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THE POEMS OF OSSIAN: BETWEEN MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

Abstract

The Poems of Ossian (1760, 1765) by James Macpherson are considered the most famous literary hoax in history. On the wave of pseudo-historical productions of the first half and – especially – the middle of the eighteenth century the counterfeit songs of a fictional third-century Scottish bard gained popularity that spanned the ocean, exerting a lasting influence on literature and culture (to mention the endurance of such names as Malvina or Oscar). The battle over their authenticity, waged for fifty years, testifies to the eagerness with which the contemporary people embraced the fictional version of history, choosing to preserve the idealized and heroic version of the past. Considering the destruction of the old Highland culture that Scotland was facing at that time, the attitude of the Scots can be understood. However, the rising sensibility movement also expressed its support for Macpherson's creation, regardless of nationality. In the words of Thomas Gray (1716–71): „I am resolved to believe them genuine, spite of the Devil and the Kirk" (*Poems and Letters*, 1820, 276).

It must be noted that the eighteenth century was the time in which the division between factual history and fictional history was in its nascence. Imagination, traditionally distrusted, was sometimes considered a part of memory. Some thinkers – like seventeenth-century Hobbes – believed the two are essentially the same. Others – like David Hume – saw the difference in the vividness of the images they create. From the attempts to define the mental faculties responsible for perception there arises the image of the „universe of imagination" (Hume): built of ever-changing impressions, hazy and blurry.

The Poems of Ossian, a complex and little-studied work, responds to all the questions of the period outlined above. It is a perfect example of imaginative alternate history arrested between the Enlightened reverence for history and Romantic awe for imagination. The main hero, Ossian, a blind bard, the last of his race, tries to retrieve from his crumbling memory the „tales of the times of old", creating the world of mist and shadow: a liminal, limbo-like space, between the actual memory of the past and imagination filling in for the missing facts.

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Key words

imagination, memory, Poems of Ossian, Scottish literature, eighteenth century

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The eighteenth century was the time of redefinition of the terms "history" and "fiction". There existed two approaches to history writing: one aimed at popularizing the actual, uncontestable findings, and the other – constructing over the remnants of the past a layer of imaginative space, and breathing the contemporary spirit into the legendary characters. The painful divorce of poetry and history is testified by literary scandals of the epoch, the most famous of which is the hoax of a Scottish scholar, James Macpherson (1736–1796), who claimed to have discovered the poems of a third-century Gaelic bard and to have translated them. In fact, *The Poems of Ossian* (1773) were produced by Macpherson himself.

His field work was appointed and supported by the Scottish academic circles, in the face of the after-Culloden loss of indigenous clan culture. In 1760 *Fragments of ancient poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland, and translated from the Gaelic or Erse language* were published, starting the vogue for everything Ossianesque. They contained parts of the poems, which appeared later, together with the epic "Fingal" and "Temora" in the collected *Works of Ossian* (1765). Finally, they comprised twenty-two tales, relating the exploits of third-century heroes: Fingal and his sons: Ossian, Ryno and Fillan. Most of the pieces contain embedded tales, creating a Chinese-box construction. The unifying agent for all the stories is the person of the bard Ossian, sitting at the tombs of his family and friends and spinning the "tales of the times of old".

The poems have sprung from, and gained popularity on the wave of the antiquarian fashion, which produced also Percy's *Reliques* (1765), Chatterton's *Rowley Poems* (1769), and Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764). The "adjustments" of the historical material to contemporary tastes were common. What distinguishes *The Poems of Ossian*, though, from other productions, is its distinctly liminal character. They exemplify a "new kind of literariness" (Radcliffe 1998: 41) and constitute a "cultural seam" between two epochs: the early modern and the modern (John Dwyer *The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in "The Poems of Ossian"* quoted in Moore 2000: 43).

