

Scotland's Forgotten  
Treasure: the Visionary  
Romances of  
George MacDonald



Scotland's Forgotten  
Treasure: the Visionary  
Romances of  
George MacDonald

Colin Manlove

Aberdeen University Press

© Colin Manlove, 2016  
Aberdeen University Press  
University of Aberdeen  
Aberdeen AB24 3UG

Typeset by the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies,  
University of Aberdeen  
Printed and bound in Great Britain  
by CPI Anthony Rowe, Eastbourne

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-85752-056-9

The right of Colin Manlove  
to be identified as author of this work  
has been asserted in accordance with  
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

For Barbara Amell



# Contents

Preface	ix
1: MacDonald's life and character	1
2: MacDonald's views, literary and theological	9
3: Before MacDonald	29
4: <i>Phantastes</i> (1858)	39
5: 'The Golden Key' (1867)	79
6: <i>Lilith</i> (1895)	99
7: Conclusion	157
Bibliography	171
Index	179





## Preface

Ideally George MacDonald (1824–1905) and his fantasy works should need no introduction, but time and fashion in Britain have not been kind to a Scottish writer well-known and often celebrated in his day. This is particularly sad given that MacDonald is actually one of the finest and most profound of Scottish writers, equal at least with his now far more popular contemporary Robert Louis Stevenson. However MacDonald is better known and celebrated in the land where Christian issues meet with more widespread attention than in Britain – the United States of America. MacDonald brings to British literature a hitherto largely unknown current of mysticism to trouble its often too-assured rationality and to question its moral and aesthetic certainties, and uses an imagistic dream style to stir the depths of the reader's spirit. At the same time his original and wise intelligence work to surprise us into new awareness of truth. And yet because he is seen as a Christian he has suffered undeserved neglect.

There is every reason to read MacDonald. Some of his works of fantasy, written in the tradition of Dante, Spenser, Milton and Blake, are among the most moving and profound we have. Compared to his *Lilith* (1895), the fantastic work of MacDonald's disciple C. S. Lewis can sometimes seem like play. MacDonald's unorthodox Christian views, which centre on love between man and God, and repudiate much dogma and theology since the Gospels, make his faith available to all times and conditions of men. The originality of his mind constantly turns old assumptions upside down. His use of myth in his fantastic stories creates a sense of the divine mystery at the heart of both the world and the human mind. MacDonald is also something of a great writer, his symbolic style potently conveying his vision. Indeed it is partly to

show how complex and moving his works of fantasy are that this book has been written.

MacDonald is also one of the prime exponents of Scottish fantasy, a genre which is arguably the other side of Scottish literature, and is peculiarly concerned with the believed supernatural. English fantasy often tends to be much nearer to a game of the impossible; Scottish fantasy has its roots in folk culture and in a landscape still imaginatively populated by legendary monsters, bewildering fairies and devils stemming from a largely unassimilated landscape of forgotten bens, lochs and moors. Its writers range from the medieval poets Robert Henryson or William Dunbar to the contemporary fiction writers Alasdair Gray or James Robertson; and it includes such figures as Burns, Scott, Hogg, Carlyle, Stevenson, Lang, 'Fiona Macleod', Barrie, David Lindsay, Neil Gunn and George Mackay Brown.

Scottish is very different from English fantasy. The protagonists of Scottish fantasy are often solitary individuals, withdrawing from or without a society. Scottish fantasy tends to depict the mind rather than adventures into the outside world; it is often centred on one place. In it people get less rather than more from life. Frequently it portrays a breakdown of personal identity, setting the public or rational self against the urges of the unconscious mind. It is egalitarian in social outlook where English fantasy is hierarchic.<sup>1</sup>

MacDonald, being a Christian, and himself living in England, exhibits some but not all of these characteristics. For example, his protagonists end more happy than sad, if they often have to die out of the world to reach this condition. And like many English fantasy writers he invents secondary or fantastic worlds that his characters enter, such as Fairy Land in *Phantastes* or the region of the seven dimensions in *Lilith*. Indeed he is one of the first to do this. His heroes in these worlds make journeys, though those journeys are inward and spiritual. The lush wooded setting of *Phantastes* seems more Surrey than Sutherland; although the bleak moors of *Lilith* seem to put us in Scotland, they could equally depict some of the arid land around Bordighera in Italy, where it was written. Nevertheless MacDonald did not stay long in

---

<sup>1</sup> See Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature, A Critical Survey* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), 1–19, 343–7; and *The Fantasy Literature of England*, (London: Macmillan, 1999), 1–9, 191–9.

any one place in England; and his strongest roots were always in Scotland and his beloved Aberdeenshire.

Yet there is one other feature of Scottish fantasy of which MacDonald could be called the prime exponent: and that is the note of longing. All his life MacDonald longed for the time when he would meet God. Desire is also seen in Hogg's semi-mystic poem 'Kilmeny'; in the ecstasy of Carlyle's Herr Teufelsdrökh at the created world; in the urge of Stevenson's Jekyll towards a wild freedom from the repressed self; and in the false glamour of Fairyland that draws and then entraps Randal in Andrew Lang's 'The Gold of Fairnilee'. It is found too in the wish of Barrie's Peter Pan to stay young for ever; in the urge of David Lindsay's Maskull to escape the sensual world to find the god Muspel; in the desire in Neil Gunn for a world of Highland purity; and in the longing to make a perfect sacrifice of himself to God that drives George Mackay Brown's hero in *Magnus*. Such longing comes from a variety of personal or social causes, but frequently behind it is a sense of the inadequacy of the self or the world in which one has to live. That sense is often religious and mystical, sometimes involving a journey into the spirit. Such journeys are at the centre of George MacDonald's fantasy.

In his day, MacDonald was a great man. He was well-known to such writers as Carlyle, Dickens, Thackeray, Ruskin and Kingsley, and a close friend of Lewis Carroll, whose *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) his own work greatly influenced and inspired. As a writer of children's fantasies and fairy-tales, and of over twenty-five novels of 'real life', he was admired and widely read. As a lecturer in Britain and the United States in the 1870s and 1880s he was almost as hugely popular there as Dickens had been four years before him, his talks on religious subjects and on literature often drawing audiences far larger than could be contained in the lecture halls and churches.

But unfortunately for MacDonald his time was followed by a century that in British culture came to repudiate most things religious. While a high place in Scottish literature is still given to MacDonald's contemporaries Carlyle, Stevenson or Barrie, he himself is largely forgotten, his reputation sustained only by such occasional figures as G. K. Chesterton or C. S. Lewis. Even J. R. R. Tolkien, whose *The Lord of the Rings* is, secretly, highly indebted to MacDonald's fantasy 'The Golden Key' (1867), came to reject his work. Only the cult of the fantastic from the 1960s onwards, and the growing interest in its Christian form, led to a revival of interest in MacDonald's work – and as

seen, this much more in America than in Britain. Very few Scots have ever heard of him, and he is continually confused with the better-known crime writer George MacDonald Fraser.

MacDonald's fantasies for children, particularly *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1888) were highly popular, and went through numerous editions before his death in 1905; they have never been out of print since. These stories, written in the idiom of Grimm and Andersen, were part of a fascination for the invented fairy tale or fantasy for children that developed through the Victorian period in such works as Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* (1851), Thackeray's comic *The Rose and the Ring* (1855), Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863), Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) or Andrew Lang's *The Chronicles of Pantouffia* (1889–93).

MacDonald's two fantasies for adults, *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895), written at the beginning and end of his literary life, were however much less popular. Together with the fairy tale 'The Golden Key', they use sequences of strange and seemingly disconnected images and events with uncertain direction. They spring from the chaos-embracing German Romantic fairy tales of Goethe, Novalis, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Frederick de la Motte Fouqué (*Undine*) which appeared between 1795 and 1811. They do not tell a story in the conventional sense, but describe wanderings by their protagonists across fantastic worlds. Yet they are among the most profound works of fantasy and mystical literature in English.

*Phantastes* and *Lilith* mark the beginning and end not only of MacDonald's literary life but of the Christian life as he sees it. *Phantastes* is concerned with what may be called the first things, and *Lilith* with the last. *Phantastes* deals with created nature itself, with waking things up, and eventually with a Christ-like life and death. *Lilith* describes nature run down, the need for everything to die out of this world into the next, the gradual end-time of all things. In the middle of the way comes the short fairy tale 'The Golden Key', which in a sense is the pivot that moves us from the Christian life in this world described in *Phantastes* to that in the next world in *Lilith*.

Each story takes up where the other left off. At the end of *Phantastes* the hero is returned from Fairy Land to this world; in 'The Golden Key' both characters start as children in this world, and travel through it on their way to the next; and in *Lilith* the protagonist's adventures take place in an

after-world that eventually leads to God. Starting from apparent human subjectivity, we end with the most objective fact of all.

But all of these works are also set in the imagination: the landscape of *Phantastes* is the human imagination of its protagonist, with God dwelling at its root; that of 'The Golden Key' is the world as created by God's imagination; and in the after-world of *Lilith*, even while the strange realm partly images the sick soul of the protagonist, we are closer to the divine imagination itself. Correspondingly the stories move from the individual to the typical to the mythic. Anodos's experience relates to him as a particular person; the journey of Mossy and Tangle in 'The Golden Key' is a pattern of pilgrimage through life to heaven; and the narrative of *Lilith* is a myth of purification.

Alone among MacDonald's fantasy works, even among his many novels, these three texts, *Phantastes*, 'The Golden Key' and *Lilith* are journey stories, following a protagonist as he or she travels through a landscape. And insofar as that journey eventually arrives at a spiritual goal, they are also pilgrimage narratives, like Dante's *Commedia* or Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Nineteenth-century pilgrimage stories include Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1836), Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* and MacDonald's friend Margaret Oliphant's *A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen* (1882) and *The Land of Darkness* (1888). All of these involve growth in spiritual and moral insight. Growth in moral insight is also at the heart of the Victorian novel as *Bildungsroman*, as in *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, *Vanity Fair* or *Middlemarch*, but there the concern is with secular development, and with people in a social setting. In MacDonald's mystical books as a whole we are involved rather with progress towards God and life beyond death, and with supernatural rather than realistic fiction. And as in most pilgrimage literature, his protagonists leave society and follow an often solitary path through and out of the world. Throughout history pilgrimage narratives have in fact been one of the most recurrent images for the lonely mystic way.

But if they are all pilgrimages, these stories do take time to find their proper objective. *Phantastes* and *Lilith* are revealed as mystic journeys towards revelation mainly in retrospect, for their protagonists Anodos and Vane are at first tainted with evil and have no direction. This is unlike, say, Galahad or Dante or Piers Plowman, who are not seen as evil before they set out, and are from the first journeying from the world of corruption towards divine

illumination, whether in reaching the Grail or heaven itself. In *Phantastes* and *Lilith* the procedure is one of by indirections finding direction out. In *Phantastes* the hero Anodos wanders at first in Fairy Land as a slave to his impulses, but eventually finds a direction that leads him to giving his life for others before being returned to this world. In 'The Golden Key' Mossy and Tangle set out at first to find the keyhole for the key Mossy has discovered, but then the object of their journey becomes the invisible land above them from whence the shadows fall. After this they are parted, and with them the narrative: we spend much time with Tangle underground before returning to Mossy. Vane, the protagonist in *Lilith*, is like Anodos in that for long he follows his selfish impulses and falls into evil ways, before he accepts his proper destination and travels there.

Each story has desire as a central theme. At first the desire may be evil or mistaken, involving self-gratification or looking for a mere means (a white lady, a keyhole) instead of an end (the glory the lady figures, the world beyond the keyhole). Always the desire itself is most true when it becomes a longing for something holy, beyond this world

These are the three most complex and mysterious fantasies that MacDonald wrote. In the most mystery-filled of his other fantasies, such as *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) or 'Photogen and Nycteris' (1879), we know where we are, what is happening and roughly what is the meaning of the story. But in *Phantastes*, 'The Golden Key' and *Lilith* the sequence of events is often inexplicable and full of the strangest, often grotesque, terrifying or loathsome imagery, punctuated by scenes of passionate love, beautiful nature or art or spiritual wonder. At a first reading few readers will have any sense of why how one strange scene follows another, or of what the narrative is about, or where it is going. To the searches for meaning that these stories provoke in the reader there are often no possible answers, because the images are grounded in truths that can only be lived, not analysed. The stories force questions, and even when any solutions are found, these can sometimes seem like dead sticks, cut from the tree that sustained them. With these caveats in mind, we may start our own journey.

## Abbreviations of MacDonald Works in Text

- ADO* *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination, and on Shakspeare*  
(London: Sampson Low Marston, 1893)
- GK* 'The Golden Key', in U.C.Knoepfmacher (ed.), George MacDonald,  
*The Complete Fairy Tales* (New York and London: Penguin, 1999)
- GMDW* Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife* (London:  
George Allen, 1924)
- GMP* *George MacDonald in the Pulpit: The 'Spoken' Sermons of George MacDonald*,  
compiled by J. Joseph Flynn and David Edwards (Whitethorn, CA:  
Johannesen, 1996)
- HG* *The Hope of the Gospel and the Miracles of our Lord* (Whitethorn, CA:  
Johannesen, 1995)
- PL* *Phantastes and Lilith* (London: Gollancz, 1962)
- US* *Unspoken Sermons, Series I, II, III in one volume* (Whitethorn, CA:  
Johannesen, 1997)





# 1 MacDonald's Life And Character

## Life

There are several good biographies of George MacDonald, and we shall be brief here.<sup>1</sup> Descended from the MacDonalds of Glencoe, MacDonald was born the son of a thread-manufacturer in Huntly, Aberdeenshire, in 1824. Though he did well at school and in 'Natural Philosophy' at Aberdeen University, MacDonald was without the money to pursue his scientific studies abroad. He travelled to London in 1845, working unhappily as a tutor until 1848, when he decided to enter the church, and enrolled at Highbury Theological College to become a Congregational minister. In 1846 he met his wife-to-be Louisa Powell, whom he married in 1851. After his training in London, he was appointed to Arundel Parish Church in Sussex in 1850, but in 1853 he was forced to resign over his liberal and heterodox theological views. He then settled near Manchester, where some relatives lived, and earned a precarious living as a tutor, lecturer, preacher and poet, publishing the long and quite well-received religious poem *Within and Without* in 1855 (second edition, 1857). This poem won him the favour and patronage of Lady Byron, former wife of the poet.

Plagued all his life by a form of tuberculosis that several times almost killed him, in 1857 MacDonald moved south with his now growing family to the cleaner sea air of Hastings. He wrote *Phantastes* in two months over his first Christmas there, in the hope of profiting from the contemporary popularity of romances, but it had only modest success. His next venture was into children's fairy stories, then also growing in vogue. At this time he made friends with Lewis Carroll, then coincidentally living in Hastings with

---

<sup>1</sup> See the works by Hein, Ronald MacDonald, Greville MacDonald and Raeper in the bibliography. Raeper is by far the most comprehensive and detached.

relatives. MacDonald's *Phantastes* greatly influenced *Alice in Wonderland*. Carroll also loved the punning fairy story 'The Light Princess', which MacDonald was then writing.

Encouraged by his friend Lady Byron, the MacDonalds moved to London in 1860. He now tried the market with a Highland romance of 'second sight', *The Portent* (1860), to little effect; and his attempt at writing a play, the oft-revised 'If I Had a Father', was rejected by his publisher George Murray Smith. Warned by Smith that "'Only fiction pays!'"<sup>2</sup> MacDonald then set about writing novels, at last with financial success. *Martin Elginbrod* (1863) was quickly followed by *Adela Cathcart* (1864), *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865), *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1865), *Guild Court* (1868), *Robert Falconer* (1868) and *The Seaboard Parish* (1868). Many of these gained much of their vitality from being partly autobiographical. After these, and despite extensive pirating in the USA, MacDonald was never again in dire financial straits, and became a well-known literary figure, and a friend of such writers as Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley and John Ruskin. He had learnt the hard way that only novels and children's stories would find a large readership. But though they sold very well, and the best of them are part of Scottish literary tradition, his novels were never central to his genius. That lay in fantasy, but only his children's fantasy was to be widely popular.

Meanwhile, in 1862 MacDonald secured a position as lecturer at the recently established Bedford College for Ladies in London; and in 1865 he gained a post as a theology lecturer at the evening classes of King's College. He was also preaching frequently in a number of churches, not always keeping within the bounds of orthodoxy. In 1865 he applied for the then vacant chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University, but despite testimonials from many leading literary figures, was unsuccessful. In 1867 Aberdeen University awarded him the honorary degree of LLD, for 'high literary eminence as a poet and author'.<sup>3</sup>

In winter 1871–2 MacDonald followed in the footsteps of Dickens and Thackeray by undertaking a lecture tour of the United States, where his books were highly popular – and continually pirated. His tour was a huge success, even though he was frequently ill, and he made friendships with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Mark Twain (who later visited him in England). In 1877 the health of not only MacDonald but one of his eleven children took the family to the warmer air of Porto Fino in Italy, from where they did not return to England till early 1879. Although in the interim

<sup>2</sup> *GMDW*, 318.

<sup>3</sup> William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Tring, Herts.: Lion, 1987), 236.

the family had lost not only their originally sick child Mary Josephine but also the beloved and promising Maurice, they resolved on setting up a permanent home in Italy, and had a large house called Casa Coraggio built for them in Bordighera on the Italian/French border near Grasse. They developed the custom of wintering in Italy, and travelling all over Britain in summer, when the family turned themselves into a group of itinerant players, with their speciality Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Sometimes MacDonald would also tour the country lecturing on literary and religious subjects. His half-life in Italy, and his general avoidance of London meant that he largely cut himself off from society and his literary friends, and became less well-known.

Meanwhile MacDonald continued to turn out novels at his usual rate. Between 1877 and 1891, when he carried out his last lecturing tour in Britain, no less than twelve were published, including *Paul Faber, Surgeon* (1879), *Sir Gibbie* (1879), *Donal Grant* (1883) and *A Rough Shaking* (1891). But in 1891 the death of their beloved daughter Lilia Scott MacDonald broke the hearts of both MacDonald and Louisa. After that, both turned their thoughts towards another life. MacDonald was still to write a few more novels, and to write, and rewrite, his last and most profound fantasy *Lilith* from 1890–95, which is in a sense his grappling with Lilia's death; but thereafter his mental health declined and he entered a long period of speechlessness lasting from 1898 until his death in 1905.

## Character

This writer used to have some difficulty in talking about George MacDonald the man, because he thought he was hidden by George MacDonald the Christian preacher. Whenever he spoke, even in his letters to his wife, this Christian MacDonald came through, early and late. This in a letter of 1845 to his father:

My greatest difficulty always is "How do I know that my faith is of a lasting kind such as will produce fruits?" I am ever so forgetful and unwilling to pray and read God's word – that it often seems as if my faith will produce no fruit. My error seems to be always searching for

faith in place of contemplating the truths of the gospel which are such as produce faith and confidence.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, MacDonald is writing for his Christian father, but it is clear that he is entirely committed to what he is saying, and not concealing his limitations. There is little sense of George MacDonald the individual personality here, rather the struggle of a soul at the dawn of its Christian journey. The temptations the spirit strives against are familiar to every would-be believer – inaccuracy, laziness, reluctance to change, a demand for instant conviction.

And here again is MacDonald near the other end of his Christian life, writing to the dying Oxford Professor of Anatomy and Physiology, George Rolleston, whom he knew only slightly:

Do not start at the warmth of my address, for brief as was our opportunity of knowing each other, it was more than long enough to make me love you. I write because I hear you are very ill. I know not a little about illness, and my heart is with you in yours. Be of good courage; there is a live heart at the centre of the lovely order of the Universe ... All my life, I might nearly say, I have been trying to find that one Being, and to know him consciously present; hope grows and grows with the years that lead me nearer to the end of my earthly life.<sup>5</sup>

For this MacDonald there is really no such thing as personality, or the privacy of the individual self. That is why MacDonald can speak to Rolleston as he does. As illness and approaching death open us to the ultimate truths that have always been present beneath our lives, so MacDonald feels that he can talk directly to what is now an exposed soul, moving away from all the identity it had in the world.

Compare this by the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), who became a close friend of MacDonald's:

The Sultan and I arrived in London almost at the same time, but in different quarters – *my* point of entry being Paddington, and *his* Charing Cross. I must admit that the crowd was greater at the latter place ....<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Letter of 8 November 1845, repr. in Glenn Edward Sadler (ed.), *An Expression of Character: The Letters of George MacDonald* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to George Rolleston, June 16, 1881. repr. in Sadler, op. cit. 305.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart D. Collingwood (ed.), *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (London: Nelson,

Of course, Carroll is playing a part here, a game with pomp, and we are not getting the real, naked Dodgson, as it were; but still that urbane, witty, mocking self is there, breathing through every word. And we feel Carroll's own love of reversals, of continually turning the world upside-down. He is performing for an imagined audience, where MacDonald is completely involved in addressing one person with naked feeling.

Then again there is the no less Reverend Charles Kingsley, whose *The Water-Babies* appeared in 1863, five years after MacDonald's *Phantastes*. Here the style is not balanced, like Carroll's, but rushing and jostling like a stream from one side to the other:

I am the strangest jumble of superstition and of a reverence for scientific induction which forbids me (simply for want of certain facts) to believe in heaps of things in which I see no *a priori* impossibility. I want to believe all Jung Stilling's pneumatology, all Elliotson's mesmerism. Yea, I would gladly believe in deevs and peris, elves and fairies, if I could... What is a poor fellow to do, who, disbelieving the existence of matter far more firmly than Bishop Berkeley, is accessible to no hints from anything but matter? A mystic in theory, and an ultra-materialist in practice – who, if I saw a ghost to-morrow, should chat quietly with it, and take out pen, ink and paper to get an exact description of the phenomenon on the spot, what shall I do? I fear sometimes that I shall end by a desperate lunge into one extreme or the other...<sup>7</sup>

What Kingsley is describing is a tension between faith and knowledge of the world that was felt by many Christians of his time with the rise of scientific method and the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859), but he puts it as it affects him personally, regarding it as a peculiarity of his own divided character. It comes direct from the heart, and that gives it its immediacy, gives us the sense of an individual lurching from one side to another. Such indeed was Kingsley's own nature, often more effervescent than profound, capable of shifting from one belief to another, because volatility is the essence of the man – evident as much in the excited, oscillatory, yet rushing style of *The Water-Babies*. Such a writer, like Carroll, is immediately engaging at a human level, because the signature of his personality is everywhere.

---

1898), 97.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Kingsley: *His Letters and Memories of his Life*, ed. by his wife (Frances E. Kingsley), 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, 1876), II, 18–19.

Few such individual quirks colour MacDonald's personality. We know that he had a love of sartorial finery and of precious stones; that he was sometimes stern in disciplining his sons; and his 'The Light Princess' shows that he had a real, if occasional talent for witty comedy. His heterodox theological beliefs – for example, that hell is not everlasting, or that Christ did not come to atone for our sins, but to show us the way back to God, might seem to make him stand out: but many of them can be traced back to F.D. Maurice, to Unitarianism or to liberal German theology; and in any case they are more matters of belief than of personality. MacDonald did have a marked belief in a loving God which originated partly in reaction to his harsh Calvinist upbringing, and this led to his belief that the purpose of life was to get to know God through a lifelong friendship.

The biographies of MacDonald do not seem to find a 'personality' either. That by his son Greville, who admired his father, was concerned not so much with MacDonald as a particular character but rather with him as a great Christian and writer. However the more objective modern biography by William Raeper in 1987 has not substantially changed this view, finding nothing to contradict it in the way of private notebooks or diaries. Raeper does allow that MacDonald was over-harsh with his sons, particularly Greville, but finds little else to criticise. And indeed MacDonald's marriage to Louisa Powell seems to have been a very happy one and he loved all his eleven children. It will be allowed that as a student at university MacDonald had his drunken and debauched times, but that is a lapse of youthful energies rather than of any personal flaw. Naturally one is a little suspicious of such excellence of character when it is presented by a devoted son, but we must begin to accept it when it appears in a less biased commentator.

The editor of the collection of George MacDonald's letters, Glenn Sadler, entitled it *An Expression of Character*. For this reader an expression of character in the usual sense is precisely what it is not. True, MacDonald has hobbies, interests, oddities and occasional failings; true he was marked by a lifelong lung disease that he met with sturdy courage; but these are items, and do not seem to emerge from a particular *personality* that unites them. And that was the difficulty for this writer, who thought the 'real' MacDonald was in there somewhere, but not being allowed one word by the Christian MacDonald.

But in fact there is no MacDonald apart from the Christian one: his faith is the constant ground of everything he does, and the root of almost every pleasure he takes in life. The 'real' MacDonald *is* the Christian. He is not, finally, interested in personality, only in the persons of Christ and of God. While he

creates many vivid characters in his novels, his moral and religious purpose is always dominant. In his theology he sets his face against the idea of the individual self, considering it a source of evil: 'Man is only man in the doing of the truth, perfect man only in the doing of the highest truth' (*US*, 471).

All Christians know that they have to try to suppress selfish interests, but MacDonald carries the notion to a limit. 'The self is given to us that we may sacrifice it' (*US*, 366, 'Self-Denial'). For MacDonald this means 'we must refuse, abandon, deny self altogether as a ruling, or determining, or originating element in us' (*ibid.*, 367). This will be done not by our own wills in separation from God's, for therein lies pride and blindness; it will be done by turning to God so that he may take the place of the old self (364–70). Through a continued opening of ourselves to God,

The deeper soul that willed and wills our souls, rises up, the infinite life, into the Self we call I and me, but which lives immediately from him, and is his very own property and nature – unspeakably more his than ours: this deeper creative soul, working on and with his creation upon higher levels, makes the *I* and *me* more and more his, and himself more and more ours; until at length the glory of our existence flashes upon us, we face full to the sun that enlightens what it sent forth, and know ourselves alive with an infinite life, even the life of the Father; know that our existence is not the moonlight of a mere consciousness of being, but the sun-glory of a life having become one with its origin ... Then indeed we are; then indeed we have life; the life of Jesus has, through light, become life in us; the glory of God in the face of Jesus, mirrored in our hearts, has made us alive; we are one with God for ever and ever. (*US*, 456–7)

This will involve a change of identity, but it will be from the false identity of the mere self to the true one of God living in the self's place. While our Christian life still involves will, this will not be a self-begotten will, but one working in harmony with God. Every minute of every day we will be talking to God, making ourselves more open to him. And this will make one's whole life a mystic process through which we come ever closer to him. All our new selves will eventually be one with God, and in him we will find our true identities and names (*US*, 'The New Name', 69–78). That this process in some sense happened with MacDonald himself may be attested by the many hearers

of his sermons and others who found he looked like their images of Christ or God or an ancient prophet.<sup>8</sup>

With MacDonald then, what one sees is actually the whole truth of the man: his statement that the truth of a thing lies in its show and not in its analysis<sup>9</sup> is applicable to himself. For him the sole truth of the world became God and love, and he let that fact irradiate his whole life. MacDonald's life is pre-eminently one of a growing mystic relationship with a divine being who is sometimes near, sometimes far off. 'I have all my life, I think, been attended ... by the feeling of a meeting at hand.'<sup>10</sup> Like Bunyan, whose *The Pilgrim's Progress* became an important book in his life, MacDonald is moving towards the Celestial City; but where Bunyan's Christian will find there the reward for all his sufferings and endurance, MacDonald will find the God he has all his life longed to meet. Though he loves the world as God's creation, everything he does in it is coloured by the desire for what is beyond it. 'Oh dear, what a mere inn of a place the world is! and thank God! we must widen and widen our thoughts and hearts. A great good is coming to us all – too big for this world to hold ...'<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Amell (ed.), *Wingfold: Celebrating the Works of George MacDonald*, no. 21 (Winter, 1998), 42, 'the very mouthpiece of the Divine Spirit'; *ibid.*, no. 42 (Spring, 2003), 14, 'He was child, lover, and saint in one'; *ibid.*, no. 46 (Spring, 2004), 22, 40; *ibid.*, no. 51 (Summer, 2005), 19, 41; *ibid.*, no. 62 (Spring, 2008), 41 ('the face of our Saviour'); Barbara Amell, *A Perfect Soul: George MacDonald in America* (Portland, OR: Wingfold Books, 2009), 56, 73, 99. In *Wingfold* no. 62, 41 Sara Tytler also remarks 'He was sometime spoken of by those who knew nothing of him save by sight, yet would turn and look after him because of the likeness as "the living Christ."'

<sup>9</sup> *US*, 350, 463–9.

<sup>10</sup> *GMDW*, 534; see also 528.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 524; see also 349, 352, 396.



## 2 MacDonald's Views

### Literary

Though MacDonald is best known as a fiction writer and as a Christian, he was also a lifelong literary critic. When in 1865 he applied for the Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh, he was considered a serious candidate for the position – even at a time when he had as yet not published much criticism. MacDonald's main literary-critical works are *England's Antiphon* (1868), *Orts* (1882), *The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke* (1885) and 'The Fantastic Imagination' (1893). Of these *England's Antiphon* is a series of essays on the Christian content of English devotional poetry from the medieval period to the end of the seventeenth century, with added brief accounts of preferred poets thereafter – John Byrom, James Thomson, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Clough, Tennyson, Arnold. *Orts* has chapters on the imagination, and on Shakespeare, Browning, Wordsworth and Shelley. Most considerable is MacDonald's textual and critical interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which he comments on the text line by line and produces a scholarly and original account of the play. Throughout his life, most notably in his tour of the United States in 1872–3, MacDonald lectured on numerous literary topics, especially Shakespeare and Burns.

Not surprisingly then, MacDonald, was very thoughtful on the nature of his own writing, particularly his fantasy, where his main claim to originality lay. In this he is like only two other major writers of fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien, who wrote a long essay 'On Fairy Stories' (1947) describing much of what he was about in his *The Lord of the Rings*; and C. S. Lewis, who wrote several papers, including 'On Stories' (1956) explaining his preferred mode of fantastic narrative. Tolkien and Lewis were academics, who wrote much literary criticism besides their own work. Fortunately MacDonald and these writers wrote about fantasy after they had written much of their own, so

that there is little sense of it being written to a formula. Both Lewis and Tolkien owed a considerable literary debt to MacDonald; though Lewis claimed too much of this influence, and Tolkien, who later turned against MacDonald, too little.<sup>1</sup> MacDonald has often been seen as a forerunner of Lewis and Tolkien, but his appeal to them as a scholar and a critic has rather escaped notice.

MacDonald's view of the imagination is religious. He explores this in his essay 'The Imagination' (1867). For him God did not create the universe and then leave it to get on by itself. God is rather continually active, making new things at every instant. In eternity, where all times come together, it may be true that the creation is complete, but within time God is still making the world (*ADO*, 4; see also *HG*, 400). This making is a process of imagining: God imagines us into being, and thus works as an artist. The human imagination works in the same way as God's, shaping thoughts into form, and is thus man's highest faculty (*ADO*, 2). But the human imagination is secondary to God's because man is God's creation and 'but a thought of God' (*ibid*); and man can only use the materials of the world God has already created. When a man imagines a new thing, God is the true author of that thing: 'If we ... consider the so-called creative faculty in man, we shall find that in no primary sense is this faculty creative. Indeed, a man is rather being thought than thinking, when a new thought arises in his mind' (*ibid*).

What then of the created world? MacDonald says that 'the imagination of man is made in the image of the imagination of God' (*ADO*, 3). That being so the world created by God's imagination will be continually symbolic of the imagination of man. 'For the world around him [man] is an outward figuration of the condition of his mind'; 'all that moves in the mind is symbolised in Nature'; 'the world is a sensuous analysis of humanity, and hence an inexhaustible wardrobe for the clothing of human thought' (*ADO*, 5, 9). The world is not merely physical, but the physical is the form in which the creative thought of God expresses itself. In this nature is simultaneously mind and matter, with mind dominant.

True physical laws are metaphysical: the 'law' of gravitational attraction which we discern is only contingent, for beneath it the real law is that of 'atonement', of things coming together. The laws of gravity or of entropy,

---

<sup>1</sup> Colin Manlove, 'Parent or Associate? George MacDonald and the Inklings', in Roderick McGillis (ed.), *George MacDonald, Literary Heritage and Heirs: Essays on the Background and Legacy of his Writing* (Wayne, PA; Zossima Press, 2008), 232–5.

of weight or death in our world are only half of the truth in the metaphysical world, where gravity and levity, death and life, are both at once real, and where one may walk on water or become more truly alive by dying. It is these deepest 'natural' laws that MacDonald uses in his *The Miracles of Our Lord* (1870) to explain how miracles do not violate the true laws of nature. The real world is one in which water can turn into wine, the dead rise again, prayers fly up as doves, when every thing in nature and seemingly beyond it is revealed as coming directly from God.<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, MacDonald says nature is only seen aright when it is seen as by a child, full of magic, or like a dream, a collection of seemingly random events. Only when we stop analysing nature into grids of physical law will we see through to the continual wild miracle that she is. The child sees things in terms of their show; and it is there, in the coming together of the mind with what is immediately seen, that nature reveals its mystic nature, and not through any search or analysis. 'One day, I trust, we will be able to enter into the secrets [of nature's gifts] from within them – by natural contact between our heart and theirs' (*US*, 351). That is again why fairy tales, which as Tolkien says, give us a fresh view of simple things by putting them in an enchanted world, can make us see things anew as the child does. And God's creates in fairy tales: the fairy tale is his idiom. The world and the human imagination he makes and sustains, are most truly seen as 'narratives without connection but rather with association, like chance', like a fairy tale in which 'everything ... [is] wonderful, mysterious and incoherent'. This is translated from a quotation from Novalis that forms the epigraph to *Phantastes*. But while MacDonald agrees with Novalis in seeing nature as a chaos to man, he goes beyond him in finding its ultimate coherence in an indwelling God.

When MacDonald speaks of the imagination, he speaks of it as that faculty in man which is concerned with the discovery or making of new things, which is precisely the way God's imagination works in making new things in nature. (MacDonald's stress on the new is also one on the future rather than the past.) For this reason, the workings of the imagination are not limited to artistic creativity, but are found in the construction of scientific hypotheses, or theories concerning history, or new philosophical ideas (*ADO*, 11–18). On the other hand, not all literature may be called novel or imaginative: only certain works, such as fantasies and fairy-tales and some poetry, truly qualify.

---

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., Ch. ix, 'The Government of Nature'.

That is why MacDonald devotes his literary theories to these sorts alone, as the highest forms of the human imagination. While he has much to say of poetry and poets in his essays, because poetry itself depends on a metaphoric and symbolic understanding of the world, he has remarkably little to utter on prose fiction, and particularly the novel, which forms by far the major part of his own literary output.

We can now see that MacDonald believed his fantasy to be directly inspired by God. He tells us that 'God sits in that chamber of our being in which the candle of our consciousness goes out in darkness, and sends forth from thence wonderful gifts into the light of that understanding which is His candle' (*ADO*, 25). This does not mean that the artist is a mere ventriloquist's dummy, for the will and the discriminating intellect of the individual then come into play to mould the material as far as may be done. The imagination 'takes forms already existing, and gathers them about a thought so much higher than they, that it can group and subordinate and harmonise them into a whole which shall represent, unveil that thought' (*ADO*, 20); this imagination is concerned with 'choosing, gathering, and vitally combining the material of a new revelation' (*ibid*, 22). Nevertheless, this is not creation, which is God's alone; and here the artist must passively accept what is given:

As to this matter of *creation*, is there, after all, I ask yet, any genuine sense in which a man may be said to create his own thought-forms? Allowing that a new combination of forms already existing might be called creation, is the man, after all, the author of this new combination? Did he, with his will and his knowledge, proceed wittingly, consciously, to construct a form which should embody his thought? .... Such embodiments are not the result of the man's intention, or of the operation of his conscious nature. His feeling is that they are given to him; that from the vast unknown, where time and space are not, they suddenly appear in luminous writing upon the wall of his consciousness. Can it be correct, then, to say that he created them? Nothing less so, as it seems to us. (*ADO*, 24)

For this reason MacDonald says of the human artist, 'Is not the *Poet*, the *Maker*, a less suitable name for him than the *Trouvère*, the *Finder*?' (*ADO*, 20).

Having established the divine ground of the imagination and its products, MacDonald proceeds in the remainder of the essay to show that the

imagination is also the source of all good and every virtue in man, and to describe how it may be cultivated. Here we have left making for morality, and strangeness for known good. There is a division between MacDonald the chaotic fairy tale maker and MacDonald the ordering moralist that occasionally appears in his fantasy – though in *Phantastes* and *Lilith* the morals are often uttered by compromised figures. In the essay following this in *A Dish of Orts*, 'A Sketch of Individual Development' (1880), MacDonald gives a moral biography of a man guided through life by his imagination (43–76). He shows how the natural patterns of a life are filled with imaginative promptings that, heeded, lead to a feeling of oneness with the universe, an acceptance of pain and death and a sense of the true mystery underlying the seen. All this is as much about the imagination as was the discussion of its makings: where that was concerned with the being of the imagination its products, this is focussed on their doing. This is important to the development of individuals within imaginative narrative – to the spiritual growth of Anodos in *Phantastes*, Vane in *Lilith*, Curdie in the 'Princess' books and Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind*.

In a further essay 'The Fantastic Imagination' (1893) written at the end of his life at the request of his readers, and first published as the preface to the New York edition of his fairy tales, MacDonald went on from describing the imagination to an account of the kind of literary work it produces, and its effect on the reader. Following Novalis, he calls such works 'fairy tales': but this term describes not just traditional fairy stories such as those collected by the Grimms, but modern invented tales which may be quite different in character from folk fairy tales. In the short fairy tales collected as *Dealings with the Fairies* (1867), MacDonald gives us tales such as 'The Giant's Heart' or 'The Carasoy'n' which are like traditional tales, and tales such as the highly witty yet profound 'The Light Princess' or the symbolic and mystical story 'The Golden Key' which are both new and highly individual in form. Similarly, the longer *The Princess and the Goblin* may be reminiscent of the Grimms' fairy tales, but *The Princess and Curdie* is less so, and *At the Back of the North Wind*, which is set mainly in Victorian London, least of all. And *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, written in the form of dreams, are almost wholly different from the traditional fairy tale. Yet all these do have in common their source in the imagination as MacDonald has described it, taking different forms according to the different thoughts behind them.

MacDonald starts his essay by declaring that fairy tales may not be defined, and that if his reader still wants to know, he or she should "Read

*Undine: that is a fairy tale*” (*ADO*, 313). Nevertheless he can still talk about the proper nature and reading of ‘such fairytales as I would wish to write, or care to read’ (ibid, 314). First, he says, ‘a man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws; for there is that in him which delights in calling up new forms, which is the nearest, perhaps, he can come to creation’ (ibid). MacDonald here makes a distinction between fanciful and imaginative invention which has relevance to his own work, which often contains fanciful elements, as in *Phantastes* or ‘The Light Princess’. When fantastic worlds ‘are new embodiments of old truths, we call them products of the Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of the Fancy’ (314).

But the writer must keep to the laws of his invented world: the consistency of the plot, the nature of the world and the behaviour of his characters must be maintained, or we will cease to believe in the fiction. ‘Suppose,’ MacDonald instances, ‘the gracious creatures of some childlike region of Fairyland talking either Cockney or Gascon!’ (*ADO*, 315). Moreover the moral laws of a fantasy must be not only consistent with one another, but the same as those in our world. ‘A man who is called good cannot, unless he is under some evil enchantment, be portrayed as always doing bad – ‘the notion itself is absolutely lawless’ (316). The question of consistency might be hard to determine in MacDonald’s own *Phantastes*, which is a bewildering sequence of different and often somewhat discordant contexts.

For the rest of his essay, MacDonald is concerned with the meaning and understanding of fairy tales. For him the fairy tale works indefinitely, like music, waking things up in the soul without defining them. The truer a work of art is, the more meanings it will have for different readers. It is wrong to pin it to just one. Like the flashing guide which at one point leads Vane in *Lilith*, it must not be seized or, as in his case, it will turn from something like a butterfly to ‘a dead book with boards outspread’ (*Lilith*, 228). For this reason, a fairy tale is not an allegory, with a worked-out pattern of significance (*ADO*, 317). Children, or the child-like of any age, are the best readers of fairy tale, because they open their imaginations to its worlds without asking questions.

The reason for the mystery at the heart of fairy tales is that they come from God.

One difference between God’s work and man’s is, that, while God’s work cannot mean more than he meant, man’s must mean more than he

meant. For in everything that God has made, there is layer upon layer of ascending significance; also he expresses the same thought in higher and higher kinds of that thought: it is God's things, his embodied thoughts, which alone a man has to use, modified and adapted to his own purposes, for the expression of his thoughts; therefore he cannot help his words and figures falling into such combinations in the mind of another as he himself had not foreseen, so many are the thoughts allied to every other thought, so many are the relations involved in every figure, so many the facts hinted in every symbol. A man may well himself discover truth in what he wrote; for he was dealing all the time with things that came from thoughts beyond his own. (*ADO*, 321)

There can be no control over the meaning of a fairy tale, for it speaks to its readers in multiple truths far beyond the author's knowing. The reader's best response is emotional rather than intellectual. The fairy tale is not concerned with producing logical conviction: its object is 'to move by suggestion, to cause to imagine' (*ibid.*). The nearest analogy is with music, where 'The best way ... is not to bring the forces of our intellect to bear upon it, but to be still and let it work on that part of us for whose sake it exists' (321–2). The ideal reader of fairy tale for MacDonald is the child or the loving mother. 'If any strain of my "broken music" make a child's eye flash, or his mother's grow for a moment dim, my labour will not have been in vain.'

MacDonald elsewhere admits however that our more adult desire to understand a thing cannot be gainsaid. He allows that the fairy tale invites as much understanding as emotion (*ADO*, 316–17), and that we will try to interpret a mystery. Indeed in some places he says we ought to do this.<sup>3</sup> And here it should be said that MacDonald himself as a writer is not infrequently trying to direct the sense of his material. But his general extra-literary tendency is to say that while our interpretations may have truth, they will never have all the truth, not even if we added together all the interpretations made by all readers that ever were.

MacDonald writes many kinds of fantasy – traditional fairy tale, invented fairy tale, mystic story, dream-like romance, posthumous fantasy, ghost and terror story. Some stories are for children, some for adults, some for both; some are long, some short; some are tightly ordered, some seem to be chaotic and disconnected. All they have in common seems to be that they

---

<sup>3</sup> E.g. *ADO*, 38–42, 320–1.

all deal with the supernatural in some form, and that this supernatural element is closely associated with the imagination. These differences illustrate MacDonald's point that the artist has to find the proper form for his thought, and here thoughts are different, so will be the form. But in all cases the root source of all thoughts is the belief in God within and beyond the world. 'The man who, in harmony with nature, attempts the discovery of more of her meanings, is just searching out the things of God' (*Orts*, 18). And since nature is so made by God to symbolise every thought that arises in man's mind, every literary work or fairy tale so created will be at root mystical.

### Theological views

God so understood in relation to fairy tales is fair enough, and general enough: but what of the specifically Christian element in MacDonald's fairy tales? To answer this, it is best to start from his theological views, as portrayed in his three series of *Unspoken Sermons* (1867, 1885, 1889), *The Miracles of Our Lord* (1870), *The Hope of the Gospel* (1892) and the twenty spoken sermons and addresses selected in *George MacDonald in the Pulpit* (1996).<sup>4</sup>

The most striking aspect of MacDonald's theological work is the way he has come to his own understanding of Christianity without reference to churches or creeds. In his view, systems and beliefs could only talk about or define one's relationship to God, they could not know that relation. And this from his earliest days as a Christian; writing to his father in 1851 he declared,

We are far too anxious to be definite and to have finished, well-polished, sharp-edged *systems* – forgetting that the more perfect a theory about the infinite, the surer it is to be wrong, the more impossible it is to be right. I am neither Arminian nor Calvinist. To no system would I subscribe. (*GMDW*, 155)

Christianity was not a collection of beliefs, but essentially a way of experiencing God. This view and MacDonald's supposed heterodoxy were to lead

---

<sup>4</sup> MacDonald 'preached perhaps more than a thousand sermons over the course of his life' (J. Joseph Flynn and David Edwards, *GMP*, Preface).



to his expulsion as minister of Arundel Congregational Church in 1853. But for him, systems and beliefs could only talk about or define one's relationship to God; they could not know that relation. For MacDonald, coming into harmony with God's love and purpose both in himself and in the world was the key concern of a Christian: in this he was close to the view of God's essentially loving nature held by Frederick Denison Maurice, a leading liberal theologian of the time who became his friend.

Theologically MacDonald was a 'deconstructionist'. He wanted to take away the fixed and hard edifices of doctrine, even the fixed and hard constructs that are churches themselves, to arrive at the living fire of love at the heart of Christianity. Declaring that 'Theologians have done more to hide the gospel of Christ than any of its adversaries' (*US*, 259), he called fixed dogmas 'the theology of hell' (*GMP*, 41), and said, 'The world in which you move, the place of your living and loving and labour, not the church you go to on your holiday, is the place of divine service' (*US*, 592; see also 615 and *HG*, 53). MacDonald himself did not have a built or formal life as a Christian. He spent his whole Christian life undoing what he saw as the harmful forms and antagonisms man had over the centuries built on the plain ground of what Jesus was and taught.<sup>5</sup> He believed in a creedless Christianity available to all men and women through a simple choice to love and follow Christ. Such a faith had nothing to do with sects of belief or churches, and its truth was no less real in his own time of scientific scepticism than in the time of Christ's life and persecution on earth.

MacDonald owed some of his theology not just to his own temper but to contemporary German liberal theology exemplified in Friedrich Schleiermacher and most extremely in David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835) first translated into English by Marian Evans (George Eliot) and published to the horror of the orthodox in 1846. Strauss saw the life of Jesus and his miraculous birth and resurrection as mythic versions of the truth created by writers after his death. For Strauss Christ's life is exemplary for the Christian and not evidently supernatural or miraculous: and the miracles themselves are simply poetic and mythic versions of the truth. (Here however

---

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. *GMP*, 48-9, 87, 307, 321; *US*, 79, 275-6, 328-62, 384-412, 450, 500-40, 577-92. In MacDonald's view different churches and doctrines produce 'separation, repulsion, recoil between the component particles of the Lord's body' *GMP*, 48-9. Also, the dogmatic habit leads to considering human beings as masses, rather than as the individuals with each of whom God has a unique relationship ('The New Name', *US*, 67-78).

MacDonald would have disagreed.) These ideas had considerable influence on free-thinking Christians and clergymen.

But Strauss was only putting in theoretic terms what had already formed a large part of the beliefs of Unitarians, whose first church was founded in England in 1774. In many ways the Unitarians are Quakers in another form. They believed neither that Christ was God, nor that he was the Son of God, nor that he came down from heaven to redeem us from our sins. Rather Christ was a son of God, born normally and not by virgin birth, whose life was a pattern for us to follow, not a series of redemptive miracles accomplished on our behalf. The Unitarians rejected the whole notion of original sin and eternal punishment, and effectively turned away from the system of Christian history from creation (in 4004 BC) through fall, redemption and final last judgement. For the Unitarians there was no fall, no devil and no hell, for man was created both good and evil by God from the beginning. No religion or sect had more authority than another. Man is endowed with free will with which to choose good or evil: no people are predestined for heaven or hell as the Calvinists believed. MacDonald, however, would have had little sympathy with the Unitarian idea that science and religion, reason and belief, go together in the Christian experience: this is close to deism.<sup>6</sup> Numbers of Victorians, such as Darwin and Dickens, went over to this form of belief; and the clergy who began to preach such ideas were expelled from office.

Such expulsion, of course, was MacDonald's experience. After he opposed and was turned out by the Congregationalist church, he may have moved towards Unitarianism, a theology that his wife Louisa Powell could not accept.<sup>7</sup> But such a move would not have been one peculiar to MacDonald, for in the nineteenth century in America the dominant

---

<sup>6</sup> George Willis Cooke, *Unitarianism in America: A History of its Origin and Development* (Marston Gate, U.K.: Amazon reprint of 1902 edn); John Hostler, *Unitarianism* (London: the Hibbert Trust, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> GMDW, 126. Though Kerry Dearborn in her *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald* (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 1988) repeatedly terms MacDonald a Trinitarian, there is no evidence of this. Even when a Trinitarian statement might be called for, at the end of a sermon in a Trinitarian church, MacDonald is quoted as saying, 'May the love of God our Heavenly Father, the graciousness of our Lord Jesus Christ, our Elder Brother, and the power that proceedeth from the Father and the Son, be with us, and with all men, now, and for evermore' (sermon 'The Eternal Harmony', preached in Trinity Congregational Church, Glasgow, 15 Sept., 1889, *GMP*, 335).

Congregational church was seeing the same move to Unitarianism in many of its adherents. When MacDonald went on a lecture tour of America in 1872–3, he was visiting a country that had partly turned Unitarian in belief. The notable friends he made – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Greenleaf Whittier, Mark Twain – were all Unitarians. That MacDonald's most frequent topic there was the poetry of Robert Burns was possibly because Burns was not only a Scottish writer, but a Unitarian.

MacDonald's view of the Bible is important here, for the Bible is the template of the Christian faith. For MacDonald the Bible is a central text by the light of which to know what God wants, to understand and to follow Christ, and to find out heaven. This purpose he finds contained within the Gospels, in the account of Christ's life and His continually tested loyalty to God. All MacDonald's thinking is founded on the Gospels and Christ: 'I believe in nothing but the Lord revealed in Christ' (*GMP*, 20; see also 28). MacDonald has little to say in his theological writings of other books of the Bible, and indeed the Old Testament features only in an account of Job's arguments with God, because it is a singular example of man trying to relate to God ('The Voice of Job', *US*, 328–62).

