

Fantasy, Art and Life

Fantasy, Art and Life:
Essays on George MacDonald,
Robert Louis Stevenson
and Other Fantasy Writers

By

William Gray

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For Joan



THE PRINCESS SWIMMING

Figure 1: “The Princess Swimming” by Arthur Hughes, for “The Light Princess” in *Dealings with the Fairies* (1867)

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABNW</i>	<i>At the Back of the North Wind</i> (MacDonald)
<i>AC</i>	<i>Adela Cathcart</i> (MacDonald)
<i>CFT</i>	<i>The Complete Fairy Tales</i> (MacDonald)
<i>CT</i>	<i>The Cosmic Trilogy</i> (C.S. Lewis)
<i>FT</i>	<i>Fragile Things</i> (Gaiman)
<i>FH</i>	<i>Fabulous Histories</i> aka <i>The Story of the Robins</i> (Mrs Trimmer)
<i>FMMT</i>	<i>Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth</i> (Gray)
<i>L</i>	<i>Lilith</i> (MacDonald)
<i>LNL</i>	<i>Lilith in a New Light</i> (ed. Harriman)
<i>LI-8</i>	<i>The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson</i> (8 vols) (ed. Booth & Mehew)
<i>NA</i>	<i>The Norton Anthology of English Literature</i> (8 th Ed., Vol. 2)
<i>OFS</i>	“On Fairy-stories” (Tolkien)
<i>Orts</i>	<i>A Dish of Orts</i> (MacDonald)
<i>RBB</i>	<i>Ranald Bannerman’s Boyhood</i> (MacDonald)
<i>S</i>	<i>The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson</i> (Swearingen)
<i>SWM</i>	<i>Smith of Wootten Major</i> (Extended Edition)
<i>TI-35</i>	<i>The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson</i> (Tusitala Edition in 35 vols)
<i>TS</i>	<i>Topographies of the Sacred</i> (Rigby)

INTRODUCTION

“Only more life”

After my essay collection *Death and Fantasy*, there seemed almost a compulsion to produce a sequel with a complementary emphasis on life. Whatever part my personal unconscious may have played in this compulsion to reaffirm life, it was doubtless also determined by cultural myths of the natural cycle of regeneration. This kind of regeneration myth might be named the “Die and Become” motif after Goethe’s phrase “Stirb und Werde”¹ which arguably epitomizes a certain kind of Romanticism—though the term “Romantic” can of course only be applied to Goethe with qualifications. Perhaps one of the strangest examples of this “Die and Become” motif occurs in George MacDonald’s “The Golden Key” when a multi-coloured flying fish, which has led Tangle through Fairyland to the mystical Lady, then dives into a pot of boiling water, only to reappear (after its body has been eaten) as an “aëranth”, or tiny angel. Another of these marvellous flying fish, who “like you and me”, says the Lady, “must wait their time” for death and transfiguration,² is sent to lead Mossy to the Lady’s cottage. Mossy and Tangle are then sent by the Lady to discover the key-hole for the golden key that Mossy has found, and after they become separated, an “aëranth” leads Tangle to the Old Man of the Sea. The bath that Tangle takes in the house of the Old Man of the Sea evidently represents death. This is later made explicit when Mossy in his turn reaches the house of the Old Man of the Sea and takes the necessary bath. “‘You have tasted of death now,’” says the Old Man, and asks Mossy whether it is good. Mossy replies that it is good, indeed better than

¹ The penultimate stanza of “Selige Sehnsucht” in Goethe’s *West-östlicher Divan* (1819) runs:

<i>Und so lang du das nicht hast,</i>	And along as you have not,
<i>Dieses: Stirb und Werde!</i>	This: Die and Become!
<i>Bist du nur ein trüber Gast</i>	You are but a dull guest
<i>Auf der dunklen Erde</i>	On the dark earth.

² George MacDonald, *The Complete Fairy Tales* (edited by U.C. Knoepfelmacher) (Penguin, 1999), p.128. Hereafter cited as *CFT*.

life. The Old Man responds: “‘No, … it is only more life’”. Thus for MacDonald death is not just the end (in both senses) of life; it is “only more life” (*CFT* 142). MacDonald believed that death necessarily leads to “more life” — though only ultimately, since you have to learn to die in the right way. This is a lesson that both the wilful Mr Vane and *a fortiori* the eponymous Princess in MacDonald’s *Lilith* find much harder to learn than do the protagonists of “The Golden Key”.