Ossian poems remain a largely insoluble riddle even today. Although it is generally agreed that they were only loosely based on the stories James Macpherson actually heard in the Scottish Highlands,

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it is impossible to state the degree of creativity in his "translation" (Foley 2002: 100; Grobman 1973: 192; Laplace 2010: 30; Murphy 1986: 567, 577; Porter 2001: 396). Hovering between history and fantasy, the epic and the lyric, the written and the oral, the rational and the emotional, the collection is currently described as "liminal" (Leerssen 1998: 7; Nagy 2001: 443; Porter 2001: 399). The anthropological term "liminality" refers to the rites of passage in the primitive societies. It is important to keep in mind the anthropological perspective of the poems, although – factually speaking – they represent "fakelore" (Dundes 1985: 5), aimed at generating more interest rather than at information. With very little actual "liminality" (in the sense of pubertal or heroic initiations), the poems display formulaic infinitude and constitute a borderline between the Augustan and the Romantic (Foley 2002: 100; Frye 1990–91: 169; Moore 2000: 43; Porter 2001: 397–398). Leerssen shows that the figures of border appear in Macpherson's text abundantly on many levels.

The Poems of Ossian resonate with the impression of the suspension between two spheres, epochs, or states of being. It is mainly in connection with the space of the Ossianic poems that Leerssen wrote about liminality. The adventures take place "between land and sea, or between earth and open air, or between land and water: liminal setting could be a shore, a riverbank, the mouth of a river or an estuary, a harbour, a cave, a mountain top" (Leerssen 1998: 3). The undefined quality of space is heightened by its temporal aspect: the heroes walk around at midnight, begin their battles at dawn, watch the sun set, etc. (Leerssen 1998: 3–4; Macpherson 1773: 209, 413, 456). In *The Poems of Ossian* the action takes place at the threshold, at the point of venturing outside historical into the imagined environment. Macpherson's cautious reach into the fantastic is sure, creating a whole alternative world, but crafty at the same time: he is ready to withdraw into the pretences of realism at any moment. He achieves the effect of the threshold relying in his use of imagery chiefly on impressions. The actual pictures he presents to imagination are few and repetitive: hills, caves, streams, lakes and seas, often in the same configurations. They are dark, misty and distant, echoing with the sounds of hunting (woods) or remaining silent (halls). Imagination gets lost among the same "gray morns", "reflected moonbeams" and flashes of lightening. Macpherson is clearly not interested in differentiating between separate locations in his poems, neither does he care, e.g., if the roar of thunder the characters hear is in fact the sound of the approaching army or of a waterfall, all possibilities being equally valid. He aims rather at the creation of an overall "land of mist and wind". Border-

line and unclear, these two components give rise to the world of prob-
abilities, in which the shapes and colours are obscured and the senses
disabled.

It is darkness and pessimism that pervade Ossian's Scotland. Al-
though he recourses to the past to look for consolation, his mind re-
turns pictures that can hardly provide it. The colours, like the shapes,
are few. The vividness of blue, green and yellow is subjected to the
overwhelming dimness of mist and darkness of night. The obscurity is
streaked with the flashes of lightening and with the red of the mete-
ors. The light and the sounds are described as constantly changing,
intermittent and shifting. The moonbeams and sunlight are gleaming
in the distance, glittering in the weapons of the heroes and reflecting
on the surface of water (1773: 199, 214, 248, 445) The play of light
and shadow creates the space of uncertainty: Ossian often asks him-
self if he sees actual "forms" or "empty wind" (1773: 270). His ques-
tions serve as a rhetoric device, but at the same time betray deep con-
fusion. The impressions are formed on the basis of the gusts of wind
and dispersed moonlight.

The crumbling away of the factual memory is one of the main sub-
jects of the poems. The heroes live in the constant awareness of the
continuous wars wasting away their world. Fingal, haunted by the
premonition of death, experiences powerful anxiety:

"I behold thy tempests, O Morven! which will overturn my halls! when my
children are dead in battle, and none remains to dwell in Selma. Then will the
feeble come, but they will not know my tomb. My renown is only in song. My
deeds shall be as a dream to future times!" (Macpherson 1773: 393).

"The feeble" are the ones who stay at home, and whom Fingal pro-
tects. Still, in the course of the poems, the weak become threatening.
They keep appearing in the background as a "new race" of survivors,
who fail to perpetuate the memory of the ones to whom they owe their
lives. A mysterious "trembling traveller" appears frequently, passing
through the Scottish mountains, unaware of stepping on the tombs of
heroes. (e.g. 1773: 195, 197, 240, 343, 395).

