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A Note on the Structure and Conclusion of *Phantastes*

John Docherty

David Holbrook, in *George MacDonald and Dreams of the Other World, VII, IV*, (1983), likens *Phantastes* to “a symphony developed by variations on the unconscious themes”; William Raeper, in *George MacDonald*, (1987), feels “it might almost qualify as a stream of consciousness (or rather unconsciousness) novel It is a novel without a plot.” Most critics would accept these assessments of the importance of the “unconscious” in the story, and MacDonald himself would probably have agreed. However, it is difficult to understand how a symphony could actually be developed from unconscious themes, and even though *Phantastes* possesses no plot it *is* like a symphony, it does possess a structure. This structure, although undoubtedly related to unconscious themes, is not immediately derived from them and can only be a conscious creation. An appreciation of the structure of *Phantastes* is essential to a proper understanding of the story, but little attention has been given to it. Robert Lee Wolff, for example, scarcely mentions structure in his long chapter on *Phantastes* in *The Golden Key* (1961).

To recognise the broad framework of *Phantastes* is in no way to devalue the story by allegorizing it, although undue elaboration of the schema might well cause us to slip into the type of allegorical interpretation which MacDonald in *Orts* warns is “a weariness of the spirit.” *Phantastes* is particularly vulnerable because much of the imagery has not been completely assimilated and hovers between (very powerful) allegory and true myth. Additionally, some of the assumptions underlying *Phantastes*, which were real to MacDonald, can only be comprehended as allegory by reductionist critics.

Phantastes is a tale told by one Anodos of 21 days he spent in Fairy Land immediately following his 21st birthday. The first and last chapters are in the nature of a prologue and epilogue outside Fairy Land, and two middle chapters are devoted to free renderings of two books he reads in the library of the fairy palace. The remaining 21 chapters are grouped into three sections, each beginning with a water **[end of page 25]** adventure with typical water imagery of implied death and rebirth. The middle section describes Anodos’s adventures in the fairy palace and its above- and below-ground

environs. The first and last sections have reflecting series of encounters: for example, Anodos's shattering of the girl's world (allegorized as a globe) in the first part, is reflected in her reintegration of his world in the third part.

This threefold organisation is repeated at several levels in the parts, just as happens, on a grander scale, in *The Divine Comedy*.¹ In both works it conveys the relationships of the different aspects of man to one another and to the Godhead.

In the first of the three parts of *Phantastes*, Anodos dwells largely in his perceptions. As the knight subsequently remarks: "There was something noble in him, but it was a nobleness of thought, not of deed." His early adventures are concerned with the imaginative perception, first of art, then of the formative forces of plants, then of the activities of insects. Following this, his thoughts are taken up with aspects of eros in a threefold descent from beech diva to marble lady to Alder Woman. Then he willfully enters the darkest corner of his mind when he comes to the church of darkness and chooses first to look in, next to enter, then to open the closet door where he encounters his shadow. The rest of this section is devoted to a description of some of the effects of the shadow.

In the middle part of the story Anodos penetrates deeply into his feelings. In the palace library it is thought-related feeling: "if the book was one of travels, I found myself the traveller . . . Was it a history? I was the chief actor therein." Then, in the halls of the dancers who are also statues, he encounters the different moods of the feeling soul. Lastly, with misguided will, he pursues the white lady underground. In the final part of the story Anodos, by observing the knight, and by three knightly acts of his own, gradually comes to learn what is

1. The Trinitarian structure of *The Divine Comedy* is analysed by Paul Priest in *Dante's Incarnation of the Trinity* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1982). [26] [27]
[Note: images not available]

required for true deed.

So much is clear and important for understanding MacDonald's aims. Inevitably, however, in a story written in the short space of two months, there are inconsistencies and loose ends, several of which are noted by Wolff.