MacDonald’s faith that death can be defined as “only more life” may express a confidence in post-mortem existence that fewer readers would probably now share than was the case in the nineteenth century. However, the phrase may also suggest ideas that modern readers can more comfortably entertain, for example, the idea that life and death are not necessarily mutually exclusive binary opposites; nor must they always be related in terms of linear chronology, that is, with death always *following* and concluding life. In the following essays it is not the case that “life” (in some univocal sense) simply *replaces* “death” as the leading idea in terms of which some examples of imaginative and fantasy writing are discussed; rather, *the imagination itself* is explored as a life-enhancing power which seeks to overcome death by somehow embracing or incorporating it.

The life-enhancing power of the imagination is explored in the first essay, “The Life-giving Power of Fantasy: Narrative as Therapy in George MacDonald’s *Adela Cathcart*”. Adela is a young woman suffering from the kind of “mysterious ailment” to which young women seemed so prone in Victorian times, and which would nowadays most likely be diagnosed as some form of depression. As is discussed below, Adela’s “sickness unto death” is vividly described in a way which suggests that MacDonald knew what he was talking about, and was writing from personal experience. Whatever therapeutic value MacDonald himself may have derived from the act of writing stories, the point of *Adela Cathcart* is that Adela is, so to speak, given her life back by the therapeutic experience of listening to stories—stories which take her out of the limitations of self-preoccupation and open her up to “the Other”, that is, the world, other people and ultimately the divine Life itself. This transformative power of the act of reading or listening (as in Adela’s case) was well-known to C.S. Lewis who wrote about the saving power of the experience of reading—or to put it slightly differently, the transformative power of “attending” (in Iris Murdoch’s, and Simone Weil’s, sense) to narrative.³ Lewis speaks of the saving “annihilation of the self”⁴ in the act of reading, which echoes, and is

³ See “Spirituality and the Pleasure of the Text: C.S. Lewis and the Act of Reading” in my *Death and Fantasy*.

⁴ C.S. Lewis *An Experiment in Criticism* (CUP, 1961), p.138.

perhaps partly derived from, MacDonald's sense of the necessity of dying to live, and of how the imagination can overcome death by enabling the death of self.

MacDonald's sense of the power of the imagination to enable spiritual life and growth is rooted in the Romantic tradition, broadly understood. The relation of MacDonald to this Romantic background is explored in the essay “‘The Child in the Midst’: Childhood and Salvation History in Fantasy Fiction by MacDonald, Lewis and Pullman”. It is clear that Adela Cathcart's problem is above all to do with some kind of blockage of her *feelings*, and the way that MacDonald expresses this is to say that she needs to recover the “childlikeness” that will enable her to respond to the wonder of life. For MacDonald the quality of “childlikeness” is the key to the ultimate questions of human existence, and the loss of that quality of childlikeness is the source of all human misery. Such an idea of childlikeness lies at the heart of the Romantic revolution in culture and above all in *feeling*. What MacDonald calls childlikeness also looks very like what C.S. Lewis and Tolkien call “Joy”, and there seems to be a direct connection between Lewis and Tolkien and a certain kind of Romanticism. This chapter explores MacDonald's relation to the Romantic valorisation of fairy tales, and also of fantasy (if not mere “fancy”), as means of developing spiritual feelings (or “Joy”) which connect the reader or hearer with “the life of things”. The essay also explores Philip Pullman's relation to this tradition, which some readers feel is unmistakably present. Notwithstanding Pullman's insistence that he doesn't write fantasy and doesn't believe in God, this chapter nevertheless explores Pullman's important place in what is arguably an essentially theological argument that runs from Romanticism (and before that Platonism) through to Lewis, Tolkien and their modern epigones.

However, in tension with this Platonic/Romantic tradition that flirts with the idea of the inherent divinity of all things (i.e. pantheism), there runs another tradition, often labelled Calvinist, which remains deeply suspicious of the delusions of grandeur endemic in most forms of Platonic/Romantic “spirituality”. For this Calvinist tradition it is exactly these delusions of (spiritual) grandeur that are at the very heart of the problem that each human being is to itself (and unfortunately not only to itself): such delusions were and are precisely “original sin”. Perhaps the most interesting and important thing about George MacDonald as a writer doing theology by means of fantasy is that he stands at exactly the point where these antithetical traditions collide: MacDonald is *both* a Romantic

Platonist and a residual Calvinist—even if he lambasts *Calvinistic* theology and piety with its “martinet” God.⁵

