Mythopoeic Society

Mythlore

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 14
Number 3

Article 5

Spring 3-15-1988

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Pennington, John (1988) "Phantastes as Metafiction: George MacDonald's Self-Reflexive Myth," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 14 : No. 3 , Article 5.
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol14/iss3/5

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Abstract

Considers MacDonald a more modern and self-reflexive fantasist then previously recognized. Believes the use of "other myths and interpolated fictions" in *Phantastes* "anticipates modern metafictional techniques."

Additional Keywords

MacDonald, George. Phantastes—as metafiction; Metafiction; Self-reflexivity

This article is available in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol14/iss3/5

Phantastes as Metafiction

George MacDonald's Self-Reflexive Myth

John Pennington

G. K. Chesterton called George MacDonald "a spiritual genius" whose "fairy tales and allegorical fantasies were epoch-making in the lives of multitudes, children and parents alike..." (p. 1) W.H. Auden considered him "pre-eminently a mythopoeic writer," and "in his power... to project his innerlife into images, events, beings, landscapes which are valid for all, he is one of the most remarkable writers of the nineteenth century" (v-vi). More recent critics are also kind to MacDonald: Stephen Prickett labels MacDonald "possibly the greatest fantasy-writer of that (or any other) period" (p. 10), Jonathan Cott describes him as "the greatest visionary writer of children's literature" (xli), and Jack Zipes places him alongside Dickens and Lewis Carroll as "the three most important writers and defenders of fairy tales from 1840 to 1880 (xx).

Yet there is no clear definition of MacDonald's brand of fantasy, Is it allegory? Mythopoeic? A combination of the two? C.S. Lewis, however, attempts to define MacDonald's fantasies and his myth-making abilities. To Lewis, MacDonald excelled in "fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic (xxvi), and in this art form "the mere pattern of events is all that matters.... Any means of communication whatever which succeeds in lodging those events in our imagination has, as we say, 'done the trick.' After that you can throw the means of communication away" (xxvii). Lewis' theory, in part, is a reaction to what he sees as MacDonald's "fumbling" style, and, thus, his theory of myth-making is convenient to apply to MacDonald's art since words are less important than action. Lewis, of course, has done more than anyone to resurrect interest in MacDonald, and at times he is MacDonald's greatest defender. But he is also MacDonald's greatest apologist, and is, ironically, MacDonald's albatross: Lewis is embarrassed by much of MacDonald's writing, and his theory of myth-making deflects attention from the written word and the artistry of the work.

It is not my concern here to agree or disagree with Lewis' theory of myth-making; it is my concern, though, to suggest that MacDonald's brand of fantasy is much more complex and modern than has yet been examined. MacDonald was a very self-reflexive writer: in his fairy tales "The Wise Woman," "The Light Princess," and "The Golden Key," for example, he plays with classical fairy-tale conventions, inverting and parodying these conventions to highlight his thematic concerns. In his adult fantasies, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, he is also highly self-reflexive -- his characters realize that they are in a fantasy, that they are part of a fictional world -- and this self-relexivity manifests itself in structure as well as in theme. In *Phantastes*, specifically, MacDonald's fantasy approaches the metafictional, the meta-mythical; he uses other myths and interpolated fictions to construct his own fantasy world. Consequently, there are multiple textual worlds that MacDonald draws on, and this self-reflexive nature of *Phantastes* is a form of metafiction. Although published in 1858, *Phantastes* anticipates modern metafictional techniques.