An element of systole and diastole is prominent in *Phantastes*. Thus Anodos comes "home" at intervals to kindly older women who treat him like a tired child until he can go forth again refreshed. If we exclude the

“mighty woman” who is mentioned briefly near the end of MacDonald’s poem *A Hidden Life*, the third such woman in *Phantastes* is the prototype of all his subsequent wise women. She is in conscious harmony with the spiritual forces of nature whereas the second woman merely accepts the world of Faerie and the first is like a savage, in thrall to the lowest spiritual beings. Their outlooks are reflected in their respective dwellings. The four trials which Anodos undergoes whilst staying at the wise woman’s foursquare cottage obtrude conspicuously into the loose threefold organisation of the rest of the story.

The cottage has “a high pyramidal roof” and doors in the middle of each of the four sides out of which Anodos goes to his four trials. He returns from each trial when he encounters the old woman’s mystic sign: “in dark red a mark like this ☿.” The symbol can be seen as a very slight modification of the CANCER symbol so that it represents two arms, one giving whilst the other receives. The constellation of Cancer suggests a vortex, and the symbol is usually taken to represent a descent into the vortex (chaos) and subsequent regeneration. (The Crab is essentially the Sign’s negative aspect.) Thus Anodos’s four trials are each, in effect, separated by death and rebirth, just like the three main parts of the story.

As a symbol of giving and receiving at the highest level, the old woman’s sign repeats the imagery of her cottage, which from every side presents the aspect of a square surmounted by a triangle—a traditional symbol for Heaven and Earth, expressed, for example, in the four Cardinal and three Spiritual Virtues and in the four earthly and three heavenly petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. Giving and receiving (in) Love is the central theme of *Phantastes*. However, the story is [28] essentially a Tragedy—in contrast to Dante’s *Comedy*—since Anodos never achieves the balance between giving and receiving exemplified in the mystic sign but merely switches from one to the other.

Despite what Anodos learns from his trials, and despite the threefold structure which upholds him, he is trapped in negative duality. This is well exemplified in his two successive seductions. First his feckless eroticism causes him to yield utterly to the evil Alder Woman; then his desire for “purity” causes him to yield to his interpretation of the song sung by the young woman while he is self-imprisoned. This very positive song is not what arouses Anodos. It merely triggers him to act upon a wish he has just expressed “to be a child again, innocent, fearless, without shame or desire.” His actions were inadvertently the means whereby she was able to grow in

outlook into a young woman; now her actions inadvertently cause him to regress into a childish outlook.

MacDonald's close friend Lewis Carroll understood Anodos's two temptations very clearly and portrays them in his poem *Stolen Water* (1862). The first temptress in Carroll's poem is more-or-less indetical with the Alder Woman. The song his second temptress sings, instead of being related to the song Anodos hears, converts Anodos's own wish into a command:

“be as a child—
So shalt thou sing for very joy of breath—
So shalt thou wait thy dying,
In holy transport lying—
So pass rejoycing through the gate of death,
In garment undefiled.”

The effects of Anodos's conversion do not become evident until the very end of his life in Fairy Land; then he fails to recognise a metamorphosis of his shadow even more deadly than when it changed into the double and imprisoned him. That double was immediately recognisable as himself; now, however, the double appears as *two* opposite figures. Anodos first overthrows a father-figure, then throttles a werewolf. He is demonstrating his own hollow nature and slaying parts of himself, although, obviously, he does not regard his [29] actions in this light. Since, instead of “Christ within,” he has merely a childish image of “purity,” all opposites reaction against one another and manifest as negatives. His werewolf causes him to picture his former spiritual ideals as a hollow, rotten father-king, whilst this hollow image of a father-king makes his human feelings seem a werewolf.

In many ways, MacDonald in *Phantastes*, at the age of 34, was trying to imagine himself into the soul of a romantic youth. But did he, at that time, appreciate the negative aspects of Anodos's last acts in Fairy Land? Do these last actions of Anodos in any way accord with his final verdict on his adventures 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”?

“These questions I cannot yet answer . . .” [30]