One of the places where this tension is most clearly apparent is in MacDonald’s late fantasy *Lilith*, particularly at the ending of the work. The crux of the problematic ending of *Lilith* comes when, his heart “beating with hope and desire” on what seems to be his final ascent towards the throne of the Ancient of Days, Mr Vane⁶ is suddenly and unexpectedly interrupted: “A hand, warm and strong, laid hold of mine, and drew me to a little door with a golden lock.”⁷ But rather than this being the final initiation into the Holy of Holies, on the contrary Vane seems to have slithered all the way down the final snake in this game of theological game of “Snakes and Ladders”.⁸ He finds himself back where he started, alone in his library, almost as if the game had never been played. This strange and anti-climactic ending has caused some confusion and dissension among critics who have sought to interpret *Lilith*. Chapter Three, “Making Sense of the Ending: The Problem of George MacDonald’s *Lilith*”, is based on a review article of an essay collection, *Lilith in a New Light: Essays on the George MacDonald Fantasy Novel*, edited by Lucas H. Harriman, devoted to precisely this problem. Arguably the crux of the matter is the tension between aspiring (Platonic) *eros* and condescending divine *agape*, a tension by which the heart not only of George MacDonald but also of St Augustine of Hippo was riven (though perhaps surprisingly Augustine is almost entirely neglected in Harriman’s collection).

Chapter Four is entitled “Untrue to life? The Theological Use of Caricature by MacDonald, Lewis, Pullman and Gaiman”. This chapter delves into the potentially nasty world of theological dissension, so notoriously prone to *odium theologicum* (theological hatred), and to that kind of argument which generates animosity in inverse proportion to its susceptibility of resolution. In this context the *ad hominem* and the *reductio ad absurdum* become the default modes of “argument”. Such *odium theologicum* spreads far beyond the confines of theology proper,

⁵ In his sermon “Justice” MacDonald wrote: “[Men] yield the idea of the Ancient of Days, ‘the glad creator’, and put in its stead a miserable, puritanical martinet of a God, caring not for righteousness, but for his rights”; see *Unspoken Sermons: Series I, II and III* [1889] (Wilder Publications, 2008), p.208.

⁶ The name reeks of allegory—“reek” being the apposite word given the avowed antipathy of MacDonald to allegory: see “The Fantastic Imagination”, *CFT* p.8.

⁷ George MacDonald, *Lilith* [1895] (Eerdmans, 2000), p.246.

⁸ Originating in India, “Snakes and Ladders” seems in a sense always already to have been a game with a theological, or at least a moral, subtext.

and as I have argued elsewhere, ironically Philip Pullman's atheistic criticisms of Christianity in general, and of C.S. Lewis in particular, are patently infected by precisely such *odium theologicum*.⁹ This chapter argues that the *ad hominem* and the *reductio ad absurdum* are a whisker away from outright caricature, and that such use of caricature to score essentially theological points is apparent not only in Pullman and Neil Gaiman, those obsessive haters of C.S. Lewis and all his works (though Gaiman admits to once having been a Lewis fan), but also in Lewis and Tolkien, as well as in George MacDonald himself. Fantasy is always potentially dangerous, in that it lures us away from common sense. However limited the latter may be (and MacDonald in particular pillories "common sense", especially in *Lilith*), it can nevertheless serve as a foil to the tendency of fantasy to lose touch altogether with real life in the world. Instead of enhancing or even transfiguring that life, fantasy can at times falsify it; fantasy can tell lies as well as truths.

Fantasy, Ecocriticism and the Life of the World

The power of the fantastic imagination is thus always double, or Janus-faced: if used in the wrong way, it can falsify and detract from life, rather than enhance it. The question of whether fantasy enhances or blights life (the issue arguably at the heart of MacDonald's *Phantastes*) is tied up with the question of what we mean by "life". For MacDonald, "Life" seems to refer above all to a transcendental Beyond. Rather surprisingly perhaps, it was Tolkien who criticised "The Golden Key" partly on account of this otherworldly emphasis. As will be discussed below in the chapter "Out of the everywhere into here": Romanticism, Ecocriticism and Children's Literature", Tolkien came to be so irritated by MacDonald ("irritant" is Tolkien's own word) that it was with considerable relief that he abandoned the Introduction he had been contracted to write for a new edition of "The Golden Key". Instead Tolkien began a critique of MacDonald in general, and "The Golden Key" in particular, which in the course of composition turned into *Smith of Wootton Major*. If the latter became (in Tolkien's own phrase) a kind of "anti-G.M. tract", then we seem entitled to read it as an implicit criticism not only of MacDonald's tone and style, but also of the content and the worldview embodied in his work. Here Tolkien's implied criticism seems to be that the experience of the other worlds of faery or fantasy should be such as to transform the