In *Fabulation and Metafiction*, Robert Scholes argues that metafiction, what he calls "experimental fabulation" (p. 41), "grows out of an attitude which may be called 'fallibilism,' just as nineteenth-century realism grew out of an earlier attitude called positivism. Fabulation, then, means not turning away from reality which is fiction, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality" (p. 8). Scholes contends that metafictional authors assume "the sense that the positivistic basis for traditional realism had been eroded, and that reality, if it could be caught at all, would require a whole new set of fictional skills" (p. 4). This new genre or mode, which Scholes labels the "ethically controlled fantasy" (p. 3), incorporates the philosophic and mythic in its narrative structure, quite unlike the realistic novel. *Phantastes* can be considered an ethically controlled fantasy, for it does waver between the philosophic and mythic. In a sense, then, metafiction is a reaction against the realistic novel, and the Victorian period, the era in which MacDonald writes, witnessed the blossoming of the realistic novel. In *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis admits that MacDonald was "seduced" into writing realistic novels (p. 232), and I think it more than coincidence that his first work of fiction was a fantasy, as was his last --MacDonald felt a need to go beyond realism. It is ironic, and unfortunate, that MacDonald spent most of his energy writing second-rate realistic novels.

In her study *Metafiction*, Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (p. 2). Waugh claims that "metafiction thus converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism" (p. 11). Both Waugh and Scholes, consequently, see metafiction as a reaction against the realistic novel, and they both suggest that such fabulation enters a dialogue not only with the process of its own fictional representation, but also with the dominant views on artistic creation. By writing metafiction, an author creates a new set of fictional skills, literally creates a new fiction. Such a claim for metafiction implies that it is a radical departure from the normal realistic portrayal, highlighting the fact that reality is more complex than that found in the monological construction of the realistic novel. *Phantastes* works as metafiction. The book is constructed from a series of subtexts which remove the reader further and further from his or her own conception of reality, replacing the reality with multiple fictional realities that eventually become more real and valid than the reader's armchair world. In *Phantastes* MacDonald replaces the real world with an alternate one, or, more specifically, replaces reality with fiction. Both *Phantastes* and *Lilith* end with a quote from Novalis --"Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will" (Phantastes, p. 182) -- and MacDonald's self-reflexive myth-making, or metafiction, provides a space where fiction replaces reality, where myth and fantasy become real. His primary method is to exchange the real world for the fantasy world, and he achieves this primarily through metafictional means.

MacDonald escapes from the confines of the realistic novel and creates a new and alternative fiction which argues for fictional reality. This sense of escape, to use Tolkien's notion, is a very self-conscious, deliberate escape; it is also quite radical and subversive for MacDonald's day.

Anodos enters fairyland, in part, because he was reading a fairy tale to his sister; a fairy woman appears out of his father's bureau and promises him that he will find the entrance to fairyland. The fairy says in reference to Anodos' sister: "When she had finished, she said, as she closed the book, 'Is there a fairy-country, brother?' You replied with a sigh, 'I suppose there is, if one could find the way into it'" (p. 8). In a sense, the fairy woman shows Anodos that the fiction he was reading is real or will be real. MacDonald immediately shows this by having Anodos' bedroom transform before his eyes into fairyland. Thus the concrete world metamorphoses into another world, another fictional world that Anodos can enter. Once he is in fairyland, a group of mischievous fairies taunt him -- "Look at him! Look at him! He has begun a story without a beginning, and it will never have any end. He! he! he! Look at him" (p. 24) Thus Anodos is immediately aware that he is in a fiction. He says at one point in the story, "I sat a long time, unwilling to go; but my unfinished story urged me on. I must act and wander" (p. 32). The reading of a fairy tale gets him into fairyland, and in fairyland he realizes that he is in a fairy tale himself. Reality switches to fiction, and that fiction, finally, takes on a new reality for Anodos. Essentially, fiction replaces the real in *Phantastes*.

