any distinct idea of the existence of an immaterial Being. We are not, therefore, to wonder that the northern nations carried the business and pastimes, though not the miseries, of life into their future state. Without being acquainted with the PALINGENESIA of Pythagoras and his followers, they clothed departed spirits with bodies not subject to decay.²⁷

Primitive subjects lack the more advanced philosophy of Greece, or, more to Macpherson's point, Hellenic Christianity.²⁸ Ideas about the immaterial soul, he argues, arrive comparably late in the history of philosophy and require a level of abstraction that primitive societies lack. As a result, they approximate the idea of the soul by telling tales of ghosts and immaterial spirits.

For poetic empiricists, this philosophical impoverishment was a good thing since it led to more gripping and moving language. For Macpherson, though, such impoverishment is desirable, paradoxically, for philosophical reasons. The primitive mind's dependence on the concrete and the sensory does not just conduce to appealing literary subject matter, but performs a philosophical work of its own by reopening the discussion of materialism. Macpherson's language, of course, concedes that a mature philosophy will ultimately possess a theory of the immaterial spirit. The poems themselves, however, open up the possibility that mind might be more intimately connected to body. If the mind outlasts death, it does so in bodily form.

This location of mind in matter has long been seen as a desideratum for later eighteenth-century literature. Studies by Jerome J. McGann and Adela Pinch have portrayed Sensibility as a literary movement crucially interested in the continuities between mental states and the social environments in which they subsist.²⁹ McGann, for instance, finds in Macpherson a nostalgia for an earlier age of pagan materialism and a poetic practice that "erodes the sharp divisions of matter and spirit, body and soul, at every textual level."³⁰ The possibility of situating the spirit firmly in the body, and of correlating mind and matter, proved both dangerous and fascinating. The most ambitious way to bring mind and body together was to make a claim about the mind's underlying ontology. In order to explain how mental states inhere in the body, we need first to explain how they can be a property of matter at all. Baruch Spinoza had made a particularly influential version of this claim with his monistic account of the universe, in which the one existing substance possesses the radically different attributes of thought and extension, of mind and matter. Spinoza's influence was on the rise by midcentury. Within a few decades monist-inflected controversies would erupt between Reid and Joseph Priestley—occasioned by the latter's scandalous 1777 *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*—and soon thereafter in the German *Pantheismusstreit*.

This set of debates—about how matter can think, or be understood as vital—would seem to be what McGann has in mind, since he claims that "the world of Ossian appears to subsist," at base, "as a complex

affective system.”³¹ Yet there is a substantial difference between this position—which typically goes by the name panpsychism—and the more modest, descriptive approach known as animism.³² Animism names a human psychology: the primitive speaker loses track of his own mental states and projects them onto the landscape. Panpsychism, on the other hand, alleges that the mental is at least potentially a characteristic of all matter. When William Wordsworth declares his “faith that every flower / Enjoys the air it breathes,” he gestures toward a variety of panpsychism with particular revolutionary associations in the 1790s.³³ A few years later, he turned to a reactionary animism in an equally well known exclamation:

Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn,
That I might, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn.³⁴

That later sonnet conveys nostalgia for a world perceived as vital and living, rather than as the inert object of scientific rationality. Animism, on this familiar model, is a mode of enchantment, one which ultimately tells us less about the world than about the psychology of the perceiving subject. Stanley Cavell suggests why this is disappointing when he speaks of Romantic thought as risking a kind of animism, one “already implicit” in philosophical skepticism.³⁵ Like the Ancient Mariner’s “ghastly crew,” animism offers only the artificial animation of something always already lifeless.³⁶ Against this specter of animistic encounter—and the disappointing Kantian “settlement” with it—Cavell sets Romanticism’s project of “bringing the world back, as it were, to life.”³⁷

This is a disappointment that Macpherson shares. For poetic theorists from Blair to Wordsworth, animism offered primarily aesthetic benefits. Animism supposedly captures something genuine about cognition in general, something that endures in the most basic functions of expressive language. Thus Lowth explains that “to those who are violently agitated themselves, the universal nature of things seems under a necessity of being affected with similar emotions.”³⁸ For an influential critical tradition, primitive projection continues to explain our own mental functioning, at least for a special category of impassioned thought. It endures into the nineteenth century, where it becomes the habit John Ruskin terms the “pathetic fallacy.”³⁹ And it inflects Paul de Man’s brand of deconstruction, where anthropomorphic projection speaks to the most basic of language’s figural dependencies.⁴⁰

Macpherson, though, was uncomfortable with animistic projection. In fact, after publishing the *Fragments* he quickly revised the “Shilric, Vinvela” sequence in ways that make it less animistic. The second edition of September 1760 advertises that some changes have been made to conform to the more accurate manuscripts Macpherson claimed to have located. In fragment 2, Shilric had originally painted a dreary scene: “One tree is rustling above me. Dark waves roll over the heath” (*F*, 9). The “troubled” lake and strange midday silence anticipate (unremarkably) Shilric’s turn inward: “Sad are my thoughts as I sit alone” (*F*, 9). In September’s revised edition, however, that line is simplified to “Sad are my thoughts alone” (*F*, 9n). Originally, there had been some slippage between Shilric’s feelings and the natural scene. The new language, in contrast, makes the lone melancholy element either Shilric (“Sad are *my* thoughts alone”), or mind itself (“Sad are my *thoughts* alone”). Either way, the revision strips away the pathetic fallacy that had suffused the natural scene with mental presences. Macpherson’s poetry consistently seeks to identify such mental presences and remains rife with ghosts. But he recoils from a moment where those presences threaten to dissipate into a psychology of the primitive mind. If Macpherson is interested in pursuing how thoughts exist in nature—not just as projections, but part of the natural surround—animism will not do. What the poem gains by this revision, then, is a new purchase on the “vital and articulate human presences” that McGann identifies “throughout Macpherson’s otherwise inanimate, desolate, and purely geophysical places.”⁴¹ Animism would tell us primarily about the psychology of the primitive mind: it supposedly projects itself onto inanimate nature. A literal reading of these poems, by contrast, entails a claim about the mind’s underlying ontology: mental states are continuous with that which is outside the head. This opens up a philosophical framework in which spirits—that is, minds—are integrated into the world of natural objects such that there is a homology between seeing a rock and perceiving or encountering another mind. The implication is that primitives are actually more philosophically sophisticated than modern, philosophical readers.

