

North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies

Volume 2

Article 2

1-1-1983

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Recommended Citation

Prickett, Stephen (1983) "The Two Worlds of George MacDonald," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol2/iss1/2>

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The Two Worlds of George MacDonald

Stephen Prickett

“**Y**ou would have me then understand, Mr Raven,” I said, “that you go through my house into another world, heedless of disparting space?”

“That I go through it is an incontrovertible acknowledgement of space,” returned the old librarian.

“Please do not quibble, Mr Raven,” I rejoined. “Please to take my question as you know I meant it.”

“There is in your house a door, one step through which carries me into a world very much another than this.”

“A better?”

“Not throughout; but so much another that most of its physical, and many of its mental laws are different from those of this world.”

This idea of two worlds co-existing in time and space, superimposed upon one another and yet, except for the occasional mysterious doorway, totally invisible to one another, is one of the most persistent themes of George MacDonald’s fantasy writing. It is central to the action of *Phantastes*, his first prose work, and it is no less important to *Lilith*, from which that passage was drawn. The setting is interesting. Mr Vane, the protagonist, has discovered a manuscript written by his father in which he describes a conversation with Mr Raven, the elusive figure who seems to be at one and the same time librarian, bird, sexton, and finally our forefather Adam. The conversation parallels Vane’s own conversations with Mr Raven, but also in some respects goes beyond them in their metaphysical probing. Vane’s father, for example, is more curious than his son about the relationship of the two worlds, but as we have seen the answers he receives are, to say the least, enigmatic.

This manuscript has several purposes in the narrative of *Lilith*. One of its most important is to assure Vane that he is not alone. The sudden discovery that he is poised in some mysterious way between this world and another, where in order to live he must sleep the sleep of death, is not unnaturally highly disconcerting. What the manuscript demonstrates to him is that his experience is neither as new nor as unique as he had at first [end

of page 14] supposed. Mr Raven's contention that all men must sooner or later enter his house is substantiated by at least the knowledge that Vane's father did. Similarly, we the readers, who, if we are typical of Victorian novel-readers, would ourselves have borrowed the book from a library, are placed in an analogous position, poised between our own lives and the world of fiction in the book in front of us. It was a duality that MacDonald himself was entirely conscious of. He was in his life as in his writings a man of two worlds. It was his peculiar gift as a writer to see and to make others see that to live in two juxtaposed worlds is not an accident of spiritual geography or a psychological quirk, but part of man's normal condition of existence. That insight was rooted simply enough in his own personal story. England was for him a long way from home.

It is easy for the foreign reader—or the American reader used to the vast distances of his own continent—to forget the even vaster cultural gulf, between MacDonald's childhood home in Huntly, Aberdeen, and his environment as a writer, at first in Hastings on the Sussex coast and then in London. The two are only 500 miles apart, but they represent two nations, two cultures, two religions. In the vivid phrase of a recent critic, he'd grown up in a traditional atmosphere compounded of "Calvinistic hell-fire, oatcakes, horsemanship, agricultural virtues, and explorations of the neighbourhood ruins." It was in many ways a typical upbringing of the period for a poor rural Scottish boy. He grew up within a religious and educational system very far removed from the Anglican or English equivalents of his day. In one respect at least it was far superior to anything he would have been likely to have found in England. The Scottish education system was one of the best in Europe. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century Scotland had five universities to England's two. MacDonald was able to go on from his local school to the University of Aberdeen, where in 1845 he gained his MA in Chemistry and Natural Philosophy (as Physics was then called).

Yet even within this background there were elements suggestive of the tensions and conflict that were to shape his life. Though his upbringing had been Calvinist, he did not wholly belong to the Calvinist ethos. His grandfather had been a Gaelic-speaking Highlander, representative of a very different emotional and intellectual tradition from that of either strict Calvinism or the more urbane Scottish enlightenment. As we have just **[15]** been reminded, the ruins of the old faith and of clan warfare, the romantic abbeys and castles, were a part of his childhood landscape; and what in the rest of his family was no more than a slightly fey streak was to blossom in

MacDonald into a fully elaborated mysticism. But even here the contradictions obtrude themselves. The image of the poor but earnest scholarship boy entering university on a bursary is rapidly displaced by the record of financial extravagance that was to be a recurring problem throughout his whole life. If we are to read the accounts of similar situations in his novels as being autobiographical—as at least some of his biographers have done—his chronic overspending was helped by hard drinking in the Aberdeen brothels. Certainly we know that in 1842 he was forced to leave the University for a time in order to earn more money.

