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János Batsányi's Early Translations of Ossianic Poems

"The Death of Oscar"

The translation of "The Death of Oscar" is János Batsányi's second Ossianic work published in *Magyar Museum* (1788/1789), and the only one among the altogether seven extant fragments in which he experimented with the hexametric form. Although two Hungarian scholars of Ossian in the early 20th century, Gusztáv Heinrich and Sándor Maller, do point to Michael Denis's rendering as a possible source, the critical editors of Batsányi's complete works, Keresztury and Tarnai, believed the poem could not be found among Denis's Ossianic translations and thus located two German prose translations as source-texts. This paper, besides offering an explanation of why Batsányi chose this poem, aims to prove through a close textual analysis that the main source for his translation was Denis's Latin hexametric poem, "Mors Oscaris." As the textual analysis shows that even if Batsányi, despite his own established rules of translation, followed Denis almost verbatim, he did enrich and paraphrase the original and probably made the poem more available to the Hungarian reader.

To the pages of the printed version of his translation of "The Death of Oscar" in the literary quarterly *Magyar Museum* (1788–89) Batsányi attached a postscript with the following remark:¹

As regards this little piece of translation: I myself do not find it perfect. I only wanted to make an attempt to see how the Hungarian *hexameter* suits Ossian's poems. Perhaps it would be best to translate the whole of Ossian

1. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Howard Gaskill for his invaluable and timely professional help throughout my work, and for providing me with Petersen's text; to László Jankovits, for his help with the Latin text and also to Mária Kurdi and Noémi Najbauer for a careful reading of my paper. All the English translations in the text are mine.

(as Denis did) in this metre. Thus the dignity and unparalleled beauty of our language would shine out most nicely. However, even though I may have the skills, I do not have the time for it.²

Later he wrote the following note on the margin of the poem, in his own copy of the journal: “It was a mistake! I learned only too soon how wrong I was.”³ What happened between the printed hexametric version and Batsányi’s private withdrawal of his translation? It is the debate about the poetic form of translation which the present essay discusses focussing on Batsányi’s hexametric translation of “The Death of Oscar,” a poem which is originally attached to “Temora: An Epic Poem” in *Fingal* in James Macpherson’s 1765 edition, *The Works of Ossian*. I would like to highlight the shift in Batsányi’s concept of his translating the Ossianic poems, which also marks the transition from what is called Latinized Classicism to a new trend, one that we may label early Romanticism. The fact that he never turned to the hexametric form in his Ossianic translations again may prove that this form was judged as anachronistic and ill-fitting in the Romantic phase of the European, especially German, reception of Macpherson’s works.

Scholars have identified various possible source-texts for the translation. The editors of Batsányi’s complete works, Dezső Keresztury and Andor Tarnai, believed the poem could not be found among Michael Denis’s Ossianic translations and thus located two German prose translations as source-texts. To support the above view on the paradigm shift in the concept of Ossianic translations, this paper also aims to prove, through a close textual analysis, that Batsányi in fact relied most heavily on Michael Denis’s Latin hexametric translation of the poem in his own translation of “The Death of Oscar” and decided only later to employ more modern poetic forms in his translations. The oddity of the first published translations of Ossianic poetry in Hungary is that neither “Ossian’s Last Song” nor “The Death of Oscar” belong to the official corpus of the *Works of Ossian*: the first is an invention by Edmund von Harold, the second appears in a note in the 1765 edition, only to disappear from later editions even as Macpherson himself questioned its being an authentic piece.

2. János Batsányi (trans.), “Oskár’ halála,” *Magyar Museum* 1.3 (1788/89) 197–200, p. 200.

3. Quoted in Sándor Maller, *Ossian Magyarországon 1788–1849* (Debrecen: Tisza István Tudományegyetem, 1940), p. 11; Dezső Keresztury and Andor Tarnai, eds., *Batsányi János összes művei*, vol. 1 (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1953), n. 532; Dezső Keresztury, “The First Hungarian Translator of Ossian,” *The New Hungarian Quarterly* 4.12 (1963) 163–72, p. 167; also quoted in Sándor Varró, “Batsányi János születési napja,” *Vasárnapi Újság* (1869), p. 703.

"The Death of Oscar"

When in the autumn of 1759, John Home asked James Macpherson to choose a poem from his collection of Gaelic verse and translate it into English, he was rather reluctant to carry out the task. Finally persuaded, he chose a poem from the large storehouse of his memory, the one in which Ossian relates the story of Oscar, who kills his best friend Dermid then, unable to bear the burden of his shameful act, asks his love, Dargo's daughter, to kill him. She then pierces her own heart. Macpherson's talent in translating "The Death of Oscar" secured his future fame. Home was so enthusiastic about the translation that he immediately showed it to his friends and travelled to Edinburgh to present it to Hugh Blair, among other literary figures. Despite Macpherson's emphatic refusals, Blair insisted that the young poet continue translating Gaelic poetry. As Fiona Stafford quotes, "The popular image of Macpherson as a skilful swindler, setting out to make a fortune from a literary hoax, is hard to reconcile with the descriptions of what actually happened."⁴ Macpherson's unwillingness can partly be attributed to his fear that the "high spirit," genius and crudity of Gaelic poetry can neither be reproduced, nor enjoyed in the English language. Another reason for his refusal may have been, that his "Highland pride was alarmed at appearing to the world only as a translator,"⁵ a fear that haunted the first Hungarian translator of Ossian's complete works, Ferenc Kazinczy, as well. "The Death of Oscar," the very first piece that he handed over to Home, thus became a milestone in Macpherson's literary career procuring him the ambiguous title of the greatest literary "charlatan" as well as the greatest mediator between Gaelic and English culture.⁶

The *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, fifteen pieces altogether, appeared in June 1760, "The Death of Oscar" being the seventh fragment. Blair notes in his Preface that the translated fragments have their authentic sources in Gaelic poetry and Macpherson offers a faithful rendering of them.⁷ The significance of the seventh

4. Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), pp. 79–80. Stafford quotes from a letter, dated January 18 1762, by George Laurie, minister of Loudon, originally quoted in Malcolm Laing, ed. *The Poems of Ossian* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1805), vol. 1, p. xv.

5. Also quoted in Stafford, p. 80.

6. See Fiona Stafford, "Introduction," in Howard Gaskill, ed. *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003 [1996], hereafter: *PO*), v–xviii, p. xv.