By 1760, the lyric was taking on its soon habitual association with the solitary expressive speaker, based on the mode’s close association with the sensory and linguistic forms that condition individual thought. For Blair, Ossian was one such relic of concrete language and strong feeling, a poet of solitude and the sublime.⁴² Blair goes on to align higher philosophical abstraction, which these poems lack, with the realm of social life. Ossian’s ideas, he writes, “extended little farther

than to the objects he saw around him. A public, a community, the universe, were conceptions beyond his sphere.”⁴³ This assessment of Ossian should sound strange to anyone who has read the poems and tried to keep straight the sometimes labyrinthine networks of interpersonal relationships they entail. Even the first, simpler fragments turn on Shilric’s relationship to Vinvela, the call of societal duties, and the conflict between those intimate and public modes of sociality. But Blair’s insistence on Ossian’s sublimity makes sense within the familiar empiricist story, which reads primitive poetry as the origin of human thought and so as a pristine faculty of sensation that preexists social engagement with other minds.⁴⁴ In the Romantic era, such arguments sequester lyric subjectivity from the messy business of plots, characters, and events that drives popular literary forms—what has recently been described as literature’s obsession with “social intelligence.”⁴⁵ For Blair, by contrast, the broader horizons of sociality were too much for Ossian to conceive in his world of bare, lifeless objects. Blair is wrong about this. To understand why that mistake matters for Macpherson’s literary project, I turn to one of the Scottish Enlightenment’s predominant ways of talking about other minds.

III. FROM COMMON SENSE TO FOLK PSYCHOLOGY

The scholarly discourse that framed Macpherson’s project offered a solipsistic model of mental life, one with little purchase on other minds as actual, vital presences in the world. The best-known articulation of this projectivist stance is Hume’s. Hume was adamant that we do not know the world, but only certain qualities that we project onto the world. Thus, in his account of causation, Hume declines to discuss actual causal relations between objects (say, that a bat strikes and propels a baseball), and remains restricted to ideas (I find the bat’s striking of the ball “constantly conjoin’d” to the ball’s subsequent movement).⁴⁶ A version of this projectivism also governs sympathetic relationships with other minds. I know only my own sensations, my own feelings—but I can, through a projective act of sympathy, approximate the experience of others.⁴⁷

For Reid, Hume’s projectivist account of the mind proved unsatisfying. Immanuel Kant, more famously, would go to great lengths to show that human knowledge refers to an actual world (even if, as Cavell suggests, Kant disappointingly forswears the possibility of knowing that world in itself). Reid’s “common sense” response to Hume, by contrast, took the form of a methodological shift. Projectivism, Reid

argued, presumed that our commonsense way of thinking about the world was wrong. We take ourselves to perceive actual objects, Hume said, though a close attention to our own minds showed that we speak merely of ideas and impressions. Against this Humean “theory of ideas,” Reid asserted that commonsense intuitions about external objects were reliable (I, 12). “We know,” he argues, “that when certain impressions are made upon our organs, nerves, and brain, certain corresponding sensations are felt, and certain objects are both conceived and believed to exist.”⁴⁸ For Reid, that conception and that belief indicate basic elements of the human constitution, which imply a reliable connection between the world, bodily organs, and sensation. Thus, when I perceive an object, I obtain actual, positive knowledge about something in the world. Although philosophers “find inexplicable mysteries, and even contradictions” in these “acts of mind,” Reid emphasizes that they “are perfectly understood by every man of common understanding.”⁴⁹

Such acts of mind grant knowledge of the world, and—as Reid discusses in his *Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man*—knowledge of other minds. Acts like willing, judging, and reasoning, Reid concedes, would be possible in a solipsistic universe. But other, social actions—promising, receiving testimony—presuppose “society with other intelligent beings,” and presuming this is part of our basic constitution.⁵⁰ Reid’s main evidence for the naturalness of this presumption is its emergence in early childhood. He writes:

Our social intellectual operations, as well as our social affections, appear very early in life, before we are capable of reasoning; yet both suppose a conviction of the existence of other intelligent beings. When a child asks a question of his nurse, this act of his mind supposes not only a desire to know what he asks; it supposes likewise a conviction that the nurse is an intelligent being, to whom he can communicate his thoughts, and who can communicate her thoughts to him.⁵¹

This is Reid’s argument against other minds skepticism, one that follows the same logic he had used to counter skepticism generally. Reid goes on to emphasize that the child’s “early conviction” is quite striking, and demands more attention than it has frequently merited: “How he came by this conviction so early, is a question of some importance in the knowledge of the human mind, and therefore worthy of the consideration of Philosophers.”⁵² This natural belief is a phenomenon that must be accounted for in its own right, not explained away as an illusion. The premise of common sense is that ordinary people possess an intuitive, largely reliable folk theory. As such, Reid’s philosophy

represents a third option that avoids both Humean skepticism and a Kantian faculty psychology with its animistic supplement. In recent years, cognitive science has given Reid's theory a new lease on life; his account of the mind's innate social mechanisms bears a striking resemblance to what now goes by the name of folk psychology, theory of mind, or simply mindreading.⁵³

While the term "folk psychology" is a coinage of the twentieth century, it draws on an older concept of folk belief or folk faith, as opposed to more developed philosophy or science. Reid uses this verbal formula in his attack on Hume, who, Reid notes, occasionally confesses to having "relapsed into the faith of the vulgar" (*I*, 21). In the well-known passage to which Reid alludes—from the end of the first book of the *Treatise of Human Nature*—Hume registers his dismay at philosophy's inability to provide any firm footing beyond our habitual modes of vulgar belief. After thinking deeply about the self, causation, and other minds, Hume writes, "I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, inviron'd with the deepest darkness."⁵⁴ For Hume, such philosophical despair can only be cured by a return to common life: "I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends," after which his "speculations . . . appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther."⁵⁵ Reid thinks that Hume arrived at this philosophical impasse by being needlessly abstruse. The common, social life of parlor games and conversation—a setting in which everyone shares our pretheoretical faith in other minds—should not simply be a respite from skeptical philosophy, but should provide a lasting alternative to skepticism. In the social world, common sense should not just allow us to get by, but should reassure us that the world really contains other minds.