But for MacDonald it is mistaken to give the Bible the authority of *the* Word of God: 'It nowhere lays claim to be regarded as *the* Word, *the* Way, *the* Truth'; for 'The one use of the Bible is to make us look [beyond it] at Jesus' (*US*, 36, 37; see also 95–6). In any case, fogged as it is by two millennia of the varying psyches and understandings of its composers, copiers and translators, it cannot any longer claim to be the Word of God, even supposing it had once been so. And further, much of the Bible is for MacDonald, 'only a way of putting it'. Nothing can adequately describe God or Christ in their divinity (see for example 'The Temptation in the Wilderness', *US*, 84–109; also *US*, 441, *HG*, 115–16), though parables best glance at it (*US*, 86–9, 261). Even words themselves break under the weight of the profound meanings Christ gives them.

The inarticulate child and the striving Christian are nearer to the truth, because the one sees the universe as a wonder, and the other understands by obeying: 'It is he that runneth that shall read, and no other' (*US*, 260). MacDonald sees God as caring for live things and truths, 'not things set down in a book, or in a memory' (*US*, 566). This view is reflected in MacDonald's own little bibles, his mystical fantasies, where, to avoid all fixities, he often makes their words and images suggestive rather than definite,

and their meanings potentially as varied as their readers (*ADO*, 313–22). The truest word, and the profoundest book, is that which is continually fluid, or self-subverting.

Though trained as a scientist himself, MacDonald also had a Romantic dislike of the analytic methods of the scientist, which he saw as probing beneath the divine surface of creation (*US*, 439, 469), as dividing one thing of God's creation from another, and as turning living truth to dead particulars: "What in the name of God... is the analysis of water to the babble of a living stream?"<sup>8</sup> 'Analysis,' he declared, 'is well, as death is well' (*US*, 464). No words about Christ, or His work, or about Christian belief, are in themselves important (*US*, 350) – their sole use if any is in bringing us to do the will of the Father. This loving walking in God's ways is the core of the Christian life and nothing else matters beside it. The only way to *know* God is to love and obey Him.<sup>9</sup> MacDonald was happier with science as the synthesis rather than the analysis of data.

In keeping with his rejection of Christian dogma and creed, and in common with other liberal theologians of his day such as F.D. Maurice, MacDonald tends to a 'demythologised' view of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> That is, he does not assert – though he never openly denies – an objective pattern of events from the Creation, through the Fall of Man, and Christ's life and death to the Last Judgement. Using the findings of science to spiritual purpose, he sees creation as 'beginning' far back in time, as evolutionary rather than simultaneous, and as not yet complete (*US*, 290–1, 298). (Though since God continually thinks the universe into being (*GMP*, 106), that far-off time and our own are as one in His mind.) Nowhere in MacDonald's work is there a sustained account of man having been once in a paradise, which he lost by

---

<sup>8</sup> 'What in the name of God is our knowledge of the elements of the atmosphere to our knowledge of the elements of Nature? What is the analysis of water to the babble of a running stream?' (*US*, 350–1; see also 452, 462–9). On the inability of science and the intellect either to prove or to disprove the existence of God – a side-swipe at those of his contemporaries who lost faith because of scientific discoveries – see *GMP*, 71. MacDonald often widened his attack to the unfettered intellect itself (*GMP*, 135–6, 145, 218; *US*, 206, 259, 452–3, 468–9). His view is that 'Your theory is not your faith, nor anything like it. Your faith is your obedience' (*US*, 532).

<sup>9</sup> This is a mantra of MacDonald's thought: see *GMP*, 73, 79, 171, 211, 296; *US*, 185, 206, 211, 226, 259–61, 390–403, 437, 471–2, 504, 520, 533, 588.

<sup>10</sup> On this 'demythologising', see Colin Manlove, *Christian Fantasy: from 1200 to the Present* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1992), 156–63.

giving way to an evil force called Satan. Rather, for MacDonald the picture is one of a loving God repeatedly creating men as wills separate from His own, so that they may of their own choices turn their hearts towards Him (*US*, 117–18).

Evil lies in preferring lesser goods before God. Therefore MacDonald does not see our nature as inherently fallen through Adam (*US*, 343, 385), but views each of us as capable of enacting our own fall away from God in each moment of our spiritual lives. For Him evil does not lie in our past sins, but in our present choices: 'It is not the sin that I have done, it is the sin that I am. No man was ever yet condemned for the sins that he has done, he is condemned because he will not leave them' (*GMP*, 298).<sup>11</sup>

In the same way Macdonald tends not to see evil as an objective force outside man, the product of a group of former angels who rebelled against God and were cast out. Rather he sees evil as the individual choosing the self before God, and hell as the experience of alienation from our own loving Creator.<sup>12</sup> MacDonald does not, except occasionally and formally, use the concept of a devil who tempts man. He sees the Biblical story of the devil tempting Christ in the Wilderness not as a picture of an actual demon, but a parable of the spiritual conflicts that Christ experienced within himself (*US*, 87–8). MacDonald is fundamentally not a dualist: he does not allow the existence of any absolute figure or force opposed to God: 'In those... who believe that good is the one power, and that evil exists only because for a time it subserves, cannot help subserving the good, what place can there be for fear?' (*US*, 326). Those who choose in opposition to God's will bring sin into being, and, as Creator, quite apart from his love for His children (*US*, 343), God is obliged to correct this and destroy evil (*US*, 510–11). He therefore plants Himself in man's innermost soul to prompt his better urges and desires, makes His universe speak holy truths to him, and sends His Son into the world to 'work... atonement in every heart' (*US*, 515).

Although MacDonald's last work of fantastic fiction *Lilith* has as among its main actors Adam, Eve, and the Great Shadow, they are present less as figures from Christian history than as a new Adam and Eve and a different (less active) Satan within a revised myth. The notion of Adam and Eve as the pair who led all humanity into sin is largely replaced by a picture of an Adam and Eve who conduct souls to eternity. And the Great Shadow, with

<sup>11</sup> See also *GMP*, 254, 309–10; *US*, 500–40, 550–3; *HG*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Thus he views evil more as a mental than as a physical event: 'Our wrong deeds are our dead works; our evil thoughts are our live sins' (*HG*, 18).

his overtones of a Satan of absolute evil, will in the end renounce his nature lie down to sleep and resurrection in Adam's house.

The Shadow is utter antagonism; Lilith furiously insists on her own self in opposition to all others; but Adam and Eve together embody that perfect human togetherness which hints at the greater 'at-one-ment' all will feel in heaven. For MacDonald such atonement is the fundamental truth of the universe: 'the work of Jesus Christ on earth was the creative atonement. He brings and is bringing God and man, and man and man, into perfect unity' (*US*, 515). By the end of the story Lilith has shifted out of her evil character and yielded up her self to the divine current of the universe. At every point MacDonald challenges and subverts the meanings we bring to these characters from the original biblical myth; even while at the same time he is making another series of mythic identifications of his own.

As for Christ's life and death on earth, MacDonald accepts that as a historical fact, but his real interest in it is as a continuous event; 'We use the past tense about Jesus Christ very foolishly and stupidly ... If Jesus ever was anything that He is now' (*GMP*, 187). The Christ child is still with us; the life He lived is the perfect pattern of ours now; and He did not die once, but put His dying for ever into the universe. 'There is no "was" with Him. He is the same. Just what he appeared on the earth He is now, and is in the earth still' (*GMP*, 282; also 147, 165). Do not fix on the Cross, or the picture of the dying body, MacDonald says (*US*, 515): rather think of the dying as the perfecting of the Son's relation to the Father, now and always.

MacDonald has little to say of the Incarnation – except that in his view Christ was not really incarnated at all, since He was already the Perfect Man: 'I don't believe that Jesus became a man by taking our body ... He was *the* Man from all eternity' (*GMP*, 201).

I believe that Jesus is the eternal Son of the eternal Father; that in Him the ideal humanity sat enthroned from all eternity; that as He is the divine man, so He is the human God; that there was no taking of our nature upon Himself, but the showing of Himself as He really was, and that from evermore. (ibid., 51)

MacDonald's view of Christ's coming rather misses His love and sympathy for man: Jesus, he tells us, loved His Father before us (*GMP*, 86), and came here not out of love of man, but to make us love God more (*US*, 162, 430). Nor in His death did Christ take upon Himself the sins of man and pay

the price of them through 'sufficient sacrifice' or 'atonement': MacDonald believes that 'The idea that the salvation of Jesus is a salvation from the consequences of our sins is a false, low, mean notion' (US, 518). He sees Christ rather as showing in himself a perfect pattern of love and devotion to His Father for man to follow.<sup>13</sup> In his view people are too ready to make destructive theories about Christ when they should know and follow Him out of love and obedience (US, 526–33).

And the Last Judgement? For MacDonald there is no such single event at the end of history. According to their choices men have the alienation from God that they want now, and the hellish suffering that entails. They choose for themselves whether they are for heaven or hell, and in a universe of love what else should their refusals do but give them pain? Nor is such pain final: it lasts only so long as men remain obdurate. For God creates and sustains in every man a deepest self which loves Him, and which awaits only its discovery to begin to return towards the heaven that is in Him: 'We are made for love, not for self' (US, 312). This is the vision of the purgatory in *Lilith*. Such a heaven is no built and finished place, but is always a-making, so long as there are still men a-making to fill it: 'We have had nearly two thousand years' experience of the continued coming of the kingdom. He [Christ] then preached it: it is not yet come; it has been all the time, and is now, drawing slowly nearer' (HG, 80). In *Lilith* the sleepers in Adam's dormitory of the dead awake and travel to heaven as each becomes spiritually ripe: there is no universal apocalypse, though each arrival in heaven is treated as such, a victory of the soul of man over evil through love and obedience to God. It is, as the heading to the last chapter of *Lilith* has it, 'The Endless Ending'.

The only Truth is God, and our relation to him as the father of us all. The notion of God as the Father and of our being part of his family is at the core of MacDonald's theology. As our Father, God loves us and wants us to meet and know him. He gives us free will, so that we may choose out of our own hearts to do so, because only so can there be a relationship with Him, and not slavery. He gives us his own Son to give us a pattern of love for the Father to follow. But free choice allows man to choose against God, to defy his maker and make himself and his desires a god. However God has so made the universe that the man who will not turn to Him will find himself trudging into the teeth of a gale; or, in MacDonald's terms, he will experience

---

<sup>13</sup> GMP, 162, 184–90; US, 284, 286, 424–6, 429–30, 490, 537–8.



God's love not as welcoming warmth but as fire. For such opposition, which is the choosing of lesser goods before God, produces a distance from Him which burns ('The Consuming Fire', *US*, 18–33). Nevertheless it is still God's love, in another mode, and in the end it will win, because evil has no final reality. 'Endless must be our terror, until we come heart to heart with the fire-core of the universe, the first and the last and the living one!' (*US*, 322–3). MacDonald here breaks down the old notion of a two-natured God, one of love and one of just wrath (*US*, 534–5), which is sometimes carried so far as to suppose that the mildness of the Son intercedes on humanity's behalf with the righteous anger of the Father. God's love is a consuming fire and 'love loves unto purity' all things it beholds (*US*, 18):

It is not that the fire will burn us if we do not worship thus; but that the fire will burn us until we worship thus; yea, will go on burning within us until all that is foreign to it has yielded to its force, no longer with pain and consuming, but as the highest consciousness of life, the presence of God. (*US*, 21)

MacDonald can conceive of only two unpardonable sins that might shut a person out from the power of God's love – refusal to forgive one's neighbour, and speaking against the truth of the spirit – and even then he is unwilling to see such exclusion as permanent ('It Shall Not Be Forgiven', *US*, 45–66). MacDonald's view of hell is the experience of alienation from God, an experience so unendurable that it eventually drives man back towards God's love. He paints a terrifying picture of this at the end of the sermon 'The Last Farthing', (*US*, 268–74). Hell is not a separate place eternally opposed to heaven, but a condition of more or less temporary resistance to divine love: this is true even of MacDonald's picture of hell, oft-supposed an absolute one, in his preface to the translation of V. A. Thisted's *Letters from Hell* (1884):

In these days, when men are gladly hearing afresh that 'in Him is no darkness at all,' that God therefore could not have created any man if he knew that he must live in torture to all eternity; and that his hatred to evil cannot be expressed by injustice, itself the one essence of evil – for certainly it would be nothing less than injustice to punish infinitely what was finitely committed, no sinner being capable of understanding the abstract enormity of what he does, – in these days has arisen



another falsehood – less, yet very perilous: thousands of half-thinkers imagine that, since it is declared with such authority that hell is not everlasting, there is no hell at all. To such folly I for one have never given enticement or shelter. I see no hope for many, no way for the divine love to reach them, save through a very ghastly hell. Men have got to repent; there is no other escape for them, and no escape from that. (vii–viii)

Even while he asserts the awful reality of a hell, MacDonald sees it both as non-eternal and as part of the operation of God's love: 'For hell is God's and not the devil's' (*HG*, 15). Since God is the only reality, universalism is here theologically inevitable.<sup>14</sup>

Central to MacDonald's Christian outlook is the idea of relationship. He believed that the love between the Father and the Son is the foundation of the universe, and that we must participate in that love relation, becoming parts of a heavenly family just as at our best we were members of loving human families on earth. Such networks of relationship constitute heaven: 'The true idea of the universe is the whole family in heaven and earth' (*HG*, 126).<sup>15</sup> The belief that the heart of Christianity lies in growing closer to the Father is the most frequent subject of MacDonald's theological writings. 'The light of our life... is simply God – God – God – nothing but God' (*US*, 586); 'The profoundest truth of the universe is the relation of the son to the Father' (*GMP*, 311; see also *US*, 428). For MacDonald Christ's story is that of a perfect relation of love and trust we hope one day to enter ourselves. Whatever sufferings Christ experiences He still willingly and lovingly submits Himself

---

<sup>14</sup> See also David L. Neuhouser, 'George MacDonald and Universalism', in McGillis (ed.), *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs*, 83–97. In his view of evil MacDonald is close to the heterodox medieval theologian John Scottus Eriugena, who in *De divisione naturae* (862–7 AD), held that evil was necessarily present in creation itself, that the devil had no central importance, that man was already corrupted before he fell, that hell was not a place but separation from God, and that the pain of this separation would ultimately drive all people back to God and heaven (Eriugena, *Periphyseon on the Division of Nature*, tr. I. P. Sheldon-Williams, rev. John J. O'Meara (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987), 4.11, 4.14–15, 4.20; 5. 26–36 (436–43, 454–69, 493–6, 590–669)). See Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 122–3.

<sup>15</sup> See also *HG*, 165; *GMP*, 90, 93, 94, 307. 'The child-relation is the one eternal, ever enduring, never changing relation' (*HG*, 152).

to the purposes of His Father; even when He is on the Cross, when He is in the deepest pit of apparent alienation, it is still “My father, my father” to whom He cries (*US*, 111–14). Christ’s life is a witness to the perfect relationship, the At-one-ment, we should try to emulate as we grow in love of God:<sup>16</sup>

The work of Jesus Christ on earth was the creative atonement, because it works atonement in every heart. He brings and is bringing God and man, and man and man, into perfect unity: “I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one.”’ (*US*, 515; see also 510–11, 536–40)

And the relation is always two-way: the Son loves the Father and the Father loves the Son (*US*, 476–7), and so too with the relations between man and God – ‘The upstretched meets the downstretched hand’ (*ADO*, 72).

MacDonald saw this perfect relationship, between Son and Father, man and God and nature, demonstrated in Christ’s miracles, on which in 1870 he published a whole separate study. For many of MacDonald’s contemporaries the miracles of Christ in the New Testament would seem simple marvels, breaking natural law, and designed only to increase evidence and awe of Christ’s more than human power. To Victorian scientists, on the other hand, believing in the pre-eminence of natural laws, they would seem more or less suspect. But for MacDonald they are signs of the deeper laws of nature that become open to all who grow close to God at any time. They are in Christ the expressions of a perfect relation of creature and Creator, which then incorporates the other creature that is Nature: MacDonald even suggests that when we become really close in our relation to God, we too will be capable of such miracles as walking on the sea (*US*, 285). Miracles are in this view not more wondrous than anything else, for all things come from God:

[Christ’s] miracles in bread and in wine were far less grand and less beautiful than the works of the Father they represented, in making the corn to grow in the valleys, and the grapes to drink the sunlight on the hill-sides of the world, with all their infinitudes of tender gradation and delicate mystery of birth. (*HG*, 235; see also *US*, 244)

---

<sup>16</sup> *US*, 424, 429–31, 470–5, 490–1, 537–8: ‘The highest truth is the relation in which man stands to the source of his being’ (*US*, 475).

And, from another view, miracles are not violations of the laws of nature, but 'at least a possible fulfilment of her deepest laws' (*HG*, 236): at the deepest level they are in harmonious relation with nature. Into this idiom come the changing of the water into wine, the healing of the lunatic child with the unclean spirit and the very Resurrection of Christ himself. Into this idiom too, at a lesser level come the 'fantastic' worlds of Fairy Land or the Region of the Seven Dimensions that MacDonald has created in his own work, for their seemingly marvellous natures witness in their own degree to the new and much larger Nature that is revealed through the man-God relation.

MacDonald makes separation from others one the great enemies of the divine universe: 'The one principle of hell,' he says, 'is – "I am mine own"' (*US*, 495). 'We so often choose death, the thing that separates and kills; for everything that parts us from our fellow, and every thing that parts us from God is a killing of us' (*GMP*, 87):

Every one will, I presume, confess to more or less misery. Its apparent source may be this or that; its real source is, to use a poor figure, a dislocation of the juncture between the created and the creating life. This primal evil is the parent of evils unnumbered, hence of miseries multitudinous. (*HG*, 67)

The enemy is the self, which leads a man to 'cut his own stem from his root that he might call it his own and love it' (*US*, 486, 619). Contrasted to this is the creation of man as a free and separate agent by God: for this was done so that out of it there might grow a new coming together or atonement and an enrichment of love's power (*US*, 299); or, as MacDonald puts it, 'Two at least are needed for oneness' (*US*, 298, 428). This idea of 'at-one-ment' is central to his *Lilith*.

There is nevertheless a vein of Platonism running through MacDonald's work. He believed that the universe is a thought in the mind of God;<sup>17</sup> that the world is a mirror of God and an analysis of the spirit of man;<sup>18</sup> that the soul makes the body;<sup>19</sup> and that on this earth God has his special dwelling place in the innermost spirits of men.<sup>20</sup> This tendency emerges in MacDonald's theology also in the way that almost all of it is directed not

---

<sup>17</sup> *GMP*, 19, 100, 106, 328; *US*, 200, 291–2, 302, 456.

<sup>18</sup> *US*, 463, 467; *HG*, 346; *ADO*, 4–10.

<sup>19</sup> *HG*, 105–06; *US*, 291–2, 302, 456.

<sup>20</sup> *GMP*, 9, 105; *US*, 118, 161, 255–6; *HG*, 40.

so much at helping others in this world so much as in preparing them for the next, by getting into the right relationship with God. MacDonald does insist on love of one's neighbour as an essential part of the Christian life, but when he comes to speak of it we sometimes feel the change of gear to the needful rather than the desired (*GMP*, 110, 155–6; *US*, 126–8, 379). The emphasis is always away from earth, towards the Father. The direction is not downward, but upward, one of MacDonald's favourite prepositions.

Desire for God and Heaven pervades MacDonald's theology. What he wants above all is oneness. That oneness can be glimpsed on this earth through the childlike vision of the holy world, through love, and through walking in God's ways; but in the land beyond death it will grow towards perfection:

This life, this eternal life, consists for man in absolute oneness with God and all divine modes of being, oneness with every phase of right and harmony. It consists in a love as deep as it is universal, as conscious as it is unspeakable; a love that can no more be reasoned about than life itself – a love whose presence is its all-sufficing proof and justification, whose absence is an annihilating defect: he who has it not cannot believe in it: how should death believe in life, though all the birds of God are singing jubilant over the empty tomb! The delight of such a being, the splendour of a consciousness rushing from the wide open doors of the fountain of existence, the ecstasy of the spiritual sense into which the surge of life essential, immortal, increate, flows in silent fullness from the heart of hearts – what may it, what must it not be, in the great day of God and the individual soul! (*US*, 309).<sup>21</sup>

It was to such a heavenly relationship with God that MacDonald looked forward all his life; and the desire for it is at the heart of his fantastic writing.

---

<sup>21</sup> See also *US*, 295, 312–13, 612–19; *HG*, 'The Hope of the Universe', 190–224.

### 3 Before MacDonald

The idea of making the imagination the subject of a poem or a prose fiction was well known before MacDonald's time, and he is often highly indebted to his fore-runners, particularly among the English and German Romantics, such as Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge, and Goethe, Novalis and E.T.A. Hoffmann, for whom the imagination had begun to be seen as generating its own worlds of truth. But MacDonald also looks further back, to writers such as Dante, Spenser and Milton, for the latter two of whom the imagination is seen as a potentially dangerous and delusive faculty, even while their works are in effect celebrations of it.

In the medieval period, illustrated in the views of Thomas Aquinas, the imagination was not as we understand it a free construct of the mind, but rather a fluid collection of images derived from sense-impressions; these images were utilised by the cognitive faculty to give force to conceptual or moral statements. The imagination was under rational control, unable to operate on its own without being called upon by the intellect. Essentially the creative faculty was the cognitive one, which arranged images in an order that embodied an idea.<sup>1</sup> This is roughly the notion of the imagination that informs Dante's *Commedia*, in which each created world, of hell, purgatory and heaven, is so constructed as to demonstrate its essential nature. Dante's purpose is to show in every aspect the posthumous consequences of sin, the processes of spiritual purgation, and the levels and kinds of heavenly bliss. He intends his poem to display the moral universe of God and thereby effect improvement in the souls of his readers. At the same time, particularly in the *Paradiso*, he wants to show the intricate order of God's cosmos. Of course there are works in which the imagination is too dominant – Chaucer

---

<sup>1</sup> On the imagination from antiquity to the modern period, see James P. Mackey (ed.), *Religious Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986).

mocks the wild fancies of magical romance in *The Squire's Tale*: and there are those in which the conceptual and moral side takes the lion's share, as in John Lydgate's *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*.

Therefore the construction of what we would call imaginary worlds was not found objectionable as it was to be in later Enlightenment culture. A fusion of rational Christian purpose and powerful imagination is often to be seen in medieval literature, in such works as Dante's *Commedia*, the French *Queste del Saint Graal*, Langland's *Piers Plowman* and the visionary *Pearl*. Chaucer paints instructive dream-worlds in *The House of Fame* or *The Parliament of Fowls* as readily as the often demotic stories in *The Canterbury Tales*. German, French and British writers wrote romances about Arthurian or other fabulous knights, and France created and embroidered an Arthurian story of the Holy Grail – many designed either to afford heroic images of knighthood to be emulated, or the opposite, pictures of chivalry as secular sinfulness that ignored spiritual truth. (The latter impulse is behind the story of the quest for the Grail, in which only one of Arthur's knights, Sir Galahad, is truly holy.) In terms of literature, this meant that the images used must be clearly subject to a moral or spiritual theme. For modern readers, however, the attractiveness of a medieval work often depends rather on the degree to which its imaginative life breaks free of such restraint.

A similar rational approach informs the medieval notion of dreams, which in all times have been linked to the imagination, inasmuch as dreams are full of images which need to be interpreted or reduced to sense. Chaucer's poems frequently contain dreams that require more or less translation to discover the potentially prophetic truths within their imaginative form. For medieval writers however, the source of dreams is often uncertain, hovering between the possibilities of human invention and supernatural inspiration from outside. Chaucer discusses this aspect of dreams often, in *The Romance of the Rose*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The House of Fame* and 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' in *The Canterbury Tales*. The dreamer in *Pearl*, however, is sure that his experience of meeting his dead daughter near the walls of heaven is 'a verray avisioun' granted him by God. Such certainty links the poem with the thousand year-old tradition of the visions of heaven or hell.<sup>2</sup>

The possibility of a supernatural source for dreams and imaginative constructs largely disappeared with the more rationalist and neo-classical

---

<sup>2</sup> Howard Rollins Patch, *The Other World: According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), is still the clearest account of medieval visions of heaven and hell.

Renaissance, to be later replaced in turn by the idea of the heterocosm, whereby the artist creates a new world of his own which is not subject to the claims of narrow realism.<sup>3</sup> This idea substituted analogy for causality: the artist was not inspired by God, but created in the same way as God. At once this removed the supernatural from the world and elevated man's importance in it. Its most notable proponent in sixteenth-century England was Sir Philip Sidney, but it is later seen in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and in the metaphysical poets. Its removal of supernatural agency from the world was to contribute to a growing empiricism in the seventeenth century which denied the artist this very creative freedom, insisting that the poet imitate only what was directly before him, and increasingly that what was before him should not be his view only, but a standard view of it shared by all men. However the greatest poetry, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the work of Marvell or Vaughan, flew above this in their Christian faith: Christianity was the one exception to the general rule on excluding the supernatural from literature. It is fair to say that from this period the mystic poet Vaughan is in character nearest to MacDonald.<sup>4</sup>

There are also several pre-Romantic works, not necessarily about the imagination, which in their unstructured form anticipate the idiom of *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. Among these are the medieval prose romance, François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532–64), Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67). MacDonald detested Sterne's work, and doubtless felt similarly about the 'vulgar' Rabelais. However it seems probable that along with most other Victorian writers of the medieval revival, he was drawn to the medieval Arthurian cycles, and primarily the story of the Grail Quest, which he uses in *Phantastes* in the story of Sir Perceval and his relation to Anodos. But his special debt, especially in *Phantastes*, is to Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

Book I of *The Faerie Queene* seems a central source, for the poem is filled with just the sorts of romance features that we find in MacDonald's *Phantastes*

<sup>3</sup> M. H. Abrams, 'The Poem as Heterocosm', *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1958), 272–85.

<sup>4</sup> Vaughan is one of the late seventeenth century 'Cambridge Platonists' and as such would appeal to MacDonald's world-forsaking impulse. He wrote of him that his insight 'makes Vaughan a mystic ... For him everything is the expression of, and points back to, some fact in the Divine Thought. Along the line of every ray he looks toward its radiating centre – the heart of the Maker' (MacDonald, *England's Antiphon* (London: Macmillan, 1874), 262.

— a wooded landscape, a knight on a quest (Sir Perceval in *Phantastes*), a beautiful maiden, an evil parody of the lady (the Maid of the Alder), a monster, three giants and a dragon, a palace, a castle and a tower. Indeed several of the episodes in *Phantastes* are directly indebted to Spenser. As in Spenser, the landscape is the imaginary one of Fairy Land, because it is the topography not of any material realm, but of the soul. Spenser employs the loose and rambling character of Ariosto in his *Orlando Furioso* (1516–32), to imitate the wandering of the spirit in this life. The seemingly unstructured narrative of MacDonald's *Phantastes* carries the same purpose. The actual aim of Redcrosse's journey is hardly mentioned, and most what happens to him is unanticipated; Anodos has no apparent objective at all, and also seems simply to happen on his adventures.

Like MacDonald, Spenser effectively gives us a changing picture of the imagination. Indeed it is fair to say of the experience of Redcrosse in encountering the wizard Archimago, the false hag Duessa, the giant Orgoglio, the monstrous seven-headed beast on which Duessa rides and the huge dragon that has imprisoned Una's parents in their castle, that all these come from are what MacDonald called the dark side of the imagination, where 'such monsters' live as represent a 'return towards primeval chaos' (*ADO*, 25). Most of what Redcrosse encounters is the stuff of fairy tale, or what we would call imaginary. But the imagination is partly what Spenser is writing about here. And he is not, officially, enthusiastic.<sup>5</sup>

Redcrosse is meeting evil figures drawn from the imagination (Archimago, Duessa) who work on the same faculty in him, by giving him false dreams and presenting him with an illusion of Una being unfaithful to him. Only Una, who is Truth, is not deceived; but, while she is away from him, Redcrosse all too readily is. In Una we seem to see a condemnation of the imagination as presenting illusions and falsities. This is ultimately theological, being a preference for the plainness of Protestantism against the ornament of Catholicism. MacDonald, however, has no such distrust of the imagination itself: it may contain horrors and dark things, but it is also a source of delight, and a road to God.

Of MacDonald's admiration for Shakespeare we have ample record in his essays on him and his art, and in his edition of *Hamlet*. It is harder to quantify Shakespeare's influence on MacDonald's fantasy. The interplay of nature, art

---

<sup>5</sup> Colin Manlove, 'Spenser: *The Faerie Queene*, Book I', *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 50–72.



and grace that is frequently seen in Shakespeare, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *The Tempest* is also present in MacDonald's *Phantastes*, and the idea of the fantastic world being partly an image of mind is seen in both *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. Shakespeare is fond of using opposites, such as court and country, appearance and reality, rich and poor, dark and light in his plays; and MacDonald has a similar tendency, seen in the way that *Lilith* is the polar opposite of *Phantastes*, and also in the frequent use of contrasted pairs in both books.

To Milton's *Paradise Lost* MacDonald owes curiously little. Of course he did not have much time for the idea of a long-past fall of man that all men have inherited: 'No man was ever yet condemned for the sins that he has done, he is condemned because he will not leave them.'<sup>6</sup> And his own imagination does not readily range among the planets and stars, the heavens and the earth. He takes us to strange worlds, but in the case of *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, these are in one sense very close to ours. His is not so much a cosmological imagination, or even a science-fictional one, concerned with the high sublime or an elaborately constructed universe.

MacDonald is more attracted to a work published at almost the same time as *Paradise Lost* – Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) with its single path to salvation. Bunyan's work is not about the past as in Milton, but about the future; and especially about that heavenly future which we are all promised if we walk rightly in God's ways. However, 'ways' is the word for MacDonald, where Bunyan believes in the One Way and a set path to heaven. For MacDonald the way varies according to the pilgrim – even if the spiritual pattern traced from self to selflessness is itself a constant. Nor do MacDonald's fantasy heroes always have a clear goal as the end of their journeys – in contrast, say, to the *Queste del Saint Graal* or *Pilgrim's Progress* where the hero strives for a prize, such as sight of the Grail or heaven itself. Anodos in *Phantastes* tells us only retrospectively that he was looking for his 'Ideal', while Vane in *Lilith* spends much of his time walking in the opposite direction from heaven.

As has often been said, MacDonald owes much to his Romantic predecessors, both British and German. His love of Blake is evident, especially in *Lilith* and his short fantasy 'The Golden Key': and certainly Blake's view of the visionary imagination as being at least as much the source of truth as reason would have been congenial to him; as too would Blake's view that

---

<sup>6</sup> *GMP*, 298; compare *US*, 343, 385.

the material world was a projection of the spirit. Indeed MacDonald follows Blake's idea of immediate supernatural inspiration, claiming that the first draft of *Lilith* was dictated to him directly by God, and elsewhere that God is the true source of the creative imagination in any sphere. But it is to Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and to his belief that 'Without contraries is no progression' that he owes most in *Lilith*. While MacDonald is more attached to the moral and Christian view, he often subverts it in his work – unconsciously in most of it, but more deliberately in *Lilith*.

Although MacDonald often deplored the use of uncontrolled 'fancy' in the work of Shelley, he is at the same time drawn to him. A quotation from *Alastor* heads the first chapter of *Phantastes*, the forest imagery of the poem also fills MacDonald's book, and the idea of the fugitive spirit in *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion* is seen in the white lady who evades Anodos. Shelley's pursuit of exotic nature approaches the fantastic impulse in its aim of making our dulled world seem once again new and strange,<sup>7</sup> and his often fragmentary mode of writing would appeal at least to the early MacDonald. MacDonald shared Shelley's belief that 'Poetry ... may be defined to be "the expression of the imagination"', 'the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself',<sup>8</sup> and his idea of inspiration as a fading coal blown to a momentary heat, which by the time of composition 'is already on the decline'.<sup>9</sup> In *Phantastes* MacDonald's Anodos laments this (PL, 89).

MacDonald's debt to the German Romantic writers of fairy tale, particularly Novalis and E. T. A. Hoffmann, was also large. Indeed his first published work was a translation *Twelve of the Spiritual Songs of Novalis* (1851). From Novalis in particular he took his idea of the 'fairy tale' as the highest form of literary creation because it best depicted spiritual reality, both in content and in form. Novalis, translated, says, 'A fairy tale is really a dream picture – devoid of all coherence – An *ensemble* of wondrous things and happenings – a *musical fantasy* for instance – the harmonious effects of an Aeolian harp – *Nature herself*.' And

In a true fairy tale everything must be marvellous – mysterious and unconnected – everything must be animated. Everything in a different

---

<sup>7</sup> Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in G. W. Allen & H. H. Clark (eds), *Literary Criticism: Pope to Croce* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1962), 311, 313–14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 300, 310.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

fashion. The whole of Nature must be interwoven in a wondrous manner with the entire spirit world. [This is] The age of general anarchy – lawlessness – freedom – the *natural state of Nature* – the age prior to the *world* (State)...The world of fairy tales is the *absolutely opposite* world to the world of truth (history) – and for this reason so *remarkably similar* to it – as chaos is to *completed creation*.<sup>10</sup>

MacDonald used this and another similar quotation from Novalis as the epigraph to *Phantastes*. Novalis's best-known fairy tale embodying these ideas is Klingsohr's 'Märchen' (fairy tale) 'Hyazinth und Roseblutte' in his story of the education of a poet, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802). And as we shall see, *Phantastes* is composed very much according to Novalis's ideas, being in the form of a dream by the protagonist, with a wandering and frequently interrupted narrative, a series of sharply different images and locations, and a stylistic mixture of the clearly-seen and the vague. MacDonald uses the method in his other works 'The Golden Key', *At the Back of the North Wind* and *Lilith*, though in other stories such as the 'Princess' books he is happier to write in a superficially more coherent mode.

One more aspect of MacDonald's idea of the imagination was that concerning the vision of a child. MacDonald agreed with Wordsworth that the child was uniquely gifted with spiritual insight. But Wordsworth assigned this to the new-born child's magical vision of the world he has just arrived in, while MacDonald links the innocent child to the nature of Christ: 'Jesus is represented in the child, for that Jesus is like the child' (*US*, 'The Child in the Midst', 12). For MacDonald one can be such a child at any age, 'whether five, or fifty, or seventy-five' (*ADO*, 317). Such adult children are 'child-like': they have the innocence and the trust and openness to the world that makes them see things that others cannot, because their spirits are pure.

Of the other German fairy tale writers, Goethe, Tieck and even the humorous Clemens Brentano are influences: but MacDonald owed a particular debt to the often wild and extreme imagination of E. T. A. Hoffmann. Hoffmann's frequent theme is the relative value of the different worlds perceived by the imagination and by reason and the senses, so that his stories often switch without notice between the ecstatic and supernatural visions of their protagonists and the more ordinary reality of the other characters. This

---

<sup>10</sup> Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, tr. and ed. David W. Wood (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2007), 171, §986; 34, §234.

is like MacDonald's idea of 'bi-local' worlds in *Lilith*; but in its mixing of contexts till we lose touch with which is which, it is like the shifting medium of *Phantastes*. In *The Golden Pot*, Hoffmann comes nearest to identifying with the imaginative side in his young hero Anselmus, who is betrothed to the bourgeois and conventional Veronica but has fallen in love with the exotic Serpentina, daughter of the Archivarius Lindhorst of Dresden. Thereby Anselmus has been introduced to the elemental world of the fiery salamanders. Throughout the story Anselmus oscillates between the civil world of Veronica and the magical one of Serpentina, and eventually gives himself to the latter.

Like Hoffmann, MacDonald identifies fantasy and the supernatural with the imaginative and dreaming mind. However, while he has no doubt over which side he prefers, his stories still have to deal with the issue of whether or not the magic is real, and in what sense. His answers are various, from saying that the magic world is actually more real than reality, or that if a magical being is believed in or loved, it will really exist. But as with Hoffmann, MacDonald is faced in all his stories with the conflicting claims of fantasy and reality. In *Phantastes* Anodos has all his experiences in a dream; in *At the Back of the North Wind* the issue of whether North Wind is real or an invention of Diamond's is continuous; in *The Princess and the Goblin* much of the story turns on the princess's continuing belief in her fairy 'grandmother'; and in *Lilith* Vane's experience is both a dream and a vision sent to him.

Apart from Hoffmann, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811) and August Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl* (1814) were of notable influence on MacDonald. The first, which MacDonald saw as the perfect fairy tale (*ADO*, 313), perhaps gave him the strange mid-ocean cottage in *Phantastes*, and *Peter Schlemihl* is almost certainly the source of the shadow in the same work. The idea of the *Doppelgänger* or split self attracted MacDonald as it did many Scots writers in the nineteenth century; but where the latter were more often interested in it as a function of the division between the respectable public self and the wilder private individual, MacDonald's concern with it (as the shadow in *Phantastes*) was as a symbol of cold reason versus imagination in the perception of the world.

The context for MacDonald's first 'romance' *Phantastes* (1858) was the new vogue for the fairy tale and the fantastic in Victorian literature, notably in works by Charles Dickens, F.E. Paget, John Ruskin and W.M. Thackeray published between 1843 and 1855. The age was also increasingly interested in

what we now call the unconscious mind.<sup>11</sup> Grimms' *Fairy Tales*, first translated in 1823–6 play a major part in MacDonald's 'Princess' books. MacDonald's short tale 'The Shadows' and *At the Back of the North Wind* with its mixture of everyday life and fantasy, are indebted to Hans Andersen's fairy tales, first translated by Mary Howitt in 1846.

Three writers of the 1850s particularly influenced MacDonald's fantasy. First is Dinah Maria Craik's 'Avillion, or The Happy Isles' (1853), a story about a sick man transported by a suspect drug to a series of different earthly paradises. The themes are love and death, as in *Phantastes*; and this book is one of the first modern fantasies to show someone travelling from this world to another. Another of Craik's stories, 'The Rosicrucian: A Tale of Cologne' (1847) has in it a poem about an 'Elle maid' or wood sprite 'who in front appears as a beautiful damsel, but seen behind is hollow as a mask' who drives men mad; this may be the source for the evil Maid of the Alder in *Phantastes*. Then there is the Irish author Frances Browne's *Granny's Wonderful Chair* (1856), a collection of invented folktales described as told to a sad king by a magic chair on which sits the girl Snowflower.<sup>12</sup> But a more immediate stimulus was undoubtedly the early romances of William Morris, published in the *Oxford Magazine* in 1856.<sup>13</sup> Many of Morris's tales have a dream-form that anticipates MacDonald's, particularly Morris's 'Lindenberg Pool' where the time-shift as the modern narrator increasingly finds himself in a medieval world anticipates the place-shift early in *Phantastes* when Anodos wakes up to find his bedroom changing into a woodland glade.

Beyond these are such early science-fictional works as Charles Ischir Defontenay's *Star ou Psi de Cassiopée: Histoire Merveilleuse de l'un des Mondes de l'Espace* (Paris, 1854) and Sydney Whiting's *Helionde or Adventures in the Sun* (1855); the sheer inventiveness of the former must have appealed strongly to MacDonald, whose own imagination was highly original.

But MacDonald was very well-read far beyond the specifically fantastic, romantic or faërian. He had a reading knowledge of several languages including Greek, German and French. He knew the *Kabbalah*, and the work of

<sup>11</sup> Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (London: Fontana Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> On Frances Browne's influence on MacDonald, see Colin Manlove, 'George MacDonald and the Fairy Tales of Francis Paget and Frances Browne', *North Wind* 18 (1999), 17–32.

<sup>13</sup> See Colin Manlove, 'Did William Morris Start MacDonald Writing Fantasy?' *North Wind* 24 (2005), 61–73.

Jakob Boehme, William Law and Emmanuel Swedenborg. Several of his fantasies have roots in Greek epic and myth, and *Lilith* is considerably indebted to Dante. And aside from the literary, as a scientist he was well-versed in the leading writers of his day, Chambers, Lyell, Darwin and Huxley, and particularly drawn to the new science of electricity.

MacDonald was also conversant with the new American literature of Edgar Allen Poe, Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow and Mark Twain, most of whom he was later to meet. The epigraph to *Lilith* is a long quotation from Thoreau's 'Walking' concerning the possibility of two different places being coincident – which is what we have in MacDonald's book. Edgar Allen Poe, whose collected short tales appeared in England in 1845 and 1848, also influenced *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. And Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story collections, particularly *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846) also seem to have left a mark. Although Michaelangelo is the original of the idea that the form of a statue is already present in the material from which it is to be carved, its treatment in Hawthorne's 'Dronke's Wooden Statue' is more likely behind MacDonald's use of it in *Phantastes* when Anodos discerns the misty outline of a woman within a marble block in a cave (43–5).

Though MacDonald may have used these sources and others which we shall note later, it must be said that he alters everything he takes in such a way as to leave his indebtedness often uncertain. Every literary debt is so transfigured by his imagination as to become original. And indeed that is the nature of Macdonald in general as both a writer and a thinker. He makes everything new and vital. It is a pity that literary criticism lacks a category of value for originality, for both fantasy literature in general and George MacDonald in particular would stand to benefit from it.

## 4 *Phantastes*

MacDonald had first tried his literary hand at poetry. His long poem *Within and Without* (1855) describes a monk who quits the church out of love for a woman, but who then wastes away spiritually until he is dead. At the end there is a vision of the reunion of the pair in heaven. The story recalls that of Vaudracour and Julia in Book IX of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805). It was fairly successful, being well reviewed and going into a second edition in 1857. Nevertheless it did not bring in enough money for a growing family, and MacDonald next turned to prose fiction with *Phantastes*, written in two months over Christmas 1857 and published in October 1858. The difference in form from *Within and Without* is not absolute, for *Phantastes* is imbued with the idea of the divine power of song, and is scattered with poetry long and short. It is probable that MacDonald would have moved to writing fantasy in any case, since his entire religious and aesthetic outlook is geared to it. However reviewers were not enthusiastic and the book sold poorly, not being re-published on its own until 1885. After *Phantastes* MacDonald turned to writing fiction about 'real life', from which he gradually earned a living. Though he was to continue writing fantasy in the shape of the then popular fairy tale for children, it was not until it no longer mattered financially that he returned to the idiom of *Phantastes* in his *Lilith* (1895).

The first thing that strikes us about *Phantastes* is the riot of ill-assorted creatures and happenings that fill it. A knight in rusty armour, a carnivorous ash tree, a fraudulent alder, a comforting beech, all met in a seemingly endless broadleaf forest; a white lady enclosed in alabaster, a jolly empiricist farmer, an ogress, a shadow, a fairy palace, a planet with winged women, twelve halls of dancing statues, a journey underground, a cottage in the middle of an ocean, a fight with giants, entrapment in an imaginary tower, a girl hunting for butterfly wings, a collection of invisible creatures made of logs, a congregation in a church of evil, a soul floating on an evening cloud

– the oddities keep coming in a continual spray. No other of MacDonald's fantasies is quite like it; none is so continually inventive and original. It is hard to know what reality we are in since the theatre changes so much, from a Victorian house to a magical forest glade, a fairy palace, an underground journey, a mid-sea cottage, a hilltop tower, a court, a forest church and a cloud.

There is an element of rejoicing in mere being, symbolised in the nature of the fairies themselves when the hero Anodos encounters them in a cottage garden one evening:

The whole garden was like a carnival, with tiny, gaily-decorated forms, in groups, assemblies, processions, pairs or trios, moving stately on, running about wildly, or sauntering hither and thither. From the cups or bells of tall flowers, as from balconies, some looked down on the masses below, now bursting with laughter, now grave as owls; but even in their deepest solemnity, seeming only to be waiting for the arrival of the next laugh. (*PL*, 28)

As Anodos looks out of a cottage window one morning and sees the woods shining in the sunlight, 'a gush of wonderment and longing flowed over my soul like the tide of a great sea. Fairy Land lay before me, and drew me towards it with an irresistible attraction' (61). In this world even the horrors are sharply created: Anodos actually puts himself in the shadowed claws of the monstrous ash in order to get an accurate view of it (36). Nor do the creativity and wonder in *Phantastes* arise only from the countryside: we find no less delight in the elaborate architecture of the fairy palace, shining in the moonlight, with its pool that turns to an ocean beneath the surface, its sumptuous library and its hall with a chair on which Anodos is regaled by 'a succession of images of bewildering beauty' (109; compare 43). The only bar to Anodos's ecstatic involvement is a shadow that at one point his own impulsiveness draws to him: thereafter for a time he is quite unable to see the wonders in Fairy Land, or even the true good nature of his friend the knight in rusty armour.

The story is in some ways about creation. Anodos is often waking or stirring things up – a fairy in his father's old bureau, the Ash Tree, the rescuing Beech tree, the white lady shut in alabaster, the shadow, the white lady again in the fairy palace. There is much about art and making. Anodos finds that



in Fairy Land he has the gift of song, and by its means he twice brings the white lady to life. Yet art often tends to freeze the life that should animate it. The fairy palace is wonderful, but within it art has once more entrapped the lady as it did before in alabaster in the natural cave. By contrast when Anodos wakes up on the morning of his journey into Fairy Land, he sees the carved furniture of his bedroom and the design on the carpet turning into trees, leaves, grass and flowers, and the water running in his basin overflowing to make a stream: art is here changing to life, and in the next moment Anodos finds himself in a forest glade. That is the ideal state, but the shadow Anodos later acquires is the opposite, reducing wonders to mere artefacts or destroying them as with the toys of the children he encounters. True creation can only exist when it is allowed free life. Love of being and making is at the heart of *Phantastes*.

But as will be seen, it is not just love of being for itself: it is love of being as created by God. For what is Fairy Land? When Anodos finds himself there, we at first suppose that it is a real place. He wakes up, finds his bedroom changing into another country before his eyes, and sets off into it. He treats the new realm as a physical world and always keeps us close to his experience of it, so that we are inclined to take his word. We are with him, for example, when later in Fairy Land he idly scratches with his knife at the moss covering a block on which he has been lying and discovers the stone beneath to be alabaster; and there is a terrible reality about the dark figure that comes running towards him down the long tunnel into the backless cupboard in the ogress's house. At the narrative level Fairy Land is presented as a 'real' place outside Anodos, through which he walks: at the end he is told by his sisters that he has been absent for twenty-one days (the same number as his age).

But gradually we come to see that what appears to be 'Without' is also 'Within', and that Fairy Land is also a picture of the inside of Anodos's head. Just as in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* the knightly adventures seem real and yet also figure the spirit, so in *Phantastes* Fairy Land is also the landscape of Anodos's dreaming mind, or imagination. When Anodos enters the magic realm, he does so from his bed. (Mr Vane in *Lilith* is by contrast met by Mr Raven in the library of his house.) The furniture of Anodos's bedroom is described as changing into leaves and branches, and his overflowing basin into a stream flowing across the carpet towards a forest. This happens, Anodos tells us, when he wakes up in his bedroom; but it is equally a dream

he has while still sleeping.<sup>1</sup> As MacDonald said, 'The world is ... the human being turned inside out. All that moves in the mind is symbolised in Nature' (*ADO*, 9). And thus, as the story proceeds, and the landscapes and characters met change, these symbolise changes in Anodos's spirit.

*Phantastes* is a journey into the human imagination. Indeed the word itself comes from the name of a character in Phineas Fletcher's poem of 1633 *The Purple Island* (Canto VI, sts 46–8) meaning the fantasy-making faculty, the imagination; and Fletcher himself took it from the account of the Castle of Alma in Book II of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (ix, st.52); its first use as 'Phantasia' is in Plato (*Republic*, 382e). Fairy Land, with its wonder-filled landscape, its giants, monsters, dragons, elusive damsels and fairies, its forests, vast palace, towers and evil enchantments, is not only made by the imagination but pictures it.

But if this is so, it is the most subjective of imaginations, the most open to delusion. Compared to MacDonald's other fantasy protagonists Anodos is isolated, having no companion to corroborate his adventures as in most of his other fantasies – as, for instance, in *Lilith*, where Mr Raven is aware throughout of what Vane is doing in the further parts of the region of seven dimensions, and from time to time upbraids him for his actions – or the lack of them. An instance of Anodos's continual state of uncertainty is seen when he stays at a farmhouse on the fourth night of his travels: the farmer is so downright an empiricist that he makes Anodos doubt the reality of Fairy Land; but then the farmer's daughter is so convinced of the enchantment of the place that Anodos switches to believing in it again; and so he goes on from one view to the other (56–61). Anodos has his experiences almost entirely on his own, except for occasional warnings or short-term instructions from three cottage women he encounters; on the first night he is warned not to go out while the Ash Tree is abroad, but does so; the farmer's wife tells him to avoid the path that leads to the ogress's cottage, but her boorish son leads him to it; and the lady of the mid-ocean cottage tells him to get to land when her cottage is about to sink beneath the waves. The whole of *Phantastes* is, as its epigraph from Novalis suggests, written in the form of a dream, 'wie ein

---

<sup>1</sup> Anodos describes himself waking up at the beginning of the first chapter, and then again at the beginning of the second. This further confuses us as to whether he is awake or asleep. He is awake insofar as he describes his adventures as really happening to him; and asleep in that they take the form of a dream.

Traumbild ohne Zusammenhang',<sup>2</sup> with uncertainties of direction, images that leap out upon the eye, abrupt shifts of context and often little clear sense of why one object follows or precedes another. In Fairy Land Anodos is wandering through the tangled layers of his own imagination.