7. *PO*, p. 6.

fragment is that it reappears, in a revised form, again as a footnote in “Temora,” a poem inserted as a lesser piece in Macpherson’s first coherent composition *Fingal* (1762) compiled after his journeys to the Highlands. At the same time, it is missing from the completed epic *Temora* published the following year in eight books⁸ and is also left out in the famous 1773 edition, the *Poems of Ossian*⁹ probably because, by that time, Macpherson himself found this version of the story inauthentic and not of Ossian’s own composition. Nevertheless, “The Death of Oscar” lived on in foreign translations, so much so, that it was the second piece to be translated into Hungarian.

Oscur appears as the son of Ossian in the seventh fragment, however, in the poem “Temora” Oscar is presented in a different manner and with a different lineage.¹⁰ Macpherson’s explanation of this change in a note is worth recalling because parts of it will later be quoted verbatim by foreign translators: “One of the Fragments of Ancient Poetry lately published, gives a different account of the death of Oscar, the son of Ossian. The translator, though he well knew the more probable tradition concerning that hero, was unwilling to reject a poem, which, if not really of Ossian’s composition, has much of his manner, and concise turn of expression. ... Though the translator thinks he has good reason to reject the fragment as the composition of Ossian; yet as it is, after all, still somewhat doubtful whether it is or not, he has here subjoined it.”¹¹ Howard Gaskill finds it extraordinary that Macpherson “should still have been ignorant of the authentic traditions about the death of Oscar when he presented the poem to John Home in the autumn of 1759.”¹² The source-texts of Batsányi’s translation by Michael Denis, Edmund von Harold, and Johann Wilhelm Petersen are all translations of the later “official” version, not the original fragment. Macpherson’s last sentence about the possible inauthenticity of “Oscar’s Death” might explain why the poem is placed separately from the rest of Ossianic poetry, either in an appendix as in Harold’s or Denis’s translation or among other, non-Ossianic poems such as in Joseph von Retzer’s collection of Denis’s own poems.

8. *PO*, p. 415, note 25.

9. In fact, the poem as a footnote to “Temora” is missing from all subsequent editions: I am grateful to Howard Gaskill for these pieces of information.

10. For the authentic ballad sources of the first Book of *Temora* and “The Death of Oscar,” see Derick S. Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson’s ‘Ossian’* (Edinburgh, London: Oliver and Boyd, 1952), pp. 59–67, and also Donald E. Meek, “The Gaelic Ballads of Scotland,” in Howard Gaskill, *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1991), pp. 19–48.

11. *PO*, p. 156, note.

12. *PO*, p. 459, note 36.

Macpherson's note might also explain the fact why Denis decided to translate it into Latin instead of German, which may, in turn, have inspired Batsányi to choose this poem over others in order to try his hand at hexametric translation.

"I wanted to be the bard of my Hungarian nation. . ." **Batsányi's Rules**

By the Hungarian reader Michael Denis (1729–1800), or "Sined" (Denis read backwards), as he was perhaps better known in his time through his adopted bardic name, a Jesuit poet and bibliographer, is remembered today as the earliest translator of the complete poems of *Ossian* into German. His hexametric rendering served as a source for quite a few Hungarian translators. The first two volumes of his *Die Gedichte Ossians eines alten celtischen Dichters* appeared in Vienna in 1768 with Trattner, the third volume, in which the Latin translation "Mors Oscaris" can be found,¹³ in 1769. Dávid Baróti Szabó, one of the editors of *Magyar Museum* writes in his memoirs that he began to write metrical poetry in 1773, after being encouraged by one of his fellow Jesuits "to follow the example of Klopstock and Sined."¹⁴ He was surprised to see how much better suited the Hungarian language was to hexameters than was the German.¹⁵

Why Denis chose to render the rough and sublime prose of Macpherson's poems into the smoothly flowing metres of Virgil he explains in his often quoted "Vorbericht."¹⁶ By placing Ossian side by side with Homer and Virgil, he expresses his wish to elevate Macpherson's poems to the heights of heroic poetry. Impressed by their sublimity, he insisted that only the most solemn poetic diction would convey their resemblance to the greatest of the epic poems. Being a student of the Latinate-Humanistic tradition he could not but follow the strict rule of the hierarchy of poetic forms in which the 'epopeia' is defined as the most heroic genre to be represented in the highest poetic form, the hexameter.¹⁷ As Rudolph Tombo remarks, "The hexame-

13. Michael Denis (trans.), *Die Gedichte Ossians, eines alten celtischen Dichters*, 3 vols, (Wien: Trattner, 1768/69), vol. 3, pp. 181–85.

14. Quoted in András Kecskés, *A magyar verselméleti gondolkodás története* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1991), p. 131.

15. Kecskés, p. 131.

16. Quoted, among others, in Rudolph Tombo, *Ossian in Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1901), p. 125.

17. Ruprecht Wimmer, "Michael Denis und seine Ossianübersetzung," *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* 28 (1987) 27–47, p. 34.

ters lend an air of stateliness and dignity to the poems and give them more the air of a classic. What is more, the novel introduction of hexameters evoked a lively discussion and so stimulated the popular interest in Ossian. The translation became a model for the school of the bards, most of whom derived their knowledge primarily from the version of their revered confrère.”¹⁸ In Hungary, Ossian’s hexametric translation is inseparable from the traditions of Latinate Classicism, the Jesuit circle of Austrian poets to which Denis belonged, and Milton’s Austrian and Hungarian reception. Denis’s admiration for Milton and Klopstock is well known; he chose the hexameter in imitation of Klopstock’s *Der Messias* as the most appropriate poetic form for the German *Ossian*.¹⁹ Batsányi’s, and later Kazinczy’s ambitious project to translate the whole of the poems of Ossian grew out of the aspiration to follow the example of first the Austrian then the German reception of Macpherson’s work. One of their earliest steps was to start a literary journal in 1788 modelled on *Deutsches Museum*²⁰ with the purpose in mind of cultivating the Hungarian language.

When founding *Magyar Museum* together with Ferenc Kazinczy and Dávid Baróti Szabó, Batsányi, inspired by Denis,²¹ asked the latter – Szabó was an ex-Jesuit poet and could thus be expected to approach the clerical subject with heightened sensitivity²² – to translate Milton from Ludwig Bertrand Neumann’s abridged Latin hexametric version. This same Neumann had also translated *Der Messias* into Latin hexameters.²³ Batsányi kept the task of translating *Ossian* for himself, and Kazinczy decided to render Klopstock’s epic poem into Hungarian. Milton and Ossian share the features of sublimity, both of them fall outside the conventions of classic epic poetry and their reception in Hungary conforms to the different theories of translation partly voiced on the pages of *Magyar Museum*. Batsányi explains the principles (in “Tóldalék,” an Appendix) of his own translation of the first Ossianic poem that he publishes, “Ossian’s Last Song”:

18. Tombo, p. 125.

19. Tombo, p. 120; see also Wolf Gerhard Schmidt, ‘Homer des Nordens’ und ‘Mutter der Romantik.’ *James Macpherson’s Ossian, zeitgenössische Diskurze und die Frühphase der deutschen Rezeption* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), Vol. 1, 545–68, p. 548.

