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The poems of Ossian

in two volumes ; to which are prefixed dissertations on the æra and
poems of Ossian

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Temora, Book VII.

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ARGUMENT

TO BOOK VII.

TEMORA:

AN EPIC POEM.

BOOK VII.

A R G U M E N T

TO BOOK VII.

THIS book begins about the middle of the third night from the opening of the poem. The poet describes a kind of mist, which rose by night from the lake of Lego, and was the usual residence of the souls of the dead, during the interval between their decease and the funeral song. The appearance of the ghost of Fillan above the cave where his body lay. His voice comes to Fingal, on the rock of Cormul. The king strikes the shield of Trenmor; which was an infallible sign of his appearing in arms himself. The extraordinary effect of the sound of the shield. Sulmalla, starting from sleep, awakes Cathmor. Their affecting discourse. She insists with him to sue for peace: he resolves to continue the war. He directs her to retire to the neighbouring valley of Lona, which was the residence of an old Druid, until the battle of the next day should be over. He awakes his army with the sound of his shield. The shield described. Fonar, the bard, at the desire of Cathmor, relates the first settlement of the Fir-bolg in Ireland, under their leader Larthon. Morning comes. Sulmalla retires to the valley of Lona. A lyric song concludes the book.

TEMORA:
AN EPIC POEM.

BOOK VII.

FROM the wood-skirted waters of Lego, ascend, at times, grey-bosomed mists; when the gates of the west are closed, on the sun's eagle-eye. Wide, over Lara's stream, is poured the vapour, dark and deep: the moon, like a dim shield, is swimming through its folds. With this, clothe the spirits of old their sudden gestures on the wind, when they stride, from blast to blast, along the dusky night. Often, blended with the gale, to some warrior's grave^d they roll the mist, a grey dwelling to his ghost, until the songs arise.

^d As the mist, which rose from the lake of Lego, occasioned diseases and death, the bards feigned that it was the residence of the ghosts of the deceased, during the interval between their death, and the pronouncing the funeral elegy over their tombs; for it was not allowable, without that ceremony was performed, for the spirits of the dead to mix with their ancestors, *in their airy halls*. It was the business of

A sound came from the desert; it was Conar, king of Inis-fail. He poured his mist on the grave of Fillan, at blue-winding Lubar. Dark and mournful sat the ghost, in his grey ridge of smoke. The blast, at times, rolled him together: but the form returned again. It returned with bending eyes, and dark-winding locks of mist.

It was dark.° The sleeping host were still in the skirts of night. The flame decayed on the hill of Fingal; the king lay lonely on his shield. His eyes were half-closed in sleep: the voice of Fillan came. "Sleeps the husband of Clatho? Dwells the father of the fallen in rest? Am I forgot in the folds of darkness; lonely in the season of night?"

the spirit of the nearest relation to the deceased, to take the mist of Lego, and pour it over the grave. We find here Conar, the son of Trenmor, the first king of Ireland, performing this office for Fillan, as it was in the cause of the family of Conar that that hero was killed.

° The following is the singular sentiment of a frigid bard:

"More pleasing to me is the night of Cona, dark-streaming from Ossian's harp; more pleasant it is to me, than a white-bosomed dweller between my arms; than a fair-handed daughter of heroes, in the hour of rest."

Though tradition is not very satisfactory concerning the history of this poet, it has taken care to inform us, that he was *very old* when he wrote the distich, a circumstance which we might have supposed, without the aid of tradition.

“Why dost thou mix,” said the king, “with the dreams of thy father? Can I forget thee, my son, or thy path of fire in the field? Not such come the deeds of the valiant on the soul of Fingal. They are not there a beam of lightning, which is seen, and is then no more. I remember thee, O Fillan! and my wrath begins to rise.”

The king took his deathful spear, and struck the deeply-sounding shield: his shield that hung high in night, the dismal sign of war! Ghosts fled on every side, and rolled their gathered forms on the wind. Thrice, from the winding vale, arose the voice of deaths. The harps^f of the bards, untouched, sound mournful over the hill.

He struck again the shield; battles rose in

^f It was the opinion of ancient times, that, on the night preceding the death of a person worthy and renowned, the harps of those bards, who were retained by his family, emitted melancholy sounds. This was attributed to *the light touch of ghosts*; who were supposed to have a fore-knowledge of events. The same opinion prevailed long in the north, and the particular sound was called *the warning voice of the dead*. *The voice of death*, mentioned in the preceding sentence, was of a different kind. Each person was supposed to have an attendant spirit, who assumed his form and voice on the night preceding his death, and appeared, to some, in the attitude in which the person was to die. THE VOICES OF DEATH WERE the foreboding shrieks of those spirits.

the dreams of his host. The wide-tumbling strife is gleaming over their souls. Blue-shielded kings descend to war. Backward-looking armies fly; and mighty deeds are half-hid in the bright gleams of steel.

