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Bridge over the River Why: The Imagination as a Way to Meaning

Kerry Dearborn

The imagination has long been suspected of spawning more deviance than devotion, more illusion than truth, and more vacuity than solid understanding. A common contemporary question is “What’s the point of reading imaginative literature or stories in the complex technological age in which we live?” Many people believe they must not waste time on “frivolous activities” such as reading fiction; self-help literature must be the first priority, they believe. This sentiment is not new: Augustine, for example, refers to literature in his *Confessions* as a source of “empty studies” (32). To answer such complaints, we can turn to George MacDonald who addresses these issues in one of his short stories and in an essay on the role of the imagination and the harmonizing of the imagination to truth. The following article, will discuss the way “Photogen and Nycteris” presents the imagination as a bridge to meaning and truth; it will also examine the foundations of that bridge, particularly as seen in *A Dish of Orts*.

Watho, the witch who raises Photogen and Nycteris, is a pragmatic woman who seeks experiences and relationships that will enhance her knowledge. She understands the essence of “networking” and management and the accumulation of knowledge as a source shows that she aligns value and usefulness. People who are not useful to her she sees as dispensable. Her experiment with Photogen offers a nineteenth-century portrait of how to raise a child with positive self-esteem. Allowed from birth to see nothing of darkness or shadow, he masters multiple skills and develops a robust sense of confidence. Nycteris, on the other hand, is placed in constant darkness from her infancy, which says something about the Victorian approach to women and to the imagination itself. **[end of page 29]** Nycteris is officially given only music lessons, though her nurse does give in to her pleas to learn to read.¹ She is kept cloistered, *entombed* as MacDonald describes her chambers, just as the imagination in much of MacDonald’s day was allotted only a tiny sphere and was more often associated with the darkness than with the light, especially by church affiliates.

Each of these three main characters strives to expand, but each

chooses a different method. Watho seeks to expand through accumulation and control, Photogen through mastery and conquest, and Nycteris through more light and through harmony and unity with the light and the world around her, rather than through mastery of it. She exemplifies what Dorothy Sayers sees as the artistic approach to life: “Perhaps the first thing that the common man can learn from the artist is that the only way of ‘mastering’ one’s material is to abandon the whole conception of mastery and to co-operate with it in love: whoever will be a lord of life, let him be its servant” (186).

Nycteris seeks to serve Photogen by offering him comfort in the midst of his terror of the night. Although she is rather astonished at his fear and at that which distinguishes him from her, she seeks to understand this “otherness” through her questions and her care. In this encounter, MacDonald humorously exposes the falseness of Victorian gender stereotypes. Not knowing any males, Nycteris urges him to be a brave girl. When he protests, she responds: “Oh, I see! . . . No, of course! you can’t be a girl: girls are not afraid— without reason. I understand now: it is because you are not a girl that you are so frightened” (66). MacDonald is urging us to rethink femininity and that which is associated with it—the night and the imaginative.² Though Photogen is terrified by that which he cannot master, by the mystery and wonder of the night, MacDonald writes of Nycteris’ rapturous first encounter with the nighttime outside of her chamber and with the castle as “an intoxication of purest joy,” in which she “seemed at one and the same moment annihilated and glorified” (50). Her imagination is at work envisioning the persona behind the wind, the river, the moon, and her own shadow. Even the moth is to her a source of delight that she follows “not in the spirit of the hunter, but of the lover” (62). Her imagination working in the service of love connects her to that **[30]** which is around her, to that which she can appreciate without striving for control, dominion, or understanding.

MacDonald’s story reveals that night and mystery and imagination and femininity are not sources of evil and therefore need not be feared.³ Moral darkness and nighttime (together with those things associated with night) are not synonymous. Watho is a child of the darkness. Similarly, we see in *Phantastes* that Anodos’s shadow brings him into dark thinking. In both cases moral darkness is portrayed in part as a lack of appreciation for that which is mysterious or imaginative, for that which is other, for that which is non-pragmatic. This darkness within is evidenced as pride, manipulative rationality, and cold analysis. Evil finds a place inside a person like Watho and can be as easily tied to rationality as to the imagination—for it is the

diabolic, that which divides to conquer and to control. Watho, as a child of the darkness, would dominate all through fear, self-interest and greed, while Nycteris, as a child of the night, embraces all that is around her, including the night, which she sees as “gentle and sweet,” “kind and friendly,” “soft and velvety” (79).