⁹ See my *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp.170-2. Hereafter cited as *FMMT*.

protagonist's relation to *this* world, rather than merely offering an escape route to somewhere else. In contrast to "The Golden Key" where the protagonists go *through* Fairyland and finally ascend to somewhere else, presumably Heaven, at the end of *Smith of Wootton Major* Smith does not leave this world for somewhere else, but rather returns from Faery to *this world* and goes back to work in his forge. Moreover, as we can see in the essay that Tolkien wrote about *Smith of Wootton Major*, his this-worldly emphasis is susceptible of an ecocritical reading. "Life" in this context means *this* life, life situated here and now in the environment in which we find ourselves, and which we should care for, rather than abandoning for the sake of some (possibly chimerical) other world.

The ecocritical reading of which Tolkien's *Smith of Wootton Major* and his related writings are susceptible is at the heart of the chapter on Romanticism, ecocriticism and children's literature. This chapter also makes reference to other fantasy writers such as Novalis, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué and Philip Pullman. The latter are all linked one way or another to Romanticism, and it is in her *Topographies of the Sacred: the Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* that ecocritic Kate Rigby links fantasy in general and Tolkien in particular to the potential of fantasy literature for Green politics:

The genre of fantasy, it should be stressed, can be an effective vehicle for engaging with the question of our right relationship to the natural world, as it is, for example, in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien (a true inheritor of the romantic project of re-creating myth through literature).¹⁰

Ecocriticism is also a theme in the chapter on Robert Louis Stevenson's attitudes to the natural world. Stevenson is not the first name that springs to mind in terms of literary eco-warriors. However, Stevenson is interestingly placed among a range of attitudes to science and the natural world in the nineteenth century. Heir to the achievements of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment and nineteenth-century Scottish engineers, as well as to a strain of Calvinistic pessimism, he was also a kind of neo-Romantic who anticipated, and indeed helped to create, the neo-paganism and ruralism of the aesthetic 1890s which had a formative role in the creation of early conservation and environmentalist movements such as the National Trust. Stevenson also studied and wrote about the South Sea Islands where he lived at the height of the colonial period. His incipient environmentalism is of a piece with his anti-colonialism: and—perhaps

¹⁰ Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: the Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (University of Virginia Press, 2004), p.106.

naively—both attitudes are linked with his abhorrence of the destruction of the life of the land and the people in the Scottish Highlands and Islands during and after the so-called Clearances.¹¹

Life and Art

If—to his wife Fanny's intense irritation—Stevenson devoted his art and craft of writing to the project of documenting the threatened way of life of the South Sea Islanders (rather than writing lucrative best-sellers),¹² this might be seen as one way of understanding the relation between life and art. “Life” often figures as a binary opposite not only of “Death” but also of “Art”, and Stevenson’s writings during his South Seas period explore the tensions between life and art. As a lover of French literary culture and aesthetic theory long before it became fashionable in *fin-de-siècle* England, Stevenson was aware from the early 1870s of the theories of *l’art pour l’art* (art for art’s sake) circulating in Paris from as far back as the 1830s. The tension between life and art was central to literary debates in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and in Britain took the form of the debate about “Realism” (meaning, above all, Zola) versus “Romance”. Stevenson discussed the relation between life and art in his correspondence and in essays, most famously in his exchange with Henry James, when in 1884 he wrote “A Humble Remonstrance”¹³ in response to James’s “The Art of Fiction”.

Perhaps Stevenson’s most interesting intervention into the debate about the relation between art and life was, however, his dramatization of this tension in *The Wrecker* (1892), the novel he co-wrote with his stepson Lloyd Osbourne. Although the opening, as well as the dark heart, of this novel is located in the Pacific, the rambling plot covers several continents, and includes sequences set in San Francisco, Edinburgh, the South West of England, Paris and Barbizon. The latter was the summer headquarters

¹¹ The Clearances were forced displacements of the population of the Scottish Highlands during the 18th and 19th centuries, leading to mass emigration. They were part of a process of agricultural change throughout the United Kingdom, but were particularly notorious as a result of the lack of legal protection for tenants under Scottish law, the abruptness of the change from the traditional clan system, and the brutality of many evictions.

¹² See my *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Literary Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.114.