But when the third sound arose, deer started from the clefts of their rocks. The screams of fowl are heard, in the desert, as each flew, frightened, on his blast. The sons of Selma half-rose, and half-assumed their spears. But silence rolled back on the host: they knew the shield of the king. Sleep returned to their eyes; the field was dark and still.

No sleep was thine in darkness, blue-eyed daughter of Conmor! Sulmalla heard the dreadful shield, and rose, amid the night. Her steps are towards the king of Atha. "Can danger shake his daring soul!" In doubt, she stands, with bending eyes. Heaven burns with all its stars.

Again the shield resounds! She rushed. She stopt. Her voice half-rose. It failed. She saw him, amidst his arms, that gleamed to heaven's fire. She saw him dark in his locks, that rose to nightly wind. Away, for fear, she turned her steps. "Why should the king of Erin awake? Thou art not a dream to his rest, daughter of Inis-huna."

More dreadful rings the shield. Sulmalla

starts. Her helmet falls. Loud echoes Lubar's rock, as over it rolls the steel. Bursting from the dreams of night, Cathmor half-rose, beneath his tree. He saw the form of the maid, above him, on the rock. A red star, with twinkling beam, looked through her floating hair.

"Who comes through night to Cathmor, in the season of his dreams? Bringest thou aught of war? Who art thou, son of night? Stand'st thou before me, a form of the times of old? A voice from the fold of a cloud, to warn me of the danger of Erin?"

"Nor lonely scout am I, nor voice from folded cloud," she said; "but I warn thee of the danger of Erin. Dost thou hear that sound? It is not the feeble, king of Atha, that rolls his signs on night."

"Let the warrior roll his signs," he replied; "to Cathmor they are the sounds of harps. My joy is great, voice of night, and burns over all my thoughts. This is the music of kings, on lonely hills, by night; when they light their daring souls, the sons of mighty deeds! The feeble dwell alone, in the valley of the breeze; where mists lift their morning skirts, from the blue-winding streams."

"Not feeble, king of men, were they, the fathers of my race. They dwelt in the folds of battle, in their distant lands. Yet delights

not my soul in the signs of death! He,[§] who never yields, comes forth: O send the bard of peace!"

Like a dropping rock, in the desert, stood Cathmor, in his tears. Her voice came, a breeze, on his soul, and waked the memory of her land; where she dwelt by her peaceful streams, before he came to the war of Conmor.

"Daughter of strangers," he said, (she trembling turned away) "long have I marked thee in my steel, young pine of Inis-huna. But my soul, I said, is folded in a storm. Why should that beam arise, till my steps return in peace? Have I been pale in thy presence, as thou bidst me to fear the king? The time of danger, O maid, is the season of my soul; for then it swells, a mighty stream, and rolls me on the foe.

"Beneath the moss-covered rock of Lona, near his own loud stream, grey in his locks of

[§] Fingal is said to have never been overcome in battle. From this proceeded that title of honour which is always bestowed on him in tradition, *Fionn gul na buai*, FINGAL OF VICTORIES. In a poem, just now in my hands, which celebrates some of the great actions of Arthur, the famous British hero, that appellation is often bestowed on him. The poem, from the phraseology, appears to be ancient; and is, perhaps, though that is not mentioned, a translation from the Welsh language.

age, dwells Clonmal,^h king of harps. Above him is his echoing tree, and the dun bounding of roes. The noise of our strife reaches his ear, as he bends in the thoughts of years. There let thy rest be, Sulmalla, until our battle cease. Until I return, in my arms, from the skirts of the evening mist, that rises, on Lona, round the dwelling of my love.”

A light fell on the soul of the maid; it rose kindled before the king. She turned her face to Cathmor, from amidst her waving locks. “Sooner shall the eagle of heaven be torn from the stream of his roaring wind, when he sees the dun prey before him, the young sons of the bounding roe; than thou, O Cathmor! be turned from the strife of renown. Soon may I see thee, warrior, from the skirts of the evening mist, when it is rolled around me, on Lona of the streams. While yet thou art distant far, strike, Cathmor, strike the shield, that joy may return to my darkened soul, as I lean on the mossy rock. But if thou shouldst fall, I am in

^h Claon-mal, *crooked eye-brow*. From the retired life of this person is insinuated, that he was of the order of the Druids; which supposition is not at all invalidated by the appellation of *king of harps*, here bestowed on him; for all agree that the bards were of the number of the Druids originally.

the land of strangers; O send thy voice, from thy cloud, to the maid of Inis-huna!"

