

STEEN STEENSEN BLICHER AND MACPHERSON'S OSSIAN

Harry D. Watson

In the early 1760s, according to one of his biographers, "James Macpherson descended from his native hills and exploded a mine in the midst of Europe".¹ With his "Fragments of Ancient Poetry" (1760), "Fingal" (1762) and "Temora" (1763) – known collectively as "The Poems of Ossian" – Macpherson ushered in a new era of European literature, and the roll-call of his early disciples is a resounding one. In Germany Goethe, Herder, Klopstock, Lessing, Schiller, Novalis, Bürger and Tieck were enthusiastic admirers; in France Chateaubriand, George Sand and Madame de Staël were equally smitten, and Lamartine wrote "The harp of Morven is the emblem of my soul." Across the Atlantic, even the Bard of Manhattan, Walt Whitman, was bitten by the Ossianic bug, and James Fenimore Cooper's Indians spoke the language of Ossianic rhetoric. Less well documented, at least in this country, is the decisive influence of Macpherson's work on the literary career of his Danish translator, the Jutland clergyman Steen Steensen Blicher (1782–1848), "one of the best loved of Danish poets and a writer near to the heart of Denmark."² In this article I should like to examine several of Blicher's short stories, with a view to highlighting this influence and clarifying the indebtedness of a great Scandinavian writer to his controversial Scottish predecessor.

Blicher's early life seems to have been marked by unhappiness and domestic tragedy. His mother succumbed to mental illness when he was barely ten, and, as Johannes Nørvig explains: ". . . fra da af opfattede han sin første Barndom som et Glimt af Paradis han aldrig mere skulde opnaa paa Jorden."³ At the age of fourteen, he is known to have fallen precociously and hopelessly in love with a newly-married girl of sixteen, and this experience, together with the fact of his later wife's unfaithfulness, must go some way towards explaining his sombrely pessimistic attitude to the attainability of human happiness.

In early manhood, while pursuing his rather lacklustre studies for the priesthood, Blicher became seriously ill with what now appears to have been rheumatic fever, and it was precisely at this impressionable stage of his life that Macpherson's "Ossian" first fell into his hands. Here, in the tragic fates of Macpherson's pseudo-historical heroes and heroines, and the laments of the aged bard for the friends and loved ones who have gone, Blicher must have found a congenial artistic metaphor for his own spiritual condition. As the Introduction to the "Samlede Noveller" puts it: "Hvad Ossian har betydet for Blichers indre udvikling kan naeppe overdrives. . . . Her fik han den kraftige impuls til at besyngte det danske Skotland — blev bekraeftet i troen på Jylland og alt, hvad jysk var, som poetisk motiv."⁴

When he first broke into print, in 1807, it was as the author of the first Danish translation of "The Poems of Ossian", and if some respected critics had long suspected the genuineness of Macpherson's "translations", the preface to the Danish edition makes it abundantly clear that Blicher entertained no such doubts. After a lengthy rebuttal of the main charges levelled against Macpherson by the sceptics, Blicher continues: "Hvor var det vel mueligt, at et Nutids Menneske, han vaere nok saa meget Digter — kunne saa fuldkommen saette sig ind i en Tidsalders Aand, som han aldrig kjendte? . . . vedligeholdte denne Aand og dette Sprog uden en eneste Gang at falde tilbage til sit Modersmaal og sin egen Tankegang?"⁵

Modern criticism, of course, proceeds from the standpoint that Macpherson's heroes were all too obviously late eighteenth-century "men of feeling", but Blicher was obviously sincere in his partisanship. In his translation, he strove to emulate the archaicisms of his originals, particularly with regard to verbal forms; e.g. "Hvi *est* du bedrøvet?" (Kampen med Caros, 4); "*Est* du falden paa Caruns Bredder?" (op. cit., 5), and indeed he seems to have retained a life-long fondness for archaic modes of expression, as Nørvig makes clear: "Den gammeldags Sprogform i Ossians Digte har paavirket Blichers Sprog, der hele hans Liv igennem forblev mere foraeldet end hans samtidiges."⁶

According to Blicher himself, it was his discovery of "Ossian" which gave him the inspiration to become a creative writer. Moreover, the wild Highland moors in which Fingal and his compatriots played out their drama made him realise that his native Jutland could equally well serve as the backdrop for drama and tragedy. Nørvig suggests yet another reason for Blicher's identification with Jutland; the Jutlanders were traditionally portrayed as figures of fun in Danish literature, and Blicher to some degree suffered from an inferiority complex in relation to the cultivated literary circles of Copenhagen. But just as Macpherson and Walter Scott had brought fame to a despised and poverty-stricken Scotland, so he would give new dignity to the Jutland peasantry and their beautiful but austere landscape.