When, after some kind of spiritual crisis in 1847, MacDonald decided to seek ordination, it was not to the Scottish Presbyterians but to England and the Congregationalists that he turned, and in 1848 he entered Highbury College in London as a theology student. In addition to his formal theological studies he was also an avid reader of German, a rare accomplishment in England, where only twenty years earlier it was said there were only two men in the University of Oxford who could read German.

This Scottish erudition was from the first to arouse the gravest suspicion in the elders of his first church at Arundel in Sussex. In fact it doesn't seem to have been German theology so much as German poetry that attracted him. His first published work was a translation of the *Twelve Spiritual Songs* by the German romantic poet Novalis. He was also reading other mystics at this time, including Blake, and finding through the paintings of Turner a visible confirmation in nature of his own growing mystical intuitions.

It was from this background, then, that George MacDonald came to Arundel in 1850, but before he could take up residence one other event intervened, which was to have a lifelong impact on him. He was discovered to have tuberculosis. It was the first of many such attacks, and though he was to live through all of them and finally die at ripe old age in 1905, he was for much of his life a semi-invalid, always conscious of death as more or less an immediate possibility. Tuberculosis was the family disease. His father and two brothers eventually died of it, as did four out of his eleven children. The disease was to have, moreover, a lasting effect on **[16]** his literary as well as on his private sensibility. Some have speculated on the possible connections between TB and literary talent. There is certainly an impressive list of nineteenth-century writers who died of TB. But more to our point is the way in which it served to reinforce MacDonald's Calvinist lesson—that here is no abiding city, that he lived as a wanderer on borrowed time, which was a debt

too precious (or too heavy) not to repay with interest.

Though Sussex apparently offered him the security and salary he needed to get married, he came to Sussex as an outsider, a sick Scot of poetical and mystical leanings, to take charge of English dissenters, lower middle-class and commercial in outlook, and as rigidly Calvinist as any of the congregations MacDonald had left behind, him in Aberdeenshire. Even in the first flush of enthusiasm the gap between himself and his new flock was dauntingly obvious. In an early letter to his father he wrote,

The people are a simple people—not particularly well-informed—mostly tradespeople—and in middling circumstances. They chiefly reside in the town, which has between two and three thousand inhabitants. There are none I could call society for me—but with my books now and the beautiful earth, and added to these soon, I hope, my wife—and above all that, God to care for me—in whom I and all things are—I do not much fear the want of congenial society

Within three years it was to prove, in spite of pious hopes, a recipe for disaster. To social and cultural differences was added the doctrinal ones. At the final showdown the deacons of the church charged him with three areas of heresy. Firstly, that he was unwise enough to speculate about salvation for animals, though he had, modestly enough, added that this was only “for all he knew.” Secondly, far worse, he had followed up this piece of liberal agnosticism by suggesting that the same dispensation might even be extended to the heathen—which was much worse. Finally, turning away from specifics altogether, the deacons declared MacDonald to be tainted by German theology; by which, interestingly enough, they seem to have meant not the bolder speculations of Eichhorn, Feuerbach and Strauss, which about the same time had destroyed the faith of George Eliot, of whom they seem never to have heard, but simply that MacDonald had been translating Novalis, whose work today looks unexceptionally pietistic. [17]

Thus that sense of inhabiting two worlds, so characteristic of all MacDonald’s fantasy, is rooted at any rate on the most obvious level in the facts of his own outward existence. But though circumstances may have made his an extreme case, it was by no means a unique one. What is unique to my knowledge is not MacDonald’s primary experience, but the aesthetic and philosophical use he was able to make of that experience in his fiction. In his introduction to Greville MacDonald’s life of his father, G K Chesterton singles out for especial praise one book

that has made a difference to my whole existence, which helped me to see things in a certain way from the start; a vision of things which even so real a revolution as a change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed. Of all the stories I have read, including even all the novels of the same novelist, it remains the most real, the most realistic, in the exact sense of the phrase the most like life. It is called *The Princess and the Goblin*.