MacDonald, then, portrays night, femininity, and imagination not as deficient or as deviants of their counterparts, the day, masculinity and reason, but rather as necessary and valuable complements. Nycteris may in her way be as protective of Photogen as he is of her and have greater strength than he, for she is willing to remain faithful and forgiving in the midst of his fickleness and selfcenteredness: “She who all night long had tended and protected him like a child, was now in his arms, borne along like a baby, with her head lying on his shoulder. But she was the greater, for suffering more, she feared nothing” (83). Photogen’s growth depends on his willingness to value that which is other for its own sake, not for its usefulness or its capacity to be mastered and controlled. Contrary to what is commonly understood as the way for women to advance, Nycteris does not become cold and calculating like Watho, having to deny her nurturing and imaginative nature. Rather, she must learn not to become a helpless victim in the face of hard rationality and the bright light of analysis and reason. She must allow her imaginative and nurturing gifts to enable her to embrace the sun and to propel her into action. In [31] this, MacDonald portrays that which has come to be known as a Jungian perspective on the male and the female, as expressed by Helen Luke in *The Way of Woman*: “. . . and all the time both man and woman are inevitably held in never ending tension between hubris (‘I am the sun’) and inertia (‘I am the helpless victim’) which can so easily be disguised behind the self-satisfied masks of good works or of resignation” (4). But MacDonald takes it a step further and reveals that both may be locked in inertia when they come to the precipice of what is familiar to each and are forced to see the chasm that may separate them in their differences. The tension arises because each naturally prefers operating within his or her own peculiar domain.

MacDonald suggests that the power to transform tension into a bridge is an I-thou relationship that is forged through the imagination by the expanding warmth of love. The imagination is vital in this process for the gifts that it offers to Photogen and Nycteris to connect them to one another, and in a larger sense for the gifts it offers to the reader to bridge him or her to the realm of story and to the reality that life is more than mastery and

conquest.

The first of these gifts is identification. MacDonald defines the imagination as “seeing as if”—that is, seeing as if one were another person, able to enter into his or her way of seeing and experiencing life, rather than just remaining safely inside the bubble of one’s own sphere. MacDonald was convinced that being made in the image of God included being made for “I-thou” relationships. The individual, for MacDonald, is most fully human when he or she exists in communion with others, for God exists as a communion of persons in His innermost being: “The secret of the whole story of humanity is the love between the Father and the Son. That is at the root of it all. Upon the love between the Son and the Father hangs the whole universe” (*Proving* 67). The imagination, then, is critical for living out the harmony of one’s relational being because it is a tool that enables one to embrace and understand otherness. It helps one to envision and feel what it is like to be someone who lives with a different set of expectations and hopes, one who has entered into experiences and relationships that may be utterly [32] foreign in culture or in time. This understanding is crucial to entering into relationships of mutuality, understanding, and compassion. The imagination assists in that most difficult of all movements, that of moving outside of oneself, such that rather than being encased in “I-it” relationships like Watho—in which one treats everyone else as a means to an end, an object for one’s use or discarding—one is granted the means to identify with another human being.

In Photogen and Nycteris’s feelings of vulnerability and fear when each moves into the other’s sphere, MacDonald reveals the perils of the process. It requires effort to imagine that entering into this otherness is not a threat to one’s entire being and may in fact be a positive and life-giving reality.⁴ Nycteris works imaginatively to connect the tenderly enfolded night-flowers she loves and these same flowers in radiant fullness and to see the relation of this to her own need for the “lamp” [sun] to perhaps “open her out somehow like the flower” (77). Thus Nycteris challenges Photogen: “And you must learn to be strong in the dark as well as in the day, else you will always be only half brave. I have begun already—not to fight your sun, but to try to get at peace with him, and understand what he really is, and what he means with me—whether to hurt me or to make the best of me. You must do the same with my darkness” (80). Photogen realizes that their escape from Watho will only be possible when he learns to appreciate Nycteris’s unique gifts as a person of the night, someone who can discern the scent and shape

of animals without need of the sun—that is, without the need to dominate. Whereas Photogen would relate to the animals he fears with a “bow and arrow or . . . with a hunting knife,” Nycteris is free to enjoy playing games with them (81). Eventually, so fully does each come to love and identify with the other that Nycteris comes to love the day best “because it was the clothing and crown of Photogen, and she saw that the day was greater than the night, and the sun more lordly than the moon; and Photogen had come to love the night best, because it was the mother and home of Nycteris” (86). **[33]**