Did Blicher's temperament also predispose him to appreciate "Ossian"'s exotic romanticism? As Alexander Gillies makes clear in his monograph "Herder und Ossian", the literary climate in contemporary Europe was peculiarly favourable to works of this kind. Gillies describes the poet Herder as "aussergewöhnlich zärtlich, empfindlich und leicht beweglich"; he describes Herder's "Überempfindlichkeit für die leichtesten Eindrücke" and calls him "irrational und subjektivistisch"⁷ — a caricature, almost, of a Romantic poet. If Blicher was less obviously wild-eyed and Byronic, he was nevertheless a demonstrably sensitive and vulnerable human being, and at no point in his life did he ever come near to embodying stolid bourgeois values.

His first literary efforts were in not always very distinguished verse; it was only when the folk-tale collector J.M. Thiele invited him to contribute to a new collection of traditional tales that he discovered his true medium. Later still, when an Aarhus publisher named Elmquist started a new popular magazine and offered him five rigsdaler each for previously unpublished short stories, Blicher at last found the incentive to recast the raw material gathered on his wanderings over his beloved heath into original works of art. His first published short story — and probably the best-known to this day — was

"Brudstykker af en Landsbydegns Dagbog" (Fragments from the Journal of a Parish Clerk). The "heroine" of this tale is a thinly-disguised Marie Grubbe, the same nobleman's daughter whose scandalous and tragic life-story was to feature in J.P. Jacobsen's great novel of the same name. Here she is the unsuspecting object of the shy young Morten Vinge's adoration. Between the first and last entries in his diary, Morten ages from a fourteen-year-old boy to a disillusioned middle-aged man of fifty-nine, and there is ample scope in between for melancholic episodes and picturesque vignettes of country life. Here for example is Morten at his lowest ebb, going out into the world after the death of his beloved master: "Andengang — kanskee Sidstegang — siger jeg dig Farvel, mit kjaere Fødeland! Farvel du grønne Skov! du brune Hede! Farvel alle mine Ungdoms Glaeder! Lettere om Hjertet var jeg, da jeg for tvende Aar siden pløiede disse vilde Bølger: da havde jeg min gode Herre; nu er han i Graven, min Junker ligesaa, og hun — som jeg gjerne vilde glemme — drager om i den vide Verden, Gud veed hvor og hvorledes."⁸

Equally mournful passages can be found almost at random in "Ossian", as for instance when Alpin, in "The Songs of Selma", is bewailing the death of Morar, "first of mortal men": "Narrow is thy dwelling now! dark the place of thine abode! With three steps I compass the grave, O thou who wast so great before! Four stones, with their heads of moss, are the only memorial of thee. A tree with scarce a leaf, long grass, which whistles in the wind, mark to the hunter's eye the grave of the mighty Morar."⁹ The imagery here is typical of the work as a whole: the grave, the memorial stones, the moss, the tree, the whistling wind — all shot through with a profound sense of the tragic mutability of human affairs. To see what use Blicher made of the same basic material, we need only look at the "Dagbog" entry for 4th. July, 1745, when Morten after decades of mishaps and vicissitudes out in the wide world, comes back at last to his starting-point: "Flere end tredive Aar er jeg omtumlet paa Verdens vilde Hav, for at ende, hvor jeg begyndte. Hvad har jeg udrettet? hvad har jeg vundet? En Grav — et Hvilested hos mine Forfaedre. . . . Der staaer endnu Abilden

udenfor mit Vindue, den er ogsaa bleven aeldre, der er Kraeft i dens Stamme, Stormen har bøiet dens Hoved, og paa dens Grene groer Mosset ligesom graae Haar paa en Oldings Hoved. . . . Saaledes gjenkender jeg mangt et Traee, mangen en lynggroet Høj og selv de døde Stene, der staae her uforanderlige i Aartusinder, og see een slaegt efter den anden opvoxet og forgaet.”¹⁰