"One way of reinforcing the notion of literary fiction as an alternative world is the use of literary and mythical allusion which remind the reader of the existence of this world outside everyday time and space, of its thoroughgoing textuality *and* intertexuality (p. 112)," suggests Waugh. In *Phantastes* MacDonald shows that myth is real by having past myths literally come to life in the book. Anodos' "pathless" quest is basically defined by two myths -- that of Percivale and the Holy Grail (a Christian myth) and that of Pygmalion (a pagan one). These two myths provide the framing subtext which create much of the action. Once in fairyland, Anodos encounters a cottage and enters it; in the cottage he finds "an old book" which "contained many wondrous tales of Fairy Land, and olden times, and the Knights of King Arthur's table" (p. 15). Anodos reads an episode about Sir Galahad and Sir Percivale: Galahad the pure is in shining armor, but Percivale is "tosmirched with mud; and mire" (p. 16). Anodos reads aloud Percivale's encounter with the demon lady who seduces Percivale, and reads with enthusiasm the climactic passage: "And with her fair words and false countenance she comforted him and beguiled him, until he followed her where she led him to a -- " (p. 16). The story ends abruptly -- the woman of the cottage draws Anodos' attention away from the narrative and focuses his attention on the greedy alder-tree's fingers which are growing outside the cabin. Thus Anodos picks up a story in the middle and it has no end, exactly like his own story with the book he writes.

More important, though, is the fact that Percivales's story becomes real in *Phantastes*. The fiction Anodos reads becomes reality. As he journeys on, "a horseman in what appeared red armour" (p. 40) appears, and immediately Anodos equates him to Percivale and his quest. The knight he meets talks in courtly language and even asks Anodos, "Hast thou ever read the story of Sir Percivale and the... Maiden of the Alder-Tree" (p. 41), the very story Anodos has just been reading. This knight is (or is a version of) Percivale, and the knight is also aware of his own story. Furthermore, Anodos will enter the Percivale story: he will be seduced by the alder-tree, saved only by the knight who chops at a tree to scare the evil demon away. It is worth noting that MacDonald's short interpolated story about Sir Percivale is told in courtly language and style, and that the knight Anodos meets also speaks in romance tongue; they both reinforce the claim that fiction is real. The Percivale myth is an apt symbol for this transformation from reality to fiction, for the stories of Arthur and his knights are based on historical fact and later become the subject of fiction -- they gain mythic status. In *Phantastes*, Anodos moves from the real world and encounters numerous fictional worlds which also are real, mirroring the movement of Arthurian legend from fact to fiction.

Not only is Anodos caught in the Percivale story, he is also part of the Pygmalion myth. He spies a cave that reminds him of Pygmalion: "'A lovely story,' I said to myself. 'This cave, now, with the bushes cut away from the entrance to let the light in, might be such a place as he would choose, withdrawn from the notice of men, to set up his block of marble, and mould into a visible body the thought already clothed in form'" (p. 35). He finds an alabaster lady in this cave. Anodos' thought of Pygmalion literally and symbolically brings the myth to being, and once again, in fairyland fiction becomes reality. Like the Arthur myth, the Pygmalion myth is perfect for MacDonald's purpose: art becomes real. In fairyland, then, the alabaster lady -- art -- is real, no longer mere representation.

What is interesting about Anodos' encounter with the alabaster lady is his self-consciousness about literary myths and tales. He contemplates the method he should use to bring the alabaster lady to life: "Numberless histories passed through my mind of change of substance from enchantment and other causes, and of imprisonments such as this before me. I thought of the Prince of the Enchanted City, half marble and half living man; of Ariel; of Niobe; of the Sleeping Beauty of the wood; of the bleeding trees; and many other histories" (pp. 36-37). He tries a kiss to awaken her, thinks of Orpheus and his music, and eventually sings the lady to life, just like Pygmalion. Ironically, though, Anodos' insertion in the Pygmalion myth is frustrated and undermined: instead of possessing the lady, she flees from him and he must wander in vain to find her. At the end of *Phantastes* MacDonald brings the Percivale and Pygmalion myths together --the knight (Sir Percivale), whom Anodos meets intermittently throughout the narrative, finally finds his true love, the alabaster lady. What has happened in the text, then, is that Anodos and his readers are drawn further and further away from the real world and brought closer and closer to alternative fictional worlds which suddenly become real. There is a chinese-box structure: the reader reads the first-person narration by Anodos who reads a fairy tale that gets him into fairyland. Once in fairyland he reads about Percivale who appears, and he thinks of the Pygmalion myth which happens. These subtexts, then, allow MacDonald to combine textual worlds. Waugh claims that "contemporary metafiction draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins" (p. 29), and MacDonald achieves an identical

effect: Anodos encounters myths and is never certain what myth he will be in, or the proper action that he should take within that particular myth. The frame of *Phantastes* is the real world, but it transforms into fairyland where there are numerous textual worlds that are also real. Thus when Anodos finally returns to the real world that he left at the beginning of the book, he realizes that it is a pale copy of the real world (the fantasy world) he has just left.