And yet, precisely because *Phantastes* is so subjective, it is grounded in the ultimate Reality of the universe: for inside his imagination Anodos is within that part of his mind that has God in its depths. Hints that Anodos is walking under some larger care are present throughout his journey. First, he encounters his fairy grandmother, and she arranges his entry to Fairy Land. There, a girl he meets tells him which trees to avoid in the forest, and a passing knight warns him against the Maid of the Alder. At the cottage he first comes to the woman tells him that "no one comes here but for some reason, either known to himself or to those who have charge of him" (24). A room named 'The Chamber of Sir Anodos' is waiting for him in the fairy palace. A wise woman living in a cottage in the midst of the ocean knows Anodos is coming, and tells two princes on land also to prepare for his arrival when he will help them against three marauding giants. Near the end a man comes out of the forest to tell him, as usual in vain, to be on his guard against a strange enchantment there. Hospitable cottages are found when night falls; boats appear and transport Anodos when he is most in despair. After his death and resurrection in Fairy Land Anodos finds himself abruptly thrust back into his own world. The story made for him is over, and he now has to make what he can of it in his own life.

The suggestion that Anodos is being watched over in Fairy Land and that his journey has been laid down for him gives us a sense of reassurance. We feel that even where he goes wrong it is so that he may eventually learn better how to go right. The evil things themselves ultimately serve the purposes of good – as Anodos realises at the very end of his story: 'What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good.' In other words, the devouring Ash-tree and the blighting shadow he meets are in the last resort agents of good, and their nature is, indirectly, founded in God.<sup>3</sup> The Ash-tree pursues Anodos because he shares in some of its greed and possessiveness, and he must learn to recognise the truth about himself. When we see that the apparent

---

<sup>2</sup> Taken from Novalis's *Die Fragmente* (Schriften, III, 454 # 986).

<sup>3</sup> See also Aren Roukema, 'The Shadow of Anodos: Alchemical Symbolism in *Phantastes*', *North Wind* 31 (2012), 48, 57–62 arguing this point from an allegorical process he finds in *Phantastes*.

evil of these things masks a deeper good, we are faced by a mystery we cannot fathom. How can the monstrous Ash be part of the divine imagination? Yet it can, and it is. One day this horror, finding that it can never fill the hole in its heart, will change and evolve into some spiritually better thing, but as it is, in the infinite network of divine action, it is Anodos's spiritual doctor. This does not affect the fact that its brutal medicine does not succeed, and Anodos remains as blindly egoistic as before.

MacDonald said, 'a man is rather being thought [by God] than thinking, when a new thought arises in his mind', and also that it is God who has made the images and forms in which the mind expresses itself (*ADO*, 4, 5). Man is not thereby an automaton, for he is still capable of choices for good or ill; but even when he makes a bad choice, the world and the mind will express it in imagery and experience that is ultimately from God: 'The instant a soul moves counter to the will of its prime cause, the universe is its prison; it dashes against the walls of it, and the sweetest of its uplifting and sustaining forces at once become its manacles and fetters'.<sup>4</sup> This makes Fairy Land both a mirror of what Anodos is, and a persuasion towards what he should be. Though Fairy Land is Anodos's imagination, Anodos's imagination is in God's. The universe is based on continual divine thought in every area of its being: rightly seen, matter and spirit are inseparable.<sup>5</sup> This means that unlike Christian in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, who could be damned at any point, Anodos is, despite all his lapses, ultimately assured of a happy end. His choices are often bad, and cause him much grief, for unlike Bunyan's hero he hardly ever resists a temptation. But the emphasis in MacDonald's story is not so much on acts of will as on the education of an often difficult pupil.

Like that of Anodos, the reader's journey is also one of understanding. We have to learn to connect the several mysterious images so that they make sequential sense. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* everything is clearly linked to what came before it by a clear geography of plains and hills and deep valleys, and a steady desire to reach the Celestial City. But *Phantastes* has no central drive, the hero simply wandering among a series of seemingly unconnected and exotic experiences which we have to turn into meaningful patterns. Moreover, during the first part at least the geography is made obscure by the fact that Anodos is passing through a largely trackless forest. We do not get a

---

<sup>4</sup> MacDonald, *HG*, 225.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, 'The Transfiguration', *HG*, 438–9.

clear idea of Fairy Land as a whole, whereas in *Lilith* the 'region of the seven dimensions' is clearly seen as a largely desert world. This aligns *Phantastes* with Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, where we are almost continually wandering in a forest, and have to work to understand what is going on.

The book is full of symbols and events that resist patterning while speaking powerfully. Why is it an Ash-tree that is the predator of the woods? (Especially since Ash trees are traditionally regarded as symbolic of good things.<sup>6</sup>) What is the significance of the fairy palace with its strange bath, its mystic library, its many halls of dancers? Who is the old woman who lives in a submersible cottage in the midst of the sea? As these images pass before us, each one as strange as the last, each floating up from some secret depth in the narrative, often with no obvious interconnection, displacing any assumptions we might make and eroding our ability to make interpretations, we enter a kind of subconscious mode of comprehension, and begin to feel too that what we are experiencing is a series of pictures emerging from the depths of mystery, and possibly from some point beyond that. C. S. Lewis felt that many of the images in *Phantastes* were shot through with what he called 'Holiness'.<sup>7</sup>

Yet this is not the whole truth, or *Phantastes* would be too simply obscure – as the *Athenaeum* reviewer of 1858 found it.<sup>8</sup> The book does have certain patterns that can be traced – though one has to work quite hard for some of them, and all too often the trail peters out or is blocked. It is unfortunate that in the finding of some of these patterns the mysterious element is often forgotten: criticism too often clears a way through the jungle and then ignores the fact that the jungle is still around it. While most of MacDonald's remarks on the fairy tale deal with its incomprehensibility to all save the childlike soul (*ADO*, 317, 321–2), he allows that his readers will want to understand, and he knows that many of them will not be of the childlike sort he looks for.

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, in the thirteenth century Icelandic Poetic and Prose Eddas Yggdrasil, the holy tree of the gods, is an ash; and the ash is venerated as the world tree in Celtic mythology. See also C. G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2nd edn, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. Herbert Read, vol. 5 (London: Routledge, 1970), 246.

<sup>7</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy, The Shape of my Early Life* (London, Bles, 1955), 170.

<sup>8</sup> The reviewer declared that in *Phantastes* MacDonald had got lost in a 'Parnassian fog' and 'seems to have lost all hold of reality', with this 'riddle that will not be read' (*Athenaeum*, 6 Nov., 1858, 580).

It is with just such a reader that MacDonald converses throughout his essay 'The Fantastic Imagination': and as the debate proceeds, we begin to feel that he is also arguing with himself. As he denies any certain interpretation to the fairy tale, claiming that it works like music even though it uses words; as he says that words can be used to evoke feeling rather than meaning, and insists that it is seldom that words contain the exact meaning of any user of them; and as he argues that no reader of a fairy tale finds the same meaning in it as another – as MacDonald maintains all this, we begin to see his argument potentially as special pleading, and realise that he may be trying to shut down his own critical mind. For elsewhere in his writings, whether on Shakespeare or Shelley, MacDonald is perfectly happy to be a literary interpreter of texts. To make the genre of fairy tale a special case immune to the normal activities associated with reading is to ask too much. Anodos himself cannot resist interpreting his own journey through Fairy Land (*PL*, 165, 179) and so far most criticism of *Phantastes* has agreed with his interpretation.

In fact, when we read *Phantastes*, several sequences and patterns gradually appear. There is the account of a white lady, whom Anodos sings into life out of marble and thereafter intermittently pursues throughout his adventure. There is also a shadow that Anodos acquires in the house of an ogress, and of which he says, 'Everything, henceforward, existed for me in its relation to my attendant' (65) – though in fact it does not. There are also several structural features in the book that help to give it some unity – for instance its recurrent and significant imagery of optics, mirrors, and transparency, which comment on the nature of seeing, the mode of perception, and the nature of what is seen. Several readers have also pointed out further patterns, such as structural balance, and the recurrence of certain motifs.<sup>9</sup> One that can be mentioned here is that we have three episodes of Anodos approaching a plinth-like object scattered through the story – the lady in the alabaster near

---

<sup>9</sup> John Docherty, 'A Note on the Structure and Conclusion of *Phantastes*', *North Wind* 7 (1988), 25–30; Adrian Gunther, 'The Structure of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*', *North Wind* 12 (1993), 43–59; Roderick McGillis, 'The Community of the Centre: Structure and Theme in *Phantastes*', in Roderick McGillis, ed., *For the Childlike: George MacDonald's Fantasies for Children* (Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Children's Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press, 1992), 51–65; Fernando Soto, 'Mirrors in MacDonald's *Phantastes*: A Reflexive Structure', *North Wind* 23 (2004); Aren Roukema, 'The Shadow of Anodos: Alchemical Symbolism in *Phantastes*', *North Wind* 31 (2012), 48–63.

the beginning, the lady as a statue in the fairy palace in the middle, and the wolf beneath the altar in the forest church near the end. In each case something is made visible and released.

Most continuous perhaps is the motif of seeing. At first Anodos has only limited perception of other figures in Fairy Land, until he has eaten its fruits. He is deceived by night by the Maid of the Alder. Then his perception is degraded to the merely materialistic when he finds his shadow. There is much also on mirrors, and their capacity to delude the viewer, if he or she be vain or selfish. Later however Anodos's sight becomes keener, as when he perceives the gap in a giant's armour that enables him to kill him, or when he alone among the congregation in a forest church can see that something evil is going on at the altar. Better seeing is an image of better moral understanding: in parallel Anodos understands his moral mistakes and determines (if rather loudly and explicitly) to reform.

Beside the motif of seeing runs one associated with mirrors, reflections and doubles. Anodos's Victorian bedroom with its flowers, trees and grasses pictured in its carpet and carved on its furniture, reflects itself into Fairy Land; and Fairy Land reflects it back as a bedroom called 'The Chamber of Anodos' which Anodos finds when he first enters the fairy palace. Anodos is himself reflected in the rusty armour of a knight he meets, in his own shadow, in distorting mirrors, in the knightly double of himself he later encounters in the forest, and indeed in everything he meets in Fairy Land, from the terrible Ash tree to the white lady, and from a singing maiden to a wolf. The white lady is simulated by the Maid of the Alder, the Ash dwindles to the log-people, Anodos's story is re-enacted in that of the student Cosmo von Wehrstahl, the knight in rusty armour is a better version of Anodos, the shadow a worse. In the middle of *Phantastes* is a story about a lady trapped in a mirror, and in the very centre of the book is the statement that 'the individual form needs an infinite change of its environments, to enable it to uncover all the phases of its loveliness' (100). Most immediately this refers to the lady in Cosmo's mirror, who has just appeared to him in a change of dress: but it also refers outwards to the multiple ways in which Fairy Land reflects the different aspects of Anodos. For when he is there he is inside himself.

Much good work has been done on the motif of reflections in *Phantastes*,<sup>10</sup> particularly in relation to the balanced structure of the story. But there is one

---

<sup>10</sup> Particularly by Gunther and Soto, *op. cit.*



other aspect of this theme. All the mirroring tends to make reality uncertain. When Anodos reads books in the library of the fairy palace, he finds himself inside them, experiencing them as if he is their central figure. This is not just a reader's empathy, but complete immersion, whereby one leaves one's own reality for another. Again, when Anodos goes through three of the doors of the cottage in the middle of the sea, he is absorbed into completely different places and times, two of them from his Victorian life. At the end Anodos is left feeling that Fairy Land is real, and his own world an illusion, where before he felt the reverse. In the face of this uncertainty one must remain true to one's best belief; and this means keeping faith with the imagination. In this world one may not know what is real, since reality keeps changing, but we can know what is true, and hold to it.

At the farmhouse Anodos reaches on the fourth day of his journey, he finds his belief in Fairy Land dispelled by the hearty empiricism of the farmer himself, who denies the existence of such a place; but then his belief is restored by the farmer's daughter, who is reading a fairy story. These two reflect the division in Anodos himself between belief and scepticism. His disbelief becomes concentrated in the shadow he next meets in the cottage of the ogress, towards which forbidden place the farmer's oafish son leads him. The shadow is that which reduces what is seen to the everyday – a child's 'wondrous toys' to a mere 'multiplying glass and a kaleidoscope', a little maiden's musical globe to a broken artefact (66–9). But in the end the shadow, which is featureless darkness, is not merely empiricism, not merely scepticism or even realism, but blank negation. It can radiate dark fingers like a black sun: and when it does so, wherever a ray strikes, 'that part of earth, or sea, or sky, became void, and desert, and sad to my heart.' One long ray shoots out 'seeming to lengthen infinitely until it smote the great sun on the face, which withered and darkened beneath the blow' (66). Here the shadow is the enemy of being itself. And thus the ultimate difference in *Phantastes* between belief and scepticism is creation versus annihilation, being versus nothingness.

In a sense *Phantastes* is about realising or making one's true being. The life task of the knight in rusty armour is to remove all the rusts caused by his past wrongs. When he has done so, the armour will once more shine as once it did. That is its true 'self', the form in which it was made. And this applies to all God's creation. Things are made pure, and it is only afterwards that they become blighted. Creation is the propagation of the good by the Good. The remaking of the self is the greatest good that can be, for it restores what



God made. By the end of *Phantastes* Anodos has gone some way on that path. He has lost his shadow, and he has begun to turn away from his self. He is rediscovering his original created Self.

A further pattern in *Phantastes* is one relating to doors and ways in or out, of which there are many in the story. Anodos enters his father's long-closed study and finds the inmost recess of his secretary, enters the cave of the white lady and that of the Maid of the Alder; goes into the ogress's cottage and opens her cupboard where the shadow is; finds a door with his name on it in the fairy palace; rushes out of a forbidden door in the palace in pursuit of the white lady; goes out and returns through four magic doors in the walls of the mid-sea cottage; enters and exits the tower of his self by a door; and is left at the end looking for the door that has a special mystic mark on it.

The significance of going through doors, entering caves and penetrating things would seem to need little gloss. Anodos is a young man entering on his sexual life as much as any other. Much of his adventure involves an exploration of his physical desires, and his changing wish to possess the white lady. He has to find out the nature of his desires, and to learn to manage them. So far in his life, his mother having died when he was a baby and his father some time before this story, Anodos has been ignorant of love. Indeed, he could be said in a sense scarcely to have grown at all, which is why there we find many mother figures to comfort him during the story.

Events in the story often involve the release of potential energy and expansion. A fairy emerges from the locked compartment of Anodos's father's secretary and then grows in size. Anodos's Victorian bedroom becomes a glade in a huge forest in Fairy Land. The white lady is freed from the alabaster in the cave. Anodos's shadow runs out of the cupboard to him. A magic musical ball Anodos seizes expands to a frenzy of music and light before bursting. The bath in the fairy palace becomes an ocean when one dives beneath its waters.<sup>11</sup> Cosmo succeeds in releasing his lady from entrapment in a magic mirror. Anodos goes out of himself into the stories he reads

---

<sup>11</sup> It is possible that MacDonald got this idea of a bath becoming an ocean from Richard Crashaw, the seventeenth-century Catholic 'metaphysical' poet whose baroque 'The Weeper' (1652), stanza 19 describes the weeping eyes of Mary Magdalene following Christ 'where'er he strays,/Among the Galilean mountains/or more unwelcome ways' as 'two faithful fountains;/Two walking baths; two weeping motions;/Portable, and compendious oceans'. 'The Weeper' is the only poem of Crashaw's that MacDonald discusses in his *England's Antiphon* (1868), ch. 8.

in the fairy library. The doors in the mid-sea cottage open on past, present, future and timeless worlds. Anodos later swells in pride over his defeat of a giant, comparing himself to Sir Galahad, but then finds himself shut in a small tower for days. After Anodos is later killed, he bursts out of his grave and his spirit expands into the sky.

But the story, as it began with an expansion as Anodos entered Fairy Land, ends with an agonising contraction, as he re-enters his old nineteenth-century life and is returned to his home: 'a pang and a terrible shudder went through me; a writhing as of death convulsed me; and I became once again conscious of a more limited, even a bodily and earthly life'. Painful though it is, it is a second birth in which he will live a spiritual rather than the thoughtless physical life he once led. He feels now that he has been 'sent into the world to minister to my fellow-men, or, rather, to repair the wrongs I have already done' (180–1).

Much of this expansion portrays a world in which every potential must be actualised, escaping from stasis, imprisonment, invisibility and isolation. And that is the nature of Fairy Land as MacDonald has presented it. It is teeming with life. Perhaps symbolic of this is the glow-worm that certain beetles collect in the fairy forest and apply to a special small lump of what looks like earth, upon which the worm 'shot up into the air like a sky-rocket, seldom, however, reaching the height of the highest tree. Just like a rocket too, it burst in the air and fell [uninjured] in a shower of the most gorgeously coloured sparks' (33–4). But for these beetles, the glow-worms would not have realised their amazing power. Similarly the fairy palace seems continually to dilate into more halls and vistas, concluding in the great wheel or clock of the twelve halls of dancing statues. These surround the hall of fantasy in which Anodos sits while his imagination sprouts worlds and beautiful songs. Near the end of the story, a little girl is gathering butterflies wings to fly away to 'her own country': some wooden men who are hindering her from doing this are stopped, so that the girl may realise her wish. All these suggest the limitless nature of the creative imagination.

And yet at the same time Anodos seems shut in throughout the story. There is the dark room of his father's study, the enclosure of the fairy forest, the frequent darkness of night. He is often inside, whether in houses, a palace, three cottages, two caves, two towers and twice under the earth itself – so much that he hardly ever looks on the sky. Indeed it is only at the end, when he has finally emerged from the tyranny of himself and the strangling power of his shadow, that he leaves the earth to float on a cloud; and even

then his gaze is still downward, at suffering mankind. These images of confinement are in tension with those of liberation, reminding us continually that the ideals of freedom and full expression of potential can be realised in this world only when the self and its urgings are controlled or absent; and even then one is still confined by one's mortality. This is particularly relevant to Anodos's impulsiveness and need to possess things, his primary moral faults during the story.

A remarkable number of things are hidden or shut away in *Phantastes*. Anodos's father's chamber has long remained shut in darkness, the secretary has stayed locked, and its inmost drawer is ingeniously fastened to prevent access to its contents. The Ash tree is invisible until Anodos looks at it from within its shadowed 'hand'; and the Maid of the Alder is concealed by darkness. The white lady is found in an obscure cave enclosed in a moss-covered block of alabaster. Anodos's shadow is hidden inside a cupboard in a house he has been warned against entering. Anodos breaks a little girl's musical ball and releases its music as a black cloud. The bath in the fairy palace is an ocean beneath its surface. In the library of the palace Anodos reads of a woman shut in a mirror; and also of people on a remote planet where the seasons are so long that their whole lives are spent in just one of them. In one of the halls of dancers the white lady Anodos has sought stands invisible on a plinth. Throughout the palace he just glimpses figures which fade when he looks at them directly. Later, Anodos is shut in a tower whose walls disappear in moonlight, and which he can escape when he uses his imagination. Further on his journey he has to struggle with a group of invisible wooden figures. In the end, in a church in the forest, Anodos finds a wolf hidden within the altar, to which youths are being sacrificed.

In almost every case Anodos enters, opens or breaks open, releases, escapes or exposes the thing hidden. This element of concealment in *Phantastes* carries a theme of penetration to truth. Even when Anodos breaks the maid's musical ball, this is in the end a good, for she learns to sing without it. Though he disobediently releases his shadow, and pays for it in later suffering, in the end it serves to teach him how to live better, and so recover some of his lost vision. *Phantastes* ends with the statement that 'What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good.' At first Anodos desired to enter Fairy Land because he saw it as the gratification of his deepest wishes (18, 38); then he realised that it was also full of danger, discomfort and despair; and finally he saw that in this way it did indeed grant his deepest wishes, wishes so

deep and so far beyond the gratifications he had imagined that he had never even conceived of them. 'Thus I, who set out to find my Ideal, came back rejoicing that I had lost my Shadow' (182).

Another recurrent motif in *Phantastes* is that of the materials of Fairy Land that appear in the story. Throughout we hear continually of wood, marble, water and earth. These make up almost the four elements of the place. There is water in the streams, seas, rivers, fountains baths and wells; wood in the Victorian furniture at the start of the story, in all the trees of Fairy Land, and near the end in the wooden men and the altar in the forest church; marble in the white lady, the construction of the fairy palace and the effigies of Anodos's buried ancestors; earth in the very spirit of the fairy forest (50, 72) and in the earth that is part of his body and feeds him like a mother when he is dead (178).

Quite why these materials occur so much is harder to say. Most of them are Jungian symbols of life, but that does not get us very far, except to say that *Phantastes* is about a young man entering into life and becoming alive (where *Lilith* is about the opposite). If we have two of the four elements here, water and earth, we do not have much in the story about fire and air. (Fire is rarely mentioned and functional (76, 138, 146-7) – except for the strange household fire that will keep the mid-ocean cottage watertight during its year beneath the sea (144) – and air has little place at all except at the end when Anodos glides for a time above the earth on a cloud (179). We are dealing with the two more solid elements.) Stone seems to be used for simpler buildings, such as cottages and isolated towers, while marble is used for more sophisticated and artistic constructions such as the statue of the lady or the fairy palace. On the other hand, the four substances we do have constitute the basis of almost everything we see, as though Fairy Land is a kind of living chemistry of them. On their own, or mixed together, they make a river or a sea, a cottage or a palace, a tree or an altar. Anodos, we may note, is continually concerned during his journey with finding out how things are constructed – with the precise make-up of the Ash-tree, the stone that shrouds the white lady in the cave, the musical globe belonging to a little girl he meets, the architecture and the materials of the fairy palace, the nature of the invisible wooden people, the way the altar of the church in the forest is made.

More than this, the two basic elements, water and wood/stone, reflect a contrast in the story between flux and stasis. Anodos's so solid bedroom melts into a landscape in Fairy Land; Fairy Land itself is uncertain; trees come to life and move; Anodos sings the statue of the white lady to life

and movement; the shadow and Anodos's possessiveness together reduce mystery to mechanics; Cosmo in the inset story must destroy the magic mirror to restore the lady to life; Anodos finds a way of keeping the statues dancing when he enters their hall; but while he makes the white lady visible, he does not make her mobile; the stone walls of the tower of pride disappear when Anodos chooses to leave; the dead Anodos changes from corpse to flower to cloud until he is re-imprisoned in flesh; back in his own world Anodos continually sees the solid world shimmer with the promise of Fairy Land. As for more incidental examples: the opening of the stiff wooden inmost drawer of the secretary brings to visible life a little fairy, who jumps down from it while growing to human size; the Ash Tree is first seen as shadow, then as substance; both it and the Maid of the Alder tree are hollow; the cupboard in the ogress's cottage liberates a malignant shadow; the bath in one of the halls of the fairy palace turns into an ocean when Anodos swims beneath the surface; the seasons change so slowly in the story of the 'loveless planet' that the people of that world are stuck in one season; the stormy and wintry ocean into which Anodos casts himself turns to a warm southern sea; the brutish solidity of the log-men is countered by their invisibility; the wooden altar of the forest church turns abruptly to the lair of a huge wolf.

Solidity is therefore constantly changeable. Earth may become a spirit, wood be a living tree that is also a woman, a marble statue turn to live beauty (72), a bath become an ocean and water itself change from stream to river to sea as Anodos follows it through Fairy Land. Everything in the book shimmers into something else as Anodos moves from place to place. When we see the fairy palace, it is both there and not there, at once solidity and illusion; and the people within it are only glimpsed, never seen clearly. From the first it is 'a stately palace glimmering ghostly in the moonshine'; now it seems to have no windows, now it has; there is no sense of the shape of the building as a whole, which is seen mainly in terms of the moonlight it reflects (74–5).

Movement depends often on the use of the imagination. It is by imaginative song that Anodos gives the statue of the white lady life and movement; it is in the world of his imagination that he trees come to life; it is only by being in a state of unconsciousness that Anodos can come upon the dancing statues without freezing them to their pedestals; it is when he recovers his imagination in the form of the little girl who returns to sing to him that Anodos finds he can walk free of his tower; and when he is dead he finally

loses the self that kept him separate from things, and can merge with his mother earth, and change to whatever being he chooses.

As we will see, virtually the entire story is about losing the self, the self that stands back from phenomena, or explains them away or tries to seize them. Immersion in the flux of life is the ideal. The whole story with its continual movement from one strange image to another expresses this. No life is isolated: everything is not only connected, but intimately joined, with everything else. As Novalis puts it, 'What is outside me is inside me, and vice-versa.' In the fairy library Anodos becomes absorbed into the books he reads. In the story of the strange planet he is a visitor from earth whom the people of that world question about his own; in the story of Cosmo he becomes Cosmo and suffers as he. We are told, 'No shining belt or gleaming moon, no red and green glory in a self-encircling twin-star, but has a relation with the hidden things of a man's soul, and, it may be, with the secret history of his body as well. They are portions of the living house wherein he abides' (83).

There is a further area of possible reading, which F. Hal Broome and Fernando Soto have pioneered.<sup>12</sup> It relates to electricity. In a paper of 1834 Michael Faraday called the point where current enters an electrolyte the 'anode' after the Greek for 'up' and 'way'. He conceived of the anode as the 'easterly' side of an electrolytic plate so oriented in an ionic solution as to produce an electric current. Likewise, the cathode was in the westerly position. The analogy was with the sun's movement from east to west. The actual electron flow was from the cathode to the anode, but this meant that the current flow was in the opposite direction, from the anode.<sup>13</sup> In *Phantastes* we have a hero called 'Anodos' who travels from west to east, and continually draws our attention to his eastwards direction (27, 37, 55, 59, 164).

Of course, the anode does not itself travel in an electrical circuit; but on the other hand it can occur at any point in a circuit. And Anodos is growing into his true self throughout his story, not achieving this until the end of his journey to the east and the sunrise. Again, while Anodos travels in what looks like a linear direction from west to east in the story, he is also going in

---

<sup>12</sup> F. Hal Broome, 'The Scientific Basis of George MacDonald's Dream-Frame', in William Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Thread: Essays on George MacDonald* (Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 90–4; Soto, 33–7, 41–3.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Faraday, *Experimental Researches in Electricity, Seventh Series*, in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* (1776–1886), Volume 124 (1 January 1834), 77–9.

a circle out of his home and back again. In other words, his journey forms a circuit. But Anodos's journey not only forms a circle but a spiral, in that the Anodos who returns home at the end is a considerably developed form of the man who first left it. Such spirals in electricity are called coils, the coils of an electric motor that when a current is passed round them generate a magnetic field sufficient to turn the rotor. Such motors were in existence by 1832, but only made commercially useful by the 1870s.<sup>14</sup> MacDonald would doubtless have heard of these developments and seen illustrations of their products. Electric motors were on show at the Great Exhibition of 1851, which MacDonald could well have visited, since he was then at Arundel.<sup>15</sup>

But why should MacDonald do this? Why should he liken the progress of Anodos to an electrical circuit? Is that not to degrade a spiritual process with a merely material one? Here we must recall that MacDonald's first vocation was to be a scientist, and that with sufficient funding after his studies at Aberdeen he would have sought to work under the German chemist and 'electro-biologist' Justus von Liebig at the University of Giessen who, following on from Galvani, explained the nervous and muscular systems of all animals as founded on the passage of electricity. *Phantastes* is written only twelve years after MacDonald gave up a scientific career. Moreover, MacDonald's literary and spiritual mentor was the German mining engineer, poet and fabulist Friedrich von Hardenberg, or Novalis, who throughout his writings, particularly his manuscript later-entitled *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* ('Notes for a Universal Encyclopedia') insists on the doctrine of correspondences whereby scientific and material processes could be seen as interlinked in a vast analogical and spiritual system.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See eg. Edward Tatnall Canby, *A History of Electricity, New Illustrated Library of Science and Invention*, Vol. 6, 3rd edn (London: Leisure Arts Ltd., 1966).

<sup>15</sup> K. G. Beauchamp, *Exhibiting Electricity* (London: The Institute of Electrical Engineers, 1997), 85–7.

<sup>16</sup> Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 116, sect. 637: 'Every thing is a general formula of something else – a function of another thing' (see also 136, sect. 737 and 196–7, sect. 24). So for instance, speech sounds like musical instruments: 'Consonants are fingerings... Vowels are strings of sound, or *batons of air*. The lungs are a *bow in motion*' (36, sect. 245); 'learning is so much like eating – and *a priori* knowledge is a satiation – and a nourishment, without partaking of food' (162, sect. 909); or 'Water is a wet flame' (176, sect. 1026). Compare MacDonald, cited in GMDW, 216: '[MacDonald] knew enough of Swedenborg's teaching to feel the truth of *correspondences*, and would find innumerable instances of physical law tallying with metaphysical, of chemical affinities with spiritual affections;



Here we must mention other aspects of *Phantastes* that seem to have a potential electrical reference. Why is there so much stress on not touching people? The fairy Anodos first meets tells him that “‘if you could touch me, I should hurt you’” (17). Anodos does wrong in laying hands on the little girl’s magic ball, which flashes and finally bursts. The people of a strange planet never touch one another, never have sexual relations, and are horrified when they learn of the way babies are made on earth. Cosmo von Wersthal gets closer and closer to his lady, but never touches. A ballad about one Sir Aglovaile tells how when one night, despite warnings, he touched the ghost of his former wife, he lost her finally. We can explain touch here as part of the desire to possess things that is so excoriated in *Phantastes* – that is, as part of its theme of denying rather than gratifying the self – but really, there is nothing wrong with touch in itself. Why should Anodos not want to touch what he loves? Why is the command “TOUCH NOT” wherever we look?

It is possible that seizing something is like breaking an electrical circuit. When Anodos releases the lady from the alabaster in the cave, he does it by singing to her. His song brings her to life and gives her the energy to break free of her prison and glide away towards the woods. If we conceive of the song as working like an induction coil, then he has induced in her a current of life or energy without touching her. He does the same in bringing her into visibility in the fairy palace: but then, in seizing her, he breaks the musical connection between them that is giving her life. She then literally runs away to earth, just like a current earthing itself; and he too, following, has to go down into the earth. Moreover, in future she will no longer be the mystic white lady, but will shrink to the earthly wife of the knight of rusty armour.

This electrical symbolism may thus help us to understand or guess at some of the oddities of *Phantastes* that seem so often to frustrate us. For instance, the chamber of the imagination in the fairy palace, circled by twelve halls of statues that dance, may recall some of the makeup of an electric motor – for example the twelve-coil armature of the celebrated

---

of crystallisation with the formation of purpose; of solution with patient waiting till the time for action was come, and so forth’ (216). The idea of correspondences between the ‘macrocosm’ and the ‘microcosm’ was an ancient one which persisted into the eighteenth century, but Novalis saw it as a fluid and mobile system animated by mind rather than the unchanging objective world founded in God that Pope, for example, portrayed in his *Essay on Man*.



‘electro-moteur’ of Paul Gustave Froment invented in 1845.<sup>17</sup> Electricity can also throw light on Anodos’s spiritual development during the story. For the anode is always the site of charging by new ions, whereas the cathode is the place of discharge. By the end of his story the spiritually depleted Anodos of its start has been charged with new health and energy.

We have so far dealt with the imagination as being, that is, as a place visited, as a region full of both Anodos’s impulses and God’s hints, all in metaphoric form. Thus the Maid of the Alder is a metaphor of Anodos’s lust, while the Beech-Tree is a figure of divine grace. However the imagination is not simply a place to be looked at or experienced: it is itself active, and works on Anodos to alter the nature of his spirit. Everything he meets in Fairy Land, whether evil or good, works to change him, ultimately for the better. Here we deal with the imagination not only as being, but as doing.

During the story Anodos is shown moving gradually out of himself to an understanding not only of desire but of love and its true object. He continually travels eastwards without knowing why (27, 37, 55, 59, 164): this may be towards the sunrise, but it is also the way to Christ on the Cross (compare Donne, ‘Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward’). Whatever sins Anodos commits, he is always moving and being moved in this direction. His journey is to end in his Christ-like act of giving his life to save a congregation of people in an evil church.

At the same time Anodos is growing spiritually from dependent child to questioning youth to choosing adult. These correspond to three contexts in *Phantastes*: first Anodos is in the fairy forest, then in the palace, then in more open country. At the beginning of his journey Anodos is physically twenty-one years old and has just come into his material inheritance through his father; at the end, he has spent twenty-one days away from home (though not in Fairy Land itself, where time is not as ours) at the end of which he has come into his spiritual majority. In this sense the story is a spiritual biography, like Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (1795–6) or Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) to both of which it is indebted.<sup>18</sup> Anodos is born into a new world, entering it from a bed; is at first in a state of childish dependency and night-terrors; has early sexual urges that lead him to shame and near-disaster (the

<sup>17</sup> Canby, 53, has a picture of this.

<sup>18</sup> Prickett, ‘Fictions and Metafictions: *Phantastes*, *Wilhelm Meister* and the Idea of the *Bildungsroman*’, in William Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Key: Essays on George MacDonald* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 109–25.

Maid of the Alder); loses the magic of childhood by becoming materialist (admits his 'shadow'); and so on.

In the first part of the story the darkness and confusion of the woods are there partly to symbolise Anodos's spiritual ignorance. There are also numerous mother figures, suggesting Anodos's child-like passivity at this stage – the Beech-tree, the earth itself (50), the farm woman (56), 'mother Nature (72). Where Anodos acts, he does so by impulse rather than choice. He reaches out for his fairy godmother like a baby after a toy, he goes out at night when warned not to, he impulsively scratches away at the moss hiding the alabaster that encases the white lady, he rashly opens the cupboard door in the ogress's house (17, 24, 40–1, 64); and even much later, he is still to be found ignoring counsel and rushing through a door to disaster (143–4). For him to be in Fairy Land at all, and have the mark of Faerie on him, does show that he lives in his imagination: but his imagination is undisciplined, like a child's. He is at the mercy of whatever may come into his unconscious mind: and what first comes is the nightmare that is the Ash-tree.

MacDonald said that such things have power over us only if we are unaware of the God in our imaginations (*ADO*, 24–5). Anodos has his first religious experience in what looks more like a romantic one, when he encounters the statue of the white lady, whose beauty draws from his soul a song that brings her to life. The experience for Anodos is one of piercing inwards to a discovery, first descending into a valley, entering a cave (described in partly sexual terms), stripping away some moss to find a block of alabaster, seeing the lady dimly lying in marble form within it, and then releasing her. The scene seems based on an episode in Sydney Whiting's science fictional *Helionde; Or, Adventures in the Sun* (1855)<sup>19</sup> – a series of veils that is pierced to a

---

<sup>19</sup> The protagonist of *Helionde* has fallen in love with the Princess Heliotrope, consort of his host Prince Helionax, and has had a very life-like statue of the princess set in an alcove for his private delectation. One day he finds it gone, with only the plinth remaining; after which he finds a tunnel behind the alcove, leading to two ways, one of which has over its entrance the words 'Love Sacrificed to Virtue' and the other 'Virtue Sacrificed to Love'. Reluctantly choosing the former, he is met by the prince, who tells him that the whole scheme was set up as a means of testing his guest's virtue; which failing, he would have been exiled from the blissful City of the Sun to a remote island given to warfare (119–20). The similarity with *Phantastes*, with the lifelike female statue in the cave, the empty-seeming plinth in the fairy palace and Anodos's contrastive placing of love over virtue, is striking. However at this time the use in literature of statues that come to life was

vision otherwise concealed from man, following which the lady thus revealed immediately glides away and is lost to view. Though he does not yet know it, Anodos has experienced an image of God, at once present and absent. He immediately mistranslates it, and sets off in pursuit of the lady as woman rather than as a goddess. Night falls and, meeting the evil Maid of the Alder, he mistakes her for the white lady and is easily seduced by her.<sup>20</sup>

The process followed here seems to have been deeply understood by C.S. Lewis, who when he first encountered *Phantastes* in 1916, felt that ‘never had the wind of Joy blowing through any story been less separable from the story itself’. Later he was to know that ‘the new quality, the bright shadow that rested on the travels of Anodos ... was Holiness,’ and that *Phantastes* had ‘baptised my imagination’.<sup>21</sup> Lewis is speaking of the peculiar desire, or *Sehnsucht*, that was awakened by certain images in his life. In his spiritual biography *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (1933; rev. 1943) Lewis presented what he called ‘a dialectic of desire’ in the story of a boy John who has an early vision of a wonderful island that so fires his soul that he sets out across the world to try to find it. Everyone he meets mistranslates his desire, saying it is for women, or power, or purity, or nature. For the women, he does exactly as Anodos does, and finds that sex was not what he wanted. The great thing for him becomes the realisation that it is not any image he is really looking for, but actually the desire that came through it, and its source. The image relayed the desire, but did not contain it: God momentarily lit it for Anodos, but the fire moved on. Like John, MacDonald’s Anodos mistranslates the image of the woman, and the rest of the story is to teach him that it was not her but what came through her that mattered. The white lady is the first pang of intense

---

common, as in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ (1816), Donizetti’s opera *Il Pygmalione* (1816), Thomas Lovell Beddoes’s ‘Pygmalion, or the Cyprian Statuary’ (1823–5), Robert Browning’s ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ (1836) and ‘My Last Duchess’ (1842), Prosper Mérimée’s ‘The Venus of Ille’ (1837), or William Cox Bennett’s ‘Pygmalion’ in his *Queen Eleanor’s Vengeance* (1857).

<sup>20</sup> See also Chris Brawley, ‘The Ideal and the Shadow: George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*’, *North Wind* 25 (2006), 91–112; Courtney Salvey, ‘Riddled with Evil: Fantasy as Theodicy in George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* and *Lilith*’, *North Wind* 27 (2008), 16–24, especially 19–20, where Salvey likens Anodos’s experience as mirroring that in Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’ from the *Republic*: ‘Anodos’s journey, like that in Plato ... is a gradual realisation of the ideal which grounds the existence of material objects.’

<sup>21</sup> *Surprised by Joy*, 171.

desire for he knows not what that a child may suddenly feel, and that Lewis's John also feels in *The Pilgrim's Regress*.

After the released lady has glided away, Anodos makes the mistake of identifying the image of her with the ideal she awakes, and sets off to find as woman what is much more than woman. His pursuit, at first romantic, quickly becomes more possessive and sexual, and meets its reward in the carnal embrace of the Maid of the Alder, a hollow deceiver who at night simulates the appearance of the white lady, only to turn Anodos over next morning to the murderous Ash-tree. This episode MacDonald appears to have taken from that of the fraudulent Duesse in Book 1 of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, who first dupes Redcrosse by pretending to be his beloved Una (Truth), and after lying with him betrays him to attack by three brutal knights who symbolise his moral condition, Sansfoy, Sansloy and Sansjoy.

After escaping from the Ash, Anodos has a further bad experience when he lets himself be led by the farmer's crudely materialist son next morning to the ogress's cottage and the evil shadow hidden there. The shadow is very like the piece of broken mirror that enters Kay's eye and heart and destroys his happy view of the world in Hans Andersen's 'The Snow Queen'.<sup>22</sup> It cancels imagination for bare fact, as when it reduces a 'lovely fairy child' with 'an aureole of emanating rays' whom Anodos meets to a 'commonplace boy, with a rough broad-brimmed straw hat, through which brim the sun shone from behind'; and two wondrous poetry-making toys he is carrying to mere looking-glass and a kaleidoscope. The shadow marks the point at which Anodos loses his childhood sense of wonder at things. After he has got it, we hear no more of the flower-fairies or the creatures whose speech he earlier grew to understand. He has as it were entered on a more materialistic and cynical youth: now, instead of seeing things as more than they are, he sees them as less.

Eventually Anodos's way leads him through 'a desert region of dry sand and glittering rocks' peopled by mocking goblin-fairies, symbolising

---

<sup>22</sup> The mirror from which the splinter that distorts Kay's vision originally came was made by an evil sprite and had 'the power of causing all that was good and beautiful when it was reflected therein, to look poor and mean; but that which was good-for-nothing and looked ugly was shown magnified and increased in ugliness. In this mirror the most beautiful landscapes looked like boiled spinach, and the best persons were turned into frights, or appeared to stand on their heads; their faces were so distorted that they were not to be recognised; and if anyone had a mole, you might be sure that it would be magnified and spread over both nose and mouth.'

the present arid state of his soul, stung by conscience. The goblins ironically revere him and offer him handfuls of gold and jewels, representing the materialism that has become his guiding principle. But they desist out of sympathy when they see his shadow, which has now become a force not just of disillusion but of despair. Wandering 'listlessly and almost hopelessly along' through the desert, Anodos one day comes upon a little spring, and feels cheered when he drinks from it. It is the first sign of returning spiritual health, a little spring in his heart, here granted by an unknown grace rather than self-begotten. He now goes with the grain of creation, following it where it goes. At first the stream disappears under the desert from time to time; but eventually it swells to a river and in parallel a gush of love wells from Anodos's heart (71–2). Still he follows the stream on its increasingly fertile way, through meadows and thick woods, until he comes to a scene that is the very image of his mind:

At length, in a nook of the river, gloomy with the weight of overhanging foliage, and still and deep as a soul in which the torrent eddies of pain have hollowed a great gulf, and then, subsiding in violence, have left it full of a motionless, fathomless sorrow – I saw a little boat lying. (72)

In all this the journey traversed is as much one inside Anodos as outside him – both Within and Without. His boat takes Anodos, resting within it, in a transport of spiritual calm, to a further realm of his imagination, the fairy palace.

When we come to the white marble palace, with all its conscious construction, we come to an Anodos who will now begin to grow in understanding Fairy Land and the mind that made it. The palace is quite separate from the previous landscape, for the woods stop well short of it, and the building is not set on the earth but on a platform of its own marble.<sup>23</sup> Where the woods were dark, the palace is shot through with light. Art and artefact,

---

<sup>23</sup> Compare Tennyson, 'The Palace of Art' (1832); revised for inclusion in *The Lady of Shalott, and Other Poems* (1842). Tennyson's palace is built on a platform aloof from the surrounding meadow grass; and has numerous rooms, pillars, fountains courts cloisters and quadrangles through which the soul wanders. But MacDonald could also be indebted to his fellow-Scot James Thomson's *The Castle of Indolence* (1748), to Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death' (1842) or to Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'A Select Party' and 'The Hall of Fantasy' in his *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846).

the re-shaping of nature, have entirely replaced the natural – perhaps too entirely. Not an animal, plant or tree is ever seen or mentioned there. The palace is like a giant hotel, where there is a room prepared for Anodos, and he is constantly waited upon: all is clearly made for him. This place may be the centre of Fairy Land, the home of the Fairy Queen; but it is also, with its endless galleries and halls a picture of the limitless nature of the mind and imagination as Anodos is now finding them.

Here Anodos is no longer absorbed only in immediate sense impressions, as in looking at the Ash-tree or the White Lady, or feeling the Beech-tree's hair about him, or sensing the change in his perception after he finds his shadow. Nor is he as simply impulsive as he was when he first released the lady from the alabaster or opened the cupboard door in the ogress's cottage. This time, we will find him planning actions that must still seem impromptu, as when he seeks to catch a crowd of statues while they are dancing. Here we are more directly concerned with the movements of thought and reflection. Indeed we might call the palace Anodos's fairy university. More than half of the fifty-odd pages covering the time of his stay are taken up with the palace library and what he reads and learns there. For now Anodos is no longer having to 'act and wander' – though he is to do so at an intellectual level, for whatever book he reads he finds himself imaginatively re-enacting (81–2, 89). Indeed this is a university of the imagination, at once expressing it and teaching it.

Anodos tells us two of the stories he read in the library. The two he chooses are essentially opposites, but both describe frustration. One portrays a strange planet of fastidious yet beautiful men and winged women who do not have sex but leave one another and die of their desire, and do not have babies but find them under bushes.<sup>24</sup> This is a form of putting women on pedestals: and we are soon to find a woman on a pedestal in the fairy palace. When Anodos tells these women of carnal sex and reproduction in our world, they are appalled. MacDonald may be satirising the often prudish Victorian attitude to sex here, and the concealment of the physical facts of birth by a people who were busy reproducing at a rate hitherto unknown.

But these people, at least the women, may have a further significance. They are mostly unhappy with their world. Their ocean, in which they delight

---

<sup>24</sup> For his picture of this 'loveless planet' MacDonald may have been indebted to Charles Ischir Defontenay, *Star ou Psi de Cassiopée: Histoire Merveilleuse de l'un des Mondes de l'Espace* (Paris: Ledoyen, 1854). For a full account see Appendix A.

to swim, reflects nothing: it is 'like a sea of death, ready to engulf and never to reveal: a visible shadow of oblivion'. Instead it is the sky that mirrors everything beneath it, 'as if it were built of water like ours' (86). The women here desire the oblivion that their sea figures. This is a weary world, following a slow and leaden course of interminably long seasons, a world in which desire has no fruit but death, and the dominant note is of 'an indescribable longing for something, they know not what' (86). This is a world of *Liebestod*.

The second story Anodos relates is no less death-directed, but where the story of the 'loveless planet' is anti-physical and Platonic, this one is imbued with sexual passion and involvement in the world. This story involves a princess magically entrapped in a mirror and an enamoured student who hesitates, 'not yet pure in love', before finally breaking the mirror and giving the lady her freedom – at the cost of his own life.

In the first story, nearness to others, sex and reproduction are rejected; in the other, separated people are brought steadily closer to one another and sex and marriage are in prospect. Both tales end in frustration, but in the Cosmo story this is not by choice. In the one, the death comes from too little passion; in the other, from too much. The women in the story of the planet direct their desire beyond their lives. Cosmo centres his on a woman and does not look beyond this world. (Cosmo, with his nobility, his late eighteenth-century continental context and his abstruse scientific studies into mining and alchemy, is possibly a figure of Novalis.)

What is being said in the planetary story is that if you locate desire beyond the world you miss its vitality, which comes from its source in created things. The paradox of the story is that the planet is one with which every person has an intensely physical relationship, whether being marked by it according to the time and place of their birth, searching it for the children it provides or delighting in some of its pleasures.

On the other hand, if you place all desire in the beloved alone, you go no less wrong. Of course the object of one's love matters, enormously: but what also matters is that she is but one, if the most important in one's life, of the images that can waken desire in us. Moreover, for all that the white lady is said to be the image of the desire in Anodos's soul, cynicism knows that another woman he met might have answered the purpose as well. And indeed one does, in the degenerate form of the Maid of the Alder-tree (50–4); and later two more possibilities are mentioned: 'Could I but see the Spirit of the Earth, as I saw once the indwelling woman of the beech-tree, and my beauty of the pale marble, I should be content. Content! – Oh,



how gladly would I die of the light of her eyes!' (72). The white lady comes third on the list here. Again, during his sojourn in the fairy palace, Anodos spends much of his time reading in the library, having apparently forgotten his desire for the white lady. Now his desire is apparently rather to see the dancers moving invisibly near him in their halls and so 'understand the whole of the music on the billows of which they floated and swung' (110). Only finally through a dream is he brought back to concentrate on the lady (112). In short, Anodos himself enacts the constantly shifting sources of desire in life when one tries to locate it only within this world.

But the place of the dancers, in twelve circular halls in a wheel about a central chamber in which Anodos sits alone, is symbolic of matters wider than him. Apart from the electrical analogy we discussed earlier, the circle of the twelve circular halls suggests an image of time, whether in terms of a clock face of twelve hours, a year of twelve months or a zodiac of twelve astral signs. However time is not a significant theme in *Phantastes*. It is better to see what is going on as the end of a cycle, which is what happens when a clock reaches twelve or a year arrives at the twelfth month. After what happens here, Anodos will enter a new cycle of life.

The halls are interconnected by a circular passage running round the outside of all of them. The circle suggests that image of perfection and wholeness, the mandala.<sup>25</sup> But it is not quite a perfect circle, for the passage into the central chamber interrupts it. Here it is not difficult to see that passage and Anodos's entry by it, as a symbol of fertilisation.<sup>26</sup> It is a fertilisation that is intended; Anodos is to enter and bring the lady to life from where she sits as a statue on her pedestal, and his dreams help him to locate her. However it turns out that he can do this only when he does not have a prior intention to enter a chamber of dancers, who are otherwise found frozen on their pedestals: he has to dart in to one as soon as the impulse to do so strikes him, and without any premeditation – in other words, he has to go in unconsciously, or, as MacDonald would have it, when he is in

<sup>25</sup> On mandalas, see C.G. Jung, 'A Study in the Process of Individuation' (rev.1950), 'On Mandala Symbolism' (1950), and 'Mandalas' (1955), repr. in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 2nd edn, trans R.F.C. Hull, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, ed. Herbert Read, vol. 9, Part 1 (London: Routledge, 1969), 290–390; and Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 2nd edn, tr. R.F.C. Hull, *Collected Works* vol. 12 (1968), 41–223. For an analysis of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in terms of a fertilised mandala, see Colin Manlove, *Literature and Reality 1600–1800* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 48–50.

<sup>26</sup> Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 311–22.



his imagination. This state of unconsciousness is here as often in *Phantastes*, the desired state: it is seen in Anodos's days-long reveries and songs in the central chamber, and in his song to make the lady visible. The chamber she is in is the tenth, the tetraktys, the Pythagorean number of wholeness and perfection.<sup>27</sup>

However, Anodos is a blighted figure, the worm to the lady's rose. She is already invisible to him and static. She is invisible because his 'shadowed' sight, which is his failure to see what she truly is, renders him blind to her. She has returned to the statue she was when he found her first, because his possessiveness wants her to be his only. For him she is 'my lady': but in truth she is no-one's to possess. Recalling the way Cosmo had a lady trapped in a mirror, Anodos sees his own lady as an aesthetic object on a plinth; in fact he is shown dreaming of her like this before he finds her (112). The likeness of this palace to the one created for the worldly soul in Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art' (1833, 1842) is quite close. The lady is an image born with Anodos in his soul, of the God in the depths of his imagination, but he will see her only in terms of something to be seized.

