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“And All About the Courtly Stable / Bright-Harnessed Angels Sit”: Eschatological Elements in *At the Back of the North Wind*

Catherine Persyn

Corruptio unius est generatio alterius.

Of all our dumb friends, all our lower brothers, there were none so dear to George MacDonald’s heart as horses. This is recalled by both Ronald and Greville MacDonald:

His great outdoor pleasure was to be in the saddle. He had an excellent seat, and an almost passionate love of horses, and, as his readers know, a very charming and convincing touch in their description. (Ronald M. 40)

My father’s love of horses and intimacy with every creature he handled date from his earliest childhood Of one grey mare he used to tell us [who] would rush away like the wind, as if possessed by her rider’s very soul. (Greville M. 54-55)

This interest was obviously so great that a whole thesis could be devoted to the figure of the horse in MacDonald’s work—always provided that the greatest care was taken not to “forget in the symbolism the thing symbolised” (*Seaboard* 210), not to stop at the image, however captivating it may be. For horses, like everything else in MacDonald, from people to winds, are what they are, *and* so much more, that—to use a simile—they “cannot be eaten raw, but must be baked in the oven.” In other words, they must be understood with the intelligence of the heart (the “oven”), not that of the head, as indeed MacDonald himself seems to suggest when he writes: “[God] hath set the world *in* man’s heart, not in his understanding. And the heart must open the door to the understanding” (*Orts* 12).

This is something essential when we study MacDonald, and should always be kept in mind. “The intelligence of the head” will bring a smile to our lips when we read observations like the following:¹

I wont vouch for what the old horse was thinking, for it is very difficult to find out what any old horse is thinking. (168)
I had a chance of buying the old horse, and I couldn’t resist

him. There he is, looking at you, ma'am. Nobody knows the sense in that head of his. (173)

“The intelligence of the heart” will cause us to smile too, but rather a different smile, not a condescending, but a slightly puzzled one. And a passage **[end of page 1]** in the *Unspoken Sermons* confirms that the second approach is the right one, and that something serious lies behind the apparent facetiousness:

the live things come from [God's] heart—from near the same region whence ourselves we came. How much my horse may, in his own fashion—that is, God's equine way—know of him, I cannot tell, because he cannot tell. Also we do not know what the horses know, because they are horses, and we are at best, in relation to them, only horsemen. [God] knows his horses and dogs as we cannot know them, because we are not yet pure sons of God. When, through our sonship, as Paul teaches, the redemption of these lower brothers and sisters shall have come, then we shall understand each other better. (“The Inheritance” *U.S.* 613)

It is the same with the charming evocation in the first chapter: when young Diamond woke in the middle of the night, and felt the bed shaking in the blasts of the north wind, he could not help wondering whether, if the wind should blow the house down, and he were to fall through into the manger, old Diamond mightn't eat him up before he knew him in his nightgown. (3)

If, like that one, so many of MacDonald's observations have kept their secret, like hard shells protecting precious almonds inside them, it is because they are so convincing, so relevant in their context, that (taking up the etymology of the adjective) their *obvious* meaning *blocks the way* to all investigation; in other words, there has been no deciphering because there has been no attempt at deciphering. In order to look for something, you have to in a measure have found it already; you have to be humble enough to know that you do not know, and have the intuition, “the intelligence of the heart,” that there is a treasure waiting to be discovered. Otherwise you may let pass unknown the god disguised as a beggar.

Thus with the feelings inspired in Diamond by the presence of his four-legged friend below his bed: we are so efficiently sent back to our own childish fantasies that if we pause awhile, it is likely to be simply to

appreciate the charm and psychological truth of the notion. Yet so much more than a child's fear is evoked here.

In a way, that awe-inspiring "eating-up" of young Diamond by old Diamond has already taken place, since the boy's empathy with the horse is complete, as can be seen from the impetuosity with which he takes up the defence of his friend and, impatient of all curb, cheekily interrupts a grown-up: "'Diamond is a useless thing rather,' said the voice. 'That's not true. Diamond is very nice'" (9).

It is indeed the image of a bolting horse which is conjured up by Diamond's lack of reserve here, and by that childish eloquence of his, which is more accumulative and fiery than logical: [2]

Oh, don't I just! Diamond is a great and good horse; and he sleeps right under me. He is Old Diamond and I am Young Diamond; or, if you like it better, for you're very particular, Mr. North Wind, he's Big Diamond, and I'm Little Diamond; and I don't know which of us my father likes best. (9-10)

Diamond's tender age, which causes him to react as he does throughout this dialogue is a metaphor for the profane state: the opposite of the *Sage*, he is the *Juvenis*, whose vital energies, traditionally represented by the horse, are as yet untamed. The description in chapter 3—"as with an earthquake, with a rumbling and a rocking hither and thither, a sprawling of legs and heaving of as many backs" (25)—gives the right idea of that turmoil of energy, which, although of a *chthonic* (earthly) nature, can, if sublimated, become *uranic* (heavenly); for the mention of both earthquake and thunder in relation with Old Diamond is probably not gratuitous: "'And doesn't he make a jolly row getting up on his four great legs! It's like thunder'" (9).

By being thus attracted by noise and movement, like all the little boys in the world² Diamond here is, figuratively speaking, a horse; he is the "natural being" instinctively aspiring to participate in the dionysiac enjoyment of life. The admiration he feels for the imposing size of his namesake—"Diamond is very nice—as big as two" (9)—a normal and excusable reaction in a child, is nevertheless a sign of the Old Diamond in him. Also typical of a child and eliciting the same amused and indulgent appreciation from the adult reader, is the way he is impressed by the length of North Wind's hair. This, to the boy's mind, contributes no little to the prestige of his new friend: "To have a lady like that for a friend—with such long hair, too!" (17).

Again, Diamond naively, innocently admires the *gloria mundi*

represented by “the grand show [his father] made with his fine horses and his multitudinous cape, with a red edge to every fold” (29). As with any symbol, the image is no doubt ambiguous, for the majesty of that father who is for the little boy the God of his little-boy’s universe, is also the Majesty of the Father. Nonetheless the terrestrial aspect seems to be the more important here.³

However, Diamond is equally sensitive to heavenly beauty:

A great fire of sunset burned on the top of the gate that led from the stables to the house; above the fire in the sky lay a large lake of green light, above that a golden cloud, and over that the blue of the wintry heavens. And Diamond thought that, next to his own home, he had never seen any place he would like so much to live in as that sky. (29)

This is a sign that he can be initiated. Another sign of this is the fact that horse Diamond lies down to sleep, unlike the majority of his species,—“he was a quiet [3] horse, and did not go to sleep standing, but lay down like a reasonable creature” (2-3).

In other words, boy Diamond, in his spontaneity, his youthful yielding to instincts is very much like horse Diamond, and horse Diamond is very much like boy Diamond. But which of the two partners will have the upper hand? The whole meaning of life could be said to lie in the uncertain outcome of that contest. For the fanciful notion of being “swallowed” by the horse has two meanings, which, all things considered, are probably one and the same. The swallowing of Diamond by Diamond is an image not only of a person’s identification with his lower nature—or more exactly, his *assimilation* by his lower nature—but also a metaphor for birth; a metaphor for the plunge of the soul into what the ancients called Generation, in other words, of its *in-carnation*. The equation made by the Greeks between life and the uninitiated state on the one hand, and death and the initiate state on the other—an equation which they considered to be reflected in the near identity of their verbs *τελευταν* (to die) and *τελεισθαι* (to be initiated)—is also implicitly present in the book.

By coming into the world, Diamond has ipso facto been absorbed, swallowed up by horse Diamond, and—by an alchemical *opus contra naturam*—it behoves him to go back upstream to counter that “incarnation of the soul” by a “spiritualisation of the body.” For—as again suggested by the near identity of the Greek words *σωμα* (body) and *σεμια* (sepulchre)—being born, for the soul which, by nature is divine, means exchanging the liberty

and bliss that belongs to it for the gaol of the body in which it finds itself “cabinéd, cribbed, confined, bound in” (*Seaboard* 151).⁴ Birth is the falling of a luminous being into a poor manger. *At the Back of the North Wind* is the account of such a going back “upstream,” of an initiation which is a death, of a death which is an initiation.