"No more shalt thou rise, O my son! to partake of the feast of Cromla. Soon
will thy tomb be hid, and the grass grow rank on thy grave. The sons of the fee-
ble shall pass along. They shall not know where the mighty lie" (1773: 355).

If not commemorated by a tomb and a song, the warriors are una-
ble to become ghosts, "riding on the storm" (1773: 321). Music be-
comes synonymous with being alive: the removal from the tangible
and the steady to the ambiguous realm of clouds, mists and melody

seems a trick played on the "feeble" race, prone to forgetfulness. As the body decays and the tombs crumble away, the indestructible spirit and music remain. Ghosts can be even more powerful than men, and the "lonely traveller" is afraid of them. (e.g., 1773: 195, 197, 375). Ossian states:

> The sons of feeble men shall behold me, and admire the stature of the chiefs of old. They shall creep to their caves. They shall look to the sky with fear: for my steps shall be in the clouds. Darkness shall roll on my side (1773: 490).

Music becomes the ladder on which the warriors ascend to the land of heroes and gain immortality. The indefinable sounds are also the way out of the impossibility of expression and the inefficiency of language. Instead of deconstructing the language, Macpherson allows it to vanish into sighs, the rustling of winds, the echoes of the forests, caves and shields, the rattling of armour and the overwhelming hum of the song, like a distant roar of the sea. Just like the vision is blurred in Ossian's blindness and in the Scottish and Irish mists, the sounds fuse one with another, posing a riddle to the senses rather than offering solutions.

Macpherson's chief technique is that of suggestive absence and meaningful silence. The abundant negative constructions and repetitive drawing attention to silence in the world resting on various sounds[1] are characteristic. While the poetics of absence and negation is abundant in *The Poems of Ossian*, doubt and hesitation, the "almost" and "maybe", are much more noticeable. Numerous times in the poems Macpherson uses compounds with "half-" (e.g. 1773: 226, 418, 467, 484). In the case of the obscured vision, it corresponds to the increasing mistrust in the power of the senses, which sprang from empiricism and which troubled the philosophers of the eighteenth century. Macpherson signals also the near-oneiric state of altered consciousness. Neither asleep, nor awake, ancient, but not dead, the characters move around in a limbo sphere between the light and darkness, in the grayness of the mist.

Switching between meanings and evaluations is accompanied by the swift shifts of the grammatical tenses and the person of the speaker. Sometimes neighbouring sentences are worlds apart: one is a third-person epic tale from the past, and one a lyric first-person expression from the present. The temporal incongruities signal the fantastic – perhaps mythical – quality of the narrative. The present tense acts like a close-up, whereas the past introduces distance: Macpher-

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[1] See also Mattew Wickman *The Allure of the Improbable: Fingal, Evidence, and the Testimony of the "Echoing Heath".*

son plays with perspectives, zooming in and out on the created literary world in his attempt to reconcile the "tale of the times of old" with his own epoch.

Macpherson's devices portray also the negotiation between the remembered and the fantastical. The misty landscapes he describes, deceptively believable as Scottish and Irish, make up the universe of imagination Hume talked about. The "magical faculty" did in fact give rise to the "historical" events which many believed "to have really happened" (Hume 1739–40: 22). Hobbes in *Leviathan* wrote about the amalgamation of memory and imagination in the following words:

> We have two ways of talking about this decaying sense: when we want to talk about the thing itself – the fancy itself – we call it 'imagination', as I said before: but when we want to talk about the decay, and signify that the sense is fading, old, and past, we call it 'memory'. So imagination and memory are a single thing that has different names for different purposes (Hobbes 1651: 4).

As Hume observed, processing data in imagination and memory would entail the disruption of order, especially chronological one, and draining the ideas of their vividness. Shapes and colours become insufficient for talking about the reality that is essentially subjective (as Berkeley notices in his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, 1710). Memory and imagination come so close as to become indistinguishable.