The current, philosophical usage of "folk psychology" is usually dated to Wilfred Sellars's 1956 essay "Empiricism and the Philosophy of the Mind."⁵⁶ Sellars's argument, in brief, is that people hold the tacit theory that other people's behavior is directed by mental states like beliefs and desires. If asked why someone picks up an apple and takes a bite, most people would answer that this person wanted to, or that she felt hungry and therefore desired to alleviate that hunger. If this seems intuitive—as Reid would say, what no one ever doubted—that is just the point. Sellars, like Reid, sought to explain the mind by vindicating the most usual, commonsense theories about it. For Sellars, this "folk" account gives a good description of mental life. What makes his argument provocative is the assertion that people apply such

theories to themselves, too. We talk about our own beliefs and desires not because we can see them through introspection, but by inference, using a theory we developed by observing others.

Reid would not run the causal history this way, if only because of the privileged role of introspection in his philosophy.⁵⁷ Yet especially in his theory of natural signs, he suggests that reading others' minds is an independent, originary faculty. In fact, many recent approaches to theory of mind place special importance on something that Reid noted: this particular set of cognitive abilities develops quite early in childhood, long before an empiricist would predict. Today's nativists have a name for this early emergence. They refer to it as the "poverty of the stimulus."⁵⁸ By the age of four, "normally-developing" children can successfully complete complex behaviors, like attributing a false belief (because she didn't see me move it, Sally thinks the marble is still in the blue box), predicting an action (Sally will look in the blue box), or interpreting facial cues (Sally now looks confused).⁵⁹ For some, these aptitudes are evidence for an innate, evolved mechanism that performs mindreading behaviors. While Reid did not speak of such mechanisms, he frequently emphasizes the innateness of the same abilities.⁶⁰

In the remainder of this essay, I explore the common ground between Reid's and Macpherson's turns to folk psychology. To be sure, "folk psychology" is a term invented for specific, philosophical usage. It resembles the "ordinary" in ordinary language philosophy, whose major proponents were directly influenced by Reid's claim that philosophical concepts inhere in everyday speech. Macpherson, meanwhile, is associated with the other, literary-cultural sense of the "folk," and indeed, via his influence on Herder, contributed to the theories of folk literature that would arise in the nineteenth century. One kind of "folk" yields a theory of culture, the other a theory of cognition. Their divergent intellectual careers notwithstanding, they come from the same Aberdeen lecture halls and try to answer the same questions. In response to what Cavell has called the "crisis of skepticism," both Reid and Macpherson turn to the common in order to reinvest intermental relations with an ontological ground. In Macpherson's hands, ancient poetry carries with it primitive models of relationships between minds. For Macpherson, as for Reid, those notions tell us something about minds that exist out in the world. Further, the Ossianic project strives to countenance the common, shared foundations of the human mind: both as a distant origin visible in the records of ancient civilizations, and as an entirely modern practice, which characterizes popular or

“low” literature. The antiquarian poetics of Mallet, Lowth, and Blair asked how primitive man thought—and, as a result, how we continue to think in the “infancy” of our thought.⁶¹ Macpherson, on my argument, goes further, and asks about the contents of our thought, and whether the commonsense picture of the mind is right or wrong. This makes him a theorist of cognition as well as culture.

In English belletrism, the move from populism to nature extends back at least to Joseph Addison’s 1711 *Spectator* papers on “Chevy Chase,” which were one early signal of what would be termed the “ballad revival.”⁶² Alluding to that song’s perennial popularity, Addison writes, “It is impossible that anything should be universally tasted and approved by the multitude, though they are only the rabble of a nation, which hath not in it some peculiar aptness to gratify the mind of man.”⁶³ He often phrases this turn to simplicity as a turn to nature, as in his assertion that highly wrought verse “would never have become the delight of the common people. . . . [I]t is only nature that can have that effect.”⁶⁴ Addison finds the mind’s underlying nature not in exemplars of literary refinement, but in the simplest productions that have always shown a “peculiar aptness” to please the vulgar. While these essays are crucial for the discourse of taste, then, they are also foundational for the academic study of so-called common or low literature. Addison lays the groundwork for the union of the ancient and the popular that drives Macpherson’s pseudo-antiquarian practice. Blair, for instance, suggests that in its supernatural portrayal of “departed spirits,” Ossian’s mythology “is not local and temporary, like that of most other ancient poets” but “the mythology of human nature; for it is founded on what has been the popular belief, in all ages and countries, and under all forms of religion.”⁶⁵ In turning to the literature of the common folk, ballad collectors, antiquarians, and, in Macpherson’s case, forgers, understood themselves to be turning from the realm of learned dispute to something like common sense.

Unlike Reid’s common sense, though, Macpherson’s “popular belief” turns up something quite philosophically counterintuitive. He treats the poems not only as sources of information about the simplest, most ordinary ways of thinking, useful for historical comparison, but as ways to explore the strangeness and the paradox that inhere within older ideas (for instance, the Celts’ simultaneous belief in materialism and a ghostly afterlife).⁶⁶ In his turn to popular representations of the mind, Macpherson interrogates divisions between mind and body, and between mind and environment, that Reid never touched. I turn now to one striking example, from the end of the 1760 volume, that seeks to

unite bodily experiments—what Gerard calls our ability to “put *bodies* in any situation that we please”—with that desired ability to extract mentalistic information from the accidents of the body.

IV. MORNA'S “GENUINE REMAINS”

Fragment 15 is one of the poems Macpherson specifies as the “detached pieces” of the “greater work” he will soon reconstruct as *Fingal*, and of which he offers three quick samples at the end of the volume (*F*, 5).⁶⁷ The plot is a love triangle. Its occurrences are few: Duchommar approaches Morna and reveals that he has killed a rival suitor, Cadmor. Morna tricks him into giving up his sword and stabs him; he does the same to her. The whole scene unfolds in a few short verse paragraphs, formatted as a dramatic dialogue.

MORNA.

And is the son of Tarman fallen; the youth with the breast of snow! the first in the chace of the hill; the foe of the sons of the ocean!———Duchommar, thou art gloomy indeed; cruel is thy arm to me.———But give me that sword, son of Mugruch; I love the blood of Cadmor!

[He gives her the sword, with which she instantly stabs him.]

DUCHOMMAR.

Daughter of Cormac-Carbre, thou hast pierced Duchommar! The sword is cold in my breast; thou hast killed the son of Muchruch. Give me to Moinie the maid; for much she loved Duchommar. My tomb she will raise on the hill; the hunter shall see it, and praise me.———But draw that sword from my side, Morna; I feel it cold.———

[Upon her coming near him, he stabs her. As she fell, she plucked a stone from the side of the cave, and placed it betwixt them, that his blood might not be mingled with hers.] (*F*, 30)

The poem hinges on bracketed moments of third-person description that most closely resemble stage directions. These descriptions would be familiar enough for readers of dramatic poetry, but they are out of place to say the least in poetry that stakes its cultural significance on its supposed origins in oral tradition.