When Diamond first meets North Wind, he is still unaware of the diamond—the Stone that is inside him—as is suggested by her remark, “you don’t seem to know what a diamond is” (9). This is a telltale echo of the line: “whether old Diamond mightn’t eat him up before he knew him” (3). Unknown of itself, the diamond is still a rough diamond.

In chapter 8, Diamond still has his child’s admiration for his noisy friend: “Old Diamond was coining awake . . . and shaking himself so that young Diamond’s bed trembled under him. ‘He’s grand at shaking himself,’ said Diamond. ‘I wish I could shake myself like that’” (90). But the process of *enantiodromy*, or turning a thing into its opposite, is nonetheless at work already, for the boy’s further fanciful conjecture is obviously much to his liking: “‘But then I can wash myself, and he can’t. What fun it would be to see Old Diamond washing his face with his hoofs and iron shoes! Wouldn’t it be a picture?’” (90). [4]

In between, there has been North Wind, and Diamond has avoided the danger of the death of the soul (a danger also evoked by Goethe, whose weird “*Erlkönig*.”⁵ offers a good illustration of MacDonald’s esoteric approach): unless we understand that the protagonists in the story are real protagonists *and* components of the soul, we shall stay (to use a favourite MacDonald image) in the *pylon* of the temple. If we take the example of Diamond’s day-dreaming only at its face value, it can be dismissed as inconsistent froth, the nonsensical byproduct of our stream of consciousness. However, in the context of that *Metamorphoseon Liber* that *At the Back of the North Wind* certainly is, it calls to mind a similar episode in *The Transformations (Golden Ass)* of Apuleius. Lucius, who has been turned into a donkey, is sold to a cook and a pastry-cook. One day he is caught partaking of the delicious dishes prepared by his masters. Masters and servants marvel greatly, and laugh exceedingly “at the marvellous daintiness . . . of a slow beast.” For Lucius is actually relishing the sort of food that “every ass doth greatly abhor” and, “gathering his lips together to the fashion of a man’s tongue,” drinking goblets of honeyed wine with the greatest ease and elegance, thus gaining the applause of his audience (10: 15-16). “[Isn’t it] a picture?” as Diamond would say.

Now, what can be the meaning of an ass or horse behaving like a human being? If we develop the implicit analogy—the animal is to the human what the human is to the god—the “humanisation of the animal” appears as an image of the potential “deification of the human.” It is the alchemical *solve et coagula*; a matter of spiritualising the body and corporifying the spirit; of providing the latter with an instrument wherewith to accomplish its mission in the world; of giving a mount to the god, and the god’s wings to the mount.

This image of man as the mount of God can be found in MacDonald’s letters:

. . . God who is at the root of all increase and all gladness and contentment. He it is who checks and admonishes and turns us into the right way. I have felt both his bit in my mouth and his spur in my flank and desire that he may take and have his own strange and *therefore* perfect way with me, whatever may be my foolish way of judging it. Would that my being were consciously filled with the gladness of his obedience! Nothing less can content me. (in Greville M. 545)

The explicit metaphor is accompanied by an implicit one, which can hardly be distinguished from it. With the phrase “that he may take and have his own strange and therefore perfect way with me,” MacDonald writes like a mystic, or like the metaphysical poets he so much admired, who often describe the human soul as feminine in its amorous relationship with God. This theme of man as the mount of God runs through the whole book under the name of Obedience. [5]

But this is only half the truth, and we must therefore give due consideration to something most surprising indeed, the fact that in some respects Old Diamond and North Wind are one and the same entity.

The symbolic identity of the beautiful lady and the horse, which concurs with her image as a mythic steed—a Pegasus carrying little Diamond away in the air—is already hinted in the title, with the possible confusion of prepositions: *At the Back of the North Wind* or *On the Back of the North Wind*? Interestingly enough, the book is sometimes mistakenly referred to in the latter fashion.⁶ And a horse is often said to “go like the wind.”

The notion, nevertheless, is rather provocative: what, generally speaking, can a horse—a four-legged, earth-bound creature—and on the other hand North Wind—who looks more-or-less like an angel—have in common? So little at first sight, that when Young Diamond takes just such an

identity for granted —“Ruby’s an angel” (331)—we may, like Joseph, feel worried for the boy’s sanity: “Joseph stared and said no more. For all his new gladness, he was very gloomy as he re-harnessed the angel, for he thought his darling Diamond was going out of his mind” (332). And yet, MacDonald’s own view of a favourite mare was not so very different: “she had an eye at once gentle and wild as that of a savage angel, if my reader will condescend to dream for a moment of such an anomaly” (qtd in Ronald M. 41). But the subtle message of the title is further corroborated by other elements.

There is, first of all, comparable disproportion between “Big Diamond” and “Little Diamond” (10) on the one hand, and a gigantic North Wind and Diamond the “baby” on the other. The child is still unable to climb unaided on or off Big Diamond’s back: “I can’t curry a horse, except somebody puts me on his back” (187); “he had never got off him without being lifted down” (26). Neither can his short arms go round the neck of the big horse, and the episode where he tries to do so—“Diamond found himself lying on his neck, with his arms as far round it as they would go” (26)—can be compared with that in which he clasps a towering North Wind (68). Such is her difference in size when they fly, that her hair is like ropes to him—“Diamond held on by two of the twisted ropes which . . . formed his shelter” (40). This is very much as he clings to Old Diamond, “with both hands twisted in the horse’s mane” (25-26).

Indeed, Diamond’s fear on first going out with North Wind, is not without resemblance to his fear on first mounting old Diamond—“not a little tremulous . . . he cowered towards the withers, grasping with his hands the bit of mane” (53). And in both cases it is clear that it is to a man’s job that he is being initiated: “Diamond, dear,’ she said, ‘be a man” (67); “the coachman . . . told him to sit up like a man” (52-53). Those two episodes, moreover, follow close upon each other as if MacDonald, as so often, meant to show the outside and the **[6]** inside of things, the invisible reality, and a translation of it into material, palpable terms.

North Wind’s hair is, in fact, expressly compared to the horse’s tail, and although the former is described by an admiring little Diamond as superior to the latter—“such long hair . . . Why, it was longer than twenty Diamonds’ tails!” (17)—the laws of symbolism have little to do with quantity, and it is therefore the bringing together, not the difference, that is important.

Both the horse and North Wind lead Diamond to the same place. The boy who has left his house after playing at driving horses steps back to let his

father drive the real carriage into the stable court, and then remembers “how the wind had driven him to this same spot on the night of his dream” (30).

North Wind who carries Diamond away to a hyperborean country is obviously, amongst other things, the angel of death. Horses frequently figure as psychopomp steeds taking the soul to the world beyond, and this concept appears in MacDonald’s writing. The young Mark in *Weighed and Wanting*, who has just escaped drowning but who in his delirium thinks he is dead, speaks thus of the river: ““Oh, how sweetly it talks! it runs all through me and through me! It was such a nice way, God, of fetching me home! I rode home on a water-horse!”” (301). A similar image appears in *The Seaboard Parish*. The narrator has a dream in which a long narrow stone astride of which he is sitting turns into a horse which carries him to an old churchyard, and he comments: “The horse of death had carried me eastward” (61-62).

Obviously again, North Wind is also a godmother figure to Diamond. Now it is as a godson of his that old Diamond thinks of young Diamond: ““I’m a stupid old horse, who can’t brush his own coat; but there’s my young godson on my back, cleaning me like an angel”” (168). This is indeed most appropriate, for a double reason: the boy has been named after him (2) and the horse, as all godparents should, provides guidance for the child, as we learn from a proud Joseph: ““He’ll be fit to drive himself before long . . . The old horse is a-teaching of him”” (173).

