

**A CRITICAL DISSERTATION
ON THE
POEMS OF OSSIAN,
THE SON OF FINGAL**

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A critical dissertation on the poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal by Hugh Blair

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HUGH BLAIR

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THE Substance of the following Dissertation was delivered by the Author in the Course of his Lectures on Rhetorick and Belles-Lettres, in the University of Edinburgh. At the Desire of several of his Hearers, he has enlarged, and given it to the Publick, in its present Form.

In this Dissertation, it is proposed, to make some Observations on the ancient Poetry of Nations, particularly the Runic and the Celtic; to point out those Characters of Antiquity, which the Works of Ossian bear; to give an Idea of the Spirit and Strain of his Poetry; and after applying the Rules of Criticism to Fingal, as an Epic Poem, to examine the Merit of Ossian's Compositions in general, with Regard to Description, Imagery, and Sentiment.

1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that this is crucial for ensuring transparency and accountability in the organization's financial operations. The text notes that without proper record-keeping, it would be difficult to track expenses and revenues, which could lead to significant discrepancies and potential fraud.

2. The second section focuses on the role of the accounting department in providing timely and accurate financial reports. It highlights that these reports are essential for management to make informed decisions about the company's future. The text also mentions that the accounting team should regularly communicate with other departments to ensure that all financial data is up-to-date and consistent.

3. The third part of the document addresses the need for a strong internal control system. It explains that such a system is necessary to prevent errors and detect any irregularities early on. The text suggests that this system should include clear policies and procedures, as well as regular audits to ensure compliance. Additionally, it stresses the importance of training employees on these controls to ensure they are understood and followed.

4. The final section discusses the impact of technology on accounting practices. It notes that the use of modern accounting software can greatly improve efficiency and accuracy. However, it also warns that there are risks associated with relying on technology, such as data security and system downtime. The text recommends that organizations should invest in robust IT infrastructure and implement strong security measures to protect their financial data.

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AMONG the monuments remaining of the ancient state of nations, few are more valuable than their poems or songs. History, when it treats of remote and dark ages, is seldom very instructive. The beginnings of society, in every country, are involved in fabulous confusion; and though they were not, they would furnish few events worth recording. But, in every period of society, human manners are a curious spectacle; and the most natural pictures of ancient manners are exhibited in the ancient poems of nations. These present to us, what is much more valuable than the history of such transactions as a rude age can afford, The history of human imagination and passion. They make us acquainted with the notions and feelings of our fellow-creatures in the most artless ages; discovering what objects they admired, and what pleasures they pursued, before those refinements of society had taken place, which enlarge indeed, and diversify the transactions, but disguise the manners of mankind.

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Besides this merit, which ancient poems have with philosophical observers of human nature, they have another with persons of taste. They promise some of the highest beauties of poetical writing. Irregular and unpolished we may expect the productions of uncultivated ages to be; but abounding, at the same time, with that enthusiasm, that vehemence and fire, which are the soul of poetry. For many circumstances of those times which we call barbarous, are favourable to the poetical spirit. That state, in which human nature shoots wild and free, though unfit for other improvements, certainly encourages the high exertions of fancy and passion.

In the infancy of societies, men live scattered and dispersed, in the midst of solitary rural scenes, where the beauties of nature are their chief entertainment. They meet with many objects, to them new and strange; their wonder and surprize are frequently excited; and by the sudden changes of fortune occurring in their unsettled state of life, their passions are raised to the utmost. Their passions have nothing to restrain them: their imagination has nothing to check it. They display themselves to one another without disguise; and converse and act in the uncovered simplicity of nature. As their feelings are strong, so their language, of itself, assumes a poetical turn. Prone to exaggerate, they describe every thing in the strongest colours; which of course renders their speech picturesque and figurative. Figurative language owes its rise chiefly to two causes; to the want of proper names for objects, and to the influence of imagination and passion over the form of expression. Both these causes concur in the infancy of society. Figures are commonly considered as artificial modes of speech, devised by orators and poets, after the world had advanced to a refined state. The contrary of this is the truth. Men never have used so many figures of style, as in those rude ages, when, besides the power of a warm imagination to suggest lively images, the want of proper and precise terms for the ideas they would express, obliged them to have recourse to circumlocution, metaphor, comparison, and all those substituted forms of expression, which give a poetical air to language. An American chief, at this day, harangues at the head of his tribe, in a more bold metaphorical style, than a modern European would adventure to use in an Epic poem.

‡ In the progress of society, the genius and manners of men undergo a change more favourable to accuracy than to sprightliness and sublimity. As the world advances, the understanding gains ground upon the imagination; the understanding is more exercised; the imagination, leis. Fewer objects occur that are new or surprizing. Men apply themselves to trace the causes of things; they correct and refine one another; they subdue or disguise their passions; they form their exterior manners upon one uniform standard of politeness and civility. Human nature is pruned according to method and rule. Language advances from sterility to copiousness, and at the same time, from fervour and enthusiasm, to correctness and precision. Style becomes more chaste; but leis animated. The progress of the world in this respect resembles the progress of age in man. The powers of imagination are most vigorous and predominant in youth; those of the understanding ripen more slowly, and often attain not their maturity, till the imagination begin to flag. Hence, poetry, which is the child of imagination, is frequently most glowing and animated in the first ages of society. As the ideas of our youth are remembered with a peculiar pleasure on account of their liveliness and vivacity; so the most ancient poems have often proved the greatest favourites of nations.

