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A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian

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

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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.

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 and 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 less. Fewer objects occur that are new or surprising. 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 less 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 to their maturity

till the imagination begins 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 páradoxical 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. Music or song has been found coæval 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 characteristical 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* [r]. Saxo Grammaticus,

[r] 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 kinds of measure, or verse, used in their *Vyses*; and though we are accustomed to call rhyme 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,

a Danish historian of considerable note who flourished in the thirteenth century, informs

if it can be allowed that name, depending neither upon rhyme 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 *on* 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 in this subject may consult likewise Dr. Hicks's Thesaurus Linguarum Septentrionalium; particularly the 23d chapter of his Grammatica Anglo Saxonica et 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 Scalders, entitled Hervarer Saga, containing an evocation from the dead, may be found in the 6th volume of Miscellany Poems, published by Mr. Dryden.

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 paraphrastical, 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 ensibus, 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, exactly as he has published it; and shall translate as much as may give the English reader an idea of the spirit and strain of this kind of poetry[s].

I.

Pugnavimus ensibus
Haud post longum tempus
Cum in Gotlandia accessimus
Ad serpentis immensi necem
Tunc impetravimus Thoram
Ex hoc vocarunt me virum
Quod serpentem transfodi
Hirsutam braccam ob illam cedem
Cuspide ictum intuli in colubrum
Fero lucidorum stupendiorum.

II.

Multum juvenis fui quando acquisivimus
Orientem versus in Oreonico freto
Vulnerum amnes avidæ feræ
Et flavipedi avi
Accepimus ibidem sonuerunt
Ad sublimes galeas
Dura ferra magnam escam
Omnis erat oceanus vulnus
Vadavit corvus in sanguine Cæsorum.

III.

Alte tulimus tunc lanceas
Quando viginti annos numeravimus
Et celebrem laudem comparavimus passim
Vicimus octo barones

" We have fought with our swords. I was
" young, when, towards the east, in the bay

In oriente ante Dimini portum
Aquilæ impetravimus tunc sufficientem
Hospitii sumptum in illa strage
Sudor decidit in vulnerum
Oceano perdidit exercitus ætatem.

IV.

Pugnæ facta copia
Cum Helsingianos postulavimus
Ad aulum Odini
Naves direximus in ostium Vistulæ
Mucro potuit tum mordere
Omnis erat vulnus unda
Terra rubefacta Calido
Frendebat gladius in loricas
Gladius findebat Clypeos.

V.

Memini neminem tunc fugisse
Priusquam in navibus
Heraudus in bello caderet
Non findit navibus
Alius baro præstantior
Mare ad portum
In navibus longis post illum
Sic attulit princeps passim
Alacre in bellum cor.

VI.

Exercitus abjecit clypeos
Cum hasta volavit

" of Oreon, we made torrents of blood flow,
" to gorge the ravenous beast of prey, and the
" yellow footed bird. There resounded the
" hard steel upon the lofty helmets of men.

Ardua ad virorum pectora
Momordit Scarforum cautes
Gladius in pugna
Sanguineus erat Clypeus
Antequam Rafno rex caderet
Fluxit ex virorum capitibus
Calidus in loricas sudor.

VII.

Habere potuerunt tum corvi
Ante Indirorum insulas
Sufficientem prædam dilaniandam
Acquisivimus feris carnivoris
Plenum prandium unico actu
Difficile erat unius facere mentionem
Oriente sole
Spicula vidi pungere
Propulerunt arcus ex se ferra.

VIII.

Altum mugierunt enses
Antequam in Laneo campo
Eislinus rex cecidit
Processimus auro ditati
Ad terram prostratorum dimicandum
Gladius secuit Clypeorum
Picturas in galearum conventu
Cervicum mustum ex vulneribus
Diffusum per cerebrum fissum.

"The whole ocean was one wound. The
"crow waded in the blood of the slain. When
"we had numbered twenty years, we lifted
"our spears on high, and every where spread

IX.

Tenuimus Clypeos in sanguine
Cum hastam unximus
Ante Boring holmum
Telorum nubes disrumpunt clypeum
Extrusit arcus ex se metallum
Volnir cecidit in conflictu
Non erat illo rex major
Cœsi dispersi late per littora
Feræ amplectebantur escam.

X.

Pugna manifeste crescebat
Antequam Freyr rex caderet
In Flandorum terra
Cæpit cæruleus ad incidendum
Sanguine illitus in auream
Loricam in pugna
Durus armorum muero olim
Virgo deploravit matutinam lanienam
Multa præda dabatur feris.

XI.

Centies centenos vidi jacere
In navibus
Ubi Ænglanes vocatur
Navigavimus ad pugnam
Per sex dies antequam exercitus caderet

"our renown. Eight barons we overcame in "the east, before the port of Diminum; and "plentifully we feasted the eagle in that slaugh-

Transegimus mucronum missam
In exortu solis
Coactus est pro nostris gladiis
Valdiofur in bello occumbere.

XII.

Ruit pluvia sanguinis de gladiis
Præceps in Bardafyrde
Pallidum corpus pro accipitribus
Murmuravit arcus ubi mucro
Acriter mordebat Loricas
In conflictu
Odini Pileus Galea
Cucurrit arcus ad vulnus
Venenate acutus conspersus sudore sanguineo.

XIII.

Tenuimus magica scuta
Alte in pugnæ ludo
Ante Hiadningum sinum
Videre licuit tum viros
Qui gladiis lacerarunt Clypeos
In gladiatorio murmure
Galeæ attritæ virorum
Erat sicut splendidam virginem
In lecto juxta se collocare.

XIV.

Dura venit tempestas Clypeis
Cadaver cecidit in terram

"ter. The warm stream of wounds ran into "the ocean. The army fell before us. When "we steered our ships into the mouth of the "Vistula, we sent the Helsingians to the Hall of

In Nortumbria
Erat circa matutinum tempus
Hominibus necessum erat fugere
Ex prælio ubi acute
Cassidis campos mordebant gladii
Erat hoc veluti Juvenem viduam
In primaria sede osculari.

XV.

Herthiose evasit fortunatus
In Australibus Orcadibus ipse
Victoriæ in nostris hominibus
Cogebatur in armorum nimbo
Rogvaldus occumbere
Iste venit summus super accipitres
Luctus in gladiorum ludo
Strenue jactabat concussor
Galeæ sanguinis teli.

XVI.

Quilibet jacebat transversim supra alium
Guadebat pugna lætus
Accipiter ob gladiorum ludum
Non fecit aquilam aut aprum
Qui Irlandiam gubernavit
Conventus fiebat ferri et Clypei
Marstanus rex jejunis
Fiebat in vedræ sinu
Præda data corvis.

" Odin. Then did the sword bite. The waters
" were all one wound. The earth was dyed red
" with the warm stream. The sword rung upon

XVII.

Bellatorem multum vidi cadere
Mante ante machæram
Virum in mucronum dissidio
Filio meo incidit mature
Gladius juxta cor
Egillus fecit Agnerum spoliatum
Impertertitum virum vita
Sonuit lancea prope Hamdi
Griseam loricam splendebant vexilla.

XVIII.

Verborum tenaces vidi dissecare
Haut minutim pro lupis
Endili maris ensibus
Erat per Hebdomadæ spacium
Quasi mulieres vinum apportarent
Rubefactæ erant naves
Valde in strepitu armorum
Scissa erat lorica
In Scioldungorum prælio.

XIX.

Pulchricomum vidi crepusculascere
Virginis amatorem circa matutinum
Et confabulationis amicum viduarum
Erat sicut calidum balneum
Vinei vasis nympha portaret
Nos in Ilæ freto
Antiquam Orn rex caderet

"the coats of mail, and clove the bucklers in "twain. None fled on that day, till among his "ships Heraudus fell. Than him no braver "baron cleaves the sea with ships; a cheerful

Sanguineum Clypeum vidi ruptum
Hoc invertit virorum vitam.

XX.

Egimus gladiorum ad cædem
Ludum in Lindis insula
Cum regibus tribus
Pauci potuerunt inde lætari
Cecidit multus in rictum ferarum
Accipiter dilaniavit carnem cum lupo
Ut satur inde discederet
Hybernorum sanguis in oceanum
Copiose decidit per mactationis tempus.

XXI.

Alte gladius mordebat Clypeos
Tunc cum aurei coloris
Hasta fricabat loricas
Videre licuit in Onlugs insula
Per secula multum post
Ibi fuit ad gladiorum ludos
Reges processerunt
Rubicundum erat circa insulam
Ar volans Draco vulnerum.

XXII.

Quid est viro forti morte certius
Etsi ipse in armorum nimbo
Adversus collocatus sit
Sæpe deplorat ætatem

" heart did he ever bring to the combat. Then " the host threw away their shields, when the " uplifted spear flew at the breasts of heroes. " The sword bit the Scarfian rocks; bloody was

Qui nunquam premitur
Malum ferunt timidum incitare
Aquilam ad gladiorum ludum
Meticulosus venit nuspiam
Cordi suo usui.

XXIII.

Hoc numero æquum ut procedat
In contactu gladiorum
Juvenis unus contra alterum
Non retrocedat vir a viro
Hoc fuit viri fortis nobilitas diu
Semper debet amoris amicus virginum
Aucax esse in fremitu armorum.

XXIV.

Hoc videtur mihi re vera
Quod fata sequimur
Rarus transgreditur fata Parcarum
Non destinavi Ellæ
De vitæ exitu meæ
Cum ego sanguinem semimortuus tegerem
Et naves in aquas protrusi
Passim impetravimus tum feris
Escam in Scotiæ sinubus.

XXV.

Hoc ridere me facit semper
Quod Balderi patris scamna

"the shield in battle, until Rafno the king was "slain. From the heads of warriors the warm "sweat streamed down their armour. The "crows around the Indirian islands had an

Parata scio in aula
Bibemus cerevisiam brevi
Ex concavis crateribus craniorum
Non gemit vir fortis contra mortem
Magnifici in Odini domibus
Non venio desperabundis
Verbis ad Odini aulam

XXVI.

Hic vellent nunc omnes
Filii Aslaugæ gladiis
Amarum bellum excitare
Si exacte scirent
Calamitates nostras
Quem non pauci angues
Venenati me discerpunt
Matrem accepi meis
Filiis ita ut corda valeant.

XXVII.

Valde inclinatur ad hæreditatem
Crudele stat nocumentum a vipera
Anguis inhabitat aulam cordis
Speramus alterius ad Othini
Virgam in Ellæ sanguine
Filiis meis livescet
Sua ira rubescet
Non acres juvenes
Sessionem tranquillam facient.

" ample prey. It were difficult to single out one " among so many deaths. At the rising of the " sun I beheld the spears piercing the bodies of " foes, and the bows throwing forth their steel- " pointed arrows. Loud roared the swords in " the plains of Lano.—The virgin long bewailed " the slaughter of that morning."—In this strain the poet continues to describe several other military exploits. The images are not much varied: the noise of arms, the streaming of blood, and the feasting the birds of prey, often recurring. He mentions the death of two of

XXVIII.

Habeo quinquagies
Prælia sub signis facta
Ex belli invitatione et semel
Minime putavi hominum
Quod me futurus esset
Juvenis didici mucronem rubefacere
Alius rex præstantior
Nos Asæ invitabunt
Non est lugenda mors.

XXIX.

Fert animus finire
Invitant me Dysæ
Quas ex Othini aula
Othinus mihi misit
Lætus cærevisiam cum Asis
In summa sede bibam
Vitæ elapsæ sunt horæ
Ridens moriar.

his sons in battle; and the lamentation he describes as made for one of them is very singular. A Grecian or Roman poet would have introduced the virgins or nymphs of the wood, bewailing the untimely fall of a young hero. But, says our Gothic poet, "When Rogvaldus was "slain, for him mourned all the hawks of hea- "ven," as lamenting a benefactor who had so liberally supplied them with prey; "for boldly," as he adds, "in the strife of swords, did the "breaker of helmets throw the spear of blood."

The poem concludes with sentiments of the highest bravery and contempt of death. "What "is more certain to the brave man than death, "though amidst the storm of swords, he stands "always ready to oppose it? He only regrets "this life, who hath never known distress. The "timorous man allures the devouring eagle to "the field of battle. The coward, wherever he "comes, is useless to himself. This I esteem "honourable, that the youth should advance to "the combat fairly matched one against ano- "ther; nor man retreat from man. Long was "this the warrior's highest glory. He who as- "pires to the love of virgins, ought always to be "foremost in the roar of arms. It appears to "me of truth, that we are led by the Fates. "Seldom can any overcome the appointment of

" destiny. Little did I foresee that Ella[t] was
" to have my life in his hands, in that day when
" fainting I concealed my blood, and pushed
" forth my ships into the waves; after we had
" spread a repast for the beasts of prey through-
" out the Scottish bays. But this makes me
" always rejoice, that in the halls of our father
" Balder [or Odin] I know there are seats pre-
" pared, where, in a short time, we shall be
" drinking ale out of the hollow skulls of our
" enemies. In the house of the mighty Odin,
" no brave man laments death. I come not
" with the voice of despair to Odin's hall. How
" eagerly would all the sons of Aslauga now
" rush to war, did they know the distress of
" their father, whom a multitude of venomous
" serpents tear! I have given to my children a
" mother who hath filled their hearts with va-
" lour. I am fast approaching to my end. A
" cruel death awaits me from the viper's bite.
" A snake dwells in the midst of my heart. I
" hope that the sword of some of my sons shall
" yet be stained with the blood of Ella. The
" valiant youths will wax red with anger, and
" will not sit in peace. Fifty and one times
" have I reared the standard in battle. In my

[t] This was the name of his enemy who had condemned him to death.

" youth I learned to dye the sword in blood:
" my hope was then, that no king among men
" would be more renowned than me. The god-
" desses of death will now soon call me; I must
" not mourn my death. Now I end my song.
" The goddesses invite me away; they whom
" Odin has sent to me from his hall. I will sit
" upon a lofty seat, and drink ale joyfully with
" the goddesses of death. The hours of my life
" are run out. I will smile when I die."

This is such poetry as we might expect from a barbarous nation. It breathes a most ferocious spirit. It is wild, harsh, and irregular; but at the same time animated and strong; the style, in the original, full of inversions, and, as we learn from some of Olaus's notes, highly metaphorical and figured.

But when we open the works of Ossian, a very different scene presents itself. There we find the fire and the enthusiasm of the most early times, combined with an amazing degree of regularity and art. We find tenderness, and even delicacy of sentiment, greatly predominant over fierceness and barbarity. Our hearts are melted with the softest feelings, and at the same time elevated with the highest ideas of magnanimity, generosity, and true heroism. When we turn from the poetry of Lodbrog to that of Ossian, it is like passing from a savage desert,

into a fertile and cultivated country. How is this to be accounted for? Or by what means to be reconciled with the remote antiquity attributed to these poems? This is a curious point; and requires to be illustrated.

That the ancient Scots were of Celtic original, is past all doubt. Their conformity with the Celtic nations in language, manners, and religion, proves it to a full demonstration. The Celtæ, a great and mighty people, altogether distinct from the Goths and Teutones, once extended their dominion over all the west of Europe; but seem to have had their most full and complete establishment in Gaul. Wherever the Celtæ or Gauls are mentioned by ancient writers, we seldom fail to hear of their Druids and their Bards; the institution of which two orders was the capital distinction of their manners and policy. The Druids were their philosophers and priests; the Bards, their poets and recorders of heroic actions: and both these orders of men seem to have subsisted among them, as chief members of the state, from time [u] immemorial.

[u] Τρία φῦλα τῶν τιμωμενων διαφερόντως ἐϛι. Βαρδοι τε και ὀατεις, και Δρπιδαι. Βαρδοι μεν ὑμνηταὶ και ποιηταὶ. Strabo, lib. iv.

Ε ισι παρ' ἀυτοῖς και ποιηταὶ μελῶν, ὕς Βαρδας ονομαζουσιν. ὕτοι δε μετ' ὀργάνων, ταῖς λυραις ομοιων, ὕς μεν ὑμνοῦσι, ὕς δε βλασφημουσι. Diodor. Sicul. l. 5.

We must not therefore imagine the Celtæ to have been altogether a gross and rude nation. They possessed from very remote ages a formed system of discipline and manners, which appears to have had a deep and lasting influence. Ammianus Marcellinus gives them this express testimony, that there flourished among them the study of the most laudable arts, introduced by the Bards, whose office it was to sing in heroic verse the gallant actions of illustrious men; and by the Druids, who lived together in colleges or societies, after the Pythagorean manner, and philosophizing upon the highest subjects, asserted the immortality of the human soul [x]. Though Julius Cæsar, in his account of Gaul, does not expressly mention the Bards, yet it is plain, that under the title of Druids, he comprehends that

Τα δε ἀκεσματα αὐτῶν εισιν οἱ καλεμενοι βαρδοι, ποιηταὶ δ'ἔτοι τυγχανεσι μετ' ὠδης ἐπαινές λεγοντες. Posidonius ap. Athenæum, l. 6.

[x] Per hæc loca (speaking of Gaul) hominibus paulatim excultis *viguere studia laudabilium doctrinarum*; inchoata per Bardos et Euhages et Druidas. Et Bardi quidem fortia virorum illustrium facta heroicis composita versibus cum dulcibus lyræ modulis cantitârunt. Euhages vero scrutantes serium et sublimia naturæ pandere conabantur. Inter hos, Druidæ ingeniis celsiores, ut auctoritas Pythagoræ decrevit, sodalitiis adstricti consortiis, questionibus altarum occultarumque rerum erecti sunt; et despanctes humana pronuntiârunt animas immortales. Amm. Marcellinus, l. 15, c. 9.

whole college or order; of which the Bards, who, it is probable, were the disciples of the Druids, undoubtedly made a part. It deserves remark, that, according to his account, the Druidical institution first took rise in Britain, and passed from thence into Gaul; so that they who aspired to be thorough masters of that learning were wont to resort to Britain. He adds too, that such as were to be initiated among the Druids, were obliged to commit to their memory a great number of verses, insomuch that some employed twenty years in this course of education; and that they did not think it lawful to record these poems in writing, but sacredly handed them down by tradition from race to race[y].