Last but not least, is Nanny’s mistake. The street-wise urchin who, of course, did not believe a word of Diamond’s adventures with the lady of the wind, one day sees her friend standing all of a sudden in front of her, almost as if he had materialised out of thin air, and her first bewildered thought is: “Then he *was* on the back of the North Wind after all!” Then, hearing the sound of Old Diamond’s feet, she changes her mind and says to herself: ““North Wind is his father’s horse! That’s the secret of it! Why couldn’t he say so?”” (54-55); The text further draws our attention to this symbolic identity between Old Diamond and North Wind through the parallelism between this meeting and the first encounter between young Diamond and Nanny: “the little girl was she for whose sake he [7] had got off North Wind’s back” (54). On that occasion, likewise, Diamond acted out of the same altruistic motivation. These episodes are but two of several actualisations in my book of an archetypal “fall from bliss” of which the final pages of *Phantastes* may be considered the paradigm.⁷

What lies behind Nanny’s apparent mistake, is the profound and paradoxical truth, voiced amongst others by Plato and Dante (whose real

name, by the way *was* Durante) that it is not the body that carries the soul but the soul that carries the body (*Timaeus* 34c; 36d).⁸ The soul is also described by Plato as being created before the corporeal body:⁹

God did likewise plan [soul] to be younger than the body; for, when uniting them, He would not have permitted the elder to be ruled by the younger . . . God . . . constructed Soul to be older than body and prior in birth and excellence, since she was to be the mistress and ruler and it the ruled. (*Timaeus* 34c)

The description applies accurately to old Diamond and young Diamond, for the boy, learning to ride, discovers that “in order to guide the horse, he had in a measure to obey the horse first. If he did not yield his body to the motions of the horse’s body, he could not guide him; he must fall off” (54). In other words, young Diamond here represents the inferior corporeal principle subordinate to the higher, spiritual, principle represented by Old Diamond-North Wind, the divine steed.

One of the difficulties of the book is that the characters are not to be assessed in the absolute, but according to the connection in which they stand. Thus in a relatively exoteric approach, young Diamond mounting old Diamond is an image of the soul *anima-ting* the body that carries it: “It was a grand thing to be able to guide a great beast like that” (54). But, in an esoteric approach (inasmuch as old Diamond is equivalent to North Wind), the boy is an image of the body which is carried by the soul.¹⁰ And with the lyrical evocation of Psalm 18.10 in mind, “[God] rode upon a cherub and did fly: yea he did fly upon the wings of the wind,”¹¹ we may be tempted to take this imagery a further stage upwards, with North Wind as the mount of God. But North Wind is also young Diamond’s animating principle, just as young Diamond is the animating principle of old Diamond: He is described as “like an angel” in his care of the horse (168). The same kind of paradox can be found in *Ranald Bannerman’s Boyhood*. When the narrator, still feeble after illness, is unable to walk, his great friend Turkey volunteers to be his *horse*:

there was I following the cows on Turkey’s back, riding him about wherever I chose; for my horse was obedient as only a dog, or a horse, or a servant from love can be. From that day, I recovered very rapidly. (116)

“It’s Ranald Bannerman,” said Turkey quietly. “I’m his horse.”

(120) [8]

But this same Turkey, however helpful and loving, does not hesitate to show his disapproval when Ranald is on the slippery slope: “I had indeed sunk low

when Turkey, who had been such a friend, would have nothing to say to me more” (149). In other words, the so-called horse is in fact Ranald’s *spiritus rector*, his good angel, which is what North Wind is to Diamond.

Diamond’s discovery during his first riding lesson that he must fall off if he does not obey the horse’s movements relates to the episode (only two chapters before) when he is unseated (or almost so) by his namesake. Here again one may see nothing out of the ordinary about such a scene: just an example of the scrapes into which foolhardy little boys will get! Now it is that, *and* something more.

The first thing to be noticed is that—just as Diamond’s first ride on old Diamond (ch.5) is immediately preceded by his first outing with North Wind (ch.4)—the spiritual being “prior in birth and excellence” to the corporeal—here the great horse’s unpredictable reaction in chapter 3 is immediately preceded by North Wind’s equally unpredictable reaction in chapter 2, where, after inviting Diamond to follow her, the lady of the wind leaves him in the lurch. In both cases Diamond is equally “thrown” and taken aback.

Diamond, in dallying when North Wind has invited him to follow her into the yard, is assuming that a great “wise-woman” figure like this will dance attendance on a small boy. He makes the same naive mistake when he believes a novice like himself can with impunity take a liberty with an animal ancient in years (full of wisdom) like Old Diamond and climbs on the horse’s back while he is lying down to “give [him] a surprise” (25). Both North Wind and Old Diamond take care that the boy shake off the presumption assumption: for “God, when uniting them, would never have permitted the older to be ruled by the younger” (*Timaeus* 34c):

he was so disappointed to lose the lady . . . Then he began to think that after all he must have done wrong, and she was offended with him for not following close after her, but staying to talk to the horse, which certainly was neither wise nor polite. (17-20)

Then it was young Diamond’s turn to have more of a surprise than he had expected; for as [the horse got up] young Diamond found himself hoisted up in the air, with both hands twisted in the horse’s mane. The next instant old Diamond lashed out with both his hind legs, and giving one cry of terror young Diamond found himself lying on his neck.” (25-26)

The identity between Old Diamond and North Wind suggests that such

a scene refers to what the alchemists called a *cohobation*. Here is what Fulcanelli has to [9] say about this mysterious process, which is depicted on the portals of various cathedrals and churches (see fig. p.26):

The first motif shows an unseated horseman holding on to the mane of a fiery horse. Such an allegory is about . . . alchemical Dissolution The steed, a symbol of speed and lightness, represents the spiritual matter; its horseman represents the ponderability of the crude metallic body. At each cohobation, the horse throws its rider, the volatile leaves the fix; but the horseman forthwith reasserts himself, again and again until the exhausted animal . . . consents to bear that obstinate burden The absorption of the fix by the volatile . . . is a slow and difficult process. The steed [depicted at] Notre-Dame is the same as the winged Pegasus of the fable. (123)

It might be argued that in Diamond's case the process does not seem to be "slow and difficult." His progress during that first lesson seems to be almost immediate, and similarly Diamond the fiery Pegasus directly gets in tune with the "ponderability" of his horseman when he realises who he has to deal with:

But then the horse stood still as a stone; except that he lifted his head gently up, to let the boy slip down to his back. For when he heard young Diamond's cry, he knew that there was nothing to kick about; for young Diamond was a good boy, and old Diamond was a good horse, and the one was all right on the back of the other. (26)

The meaningful comparison "still as a stone," is worth noticing, and so is the horse's acceptance of its burden, which is certainly not gratuitous either. Such apparent ease however should not lead us astray, for Diamond, although born in the trade, will nonetheless have to go through an apprenticeship. The scene therefore is simply a prolepsis: just as Diamond is called Diamond even while still a rough diamond, the happy outcome of the unseating episode signifies the future success of the Great Work.

In the initiatory journey as it is carved in the stone of cathedrals (and chapter 7 is entitled "The Cathedral") the unseated horseman, an image of Vanity,¹² marks the end of the first leg of the journey. As the seventh and last of the obstacles that make initiation impossible, it constitutes the entrance door to the Small Mysteries.

Now is the place to consider the entertaining Old Diamond and Ruby episode in chapter 32. This conversation between animals may remind readers of those tales in which, at the very special time of Christmas eve, animals can be heard to speak—but here again, there is so much more than meets the eye.

In the first place there are many powerful reasons, both internal to the book and external, that lead us astray, and cause us to believe erroneously that Ruby is inferior to Diamond. **[10]**

Of the internal reasons, the first and weightiest lies in the implicit equation between horse Diamond and boy Diamond on the one hand, and Ruby and Nanny on the other. For the girl and Ruby are foisted off together in a kind of package-deal on an almost desperate Joseph:

Mr. Raymond . . . made the following distinct proposal . . . not over-advantageous to Diamond's father . . . namely, that Joseph should have the use of Mr. Raymond's horse . . . and that, besides, he should take Nanny home as soon as she was able to leave the hospital, and provide for her as for one of his own children . . . so long, that is, as he had the horse. (286-87)

Both boarding with Joseph, Nanny and Ruby will each of them have to be well-treated—neither overworked nor idle—and each of them will be in contact with a Diamond. As boy Diamond obviously represents the initiated, and Nanny the uninitiated person, we expect a comparable relationship between old Diamond and Ruby.