"Young branch of green-headed Lumon, why dost thou shake in the storm? Often has Cathmor returned, from darkly-rolling wars. The darts of death are but hail to me; they have often rattled along my shield. I have risen brightened from battle, like a meteor from a stormy cloud. Return not, fair beam, from thy vale, when the roar of battle grows. Then might the foe escape, as from my fathers of old.

"They told to Son-mor,ⁱ of Clunar,^k who was slain by Cormac in fight. Three days darkened Son-mor, over his brother's fall. His spouse beheld the silent king, and foresaw his steps to war. She prepared the bow, in secret, to attend her blue-shielded hero. To her dwelt darkness at Atha, when he was not there. From their hundred streams, by night, poured down the sons of Alnecma. They had heard the shield of the king, and their rage arose. In

ⁱ Són-mor, *tall handsome man*. He was the father of Borbar-duthul, chief of Atha, and grandfather to Cathmor himself.

^k Cluan-er, *man of the field*. This chief was killed in battle by Cormac Mac-Conar, king of Ireland, the father of Ros-crána, the first wife of Fingal. The story is alluded to in some ancient poems.

clanging arms they moved along, towards Ullin of the groves. Son-mor struck his shield, at times, the leader of the war.

“Far behind followed Sul-allin,¹ over the streamy hills. She was a light on the mountain, when they crossed the vale below. Her steps were stately on the vale, when they rose on the mossy hill. She feared to approach the king, who left her in echoing Atha. But when the roar of battle rose; when host was rolled on host; when Son-mor burnt, like the fire of heaven in clouds; with her spreading hair came Sul-allin; for she trembled for her king. He stopt the rushing strife, to save the love of heroes. The foe fled by night: Clunar slept without his blood; the blood which ought to be poured upon the warrior's tomb.

“Nor rose the rage of Son-mor; but his days were silent and dark. Sul-allin wandered, by her grey streams, with her tearful eyes. Often did she look on the hero, when he was folded in his thoughts. But she shrunk from his eyes, and turned her lone steps away. Battles rose, like a tempest, and drove the mist from his soul. He beheld, with joy, her steps in the hall, and the white-rising of her hands on the harp.”

¹ Suil-alluin, *beautiful*; the wife of Són-mor.

In^m his arms strode the chief of Atha, to where his shield hung, high, in night: high on a mossy bough, over Lubar's streamy roar. Seven bosses rose on the shield; the seven voices of the king, which his warriors received, from the wind, and marked over all their tribes.

On each boss is placed a star of night; Cean-mathon, with beams unshorn; Col-derna, rising from a cloud: Ul-oicho, robed in mist; and the soft beam of Cathlin glittering on a rock. Smiling, on its own blue wave, Reul-durath half-sinks its western light. The red eye of Berthin looks, through a grove, on the hunter, as he returns, by night, with the spoils of the bounding roe. Wide, in the midst, arose the cloudless beam of Ton-théna, that star, which looked, by night, on the course of the sea-tossed Larthon: Larthon, the first of Bolga's race, who travelled on the

^m To avoid multiplying notes, I shall give here the signification of the names of the stars, engraved on the shield. Cean-mathon, *head of the bear*. Colderna, *slant and sharp beam*. Ul-oicho, *ruler of night*. Cathlin, *beam of the wave*. Reul-durath, *star of the twilight*. Berthin, *fire of the hill*. Ton-théna, *meteor of the waves*. These etymologies, excepting that of Cean-mathon, are pretty exact. Of it I am not so certain; for it is not very probable, that the Fir-bolg had distinguished a constellation, so very early as the days of Larthon, by the name of the bear.

winds.ⁿ White-bosomed spread the sails of the king, towards streamy Inis-fail; dun night was rolled before him, with its skirts of mist. Unconstant blew the winds, and rolled him from wave to wave. Then rose the fiery-haired Ton-théna, and smiled from her parted cloud. Larthon^o blessed the well-known beam, as it faint-gleamed on the deep.

ⁿ *To travel on the winds*, a poetical expression for sailing.

^o Larthon is compounded of *Lear*, sea, and *thon*, wave. This name was given to the chief of the first colony of the Fir-bolg, who settled in Ireland, on account of his knowledge in navigation. A part of an old poem is still extant, concerning this hero. It abounds with those romantic fables of giants and magicians, which distinguished the compositions of the less ancient bards. The descriptions contained in it are ingenious, and proportionable to the magnitude of the persons introduced; but, being unnatural, they are insipid and tedious. Had the bard kept within the bounds of probability, his genius was far from being contemptible. The exordium of his poem is not destitute of merit; but it is the only part of it that I think worthy of being presented to the reader.