¹³ Robert Louis Stevenson, “A Humble Remonstrance”, *Longman’s Magazine*, November 1884 (reprinted in *Memories and Portraits* (1887)) in response to Henry James’s “The Art of Fiction” in *Longman’s Magazine*, September 1884.

of the Parisian artists and bohemians in the mid-nineteenth century, and is thus an appropriate setting for a novel which explores in some depth, and at much length, the complex relation between art and life, and especially *economic* life. Whatever flaws there undoubtedly are in what is in every sense a monstrous novel, what *The Wrecker* is brilliantly successful in doing—as I argue in “Art and the Trauma of Life in Stevenson’s *The Wrecker*”—is dramatizing in an unforgettable way the tensions, the collusions and the evasions which relate the pretensions and at times grandeur of art to the miseries of real life in all its economic sordidness. In *The Wrecker* “Realism” meets “Romance” head on, though this apparent binary opposition is deconstructed as the novel goes on to compare the “Romance” of “dickering” (financial trading) with the fantasy of finding a Spanish galleon filled with treasure.¹⁴ The result of this juxtaposition of the brutal realism and the fantastic romance which are integral to *both* art and financial life is a truly shocking piece of art—a work which consciously plays with the genre of the “novel of sensation” that was enjoying its heyday when Stevenson and his stepson wrote *The Wrecker* (Mary Braddon is explicitly mentioned in the novel).

The power of narrative to shock is something that greatly interested Stevenson all his life. A reading effect that he set great store by was what he referred to in Scots as “the cauld grue” [a cold shiver, shudder or creeping of the flesh], which seems to bear at least a family resemblance to the reading effect Freud called “the Uncanny”. If Freud used fantasy texts by E.T.A. Hoffmann to exemplify writing that generated this particular feeling of “uncanniness”, he might well have used texts by Stevenson—not only *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* which seems to create many of the effects Freud describes in his essay “The Uncanny” (especially the deathly effect of the *Doppelgänger* or double), but also a string of other fantasy texts, more or less well known. The chapter “The Uncanniest Scot? Stevenson, Scottish Folklore and Dark Fantasy” outlines and discusses some of the fantasy texts that arguably may entitle Stevenson to be called the uncanniest Scottish writer. The competition for that title is stiff: writers such as Sir Walter Scott, James Hogg and Robert Kirk all produced some genuinely uncanny moments, as did George MacDonald himself.

¹⁴ Is this “Romance” or fantasy element in business entrepreneurship also apparent in a television programme such as “Dragon’s Den”?

George MacDonald and Robert Louis Stevenson

In conclusion, it is worth addressing head-on the question as to why the title of this collection of essays should pair George MacDonald and Robert Louis Stevenson as its central focus. Clearly some of the essays include reference to other writers such as Novalis, E.T.A. Hoffmann, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Philip Pullman and Neil Gaiman. Although some of these (in a broad sense “fantasy”) writers may have something in common with one another as well as with George MacDonald, and Stevenson seems by contrast to come from a rather different stable, nevertheless I would argue that MacDonald shares with Stevenson some commonalities which if not immediately obvious are nonetheless central to their imaginative writing.¹⁵ It is true that MacDonald and Stevenson never actually met, though they almost did: their brief encounter that only just failed to occur would have taken place in Lerwick in the Shetland Islands in June 1869, almost exactly midway through Victoria’s reign. However, to say that both MacDonald and Stevenson are popular Scottish writers of the Victorian period¹⁶ is to say too little, and merely scratches the surface. There are interesting comparisons to be made between the reception histories of both writers: both suffered from their work being pigeonholed as “children’s literature”. If Stevenson was only taken seriously by the academy towards the latter part of the twentieth century (partly due to the long-lasting effect of the almost Oedipal reaction of many Modernist writers to the favourite writer of their parents’ generation¹⁷), MacDonald has only recently begun to be taken more seriously as a Scottish writer, while his status as a symbolist writer has been largely occluded due to his adoption by C.S. Lewis and his fan-club.

However different their literary productions may be, what MacDonald and Stevenson do have in common as Scottish writers working in the second half of the nineteenth century is their wrestling with the Scottish Calvinist tradition. Both writers encountered this tradition in their formative years in Scotland, before they both had to leave their native

¹⁵ On the relation between Stevenson and MacDonald see “Strange Case of Dr MacDonald and Mr Hyde: Robert Louis Stevenson and George MacDonald” in my *Death and Fantasy*.