20. Kecskés, p. 127.

21. See Sándor Fest, *Angol irodalmi hatások hazánkban Széchenyi István fellépéséig* (Budapest: MTA, 1917), p. 66.

22. Keresztury, p. 166.

23. Andor Tarnai, “A deákos klasszicizmus és a Milton-vita,” *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 63.1 (1959) 67–83, p. 77.

If ever I can achieve any success, I owe it to my rules or, better said, to my inclination led by those rules. That is, before I set out to prepare my translation, I tried to learn about and become familiar with all the features of Ossian. Then, during my translation, I adopted the different translations in a way that, when comparing them, I would possess each of his thoughts, each of his feelings and expressions, inasmuch as possible in my own language, word by word, phrase by phrase: to translate *Ossian* so authentically, faithfully and well that anyone, having read and known him in another language, would find in him a similarly sublime, pathetic, intense and forceful singer.²⁴

An earlier essay by Batsányi, "On Translation," appears in the first quarter of *Magyar Museum*, introducing "Ossian's Last Song." His rules reflect the precepts of Latinate Classicism, the adoption of antique verse forms.²⁵ The most debated principle among his rules was that a worthy translation ought to be "the exact and best grasped image of the original, that is, all that is in the original, no less, no more, must be translated and in the same order. Thus the translator ought not to add nor take away from the original."²⁶ It also means, as his opponents pointed out, that the translation should never improve on its original. In his defence in the third quarter of the journal, Batsányi draws a parallel between the original and its translation: "I commonly consider the translation of books from one language into another similar to preparing a copy of a painting."²⁷ In other words, the copier should add nothing to the painting because then he would produce a different picture, not a copy of the original. Baróti Szabó's translation of Milton from the Latin elicited severe criticism from Batsányi's opponents who questioned the form and also the quality of the translation. As it appears from his essays on the nature of good translations, this quarrel influenced his own Ossianic renderings as well. Batsányi, when defending both Baróti Szabó's Miltonic translation and his above mentioned principle about the necessity of a faithful translation, sets his method against József Rájnis's borrowed concept of emulation according to which the translation purports to compete with the original. However, Batsányi, as Tarnai remarks, identifies this kind of competition as imitation not translation.²⁸

24. János Batsányi, "Tóldalék," [Appendix] *Magyar Museum* 1.3 (1788/89) 271–348, p. 321.

25. Keresztury and Tarnai identify Batsányi's main source to his essay in Johann Christoph Gottsched's *Ausführliche Redekunst* (Leipzig, 1759).

26. János Batsányi, "A' fordítástról," *Magyar Museum* 1.1 (1788/89) 6–19, p. 10.

27. Batsányi, "Tóldalék," p. 306.

28. Batsányi, "Tóldalék," p. 316, also see Tarnai, p. 78.

In his Ossianic prose translations Batsányi faithfully and avowedly followed his own rules: as he explains in his defence, he published the translation of “Ossian’s Last Song” with the express purpose of illustrating his principles through an example.²⁹ His concept of translation, to revise his own text as soon as he could get hold of a newer foreign translation, complied with the contemporary method of consulting all the available foreign editions. Maybe that is the reason why, as he hints several times in his letters, the full publication of the poems never materialized although he was possibly ready with the whole of *Ossian* in prose as early as the 1790s. What we now have is seven pieces, four of which he prepared in his Kassa years. Out of these four three were published in *Magyar Museum*, and Keresztury and Tarnai found an additional piece, a few lines from the first book of *Fingal*, in manuscript. As Batsányi always signed his own copies, his critical editors knew which foreign editions he possessed: the second, revised edition of Denis’s translation which also contains his own bardic songs, *Ossians und Sineds Lieder* (6 vols. 1784), the second edition of *Die Gedichte Ossians des celtischen Helden und Barden* by Edmund von Harold (1782), and Johann Wilhelm Petersen’s *Die Gedichte Ossians neuverteutschet* (1782).³⁰ We can reconstruct, based on his correspondence with the Baron Gedeon Ráday, when and in what order he got hold of the copies in his possession during the period he spent in Kassa. The two earlier pieces appearing in *Magyar Museum* may have been of special interest for him, each for a different reason. “Ossians Letztes Lied” was published in an “Anhang,” together with “Bosmina” and “Ossians Lied nach der Römer Niederlage,” with Harold’s claim that they were newly discovered Ossianic pieces. “Der Tod Oscars,” found at the end of the second volume of Harold also has a footnote in which he calls attention, after Macpherson, to the assumed inauthenticity of the poem.³¹ Denis, however, explains in a footnote why he decided to translate the piece into Latin rather than German:

29. Batsányi, “Tóldalék,” p. 320.

30. Keresztury and Tarnai, pp. 527–30. The critical editors find it improbable that Batsányi possessed Melchior Cesarotti’s Italian translation when translating Carthon (see Keresztury and Tarnai, p. 532): I have discovered two copies in the National Library with Batsányi’s own signature on the title pages, the 1772 edition of *Poesie di Ossian* (4 vols, under the classification number of “P. O. rel. 307 w”: it even contains Batsányi’s handwritten notes on pages xvii to xxii) and a newer edition from 1805 (“P. O. rel. 311 d”).

31. Edmund von Harold (trans.), *Die Gedichte Ossian’s eines alten Celtischen Helden und Barden*, vol. 2 (Mannheim, 1782), pp. 286–93.

Ich habe dieses Gedichtchen ins Latein übersetzt. Es ist kurz, und am Ende des Bandes. Lesern, die kein Latein verstehen, oder lesen wollen, verschlägt nichts. Kenner werden vielleicht mit mir begierig seyn zu sehen, wie einem celtischen Barden die römische Toga lasse. Sie werden aber auch gleich bemerken, dass mir der Stoff mehr den Ton der ovidianischen Verwandlungen, als der Aeneis angegeben habe.³²