First, Morna asks for the sword, pretending to desire Cadmor's blood, after which (in what I'm calling a stage direction) she “instantly” turns the weapon on Duchommar. When Duchommar repeats this pattern of deception and Morna is stabbed in return, we read a still more substantial description. The former stage direction described only Morna's actions. But the one that concludes this fragment delves

deeper into her character. It even includes a statement of intention, in what is a rather more complex action than the impassioned murders the volume has heretofore displayed. This would, of course, be quite unremarkable in a novel, but it stands out jarringly in the context of this oral poetry of voice, which on empiricist accounts focused exclusively on a primitive, first-person engagement with the external world. The stage direction pertains not to the bardic voice, nor to the performance of quoted speech. Rather, it splits the work of novelistic narration and editorial gloss. This is also the moment at which voice (lyric or dramatic) stops—is stifled, and attempts in the process to mark its own body, to delimit its own borders, and to prevent the commingling of blood. Why does such a mark of translatedness and reconstructedness appear at this particular moment? Clearly this is an important passage for those interested in orality and print, as it dramatizes voice giving way to the “dead letter” of the stage direction.

The first phrase of Blair’s anonymous preface to the 1760 *Fragments* emphasizes their authenticity: “The public may depend on the following fragments as genuine remains of ancient Scottish poetry.”⁶⁸ “Genuine” here speaks to the text’s historical legitimacy. Yet in the context of Morna’s deception of Duchommar, where the text hinges on a question of concealed intentions, or *disingenuousness*, it is the bodily remains (of Morna and of the printed text) that ultimately claim to be genuine. The textual body of the written tradition here becomes the site of the least corporeal, most mentalistic description available. It might appear that Morna attempts to manipulate the body from beyond the grave, or at least from a place no longer reliably embodied. And yet this remains one of the most bodily moments to be found in the *Fragments*: a moment of identification with the body, from Morna’s request for the blood of her slain lover to her last measures to keep her own blood free from mixture with that of her aggressor. Macpherson brings into play a materialism both primitive and modern, and countenances their shared investment in prolonging the reach of the mentalistic beyond the bodily. Morna’s death scene manages to retain the sense that the mind is an easily extinguished modality of the body, one that exists within it and yet still outlasts it, if only “gleaned in an instant”—to revisit Gerard’s language—when made available to literary representation.

For a material account of the vital spirits that might still outlast the body, we might consider eighteenth-century discussions of the soul’s posthumous endurance. James Chandler has pursued one such theory—the “vehicular hypothesis,” which invests the soul more

intimately in the body—from Henry More’s poetry, through Abraham Tucker’s philosophy, and ultimately to Laurence Sterne’s sentimental narratives.⁶⁹ The “vehicular hypothesis,” in Tucker’s words, entailed that the spirit “does not go out naked, nor entirely disengaged from matter, but carries away with her an integument from among those wherewith she was before invested.”⁷⁰ With its language of departed spirits taking with them a piece of their bodily “integument,” the vehicular hypothesis calls to mind Macpherson’s discussion of pagan materialists, who “clothed departed spirits” with just such integuments (which etymologically means “covering”).

That is not, however, what happens in the poem. A more likely candidate, I suggest, is the philosophy of Robert Whytt, whom Neil Vickers has called “the most influential British physician of the eighteenth century.”⁷¹ Both Whytt and his rival Albrecht von Haller studied under the renowned Dutch physician Herman Boerhaave and were influenced by his theory of fibers. Under a kind of pantheistic sway, though, Whytt desired to show that matter could perform acts usually reserved for mind. Many physicians—including Haller—divided human action into two kinds of motions. The first, “irritation,” included automatic bodily motions, from the beating of the heart down to involuntary twitches.⁷² These mere mechanical movements were distinguishable from conscious, volitional actions. For Haller, this latter type of privileged activity required a higher faculty, a faculty of perception, feeling, or consciousness, which he thought to be localized to the brain. Whytt, on the other hand, contended that although the brain is the privileged location of thought, the entire body is endowed with a power *like* thinking or feeling, a faculty he referred to as “sensibility.”⁷³

To this end, Whytt kept a running list of anecdotal evidence, a list of strange or prodigious cases, in which animals, upon decapitation, not only remained living, but even continued to pursue certain habitual, apparently intentional actions for some period of time after being detached from their brains. His *Essay on the Vital and Other Involuntary Motions of Animals* (1751) lists these prodigies, some of which he had observed himself, and many of which he had culled from other writers. Whytt’s phrasing sometimes suggests that these incidents are universally observed facts about a species. For instance, he writes, “A frog lives, and moves its members, for half an hour after its head is cut off; nay, when the body of a frog is divided in two, both the anterior and posterior extremities preserve life and a power of motion for a considerable time.”⁷⁴ Others are single occurrences, such as a tortoise which, after having its brain “extracted by a hole

made in its skull, in the beginning of *November*,” survived until the following May, while another tortoise, decapitated and bled, lived the better part of a month.⁷⁵ Most important to Whytt were the cases that showed signs of habitual, but on most accounts volitional action by animals. “A viper,” for instance, “after being deprived of its head and intrails, moved towards a heap of stones in a garden where it used to hide itself.”⁷⁶ Whytt also recounts Boyle’s experiments with vipers that, days after being decapitated and disemboweled, responded to experimental pricking, like the sparks Galvani would administer to a detached frog’s leg in his 1771 experiments.

Perhaps the most striking example is something Whytt offers as a little-known fact about silk moths. He cites a phenomenon described by Boyle, who claimed that “[t]he female butterflies into which silk worms have been metamorphosed, not only admit the male, after losing their heads, but also lay eggs.”⁷⁷ Here, the overarching project of Whytt’s catalog—to demonstrate the continuity between the brain and the body, between sentient action and mechanical irritability—intersects with a focus on the sexualized body. The spectacle of posthumous penetration and reproduction, which is jarring even in a description of animal life, serves as a disturbing if clinical gloss on the sexual aggression Morna dies trying to fend off. So, too, the catalog as a whole offers an interesting analogue to Macpherson’s survey of traumatized bodies, which are torn between the domain of political violence, social and sexual confrontation, and the ostensibly private realm of affect. For Whytt, these not-quite-dead creatures demonstrate that there is really just one kind of spirit, which is fully embodied during life, communicates motion throughout the body during its lifetime, and leaves a temporary, posthumous push upon being extinguished. Whytt’s creatures perform an exaggerated version of Morna’s posthumous action.