At the end of “Fingal”, Ossian breaks off his narrative to lament his lonely state: “I joined the bards, and sung of battles of the spear. Battles! where I often fought. Now I fight no more! The fame of my former deeds is ceased. I sit forlorn at the tombs of my friends.” No less “Ossianic” in tone, if somewhat less heroic, is this sentence from the last entry in Morten Vinge’s diary: “Her boer jeg nu i min Faders Huus; men jeg boer her allene. Alle mine Ungdomsvenner ere forlaengst gangne til Hvile; jeg er endnu tilbage, som et skaldet Traee paa Heden; men om føie Tid skal jeg samles til dem, og vaere den sidste af min Slaegt.”¹¹

In a later story, “*Ak! hvor forandret*” (Alas, how changed!), Blicher resorts to one of his favourite, and most typically Ossianic, themes — the narrator, revisiting with high expectations the place where once he found love and innocent happiness, learns the painful lesson that the past cannot be retrieved. In contrast to the “Dagbog”, this is a cheerful, even frivolous pastiche; five out of its six short chapters are devoted to the stock situation of the “townie” let loose in the countryside, with devastating effect. Our hero is a more debonair, light-hearted version of Morten Vinge, whose introduction to the fine art of duck-shooting, like his ineffectual wooing of the beautiful Maren Lammestrup, goes comically awry. Only in the final chapter does Blicher come up with a peg on which to hang his moral. The narrator, now twenty years older, is riding back to the North Jutland parsonage where those carefree days were spent. The nostalgia of this passage, if reminiscent of “Ossian”, is nevertheless tinged with irony: “Jeg red over den eng, på hvilken forundt hin mærkværdige batalje forefaldt. Høstakkerne stod der endnu som dengang, men de skønne amazoner

var borte."¹² At first, he does not recognise his old friend, and the truth begins to dawn on him: "Når man i en femtedel sekulum ikke har set en fordums ven, . . . da banker hjertet med en saelsom glad urolighed gensynets time i mode. Men man finder såre sjældent, hvad man venter, fordi man ikke forud belaver sig på tidens mægtige indvirkninger."¹³ With his first sight of the now middle-aged Maren, his disillusionment is complete: "Således kan tiden udslette, daempe, tilintetgøre skønhed, vid og munterhed, og hvad den måske kunne levne, det skal sikkerlig nok gå under i naeringssorg, tidens trofaste medarbejder",¹⁴ and he closes with the hackneyed Latin tag: "Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur cum illis".

In "*Hosekraemmeren*" (The Hosier), the contrast between past and present is far grimmer, and indeed this is one of the most tragic of all Blicher's stories. It opens with a lyrical evocation of the heath, which in its wild unemotional beauty contrasts starkly with the lives of its few inhabitants. Visiting a lonely farmhouse, the author/narrator is the involuntary witness to a fraught domestic situation. The farmer's beautiful daughter Cecil is in love with a young peddler of hosiery, Esben, who is about to set off on a business trip to Holstein. Her father disapproves of the match, and has another prospective husband in mind for her. Leaving the farmhouse, Blicher reflects: "Jeg gik atter ud i den menneske tomme og sorgløse hede;"¹⁵ and we are reminded that for Blicher, the landscape he could and did describe so naturalistically was also a place of symbolic significance — a place of refuge and solace from worldly cares, or a microcosm of the uncaring world, according to the demands of his narrative.

Six years later, he returns to find a drastically altered situation, and his expectations of finding a happy, reconciled family group are rudely shattered. The girl's mother unfolds the tragic tale. Cecil has gone mad with grief on being betrothed against her will to Esben's rival, and believes herself to be in Paradise, where Esben will shortly join her. However, when Esben finally returns from Germany, the reality of his presence in the flesh is too much for the crazed girl, and she cuts

his throat during the night, while he is asleep in bed. This terrible catharsis has the effect of restoring her sanity, although she is totally unaware of what she has done. Her parents keep the secret to themselves, and her father eventually dies of grief. Later still, her rejected suitor spitefully breaks the news of her crime to her, and she reverts to her former insanity, in which state the author finds her, singing over and over to herself the eerie refrain with which the story ends:

“Den største sorg i verden her
Er dog at miste den man har kaer.”¹⁶

If there is no direct parallel to this story in “Ossian”, there are at least similar incidents where star-crossed lovers are accidentally slain. A case in point occurs in Book 2 of “Fingal”, when Comal slays Galbina in the mistaken belief that she is his enemy: “He sunk upon her breast! The hunters found the hapless pair; he afterwards walked the hill. But many and silent were his steps round the dark dwelling of his love. . . . He searched for death along the field. . . . An arrow found his manly breast. He sleeps with his loved Galbina at the noise of the sounding surge! Their green tombs are seen by the mariner, when he bounds on the waves of the north.”¹⁷