Phantastes' intricate framework becomes even more complex in its use of metafictional devices. Anodos visits a farmhouse that borders fairyland. Within fairyland, then, there is a house that borders another fairyland. The husband tells Anodos, "Now, you would hardly credit it, but my wife believes every fairy-tale that ever was written. I cannot account for it. She is a most sensible woman in everything else" (p. 51). The wife believes that fiction is reality. Now the fictional characters discuss the possibility of fiction being real, as if MacDonald wanted to highlight the fact that Percivale and Pygmalion are real. Characters are self-conscious about living within a fiction. Though the husband is hesitant to believe in fairyland -- even though he is in fairyland -- he warns Anodos not to take the eastward direction because he will "pass close to what the children say is the very house of the ogre that Hop-o'-my-Thumb visited" (p. 52). Consequently, the farmhouse which borders fairyland is symbolic of this fiction within a fiction, or, more precisely, this metamorphosis that replaces reality with fiction.

Anodos will acknowledge the truth of fiction when he enters the fairy palace. There he finds "*The Chamber of Sir Anodos*" (p. 70), an exact replica of his bedroom back in the real world, the very bedroom that transformed into fairyland. An interesting reversal takes place: now in fairyland the real -- symbolzed at the beginning of the book by his bedroom --is nade into art. Anodos says that "the room was in very respect a copy of my own room, the room whence the little stream from my basin had led me into Fairy Land" (p. 70). His room is now art -- or fictional representation -- and fairyland, in turn, becomes the true reality. While he is in the fairy palace, Anodos explains to the reader "how true the fairy tales are; for I was waited on, all the time of my meal, by invisible hands" (p. 70). Once again, fairy tales are real; once again, fiction is acted out in fairyland.

The ultimate symbol for this replacement of reality by fiction is seen in the library Anodos enters in the fairy palace. A library holds other fictional worlds, potentially an infinite number of fictional realities. As with Borges' libraries, this library represents the limitless fictional worlds that represent multiple or infinite realities. When Anodos reads in the library, he becomes part of the story: "If, for instance, it was a book of metaphysics I opened, I had scarcely read two pages before I seemed to myself to be pondering over discovered truth..." (p. 75). "Or if the book was one of travels, I found myself the traveller.... With fiction it was the same. Mine was the story. For I took the place of the character who was most like myself, and the story was mine" (p. 76) Even when he reads poetry he becomes the sensation that he reads. A first-person narrator -- Anados -- enters a fictional world -- fairyland -- where fictional worlds are real; in fact, he can participate in these fictional worlds simply by reading stories. He describes one tale about a planet very dissimilar from the real world, and when he describes it he is the central character in the story, providing dialogue between himself and the inhabitants of this other world. Multiple realities thus exist, and there is no clear distinction of frames to separate truth from fiction, the real from the unreal. Anodos describes his sensation as he copies the story of the other planet for his readers to read: "But see the power of this book, that, while recounting what I can recall of its contents, I write as if myself had visited the far-off planet, learned its ways and appearances, had conversed with its men and women. And so, while writing, it seemed to me that I had" (p. 82). The very act of reading and writing is now creation. Throughout *Phantastes*, Anodos is conscious of his role as author or fabulator, and he realizes that he is caught in the paradox that what he writes and reads becomes real.