“Who first sent the black ship, through ocean, like a whale through the bursting of foam? Look, from thy darkness, on Cronath, Ossian of the harps of old! Send thy light on the blue-rolling waters, that I may behold the king. I see him dark in his own shell of oak! Sea-tossed Larthon, thy soul is strong. It is careless as the wind of thy sails; as the wave that rolls by thy side. But the silent green isle is before thee, with its sons, who are tall as woody Lumon; Lumon,

Beneath the spear of Cathmor, rose that voice which awakes the bards. They came, dark-winding, from every side; each with the sound of his harp. Before them rejoiced the king, as the traveller, in the day of the sun; when he hears, far-rolling around, the murmur of mossy streams; streams that burst, in the desert, from the rock of roes.

“Why,” said Fonar, “hear we the voice of the king, in the season of his rest? Were the dim forms of thy fathers bending in thy dreams? Perhaps they stand on that cloud, and wait for Fonar’s song; often they come to the fields where their sons are to lift the spear. Or shall our voice arise for him who lifts the spear no more; he that consumed the field, from Moma of the groves?”

“Not forgot is that cloud in war, bard of other times. High shall his tomb rise, on Moilena, the dwelling of renown. But now, roll back my soul to the times of my fathers: to the years when first they rose on Inis-huna’s waves. Nor alone pleasant to Cathmor is the remem-

which sends from its top a thousand streams, white-wandering down its sides.”

It may, perhaps, be for the credit of this bard, to translate no more of this poem, for the continuation of his description of the Irish giants, betrays his want of judgment.

brance of wood-covered Lumon. Lumon of the streams, the dwelling of white-bosomed maids."

"Lumon^p of the streams, thou risest on Fonar's soul! Thy sun is on thy side, on the rocks of thy bending trees. The dun roe is seen from thy furze; the deer lifts his branchy head; for he sees, at times, the hound on the half-covered heath. Slow, on the vale, are the steps of maids, the white-armed daughters of the bow; they lift their blue eyes to the hill, from amidst their wandering locks. Not there is the stride of Larthon, chief of Inis-huna. He mounts the wave on his own dark oak, in Cluba's ridgy bay. That oak which he cut from Lumon, to bound along the sea. The maids turn their eyes away, lest the king should be lowly-laid; for never had they seen a ship, dark rider of the wave!

"Now he dares to call the winds, and to mix with the mist of ocean. Blue Inis-fail rose, in smoke; but dark-skirted night came down. The sons of Bolga feared. The fiery-haired Ton-théna rose. Culbin's bay received the ship, in the bosom of its echoing woods. There issued a stream from Duthuma's horrid cave;

^p Lumon was a hill in Inis-huna, near the residence of Sul-malla. This episode has an immediate connexion with what is said of Larthon, in the description of Cathmor's shield.

where spirits gleamed, at times, with their half-finished forms.

“ Dreams descended on Larthon : he saw seven spirits of his fathers. He heard their half-formed words, and dimly beheld the times to come. He beheld the kings of Atha, the sons of future days. They led their hosts, along the field, like ridges of mist, which winds pour, in autumn, over Atha of the groves.

“ Larthon raised the hall of Samla,^q to the music of the harp. He went forth to the roes of Erin, to their wonted streams. Nor did he forget green-headed Lumon ; he often bounded over his seas, to where white-handed ^rFlathal looked from the hill of roes. Lumon, of the foamy streams, thou risest on Fonar’s soul !”

Morning pours from the east. The misty heads of the mountains rise. Valleys shew, on every side, the grey winding of their streams. His host heard the shield of Cathmor : at once they rose around ; like a crowded sea, when first it feels the wings of the wind. The waves know not whither to roll ; they lift their troubled heads.

^q Samla, *apparitions* ; so called from the vision of Larthon concerning his posterity.

^r Flathal, *heavenly, exquisitely beautiful*. She was the wife of Larthon.

Sad and slow, retired Sulmalla, to Lona of the streams. She went, and often turned; her blue eyes rolled in tears. But when she came to the rock, that darkly-covered Lona's vale, she looked, from her bursting soul, on the king; and sunk, at once, behind.

Son of Alpin, strike the string. Is there aught of joy in the harp? Pour it then on the soul of Ossian; it is folded in mist. I hear thee, O bard! in my night. But cease the lightly-trembling sound. The joy of grief belongs to Ossian, amidst his dark-brown years.

Green thorn of the hill of ghosts, that shakest thy head to nightly winds! I hear no sound in thee: is there no spirit's windy skirt now rustling in thy leaves? Often are the steps of the dead, in the dark-eddying blasts; when the moon, a dun shield, from the east, is rolled along the sky.

Ullin, Carril, and Ryno, voices of the days of old! Let me hear you, while yet it is dark, to please and awake my soul. I hear you not, ye sons of song; in what hall of the clouds is your rest? Do you touch the shadowy harp, robed with morning mist, where the rustling sun comes forth from his green-headed waves?