So strong was the attachment of the Celtic nations to their poetry and their Bards, that, amidst all the changes of their government and manners, even long after the order of the Druids was extinct, and the national religion altered, the Bards continued to flourish; not as a set of strolling songsters, like the Greek Ἀοιδοι or Rhapsodists, in Homer's time, but as an order of men highly respected in the state, and supported by a public establishment. We find them, according to the testimonies of Strabo and Diodorus,

y Vide Cæsar de Bello Gall. lib. 6.

before the age of Augustus Cæsar; and we find them remaining under the same name, and exercising the same functions as of old, in Ireland, and in the north of Scotland, almost down to our own times. It is well known that in both these countries, every *Regulus* or chief had his own Bard, who was considered as an officer of rank in his court; and had lands assigned him, which descended to his family. Of the honour in which the Bards were held, many instances occur in Ossian's poems. On all important occasions, they were the ambassadors between contending chiefs; and their persons were held sacred. "Cairbar feared to stretch his sword "to the bards, though his soul was dark. Loose "the bards, said his brother Cathmor, they are "the sons of other times. Their voice shall be "heard in other ages, when the kings of Te-"mora have failed."

From all this, the Celtic tribes clearly appear to have been addicted in so high a degree to poetry, and to have made it so much their study from the earliest times, as may remove our wonder at meeting with a vein of higher poetical refinement among them, than was at first sight to have been expected among nations, whom we are accustomed to call barbarous. Barbarity, I must observe, is a very equivocal term; it admits of many different forms and degrees; and

though, in all of them, it excludes polished manners, it is, however, not inconsistent with generous sentiments and tender [z] affections. What degrees of friendship, love, and heroism, may possibly be found to prevail in a rude state

[z] Surely among the wild Laplanders, if any where, barbarity is in its most perfect state. Yet their love-songs, which Scheffer has given us in his Lapponia, are a proof that natural tenderness of sentiment may be found in a country, into which the least glimmering of science has never penetrated. To most English readers these songs are well known by the elegant translations of them in the Spectator, Nos. 366 and 400. I shall subjoin Scheffer's Latin version of one of them, which has the appearance of being strictly literal.

Sol, clarissimum emitte lumen in paludem Orra. Si enisus in summa picearum cacumina scirem me visurum Orra paludem, in ea eniterer, ut viderem inter quos amica, mea esset flores; omnes suscinderem frutices ibi enatos, omnes ramos præsecarem, hos virentes ramos. Cursum nubium essem secutus, quæ iter suum instituunt versus paludem Orra, si ad te volare possem alis, cornicum alis. Sed mihi desunt alæ, alæ querquedulæ, pedesque, anserum pedes plantæve bonæ, quæ deferre me valeant ad te. Satis expectâsti diu; per tot dies, tot dies tuos optimos, oculis tuis jucundissimis, corde tuo amicissimo. Quod si longissimè velles effugere, cito tamen te consequerer. Quid firmius validiusve esse potest quam contorti nervi, catenæve ferreæ, quæ durissimè ligant? Sic amor contorquet caput nostrum, mutat cogitationes et sententias. Puerorum voluntas, voluntas venti; juvenum cogitationes, longæ cogitationes. Quos si audirem omnes, a via, a via justa declinarem. Unum est consilium quod capiam; ita scio viam rectiorem me reperturum. Schefferi Lapponia, cap. 25.

of society, no one can say. Astonishing instances of them we know, from history, have sometimes appeared: and a few characters distinguished by those high qualities, might lay a foundation for a set of manners being introduced into the songs of the bards, more refined, it is probable, and exalted, according to the usual poetical licence, than the real manners of the country. In particular, with respect to heroism; the great employment of the Celtic bards was to delineate the characters, and sing the praises of heroes. So Lucan;

> Vos quoque qui fortes animos, belloque peremptos,
> Laudibus in longum vates diffunditis ævum
> Plurima securi fudistis carmina bardi.
>
> *Phars.* l. 1.

Now when we consider a college or order of men, who, cultivating poetry throughout a long series of ages, had their imaginations continually employed on the ideas of heroism; who had all the poems and panegyrics which were composed by their predecessors, handed down to them with care; who rivalled and endeavoured to outstrip those who had gone before them, each in the celebration of his particular hero; is it not natural to think, that at length the character of a hero would appear in their songs with the highest lustre, and be adorned with qualities

truly noble? Some of the qualities indeed which distinguish a Fingal, moderation, humanity, and clemency, would not probably be the first ideas of heroism occurring to a barbarous people: but no sooner had such ideas begun to dawn on the minds of poets, than, as the human mind easily opens to the native representations of human perfection, they would be seized and embraced; they would enter into their panegyrics; they would afford materials for succeeding bards to work upon and improve; they would contribute not a little to exalt the public manners. For such songs as these, familiar to the Celtic warriors from their childhood, and throughout their whole life, both in war and in peace, their principal entertainment must have had a very considerable influence in propagating among them real manners nearly approaching to the poetical; and in forming even such a hero as Fingal. Especially when we consider that among their limited objects of ambition, among the few advantages which, in a savage state, man could obtain over man, the chief was Fame, and that immortality which they expected to receive from their virtues and exploits, in the songs of bards [a].

[a] When Edward I. conquered Wales, he put to death all the Welch bards. This cruel policy plainly shews, how great an influence he imagined the songs of these bards to have

Having made these remarks on the Celtic poetry and bards in general, I shall next consider the particular advantages which Ossian possessed. He appears clearly to have lived in a period which enjoyed all the benefit I just now mentioned of traditionary poetry. The exploits of Trathal, Trenmor, and the other ancestors of Fingal, are spoken of as familiarly known. Ancient bards are frequently alluded to. In one remarkable passage, Ossian describes himself as living in a sort of classical age, enlightened by the memorials of former times, which were conveyed in the songs of bards; and points at a period of darkness and ignorance which lay beyond the reach of tradition. "His words," says he, "came only by halves to our ears; they "were dark as the tales of other times, before "the light of the song arose." Ossian, himself, appears to have been endowed by nature with an exquisite sensibility of heart; prone to that tender melancholy which is so often an attendant on great genius; and susceptible equally of strong and of soft emotions. He was not only a professed bard, educated with care, as we may easily believe, to all the poetical art then known,

over the minds of the people; and of what nature he judged that influence to be. The Welch bards were of the same Celtic race with the Scottish and Irish.

and connected, as he shews us himself, in intimate friendship with the other contemporary bards, but a warrior also; and the son of the most renowned hero and prince of his age. This formed a conjunction of circumstances uncommonly favourable towards exalting the imagination of a poet. He relates expeditions in which he had been engaged; he sings of battles in which he had fought and overcome; he had beheld the most illustrious scenes which that age could exhibit, both of heroism in war, and magnificence in peace. For, however rude the magnificence of those times may seem to us, we must remember that all ideas of magnificence are comparative; and that the age of Fingal was an æra of distinguished splendour in that part of the world. Fingal reigned over a considerable territory; he was enriched with the spoils of the Roman province; he was ennobled by his victories and great actions; and was in all repects a personage of much higher dignity than any of the chieftains, or heads of Clans, who lived in the same country, after a more extensive monarchy was established.

The manners of Ossian's age, so far as we can gather them from his writings, were abundantly favourable to a poetical genius. The two dispiriting vices, to which Longinus imputes the decline of poetry, covetousness and effemi-

nacy, were as yet unknown. The cares of men were few. They lived a roving indolent life; hunting and war their principal employments; and their chief amusements, the music of bards, and "the feast of shells." The great object pursued by heroic spirits, was "to receive their "fame;" that is, to become worthy of being celebrated in the songs of bards; and "to have "their name on the four grey stones." To die unlamented by a bard, was deemed so great a misfortune as even to disturb their ghosts in another state. "They wander in thick mists "beside the reedy lake; but never shall they "rise, without the song, to the dwelling of "winds." After death, they expected to follow employments of the same nature with those which had amused them on earth; to fly with their friends on clouds, to pursue airy deer, and to listen to their praise in the mouths of bards. In such times as these, in a country where poetry had been so long cultivated, and so highly honoured, is it any wonder that among the race and succession of bards, one Homer should arise; a man, who, endowed with a natural happy genius, favoured by peculiar advantages of birth and condition, and meeting, in the course of his life, with a variety of incidents proper to fire his imagination, and to touch his heart, should

attain a degree of eminence in poetry, worthy to draw the admiration of more refined ages?

The compositions of Ossian are so strongly marked with characters of antiquity, that although there were no external proof to support that antiquity, hardly any reader of judgment and taste could hesitate in referring them to a very remote æra. There are four great stages through which men successively pass in the progress of society. The first and earliest is the life of hunters; pasturage succeeds to this, as the ideas of property begin to take root; next, agriculture; and lastly, commerce. Throughout Ossian's poems, we plainly find ourselves in the first of these periods of society; during which, hunting was the chief employment of men, and the principal method of their procuring subsistence. Pasturage was not indeed wholly unknown; for we hear of dividing the herd in the case of a divorce; but the allusions to herds and to cattle are not many; and of agriculture we find no traces. No cities appear to have been built in the territories of Fingal. No arts are mentioned except that of navigation and of working in iron [b]. Every thing pre-

[b] Their skill in navigation need not at all surprize us. Living in the western islands, along the coast, or in a country which is every where intersected with arms of the sea, one

sents to us the most simple and unimproved manners. At their feasts, the heroes prepared their own repast; they sat round the light of the burning oak; the wind lifted their locks, and whistled through their open halls. Whatever was beyond the necessaries of life, was known to them only as the spoil of the Roman province; "the gold of the stranger; the lights "of the stranger; the steeds of the stranger, "the children of the rein."

This representation of Ossian's times, must strike us the more, as genuine and authentic,

of the first objects of their attention, from the earliest time, must have been how to traverse the waters. Hence that knowledge of the stars, so necessary for guiding them by night, of which we find several traces in Ossian's works; particularly in the beautiful description of Cathmor's shield, in the 7th book of Temora. Among all the northern maritime nations, navigation was very early studied. Piratical incursions were the chief means they employed for acquiring booty; and were among the first exploits which distinguished them in the world. Even the savage Americans were, at their first discovery, found to possess the most surprising skill and dexterity in navigating their immense lakes and rivers.

The description of Cuthullin's chariot, in the 1st book of Fingal, has been objected to by some, as representing greater magnificence than is consistent with the supposed poverty of that age. But this chariot is plainly only a horse-litter; and the gems mentioned in the description are no other than the shining stones or pebbles, known to be frequently found along the western coast of Scotland.

when it is compared with a poem of later date, which Mr. Macpherson has preserved in one of his notes. It is that wherein five bards are represented as passing the evening in the house of a chief, and each of them separately giving his description of the night. The night scenery is beautiful; and the author has plainly imitated the style and manner of Ossian: but he has allowed some images to appear which betray a later period of society. For we meet with windows clapping, the herds of goats and cows seeking shelter, the shepherd wandering, corn on the plain, and the wakeful hind rebuilding the shocks of corn which had been overturned by the tempest. Whereas, in Ossian's works, from beginning to end, all is consistent; no modern allusion drops from him; but every where, the same face of rude nature appears; a country wholly uncultivated, thinly inhabited, and recently peopled. The grass of the rock, the flower of the heath, the thistle with its beard, are the chief ornaments of his landscapes. "The "desert," says Fingal, "is enough for me, with "all its woods and deer."

The circle of ideas and transactions is no wider than suits such an age; nor any greater diversity introduced into characters, than the events of that period would naturally display. Valour and bodily strength are the admired

qualities. Contentions arise, as is usual among savage nations, from the slightest causes. To be affronted at a tournament, or to be omitted in the invitation to a feast, kindles a war. Women are often carried away by force; and the whole tribe, as in the Homeric times, rise to avenge the wrong. The heroes shew refinement of sentiment indeed on several occasions, but none of manners. They speak of their past actions with freedom, boast of their exploits, and sing their own praise. In their battles, it is evident that drums, trumpets, or bagpipes, were not known or used. They had no expedient for giving the military alarms but striking a shield, or raising a loud cry: and hence the loud and terrible voice of Fingal is often mentioned as a necessary qualification of a great general; like the βοὴν ἀγαθος Μενελαος of Homer. Of military discipline or skill, they appear to have been entirely destitute. Their armies seem not to have been numerous; their battles were disorderly; and terminated, for the most part, by a personal combat, or wrestling of the two chiefs; after which, "the bard sung the song of "peace, and the battle ceased along the field."

The manner of composition bears all the marks of the greatest antiquity. No artful transitions; nor full and extended connection of parts; such as we find among the poets of

later times, when order and regularity of composition were more studied and known; but a style always rapid and vehement; in narration concise even to abruptness, and leaving several circumstances to be supplied by the reader's imagination. The language has all that figurative cast, which, as I before shewed, partly a glowing and undisciplined imagination, partly the sterility of language and the want of proper terms, have always introduced into the early speech of nations; and, in several respects, it carries a remarkable resemblance to the style of the Old Testament. It deserves particular notice, as one of the most genuine and decisive characters of antiquity, that very few general terms, or abstract ideas, are to be met with in the whole collection of Ossian's works. The ideas of men, at first, were all particular. They had not words to express general conceptions. These were the consequence of more profound reflection, and longer acquaintance with the arts of thought and of speech. Ossian, accordingly, almost never expresses himself in the abstract. His ideas extended little farther than to the objects he saw around him. A public, a community, the universe, were conceptions beyond his sphere. Even a mountain, a sea, or a lake, which he has occasion to mention, though only in a simile, are for the most part particularized; it is the

hill of Cromla, the storm of the sea of Malmor, or the reeds of the lake of Lego. A mode of expression, which, whilst it is characteristical of ancient ages, is at the same time highly favourable to descriptive poetry. For the same reasons, personification is a poetical figure not very common with Ossian. Inanimate objects, such as winds, trees, flowers, he sometimes personifies with great beauty. But the personifications which are so familiar to later poets of Fame, Time, Terror, Virtue, and the rest of that class, were unknown to our Celtic bard. These were modes of conception too abstract for his age.

All these are marks so undoubted, and some of them too so nice and delicate, of the most early times, as put the high antiquity of these poems out of question. Especially when we consider, that if there had been any imposture in this case, it must have been contrived and executed in the Highlands of Scotland, two or three centuries ago; as up to this period, both by manuscripts, and by the testimony of a multitude of living witnesses, concerning the uncontrovertible tradition of these poems, they can clearly be traced. Now this is a period when that country enjoyed no advantages for a composition of this kind, which it may not be supposed to have enjoyed in as great, if not in a greater degree, a thousand years before. To

suppose that two or three hundred years ago, when we well know the Highlands to have been in a state of gross ignorance and barbarity, there should have arisen in that country a poet, of such exquisite genius, and of such deep knowledge of mankind, and of history, as to divest himself of the ideas and manners of his own age, and to give us a just and natural picture of a state of society ancienter by a thousand years; one who could support this counterfeited antiquity through such a large collection of poems, without the least inconsistency; and who, possessed of all this genius and art, had at the same time the self-denial of concealing himself, and of ascribing his own works to an antiquated bard, without the imposture being detected; is a supposition that transcends all bounds of credibility.

There are, besides, two other circumstances to be attended to, still of greater weight, if possible, against this hypothesis. One is, the total absence of religious ideas from this work; for which the translator has, in his preface, given a very probable account, on the footing of its being the work of Ossian. The druidical superstition was, in the days of Ossian, on the point of its final extinction; and for particular reasons, odious to the family of Fingal; whilst the Christian faith was not yet established. But

had it been the work of one to whom the ideas of Christianity were familiar from his infancy; and who had superadded to them also the bigoted superstition of a dark age and country; it is impossible but in some passage or other, the traces of them would have appeared. The other circumstance is, the entire silence which reigns with respect to all the great clans or families which are now established in the Highlands. The origin of these several clans is known to be very ancient: and it is as well known that there is no passion by which a native Highlander is more distinguished than by attachment to his clan, and jealousy for its honour. That a Highland bard in forging a work relating to the antiquities of his country, should have inserted no circumstance which pointed out the rise of his own clan, which ascertained its antiquity, or increased its glory, is, of all suppositions that can be formed, the most improbable; and the silence on this head, amounts to a demonstration that the author lived before any of the present great clans were formed or known.

Assuming it then, as well we may, for certain, that the poems now under consideration, are genuine venerable monuments of very remote antiquity; I proceed to make some remarks upon their general spirit and strain. The two

great characteristics of Ossian's poetry are, tenderness and sublimity. It breathes nothing of the gay and cheerful kind; an air of solemnity and seriousness is diffused over the whole. Ossian is perhaps the only poet who never relaxes, or lets himself down into the light and amusing strain; which I readily admit to be no small disadvantage to him, with the bulk of readers. He moves perpetually in the high region of the grand and the pathetic. One key note is struck at the beginning, and supported to the end; nor is any ornament introduced, but what is perfectly concordant with the general tone or melody. The events recorded, are all serious and grave; the scenery throughout, wild and romantic. The extended heath by the sea shore; the mountain shaded with mist; the torrent rushing through a solitary valley; the scattered oaks, and the tombs of warriors overgrown with moss; all produce a solemn attention in the mind, and prepare it for great and extraordinary events. We find not in Ossian, an imagination that sports itself, and dresses out gay trifles to please the fancy. His poetry, more perhaps than that of any other writer, deserves to be styled, *The Poetry of the Heart*. It is a heart penetrated with noble sentiments, and with sublime and tender passions; a heart that glows, and kindles the fancy; a

heart that is full, and pours itself forth. Ossian did not write, like modern poets, to please readers and critics. He sung from the love of poetry and song. His delight was to think of the heroes among whom he had flourished; to recal the affecting incidents of his life; to dwell upon his past wars, and loves, and friendships; till, as he expresses it himself, "there comes a "voice to Ossian and awakes his soul. It is "the voice of years that are gone; they roll "before me with all their deeds;" and under this true poetic inspiration, giving vent to his genius, no wonder we should so often hear, and acknowledge in his strains, the powerful and ever-pleasing voice of nature.

—— Arte, natura potentior omni.—
Est Deus in nobis, agitante calescimus illo.

It is necessary here to observe, that the beauties of Ossian's writings cannot be felt by those who have given them only a single or a hasty perusal. His manner is so different from that of the poets, to whom we are most accustomed; his style is so concise, and so much crowded with imagery; the mind is kept at such a stretch in accompanying the author; that an ordinary reader is at first apt to be dazzled and fatigued, rather than pleased. His poems require to be taken up at intervals, and

to be frequently reviewed; and then it is impossible but his beauties must open to every reader who is capable of sensibility. Those who have the highest degree of it, will relish them the most.