But if his shadow makes Anodos unable to see the lady, his soul can still see her aright, if only it is given the way. As with the first time he met her, that way is through the power of song given to him by Fairy Land – in other words to use his spirit, his imagination, to release her, not his will to catch her. This however works only superficially, for while Anodos's song, which glorifies the lady's body from her feet to head, gradually makes her visible, it also expresses his own desire for her, so that when she stands revealed before him, she is still static on the plinth. His earlier song to her while she was visible in the alabaster asked her to move; but this one has only asked her to appear, effectively trapped within his desires. Frustrated, Anodos seizes her and lifts her from the plinth; at which she does indeed move, but now, having regained her true self, she struggles free of him and flees crying, "Ah! You should have sung to me; you should have sung to me!" (120). He has sung

---

<sup>27</sup> *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library: An Anthology of Ancient Writings Which Relate to Pythagoras and Pythagorean Philosophy*, trans. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes, 1987), 28–30, 133, 137, 171, 175, 307–8, 312. The tetraktys is an equilateral triangle formed of ten points, one in at the apex, then in descending symmetrical rows of, two then three and then four points, and was a symbol of perfection and of heaven. For Pythagoras the decad was the perfect number, both because it formed the first quaternary (1+2+3+4) and because it was the basis of all numbers.

to her only as a body: he has failed to sing to her also as a mind and a soul. Had he seen her as someone to be freed rather than as a woman to be won, he might have brought her to full life.

Anodos has now lost the lady through his possessive sensuality. In doing so he has reduced her from an image that might lead him to God to a mere woman to feel only jealous desire for. For when next we see her, the lady is married to the knight Anodos met earlier in the forest, as though she has always belonged to him; and Anodos is left to be tormented at their union. He has lost the divine truth she partly figured, and can only recover some sense of it through repentance and renewal of soul. In short, he has fallen, and can return to God only through broken images of the original.

Anodos's error here shows us the truth that lies behind this story. Whatever one makes one's idol in this world will always fall away, because the true object of one's desire is not it, but what comes through it. The idea is expressed in a poem that arises in Anodos's own soul after he has left the fairy palace and has made his first essay at giving up the white lady:

Do not vex the violet  
 Perfume to afford:  
 Else no odour thou wilt get  
 From its little hoard.

In thy lady's gracious eyes  
 Look thou not too long;  
 Else from them the glory flies,  
 And thou dost her wrong.

Come not thou too near the maid,  
 Clasp her not too wild;  
 Else the splendour is allayed,  
 And thy heart beguiled. (124)

Each of these stanzas says that you should not try to possess things, for if you do, the secret essence that drew you to them is lost. For what delights you is not just them, but what comes through them: and that is the divine imagination that has created and sustains them. The basic point is one of restraint: if you base your love in the lady alone, you deceive yourself and

her. For what you really love is both her and the God in her. But as soon as the image is mistaken for its divine source, that source forsakes it.

This theme – which may be put in Charles Williams’s Christian aphorism ‘This also is Thou: neither is this Thou’<sup>28</sup> – is mirrored in the whole idiom of *Phantastes*. This idiom is one of elusiveness. Men try to possess women, and immediately lose them. Though Anodos twice rescues the white lady from marble, she simply runs away from him; and indeed he is unable ever to address her directly, and in the end loses her to another. In the story of Cosmo and the lady he sees trapped in a magic mirror, Cosmo no sooner succeeds in meeting her than she tells him to break the mirror, even though he may never see her again. When he finally succeeds he is mortally wounded and loses her for ever (103–8). So too in another story, Sir Aglovale gets back as a ghost-bride the woman he once left to die in childbirth, but loses her finally when he clasps her to him (131–5). There is as we have seen before a continual theme of it being dangerous to touch the beloved. Cosmo, for instance, can only prove his love for his lady by dying, can only come close to her when he is about to be removed from her.

Furthering the sense of elusiveness, there are few names in *Phantastes*. Anodos is not so much a name as a descriptor: and as a descriptor it is as we saw ambiguous, meaning in Greek equally ‘upwards’ and ‘without direction’, which conveys both purpose and lack of it. Anodos is named only five times – twice in the first chapter, once in the last, once in the title to his room in the fairy palace, ‘The Chamber of Sir Anodos’, and only once directly during the story, by an old hag (124). As to other figures in the story, we know no more of Anodos’s beloved than that she is ‘the white lady’, and all the various ladies he meets in cottages have no designations at all. The ‘knight in rusty armour’, though likened to Sir Perceval (48) is never named; the girl whose musical globe Anodos destroys is indistinguishable from the later girl he helps gather butterflies; the two king’s sons Anodos trains with for months to overcome some bloodthirsty giants are given no names. As compared with *Phantastes*, its sister romance *Lilith*, written at the end of MacDonald’s life, is full of names – indeed one of its themes is knowing one’s proper name. But there such names are of heaven rather than of earth.

Even the medium of *Phantastes* is elusive. The story is never a constant one, for it is always being interrupted by others – the adventures of Sir Perceval

---

<sup>28</sup> Charles Williams, *He Came Down From Heaven and The Forgiveness of Sins* (London: Faber, 1950), 102–3.

(25), the tale of the 'loveless planet' or of Cosmo of Prague (83–108), the ballad of Sir Aglovale (131–5), an episode from childhood revisited (137–8). We are also made aware of fictions other than Anodos's story, in the epigraphs from other writers which head every chapter and invite us to see what follows by their light. In some ways too the whole of *Phantastes* is a mass of changing literary genres – allegory, science fantasy, horror, folk tale, gothic story, pastoral and Romantic biography – so that we can never pin it down. At the same time the idiom of the story continually shifts between prose and poetry. As well as sixteen poems, several more than a page in length, which scatter the text, all but two of the interruptive epigraphs to chapters are in verse. Meanwhile the language itself continually varies in idiom between highly emotional and a scientific mode of discourse.<sup>29</sup>

Through this motif of elusiveness, *Phantastes* can be seen as imaging God's simultaneous presence in and absence from the image of desire: we are not allowed to settle on any one position without moving to another. It is significant that the nightly dancing in the fairy palace should be at the centre of the story. The book attacks whatever traps or fixes a person or object. Change and motion are continual. The fairy found in the recess of the secretary is first tiny, then human-sized, the lady in the cave is first a statue, then a living and moving being, and then apparently a woman seducing Anodos in the night, the ogress seems evil but then counsels Anodos against opening her cupboard door, the shadow changes the wondrous appearance of things, a bathing pool in the fairy palace turns into an ocean beneath its surface, Anodos changes from a reader to the hero of the stories he reads in the fairy library, he prevents the dancers in the hall from becoming motionless when he enters; and so on. And though he himself stops in the fairy palace, still he must 'act and wander' until the end; and even then there is no end, for he must re-live his story in this world. All the time each strange image presented to us no sooner appears than we move to another, and then another. And none of them is recalled by Anodos: his consciousness feels each moment intensely, but makes no connections with what has been.

Beneath the continual mobility of the book and its elusiveness, certain structures are to be found. For instance the sequence of events after Anodos's eventual departure from the palace is much the same that followed his acquisition of his shadow before he arrived there. Again he finds himself in a

---

<sup>29</sup> See Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature: A Critical Survey* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), 86.

rocky landscape, this time underground, and again his conscience treats him with mocking reverence and then derision, this time at his loss of the White Lady, in the form of troops of goblins and other fairy grotesques.<sup>30</sup> And again these desist from tormenting him, but this time not when they see his shadow, but when he answers their clamour that the lady loves another than himself (“‘She’s for a better man; how he’ll kiss her! How he’ll kiss her!’”) by saying, “‘Well, if he is a better man, let him have her’” (123). Anodos pursues this spirit of generous humility in a song that wells up unbidden in his soul, saying that if the lady loves another, he will accept it (“‘Still! Be still, my heart!’”). He then continues his dreary journey, just as he did before across the rocky desert (71), and finally comes to an ocean, where as he did before at the river, he finds a boat, lets it take him where it will and enters a state of ecstasy.

These events may be so alike because MacDonald believed that growth of the human spirit was not in straight lines, but rather in spirals, constantly returning on itself, but always a little further up.

For the movements of man’s life are in spirals: we go back whence we came, ever returning on our former traces, only upon a higher level, on the next upward coil of the spiral, so that it is a going back and a going forward ever and both at once.<sup>31</sup>

Coiled ways upwards, in the form of staircases, always fascinated MacDonald, because he saw them as symbolising the way to God. And we have also seen how electrical coils may play a part in the book’s imagery.

Anodos has actually recently been going down a spiral staircase: for after he leaves the fairy palace he comes to a field of large rocks like tombstones, behind one of which he sees the White Lady disappear, and when he gets there it is to find a huge well going into the ground, with stone stairs winding down its rim. This is the first time in the story that he has moved in a vertical direction. The stairs end at last at an opening into the rock; and before Anodos enters this, he looks up, to see the stars far off, and then in the opposite direction to see ‘that the sides of the shaft went sheer down, smooth as glass; and far beneath me, I saw the reflection of the same stars’ (121). Here the idea is that Anodos has further to go to find his own spiritual bedrock:

---

<sup>30</sup> Gunther, 44, 46 has noted this.

<sup>31</sup> George MacDonald, *England’s Antiphon* (1874), 256.

and indeed he tells us that 'Whenever a choice was necessary, I always chose the path that seemed to lead downwards' (ibid.). Here, going underground down the shaft, Anodos is descending into himself, his spiritual roots, to where God lives in his 'dark self' or unconscious. For MacDonald here, as for most Christians, this kind of spiritual journey down into the salt and oozy bottom of the self is equally a journey up.<sup>32</sup> Thus the stars are seen by reflection at the bottom as well as at the top of the shaft.

But Anodos has first to go a long way through the stony underground into the depths of his despair. Like earthed electricity his way is downwards to loss of energy. Even when the tunnel eventually narrows as it reaches its end, and in an image of birth Anodos has to force his way out, it is into no happy new life; for he finds himself on the desolate shingle shore of a vast wintry sea. The scene is one of depleted energy: 'Hundreds of hopeless waves rushed constantly shorewards, falling exhausted upon a beach ... No rock lifted up a sheltering severity above the dreariness around ... Sign of life was nowhere visible' (127).

Yet when finally Anodos resolves, instead of his usual passivity, to meet death halfway, and throws himself into the sea, sinking far into its depths, he is uplifted again, comes across a boat symbolising help, and finds that the sea, previously raging, is now calm beneath a 'warm southern night' (128). This boat, which recalls the one Anodos found earlier while walking in sadness beside the stream (72) is at almost the same distance from the end as the other one was from the beginning of the story. The nature of life is such, MacDonald says, that we are continually saved and raised up from despair and loss by a power not our own. The boat in which Anodos is now borne like Galahad has in it a heavy purple cloth that he draws over him like a pall, symbolising his death into a new life of joy. For MacDonald, birth was associated with this world, death with the next. A small motion of will by Anodos, in which he throws himself on the mercy of the sea, becomes self-surrender to the mercy of God, to a grace far beyond his knowing. Now, in his death, his past life unwinds before him in the sea's depths.

Grace is continued on the mid-sea island to which a current eventually bears Anodos.<sup>33</sup> This island has no shelving shore, but simply rises straight out of the sea, which is deep to its very edge. On it is a windowless square

<sup>32</sup> This paradox originates in Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 60.

<sup>33</sup> For the cottage on this island MacDonald is possibly indebted to *Undine* and to 'The Sunken Mansion' in Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* (1851), used in Morris's 'Lindenberg Pool' (1856).

cottage with a pyramidal roof and a door in each side. When later opened by Anodos from the inside, one of these doors causes the island to sink back into the depths of the sea from which we learn it came. In the cottage lives a lady who is at once both young-looking and extremely old. She is one of 'the wonderful gifts' that MacDonald says God sends from the 'darkness' of our minds where he lives up into 'the candle of our consciousness' (*ADO*, 25). Though motherly, she gives Anodos a hard education, and in the end is to send him out into the world to "'do something worth doing"' (145). On this island Anodos changes further from being passive before events to being active and able to choose.

Anodos also begins to meet more people and care for them rather than himself. When in the mid-sea cottage Anodos goes out through the first of its four doors, he finds himself returned in time to a joyful childhood day with his brother that ended in a tragic drowning. The next door, the door of Sighs, takes him to a room where he sees the white lady tend to the knight she loves, and watches them both go into her bed-chamber together: here he has to taste the ultimate in sexual jealousy and somehow get beyond it – unlike Goethe's Werther in a similar situation. The third door, the door of Dismay, leads to a church where Anodos's ancestors lie in stone effigies: these touch him lovingly through the dark. Here no song of his is needed to move these marbled figures, but only love: he asks for comfort, and comfort is given (142). We have moved beyond Anodos's imaginative power to waken others, to the God of charity who can awaken relationships even beyond the grave.<sup>34</sup>

However Anodos has still lost none of his impetuosity, his wish to express himself without restraint. Despite the lady standing in the way of the fourth door of the cottage, and imploring him not to go through it, Anodos does so, like some new disobedient Adam. At once the paradise of the island is lost. The lady has to rescue him from the other side of that fourth door, and in consequence the cottage must sink for an age beneath the waves, sustained

---

<sup>34</sup> At the same time Anodos has touched on all times: through the first door, the past of his childhood; through the second, his present relation to the white lady; and through the third the future, in the shape of an acquaintance with death that will soon be his own. In the scenes he finds beyond all these doors he shows a new care for others. After these, he rushes headlong out of all time and mortality through the last door, the door of the Timeless: but he is thrown back into life here as he will be at the end of his story.

only by the fire she keeps burning within it. Anodos now loses direct contact with the divine help sent up from the depths of his mind.

For now, Anodos must operate within a more secular life of service to others, where his now more social virtues may be exercised. First, he is sent by the lady of the island to help two brother princes in their battle against three giants who are marauding a country and imprisoning its people.<sup>35</sup> Both brothers die in killing their giants, but Anodos, whose eyesight is sharper than theirs, survives his. These giants are straight out of traditional romance, but it is possible that, as there is one giant for each of the human combatants, they signify the importance men give to their selves, inflating them beyond everyone else. If that is the case, then the battle is not yet over for Anodos who is to develop a more insidious 'giantism' within himself.

As sole victor of the struggle, Anodos releases the giants' prisoners, and then enjoys the gratitude of a kingdom and a court. But some time after he has left the court and is again travelling Anodos begins to be persuaded that he alone was responsible for the destruction of the giants, and that he is comparable to some of the great knights of old, even Sir Galahad. His pride here is social, in that it is putting himself above others. In doing this, he loses all sense of his true self, and becomes a sort of posturing vacancy, like the giant Orgoglio in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. He is then met by a knight who looks just like him, who is his true self, before whom he is powerless and put to shame, and is then immured in the tower of his own pride.

The emptiness of this pride is shown in the way that every night the walls of the tower dissolve away beneath the moon, which throughout *Phantastes* symbolises the imagination. When at length Anodos's pride has diminished, and he once more heeds his imagination and his true spirit, a woman who symbolises them comes to the tower and sings to him to come out. She is the now grown-up child whose wondrous musical globe Anodos destroyed through his greed to possess it. Now she no longer needs the globe or any external thing, for she has found she can sing instead. Unlike Anodos, she is free of possessiveness. Her invocation to Anodos is paradoxical, for she describes the whole world as a house from which he has shut himself out:

---

<sup>35</sup> The likely source here is Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, I, vii, 7–14; Bk V, x, xi, describing Arthur's battle with the three-bodied giant Gerioneo, and his restoration of Queen Belge's kingdom helped by two of her sons.



From the narrow desert, O man of pride,  
Come into the house, so high and wide. (163)

Anodos now emerges by simply opening the door, wondering why this never occurred to him before. Released from the tower of his pride, he now dis-burdens himself of his armour, another symbol of the shut-up self. Now he realises that his error has been to search not purely for his ideal but for his ideal in relation to his self. But, seeing this, his impulsive nature takes him too far in self-blame: 'I took, at first, what perhaps was a mistaken pleasure, in despising and degrading myself.' And with this the spiral of regeneration begins:

Another self seemed to arise, like a white spirit from a dead man, from the dumb and trampled self of the past. Doubtless this self must again die and be buried, and again, from its tomb, spring a winged child; but of this my history bears not yet the record. Self will come to life even in the slaying of self; but there is ever something deeper and stronger than it, which will emerge at last from the unknown abysses of the soul: will it be as a solemn gloom, burning with eyes? or a clear morning after the rain? or a smiling child, that finds itself nowhere, and everywhere? (165)

In this life the process can never be complete, which is why Anodos was earlier told he had begun a story that would have no end (33). However we are soon to meet a living image of the winged child that continually springs upwards out of this death of the self.

Anodos now encounters the knight of the formerly rusty, but now shining, sin-clear armour, who in a sense represents his better self. He pledges himself to his service, in contrast to the earlier meeting where his shadow made him withdraw from the knight in suspicion (67). As Anodos's alter ego, who succeeds where Anodos fails, the knight has just slain a dragon whose body is slung across his horse. Anodos is struck at how beautiful the colours of the dragon are. This recalls his earlier wonder at how the beauty of the Maid of the Alder could coexist with her evil (55). But the point is that evil and self always seems attractive on the outside. This dragon is an image of pride that thinks itself as beautiful as a peacock, but at the same time is as ugly as a dragon.

The knight is currently involved in helping children. The dragon has badly wounded a child and he has rescued her; and he proceeds to tell Anodos

about another child he recently saved from some marauding wooden creatures. This child was trying to gather butterfly wings in the wood to fly “to her own country” (heaven).<sup>36</sup> The child here represents a higher state of mystic being, that child-likeness that MacDonald always saw as the imprint of God (165).<sup>37</sup> The knight is here, as C.S. Lewis would put it, ‘farther up, and farther in’ than Anodos.

The wooden men are opposite to the butterflies, being ungainly, crude and ugly. They are a form of what the world looked like to Anodos while he was under the power of the shadow, when he reduced every wonder to the merely commonplace and vulgar. However we should note that it is not the butterflies themselves that these wooden creatures object to, but the girl trying to get near them. They themselves do not want the butterflies for anything. Their possessiveness is of the sort that wants to stop other people gaining pleasure. They are, in a sense, logs in a manger.

These creatures have virtually no identity, being mere rough figures hacked out of wood, and with no facial features of eyes or nose or mouth. In this they contrast with the butterflies whose richness and intricacy of colour are unparalleled, each having a slightly different design. Indeed the wooden men seem to deny being itself. They are themselves almost a negation of the human form, and they will not allow the beggar-girl to add form to herself. Their crudity of shape and their invisibility recall the Maid of the Alder and the Ash-tree (36–7, 53–4). They are opposed to that side of *Phantastes* which celebrates greater richness of life, whether in releasing the white lady from enchantments that make her static or invisible, or in Anodos’s becoming more truly himself during the story, or in the continual wonder and variety of Fairy Land itself.

And, comical though they are, the creatures are emblems of the will. Even when they are cut in half, or in quarters, or more, their fragments still persist in their object of keeping the girl away from the butterflies. They are like the ‘Self [that] will come to life even in the slaying of self’. They are the blind will that continues to operate without reason in what is in any case a reasonless exercise. Their deficiency contrasts with the more intelligent use of the will that Anodos learns to deploy in the second half of the story – marking where a giant’s armour leaves him vulnerable, and later

---

<sup>36</sup> The idea of gathering butterfly wings for flight probably comes from Sara Coleridge, *Phantasmon* (London: William Pickering, 1837), Bk I, ch.2, 22–3.

<sup>37</sup> See MacDonald’s sermon, ‘The Child in the Midst’ (*US*, 1–17, esp. 7–14).

(177) calculating in the midst of struggle just how to kill a beast before he is killed himself.

Anodos's final act is to save a congregation of people at a forest church from an unseen danger.<sup>38</sup> In doing this he shows that he has developed both sight and insight that on occasion can surpass even those of his friend the knight who, also present, thinks that nothing is wrong. Observing young men being led forward to the altar and forced through a door in it, Anodos resolves to disguise himself as one of them to see what is happening. But first he lays aside his battle-axe, being now indifferent to his own fate, and even wanting to take revenge on 'the self that had fooled me so long' (176). Being prepared would have been an imposition of the self on events – we recall how the giants came upon Anodos and the princes when they had no time to don their long-prepared armour (154–5). Anodos is told by the knight that if a man does the best he can in life, he will “‘fare none the worse in the end, that he was not burdened with provision and precaution”’ (169). While refusing to prepare himself costs Anodos his life, it also frees him from his self – or at any rate his shadow, that has fuelled his possessive mania throughout his adventure. In dying to save others he has won back his soul.

In his action in the forest church, Anodos has become in some ways a type of Christ, dying to save others. And after his death and subsequent burial, he is to rise again, first into the form of a flower, and then on to a cloud that wanders over the earth. Yet we know that the motives which led him to this are not as selfless as Christ's, being as much a mixture of despair at the loss of the white lady, anger at his persistent self and even not a little of the impulsive curiosity that has led him to open several forbidden doors previously in his history (63–4, 120, 143–4). And as we see the dead Anodos travel on his cloud above suffering humanity on earth and vow, still with faint egoism, to care for the suffering humanity he has left – “‘O pale-faced women, and gloomy-browed men, and forgotten children, how I will wait on you, and minister to you, and putting my arms about you in the dark, think hope unto your hearts, when you fancy no one is near!”’ (179–80) – as we see

---

<sup>38</sup> MacDonald may well have derived this forest church from the one in Dinah Maria Mulock (Mrs Craik)'s *Avillion; or, The Happy Isles, and Other Tales*, 3 vols (London: Smith, Elder, 1853), I, ch xi, 92–3; and the transactions at the altar from Spenser, *Faerie Queene* V, vii (on the idol of Isis), xi (on human sacrifice) and xi (on the overthrow of the idol set up by the giant Gerioneo and the destruction of the monster that lives beneath the altar).

this, we realise that he is taking to himself the role of the Comforter, and once more imposing his own wishes and plans on the future.

No sooner has Anodos said this, and contemplated his own serene end-time, than with apparently abrupt irony he is cast back once more into that very struggling humanity: 'a pang and a terrible shudder went through me; a writhing as of death convulsed me; and I became once again conscious of a more limited, even a bodily and earthly life' (180). The process is that of a birth that is also a death: the pang, the terrible shudder and the writhing are the prelude not to breaking out of the womb into a larger space, but to being confined and constricted in a smaller one. Again the Christ image of being 'contracted to a span' is there: and yet we know that Anodos has been returned to this world because he is not yet ready for the other. Fairy Land has done all it can for him, and now like a teacher it must withdraw and leave him to live out his life in the knowledge and spiritual awareness it has given him.

If Anodos is not a perfected soul by the end of *Phantastes*, he is at least an improved one, one who knows that it is better to love than to be loved (179). In the twenty-one days he has supposedly been in Fairy Land Anodos has caught up on the twenty-one years of spiritually undeveloped life he has so far lived in this world. Now the final turn of the spiral in this story puts him back home in a reconditioned state, to go on in the life of the spirit through his remaining years. He sums up his history thus: 'I, who set out to find my Ideal, came back rejoicing that I had lost my Shadow' (182). But he has not lost his ideal, he has lost only his version of it, in the lady he sexualised. His true ideal is still ahead of him, in the deepest part of his soul as much as in the heavens, for that Ideal has no earthly correlative. We leave him with the consolatory imagined murmurs of the beech tree beneath which he lies one sunny day – 'A great good is coming – is coming – is coming to thee, Anodos,' and the conviction that every one of his experiences, happy and unhappy, was to his soul's benefit. 'What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good.'

Looking back over the story, we see how the style in which *Phantastes* is written has served admirably to express its significance. The way the ideas emerge at first faintly is a way of confusing us in its dream-like world while at the same time making us feel that there is purpose and direction in it somewhere. We are meant to lose our way like Anodos, but only to find a deeper path we might not otherwise have noticed. As we do, we begin to feel that the story is not just about Fairy Land, but about Anodos in it; and that

he first goes wrong, and then gradually learns to go right. The going wrong we link figuratively to his initial wandering without an aim, or being the slave of others, whether the white lady or his evil shadow. Then we begin to notice recurrent motifs, of seeing, touching, wanting; of doors opening out, caves, penetration, self-realisation, electricity, mothers, water, most of which, apart from the motif of seeing, are gone in the later stages of the book. Perhaps then we begin to see the overall journey of the book as one from self-realisation (both good and bad) to self-renunciation. This condition of hints, occasional heightening, and certain similarities among different episodes is stylistically necessary to a story about the mysteries of man's imagination and of God; and it is supremely appropriate to suggesting meanings which are continually shimmering into others.

Another stylistic technique is disjunction. MacDonald has written a story in which there seems at first an element of disproportion between what Anodos does and what he suffers. For a first-time reader who takes *Phantastes* as a plain story without deeper meaning will think that Anodos is being harshly treated for what amount to peccadilloes. After all, who would not want to seize the woman he has just brought to life out of marble; and who could blame that man, with his passions roused, for being deceived in the darkness by the Maid of the Alder? It is only when we see that the darkness and the Maid of the Alder are not outside Anodos but express something corrupt in his soul that we understand why he is condemned for this. For the first time reader, Anodos can seem like a man put through the mill. What is wrong with wanting a woman and then touching her, as with the white lady in the fairy palace; and is feeling a touch of vanity in having beaten a giant in battle so bad a thing that it deserves being shut in a tower for days? But it is not for a single act or thought or forbidden touch of another that Anodos is punished, but for the condition of his inner being from which it comes – pride. The disjunction of act and punishment at the literal level forces us to look more deeply. We have to see better, as Anodos has become able to at the end.

This is the way the book often works on us. MacDonald uses this seeming discordance of cause and effect to drive us, if we are alert, to a level of reading that makes sense of it. In other words, the story is a surface film to be broken to see the more real one in the depths. At this deeper level of understanding it is not a series of events external to the hero but movements from within. Everything that happens, takes place in the imagination, the spirit: a devouring Ash-tree is encountered because it is an image of the

beholder's mind. Only in this way does the story make moral sense; and in this way the reader is made to become morally engaged with it.

So too, in the ballad the lady of the mid-sea cottage sings to Anodos, the knight Sir Aglovaile embraces the ghost-form of his dead wife and then loses her, not because of the prohibition on touching, nor even because of some dismal cosmic principle whereby, as the refrain puts it

*Alas, how easily things go wrong!  
A sigh too much, or a kiss too long,  
And there follows a mist and a weeping rain,  
And things are never the same again.*

He is parted from her so that he may suffer in his shallow soul something of the loss that the lady felt when he so casually abandoned her long ago, having left her pregnant and alone. But the sense of disproportion, between a mere prohibition and everlasting loss, or a world in which doom is too ready to fall, is there to ask us to go beyond it to make sense of the story. And the same goes for the suffering and death of Cosmo von Wehrstahl in the inset story, 'merely' for hesitating before breaking the magic mirror that keeps the lady with him. It is not the act that counts, but the possessiveness of nature it portrays: the lady in the mirror is in part for him a collector's piece, at the mercy of his choices. .

Even so the ability to read in this way is something of a test of the penetration of the reader. And this is where the 'seeing' 'penetration' and 'door' imagery of the story comes fully into its own. For if Anodos develops in his ability to see as he moves through Fairy Land, so must the reader. If we see clearly enough, and if we pass through the doorway of the story we may perceive patterns that otherwise might have remained hidden. That is evident from the many perceptive critical analyses of *Phantastes* in recent years: we now know the book much better than we did. And MacDonald himself asks this of us: 'Especially must ... [the student of imagination] endeavour to show the spiritual scaffolding or skeleton of any work of art; those main ideas upon which the shape is constructed, and around which the rest group as ministering dependencies' (*ADO*, 38).

## 5 ‘The Golden Key’ (1867)

First published in 1867 in MacDonald’s collection of fairy tales *Dealings with the Fairies*, ‘The Golden Key’ is a tale that well illustrates his later pronouncement that ‘I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five’ (*ADO*, 317), for much in it is both far too complex for the child and too simple for the adult to understand, without that perceptive innocence he calls ‘the childlike’. The tale is the story of two children who travel through the world to find ‘the country from which the shadows fall’ – the shadows being of strange people, creatures and forests from an unknown source that crowd the land around them on their journey through life.

The story begins from where *Phantastes* left off, in the world. At the end of *Phantastes* Anodos returned from Fairy Land to this world to begin the journey of his life anew. In ‘The Golden Key’ we follow that journey through the adventures of a boy and a girl who, with a golden key, set out to find the door it fits. They travel through a fairyland which is really this world as it truly is – a series of miracles which we no longer perceive, either through familiarity with them or because we have blighted the world with factories and cities. Fairyland shows how the world we so take for granted may change in a moment to something rich and strange if we will only see. This miraculous world is perceivable by only one mental faculty, the imagination, which is also the dwelling place of God in man’s mind.

The boy in the story (only later named as ‘Mossy’), is imaginative in this sense, and can see things others cannot, which is why he finds the golden key. He is truly childlike. The house he lives in stands right next to the forest that skirts Fairyland, and some trees from this forest have even entered the cottage garden – showing that the realm of the imagination is part of his existence. The boy sits ‘in the twilight’ (always a sign of the imagination in

MacDonald<sup>1</sup>) listening to his great aunt telling him, not a story but an imaginative truth, that there is a golden key at the end of the rainbow, if he can only find it. She answers none of his questions about how to find it, and what it will open, for such questions come from the conscious and possessive part of the mind. At first he supposes that if he could get it and sell it, he might make a lot of money: to which his great-aunt replies “Better never find it than sell it” (GK, 120). There is nothing to be done with or said about this key, for it has no relation to the common world we live in.

Things that belong to the imagination are given, not found out. The trees of the forest, it seems to the boy, want him to go there. And as he continues looking at them, he sees a rainbow glimmer far off in the forest, and realises he is looking at the end of the rainbow glorious not only with its seven beautiful colours, but an eighth colour he has never seen before. He has seen a token of God's presence, because he sees with his imagination, which is God's home in man. Immediately after this gift, he thinks of the golden key at the rainbow's end and rushes out into the forest. The trees 'welcome' him, and the bushes make way for him, the rainbow continues to shine although the sun has set: everything conspires to bring him to his goal. And when he arrives at the foot of the rainbow, he is so captivated by its beauty, and by the living forms of men and women he now sees ascending within it, that he forgets about the golden key. Even when he remembers it, he spends some time 'feeding his eyes upon its beauty', until he thinks again of its use, and realises he does not know where on earth to find the keyhole it fits. All his personal and worldly motives keep being forgotten by him or frustrated, because his heart is holy. And this is the true goodness in him.

At this point we are introduced to a girl living in a house near the boy's, who is to meet and travel with him. A contrast is thus set up between the two. Where the boy is child-like, she is an ordinary child. She has been neglected, and though unlike the boy she has a father still living, he might as well be dead, because he is a merchant, an acquisitive man of the world, who is away from home most of the time. The house, left ungoverned save by two 'idle and careless' servants, has become very untidy and run-down. Even the window of the child's bedroom is largely blocked by straggling ivy and creeper, so that she cannot see much outside, and rarely looks towards the wood. This choked window is an image of the girl's limited imaginative sight; while

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Gabelman, *George MacDonald: Divine Carelessness and Fairy Tale Levity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 116–22.



the house signifies the disordered mind, even the unconscious; for, deserted by reason and control in the form of the merchant, the mind has run wild. Later this child reveals that she is nicknamed Tangle.<sup>2</sup>

Like the boy she is highly imaginative, but her imagination is largely disconnected from the world. She is kept inside a house where the boy is often outside in the woods, and hears his aunt's story in the garden. The girl knows tales which have no basis in fact, such as 'The Story of the Three Bears'. In short, she lives more within what MacDonald would call her 'fancy' rather than her imagination. Her unsupervised reading has led her to prefer fancies to imaginative truths, although she can distinguish truth from imposture when the fairies try to frighten her with inventions.

For the fairies, who we are told are worldly and house-proud, resolve to restore order to the house by chasing the girl out of it and thus removing her servants. They do this by playing on her fears of the monstrous and the grotesque, having an ape's face leer at her from her bedroom mirror<sup>3</sup> or making two chairs dance together. However they succeed only when they make it sound as though the 'Story of the Three Bears' she has been reading has come true and that the bears are actually coming up the stairs towards her. In this way imagined creatures from the forest outside the house seem to invade it and drive out the girl, who has too long been shut up in herself, into the wild outer world. This we will later see is in contrast to the boy, who spends most of his time reading outside.

These fairies are curiously nothing to do with the lady in the forest the girl is later to meet, who tells her that "I have been looking for you a long time" (GK, 125). Their need for domestic order is self-contained, bearing no relation to the motives of the lady: indeed they do not intentionally drive the girl towards the wood at all, their aim being only to remove her from the house. Thus what seems self-contained is in fact connected, and the world is not a series of experiential islands, but is interlinked by a deeper reality. In the same way later in the story the golden key and a strange land from which

---

<sup>2</sup> The names of the children, Tangle and Mossy may well have come from the titles of two story-collections by Nathaniel Hawthorne known to MacDonald – *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846) and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853).

<sup>3</sup> Just such an image of himself in a mirror like a little ape shocks Tom in Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby* (1863) into abrupt self-awareness when he has mistakenly entered little Ellie's beautiful room via a chimney he has been cleaning (London: Macmillan, 2nd edn, 1864), 30–1.

shadows fall on earth come to be linked, for the one opens the door to the other.

Still, the whole episode concerning the fairies is at first sight strange. Why should they be the only way of getting the girl out of the house? Could she not have been frightened just as well by burglars, or by an actual wild beast that finds its way into the house? Then the insistence on the fairies' dislike of untidiness seems peculiar: it is not a general characteristic of fairies but one that MacDonald has invented. And it has nothing to do with the rest of the story. But an answer to this may be that the girl must be removed by a fairy story that seems to come true. When she believes that a fairy story is real and she is a part of it, she is ready to enter another one.

After the girl goes into the forest, the bear she thinks is following her turns out to be an air-fish. Now fiction, a work of imagination, is changed to reality at a much deeper level. The false fairy tale she ran from becomes a true and deeper one she is running towards; the bear she thought she was fleeing changes to an air-fish. The girl herself has moved from an imagination that only suspends disbelief in stories, through a credulous one that believes in falsehoods, to a realm in which she will meet the imagination come true. But where she has to learn, the boy believes in the truth of the imagination from the first, and has the keenness of sight to descry the end of the rainbow in the forest and set out to find it. This is why he gains and holds the golden key: there is nothing of bias towards the male sex on MacDonald's part.<sup>4</sup>

Though the fairy lady in the forest expects Tangle, she gives greater honour to Mossy. This is not sexism – certainly not anyway with MacDonald. It is rather that Tangle's mind has not been ordered and instructed in imaginative and therefore holy truth. Also she has been cut off from the natural – and the supernatural world – in the house of her self. The only 'supernatural' she knows are literary inventions. That is why she can be considered as something of the 'little heathen' Charles Kingsley calls his Tom in *The Water-Babies* (1863), who 'had never heard of God, or of Christ, except in words which you never have heard, and which it would have been well if he had never heard'.<sup>5</sup> Tangle has to be converted as MacDonald understands it – not into

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert Lee Wolff, *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 136–8, views Mossy's possession of the key in primarily sexist – and Freudian – terms. However, he does say that the key also has other more spiritual meanings such as 'kindness... religious faith and love' (138)..

<sup>5</sup> Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby*, 2nd edn (London:

a religion but into the wild presence of the living God. That may be why the lady shuts her out of the cottage in the woods for 'a day'. After this she is led into the heart of the world to experience its nature to the full. While Mossy goes straight ahead and is able at the end to walk miraculously across the sea towards the other end of the rainbow, Tangle has to go there by an indirect route underground.

'Mossy' was so nicknamed by his friends because he would spend his time reading on an old moss-covered stone. Here the notion of Peter, the rock on which Christ built his church comes in. And it was to Peter that Christ pledged the keys that would open heaven; and Peter who like Christ – and here Mossy – was able through his faith to walk on the waters.<sup>6</sup> Mossy is full of purpose. He means to find the key, and when he has it he wants to find the keyhole it fits.

Tangle by contrast reads inside a house. She has no aim, and seemingly blunders into Fairyland after she is chased out of her house by the fairies. (Nevertheless she has long been long expected by the lady of the cottage (125)). When the woman of the cottage tells her to accompany Mossy on his journey she is reluctant to leave, saying she does not know him, but then when she looks at him she thinks she would like to go with him. Clearly she travels with him because she finds him a pleasant companion, but she has no other purpose until later. We may say then that Mossy is committed, where Tangle is not. Whether we can go further and say that the one is a Christian and the other an agnostic, or that in joining Mossy Tangle has entered the Christian faith seems doubtful. Nevertheless some hinted parallel is there.

Mossy and Tangle's quest is a search, first for a door that the golden key will fit and then, after their experience of the shadows of joyous people and creatures thrown on the plain, for the land from whence these shadows fall. The key itself is almost forgotten until suddenly at the end it proves essential to getting there. Once again, the deepest things of the imagination are given, not subject to mortal will. The key seemed to confer power upon Mossy, for it came to him as its sole user; yet the key is really in the hands of God, who has made the door it will fit in the rainbow. Desire for the other, not for the self, is the true key to heaven. And that desire, or *Sehnsucht*, is at the heart of the story. It is aroused most intensely when Mossy and Tangle see the shadows thrown from an invisible source that dance over the wide central plain:

---

Macmillan, 1864), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 16:19; 14:24–31.

for at this point it changes from looking for a door the golden key will fit to longing for a way into a land of the spirit that figures heaven. In other words desire has moved to that which is beyond mortal life.

Shadows have an evil place in MacDonald's *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, where they are either agents of disillusion and of destruction of beauty, or the form taken by Satan himself. But MacDonald was just as ready to see darkness as creative rather than destructive. His fairy tale 'The Shadows', written not long before 'The Golden Key', delights in the vagaries of shadows, and his 'Photogen and Nycteris' (1879) sees darkness and light as of equal value. Here also dark shadows convey delight, and a longing for the world from which they fall. MacDonald is clearly also alluding here to Plato's myth of the cave, by which all we see in our world are the shadows of realities beyond our perception. A 'bright mist' in the sky prevents Mossy and Tangle from seeing the originals of the shadows (*GK*, 132).

Towards the end of their journey across the plain, the shadows mount and thicken, suggesting that this other world has become more real to the travellers as they age; and in the confusion Tangle loses hold of Mossy and cannot find him again. She has died, and the shadows have become shadows of death, and the mystic desire for 'the land whence the shadows fall' is again temporarily in abeyance. However this is not a chance death: the separation of the two pilgrims is not arbitrary, but purposeful and ultimately benign. It initiates the different roads each will follow to reach their goal.

In fact it will show something of the two mystic approaches to God – the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*, the one going by way of the world as divine creation, the other continually going beyond phenomena to find God. This is not an absolute distinction, for both Mossy and Tangle walk through the richness of this world in the forest (*via positiva*), and then experience this world as an empty plain with a rich other realm above it (*via negativa*). Nevertheless we can say that Tangle, who is more entangled with this world, takes the *via positiva*; whereas Mossy, who with the key has already reserved a place in heaven, is more removed from the world. The Old Man of the Sea enables him to walk straight across the ocean, above the laws of this world as we know them.<sup>7</sup> But Tangle's course is longer and more roundabout, and takes her through the centre of this earth. Further, Mossy is much more

---

<sup>7</sup> 'When God can do what he will with a man, the man may do what he will with the world; he may walk on the sea like his Lord' (*US* 285); compare *HG*, 413–14.

self-sufficient than Tangle, who needs continual help. More space in the story is given to Tangle than to Mossy, who is, to pun, spiritually straightforward.

Further support is given to reading in terms of the two mystic ways by the sources MacDonald used for this story – John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and Charles Kingsley's 'fairy tale for a land-baby' *The Water-Babies* (1863).<sup>8</sup> It is actually unusual for a MacDonald fantasy to have such clear and continuous literary sources and it would seem that he wanted to reveal the books behind his story to his readers. Most Victorian readers were well acquainted with *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which was practically the book of the age, and Kingsley's just-published *The Water-Babies* was already enormously popular. The one describes a journey to heaven that involves a rejection of all the things of this world; the other celebrates the world as a picture of God's creativity.

There are numerous narrative parallels among all three books. All describe pilgrimages to heaven, however differently seen; and all the travellers get there at the end. All start with prompting from a supernatural source – Christian's sudden awareness of his need for salvation, Tom's flight across the moors followed by the fairy Irishwoman, Mossy's sight of the rainbow's end and Tangle's expulsion from her house by the fairies. Supernatural counsel and help are given to them on the way, in Bunyan by Interpreter or the lady of Palace Beautiful, in Kingsley by the fairy sub-vicars Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Bedonebyasyoudid, and in MacDonald by the lady of the forest and the three Old Men.

There are many smaller likenesses also. First, Bunyan. The golden key itself is like Christian's roll, which guarantees him entrance to heaven. Mossy's sight of the distant rainbow in the forest parallels Christian's faint perception of a light far off at the Wicket-Gate. The cottage of the lady in the forest where Mossy and Tangle are looked after and instructed before being sent on their way recalls both Bunyan's Palace Beautiful and Interpreter's House. Hill Difficulty in Bunyan, which precedes Palace Beautiful, is recalled in the hill Mossy and Tangle labour up after leaving the lady; and the very steep and high hill Christian has to descend after Palace Beautiful is paralleled in the precipitous path Mossy and Tangle have to go down to the plain of shadows.

---

<sup>8</sup> For other considerations of these as sources, see Kirstin Jeffrey, 'The Progressive Key: A Study of Bunyan's Influence on MacDonald's "The Golden Key"', *North Wind* 16 (1997), 69–75; Hugh P. O'Connor, 'George MacDonald's Sources for "The Golden Key"', *North Wind* 22 (2003), 46–52).

This plain is parallel to Bunyan's Valley of the Shadow of Death. Thereafter the likenesses cease, because MacDonald's narrative becomes posthumous, where Bunyan's is only so at its very end. But MacDonald bases his story on Bunyan's because he wants to underline the fact that 'The Golden Key' is also a Christian pilgrimage.

These parallels with Bunyan, we may notice, occur only when Mossy is present. And with one significant exception all the parallels with *The Water-Babies* occur in reference to Tangle. First, MacDonald reverses the sexes: his Mossy is a boy-version of Kingsley's idealised Ellie, and his initially untidy girl Tangle has some likeness to Kingsley's Tom. Tom starts by escaping from a house, and so does Tangle who is also like Tom in being impeded by branches on her way. Tom is turned into a water-baby, that is, a human living underwater, while in 'The Golden Key' MacDonald has inverted this, and gives us an air-fish, a fish that has wings and lives in the air. Tom is parted from Ellie in the midst of his adventure, and so is Tangle from Mossy in 'The Golden Key'. Just as Tom has to plunge into the undersea volcano to get to the Other-end-of-Nowhere, so Tangle has to jump down a deep hole in the ground to reach the Old Man of the Fire.

At the end of his travels Tom finds sitting on a rock 'the most graceful creature that ever was seen, looking down, with her chin upon her hand'<sup>9</sup> and realises that it is little Ellie grown up; and similarly at the end of the journeys in 'The Golden Key' Mossy finds a tall and noble woman sitting on the pedestal of one of the columns in the heart of the mountain with 'her face bowed upon her knees' and realises that it is his long-lost Tangle. In a vision at the end of *The Water-Babies* Kingsley's three great fairies interchange their appearances at the end of the story so that Tom cannot distinguish among them; and MacDonald's Tangle finds when they meet that Mossy looks sequentially like The Old Men of the Sea, the Earth and the Fire, and then all of them at once; and through them all he is still Mossy. Now that they have met once more the two, like Kingsley's Tom, ascend a winding stair towards heaven.

The exception to this, that is when the Kingsley parallel is with Mossy alone, occurs in his journey across the sea to the mountain at the rainbow's end, for Kingsley's Tom also makes just this journey. Mossy goes halfway round the world across the sea to the other end of a rainbow inside a mountain, and Kingsley's Tom swims the oceans to the Other-end-of-Nowhere.

---

<sup>9</sup> *The Water-Babies*, 371.

However while both go on similar journeys, they do so by quite different means: Mossy walks on the water, while Tom swims through it.

On his journey, Mossy meets no-one and encounters no obstacle save an initial storm which he overcomes. Tom, however, has to ask the advice of "all the beasts in the sea, and all the birds in the air"<sup>10</sup> until he learns the way to Mother Carey, who will tell him the way to the Other-end-of-Nowhere. On his way he is constantly frustrated at the lack of information, and is passed from one bird to another until he happens on the molly-mocks who take him to Shiny Wall in the Arctic and leave him to swim for days beneath it until he surfaces in Peacepool, where Mother Carey lives. Mother Carey tells him that he will only find his way by travelling backwards, always looking at his dog, which will find the way by instinct. Even so, on his way he is assailed by all sorts of people who try to make him stop, and he is nearly swallowed in the fiery mid-ocean ridge. (His frustration-filled sea journey parallels the underground one of MacDonald's Tangle.)

Mossy, whose bath at the house of the Old Man of the Sea gives him the ability to make no holes in the water, is clearly above nature's power. Self-contained, forging through the storm directly to his goal, his path is a miracle and his contact with the world is minimal. A pure Platonist, his goal is the world of Forms. Like Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress* he pursues his world-renouncing way to certificated bliss. Kingsley's Tom, however, struggling through the ocean, constantly subjected to the ignorance of his passing acquaintance, is inside nature, grappling with it at every stroke he swims. This one *Water-Babies* source for Mossy's journey uses its likeness to heighten its deeper difference.

For *The Water-Babies* is very much about living in this world and exploring its wonders as widely as possible. The character in 'The Golden Key' who does this is Tangle, who is continually entangled by this world, where Mossy passes over it like a spiritual hovercraft. In short, Mossy is the mystic of the negative way, the way of flying above the world to one's transcendent goal. But Tangle, whether she will or no, is taken on her journey through the bowels of the world, pursuing the positive way. The two pilgrimage books behind the story, *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Water-Babies*, the first setting its face above and beyond a corrupt world, the second demonstrating 'that there is a

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 273.



quite miraculous and divine element beneath all physical nature,<sup>11</sup> give depth to the two mystic ways of 'The Golden Key'.

The attraction of the negative way is just as strong. Everything is laid out for Mossy. The trees part to let him through to the rainbow's end, the lady of the cottage honours him because he has the golden key, the Old Man of the Sea is able to help him on his way as he is not with Tangle, the key fits the mountain and the strange colour-column of the rainbow. His way is fluid, but Tangle's is constantly interrupted and apparently sidetracked. Then, the story becomes pervaded with the sense of the wondrous country from whence the shadows fall, which adds to the other-worldly element. And meanwhile this world has become stripped bare to plains and mountains of unmitigated rock.<sup>12</sup> All the flowers, forests and animals we saw in the early part of the story have vanished – vanished from the earth, that is, until, looking at the luxuriant shadows that fall on the sandstone plain from above, we see that they have been transferred to the mystic land beyond the world. This sort of inversion is quite common in the story, where fish fly like birds and birds swim like fish, and where the Oldest Man of all is a baby. This is partly because MacDonald wants to shake us out of our categorical ways of thinking. In the same way he continually shifts in the story from a mysticism of the positive way to one of the negative way, because each is alternatively true.

Tangle eventually leaves the plain by ascending a precipitous path half-way up a sheer mountain to a cave, through which she travels till she finds herself by a sea. Mossy will follow the same route after her, and will later climb halfway up another mountain side to find a way in. Before reaching the plain they have just crossed, they both had to go through a tunnel in another mountain and descend a steep and dangerous path. We see that the topography of the story involves three high mountains, three steep paths and three tunnels.

---

<sup>11</sup> *Kingsley, Letters and Memories*, II, 137 (letter of summer 1862 to F.D. Maurice).

<sup>12</sup> The central imagery of a large plain bounded by mountains may reflect the contemporary and widely-followed (1865–6) laying of a viable telegraph cable down across the abyssal floor of the Atlantic; the first broke in 1865 after 1000 miles and had to be dragged up again by the ship the *Great Eastern*, its end spliced and continued to Newfoundland; this may be a glancing image of the key that has to find a lock that it fits, but also it may reflect the parting of Mossy and Tangle on the plain, only to be rejoined from above and below in the 'cable' of the rainbow in the heart of the mountain. To this one might add that the land whence the shadows fall can be seen as an image of the marine surface.



The tunnels may each be seen as birth canals out of one world into another. The high and almost vertical mountain faces symbolise categorical breaks and changes between one life and another – first, the transition from fairyland to the world of shadows; second, entry from there to the purgatorial world after death; and third, admission to the stairway to heaven – three crossovers, and four worlds. (Five worlds, if we include the human one from which the story starts out.) The first world, in fairyland involves delight in the natural world, the second, joy in the next world amid the barrenness of this one, the third, immersion again in this world from its beginnings, and the final stage, disappearance out of the purgatorial world into heaven. This catches the dialectic between seeing God in this world and looking to him in the next, a dialectic seen throughout MacDonald's life in his love of divinely-created nature and his equal longing to escape a wretched and narrow world.