So the all-too-human Nanny, who seems to be more fascinated by the glow of the terrestrial ruby than by the nonsense of angels,¹³ comes to live with the Διάμων-Diamond,¹⁴ the intermediary between the terrestrial and the celestial world, and is taught by the angel-like boy. We learn that “Diamond had taken her education in hand” (311) and that Joseph would daily “make Nanny produce her book that he might see how she was getting on” (311). But Diamond has for his “lesson-book” the *Liber Vitæ* itself (192), and he seems to have access to its supernatural knowledge. The narrator in fact believes “little Diamond possessed the secret of life” (345).

In the same way the sybaritic Ruby ought to be in good hands with the hardworking, ascetic old Diamond constantly setting him an example. Between the guests and their hosts there ought to be a relationship of literal symbiosis. Going by Joseph's reaction, however—“[he] could not help thinking it a very close bargain” (287)—or by horse Diamond's indignant reproach to Ruby—“Is it no harm to go eating up all poor master's oats?”

(317)—one may wonder whether the relationship is not going to take the form of mere parasitism.

Theoretically, the association ought to be beneficial to both parties, Ruby and Nanny supposedly bringing their sanguine energy in exchange for the spiritual influx they are to receive: “she would help me, and I should be the stronger for it” (288) says Martha of Nanny. In the same way, the arrival of Ruby in the stable ought to give Diamond some well-needed respite. Joseph reckons that if he “gave Diamond two hours’ additional rest, it would be all the better for the old bones of him, and there would [still] be four hours extra out of the other horse” (289). In other words, and as young Diamond rightly says, “it’s very good for different sorts to go together” (331). **[11]**

But as far as Ruby is concerned, things do *not* go as expected. The coincidence of his arrival with a period when “The North Wind Doth Blow” for the family (ch. 31) incites us to have like Joseph mixed feelings about the new horse. Things “did not go well with Joseph from the very arrival of Ruby. It almost seemed as if the red beast had brought ill luck with him. The fares were fewer and the pay less . . . After the first month he fell lame.” (309-10) Ruby has the great disadvantage of being a latecomer in the book. At this stage, Diamond’s family has become “ours” to such an extent that we take to heart whatever happens to them and cannot help being slightly prejudiced against a figure which, like Ruby, seems to jeopardise their welfare.

Another reason for thinking that Ruby does not hold a candle to Diamond is that it is indeed less honourable to grow fat eating the bread of idleness than selflessly to exert oneself in the service of others. Added to this is the fact that Ruby, fat quadruped though he is, has no scruple about speaking of himself as if he were a human being—“I put my foot on one of those horrid stones . . . and it gave my ankle such a twist” (318)—apparent hubris which evokes from horse Diamond the response: “Ankle indeed! Why should you ape your betters? Horses ain’t got any ankles: they’re only pasterns” (319). If one considers furthermore that the animal most provokingly declares “I’m an angel” (320), thus revealing, as a just corollary of his obesity, an inflation of his Self, one has to admit that the final portrait is not particularly attractive. Moreover the reader’s (mistaken) assumption that Diamond is by far the better horse is also amply corroborated by external evidence.

It cannot simply be MacDonald’s love of horses that made him choose this milieu of London coachmen as the setting for his book. The

Platonic description of the soul as being divided “into three parts, two of which ha[ve] the form of horses, the third that of the charioteer” (*Phaedrus* 253c) is certainly not irrelevant to the long-drawn-out metaphor of Diamond’s learning how to drive. All the art of the charioteer (the divine reason, or *Nous*) consists in getting the good horse (*Tumos*) to carry along the bad one (*Epitumeticon*) in the right direction.

Now if we consider Diamond and Ruby in this perspective (although it is only later that they will be in the same harness) it is obviously Diamond that is the good horse, for he, like the obedient one in the myth, “needs no whip, but is guided by the word of command and by reason” (253d):— “‘Don’t pull at his mouth,’ said his father; ‘just feel at it gently to let him know you’re there and attending to him. That’s what I call talking to him through the reins’” (160). Ruby, on the contrary, is in several respects rather like the bad horse as described by Plato: “his eyes grey and bloodshot; he is the friend of insolence and pride, is shaggy-eared and deaf, hardly obedient to whip and spurs” (253e). [12]

While Diamond is all ear, that is, all obedience—“see how he’s turning round his ears, with the mouths of them open, for the first word [boy Diamond] speaks to tumble in?” (161)—Ruby is deaf indeed, or at least deaf to orders, which comes to the same thing: “‘If ever a horse wanted the whip, he do’” (328) protests Joseph. Like the “bloodshot” eyes of Plato’s beast, the colour of Ruby’s coat, “a very red chestnut,” seems to suggest the same sanguine lack of self-restraint, the same indiscipline and the same yielding to the baser instincts—“he’s as fat as a pig! . . . he did nothing but eat his head off. He’s an awful eater” (327). Finally, as far as braggadocio is concerned, we have seen that Ruby is certainly in no way outdone by his Platonic forbear.

But should poor Ruby have all the qualities of a Diamond, nay, were he a very paragon of virtue, the chances are that he would nevertheless remain an eternal second best in our eyes, for the logic that makes boy Diamond ruefully exclaim “‘[b]ut it’s not something better—it’s you I want, North Wind’” (360) applies just the same where horse Diamond is concerned.

Another reason for our bias probably lies in the primacy of the diamond over all other stones in the collective unconscious. We know the great fascination that precious stones exerted on MacDonald—a feature pointed out by both Ronald (54) and Greville MacDonald (543). It accounts for that wonderful page in *Castle Warlock*, the conclusion of which is especially interesting here, for the pre-eminence it grants to the diamond:

“All the gems were there—sapphires, emeralds, and rubies; but they were scarce to be noted in the glorious mass of ever new-born, ever dying colour that gushed from the fountains of the light-dividing diamonds” (342).¹⁵ The diamond represents both the lowest and highest degree of reality; it is stone and The Stone; the fruit of the Earth womb; the Light that shineth in darkness which is to the pebble on the road what Christ is to man—his completion, his achievement. There are therefore many excellent reasons why the reader should be mistaken about Ruby.

However, it must not be overlooked that although Diamond’s father looks upon both Ruby and Mr Raymond with equal severity, young Diamond abstains from passing judgement on either of them. Joseph tells Mr Raymond that, whenever he would grumble at him in his absence, the boy would look and smile “as much as to say: ‘I know him better than you, father’” (330). Also, most surprisingly, Diamond does not hesitate to lay the blame on old Diamond, and, implicitly, on his own father too, as equally lacking in faith: “Diamond shouldn’t have thought such bad things of Ruby. He didn’t try to make the best of him” (331). This assertion calls to mind a passage in “The Voice of Job”:

The true child, the righteous man, will trust absolutely, against all appearances, the God who has created him in the love of righteousness. [13]

God does not . . . tell Job why he had afflicted him: he rouses his child-heart to trust. (MS. 353)

In a spectacular turning of tables, the boy goes as far as to suggest, when we were persuaded otherwise, that it is their own dear Diamond who should be under Ruby’s guidance: “Now Ruby will have a chance of teaching Diamond better manners” (331).

Still other clues ought to alert us, but they are mentioned so very casually that we do not grant them all the attention they deserve. One of them is the association of the horse with the ring which Nanny is lent while in hospital: “‘It was a red stone, and she told me they called it a ruby.’ ‘Oh, that is funny!’ said Diamond. ‘Our new horse is called Ruby. We’ve got another horse—a red one—such a beauty!’” (293). Another clue is the sight seen by Diamond when he enters the dimly lit stable: “The light showed the white mark on Diamond’s forehead but Ruby’s eye shone so bright, that he thought more light came out of it than went in” (315). This description is strangely reminiscent of that of North Wind first appearing to Diamond: ‘From her eyes came all the light by which Diamond saw her face and her hair’ (12).¹⁶ The

connection suggests that Ruby after all might well be what he pretends to be, and not the ungrateful beast he seems. However, Ruby must be studied in his relation with horse Diamond, for his true nature cannot be understood unless one knows more about Diamond, particularly the colour of his coat, of which I have said nothing of yet, following MacDonald, who keeps silent on the subject.