Reading and writing, then, represent reality since fiction is fact. MacDonald, who writes *Phantastes*, creates a first-person narrator, Anodos, who writes his story about his journey in fairyland, and he writes of his experiences in other fictional worlds that he reads about in fairyland. When Anodos transcribes Cosmo's story, for example, he tells the reader, "I was Cosmo, and his history is mine. Yet, all the time, I seemed to have a kind of double consciousness, and the story a double meaning" (p. 84). In fact, the Cosmo story seems a microcosm of Anodos' story --unrequited love, desire, finally death to save a maiden. One finds stories within stories in *Phantastes*, and each story has its own internal reality and truth, and is also integral to the overall narrative, both thematically and structurally. MacDonald creates a intricate narrative tapestry, not just a series of stories and adventures strung together.

MacDonald's metafictional techniques continue throughout the book: there are numerous interpolated poems and stories which foreshadow what will happen to Anodos. A final, major example of MacDonald's metafictional methods is found in Anodos' death scene. By the end of *Phantastes*, the fictional world has completely replaced the real world. When Anodos "dies" at the end of the book, however, he dies back into the "real" world that he left at the beginning of the book. But this world is now foreign to him, and he awaits the "great good" (p. 185) -- death -- which will take him from this world and place him in the real world he has just left. He describes his own death, breaking all narrative conventions, for a narrator must be alive to narrate his own story, but his death is life. In *Lilith* MacDonald also achieves a similar affect: Vane will die back into his library, but when he finds himself back in his own library, he realizes that a higher reality exists in another world. Death, then, now opens the door to the eternal world, to the ultimate reality. A fiction replaces reality, death replaces life.

The structure of *Phantastes*, then, inverts and undermines the narrative norms of realistic fiction. There is no closure to the book -- Anodos awaits the opportunity to enter another world that is the real world. Phantastes remains open-ended, has an "endless ending" like *Lilith*. Waugh contends that "metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion" (p. 6). Furthermore, argues Waugh, "What [metafiction] does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover -- through its own self-reflection -- a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers" (p. 18). The realistic novel could not encompass what MacDonald was trying

to show, that the real world is an unknown world beyond, a world found in death. In his fantasies, however, he could provide a space for this world and replace the reader's world with a fictional world that becomes real. The reader, MacDonald hopes, will read *Phantastes* as Anodos reads the books in fairyland --MacDonald wants the reader to participate in the story, to realize that multiple realities exist, to realize that fairyland and dream are real, that death is the final reality and a new life. The self-conscious and self-reflexive fictional worlds in *Phantastes* draw attention to the fact that the stable bases of a coherent reality normally found in realistic novels are very unstable. MacDonald's fantasy world allows for multiple realities to exist simultaneously. In his study of Peter Beagle's *Last Unicorn* as meta-fantasy, R.E. Foust places Beagle alongside Barth, Coover, Gass, and Pynchon as writers who use metafiction to expand the rigid constraints dictated by the conventional realistic novel (p. 5). *The Last Unicorn* was written in 1968; *Phantastes* was written in 1858. Beagle essentially was doing what MacDonald had done a hundred years earlier. MacDonald's self-reflexive myth-making, his brand of metafiction or meta-fantasy, is peculiarly modern in technique. *Phantastes* is very modern in its narrative experimentation, a complex interaction of multiple fictional worlds, a fact that has not yet been recognized or adequately explored.

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On J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings

Sun-hating, Doom-drumming, strange-flesh-eating
Orcs beyond numbering, with saw-toothed knives
And Legs iron-shod, effluvia-secreting,
Vile of speech, viler of sport, snuffing lives
Even of orc-filths, long red tongues extruding
From flat, slant faces, coal blood fired to kill
But inly fearing the Red Eye unhooding,
Trained on the true by leather-winged Nazgul,
Lope west from Mordor's mirk and blackened spire,
Where violated soil brings forth no food,
To Gondor, Lorien, Rohan, and the Shire,
Whose free hearts. clear streams, and the Golden Wood
Are spared, dread Sauron's Ring in Mount Doom's bore.
Can this vast spell be spelled? Casts it coming war?

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