Where Mossy is almost independent, Tangle constantly needs help. When she falls in despair at the mouth of the tunnel into the mountain, she is rescued by the arrival of an æranth, which lights her way through to ashore by an ocean on the other side. There she meets the Old Man of the Sea. A sign of Tangle's goodness is that she asks, as requested by her 'grandmother', for new fish for her tank (*GK*, 135); it is only when the Old Man asks her what she herself wants that she asks him the way to the land whence the shadows fall. Though he cannot help her he gives her a healing bath that enables her to see in the dark and sends her on to ask the Old Man of the Earth far underground. Sight is what she needs, for she has failed to see this Old Man as he truly is, and that may be why he cannot tell her the way.

Tangle descends to the Old Man of the Earth by means of a long dark spiral stair, helped by her new sight. In his cave with his back to her the Old Man of the Earth seems to have a huge beard trailing on the floor, but when Tangle sees him from the front, he is a beautiful young man who is seated gazing with joy into a mirror. This gazing he calls his work, repeatedly saying "I must mind my work" (*GK*, 138). The Old Man of the Earth is founded on Kingsley's Mother Carey in *The Water-Babies* who sits forever in the Arctic gazing into her Peacepool, and works very hard 'without stirring a finger'. She says her work is to make new creatures out of old, but not by any construction on her part: her whole work is to "make them make themselves".<sup>13</sup> Quite what MacDonald's Old Man of the Earth is doing we are not told, but the point is that he is at once prodigiously busy and absolutely still.

---

<sup>13</sup> *The Water-Babies*, 306.

Tangle failed to perceive the true form of the Old Man of the Sea, but with the Old Man of the Earth she only half fails, for though she sees him first as what he is not, she then sees him as he is. Neither of these Old Men can help her, perhaps because they are not rightly seen by her (or do not fully reveal themselves to her); and she is directed down a still deeper hole to the Old Man of the Fire. (Again this follows Kingsley, for Tom can only arrive at the Other-end-of-Nowhere by throwing himself down a great hole in the sea floor when the water suddenly flows into it – just as Tangle is drawn along by a river that rushes down the hole.) When Tangle meets the last Old Man, she sees him directly for what he is, a baby, though she still starts at the difference between the old man expected and the infant before her. Now at last she sees truly, and can be told the direction to the land from whence the shadows fall.

The stairs by which Tangle descends to the Old Man of the Sea remind us of other stairs in the story – the stairs Tangle hears the supposed bears ascending in her house, the stairs people climb inside the rainbow, the stairs of falling rock slabs that lead Mossy into the last mountain.<sup>14</sup> The stairs down to the Old Man of the Earth will in the end be part of Tangle's progress towards meeting Mossy at the rainbow's end in the centre of the mountain. In that sense the way down is the way up. We recall the same idea being present in *Phantastes* in Anodos's descent into the pit after leaving the fairy palace. Stairs also reflect evolution or devolution: and here again the way upwards is only shorter than the way downwards, which will still lead us back to God in the end.

It has been well pointed out by Geoffrey Reiter that the journey Tangle follows down from the Old Man of the Sea to the Old Man of the Fire is a journey back through the deep time of the earth to its beginning. The Old Men become progressively older, and yet younger in appearance, because we are going back in time to what is very old to us, and also to the beginning or infancy of the world. To such contemporary writers as Hugh Miller, the earth was first fire, then earth or rock, and next water, which gave the first life in the 'Age of Fishes'.<sup>15</sup> (And we might add that it gained its fourth element,

---

<sup>14</sup> The idea for these slabs could have been a memory from his student days of the cutting and falling of granite slabs at Rubislaw Quarry for the new Marischal College, built 1837–44 while MacDonald was a student at King's College; MacDonald walked much in Aberdeen, and the quarry at Rubislaw Hill was about two miles to the west. But equally the idea might have come simply from seeing a row of dominoes falling.

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Reiter, "Down the Winding Stair": Victorian Popular Science

breathable air, after these.) Victorians were struck by the huge variety of fossil fish then being discovered in England, especially on the marine sediments of the south coast. 'The Golden Key' has fish at its evolutionary centre. We have the air-fish that change to aëranths, and the hideous 'Devonian' (Reiter) fish in the Old Man of the Sea's marine aquarium that want to become air-fish; and there is the fish that guides Mossy over the sea to the rainbow's end. Fish are seen as the beginning of life, and therefore in evolutionary terms as its lowest common denominator. But they are also its highest form as symbols of Christ and the Christian faith.

The Old Man of the Sea is the source of life, as fish themselves were believed to be; and his daughter, the lady of the cottage, is Nature herself, who helps the living things he sends her to develop physically and spiritually. The Old Man of the Earth, whose work keeps him utterly still while he gazes on himself, delights in the unchanging, and is effectively in opposition to the other Old Men, whom he has never met. He gives us the stillness of the solid foundations of life, the rocks and the mountains, which are images of eternity even while from the perspective of deep time they are continually wearing away and being remade. It is from the interior of a mountain that Mossy and Tangle make their way to the land from which the shadows fall. The Old Man of the Fire is the maker of all things and their mover. As fire he is the origin of the solar system out of a fiery nebula into the balls of sun and planets whose motions and existence he now manages with his hands. As a figure of Christ<sup>16</sup> he is a triumphant statement that the centre of the earth is not hell as in Dante, but God himself, who once and for all came down into this world as a baby. The Old Man of the Fire is the creative fire of God himself, who continually thinks worlds into being, and manages every contingency.

What MacDonald is showing in this sequence of Old Men is how God is present in all things, right back to the beginning of the world; and that Christian truth, rather than beginning, as some still thought, in 4004 BC, is at least as old as the now aeons-old earth itself. If Tangle traverses the world in terms of its time, Mossy, travelling over the seas halfway round the world, does so in terms of its space. Together they come to a mystic relation with the earth throughout its existence. This does not alter the fact that both are now looking to joys beyond the world. Considered as the work of God's imagination, this world is full of beauties; it is when it is viewed in terms of

---

and Deep Time in "The Golden Key", *North Wind* 27 (2008), 35–50.

<sup>16</sup> O'Connor, 50, 53.

its final reality that it is seen also as a transient place of shadows and images that point beyond it. In this story Platonism and a measure of holy hedonism lie side by side. Mossy and Tangle go beyond this world in the end; but, unlike Bunyan's more fastidious Christian, that has not stopped them from finding it a delight on their way.

The beauties of this world, the world created by God, are reflected in the divine rainbow that Mossy follows. The whole story is full of colours – the red of the trunks of the trees in the forest, the gold of the key, the multicoloured feathers of the air-fish, the coloured sparks thrown off by the aëranth's wings to guide Tangle in the dark, the coloured balls and the yellow, white and gold rivulets of gold, silver and copper in the cave of the Old Man of the Fire. Shelley said that 'Life, like a many-coloured glass,/Stains the white radiance of eternity', but here the pillar of a totally new and heavenly colour stands amid the rainbow, beside its red column, signifying Christ's blood, while the rainbow of Genesis 9 was God's covenant with man.. Here heaven and earth, eternity and time, man and God come together. We may recall also Revelation 4:3, where a rainbow surrounds the throne of God.

Tangle's journey has been one into greater knowledge of and intimacy with the world. But for MacDonald, the world is also an image of the interior self. As well as going outwards, Tangle can be seen to have gone inwards to the depths of her mind, where God lives, within the creative imagination. At the beginning of the story, Mossy had been the one to find the golden key, because he had been brought up within the imagination, and his garden and fairyland were almost continuous with one another. But where Mossy had been told by his aunt about a true magic thing, the golden key, Tangle learned only fables and fancies. Now at the end of the story she has found her own golden key through a journey into both the world and her imagination. She is now spiritually like Mossy, and is able to enter the mountain at the end as he is. The difference is that she enters it from under the earth, through which she has travelled.

Tangle has also in a sense reached the true fairy tale. The child playing with the balls has the mingled mystic effect on her that MacDonald described: 'Let fairy tale of mine go for a firefly that now flashes, now is dark, but may flash again' (*ADO* 321). As she watches the child moving the balls 'Flashes of meaning would now pass from them to Tangle, and now again all would be not merely obscure, but utterly dark' (*GK*, 139). This is just what readers feel with 'The Golden Key' itself. Each image, if true, is a symbol of God, whether it is actually beheld, as by Tangle, or read, as by the childlike reader.

The fairy tale is the true language of the imagination, which is the home of God in man. During her pilgrimage Tangle has travelled from false fairy tales to a true one.

At this point Tangle has in a sense met Christ, or the God at the centre of self and world alike. MacDonald likened God to a child,<sup>17</sup> and while there are other reasons for the child form here, it is also the central fire of the world. If so however, he does not identify himself to Tangle, and she is not censured for wanting to press on with her journey – a journey which we may note is not immediately for God, but for a heaven. Other Christian suggestions have occasionally been present in the story, such as the eating of fish with the lady earlier, which may suggest becoming Christian.<sup>18</sup>

There is a kind of moral 'evolution' in 'The Golden Key', as there is in the story of Tom's development in *The Water-Babies*: both are dependent on a translation of Darwin's theory of natural evolution into spiritual terms. The fish that change to air-fish and thence to aëranths are clearly evolving both in form and spirit. They proceed from fish to birds and thence, on being eaten by people, to small winged human-like creatures. Something of evolution we also see in the painful sequential journey Tangle makes to the three Old Men, approaching the last by throwing herself down a deep hole into boiling water just as the air-fish threw themselves into the pot of boiling water on the fire of the lady in the forest. Then the Old Man of the Fire touches her to make her immune to the heat surrounding her. This recalls Curdie being made pure by spiritual fire in *The Princess and Curdie*. The Tangle who ends her journey inside the mountain has become a spiritual queen.

Considered objectively however, the moral purity of both Mossy and Tangle appears narrow. Neither of them is asked to make any kind of self-sacrifice to help the other. They really do not interact at all, but simply accompany one another in love and friendship. When Mossy enters the mountain at the end, it is not in search of Tangle but to find the door to the country whence the shadows fall. And when Tangle loses hold of Mossy in the shadows on the plain, she is not shown later mourning over this or longing to get him back. The gaze of both is on the far country. And the strange thing is that the story so contrives matters that we do not think them in the least deficient for this. For its concentration is not on human relationships, but on desire.

---

<sup>17</sup> 'The Child in the Midst', *US* 1–17.

<sup>18</sup> See John 21: 9–13, where the risen Christ cooks fish for his disciples.

The story is also narrowly focussed on its goal. Mossy has little contact with others in the pursuit of his objective, and Tangle, while noticing the peculiarities of the people she meets, keeps simply to the point of what she wants from them. At the same time every person they have met has been concerned only with helping them to go further on their way.

This distinguishes their journey from those of other pilgrimage stories, where the central figure interacts with other figures along the way and has to resist temptation and pursue good: Galahad, Perceval and Lancelot in the *Queste del Saint Graal* (c. 1230) must continually fight off temptations on their way if they are to reach the Grail; Tom in *The Water-Babies* has to stop stealing sweets and go to the world's end to rescue his hated master Grimes if he is to see Ellie again. Neither Mossy nor Tangle is ever required to make a moral choice in this sense. This is in contrast to both *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, MacDonald's other pilgrimage stories. Nor are they in conflict in themselves: neither of them ever asks why they are on this journey, or wants to turn back.

Adding to the unity of MacDonald's story is the sense that it is all meant and guided at a deeper level. The key Mossy finds at the end of the rainbow is a clear sign of hidden intent. The lady of the forest cottage has long expected Tangle's arrival, even if it is accomplished by what looks to us like chance and blunder. The fairies' wanting to remove Tangle and then the servants from the house so that it will become tidy seems a trumped-up motive for something deeper that is going on. Then Tangle's apparently chance entry into the forest is almost certainly not chance at all; and she is helped and guided to the lady's cottage by an air-fish. The way she and Mossy follow through mountains is clearly made for travellers. Tangle is guided through the second mountain passage by an aëranth, and Mossy through the ocean by a silver fish. Overall, the arch of the rainbow across the story from beginning to end binds it together. It does this in the bible too, appearing in its first and last books.

However, while the structure of the story is closely focused, its narrative, as has been pointed out by Cynthia Marshall,<sup>19</sup> is at the same time considerably broken up. At the outset we meet a boy, and follow him to the point where he finds a golden key and sees a strange flying fish coming towards him. Then we are introduced to a girl in another house and follow her to a cottage in the forest where she is made welcome by a lady. After a night and

---

<sup>19</sup> Cynthia Marshall, 'Reading The Golden Key: Narrative Strategies of Parable' in McGillis (ed.), *For the Childlike*, 99–100.

a day the lady sends out an air-fish to bring the boy to the cottage. What seemed to be a sequence in the story is actually a temporal loop: Tangle reached the cottage a day before Mossy set out to find the key. Time thus appears to go backwards. This happens again later after Mossy and Tangle are parted when she dies. We follow her adventures through the mountains and to her various meetings with the Old Men until she is sent on her way to reach the country whence the shadows fall. And then again we have to return again, this time to pick up on where we left Mossy.

This could of course be a necessity of telling the story: when you are talking about two characters in different places, it is necessary to backtrack when you move from one to catch up on the other. But there are ways in which to do this without making it seem a jump backwards, as can be seen in MacDonald's other stories, such as 'Cross Purposes' (1862), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), *The Wise Woman: A Parable* (1875) or 'The History of Photogen and Nycteris: A Day and Night Märchen' (1879).

Each part of the journey is cut off from the last by a tunnel through a cliff leading to a different landscape. The shadows moving on the plain are cast by figures that cannot be seen. The three Old Men of the Sea, Earth and Fire live in isolation and do not seem to meet. The very style itself of the story, with its short, staccato sentences, seems like a series of islanded observations:

Before long she arrived at a precipice, in the face of which a stair was cut. When she had ascended half-way, the stair ceased, and the path led straight into the mountain. She was afraid to enter, and turning again towards the stair, grew giddy at the sight of the depth beneath her, and was forced to throw herself down in the mouth of the cave. (GK, 134)

There is also much delayed progress. Mossy finds the key, but then sits there wondering what to do with it. On the way they are sent to find the door the key fits, Mossy and Tangle are diverted by the shadows on the plain, and now make their objective the finding of the substantial world casting them from the sky. The Old Man of the Sea cannot direct Tangle to the way to that world, nor can the Old Man of the Earth to whom he then refers her. Finally, and through much difficulty she reaches the help of the Old Man of the Fire. And then when both have met at the centre of the mountain where the rainbow ends, they do not see a way out.



In some sense these frustrations only heighten the reader's awareness of the quest around which the story is written. There is the core: and it burns the more for these digressions. Another may be that the digressive aspects of the tale, in thus pulling against its unity, represent the worldly versus the otherworldly tendencies of the story, with Mossy going straight to his goal and Tangle diverging along the way. (Tangle's story is a diversion from the first: we start with Mossy and then go back to her (123).) Together these two mystic ways make up the whole picture of God's relation to man and man's to God, both necessary, both irreconcilable save in God himself.

The mystery of the creatures, objects and places in this story – the magic key, the air-fish, the aëranths, the land whence the shadows fall, the Old Men and the rainbow with its extra colour – is of a rather different order from that in *Phantastes*. These are ultimately not explicable, though we can find explanations. The story does not work by metaphor like *Phantastes*, where Fairy Land is a metaphor for Anodos's mind, and every identity is intimately bound up with others: rather, it works by symbol, which stands by itself in significance. Tangle's untidy and ill-managed house may be a metaphor of her mind, but thereafter when both she and Mossy have entered Fairy land we deal mainly in religious symbols, where the image is inseparable from what it represents, and what it represents is the numinous and the sacramental. Tangle's mind could equally be pictured through some other image, such as, say, a work-box to a schoolbook full of scribbles; but the golden key that Mossy finds is an old symbol not only of promise but of entry to heaven. By contrast, *Phantastes* is continuously metaphorical, in that Fairy Land is an image of the unconscious mind, but other images for the unconscious could have been found, from jungles or houses to underground or undersea. Further, Anodos himself rarely comes close to the trans-mortal, and when he does, as with the potential significance of the white lady, he fails to see it; or, when he enters the door of the timeless in the island cottage he is immediately thrown back, as he is later from his posthumous life to this one.

'The Golden Key' is full of symbols – rainbows, fish, the lady of the cottage, aëranths, shadows, mountains, tunnels, baths, the Old Men of the Sea, the Earth and particularly, the Fire, the colour red. Unlike the similes and metaphors that pervade *Phantastes*, the symbols of 'The Golden Key' with its this-worldly setting are not inventions of the imagination but items found in the world outside the mind. All these symbols express something numinous. MacDonald always believed that the truth of a thing lay on top of it rather than in its depths, in its show rather than its analysis, for there alone



lay revelation (*US*, 350). The numinous is experienced from the very surface of the symbol, where metaphor bids one look underneath for the truth. This means that the very language of the story is mystically close to us. For instance the fish that progresses to an æranth is following not only a natural law as in Kingsley, but a divine one through the God who thinks the world into being. And the golden key is not just *like* the key that opens heaven, but *is* that key, partaking in its nature.

Towards the end of the story the nature of the imagery changes, as we approach the land whence the shadows fall, it becomes more paradoxical. The Old Man of the Earth is busy while still, the Oldest Man of all is a child, the way down (for Tangle) is the way up, death is more life. At the same time we begin to see instances of metamorphosis, in which one being is simultaneously another. We have seen *change* before, in the air-fish changing into an æranth, but now we have a situation in which the Old Man of the sea is also a man of middle years with a kingly look, and in which Mossy is all three Old Men at once. The two terms of metaphor in *Phantastes* have now merged so that now one thing not just stands for, or even shares in the nature of another, but is that other as well as itself. Even opposites, two irreconcilable terms, merge in paradox. This is the style we will find developed in the next book, *Lilith*.

'The Golden Key' ends where *Lilith* is to continue, with a journey to the next world. But in *Lilith* that other world will be far different from the joyous and beautiful one Mossy and Tangle anticipate, because many of the characters in it, including its hero, are too evil to see it as it truly is.



## 6 *Lilith* (1895)

*Lilith* begins where ‘The Golden Key’ ends, with a journey to the next world. But where that world, the realm from whence the enrapturing shadows fell, was infinitely desirable in ‘The Golden Key’, in *Lilith* the after-world will prove quite different, indeed terrible – a world where sin can take living and monstrous form and spiritual progress can be measured by the gradual reversal of bodily putrefaction. The difference can be explained by the fact that when they leave this world for another Mossy and Tangle are almost perfected souls for whom the next world will be a paradise rather than the purgatory it appears to be in *Lilith* – indeed just the kind of paradise that the eventually purified Mr Vane reaches at the end of *Lilith* (PL, 412–17). For then he sees the next world as the heaven it truly is, not the hell or purgatory it appears to be to sinful eyes. (To show this continuity MacDonald dropped the special doorway to heaven he has in *Lilith A*.) Vane at the beginning of *Lilith* is still a sinful man, and it is his own sins, set in an arid and largely desert world, that he meets.

*Lilith* is both the companion piece and the polar opposite of *Phantastes*. It is of roughly the same length, involves a similar wandering hero and is written in almost the same dream-like idiom; but it deals with death, passivity, centripetal movement and decay, where *Phantastes* stresses childhood, activity, linear progress outwards and increase of life. *Lilith* ends the story of the spiritual life that *Phantastes* began, but also begins a new one in another dimension.

Whereas *Phantastes* and ‘The Golden Key’ paint the wonders of creation in the human imagination and in this world, *Lilith* deals with the new creation, in the after-world beyond this mortal one. Here the dead come to be re-grown in spirit, often through suffering; and broken-down creation is being remade into its true form. Here we deal with God’s creativity in terms of the hospital or the sanatorium.

## Versions

When MacDonald wrote the first version of *Lilith* in 1890, we are told that he considered it to have come to him as a mandate direct from God.<sup>1</sup> MacDonald believed that God was present in the imagination of man, but he had never before claimed quite this directness of influence. Despite his belief, he was to revise *Lilith* five more times before publication, including episodes that reflected the death in 1891 of his beloved daughter Lilia Scott MacDonald. As a result the book became more than twice its original length. Nevertheless, the revisions both deepened and clarified its vision.

*Lilith* is in part indebted to Dante's *Commedia* with its journey through hell to heaven and its protagonist directed by a wise old man of letters. But since MacDonald did not believe in hell as a place, he gives us a purgatory in which some still undeveloped souls are in hell and see the world as hell. And unlike Dante, who at least half-believed in the physical reality of the three realms of hell, purgatory and heaven, which he located beneath the earth, on a mountain at the end of the world and beyond the circuit of the stars, MacDonald's purgatory and heaven cannot be perceived within the three-dimensional universe, but exist in a world of seven dimensions perceptible only to the soul. In the *Commedia*, Dante is more an observer than a participant, whereas Mr Vane in *Lilith* is the central actor in the story, and all that he meets is an extension of his spiritual condition. Dante's guide and instructor Virgil is paralleled in the figure of the strange librarian Mr Raven; but Vane is often unaccompanied by Mr Raven, and goes his own way. Again, unlike Dante's hero, whose journey has no short-cuts, Vane is offered the means of giving himself into God's hands at the outset of his time, so that his travels are a form of truancy (going the long way round).

*Lilith* also probably owes much to the Middle English poem *Pearl*, the story of a man who loses his most 'precious pearl', which may be his daughter. The first printed appearance of this poem was in an E.E.T.S. edition in 1864, and it appeared in translation (by Israel Gollancz) in 1891. The mourner-narrator falls asleep and has a visionary dream in which he finds his 'perle' among the blessed innocent in heaven; then, refused entry there, he tries to persuade her to come back to him. But when he begins to understand

---

<sup>1</sup> Raeper, *George MacDonald*, 365, sees this claim as part of a desire by MacDonald to identify himself with Dante, who made a similar assertion with the *Commedia*.

her happy state, he accepts his exclusion from her and heaven while he is still mortal. MacDonald lost his own most precious pearl, his daughter Lilia, in 1891, and after that, in the much extended 'B' version of *Lilith*, he introduced the child-woman Lona with whom Vane falls in love, and who is taken to heaven while he is excluded. Like the man in *Pearl*, Vane at last returns home to live in hope of seeing her again in heaven. Much of *Pearl* portrays the failure of its materialist hero to understand matters of the spirit; and in this sense it is very close to the theme of *Lilith*.

With its continual use of contradiction and paradox *Lilith* also recalls Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), in which opposite things can be true at once. Indeed *Lilith* might in some ways be a chess game like Carroll's book, in which Vane passes through a series of 'squares' or fixed locations and continually fails to make checkmate. As will be seen, *Through the Looking-Glass*, like *Lilith*, has numbers of metamorphoses. And also reversals: just as Alice goes through a mirror to begin her adventures, so does Vane. Again, just as Vane will be seen at first being several times returned to his house, so is Alice: and in fact one of the principles of *Lilith* will be seen to be that one must go backwards from oneself to go forwards. The idiom of both books is also one of opposites both existing: a hill can be a valley, one meets someone by running away from them, one must run furiously in order to stay in one place, one remembers things before they happen. Then there is the wood in *Through the Looking-Glass* where everyone forgets their names – just what will happen to Vane in *Lilith*. The issue of who one really is, and what one's name is, is also canvassed by both books.

There are other suggestive details. Alice undergoes a series of riddles posed by Humpty-Dumpty; Vane begins his second journey on a horse which he soon loses; Lilith is found nearly dead by Vane after she has tried to cross a forbidden river; a wood in Alice is full of uncertain creatures, and later another wood is packed with a struggling army. MacDonald, of course, was a friend of Carroll's, and *Phantastes* and 'The Light Princess' were prime sources for *Alice in Wonderland* (which Carroll had the MacDonald children read and decide on before he went ahead with publication). Would it be surprising that MacDonald should himself rewrite *Through the Looking-Glass* in his *Lilith*, just as Carroll rewrote *Phantastes* in *Alice in Wonderland*?<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> For other possible references to *Through the Looking-Glass* in *Lilith* (not all of them convincing), see John Docherty, *The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll-George MacDonald Relationship* (Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 375–86. Docherty maintains that MacDonald covertly dedicated

More immediately, of course, *Lilith* seems very like MacDonald's own *Phantastes*. Both stories are sequences of inexplicable but suggestive images; in all of MacDonald's work only 'The Golden Key' approaches them in character. In each there is one central and isolated figure who has just come of age and into the management of his estate, and who goes from within his house into a fairyland where he wanders without clear purpose. In these fairylands each hero brings to life a woman enchanted or near death, is repulsed by her, and subsequently pursues her. At the end of each work the hero is returned to 'this' world to await a great good which he believes is coming to him (*PL*, 182, 420). In *Lilith*, at the end of his life as a prose writer, MacDonald returned to the idiom of the book that began it.

However the two works are also very different.<sup>3</sup> There is a more evident Christian element in *Lilith* than is seen in *Phantastes*. We are presented with Adam, Eve, Lilith, the Great Shadow (Satan), Jesus, the Last Days, Heaven. In *Lilith* Vane may like Anodos be dreaming, and the 'region of the seven dimensions' he enters may as much an image of his mind as Fairy Land is of the inner world of Anodos, but at the same time Vane and the world he is in are to be seen as being dreamt by someone else. Anodos continually enters things in *Phantastes* – chambers, cottages, cupboards, caves, a palace, tunnels, towers, an altar, a grave – but Mr Vane more often goes out, whether from his world to another, or across the landscape of the region of the seven dimensions in flat denial of Adam's injunction that he should enter Eve's cottage and lie down with the dead.

In *Phantastes* we deal most immediately with the human imagination; in *Lilith* we also deal with God's imagination. In *Lilith* there is no longer a fiction about a Fairy Land that has to be penetrated to find any deeper truth, or an image of a lady that has to be gone beyond to find God. Here the deeper truth is on the surface: 'The show of things is that for which God cares *most*, for their show is the face of far deeper things than they... It is through their show, not through their analysis, that we enter into their deepest truths' (*US*, 'The Voice of Job', 350). Here MacDonald drops the veil of imagery to the point where we glimpse "the beautifullest man" (as some child characters put it), reach heaven and almost encounter the Maker. Still, though, MacDonald does not name these in Christian terms. The world of

---

*Lilith* to Carroll (376); and he considers that 'MacDonald does not pay very much attention to the "intellectual structure" of *Looking-Glass*' (375).

<sup>3</sup> See C. N. Manlove, 'Circularity in Fantasy: George MacDonald', *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 70–92.

the region of the seven dimensions in *Lilith* may appear differently to each soul that enters it, according to his or her spiritual state, but it is a real one, purgatory, that all souls must pass through before they are fit to enter heaven. Furthermore it has its own recurrent features, in the Bad Burrow of monsters, the evil Lilith, Adam's first wife, the veiled woman Mara who opposes Lilith's acts, the children, the Little Ones, who live in exile in the woods, and Adam and Eve themselves, who are guardians of a great dormitory of the sleeping dead. All who die will come to this place, and meet some or all of its inhabitants, depending on their condition. MacDonald's Vane is one such soul.

While *Phantastes* is concerned with beginnings, *Lilith* looks to endings. Anodos is a man on the threshold of life, who has yet to learn how to live. The perspective is that of an individual. But Vane has to see life in larger terms than his own, and against the backdrop of its end. In *Phantastes* we have much making, poetry, art, moral progress. But in *Lilith* the object is to go backwards, to unmake life, to sleep and to die. In *Lilith* the sense of an ending is there from the first, when Mr Raven and his wife offer Mr Vane a bed in the huge dormitory of the sleepers who are growing backwards to innocent childlikeness before waking and going to heaven. Throughout *Lilith* we are impatient with Mr Vane, whose refusals to lie down with the dead and whose wanderings across the realm of the seven dimensions seem not far from truancy.

*Lilith* is so opposite to *Phantastes* in almost every respect that the two are united by their very opposition, the one completing the other. And when they are put together, they can be seen as making up one huge Christian fantasy, in which *Phantastes* deals with the first things, of creation, sin and regeneration, and *Lilith* with the last things, of death, judgment and resurrection.<sup>4</sup> *Phantastes* starts with Fairy Land as a potential paradise in which Anodos finds his own devils and falls out of disobedience, before learning better and finally sacrificing himself like Christ and thinking to redeem all men. *Lilith* completes the pattern in its vision of the death and eventual resurrection of all people. Such 'united oppositions' will be found at the heart of *Lilith*'s meaning.

Nevertheless it may seem strange that in a book about the ending of one's life and the world, the protagonist of *Lilith* should be a man almost as young as Anodos in *Phantastes*. But for MacDonald a longing for death was

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 92.

accompanied by a great zest for life. On the one hand he looked forward all his life to meeting God; one of his repeated utterances was “‘I wis’ we war a’ deid”” (*GMDW*, 84). This goes together with the vein of Platonism in his work, the sense that all created things are but passing shadows of their true forms in a world beyond. ‘What a poor inn of a place this world is ...’<sup>5</sup> Yet beside this stands the MacDonald who loved the world, particularly the natural world with an intense passion. How could he not, believing as he did that the world was the expression of God’s imagination? For such a man God is as immanent in the world as He is transcendentally beyond it. MacDonald spent his life in this dual commitment to this world and the next, as aware of death in every instant as much as taking joy in creation.

For MacDonald therefore a story about a young man living his life in the light of his approaching death was nothing strange. Together the stories of Anodos and of Vane constitute the duality that must run through all our life. It is now that we must learn what we are, not when we have gone on too long in being what we should not. Making Anodos and Vane so alike at the beginnings and ends of their stories while quite different within them, tells us that each is the opposite face of one coin, and we must try to live both ways to compass the whole life of the spirit.

*Lilith* can thus be called another version of *Phantastes*, or *Phantastes* seen through a mirror. Versions, or different ‘selves’ of things are important in *Lilith*. As we have seen the book went through six of them before publication. The whole story, describing the journey of a human soul after death, is another version of Dante’s *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. And at the same time it is another version of the Christian story itself, rewriting the nature of apocalypse.

Within *Lilith* itself we have repeated journeys. There is, first, an inset account at one point of how Vane’s father met Mr Raven which repeats Vane’s own early experience, except that Vane does not flee from the mirror like his father but enters it (193, 222). Then Vane journeys through the posthumous land three times. His first wanderings bring him to a variety of strange individuals and situations, culminating in a city called Bulika. After his return he once again sets out and makes much of the same trip for a second time, though this time with a different outcome. On his third ‘voyage out’ he is asked to journey into the desert land to restore water to it. Each journey is in a sense a spiritual revision of the last.

---

<sup>5</sup> MacDonald, letter of 27 Oct., 1891, quoted in *GMDW*, 524.



We also have assumptions continually changed, one version of a person giving way to another. When Vane first finds Lilith, she is a wretched and disfigured creature near death. When he has restored her to life, she is a magnificently beautiful woman, and he shifts from nurse in charge to abject lover. Despite continual rejection he follows this woman to a city where she then proves to be the ruling princess. Vane sees a leopard prowling about and is told it is the princess's pet. Finally he realises that the animal and the princess are in fact one, she shifting into its form at will.

Later still Vane's understanding of the princess's nature is changed again when she is identified by Mr Raven as the evil Lilith of myth; while at the same time Mr Raven reveals himself to be Lilith's former husband Adam (322–3). What we have here are two versions of the story. In the first part we have a Mr Raven and a princess as characters, and a later part where Mr Raven becomes Adam and the princess becomes 'Lilith', we are shifted from reading a fiction to tracing a modified myth. And beyond this we have in Eve a different version of Adam's original wife, one who submits rather than rebels as Lilith did.

*Lilith* may be called a 'deconstructionist' work, insofar that any one view of something is continually being countered by another. But unlike present-day deconstruction, *Lilith* does not finally let go of an objective. While the book questions everything human, whether alive or dead, all is founded on an ultimate divine fact. *Lilith* is full of apparent shifts and contradictions, anticipating texts such as say, Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* or Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and yet it uses these oppositions to demonstrate the nature of a man-God at once merciful and just, in whom all paradoxes harmonise. While leaving us baffled the book pushes us beyond understanding; by mystifying us it drives us towards the great Mystery in whom all contradictions are reconciled. *Lilith* is MacDonald's most mystical book.

The first aim of the book is to remove Vane's – and our – certainties about life. It wants to replace our limited versions of the world with a 'truer' one. In this it must be said it is like other Scottish fantasies of the nineteenth century such as James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1836) or Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).<sup>6</sup> In Hogg's story the man of Calvinist virtue Robert Wringhim

---

<sup>6</sup> On these and other Scottish authors mentioned here see Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature*.

uses his vain belief in his being one of the elect to justify his murder of his own brother. He is exposed by the end and apparently – but even this view is uncertain – destroyed by the devil to whom he was really committed. Carlyle in *Sartor* uses an obscure and vagabond German professor called 'Teufelsdrökh' ('Devil's Dung') to advance an apparently absurd philosophy of clothes which at once inverts our easy materialism and penetrates to the heart of life. This he does through a chaotic and fragmentary style which defies our notions of sense and decorum while enacting precisely the wild and wonderful universe it describes. As for Stevenson, his respectable Dr Jekyll tries throughout the story to divide his good and bad selves, and assign his evil deeds to a Mr Hyde, but in the end his civil self has been so eroded by the acts of his wicked one that Hyde takes him over. The wilderness of the unconscious mind, let out like a savage dog for which its master pretends no responsibility, returns to eat him. A parallel process of wearing away the rational mind is present in *Lilith* from Vane's first interviews with Mr Raven, who continually bewilders him with truths from a wider world than he has ever conceived.

What all these fantasies deal with is separation – the separation of the conscious or social self from the unconscious. The eighteenth century called the opposition one between reason (good) and passion (bad); Blake spoke of it as reason (bad) and energy (good). The Romantic writers including Blake released the energies in poetry, and even in their lives (Shelley, Byron). For Scottish fantasy writers the opposition was between the perverse rigidities of respectability and the liberating energies of the unconscious mind. For all of them the unconscious must be brought out whatever the consequences, because the truth of life is at least as much chaos as it is order. Hogg's Witch of Fife cannot stand the boredom of domestic routine and flies off with a coven of witches; Margaret Oliphant in 'A Beleaguered City' has a city's dead return to claim the town; 'Fiona Macleod' reveals the deep and sinister Celtic traditions that lie behind Scottish life. In meeting Mr Raven the respectable and rational Mr Vane is meeting the wild world he has refused, and is moving from his narrow version of life in three dimensions into a much less controllable seven.

Separation is a central motif in *Lilith*. Vane is separated from his parents, both of whom are dead. In the region of the seven dimensions he is on two occasions asked to sleep his way to purification in the dormitory in the house of Adam and Eve, and refuses and departs. He spends his time in the book as a spiritual tourist in the world of the dead, separated at his own

choice from the place he must come to in the end. Indeed all who are in this other world must sooner or later come to the dormitory, from which their persistence in sin has long separated them. Even the Great Shadow or Satan must in the end lie down there and sleep his way to salvation: for MacDonald did not believe in a final duality between Heaven and Hell. Separation must end in unity, solitude in society. Those who shut their doors against the truth will have them broken down.

All the places and people Vane visits on his first wanderings – the Bad Burrow, the forest of the warring dead, the wood where he finds a group of children called the Little Ones, the cottage of the strange lady Mara who hides her face, the house where skull-headed corpses dance, the river bank where he restores an almost dead woman to life, the city of Bulika – exist apparently in isolation from one another. Insofar as the strange world is an extension of Vane's mind, it shows a mind that is fragmentary and incoherent. Yet even while Vane journeys, he is connecting the different parts of this new world.

Lilith, Adam's first wife, is separated from her former husband. She has also put hatred between herself and her exiled daughter Lona, whom she seeks to kill; and she has also caused the separation of the mothers and children of Bulika who have many of them left their children at a distant forest to protect them from her. Meanwhile Lilith has cut off this world from water, leaving much of it desert. In the latter stages of the book the state of separation is reversed and people begin to move from the margins of the world towards its centre. Lilith herself meets Adam, at first by accident; and then later when she has gone a long way towards repentance she is brought to him at Eve's house. Mara, daughter of Adam and Eve and Lilith's half-sister, who has been Lilith's antagonist throughout, becomes her loving minister and friend. Lilith herself, who killed her daughter Lona when she was brought to her, finally lies down by her side in the great dormitory.

*Lilith* is largely founded on oppositions. Not only is it opposite to *Phantastes* in all but formal effects, but it is shot through with contraries. Lilith is the opposite of Eve, Bulika is at one end of the world, and the dormitory of the dead at the other. Two leopardesses, one white and good, the other spotted and evil, inhabit the landscape, the one trying to hinder the other. Armies struggle in the Evil Wood, and a married pair quarrel. The Little Ones have their opposites in their enemies the gross Giants. Seen one way the region of the seven dimensions is hell; seen another, it is paradise. The way to self-redemption lies through oppositions: one dies

in order to live, home is ever so far away in the palm of your hand, one can have a self only by giving the self away, one must be made a fool to become wise.

In some ways the book teaches inversely. Lilith, who once forewent the society of Adam when he asked that she love him as an equal, not an inferior, denies all community with others. She has made herself the centre of the world and has rejected her role as a mother. The more we see of Lilith, the more another picture is built up, of someone who loves another more than herself, who lives for a community in the service of one greater than she. Such a person will be seen in Lona; but beyond her it is found in God. But Lilith loves only herself: “I will do what I will to do”, she declares; and she utters what was for MacDonald ‘the one principle of Hell’, namely, ‘I am my own,’ (*PL*, 371; *US*, 495). She lives her life as a tyrant, contemptuous and cruel to her subjects. Yet at the same time she is filled with a growing despair – the effect of having cut herself off from all that is sustaining in life. But the direction of the story is not centrifugal, as with Lilith, but in the end centripetal. Even Lilith will be eventually brought to the centre, the point of ‘at-one-ment’ where dying into new life begins.

In this the ultimate force is love. Between Bulika and Eve’s cottage, between community rejected and community accepted, lie the various dead, some good, some still bad, some of them in one sense parts of Vane’s spirit, all of them gradually changing, turning their souls towards the centre rather than the margins of the world. And among them moves Vane, who begins with some of Lilith’s attitudes (“Am I . . . not a free agent?” (*PL*, 202)), and then travels without a name across the region of the seven dimensions so that he may eventually find himself by needing others. And all this is through God’s grace.

MacDonald saw self-separation from God as an often painful educator that would drive us inexorably back to Him. In our own three-dimensional world we are always in some degree separate from God. In MacDonald’s view God created men and women with free wills so that they could choose to love Him of their own volition. But even if they did not, they would be drawn back by their maker. MacDonald said that the nature of love is such that it is felt as a fire that punishes when one tries to go further away from God; and thus evil is self-defeating. Yet he did not feel that when a soul was wholly with God it was merged with Him. All his life MacDonald felt that God was the friend who knew him best. Since God had created the

world out of a delight in making the individual, how could that individual be forfeit in heaven? ‘Two at least are needed for oneness,’ he wrote (*US*, 298), and he meant that in relation to life in heaven as well as on earth.

To those who have grown in spirit, the region of seven dimensions becomes a world where categories are no longer divided or separated as in mortal experience, where spirit and matter are one, and time and space, that put one moment or place apart from another, are merely modes of thought. It is for MacDonald the world of miracles, if miracles are defined as the true laws of nature, higher than those we know: ‘A higher condition of harmony with law, may one day enable us to do things which must now *appear* an interruption of law.’<sup>7</sup> MacDonald puts this vision at the start of Vane’s journey, when Mr Raven shows him how spirit and matter are fused, and again after his last, when he is on the way to heaven. It is a vision of what MacDonald called Atonement, or ‘At-One-ment’, in which all that was separated comes together.<sup>8</sup> At the end,

Nothing cast a shadow; all things interchanged a little light. Every growing thing showed me, by its shape and colour, its indwelling idea – the informing thought, that is, which was its being, and sent it out. My bare feet seemed to love every plant they trod upon. The world and my being, its life and mine, were one. The microcosm and macrocosm were at length atoned, at length in harmony! I lived in everything; everything entered and lived in me. (*PL*, 312)

When Mr Raven first presented Vane with this vision of true reality, in the form of prayers that rose in the shape of doves or flowers, or different worlds that coincided with one another, he could not grasp it. The whole process of *Lilith* is a form of at-one-ment, insofar as some of the separate and often antagonistic figures we meet during the story come together at last to sleep in the great dormitory beneath Eve’s house. But the fact that Vane and Lilith repent their worldliness or ambition only at the end means that for much of the narrative we are dealing with minds that separate themselves from the world.

---

<sup>7</sup> George MacDonald, *HG*, 403.

<sup>8</sup> *US* 483, 510, 515 (“Justice”).

### Versions of the fantastic world

If in *Phantastes* the question was 'What is the ideal?' in *Lilith* it is 'What is the real?' With Vane we find from the first a man given to exploring reality by making analogies between events drawn from different sciences, or between scientific and metaphysical arguments. Vane is habitually in the sprawling library of his house, surrounded by books, each of which presents a different version or story of life, and each of which poses the old question of which is more 'real', a book or the world. He catches sight of a shadowy form near one bookcase, and approaching, finds that the very book he himself intended to pick out is no longer there. A decorative slice of a sham book fixed between shelves on a door is removed, and then reappears as a triangular section of a book with real pages, implying that, incredible or not, it was taken as a whole book to be read. As for the shadowy figure, Vane learns that this may be the ghost of a long-dead librarian called Mr Raven. When one day he follows it to the attics of the house, it has disappeared; and looking into a large mirror there Vane sees not himself or the attic, but a strange landscape, in the foreground of which a raven is hopping towards him. By now what we thought might be a ghost or a devil story has turned to another reality altogether, one into which Vane now stumbles.

What are we to do with this? It is possible to see it as a dream, Vane having fallen asleep over his books in the afternoon in the library. At the end of his story he finds himself back in the library. In that sense everything that has happened is the product of his dreaming mind. Equally the events can be taken as actually happening to him. In the end we somehow accept both. Did he dream the ghost of Mr Raven, or is there really a ghost as the butler suggests and the old woman of the village insists? And there is the question of Vane's being seen at first in his library, and returning there on several occasions. On his apparently final return he sees 'the board of a large book in the act of closing behind me' (*PL*, 419). The suggestion is that his journey has been a story in a book, as it is for us, his readers.<sup>9</sup> Fiction, dream, fact, they are all there in our experience of the book. *Lilith* is in one sense a fantasy based on what Tzvetan Todorov calls a 'hesitation' where we are caught between psychological and supernatural explanations of an event, unable to

---

<sup>9</sup> Michael Mendelson, 'Lilith, Textuality, and the Rhetoric of Romance', in Lucas H. Harriman (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light: Essays on the George MacDonald Fantasy Novel*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 27–8, 33, 35–6.

resolve them.<sup>10</sup> But here no resolution can even be looked for, because both explanations are simultaneously true. We are dealing with multiple versions of an experience.

MacDonald did not see dreaming something as necessarily making it any less real; indeed he felt that only by dreaming could we arrive at the deepest truths. To see the world as a dream is to see through to the world of the spirit. Quoting Novalis in the last words of *Lilith*, MacDonald says, ““Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one.””<sup>11</sup> It is part of the aim of the story to make us see this also. Then we will perceive that our world of three dimensions is in fact all we see of the region of seven dimensions, the world of the soul, into which Vane travels. MacDonald thus gives us a new version of our world, one coincident or ‘bi-local’ with ours, in which the sound of a piano being played by Vane’s housekeeper’s niece is enhanced by the fact that in the region of the seven dimensions ““those great long heads of wild hyacinth are inside the piano, among the strings of it, and give that peculiar sweetness to her playing”” (203–4). Equally music from our reality changes the scent of a flower in the seven-dimensional one. Mr Raven proceeds, ““I smell Grieg’s Wedding March in the quiver of those rose petals!””<sup>12</sup>

MacDonald also teases us with the idea of the region of the seven dimensions being a planet in this or another solar system rather than a supernatural world. Mr Raven suggests at one point that it may be located on Uranus (then quite well known to science<sup>13</sup>) though also in Greek mythology Uranus

---

<sup>10</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Yale University Press, 1975), 25: ‘The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.’

<sup>11</sup> Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 35, §237.

<sup>12</sup> The idea of the two worlds being coincident is paralleled in the Greek belief that Uranus (the first god, the god of sky) married Gaea, the goddess of earth.

<sup>13</sup> Uranus, discovered by Herschel in 1781, is the seventh planet out from the sun. Water is a large constituent of its surface mass (as ice), as it once was in the region of seven dimensions; in MacDonald’s day Uranus was astrologically placed in the constellation of Aquarius, ‘the water carrier’. We are told that the region has several moons (*PL*, 257); by MacDonald’s time it was known that Uranus had four moons (it is now known to have 27 in all). Mr Raven makes comments to Vane about Uranus, which leaves it uncertain as to whether he is referring to the region of seven dimensions. While it is raining at Vane’s home he says to him, ““It must be a grand time

was the god of the sky and the king of heaven. Elsewhere Vane thinks the moonlight of this new world strange, and Mr Raven tells him that it is not the dead planet of his own world (214, 215). Later Vane speculates that the moon derives its light from an unknown sun (228) and wakes one night beneath 'constellations unknown to my former world' (251). That we remain in the same universe as our own world is also implied by the mirror to the new world operates by laws concerning the polarisation of light, the incident angles of which can be adjusted by ropes and pulleys.<sup>14</sup> MacDonald's idea of the seven dimensions is partly predicated on his use of light, for if light can go through a mirror to another world, it is no less possible that with its seven different wavelengths it might be so refracted in that world as to reveal seven dimensions. MacDonald does not overtly say this, however, and his strange world operates by laws of the spirit only, but a tincture of possibility is left there. This is added to by the fact that he almost certainly derived his notion of a world of more than three dimensions from the speculative contemporary science and science fiction of E. A. Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884) and C. H. Hinton's *Scientific Romances* (1884–86).<sup>15</sup> Of course we do not take any of these semi-scientific notions as the truth of what is going on, only as one more version of it.

Equally it is hinted that Vane has entered his own soul in passing through the mirror. When he looks in it, he sees a melancholy landscape of moorland and low hills. On a first reading we will naturally take this to be a real, 'solid' place which he will walk into. But when we consider that it is a mirror that

---

on the steppes of Uranus! ... I believe it is raining there too; it was all the last week!'" (200). Then he goes on to speak of the animals on Uranus all being burrowers, so that often the earth will heave and a beast emerge. This is the situation in the region of seven dimensions. Finally he remarks the shock of seeing "the dry bog-serpent come wallowing out – such a head and mane! and *such* eyes!" This recalls the giant plumed worm of the Bad Burrow (229, 257).

<sup>14</sup> H. G. Wells was particularly attracted by this aspect of *Lilith*, and wrote to MacDonald in 1895 praising his ingenuity of invention. He was to attempt a not dissimilar quasi-scientific use of light theory in his *The Invisible Man* (1897); see Greville MacDonald, *Reminiscences of a Specialist* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932), 323–4. Noting subsequent advances in the study of polarised light, Greville remarked on the prophetic and potentially scientific aspect of *Lilith*, suggesting, 'Perhaps one day all substance may be transparent.'

<sup>15</sup> See Jeffrey Bilbro, "'Yet more spacious Space", Higher-Dimensional Reality from *Flatland* to *Lilith*', *North Wind*, no. 28 (2009), 1–12.



he is looking into, one which would normally reflect Vane's outside, his body and his face, we may, especially with Mr Raven's later accounts, consider that the mirror may indeed still be reflecting Vane. However, in the way of mirrors, this will be Vane's reflection inverted; and where other mirrors invert space, turning left to right, this one inverts the soul, so that it appears on the outside, rather than inside. Therefore we see not Vane's outer but his inner self in the form of a landscape that pictures the low state of his soul. In that sense when Vane goes through the mirror he enters himself. And everything he meets in the other world is part of that self.<sup>16</sup>

Vane's travels in the strange world then become a *psychomachia*, an allegorical struggle through his soul. His present spiritual state is one of bareness and aridity, his deeper nature having gone underground, symbolised in the buried water of this world. That deeper nature is only restored to him at the end in the form of the water which wells up from the desert when Vane symbolically buries the severed grasping hand of Lilith. In the interim, the Bad Burrow of threatening monsters, the warring and dancing dead Vane finds in a wood, the giants and Little Ones he later encounters, and then Lilith herself, have all been figures of his confused yet slowly changing spirit.

But there is another and more objective version of the region of the seven dimensions. Here it is not just an image of Vane's mind; it is also a creation of God's, being the spiritual world or purgatory we all go to after death. (Vane himself is not dead, but is simply granted a vision of this place.) It is full of souls being gradually purified through the workings of God's love. It is much more communal than *Phantastes*, where Anodos is alone and is the only visitor from our world to Fairy Land: in *Lilith* Vane is one mortal soul among many, and is often among groups. While the region of the seven dimensions is subjective as a picture of Vane's soul (and, differently, every other soul within it), it is also has 'objective' and actual existence as a revelation of divine realities beyond our world. Of course it is a portrayal within a fiction – but then as Vane sees at the end, ““When a man dreams his own dream, he is the sport of his dream; when Another gives it him, that Other is able to fulfil it.””

---

<sup>16</sup> This point has been made by Adelheid Kegler, 'Below in the Depths: MacDonald's Symbolic Landscape', *North Wind* 24 (2005), 38–9; and by Roderick F. McGillis, 'Liminality as Psychic Stage in *Lilith*', in *Lilith in a New Light*, 107. Nevertheless it is also the case that this is the same landscape presented to Vane's father when he looks through the mirror (222). Here again we must accept both versions.