As Homer is, of all the great poets, the one whose manner, and whose times, come the nearest to Ossian's, we are naturally led to run a parallel in some instances between the Greek and the Celtic bard. For though Homer lived more than a thousand years before Ossian, it is not from the age of the world, but from the state of society, that we are to judge of resembling times. The Greek has, in several points, a manifest superiority. He introduces a greater variety of incidents; he possesses a larger compass of ideas; has more diversity in his characters; and a much deeper knowledge of human nature. It was not to be expected, that in any of these particulars, Ossian could equal Homer. For Homer lived in a country where society was much farther advanced; he had beheld many more objects; cities built and flourishing; laws instituted; order, discipline, and arts, begun. His field of observation was much larger and more splendid; his knowledge, of course, more extensive; his mind also, it shall be granted, more penetrating. But if Ossian's ideas and objects be less diversified than those

of Homer, they are all, however, of the kind fittest for poetry: the bravery and generosity of heroes, the tenderness of lovers, the attachments of friends, parents, and children. In a rude age and country, though the events that happen be few, the undissipated mind broods over them more; they strike the imagination, and fire the passions in a higher degree; and of consequence become happier materials to a poetical genius, than the same events when scattered through the wide circle of more varied action, and cultivated life.

Homer is a more cheerful and sprightly poet than Ossian. You discern in him all the Greek vivacity; whereas Ossian uniformly maintains the gravity and solemnity of a Celtic hero. This too is in a great measure to be accounted for from the different situations in which they lived, partly personal, and partly national. Ossian had survived all his friends, and was disposed to melancholy by the incidents of his life. But besides this, cheerfulness is one of the many blessings which we owe to formed society. The solitary wild state is always a serious one. Bating the sudden and violent bursts of mirth, which sometimes break forth at their dances and feasts, the savage American tribes have been noted by all travellers for their gravity and taciturnity. Somewhat of

this taciturnity may be also remarked in Ossian. On all occasions he is frugal of his words; and never gives you more of an image or a description than is just sufficient to place it before you in one clear point of view. It is a blaze of lightning, which flashes and vanishes. Homer is more extended in his descriptions; and fills them up with a greater variety of circumstances. Both the poets are dramatic; that is, they introduce their personages frequently speaking before us. But Ossian is concise and rapid in his speeches, as he is in every other thing. Homer, with the Greek vivacity, had also some portion of the Greek loquacity. His speeches indeed are highly characteristical; and to them we are much indebted for that admirable display he has given of human nature. Yet if he be tedious any where, it is in these; some of them are trifling; and some of them plainly unseasonable. Both poets are eminently sublime; but a difference may be remarked in the species of their sublimity. Homer's sublimity is accompanied with more impetuosity and fire; Ossian's with more of a solemn and awful grandeur. Homer hurries you along; Ossian elevates, and fixes you in astonishment. Homer is most sublime in actions and battles; Ossian, in description and sentiment. In the pathetic, Homer, when he chuses to exert it, has great power; but

Ossian exerts that power much oftener, and has the character of tenderness far more deeply imprinted on his works. No poet knew better how to seize and melt the heart. With regard to dignity of sentiment, the pre-eminence must clearly be given to Ossian. This is indeed a surprising circumstance, that in point of humanity, magnanimity, virtuous feelings of every kind, our rude Celtic bard should be distinguished to such a degree, that not only the heroes of Homer, but even those of the polite and refined Virgil, are left far behind by those of Ossian.

After these general observations on the genius and spirit of our author, I now proceed to a nearer view and more accurate examination of his works: and as Fingal is the first great poem in this collection, it is proper to begin with it. To refuse the title of an epic poem to Fingal, because it is not, in every little particular, exactly conformable to the practice of Homer and Virgil, were the mere squeamishness and pedantry of criticism. Examined even according to Aristotle's rules, it will be found to have all the essential requisites of a true and regular epic; and to have several of them in so high a degree, as at first view to raise our astonishment on finding Ossian's composition so agreeable to rules of which he was entirely ignorant. But our

astonishment will cease, when we consider from what source Aristotle drew those rules. Homer knew no more of the laws of criticism than Ossian. But, guided by nature, he composed in verse a regular story, founded on heroic actions, which all posterity admired. Aristotle, with great sagacity and penetration, traced the causes of this general admiration. He observed what it was in Homer's composition, and in the conduct of his story, which gave it such power to please; from this observation he deduced the rules which poets ought to follow, who would write and please like Homer; and to a composition formed according to such rules, he gave the name of an epic poem. Hence his whole system arose. Aristotle studied nature in Homer. Homer and Ossian both wrote from nature. No wonder that among all the three there should be such agreement and conformity.

The fundamental rules delivered by Aristotle, concerning an epic poem, are these: That the action which is the ground-work of the poem, should be one, complete, and great; that it should be feigned, not merely historical; that it should be enlivened with characters and manners, and heightened by the marvellous.

But before entering on any of these, it may perhaps be asked, what is the moral of Fingal? For, according to M. Bossu, an epic poem is no

other than an allegory contrived to illustrate some moral truth. The poet, says this critic, must begin with fixing on some maxim or instruction which he intends to inculcate on mankind. He next forms a fable, like one of Æsop's, wholly with a view to the moral; and having thus settled and arranged his plan, he then looks into traditionary history for names and incidents, to give his fable some air of probability. Never did a more frigid, pedantic notion enter into the mind of a critic. We may safely pronounce, that he who should compose an epic poem after this manner, who should first lay down a moral and contrive a plan, before he had thought of his personages and actors, might deliver indeed very sound instruction, but would find few readers. There cannot be the least doubt that the first object which strikes an epic poet, which fires his genius, and gives him any idea of his work, is the action or subject he is to celebrate. Hardly is there any tale, any subject a poet can chuse for such a work, but will afford some general moral instruction. An epic poem is by its nature one of the most moral of all poetical compositions: but its moral tendency is by no means to be limited to some commonplace maxim, which may be gathered from the story. It arises from the admiration of heroic actions, which such a composition is peculiarly

calculated to produce; from the virtuous emotions which the characters and incidents raise, whilst we read it; from the happy impressions which all the parts separately, as well as the whole together, leave upon the mind. However, if a general moral be still insisted on, Fingal obviously furnishes one, not inferior to that of any other poet, viz. That Wisdom and Bravery always triumph over brutal force: or another, nobler still; That the most complete victory over an enemy is obtained by that moderation and generosity which convert him into a friend.

The unity of the Epic action, which, of all Aristotle's rules, is the chief and most material, is so strictly preserved in Fingal, that it must be perceived by every reader. It is a more complete unity than what arises from relating the actions of one man, which the Greek critic justly censures as imperfect; it is the unity of one enterprise, the deliverance of Ireland from the invasion of Swaran: an enterprise, which has surely the full Heroic dignity. All the incidents recorded bear a constant reference to one end; no double plot is carried on; but the parts unite into a regular whole: and as the action is one and great, so it is an entire or complete action. For we find, as the critic farther requires, a beginning, a middle, and an

end; a Nodus, or intrigue in the poem; difficulties occurring through Cuthullin's rashness and bad success; those difficulties gradually surmounted; and at last the work conducted to that happy conclusion which is held essential to Epic Poetry. Unity is indeed observed with greater exactness in Fingal, than in almost any other Epic composition. For not only is unity of subject maintained, but that of time and place also. The Autumn is clearly pointed out as the season of the action; and from beginning to end the scene is never shifted from the heath of Lena, along the sea-shore. The duration of the action in Fingal, is much shorter than in the Iliad or Æneid, but sure there may be shorter as well as longer Heroic Poems; and if the authority of Aristotle be also required for this, he says expressly, that the Epic composition is indefinite as to the time of its duration. Accordingly the Action of the Iliad lasts only forty-seven days, whilst that of the Æneid is continued for more than a year.

Throughout the whole of Fingal, there reigns that grandeur of sentiment, style, and imagery, which ought ever to distinguish this high species of poetry. The story is conducted with no small art. The poet goes not back to a tedious recital of the beginning of the war with Swaran; but, hastening to the main action, he falls in exactly,

by a most happy coincidence of thought, with the rule of Horace:

> Semper ad eventum festinat, et in medias res,
> Non secus ac notas, auditorem rapit——
> Nec gemino bellum Trojanum auditur ab ovo.
>
> De Arte Poet.

He invokes no muse, for he acknowledged none; but his occasional addresses to Malvina, have a finer effect than the invocation of any muse. He sets out with no formal proposition of his subject; but the subject naturally and easily unfolds itself; the poem opening in an animated manner, with the situation of Cuthullin, and the arrival of a scout who informs him of Swaran's landing. Mention is presently made of Fingal, and of the expected assistance from the ships of the lonely isle, in order to give further light to the subject. For the poet often shews his address in gradually preparing us for the events he is to introduce; and in particular the preparation for the appearance of Fingal, the previous expectations that are raised, and the extreme magnificence fully answering these expectations, with which the hero is at length presented to us, are all worked up with such skilful conduct as would do honour to any poet of the most refined times. Homer's art in magnifying the character of Achilles has been universally

admired. Ossian certainly shews no less art in aggrandizing Fingal. Nothing could be more happily imagined for this purpose than the whole management of the last battle, wherein Gaul the son of Morni, had besought Fingal to retire, and to leave to him and his other chiefs the honour of the day. The generosity of the king in agreeing to this proposal; the majesty with which he retreats to the hill, from whence he was to behold the engagement, attended by his bards, and waving the lightning of his sword; his perceiving the chiefs overpowered by numbers, but from unwillingness to deprive them of the glory of victory by coming in person to their assistance, first sending Ullin, the bard, to animate their courage; and at last, when the danger becomes more pressing, his rising in his might, and interposing, like a divinity, to decide the doubtful fate of the day; are all circumstances contrived with so much art as plainly discover the Celtic bards to have been not unpractised in heroic poetry.

The story which is the foundation of the Iliad, is in itself as simple as that of Fingal. A quarrel arises between Achilles and Agamemnon concerning a female slave; on which Achilles, apprehending himself to be injured, withdraws his assistance from the rest of the Greeks. The Greeks fall into great distress, and beseech him

to be reconciled to them. He refuses to fight for them in person, but sends his friend Patroclus; and upon his being slain, goes forth to revenge his death, and kills Hector. The subject of Fingal is this: Swaran comes to invade Ireland: Cuthullin, the guardian of the young king, had applied for assistance to Fingal, who reigned in the opposite coast of Scotland. But before Fingal's arrival, he is hurried by rash counsel to encounter Swaran. He is defeated; he retreats; and desponds. Fingal arrives in this conjuncture. The battle is for some time dubious; but in the end he conquers Swaran; and the remembrance of Swaran's being the brother of Agandecca, who had once saved his life, makes him dismiss him honourably. Homer, it is true, has filled up his story with a much greater variety of particulars than Ossian; and in this has shewn a compass of invention superior to that of the other poet. But it must not be forgotten, that, though Homer be more circumstantial, his incidents however are less diversified in kind than those of Ossian. War and bloodshed reign throughout the Iliad; and, notwithstanding all the fertility of Homer's invention, there is so much uniformity in his subjects, that there are few readers, who, before the close, are not tired with perpetual fighting. Whereas in Ossian, the mind is relieved by a

more agreeable diversity. There is a finer mixture of war and heroism, with love and friendship, of martial with tender scenes, than is to be met with, perhaps, in any other poet. The Episodes too, have great propriety; as natural, and proper to that age and country: consisting of the songs of bards, which are known to have been the great entertainment of the Celtic heroes in war, as well as in peace. These songs are not introduced at random; if you except the Episode of Duchom-mar and Morna, in the first book, which, though beautiful, is more unartful than any of the rest; they have always some particular relation to the actor who is interested, or to the events which are going on; and, whilst they vary the scene, they preserve a sufficient connection with the main subject, by the fitness and propriety of their introduction.

As Fingal's love to Agandecca influences some circumstances of the poem, particularly the honourable dismission of Swaran at the end; it was necessary that we should be let into this part of the hero's story. But as it lay without the compass of the present action, it could be regularly introduced no where, except in an Episode. Accordingly the poet, with as much propriety as if Aristotle himself had directed the plan, has contrived an Episode for this pur-

pose in the song of Carril, at the beginning of the third book.

The conclusion of the poem is strictly according to rule; and is every way noble and pleasing. The reconciliation of the contending heroes, the consolation of Cuthullin, and the general felicity that crowns the action, sooth the mind in a very agreeable manner, and form that passage from agitation and trouble, to perfect quiet and repose, which critics require as the proper termination of the Epic work. "Thus "they passed the night in song, and brought "back the morning with joy. Fingal arose on "the heath; and shook his glittering spear in "his hand. He moved first toward the plains "of Lena; and we followed like a ridge of fire. "Spread the sail, said the king of Morven, and "catch the winds that pour from Lena. We "rose on the wave with songs; and rushed with "joy through the foam of the ocean."—So much for the unity and general conduct of the Epic action in Fingal.

With regard to that property of the subject which Aristotle requires, that it should be feigned, not historical, he must not be understood so strictly as if he meant to exclude all subjects which have any foundation in truth. For such exclusion would both be unreasonable in itself, and, what is more, would be contrary to the prac-

tice of Homer, who is known to have founded his Iliad on historical facts concerning the war of Troy, which was famous throughout all Greece. Aristotle means no more than that it is the business of a poet not to be a mere annalist of facts, but to embellish truth with beautiful, probable, and useful fictions; to copy nature, as he himself explains it, like painters, who preserve a likeness, but exhibit their objects more grand and beautiful than they are in reality. That Ossian has followed this course, and, building upon true history, has sufficiently adorned it with poetical fiction for aggrandizing his characters and facts, will not, I believe, be questioned by most readers. At the same time, the foundation which those facts and characters had in truth, and the share which the poet himself had in the transactions which he records, must be considered as no small advantage to his work. For truth makes an impression on the mind far beyond any fiction; and no man, let his imagination be ever so strong, relates any events so feelingly as those in which he has been interested; paints any scene so naturally as one which he has seen; or draws any characters in such strong colours as those which he has personally known. It is considered as an advantage of the Epic subject to be taken from a period so distant, as by being involved in the darkness of tradition, may give

licence to fable. Though Ossian's subject may at first view appear unfavourable in this respect, as being taken from his own times, yet, when we reflect that he lived to an extreme old age; that he relates what had been transacted in another country, at the distance of many years, and after all that race of men who had been the actors were gone off the stage; we shall find the objection in a great measure obviated. In so rude an age, when no written records were known, when tradition was loose, and accuracy of any kind little attended to, what was great and heroic in one generation, easily ripened into the marvellous in the next.

The natural representation of human characters in an Epic Poem is highly essential to its merit; and, in respect of this, there can be no doubt of Homer's excelling all the heroic poets who have ever wrote. But though Ossian be much inferior to Homer in this article, he will be found to be equal at least, if not superior, to Virgil; and has indeed given all the display of human nature, which the simple occurrences of his times could be expected to furnish. No dead uniformity of character prevails in Fingal; but, on the contrary, the principal characters are not only clearly distinguished, but sometimes artfully contrasted, so as to illustrate each other. Ossian's heroes are, like Homer's, all

brave; but their bravery, like those of Homer's too, is of different kinds. For instance, the prudent, the sedate, the modest, and circumspect Connal, is finely opposed to the presumptuous, rash, overbearing, but gallant and generous Calmar. Calmar hurries Cuthullin into action by his temerity; and when he sees the bad effect of his counsels, he will not survive the disgrace. Connal, like another Ulysses, attends Cuthullin to his retreat, counsels and comforts him under his misfortune. The fierce, the proud, and high-spirited Swaran is admirably contrasted with the calm, the moderate, and generous Fingal. The character of Oscar is a favourite one throughout the whole poems. The amiable warmth of the young warrior; his eager impetuosity in the day of action; his passion for fame; his submission to his father; his tenderness for Malvina; are the strokes of a masterly pencil: the strokes are few; but it is the hand of nature, and attracts the heart. Ossian's own character, the old man, the hero, and the bard, all in one, presents to us through the whole work a most respectable and venerable figure, which we always contemplate with pleasure. Cuthullin is a hero of the highest class; daring, magnanimous, and exquisitely sensible to honour. We become attached to his interest, and are deeply touched with his distress; and after the admiration raised for him

in the first part of the poem, it is a strong proof of Ossian's masterly genius, that he durst adventure to produce to us another hero, compared with whom, even the great Cuthullin should be only an inferior personage; and who should rise as far above him, as Cuthullin rises above the rest.

Here, indeed, in the character and description of Fingal, Ossian triumphs almost unrivalled: for we may boldly defy all antiquity to shew us any hero equal to Fingal. Homer's Hector possesses several great and amiable qualities; but Hector is a secondary personage in the Iliad, not the hero of the work. We see him only occasionally; we know much less of him than we do of Fingal; who, not only in this Epic Poem, but in Temora, and throughout the rest of Ossian's works, is presented in all that variety of lights which give the full display of a character. And though Hector faithfully discharges his duty to his country, his friends, and his family, he is tinctured, however, with a degree of the same savage ferocity, which prevails among all the Homeric heroes. For we find him insulting over the fallen Patroclus, with the most cruel taunts, and telling him, when he lies in the agony of death, that Achilles cannot help him now; and that in a short time his body, stripped naked, and deprived of funeral honours,

shall be devoured by the vultures [c]. Whereas, in the character of Fingal, concur almost all the qualities that can ennoble human nature; that can either make us admire the hero, or love the man. He is not only unconquerable in war, but he makes his people happy by his wisdom in the days of peace. He is truly the father of his people. He is known by the epithet of "Fin-"gal of the mildest look;" and distinguished, on every occasion, by humanity and generosity. He is merciful to his foes [d]; full of affection to his children; full of concern about his friends; and never mentions Agandecca, his first love, without the utmost tenderness. He is the universal protector of the distressed; "None ever "went sad from Fingal."——"O Oscar! bend "the strong in arms; but spare the feeble hand. "Be thou a stream of many tides against the "foes of thy people; but like the gale that

[c] Iliad xvi. 830. Il. xvii. 127.

[d] When he commands his sons, after Swaran is taken prisoner, to "pursue the rest of Lochlin, over the heath of Lena; "that no vessel may hereafter bound on the dark-rolling waves "of Inistore;" he means not, assuredly, as some have misrepresented him, to order a general slaughter of the foes, and to prevent their saving themselves by flight; but, like a wise general, he commands his chiefs to render the victory complete, by a total rout of the enemy; that they might adventure no more for the future, to fit out any fleet against him or his allies.

" moves the grass, to those who ask thine aid. " So Trenmor lived; such Trathal was; and such " has Fingal been. My arm was the support of " the injured; the weak rested behind the light- " ning of my steel." These were the maxims of true heroism, to which he formed his grandson. His fame is represented as every where spread; the greatest heroes acknowledge his superiority; his enemies tremble at his name; and the highest encomium that can be bestowed on one whom the poet would most exalt, is to say, that his soul was like the soul of Fingal.