The unrivalled shine of the stone whose name old Diamond bears, when added to the favourable prejudice arising from his being namesake (and godfather) of the loveable and candid (*L. candidus* white) boy Diamond, might incline one to think of him as a white horse, with all the positive connotations that belong to such a figure.¹⁷ That is obviously how old Diamond struck G. K. Chesterton, who writes in his preface to Greville MacDonald's biography:

Another recurrent image in [MacDonald's] romances was a great white horse; the father of the princess had one, and there was another in *The Back of the North Wind*. To this day I can never see a big white horse in the street without a sudden sense of indescribable things. (10)

In fact, even though the colour of Diamond's coat is never explicitly mentioned, it is certainly dark, as can be inferred from the information that "Diamond's name came from a white lozenge on his forehead" (290). For, as has been pointed out, "he must be dark for a white lozenge to stand out on his forehead" and "he certainly appears so in the Arthur Hughes illustrations."¹⁸ However, Chesterton's error, like Nanny's, contains a symbolical truth, in that it is simply an anticipation of the next stage of *The Work*: for just as the great **[14]** black horse *bears* the little boy Diamond on his back, he also bears that little white lozenge on his forehead—the diamond that he is only potentially at the beginning of the story. Those few white square inches in relation to the total surface of the dark coat, like the biblical "grain of mustard seed," can be seen as what Simone Weil has called "the supernatural in nature which is at once infinitely small and infinitely potent" (*Intuitions* 51).

But in a way which is consistent with his usual tolerant approach, MacDonald only brings in the oblique mention of old Diamond's dark coat when it has already become something of the past; when, like the night before the dawn, the *nigredo* has yielded to the *albedo*; when the Little has absorbed the Big; when the light has *assimilated* the darkness—when the little lozenge, gaining ground, has grown and grown and grown until all of Old Diamond has become what he always was, that unrivalled Stone:¹⁹

“Young Diamond said they *were* rich now, with such a big diamond and such a big ruby” (290). The logic here is very much like that in *There and Back*, where the hero Richard exclaims to the girl he has just married: ““Oh Barbara, you are a queen at giving! I was well named, for you were coming! I *am* Richard indeed!—oh, so rich!”” (389). Diamond has now *become* his name, a crucially important theme as we know in MacDonald’s works.

John Stonecrop, the owner of the stables, like the true Adept he no doubt is, never calls his horse by any name: ““It’s not a nice name,’ . . . ‘You needn’t call him by it. I didn’t give it him. He’ll go well enough without it”” (162). He knows, as all alchemists do, that decay comes before genesis, that the end is but the beginning, that Death (for such is the identity of his “nameless” horse) feeds the life which is in the making.²⁰ As always, MacDonald is stressing the necessity that we start from the good, always, so that the little lozenge can grow and spread and annex our whole person. Instead of vainly trying to behead the Lernaean Hydra of our failings, to start from the good, as Diamond does with their alcoholic neighbour in chapter 18, by turning towards him the loving glance that will enable him to become what he truly is, “[b]egin[ing] to love him now, and help[ing] him into the loveliness which is his” (“Love Thine Enemy” *U.S. 151*).

But Stonecrop’s horse is not the only one that remains anonymous. The horse who goes in harness with Old Diamond at the beginning of the story is never given a name either. In fact, the text is so discreet about him, that he hardly seems to exist at all for the reader (which certainly corresponds to a symbolic truth, which might be that, much more than an autonomous animal, he is to be considered as a component of Old Diamond). He is apparently only mentioned thrice, and each time indirectly: in chapter 1, when we are told about boy Diamond hearing “the horses under him munching away in the dark” (2); in [15] chapter 3 with “old Diamond and his friend in the carriage, dancing with impatience to get at their stalls and their oats” (29); and in chapter 14 when Joseph, on finding again his old Diamond (who had been sold after Mr Coleman’s bankruptcy), exclaims: ““It’s my own old Diamond. I liked him far the best of the pair, though the other was good.”” (148).

We might choose to see in such a figure our inferior being. Whether we call it the *epitumeticon* or the *id*, its inferiority notwithstanding it is *good* inasmuch as, when carried along by the better horse, it constitutes a wealth of energy that can be put to good use. And since Diamond’s harness-mate on the one hand, and Diamond’s dark coat on the other are subjects of the

same pregnant silence on MacDonald's part, it seems reasonable to assume that there is a symbolic identity between the two—or, more precisely, that the unnamed horse is a metaphoric representation of all the darkness that Diamond's little white lozenge has not yet assimilated.

We now come to the conversation between Diamond and Ruby. Young Diamond hears “the two horses talking to each other—in a strange language, which yet, somehow or other, he [can] understand, and turn over in his mind in English” (315-16). Even thus translated it remains rather cryptic, but should be capable of a further translation from that mysterious horse language. The first stage of the deciphering consists in tracing the various allusions in the exchange.

By rebuking Ruby for his fat and shine, horse Diamond incurs the following haughty retort from Ruby: ““There's no harm in being fat . . . No, nor in being sleek. I may as well shine as not”” (316). This can be construed as a transparent allusion to Paul's recommendation of tolerance in Romans 14.3-15:

and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgeth another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth . . . He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, . . . and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, . . . For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. . . . why dost you judge thy brother? . . . there is nothing unclean of itself, but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

As MacDonald says elsewhere, the important thing is to be a witness of the truth, in whatever garment: “The rags are the more likely, but neither better nor worse than the robes” (“Kingship” *U.S.* 497).

This conversation between the horses occurs at a time when Diamond's family are being put to a severe test by a combination of unfortunate circumstances. “How they managed to get through the long dreary expensive winter, I can hardly say” exclaims the narrator, going on to describe how Ruby “fell lame”; there was “great depression in business and . . . bread rose greatly in price”; “Diamond's mother was but poorly”; and Joseph's “own health was far **[16]** from what it had been” (311-13). “One week at last was worse than they had yet had. They were almost without bread before it was over” (313). Joseph, at a loss to understand a Providence that overwhelms the just with trials, can't help remonstrating—“I cannot say that he never grumbled” (310). So upset is he, that he is even “cross to his

wife” (314).

In such hard times, then, Joseph is (symbolically at least) as gaunt as his four-legged friend—““It was necessary . . . that good Joseph, . . . should grow lean”” (320). Struck down by God’s hand, he appeals, like Job, to a God that remains absent (Job 19.7; 20): “I did grumble at you, sir, many’s the time in my trouble” (330). And yet, it could be said that it was in such darkness that the coming of Light was being prepared. Diamond’s so-called sleepwalking crisis in fact corresponds to North Wind’s reappearance, which so rejoices the boy: “His little heart was in a flutter, for he had long given up all thought of seeing her again” (315). Concurrently a new baby has arrived in the family, an event which should certainly not be considered only from a literal point of view. There is an interesting symmetry that must be pointed out between the twin phrases: “as if the red beast had brought ill luck with him” (309-10) / “as if she [the baby] had brought plenty with her” (311)—the latter inviting one not to take the former at its face value.

The notion of *master* which appears in the quotation above from St Paul is of paramount importance here, as may be inferred from the recurring use (no less than twelve times) of the word in the chapter. For Diamond and Ruby are not to be considered in themselves, as two fellow creatures doing the same job (an erroneous view in which Ruby will necessarily cut a poor figure as we have seen), but as servants of *two different masters*. This is the key to unlocking the horse language. Ruby expressly says: ““Your master’s not mine”” (317). But we do not pick this up because the animal really sounds a selfish lazybones when he goes on to say: “I must attend to my own master’s interests, and eat all that is given me, and be as sleek and fat as I can, and go no faster than I need”” (317). The comical effect of such a cynical declaration leads us astray and we fail to perceive the solemn echo awoken by his: “Your master’s not mine”—a negative declaration not without some resemblance to Christ’s “My kingdom is not of this world.”