In this version of events Vane is within God's imagination throughout his adventure, however much he tries to escape from it. MacDonald said, 'A man is rather *being thought* than *thinking*, when a new thought enters his mind' (*ADO*, 4). Vane thinks that when he starts walking away from Adam's cottage he is leaving it. But in this world he cannot leave it, nor it him (*PL*, 202, 226). Everything in the spiritual world is coincident, and distances are only those of the unregenerate soul – Lilith and Bulika being as we shall see at the furthest. While Vane thinks to explore the strange planet, he will be exploring the condition of his own soul. When he returns to the cottage, it will be because his soul is ready for it. His entire journey, apparently away from Adam's cottage, is God's way of bringing him more surely back to it. His rebellion is real enough at the level of human will; but at the level of divine working it is only the means to eventual submission, a way of by indirection finding directions out.

We also have to see Vane's experiences as a vision conferred on him with Mr Raven as agent, just as MacDonald himself felt that the first draft of *Lilith* was so given to him. Quite why Vane and his family are so privileged in having a sub-vicar of God as their librarian and spiritual director is never clear. However the significance of the granted vision is clear enough: it gives Vane not only a picture of the nature of his own soul, but at the same time of a purgatory in which all people, even the most wicked, will repent and be purified before entering heaven. As such the story is MacDonald's own Book of Revelation, reassuring him amid his own crisis of faith after the death of Lilia, just as much as it affords hope to Vane and to its Victorian readers, longing for certainty of a world beyond. The world so revealed is not a comfortable one, but it denies that death is the end of being, and makes visionary sense of a world that then seemed to lack it.

Within this version, everything in the story, while it is an image of Vane's inner self, is also a picture of the 'outer' universe sustained by God. Its grimness here is a reflection not just of Vane but of the fact that it is set in an often harsh purgatory. If Vane passes through the mirror into his mind, he also goes out of his own narrow world of three dimensions to one of seven, and thence farther out to the true supernatural universe that surrounds us all. When Vane has got far enough inside and outside his spirit to know it for what it truly is, he comes close to meeting the God who lives both in the depths of the soul and in the high places of the world. In this sense *Lilith* is a mystical or anagogical book; indeed one commentator has likened its journey

to the mystical one of St John of the Cross.<sup>17</sup> The mysticism is present not just at the end but in hints throughout, from the sense of awe we feel at the source of Mr Raven's riddles, to the trembling of the spirit that overtakes us in the dormitory of the dead; and from the dread that seizes us in the house of Mara to the shock of revelation when Mr Raven first names himself as Adam. And all the time we know that Vane must come back to the dormitory and the sleeping dead.

In his region of the seven dimensions MacDonald has given us a world which is both impossible and hovering on the edge of possibility, real and imagined, fictive and dreamt, man-projected and God-inspired. Where each begins and ends we cannot tell, how much of each is present in any part cannot be determined. All operate together, and for MacDonald their foundation is in God in whom all things live and have their being and in whom all opposites are joined. For us as literary critics it is enough to say that this dance of multiple realities is the idiom of *Lilith* so long as we are mortal. As Vane himself puts it,

It involves a constant struggle to say what cannot be said with even an approach to precision ... [for it is] impossible to present more than one phase of a multitudinously complicated significance, or one concentric sphere of a graduated embodiment. A single thing would sometimes seem to be and mean many things, with an uncertain identity at the heart of them, which kept constantly altering their look ... While without a doubt, for instance, that I was actually regarding a scene of activity, I might be, at the same moment, in my consciousness aware that I was perusing a metaphysical argument. (227)

Our world of three dimensions is one of either/or: a world may be a dream or a reality; it may be another planet or a thought of God but it can never be both or all at once. But in the world of seven dimensions it can. Here the idiom is both/and: reality is not just one but many. Visions that contradict one another can both be true. We are in a realm that at once envisions the boundlessness of God and the infinite flux of the universe now revealing itself to quantum physics.

---

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Robinson, 'Lilith as the Mystic's Magnum Opus', *Lilith in a New Light*, 128–42; compare also Charles Beauchamp, 'Lilith and Mysticism', *North Wind* 28 (2009), 13–32.

### Versions of being – metamorphosis

What we are also dealing with here is metamorphosis, a series of different versions of the story and the characters that continually shimmer in and out of each other. Metamorphosis is frequent in *Lilith*, as it was not in *Phantastes*, which stressed fluidity of form rather than change of identity. Mr Raven is first the ghost of an old librarian, then a large raven, and then Adam. Prayers can manifest themselves as flowers or doves. Butterflies turn to books, worms change into butterflies. Tree branches turn to fighting skeletons and back again, dancing corpses fall to pieces that become leaves. Mara and Lilith change at will into leopardesses; the Little Ones can change into giants. And as seen the story itself continually changes character, from ghost story to fantasy, metaphysical journey and apocalyptic vision.

Mr Raven tells Vane that we all contain within us a multiplicity of selves, which are part of the truth about us.

Every one, as you ought to know, has a beast-self – and a bird-self, and a stupid fish-self, ay, and a creeping serpent-self too – which it takes a deal of crushing to kill! In truth he has also a tree-self and a crystal-self, and I don't know how many selves more – all to get into harmony. You can tell what sort a man is by his creature that comes oftenest to the front”” (211).

When all these selves are in harmony, then each person's true self will be revealed. Purgatory exists to restore our distorted selves to the original idea in which they were created by God. Identity will at last find its perfect expression, where the outer self perfectly expresses its inner idea. At that point Vane's true name, which is written on his forehead, but which during his journey ““whirls about so irregularly that nobody can read it”” (253), will come to rest and be read. We see this at the end as Vane makes his way towards heaven with transformed vision and everything he sees displays the creative idea inside it (412). Now each indwelling idea is fully expressed through its form: and, paradoxically, because of this can be fully expressed in an infinite number of forms. Now there is no longer any distance from the object, for all perception involves entering the thing perceived, and is essentially mystical. ‘I lived in everything; everything entered and lived in me.’ This is the realisation of MacDonald's hope regarding symbols, which

partake in the natures of the things they describe: ‘One day, I hope we will enter their secrets by natural contact . . .’ (US, 351). The point here is that we separate our selves from God’s wonders by the analytic methods of science, when the only way to understand them is to get closer to them. Here again we see MacDonald’s antipathy to separation, his ultimately mystical bent.

In Vane’s uncertain state at the outset of the story, he cannot answer Mr Raven’s question, “‘Who are you, pray?’” He realises that ‘I did not know myself, did not know what I was, had no grounds on which to determine that I was one and not another. As for the name I went by in my own world, I had forgotten it, and did not care to recall it, for it meant nothing, and what it might be was plainly of no consequence here’ (195–6). However his name, ‘Vane’, does at this stage mean something which he has not enough width of mind to see; and what it means is perfectly true as a description of him, vain as he presently is in his assurance about his way of seeing things. Even so, Mara tells him it is not his true name, which is the as yet unreadable one on his forehead.<sup>18</sup> Almost everything in the story is in flux.

There is one exception to this, however, and that is Lilith. Only Lilith tries to stay one thing – and the morality of the story tells us that this is not because she is her true self, but because she puts everything into her false one. She insists on her ego above all others, and in living absolutely independent of anything else, including God. “‘I will do as my Self pleases – as my Self desires’” (371). She seeks to draw life into herself, whether by sucking blood out of others or by killing new life in the form of children.

Formerly Adam’s first wife, Lilith left him when he refused to be subordinate to her; whereas Eve, Adam’s second wife, accepted his rule. (The rabbinical tradition concerning Lilith portrayed her as demanding equality with Adam, but here she is seen still more blackly as demanding superiority over him.<sup>19</sup>) Her city of Bulika is at the extreme of distance from the dormitory of the dead in Adam’s cottage: she refuses death and chooses immortality within life. Yet she cannot escape being related to people – to her first husband Adam and to their child Lona; to Mara, who is her step-daughter and continually changes into a giant cat like Lilith; and even to the Shadow, whose frequent companion she is (and in some sources became his ‘partner’ or ‘consort’). The self Lilith enlarges is moralised as a hollow thing,

<sup>18</sup> Compare the sermon ‘The New Name’ (US, 70–8).

<sup>19</sup> The first version of this myth of Lilith is in *The Alphabet of ben shirach* (c.700–1000), Question #5 (23a-b).

being steadily eaten away by a spreading dark spot in her side. In striving to be an independent being she is seen as trying to be a nothing, and nothingness is gradually consuming her.

So continually has Lilith chosen this path, that she cannot in the end repent and open her clenched hand, which has to be cut from her. She has become, we are to believe, the slave of her choice of total freedom. In so far as that is true she is at once heroic rebel and rigid fool. Therefore her name, even though it is the name of the antagonist, is most suitable as the title for a book that is really the denial of names.<sup>20</sup> None of the other characters could be on the spine because their names are in any world save heaven too mobile to be caught. Her city also has a fixed and specific name, Bulika: this may come from the Indo-European Boul, meaning 'will'.<sup>21</sup> In contrast every other thing or person in the book 'seem[ed] to be and mean many things, with an uncertain identity at the heart of them, which kept constantly altering their look' (227).

Lilith is 'stuck' in her own myth. What she is in legend she stays, still in this story the woman who would not obey her husband and went her own way. She is engaged on a perpetual struggle to kill all children because a prophecy has said that a child will be the death of her (291). In this she is living in nonsense, because the prophecy is untrue in all but a spiritual sense which she cannot comprehend, and it will be Lilith who literally kills her own child Lona.

Adam and Eve are portrayed differently. They may still be the Adam and Eve of Paradise and the fall, but much more they are a New Adam and a New Eve, preparing humanity not for the start of its race, but for the end. As we meet these two we are uncertain of their identity, for their Edenic selves hover like shadows behind their new roles. Their names no longer define them. And this is true of most figures in the story. 'The Little Ones' describes only the present condition of the children, who will grow up when water is restored to their world. Mara, the Lady of Sorrows, is also uncertain in nature, now gentle, now savage in the form of a leopard. She refuses any easy biblical identification of her (256). Like the lady North Wind, she may be pain, or death, or loss, but none of these captures her, for she is both the Lady of Sorrows and a comforter. Many names in the book are

---

<sup>20</sup> Lilith was not given her name until the second version, *Lilith B*. In *Lilith A* she was simply 'the princess'; Rolland Hein (ed.), *Lilith: a Variorum Edition*, 2 vols (Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix B, below, for a full account.

mere descriptors turned into names – the bad giants, the Evil Wood, the Bad Burrow. Vane's name is changed through MacDonald's six versions of the story, for he was originally Mr Fane.<sup>22</sup>

But while being such a mythic and absolute character, Lilith and her evil nature are also part of Mr Vane. She is the well of evil in him, or in other terms, his desire to be free of Adam and his dormitory, his insistence on his self above all other values. When during his wanderings in the strange world he first comes upon her, lying almost dead in a wood, this is not by the chance it seems, but because his own various refusals of Mr Raven/Adam have inexorably led him there; and after that to the remotest point from Adam in her city of Bulika. And through Vane's apparent charity in healing Lilith, he is re-making her, as she later tells him (307). Lilith is the ultimate of the rebellious, selfish, solitary character that Vane has already shown himself to be, the end point of the direction he is going in; in reviving her, he is ironically giving new strength to this tendency, even while he thinks he is gaining a companion. Indeed, when she is well, and does not thank him but tries to repel him from following her, he is the more attracted by her contemptuous pride. At the level of ordinary human love it is understandable that rejection can increase attraction: at the level of spiritual encounter it is shown as damnable. Both impressions are present and are irreconcilable in this world.

### From three dimensions to seven

In most of his conversations with Mr Raven, Vane shows himself to be largely materialist in his outlook. Mr Raven we may take as his presently ignored but still highly vocal spiritual side; his name is 'Vane' largely inverted, and by the close of the story Vane himself will indeed be spiritually inverted. The riddles and paradoxes with which Mr Raven greets Vane on his arrival in the new world are intended to unsettle Vane's three-dimensional view of life, but more importantly they are meant as keys to understanding the new seven-dimensional world in which he finds himself. For instance, if Vane fully comprehended his new knowledge that he 'had no grounds on which to determine that I was one and not another' (195), he might more readily

---

<sup>22</sup> See Robert Trexler, 'Mr Vane's Pilgrimage into the Land of Promise: MacDonald's "Historical Imagination" in *Lilith*', Roderick McGillis (ed.), *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs* (Wayne, Pennsylvania: Zossima, 2008), 49–59.

see that everything he meets in the strange world may be part of himself. Mr Raven's remarks about the interpenetration or bi-locality of Vane's world and the region of the seven dimensions also show that things are only separate from one another to a mind living in a world of three dimensions.

This new world is one of the spirit, and exists by spiritual laws. Thus when Mr Raven later tells Vane, "You will be dead, so long as you refuse to die" (331), he means that Vane will be spiritually dead so long as he refuses to kill his old self; but for Vane, who still sees things in material terms of sequence, this is "the old riddling". Mr Raven's answer to this is that it only seems a riddle to Vane because he himself is "the only riddle. What you call riddles are truths, and seem riddles because you are not true" (226). Mr Raven even inverts his own riddles, in one place saying that "the more doors you go out of, the farther you get in!" (194) and in another, "*The only door out is the door in!*" (221). Each of these reverses our normal material sense of the world in the mirror of the spirit. Mr Raven is the riddling Fool to Vane's Lear.<sup>23</sup> He is giving Vane a new way of looking at himself, a new version of his life, one which the story that follows will eventually teach him. The version of reality supplied by three dimensions is being expanded into a version supplied by seven.

Though destabilised by Mr Raven, Vane's old self remains strong, for he still presents worldly and rational retorts to Mr Raven's mysticism, refuses his offer to lie down in the house of the dead and twice retreats to the security of his home. But eventually he chooses to return to the strange world, where he is left by Mr Raven to begin a journey apparently without landmarks or direction – essentially a journey in which he has had to let go of some of the shallow certainties that previously governed his life – "abandoned in a strange world, and refused instruction as to where I am to go or what I am to do" (226). Like Lear on another heath, he has gone into the wilderness of his unknown mind, to meet all the unknown selves that he is, from Mara to Lilith and from children to monsters. And, since Vane is walking through the image of a purgatorial afterlife created by God, he is also walking through God's imagination. And it is God, not Mr Raven, who will conduct him safely through.

This is all true: yet in a world of multiple realities its very truth begets a contrary. Mr Raven's point of view is undeniably the correct one, but it rides

---

<sup>23</sup> And also like Lear's Fool he is inviting Vane to house himself before the storm.



roughshod over ordinary human sensibility. However accurately Mr Raven has anatomised Vane, the reader who like Vane comes from a world of three dimensions cannot wholly set aside Vane's point of view. The entrant into a new realm can hardly be expected to be familiar with its mores before arriving. Even a Christian fully accepting spiritual reality as primary over material, would not be able easily to absorb some of the peculiar conditions of this strange world, since they relate not just to a spiritual reality but to a reality made perfect, in which prayers can express themselves as doves, and a sexton tosses worms into the air turns them into butterflies. Mr Raven's scorn for Vane's more limited view of reality is a little unfair-seeming when he will need time to adapt.

Even if we might argue that Mr Raven does not seem to be asking for instant transformation on Vane's part ("There is no early or late here") yet he still goes on to take Vane to the dormitory of the dead as though he is now ready for it. Again, while we may be invited to see Mr Raven as correct here in emphasising the spirit, the very dichotomy set up between what the empirical eye sees and the enlightened soul perceives ("you see a pigeon... I see a prayer on its way" (206)) suggests that one cannot entirely deny the one for the other. Indeed it is typical of the double visions of *Lilith* that there is also a place for reading the story at a literal and physical level as well as at a spiritual level. MacDonald was no rejecter of the world, which for him was as much God's creation as the inner spirit. Thus, while Vane's refusal to lie down and sleep in Adam's dormitory is a spiritual failure on his part, it is at the same time possible to see it as a perfectly natural reaction to being invited to lie down and die in a freezing chamber. In other words, Vane's materialism, rejected at the moral level, cannot be gainsaid so easily at the ontological one. It may be truest to move to seeing in seven-dimensions, but those seven include the three by which most humans, MacDonald's readers included, live.

Natural, and in the end ignorant three-dimensional human response may also already have led us to see Mr Raven's earlier ghostly importunities of Mr Vane in his library as somewhat impertinent, and the succeeding riddles through which he berates Vane as a little presumptuous.<sup>24</sup> And when Mr Raven and his wife leave Vane to his fate after he has refused their invitation to lie down with the sleepers, we may feel a sense of cold abruptness in their

---

<sup>24</sup> Compare Dieter Petzold, 'Mr Raven ... preaches like a schoolmaster with his vendor's tray of paradoxical sayings' ('Beasts and Monsters in MacDonald's Fantasy Stories', *North Wind* 14 (1995), 17.

treatment. Why should Vane supinely obey these strangers, even if as they say they seem to have his good at heart? He cannot accept Mr Raven's analysis of him unquestioningly, even if it is true. Vane's later apology to Mr Raven and his willingness to try the dormitory again are rejected; he is told that he cannot return to his own world, and is cast adrift in the region of the seven dimensions, with scarcely a direction to help him. We have some sympathy with Vane here, the more because he is faced with an uncertain fate. We may remark that Mr Raven, who stays behind and indeed is rarely seen in the strange world, is in rather unfavourable contrast here. We notice too that Mr Raven does nothing to help any of the people in his world, only those who come to his dormitory, who seem to be a sort of elite.

All these feelings are at once made possible and rejected by the deeper vision of the book. But shallow though they may appear beside the spiritual view, they are as true as the physical world, the solid three-dimensional world that God made just as he made the further four dimensions of the spirit. If MacDonald had meant us in *Lilith* to jettison the three-dimensional level of understanding altogether, he might have called the strange world here 'the region of the spirit' or similar. MacDonald is to a large extent using Dante's multiple levels of allegory in *Lilith* – the literal, the moral, the allegorical and the anagogical – and all have their place, even when as here they may stand in contradictory relation to one another.<sup>25</sup> We are able to condemn Vane as a materialist at the same time as we are given rein to make materialistic readings. By such readings the region of the seven dimensions is a real world, maybe as we have seen a planet, and all the monsters, beasts and people that Vane meets are real and outside him, not only reflections of the inner world of his spirit. This tension between seeing the world as solid and seeing it as spirit underlies much of Vane's experience. This is of course part of his education: he has to learn that what is outside him is also inside him. But that does not make the world only subjective. What Vane sees is also independent of him. This is part of the vision of contraries in *Lilith*, where what we feel as opposites can both come together or be 'at-oned' only in God.

When Stephen Prickett finds it strange that there have as yet been few allegorical readings of *Lilith* apart from one offered privately by C. S. Lewis,<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Rolland Hein, 'A Fresh Look at *Lilith*'s Perplexing Dimensions', in Harriman (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light*, 71–82.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Prickett, 'Belief and Scepticism: The Idea of Tradition in George MacDonald', in Christopher MacLachlan, John Patrick Pazdiora and Ginger Stelle (eds), *Rethinking George MacDonald: Contexts and Contemporaries* (Glasgow:

it can be replied that the sheer separation of the two levels often gets in the way. Very little is done by the narrative, for example, to prompt us to see the region of seven dimensions as the landscape of Vane's soul, with each character and place figuring some aspect of his spirit. In *Phantastes* the way that Anodos dreams his way into Fairy Land, and the wandering, melting nature of the story convey that we are dealing with an inner landscape; but Vane in *Lilith* is much more rational and questioning, the narrative is more connected and the world more solid-seeming. This gives much more scope for the story to establish an apparent reality, and to prevent any immediate substitution of literal reading for spiritual meaning.<sup>27</sup>

By contrast in an allegory such as Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* the literal story is much more inviting of allegorical interpretation. When in Book I the Redcrosse knight leaves his lady the true Una after he sees a false image of her making love to a man, this shows him departing from truth; henceforth in the wood of error he will be taken in by lies and shows, until he meets Una once more. The translation from the outer story of knights, ladies and enchanters to the inner one of the spirit is readily made; and it is helped by Spenser's giving his characters meaningful names such as Una, Redcrosse, Archimago, Duessa, Sansfoy, Orgoglio or Despair. But such traffic between the story and its meaning is not so easily made in MacDonald's *Lilith*, even though it is there to be made.

Here we may remark that the region of the seven dimensions is a world of which only part is visible, for much is underground or concealed. This is a world largely of 'a hidden life', as one of MacDonald's early poems is entitled. According to Mr Raven the animals on Uranus are all burrowers (200). There are large red worms which on being brought to the surface grow gorgeous wings of red and black and fly aloft (203). The whole of the region of the seven dimensions is also one huge cemetery<sup>28</sup> of people who exist as trees, branches or leaves by day and take human form by night. The water of the world has been sunk beneath the ground, whence it can still be

---

Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2013), 3–9. See also C.S. Lewis, letter of Sept. 1, 1933 in *They Stand Together: The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914–1963)*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Collins 1979), 459–61.

<sup>27</sup> John Docherty, 'An Ambivalent Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Some Aspects of Irony in *Lilith*', in McGillis (ed.), *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs*, 114–15, sees the strain of keeping before us the characters as figures simultaneously outside and inside Vane.

<sup>28</sup> Compare Clifford Simak's *Cemetery World* (1972), where a whole planet is used to bury the dead of the worlds around it.

heard flowing. And of Mr Raven's dwelling in that world only 'a little cottage' is seen by Vane from outside, the vast dormitory of the sleepers to which it is attached remaining invisible. All this imagery of a world unseen or sunk below the surface suggests the unconscious, which has somehow become divided from the rest of the mind.<sup>29</sup> And inasmuch as the region of the seven dimensions is an image of the condition of Vane's spirit, this figures his own loss of contact with his deeper self.

Indeed Vane's first encounter on his travels is the 'Bad Burrow', an area of heath inhabited by tunnelling monsters. At first we see this only as a terrifying episode which he is lucky to survive: certainly Vane himself does not view it in any other terms. These horrors may be insubstantial in the moonlight, but they are not so when it is gone, and they nearly rip Vane to pieces and devour him. There is something meaningful in the moon which, so long as it is above the horizon renders the monsters phantasmal and impotent; but we are very much left on our own to make sense of the whole scene. This may be part of MacDonald's dislike of underlining the meaning of his work: 'So long as I think my dog can bark, I will not sit up to bark for him' (*ADO*, 321).

That does not imply that the meaning is scarcely present either. With leisure (unlike Vane) to reflect and reread, it can eventually be seen that there is a very real significance beneath the soil of the narrative. Reading from three to seven dimensions in the idiom of Mr Raven, we may gradually perceive that these monsters are not simply material creatures, but can also be understood as symbolising Vane's wild and unknown spirit, to which he is prey. In this new world we have already seen the spiritual manifesting itself in physical-seeming shapes, prayers as doves.

Reading still further it might occur to us that the horrors of the Bad Burrow are the varying shapes of sin itself, and any who go into or this world must pass them, for they are the state of evil in which all people live who have not yet learned to repent. At the end of *Lilith*, when they are seen sunk beneath a lake, they are still alive, for 'So long as there exist men and women of unwholesome mind, that lake will still be peopled with loathsomeness' (413). They are 'the dark portion of our own being', which if it

---

<sup>29</sup> This contrasts with *Phantastes*, where everything hidden is continually being brought to light – the white lady in her cavern, the deceitful Maid of the Alder, the shadow behind the cupboard door, the dancing statues in the fairy palace, the invisible lady on her plinth, the horror beneath the altar in the forest church.

were the sole ‘origin of our imaginations’ would be full of ‘such monsters as would be generated in the sickness of a decay which could never feel – only declare – a slow return towards primeval chaos’. ‘But,’ MacDonald goes on, ‘the Maker is our Light’ (*ADO*, 25). Vane is as yet quite unaware of such significances, even while the thin ground of certainty on which he walks is continually breaking to reveal horrors beneath it. He cannot see, as for a long time we cannot either, that these are not just physical but spiritual beings that will rend his soul. Nor does he know that only the light of the Maker in the form of the moon keeps the monsters insubstantial and unable to devour him.

One of the striking features of the book is the way it begins in profound and complex metaphysics, yet in the middle seems often physical, or one-levelled. The reason is that having refused Mr Raven’s spiritual picture of this world and left him, Vane thereafter views his surroundings in his own more limited and material terms. Instead of seeing creation as a living exchange of matter and spirit, he sees it only in three-dimensions as matter. The Bad Burrow is seen as heaving earth and the fleshly terrors of the mould-clotted tiger, the huge worm, the feathered serpent and the writhing woman whose arms and legs hurry away from her as snakes (229–30).

There is however a gradual move in the book towards seeing things in both material and spiritual terms at once, as the opposed ways of reading gradually begin to come closer. Later physical images become a little more clearly instinct with spiritual being. In the Evil Wood Vane lies beneath a tree like a blossoming eucalyptus whose flowers have ‘a hard calyx much resembling a skull, the top of which rose like a lid to let the froth-like bloom-brain overfoam its cup’ (232). This grotesque analogy suggests that Vane is near to a sense of the deeper nature of what he sees. And then what seems mere analogy comes true, as the branches of the trees in the wood change at night to skeletons and phantoms fighting around Vane in the darkness. Vane is himself too much in the dark to perceive this transformation, and his ‘daylight prudence’ suggests the whole experience came out of his own fancy (234). Indeed it did come partly from his mind, but with a truth he is not yet near to understanding.

Yet what are these fighting figures? As the fight they utter ‘the war-cry of every opinion, bad or good, that had bred strife, injustice, cruelty in any world. The holiest words went with the most hating blow. Lie-distorted truths flew hurtling in the wind of javelins and bones’ (234). All cry for “‘*The Truth! The Truth!*’” These are men so convinced of the rightness of their

beliefs as to kill for them. Vane seems no partisan of this sort, and at first we do not see any link between him and these strange figures. And anyway, is it always so wrong to have an all-consuming belief in a thing? We have just seen Vane and Mr Raven contending in their different beliefs concerning the nature of the region of the seven dimensions. Of course, they do not try to kill each other in defence of their convictions. The objects of attack here are most obviously the likes of Christians versus Moslems, Catholics versus Protestants, Parliamentarians versus Royalists, even Presbyterians versus Free Church – in other words, all sects. But still, we sense that anyone with a conviction of his own rightness would be at risk of finding himself in the Evil Wood. We may here begin to speculate as to whether this might extend even to Mr Raven himself, who so continually corrected Vane with his own more spiritual view of things.

In the Evil Wood rather more is at issue than appears. We are being asked to consider how far any morality, any one view of truth has the right to impose itself on another. This hint of relativism has implications not only for Mr Raven/Adam's declarations of truth and correct behaviour, but also on the later 'forced' conversion of Lilith and indeed on MacDonald's view of God Himself, a God who treats rebellious man as 'a fly who creeps his foolish way/Athwart an engine's wheels in smooth resistless way' (*Diary of an Old Soul*, 'January' st. 20). It is the strength of the vision in *Lilith* that it can accommodate views which so oppose its more conventional Christianity.

But these are larger considerations. More locally we are with Vane's failures of perception as to what is going on. In the morning, at the cry "Let the dead bury their dead!" these armies silently fall to the ground and disappear. Vane does not understand the meaning of this cry (225, 234), which is taken from Matt. 8. 22, and refers to the man who wanted to follow Jesus but only after burying his dead father: Jesus says in effect: "let those who are dead in spirit by not following me bury your father." He also means that we must submit to God, not stand back asking for intellectual answers regarding His purposes (*US*, 590–1). In this sense, in meeting these creatures, Vane is unknowingly meeting himself, for he too can be judged as dead in spirit in not following the injunction that he lie down with the dead and be remade in the great dormitory.

It can also be argued here that if we fail to see the spiritual significances behind the narrative, we are as much indicted for materialism as Vane. Thus we are being tested as Vane is: we are to penetrate to the other version of what is going on, namely, that he is wandering through the implications of

his own materialist mind, exposing what it finally amounts to. On this reading *Lilith* will be a book which does not leave its readers comfortably looking on, while the moral status of its hero is muddled. If we see things as Vane does, then we too are accused and involved.

And there is another aspect to the battling figures here. Throughout the story we are being asked to see the region of the seven dimensions and everything in it not just as some strange world which Vane has happened to get into, but more deeply, especially after Vane's visit to the house of the sleeping dead, as a place of soul-making, which is variously purgatory or hell for those within it. In this world death is not simply a horror but the sole means to new life. However for Vane this is a perception yet to be reached. He comes his nearest to it when, gazing on a former married pair, now skeletons, raging at one another, he remarks to himself, "These are too wretched for any world, and this cannot be hell, for the Little Ones are in it, and the sleepers too!" It needs Mr Raven to make a surprise appearance and tell him, and the reader, that hell is not simply a material and external place but a spiritual one: "You are not in hell . . . Neither am I in hell. But those skeletons are in hell!" (271).

The same kind of translation is needed with Vane's journey. To the reader it will seem that Vane travels from one place in the new land to another – from Adam to the Bad Burrow; then to the fighting skeletons, the Little Ones, Mara's house, the dancing corpses, the squabbling married skeletons, the half-dead woman Vane finds by a river, and thence to the city of Bulika. This is true: but on considerable reflection it is also true that Vane does not physically move a step, and that all his experiences are within his imagination and his spirit. For Mr Raven told him, "Home is ever so far away in the palm of your hand" (225); "The closet [in Vane's library] is no nearer our cottage, and no farther from it, than any or every other place" (326). The physical narrative both mirrors and is contradicted by the spiritual one, so that the whole story becomes a paradox. We have to see through continually to this to this more multi-levelled reality, where what in our world we see in three dimensions becomes what we see in seven. The sense of our separation from this truth is as strong as the effort we have to make to see it.

After leaving the fighting skeletons, Vane encounters a tribe of children, who call themselves the Little Ones (from Jesus's words in Matt.18: 6.10.14) and are looked after by an older and more perceptive child, Lona. That Vane meets such a group in this journey through his mind suggests something more positive about him. This is added to by his preferring to eat the apples



they grow to those of a group of brutish giants living close by – thus proving to the Little Ones that he is more one of them than a giant. These children are both innocent and ignorant. They do not know where they came from, and have no wish to improve their situation, despite Vane's offers to help. They are a little like the Eloi in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, published in the same year as *Lilith*, and the giants are like the Morlocks. If the children will not evolve, they can certainly devolve, for any who take a liking to the giants' apples eventually grow to become stupid giants themselves. It is not hard to see that the ignorant innocence of these children expresses something of Vane himself.

However, the children's refusal to change is different version from Vane's: they think that growth will turn them into stupid giants (or, in our terms, materialistic adults); but Vane does not wish to change from an adult into a visionary child. Vane's prompt capture and enslavement by the giants just as he meets the Little Ones, so that for the rest of his time he converses with them as a servant of their enemies, conveys the distance between him and the children; by contrast on his next visit he is to meet them more directly. Here Vane's capture by the giants implies his possession of the same coarseness of soul that the giants have and the children are without.

The appearance of children in the midst of accounts of fighting and dancing skeletons, and in a world that hitherto has been presented as one gigantic cemetery, has another purpose. How, we may be asking, in a story dealing with what happens after the end of life, can we have an episode describing people who are only beginning theirs? As yet we have no knowledge of *Lilith*, or of her role in putting the children in this wilderness. But if we consider, the children have entered on a new world through birth, and the skeletons through what we call death. But both are alike spiritual beings in this new world, and now for them dying means dying out of the self, while being dead means being in an evil spiritual condition. *Lilith* is almost dead, but the sleepers in Adam's house are continually dying, and so becoming younger and more alive. Mr Raven tells Vane that his 'dead' mother in the dormitory will "go on steadily growing younger until she reaches the perfection of her womanhood" (399). Here death and life, childhood and age, are but different versions of one another. Vane is told by Mr Raven, "You will be dead, so long as you refuse to die" (331); and later, after he has submitted and lain down with the sleepers and woken again, "You have died into life, and will die no more; you have only to keep dead" (408). On this view death



is a continual growing process, just as life is for children: but the one involves growing younger, and the other growing older.

MacDonald introduces the children not only to show how in this strange world opposites lie together, but also to imply that the innocence of childlikeness is the condition reached after one has slept in Adam's house – except that there it will no longer be an ignorant innocence (the children not knowing their origins) nor one that cannot grow, nor one that can go bad. The dancing spectres in the ivy-covered house later welcome the Little Ones, 'for they had themselves long been on their way back to childhood' (362). For MacDonald childlikeness – not childishness – is the idiom of heaven and of God.<sup>30</sup> That is why he has the Little Ones so prominent at the end, running among the sleepers to choose beds to sleep on, loud with joy on the walk to the city of heaven, and almost taking the place by storm in their delight at getting there.

Vane next meets Mara, 'the lady of sorrows', who has her cottage in the waste land. Allegorically he himself becomes sorrowful: and this is possibly at the fact that he was able to do so little to help the Little Ones, his own better, if still ignorant, impulses for good. Mara only enters *Lilith* in its second version. She gives Vane a (cold) bed for the night and some bread and water but keeps her face hidden from him. He views her with some awe and addresses her as "Madam", as though she is some grand Victorian lady. But her true spiritual nature remains hidden from Vane, symbolised in her concealment of her face: he can see her only as rather odd, not in any way as a manifestation of divine grace working in his own soul. He treats her bare cottage with its hard cold bed (reminder of the cold beds of the sleepers) and its mystic fare of bread and water as a rather inferior youth hostel. She tells Vane that she keeps cat-like creatures, and that "A new one came to me last night – from your head while you slept" (258). Vane can make nothing of this, because he does not think the mind can create 'solid' or 'material' things outside itself –for which belief, remembering how Mr Raven earlier showed him prayers becoming doves, we feel critical of him.

Vane's material view of what he sees around him continues in the later picture of the crowd of dancers with their heads stripped of flesh in the hall of a ruined house (263–6). On a first reading we like him are so caught up in the physical horror of the scene as not to see through it; at most it will seem like punishment for some kind of wickedness. Again, much further thought

---

<sup>30</sup> See MacDonald, 'The Child in the Midst', *US*, 1–17.

may bring us to the realisation that unlike the warring skeletons whose bones were continually being shattered, these have regained much of their flesh. Later still we might say that their participation in the ordered society of dancing symbolises how these figures have put aside their own selfish desires. But in this case there is no sense in which they represent any part of the spirit of Vane himself, who so far has developed very little. Indeed the disgusting conclusion of the dance, when all present rot into nonentity before Vane's eyes is recalled in Lilith's later song of the corruption of her body through her existence as a succuba (319–22): the same obsession with the physicality of death is there: neither Vane nor she (desperate to live for ever) can visualise death as anything other than wretched decomposition.

However Vane does here begin to draw spiritual explanation for what he sees, if from the wrong direction. He surmises that when alive these people concealed their thoughts and made their faces masks that now are stripped bare (264). Yet this idea is rather lost in the revolting physical specificity that ends the scene, as a warm wind comes and the figures rot before Vane's eyes:

As if each shape had been but a snow-image, it began to fall to pieces, ruining in the warm wind. In papery flakes the flesh peeled from its bones, dropping like soiled snow from under its garments; these fell fluttering in rags and strips, and the whole white skeleton, emerging from garment and flesh together, stood bare and lank amid the decay that littered the floor. (266)

This, we may later understand is what death means to Vane: he sees the disintegration of flesh, the exposure of raw bone; he does not perceive death as new life, only as the loss of the old. Already his preoccupation with death as finality has made him flee from the dormitory of the dead. He has to be corrected in his view of these people by Mr Raven, who tells him that they are slowly growing, and will one day be whole again (272) – a piece of information needful for the reader also.

Vane's materialism is once more apparent when he finds and looks after the wasted body of a nearly dead woman. There is first a measure of suppressed prurience at finding a naked female body (274) – Vane is a young and inexperienced man and his Victorian age was one that found the legs of tables indecent. We then have ten pages of his practical improvisations to revive his patient – covering her with leaves, warming her further with his own body, squeezing grapes into her mouth, warming her on a litter

placed above a nearby hot stream. It is quite extraordinary to have such fatuous details of patient care in the midst of a work that is founded on final truths, but it shows how much Vane is happier with the physical rather than the metaphysical. At the same time it is a picture of Vane's natural care for another, if the closeness involved becomes more erotic as the woman's physical appearance improves. In the larger scheme of the book however, Vane's humanity is being mocked, the more so as it is devoted to the resuscitation – or rather here, the making – not of a beauty as he thinks, but of a succuba, a monster he does not recognise because he does not yet have a sense of his own evil. Further, *Lilith* claims that she would have recovered without Vane's help (284).<sup>31</sup> And we see that in one sense she would indeed have recovered without Vane's help, for it is her continual sucking of his blood by night that revives her – the supposed 'white leech' that does this actually being herself. As his own evil, she feeds on his soul.

Indeed it can be said that the woman represents something that Vane is growing within himself, as he covers her, warms her with his own body and feeds her unknowingly with his own blood until she is fully alive. This *Lilith* – for it is she – reveals later in an apparently confessional poem where she says that if she could find the right man, ““a man that could believe/In what he saw not, felt not, and yet knew”” she would take form and substance from him and

“Then should I clothe me in the likeness true  
Of that idea where his soul did cleave.” (319)

In other words she would take the form the man already had of her in his soul to give herself separate life. She shapes herself to the image he has of her. She will tell Vane, ““What you have made me is yours!”” (307). This keeps her in power: it is not Vane who begets or transmits her, but she who uses his mind to copy her shape from it. In this sense it will not be she who is a projection of Vane's mind, but he who will be contained in hers: Vane is to realise this when inside the black ellipsoid hall of her palace he finds himself amongst an assembly of the skeletons of the Evil Wood together with the dancing dead and realises when outside again afterwards that all of

---

<sup>31</sup> Though Adam later contradicts this (325), leaving us as usual, with more than one version.

them, including himself 'had been in the brain of the princess!' (311). This gives her objectivity above Vane's.

Lilith's being a vampire symbolises the way evil devours the soul: Vane has been drawn in by the woman, and not just romantically. It is notable that there is much eating and consuming imagery, both bad and good, in the story. The monsters of the Bad Burrow seek to devour all comers, as sin seeks to swallow the soul. Lilith frequently drinks Vane's blood and saps his life. The Great Shadow temporarily absorbs all those through whom he passes (360–1). These want to engulf other beings into their nothingness. They are the opposite of the idea of 'at-one-ment' behind the story, which involves bringing people together not to merge their identities but to find their true selves: this is imaged in the free sharing of food.<sup>32</sup> Lilith as devourer of others is the satanic evil of pride that will have only its self in the world. Now companion of the Shadow, she is becoming the evil that lives on at a far more fundamental level in Vane and all people than it is possible for them to plumb or alter themselves. This is evil not as doing, but as being – evil as the great pit in every man and woman.<sup>33</sup> Yet as we shall see, even as she falls towards this void, MacDonald alters the rabbinical myth of Lilith so that her absolute evil is increasingly countered by a force in her working for good – her conscience.

But what is this figure Lilith doing in the story at all? MacDonald has chosen a figure unknown to the bible, first grafted on to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve only in the Jewish *Alphabet of ben shirach* (c. 700–1000), and later developed in the medieval Talmud.<sup>34</sup> She is brought in to explain an anomaly between Genesis 1.27 and 2.7 – namely that woman is apparently created twice. To avoid the bible appearing inconsistent, Lilith, whose name is taken from that of a Babylonian evil spirit, was brought in to give us a story

---

<sup>32</sup> When Vane eats the fruits of the Little Ones, and rejects the big green apples preferred by the Giants, he shows himself to be spiritually one with the little people: this is eating as fellowship. So too when Vane is given bread and water by Mara to sustain him: this is feeding as charity. But when Vane later feeds the wasted Lilith with fruits to revive her, what looks like charity is not, for he is giving renewed life to evil.

<sup>33</sup> Jeanne Murray Walker, 'The Demoness and the Grail', *Lilith in a New Light*, 67, has argued that MacDonald chose Lilith as his antagonist because if she could be brought to repent, so could everybody else.

<sup>34</sup> Barbara Black Koltuv, *The Book of Lilith* (York Beach, Maine: Nicolas-Hays, 1986); Roderick F. McGillis, 'George MacDonald and the Lilith Legend in the Nineteenth Century', *Mythlore* 19 (Winter, 1979), 3–11.

of two wives of Adam, Lilith and Eve, the first of whom refused to submit to him and fled to live among devils, so that a second wife was needed. (However this still leaves us with Adam being created twice, and with God seeming to have made a bad job of the first wife Lilith.)

But aside from the bible, Lilith has many manifestations in late nineteenth-century literature and painting. She is in part the beautiful seductress, a recurrent figure from Keats's *Lamia* to the women of Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and from Dickens's *Estella* to Hardy's *Eustacia Vye* and Rider Haggard's *She*. She appears too, in the vampire fiction of the age, from Edgar Allen Poe's 'Ligeia' (1838) or J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871) to R. L. Stevenson's 'Olalla' (1885) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).<sup>35</sup>

Here we must go to what Lilith represents to her age: she is the rebel against convention, who breaks free of marriage to live as she wishes, not as others will her to do. The issue of the 'free woman' was very strong in the 1890s, and was to become militant in the next decade. The root problem was the age-old subjection of women to men, who denied them the vote and were given near-absolute control over them in marriage. Lilith seen in this context is not a demonic figure, but a heroine resisting the repressive male. However we should note that Lilith is not subjected to Adam, for they are created equal: she leaves him because he refuses to let her dominate – "I would but love and honour, never obey and worship her" (322). Certainly by changing the 'princess' of the first version of his story to Lilith in the second, by naming the book itself after her, and by placing Lilith rather than any other rebellious figure at the centre of his romance, MacDonald is telling us that that the issue of female or any human freedom will be his concern – but not in the social terms of 'women's rights' so much as in relation to a divinely-based universe which she rejects.

There is a larger problem here, of course, and it is that Lilith, for all her evil, is felt to be the most powerfully realised figure in the book. Beside her, it is said, Lona is a shadow, Vane a thing of putty, and Adam a mere strident voice.<sup>36</sup> But this is more a case of her being the big rebel in the book, like Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Of course, she is beautiful, sexual, and a creature of

<sup>35</sup> See David Melville Wingrove, 'La Belle Dame – *Lilith* and the Romantic Vampire Tradition,' in *Rethinking George MacDonald*, 175–97.

<sup>36</sup> Roderick F. McGillis, 'Phantastes and *Lilith*: Femininity and Freedom,' in William Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Thread: Essays on George MacDonald* (Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 48–53; John Pennington, 'Of "Frustrate Desire": Feminist Self-Postponement in *Lilith*,' *North Wind* 21 (2002), 26–37.

power who has thrown everything up to go her own way. We naturally admire such things, because we value such things as personality. But 'naturally' can only be part of the story here. One would argue too that Lilith's attractiveness is there to tempt us, to show us how much we too are implicated in all that she is. To the extent that we find her admirable, we are ourselves Liliths. Here again there are two sides: Lilith has all the life in the book, and yet her vitality is there to subvert the reader as well as Vane.

And whatever our feelings we cannot deny that Lilith's so called rebellion is a fraud. The very assertion of her will has made her more a slave. Driven by the prophecy that says she will be killed by her own child (291, 322) she is reduced like Herod to killing every baby in sight in the hope that one of them will be her daughter. And every step she takes in evil is not the triumphant exercise of her will that she would make it, but an increasing helplessness before the growing spot in her side that will eat her away till she is hollow. She is in continual torment, and oscillates between fierce joy and utter despair and self-loathing, seeing herself now as a mighty and free spirit, now as a rotten corpse (305–06, 320–1). It cannot be said that the apparent constraint of her will by Mara is a bad thing. This is no free spirit exploring the limits of the human will, but a monster who lives by feeding on and killing others, while encouraging every sin she can. To ask that she be allowed to escape any confines put on her by Mara would be like opening a high-security jail to allow its inmates to run free. Lilith is a child-murderer, a Myra Hindley to the nth power.

But clearly, in this book whatever is said on one side by one reader, another can offer just as much support for the other. MacDonald said, 'A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean' (*ADO*, 317). This allows for readings that go beyond the writer's intentions. However there is one proviso: 'If he be not a true man, he will draw evil out of the best ... If he be a true man, he will imagine true things; what matter whether I meant them or not' (*ibid*). One can have any bias except an 'evil' disposition: if this attempts to blacken any reading of Lilith as the heroine of her story, it should be ignored, so long as the text supports such a reading. We are left, then, as elsewhere with another double reading, with Lilith as both heroine and as horror. And again, this antinomy cannot be reconciled on earth. Indeed that is what MacDonald's much-loved poet William Blake said in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93) concerning Reason and Energy 'whoever seeks to reconcile them seeks to destroy

existence'. Blake's idea of marriage in the poem is a tension of contraries, at once separated and joined.<sup>37</sup>

Unlike Adam, who resisted her, Vane is for long Lilith's slave. After he has nursed and restored her she tells him his efforts were wasted since she would have revived by herself (a claim later denied by Adam (325)); and then she leaves him. Though Vane follows and begs her for her love, she spurns him and continues alone to her city of Bulika, while he trails her at a distance. Once in Bulika, he veers between repugnance at her behaviour (especially when he sees that she is the leopard<sup>38</sup> that goes about killing people) and continued devotion to her despite all the evidence. In the end, after she has been badly scratched in a fight with another leopard, she asks Vane to lead her up a tree to where a flower grows that will heal her. But it is all a ruse to enable her to cross into Vane's world by holding on to him as one of its inhabitants. Once there she will be on the side of the river she was trying to reach before an enchantment cut her down and Vane found her. Her purpose was and is to reach and slay the Little Ones, particularly her own daughter by Adam, Lona. On his return, Vane meets Mr Raven, who berates him for the failures of his journey before arraigning Lilith for the horror she is. After this she escapes.

We should however understand what is also going on at the deeper level. On the literal plane Vane may be an amorous dupe, but allegorically his subjection to Lilith and continuation in Bulika show how much he is implicated in her evil. Yet, at the same time, we are being given a picture of Lilith as not so absolutely evil as she appears on the narrative level. In battling in leopard form with Mara as another, unspotted leopard, she is in a sense fighting with herself; and the scratches she receives can be seen as images of a painful conscience she tries to silence. For Mara is her step-daughter by Adam, and is also sorrow, bitterness and guilt. All these things manifest themselves in

---

<sup>37</sup> John Docherty, 'An Ambivalent Marriage of Heaven and Hell', 116–22, portrays MacDonald's debt to Blake's poem in *Lilith*. MacDonald had 'an early hand-coloured reproduction of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*' in his library (GMDW, 555).

<sup>38</sup> MacDonald probably got the whole idea of Lilith as leopardess and vampire from J. Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' (1871–2), first published in his supernatural story collection *In a Glass Darkly* (1872). There is a scene in Le Fanu's story (ch. 6, but see also ch. 7) where the young woman Laura dreams that a giant black cat is on her chest at night sucking her blood, and wakes to see a woman leaving her room: this is echoed in Vane's experience in *Lilith* (PL, 308–9; see also 280–3).



the growing dark spot in Lilith's side which she tries to hide from herself. When Lilith tricks her way into Vane's world and sets off to destroy the Little Ones, she is easily headed off by Mara and returned to Bulika. In one sense, as God's agent on behalf of his creation, Mara is a force from outside Lilith; but she must also be seen as that good which works within Lilith herself to counter her evil.

Realising that Lilith has tricked him in order to get into his own world, Vane now insists that he has turned away from her: "I hate her!" he cries (318) with a vehemence which rather belies his assertion, for he has to admit that he did not tell her so. And he is also really angry with himself for being such a fool. Nevertheless he does in reality turn from her at this point, though not from her selfish egotism. He has reached the point where Mr Raven can reveal to him that he is Adam, and that the wicked princess is his first wife Lilith. To this Vane now responds not as a materialistic scientist but as a Christian believer: 'Then at last I understood that Mr Raven was indeed Adam, the old and the new man; and that his wife, ministering in the house of the dead, was Eve, the mother of us all, the lady of the New Jerusalem' (323). But this is an understanding that does not last, a sign of which is that Vane returns to addressing him as 'Mr Raven' in the following chapter.

For all his failures, Vane's first journey has at least had the effect of creating a measure of interconnectedness in this strange world. He can now see that each separated society is in fact linked to a larger context, often without knowing it. Many are in a purgatory; the Little Ones are children from Bulika that the evil princess wants to slay; and now Mr Raven reveals that he is Adam and that the princess is his first, renegade, wife Lilith. Symbolically however this also means that Vane has begun to draw together some of the separate impulses of his mind: or, in Mr Raven's words, he has connected several of the various selves that he has to bring into harmony (211). But this is still incidental rather than intentional. Vane has found that isolation is intolerable in this new world, and longs for company as he never did when safe at his home (235, 262). At first his social impulse is fairly weak, for after deciding to help the Little Ones he leaves them. Eventually he finds another to care for in Lilith, but this is misplaced, and his care becomes so woven about with eroticism as to be compromised. And at the deeper level, Vane finds and cares for Lilith because she is the deep evil of his own soul.

Vane's second journey is a revised version of his first. It starts just as the first did, with a refusal of another invitation from Adam to sleep in the



dormitory of the dead, though this time with a happier outcome. And if we consider the story at the surface, or literal level, there seems little change in Vane's motives and behaviour to others. Though he says he is determined to help the Little Ones (an endeavour which Adam says "will bring mischief upon them" (331)) Vane is actually thinking not so much of the Little Ones as of testing the power of the horse Adam has given him (*ibid.*). Having then set out on this horse – the horse of his passions – Vane soon comes to grief and is only saved by Mara's creatures from being devoured by the monsters of the Bad Burrow (that is, again nearly eaten by sin). Following this, he falls victim to the oafish giants, neighbours (and products) of the Little Ones. At this he can only conclude bitterly, "What fitter? ... to whom else should I belong?" (335).