What in particular inspired Chesterton and gave him such a sense of realism was precisely this sense of two worlds. Elsewhere, in *The Victorian Age in Literature*, he spelt out what he means more specifically: “MacDonald, a Scot of genius as genuine as Carlyle’s, could write fairy stories that made all existence a fairy tale. He could give the real sense that everyone had the end of an elfin thread that must at last lead them into Paradise.” In short, MacDonald offered a new way of writing in English. Certainly it resembled the conventional fairy story in its use of magic and in the introduction of non-human beings. But it differed in that this mythological framework was made to serve very subtle and highly structured literary purposes. Behind the magical beings of MacDonald’s universes lie the philosophical and theological principles of a scheme that is as carefully worked out as that of Dante—indeed, his references to Dante in *At the Back of the North Wind* make it clear, that, almost unbelievably, he is inviting just such a comparison. When the little boy, Diamond, actually goes to the back of the North Wind, we are told that one of the very few who had been there before him was a great Italian of noble family who died more than five hundred years ago: “His name was Durante . . . and it means Lasting, for his books will last as long as there are enough men in the world worthy of having them.” It is quite clear from the descriptions that follow that the [18] back of the North Wind is none other than the Earthly Paradise (*Purgatorio* Cantos 23 & 24). But it’s not, I think, conceit that makes MacDonald deliberately invite comparison with one of the world’s greatest allegorists. It is rather that he, like Chesterton, is seeking to establish himself within an existing literary tradition—a tradition not of folklore and primitive ritual, but of complex theological sophistication.

Moreover the comparison is not one of genre but of content. MacDonald is attempting to open up and articulate areas of human experience that had been more or less dormant since the Renaissance. In the face of a predominantly empiricist and scientific culture concerned to rationalise

and where possible demythologise the long record of man's awareness of the numinous, MacDonald reasserts the value of myth and symbol, not as a primitive relic nor simply as a literary device, but as a vital medium of human consciousness. Religious experience is seen not as something to be reduced to a psychological or physical term in order to be articulated, but as itself, in itself, a new kind of articulateness, a symbolic, myth-making activity that taps the very roots of human creativity.

Thus MacDonald's philosophy is inseparable from his serious symbolism. At its simplest it resembles the medieval idea of correspondences, so prevalent also in Dante. But MacDonald's way of applying it was very un-medieval. Greville MacDonald noted a conversation in which his father once tried to explain his ideas on symbolism:

He would allow that the algebraic symbol, which concerns only the three-dimensioned, has no *substantial* relation to the unknown quantity; nor the "tree where it falleth" to the man unredeemed, the comparison being false. But the rose, when it gives some glimmer of the freedom for which a man hungers, does so because of its *substantial* unity with the man, each in degree being a signature of God's immanence. To a spiritual pilgrim the flower no longer seems a pretty design on the veil, "the cloak and cloud that shadows me from Thee"; for see! she opens her wicket into the land of poetic reality, and he, passing through and looking gratefully back, then knows her for his sister the Rose, of spiritual substance one with himself. So may even a gem, giving from its heart reflections of heavenly glory, awaken like memory in ourselves and send our eyes upwards.

So also we may find co-substance between [19] [20] [Note: **image not available**] the stairs of a cathedral-spire and our own "secret stair" up to the wider vision—the faculty of defying the "plumb-line of gravity". (*George MacDonald and his Wife*)

Now clearly this conversation owes much to Coleridge's idea of the symbol, and MacDonald was always quick to acknowledge his debt to Coleridge. Now for Coleridge a symbol was essentially bifocal. Its characteristic quality was that it belongs simultaneously to two different planes of existence, so that it revealed "the special in the individual, the general in the especial, or the universal in the general; above all, the translucence of the eternal in and through the temporal." In other words, the defining quality of a symbol in Coleridge's sense was that it brought two separate worlds into relationship

with each other.