> When we search for the feature that distinguishes memory from imagination, we see straight off that it can't lie in the simple ideas they present to us; for both these faculties borrow their simple ideas from impressions, and can't ever get beyond those original perceptions. Nor are memory and imagination distinguished from one another by how their complex ideas are arranged. It is indeed a special property of the memory to preserve the original order and position of its ideas —·or, more strictly speaking, to preserve its ideas in the order of the original corresponding impressions·— whereas the imagination transposes and changes its ideas as it pleases. But this difference is not sufficient to tell us whether in any given case we have memory or imagination; for it is impossible to bring back the past impressions in order to compare them with our present ideas and see whether the arrangements are exactly alike. So the memory is not known by the nature of its simple ideas or the order of its complex ones; so the difference between it and imagination must lie in memory's greater force and liveliness. You can indulge your fancy by imagining a past scene of adventures; and you couldn't distinguish this from a memory of those events if it weren't that the ideas of the imagination are fainter and more obscure (Hume 1739–40: 46).

As an idea of the memory can by losing its force and liveliness degenerate so far that it is taken to be an idea of the imagination, so on the other hand an idea of the imagination can acquire such force and liveliness that it passes for an idea

of the memory and has a counterfeit effect on belief and judgment. We see this in liars who by frequently repeating their lies eventually come to believe them, 're-membering' them as realities. In this case, as in many others, custom and habit have the same influence on the mind as Nature does, and implant the idea with the same force and vigour (1739–40: 47).

Macpherson conforms to the then prevalent belief that memory and imagination are nearly the same, and presents a convincing ex-ample of such confusion in his narrative. The distance in time and space, as in the case of Ossian's invented memories, weakens the ide-as in the mind. Solid images dissolve into impressions: unclear forms, ready to change into whatever concrete form will be fitting. The world is plastic, "like a cloud varying its form to the wind" (Macpherson 1773: 345). The wind becomes the chief agent, "deceiving" the heroes: it imitates the shapes and voices of their relatives and friends (e.g. 1773: 371, 480), pushes their ships out of their course (1773: 276, 358, 370), more often than not bringing death and destruction (e.g. 1773: 384, 449). It is also the seat of the spirits of dead warriors, and the appearance of the "dark wind" is often associated with the appear-ance of ghosts. (e.g. 1773: 296, 397). The chiefs are described as "sum-mer gales" (1773: 273), which adds to their unreality, and hints that they are nothing more than spirits. Ossian, as a bard, should have the power to control the apparitions, to invoke them and send them away, but they do not answer to his words. In fact, the spectres impose themselves on him, and he has little choice whether he wants to en-counter them or not (1773: 468, 480). The bard finds being haunted a torment. He says: "Oh, that I could forget my friends!" (1773: 482). They keep appearing to him, though, like portends of death: in fact, it is in this function they come for the last time in "Berrathon":

There is a murmur in the heath! the stormy winds abate! I hear the voice of Fingal. Long has it been absent from mine ear! 'Come, Ossian, come away,' he says. 'Fingal has received his fame. We passed away, like flames that have shone for a season. Our departure was in renown. Though the plains of our battles are dark and silent; our fame is in the four gray stones.' The voice of Ossian has been heard. The harp has been strung in Selma. 'Come, Ossian, come away,' he says; 'come, fly with thy fathers on clouds.' I come, I come, thou king of men! The life of Ossian fails. I begin to vanish on Cona. My steps are not seen in Selma. Beside the stone of Mora I shall fall asleep. The winds whistling in my gray hair, shall not awaken me. Depart on thy wings, O wind, thou canst not disturb the rest of the bard. The night is long, but his eyes are heavy. Depart, thou rustling blast. (1773: 491–492)

Ossian is claimed by the supernatural. Frequent inspiration in-duced by the blasts of wind or the rays of the setting sun (e.g., 1773:

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189, 254, 280) is replaced by the ghosts' direct command to sing about their deeds and thus prolong their existence. Wind, signifying life, movement and poetic creativity (e.g., 1773: 379, 491), is rejected. *Le besoin de voyager* of Sterne's Yorick, who willingly pursues his imagination, is here changed into *le besoin de chanter*: but not an intrinsic need of the protagonist. It is the call to reproduce facts: a strenuous task and a demand impossible to fulfill. Ossian fails to perpetuate the memory of the truth of the events he witnessed, and in the end he is overwhelmed by fantasy. By the end of *The Poems* he becomes more like a medium than an independent being.