In an undated letter, in which he talks about the preparatory works of the second quarter of *Magyar Museum* (it means that it must have been written sometime in the first half of 1788) Batsányi adds in a postscript that, “I have not gained enough confidence yet to lay my Ossian before your judgment. I have only translated a part from its old [edition] and it is not sufficiently polished yet.”³³ This might mean that he had only Harold’s 1782 edition, *Die Gedichte Ossians* but already learnt about his *Neu-entdeckte Gedichte Ossians* (Düsseldorf, 1787). On 23 June, 1788, he writes that, “Your Lordship will see from ‘Ossian’s Last Song’ that I am translating his works from Hárold. I will take Denis only as an aid” (89). He also adds that the Count Joseph Teleki and the Baron Orczy had already approved of the poem in May. In September 1788 he asks for “the fourth volume,” “erga remissionem,” to be borrowed, because it cannot be found in Pest (89). Seven months later (11 April, 1789) he sends the first version of “Oscar’s Death” to the Baron: “I cannot yet send more of Ossian to your Lordship than these few hexametric lines which I was preparing these days. And this is only an early version of it” (90). He also adds that, “it would be nice to translate Ossian in Hexameters if it did not consume so much time” (90). Two months later he asks the Baron for “the fragments of Ossian” (93), probably meaning Harold’s new edition again, the *Neu-entdeckte Gedichte Ossians* (1787) because in its “Vorrede” Harold himself calls his poems “Fragmente.”³⁴ The following month, 4 July, 1789, he writes that he is going to find “Harold’s fragments in Pest or Buda.” Half a year later (7 May, 1790) he informs the Baron that he has already got hold of “the Fragmentary Works of Ossian” (209). In a footnote appended to his translation of “Ossian’s Last Song” he introduces his source in the following words: “Harold

32. Denis, 1768/69, vol. 3, p. 181.

33. Quoted by János Molnár, “Bacsányi János levelei id. Bárá Ráday Gedeonhoz,” *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 17 (1907) 82–93, 206–15, p. 84. János Molnár had discovered twenty of Batsányi’s manuscript letters addressed to the Baron Gedeon Ráday and published them on the pages of *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* in 1907.

34. Harold, 1787, p. IV.

recounts of himself that, as he was born in Scotland,³⁵ the present *dialect* of the Celtic language is his native language, and he translated the poems of Ossian into German directly from that [language], namely, “Ossian’s Last Song,” which, together with the other poems, were translated by an anonymous poet of Tübingen who followed his translation.³⁶ It was translated neither by Macpherson nor Denis (who closely followed him). – yet this piece, although it is beautiful, can hardly belong to Ossian’s own work. The same Song, completed with other poems was newly published by Harold, see: *Neu-entdeckte Gedichte Ossians. Düsseldorf. 8. 1787.*³⁷

Batsányi may have chosen this piece to be published as the earliest Ossianic piece in Hungarian for various reasons. For him, it showed the main characteristics of Ossian, the sublime and the pathetic and he probably considered it as authentic as any of Macpherson’s Ossianic transcriptions. Since it was published as a key text to prove his own points in the hottest literary debate on translation, he may also have been careful to choose a piece where the faithfulness of his translation could not be checked against the language of the original, Macpherson’s English (where he was not going to find the poem anyway), which he most likely did not grasp nearly as well he did the German text. As for the supposed original of Harold, even if he thought that there was one, he was safe from the chance of any of his opponents being able to check a Gaelic source. Knowing that the Macphersonian text in itself was merely a translation and in accordance with his views on the correlation between original and copy, he may also have reasoned that translating a newly invented poem from Harold was one step less away from the original than translating from a German rendering of Macpherson, itself a mere copy of the original. That he faced many difficulties and was not a little uncertain about the success of his translation is expressed in his letter to the Baron Ráday: “Ossian has sentences sometimes so difficult that they exhaust one when he tries to express them in his own language. They have the potential of doing the language great service but also of injuring it. I wish someone had translated at least a few lines from his more complicated parts so that I could proceed with mine with greater courage.”³⁸ He also adds that many of the difficulties that can be found in the other poems, cannot be found in “Ossian’s Last Song.”

35. “Harold-is azt mondgya magáról, hogy ónéki, mint született Skótziainak...”: Harold was of Irish origin.

36. The “Anonymous of Tübingen” is Johann Wilhelm Petersen and his 1782 edition. I owe this piece of information to Howard Gaskill.

37. János Batsányi, “Tóldalék,” p. 320, note 38.

38. Quoted by Molnár, p. 89; also quoted in Keresztury and Tarnai, p. 531.

The Comparative Translation of "Mors Oscaris"

Contrary to what the critical editors supposed, a translation, albeit in Latin, of "The Death of Oscar" does appear not only in the first edition of Denis's *Die Gedichte Ossians* (3:181–85) but also in Retzer's *Nachlese zu Sineds Lieder*³⁹ after some odes and elegies with their Italian or German translations.⁴⁰ The poem here is preceded by a Latin elegy on Germany's new poets, side by side with Retzer's German prose translation, "Deutschlands neuere Dichter" in which German bardic poetry is praised.⁴¹ Retzer may have wanted to give an example of the bardic poetry of Austrian Latinized Classicism when he presented "Mors Oscaris" in this context, in the company of a German hexametric version by Anton von Rehbach, possibly a "student" of Denis who also wrote bardic songs.⁴²

What is also characteristic of the choice of "Ossian's Last Song" and "The Death of Oscar" is that one cannot miss the political overtone. Batsányi's oft recalled expression, "I wanted to be the bard of my Hungarian nation"⁴³ shows not only his attachment to Austrian bardic poetry and to Michael Denis, but his political aim as well, which was to support the national opposition against Joseph II. He ends his dedication (part of which is a direct borrowing from Hugh Blair's *Critical Dissertation* via Harold)⁴⁴ to the Baron Orczy, one of the leading figures of the opposition with the following words:

I dedicate [this poem] to your Lordship to show the world that I pay the same deep respect which is paid to you by every patriot in whose veins Hungarian blood runs. I, who have your Lordship's more than fatherly care and encouragement to thank for that in me, which serves or will serve the good of my country, and who can express my own feelings best with the words of *Alpin*.⁴⁵

39. Joseph von Retzer, *Nachlese zu Sineds Lieder* (Wien: Ch. Fr. Wappler, 1784), Vol. 6, pp. 201–205.

40. Tombo lists both appearances in his bibliography: Tombo, pp. 7, 24.

41. Retzer, pp. 186–99.

42. See Karl Goedeke, *Grundriss zur Geschichte der deutschen Dichtung*, vol. 4 (Dresden: Ehlermann, 1916), p. 200; also see J. W. Nagl and J. Zeidler, *Deutsch-Österreichische Literaturgeschichte. Ein Handbuch zur Geschichte der deutschen Dichtung in Österreich-Ungarn* (Wien, 1914), Vol. 2, p. 71.

43. Quoted in Tarnai, p. 166.

44. See Keresztury and Tarnai, p. 530.

45. Keresztury and Tarnai, p. 180.

There must also be a personal attachment in his choice of the poem: the reason why he went to Kassa was that his “fellow student” and close friend, István Orczy died at the age of eighteen. Batsányi’s earliest poem was written “To the Dying István Orczy” (1785). Alpin’s words might well express the sorrow of the father through the mourning words of Gellamin over the loss of his son, Kolulla and his daughter Sulvira.