Read alongside Whytt and the antiquarian poetics on which Macpherson was intellectually raised, the fragments begin to look like a kind of science fiction. They slow down quick and unusual natural occurrences to imagine what they tell us about the mind, which, as Gerard and Reid both suggest, still proves elusive to even the closest observation. Remarkably, Morna’s death rewrites, at the starkest physiological level, the strangely material phantoms present earlier in the volume and subsequently in Macpherson’s Ossianic epics. Unlike the ghosts that haunt the earlier fragments, Morna’s spirit sticks closer to her body.

This entails, moreover, the turn from dialogue to stage direction. The poem ends with a narratorial gloss, which conveys the sense that the

motions of the body go on after the voice is extinguished. The whole act, it seems, is something Morna accomplishes—to quote the stage directions—“as she fell.” As a result, what we read is a kind of externalized introspection, the equivalent of free indirect discourse for this ostensibly oral poetry. Morna’s statement of intention migrates from the first person of the lyrical dialogue to the editorial third person, at the very moment when the text confesses its reconstructedness. We could call this a kind of “giving up the ghost,” a fall into print conventions. How does one depict mental states in the absence of a lyric voice? Just as free indirect discourse creates an externalized, depersonalized account of thoughts ostensibly going through someone’s head, it is unclear whether this stage direction reflects explicit thoughts.

Morna might have simply announced her intentions: “Our blood shall not be mingled,” “I shall place this rock,” and so on. In fact, such first-person narration would not be much more strained than the descriptions of landscape that begin the second fragment in the volume: “One tree is rustling above me. Dark waves roll over the heath” (*F*, 9). That type of soliloquy would fit well with Blackwell’s or Lowth’s claims about the rhetorical forms conducive to oral transmission, as well as with theories of primitive thought as a language that figures itself as address. Equally fitting, for that matter, would be Duchommar’s metaphorical manner: he tells Morna he has killed a deer for her, when in fact he has killed her lover. On a first reading, this figurative meaning is hardly clear. In the absence of additional context, Morna assumes that Duchommar speaks literally. There is no indication that he is speaking of a murder until he spells it out in explicit terms. The shock this entails serves to defamiliarize the poem’s figurative language and renders it jarring. It hardly seems to embody a theory of primitive language as essentially figural.

In the same way, we might read Morna’s final, posthumous action figuratively, as a representation of her disdain for the possibility of union, even in death, with her aggressor. But it seems more promising to read this scene literally, as simply enacting Morna’s desire to prevent her blood from mixing with Duchommar’s. At this literal level, the poem does not channel voices and feelings from the past. Indeed, the turn to the stage direction dramatizes the collapse of that folk model of poetry, which by this point Macpherson seems to have taken as far as it will carry him.⁷⁸ The fragmentary form here suggests an experimental breakage of the lyric voice—as when Whytt describes surgically removing a tortoise’s brain—to see how intimately the mind is entangled with the body. The poem locates mental states, to be

sure—but it locates them in bodily practices, in Morna's one final continuous movement, remarkably sustained even once the mind's guiding force has dropped away.

V. MATERIALISM AND LITERARY METHOD

Like Whytt's catalogue of experiments, fragment 15 shifts mentality's location beyond the head, beyond the seat of consciousness. Here the poem takes on the aspirations of panpsychism, which extends mindedness from the conscious agent to matter itself. In doing so, the poem allegorizes a persistent desire to establish mental states as real, observable entities. The fragment thus arrives at a different, materialist answer to the question that Reid too pursued: how to put the empiricist sensorium back in contact with a real world, populated by real minds. In particular, the turn from lyrical dialogue to editorial gloss seeks to affirm that Morna's intentions are legible, that they can be read or recognized as such without the intervention of the expressive poetic voice. They can, in other words, be "gleaned in an instant": not through introspection, but by bodily observation. The fragment, in other words, frames the attribution of mental states not as an act of primitive, animistic projection, but as an act of reading. That scene of reading, I want to suggest, registers Macpherson's resistance to Blair's model of the lyric mind. Blair, remember, described Ossian as a primitive poet, whose thoughts "extended little farther than to the objects he saw around him."⁷⁹ By contrast, fragment 15 depicts a lyric mind that exceeds sensory absorption and animistic projection. Instead, it extends everywhere, hungering after a kind of mentalistic access that can only be granted by other means.

Macpherson "found" in his ancient sources documents of the early mind. But the poems tell us of more than primitive, sensuous experience: they proceed to the complex business of plotting and posturing in the social world. As subsequent theorists developed Macpherson's line of thought, they tended to push that latter, socially entangled mindedness onto a different, more emphatically narrative model of literature. That emphasis is clear, for instance, in Wordsworth's polemic against "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse."⁸⁰ To be sure, Macpherson sometimes hews close to this anti-narrative tradition. He disparages "dull narrative[s] of facts in verse," which cannot "take hold of the human mind" sufficiently to endure in an oral culture, contrasting such dull narratives with the rich formal and linguistic properties of "the rhimes of the bards," those primal, sensory properties of mind

that form poetry's proper object.⁸¹ The thinkers Macpherson is echoing here typically had a hard time addressing the question of other minds. Attending to the formal properties of language was the period's most tried and true method for explaining what textual artifacts reveal about the literary mind.⁸²

That eighteenth-century interest in the literary mind is all the more intriguing in light of the recent empirical turn in literary studies. In the wake of the cognitive revolution, scholars have begun to ask what literature's ordinary practices tell us about the mind's foundations. The past decades have seen the formation of an array of such critical methods, under the general rubric of cognitive approaches to literature and culture.⁸³ Such studies seek to ground our understanding of these literary experiences in a scientific understanding of the mind's abilities and constraints. In his essay "Literary Universals," Patrick Colm Hogan argues broadly for such a critical method, one that would situate diverse literary cultures against a broader "background of commonality," commonalities that are cognitively grounded and cross-culturally universal.⁸⁴ Hogan enumerates many such universals: for example, throughout world poetry, poetic lines tend with surprising consistency to contain between five and nine words. Likewise, assonance is a verbal pattern to be found in all major literary traditions, as is "verbal parallelism"—the repetition of the same content in a different verbal structure—which Hogan locates in a host of ancient poetics including Chinese, Babylonian, and Hebrew.