Ruby’s master, at a literal level, is of course Mr Raymond, who, having to be absent for a while, has entrusted his horse to Joseph’s safe-keeping. However, he “had come to the resolution . . . to put them all to a certain test” (282) and the trials to which the family are as a consequence subjected, the various calamities which rain down on them, Joseph’s revolt at the apparent injustice, the very absence of Mr Raymond, all point to Mr Raymond as the God whose mighty hand strikes a Job-like Joseph. [17]

Ruby’s master therefore is He whose realm belongs to another world, a divine Master, as suggested also by the parable of the wise and foolish

virgins which is another of the numerous biblical allusions in the chapter. Ruby has done whatever was needed to put on fat because, as he says: “I didn’t know when master might come home and want to see me” (320):

Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh. (Matt. 24.44)

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom . . . Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour. (25.1-13)

The fat that Ruby has taken good care to stock is the oil that the wise virgins, unlike their improvident sisters, acquired to trim their lamps. When the bridegroom came in the middle of the night, “they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut” (25.10).

Ruby makes the further cryptic claim that: “It was necessary I should grow fat, and necessary that good Joseph, your master, should grow lean” (320). What are these mysterious figures, between whose *increase* and *decrease* there seems to exist such a mathematical correlation? By substituting for the down-to-earth notions of fatness and leanness these accepted terms, we have the answer. What is evoked here is the advent of a new realm, in which he that baptised with water must yield precedence to He that baptises with the Holy Ghost. Ruby’s sibylline declaration then is an echo (with a change of point of view) to the Baptist’s declaration concerning Christ: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3.30). After the Small Mysteries come the Great Mysteries, after the *albedo* comes the *rubedo*, of which Ruby’s arrival is the sign.

However, it is not sufficient to perceive these various allusions to understand the logical context in which MacDonald uses them. For this the knowledge of mystics proves helpful. Considering the soul, Weil for example makes the distinction between a divine, eternal, “uncreated part which is identical to the Son of God,” and a created and perishable part (*Conn. Surn.* 248). Between the two, there is an extreme interdependence, the effect of which is that the growth of the one part requires the lessening of the other. With a mystical outlook, the sole *raison d’être* of the created part is *to be fed to the uncreated part*.²¹

Ruby’s plumpness (his fat, taken in the positive sense of “the oil of his lamp”) is inversely proportional to Diamond’s leanness. This inverted symmetry is strongly emphasised in the text: Diamond is “in the cab all day and every day” (284) and nevertheless as sober as a judge; while the apathetic

Ruby, “fall[s] asleep between every step” (319) and does “nothing but eat his head off” (327). One animal overtakes himself and is “proud to be so worked” (317), [18] while the other conserves his energy as much as he can and goes no faster than he needs. After a month of this contrasting diet and life-style for the two horses, Ruby can be said to be symbolically fat of Diamond’s leanness. The diamond has fed the ruby, the white has fed the red: “Beside the great red round barrel Ruby, all body and no legs, Diamond looked like a clothes-horse with a skin thrown over it” (328). The relationship between these two parts of the soul is actually very much the same as the one between the body and the soul. The soul in its turn is itself constituted of a *body* (the created part of the soul) and of a *soul* (the uncreated part) so that the following lines from *Castle Warlock* offer quite an accurate description of that mysterious process:

The material part of us is meant to keep growing gradually thinner to let the soul out when its time comes, and the soul to keep growing bigger and stronger every day, until it burst the body at length, as a growing nut breaks its weakening shell; but when, instead, the body grows thicker and thicker, lessening the room within, it squeezes the life out of the soul, and when such a body dies, the soul inside it is found a poor shrivelled thing. (88)

For however surprising it may appear at first sight, the soul has the same requirements (according to its kind) as the body: in order to grow it has to be fed. Opposing the man who “indulges his lusts” and he “who is ever tending his divine part (dæmon),” Plato writes in the *Timaeus*: “the way of tendance of every part by every man is one—namely, to supply each with its own congenial food and motion” (90c). MacDonald may well have had this declaration in mind when, concerning the Imagination—which he recognises as “the presence of the spirit of God” (*Orts* 28)—he writes: “for the culture of the imagination, the whole is comprised in two words—*food* and *exercise*. If you want strong arms, take animal food, and row. Feed your imagination with food convenient for it, and exercise it” (*Orts* 36, italics added).

Poor old horse Diamond, we are told, has been brought to the state where “[t]here was hardly a spot of him where you could not descry some sign of bone underneath. Gaunt and grim and weary he stood, kissing his master” (328). In this state he represents the perishable part of the soul, which is indeed starved because, forgetful of all care for personal conservation, it has fulfilled its nourishing function, because it has carried out its duty to

the end and been faithful to its true vocation. “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (John 12.24). In *Gutta Percha Willie*, Willie is reminded of this by his philosophic friend the shoemaker:

“Don’t you think it’s an honour to mend boots for a man who makes the best bed for the corn to die in?” **[19]**

“I thought it was to grow in,” said Willie.

“All the same,” returned Hector. “When it dies it grows—and not till then, as you will read in the New Testament.” (52-53)

The link with the alchemical symbolism is obvious, for alchemists insist that all seed is useless if it remains whole. The ultimate purpose of the *horse* in us is to serve wholeheartedly, unstintingly, even up to sacrificing himself, that superior reality called *master*. Horse Diamond perfectly understands the nobility and the metaphysical significance of such a service,²² and has, for the best and the worst, espoused his destiny as a horse:

“I’m proud to be so worked. I wouldn’t be as fat as you . . .

You’re a disgrace to the stable. Look at the horse next you. *He’s* something like a horse—all skin and bone” (317).

“You don’t even care for your own legs—so long as you can eat, eat, and sleep, sleep. You a horse indeed!” (318)

But we must perceive what lies behind that “eat, eat, and sleep, sleep.” If we do, we shall understand how little founded is old Diamond’s indignation, which is also ours in a first uninitiated stage of reading. What we have here is an implicit riddle—a riddle easy to solve as soon as one becomes aware of it as such. But the whole difficulty lies in finding out that it *is* a riddle, for we tend to take at face value whatever the “good” characters tell us, and horse Diamond is one of them. That riddle is: What is it that spends its time eating and sleeping while are being completed the final operations of that marvellous machinery, that wonder of wonders which a new autonomous life represents? What if not *a baby*?

baby’s a sleeping

snoring snoring

for himself and no other

for himself in particular. (157-58)

“There’s baby fast asleep! Oh, what a nonsense baby it is—to sleep so much!” (231)

Would one dream of reproaching a baby (otherwise than in fun, as Diamond does here) for the time it spends sleeping, or for sucking milk

at its mother's breast? The mother gives and the baby receives, and it is beautiful to give and beautiful to receive, as an old sage said. To reproach Ruby for being what he is, is like reproaching Mary for not bustling about like Martha—when we know that “Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10.42).²³ We might also consider Psalm 147—“[God] delighteth not in the strength of the horse, / He taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man”—in relation [20] to the highly contrasted morphology of Diamond and Ruby, which entitles us to perceive them as respective metaphors for *Action* and *Contemplation*. Diamond takes the greatest care of his legs—pre-eminently his working tool: “the moment he's had his supper, down he goes, and never gets up till he's called; and, for the legs of him, father says that makes no end of a differ” (284-85). Symbolically, Diamond is *Legs*, whereas Ruby, as can be expected; feels a supreme contempt for his (318). He then, is *Stomach*—“the great red round barrel Ruby, all body and no legs” (328)—because, as divine embryo, the great affair of his life, as for any embryo, is to digest, assimilate, and thrive as much as he can. Such is the law of life.

Significantly enough, Ruby looks exactly like the Ass-Lucius when the latter is about to become again the man (metaphorically the god) he verily is: “In the mean season, while I was fed with dainty morsels . . . I gathered together my flesh, my skin waxed soft and juicy, my hair began to shine, and I was gallant on every part” (10:116). Ruby then, whose “fat and shine” have made him unctuous—“as plump and sleek as a bishop's cob” (311)—stands for the eternal part of the soul, which fed off Diamond's flesh and blood (the perishable part of the soul).