¹⁶ In the nineteenth century MacDonald’s novels enjoyed great popularity, though they subsequently fell out of fashion; Stevenson’s work has always been popular, something held against him in Modernist circles and in the academy until recently.

¹⁷ This is particularly true of Virginia Woolf and her Bloomsbury coterie. Stevenson had after all been practically discovered by Woolf’s father, Sir Leslie Stephen.

heath not only on health grounds (the lungs of neither writer being capable of surviving a Scottish winter) but also to further their literary careers. In particular, they both had to deal with the complex relationship between the Calvinist tradition and the power of the imagination. If *Phantastes* (a book which Stevenson knew) is on one level arguably *about* the imagination, MacDonald also wrote two essays explicitly on the imagination. Although the second of these, “The Fantastic Imagination” is better known, possibly because it is the more attractive piece, prefiguring as it does some of the main tenets of later “Reader-response” theory, MacDonald’s much earlier essay “The Imagination: Its Function and its Culture” is a more substantial piece of work, which develops MacDonald’s theory of the imagination with reference to Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley. The earlier essay also shows an awareness of the dark other side of the imagination, an emphasis underplayed in the later essay. In the earlier essay MacDonald offers a very high estimate of the imagination, clearly deriving from his study of the Romantics: “It is ... that faculty in man which is likest to the prime operation of the power of God, and has, therefore, been called the *creative* faculty, and its exercise *creation*.¹⁸ However, MacDonald’s attraction to the Romantic emphasis on quasi-divine creativity is tempered by a residual Calvinist insistence on the *difference* between the human and the divine (this despite MacDonald’s repudiation of the ‘puritanical martinet of a God’ of some Calvinists¹⁹):

It is better to keep the word creation for that calling out of nothing which is the imagination of God; except it be as an *occasional symbolic expression, whose daring is fully recognized*, of the likeness of man's work to the work of his maker. The necessary unlikeness between the creator and the created holds within it the equally necessary likeness of the thing made to him who makes it, and so of the work of the made to the work of the maker. (*Orts* 2, emphasis added)

MacDonald is thus wary of using the term “creation” for human artistic activity (he might have been a wee bit suspicious of the title, if not necessarily the practice, of courses in “Creative Writing”). In seeking to resist the blurring of ontological boundaries that characterizes the Romantic assimilation of neo-Platonic mystical pantheism, and its *analogia entis* (the analogy of being), MacDonald seems to approach the notorious claim of the twentieth-century Reformed (or Calvinist) theologian

¹⁸ George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts* (Dodo Press, 2007), p.1. Hereafter cited as *Orts*.

¹⁹ See note 5 above.

Karl Barth that the *analogia entis* is “the anti-Christ”.²⁰ Barth proposed instead an *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith) which gives priority to divine *revelation*, and according to which human attributes may be compared to *revealed* divine attributes. MacDonald appears to anticipate Barth’s (in some sense anti-humanistic) position on this issue by agreeing to compare the human and the divine imagination only on the basis of the former’s derivative resemblance to the latter, *and not vice versa*. The point here is not to see MacDonald as some kind of postmodernist stablemate of Karl Barth *avant la lettre* (this move has been made, though both MacDonald and Barth are arguably more interesting than that); rather the point is to indicate MacDonald’s residual Calvinist suspicion of the ingrained human tendency to corrupt the best into the worst. In terms of the unconscious workings of the imagination, MacDonald writes:

If the dark portion of our own being were the origin of our imaginations, we might well fear the apparition 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 the Maker is our Light. (*Orts* 16-7)

Light may triumph, but for MacDonald—in this respect at least a sound Calvinist—it is not truly *our* light. If MacDonald embraced a form of theological universalism, according to which all (not excluding Satan) will be saved—though only *in the end*, after an infinitely long process of purification—he nevertheless retained a very strong sense of the power of evil. This sense of evil fighting against, and striving to undo, the salvific process is strong in many of MacDonald’s works. Stevenson too was obsessed by a strong (and perhaps distinctively Scottish) sense of the powerful pull of “original” sin; he explored the power of evil in many of his fantasy works, as is discussed below in the chapter “The Uncanniest Scot? Stevenson, Scottish Folklore and Dark Fantasy”. Both Stevenson and MacDonald share a sense of this insistent pull of evil which they both inherited from the Scottish Calvinist tradition; they both tried to escape from this tradition in different ways, but in the end it returned ineluctably (like a distorted mirror-image of the irresistible grace of Calvinism) to haunt them in a way which is—precisely—*uncanny*.

²⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 (T&T Clark, 1975), p.xiii (partially retracted in 2/1, pp.80f).

CHAPTER ONE

THE LIFE-GIVING POWER OF FANTASY: NARRATIVE AS THERAPY IN GEORGE MACDONALD'S *ADELA CATHCART*

The early 1860s was not the best of times to get a literary fairy tale or *Kunstmärchen* published in England. Although from 1823 onwards there were English versions of Grimm's *Fairy Tales* (as the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* came to be called in the English-speaking world), and although translations of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales were available from the 1840s, there was comparatively little by way of indigenous British *Kunstmärchen* or literary fairy tales in the mid 1800s. One notable exception was John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River*, written in 1841 but not published until 1851. One of the ironies surrounding George MacDonald's novel *Adela Cathcart* is that, as we shall see below, Ruskin actually appears in MacDonald's novel thinly disguised as Adela's aunt, Mrs Cathcart, who represents the kind of rigid "evangelical" Christianity in mid-Victorian England which was actively hostile to fairy tales, and made their publication difficult. Mrs Cathcart pointedly asks the narrator of *Adela Cathcart*, John Smith, who is about to recount "The Light Princess", the first of the fairy tales contained in the novel, whether he approves of fairy tales for children. Smith—clearly a persona of MacDonald himself—replies that fairy-tales, of which he is confident God approves, are "not for children alone ... but for everybody that can relish them"¹ Indeed, he says, his fairy tale is "fitter for grown than young children" (AC 55).

Thus MacDonald introduces the idea that "childhood" is more than a merely chronological category, and anticipates the famous lines from his later essay "The Fantastic Imagination": "For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five." (CFT 7) These lines could be seen as virtually providing the slogan for so-

¹ George MacDonald [1864] *Adela Cathcart* (Johannesen, 1994), p. 56. Hereafter cited as AC.

called “crossover fiction”. Already in *Adela Cathcart* MacDonald is insisting that his stories are “for the childlike”, whatever their age. What will also become clear is that he hopes that the effect of reading or hearing his stories will be to help the reader or hearer to *become* more childlike. The idea that “childlikeness” is the most highly valued state of being is made clear in another of MacDonald’s fairy tales, “The Golden Key”, where (in a possible allusion to Swedenborg²) “the oldest man of all—the Old Man of the Fire” turns out to be “a little naked child” who is clearly in some sense divine (*CFT* 138-40). At the heart of MacDonald’s use of “crossover fiction” is not only some generalized Romantic nostalgia for childhood (though doubtless an element of that is present), but a very specific theological conviction, on the very edges of orthodoxy, as will be discussed below.

“The Golden Key” did not appear in *Adela Cathcart* however, but in the later collection entitled *Dealings with the Fairies* (1867) where it was added, together with another new fairy tale entitled “Cross Purposes”, to the three fairy tales in *Adela Cathcart*. In that three year gap between MacDonald having almost surreptitiously to smuggle his fairy tales into print within the framework of a mid-Victorian “realistic” novel (*Adela Cathcart*), and the overt publication of a book of literary fairy tales or *Kunstmärchen* (*Dealings with the Fairies*), something momentous occurred in the history of children’s fantasy literature: the publication in 1865 of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by “Lewis Carroll”. This publishing sensation changed everything, both for children’s literature in general, and for George MacDonald in particular. It is fitting that the book that enabled MacDonald to reissue his fairy tales explicitly as a fairy-tale collection was originally tried out in manuscript form on the MacDonald children. Whenever it was that C.L. Dodgson (aka “Lewis Carroll”) and George MacDonald first met—possibly as early as the late 1850s³—it was in July 1862, just five days after his famous boat trip with the Liddell girls that gave rise to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in the first place, that Dodgson paid the MacDonalds a visit in London, and bumped into George MacDonald on his way to a publisher with the manuscript of “The Light Princess”.⁴ If MacDonald’s visit to the publisher was fruitless, since his fairy tale was rejected, within six months of Dodgson’s visit the MacDonald family had read together, at Dodgson’s request, the manuscript of *Alice’s Adventures Underground*, and MacDonald’s son (and later his biographer) Greville had made his famous remark, as he recounts:

² See William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Lion, 1987), p. 258.

³ *Ibid.*, p.170.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.173.