The pursuit of such literary universals was already a feature of eighteenth-century antiquarian poetics. Lowth's major achievement was the discovery of the verbal parallelism. Lowth identified the parallelism as the defining feature of Hebrew poetry, and one that distinguished it from the form known to students of Homer and Virgil. Hebrew poetry, he explained, typically structures itself on a repetition between lines. One line will state a description or proposition, and the next will repeat it with a difference. Sometimes this entails what Lowth calls "synonymous" parallelism, which repeats the same or similar content in different verbal garb.⁸⁵ Other times, it entails a "synthetic" parallelism, which takes the original content in a new direction while maintaining a balance in the construction and parts of speech.⁸⁶ Although for Lowth, the parallelism initially marked Hebrew poetry's difference from classical poetic forms, it soon became a hallmark of a generic, cross-cultural, and pre-classical poetics, founded on the principle that the primitive mind tends to be alike in all its geographical iterations. Lowth writes, "A poem translated literally from the Hebrew into the

prose of any other language, while the same forms of the sentences remain, will still retain, even as far as relates to versification, much of its native dignity, and a faint appearance of versification.”⁸⁷ While this was received as an iconoclastic move, one result was the casting of Hebrew verse into a prose that was less characteristic of any particular culture. Throwing off the classical paradigm means, in large part, throwing off the features of versification, leaving a generic prose in which verse is only a “faint appearance.”

Drawing on the cultural background he shared with Lowth, Macpherson crafted his traditional Ossianic poems to sound like biblical literature, and to look, on the page, like prose. The result was something of an anomaly in Gaelic translation. Previously, for instance in the *Scots Magazine*, Gaelic poems were by and large fitted to English criteria, rendered in balanced, rhymed Augustan couplets.⁸⁸ Macpherson, on the other hand, often characterizes what he does as prose translation, despite the fact that he usually keeps quite regularly to a hexameter line. Vinvela, for example, opens the 1760 volume by saying, “My love is a son of the hill. He pursues the flying deer. His gray dogs are panting around him; his bow-strings sound in the wind” (*F*, 7). As the poem continues, a Hebraic parallelism gradually emerges. Here is Vinvela, a few lines later, shown as her lines sound and not as they were originally printed:

Then thou art gone, O Shilric! and I am alone on the hill.
The deer are seen on the brow; void of fear they graze along.
No more they dread the wind; no more the rustling tree. (*F*, 7)

The punctuation and cadence create palpable pauses, a caesura which separates each sentence into sections of three stresses. The second half alternates between the “synonymous” and “synthetic” parallelisms Lowth identified. By making his ancient Scottish poems sound like ancient Biblical poetry, Macpherson gestures toward the uniform basis of cognitive architecture, which was required of the empiricist mind and those primitive artistic productions that spoke—as Blair understood them to—from the origins of stadial history.

In this sense, Macpherson’s Ossianic project draws on some of the same assumptions that drive more recent work on literary universals. Hogan’s project, for one, owes a clear debt to Lowth, as well as to Macpherson, in whose hands the Hebrew parallelism began to look less like a mark of cultural difference than a cross-cultural feature of the literary mind. If the pursuit of such universals was already a feature of eighteenth-century belletrism, then it is necessary to think about

how that history continues to condition more recent critical endeavors. Like the Scottish Enlightenment's conjectural histories, philologists' exploration of cultural differences in poetry served a broader project, which sought to uncover the mind's basic, cross-cultural foundations. Rather than paving the way for cultural relativism, then, Macpherson (and theories of the "folk" more broadly) are part and parcel of that universalist project.

That project began—like Hogan's "literary universals" or Rueven Tsur's "cognitive poetics"—in the study of the single mind, and its experience of poetic language.⁸⁹ What makes poetry distinctive—and this remains common sense for many of those who teach poetry to undergraduates—is its complex and self-aware treatment of language, its drawing on sensory experience, and its manipulation of sonic and conceptual linguistic effects. Sometime in the nineteenth century, though, storytelling becomes a cognitive attribute in its own right. Famously, John Stuart Mill will identify poetic "feeling" and narrative "incident" as "two mutually exclusive characters of mind." While "all minds are capable of being affected" by both, only advanced societies cultivate true poetry. The earliest stages of life are marked, meanwhile, by the "passion for a story."⁹⁰ Like Wordsworth, Mill reviles popular narrative as a vulgar, rudimentary activity. Yet where Wordsworth aligned only poetry with a mental faculty, Mill grants that narrative, too, is a cognitive ability. The result is a compartmentalized picture of two different faculties: one aligned with sensation and passion, and the domain of a singular voice; and the other marked as the domain of narrative, folk psychology, and the doings of other minds.

That compartmentalization remains clear in more recent approaches to the literary mind, a subset of which focus on the concerns of folk psychology, specifically readers' engagement with fictional minds. Such studies—as indicated by titles like Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction* and Blakey Vermeule's *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?*²—ask what makes mundane, plot-driven literature possible.⁹¹ In order to provide the explanations their titles promise, both of these studies attempt to link how we read with how we countenance other minds in everyday life. As a groundwork for literary studies, the scientific debates around folk psychology tend to position the literary artifact as a vehicle of social information. For Zunshine and Vermeule, novels portray complex networks of social information, which ultimately provoke and exercise our mindreading abilities. This includes both our common or "folk" theories about what the mind is like, and, more to the point, our ordinary (and on many versions of this argument,

evolutionarily hard-wired) methods for recognizing and navigating the social world. These studies typically describe literature in terms of realist narrative, or more generally in terms of plot or story. And that equation is particularly stark in work that, seeking a broad, cross-cultural and transhistorical scope, cuts across myth, national epic, folktale, metrical romance, and the realist novel, seeking a more basic and all-encompassing definition of the literary artifact. The result is a model of literature as something like “storytelling,” a designation that has particular affinities with theories of narrative and oral culture. Thus John D. Niles defines “oral narrative” as “people’s use of the elements of speech to evoke action in a temporal sequence.”⁹² The openness of that definition intends to make narrative include both cultural institutions (such as ritual performance) and the basic tools of everyday social life (such as the conversational anecdote). Indeed, such theories can say little about questions of literary genre; the cognitive architecture to which these theories refer has not changed since the Pleistocene era.⁹³