To do justice to the poet's merit, in supporting such a character as this, I must observe, what is not commonly attended to, that there is no part of poetical execution more difficult, than to draw a perfect character in such a manner as to render it distinct and affecting to the mind. Some strokes of human imperfection and frailty, are what usually give us the most clear view, and the most sensible impression of a character; because they present to us a man, such as we have seen; they recal known features of human nature. When poets attempt to go beyond this range, and describe a faultless hero, they, for the most part, set before us a sort of vague undistinguishable character, such as the imagination cannot lay hold of, or realise to itself, as the object of affection. We know how much

Virgil has failed in this particular. His perfect hero, Æneas, is an unanimated insipid personage, whom we may pretend to admire, but whom no one can heartily love. But what Virgil has failed in, Ossian, to our astonishment, has successfully executed. His Fingal, though exhibited without any of the common human failings, is nevertheless a real man; a character which touches and interests every reader. To this it has much contributed, that the poet has represented him as an old man; and by this has gained the advantage of throwing around him a great many circumstances, peculiar to that age, which paint him to the fancy in a more distinct light. He is surrounded with his family; he instructs his children in the principles of virtue; he is narrative of his past exploits; he is venerable with the grey locks of age; he is frequently disposed to moralise, like an old man, on human vanity and the prospect of death. There is more art, at least more felicity, in this, than may at first be imagined. For youth and old age are the two states of human life, capable of being placed in the most picturesque lights. Middle age is more general and vague; and has fewer circumstances peculiar to the idea of it. And when any object is in a situation that admits it to be rendered particular, and to be clothed with a variety of circumstances, it al-

ways stands out more clear and full in poetical description.

Besides human personages, divine or supernatural agents are often introduced into epic poetry; forming what is called the machinery of it; which most critics hold to be an essential part. The marvellous, it must be admitted, has always a great charm for the bulk of readers. It gratifies the imagination, and affords room for striking and sublime description. No wonder, therefore, that all poets should have a strong propensity towards it. But I must observe, that nothing is more difficult, than to adjust properly the marvellous with the probable. If a poet sacrifice probability, and fill his work with extravagant supernatural scenes, he spreads over it an appearance of romance and childish fiction; he transports his readers from this world, into a fantastic, visionary region; and loses that weight and dignity which should reign in epic poetry. No work, from which probability is altogether banished, can make a lasting or deep impression. Human actions and manners are always the most interesting objects which can be presented to a human mind. All machinery, therefore, is faulty, which withdraws these too much from view; or obscures them under a cloud of incredible fictions. Besides being temperately employed, machinery ought always to

have some foundation in popular belief. A poet is by no means at liberty to invent what system of the marvellous he pleases: he must avail himself either of the religious faith, or the superstitious credulity of the country wherein he lives; so as to give an air of probability to events which are most contrary to the common course of nature.

In these respects, Ossian appears to me to have been remarkably happy. He has indeed followed the same course with Homer. For it is perfectly absurd to imagine, as some critics have done, that Homer's mythology was invented by him, in consequence of profound reflections on the benefit it would yield to poetry. Homer was no such refining genius. He found the traditionary stories on which he built his Iliad, mingled with popular legends concerning the intervention of the gods; and he adopted these because they amused the fancy. Ossian, in like manner, found the tales of his country full of ghosts and spirits: it is likely he believed them himself; and he introduced them, because they gave his poems that solemn and marvellous cast, which suited his genius. This was the only machinery he could employ with propriety; because it was the only intervention of supernatural beings, which agreed with the common belief of the country. It was

happy; because it did not interfere in the least with the proper display of human characters and actions; because it had less of the incredible, than most other kinds of poetical machinery; and because it served to diversify the scene, and to heighten the subject by an awful grandeur, which is the great design of machinery.

As Ossian's mythology is peculiar to himself, and makes a considerable figure in his other poems, as well as in Fingal, it may be proper to make some observations on it, independent of its subserviency to epic composition. It turns, for the most part, on the appearances of departed spirits. These, consonantly to the notions of every rude age, are represented not as purely immaterial, but as thin airy forms, which can be visible or invisible at pleasure; their voice is feeble; their arm is weak; but they are endowed with knowledge more than human. In a separate state, they retain the same dispositions which animated them in this life. They ride on the wind; they bend their airy bows; and pursue deer formed of clouds. The ghosts of departed bards continue to sing. The ghosts of departed heroes frequent the fields of their former fame. "They rest toge-
"ther in their caves, and talk of mortal men.
"Their songs are of other worlds. They come

"sometimes to the ear of rest, and raise their "feeble voice." All this presents to us much the same set of ideas, concerning spirits, as we find in the eleventh book of the Odyssey, where Ulysses visits the regions of the dead: and in the twenty-third book of the Iliad, the ghost of Patroclus, after appearing to Achilles, vanishes precisely like one of Ossian's, emitting a shrill, feeble cry, and melting away like smoke.

But though Homer's and Ossian's ideas concerning ghosts were of the same nature, we cannot but observe, that Ossian's ghosts are drawn with much stronger and livelier colours than those of Homer. Ossian describes ghosts with all the particularity of one who had seen and conversed with them, and whose imagination was full of the impression they had left upon it. He calls up those awful and tremendous ideas which the

——Simulacra modis pallentia miris

are fitted to raise in the human mind; and which, in Shakespeare's style, "harrow up the "soul." Crugal's ghost, in particular, in the beginning of the second book of Fingal, may vie with any appearance of this kind, described by any epic or tragic poet whatever. Most poets would have contented themselves with telling us, that he resembled, in every particular,

the living Crugal; that his form and dress were the same, only his face more pale and sad; and that he bore the mark of the wound by which he fell. But Ossian sets before our eyes a spirit from the invisible world, distinguished by all those features, which a strong astonished imagination would give to a ghost. "A dark-"red stream of fire comes down from the hill. "Crugal sat upon the beam; he that lately fell "by the hand of Swaran, striving in the battle "of heroes. His face is like the beam of the "setting moon. His robes are of the clouds of "the hill. His eyes are like two decaying "flames. Dark is the wound of his breast.— "The stars dim-twinkled through his form, and "his voice was like the sound of a distant "stream." The circumstance of the stars being beheld, "dim-twinkling through his form," is wonderfully picturesque; and conveys the most lively impression of his thin and shadowy substance. The attitude in which he is afterwards placed, and the speech put into his mouth, are full of that solemn and awful sublimity, which suits the subject. "Dim, and in tears, he stood "and stretched his pale hand over the hero. "Faintly he raised his feeble voice, like the "gale of the reedy Lego.—My ghost, O Connal! "is on my native hills; but my corse is on the "sands of Ullin. Thou shalt never talk with

" Crugal, or find his lone steps in the heath. I " am light as the blast of Cromla; and I move " like the shadow of mist. Connal, son of " Colgar! I see the dark cloud of death. It " hovers over the plains of Lena. The sons of " green Erin shall fall. Remove from the field " of ghosts.—Like the darkened moon he re- " tired in the midst of the whistling blast."

Several other appearances of spirits might be pointed out, as among the most sublime passages of Ossian's poetry. The circumstances of them are considerably diversified; and the scenery always suited to the occasion. " Oscar " slowly ascends the hill. The meteors of night " set on the heath before him. A distant tor- " rent faintly roars. Unfrequent blasts rush " through aged oaks. The half-enlightened " moon sinks dim and red behind her hill. " Feeble voices are heard on the heath. Oscar " drew his sword."——Nothing can prepare the fancy more happily for the awful scene that is to follow. " Trenmor came from his hill, at " the voice of his mighty son. A cloud, like " the steed of the stranger, supported his airy " limbs. His robe is of the mist of Lano, that " brings death to the people. His sword is a " green meteor half-extinguished. His face is " without form and dark. He sighed thrice " over the hero: and thrice, the winds of the

"night roared around. Many were his words "to Oscar.—He slowly vanished, like a mist "that melts on the sunny hill." To appearances of this kind, we can find no parallel among the Greek or Roman poets. They bring to mind that noble description in the book of Job: "In "thoughts from the visions of the night, when "deep sleep falleth on men, fear came upon "me, and trembling, which made all my bones "to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face. "The hair of my flesh stood up. It stood still: "but I could not discern the form thereof. "An image was before mine eyes. There was "silence; and I heard a voice—Shall mortal "man[e] be more just than God?"

As Ossian's supernatural beings are described with a surprising force of imagination, so they are introduced with propriety. We have only three ghosts in Fingal: that of Crugal, which comes to warn the host of impending destruction, and to advise them to save themselves by retreat; that of Evirallin, the spouse of Ossian, which calls him to rise and rescue their son from danger; and that of Agandecca, which, just before the last engagement with Swaran, moves Fingal to pity, by mourning for the approaching destruction of her kinsmen and

[e] Job, iv. 13—17.

people. In the other poems, ghosts sometimes appear when invoked to foretel futurity; frequently, according to the notions of these times, they come as forerunners of misfortune or death, to those whom they visit; sometimes they inform their friends at a distance, of their own death; and sometimes they are introduced to heighten the scenery on some great and solemn occasion. "A hundred oaks burn to the wind; "and faint light gleams over the heath. The "ghosts of Ardven pass through the beam; and "shew their dim and distant forms. Comala is "half-unseen on her meteor; and Hidallan is "sullen and dim."—"The awful faces of other "times, looked from the clouds of Crona."—"Fercuth! I saw the ghost of night. Silent "he stood on that bank; his robe of mist flew "on the wind. I could behold his tears. An "aged man he seemed, and full of thought."

The ghosts of strangers mingle not with those of the natives. "She is seen; but not "like the daughters of the hill. Her robes are "from the stranger's land; and she is still "alone." When the ghost of one whom we had formerly known is introduced, the propriety of the living character is still preserved. This is remarkable in the appearance of Calmar's ghost, in the poem intitled, The Death of Cuthullin. He seems to forebode Cuthullin's

death, and to beckon him to his cave. Cuthullin reproaches him for supposing that he could be intimidated by such prognostics. "Why dost "thou bend thy dark eyes on me, ghost of the "car-borne Calmar? Would'st thou frighten me, "O Matha's son! from the battles of Cormac? "Thy hand was not feeble in war; neither was "thy voice for peace. How art thou changed, "chief of Lara! if now thou dost advise to fly! "Retire thou to thy cave: thou art not Cal-"mar's ghost: he delighted in battle; and his "arm was like the thunder of heaven." Calmar makes no return to this seeming reproach: but, "He retired in his blast with joy; for he had "heard the voice of his praise." This is precisely the ghost of Achilles in Homer; who, notwithstanding all the dissatisfaction he expresses with his state in the region of the dead, as soon as he had heard his son Neoptolemus praised for his gallant behaviour, strode away with silent joy to rejoin the rest of the shades[f].

It is a great advantage of Ossian's mythology, that it is not local and temporary, like that of most other ancient poets; which of course is apt to seem ridiculous, after the superstitions have passed away on which it was founded. Ossian's mythology is, to speak so,

[f] Odyss. Lib. 11.

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, concerning the appearances of departed spirits. Homer's machinery is always lively and amusing; but far from being always supported with proper dignity. The indecent squabbles among his gods, surely do no honour to epic poetry. Whereas Ossian's machinery has dignity upon all occasions. It is indeed a dignity of the dark and awful kind; but this is proper; because coincident with the strain and spirit of the poetry. A light and gay mythology, like Homer's, would have been perfectly unsuitable to the subjects on which Ossian's genius was employed. But though his machinery be always solemn, it is not however, always dreary or dismal; it is enlivened, as much as the subject would permit, by those pleasant and beautiful appearances, which he sometimes introduces, of the spirits of the hill. These are gentle spirits; descending on sun-beams, fair-moving on the plain; their forms white and bright; their voices sweet; and their visits to men propitious. The greatest praise that can be given, to the beauty of a living woman, is to say, "She is fair as the ghost of "the hill; when it moves in a sun-beam at "noon, over the silence of Morven." "The

" hunter shall hear my voice from his booth. " He shall fear, but love my voice. For sweet " shall my voice be for my friends; for pleasant " were they to me."

Besides ghosts, or the spirits of departed men, we find in Ossian some instances of other kinds of machinery. Spirits of a superior nature to ghosts are sometimes alluded to, which have power to embroil the deep; to call forth winds and storms, and pour them on the land of the stranger; to overturn forests, and to send death among the people. We have prodigies too; a shower of blood; and when some disaster is befalling at a distance, the sound of death heard on the strings of Ossian's harp: all perfectly consonant, not only to the peculiar ideas of northern nations, but to the general current of a superstitious imagination in all countries. The description of Fingal's airy hall in the poem called Berrathon, and of the ascent of Malvina into it, deserves particular notice, as remarkably noble and magnificent. But above all, the engagement of Fingal with the spirit of Loda, in Carric-thura, cannot be mentioned without admiration. I forbear transcribing the passage, as it must have drawn the attention of every one who has read the works of Ossian. The undaunted courage of Fingal, opposed to all the terrors of the Scandinavian

god; the appearance and the speech of that awful spirit; the wound which he receives, and the shriek which he sends forth, "as rolled into "himself, he rose upon the wind;" are full of the most amazing and terrible majesty. I know no passage more sublime in the writings of any uninspired author. The fiction is calculated to aggrandise the hero; which it does to a high degree; nor is it so unnatural or wild a fiction, as might at first be thought. According to the notions of those times, supernatural beings were material, and, consequently, vulnerable. The spirit of Loda was not acknowledged as a deity by Fingal; he did not worship at the stone of his power; he plainly considered him as the god of his enemies only; as a local deity, whose dominion extended no farther than to the regions where he was worshipped; who had, therefore, no title to threaten him, and no claim to his submission. We know there are poetical precedents of great authority, for fictions fully as extravagant; and if Homer be forgiven for making Diomed attack and wound in battle, the gods whom that chief himself worshipped, Ossian surely is pardonable for making his hero superior to the god of a foreign territory. [g]

[g] The scene of this encounter of Fingal with the spirit of Loda is laid in Inistore, or the islands of Orkney; and in the description of Fingal's landing there, it is said, "A rock bends

Notwithstanding the poetical advantages which I have ascribed to Ossian's machinery, I acknowledge it would have been much more beautiful and perfect, had the author discovered some knowledge of a Supreme Being. Although his silence on this head has been accounted for by the learned and ingenious translator in a very probable manner, yet still it must be held a considerable disadvantage to the poetry. For the most august and lofty ideas that can embellish poetry are derived from the belief of a divine administration of the universe: and hence

" along the coast with all its echoing wood. On the top is " the circle of Loda, with the mossy stone of power." In confirmation of Ossian's topography, it is proper to acquaint the reader, that in these islands, as I have been well informed, there are many pillars, and circles of stones, still remaining, known by the name of the stones and circles of Loda, or Loden; to which some degree of superstitious regard is annexed to this day. These islands, until the year 1468, made a part of the Danish dominions. Their ancient language, of which there are yet some remains among the natives, is called the Norse; and is a dialect, not of the Celtic, but of the Scandinavian tongue. The manners and the superstitions of the inhabitants are quite distinct from those of the Highlands and western isles of Scotland. Their ancient songs, too, are of a different strain and character, turning upon magical incantations and evocations from the dead, which were the favourite subjects of the old Runic poetry. They have many traditions among them, of wars in former times with the inhabitants of the western islands.

the invocation of a Supreme Being, or at least of some superior powers who are conceived as presiding over human affairs, the solemnities of religious worship, prayers preferred, and assistance implored on critical occasions, appear with great dignity in the works of almost all poets as chief ornaments of their compositions. The absence of all such religious ideas from Ossian's poetry, is a sensible blank in it; the more to be regretted, as we can easily imagine what an illustrious figure they would have made under the management of such a genius as his; and how finely they would have been adapted to many situations which occur in his works.

After so particular an examination of Fingal, it were needless to enter into as full a discussion of the conduct of Temora, the other Epic Poem. Many of the same observations, especially with regard to the great characteristics of heroic poetry, apply to both. The high merit, however, of Temora, requires that we should not pass it by without some remarks.

The scene of Temora, as of Fingal, is laid in Ireland; and the action is of a posterior date. The subject is, an expedition of the hero, to dethrone and punish a bloody usurper, and to restore the possession of the kingdom to the posterity of the lawful prince: an undertaking worthy of the justice and heroism of the great

Fingal. The action is one and complete. The poem opens with the descent of Fingal on the coast, and the consultation held among the chiefs of the enemy. The murder of the young prince Cormac, which was the cause of the war, being antecedent to the epic action, is introduced with great propriety as an episode in the first book. In the progress of the poem, three battles are described, which rise in their importance above one another; the success is various, and the issue for some time doubtful; till at last, Fingal, brought into distress by the wound of his great general Gaul, and the death of his son Fillan, assumes the command himself, and having slain the Irish king in single combat, restores the rightful heir to his throne.

Temora has perhaps less fire than the other epic poem; but in return it has more variety, more tenderness, and more magnificence. The reigning idea, so often presented to us, of "Fin-"gal in the last of his fields," is venerable and affecting; nor could any more noble conclusion be thought of, than the aged hero, after so many successful atchievements, taking his leave of battles, and with all the solemnities of those times, resigning his spear to his son. The events are less crowded in Temora than in Fingal; actions and characters are more particularly displayed; we are let into the transactions of both

hosts; and informed of the adventures of the night as well as of the day. The still pathetic, and the romantic scenery of several of the night adventures, so remarkably suited to Ossian's genius, occasion a fine diversity in the poem; and are happily contrasted with the military operations of the day.

In most of our author's poems, the horrors of war are softened by intermixed scenes of love and friendship. In Fingal, these are introduced as episodes; in Temora, we have an incident of this nature wrought into the body of the piece, in the adventure of Cathmor and Sulmalla. This forms one of the most conspicuous beauties of that poem. The distress of Sulmalla, disguised and unknown among strangers, her tender and anxious concern for the safety of Cathmor, her dream, and her melting remembrance of the land of her fathers; Cathmor's emotion when he first discovers her, his struggles to conceal and suppress his passion, lest it should unman him in the midst of war, though "his soul poured "forth in secret, when he beheld her fearful "eye;" and the last interview between them, when, overcome by her tenderness, he lets her know he had discovered her, and confesses his passion; are all wrought up with the most exquisite sensibility and delicacy.