Matters do not seem greatly to improve when Vane is released and with the Little Ones again. When he sees that they have now considerably developed their society – and without the water Mr Raven insisted was essential to their growth (316–17) – he allies himself with the self-serving schemes of a woman exiled from Bulika to make an army of them to attack the city. Having now fallen in love with Lona, the girl in charge of the Little Ones, Vane plans to put her on the throne of Bulika and become her consort, when he will, he fancies, build up a trade in precious stones between the city and his own world (346).

The plan comes to nothing (as in MacDonald's work most human plans do). The mothers reject their returned children (353–4), Lona, left uninformed by Vane that Lilith is her mother (347) is killed by her, and though the city is subdued, its population will return to their old ways as soon as the invaders are gone. Some of the Little Ones capture and bind the now enfeebled Lilith and take her outside the city to Vane who is lamenting the death of Lona. Vane apparently does nothing here. There is no plan to take Lilith to be made to repent by Mara;<sup>39</sup> they all go to Mara's house simply as a means of finding out how best to reach Adam and Eve's cottage.<sup>40</sup> Nor did Vane have any original intention of capturing Lilith and taking her to Adam

---

<sup>39</sup> Contrast Walker, 63: 'Vane storms Bulika, captures Lilith and carries her to Adam'; or Robinson, 135, who maintains that Vane repents when he looks on the dead Lona, 'It was not she, it was I who was lost' (358) – but what he means by his being 'lost' is his belief that she has gone to a better place, 'and', the quotation continues 'she would find me.'

<sup>40</sup> And though Vane says he wants to learn from Mara how best to avoid the Bad Burrow, but in the event they go straight across it.

to be healed: in fact he takes her to Adam not primarily to bring about her repentance but to get her off his hands: 'I scarce merited being made for ever her gaoler!' (362). Only the journey itself, irrespective of motives, back towards Adam may be said to imply a change for good in Vane. This is most directly the way the story presents itself to us.

However, when we consider what is happening from the allegorical or seven-dimensional point of view, we once again get a wholly different version of events. From this perspective, the purer side in Vane, represented in part by the Little Ones, has grown without his care in that they have become more organised, have found a way of avoiding the giants and have befriended many of the beasts of the forest, who now help them. Meanwhile Lilith's power is on the wane, and she has shrunk within her palace, to be overthrown and captured by 'mere' children whom Vane has organised to attack her city. In other words, Vane's deepest evil is being considerably weakened. Further, Vane's falling in love here with the older child Lona, leader of the Little Ones and daughter of Adam and Lilith, is a redeeming sign, for it is in sharp contrast to his involvement with Lilith. There, he was subjecting himself to evil: here, he is joining as an equal with one who is pure in thought, selfless and devoted. There, he opened himself to his inner darkness; here, to his inner light. While Lona is at one level a woman, at another she is Vane's Eve, or Psyche, his soul; he feels he has 'known her ages – for always – from before time began!' (346). Lona is in a sense the 'white lady' of *Lilith*, but she is not so elusive, being in converse with Vane throughout their relationship – save when he loses her in death. Even then he continues their relationship, looking to a reunion through resurrection.

Thus seen, the Vane who seemed at the literal story to do little save ill, is at the allegorical level doing much good. And as with all opposites, even contradictions, in *Lilith*, we are asked to hold both pictures as truth. Of course we do not do this consciously, piecing out the differences and watching them swing together in some intellectual scales. Rather the process involved is just that which MacDonald described in his essay on 'The Fantastic Imagination', published in 1893 while he was writing *Lilith*: likening the fairy tale to music he said, 'The best way with music, I imagine, is not to bring the forces of our intellect to bear upon it, but to be still and let it work on that part for whose sake it exists' (*ADO*, 321–2). By 'that part' MacDonald meant the imagination, the soul. But we should also note that MacDonald himself can at times be highly intellectual and schematic in *Lilith* (for example, 373, 375, 377): he

sometimes labours to be clear. The contradictions of literal and allegorical, here as elsewhere, cannot fully be resolved.

Several modern readers have taken issue with the way in which Lilith is brought to repent, first by Mara, and then by Adam.<sup>41</sup> Mara tells Lilith that her deepest will is not to remain a rebel but to repent, because God, not evil, is the deepest thing in her soul. Critics have particularly objected to the way in which Lilith, felt to be a character of magnificent female power and absolute rebellion against the divine order, is brought to yield to that order by apparent force. First a white-hot worm enters the dark spot in her side and makes her see herself as she is; after which, when she still refuses to change, she suffers ‘the torture of pure interpenetrating inward light’ in her now divided soul, followed by ‘a horrible Nothingness’; and then finally, still defiant, she is deprived even of the part of her that God has made, so that she is left a living death, ‘a conscious corpse’ (374–8). Now grudgingly repentant, she is taken to Adam, who cuts off her still clenched hand of possessiveness so that she may sleep in the dormitory of the dead. It seems that Lilith has been reduced to compliance by the divine order – and by the patriarchal male Adam whom she once defied. She lies flat, passive and unconscious within God’s power, and all her vitality seems simply to have been crushed.

But reading with a seven- rather than a three-dimensional vision, there is an alternative view here. Even before her capture Lilith has become aware of where her choices have led her, in the form of the now huge spot of conscience in her side and a growing sense of being powerless. Even when she asserts her power to Vane (305–6) she is already almost the slave of the great Shadow. She lives increasingly in her palace, seeking vain consolations of her strength and beauty until both fade; and after one monstrous last outburst she kills her own daughter Lona – at which she is rendered so weak that she can be captured by children. The picture we have is that her own choice of evil eventually paralyses her. And if she is taken to Mara, that is, to Sorrow, it is her own sorrow and shame that, working against her evil, eventually save her. This is what was meant by the prophecy that her daughter would kill her: she is to cease to be Lilith. On this reading she is not forced by God or any external force to repent, but only by her own still human nature.

These two versions of events have equal claim to truth. The one sees everything happening to Lilith against her will, the other sees what goes on at

---

<sup>41</sup> For example, McGillis, ‘*Phantastes* and *Lilith*’, 53; Pennington, ‘Of “Frustrate Desire”’, 31–5.

Mara's house as Lilith's own internal struggle to get away from the evil that is destroying her. In support of the second version one could add that the element of persuasion used by Mara is much more compassionate than harsh. Mara's whole approach is one of trying to save Lilith from her pain. Lilith is already suffering in herself the effects of her evil, and we know that if she does not change she will suffer much more. Mara is asking not so much for Lilith's submission, but for her yielding of that very self-will that is giving her pain. To Lilith's "I will be myself and not another!" Mara answers, "Alas, you are another now, not yourself! Will you not be your real self?" (371). She wants to save her from slavery through returning to God, in whose service is perfect freedom. From the merely human point of view this may seem specious, but human notions are frequently being transcended in this book, where what we think of as opposites are paradoxically one, and true freedom may indeed be more itself when it gives itself to God. This is only seen when we get out of the jail of the supposed 'free' self and into the larger reality of God's universe.

A further discrepancy is seen in the behaviour of Vane during and after Mara's attempt to change Lilith's evil will. Vane, who has hitherto concerned himself solely with the physical aspects of his travels and has shown no knowledge of his or anyone else's spirit, suddenly becomes an acute commentator on the state of Lilith's soul. 'The soul of Lilith lay naked to the torture of pure interpenetrating light'; 'a horrible Nothingness, a Negation positive infolded her'; 'None but God hates evil and understands it' (374, 375, 377). To find Vane so suddenly a subtle theologian is a shock. However this may be less of a problem than it seems. For clearly MacDonald himself, wanting to put over what is happening to Lilith, has used Vane as a mouth-piece here without regard to consistency. In this sense we may dismiss the impression we are given of Vane here, as an unfortunate mistake. Clearly the Vane we know would begin to learn something of the soul from Lilith's terrible experience here, but it would not have emerged in these well-turned formulations.

But at the end of Lilith's 'treatment', the very same Vane who was last seen by us in a futile attempt to gain secular power in Bulika, suddenly says, "I give me up. I am sick of myself, and would fain sleep the sleep" (391). Little in the story has prepared us for this repentance, for ever since the failure at Bulika our attention has been directed not at him but at Lilith and the changing of her by Mara and then Adam. Indeed, the very gradualness of that transformation heightens the sense of abruptness at Vane's. Of course,

Vane has been moved by Lilith's painful journey towards spiritual health; and we may add that one of his reasons for wanting to sleep the sleep is that he will be next to the body of his beloved Lona: but still it comes as a startling change.

Here again we have to see a different version of what is going on, namely the symbolic one. Lilith, as we said, as well as being a 'character' within the book, also represents the deepest evil in Vane. In that sense, even though we do not see it in the immediate narrative, Lilith's own gradual repentance represents a spiritual transformation in him also. As she is brought to yield up her precious self, so is he; as she is brought to see the good that she is not and the evil that she is, so is he. She represents the refusal to yield the self that made him twice reject the dormitory, the proud isolation that used to make him happy to be alone, the determination that his judgement, however absurd, should prevail over all others, the blindness to truth that has made him unaware of any other category but the material for most of his journey. She represents these things, yes: but in a real sense she, and the Shadow subsumed in her, are their origin. Take her away, and Vane has finally got rid of his self and is ready to sleep – at least in this world. But this still leaves his change hard to take at the level of the plain story, and the opposition remains, between the literal narrative where Lilith is viewed as being outside Vane, and the allegorical one where she is seen as inside him. And that is the way it is in *Lilith* – until the end.

After he repents, Vane is given a more clearly heroic role in a third journey he must make into the region of the seven dimensions. This is a journey in which he will at last both do good and be thoroughly conscious of what good is. Adam tells him to take Lilith's severed hand far into the desert region and bury it. The severed hand contains the essence of Lilith's evil, the last of it to be yielded up, and that is – nothing. He here succeeds on all fronts, obeying Adam/Mr Raven for the first time, enduring spiritual obstacles to which earlier he would have succumbed – the evil figure of Lilith, the seemingly 'good' one of Mara, a body of obstructive soldiers he has to walk through, and the great Shadow which try to turn him aside from his path or stop him. The female figures represent his carnal desire and his tendency to judge by outsides; the soldiers whose apparent solidity he must deny figure his materialism, and the Shadow, which is evil as the death of the soul. In short, he moves beyond the world, the flesh and the devil. Then he reaches the place where he can bury both the hand and his own evil; whereupon water, which is also divine grace, flows up to replenish the desert world of the soul.

On his return Vane is met by an old man who asks him to intercede with Eve for his admission to the dormitory of the dead. Vane, who is now himself become a man of a riddling vision like Mr Raven, tells this man that his longing for death is sinful, for he does not see death as the way to life. Here we may see Vane from the human point of view as priggish,<sup>42</sup> but he has now himself got beyond the merely mortal vision by which he has hitherto lived. Vane's journey is from one point of view that of the mythic hero described in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* who journeys into the waste land, overthrows a force of evil and restores the land to health. But it is also a journey in which he has finally grasped the truths of the spirit, and has moved from a three-dimensional to a seven-dimensional vision.<sup>43</sup> He has 'qualified' for the dormitory. But we have to hold this beside the dimmer view we still have of him, and our earlier sense of a too rapid change on his part seems reflected in his behaviour to the old man here. Moreover, however much Vane is 'better' here, we also sense that he has been helped by a larger power for good.

### The Nature of God

For there is another and wider force in the story and that is the working of God's grace, which no human 'improvement' can earn, and no human depravity is entirely denied. Heaven is not won by merit (for nothing we could do could merit it), but through free grace, exhibited in a universe so created that all will end well, and in God's gift of his Son. The sleepers all grow backwards to become perfectly child-like, but it is not they who accomplish this, but God, after they have yielded up their wills to him. It is good that Vane has come to the point where he can give himself to God; but at the same time all he has done has been unnecessary, since the Little Ones

---

<sup>42</sup> Manlove, 'The Logic of Fantasy and the Crisis of Closure in *Lilith*' in *Lilith in a New Light*, 53–4. MacDonald makes Vane far harsher in the final text than he is in 'Lilith B'. In B he portrays himself as one who in the past has himself gone wrong like the old man; apologises for the necessarily hard nature of the truths he must impart to him for his own good; and his riddling is much more muted and tentative (MacDonald, *Lilith: A Variorum Edition*, 2 vols (Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen, 1997), I, 206–7).

<sup>43</sup> Robert A. Collins, 'Liminality in *Lilith*', *Lilith in a New Light*, 8–9, seems mistaken when he finds this myth 'unproductively circular' and unhappily ended in all three of Vane's journeys into the interior.

and even Lilith, considered as figures independently of Vane, would in the end have come by themselves. There was no final need for Vane's journeys, because he could have lain down with the sleepers from the first; he had only to choose to do so, and then would sleep short or long as his amount of evil required. But his adventures, which for all his self-will and contrariness have ended in a joyous outcome, have been a means, particularly in their latter stages, of portraying God's working to good both through and beyond man's will. (Yet still, if this is so, mankind's free will is rather limited to obedience.)

The reconciling power of God is evident in the story from the attack on Bulika onwards. If the invasion of the city has failed, in the larger scheme of things matters have so arranged themselves that the Little Ones, Lilith and Vane will end at Adam's cottage. This is God's plan, the larger pattern of events that governs the movements of everybody; 'it was decreed that her doom should now be brought to pass through us!' (355). Putting it another way, this is not Vane's dream, but God's dream of Vane: God is preparing the way for his betterment. So it is as Vane goes to Mara's house to ask directions to Adam, but Mara herself turns out to be a primary agent in Lilith's healing. The great motif of the book is at-one-ment, and this is accomplished in the end not by human agency alone but by divine action working through human choices. The drive of things is upward to a centre, first imaged in the purifying dormitory of the dead and then 'farther up, and farther in',<sup>44</sup> in the unanticipated gift of heaven. Heaven comes as even more of a gift of grace because it has never been mentioned in the story before.

The deepest vision of the book is one of interrelationship, and that includes the relations of opposites. This is for MacDonald the very essence of Christ, the bringing-together of heaven and earth, god and man, which he calls not 'atonement' for sin but 'at-one-ment' (*US*, 536–9). At the conscious, or intended level of the book's meaning, Lilith, who loves only herself, is the antitype in the book, living in Bulika at the opposite pole of the world from the self-yielding dormitory of the dead; yet in the end even she comes to lie down and sleep beside the daughter she murdered. The scattered and isolated figures we encounter on Vane's first journey can be seen as different parts of his mind that he brings together into harmony. In addition Adam's family is made whole in the return of Lilith, Mara and the dead Lona to Adam and Eve. The community of the sleepers in the dormitory of the dead

---

<sup>44</sup> The phrase is from C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (1956) the final 'Narnia' book, where it is used recurrently as the children climb through better and still better Narnias towards heaven.

is an emblem of shared life under grace. And behind this is MacDonald's own relation with God throughout his life, founded as it is on a continued friendship with 'the father' and with Christ; and the centrality of relationship to his theology.

On his (supposed) resurrection morning Vane can see at last the true mystic nature of the world about him, if still with mortal eyes and words (the biblical parallel to this is 1 Corinthians, 13). It is a vision of heaven and earth joined, of matter instinct with spirit, in which 'the microcosm and the macrocosm were at length atoned' (412). It is the vision which Mr Raven offered him at the beginning of his story, when prayers became birds or flowers, and thoughts emerged as ships or eggs (206–7). Rightly seen, the region of the seven dimensions is always like this, if it is seen with pure eyes. Perceived for most of the story by a man whose soul was sick, it was a desert and wretched place full of images or pain and loss: but now, in his redemption, it is transfigured in glory:

Every growing thing showed me, by its shape and colour, its indwelling idea – the informing thought, that is, which was its being and sent it out. My bare feet seemed to love every plant they trod upon. The world and my being, its life and mine, were one ... To everything glad I lent the hall of my being wherein to revel. I was a peaceful ocean upon which the ground-swell of a living joy was continually lifting new waves; yet was the joy ever the same joy, the eternal joy, with tens of thousands of changing forms.

Just prior to this is the scene on Vane and Lona's resurrection morning, when Adam, Eve and Mara are suddenly transfigured before them into their original God-created selves.

The three looked at each other and smiled, and their smiles went floating heavenward a three-petalled flower, the family's morning thanksgiving. From their mouths and their faces it spread over their bodies and shone through their garments. Ere I could say, "Lo, they change!" Adam and Eve stood before me the angels of the resurrection, and Mara was the Magdalene with them at the sepulchre. The countenance of Adam was like lightning, and Eve held a napkin that flung flakes of splendour about the place. (409)



At this point they are the immediate thought of God, irradiated with his nature. Matter and spirit are so joined in them that their thanksgiving smiles become a flower that both rises to heaven and spreads through their bodies; splendour is scattered in flakes. The librarian ghost Vane first met has changed to the form of a raven and then to a Mr Raven; thence he has named himself as Adam; now in this change he has shared his nature with a great angel. The boundaries of being, while still real enough to allow for joy in the individual creation, are at the same time melted to allow sharing in all other forms. This in a sense is the transfiguration of metamorphosis itself. Earlier the full self could only be wholly realised through numerous forms; now it is fully itself in any form.

These are relationships of agreement, whereby the divided or opposed worlds of the book are brought into harmony. But there are also relationships that are founded in contrariety and even discord. We saw this first in the seemingly opposed versions we have been given of things, forming quarrelling groups where each member, even while it claims sole authority, is countered by another, and so on till together they make up a truth that transcends them. So it is with the many explanations of the nature of the region of the seven dimensions. Mr Raven has presented Vane with a picture of the world that takes this sort of relationship further, into the realm of apparent contradictions, where doors out are doors in, where one can only live by dying, get by giving, do by doing nothing, age by becoming younger, grow by going backwards; where worlds of opposite nature are bi-local, thoughts appear as things, and no man is himself until he sees that he is nobody. Vane finds these riddles incomprehensible at the level of three dimensional understanding of the world, but they make sense when they are viewed by the light of the four further dimensions of the spirit. And in our reading we have encountered in *Lilith* opposites that seem still less bridgeable. There has too been the frequent gap between the literal level, the matter of the story and its spiritual meaning – or between three- and seven-dimensional levels of understanding. There has been sympathy for Vane and for Lilith in their resistance, at the same time that the moral drive of the book is to yield, to lie down in the dormitory of the dead, to submit.

Yet it is both 'now' and 'not yet'. At the end there are also still at-onesments to be made that are beyond our comprehension, and closures that are yet to be. We are led by the narrative of endings, and by Lilith's acceptance that she must at last lie down with the sleepers in Adam's dormitory, to believe that we are dealing with the Last Things. Mara tells Lilith that she has

waited thousands of years for her to come to her cottage (367). The book is at one level a vision of the End: we are looking to the resurrection of all people, cleansed of sin and ready to enter heaven. Writing as he was near the end of his life and on the eve of the twentieth century, MacDonald would have been naturally inclined towards apocalyptic feelings.

But *Lilith* also gives us a resurrection which is not yet fully accomplished. Adam's dormitory holds souls that are both nearer and further from purity, and that will rise variously from their beds as they become 'ripe'.<sup>45</sup> We are given both the final and the gradual universe in Adam's words when he hears God's cock crow, "'Hark to the golden cock! Silent and motionless for millions of years has he stood on the clock of the universe; now at last he is flapping his wings! Now will he begin to crow! and at intervals will men hear him till the dawn of the day eternal'" (410). So we are left with two impressions, one of this being the final resurrection and one of its being completed gradually. Of course, the resurrection of Vane and his companions prefigures the final end; and the joy any one saved soul feels will be the joy of all. But the double vision of 'now' and 'not yet' remains, as the small party of the presently redeemed makes its way to heaven.

MacDonald also leaves us in some doubt as to whether Vane's journey to heaven really takes place, or is only a dream he has while still sleeping in Adam's dormitory. For he has seemed to awake before, and then been told by Adam that he was dreaming. He had found the dormitory deserted and himself alone, and had wandered over the land outside the cottage, seeing it now running with streams. After Adam's reassurance, Vane enters a pit he finds in the rock, and abruptly finds himself back at his home in his garret. For four days he struggles to return to the house of the dead, and finally does so in his sleep. But at the end of the story, when he has supposedly woken on the resurrection morning, only to be sent back to his house just as he is about to meet his God, he is left to wonder whether he is really back in his world or still dreaming in Adam's house. There is always another version of what we are seeing. And so the story ends without being certain that it has, in a chapter called 'The Endless Ending': we are back in the world of insecurity, where like Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind* we have not revelation but only faith to guide us: 'When a man dreams his own dream,

---

<sup>45</sup> Compare Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 198: 'The Last Judgement won't occur on any particular day, rather, it will be nothing else than that period – which is also called the Thousand-year Kingdom.'

he is the sport of his dream; when Another gives it him, that Other is able to fulfil it' (420).

At the end even heaven, the end of all desire, is tinged with darker qualities.<sup>46</sup> When the risen Vane, Lona and some of the Little Ones arrive there, they find at its gate a portress, 'a woman-angel of dark visage, leaning her shadowed brow on her idle hand' (417). Anyone reminded of Dürer's picture 'Melancholia' will find that picture specifically referred to in the original passage in *Lilith A*.<sup>47</sup> (In the versions that followed *A*, MacDonald toned down the definite labelling, removing names and everything that effectively said 'This is a horse.') Dodging round this sad figure, the children also pass a group of armoured 'officer' angels coming down to welcome them: the leader tells Vane and Lona that the children will make much-needed recruits for the army of heaven, for he has heard that "'there is a horde of black bats on the frontiers'" (418).<sup>48</sup> (In *Lilith A* this angel is called 'Cacourgos', a name used in the original Greek New Testament, meaning 'criminal' (Luke 23:32, 33:39; 2 Timothy 2:9 – though this could be the criminal on the cross beside Christ, who was told, "'This day shalt thou be with me in paradise'"). A group of female angels then descend on the Little Ones and carry them away 'fettered in heavenly arms'. And as Vane and Lona are led up the central street of heaven, any sense of the place as a community of continual joy and praise is entirely absent: we hear no more than that "We went up through...<sup>45</sup> [it] and passed out': not a word of houses or inhabitants. The sense is rather of a gradual shrinkage of company – first the Little Ones go, then the angelic guides drop away and Lona disappears.

What is the state of heaven that it is so threatened; and what is this place of joy that children have to become soldiers in it, and no people are there

---

<sup>46</sup> Robert Lee Wolff, *The Golden Key*, ch.6, 324–71, esp. 332, 369–71, sees MacDonald as having lost control of his material because of growing doubts; John Docherty, 'Some ironies in the Last Chapters of *Lilith*', *North Wind* 26 (2007), 77–98, considers MacDonald to be more deliberately subversive.

<sup>47</sup> George MacDonald, *Lilith: First and Final* (Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen, 1994), 387.

<sup>48</sup> MacDonald may have taken the idea from Milton's heavenly soldiery and from Emmanuel Swedenborg *Heaven and Hell*, tr. J. Howard Spalding, (1909): 'The hells are continually assaulting heaven and endeavouring to destroy it ... I have often been allowed to perceive the sphere which flows from the hells, which is nothing but an effort to destroy the Divine Sphere of the Lord, and consequently to destroy heaven' (sect.595, 298).

to welcome the new arrivals? We seems not altogether remote here from the vision at the end of a later Scottish fantasy owing much to MacDonald, David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920), where the hero Maskull finds that the divine Muspel he has so long sought is in fact alone and desperately besieged by evil: 'Muspel was no all-powerful Universe ... Muspel was fighting for its life ... Against all that is most shameful and frightful ...'<sup>49</sup> This sense of threat and evil in the midst of bliss was also seen when just as Adam and Eve were transfigured into angels of the resurrection, the wings of the great Shadow were heard stirring on the roof of the cottage above them (409–10).

There are some explanations that can be offered. First, there is an argument from man's impurity. We can say that Vane is dreaming this place while still asleep in the dormitory and not yet spiritually cleansed. If so, his own mixed vision of heaven is a sign that he cannot yet see things clearly, for he himself is still embattled with evil, and still has black bats on his own 'frontiers'. More largely it could be argued that MacDonald himself recognises that while still a mortal man he himself must see heaven through his own sinfulness. Certainly the effect is of the simultaneous adequacy and inadequacy of his image of heaven, an image he continually blurs. Clouds make it indefinite, and Vane cannot tell from a distance whether a lofty eminence is a tower or a rock. Only the Little Ones see "The beautifullest man" inviting them onwards (416). As MacDonald puts it in his *The Diary of an Old Soul* (1882), 'Why hangs a cloud betwixt my lord and me?/.../It is because it is not thou I see,/But only my poor, blotted fancy of thee' ('October', sts 6,7). A parallel here is with the Middle English *Pearl*, where heaven is portrayed in uncongenial terms as foursquare, precious, aloof and exclusive, to convey both the dreamer's limited earthly vision and the transcendent and ineffable nature of the joys of heaven.<sup>50</sup> However there is a difference between making heaven remote and making it in any way joyless or associated with evil.

Then one can consider this heaven from the point of view of God's own possible involvement with evil. The question of God's responsibility for evil has vexed commentators from the beginning. First, heaven can be seen as the origin of evil in the form of Satan's revolt. Further, God himself, in

<sup>49</sup> David Lindsay, *A Voyage to Arcturus* (London: Gollancz, 1963), 247.

<sup>50</sup> Theodore Bogdanos, *Pearl: Image of the Ineffable. A Study in Medieval Poetic Symbolism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), ch. 5, "The New Jerusalem", 99–142.

creating Satan, can be seen as indirectly responsible for evil, especially since he must foreknow the consequence. Again, the God of the Old Testament not only admits that he is the author of evil, but continually plagues, floods, starves, torments and murders the creature he created in his own image.<sup>51</sup> Put this God beside the God of the New Testament and we find a marvel of generosity who for humanity's sake gives his own son to bring people to him through love. The bible as a whole is an image of this two-faced God. And the ambiguous heaven in *Lilith* can be seen likewise.

This might seem an explanation removed from MacDonald himself, who thought of heaven as a happy reunion and continuation of family life,<sup>52</sup> and insisted on a God of love rather than vengeance, and on the New Testament much more than the Old. However there are aspects of MacDonald's theology that still show Calvinist influence, such as his notion of God as a consuming fire 'who will have purity' and his continual insistence on our unquestioning obedience to the deity. That view allows more for a God whose nature we cannot know, and for a heaven that may be nothing like we expect, even to the point of it violating our (limited) notions of what is good or desirable.

On this side there is also the view of William Blake. Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* inverts the terms 'Good' and 'Evil' as applied respectively to God and to Satan. The poem has the devil put the case that the universe is composed of two forces, Reason and Energy, of which the first has always been seen as Good or God, and the other as Evil, or the Devil. The Devil argues that the reverse is true and that 'Energy is Eternal Delight', while Reason and Good have become repressive forces that deny life. But if the Devil argues for Energy in place of Reason, Blake's own view is more inclusive, as the title of his poem implies: 'Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.' MacDonald would have been well aware of this dialectical vision of Blake's; and indeed *Lilith* can be seen as in some ways a continuation of Blake's poem.

---

<sup>51</sup> For example, Isaiah 45:7, Josh.23:15, Jer.18:8, Mic.1:12. Jeffrey Burton Russell's *Lucifer* deals with the varying attempts of theologians from 500-1500 AD to deal with the issue of God's possible involvement in evil.

<sup>52</sup> Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 264-75, show how the idea of heaven as a reunion and continuation of family life became prominent in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In such a vision Lilith the rebellious and unrepentant spirit is as necessary to her identity as Lilith the submissive angel: as Blake puts it, 'whoever tries to reconcile ... [these contraries] seeks to destroy existence.' In such a vision, what we call Evil and Good are bound fighting together, and neither one of them has the whole truth of life. In MacDonald's own case, we may see this in the rebellious black bats that assault his highly organised heaven.

This of course is precisely opposed to the official argument in *Lilith*, which is all in support of goodness and heaven, and in crushing evil. In his realistic and didactic novels, where MacDonald was much more consciously deploying his Christian material, there was no such problem. But with *Lilith* MacDonald was writing a fantasy, a work that he said himself came from the mysterious depths of the imagination, the unconscious mind where God lived. In such a context 'While God's work cannot mean more than He meant, man's must mean more than he meant' (*ADO*, 320). Therefore it is possible to see *Lilith* as portraying a larger vision than appears, a war of contraries, between the conscious level where God is alone good, and the unconscious one where God's truth must be set alongside that of its warring opposite. For the writer of such a work 'may well himself discover truth in what he wrote; for he was dealing all the time with things that came from thoughts beyond his own' (*ibid.*). Here again we see the human notion of either/or being added to by the wider vision of both/and: we look for a single truth where at the same time it is both multiple and contradictory.

There is a further point in support of this. *Lilith* is a work of the 1890s, and for all MacDonald's desire finally to convert his readers through his writing, it reflects its decade. That age was one in which the moral and Christian values that characterised Victorian culture were being questioned by writers. H. Rider Haggard in *She* (1886)<sup>53</sup> and Bram Stoker in *Dracula* (1897) presented figures of an attractive evil before dispatching them. Hardy in *Tess of the Durbervilles* (1892) exposed the evils of a conventionality that confined and finally killed the free spirit of nature in his heroine; and *Jude the Obscure* (1896) is a grim picture of the effects of her own conformity on a woman's free spirit. Arthur Morrison in *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894) and *A Child of the Jago* (1896) pursued a new naturalism that portrayed the realities of poverty and implicitly criticised society and the state. Oscar Wilde excoriated the wickedness of the death penalty in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). From 1895–1898 H. G. Wells wrote science fiction such as *The Time Machine*,

---

<sup>53</sup> MacDonald seems in fact indebted to Haggard's *She* for his picture of Lilith.

*The Island of Dr Moreau*, *The Invisible Man* and *The War of the Worlds*, casting a satiric eye on Victorian notions of human progress and the vanities of human reason. In *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) Henry James wrote a story of juvenile hysteria in which it is impossible to decide whether the evil Quint is a reality or a delusion of the governess or a fiction invented by the children. What these writers do in effect is make the world too complex and various to be ordered by any moral imperatives or generalisations. And this is in keeping with the double vision of *Lilith*.

*Lilith* ends with one further reversal, one which many readers have found a total denial of everything that has gone before it. Having reached heaven, and on the point of meeting his God, Vane is suddenly turned aside to a little door that returns him to this world. This action makes sinister recall of the way Ignorance in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is hustled through a similar door next to heaven, which leads directly to hell. So baffled have many readers been by this apparent volte-face, that recently a whole book of essays discussing the topic has been published.<sup>54</sup> Numerous explanations have been offered to make sense of it. The simplest reason given is that Vane is not actually dead, and still has his life to live out in his own world, to which he must return – or he could not write his book! This neglects the fact that Vane is on the way to heaven when this happens: he is placed on the verge of bliss when it is taken away. Surely, if it was necessary, he could have been removed at some less frustrating point – perhaps on one of the returns he makes to his own world while he is asleep and dreaming in the dormitory? The fact is, there is meant to be a shock here, and no certain explanation will cover it. We might argue that the whole of his journey to heaven is just one more of Vane's dreams while still asleep and spiritually unready for it, and therefore it is bound to be frustrated. But if so, if he is still in the process of spiritual growth, how can he have attained the vision of spirit and matter fused which is the very idiom of heaven (414)? We are left with two opposed impressions, that Vane reaches heaven and that he is turned away. It is like reading the picture of the lamb in Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and then that of the tiger in the *Songs of Experience*.

It has been argued, from this and other evidence, that in his later years MacDonald became less happy with God's ways, particularly in the death of his daughter Lilia in 1891; and that in *Lilith* Vane's exclusion from meeting

---

<sup>54</sup> Lucas H. Harriman (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light: Essays on the George MacDonald Fantasy Novel* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008). See Appendix C.



God and the sometimes questionable nature of heaven itself show the strains beneath the panegyric surface.<sup>55</sup> Though I have myself argued that there is a tension in *Lilith* between MacDonald's faith and his doubt,<sup>56</sup> I think that the book is deeper even than this, and that by ending with these contradictory views of God and of heaven, MacDonald is doing what he has done throughout *Lilith*, namely, give us opposites that point to a resolution or 'at-one-ment' beyond our comprehension.

The central problem here is that most of us see as Vane does: we perceive reality in three dimensions where in the book it lies in seven. For us it is hard to read beyond the physical to the spiritual, it is difficult to accept that truth may not only be multiple but even contain contradictions. We are not able to accommodate a heaven that in some respects has what we evil in it, a resurrection that is both now and to come, a redemption that leads to refusal of present reward. The hope of the book can only be that we may have been brought with Vane a little nearer to seeing this; and that back in our world, with the cover of the book closed behind us, Mara will prepare us to enter into the truth of which *Lilith* has given us one vision.

MacDonald knew that 'It is very seldom indeed that ... [words] carry the exact meaning of any user of them' (*ADO*, 318, 320). The mystical author may try to limit us to one reading – as MacDonald himself does in the analysis of Lilith's evil made by Mara – but ultimately his work must be multi-faceted and bedded in mystery. 'The greatest forces lie in the uncomprehended' (*ibid.*, 319). So for all his own insistence on the spiritual meaning of Vane's career, he is prepared to see it as only one of many possible readings, and to accept that the work means far more than he, its maker knows. Further, just as he makes the book a series of versions of the truth, he sees his various readers as continuing this through their many interpretations of it. For he knows that the essence of divine reality is metamorphic, shimmering among apparent opposites, living though many forms.

John Scotus Eriugena once declared of the two opposites Affirmation and Negation, of which 'there can be no greater contrariety', that if one considered with 'perfect reasoning', one would see clearly 'that these two which seem to be the contraries of one another are in no way mutually opposed when they are applied to the Divine Nature, but in every way and at every

<sup>55</sup> Wolff, 369; John Docherty, 'Some Ironies in the Last Chapters of *Lilith*', *North Wind* 26 (2007), 88–91.

<sup>56</sup> Manlove, 'The Logic of Fantasy and the Crisis of Closure in *Lilith*', in Harriman (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light*, 54–7.



point are in harmony with each other'.<sup>57</sup> In the same way Eriugena could consider God as both Everything and Nothing, existent and non-existent, visible and invisible, unknowable and known, infinite and finite, creator and created, darkness and light.<sup>58</sup> Or as one commentator has put it, 'God creates the opposites of himself and realises himself in the coincidence of opposites'.<sup>59</sup> This vision of God is at the deepest level of *Lilith*.

Because the force for togetherness is at the core of the book, driving everyone towards loving submission to God in the dormitory of the dead-alive, we are left feeling that even these opposites will be resolved in God. That is *Lilith's* power as a mystical work: it continually pulls us towards a centre in which all seeming antagonisms will find a resolution beyond our conceiving. Nicholas of Cusa says that 'the place wherein Thou [God] art found is girt round with the coincidence of contradictories' and that we must overcome our reason to pass through this to where God may be seen.<sup>60</sup> The heaven with which we end is not the true one, for that can be caught by no mortal image. While we are human our images must still be tainted, our understandings constantly falling short of what they would capture.

As human readers we cannot understand except by obedience (as MacDonald would say) to God how freedom can only exist in self-surrender. In other words, if we see by the three dimensions of our mortality, we will see only contradiction. But if we look with eyes of the spirit, that is, of the seven dimensions, the contradiction begins to make heavenly sense to our hearts. The Vane who seems always to be doing wrong is at a deeper level

---

<sup>57</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon on the Division of Nature*, Book I, sect.14, 49.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, Book III, sect.17, p.305: 'we ought not to understand God and the creature as two things distinct from one another, but as one and the same. For both the creature, by subsisting, is in God; and God, by manifesting Himself, in a marvellous and ineffable manner creates himself in the creature, the invisible making Himself visible and the incomprehensible comprehensible and the hidden revealed and the unknown known and being without form and species formal and specific and the superessential essential and the supernatural natural and the simple composite and the accident-free subject to accident and the infinite finite and the uncircumscribed circumscribed and the supratemporal temporal and the Creator of all things created in all things and the Maker of all things made in all things, and eternal He begins to be, and immobile he moves into all things and becomes in all things all things.'

<sup>59</sup> Russell, *Lucifer*, 120.

<sup>60</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God* (1453), ch.ix; (repr. New York: Cosimo, 2007; trans. Emma Gurney Salter), 44.

doing right. The desert world that he sees with his eyes is all the time the blooming, fecund world that he sees when his soul is fully awake. So too with Lilith as both rebellious and repentant spirit, with Vane as doing good at one level where at another he does none, with heaven apparently both good and a little evil, with Vane at once reaching and being denied bliss. And so too with the numerous and often opposed versions or readings of *Lilith* itself. These relationships present themselves as opposites struggling together, but they are bound together as closely as those that are more evidently harmonious. Vane's own human language, which he rightly says is inadequate to convey the mysteries of the strange world, is at the same time the only way we can approach it; and its very failures are perhaps the best means by which to come nearer to the ineffable. For God is also incarnate, his nature one with the fallen creatures he has made, his word married to the language of man.

The Vane we have by the end of this story is one who we may say has approached the level of understanding Lilith is given by Mara. As he says when he seems to return to his home, 'Mara is much with me. She has taught me many things, and is teaching me more' (419). He has learned that the only way forwards is backwards, back in a circle to the dormitory he once refused, back from the arrogance of materialist reason to the humility of the child-like soul. Lilith thought only of the self as evolving. "Your perfection," she told Vane, "is a poor thing, comes soon, and lasts but a little while; ours [that of higher beings] is a ceaseless ripening. I am not yet ripe, and have lived thousands of your years" (305). But in fact she was not ripening but rotting. We recall here the quite different ripening of the sleepers at Adam's house, who are only so when they have sloughed off every last vestige of self. The injunction in *Lilith* – in contrast to *Phantastes* – is not to live, but to die; not to go forward, but to go back; not to become but to be what God originally made. That is why 'doing nothing', lying asleep on the slabs in the house of the dead, is doing everything. That is why Vane is presented with the end of his story at its beginning, when he is invited to lie down with the sleepers. Mr Raven would not have made him that offer had he been certain he would refuse it.

In many ways this story is an image of the quantum universe with which we are now becoming both so familiar and ignorant. The quantum computers currently being constructed employ both the old binary idea of the bit as 0 or 1 together with the 'qubit' of 0+1, particle or wave together with

particle plus wave.<sup>61</sup> In other words, on to the old system of either/or is added that of and/and. This is just the 'system' of *Lilith*: for there we have a universe of alternatives which is also one of additions. There we have numerous opposed accounts of the nature of the fantastic universe all of which are both true and not true. There we are asked simultaneously to see Vane as spiritually developing and not doing so; Lilith as rightly tamed and not, heaven as both reached and not yet found. The moral universe asks us to choose between Lilith and Adam; the metaphysical one demands acceptance of both. The divisive and the synthetic visions exist together. In the new quantum computers there may be billions of alternative universes. However in the universe of *Lilith* MacDonald sees all things as reconciled in God. The darkest vision of *Lilith* is the centrifugal one in which Lilith herself fragments into separate limbs that scuttle in all directions:

She began to writhe in such torture that I stood aghast. A moment more and her legs, hurrying from her body, sped away serpents. From her shoulders fled her arms as in terror, serpents also. Then something flew up from her like a bat, and when I looked again she was gone. The ground rose like the sea in a storm; terror laid hold upon me; I turned to the hills and ran. (230)

---

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Anthony, 'The Rage to Build the Most Powerful Computer in History', *The Observer, New Review, Science and Tech*, 22 May, 2016, 19–21.



## 7 Conclusion

Not the least remarkable feature of these books of George MacDonald's is that they do not often make direct mention or even allude to Christianity. Indeed it has been possible for several readers to present non-Christian readings of his fantasy works, or even to argue that they are in some senses anti-Christian. One commentator, Fernando Soto, has pointed out MacDonald's debt to Greek myth and culture, and produced many literary sources and analogues for material in 'The Golden Key'. Others have stressed MacDonald's Jungian or Freudian affinities, or indicated debts to the French Symbolists of the nineteenth century. For as we have seen, even where MacDonald presents biblical characters such as Adam and Eve, their roles in Christian myth are changed and Adam is given a non-biblical history of involvement with Lilith. In *Phantastes*, a story of the learning of true knightly conduct, the Christian myth of Sir Galahad is absent, and the sense of some deeper significance emerges only from the fact that Anodos's way through Fairy Land seems to be laid out for him, and from Christian readings of Anodos's actions and story. 'The country from which the shadows fall' in 'The Golden Key' could be seen as Plato's realm of Ideas, and the journey of the characters to be through the dim intuitions of the phenomenal world to the substantial truths of the Real – were it not for the baby at the centre of the world.

C.S.Lewis, who saw MacDonald as his spiritual mentor, also saw and used his method of indirection. Writing of his motives for writing Christian stories for children he declared that he could never write a fairy tale with the deliberate intention of inculcating Christian truths. He had found in his childhood that the books which did so 'paralysed' his religion, forcing reverence on him. He thought the best way to 'steal past those watchful dragons' was 'by casting all these [Christian] things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations ... mak[ing] them

for the first time appear in their real potency'.<sup>1</sup> In this light, for example, he wrote *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It is true that the story of the mysterious lion is made part of a fantastic narrative, in which he occasionally visits Narnia: but when his story turns into a clear reference to the story of Christ's self-sacrifice, death and resurrection many readers feel that the author has played them a trick. For the difference with Lewis is that he intends his Christian teaching, and uses his story for evangelical purpose.

By contrast MacDonald stands much further off from such a purpose. This maybe seems odd, since elsewhere, in his 'realistic' novels, his poetry and his sermons he is nothing if not explicitly didactic concerning the Christian faith. And indeed it is strange, almost a singularity of the man, that on the one hand MacDonald wrote novels that laboured to be clear, and on the other fantasies that dealt in mystery. But then, for him, the one sort was written by man, where the fantasy, coming from the imagination, was at least part-created by God. Answering those who wanted to know what he meant in his fantastic stories, he replied that they have as many meanings as they have readers, and that 'The greatest things lie in the region of the uncomprehended' (*ADO*, 319). The ideal reader of his fantasy would be one who felt but could not easily name the deep truths the fantasy portended. 'If any strain of my "broken music" make a child's eyes flash, or his mother's grow for a moment dim, my labour will not have been in vain' (*ibid.*, 322).

Because of his belief that God has his home in the human imagination and is at root the creator of his fantasy works, MacDonald feels it entirely inappropriate for him as a mere man to try to limit what God is saying to any single human interpretation. 'A man may well himself discover truth in what he wrote; for he was dealing all the time with things that came from thoughts beyond his own' (*ibid.*, 321). This means that MacDonald will not turn his fantasy works to any explicit purpose, including the Christian one.

Beyond this, there is the peculiar nature of MacDonald's own Christianity. Suspicious as he became of human interpretations of Christ, he viewed all doctrines and churches in a sceptical light, shifting his position from Congregationalist to near-Unitarian and finally Broad Church Anglican. He disliked all systems and 'isms'. For him the central truth of Christianity is back in the Gospels, and is simply love, self-sacrifice, and following Christ's great example. We should ignore entirely what we have been taught, and

---

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, 'Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said' (1956), repr. in Lewis, *Of Other Worlds, Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Bles, 1966), 37.

re-learn Christianity from its core. It is something wild and ever-new, with a God and a Christ far different from the categories and images to which we assign them.

In MacDonald's fantasy we find no creed to follow, no certain God, no identifiable Christ. He goes much further than C.S. Lewis, leaving it to his readers to feel in a living and not a labelled or allegorical way the visions which the created world and the mysterious God in his own mind are showing through the veil of human language and thought. 'So long as I think my dog can bark, I will not sit up to bark for him' (ibid). And thus we have the curious situation of a man whose purpose is Christian but who often hides it. MacDonald means us to come upon Christ unaware. We are not to name or translate: the heaven in 'The Golden Key' is as true as the one at the end of *Lilith*. Anodos giving his life to save the congregation at the end of *Phantastes* is like, but not the same as any soldier giving his life to save a comrade, or Christ dying for man's sake. Adam and Eve in *Lilith* are precisely not the Adam and Eve we know. Heaven is what we all desire, but no image of it is adequate; self-sacrifice is a primal virtue, but no one act of it is the same as another.

We have made numbers of comparisons and contrasts among our three chosen texts, all concerning pilgrimage, and written respectively at the beginning, middle and end of MacDonald's literary life. But one constant theme runs through them, and that is the theme of desire. Pilgrimage stories, such as the *Queste del Saint Graal*, Dante's *Commedia*, Spenser's story of Redcrosse or Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* usually concern desire for a goal, of which the journey itself is a symbol. This is so even though Dante approaches desire through its opposite, hell, and Redcrosse does not mention his objective of liberating man's soul until he reaches and with help achieves it. However, while desire is central in MacDonald's pilgrimage books, it is not always desire for a goal. Indeed one of them, *Lilith*, is filled with desire's opposite, repugnance.

In *Phantastes* Anodos has no other object at first than to enter Fairy Land, which he does within the first chapters. Once in Fairy Land he goes roughly eastwards, but describes himself as following whatever path offers: he is "wandering ... without an aim" (149). After he has returned to his home he tells us that he set out 'to find my ideal', but there is no sign of such a motive at the time, apart from his wish to get into Fairy Land. Nevertheless, during his story he becomes filled with desire for the white lady he sings into life out of marble. He fails to understand the holy object of his desire, instead

debasing it to lust and possessiveness, which loses it. Only at the end does he begin to see his error.

'The Golden Key' seems more like the standard pilgrimage narrative, with an aim throughout – first, to find the golden key at the end of the rainbow, then to find the lock it fits, and then to go to 'the country from which the shadows fall'. There are few digressions as in *Phantastes*, whose inset stories, poems and elaborate descriptions (as in the fairy palace) continually remove us from Anodos's immediate predicament and journey. True, Tangle has to go a roundabout way via the three Old Men to her goal, but that does not blur it, only postpones it. Desire for an end governs the whole story. But as seen the end changes, from key to lock to mysterious country.

In *Lilith* Vane at first desires not to go forward but to return home out of the strange land he has found himself in. With him it is 'un-desire'. He finds the dormitory of the dead in Eve's cottage cold and repugnant. On his journey across the region of the seven dimensions he meets repulsive figures, the monsters of the Bad Burrow, the battling skeletons, the ugly Giants, the rotting dancers, the nearly-dead woman reduced almost to bones. Bulika offers fresh disgust and disdain: leopardesses that hunt children and one another, a defenestrated baby that 'squelches' on the street, and the rejection of Vane's advances by Lilith. And Vane's own desire for Lilith is as corrupted as was Anodos's for the white lady – except that the white lady was misunderstood good, while Lilith is unperceived evil.

*Lilith* is in a sense about the opposite of desire. Rejecting the offered sleep in the frozen dormitory, Vane is shown what is horrible to his diseased soul, so that one day, purified, he will return. He has to learn to desire the good that previously repelled him when he was not yet ready to lie down. Then, the cold and the stillness of the dormitory drove him away; but at the end they are a delight beyond all else:

I grew aware ... of the profound, the infinite cold. I was intensely blessed – more blessed, I know, than my heart, imagining, can now recall. I could not think of warmth with the least suggestion of pleasure. I knew that I had enjoyed it, but could not remember how. The cold had soothed every care, dissolved every pain, comforted every sorrow ...

How convey the delight of that frozen, yet conscious sleep! I had no more to stand up! had only to lie stretched out and still! How cold I was, words cannot tell; yet I grew colder and colder – and welcomed he



cold yet more and more. I grew continuously less conscious of myself, continuously more conscious of bliss, unimaginable yet felt. (400)

There is a truth here, namely, that what we think is desirable is often not what we want. The idea is seen at the end of the medieval poem *Pearl*, where the narrator's longing for his lost 'pearl', interpreted as his dead daughter, is transformed into a burning desire to be in the New Jerusalem of which she is now a part. And C.S. Lewis's *Pilgrim's Regress* (1933) shows that the hero's search for the source of a desire that continually visits him is not for anything that is in the world, but for the very God he feared and fled from at the beginning of his story.

In *Lilith* it is less a case of man desiring God than of God desiring man. In neither of the other fantasies do we have someone like the librarian/Mr Raven, who seemingly unintentionally draws Vane to the attics where he will find the mirror and arrive in the region of the seven dimensions. There he is solicited by this Mr Raven to change his understanding from a materialist to a spiritual view of life, and is twice invited to enter the dormitory of the sleeping dead so that one day he may arise and go to God. In contrast to this, in *Phantastes* Anodos's fairy godmother grants him entry to Fairy Land, but in no obvious way guides him thereafter. In 'The Golden Key', which as usual occupies a halfway point here, both Tangle and Mossy have long been expected by the grandmother, who prepares them and sets them on their way; but thereafter they follow their own paths to the same goal.

MacDonald well understood the nature of desire and its objects. His life was filled by a longing for heaven. "I wis' we were a' died" he would often say, and continually looked to a world where he would meet the God he had loved as a friend much more closely. He wrote fairy tales, with their drive towards happy endings, as pictures of his own desire, and rehearsals of his own transformation. In their portrayal of desire, *Phantastes*, 'The Golden Key' and *Lilith* tell their own story, from the beginning to the end of MacDonald's writing life, of the changes in the nature of desire as the time for meeting its object came nearer.