“Ossian’s Last Song” and the fragment from *Fingal* were translated in prose, together with his third sample translation “Carthon.” Batsányi may have decided to turn to “Oscar’s Death” because Denis offers it in a Latin hexametric translation and the Latin hexametric line is more familiar in the Hungarian language. In accordance with Hungarian prosody, the accent falls on long syllables, not on stressed ones as in the German language. “The Death of Oscar” remained the only piece in which Batsányi experimented with the hexameter. Having consulted the 1784 edition, he may also have been inspired by the opening dialogue in *Ossians und Sineds Lieder* entitled “Gespräch von dem Werthe der Reime” where in an Appendix Denis offers examples of hexametric verses in various national literatures, Italian, French, Spanish, or English. Surprisingly enough, the third language that he mentions is the Hungarian language: Mihály Vilmányi Líbecz, a sixteenth-century poet, addresses the author, István Székely, on the occasion of his newly published work *Chronica* (1559) in a foreword and recommends the book in hexameters.⁴⁶ Denis’s other Hungarian example is János Molnár, a contemporary of Denis and a fellow Jesuit who wrote the earliest history of art in Hungarian. Denis cites five hexametric lines from his *A régi Jeles Épületekről* (1760).⁴⁷ Molnár appeared in Hungarian neo-Latin poetry as the first to utilize the Hungarian hexameter, even if he was not the one to invent it. The introduction to Molnár’s work, “Bévezető levél,” appeared to be the Catholic manifesto of what later became known as the “versification reform movement.”⁴⁸

Batsányi’s translated fragment is a rendering of the first thirty lines, three passages from Denis’s Latin poem. In April 1789 he sent the first few lines of his verse translation to the Baron Ráday. After citing his own translation of the first two stanzas, sixteen lines, Batsányi concludes his letter with the words, “it would be nice to translate Ossian in hexameters if it did not take up so much time.”⁴⁹ Keresztury and Tarnai establish the sources for this piece in Harold (1782, 2:281–83) and Petersen (1782, 451–53) adding that, besides “Ossian’s Last Song,” “it is missing from Denis as well.”⁵⁰ This

46. Denis 1784, vol. 5, p. xxxii.

47. Denis, 1784, vol. 5, pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

48. Kecskés, p. 132.

49. Quoted in Molnár, p. 90.

50. Keresztury and Tarnai, p. 532.

is rather strange since earlier Ossian scholars such as Gusztáv Heinrich or Sándor Maller do point to Denis as a possible source although the earlier refers to him as a general source to most of his translations besides Harold, and the latter means the hexametric form which Batsányi borrowed.⁵¹ A careful comparison with the sources, however, can prove that he in fact used Denis as the main source-text for his translation and hardly ever turned to Petersen. “Mors Oscaris,” partly because of the verse scheme partly out of poetic freedom, deviates from the original of Macpherson many times whereas the prose translation of Harold is a literal one which follows the original much more closely.⁵² Similarly to Denis, Batsányi also prepared a verse translation therefore it can be expected that his would be a freer translation, too. Thus, whenever he closely follows any of his source-texts closely, it has a greater significance in the identification process than would be the case had he prepared a prose translation. Let me point out some of the most telling parts of Batsányi's translation by offering a few examples:

Macpherson (PO 2003, 530): Why openest thou afresh the spring of my grief, O son of Alpin, inquiring how Oscar fell?

Harold (1782): Warum öfnest du wieder, Erzeugter von Alpin, die Quelle meiner Wehmuth, da du mich fragst, wie Oscar erlag?

Petersen (1782): Warum öfnest du wieder, Sohn Alpíns, die Quelle meiner Wehmuth, da du mich fragst, wie Oskar, Karuths Erzeugter, gefallen?

Denis (1769, 1784): Alpino Sate! Quid refricas mea vulnera quaerens / Oscaris interitum? [Offspring of Alpin! Why do you again tear up my wounds inquiring / Oscar's destruction?]

Rehbach (1784) Meine Wunde, die wird mir geöffnet, Erzeugter von Alpin! / Wenn du mich um den gefallenen Oscar befragest.

Batsányi (1788/89):⁵³ Álpínnak Magzattya! sebem' m'ért szaggatod újra? – / Íme, megínt bánatba hozál, Oskárnak halálát / Kérdezvén töllem! – [Offspring of Alpin! why do you tear up my wound again? / See, you torment me with grief again, / inquiring about Oscar's death!]

51. Gusztáv Heinrich, *Ossian énekei* (Budapest: Franklin, 1903), 71–72; Maller, p. 11.

52. For *Ossians und Sineds Lieder* (1784) Denis used the revised, 1773 edition of Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian* (See Howard Gaskill, “‘Aus der dritten Hand’: Herder and his Annotators,” *German Life and Letters* 54.3 (2001) 210–18, p. 213, note 8; also see Gaskill, 2004, p. 15) and Harold also translated from the 1773 edition (Schmidt, vol. 2, p. 1135).

53. Debreczeni Attila, ed., *Első folyóirataink: Magyar Museum I.* (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2004), p. 122.

Both Denis and Batsányi cut the first sentence into two, turning the first half of Macpherson's rhetorical question into an address of Ossian. In his first sentence Batsányi follows Denis verbatim. His choice of the vocative sentence as well as the expression "offspring" (Hung. "magzat") is identical with Denis's choice of the Latin "satus" ("offspring") and his address of Alpin. Both Harold and Petersen follow Macpherson in their interrogatory sentence.

In his second sentence, Denis's text differs from Macpherson's in that "grief" becomes "wound" (Lat. "vulnus") and "open afresh" is translated as "tear up again" (Lat. "refrico"). Batsányi gives a verbatim translation of Denis and also follows the Latin text in his rendering the present participle form, "inquiring" (Lat. "quaeror") into an adverbial participle, "kérdésvén" whereas Harold substitutes the participle form with a subordinate clause, "that you ask me" ("da du mich fragst"). Batsányi's phrase, "Oscar's death," cannot be found either in Denis or in Harold but is closest to Denis's "destruction" (Lat. "interitus"). In his choice of the phrase "torment me with grief" Batsányi may have turned to Harold's "Wehmuth" thus trying to combine the two versions. Petersen, as these examples show, follows Harold so closely in places that are significant from Batsányi's viewpoint that, here at least, there is no sense in differentiating between their texts. Batsányi must have seen Rehbach's text, but in these first sentences, his rendering seems to rely on Denis.