Besides the characters which appeared in

Fingal, several new ones are here introduced; and though, as they are all the characters of warriors, bravery is the predominant feature, they are nevertheless diversified in a sensible and striking manner. Foldath, for instance, the general of Cathmor, exhibits the perfect picture of a savage chieftain: bold and daring, but presumptuous, cruel, and overbearing. He is distinguished on his first appearance, as the friend of the tyrant Cairbar; "His stride is haughty "his red eye rolls in wrath." In his person and whole deportment, he is contrasted with the mild and wise Hidalla, another leader of the same army, on whose humanity and gentleness he looks with great contempt. He professedly delights in strife and blood. He insults over the fallen. He is imperious in his counsels, and factious when they are not followed. He is unrelenting in all his schemes of revenge, even to the length of denying the funeral song to the dead; which, from the injury thereby done to their ghosts, was in those days considered as the greatest barbarity. Fierce to the last, he comforts himself in his dying moments, with thinking that his ghost shall often leave its blast to rejoice over the graves of those he had slain. Yet Ossian, ever prone to the pathetic, has contrived to throw into his account of the death, even of this man, some tender circumstances, by

the moving description of his daughter Dardulena, the last of his race.

The character of Foldath tends much to exalt that of Cathmor, the chief commander, which is distinguished by the most humane virtues. He abhors all fraud and cruelty, is famous for his hospitality to strangers; open to every generous sentiment, and to every soft and compassionate feeling. He is so amiable as to divide the reader's attachment between him and the hero of the poem; though our author has artfully managed it so as to make Cathmor himself indirectly acknowledge Fingal's superiority, and to appear somewhat apprehensive of the event, after the death of Fillan, which he knew would call forth Fingal in all his might. It is very remarkable, that although Ossian has introduced into his poems three complete heroes, Cuthullin, Cathmor, and Fingal, he has, however, sensibly distinguished each of their characters. Cuthullin is particularly honourable; Cathmor particularly amiable; Fingal wise and great, retaining an ascendant peculiar to himself in whatever light he is viewed.

But the favourite figure in Temora, and the one most highly finished, is Fillan. His character is of that sort, for which Ossian shews a particular fondness; an eager, fervent, young warrior, fired with all the impatient enthusiasm for

military glory, peculiar to that time of life. He had sketched this in the description of his own son Oscar; but as he has extended it more fully in Fillan, and as the character is so consonant to the epic strain, though, so far as I remember, not placed in such a conspicuous light by any other epic poet, it may be worth while to attend a little to Ossian's management of it in this instance.

Fillan was the youngest of all the sons of Fingal; younger, it is plain, than his nephew Oscar, by whose fame and great deeds in war, we may naturally suppose his ambition to have been highly stimulated. Withal, as he is younger, he is described as more rash and fiery. His first appearance is soon after Oscar's death, when he was employed to watch the motions of the foe by night. In a conversation with his brother Ossian, on that occasion, we learn that it was not long since he began to lift the spear. "Few are the marks of my sword in battle; but "my soul is fire." He is with some difficulty restrained by Ossian from going to attack the enemy; and complains to him, that his father had never allowed him any opportunity of signalizing his valour. "The king hath not re-"marked my sword; I go forth with the crowd; "I return without my fame." Soon after, when Fingal, according to custom, was to appoint one

of his chiefs to command the army, and each was standing forth, and putting in his claim to this honour, Fillan is presented in the following most picturesque and natural attitude: "On his "spear stood the son of Clatho, in the wander- "ing of his locks. Thrice he raised his eyes to "Fingal: his voice thrice failed him as he spoke. "Fillan could not boast of battles; at once he "strode away. Bent over a distant stream he "stood; the tear hung in his eye. He struck, "at times, the thistle's head, with his inverted "spear." No less natural and beautiful is the description of Fingal's paternal emotion on this occasion. "Nor is he unseen of Fingal. Side- "long he beheld his son. He beheld him with "bursting joy. He hid the big tear with his "locks, and turned amidst his crowded soul." The command, for that day, being given to Gaul, Fillan rushes amidst the thickest of the foe, saves Gaul's life, who is wounded by a ran- dom arrow, and distinguishes himself so in bat- tle, that "the days of old return on Fingal's "mind, as he beholds the renown of his son. "As the sun rejoices from the cloud, over the "tree his beams have raised, whilst it shakes its "lonely head on the heath, so joyful is the king "over Fillan." Sedate, however, and wise, he mixes the praise which he bestows on him with some reprehension of his rashness. "My son,

" I saw thy deeds, and my soul was glad. Thou " art brave, son of Clatho, but headlong in the " strife. So did not Fingal advance, though he " never feared a foe. Let thy people be a ridge " behind thee; they are thy strength in the field. " Then shalt thou be long renowned, and behold " the tombs of thy fathers."

On the next day, the greatest and the last of Fillan's life, the charge is committed to him of leading on the host to battle. Fingal's speech to his troops on this occasion is full of noble sentiment; and, where he recommends his son to their care, extremely touching. " A young beam is " before you; few are his steps to war. They are " few, but he is valiant; defend my dark-haired " son. Bring him back with joy; hereafter he " may stand alone. His form is like his fathers; " his soul is a flame of their fire." When the battle begins, the poet puts forth his strength to describe the exploits of the young hero; who, at last encountering and killing with his own hand Foldath, the opposite general, attains the pinnacle of glory. In what follows, when the fate of Fillan is drawing near, Ossian, if any where, excels himself. Foldath being slain, and a general rout begun, there was no resource left to the enemy but in the great Cathmor himself, who, in this extremity, descends from the hill, where, according to the custom of those princes, he

surveyed the battle. Observe how this critical event is wrought up by the poet. " Wide " spreading over echoing Lubar, the flight of " Bolga is rolled along. Fillan hung forward " on their steps; and strewed the heath with " dead. Fingal rejoiced over his son.——Blue- " shielded Cathmor rose.——Son of Alpin, bring " the harp! Give Fillan's praise to the wind; " raise high his praise in my hall, while yet he " shines in war. Leave, blue-eyed Clatho! leave " thy hall; behold that early beam of thine! " The host is withered in its course.——No far- " ther look——it is dark——light trembling " from the harp, strike, virgins! strike the sound." The sudden interruption, and suspense of the narration on Cathmor's rising from his hill, the abrupt bursting into the praise of Fillan, and the passionate apostrophe to his mother Clatho, are admirable efforts of poetical art, in order to interest us in Fillan's danger; and the whole is heightened by the immediate following simile, one of the most magnificent and sublime that is to be met with in any poet, and which, if it had been found in Homer, would have been the frequent subject of admiration to critics: " Fillan " is like a spirit of heaven, that descends from " the skirt of his blast. The troubled ocean " feels his steps, as he strides from wave to

" wave. His path kindles behind him; islands " shake their heads on the heaving seas."

But the poet's art is not yet exhausted. The fall of this noble young warrior, or, in Ossian's style, the extinction of this beam of heaven, could not be rendered too interesting and affecting. Our attention is naturally drawn towards Fingal. He beholds from his hill the rising of Cathmor, and the danger of his son. But what shall he do? " Shall Fingal rise to his aid, and " take the sword of Luno? What then shall be- " come of thy fame, son of white-bosomed Cla- " tho? Turn not thine eyes from Fingal, daugh- " ter of Inistore! I shall not quench thy early " beam. No cloud of mine shall rise, my son, " upon thy soul of fire."—Struggling between concern for the fame, and fear for the safety, of his son, he withdraws from the sight of the engagement; and dispatches Ossian in haste to the field, with this affectionate and delicate injunction: " Father of Oscar!" addressing him by a title which on this occasion has the highest propriety, " Father of Oscar! lift the spear; de- " fend the young in arms. But conceal thy " steps from Fillan's eyes. He must not know " that I doubt his steel." Ossian arrived too late. But unwilling to describe Fillan vanquished, the poet suppresses all the circum-

stances of the combat with Cathmor; and only shews us the dying hero. We see him animated to the end with the same martial and ardent spirit; breathing his last in bitter regret for being so early cut off from the field of glory. "Ossian, lay me in that hollow rock. Raise no "stone above me, lest one should ask about my "fame. I am fallen in the first of my fields; "fallen without renown. Let thy voice alone "send joy to my flying soul. Why should the "bard know where dwells the early-fallen Fil-"lan?" He who, after tracing the circumstances of this story, shall deny that our bard is possessed of high sentiment and high art, must be strangely prejudiced indeed. Let him read the story of Pallas in Virgil, which is of a similar kind; and after all the praise he may justly bestow on the elegant and finished description of that amiable author, let him say which of the two poets unfold most of the human soul. I waive insisting on any more of the particulars in Temora, as my aim is rather to lead the reader into the genius and spirit of Ossian's poety than to dwell on all his beauties.

The judgment and art discovered in conducting works of such length as Fingal and Temora, distinguish them from the other poems in this collection. The smaller pieces, however, contain particular beauties no less eminent.

They are historical poems, generally of the elegiac kind; and plainly discover themselves to be the work of the same author. One consistent face of manners is every where presented to us; one spirit of poetry reigns; the masterly hand of Ossian appears throughout; the same rapid and animated style; the same strong colouring of imagination, and the same glowing sensibility of art. Besides the unity which belongs to the compositions of one man, there is moreover a certain unity of subject, which very happily connects all these poems. They form the poetical history of the age of Fingal. The same race of heroes whom we had met with in the greater poems, Cuthullin, Oscar, Connal, and Gaul, return again upon the stage; and Fingal himself is always the principal figure, presented on every occasion, with equal magnificence, nay, rising upon us to the last. The circumstances of Ossian's old age and blindness, his surviving all his friends, and his relating their great exploits to Malvina, the spouse or mistress of his beloved son Oscar, furnish the finest poetical situations that fancy could devise for that tender pathetic which reigns in Ossian's poetry.

On each of these poems there might be room for separate observations, with regard to the conduct and disposition of the incidents, as

well as to the beauty of the descriptions and sentiments. Carthon is a regular and highly finished piece. The main story is very properly introduced by Classamor's relation of the adventure of his youth; and this introduction is finely heightened by Fingal's song of mourning over Moina; in which Ossian, ever fond of doing honour to his father, has contrived to distinguish him for being an eminent poet as well as warrior. Fingal's song upon this occasion, when, "his thousand "Bards leaned forward from their seats, to hear "the voice of the King," is inferior to no passage in the whole book; and with great judgment put in his mouth, as the seriousness, no less than the sublimity of the strain, is peculiarly suited to the Hero's character. In Darthula, are assembled almost all the tender images that can touch the heart of man; friendship, love, the affections of parents, sons, and brothers, the distress of the aged, and the unavailing bravery of the young. The beautiful address to the moon, with which the poem opens, and the transition from thence to the subject, most happily prepare the mind for that train of affecting events that is to follow. The story is regular, dramatic, interesting to the last. He who can read it without emotion, may congratulate himself, if he pleases, upon being completely armed against sympathetic sorrow. As Fingal had no

occasion of appearing in the action of this poem, Ossian makes a very artful transition from his narration, to what was passing in the halls of Selma. The sound heard there on the strings of his harp, the concern which Fingal shews on hearing it, and the invocation of the ghosts of their fathers, to receive the heroes falling in a distant land, are introduced with great beauty of imagination, to increase the solemnity, and to diversify the scenery of the poem.

Carric-thura is full of the most sublime dignity; and has this advantage, of being more cheerful in the subject, and more happy in the catastrophe, than most of the other poems: though tempered at the same time with episodes in that strain of tender melancholy which seems to have been the great delight of Ossian and the Bards of his age. Lathmon is peculiarly distinguished by high generosity of sentiment. This is carried so far, particularly in the refusal of Gaul, on one side, to take the advantage of a sleeping foe; and of Lathmon, on the other, to overpower by numbers the two young warriors, as to recal into one's mind the manners of chivalry; some resemblance to which may perhaps be suggested by other incidents in this collection of poems. Chivalry, however, took rise in an age and country too remote from those of Ossian, to admit the suspicion that the

one could have borrowed any thing from the other. So far as chivalry had any real existence, the same military enthusiasm, which gave birth to it in the feudal times, might, in the days of Ossian, that is, in the infancy of a rising state, through the operation of the same cause, very naturally produce effects of the same kind on the minds and manners of men. So far as chivalry was an ideal system, existing only in romance, it will not be thought surprising, when we reflect on the account before given of the Celtic Bards, that this imaginary refinement of heroic manners should be found among them, as much, at least, as among the *Trobadores*, or strolling Provençal Bards, in the 10th or 11th century; whose songs, it is said, first gave rise to those romantic ideas of heroism, which for so long a time enchanted Europe.[h] Ossian's heroes have all the gallantry and generosity of those fabulous knights, without their extravagance; and his love scenes have native tenderness, without any mixture of those forced and unnatural conceits which abound in the old romances. The adventures related by our poet which resemble the most those of romance, concern women who follow their lovers to war disguised in the armour of men; and these are so

[h] Vid. Huetius de origine fabularum Romanensium.

managed as to produce, in the discovery, several of the most interesting situations; one beautiful instance of which may be seen in Carric-thura, and another in Calthon and Colmal.

Oithona presents a situation of a different nature. In the absence of her lover Gaul, she had been carried off and ravished by Dunrommath. Gaul discovers the place where she is kept concealed, and comes to revenge her. The meeting of the two lovers, the sentiments and the behaviour of Oithona on that occasion, are described with such tender and exquisite propriety, as does the greatest honour both to the art and to the delicacy of our author; and would have been admired in any poet of the most refined age. The conduct of Croma must strike every reader as remarkably judicious and beautiful. We are to be prepared for the death of Malvina, which is related in the succeeding poem. She is therefore introduced in person; "she has heard a voice in a dream; she feels "the fluttering of her soul;" and in a most moving lamentation addressed to her beloved Oscar, she sings her own Death-song. Nothing could be calculated with more art to sooth and comfort her than the story which Ossian relates. In the young and brave Fovargormo, another Oscar is introduced; his praises are sung; and the happiness is set before her of those who die

in their youth, " when their renown is around " them; before the feeble behold them in the " hall, and smile at their trembling hands."

But no where does Ossian's genius appear to greater advantage, than in Berrathon, which is reckoned the conclusion of his songs, " The last " sound of the voice of Cona."

> Qualis olor noto positurus littore vitam,
> Ingemit, et mæstis mulcens concentibus auras
> Præsago quæritur venientia funera cantu.

The whole train of ideas is admirably suited to the subject. Every thing is full of that invisible world, into which the aged Bard believes himself now ready to enter. The airy hall of Fingal presents itself to his view; " he sees the " cloud that shall receive his ghost; he beholds " the mist that shall form his robe when he ap- " pears on his hill;" and all the natural objects around him seem to carry the presages of death. " The thistle shakes its beard to the wind. The " flower hangs its heavy head; it seems to say, " I am covered with the drops of heaven; the " time of my departure is near, and the blast " that shall scatter my leaves." Malvina's death is hinted to him in the most delicate manner by the son of Alpin. His lamentation over her, her apotheosis, or ascent to the habitation of heroes, and the introduction to the story which

follows from the mention which Ossian supposes the father of Malvina to make of him in the hall of Fingal, are all in the highest spirit of poetry. "And dost thou remember Ossian, O Toscar, "son of Comloch? The battles of our youth were "many; our swords went together to the field." Nothing could be more proper than to end his songs with recording an exploit of the father of that Malvina, of whom his heart was now so full; and who, from first to last, had been such a favourite object throughout all his poems.

The scene of most of Ossian's poems is laid in Scotland, or in the coast of Ireland opposite to the territories of Fingal. When the scene is in Ireland, we perceive no change of manners from those of Ossian's native country. For as Ireland was undoubtedly peopled with Celtic tribes, the language, customs, and religion of both nations were the same. They had been separated from one another, by migration, only a few generations, as it should seem, before our poet's age; and they still maintained a close and frequent intercourse. But when the poet relates the expeditions of any of his heroes to the Scandinavian coast, or to the islands of Orkney, which were then part of the Scandinavian territory, as he does in Carric-thura, Sulmalla of Lumon, and Cathloda, the case is quite altered. Those countries were inhabited by na-

tions of the Teutonic descent, who, in their manners and religious rites, differed widely from the Celtæ; and it is curious and remarkable, to find this difference clearly pointed out in the poems of Ossian. His descriptions bear the native marks of one who was present in the expeditions which he relates, and who describes what he had seen with his own eyes. No sooner are we carried to Lochlin, or the islands of Inistore, than we perceive that we are in a foreign region. New objects begin to appear. We meet every where with the stones and circles of Loda, that is, Odin, the great Scandinavian deity. We meet with the divinations and inchantments, for which it is well known those northern nations were early famous. "There, "mixed with the murmur of waters, rose the "voice of aged men, who called the forms of "night to aid them in their war;" whilst the Caledonian chiefs, who assisted them, are described as standing at a distance, heedless of their rites. That ferocity of manners which distinguished those nations, also becomes conspicuous. In the combats of their chiefs there is a peculiar savageness; even their women are bloody and fierce. The spirit, and the very ideas of Regner Lodbrog, that northern scalder whom I formerly quoted, occur to us again. "The hawks," Ossian makes one of the Scandi-

navian chiefs say, "rush from all their winds; "they are wont to trace my course. We re- "joiced three days above the dead, and called "the hawks of heaven. They came from all "their winds, to feast on the foes of Annir."

Dismissing now the separate consideration of any of our author's works, I proceed to make some observations on his manner of writing, under the general heads of Description, Imagery, and Sentiment.

A poet of original genius is always distinguished by his talent for description.[1] A second-rate writer discerns nothing new or peculiar in the object he means to describe. His conceptions of it are vague and loose; his expressions feeble; and of course the object is presented to us indistinctly, and as through a cloud. But a true poet makes us imagine that we see it before our eyes; he catches the distinguishing features; he gives it the colours of life and reality; he places it in such a light that a painter could copy after him. This happy talent is chiefly owing to a lively imagination, which first receives a strong impression of the object, and then, by a proper selection of capital picturesque circumstances employed in describ-

[1] See the rules of poetical description excellently illustrated by lord Kaims, in his Elements of Criticism, vol. iii. chap. 21. Of narration and description.

ing it, transmits that impression in its full force to the imaginations of others. That Ossian possesses this descriptive power in a high degree, we have a clear proof from the effect which his descriptions produce upon the imaginations of those who read him with any degree of attention and taste. Few poets are more interesting. We contract an intimate acquaintance with his principal heroes. The characters, the manners, the face of the country, become familiar: we even think we could draw the figure of his ghosts. In a word, whilst reading him, we are transported as into a new region, and dwell among his objects as if they were all real.