We are not then necessarily to be given what we desire. For God, while he is love, is both like and unlike what we suppose of him. Like, in that he came down to us as a man; unlike in that he is wholly beyond our conceiving. In the end the heaven we reach may be unlike the heaven we think we wish for. Indeed wishing and desiring themselves, which exist only while we are still

separate from their objects, may be changed to love, and that love will itself be far beyond our conception of it.

And this may most truly be why the heaven we find at the end of *Lilith* at first freezes rather than stimulates joy. The melancholy gatekeeper, the armed angels, the talk of heaven under attack, the silent city and the misty mountain outside, the abrupt return of Vane to his own world, these are all images that turn desire to disquiet. So too at the ends of others of MacDonald's fantasies the desire of the reader for the purely happy ending is refused. In *Phantastes* as in *Lilith* the hero is on the point of bliss when he is returned to earth. *At the Back of the North Wind* leaves us finally uncertain whether North Wind herself may be the figment of a sick child's imagination and there may be no happy land at the back of the North Wind awaiting Diamond when he dies. At the end of *The Princess and the Goblin*, Curdie and Irene ('Righteousness and Peace') do no sooner kiss than they part, in defiance of the standard fairy-tale ending. The sequent *Princess and Curdie* finally sees them married, but leaves them fatally childless, after which their royal city of Gwyntystorm is ruined. In *The Wise Woman* the lady monitor succeeds in setting only one of her two wicked girl charges on the road to moral reform.

This avoidance of any simply happy ending is not just a case of being true to the mingled nature of reality, but comes from the sense that there is something beyond wishing and having, something that can transfigure our poor notions of what we want. We find a not dissimilar situation in *Pearl*, where the chill foursquare heaven and its severance from all mortal standards and earthly ties sets it at a transcendent distance from us: and yet the poor 'jeweller' who visits it realises in the end that it is the sole source of his future joy. And in Dante's *Commedia*, all the longing Dante has felt for Beatrice is turned to joy when he meets her at the end of the *Purgatorio*; and thereafter in the *Paradiso*, where Beatrice is Dante's conductor, their converse goes beyond one another to love of God. The heaven of the *Paradiso* is ordered, hierarchic, mathematical and musical: the love it inspires is beyond mortal longing, which it chills, and has become the highest ecstasy of the spirit.

Throughout this book we have seen MacDonald propelling this vision forward through a style that draws us as readers not just to behold but to partake in his visions. At first *Phantastes* mystifies us, but then suggests patterns and significances, not least the growth of the hero, for us to pursue so far as we may. In its use of elusiveness and subversion, whereby the style and form continually change, and the imagery is at once clear in outline and

obscure in meaning, *Phantastes* embodies its own theme, which is that the numinous cannot be possessed, but must be continually pursued.

The idiom of 'The Golden Key', with its two protagonists, is one of contrasts and balances, between Mossy and Tangle, the golden key as material object and as way to heaven, the young woman of the wood and the Old Man of the Sea, mountains and plains, underground and overground, the steadily older and yet younger-looking Men of the Sea, Earth and Fire. The style here imitates and absorbs us into the theme of the two mystic ways at the centre of the story.

In *Lilith* the paradoxes and oppositions that are seen throughout the story show us both that reality is ultimately whole but presently divided. On this side of heaven we are faced with a multiplicity of contending and even contradictory visions, from the varying forms of what we see to the ambiguous form of heaven itself. This is to see through a glass, darkly: and the story itself confuses us with contradictions. On the other side are the paradoxes that pull opposites together – two worlds bi-local with one another, death as more life, and God and even the most evil beings in his creation as ultimately one. That the paradoxes, like the dormitory of the dead are encountered at both the beginning and the end of the story suggests further that unity lies beyond division.

In these ways these stories are literature, their subjects profound, their art both embodying what they say. And therein lies MacDonald's claim to greatness. There is not another like him in British literature. There is mystical writing, in the medieval *Cloud of Unknowing* or *Pearl*, or visionary apprehensions, as in Vaughan or Blake; and there is a history of man's beginnings, in Milton. But no-one before MacDonald had given an entire Christian history of man's mind from the First Things of a man setting out on life in *Phantastes* to the Last, of a man in the afterlife, as in *Lilith*. And the whole reads as a continuous visionary sequence from the individual mind, to the world created by God's mind and thence to a fusion of both; and from man alone to man accompanied to man before a whole world.

With the new century, which MacDonald only entered to die, the Christian vision that still filled churches and sustained soldiers on the Flanders battlefields was dying out in intellectual circles. Of mystical works only Evelyn Underhill's *The Column of Dust* (1909) stands out. After the First World War, fantasy itself, apart from the saccharine fairy fancies of the 1920s, had only occasional writers. Stories of the afterlife, such as Wyndham Lewis's *Childermass* (1926) or Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (completed

1939–40) featured hell or the devil rather than heaven. Of major writers only the American-born T.S. Eliot in his later years was a Christian.

Yet MacDonald is no mere Victorian, to be remembered only as a period piece; nor a sectarian Christian of outmoded views. His Christian vision is highly unorthodox and anti-clerical: his belief is that true Christianity is better understood by the child-like rather than any churchman, and that its lessons are the simple ones of love and obedience to Christ and God, because only through these can we find our true selves. As such he is forever contemporary. Critics might say that MacDonald ignores the Old Testament, with its stress on man's sinfulness and on judgement and retribution, and its idea of a pattern of history from man's fall to Christ's rescue and the Last Things: and that is true, as true as his own early renunciation of Calvinism. He speaks to us mainly from the New Testament, and this makes him uniquely relevant to an age of liberal values such as ours has increasingly been since the 1960s. At the same time his vision of divine reality is prophetic of the quantum universe in which we now live.

The incomprehension with which MacDonald's own contemporaries greeted *Phantastes* and *Lilith* would almost certainly be the experience of any first reader of these extraordinary books, but this is equally one's first experience of reading Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Pope's *The Dunciad*, Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or Joyce's *Ulysses*. MacDonald does not intend to be obscure, but to be mysterious, to write works of shifting and strange imagery that wake things up in us, like music. Indeed in writing de-structured fantasies MacDonald is in harmony with a time such as ours, in which many forms of disconnected narrative have appeared. He writes in the dislocated form of dream and the unconscious mind because he wants his works to draw us in and still further in to God. MacDonald believes it is not just he but God who writes his fairy tales, by sending up thoughts and images from the dark part of his mind: 'I cannot say I think:/I only stand upon the thought-well's brink./From darkness to the sun the water bubbles up...' <sup>2</sup> In these days, when the religious outlook is returning to favour, and science is even rediscovering the Christian universe of paradox under another name, it may be that MacDonald's work will find the recognition it deserves. But certainly there should be a long-overdue acknowledgement by Scotland of the importance of this great writer in its literary tradition.

---

<sup>2</sup> MacDonald, 'A Cry', *Poetical Works*, II, 214.

**Appendix A: MacDonald's possible debt to Charles Ischir Defontenay, *Star ou Psi de Cassiopée: Histoire Merveilleuse de l'un des Mondes de l'Espace* (Paris: Ledoyen, 1854) for the picture of the 'loveless planet' in *Phantastes*, ch. xii.**

In Defontenay's book, the race of Starians, who have been exiled from their planet Star, travel successively to its four satellites Tassul, Lessur, Rudar and Élier. On Lessur they find a race of humans who do not have sex, but procreate through a unique mutual sympathy, a sublimation of sex. Each man searches the world for a woman whose 'élan vital' fits his own (Star, 2, iii). This sympathetic force alone accomplishes the production of children, the Lessurians being of an organic condition that 'forbade an impure union of the sexes'.

On MacDonald's planet a not dissimilar state prevails, except that when a man and woman become bound together spiritually, they wander away alone and 'die of their desire'. Defontenay's planet is one of redirected desire, where MacDonald's is one of frustration. On Lessur the fluid electric atmosphere of the planet itself brings its inhabitants to orgasm; but on the 'loveless planet' time is so slow that one can rarely enjoy more than one season in a lifetime. The emphasis of MacDonald's planet is on isolation; even the 'waters reflect no forms'. However like Defontenay, who has Lessurian women sporting and singing in a glade, MacDonald portrays the women of his planet 'sporting' in the sea. Again, just as in Defontenay, half of the account of the planet is conveyed through poetry, half through prose. Finally, the rather unusual interest shown in human reproduction in MacDonald's account is mirrored in Defontenay's detailed exploration of sex on Tassul as well as Lessur: on Tassul is found a race of self-fertilising hermaphrodites.

MacDonald of course plays down the science-fictional element. He calls his world a planet and gives it unique orbital characteristics, but unlike Defontenay he does not give us four differently-coloured suns. Nevertheless both writers colour their worlds four ways, and play with the mixing and blending of different hues.

The reader must decide here. One would mention that Defontenay is the first French writer to explore the cosmos this way, and even at MacDonald's time of writing there was hardly any English precedent apart from Whiting. In other words, nobody else had really written about other planets like this. *Star* remained untranslated into English until 1972, but reading it in

the original would have been no obstacle to MacDonald. If he did read Defontenay, himself a prodigiously original writer, MacDonald's reworking gives us unique insight into his own imagination.

## Appendix B – on the name of the city ‘Bulika’ in *Lilith*

Only in the Czech language, where ‘bulik’ means ‘falsity’ or ‘deception’ is there any potentially assignable meaning to this name. However it is much more likely that MacDonald, who knew Greek, used a different source, as my colleague and philological expert Graham Martin has pointed out to me (email of 9 July, 2014):

‘Boul’ is a fundamental root word in Indo-European.

The Boulê in 5th century Athens was the equivalent of the Senate in modern democratic constitutions, i.e. it was the upper house. The word Boulê is connected with the verb boulomai meaning ‘to will, wish, choose, prefer’. Boulê means “will, determination, plan, intention, counsel, advice”. And of course also “Senate”. It is also connected to the verb bouleuô meaning to “take counsel, to consider”. The fundamental notion is undoubtedly “will”, and the word is connected with words such as “volo” (Lat.), “will” (English), etc, in the various Indo-European languages.

The “-ika” ending could be construed as an adjectival neuter plural ending. This kind of thing has gone straight into English in a large number of words, such as “politics” (Gk “ta politika” = the things relating to the “polis” = “state”), economics (Gk “ta oikonomika” = the things relating to the management of a household), etc, etc.

If we understand Bulika as meaning ‘will’, then that describes the essence of Lilith, who has insisted on her absolute freedom of will since her creation, who demands that Vane can only be truly her lover as her slave, and who will not submit to the very laws of her being when asked by Mara to repent.

### Appendix C: *Lilith in a New Light: Essays*

How, it is felt, could MacDonald have Vane on the road to bliss and then so abruptly deny it? For Elizabeth Robinson, in her '*Lilith* as the Mystic's Magnum Opus' this is an almost unanswerable question. Having traced Mr Vane's mystic development to the heights or depths reached by St John of the Cross, her first response is 'One wonders why' (140). She concludes however that Vane's development has occurred within a vision granted to him by God, and that he must now wait on earth for its final realisation (140–1). T. A. Shippey, 'Liminality and the Everyday in *Lilith*', maintains that only those who have died are eligible to enter heaven, and Vane has still his life to live out on earth; and that the convention of fairy tale always demands that the hero leave the enchanted world and go home at the end. Verlyn Flieger, 'Myth, Mysticism, and Magic: Reading at the Close of *Lilith*', argues that since the distinctions we make between life in this world and life in the region of seven dimensions are not real to MacDonald, Vane can simultaneously be lamenting in this world and dreaming with the sleepers in the other. For Michael Mendelson, '*Lilith*, Textuality, and the Rhetoric of Romance', *Lilith* is about the power of books, particularly when we give ourselves up to myths of other worlds, and so come to regard our own world and our life in it much more closely. 'The goal of romance has always been to re-imagine the world in such a way that it wakes readers up' (35). For Rolland Hein, 'A Fresh Look at *Lilith*'s Perplexing Dimensions', Vane has achieved through his quest an understanding of the meaning and purpose of life that enables to wait patiently in any world for the final transformations beyond death. Similarly Lucas H. Harriman, 'The Revelatory Potential of *Lilith*'s Immanent Eternity', sees MacDonald's fantasy world itself as a figure of our own world, instinct with God and miracle if we will only allow ourselves to see them; Jeanne Murray Walker, 'The Demoness and the Grail: Deciphering *Lilith*', says that just as Lilith has to undergo acts of agonising will to move towards heaven, so too must Vane, and in his life back in this world: 'The fact that conversion is assured does not reduce the element of painful choice' (68). Yet this view is rather undercut by the fact that Vane is already supposed to have reached a point of improvement where, like Lilith, he can lie down in the house of the sleepers to await resurrection.

By contrast John Pennington, 'Frustrated Interpretation in *Lilith*', argues that we are meant to be frustrated when Vane is returned to his own world. This is because *Lilith* is about ultimate desire, whether for good or evil



(Lilith), and the book wants at once to stimulate and to frustrate such desire. So Lilith is forced to renounce her desire for perfect isolation, and Vane must learn to wait for joy. Rod McGillis, 'Liminality as Psychic Stage in *Lilith*', puts it in Blakean terms of opposition: the passionate desire bursts out, and then reason controls and harnesses it. 'Victory must confront us as a possibility, as it does Vane when he approaches the City in the blue clouds, but failure is our necessary ground. Failure is necessary because without it we would have nowhere to go. Without contraries there is no progression' (109).

These readers are all doing what MacDonald asked, finding a large number of different meanings in his 'fairy tale': 'A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean' (*ADO*, 317).



# Bibliography

(*NW* = *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*)

Abrams, M. H., 'The Poem as Heterocosm', *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1958), 272–85

*Alphabet of ben shirach*

Amell, Barbara, *A Perfect Soul: George MacDonald in America* (Portland, OR: Wingfold Books, 2009)

Amell, Barbara (ed.), *Wingfold: Celebrating the Works of George MacDonald*, nos. 21–62 (Winter, 1998–2008)

Andersen, Hans Christian, *Hans Andersen's Story Book*, trans. Mary Howitt, 3 parts (New York: C. S. Francis, 1849)

Anthony, Andrew, 'The Rage to Build the Most Powerful Computer in History', *The Observer, New Review, Science and Tech*, 22 May, 2016, 19–21.

*Athenaeum*, 6 Nov., 1858, 580

Beaucham, Charles, 'Lilith and Mysticism', *NW* 28 (2009), 13–32

Beauchamp, K. G., *Exhibiting Electricity* (London: The Institute of Electrical Engineers, 1997)

Bilbro, Jeffrey, "'Yet more spacious Space", Higher-Dimensional Reality from Flatland to Lilith', *NW* 28 (2009), 1–12

Bogdanos, Theodore, "The New Jerusalem", *Pearl: Image of the Ineffable. A Study in Medieval Poetic Symbolism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), ch. 5, pp. 99–142.

Brawley, Chris, 'The Ideal and the Shadow: George MacDonald's *Phantastes*', *NW* 25 (2006), 91–112

Broome, F. Hal, 'The Scientific Basis of George MacDonald's Dream-Frame', in Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Thread*, 87–108

- Canby, Edward Tatnall, *A History of Electricity, New Illustrated Library of Science and Invention*, vol. 6, 3rd edn (London: Leisure Arts Ltd., 1966).
- Coleridge, Sara, *Phantasmion* (London: William Pickering, 1837)
- Collingwood, Stuart D. (ed.), *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (London: Nelson, 1898)
- Collins, Robert A., 'Liminality in *Lilith*', in Harrison (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light*, 7–14
- Craik, Dinah Maria, *Avillion; or The Happy Isles and Other Tales*, 3 Vols (London: Smith, Elder, 1853)
- Dearborn, Kerry, *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald* (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 1988)
- Defontenay, Charles Ischir, *Star ou Psi de Cassiopée: Histoire Merveilleuse de l'un des Mondes de l'Espace* (Paris: Ledoyen, 1854)
- Docherty, John, 'An Ambivalent Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Aspects of Irony in *Lilith*', in McGillis (ed.), *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs*
- Docherty, John, *The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll-George MacDonald Relationship* (Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995)
- Docherty, John, 'A Note on the Structure and Conclusion of *Phantastes*', *NW* 7 (1988), 25–30
- Docherty, John, 'Some Ironies in the Last Chapters of *Lilith*', *NW* 26 (2007), 77–98
- Ellenberger, Henri F., *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (London: Fontana Press, 1994)
- Eriugena, John Scottus, *Periphyseon on the Division of Nature*, tr. I. P. Sheldon-Williams, rev. John J. O'Meara (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987)
- Faraday, Michael, *Experimental Researches in Electricity, Seventh Series*, in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* (1776-1886), Volume 124 (1 January 1834), 77–9
- Flieger, Verlyn, 'Myth, Mysticism, and Magic: Reading at the Close of *Lilith*', in Harriman (ed.), *New Light on Lilith*, 39–45
- Fouqué, Frederick de la Motte, *Undine*, tr. Paul Turner, in *German Romantic Stories*, ed. Frank G. Ryder (New York: Continuum, 1988)

- Gabelman, Daniel, *George MacDonald: Divine Carelessness and Fairy Tale Levity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013)
- Gunther, Adrian, 'The Structure of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*', *NW* 12 (1993), 43–59
- Harriman, Lucas H. (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light: Essays on the George MacDonald Fantasy Novel* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008)
- Hein, Rolland, 'A Fresh Look at *Lilith*'s Perplexing Dimensions', in Harriman (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light*, 71–82
- Heraclitus, *Fragments*, trans. Brooks Haxton (London: Penguin, 2003)
- Hostler, John, *Unitarianism* (London: the Hibbert Trust, 1981)
- Jeffrey, Kirstin, 'The Progressive Key: A Study of Bunyan's Influence on MacDonald's "The Golden Key"', *NW* 16 (1997), 69–75
- Jung, C. G., 'A Study in the Process of Individuation' (rev. 1950), 'On Mandala Symbolism' (1950), and 'Mandalas' (1955), repr. in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 2nd edn, tr. R. F. C. Hull, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Herbert Read (ed.), vol. 9, Part 1 (London: Routledge, 1969), 290–390
- Jung, C. G., *Psychology and Alchemy*, 2nd edn, tr. R. F. C. Hull, *Collected Works* vol. 12 (1968), 41–223
- Jung, C. G., *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2nd edn, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 5 (London: Routledge, 1970)
- Kegler, Adelheid, 'Below in the Depths: MacDonald's Symbolic Landscape', *NW* 24 (2005), 29–40
- Kingsley, Charles, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1864)
- Kingsley, Frances (ed.), *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of his Life*, 2 Vols (London: Kegan Paul, 1876)
- Koltuv, Barbara Black, *The Book of Lilith* (York Beach, Maine: Nicolas-Hays, 1986)
- Le Fanu, Joseph Sheridan, *In a Glass Darkly* (London: R. Bentley, 1872)
- Lewis, C. S., *The Last Battle* (London: Bles, 1956)
- Lewis, C. S., 'Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said' (1956), repr. in Lewis, *Of Other Worlds, Essays and Stories* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966)

- Lewis, C. S., *Surprised by Joy, The Shape of my Early Life* (London: Bles, 1955)
- Lewis, C. S., *They Stand Together: The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914–1963)*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Collins 1979)
- Lindsay, David, *A Voyage to Arcturus* (London: Gollancz, 1963)
- MacDonald, George, *A Book of Strife in the Form of The Diary of an Old Soul* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1924)
- MacDonald, George, *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination, and on Shakspeare* (London: Sampson Low Marston, 1893)
- MacDonald, George, *England's Antiphon* (London: Macmillan, 1874)
- MacDonald, George, *George MacDonald in the Pulpit: The 'Spoken' Sermons of George MacDonald*, compiled by J. Joseph Flynn and David Edwards (Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1996)
- MacDonald, George, 'The Golden Key', in MacDonald, *The Complete Fairy Tales*, ed. U. C. Knoepfelmacher (New York and London: Penguin, 1999)
- MacDonald, George, *The Hope of the Gospel and The Miracles of Our Lord* (Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen, 1995)
- MacDonald, George, *Lilith: A Duplex* (Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1994)
- MacDonald, George, *Lilith, A Variorum Edition*, ed. Rolland Hein, 2 vols (Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1997)
- MacDonald, George, *Phantastes and Lilith* (London: Gollancz, 1962)
- MacDonald, George, *The Poetical Works of George MacDonald*, 2 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 1893)
- MacDonald, George, *Unspoken Sermons*, Series I, II, III (Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1997)
- MacDonald, Greville, *George MacDonald and his Wife* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1924)
- MacDonald, Greville, *Reminiscences of a Specialist* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932)
- MacDonald, Ronald, *From a Northern Window: Papers, Critical, Historical and Imaginative* (London: James Nisbet, 1911)
- Mackey, James P. (ed.), *Religious Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986)
- MacLachlan, Christopher; Pazdziora, John Patrick and Stelle, Ginger, (eds), *Rethinking George MacDonald: Contexts and Contemporaries* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2013)
- Manlove, Colin, *Christian Fantasy: from 1200 to the Present* (London: Macmillan, 1992)

- Manlove, Colin, 'Circularity in Fantasy: George MacDonald', *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 70–92
- Manlove, Colin, 'Did William Morris Start MacDonald Writing Fantasy?' *NW* 24 (2005), 61–73
- Manlove, Colin, *The Fantasy Literature of England* (London: Macmillan, 1999)
- Manlove, Colin, 'George MacDonald and the Fairy Tales of Francis Paget and Frances Browne', *NW* 18 (1999), 17–32
- Manlove, Colin, *Literature and Reality 1600 – 1800* (London: Macmillan, 1978)
- Manlove, 'The Logic of Fantasy and the Crisis of Closure in *Lilith*' in Harriman (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light*, 46–58
- Manlove, Colin, 'Parent or Associate? George MacDonald and the Inklings', in McGillis (ed.), *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs*, 227–38
- Manlove, Colin, *Scottish Fantasy Literature: A Critical Survey* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994)
- Marshall, Cynthia, 'Reading "The Golden Key": Narrative Strategies of Parable', in McGillis (ed.), *For the Childlike*, 99–109
- McDannell, Colleen and Lang, Bernhard, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988)
- McGillis, Roderick F., 'The Community of the Centre: Structure and Theme in *Phantastes*', in McGillis (ed.), *For the Childlike*, 51–65
- McGillis, Roderick F. (ed.), *For the Childlike: George MacDonald's Fantasies for Children* (Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Children's Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press, 1992)
- McGillis, Roderick F., 'George MacDonald and the Lilith Legend in the Nineteenth Century', *Mythlore* 19 (Winter, 1979), 3–11
- McGillis, Roderick F. (ed.), *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs* (Wayne, Pennsylvania: Zossima, 2008)
- McGillis, Roderick F., 'Liminality as Psychic Stage in *Lilith*', in Harriman (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light*, 103–10
- McGillis, Roderick F., '*Phantastes* and *Lilith*: Femininity and Freedom,' in Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Thread*, 31–55
- Mendelson, Michael, '*Lilith*, Textuality, and the Rhetoric of Romance', in Harriman (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light*, 21–38
- Morris, William, 'Lindenberg Pool' (1856), repr. in Morris, *Early Romances in Prose and Verse*, ed. and introd. Peter Faulkner (London: Dent, 1973)
- Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God* (1453), repr. trans. Emma Gurney (NY: Cosimo, 2007), ch. ix

- Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg), *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia (Das Allgemeine Brouillon)*, trans., ed. and introd. David W. Wood (Albany, NY: New York State University Press, 2007)
- O'Connor, Hugh P., 'George MacDonald's Sources for "The Golden Key"', *NW* 22 (2003), 46-52
- Patch, Howard Rollins, *The Other World: According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950)
- Pennington, John, 'Of "Frustrate Desire": Feminist Self-Postponement in *Lilith*', *NW* 21 (2002), 26-37
- Prickett, Stephen, 'Belief and Scepticism: The Idea of Tradition in George MacDonald', in MacLachlan *et al* (eds), *Rethinking George MacDonald*, 1-17
- Prickett, Stephen, 'Fictions and Metafictions: *Phantastes*, *Wilhelm Meister* and the Idea of the *Bildungsroman*', in William Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Thread*, 109-25
- Pythagoras, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library: An Anthology of Ancient Writings Which Relate to Pythagoras and Pythagorean Philosophy*, trans. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes, 1987)
- Raeper, William, *George MacDonald* (Tring: Lion Books, 1987)
- Raeper, William (ed.), *The Gold Thread: Essays on George MacDonald* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990)
- Reiter, Geoffrey, '"Down the Winding Stair": Victorian Popular Science and Deep Time in "The Golden Key"', *NW* 27 (2008), 35-50
- Robinson, Elizabeth, '*Lilith* as the Mystic's Magnum Opus', in Harriman (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light*, 28-42
- Roukema, Aren, 'The Shadow of Anodos: Alchemical Symbolism in *Phantastes*', *NW* 31 (2012), 48-63
- Russell, Jeffrey Burton, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984)
- Sadler, Glenn Edward Sadler (ed.), *An Expression of Character: The Letters of George MacDonald* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994)
- Salvey, Courtney, 'Riddled with Evil: Fantasy as Theodicy in George MacDonald's *Phantastes* and *Lilith*', *NW* 27 (2008), 16-24



- Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 'A Defence of Poetry', in G.W.Allen and H.H.Clark  
*Literary Criticism: Pope to Croce* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press,  
1962)
- Shippey, T. A., 'Liminality and the Everyday in *Lilith*', in Harriman (ed.), *Lilith  
in a New Light*, 15–20
- Simak, Clifford, *Cemetery World* (New York, NY: G.P.Putnam's 1973)
- Soto, Fernando, 'Mirrors in MacDonald's *Phantastes*: A Reflexive Structure',  
*NW* 23 (2004), 27–47
- Tennyson, Alfred Lord, 'The Palace of Art' (1832); revised in *The Lady of  
Shalott, and Other Poems* (1842)
- Thorpe, Benjamin, *Northern Mythology*, 3 vols.(London: Edward Lumley,  
1851), II, 214–15 ('The Sunken Mansion')
- Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (origi-  
nally in French, 1970), trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Yale University  
Press, 1973)
- Trexler, Robert, 'Mr Vane's Pilgrimage into the Land of Promise: MacDonald's  
"Historical Imagination" in *Lilith*', in McGillis (ed.), *George MacDonald:  
Literary Heritage and Heirs*, 49–59
- Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's  
Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1960),
- Walker, Jeanne Murray, 'The Demoness and the Grail: Deciphering *Lilith*', in  
Harriman (ed.), *Lilith in a New Light*, 59–70
- Whiting, Sydney, *Helionde, or Adventures in the Sun* (London: Chapman and  
Hall, 1855), repr. by The Classics.us, 2013)
- Williams, Charles, *He Came Down From Heaven and The Forgiveness of Sins*  
(London: Faber, 1950)
- Wingrove, David Melville, 'La Belle Dame – *Lilith* and the Romantic Vampire  
Tradition,' in MacLachlan *et al*, eds, *Rethinking George MacDonald*, 175–97
- Wolff, Robert Lee, *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald*  
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961)
- Wright, Conrad (ed.), *A Stream of Light: A Short History of American Unitarianism*  
(Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1975)



# Index

- Abrams, M.H., 'The Poem as Heterocosm', 31 n.3
- Abbott, E.H., *Flatland*, 112
- Alphabet of ben shirach*, 117 n.2, 132
- Amell, Barbara, *A Perfect Soul*, 8 n.8; (ed.) *Wingfold*, 8 n.8
- Andersen, Hans Christian, fairy tales, 37; 'The Snow Queen', 60
- Anthony, Andrew, 'The Rage to Build the Most Powerful Computer in History', 154–5
- Aquinas, Thomas, 9
- Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, 32
- Arthurian romance, 30, 31
- ash tree, as symbol, 45
- Barrie, J.M., x: *Peter Pan*, xi
- Beddoes, Thomas Lovell, 'Pygmalion', 59 n.19
- Bennett, William Cox, 'Pygmalion', 59 n.19
- Bilbro, Jeffrey, 112 n.15
- Blake, William, ix, 33–4, 106, 163; *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 34, 134–5, 135 n.37, 149, 150, 164; *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, 151
- Boehme, Jakob, 37–8
- Brentano, Clemens, 36
- Bronte, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre*, xiii
- Broome, F. Hal, 54
- Brown, George Mackay, x; *Magnus*, xi
- Browne, Frances, *Granny's Wonderful Chair*, 37
- Browning, Robert, 'My Last Duchess', 59 n.19; 'Porphyria's Lover', 59 n.19
- Bulika (meaning), 118, 167
- Bunyan, John, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, xiii, 3, 8, 33, 44, 85–6, 87, 92, 151, 159
- Burns, Robert, x, 19
- Byron, Lady, 1, 2
- Byron, Lord, 106
- Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 142
- Canby, Edward Tatnall, 55 n.14, 57 n.17
- Carlyle, Thomas, x, xi; *Sartor Resartus*, xi, xiii, 105–6
- Carroll, Lewis, xi, 1, 2, 5; *Alice in Wonderland*, xi, 2, 101; *Letters*, 4–5; *Through the Looking-Glass*, 101
- Carter, Angela, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman*, 105
- Chambers, Robert, 38
- Chamisso, August, *Peter Schlemihl*, 36
- Chaucer, Geoffrey, 29–30; *The Canterbury Tales*, 30; *The House of Fame*, 30; 'The Nun's Priest's Tale', 30; *The Parliament of Fowls*, 30; *The Romance of the Rose*, 30
- Chesterton, G. K., xi
- Cloud of Unknowing*, *The*, 163
- Coleridge, Sara, *Phantasmion*, 74 n.36
- Collins, Robert A., 142 n.43
- Cooke, George Willis, *Unitarianism in America*, 18 n.6
- correspondences, doctrine of, 56 n.16
- Craik, Dinah Maria, 'Avillion, or The Happy Isles', 37, 75 n.38; 'The Rosicrucian', 37
- Crashaw, Richard, 'The Weeper', 49 n.11
- Dante Alighieri, ix, 122; *Commedia*, xii–xiv, 29, 30, 38, 92, 100, 104, 159, 162
- Darwin, Charles, 18, 38; *On the Origin of Species*, 5
- Dearborn, Kerry, 18 n.7
- Defontenay, Charles Ischir, *Star ou Psi de Cassiopée*, 37, 62 n.24, 165–6
- Dickens, Charles, xi, 2, 36; *David Copperfield*, xiii; *Great Expectations*, 133
- Donizetti, Gaetano, 'Il Pygmalione', 59 n.19
- Docherty, John, 46 n.9, 101–2 n.2, 123 n.27, 135 n.37, 147 n.46
- Donne, John, 'Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward', 57
- Doppelgänger*, the, 36
- dreams, medieval view of, 30; in MacDonald, 11
- Dunbar, William, 36
- Dürer, Albrecht, 'Melancholia', 147
- electric motors, early, 55

- electricity, new science of, 38; applied to MacDonald's *Phantastes*, 54–7, 69, 70
- Eliot, George, 17; *Middlemarch*, xiii
- Eliot, T.S., 164
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 2, 19, 38
- Eriugena, John Scottus, *Periphyseon on the Division of Nature*, 25 n.14, 152–3, 153 n.58
- fantasy, medieval and Renaissance, 29–32; Scottish, x, xi, 105–06, compared to English fantasy, x–xi
- Faraday, Michael, *Experimental Researches in Electricity*, 54
- Fletcher, Phineas, *The Purple Island*, 42
- Flieger, Verlyn, 168
- Fouqué, Friedrich de la Motte, xii; *Undine*, xii, 13–14, 36, 70 n.33
- French Symbolists, 157
- Froment, Paul Gustave, 'electro-moteur', 56–7
- Galahad, (Arthurian Cycle), xii–xiv
- Galvani, Luigi, 55
- German Romantic fairy tales, 34–6
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, xii, 36; *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 71; *Wilhelm Meister*, 57
- Gray, Alasdair, x
- Greek myth, 38, 157
- Grimm, Jakob and Wilhelm, 13; fairy tales, 37
- Gunn, Neil, x, xi
- Gunther, Adrian, 46 n.9, 47 n.10, 69 n.30
- Haggard, Rider, *She*, 133, 150
- Hardy, Thomas, *Jude the Obscure*, 150; *The Return of the Native*, 133; *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 150
- Harriman, Lucas H., 168
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 'Dronke's Wooden Statue', 38; 'The Hall of Fantasy', 61 n.23; *Mosses from an Old Manse*, 38, 81 n.2; 'A Select Party', 61 n.23; *Tanglewood Tales*, 81 n.2
- Hein, Rolland, 1 n.1, 118 n.20, 168
- Henryson, Robert, x
- Heraclitus, 70 n. 32
- Herschel, William, 111 n.13
- heterocosm, idea of, 31
- Hinton, C.H., *Scientific Romances*, 112
- Hoffmann, E.T.A., xii, 29, 35–6; 'The Golden Pot', 36; 'The Sandman', 59 n.19
- Hogg, James, x; 'Confessions of a Justified Sinner', 105–6; 'Kilmeny', xi; 'The Witch of Fife', 106
- Holmes, Oliver Wendell, 19
- Hostler, John, *Unitarianism*, 18 n.6
- Huxley, Thomas H., 38
- imagination, medieval view of, 29–30; in Renaissance literature, 30–1; in Spenser, 31–2
- James, Henry, *The Turn of the Screw*, 151
- Joyce, James, *Ulysses*, 164
- Jung, C. G., on mandalas, 64 n.25
- Jungian symbols in *Phantastes*, 52
- Kabbalah*, the, 37
- Keats, John, *Lamia*, 33
- Kegler, Adelheid, 113 n.16
- Kingsley, Charles, xi, 2, 5; quoted, 87–8; *The Water-Babies*, xiii, 81 n.3, 82, 85, 86–7, 89, 90, 93, 94
- Lang, Andrew, x; *The Chronicles of Pantouflia*, xiii; 'The Gold of Fairnilee', xi
- Langland, William, *Piers Plowman*, xiii–xiv
- Law, William, 38
- Le Fanu, J. Sheridan, *Carmilla*, 133, 135 n.38
- Lewis, C.S., ix, xi, 9–10, 45, 59–60, 122, 123 n.26, 157, 159; quoted, 76; *The Last Battle*, 143 n.24; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 158; 'On Stories', 9; *The Pilgrim's Regress*, 59–60, 161; 'Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said', quoted, 157–8; *Surprised by Joy*, 59
- Lewis, Wyndham, *The Childermass*, 163
- Liebig, Justus von, 55
- Lilith, origins, 117 n.2, 132; in late nineteenth-century literature and painting, 133; and women's rights, 133
- Lindsay, David, x; *A Voyage to Arcturus*, xi, 148
- Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, 2, 19, 38
- Lydgate, John, *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, 30
- Lyell, Charles, 38
- MacDonald, George, literary reception, xi–xii, 2, 39, 163–4; life, 1–3; character,

3–8: contrasted to Lewis Carroll, 4–5; and to Charles Kingsley, 5; interested not in personality but in the persons of Christ and God, 6–7; against the worldly self, 7; God to live in the self's place, 7; constant relationship with God the heart of true life, 7; life should be a continued mystic relation, 7–8; MacDonald's lifelong desire for God and heaven, 8; literary critic, 9; literary views, 9–16: on the imagination, 9–13; on the fairy tale, 13–16; theology, 16–28: 'deconstructionist', 17; and demythologised, 20–5; stress on relationship with God, 25; relationship of God and Christ the basis of the universe, 25–6; miracles, 26–7; self the great evil, 27; longing for heaven, 27–8; sources, 29–38: Spenser, 31–2; Shakespeare, 32–3; Milton, 33; Bunyan, 33; Blake, 33; Shelley, 34; German Romantic fairy tales, 34–6; Wordsworth, 35; Victorian fantasy, 36–8; on spirals in development, 69; on symbolism, 116–17; novels of real life, 2, 3; *Adela Cathcart*, 2; *A Dish of Orts*, quoted, 26; *At the Back of the North Wind*, xii, xiv, 13, 35, 36, 37, 146, 162; 'The Carasoyne', 13; 'Cross Purposes', 95, *Dealings with the Fairies*, 13, 79; *The Diary of an Old Soul*, quoted, 126, 148; *England's Antiphon*, 9, 49 n.11; 'The Fantastic Imagination', 9, 13–15, 45–6, 158; cited, 36; quoted 35, 71, 79, 92, 124, 138, 150, 152, 159; *George MacDonald in the Pulpit*, 16; cited and quoted, 17–28 *passim*; 'The Giant's Heart', 13; 'The Golden Key', xi, xii–xiv, 13, 33, 35, 79–97, 99, 102, 157, 159, 160, 161, 163; debt to Blake, 33; debt to Novalis, 35; setting in this world, 79, 99; boy hero Mossy lives by the imagination, 79–80; girl Tangle initially lives more by fancy, 80–2, 92; fairy land invites Mossy in, 80; but Tangle is chased there, 81, 82; Mossy goes directly to goal, but Tangle's journey more roundabout, 83; *Sehnsucht* (spiritual desire) at the heart of the story, 83–4, 93–4, 99, 160; change in object of search, 83–4; Tangle and Mossy follow positive and negative mystic ways in the story, 84–5, 87, 92; source in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 85–6, 87, 92; and in Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*,

86–7, 89, 90, 93, 94; Mossy a Platonist, 87; analogy with contemporary Atlantic cable-laying, 88 n.12; Tangle dependent on others, 89; stairs in the story, 90; possible source of falling stairs in cliff, 90 n.14; Tangle's underground journey back through geological time, 90–1; Tangle's journey also one into her self, 92; Tangle travels from false fairy tales to the true one, 92–3; Tangle finds God at the centre of the world, 93; theme of spiritual evolution, 93; events guided at a deeper level, 94; story goes back on itself, 95; 'islanded' style in, 95; delays and different landscapes also break it up, 95; reasons for this, 96; story deals in numinous symbols rather than metaphor, 96; ends in paradox, 97; symbols draw us towards mystic relation with the narrative, 97; mystery in, 102; Plato's myth of the cave in, 157; nature of heaven in, 159; as pilgrimage, 160; as pivot between *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, 161; style in, 163; *The Hope of the Gospel and The Miracles of Our Lord*, 16; cited, 10, 11, 17, 19, 25, 27 n.18–20, 28 n.21; quoted, 21 n.12, 23, 25, 27, 44, 84 n.7; 'If I Had a Father', 2; 'The Imagination', 10–13; cited 15, 58; quoted, 16, 32, 42, 44, 78, 114, 124–5; 'The Light Princess', 2, 6, 14, 101; *Lilith*, ix, xii–xiv, 3, 13, 14, 31–9 *passim*; 41, 42, 45, 52, 94, 97, 99–155, 157, 159, 160–64 *passim*; *Lilith* A draft, 99, 100, 118 n.20, 147; *Lilith* compared to 'The Golden Key', 99; and to *Phantastes*, 99, 102–5, 124 n.29; 'a mandate from God', 100; *Lilith* B draft, 101, 118 n.20, 142 n.42; links to Dante's *Commedia*, 100; to the Middle English *Pearl* 100–1; to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, 101; multiple versions of any one being or event, 104–5; but all differences ultimately reconciled in God, 105; Vane's separation from his unconscious mind, 105–6; this separation a theme in nineteenth-century Scottish fantasy, 106; separation a central motif in *Lilith*, 106–9; separation overcome in 'at-one-ment', 108–9; multiple versions of the *Lilith* world, 110–15; multiple versions of being (metamorphosis), 116–19; only *Lilith* fixed, 117–19; three-

dimensional versus seven-dimensional seeing, 119–42; compared to Dante's allegory, 122; and to Spenser's, 123; both materialism and mysticism have their place, 120–3, 125–7; underground life in *Lilith*, 123–5; against fixed beliefs, 125–6; role of children, 127–9; life and death paradox, 128–9; Vane as materialist, 129–32; Lilith as part of Vane, 131–2, 135, 141; why MacDonald chose Lilith as leading character, 132–3; Lilith seen as rebel and feminist in 1890s, 133; Lilith's centrality in conflict with book's theme of submission, 133–5; goodness at work in Lilith despite herself, 135–6; Vane's hidden development, 136–9, 140–2; Lilith's repentance both free and forced, 139–40; agency of God in story, 142–54; vision of interrelationship and at-onement in book, 143–5, 152–3; end time both now and not yet, 145–9; *Sehnsucht*, 144–5, 147, 159, 160–1, 162; ambiguous nature of heaven, 147–50; *Lilith*'s dual vision in keeping with its time, 150–1; Vane's apparent rejection by heaven, and explanation for this, 151–2; affirmation and negation in God, 152–4; centripetal drive of book, 153; *Lilith* works like quantum computer, 154–5; *Phantastes*, x, xii–xiv, 1, 2, 5, 13, 14, 31–8 *passim*, 39–78, 79, 90, 94, 96, 97, 99, 101, 102–4, 107, 110, 113, 116, 123, 124 n.29, 154, 159–64 *passim*; sources, 31 ff; why written, 39; reception, 39, 45; mysterious nature of, 39–40; as celebration of creation, 40–1, 48–9; *Sehnsucht*, 40–1, 58–60, 62, 68, 159–60; as journey into the imagination, 41–2; as dream, 42–3; but a dream managed by a greater being, 43–4; journey of hero Anodos to greater understanding, 44; so too for reader, 44–5; necessary balance between understanding book and its continued mystery, 45–6; themes of white lady and shadow, 46; motif of seeing and reflections, 46–8; of realising full potential of being, 48–52; doors in and out, 49; enclosures that are broken into, 50–2; marble, wood, stone, earth and water imagery, 52–3; idiom of continual movement and change, 53–4; immersion in phenomena, 54, electrical

theme, 54–7, 69, 70; Anodos' spiritual growth, 57–76: initially childish and passive, 57–8; and spiritually ignorant, 57–60; misunderstands spiritual nature of white lady, 59–60; gains shadow, 60; sustained by grace, 61; begins to learn in fairy palace, 61–5; but fails again with white lady, 65–7; theme of not possessing things, 66–8; motif of elusiveness, 67–8; spiritual growth has spiral form, 68–70; way down is way up, 71–2; Anodos now serves others, 72, 73–5; escapes from self, 75–6; yet returned to Victorian self at end, 77; stylistic techniques of book, 76–8; *Phantastes*, 'The Golden Key' and *Lilith*: narratives form continuous sequence, xii–xii, setting the imagination, xiii; as pilgrimage literature, xiii–xiv, 159–60; narratives roundabout, xiii–xiv; desire in, xiv, 159–62; mystery in, xiv; Christianity hidden in, 157–9; styles in, 162–3; 'Photogen and Nycteris', xiv, 95; *The Portent*, 2; the 'Princess' books, 13, 35, 37; *The Princess and Curdie*, xii, 93, 163; *The Princess and the Goblin*, xii, 95, 162; 'The Shadows', 84; 'A Sketch of Individual Development', 13; *The Tragedie of Hamlet*, 9; *Twelve of the Spiritual Songs of Novalis*, 34; *Unspoken Sermons*, 16; cited, 93 n.17, 108, 109, 117 n.1, 129, 143, 151; quoted, 8, 11, 16–28 *passim*, 35, 74 n.37, 84 n.7, 102, 109, 117; *The Wise Woman*, 95, 162; *Within and Without*, 1, 39

MacDonald, Greville, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 1 n.1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 16, 18 n.7, 55–6 n.16, 104, 135 n.37; *Reminiscences of a Specialist*, 112 n.14

MacDonald, Lilia Scott, 3, 100, 101, 151

MacDonald, Ronald, 1 n.1

Mackey, James P., *Religious Imagination*, 29 n.1 'Macleod, Fiona' (William Sharp), x, 106 mandala, 64

Manlove, Colin, x, 10, 37 n.13, 64 n.25, 68 n.29, 102 n.3, 105 n.6, 142 n.42, 152

Marshall, Cynthia, 94

Maurice, F.D., 6, 17

Marvell, Andrew, 31

McDannell, Colleen, and Lang, Bernhard, *Heaven: A History*, 149 n.52

McGillis, Roderick F., 46 n.9, 113 n.16, 132 n.34, 133 n.36, 139 n.41, 169

- Mendelson, Michael, 110 n. 9, 168  
 Merimée, Prosper, 'The Venus of Ille', 59 n.19  
 metaphysical poets, the, 31  
 Michaelangelo, 38  
 Miller, Hugh, 90  
 Milton, John, ix, 29; *Paradise Lost*, 31, 33, 133, 147 n.48, 163  
 Morris, William, 133; early romances, 37, 'Lindenberg Pool', 37  
 Morrison, Arthur, *A Child of the Jago*, 150; *Tales of Mean Streets*, 150
- Neuhouser, David, 'George MacDonald and Universalism', 25 n.12  
 Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God*, 153  
 Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), xii, 11, 13, 63; on correspondences, 55, 55–6 n.16; *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* (*Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*), quoted, 34–5, 42–3, 54, 55–6 n.16, 111, 146 n.45; *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, 35, 57
- O'Brien, Flann, *The Third Policeman*, 163–4  
 Oliphant, Margaret, 'A Beleaguered City', 106; *A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen*, xiii; *The Land of Darkness*, xiii
- Paget, F. E., 36  
 Patch, Howard Rollins, *The Other World*, 30, n.2  
 Pearl, 30, 100–1, 148, 161, 162, 163  
 Pennington, John, 133 n.36, 139 n.41, 168–9  
 Petzold, Dieter, 121 n. 24  
 pilgrimage literature, xiii, 159  
 Plato, *Republic*, 42, 59, 157  
 Poe, Edgar Allen, 38; 'The Masque of the Red Death', 61 n.23; 'Ligeia', 133  
 Pope, Alexander, *The Dunciad*, 164; *An Essay on Man*, 56 n.16  
 Powell, Louisa (later Mrs George MacDonald), 1, 6, 18  
 Prickett, Stephen, 57 n.18, 122  
 Pynchon, Thomas, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 105  
 Pythagorean number symbolism, 65, 65 n.27
- Queste del Saint Graal*, the, 30, 31, 33, 94, 157, 159
- Rabelais, François, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 31
- Raeper, William, *George MacDonald*, 1 n.1, 6, 100 n.1  
 Reiter, Geoffrey, 90–1  
 Robertson, James, x  
 Robinson, Elizabeth, 114–15, 168  
 Rolleston, George, 4  
 Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, 133  
 Roukema, Aren, 43 n.3, 46 n.9  
 Ruskin, John, 1, 2; *The King of the Golden River*, xii, 36  
 Russell, Jeffrey Burton, *Lucifer*, 149 n.51; cited, 25 n.14
- Sadler, Glenn, 6  
 Salvey, Courtney, 59 n.20  
 Schleiermacher, Friedrich, 17  
 Scott, Sir Walter, x  
 Scottish fantasy. *See under* fantasy  
*Sehnsucht* (spiritual longing), in Scottish fantasy, xi; in *Phantastes*, 40–1, 58–60, 62, 68, 159–60, 161; in 'The Golden Key', 83–4, 93, 160; in *Lilith*, 147, 160–2  
 shadows, in MacDonald's fantasy, 84  
 Shakespeare, William, 32; *Hamlet*, 32; *King Lear*, 120, 120 n.23; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 32; *The Tempest*, 31, 32  
 Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 106; *Alastor*, 34; 'A Defence of Poetry', 34; *Epipsychidion*, 34  
 Shippey, T.A., 168  
 Sidney, Sir Philip, 31  
 Simak, Clifford, *Cemetery World*, 123 n.28  
 Smith, George Murray, 2  
 Soto, Fernando, 46 n.9, 47 n.10, 54, 157  
 Southey, Robert, 'The Story of the Three Bears', 81  
 Spenser, Edmund, ix, 29; *The Faerie Queene*, 31–2, 41, 42, 45, 60, 72, 72 n.35, 75 n.38, 123, 159, 164  
 statues that come alive, in nineteenth-century literature, 58–9 n.19  
 Sterne, Laurence, *Tristram Shandy*, 31  
 Stevenson, Robert Louis, x, xi; *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, xi, 105–6; 'Olalla', 133  
 Stoker, Bram, 133, 150  
 Strauss, David Friedrich, *Das Leben Jesu*, 17  
 'Sunken Mansion, The', 70 n.33  
 supernatural, the, in Renaissance fantasy, 30–1  
 Swedenborg, Emmanuel, 38, 55 n.16, 147 n.48

*Talmud*, the, 132

Tennyson, Alfred Lord, 'The Palace of Art', 61 n.23, 65

Thackeray, William Makepeace, xi, 2, 36; *The Rose and the Ring*, xii; *Vanity Fair*, xiii

Thomson, James, *The Castle of Indolence*, 61 n.23

Thoreau, Henry David, 38; 'Walking', 38

Tieck, Ludwig, 36

Todorov, Tzvetan, 110–11

Tolkien, J.R.R., xi, 9–10; *The Lord of the Rings*, xi; 'On Fairy Stories', 9, 11

Twain, Mark, 2, 19, 38

Tytler, Sara, 8 n.8

unconscious, the, 36–7

Underhill, Evelyn, *The Column of Dust*, 163

Unitarianism, 6, 18–19

Uranus, 111–12, 111–12 n.13

Vaughan, Henry, 31, 163; MacDonald on, 31 n.4

visions of heaven and hell, 30

Walker, Jeanne Murray, 132 n. 33, 137 n.39, 168

Wells, H.G., 112 n.14; *The Invisible Man*, 112 n.14, 151; *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 151; *The Time Machine*, 128, 150; *The War of the Worlds*, 151

Whiting, Sydney, *Helionde*, 37, 58–9 n.19

Whittier, James Greenleaf, 19

Wilde, Oscar, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, 150; *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, xii

Williams, Charles, 67

Wolff, Robert Lee, 82 n.4, 147 n.46

Wordsworth, William, 35; *The Prelude*, 39