In the first half of Macpherson's second sentence we can find further evidence that Batsányi adheres most faithfully to Denis:

Macpherson: My eyes are blind with tears; but memory beams on my heart.

Harold: meine Augen sind von Thränen erblindet. Aber Erinnerung strahlt an meinem Herzen.

Petersen: Meine Augen sind in Thränen erblindet, aber Erinnerung strahlt in meine Seele.

Denis: Lacrimae mihi luminis usum / Eripuere quidem, / sed mentem tempora prisca / Collustrant. [Though tears took away the use of my eyes / but old times illuminate the mind.]

Rehbach: Die Thränen / Haben mir zwar den Gebrauch des Gesichtes geraubet / doch kehret / Oft das Gedächtniss der Vorzeit in Ossians Seele zurück.

Batsányi: Már könnyeim' árja szememnek / Látását el-vette ugyan, / de az hajdan' időknek / Képe világított elmémben. [Though the flood of tears of my eye / took away its sight / the image of those ancient times beams in my mind.]

Denis, Rehbach, who evidently follows Denis here, and Batsányi deviate from the original of Macpherson in that they translate this part in past tense, use active voice instead of the passive, add “though,” and choose a longer phrase to describe the state of the eyes instead of simply calling them blind. Perhaps for metrical reasons, to make out the six feet of the line, Denis describes tears as taking away “the use of my eyes” instead of sight. Batsányi translates the sentence as “took away the sight of my eye.” However, Batsányi adds one phrase which cannot be found in any of the sources: the addition of “flood” to tears is his own poetic invention – perhaps it is a reminiscence of Harold’s earlier use of “die Quelle.”

In both Macpherson and Harold we can find the expressions “memory” and “heart” whereas Denis and Batsányi use the expressions “ancient times” (Lat. “tempora prisca,” Hung. “hajdan idők”) and “mind” (Lat. “mens,” Hung. “elme”). Denis may have chosen “mens” instead of the heart because it is etymologically cognate with “memoria.” It is interesting that Denis’s choice of words, “tempora prisca” refers to the subject of remembrance, whereas Batsányi’s expansion of the phrase, “the image of ... old times,” is the result of the operation of the mind, that is, remembrance, which recalls Harold’s expression, “Erinnerung.”

The question-word in the third sentence again is identical with the Latin of Denis:

Macpherson: How can I relate the mournful death of the head of the people!

Harold: Wie kann ich den traurigen Tod des Führers der Krieger erzählen!

Petersen: Wie kann ich des Helden kläglichen Tod erzählen?

Rehbach: Ach! wie kann ich dir doch das traurige Schicksal erzählen, /
Welches den Führer des Volkes betraf.

Denis: Quanam potero ratione referre / Tristia fata Ducis populi! [In what way can I relate the fate of the leader of the people!]

Batsányi: Oh Bárde! mi módon / Adgyam elődbe azon Bajnoknak gyászos el-estét? – [O, bard! In what way / shall I relate to you the mournful fall of that champion?]

Batsányi’s “mi módon” is a close translation of “quanam ratione.” Unlike others, with the exception of Rehbach, Batsányi begins this sentence with an apostrophe, “Oh bárde!,” where “bard” is put into the Latin vocative case, as the “e” ending shows, although this case is an example of Latinism in the Hungarian language.

Macpherson’s “the head of the people” becomes “the leader of warriors” in Harold (“Führer der Krieger”) and “the leader of people” (“dux populi”) in Denis and

Rehbach (“Führer des Volkes”), whereas in Batsányi “leader” becomes “bajnok,” a lonely warrior, which creates a totally different atmosphere from any of the other variants, perhaps not without a political overtone. “Death” becomes “fate” (Lat. “*fatum*”) in Denis and “fall” (“*eleste*”) in Batsányi, although a direct translation, “*gyászos halálát*” (“the mournful death”) would also conform to the metrical requirements set up by himself in the note attached to the translation in *Magyar Museum*. Batsányi, in an attached note to the poem, writes about the metrical position of the sound “h”: contrary to the opinion of his opponents, he considers the sound as a fully pronounced consonant, not a mute sound.⁵⁴

In another line, Batsányi again follows Denis so closely that he, rather artificially, upsets the natural word order of the Hungarian language when he sends the beginning of the sentence to the very end:

Macpherson: He fell as the moon in a storm; as the sun from the midst of his course, when clouds rise from the waste of the waves, when the blackness of the storm inwraps the rocks of Ardannider.

Harold: Er fiel, wie der Mond in einem Sturm, wie die Sonne in der Mitte ihres Laufs; wenn Wolken vom Schoose der Wogen sich heben; wenn das Dunkel des Sturms Ardanniders Felsen einhüllt.

Petersen: Gesunken bist du, wie der Mond in einem Sturm, wie die Sonne in der Mitten ihres Laufs, wenn Gewitternacht Ardanniders Felsen umhüllet.

Denis: Ut nimbi lunam rapiunt, ut, ab aequore vasto / Dum surgunt nubes, et rupibus Ardannidae / Nox atra incubuit, medio sol conditur axe: / Sic cecidit. — [As the clouds tear away the moon, as from the vast surface of the sea / then rise the clouds and on the rocks of Ardannida the black night settles on, and hides on the middle axis of the sun: / so fell he.]

Rehbach: So wie die silberne Scheibe des Mondes ein jähes Gewitter / Aus den Augen uns reisst, wie wenn aus den Fluten des Meeres / Wolken sich heben, die schwärzeste Nacht auf Ardannidas / Felsen lieget, die Sonne sich birgt am Himmel: so fielst du, / Oscar!

Batsányi: Szinte miként az homályba-borúlt Hóld el-tünik Égről: / Mint a' Nap, pályája' felénn, el-enyészik előllünk, / 'S Ardannid' szikláji setét felhőkbe merülnek: / Úgy el-esett! — [As the obscured Moon disappears from the sky: / As the Sun, in the midst of its course, vanishes from us, / And the rocks of Ardannid sink into dark clouds: / so fell he.]

54. Batsányi, “Oskár’ halála,” p. 200.

Batsányi faithfully adheres to the sentence structure, built upon a simile, of Denis who, observing the rules of Latin syntax, places one part of the simile, the verb “fell,” at the end of the sentence. The Hungarian rendering of the verbal structure, “úgy el-esett,” follows the Latin in its word order as well as its metre; the foot contains one long and two short syllables (Lat. “sic cecidit”). It should, however, also be mentioned here that in the earlier version, which Batsányi sent to the Baron of Ráday, he puts the verb in the second person singular (Hung. “úgy elesél”) in which he follows Rehbach (“so fielst *du*”). Since this verbal form can only be found in Rehbach’s text one suspects that here, Batsányi relied on Rehbach first, and when he revised his poem, he replaced it with Denis’s use of third person.