Macpherson uses a conglomerate of different symbols, merging one into another, to portray the rising power of imagination. Memory is explicitly described in terms of light (1773: 480, 485), and that gets dimmed or overtaken by darkness as Ossian goes blind. Placid surfaces of lakes or oceans are taken up by billows, ruffles and reeds. Drops of water, hanging in the air are effectively disabling vision. As mist, they form a delicate but dense veil between the fact and fiction. As rainbows, they glitter with elusive beauty and freshness, charming with their loveliness. They store a world of possibilities, ready to disclose forms and colours, and are a perfect portrayal of suspension between being and non-being.

Following the epic convention, the author introduces a muse – Malvina, Oscar's wife – supposed to aid the art of the poet.

> Come, thou beam that art lonely, from watching in the night! The squalling winds are around thee, from all their echoing hills. Red, over my hundred streams, are the light-covered paths of the dead. They rejoice on the eddying winds, in the season of night. Dwells there no joy in song, white-hand of the harps of Lutha? Awake the voice of the string; roll my soul to me. It is a stream that has failed. Malvina, pour the song (1773: 269).

It was a pretty common device of the epoch to portray imagination as a woman (e.g. Addison's personified Fancy in *The Mountain of Miseries*, the figure of the fairy queen in *Tom Jones* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*). Edward Young in his *Discourse on Lyric Poetry* (1728) calls imagination a "beautiful mistress" (Patey 1993: 603). However, in Macpherson's poem there are two females of significance, who inspire the bard, and they may be read as the figures of memory and imagination. It is telling that Ossian, rather than invoke his beloved wife Everallin (Macpherson 1773: 329), calls on his daughter-in-law, Malvina. She is associated with the sun and the world of heroes, rather than with darkness. The preference of Malvina over Everallin betrays Ossian's ambiguous feelings as far as using imagination. By in-

voking the light ("of memory"), he tries to defend himself from the overwhelming obscurity, threatening with death. On the other hand, he reminisces: "I was not so mournful and blind; I was not so dark and forlorn, when Everallin loved me" (1773: 330). His wife came from Erin, from the region situated by the lake of Lego. This lake is explicitly tied in the poems with ghosts (1773: 460), and known for its dark waters (e.g. 1773: 330, 384, 389). Although Ossian loved Everallin, he shuns her memory (1773: 348): he seeks the connection to brightness, heroic strength and composure, against the overwhelming "sable surge" and "dark ocean assailing the shore of the desert" (1773: 325).

In the ambivalent relationship of Ossian to Malvina and Everallin, Macpherson utilizes the metaphor familiar to the eighteenth-century audience, presenting the attitude to memory and imagination. Attracted by the "dark side", calling on the bright and clear one, Ossian ends up in the realm of "watery forms" (1773: 385), in mists and shadows. The greyness of the alternative Scotland and Ireland is a perfect picture of the state of suspension between the reasonable and the fantastic, but also between the imitative and the divinely inspired.

Joining in his death the world of heroes, Ossian seems eventually to make a choice in favour of the light, but the heroes and Malvina, whom he joins, are no longer bright and shining. They are rather associated with the light of the moon, which makes the bard hesitate on the verge of death. The forms of heroes are "dim", "feeble" and "sickly" – precisely what Ossian wants to avoid. He finishes the songs with a paradoxical statement: he claims that his fame will outlive him, knowing well that there is no one to pass on the stories about him (1773: 492).

Concluding, Macpherson succeeds in introducing a work which, while tackling the familiar problems of the age, confronts them in avn original way. Formally, it proclaims the death of epic, foreshadowing the advance of "lyrical ballads" (Jerome 1958: 163; Patey 1933: 590; Radcliffe 1998: 32). In a further perspective, it is the forerunner of the sub-genre of fantasy literature, alternative history[2]. With the surface discontinuity the author invites the reader to reach deeper and discover the meanings behind it. His portrayal of the thresholds between multiple levels, among others, the truth of memory and the alternative truth of imagination, is ingenuous. For the creation of his world he chooses the formless and the colourless. His narrator is deprived of the sense of sight, his memory is weakened with age, and he is a poet by profession, specializing in the use of imagination. Even the most

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[2] For the role of *The Poems of Ossian for fantastic literature see David Sandner's Critical Discourses on the Fantastic, 1712–1841* (2011).

basic oppositions: Morven – Erin, Malvina – Everallin, are consistently expressing the same ideas. Hovering between memory and imagination, Macpherson creates the world of fantasy: dim and unclear, a test-field for the possibilities of expression, ultimately offering the escape from the reality of pain and from the fear of death.