The meaning of such imagery is that, for the transmutation to take place, for a person to be truly inhabited by Christ, his or her self must be starved to death. The trials sent to a Job-like Joseph and his family can be read as an evocation of the alchemical *mortificatio*. MacDonald's sermon “The Voice of Job” has a definite alchemical flavour: Job is described as being “[s]eated in the heart of a leaden despair” (*U.S.* 329); as having to go through ordeals “that he might be made perfect” (354); and if for a single moment he has mistrusted God, then it was time “that an earthquake of his being should disclose its hollowness, and at the same time bring to the surface the gold of God that was in him” (356). Each of these details is at root alchemical: lead is the metal associated with Saturn and death, and, in addition (since melancholy is “black choler”) with the nigredo; the Great Work aims at ultimately achieving the perfection of the primeval divine state;

the storm (which here takes the form of an earthquake) is a frequent image in alchemy, evoking the turmoil in the alchemical furnace; and the mention of gold speaks for itself.

Beside Joseph himself with his nigredo-melancholy, the presence of the children (Diamond, Nanny and the two babies) may correspond to the alchemical *ludus puerorum*, the hope of a new age, for Saturn is frequently represented surrounded by young children in alchemical emblem-books:

however, Joseph was able to keep a little hope alive in his heart.
. . . Nanny was no end of help, and Diamond was as much of
a sunbeam as ever, and began to sing to **[21]** the new baby the
first moment he got her in his arms . . . [H]is songs . . .
helped the whole family a great deal more than they were
aware. (311-13)

However, the divine exchange between the two parts of the soul is not completed in the gain by one part and loss by the other. Such an exchange should also be understood in the light of a passage from *Sir Gibbie*:

There is no forgetting of ourselves but in the finding of our
deeper, our true self—God’s idea of us when he devised us—
the Christ in us. Nothing but that self can displace the false,
greedy, whining self, of which most of us are so fond and
proud. (161)

We must therefore consider the remaining operations, humorously evoked when Mr Raymond expresses the apparently whimsical wish of seeing the two animals connected by a cannula so that the surfeit of the one should supply the want of the other. “If we could only lay a pipe from Ruby’s sides into Diamond’s, it would be the work of a moment. But I fear that wouldn’t answer” (329).

This striking image is open to several interpretations: the Aristotelian concept of the fault by excess and the fault by lack, or the need for a golden mean; the “union mid-way of contraries” which is central to the Tao; and, even more relevantly in the present context, the twenty first degree of the initiatory journey representing Temperance²⁴ under the guise of a man pouring a fluid from one bowl to another, an image therefore of the *One in three*. Considered in its esoteric meaning, Temperance is an image of the *solve et coagula* which infuses spirit into matter, and vice-versa.

And thus, once horse Diamond has corporified the volatile, has nourished the *angel* in him, this said angel (Ruby) who has assimilated Diamond’s terrestrial energy (i.e. literally “made it his,” transmuted it into his

own angelic substance), is going to make the *fix* volatile. He is going in his turn to nourish Diamond, by infusing into him, like a subtler blood, his own angelic substance: “We could pare Ruby and patch Diamond a bit Suppose for a week or two, you set yourself to take Ruby down and bring Diamond up” (329).

In other words, it is now the divine that is going to nourish the human. Whether the language used to describe it be that of Initiation, Alchemy or the Christian faith, the reality in question is obviously one and the same. The meaning of that inversely proportional evolution between the progress of God in us (the substance taken by Ruby) and the dispossession of our self (Diamond’s loss of substance) is further illuminated by a passage from “The Mirrors of The Lord”:

the deeper soul that willed and wills our souls, rises up, the infinite Life, into the Self we call *I* and *me*, but which lives immediately from him, and is [God’s] very own property and nature—unspeakably more his than ours: this deeper creative soul, [22] working on and with his creation upon higher levels, makes the *I* and *me* more and more his, and himself more and more ours; until at length the glory of our existence flashes upon us. (*U.S.* 456-57)

The image of the horses connected by a pipe also calls to mind that of the Pelican. That bird, which was supposed to resuscitate its young by feeding them the blood flowing from its torn breast, is an allegory of Christ sacrificing himself for mankind. But “pelican” is also another name for an alchemical retort, the spout of which (as suggested by the very name) “goes back into the belly of the vase” (Jung 33). Compare here the eloquent terms in which MacDonald writes of Christ in *The Hope of the Gospel*: “he gave himself . . . to his father’s children, and merited the power to *transfuse* the life-redeeming energy of his spirit into theirs” (185 italics added). Mr Raymond’s apparently nonsensical allusion to a pipe connecting the two horses refers to nothing less than such a wonder-ful *transfusion*. We must become vase (Grail)²⁵ worthy of receiving, like Little Daylight, “the flow of the tide of life” (265). In *The Hope of the Gospel* MacDonald writes: “I would be such into whom thy love can flow” (184). Only of course, the process “of spiritual infiltration” is often a long, indeed an “agelong” one as MacDonald says in (*Paul Faber* 38).²⁶

But to return to Diamond and Ruby, it can be said that Diamond has experienced that death after which a person no longer lives, but God lives in

him. The person has died nourishing the god in him, and in an operation very like the transfusion that saves a moribund person, the god now invests all his being, by infusing into his veins a new and higher life. The “double harness” in which the two animals will henceforth be joined (331) is a most eloquent metaphor for this two-way movement, this incarnation-humanisation of the god and this deification of man, constituting the achievement of the Great Work and the final goal of all spirituality. As the church father Irenæus said in the second century: *Deus homo factus est ut homo fieret Deus*. The harness is also, like the pelican, an illustration of the alchemical *ouroboros*. (“Tail-devouring” is the literal meaning of the Greek term.) This snake, which after swallowing itself gives birth to itself anew is an image of totality, of the Creation originating in God and returning to God; an image of the union of opposites—the head and tail of the animal representing the creative and the receptive, the spiritual and material ends of a unique reality.

For after a month during which the two horses are made to exchange their respective life-styles—“go on with your cabbing for another month; only take it out of Ruby and let Diamond rest” (330)—there is little difference left between them: “Before the end of the month Ruby had got respectably thin, and Diamond respectably stout. They really began to look fit for double harness” (333). Soon all duality will be left behind; there will no longer be Diamond here [23] and Ruby there, it will no longer be a matter of the human here, and the divine there—for theirs will be a perfect *marriage*. Hence Mr Raymond’s and Joseph’s revealing remarks to each other “if you won’t buy my Ruby, I must buy your Diamond” (329); “As to who calls him his, that’s nothing” (330).

When the two animals are under the same yoke there will be a literal *syzygy* (from *συζυγία* yoke): a fundamental Unity in which each has so well exchanged his own nature for that of the other that “the miracles of a sole thing” are indeed accomplished: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3.28).

Ruby’s loss in weight is an almost literal illustration of the process of *kénosis* where God accepted to *empty himself*, to forego his plenitude, that man might have access to that same plenitude:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of

men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.
(Phil. 2.5-8)

Now the only way for man to find God is, in imitation of this process, to “empty himself” in his turn through the same obedience and humility: “The self is given to us that we may sacrifice it; it is ours that we like Christ may have somewhat to offer” (“Self-Denial” *U.S.* 366). Old Diamond is an image of such a self-sacrifice. This is the *omnia ad unum*, the travelling-back that all Creation in good time will accomplish.

Like the Baptist before Christ, like the door opening onto the Sanctuary, the time has come for North Wind to step aside. Although Diamond hears her voice, although she leads him to the stable and causes the unreachable key to fall at his feet, she nevertheless remains invisible—“he had long ago given up all thought of seeing her again. Neither now was he to see her” (315). She will visit him only “Once More,” (ch. 37) to attempt to reconcile him to their separation, to help him understand that if she be a dream, ““there’s something better that’s not a dream”” (360). Then will come the ultimate *rendez-vous* when, after giving her godson a chance to glance at his whole harmonious life, she takes him away to her luminous country: “North Wind lifted Diamond and bore him away” (374).