It were easy to point out several instances of exquisite painting in the works of our author. Such, for instance, as the scenery with which Temora opens, and the attitude in which Cairbar is there presented to us; the description of the young prince Cormac, in the same book; and the ruins of Balclutha in Cartho. "I have "seen the walls of Balclutha, but they were "desolate. The fire had resounded in the halls; "and the voice of the people is heard no more. "The stream of Clutha was removed from its "place by the fall of the walls. The thistle "shook there its lonely head: the moss whistled "to the wind. The fox looked out from the "windows; the rank grass of the wall waved

" round his head. Desolate is the dwelling of " Moina; silence is in the house of her fathers." Nothing also can be more natural and lively than the manner in which Carthon afterwards describes how the conflagration of his city affected him when a child: " Have I not seen the " fallen Balclutha? And shall I feast with Com- " hall's son? Comhal! who threw his fire in the " midst of my father's hall! I was young, and " knew not the cause why the virgins wept. " The columns of smoke pleased mine eye, when " they rose above my walls: I often looked back " with gladness, when my friends fled above the " hill. But when the years of my youth came " on, I beheld the moss of my fallen walls. " My sigh arose with the morning; and my " tears descended with night. Shall I not fight, " I said to my soul, against the children of my " foes? And I will fight, O Bard! I feel the " strength of my soul." In the same poem, the assembling of the chiefs round Fingal, who had been warned of some impending danger by the appearance of a prodigy, is described with so many picturesque circumstances, that one imagines himself present in the assembly. " The " king alone beheld the terrible sight, and he " foresaw the death of his people. He came in " silence to his hall, and took his father's spear; " the mail rattled on his breast. The heroes

" rose around. They looked in silence on each " other, marking the eyes of Fingal. They saw " the battle in his face. A thousand shields are " placed at once on their arms; and they drew " a thousand swords. The hall of Selma bright- " ened around. The clang of arms ascends. " The grey dogs howl in their place. No word " is among the mighty chiefs. Each marked " the eyes of the king; and half-assumed his " spear."

It has been objected to Ossian, that his descriptions of military actions are imperfect, and much less diversified by circumstances than those of Homer. This is in some measure true. The amazing fertility of Homer's invention is no where so much displayed as in the incidents of his battles, and in the little history pieces he gives of the persons slain. Nor indeed, with regard to the talent of description, can too much be said in praise of Homer. Every thing is alive in his writings. The colours with which he paints are those of nature. But Ossian's genius was of a different kind from Homer's. It led him to hurry towards grand objects, rather than to amuse himself with particulars of less importance. He could dwell on the death of a favourite hero; but that of a private man seldom stopped his rapid course. Homer's genius was more comprehensive than Ossian's. It

included a wider circle of objects; and could work up any incident into description. Ossian's was more limited; but the region within which it chiefly exerted itself was the highest of all, the region of the pathetic and sublime.

We must not imagine, however, that Ossian's battles consist only of general indistinct description. Such beautiful incidents are sometimes introduced, and the circumstances of the persons slain so much diversified, as shew that he could have embellished his military scenes with an abundant variety of particulars, if his genius had led him to dwell upon them. "One man "is stretched in the dust of his native land; "he fell, where often he had spread the feast, "and often raised the voice of the harp." The maid of Inistore is introduced, in a moving apostrophe, as weeping for another; and a third, "as rolled in the dust he lifted his faint eyes to "the king," is remembered and mourned by Fingal, as the friend of Agandecca. The blood pouring from the wound of one who is slain by night, is heard "hissing on the half-extin-"guished oak," which had been kindled for giving light: Another, climbing a tree to escape from his foe, is pierced by his spear from behind; "shrieking, panting he fell; whilst moss "and withered branches pursue his fall, and "strew the blue arms of Gaul." Never was a

finer picture drawn of the ardour of two youthful warriors than the following: "I saw Gaul "in his armour, and my soul was mixed with "his: for the fire of the battle was in his eyes; "he looked to the foe with joy. We spoke the "words of friendship in secret; and the lightning of our swords poured together. We "drew them behind the wood, and tried the "strength of our arms on the empty air."

Ossian is always concise in his descriptions, which adds much to their beauty and force. For it is a great mistake to imagine, that a crowd of particulars, or a very full and extended style, is of advantage to description. On the contrary, such a diffuse manner for the most part weakens it. Any one redundant circumstance is a nuisance. It encumbers and loads the fancy, and renders the main image indistinct. "Obstat," as Quintilian says with regard to style, "quicquid non adjuvat." To be concise in description, is one thing; and to be general, is another. No description that rests in generals can possibly be good; it can convey no lively idea; for it is of particulars only that we have a distinct conception. But at the same time, no strong imagination dwells long upon any one particular; or heaps together a mass of trivial ones. By the happy choice of some one, or of a few that are the most strik-

ing, it presents the image more complete, shews us more at one glance, than a feeble imagination is able to do, by turning its object round and round into a variety of lights. Tacitus is of all prose writers the most concise. He has even a degree of abruptness resembling our author: yet no writer is more eminent for lively description. When Fingal, after having conquered the haughty Swaran, proposes to dismiss him with honour: "Raise to-morrow thy white sails to "the wind, thou brother of Agandecca!" He conveys, by thus addressing his enemy, a stronger impression of the emotions then passing within his mind, than if whole paragraphs had been spent in describing the conflict between resentment against Swaran and the tender remembrance of his ancient love. No amplification is needed to give us the most full idea of a hardy veteran, after the few following words: "His "shield is marked with the strokes of battle; "his red eye despises danger." When Oscar, left alone, was surrounded by foes, "he stood," it is said, "growing in his place, like the flood "of the narrow vale;" a happy representation of one, who, by daring intrepidity in the midst of danger, seems to increase in his appearance, and becomes more formidable every moment, like the sudden rising of the torrent hemmed in by the valley. And a whole crowd of ideas,

concerning the circumstances of domestic sorrow occasioned by a young warrior's first going forth to battle, is poured upon the mind by these words: "Calmar leaned on his father's "spear; that spear which he brought from Lara's "hall, when the soul of his mother was sad."

The conciseness of Ossian's descriptions is the more proper on account of his subjects. Descriptions of gay and smiling scenes may, without any disadvantage, be amplified and prolonged. Force is not the predominant quality expected in these. The description may be weakened by being diffuse, yet, notwithstanding, may be beautiful still. Whereas, with respect to grand, solemn, and pathetic subjects, which are Ossian's chief field, the case is very different. In these, energy is above all things required. The imagination must be seized at once, or not at all; and is far more deeply impressed by one strong and ardent image, than by the anxious minuteness of laboured illustration.

But Ossian's genius, though chiefly turned towards the sublime and pathetic, was not confined to it. In subjects also of grace and delicacy, he discovers the hand of a master. Take for an example the following elegant description of Agandecca, wherein the tenderness of Tibullus seems united with the majesty of Vir-

gil. "The daughter of the snow overheard, "and left the hall of her secret sigh. She came "in all her beauty; like the moon from the "cloud of the East. Loveliness was around "her as light. Her steps were like the music "of songs. She saw the youth and loved him. "He was the stolen sigh of her soul. Her blue "eyes rolled on him in secret; and she blest "the chief of Morven." Several other instances might be produced of the feelings of love and friendship painted by our author with a most natural and happy delicacy.

The simplicity of Ossian's manner adds great beauty to his descriptions, and indeed to his whole poetry. We meet with no affected ornaments; no forced refinement; no marks either in style or thought of a studied endeavour to shine and sparkle. Ossian appears every where to be prompted by his feelings; and to speak from the abundance of his heart. I remember no more than one instance of what can be called quaint thought in this whole collection of his works. It is in the first book of Fingal, where, from the tombs of two lovers two lonely yews are mentioned to have sprung, "whose branches "wished to meet on high." This sympathy of the trees with the lovers, may be reckoned to border on an Italian conceit; and it is somewhat curious to find this single instance of that sort of wit in our Celtic poetry.

The "joy of grief," is one of Ossian's remarkable expressions, several times repeated. If any one shall think that it needs to be justified by a precedent, he may find it twice used by Homer; in the Iliad, when Achilles is visited by the ghost of Patroclus; and in the Odyssey, when Ulysses meets his mother in the shades. On both these occasions, the heroes, melted with tenderness, lament their not having it in their power to throw their arms round the ghost, "that we might," say they, "in a mutual "embrace, enjoy the delight of grief."

——Κρυεροῖο τεταρπωμεσθα γόοιο.[k]

But in truth the expression stands in need of no defence from authority; for it is a natural and just expression; and conveys a clear idea of that gratification, which a virtuous heart often feels in the indulgence of a tender melancholy. Ossian makes a very proper distinction between this gratification and the destructive effect of over-powering grief. "There is a joy "in grief, when peace dwells in the breasts of "the sad. But sorrow wastes the mournful, O "daughter of Toscar, and their days are few." To "give the joy of grief," generally signifies to raise the strain of soft and grave music; and

[k] Odyss. xi. 211. Iliad, xxiii. 98.

finely characterises the taste of Ossian's age and country. In those days, when the songs of bards were the great delight of heroes, the tragic muse was held in chief honour; gallant actions, and virtuous sufferings, were the chosen theme; preferably to that light and trifling strain of poetry and music, which promotes light and trifling manners, and serves to emasculate the mind. "Strike the harp in my hall," said the great Fingal, in the midst of youth and victory, "strike the harp in my hall, and let "Fingal hear the song. Pleasant is the joy of "grief! It is like the shower of spring, when "it softens the branch of the oak; and the "young leaf lifts its green head. Sing on, O "bards! To-morrow we lift the sail."

Personal epithets have been much used by all the poets of the most ancient ages: and when well chosen, not general and unmeaning, they contribute not a little to render the style descriptive and animated. Besides epithets founded on bodily distinctions, a-kin to many of Homer's, we find in Ossian several which are remarkably beautiful and poetical. Such as, Oscar of the future fights, Fingal of the mildest look, Carril of other times, the mildly-blushing Evirallin; Bragela, the lonely sun-beam of Dunscaich; a Culdee, the son of the secret cell.

But of all the ornaments employed in de-

scriptive poetry, comparisons or similes are the most splendid. These chiefly form what is called the imagery of a poem; and as they abound so much in the works of Ossian, and are commonly among the favourite passages of all poets, it may be expected that I should be somewhat particular in my remarks upon them.

A poetical simile always supposes two objects brought together, between which there is some near relation or connection in the fancy. What that relation ought to be, cannot be precisely defined. For various, almost numberless, are the analogies formed among objects, by a sprightly imagination. The relation of actual similitude, or likeness of appearance, is far from being the only foundation of poetical comparison. Sometimes a resemblance in the effect produced by two objects, is made the connecting principle: sometimes a resemblance in one distinguishing property or circumstance. Very often two objects are brought together in a simile, though they resemble one another, strictly speaking, in nothing, only because they raise in the mind a train of similar, and what may be called, concordant ideas; so that the remembrance of the one, when recalled, serves to quicken and heighten the impression made by the other. Thus, to give an instance from our poet, the pleasure with which an old man looks

back on the exploits of his youth, has certainly no direct resemblance to the beauty of a fine evening; farther than that both agree in producing a certain calm, placid joy. Yet Ossian has founded upon this, one of the most beautiful comparisons that is to be met with in any poet. "Wilt thou not listen, son of the rock, "to the song of Ossian? My soul is full of "other times; the joy of my youth returns. "Thus the sun appears in the west, after the "steps of his brightness have moved behind a "storm. The green hills lift their dewy heads. "The blue streams rejoice in the vale. The "aged hero comes forth on his staff; and his "grey hair glitters in the beam." Never was there a finer group of objects. It raises a strong conception of the old man's joy and elation of heart, by displaying a scene which produces in every spectator a corresponding train of pleasing emotions; the declining sun looking forth in his brightness after a storm; the cheerful face of all nature; and the still life finely animated by the circumstance of the aged hero, with his staff and his grey locks; a circumstance both extremely picturesque in itself, and peculiarly suited to the main object of the comparison. Such analogies and associations of ideas as these, are highly pleasing to the fancy. They give opportunity for introducing many

a fine poetical picture. They diversify the scene; they aggrandize the subject; they keep the imagination awake and sprightly. For as the judgment is principally exercised in distinguishing objects, and remarking the differences among those which seem like; so the highest amusement of the imagination is to trace likenesses and agreements among those which seem different.

The principal rules which respect poetical comparisons are, that they be introduced on proper occasions, when the mind is disposed to relish them; and not in the midst of some severe and agitating passion, which cannot admit this play of fancy; that they be founded on a resemblance neither too near and obvious, so as to give little amusement to the imagination in tracing it, nor too faint and remote, so as to be apprehended with difficulty; that they serve either to illustrate the principal object, and to render the conception of it more clear and distinct; or at least, to heighten and embellish it, by a suitable association of images.[1]

Every country has a scenery peculiar to itself; and the imagery of a good poet will exhibit it. For as he copies after nature, his allusions will of course be taken from those objects

[1] See Elements of Criticism, ch. 19, vol. iii.

which he sees around him, and which have often struck his fancy. For this reason, in order to judge of the propriety of poetical imagery, we ought to be, in some measure, acquainted with the natural history of the country where the scene of the poem is laid. The introduction of foreign images betrays a poet, copying not from nature, but from other writers. Hence so many lions, and tigers, and eagles, and serpents, which we meet with in the similes of modern poets; as if these animals had acquired some right to a place in poetical comparisons for ever, because employed by ancient authors. They employed them with propriety, as objects generally known in their country; but they are absurdly used for illustration by us, who know them only at second-hand, or by description. To most readers of modern poetry, it were more to the purpose to describe lions or tigers by similes taken from men, than to compare men to lions. Ossian is very correct in this particular. His imagery is, without exception, copied from that face of nature which he saw before his eyes; and by consequence may be expected to be lively. We meet with no Grecian or Italian scenery; but with the mists, and clouds, and storms, of a northern mountainous region.

No poet abounds more in similes than Os-

sian. There are in this collection as many, at least, as in the whole Iliad and Odyssey of Homer. I am indeed inclined to think, that the works of both poets are too much crowded with them. Similes are sparkling ornaments: and, like all things that sparkle, are apt to dazzle and tire us by their lustre. But if Ossian's similes be too frequent, they have this advantage of being commonly shorter than Homer's; they interrupt his narration less; he just glances aside to some resembling object, and instantly returns to his former track. Homer's similes include a wider range of objects. But in return, Ossian's are, without exception, taken from objects of dignity, which cannot be said for all those which Homer employs. The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars, Clouds and Meteors, Lightning and Thunder, Seas and Whales, Rivers, Torrents, Winds, Ice, Rain, Snow, Dews, Mist, Fire and Smoke, Trees and Forests, Heath and Grass and Flowers, Rocks and Mountains, Music and Songs, Light and Darkness, Spirits and Ghosts; these form the circle within which Ossian's comparisons generally run. Some, not many, are taken from Birds and Beasts; as Eagles, Sea Fowl, the Horse, the Deer, and the mountain Bee; and a very few from such operations of art as were then known. Homer has diversified his imagery by many more allusions

to the animal world; to Lions, Bulls, Goats, Herds of Cattle, Serpents, Insects; and to the various occupations of rural and pastoral life. Ossian's defect in this article is plainly owing to the desert, uncultivated state of his country, which suggested to him few images beyond natural inanimate objects in their rudest form. The birds and animals of the country were probably not numerous; and his acquaintance with them was slender, as they were little subjected to the uses of man.

The great objection made to Ossian's imagery, is its uniformity, and the too frequent repetition of the same comparisons. In a work so thick sown with similes, one could not but expect to find images of the same kind sometimes suggested to the poet by resembling objects; especially to a poet like Ossian, who wrote from the immediate impulse of poetical enthusiasm, and without much preparation of study or labour. Fertile as Homer's imagination is acknowledged to be, who does not know how often his Lions and Bulls, and Flocks of Sheep, recur with little or no variation; nay, sometimes in the very same words? The objection made to Ossian is, however, founded, in a great measure, upon a mistake. It has been supposed by inattentive readers, that wherever the Moon, the Cloud, or the Thunder, returns in a simile,

it is the same simile, and the same Moon, or Cloud, or Thunder, which they had met with a few pages before. Whereas very often the similes are widely different. The object, whence they are taken, is indeed in substance the same; but the image is new; for the appearance of the object is changed; it is presented to the fancy in another attitude; and clothed with new circumstances, to make it suit the different illustration for which it is employed. In this lies Ossian's great art; in so happily varying the form of the few natural appearances with which he was acquainted, as to make them correspond to a great many different objects.

Let us take for one instance the Moon, which is very frequently introduced into his comparisons; as in northern climates, where the nights are long, the Moon is a greater object of attention than in the climate of Homer; and let us view how much our poet has diversified its appearance. The shield of a warrior is like "the darkened moon when it moves a dun "circle through the heavens." The face of a ghost, wan and pale, is like "the beam of the "setting moon." And a different appearance of a ghost, thin and indistinct, is like "the new "moon seen through the gathered mist, when "the sky pours down its flaky snow, and the "world is silent and dark;" or, in a different

form still, is like "the watery beam of the "moon, when it rushes from between two "clouds, and the midnight shower is on the "field." A very opposite use is made of the moon in the description of Agandecca: "She "came in all her beauty, like the moon from "the cloud of the East." Hope, succeeded by disappointment, is "joy rising on her face, and "sorrow returning again, like a thin cloud on "the moon." But when Swaran, after his defeat, is cheered by Fingal's generosity, "His "face brightened like the full moon of heaven, "when the clouds vanish away, and leave her "calm and broad in the midst of the sky." Venvela is "bright as the moon when it trem-"bles o'er the western wave;" but the soul of the guilty Uthal is "dark as the troubled face "of the moon, when it foretels the storm." And by a very fanciful and uncommon allusion, it is said of Cormac, who was to die in his early years, "Nor long shalt thou lift the spear, "mildly shining beam of youth! Death stands "dim behind thee, like the darkened half of "the moon behind its growing light."

Another instance of the same nature may be taken from mist, which, as being a very familiar appearance in the country of Ossian, he applies to a variety of purposes, and pursues through a great many forms. Sometimes, which one

would hardly expect, he employs it to heighten the appearance of a beautiful object. The hair of Morna is "like the mist of Cromla, when it "curls on the rock, and shines to the beam of "the west."—"The song comes with its music "to melt and please the ear. It is like soft "mist, that rising from a lake pours on the "silent vale. The green flowers are filled with "dew. The sun returns in its strength, and "the mist is gone."[m]—But, for the most part, mist is employed as a similitude of some disagreeable or terrible object. "The soul of Na-"thos was sad, like the sun in the day of mist, "when his face is watery and dim." "The "darkness of old age comes like the mist of the "desert." The face of a ghost is "pale as the "mist of Cromla." "The gloom of battle is "rolled along as mist that is poured on the val-

[m] There is a remarkable propriety in this comparison. It is intended to explain the effect of soft and mournful music. Armin appears disturbed at a performance of this kind. Carmor says to him, "Why bursts the sigh of Armin? Is there "a cause to mourn? The song comes with its music to melt "and please the ear. It is like soft mist," &c. that is, such mournful songs have a happy effect to soften the heart, and to improve it by tender emotions, as the moisture of the mist refreshes and nourishes the flowers; whilst the sadness they occasion is only transient, and soon dispelled by the succeeding occupations and amusements of life: "The sun returns in "its strength, and the mist is gone."

