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George MacDonald's *The Portent* and Colin Thubron's *A Cruel Madness*

John Docherty

The Portent was at one time recognised as among the finest of MacDonald's works.¹ The most remarkable aspect of the story is its modernity. The personality of its narrator-protagonist owes much to the protagonists of some of E.T.A. Hoffmann's stories of half a century earlier, yet, despite this, MacDonald's story strongly resembles a modern psychological novel such as Colin Thubron's *A Cruel Madness*.² Some of the parallels with *A Cruel Madness* are astonishing, and a comparison of the two stories is an effective way of illuminating MacDonald's intentions.

Both stories explore aspects of the human psyche under internal stress which have been largely ignored by fiction writers since the Romantic Period. Thubron's account of a hospital and its patients has prompted comparisons with other hospital novels, such as Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*; but this is the lesser theme of Thubron's story. The more important theme, and the one which so closely parallels MacDonald's principal theme, is the changing personality of the narrator.

The Portent first appeared in *The Cornhill Magazine* between May and July 1860. The version first published in 1864 (now reprinted by Johannesen)³, as well as being considerably modified from the 1860 text, is extended beyond the harrowing end of that version to nearly twice the length. Yet, by changing the tempo, MacDonald sustains the build-up of tension to the very end. Incredibly, however, some commentators describe the closing episode of the longer version as a conventional happy ending, and imply that this trivializes the story. There could be no higher tribute to MacDonald's skill. He invests the narrator-protagonists of his romances with such authenticity that many readers accept their every word.

The 1860 version of *The Portent* was published anonymously with a fictional dedication to the doctor tending the narrator;⁴ thus the nature of the narrative is evident from the beginning. By contrast, MacDonald prefaces the 1864 text with a signed dedication to Duncan McColl, RN., a distant relative and close friend. McColl was a doctor, but this is not mentioned, although MacDonald does imply that his friend is interested in dream-states. The initial hint as to the true nature of the story is here more subtle: the narrator

describes **[end of page 19]** his father as a Campbell “of long descent,” and no MacDonald proud of his ancestry—as George MacDonald certainly was—would make a Campbell the hero of a tale.⁵

Donald Campbell, like Thubron’s protagonist Daniel Pashley, has apparently inherited from his mother a proneness to intensely vivid visual impressions which he is able to describe with garish intensity. Yet his powers of visual imagery are as nothing by comparison with his sensitivity to auditory impressions. It has been suggested⁶ that MacDonald is writing autobiography where Duncan describes his childhood delight in looking forward:

to the hour when, laying myself straight upon my back, as if my bed were my coffin, I could call up from underground all who had passed away, and see how they fared, yea what progress they had made towards final dissolution of form.

Yet this is intended primarily as a foil to what immediately follows:

—but all the time, with my fingers pushed hard into my ears, lest the faintest sounds should invade the silent citadel of my soul. If inadvertently I removed one of my fingers, the agony of terror I instantly experienced is indescribable.

Even Poe’s protagonists appear as subdued personalities when compared with this intensity of sensation. That MacDonald was an exceptionally sensitive child is scarcely to be doubted, but that he is merely recalling his own sensations here seems unlikely.

Various mutually conflicting clues are given as to the cause of Duncan’s condition. And, as in a Hoffmann story, all these clues are meant to be equally convincing, even those which point to supernatural causes. In this, however, MacDonald is less convincing than Hoffmann. For example, the reader has to accept that when Duncan’s mother battles with supernatural evil at his birth this is as important a factor in determining the course of his life as the fact that during that period he was left abandoned and scarcely breathing for nearly an hour. The image of a baby’s basic needs being neglected in the excitement of a melodramatic struggle with a supernatural opponent also appears at the beginning of chapter 23 of *Phantastes*, but there the emphasis is subtly different.

Both Thubron’s and MacDonald’s protagonists become teachers. They fall in love with women who are their social superiors,⁷ and they describe how their love enables them to stand up valiantly to their overbearing employers. In both stories crises supervene, and there is a hiatus

in the plots. [20] Then, years later, the protagonists each believe they see their beloved in a lunatic asylum.

The effectiveness of Thubron's story is enhanced by its being told in a series of "flashbacks," and the brief encounter at the asylum actually occurs at the beginning of his story. MacDonald displays his skill by being able to tell a psychological thriller of this kind without recourse to the flashback device. Hence the first version of his story ends where Thubron's begins, apart from a short epilogue.⁸

When Duncan ultimately finds his Alice again near the end of the second version of the story he encounters her asleep, and he fears that as she wakes he will see on her face only "the bewildered and indigent expression of the insane." This is exactly what Daniel Pashley does see on the face of his beloved when he thinks he sees her in the lunatic asylum and when he locates her again near the end of Thubron's story. Both Daniel and Duncan have to endure years of frustration before reunion with their beloveds. During this period, they have intervals of exceptionally lucid perception of psychological-spiritual reality, and this at times leads them to doubt whether some of their encounters actually happened, and even whether the women they love ever existed.