Here undoubtedly is one of the roots of MacDonald's two worlds. But there are others no less important. Like MacDonald's, Coleridge's thought is at once Christian and Platonic. But there is a quality shared alike by MacDonald and by Plato that is less evident in Coleridge. The former were both mystics of a particular kind. Whereas for Coleridge one feels the rose could be a symbol of divine purity, for MacDonald, as we have seen, that divine purity when we finally encounter it as it were face to face, is none other than our sister the rose—not an abstraction but a form, a form that is in the Platonic sense more concrete and real than the earthly abstraction we all anticipated. Similarly for MacDonald it is the role of the gem not simply to inspire us but to awaken in us memories that we have in a sense always possessed. We recognise at once the Platonic 'Recognition Theme' running through this.

But there is a difference between MacDonald and the earlier Platonists. Whereas for Plato and Dante alike the perception of spiritual truth was a collective process, involving what was common to mankind, for MacDonald, living in and belonging to a world of nineteenth-century individualism, we climb our own secret stair to the wider vision. The articulation of truth is indispensable from a discovery of one's own individuality. Irene, in *The Princess and the Goblin*, has her own secret stair by which she comes to her great-great-grandmother in the attic. Looty, her earth-bound nurse, cannot find it, and even Curdie, though he can be made to ascend it, finds nothing for him at the top at that stage, only a heap of straw, an old tub and a withered apple. He has eventually to find his own way to the grandmother, and even the Princess cannot help him here. [21]

There are direct autobiographical parallels to these two worlds in MacDonald's own mysticism and his sense of God in nature. Writing to him from Arundel shortly after his resignation, his wife suddenly steps through cliché into something more concrete and private, when she moves from a description of "a sweet, sunny, breezy Sunday afternoon" to "our one tree . . . whispering most sweetly to me all about you, and Him who cares about both of us."

But at another level we find that MacDonald's sense of two worlds affects the very structure of his metaphors themselves. Look at another example from *Lilith*:

I saw no raven, but the librarian—the same slender elderly man, in a rusty black coat, large in the body and long in the tails. I

had seen only his back before; now for the first time I saw his face. It was so thin that it showed the shape of the bones under it, suggesting the skull his last-claimed profession must have made him familiar with. But in truth I had never before seen a face so alive, or a look so keen and friendly as that in his pale blue eyes, which yet had a haze about them as if they had done much weeping. “You knew I was not a raven,” he said with a smile.

“I knew you were Mr Raven,” I replied; “but somehow I thought you were a bird too.”

“What made you think me a bird?”

“You looked a raven, and I saw you dig worms out of the earth with your beak.”

“And then?”

“Toss them in the air.”

“And then?”

“They grew butterflies, and flew away.”

“Did you ever see a raven do that? I told you I was a sexton!”

“Does a sexton toss worms in the air, and turn them into butterflies?”

“Yes.”

“I never saw one do it!”

“You saw me do it!—But I am still librarian in your house, for I never was dismissed, and never gave up the office. Now I am librarian here as well.”

“But you have just told me you were sexton here.” **[22]**

“So I am. It is much the same profession. Except you are a true sexton, books are but dead bodies to you, and a library nothing but a catacomb.”

The symbolism of this passage, startling as it may seem at first sight, is not all that difficult to work out—the sexton buries men so that they may be raised to a more glorious resurrection. The sacrament of baptism is a ritual enactment of death and rebirth. Even books must be buried and raised to the glory of God. Scholarship is otherwise mere meaningless pedantry, performed only as an ego-trip for the wormlike academic. Mr Raven is merely an acting of a visible and concrete parable, an ancient and Biblical truth.

But what interests me particularly here is not the traditional symbols, or the way in which MacDonald is re-using them, so much as the method by

which he has tried to build into an event—a metaphorical event—the sense of two different systems in juxtaposition. The whole point of what Raven has just been doing is that it doesn't make literal sense; we're forced to think round it, to search for some hidden meaning which is altered itself by the content of the narrative. There is a whole area of human experience which can only be represented by the tensional language of metaphor, stretching us—literally—between impossible alternatives in order to discover a new meaning that is neither. It is, in short, this new sort of reality, only to be found at the intersection of the two perspectives which produced it, that so interests MacDonald. It provides the central structure for almost every one of his fantasy novels. As we have seen, the origins of that symbolism may lie in his own life and experience, in traditional theology, or in literary tradition. But if we stress too much either the autobiographical or the traditional aspects of such symbols, we are in danger of missing the very stereoscopic quality of MacDonald's writing that makes his metaphors so complex and in a technical sense so modernist. [23]