" ley, when storms invade the silent sun-shine " of heaven." Fame, suddenly departing, is likened to " mist that flies away before the " rustling wind of the vale." A ghost, slowly vanishing, to " mist that melts by degrees on " the sunny hill." Cairbar, after his treacherous assassination of Oscar, is compared to a pestilential fog. " I love a foe like Cathmor," says Fingal, " his soul is great; his arm is strong; " his battles are full of fame. But the little " soul is like a vapour that hovers round the " marshy lake. It never rises on the green hill, " lest the winds meet it there. Its dwelling is " in the cave; and it sends forth the dart of " death." This is a simile highly finished. But there is another which is still more striking, founded also on mist, in the 4th book of Temora. Two factious chiefs are contending; Cathmor the king interposes, rebukes, and silences them. The poet intends to give us the highest idea of Cathmor's superiority; and most effectually accomplishes his intention by the following happy image. " They sunk from the " king on either side, like two columns of morn- " ing mist, when the sun rises between them, " on his glittering rocks. Dark is their rolling " on either side; each towards its reedy pool." These instances may sufficiently shew with what richness of imagination Ossian's comparisons

abound, and at the same time, with what propriety of judgment they are employed. If his field was narrow, it must be admitted to have been as well cultivated as its extent would allow.

As it is usual to judge of poets from a comparison of their similes more than of other passages, it will perhaps be agreeable to the reader, to see how Homer and Ossian have conducted some images of the same kind. This might be shewn in many instances. For as the great objects of nature are common to the poets of all nations, and make the general store-house of all imagery, the ground-work of their comparisons must of course be frequently the same. I shall select only a few of the most considerable from both poets. Mr. Pope's translation of Homer can be of no use to us here. The parallel is altogether unfair between prose, and the imposing harmony of flowing numbers. It is only by viewing Homer in the simplicity of a prose translation, that we can form any comparison between the two bards.

The shock of two encountering armies, the noise and the tumult of battle, afford one of the most grand and awful subjects of description; on which all epic poets have exerted their strength. Let us first hear Homer. The following description is a favourite one, for we

find it twice repeated in the same [n] words. "When now the conflicting hosts joined in the "field of battle, then were mutually opposed "shields, and swords, and the strength of armed "men. The bossy bucklers were dashed against "each other. The universal tumult rose. There "were mingled the triumphant shouts and the "dying groans of the victors and the van-"quished. The earth streamed with blood. "As when winter torrents, rushing from the "mountains, pour into a narrow valley, their "violent waters. They issue from a thousand "springs, and mix in the hollowed channel. "The distant shepherd hears on the mountain, "their roar from afar. Such was the terror "and the shout of the engaging armies." In another passage, the poet, much in the manner of Ossian, heaps simile on simile, to express the vastness of the idea, with which his imagination seems to labour. "With a mighty shout the "hosts engage. Not so loud roars the wave of "ocean, when driven against the shore by the "whole force of the boisterous north; not so "loud in the woods of the mountain, the noise "of the flame, when rising in its fury to con-"sume the forest; not so loud the wind among "the lofty oaks, when the wrath of the storm

[n] Iliad, iv. 446. and Iliad, viii. 60.

"rages; as was the clamour of the Greeks and "Trojans, when, roaring terrible, they rushed "against each other."°

To these descriptions and similes, we may oppose the following from Ossian, and leave the reader to judge between them. He will find images of the same kind employed; commonly less extended; but thrown forth with a glowing rapidity, which characterises our poet. "As "autumn's dark storms pour from two echoing "hills, towards each other, approached the he-"roes. As two dark streams from high rocks "meet and mix, and roar on the plain; loud, "rough, and dark in battle, meet Lochlin and "Inisfail. Chief mixed his strokes with chief, "and man with man. Steel clanging, sounded "on steel. Helmets are cleft on high; blood "bursts and smoaks around.—As the troubled "noise of the ocean, when roll the waves on "high; as the last peal of the thunder of hea-"ven, such is the noise of battle."—"As roll a "thousand waves to the rock, so Swaran's host "came on; as meets a rock a thousand waves, "so Inisfail met Swaran. Death raises all his "voices around, and mixes with the sound of "shields.—The field echoes from wing to wing, "as a hundred hammers that rise by turns on

° Iliad, xiv. 393.

"the red son of the furnace."—"As a hundred "winds on Morven; as the streams of a hun- "dred hills; as clouds fly successive over hea- "ven; or as the dark ocean assaults the shore "of the desert; so roaring, so vast, so terrible, "the armies mixed on Lena's echoing heath." In several of these images there is a remarkable similarity to Homer's; but what follows is superior to any comparison that Homer uses on this subject. "The groan of the people spread over "the hills; it was like the thunder of night, "when the cloud bursts on Cona; and a thou- "sand ghosts shriek at once on the hollow "wind." Never was an image of more awful sublimity employed to heighten the terror of battle.

Both poets compare the appearance of an army approaching, to the gathering of dark clouds. "As when a shepherd," says Homer, "beholds from the rock a cloud borne along "the sea by the western wind; black as pitch "it appears from afar sailing over the ocean, "and carrying the dreadful storm. He shrinks "at the sight, and drives his flock into the "cave: Such, under the Ajaces, moved on, the "dark, the thickened phalanx to the [p] war."— "They came," says Ossian, "over the desert

[p] Iliad, iv. 275.

"like stormy clouds, when the winds roll them "over the heath; their edges are tinged with "lightning; and the echoing groves foresee the "storm." The edges of the cloud tinged with lightning, is a sublime idea; but the shepherd and his flock, render Homer's simile more picturesque. This is frequently the difference between the two poets. Ossian gives no more than the main image, strong and full. Homer adds circumstances and appendages, which amuse the fancy by enlivening the scenery.

Homer compares the regular appearance of an army, to "clouds that are settled on the "mountain-top, in the day of calmness, when "the strength of the north wind sleeps."[q] Ossian, with full as much propriety, compares the appearance of a disordered army, to "the moun-"tain cloud, when the blast hath entered its "womb; and scatters the curling gloom on "every side." Ossian's clouds assume a great many forms; and, as we might expect from his climate, are a fertile source of imagery to him. "The warriors followed their chiefs, like the "gathering of the rainy clouds, behind the "red meteors of heaven." An army retreating without coming to action, is likened to "clouds, "that having long threatened rain, retire slowly

[q] Iliad, v. 522.

" behind the hills." The picture of Oithona, after she had determined to die, is lively and delicate. " Her soul was resolved, and the tear " was dried from her wildly-looking eye. A " troubled joy rose on her mind, like the red " path of the lightning on a stormy cloud." The image also of the gloomy Cairbar, meditating, in silence, the assassination of Oscar, until the moment came when his designs were ripe for execution, is extremely noble, and complete in all its parts. " Cairbar heard their " words in silence, like the cloud of a shower; " it stands dark on Cromla, till the lightning " bursts its side. The valley gleams with red " light; the spirits of the storm rejoice. So " stood the silent king of Temora; at length " his words are heard."

Homer's comparison of Achilles to the Dog-Star, is very sublime. " Priam beheld him " rushing along the plain, shining in his ar- " mour, like the star of autumn, bright are its " beams, distinguished amongst the multitude " of stars in the dark hour of night. It rises in " its splendor; but its splendor is fatal; be- " tokening to miserable men, the destroying " heat."[r] The first appearance of Fingal, is, in like manner, compared by Ossian, to a star

[r] Iliad, xxii. 26.

or meteor. "Fingal, tall in his ship, stretched "his bright lance before him. Terrible was "the gleam of his steel; it was like the green "meteor of death, setting in the heath of Mal-"mor, when the traveller is alone, and the "broad moon is darkened in heaven." The hero's appearance in Homer is more magnificent; in Ossian, more terrible.

A tree cut down, or overthrown by a storm, is a similitude frequent among poets for describing the fall of a warrior in battle. Homer employs it often. But the most beautiful, by far, of his comparisons, founded on this object, indeed one of the most beautiful in the whole Iliad, is that on the death of Euphorbus. "As "the young and verdant olive, which a man "hath reared with care in a lonely field, where "the springs of water bubble around it; it is "fair and flourishing; it is fanned by the breath "of all the winds, and loaded with white blos-"soms; when the sudden blast of a whirlwind "descending, roots it out from its bed, and "stretches it on the dust."[s] To this, elegant as it is, we may oppose the following simile of Ossian's, relating to the death of the three sons of Usnoth. "They fell, like three young oaks "which stood alone on the hill. The traveller

[s] Iliad, xvii. 53.

" saw the lovely trees, and wondered how they " grew so lonely. The blast of the desert came " by night, and laid their green heads low. " Next day he returned; but they were wi- " thered, and the heath was bare." Malvina's allusion to the same object, in her lamentation over Oscar, is so exquisitely tender, that I cannot forbear giving it a place also. " I was a " lovely tree in thy presence, Oscar! with all " my branches round me. But thy death came, " like a blast from the desert, and laid my " green head low. The spring returned with " its showers; but no leaf of mine arose." Several of Ossian's similes taken from trees, are remarkably beautiful, and diversified with well chosen circumstances; such as that upon the death of Ryno and Orla: " They have fallen " like the oak of the desert; when it lies across " a stream, and withers in the wind of the " mountains:" Or that which Ossian applies to himself; " I, like an ancient oak in Morven, " moulder alone in my place; the blast hath " lopped my branches away; and I tremble at " the wings of the north."

As Homer exalts his heroes by comparing them to gods, Ossian makes the same use of comparisons taken from spirits and ghosts. Swaran " roared in battle, like the shrill spirit of a " storm that sits dim on the clouds of Gormal,

"and enjoys the death of the mariner." His people gathered around Erragon, "like storms "around the ghost of night, when he calls "them from the top of Morven, and prepares "to pour them on the land of the stranger."— "They fell before my son, like groves in the "desert, when an angry ghost rushes through "night, and takes their green heads in his "hand." In such images Ossian appears in his strength; for very seldom have supernatural beings been painted with so much sublimity, and such force of imagination, as by this poet. Even Homer, great as he is, must yield to him in similes formed upon these. Take, for instance, the following, which is the most remarkable of this kind in the Iliad. "Meriones "followed Idomeneus to battle, like Mars the "destroyer of men, when he rushes to war. "Terror, his beloved son, strong and fierce, at- "tends him; who fills with dismay the most "valiant hero. They come from Thrace, armed "against the Ephyrians and Phlegyans; nor do "they regard the prayers of either; but dispose "of success at their will."[t] The idea here, is undoubtedly noble: but observe what a figure Ossian sets before the astonished imagination, and with what sublimely terrible circumstances

[t] Iliad, xiii. 298.

he has heightened it. "He rushed in the sound "of his arms, like the dreadful spirit of Loda, "when he comes in the roar of a thousand "storms, and scatters battles from his eyes. "He sits on a cloud over Lochlin's seas. His "mighty hand is on his sword. The winds lift "his flaming locks. So terrible was Cuthullin "in the day of his fame."

Homer's comparisons relate chiefly to martial subjects, to the appearances and motions of armies, the engagement and death of heroes, and the various incidents of war. In Ossian, we find a greater variety of other subjects illustrated by similes; particularly, the songs of bards, the beauty of women, the different circumstances of old age, sorrow, and private distress; which give occasion to much beautiful imagery. What, for instance, can be more delicate and moving, than the following simile of Oithona's, in her lamentation over the dishonour she had suffered? "Chief of Strumon," replied the sighing maid, "why didst thou come "over the dark-blue wave to Nuath's mournful "daughter? Why did not I pass away in secret, "like the flower of the rock, that lifts its fair "head unseen, and strews its withered leaves "on the blast?" The music of bards, a favourite object with Ossian, is illustated by a variety of the most beautiful appearances that are to be

found in nature. It is compared to the calm shower of spring; to the dews of the morning on the hill of roes; to the face of the blue and still lake. Two similes on this subject, I shall quote, because they would do honour to any of the most celebrated classics. The one is; "Sit "thou on the heath, O bard! and let us hear "thy voice; it is pleasant as the gale of the "spring that sighs on the hunter's ear, when "he wakens from dreams of joy, and has heard "the music of the spirits of the hill." The other contains a short, but exquisitely tender image, accompanied with the finest poetical painting. "The music of Carril was like the "memory of joys that are past, pleasant and "mournful to the soul. The ghosts of de-"parted bards heard it from Slimora's side. "Soft sounds spread along the wood; and the "silent valleys of night rejoice." What a figure would such imagery and such scenery have made, had they been presented to us, adorned with the sweetness and harmony of the Virgilian numbers!

I have chosen all along to compare Ossian with Homer, rather than Virgil, for an obvious reason. There is a much nearer correspondence between the times and manners of the two former poets. Both wrote in an early period of society; both are originals; both are

distinguished by simplicity, sublimity, and fire. The correct elegance of Virgil, his artful imitation of Homer, the Roman stateliness which he every where maintains, admit no parallel with the abrupt boldness, and enthusiastic warmth of the Celtic bard. In one article indeed there is a resemblance. Virgil is more tender than Homer; and thereby agrees more with Ossian; with this difference, that the feelings of the one are more gentle and polished, those of the other more strong; the tenderness of Virgil softens, that of Ossian dissolves and overcomes the heart.

A resemblance may be sometimes observed between Ossian's comparisons, and those employed by the sacred writers. They abound much in this figure, and they use it with the utmost propriety.[u] The imagery of Scripture exhibits a soil and climate altogether different from those of Ossian; a warmer country, a more smiling face of nature, the arts of agriculture and of rural life much farther advanced. The wine-press, and the threshing-floor, are often presented to us, the cedar and the palm tree, the fragrance of perfumes, the voice of the turtle, and the beds of lilies. The similes are, like Ossian's, generally short, touching on one point

[u] See Dr. Lowth de Sacra Poësi Hebræorum.

of resemblance, rather than spread out into little episodes. In the following example may be perceived what inexpressible grandeur poetry receives from the intervention of the Deity. "The nations shall rush like the rushings of "many waters; but God shall rebuke them, "and they shall fly far off, and shall be chased "as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, "and like the down of the thistle before the "whirlwind."[x]

Besides formal comparisons, the poetry of Ossian is embellished with many beautiful metaphors: such as that remarkably fine one applied to Deugala; "She was covered with the "light of beauty; but her heart was the house "of pride." This mode of expression, which suppresses the mark of comparison, and substitutes a figured description in room of the object described, is a great enlivener of style. It denotes that glow and rapidity of fancy, which, without pausing to form a regular simile, paints the object at one stroke. "Thou art to me the "beam of the east, rising in a land unknown." "In peace, thou art the gale of spring; in war, "the mountain storm." "Pleasant be thy rest, "O lovely beam, soon hast thou set on our "hills! The steps of thy departure were stately,

[x] Isaiah xvii. 13.

" like the moon on the blue trembling wave. " But thou hast left us in darkness, first of the " maids of Lutha!—Soon hast thou set, Mal- " vina! but thou risest, like the beam of the " east, among the spirits of thy friends, where " they sit in their stormy halls, the chambers " of the thunder." This is correct, and finely supported. But in the following instance, the metaphor, though very beautiful at the beginning, becomes imperfect before it closes, by being improperly mixed with the literal sense. " Trathal went forth with the stream of his " people; but they met a rock; Fingal stood " unmoved; broken they rolled back from his " side. Nor did they roll in safety; the spear " of the king pursued their flight."

The hyperbole is a figure which we might expect to find often employed by Ossian; as the undisciplined imagination of early ages generally prompts exaggeration, and carries its objects to excess; whereas longer experience, and farther progress in the arts of life, chasten men's ideas and expressions. Yet Ossian's hyperboles appear not to me, either so frequent or so harsh as might at first have been looked for; an advantage owing, no doubt, to the more cultivated state, in which, as was before shewn, poetry subsisted among the ancient Celtæ, than among most other barbarous nations. One of

the most exaggerated descriptions in the whole work, is what meets us at the beginning of Fingal, where the scout makes his report to Cuthullin of the landing of the foe. But this is so far from deserving censure, that it merits praise, as being, on that occasion, natural and proper. The scout arrives, trembling and full of fears; and it is well known, that no passion disposes men to hyperbolize more than terror. It both annihilates themselves in their own apprehension, and magnifies every object which they view through the medium of a troubled imagination. Hence all those indistinct images of formidable greatness, the natural marks of a disturbed and confused mind, which occur in Moran's description of Swaran's appearance, and in his relation of the conference which they held together; not unlike the report, which the affrighted Jewish spies made to their leader of the land of Canaan. "The land through which "we have gone to search it, is a land that "eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the "people that we saw in it, are men of a great "stature: and there saw we giants, the sons of "Anak, which come of the giants; and we were "in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so were "we in their sight."[y]

[y] Numbers, xiii. 32, 33.

With regard to personifications, I formerly observed that Ossian was sparing, and I accounted for his being so. Allegorical personages he has none; and their absence is not to be regretted. For the intermixture of those shadowy beings, which have not the support even of mythological or legendary belief, with human actors, seldom produces a good effect. The fiction becomes too visible and phantastic; and overthrows that impression of reality, which the probable recital of human actions is calculated to make upon the mind. In the serious and pathetic scenes of Ossian especially, allegorical characters would have been as much out of place, as in tragedy; serving only unseasonably to amuse the fancy, whilst they stopped the current, and weakened the force of passion.

With apostrophes, or addresses to persons absent or dead, which have been, in all ages, the language of passion, our poet abounds; and they are among the highest beauties. Witness the apostrophe, in the first book of Fingal, to the maid of Inistore, whose lover had fallen in battle; and that inimitably fine one of Cuthullin to Bragela at the conclusion of the same book. He commands the harp to be struck in her praise; and the mention of Bragela's name, immediately suggesting to him a crowd of tender ideas; " Dost thou raise thy fair face from the

" rocks," he exclaims, " to find the sails of Cu-
" thullin? The sea is rolling far distant, and its
" white foam shall deceive thee for my sails."
And now his imagination being wrought up to conceive her as, at that moment, really in this situation, he becomes afraid of the harm she may receive from the inclemency of the night; and with an enthusiasm, happy and affecting, though beyond the cautious strain of modern poetry, " Retire," he proceeds, " retire, for it is
" night, my love, and the dark winds sigh in
" thy hair. Retire to the hall of my feasts, and
" think of the times that are past; for I will
" not return till the storm of war has ceased.
" O Connal, speak of wars and arms, and send
" her from my mind; for lovely with her raven
" hair is the white-bosomed daughter of Sorg-
" lan." This breathes all the native spirit of passion and tenderness.