The last bard of the ancient Scotland does not have anyone to verify his accounts, so it is impossible to state which parts are imagined by the narrator, and which actually happened. He may have invented some of his adventures or distorted the presentation of other characters. Unclear and blurry, the alternative world is constructed on the border between memory and imagination. Ossian "seizes the tales as they pass" (Macpherson 1773: 235), but is unsure of their quality. He is unable to tell – and not interested – if the tales concern facts, or if they are embellished and cut to create beautiful fiction (e.g. 1773: 454). He is conscious that "memory fails on his mind" (1773: 292): the failure of his sight, the darkness prevailing in his poems and the growing silence express the abandonment of the world of the senses. The passing away of the sun, the decay of heroic power and the growing role of emotions signify the passage from the early modern to the modern era, which necessitates abandoning the factual truth, stored in memory, and embracing the poetic truth – a valid model of a probability, created by fantasy.

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Streszczenie

Pieśni Osjana (1760, 1765) Jamesa Macphersona uważane są za najsłynniejsze oszustwo literackie w historii. Sfabrykowane poematy fikcyjnego szkockiego barda z trzeciego wieku naszej ery zyskały popularność po obu stronach Atlantyku na fali osiemnastowiecznej mody na pseudo-historyczne dzieła. *Pieśni* wywarły trwały wpływ na literaturę i kulturę (by wspomnieć używane wciąż imiona Malwina czy Oskar). Pięćdziesięcioletni konflikt, dotyczący ich autentyczności dowodzi, jak chętnie ówcześni ludzie zanurzyli się w fikcyjnej wersji historii, która zachowuje wyidealizowany, heroiczny obraz przeszłości. Biorąc pod uwagę zniszczenie starej kultury szkockich Highlands, można zrozumieć entuzjazm Szkotów. Macpherson znalazł jednak również głosy poparcia wśród rodzącego się ruchu sentymentalistów, niezależnie od ich narodowości. W słowach Thomasa Graya (1716–71): "Chcę wierzyć w ich autentyczność, niezależnie od tego, co mówi diabeł czy Kościół" (*Poems and Letters*, 1820, 276; tłum. własne).

Należy zauważyć, iż wiek osiemnasty był czasem, w którym rozdział pomiędzy faktycznością i fikcyjnością historii dopiero powstawał. Wyobraźnia, tradycyjnie traktowana z niedowierzaniem, uważana była za część pamięci. Niektórzy filozofowie – jak siedemnastowieczny Hobbes – sądzili, że wyobraźnia i pamięć są tym samym. Inni – jak David Hume – dostrzegali różnicę w żywości obrazów, tworzonych przez te władze. Próby zdefiniowania władz umysłowych odpowiedzialnych za percepcję przyniosły obraz "uniwersum wyobraźni" (Hume), które zbudowane jest ze zmieniających się impresji, zacierających się i mglistych.

Pieśni Osjana, złożone i mało zbadane dzieło, dotyka wszystkich powyżej nakreślonych kwestii. Jest to doskonały przykład fantastycznej historii alternatywnej, zawieszonej pomiędzy oświeceniową rewerencją dla historii i romantycznym zachwytem nad wyobraźnią. Główny bohater, Osjan, niewidomy bard, ostatni ze swojej rasy, próbuje przywołać ze swej słabnącej pamięci „opowieści o dawnych czasach", tworząc świat mgły i cienia: liminalną przestrzeń limbo, pomiędzy faktyczną pamięcią o przeszłości i wyobraźnią, wypełniającą w niej luki.

Słowa kluczowe

wyobraźnia, pamięć, Pieśni Osjana, literatura szkocka, osiemnasty wiek