Summary

This comparatively sketchy account of Blicher’s life and work necessarily does less than justice to his genius, concentrating as it does on the superficially rather melodramatic nature of his plots, and neglecting the subtlety and artistry of his writing. Nevertheless, the three stories I have singled out provide a good introduction to his philosophy and to the essential qualities and “feel” of his fiction. As for Macpherson, however harshly we judge his artistic integrity, and the literary merits or demerits of his works, there can be no doubt that “The Poems of Ossian” was the seminal influence on Blicher’s development as a writer, providing a constant source of inspiration from first to last. For that fact, if for nothing else, the affable Highland rogue deserves our gratitude.

References

1. J.S. Smart. *James Macpherson: An Episode in Literature*. (1905), 5.
2. P.M. Mitchell. *A History of Danish Literature*. (1957), 120.
3. Johannes Nørvig, intro. to *Brudstykker af en Landsbydegns Dagbog* (1944), X. "From then on, he perceived his earliest childhood as a glimpse of Paradise which he would never again attain on Earth."
4. H.P. Rohde, intro. to Steen Steensen Blicher. *Samlede Noveller* (1977), 8. "The influence of "Ossian" on Blicher's inner development can scarcely be exaggerated Here he received the powerful stimulus to celebrate in song the Danish "Scotland", and his faith in Jutland and everything pertaining to Jutland as a poetic motif was strengthened."
5. *Ossians Digte*, oversatte af S.S. Blicher (1809), Vol. 1, XXVI. "How could it be possible for a modern man, however much of a poet he might be, to enter so completely into the spirit of an age he has never known to maintain this spirit and this language without once reverting to his mother tongue and his own mode of thought?"
6. Nørvig, op. cit., XVII. "The old-fashioned form of language in "The Poems of Ossian" influenced Blicher's language, which throughout his life remained more archaic than that of his contemporaries."
7. Alexander Gillies. *Herder und Ossian*. (Berlin, 1933), 9.
8. *Brudstykker*, 24. "For the second, perhaps the last, time, I bid you farewell, my dear native land! Farewell, you green forest! You brown heath! Farewell all the joys of my youth! I was lighter of heart when two years ago I ploughed these wild waves: then I had my good master; now he is in the grave, and my young lord too, and she — she whom I would like to forget — is wandering around in the wide world, God knows where had how."
9. *The Poems of Ossian*, translated by James Macpherson, Esq. (1806), Vol. 2, 5.
10. *Brudstykker*, 29. "For more than thirty years I have been tossed around on the wild oceans of the world, (only) to

end where I began. What have I achieved? What have I won? A grave — a resting-place beside my forefathers. . . . The apple-tree still stands outside my window; it has also grown older, there is a canker in its trunk, the storms have bowed its head, and on its branches moss is growing, like the grey hair on an old man's head. . . . Thus I remember many a tree, many a heather-grown mound, and even the dead stones themselves, which have been standing here unchanged for centuries, and which have seen one generation after another grow up and perish."

11. Id., 31. "Now I am living here in my father's house; but I live here alone. All the friends of my youth have long since gone to rest. I remain yet, like a bare tree on the heath; but soon I shall be gathered to them, and be the last of my line."
12. *Samlede Noveller*, Vol. 5, 188. "I rode over the meadow where that remarkable battle had taken place of old. The haystacks were still there, as they had been that time, but the lovely Amazons had gone."
13. Ibid. "When one has not seen an old friend for the fifth part of a century . . . then one's heart beats with a strange, joyful agitation until the moment of reunion. But one very seldom finds what one expects, because one does not prepare oneself in advance for the powerful changes brought about by Time."
14. Ibid. "Thus Time can efface, subdue, annihilate beauty, wit and gaiety, and whatever it might leave will certainly founder in financial worries, Time's loyal collaborator."
15. *Samlede Noveller*, Vol. 2, 207. "I went out again onto the uninhabited, uncaring heath."
16. Id., 216. "But the greatest sorrow in this world is to lose the one you love."
17. *The Poems of Ossian*, Vol. 2, 42—3.

(All translations from the Danish are by the present writer.)