

**John Savarese, "Ossian's Folk Psychology." *ELH* 80. 3 (2013): 715-745.**

James Macpherson's Ossian poems, sophisticated forgeries published as *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), exerted a seminal influence upon early Romantic nationalism. In spite of well-founded doubts regarding their authenticity, these ostensible records of ancient Gaelic traditions captivated audiences throughout Europe, as well as luminaries such as David Hume, Denis Diderot, and Johann Gottfried Herder. In "Ossian's Folk Psychology," John Savarese provides fresh insight into Macpherson's project by exploring the influence of contemporaneous theories about embodied cognition on both the style and content of the Ossian poems.

Savarese begins by contextualizing the works within the broader philosophical discourses of the Scottish Enlightenment, emphasizing theories of mind advanced by Macpherson's contemporaries at the University of Aberdeen. He investigates the similarity between the "common sense" philosophy of the Aberdeen professor Thomas Reid, and the depiction of a coherent "folk psychology" within the Ossianic texts. Savarese links Reid's philosophy to the burgeoning late eighteenth-century interest in ancient and invented folk traditions. He suggests that "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" (730). Savarese relates this in turn to modern discourse around "folk psychology," which regards the capacity of attributing mental states to others, or mindreading, as a basic human cognitive capacity.

Drawing on the ideas of Macpherson's near-contemporary, the Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart, Savarese proposes we read the *Fragments* as stadial history, a philosophical account of experience focusing on speculation as to the inherent "primitive" qualities of the mind. Relating the Ossianic project to eighteenth-century discourses of panpsychism and animism, Savarese suggests that Macpherson turned to the genre of pseudo-primitive writing as a strategy to bypass the philosophical accouterments of more modern literary creations. Macpherson's poems can thus be understood as a materialistic investigation of the soul as firmly located in the body, with a primal focus on sensation and the sentimental aesthetics.

This interdisciplinary approach leads Savarese to insightful analyses that bring the cognitive into dialogue with the literary. For example, discussing "Morna's Genuine Remains," Savarese notes that Macpherson abandons the folk model "at the very moment when the text confesses its reconstructedness" (735). The crisis described by the poem is the nearly simultaneous deaths of Morna and Duchommar at each other's hands: Morna stabs Duchommar, who stabs her back; as she falls, she places a rock between their bodies, continuing to reject him even in death. Macpherson depicts these events with lyrical lines interspersed with shifts from the first to the third person, abrupt cuts that Savarese terms "stage directions" (731). He relates this break in literary style to the insufficiency of the folk model to express Macpherson's depiction of the action.

In interpreting Macpherson's stylistic experiments within a text purportedly based on an oral tradition, Savarese calls upon the ideas of the influential Scottish physician Robert Whytt. He compares the depiction of Morna's actions immediately after her fatal stabbing to Whytt's discussion of behaviors observed in recently decapitated animals. Whytt was interested in posthumous actions that appear to display traces of intention, such as the ability of certain reptiles to retain movement

for a period of time after death. Savarese uses Whytt's examples to illuminate Macpherson's depiction of Morna's last volitional action on the cusp between life and death. He suggests that we regard Morna's posthumous action as representing Macpherson's conception of the embodiment of mental states in bodily practices. Savarese thus claims that *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* straddles a moment in which two conceptions of literature diverged: the poem as "a key to the embodied mind," on the one hand, and as "a reflex of the mind's social operations" on the other (741).

Ultimately, as Savarese shows, every forgery cannot help but reveal the dreams of its creator. By locating Macpherson within broader intellectual currents of the Scottish Enlightenment, this excellent article represents a first-rate example of the insights that literary scholars stand to gain in engaging with cognitive historicism and the history of science. Dense but well argued, it makes a substantial contribution to contemporary understandings of the Ossianic project. Further analyses of neurophysiological ideas embodied in the depictions of human behavior within the works would be a welcome supplement to the current work, as would a more fleshed-out account of the relationships between Reid, Macpherson, and Whytt. Given the ferment of medical research in Edinburgh at the time, one also wonders as to the effect of other contemporaneous theories of physiology upon Macpherson's poems. Overall, "Ossian's Folk Psychology," contains a wealth of provocative ideas suggesting a number of further directions for research.

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