This gives the lyric an anomalous place within cognitive literary studies. The origins of the current cognitive revival can be found in the eighteenth century’s historicizing theories of poetry, yet the present obsession with narrative reduces poetry to a solitary lyric voice. Macpherson participated in this trend, too, of course. While they are not precisely ballads, the *Fragments* share many of the characteristics that have made ballads hard for literary critics to categorize. Largely narrative, populated by stock figures, generic settings, and brief actions, they support the reduction of literature in general to narrative or storytelling. But Macpherson often discussed his poems using antinarrative rhetoric, highlighting primitive linguistic effects and the “rhymes of the bards.” In short, Macpherson worked at a moment when two conceptions of literature were diverging, both of which saw the poem as the source of real knowledge about the mind. On the one hand was the empiricist poetics of sensation, which culminated in an introspective poetics and a theory of lyric solitude stretching from Mill to the twenty-first-century classroom.⁹⁴ On the other was a more positivistic turn to cognitive universals, which countenances the social mind, but only by theorizing the literary as something like an instinct to tell stories. Macpherson begins to register that divergence as a contradiction within his own poetic practice.

The best emblem for that theoretical knot is Morna’s death itself. Fragment 15 takes the poetics of sensuous expressivity to its point of rupture. It leaves us with the “dead letter” of the stage direction and its descriptive language of mental states, instantiated in behavior and

expressed as a function of the body. In that moment of textual and bodily disruption, Macpherson's poetry probes the intersection of two competing paradigms: poetry as a key to the embodied mind, and literature as a reflex of the mind's social operations. The result is a peculiarly ambivalent engagement with the era's scientifically-inflected theories of literature, one that sought both to explain literature's minds and to ground humanistic inquiry in the material world. Ultimately, this is a materialism for which literary studies is still looking.

University of California, Berkeley

NOTES

¹ For a detailed account of Restoration and eighteenth-century debates around mental-state terms, see Jonathan Kramnick, *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010).

² See [James Macpherson], *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, in *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1996), 5–31. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *F*.

³ See Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1997). Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *I*.

⁴ See Hugh Blair, preface to *Fragments*, 6.

⁵ The controversy regarding Macpherson's status as forger endures, as evidenced most recently in Thomas M. Curley's *Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud, and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009). As Curley acknowledges, however, the past several decades have seen a resurgence of interest in Macpherson's original achievement, notably Fiona J. Stafford's *The Sublime Savage: A Study of James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1988).

⁶ On Ossian's mediation, see the contributions to Howard Gaskill, ed., *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (New York: Continuum, 2004), especially the overview in Gaskill's "Introduction: Genuine Poetry . . . Like Gold," 1–20.

⁷ Macpherson transferred to Aberdeen's Marischal College in 1755. That same year he likely also studied in Edinburgh, without matriculating, before returning home to rural Ruthven. See Stafford, 24 and following.

⁸ On Aberdeen's curricular reform, see Paul B. Wood, *The Aberdeen Enlightenment: The Arts Curriculum in the Eighteenth Century* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Univ. Press, 1993); see also Stafford, 26–28.

⁹ Thomas Bailey Saunders, *The Life and Letters of James Macpherson* (New York: Macmillan, 1894), 40.

¹⁰ Stafford, 27.

¹¹ Alexander Gerard, *Plan of Education in the Marischal College and University of Aberdeen, with the Reasons of It. Drawn up by Order of the Faculty* (Aberdeen: James Chalmers, 1755), 25. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, <http://galegroup.com/ecco>

¹² Gerard, 33.

¹³ Gerard, 25.

¹⁴ Gerard, 23.

¹⁵ See René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), #-#.

¹⁶ See Robert Lowth, *De sacra poesi Hebræorum* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1753); Johann Gottfried Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, trans. James Marsh (Burlington: Smith, 1833) and “Extract from a Correspondence on Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples,” in *The Origins of Modern Critical Thought: German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism from Lessing to Hegel*, ed. David Simpson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 71–76; Paul Henri Mallet, *Northern Antiquities: or, a description of the manners, customs, religion and laws of the ancient Danes, and other northern nations*, trans. Thomas Percy (London: T. Carnon, 1770); and Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian*, in *The Poems of Ossian*, 343–99.

¹⁷ Herder, “Extract from a Correspondence on Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples,” 71.

¹⁸ Mallet, 393.

¹⁹ Mallet, 393.

²⁰ On Thomas Blackwell’s relation to Macpherson, see Stafford, 28–33; see also Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), 78.

²¹ Macpherson, *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Becket and de Hondt, 1771), 214. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*.

²² Blair, *Critical Dissertation*, 345.

²³ Blair, *Critical Dissertation*, 347.

²⁴ See Dugald Stewart, “Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D.,” in *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, ed. William Hamilton, 10 vol. (Edinburgh: Constable, 1858), 10:1–98 (34).

²⁵ Noel Jackson, *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 105. Jackson reads Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight,” for instance, as a sustained engagement with Reidian self-observation.

²⁶ On fragments 1 and 2 as a “grimly ironic” reworking of the *Song of Songs*, see Stafford, 102–3.

²⁷ Macpherson, *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, 177–78.

²⁸ In the preface to the 1760 *Fragments*, Ossian’s resistance to Christian evangelism is taken as evidence of his antiquity; see *Fragments*, 5. For the much-remarked-upon Christian use of the Greek term *palingenesia*, see Matthew 18:29.

²⁹ See Jerome J. McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); see also Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion from Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996). For a recent exploration of the vitality of objects, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2010).

³⁰ McGann, 37.

³¹ McGann, 38.

³² On panpsychism’s history see David Skrbina, *Panpsychism in the West* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

³³ William Wordsworth, “Lines Written in Early Spring,” in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), 76.

³⁴ Wordsworth, “The world is too much with us; late and soon,” in *Poems in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared R. Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), 150.

³⁵ Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 55. Cavell remains agnostic about whether “the world that poetry (or what is to become poetry) seeks” will ultimately entail “a new animism, a truer one, or whether the concept of animism will fall away, as if outgrown” (65).

³⁶ Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” in *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 3 vol. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), 1:397.

³⁷ Cavell, 31, 52–53.

³⁸ Lowth, *Isaiah: A New Translation with a Preliminary Dissertation and Notes, Critical, Philological, and Explanatory* (London: Baynes, 1825), 38–39.

³⁹ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 3, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vol. (London: Allen, 1904), 5:201–3.