Having rediscovered their beloveds, both protagonists plan to help them escape from the places where they are confined. In each story the meticulous planning of the escape increases further the already tense atmosphere, and the horror of the climax is handled in masterly fashion. Duncan's unassailable assurance perhaps highlights the pathos more effectively, but there is horror enough in the way Daniel, at one level of his being, is very clearly aware of his real situation.

Daniel retains intermittent vivid perception of external reality to the very end of Thubron's story, despite his interior world becoming progressively more dominant. Duncan at first has an imaginative life integrated with that of his foster-mother, Margaret, and this enriches his everyday life. But by the end of the story he has become totally enclosed in a world of the imagination which is the antithesis of hers. It is the world of the Victorian popular novel, where devoted servants suddenly materialize in exactly the right place at exactly the right time, possessing the exact inside knowledge and the appropriate resources to facilitate the hero's fantastic schemes, while wholly indifferent to the likely effect of their behaviour upon their careers. This vapid fantasy world is contrasted with Margaret's seership, which so dramatically enriches her harshly beautiful Highland existence. A

polarity between an [21] archetypal wise woman of the northern hills and the decadent world the protagonist finds in the south is a theme to which MacDonald returns frequently in his writings, but its psychological basis is nowhere probed so deeply, nor so disturbingly, as in *The Portent*.

MacDonald must soon have become aware that, despite his careful efforts to delineate the mental state of his protagonist, many of his readers were too caught up in conventional modes of thought to perceive the purport of his story's ending. This may be why he made the very uncharacteristic observation to his wife that he wrote *The Portent* just "for the tale."⁹ However, he had given his publishers the satisfaction of thinking they had obtained from him the happy ending they apparently demanded, and himself the satisfaction of remaining faithful to the mood of his 1860 version of the story. But in most of his subsequent "realistic" novels he takes care to make his central theme comprehensible to every reader. As Glenn Sadler says: "In spite of all the psychic explorations that go on . . . there is the quiet confidence that the unknown is being seen through the eyes of a child; there is nothing really to fear in the dark, because the father is holding the child's hand."¹⁰ And when the traumas are past, the protagonists (and the reader) come through to a legitimate experience of uplift and joy.

Notes

1. See, for example, *The Cambridge History of English Literature* XIII, 183.
2. Thubron, Colin. *A Cruel Madness*. 1984. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1985. Thubron (pers. com. 1992) confirms that he had not encountered MacDonald's story when he wrote the book.
3. The edition reprinted by the Johannesens is the third American edition. As well as *The Portent*, it includes several tales from *Adela Cathcart*, plus two further tales.
4. The substance of this dedication is reproduced in chapter 17 of the 1864 version. "Dr Ruthwell" is presumably intended to represent MacDonald's friend, the famous homoeopathic doctor Rutherford Russell, to whom he dedicates *Adela Cathcart*. The extensive musings upon the nature of various mental states in each of these books really need to be read in conjunction with each other.
5. This observation about MacDonalds and Campbells is made by F. Hal Broome in his unpublished doctoral thesis "The Science-Fantasy of [22] George MacDonald," Edinburgh University 1985, page 95. In the first version of *The Portent* the fact that Duncan is a Campbell is not revealed until part three.
6. Raeper, William. *George MacDonald*. Tring; Lion 1987. page 33.
7. As in several other of his early stories, MacDonald seems to allude to his friend Lewis Carroll. Duncan's love, Lady Alice, is kept in a state of ignorance by

repressive relatives wishing to exploit her. He is unable to accept the fact of her growing up, and many years later he sees her as unchanged: “a portrait of my own young Alice.” All this resembles Carroll’s perception of Alice Liddell.

8. This epilogue is clearly the prototype for the epilogue to *Lilith*. The protagonist waits, grasping at the hope that ultimately he will be reunited with his young beloved. He has already quoted Novalis’s “Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one,” and he ends “I wait—I wait.” *Lilith* closes with: “I wait: asleep or awake, I wait,” followed by Novalis’s aphorism. Recognition of this allusion to *The Portent* considerably intensifies the effect of the other ironies embodied in the ending of *Lilith*.

9. MacDonald, Greville. *George MacDonald and his Wife*. London: Unwin 1924. page 318.

10. Sadler, Glenn. Introduction. *The Portent*. By George MacDonald. San Francisco: Harper, 1979. xxiii. **[23]**