The addresses to the sun, to the moon, and to the evening star, must draw the attention of every reader of taste, as among the most splendid ornaments of this collection. The beauties of each are too great, and too obvious, to need any particular comment. In one passage only of the address to the moon, there appears some obscurity. " Whither dost thou retire from thy
" course, when the darkness of thy countenance
" grows? Hast thou thy hall like Ossian? Dwel-

"lest thou in the shadow of grief? Have thy "sisters fallen from heaven? Are they who re- "joiced with thee at night, no more? Yes, they "have fallen, fair light! and thou dost often "retire to mourn." We may be at a loss to comprehend, at first view, the ground of these speculations of Ossian, concerning the moon; but when all the circumstances are attended to, they will appear to flow naturally from the present situation of his mind. A mind under the dominion of any strong passion, tinctures with its own disposition, every object which it beholds. The old bard, with his heart bleeding for the loss of all his friends, is meditating on the different phases of the moon. Her waning and darkness, present to his melancholy imagination, the image of sorrow; and presently the idea arises, and is indulged, that, like himself, she retires to mourn over the loss of other moons, or of stars, whom he calls her sisters, and fancies to have once rejoiced with her at night, now fallen from heaven. Darkness suggested the idea of mourning, and mourning suggested nothing so naturally to Ossian, as the death of beloved friends. An instance precisely similar of this influence of passion, may be seen in a passage which has always been admired of Shakspeare's King Lear. The old man, on the point of distraction, through the inhumanity of

his daughters, sees Edgar appear disguised like a beggar and a madman.

Lear. Didst thou give all to thy daughters? And art thou come to this?
Couldest thou leave nothing? Didst thou give them all?
Kent. He hath no daughters, Sir.
Lear. Death, traitor! nothing could have subdued nature
To such a lowness, but his unkind daughters.
KING LEAR, Act iii. Scene 5.

The apostrophe to the winds, in the opening of Darthula, is in the highest spirit of poetry. "But the winds deceive thee, O Darthula: and "deny the woody Etha to thy sails. These are "not thy mountains, Nathos, nor is that the "roar of thy climbing waves. The halls of "Cairbar are near, and the towers of the foe "lift their head.—Where have ye been, ye "southern winds; when the sons of my love "were deceived? But ye have been sporting "on plains, and pursuing the thistle's beard. "O that ye had been rustling in the sails of "Nathos, till the hills of Etha rose! till they "rose in their clouds, and saw their coming "chief." This passage is remarkable for the resemblance it bears to an expostulation with the wood nymphs, on their absence at a critical time; which, as a favourite poetical idea, Virgil

has copied from Theocritus, and Milton has very happily imitated from both.

Where were ye, nymphs! when the remorseless deep
Clos'd o'er the head of your lov'd Lycidas?
For neither were ye playing on the steep
Where your old bards, the famous Druids, lie;
Nor on the shaggy top of Mona, high,
Nor yet where Deva spreads her wizard stream. [z]

Having now treated fully of Ossian's talents, with respect to description and imagery, it only remains to make some observations on his sentiments. No sentiments can be beautiful without being proper; that is, suited to the character and situation of those who utter them. In this respect, Ossian is as correct as most writers. His characters, as above observed, are in general well supported; which could not have been the case, had the sentiments been unnatural or out of place. A variety of personages of different ages, sexes, and conditions, are introduced into his poems; and they speak and act with a propriety of sentiment and behaviour, which it is surprising to find in so rude an age.

[z] Milton's Lycidas. See Theocrit. Idyll. I.

Πα ποκ' αρ ἠσθ' ὀκα Λαφνις ἐτακετο; πᾶ πωκα,
Νυμφαι, &c.

And Virgil, Eclogue 10.

Quæ nemora, aut qui vos saltus habuere, puellæ, &c.

Let the poem of Darthula, throughout, be taken as an example.

But it is not enough that sentiments be natural and proper. In order to acquire any high degree of poetical merit, they must also be sublime and pathetic.

The sublime is not confined to sentiment alone. It belongs to description also; and whether in description or in sentiment, imports such ideas presented to the mind, as to raise it to an uncommon degree of elevation, and fill it with admiration and astonishment. This is the highest effect either of eloquence or poety; and to produce this effect requires a genius glowing with the strongest and warmest conception of some object awful, great, or magnificent. That this character of genius belongs to Ossian, may, I think, sufficiently appear from many of the passages I have already had occasion to quote. To produce more instances were superfluous. If the engagement of Fingal with the spirit of Loda, in Carric-thura; if the encounters of the armies, in Fingal; if the address to the sun, in Carthon; if the similes founded upon ghosts and spirits of the night; all formerly mentioned; be not admitted as examples, and illustrious ones too, of the true poetical sublime, I confess myself entirely ignorant of this quality in writing.

All the circumstances, indeed, of Ossian's composition, are favourable to the sublime, more perhaps than to any other species of beauty. Accuracy and correctness; artfully connected narration; exact method and proportion of parts; we may look for in polished times. The gay and the beautiful will appear to more advantage in the midst of smiling scenery and pleasurable themes; but, amidst the rude scenes of nature, amidst rocks and torrents and whirlwinds and battles, dwells the sublime. It is the thunder and the lightning of genius. It is the offspring of nature, not of art. It is negligent of all the lesser graces, and perfectly consistent with a certain noble disorder. It associates naturally with that grave and solemn spirit which distinguishes our author. For the sublime is an awful and serious emotion; and is heightened by all the images of Trouble, and Terror, and Darkness.

> Ipse pater, media nimborum in nocte, coruscâ
> Fulmina molitur dextrâ; quo maxima motu
> Terra tremit; fugere feræ; et mortalia corda
> Per gentes, humilis stravit pavor; ille, flagranti
> Aut Atho, aut Rhodopen, aut alta Ceraunia telo
> Dejicit.—— VIRG. Georg. I.

Simplicity and conciseness, are never-failing characteristics of the style of a sublime writer. He rests on the majesty of his sentiments, not

on the pomp of his expressions. The main secret of being sublime is, to say great things in few, and in plain words: for every superfluous decoration degrades a sublime idea. The mind rises and swells, when a lofty description or sentiment is presented to it, in its native form. But no sooner does the poet attempt to spread out this sentiment or description, and to deck it round and round with glittering ornaments, than the mind begins to fall from its high elevation; the transport is over; the beautiful may remain, but the sublime is gone. Hence the concise and simple style of Ossian gives great advantage to his sublime conceptions; and assists them in seizing the imagination with full power. [a]

[a] The noted saying of Julius Cæsar, to the pilot in a storm: "Quid times? Cæsarem vehis;" is magnanimous and sublime. Lucan, not satisfied with this simple conciseness, resolved to amplify and improve the thought. Observe, how every time he twists it round, it departs farther from the sublime, till, at last, it ends in tumid declamation.

Sperne minas, inquit, Pelagi, ventoque furenti
Trade sinum. Italiam, si cœlo auctore, recusas,
Me, pete. Sola tibi causa hæc est justa timoris
Vectorem non nosse tuum; quem numina nunquam
Destituunt; de quo male tunc fortuna meretur,
Cum post vota venit; medias perrumpe procellas
Tutelâ secure meâ. Cœli iste fretique,
Non puppis nostræ, labor est. Hanc Cæsare pressam

Sublimity as belonging to sentiment, coincides in a great measure with magnanimity, heroism, and generosity of sentiment. Whatever discovers human nature in its greatest elevation; whatever bespeaks a high effort of soul; or shews a mind superior to pleasures, to dangers, and to death; forms what may be called the moral or sentimental sublime. For this Ossian is eminently distinguished. No poet maintains a higher tone of virtuous and noble sentiment throughout all his works. Particularly in all the sentiments of Fingal there is a grandeur and loftiness proper to swell the mind with the highest ideas of human perfection. Wherever he appears, we behold the hero. The objects which he pursues are always truly great; to bend the proud; to protect the injured; to defend his friends; to overcome his enemies by generosity more than by force. A portion of the same spirit actuates all the other heroes. Valour reigns; but it is a generous valour, void of cruelty, animated by honour, not by hatred. We behold no debasing passions among Fingal's warriors; no spirit of avarice or of insult; but a perpetual contention for fame; a desire of

A fluctu defendit onus.
——Quid tantâ strage paratur,
Ignoras? Quærit pelagi cœlique tumultu
Quid præstet fortuna mihi.—— PHARSAL. V. 578.

being distinguished and remembered for gallant actions; a love of justice; and a zealous attachment to their friends and their country. Such is the strain of sentiment in the works of Ossian.

But the sublimity of moral sentiments, if they wanted the softening of the tender, would be in hazard of giving a hard and stiff air to poetry. It is not enough to admire. Admiration is a cold feeling, in comparison of that deep interest which the heart takes in tender and pathetic scenes; where, by a mysterious attachment to the objects of compassion, we are pleased and delighted, even whilst we mourn. With scenes of this kind Ossian abounds; and his high merit in these is incontestible. He may be blamed for drawing tears too often from our eyes; but that he has the power of commanding them, I believe no man, who has the least sensibility, will question. The general character of his poetry, is the heroic mixed with the elegiac strain; admiration tempered with pity. Ever fond of giving, as he expresses it, "the "joy of grief," it is visible, that on all moving subjects, he delights to exert his genius; and accordingly, never were there finer pathetic situations, than what his works present. His great art in managing them lies in giving vent to the simple and natural emotions of the heart.

We meet with no exaggerated declamation; no subtile refinements on sorrow; no substitution of description in place of passion. Ossian felt strongly himself; and the heart, when uttering its native language, never fails, by powerful sympathy, to affect the heart. A great variety of examples might be produced. We need only open the book to find them every where. What, for instance, can be more moving than the lamentations of Oithona, after her misfortune? Gaul, the son of Morni, her lover, ignorant of what she had suffered, comes to her rescue. Their meeting is tender in the highest degree. He proposes to engage her foe, in single combat, and gives her in charge what she is to do, if he himself shall fall. "And shall "the daughter of Nuäth live?" she replied, with a bursting sigh. "Shall I live in Tromathon, "and the son of Morni low? My heart is not "of that rock; nor my soul careless as that sea, "which lifts its blue waves to every wind, and "rolls beneath the storm. The blast, which "shall lay thee low, shall spread the branches "of Oithona on earth. We shall wither toge-"ther, son of car-borne Morni! The narrow "house is pleasant to me, and the grey stone "of the dead; for never more will I leave thy "rocks, sea-surrounded Tromathon!—Chief of "Strumon, why camest thou over the waves to

"Nuäth's mournful daughter? Why did not I "pass away in secret, like the flower of the "rock, that lifts its fair head unseen, and strews "its withered leaves on the blast? Why didst "thou come, O Gaul! to hear my departing "sigh?—O had I dwelt at Duvranna, in the "bright beams of my fame! Then had my years "come on with joy; and the virgins would bless "my steps. But I fall in youth, son of Morni, "and my father shall blush in his hall."

Oithona mourns like a woman; in Cuthullin's expressions of grief after his defeat, we behold the sentiments of a hero, generous but desponding. The situation is remarkably fine. Cuthullin, roused from his cave, by the noise of battle, sees Fingal victorious in the field. He is described as kindling at the sight. "His "hand is on the sword of his fathers; his red-"rolling eyes on the foe. He thrice attempted "to rush to battle; and thrice did Connal stop "him;" suggesting that Fingal was routing the foe; and that he ought not, by the shew of superfluous aid, to deprive the king of any part of the honour of a victory, which was owing to him alone. Cuthullin yields to this generous sentiment; but we see it stinging him to the heart with the sense of his own disgrace. "Then, Carril, go," replied the chief, "and "greet the king of Morven. When Lochlin

" falls away like a stream after rain, and the " noise of the battle is over, then be thy voice " sweet in his ear, to praise the king of swords. " Give him the sword of Caithbat; for Cuthul- " lin is worthy no more to lift the arms of his " fathers. But, O ye ghosts of the lonely " Cromla! Ye souls of chiefs that are no more! " Be ye the companions of Cuthullin, and talk " to him in the cave of his sorrow. For never " more shall I be renowned among the mighty " in the land. I am like a beam that has " shone: like a mist that has fled away; when " the blast of the morning came, and bright- " ened the shaggy side of the hill. Connal! " talk of arms no more: departed is my fame. " My sighs shall be on Cromla's wind; till my " footsteps cease to be seen. And thou, white- " bosomed Bragela! mourn over the fall of my " fame; for vanquished, I will never return to " thee, thou sun-beam of Dun-scaich!"

——— Æstuat ingens
Uno in corde pudor, luctusque, et conscia virtus.

Besides such extended pathetic scenes, Ossian frequently pierces the heart by a single unexpected stroke. When Oscar fell in battle, " No father mourned his son slain in youth; " no brother, his brother of love; they fell with- " out tears, for the chief of the people was low."

In the admirable interview of Hector with Andromache, in the sixth Iliad, the circumstance of the child in his nurse's arms, has often been remarked, as adding much to the tenderness of the scene. In the following passage relating to the death of Cuthullin, we find a circumstance that must strike the imagination with still greater force. "And is the son of Semo "fallen?" said Carril with a sigh. "Mournful "are Tura's walls, and sorrow dwells at Dun-"scaich. Thy spouse is left alone in her youth; "the son of thy love is alone. He shall come "to Bragela, and ask her why she weeps. He "shall lift his eyes to the wall, and see his fa-"ther's sword. Whose sword is that? he will "say; and the soul of his mother is sad." Soon after Fingal had shewn all the grief of a father's heart for Ryno, one of his sons fallen in battle, he is calling, after his accustomed manner, his sons to the chase. "Call," says he, "Fillan and "Ryno—But he is not here—My son rests on "the bed of death." This unexpected start of anguish is worthy of the highest tragic poet.

> If she come in, she'll sure speak to my wife—
> My wife!—my wife—What wife?—I have no wife—
> Oh, insupportable! Oh, heavy hour!
>
> OTHELLO, Act v. Scene 7.

The contrivance of the incident in both poets is similar; but the circumstances are va-

ried with judgment. Othello dwells upon the name of wife, when it had fallen from him, with the confusion and horror of one tortured with guilt. Fingal, with the dignity of a hero, corrects himself, and suppresses his rising grief.

The contrast which Ossian frequently makes between his present and his former state, diffuses over his whole poetry, a solemn pathetic air, which cannot fail to make impression on every heart. The conclusion of the songs of Selma is particularly calculated for this purpose. Nothing can be more poetical and tender, or can leave upon the mind a stronger and more affecting idea of the venerable aged bard. "Such "were the words of the bards in the days of "the song; when the king heard the music "of harps, and the tales of other times. The "chiefs gathered from all their hills, and heard "the lovely sound. They praised the voice of "Cona;[b] the first among a thousand bards. "But age is now on my tongue, and my soul "has failed. I hear, sometimes, the ghosts of "bards, and learn their pleasant song. But "memory fails on my mind; I hear the call of "years. They say, as they pass along, Why "does Ossian sing? Soon shall he lie in the "narrow house, and no bard shall raise his

[b] Ossian himself is poetically called the voice of Cona.

" fame. Roll on, ye dark-brown years! for ye " bring no joy in your course. Let the tomb " open to Ossian, for his strength has failed. " The sons of the song are gone to rest. My " voice remains like a blast that roars lonely on " a sea-surrounded rock, after the winds are " laid. The dark moss whistles there, and the " distant mariner sees the waving trees."

Upon the whole; if to feel strongly, and to describe naturally, be the two chief ingredients in poetical genius, Ossian must, after fair examination, be held to possess that genius in a high degree. The question is not, whether a few improprieties may be pointed out in his works; whether this or that passage might not have been worked up with more art and skill, by some writer of happier times? A thousand such cold and frivolous criticisms, are altogether indecisive as to his genuine merit. But, has he the spirit, the fire, the inspiration, of a poet? Does he utter the voice of nature? Does he elevate by his sentiments? Does he interest by his descriptions? Does he paint to the heart as well as to the fancy? Does he make his readers glow, and tremble, and weep? These are the great characteristics of true poetry. Where these are found, he must be a minute critic indeed, who can dwell upon slight defects. A few beauties of this high kind, transcend whole

volumes of faultless mediocrity. Uncouth and abrupt Ossian may sometimes appear by reason of his conciseness. But he is sublime, he is pathetic, in an eminent degree. If he has not the extensive knowledge, the regular dignity of narration, the fulness and accuracy of description, which we find in Homer and Virgil, yet in strength of imagination, in grandeur of sentiment, in native majesty of passion, he is fully their equal. If he flows not always like a clear stream, yet he breaks forth often like a torrent of fire. Of art too, he is far from being destitute; and his imagination is remarkable for delicacy as well as strength. Seldom or never is he either trifling or tedious; and if he be thought too melancholy, yet he is always moral. Though his merit were in other respects much less than it is, this alone ought to entitle him to high regard, that his writings are remarkably favourable to virtue. They awake the tenderest sympathies, and inspire the most generous emotions. No reader can rise from him without being warmed with the sentiments of humanity, virtue, and honour.

Though unacquainted with the original language, there is no one but must judge the translation to deserve the highest praise, on account of its beauty and elegance. Of its faithfulness and accuracy, I have been assured by persons

skilled in the Galic tongue, who, from their youth, were acquainted with many of these poems of Ossian. To transfuse such spirited and fervid ideas from one language into another; to translate literally, and yet with such a glow of poetry; to keep alive so much passion, and support so much dignity throughout, is one of the most difficult works of genius, and proves the translator to have been animated with no small portion of Ossian's spirit.

The measured prose which he has employed, possesses considerable advantages above any sort of versification he could have chosen. Whilst it pleases and fills the ear with a variety of harmonious cadences, being, at the same time, freer from constraint in the choice and arrangement of words, it allows the spirit of the original to be exhibited with more justness, force, and simplicity. Elegant, however, and masterly as Mr. Macpherson's translation is, we must never forget, whilst we read it, that we are putting the merit of the original to a severe test. For, we are examining a poet stripped of his native dress; divested of the harmony of his own numbers. We know how much grace and energy the works of the Greek and Latin poets receive from the charm of versification in their original languages. If then, destitute of this advantage, exhibited in a literal version, Ossian

still has power to please as a poet; and not to please only, but often to command, to transport, to melt the heart; we may very safely infer, that his productions are the offspring of true and uncommon genius; and we may boldly assign him a place among those whose works are to last for ages.