⁴⁰ See Paul de Man, “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984), 239–262. De Man’s turn to the structures of language was one signal of literary criticism’s broader turn away from discussions of consciousness—on which see Colin Jager, “Can We Talk about Consciousness Again?,” in *Romantic Frictions*, ed. Theresa Kelley, *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, September 2011, <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/frictions>

⁴¹ McGann, 35. For an extension of McGann’s argument to the poetics of orality, see James Mulholland, “James Macpherson’s Ossian Poems, Oral Traditions, and the Invention of Voice,” *Oral Tradition* 24 (October 2009): 393–414, esp. 400–1.

⁴² See Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: The Romantic Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁴³ Blair, *Critical Dissertation*, 354.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of Enlightenment developmental theory’s effacing of sociality, see Nancy Yousef, *Isolated Cases: The Anxieties of Autonomy in Enlightenment Philosophy and Romantic Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2004).

⁴⁵ On the “social intelligence hypothesis” in psychology and its application to literary texts, see Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2009), 30–1.

⁴⁶ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 90.

⁴⁷ Compare, though, Pinch’s alternative account of Humean sympathy, where feeling originates outside the self and is never quite one’s own in the first place; see *Strange Fits of Passion*, 17 and following.

⁴⁸ Reid, *Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Derek R. Brookes and Knud Haakonssen (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1996), 27.

⁴⁹ Reid, *Essay*, 68.

⁵⁰ Reid, *Essay*, 68.

⁵¹ Reid, *Essay*, 69.

⁵² Reid, *Essay*, 69.

⁵³ On Hume’s relationship to folk psychology, see Kramnick, *Actions and Objects*, 48 and following.

⁵⁴ Hume, 269.

⁵⁵ Hume, 269.

⁵⁶ Wilfred Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of the Mind,” in *The Foundations of Science and the Concepts of Psychology and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1956), 253–329.

⁵⁷ Hume, on the other hand, would. See Kramnick, *Actions and Objects*, 56.

⁵⁸ The “poverty of the stimulus” argument is usually dated to Noam Chomsky’s review of B. F. Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior in Language* # (January–March 1959): 26–58. Linguists in Chomsky’s tradition argue that language acquisition—as opposed to knowledge of particular languages—must be innate, since children become fluent so early in the rules of language use.

⁵⁹ The best-known articulation of this position is probably Simon Baron-Cohen’s *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

⁶⁰ Alan Richardson points to this “inborn ability to read the ‘natural’ language of facial expressions and gestures” as something that “Herder, Reid, and Darwin all theorized” (*British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* [New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001], 161). On Reid and mindreading in early childhood, see Richardson, *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010), esp. 80–96.

⁶¹ Macpherson, *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, 177.

⁶² See Albert B. Friedman, *The Ballad Revival: Studies in the Influence of Popular on Sophisticated Poetry* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961); more recently, see Maureen McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008); and Steve Newman, *Ballad Collecting, Lyric, and the Canon: The Call of the Popular from the Restoration to the New Criticism* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁶³ Joseph Addison, “Chevy Chase,” *The Spectator*, repr. in *Selections from Addison’s Papers*, ed. Thomas Arnold (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 378.

⁶⁴ Addison, 383.

⁶⁵ Blair, *Critical Dissertation*, 368.

⁶⁶ In this sense, Macpherson’s Ossianic project is already an attempt at what Richardson has termed “cognitive historicism.” For a methodological overview, see his *Neural Sublime*, 3–16.

⁶⁷ This fragment, originally number fourteen, was renumbered in the September 1760 second edition and in all subsequent editions of the text.

⁶⁸ Blair, preface to *Fragments*, 5.

⁶⁹ James Chandler, “The Languages of Sentiment,” *Textual Practice* (March 2008): 31.

⁷⁰ Chandler, 33.

⁷¹ See Neil Vickers, review of *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* by Alan Richardson, *Studies in Romanticism* (Spring 2004): 148. For Vickers’s full discussion of Whytt, see his *Coleridge and the Doctors, 1795–1806* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).

⁷² Robert Whytt, *An Essay on the Vital and Other Involuntary Motions of Animals* (Edinburgh: Hamilton, Balfour, and Neill, 1751), 13. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*.

⁷³ Whytt, 373.

⁷⁴ Whytt, 384.

⁷⁵ Whytt, 386.

⁷⁶ Whytt, 385.

⁷⁷ Whytt, 385–86.

⁷⁸ Ian Haywood reads the poem as a failed literary experiment, since its primary claim to authenticity—its fragmentary status—comes into conflict with Macpherson’s claim to editorial authority; see *The Making of History: A Study of the Literary Forgeries of James Macpherson and Thomas Chatterton in Relation to Eighteenth-Century Ideas of History and Fiction* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1986), 85.

⁷⁹ Blair, *Critical Dissertation*, 354.

⁸⁰ Wordsworth, preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, 747. On the influence of Lowth on Wordsworth, see Stephen Prickett, *Words and the Word: Language, Poetics, and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 43.

⁸¹ Macpherson, *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, 77.

⁸² For this term and the method it implies, see Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).

⁸³ For an overview of some of these approaches, see Lisa Zunshine, ed., *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010).

⁸⁴ Patrick Colm Hogan, "Literary Universals," *Poetics Today* 18.2 (1997): 227.

⁸⁵ Lowth, *Isaiah*, 26.

⁸⁶ Lowth, *Isaiah*, 22.

⁸⁷ Lowth, *Isaiah*, 35–36.

⁸⁸ See John J. Dunn, "Coleridge's Debt to Macpherson's Ossian," *Studies in Scottish Literature* (July–October 1969): 76–89.

⁸⁹ See Rueven Tsur, *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* (New York: North-Holland, 1992). For a recent application of cognitive aesthetics to the lyric, see G. Gabrielle Starr, "Poetic Subjects and Grecian Urns," *Modern Philology* (August 2007): 48–61.

⁹⁰ John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson, 33 vol. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1963–91), 1:345.

⁹¹ See Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2006); see also Vermeule.

⁹² John D. Niles, *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 1–2.

⁹³ Kramnick makes this point in "Against Literary Darwinism," *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 2011): 315–47. "Literary Darwinists" attempt to explain literary behavior more directly through an account of selection and adaptation. See Joseph Carroll, *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004); see also Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard Univ. Press, 2009).

⁹⁴ On the Anglo-American tradition's blunting of Mill's initially more nuanced account of lyric solitude, see Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 130 and following.