The other part of the simile is an ekphrasis, a lengthy description, which is translated by Harold quite faithfully but adapted in various ways by the poets translating in classical metres. Denis is more expansive than Macpherson. Batsányi, similarly to Rehbach, sometimes reduces, sometimes extends the description: Denis interprets Macpherson’s “fell as the moon” through expanding it by an additional verb (Lat. “rapio”). Batsányi follows Denis but also deviates from him in his own version in that he gives the expression “clouds” (Lat. “nimbi”) back in a qualifying adjective, “obscured” (Hung. “homályba-borúltt”), and “tear away” (Lat. “rapio”) with “disappear” (Hung. “el-tűnik”). The part “when clouds rise from the waste of the waves” in Macpherson’s text is missing from Batsányi’s text although he makes use of the motif “cloud” in his description of the darkness covering the rocks of Ardannider.

Macpherson: The blast hath lopped my branches away; and I tremble at the wings of the north.

Harold: Der Windstoß hat mir die Äste entrissen; mich schrecken die Flügel des Nords.

Petersen: Der Windstoß hat mir meine Zweige weggeschlagen; mich verheeren die Flügel des Nords.

Denis: Furore / Turbinis interiit ramorum honor omnis, et alae / Me Boreae exterrent! [In the furious windstorm all the honours of the branches perished, and the wings of Boreas frighten me!]

Rehbach: der Winde / Wüten beraubt sie der Blätter, sie schrecken die Flügel des Nordwinds.

Batsányi: Le-verte / Ágaim’ a’ zivatar; rettentnek az Éjszaki Szélnek / Szárnyai! [The storm has beaten down / my branches; the Wings of the Northern Wind / frighten me!]

In this allegorical description Denis's translation, when compared with his previous renderings, contains less additions. Batsányi's alternates between following Denis' additions and those of Harold. For example, Macpherson's expression "lopped my branches away" is literally translated by Harold, whereas Denis changes it into the longer "all the honours of the branches perished." Batsányi here seems to follow Harold in the simpler rendering. Macpherson's metaphor, "the wings of the north," becomes personified in Denis by turning it into the wings of the pagan-antique god Boreas who symbolizes the North. In the Latin text Boreas can be understood as a common noun, but in the vulgar languages, its variants bring into the text such mythological overtone altogether alien from the world of Ossian. That may be the reason why all the other translators choose the expression "wings of the northern wind" (Germ. "die Flügel des Nordwinds," Hung. "éjszaki szélnek szárnyai"), the demythologised variant of the name Boreas.

The next example might be interesting for a different reason: in this instance, Batsányi adds to the text and offers another understanding of the expression "Morven" which cannot be found either in Harold or in Denis.

Macpherson: But, son of Alpin, the hero fell not harmless as the grass of the field; the blood of the mighty was on his sword, and he travelled with death through the ranks of their pride.

Harold: Der Held, o Alpins Erzeugter, fiel nicht friedlich, wie Graß auf dem Feld, der Mächtigen Blut befärbte sein Schwert, er riß sich, mit Tod, durch die Reihen ihres Stolzes.

Petersen: Mein Jüngling, Sohn Alpins, starb nicht ruhig, wie das Gras auf dem Felde. Der Starken Blut befärbte sein Schwerdt; mit Tod, riß er sich durch ihre stolze Schaaren.

Denis: Non tamen, o Proles Alpini! ut falce resectum / Gramen, iners cecidit. Clarorum sanguine cuspis / Oscaris immaduit, perque agmina robore fisa / Mors Iuveni dabat usque viam. [Fear not, oh, offspring of Alpin! Yet he did not fall so cowardly as the grass cut by the scythe. Oscar's sword was moistened by the blood of the mighty, death made way for the youth through the army trusting in its own strength.]

Rehbach: Aber er fiel nicht unrühmlich, wie Gras durch die Sichel geschnitten, / Alpins Erzeugter! es glänzte die Lanze von Oscar vom Blute / Vieler Tapfern. Er drang sich durch Schaaren der Starken. Verderben / War vor ihm her.

Batsányi: Oh Álpin' Magzattya! nem olly torlatlan halállal / Múlt-ki az éni deli Oskárom, mint a' le-metéltt fű / Morvának mezejénn. Az Erőssek

vére piroslott / Kardgyárol; azokat seregenként vágta halomba, / És valamerre repült, az halál vert útát előtte. – [Oh offspring of Alpin! My fine Oskar did not die an unrevenged death as the cut grass on the field of Morva. The blood of the strong shone red on his sword; he cut them into heaps and wherever he flew, death made way before him.]

The name Morven, the realm of Fingal and his ancestors, etimologically signifies “a ridge of very high hills”⁵⁵ so Morven designates a geographical area, the North-west coast of Scotland. Ossian describes himself using the simile “like an ancient oak on Morven.” Batsányi, although he knew the Macphersonian context, because he explains the name of the place as the home country of Ossian in a footnote in “Ossian’s Last Song,”⁵⁶ translates Morven into the Hungarian “Morva,” which also designates another geographical area to the north of Hungary, Moravia. The second use of “Morva” in Batsányi’s text cannot be found anywhere else; it is his own paraphrasing. For the Hungarian reader, the expression “Morva” possibly recalled the name of the territory “Morvaország,” “Morva country,” situated on the north-western border of contemporary Hungarian Kingdom. “The field of Morva” or “Morvamező” is a historical place where several battles were fought between the period of the Roman times and the Napoleonic wars. In one of these battles “Ladislás [IV.] ... allied himself with Rudolph of Habsburg, the new German king, against Ottokar [Premysl II.]... The defeat and death of the Czech king in the battle of Dürnkrut in 1278 put an end to the imperial pretensions of the Premyslids and established those of the Habsburgs, who now became Hungary’s neighbours.”⁵⁷

It is possible that Batsányi uses “the field of Morva” with a political overtone: the victory of the Habsburgs with the help of the Hungarian king opened the way to Austrian monarchs, centuries later, to become kings in neighbouring Hungary as well. In the 1780s, at the time of Batsányi’s preparing his Ossianic translations, the Holy German-Roman emperor’s, Joseph II’s Germanizing tendencies promoted the vision of the death of the nation, and this may have given rise to the Ossian-cult. Thus Batsányi re-interpreted Morven by alluding to the early beginnings of the prophesied extinction of the nation and simultaneously enriched the metaphoric structures of the Ossianic text. If there exists a hidden meaning in “Oskár’ halála,” it might have been understood by the political opposition: a possible reading of it might have been that the autonomy of the

55. See *PO*, p. 567.

56. Keresztury and Tarnai, p. 181, note.

57. László Kontler, *Millenium in Central Europe: A History of Hungary* (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1999), p. 83.