Poetry has been said to be more ancient than prose: and however paradoxical such an assertion may seem, yet, in a qualified sense, it is true. Men certainly never conversed with one another in regular numbers; but even their ordinary language would in ancient times, for the reasons before assigned, approach to a poetical style; and the first compositions transmitted to posterity, beyond doubt, were, in a literal sense, poems; that is, compositions in which imagination had the chief hand, formed into some kind of numbers, and pronounced with a musical modulation or tone. Musick or song has been found coeval with society among the most barbarous nations. The only subjects which could prompt men, in their first rude state, to utter their thoughts in compositions of any length, were such as naturally assumed the tone of poetry; praises of their gods, or of their ancestors; commemorations of their own warlike exploits; or lamentations over their misfortunes. And before writing was invented, no other compositions, except songs or poems, could take such hold of the imagination and

memory, as to be preserved by oral tradition, and handed down from one race to another.

Hence we may expect to find poems among the antiquities of all nations. It is probable too, that an extensive search would discover a certain degree of resemblance among all the most ancient poetical productions, from whatever country they have proceeded. In a similar state of manners, similar objects and passions operating upon the imaginations of men, will stamp their productions with the same general character. Some diversity will, no doubt, be occasioned by climate and genius. But mankind never bear such resembling features, as they do in the beginnings of society. Its subsequent revolutions give rise to the principal distinctions among nations; and divert, into channels widely separated, that current of human genius and manners, which descends originally from one spring. What we have been long accustomed to call the oriental vein of poetry, because some of the earliest poetical productions have come to us from the East, is probably no more oriental than occidental; it is characteristic of an age rather than a country; and belongs, in some measure, to all nations at a certain period. Of this the works of Ossian seem to furnish a remarkable proof.

Our present subject leads us to investigate the ancient poetical remains, not so much of the east, or of the Greeks and Romans, as of the northern nations; in order to discover whether the Gothic poetry has any resemblance to the Celtic or Galic, which we are about to consider. Though the Goths, under which name we usually comprehend all the Scandinavian tribes, were a people altogether fierce and martial, and noted, to a proverb, for their ignorance of the liberal arts, yet they too, from the earliest times, had their poets and their songs. Their poets were distinguished by the title of *Scalders*, and their songs were termed *Vyses*.* Saxo Grammaticus,

* Olaus Wormius, in the appendix to his *Treatise de Literatura Runica*, has given a particular account of the Gothic poetry, commonly called Runic, from *Runes*, which signifies the Gothic letters. He informs us that there were no fewer than 136 different heads of measure or verse used in their *Vyses*; and though we are accustomed to call rhyme a Gothic

invention, he says expressly, that among all these measures, rhyme, or correspondence of final syllables, was never employed. He analyses the structure of one of these kinds of verse, that in which the poem of Lodbrog, afterwards quoted, is written; which exhibits a very singular species of harmony, if it can be allowed that name, depending neither upon rhyme
nor

maticus, a Danish Historian of considerable note, who flourished in the thirteenth century, informs us that very many of these songs, containing the ancient traditionary stories of the country, were found engraven upon rocks in the old Runic character; several of which he has translated into Latin, and inserted into his History. But his versions are plainly so paraphractical, and forced into such an imitation of the style and the measures of the Roman poets, that one can form no judgment from them of the native spirit of the original. A more curious monument of the true Gothic poetry is preserved by Olaus Wormius in his book de Literatura Runica. It is an Epicedium, or funeral song, composed by Regner Lodbrog; and translated by Olaus, word for word, from the original. This Lodbrog was a king of Denmark, who lived in the eighth century, famous for his wars and victories; and at the same time an eminent *Scalder* or poet. It was his misfortune to fall at last into the hands of one of his enemies, by whom he was thrown into prison, and condemned to be destroyed by serpents. In this situation he solaced himself with rehearsing all the exploits of his life. The poem is divided into twenty-nine stanzas, of ten lines each; and every stanza begins with these words, *Pugnavimus Ensisibus, We have fought with our swords.* Olaus's version is in many places so obscure as to be hardly intelligible. I have subjoined the whole below,

nor upon metrical feet, or quantity of syllables, but chiefly upon the number of the syllables, and the disposition of the letters. In every stanza was an equal number of lines: in every line six syllables. In each distich, it was requisite that three words should begin with the same letter; two of the corresponding words placed in the first line of the distich, the third, in the second line. In each line were also required two syllables, but never the final ones, formed either of the same consonants, or same vowels. As an example of this measure, Olaus gives us these two Latin lines, constructed exactly according to the above rules of Runic verse;

Christus caput nostrum
Coronet te bonis.

The initial letters of Christus, Caput

and Coronet, make the three corresponding letters of the distich. In the first line, the first syllables of Christus and of nostrum; in the second line, the *ca* in coronet and in bonis make the requisite correspondence of syllables. Frequent inversions and transpositions were permitted in this poetry; which would naturally follow from such laborious attention to the collocation of words.

The curious on this subject may consult likewise Dr. Hicks's *Thesaurus Linguarum Septentrionalium*; particularly the 23d chapter of his *Grammatica Anglo Saxonica & Mæso Gothica*; where they will find a full account of the structure of the Anglo-Saxon verse, which nearly resembled the Gothic. They will find also some specimens both of Gothic and Saxon poetry. An extract, which Dr. Hicks has given from the work of one of the Danish