Imagination, art, and story enable us not only to identify with others and to learn to love that which is different but also to discern our identity. This second of the gifts of the imagination locates us in a context that sheds light on our true place in the universe. “The great myths are always pushing us into community by challenging us to find and accept a moral framework for our life together,” writes Alan Jones (20). Identity is understood here in a relational sense, not in the usual individualistic sense—that is, not in some isolationist, self-referent state (self-entombed as with Nycteris or self-aggrandizing like Photogen) but in the context of relationships with the Creator and the creation. Both Nycteris and Photogen begin to discover who they are when they begin to move out of their limited spheres of self and past experiences to encounter that which is other than what they are or what they have experienced previously. They discover that the world is much grander and more mysterious than they could imagine, and that neither of them is really in control. Just as each of them must learn that his or her own framework is not superior to the other’s, so may the reader glean that his or her identity is based not on being better than another group of individuals but on mutual understanding and a common moral framework. Learning to identify with the other, being able to move into the other’s sphere, clarifies for both Nycteris and Photogen their context and the nature of Watho and their plight, and it leads them to discover their true ancestry. Similarly, great stories can help us to lose that shadow of pride and suspicion that would alienate and isolate us from other people. As C. S. Lewis writes, “Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege of individuality . . . Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do” (*Experiment* 140-41). Worthy stories help with one’s identity, for they reveal that life is not a possession to be hoarded or defended but a gift to be shared—that fear and hatred need not hold sway—for one dwells in the midst of God’s own story in which all will be well, in which God’s loving Grace is

over all, in all, and through all.

The third gift of the imagination is an inspiration that awakens the deepest desires. Peter Kreeft observes that the problem [34] in the church is often not that of the “blind leading the blind” but of the “bland leading the bland.” The Protestant church’s tendency during the modern era to banish the imagination and abandon it to popular culture has often left the church somnolent, isolated, and without vision. MacDonald’s story encourages us to seek for unexplored realms, for more light, and for wider truth. It is a call to leave the security of one’s protected existence to face the reality of one’s utter dependency and God’s utter reliability, the latter represented by the sun that Nycteris learns is longing to make the best of her (77).⁵ Throughout the story, MacDonald portrays Nycteris hungering for more and more light and eventually wondering if “when we go out, we shall not go into a day as much greater than your day as your day is greater than my night” (86).

Because of the imagination’s ability to inspire and to awaken the deeper desires, MacDonald saw it as critical for education:

For repose is not the end of education; its end is a noble unrest, an ever renewed awakening from the dead, a ceaseless questioning of the past for the interpretation of the future, an urging on of the motions of life, which had better far be accelerated into fever, than retarded into lethargy By those who consider a balanced repose the end of culture, the imagination must necessarily be regarded as the one faculty before all others to be suppressed. (*Orts* 1-2)

This gift of inspiration is essential for education in that it not only awakens our deeper desires but also shows us what is worth desiring. Great stories reveal what is worth living and dying for, what is destructive behaviour and what is life-giving. Harold Goddard suggests that “The destiny of the world is determined less by the battles that are lost and won than by the stories it loves and believes in” (97). One of the reasons MacDonald felt great freedom to employ his own imaginative gifts was the recognition that the Bible itself mainly instructs by use of story and image. To see that self-denial and self-sacrifice create a positive alternative in difficult situations gives one hope and vision and enables one to learn the free- [35] dom of moving out of what is thought to be self-preserving security. The reader identifies with Nycteris, who has helped Photogen through his dark night of fear and weakness without regard to her own danger and sees his cruel abandonment of her in her need when he loses his fear (74). Eventually, Photogen replaces empty

self-centered bravado with gentle care of the *other*.

The imagination's fourth gift works in a penetrating way toward the strengthening of the will to do what is right. Its impact endures, for it touches the whole being. C. S. Lewis, who refers to his reading of *Phantastes* as a baptism of the imagination, writes: "I know nothing that gives me such a feeling of spiritual healing, of being washed, as to read MacDonald" (Huttar 225). And G. K. Chesterton claims that MacDonald "made a difference to [his] whole existence" because his stories make goodness attractive without being moralistic (Saintsbury 39). His stories, then, like any good story, touches both the physical and the non-physical dimensions of the self. MacDonald experienced God reaching out to him in a similar all-embracing fashion. He writes:

Lord of life, thy quickening voice
Awakes my morning song!
In gladsome words I would rejoice
That I to thee belong.

I see thy light, I feel thy wind,
The world, it is thy word;
Whatever wakes my heart and mind
Thy presence is, my Lord.

Therefore I choose my highest part,
And turn my face to thee;
Therefore I stir my inmost heart
To worship fervently.

Lord, let me live and will this day—
Keep rising from the dead;
Lord, make my spirit good and gay,
Give me my daily bread.