Accordingly my mother read the story to us ... When she came to the end I, being six, exclaimed that there ought to be sixty thousand volumes of it. Certainly it was our enthusiasm that persuaded our Uncle Dodgson, as we called him, to present the English-speaking world worth one of its future classics, *Alice in Wonderland*.⁵

Whatever intertextual relations there may be between *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and MacDonald's earlier *Phantastes* (1858),⁶ there certainly do seem to be strong connections between the Alice books and MacDonald's "Cross Purposes" in the post-Alice collection *Dealings with the Fairies*. MacDonald makes a series of intertextual jokes about this literary indebtedness to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The heroine of "Cross Purposes" is of course named Alice, though unlike the original Alice, she has a "buddy" named Richard—"name enough for a fairy story", comments the narrator (*CFT* 106). The adventures of MacDonald's Alice echo those of Dodgson's, though they also repeat motifs from *Phantastes*, which, ironically, Dodgson had himself imitated in his *Alice* book. Like her namesake, MacDonald's Alice shrinks to the size of the tiny fairy Peaseblossom, who then, like Anodos's fairy great-great-grandmother in Chapter One of *Phantastes*, transforms herself into "a tall slender lady". Then the tufts of Alice's counterpane become "bushes of furze" (*CFT* 105), much like the transformation of Anodos's bedroom into a wood in Chapter Two of *Phantastes*. The latter chapter's epigraph is from Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, and includes the lines: "'Seest thou not the blue waves above us?' He looked up, and lo! the blue stream was flowing gently over their heads"—lines which seem at least as relevant to the second chapter of "Cross Purposes", where MacDonald's Alice follows her namesake "down and down", ending up under water at the bottom of a pool. "Cross Purposes" perhaps resembles the *Alice* books more than any other of MacDonald's stories, with its hallucinatory sequence of anarchic metamorphoses including umbrellas changing to geese and then to "a flock of huge mushrooms and puffballs", with one goose turning into a hedgehog—the sudden appearance of which recalls the croquet game in *Alice*.⁷

But pre-*Alice*, MacDonald had to resort to the presentation of his fairy tales in the framework of a novel which, though "realistic", was hardly

⁵ Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (Allen & Unwin, 1924), p.342.

⁶ See John Docherty, *The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll-George MacDonald Friendship* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1995).

⁷ As Knoepfelmacher points out (*CFT* 349n7).

conventional. For one thing, there seems to be some kind of self-reflexive metafictional questioning of the very idea of “realism” when the narrator replies to the hostile question of the odious Mrs. Cathcart as to the truth of one of the tales:

“I object to the question,” said I. “I don’t want to know. Suppose, Mrs. Cathcart, I were to put this story-club, members, stories, and all into a book, how would any one like to have her [sic] real existence questioned? It would at least imply that I had made a very bad portrait of that one.”

The lady cast a rather frightened look at me, which I confess I was not sorry to see. (AC 127)

Moreover, although the “realistic” frame has the pragmatic purpose of providing a mechanism by means of which MacDonald could get his fairy tales into print, nevertheless it also has another interesting motivation—that of suggesting the power of stories to heal. It is not the case that for MacDonald any old frame would do. It is simply wrong, for example, when one website devoted to MacDonald describes *Adela Cathcart* as “a creative attempt on MacDonald’s part to package a collection of short stories in the guise of a ‘novel’. In it a group of travelers becomes snowbound in a country inn and pass the time by telling each other stories.”⁸ Not only is this inaccurate, since the story mostly takes place in the home of Adela’s uncle, Colonel Cathcart, who has invited various people for Christmas, when, unsurprisingly in a Victorian novel, it snows; the framing is also much more complex and interesting than that. Adela Cathcart is suffering from the kind of “mysterious ailment” to which young women were so notoriously prone in Victorian times.⁹ The medicine prescribed by the stuffy Dr Wade (“steel-wine and quinine”) is clearly failing to make any headway with Adela. Her uncle, the narrator John Smith, is inclined to try “the homeopathic system—the only one on which mental distress, at least, can be treated with any advantage” (AC 13). *Adela Cathcart* was “affectionately dedicated” to a well-known homeopathic doctor, John Rutherford Russell, whose account of homeopathy MacDonald discussed in his review—later published in *A Dish of Orts*—of Russell’s *The History and Heroes of Medicine*. Without being overtly enthusiastic, MacDonald nevertheless seems quietly to approve of Russell’s sober defence of homeopathy’s historical credentials,

⁸ <http://www.macdonaldphillips.com/bibliographygeorge.html>
(accessed 19/12/10).

⁹ See for example Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Yale University Press, 1979), pp.53ff; and Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (Virago, 1987).