As suggested by the association of the chestnut (ruby) horse and the ruby ring (significantly an engagement ring, the present of Mr Raymond to his betrothed), *the hour cometh*. Like the engagement of the *Promessi Sposi*, the preparation for Diamond and Ruby to go under the same yoke is a prefiguration of the Heavenly Marriage awaiting our souls. [24]

Notes

1. All unidentified references and allusions in the paper are to *At the Back of the North Wind*.
2. This would include the boy in the poem of MacDonald’s which begins:
I want to go, like other boys,
Out in the shining day;
Dear Lord, I want to make a noise,
And run about and play. (qtd in Greville M. 521)
3. Added to the adjective “multitudinous,” that red can suggest Roman purple (actually a crimson) and therefore temporal (as opposed to spiritual) power.
4. The quotation continues: “It is only in [God] that the soul has room.”
5. This is how I construe that cryptic poem: the materialistic father of the poem, who will hear in the sougning of the wind nothing but the sougning of the wind, who will

see in a scarf of mist nothing but a scarf of mist, has in-carnated his soul (pictured as a child in his arms) in a wholly negative sense—he has embedded it in flesh by constantly stifling that little voice which tries to remind him of the existence of another reality. And thus his arms, which he meant as a cradle, turn into a coffin—“*Das Kind war tot.*” The little voice has been silenced and the temple of the spirit is now but a whited sepulchre.

6. An account of one of MacDonald’s American lectures (*Methodist Recorder* 8 Feb. 1873) includes the following passage: “We were shown a photograph of the whole family . . . with little Maurice among them, the lad who suggested, his mother said, by his quaint sayings, that weird writing ‘On the back of the North Wind’” (qtd in Triggs 122). It is not clear whether the mistake is that of Mrs MacDonald herself, or that of the reporter.

7. When Anodos, in his “floating chariot” over the great city, hears the “hopeless cries” of his fellow-men and longs to minister to them and comfort them “with the love that healeth,” he sinks from his “state of ideal bliss” (317-18).

8. In such a context, the imagery used by Greville in his reminiscence of his father’s love of horses seems to take on a Literal significance: “[The mare] would rush away like the wind, as if possessed by her rider’s very soul” (Greville M 54).

9. This concept is familiar to a MacDonald reader, who knows that there is no *thing* that was not first a *think*. In the Unspoken Sermon “Life,” for example, he makes it clear that he is one of “those who cannot doubt” this:

One form of the question between matter and spirit is, which was first, and caused the other—things or thoughts; whether things without thought caused thought, or thought without things caused things. To those who cannot doubt that thought was first, causally preceding the earliest material show . . . (302)

10. The apparent paradox is asserted, as far as I know, in all traditions. Guénon’s *Initiation* explores this subject.

11. This verse is evoked in both *The Marquis of Lossie*—“If God makes his angels winds, as the Psalmist says” (229) and in Cosmo’s song on the winds in *Castle Warlock* (254). [25]

12. The ancients would describe Vanity as caracoling on a furious horse . . . and [falling] head first into a pit, in a great disorder of incoherent gestures. . . . Vanity is nothingness and death. The conceited person is he who starts on his journey without first getting rid of his imperfections. He thinks his mere presence is enough, and that he will triumph over all ordeals. But the horse, the sphere of instinct, violently unseats a disharmonious thought. The conceited person has a wrong idea about the work which is to be accomplished. . . . Pride is the courage of the traveller who never gives up when he is faced with the mystery. In order to ride properly the steed that takes him toward the temple, he feeds his inner fire. (Jacq 46)

We must take care not to misunderstand the phrase “sphere of instinct.” The context shows well enough that it refers to an intuitive knowledge of the spiritual reality, which in fairy tales is precisely represented by the “magical knowledge of the horse . . . that creative spontaneity that wells from the inner depths of the Self” (von Franz 360).

13. This is evident in the contrasting origins of the dreams of the two children.

14. I show in my thesis how relevant this notion of the Greek Daimon (Daemon) is in the book, and equate it with Diamond.

15. Cosmo shows the jewels to a philosopher jeweller, who obviously expresses MacDonald’s own convictions:

Like all things else, [diamonds] give a man according to what he has,” pursued the jeweller. “The fine lady may see in her diamonds victory over a rival; the philosopher may read in the law inexorable; the poet—I have read my Spenser, Mr. Warlock—sees in the diamond the only substance fit to make the shield of faith out of. Like the gospel itself, diamonds are a savour of life unto life, or a savour of death unto death, according to the eyes that look upon them. (346-47)

16. MacDonald uses the same imagery again where Nanny describes the little man in her dream: “I looked at his eyes. They were very small, but so bright that I think he saw by the light that went out of them” (300).

17. The good horse in the *Timaeus* is white, as is the mount of him who “is called Faithful and True” (Revelations 19.11). A white horse is universally depicted as the mount of heroes and spiritual conquerors.

18. Lesley Smith (*Childlike* 164). **[26]** [Note: image not available]

19. Long after writing of this “transformation” I learnt that a similar imagery exists in Zen Buddhism. “The Taming of the Cow” is a series of pictures which begins with a man in the presence of a wild black cow. When he captures it, its muzzle turns white. As the animal gradually becomes more obedient and eventually follows its master of its own free will, more and more of it becomes white, and when the man at last can let it graze and drink while he sleeps, the whole animal is white. Then they are pictured in the sky; then the cow is no longer visible, then the man, and the series closes with the image of a ring. I found these pictures reproduced in a book on church carvings (Appavou and Mougeot 124). The authors use them to show how similar this “Taming of the Cow” is, in essence, to the progressive taming of a beast which can be seen on the portal of a church in Berry.

20. The same alchemical and Christian truth is evoked in *A Rough Shaking*, in the episode that gives an adoptive son (Clare, whom an earthquake has just made an orphan) to the childless Mr. and Mrs. Porson, filling them with wonder. “Out of the bosom of the skeleton Death himself, had been given them—into their very arms—a germ of life, a jewel of heaven!” (53).

21. Hence the use of the terms *swallowed* and *assimilated* in this paper.

22. “There is *no* dignity but of service” is a notion dear to MacDonald’s heart. In *The*

Seaboard Parish he illustrates this by exploring the mediaeval concept of chivalry and concludes that: “[t]here was a grand heart of Christianity in that old chivalry, notwithstanding all its abuses” (93-94).

23. MacDonald, however is always subtle:

“Don’t you think, Papa . . . that if Mary had said the smallest word against Martha, as Martha did against Mary, Jesus would have had a word to day on Martha’s side next?”

“Indeed I do, my dear. And I think that Mary did not sit very long without asking Jesus if she mightn’t go and help her sister. There is but one thing needful—that is, the will of God; and when people love that above everything, they soon come to see that to everything else there are two sides, and that only the will of God gives fair play, as we call it, to both of them.” (*Seaboard* 195)

24. In *Phantastes*, the initiatory journey of Anodos comprises twenty one chapters of the book and his most conspicuous gain is a measure of Temperance (Pocherry 25-30).

25. “I would be such into whom thy love can flow” (*Hope of the Gospel* 184).

26. Paul Faber gives two transfusions of his own blood to Juliet: “Once more, utterly careless of himself, had the healer drained his own life-spring to supply that of his patient” (385). The doctor owns two horses, Ruber and Niger, which, like Ruby and Diamond, might well stand for the contemplative and active parts of the soul. Here again, insistence on a mathematical correlation is probably not gratuitous: “if [Niger] was but two-thirds of Ruber’s size, he was but one-third of his age, and saw better at night” (21). * Unlike the thriving Ruby, however, Ruber fails to put on weight: “he eats enough for two, but he *can’t* make fat: all goes to muscle and pluck” (3). This is hardly surprising since Faber is more *legs* than [27] *stomach*, more Martha than Mary. He is ever ready to fly to other people’s assistance because he is endowed with “a large share of the lower but equally indispensable half of religion” (6). But he is somewhat deficient as far as grace is concerned, since he is (or believes himself to be) an atheist at the beginning of the novel. (This is only a tentative approach: I have not yet made a thorough study of the novel).

* In this passage MacDonald wants us to realise that “Niger was a good horse also” (21). He always writes of our *inferior being* in such terms: “by whatever name called . . . horse or dog or tiger, it would be good horse, good dog, good tiger” (“The Truth” *U.S.* 476).

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N.B. Where a work is not cited in an English translation the translation is my own. The quotation in the title is from John Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" which is quoted in *England's Antiphon* (209). The epigraph is from Fulcanelli's *Demeures philosophales* 1:411. **[29]**