Within my heart speak, Lord, speak on,
My heart alive to keep,
Till comes the night, and, labour done,
In thee I fall asleep. **[36]**

This hymn parallels Nycteris's awakening and growth, a process that MacDonald coveted for his readers. As Amos Wilder suggests, imaginative

presentations of the truth offer a deep and lasting impact: “[the imagination] is a necessary component of all profound knowing and celebration; all remembering, realizing and anticipating; all faith, hope and love” (2).

But we must probe how we can be certain that the images and visions conveyed by the imagination are not distorted images leading people to deformed rather, than informed views on reality. What happens when a person like Watho uses her imagination and provokes desperation rather than inspiration, dehumanization rather than identification, a sense of worthlessness rather than a sense of identity? Is the imagination truly a bridge to meaning or is it to some abyss of meaninglessness? This question is crucial in contemporary intellectual thought that often denies the possibility of any foundation for a “truth-worthy” imagination, one forging bridges to meaning, truth, and life. *A Dish of Orts* counters this denial by describing a three-fold foundation on which to build a viable imagination.

First, MacDonald argues, the imagination is created by God. God the Father, in the overflow of His love, created the universe through His Son and by the Spirit. God expresses imaginative creativity in all His relations with His creation, the human part of which He created in His own image. Thus MacDonald emphasizes that to know the imagination aright, we must first look at the imagination of God in whose image our own imagination was created (*Orts* 3). God’s creativity overflows from the love between the Father, Son, and Spirit. In the Triune God one sees the imagination working most profoundly, such that there is both unity and diversity, one God and three Persons. Between the Father, Son, and Spirit exist mutual understanding, an ability to move out of the self in freedom for the other, without loss of self, without domination of the other. The Father envisions what it is that the Son experiences, without being the Son—letting the Son remain the Son and the Father remain the Father, yet existing in perfect unity. The Son can so fully envision, or imagine, that He truly weeps with those who weep. The Son—compassionately identifying with humankind in imaginative penetration through His words, stories, and love-breathes life into (“inspires”) those around Him yet remains the Son. And the Spirit, for MacDonald, continues to carry the light of God’s truth to the very inner being of [37] a person, entering into one’s plights and joys without violation of the person or loss of the Spirit’s self. The imagination, then, is vital to what it means to be created in God’s image and to what it means to be fully human.

Second, MacDonald realized that the imagination, once fallen but now redeemed, is not an infallible tool to be used in proud independence,

but one which must come under the shepherding hand of the Father's good will and purpose. "License is not what we claim when we assert the duty of the imagination to be that of following and finding out the work that God maketh It is only the ill-bred, that is, the uncultivated imagination that will amuse itself where it ought to worship and work" (*Orts* 12). Distortion of truth is not only possible but probable.

Through the Incarnation and through Redemption offered in Jesus Christ, God, MacDonald teaches, has bound humanity and creation to Himself and has brought the imagination within the light of His own creativity.

Our hope lies . . . in the wisdom wherein we live and move and have our being. Thence we hope for endless forms of beauty informed of truth. 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* 25)⁶

MacDonald reminds us, therefore, that though the imagination may still express aspects of fallenness, it can abound through an ever deepening relationship with the source of all life and all creativity. The imagination's bridge to meaning and truth includes a double movement for MacDonald, in which God Himself has come and continues to come with the inspiring truth of His own Spirit, in order that He may lead His creation back to Himself and to the wonders which He has created and desires to continue to create in partnership with us.

MacDonald's third theological affirmation on the imagination correlates a wise imagination with the presence of the Holy Spirit, which he sees as the One who enables the intimacy that refuels and refires the imagination in order to express God's own truth. **[38]** In a sacramental way MacDonald saw this truth as God's own meaning that He has placed in the very essence or "inscape" of His creation. The imagination's constructive use is dependent on an ongoing intimacy with God and the inspiration of His Spirit. Through the Spirit, MacDonald points out, God continues to draw humanity and creation to Himself, allowing it to share more and more in His likeness, and to be inspired by His thoughts and creative imagination.

MacDonald did not envision some sub-rational human spirit as the source of human creativity and imaginative understanding. It is "God [who]

sits in the chamber of our being in which the candle of our consciousness goes out into the darkness, and sends forth from thence wonderful gifts into the light of that understanding which is his candle” (*Orts* 25).⁷ For MacDonald, a wise imagination is the “presence of the Spirit of God” (*Orts* 28). God is involved with creation in an ongoing dynamic life-giving relationship. This is antithetical to the current, subjective concepts of the imagination that affirm its use and stimulation independent of ultimate truth. According to MacDonald, light is given to and through the baptized imagination and accords with the Truth as long as the imagination stands *under* the Truth. God’s Truth shines with such glory and radiance that the imagination is always Truth’s handmaiden or servant.⁸ It must “tune its instrument . . . to the divine harmonies within” creation, “for the end of imagination is *harmony* (*Orts* 35). Thus, MacDonald envisioned an imagination baptized and harnessed and called to serve, to work, and to worship the One in whom all creativity finds its true source. He did not see this as a narrowing of the imagination but as the source of its ultimate freedom and release:

Shall God’s thoughts be surpassed by man’s thoughts? God’s giving by man’s asking? God’s creation by man’s imagination? No. Let us climb to the height of our Alpine desires; let us leave them behind us and ascend the spear-pointed Himalays of our aspirations; still shall we find the depth of God’s sapphire above us; still shall we find the heavens higher than the earth, and his thoughts and his ways higher than our thoughts and our ways. (*Unspoken* Vol I, 63-4)⁹ **[39]**

MacDonald presents in “Photogen and Nycteris,” then, an analogy for the gift of the imagination itself—a gift of being moved out of one’s narrow world view and realm of experience, out of the self to be able more fully to embrace the whole. He exposes the self-defeating nature of a life lived only to gain mastery, power, and control, a life that is not equipped to face the fear of the darkness that resides both within and without. Ultimate questions are not how-to questions, but “Who” questions—questions of relationship and love, and “Why” questions—questions of meaning and purpose. MacDonald reveals through the story that imagination’s gifts of identification, identity, inspiration, and impact destroy the alienation that lies at the heart of all fear, and he prophetically confronts a contemporary postmodern relativism that isolates the individual. Postmodern thought rejects the reality that there is a story that embraces all people; instead,

myriads of tales affirm the “divisive energies of race, gender, and class” (Jones 14). MacDonald is like the old dwarf/man, Cornelius, in Lewis’s *Prince Caspian*—constantly wanting to remind us that we are part of a very old story, working to reawaken the imagination to a story that does not emanate from us but that does embrace us and that will endure. He reveals imagination’s ability to embody truth in such a way that one feels as if one is coming *home*—home to a larger family, to a deeper understanding, to the reassurance that through His redemptive and creative power, God is transforming even the most painful and hideous of things into that which holds truth and meaning. Thus MacDonald equips the reader to face both the light and the darkness and to say with him, “Corage! God mend al!”

Notes

1. MacDonald objected to the fact that men withheld certain rights from women, including the right of equal education: “It is not their [men’s] business to lay down the law for woman. That women must lay down for themselves One thing they *have* a right to—a far wider and more valuable education than they have been in the way of receiving.” MacDonald in *The Seaboard Parish*, vol. 1, 91-2. Paul Tournier in *The Gift of Feelings* demonstrates the parallel between

Continued on page 45 **[40]**

Continued from page 40

the evolution of what he calls masculine values since the Renaissance (“that man ought now to rely only on himself, on his reason and his creative genius, on his science and technology..”) “and the banishment of women into private life. This banishment, which has been characteristic of society during the last four centuries, has been accompanied in the minds of men themselves by the repression of the tendencies which are symbolized by women: sentiment, personal relationship, emotional and affective life, devotion, self-sacrifice, modesty, and gentleness” (17-18). MacDonald reveals that women (for example, Watho) as well as men may share a degree of complicity in this value system.

2. The association of mystery, night, femininity, and imagination is common in MacDonald, as can be seen, for example, in the portrayals of the Great-great-grandmother in the *Princess* books who is associated with the moon and who, in Raeper’s words, is the “poetic, mystic, hidden face of God” (261)

3. It is interesting to note that the era when women were most suspected of evil association, when witch trials were at their peak, was during the Renaissance, this period of exalted reason, not during the Middle Ages (Tournier 22).

4. Watho expresses the destructiveness of being unable to identify with those around her, evidenced as a voracious appetite that would consume them and that eventually

becomes self-consuming.

5. This symbolic correlation of the sun to God may be found elsewhere in MacDonald. He calls the reader to hold supremely to God, “dear as the sun ... towards which we haste, that, walking in the sun himself, we may no more need the mirror that reflected his absent brightness” (*Unspoken* Vol. 1, 55). Cf. *Ronald Bannerman’s Boyhood* 281,283.

6. See 2 Cor. 4. 6.

7. Cf. “God must reveal, or nothing is known” (*Orts* 287).

8. This is comparable more to the Hebrew way of thinking, “where we learn through listening and responding, serving and obeying” (Torrance 170).

9. Cf. “Be not afraid to build upon the rock Christ, as if thy holy imagination might build too high and heavy for that rock” (*Unspoken* Vol. 3, 173). Also, “Dull are those, little at least can they have of Christian imagination, who think that where all are good things must be dull” (*Unspoken* Vol. 2, 228).

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