Hungarian kingdom will not cease without resistance as did that of the Czech kingdom which lost its status as an autonomous province. The final example can be of interest because it again shows, yet again, how much Batsányi relied on the Latin version:

Macpherson: They came on the foe like two rocks falling from the brows of Ardven. *Harold:* Sie fuhren gegen den Feind, wie zwey Felsen, die von Ardvens Stirne sich stürzen.

Petersen: Sie stürmten gegen den Feind, zween Felsen ähnlich, die von Ardvens Stirne sich stürzen.

Denis: utque / Ardueniis duo saxa iugis excussa feruntur, / Sic illis conferre manum mos. [as when two rocks falling from the brows of Arduen / so they used to fight [the enemy].]

Rehbach: Der Nachdruck / Ihrer Gefechte war so, wie zween der geschleuderten Steine, / Wenn sie sich über die Hügel von Ardven mit Ungestümm wälzen.

Batsányi: 's olly módra rohantak / Ellenségöknek roppantt seregére, miként az / Árdua' bértzéről le-szakadtt két szikla. [So they broke in / on the vast army of their enemy / like two rocks fallen from the brows of Árdua.]

Only in Denis and Batsányi do we find the Latinate form of the Scottish mountains, Ardven. Denis's "Arduen" is copied by Batsányi in his use of "Árdua." He also knew the meaning of the Latin expression "arduum," "a steep place" and employed the word counting on its meaning as well.

These above examples serve to prove that Batsányi relied on Denis and used Harold only as an aid. To best describe Batsányi's translation of Denis's Latin poem, we might as well apply Hugh Blair's words of approval of the literariness of Macpherson's translations in the Preface to *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*: "The translation is extremely literal. Even the arrangement of the words in the original has been imitated; to which must be imputed some inversions in the style, that otherwise would not have been chosen."⁵⁸ Petersen does not deviate from Harold in significant places and Rehbach's hexameters, for the most part, could not possibly have been of much help when forming the Hungarian hexametric lines.

Batsányi translated only the first thirty lines of the poem then gave up his hexametric endeavours probably because, as his above cited note testifies, he found the task too demanding: "Even though I may have the skills, I do not have the time for

58. *PO*, p. 6.

it.”⁵⁹ As regards the literary merits of “Oskár’ halála”: we might conclude that the poem is an example of the attempt to prepare Hungarian translations from neo-Latin poets in the period of Latinate Classicism, in this case, from Denis. He probably wanted his translation to even suggest his Latin source. The rendering of “Ossian’s Last Song” from a forged German source and “The Death of Oscar” from a hexametric Latin poem exemplifies what unexpected turns reception can take, the further we move from the place of conception: when Ossian reaches Hungary, an exemplary piece of his poems becomes a hexametric bardic song only to illustrate Batsányi’s skills in translation and to prove that the Hungarian language, similarly to the Latin, is capable of providing metrical poetry. That he wanted to adopt this poetic form of the bardic song and thus to domesticate antique versification in his mother tongue precisely through an Ossianic song was perhaps an unfortunate idea. He himself found the attempt unsuccessful: under the influence of Johann Gottfried Herder, Batsányi later experimented with the iambic form in his Ossianic translations.

Batsányi’s admiration for Herder is well documented: in a letter from 1797–98 to his friend whom he met in Vienna, the Swiss historian Johannes von Müller, he welcomes the news about Herder’s Ossianic translations with an outburst of joy: “Ausserst angenehm ist mir dass Herder den herrlichen Gedanken hat, meinen Geliebten Ossian zu übersetzen – und zwar aus dem Original selbst! – Welch ein Gewinn für mich! für Deutschland! für die ganze litterarische Welt!”⁶⁰ After his Kassa period, when in Vienna, Batsányi not only kept an eye on the latest events in the Ossianic discourse, but he wanted to belong to this company as well, and it was probably Herder’s death that prevented him from becoming part of the European current of reception.⁶¹ Through the influence of the Herderian criticism of Denis’s translation and his own opponents, and the appearance of newer editions in Vienna, he changed his mind: he understood that, when translating the whole of Ossian, his classicist views would not hold. In 1802 he already writes about his conforming to the principle of domesticating in translation: “I want to translate Ossian as the author would have sung had he been Hungarian and lived now (regarding the present

59. Batsányi, “Oskár’ halála,” p. 200.

60. Quoted in Tivadar Thienemann, “Herder és Batsányi,” *Egyetemes Philologiai Közlöny* 38 (1914) 146–48, p. 146. For his friendship with the Swiss historian Johannes von Müller and his letters to Karl August Böttiger and Herder see Thienemann’s invaluable discoveries (1914). Through the mediation of Böttiger Batsányi wanted to order drawings from James Macdonald for his Ossianic translations (147).

61. Batsányi wrote his last letter to Herder on December 25, 1803, not knowing that he had died on the 18th (Thienemann, p. 148).

state of the language).”⁶² Although these shifts in Batsányi’s own views about translation during his Ossianic adventures cannot be assigned to his adherence to a well-defined school, this assimilatory method was characteristic of the French school.⁶³

In the translation of “Mors Oscaris” he deviated from his main rule at the time, namely, that the translator should never add to the text, only copy the original. Despite his conviction, even if he largely followed Denis almost verbatim, he enriched and paraphrased the original in quite a few places and probably made the poem more meaningful in the Hungarian reception, which indicates the power of the Ossianic corpus to inspire complex and intriguing national responses. Batsányi’s “Oskár’ halála,” unknowingly, asserts the autonomy and cultural significance of the translator. Howard Gaskill, in his famous article on “Ossian in Europe” summarizes the early European reception with the following words: “There is certainly some force to the argument that the Ossian which influenced Europe was not in fact Macpherson at all, but respectively Cesarotti, Denis, Le Tourneur, Bilderdijk, etc.: in other words, a hybrid creature mediated through Italian hendecasyllabic *sciolti*, German hexameters, French poetic prose, Dutch alexandrines, not to mention Greek fifteen-syllable lines or Russian four-foot trochaics with dactylic endings.”⁶⁴ Perhaps we may rightly add that János Batsányi’s poetic experiments and the early Hungarian reception of Ossian fully exemplify the contemporary European tendency.

62. Quoted in Keresztury and Tarnai, p. 537.

63. See Gaskill, *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London: Thoemmes, 2004), p. 12.

64. Gaskill, “Ossian in Europe,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* (1994) 643–78, p. 647.