OSSIAN – ARCHAEOLOGICAL MEMORY

Project: Borderlands – [Link]

Toscar: I shall sit in my cave in the field of the sun. The blast will rustle in my trees, and I shall think it is the voice of Culhona.

POEMS

OF

OSSIAN,

THE

SON OF FINGAL.

TRANSLATED

By JAMES MACPHERSON, Esq;

A NEW EDITION,

CAREFULLY CORRECTED, AND GREATLY IMPROVED.

WE MAY BOLDLY ASSIGN OSSIAN A PLACE AMONG THOSE WHOSE WORKS ARE TO LAST FOR AGES. BLAIR.

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Culhona: What cloud is that? It carries the ghosts of my fathers.

Howick, Northumberland UK, vista from Cullernose Point.
Locale, genius loci, weather, voices on the wind, the return of the past: these are figurative components of the archaeological imagination in Macpherson's extraordinary restoration (it was actually fake fabrication) in the 1760s of a lost medieval epic poem, *Ossian* (he claimed to have found long lost manuscripts recording the words of a forgotten bard).

memory, voice, ruin

I am fascinated by these archaeological temporalities. *Actuality* is the past-in-the-present, revenant times – Ossian returns. *Kairos* is the grasping of the moment, the connection between past-present as it flashes up in a moment of realization, of memory, of opportunity – Macpherson restores the voice of Ossian. *Kairos* is also weather – changing ambience, atmosphere, now-ness.

Alain (Schnapp) recently visited my studio/lab and we talked about his great project, now complete and in press, a *Universal History of Ruins*. These vocal fragments, poetic fragments of Ossian, are indeed ruins, but immateriality turned into script. They are an interplay of oral tradition and inscription, writing down and recording what has passed down through memory.

Transmitted voice to memory. Many antiquarians, after poets in antiquity, considered such transmission more robust that any material remains, precisely because the transmission is immaterial, human, frail and evanescent. What an extraordinary irony!

Here is the frontispiece to Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 1765 (a copy of the first edition of this seminal work in European romanticism bought in San Francisco in 2005). In the midst of a ruined church and blasted tree, surrounded by wind-scattered screeds, we read *Opus Durat Vatum* – the work of poets (and *vatum* = prophets) survives.

RELIQUES

OF

ANCIENT ENGLISH POETRY:

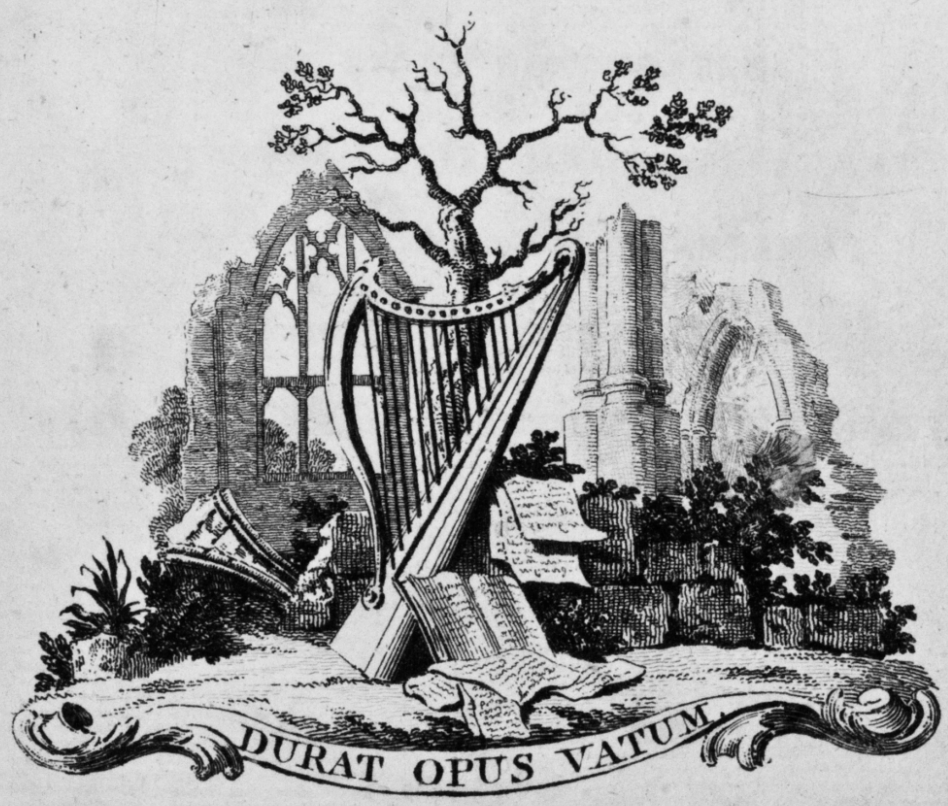
CONSISTING OF

Old Heroic BALLADS, SONGS, and other PIECES of our earlier POETS,

(Chiefly of the LYRIC kind.)

Together with ſome few of later Date.

VOLUME THE FIRST.



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