

Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016

Volume 10 *A Collection of Essays Presented at the Tenth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis & Friends*

Article 81

6-5-2016

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Recommended Citation

DeMarcus Manson, Cynthia (2016) "Awakening the Reader to Nature's Aesthetics: A Novel Purpose in *The Seaboard Parish*," *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 10 , Article 81. Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol10/iss1/81

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Awaking the Reader to Nature's Aesthetics: A Novel Purpose in *The Seaboard Parish*

by Cynthia DeMarcus Manson

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At the 2010 C. S. Lewis and Friends Colloquium, I explored several of George MacDonald's word paintings of natural phenomena, and their interconnections with the art theory and practice of some nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite painters. One of the literary landscapes came from the conclusion of MacDonald's 1868 novel *The Seaboard Parish* in which the minister narrator details the physical features of an actual Pre-Raphaelite painting by Arthur Hughes that MacDonald had once seen. Subsequently, the narrator interprets this image—a dying knight in the sunset, just-reaped shocks of corn in the valley nearby, a sky-reflecting lake and slender pines, “which lead the eye and point the heart upward” toward heaven itself (615). *The Seaboard Parish* contains many of MacDonald's radiant word paintings, but my thoughts have returned to the book to consider it more deeply as a whole. Is *The Seaboard Parish* simply a set-piece for MacDonald's artistic, highly pictorial descriptions of nature, or does it strive to meet expectations for its genre—the novel—integrating theme, plot and character development to immerse the reader in a complex representation of reality? I think it does the latter.

First published in book form by Hurst and Blackett of London, *The Seaboard Parish* centers on a long stay in the fictional seaside town of Kilkhaven by Anglican vicar Harry Walton and his family. *The Seaboard Parish* is a sequel to MacDonald's *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867) and a prequel to *The Vicar's Daughter* (1872), though it may easily be read on its own. However, questions about the seriousness of MacDonald's intentions to write a novel arise when reading the first chapter of *Seaboard*, which is entitled “Homiletic,” or sermon. Writing in first-person, the minister discursively contemplates old age, writing another book, and the different literary preferences of young and old, before abruptly announcing, “Now, readers in general, I have had time to consider what to tell you about, and how to begin”

(6). The story frame not only delays the action and positions the narrative some years in the narrator's past; it also makes the minister's selection of autobiographical topic seem very casual. One expects a memoir infiltrated with a minister's spiritual insights, rather than the carefully crafted product of a literary professional.

Narrator Walton also undercuts expectations of literary design in the final chapter of *Seaboard*, when he makes various self-deprecating remarks, such as "Now I fancy my readers, looking forward to the end, and seeing what a small amount of print is left, blaming me; some, that I have roused curiosity without satisfying it; others, that I have kept them so long over a dull book and a lame conclusion" (622-23). To answer readers' unanswered questions, the minister quickly states the matrimonial fate of two of his daughters and touches on what has become of some of his other children since the time period of the story. Then, he raises doubts as to whether he will further develop the history of himself and his family in another book, as he suspects that the end of his life is approaching. Walton laments:

The labour of thinking into sequences, even the bodily labour of writing, grows more and more severe. . . . I must therefore take leave of my patient reader—for surely every one who has followed me through all that I have here written, well deserves the epithet—as if the probability that I shall write no more were a certainty. . . ." (624)

When one contrasts George MacDonald with the persona of the Rev. Walton, one becomes aware of differences in vitality, but most particularly of literary acumen. Part of *The Seaboard Parish* was actually written while MacDonald remained by the seaside in Bude, Cornwall, where he and his family vacationed in summer 1867. As Barbara Amell points out in a *Wingfold* article on "The Bude Holiday," "he spent about two months working on *The Seaboard Parish* in its natural surroundings" (39), even after the opening installment of the novel appeared in the Oct. 1, 1867 issue of *The Sunday Magazine*. MacDonald's proximity to the seaside undoubtedly accounts for the vividness of his description, but the crafting of the novel's purpose and effect indicate that he used his fresh experiences of nature to express and further refine a complex and unified vision that developed long before his visit.

In my opinion, the key interpretive passage in *The Seaboard Parish* is a lengthy declaration that Walton makes to his daughter Connie regarding the aesthetic and spiritual value of the natural world:

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I suspect we shall find some day that the loss of the human paradise consists chiefly in the closing of the human eyes; that at least far more of it than people think remains about us still, only we are so filled with foolish desires and evil cares, that we cannot see or hear, cannot even smell or taste the pleasant things round about us. We have need to pray in regard to the right receiving of the things of the senses even, "Lord, open thou our hearts to understand thy word"; for each of these things is as certainly a word of God as Jesus is The Word of God. (116)

Walton's passage is striking because he claims that the natural world still possesses edenic qualities of beauty and pleasure, and that potentially human beings can enjoy much of the original artistry that the Creator exhibited in the Garden of Eden; Walton's reference to "the pleasant things round about us" highlights sensuous nature as appealing to the human appreciation for and response to the beautiful or to art and culture. In other words, he is talking about the aesthetics or principles underlying the beautiful and artistic. Additionally, Walton asserts that individuals should pray to understand the divine truth or meaning that is being communicated via the aesthetic effects of nature. The concept of creation as speaking of God and his characteristics is emphasized also when Walton contemplates his own continuing ability to enjoy the outdoors. He writes:

The smell of that field of beans gives me more delight now than ever it could have given me when I was a youth. And if I ask myself why, I find it is simply because I have more faith now than I had then. . . . Now, I believe that God *means* that odour of the beanfield; that when Jesus smelled such a scent about Jerusalem or in Galilee, he thought of his Father. (141)

MacDonald's emphasis on the beauty and meaningfulness of the natural world is not confined to *The Seaboard Parish* or even his realistic novels alone. David L. Neuhouser and Mark R. Hall have written: "An investigation into the writings of George MacDonald shows his love and reverence for nature and reveals how he envisions it as a manifestation of the imagination of God" (144). Neuhouser and Hall also quote from MacDonald's essay on "Wordsworth's Poetry," in which MacDonald writes: "This world is not merely a thing which God hath made, subjecting it to laws; but it is an expression of the thought, the feeling, the heart of God himself" (145).

During the course of *The Seaboard Parish*, the minister guides his two oldest daughters, Connie and Wynnie, as they grow in awareness

of and response to the aesthetic and divine communications of nature. The novel's readers vicariously share in Walton's guidance, while observing the different circumstances and processes of change that the daughters undergo. Connie's development begins in the wake of a horseback-riding accident that occurs on her eighteenth birthday. Connie is immobilized for a serious spinal injury, but her confinement indoors strengthens her appreciation of the outdoors. Her father points out that an "interruption" in the enjoyment of gifts from God may be necessary to "make us able to enjoy them as richly as he gives them," and Connie confesses: "[S]ince I have been ill, you would wonder, if you could see into me, how even what you tell me about the world out of doors gives me more pleasure than I think I ever had when I could go about it just as I liked" (36-37).

More enjoyment is ahead for Connie, after a fellow clergyman offers his house to the vicar and his family for the summer, and Walton decides to accept. He shares with Connie an epiphany he had as a young man while viewing the Atlantic on holiday from university. The sky was cloudy, and he was despondent:

All at once I turned—I don't know why. There lay the gray sea, but not as I had seen it last, not all gray. It was dotted, spotted, and splashed all over with drops, pools, and lakes of light, of all shades of depth, from a light shimmer of tremulous gray, through a half-light that turned the prevailing lead colour into translucent green that seemed to grow out of its depths—through this, I say, to brilliant light, deepening and deepening till my very soul was stung by the triumph of the intensity of molten silver. There was no sun upon me. But there were breaks in the clouds over the sea, through which, the air being filled with vapour, I could see the long lines of the sun-rays descending on the waters like rain—so like a rain of light that the water seemed to splash up in light under their fall. I questioned the past no more; the present seized upon me, and I knew that the past was true, and that nature was more lovely, more awful in her loveliness than I could grasp. It was a lonely place! I fell on my knees, and worshipped the God that made the glory and my soul. (117-18)

Walton tells Connie that he hopes she will see "a vision" by the Atlantic as brilliant as his, and she is taken outdoors for short periods to prepare her for the long journey by railway and then by open carriage to Cornwall.

As the family travels toward its destination, Walton sees "various reflexes of happiness" shining on the faces of his wife and children

and reaches for images of nature to convey the nuances of their expressions. Connie's face "was bright with the brightness of a lake in the rosy evening, the sound of the river flowing in and the sound of the river flowing forth just audible, but itself still, and content to be still and mirror the sunset" (142). In other words, Connie's rosy brightness attests to the pleasure she is receiving from the natural world. Alternately, "Wynnies face was bright with the brightness of the morning star, ever growing pale and faint over the amber ocean that brightens at the sun's approach; for life looked to Wynnies severe in its light, and somewhat sad because severe" (142). Wynnies face indicates that she is recoiling from nature's beauty. Wynnies suffers from a morbid introspection that prevents her from fully appreciating the aesthetics—and the divine meaning—in the natural world. She has a tendency to feel guilty and blame herself unnecessarily, and though she is a vicar's daughter, she has considerable doubt about God and his purposes.

As the novel progresses, Wynnies remains relatively unmoved by the natural world; that is, until after becoming acquainted with the young, Pre-Raphaelite-like painter Charles Percivale, who is sketching in the vicinity of Kilkhaven. They have several chance encounters, and one day Walton and Wynnies are taking a walk when they come upon the painter. Walton invites him to return with them to the site where the family has been picnicking, when Wynnies suddenly experiences a burst of joy:

"Oh, do look here, papa!" she cried, from some little distance.

We turned and saw her gazing at something on the sand at her feet. Hastening back, we found it to be a little narrow line of foam-bubbles, which the water had left behind it on the sand, slowly breaking and passing out of sight. . . . Such colours! deep rose and grassy green and ultramarine blue; and above all, one dark, yet brilliant and intensely-burnished, metallic gold. All of them were of a solid-looking burnished colour, like opaque body-colour laid on behind translucent crystal. (250)

This feast of color is short-lived, as the bubbles continue to burst, and Wynnies seizes this moment to express her misgivings about the Creator: "I can't think why the unchanging God should have made all the most beautiful things wither and grow ugly, or burst and vanish, or die somehow and be no more" (251). Walton's answer, in short, is that humanity is easily enamored of the physical or visible "bodies" of things to the exclusion of understanding "the spirit that dwells in

them” (253). He explains: “But we are always ready to love the body instead of the soul. Therefore, God makes the body die continually that we may learn to love the soul indeed” (252). In response to this explanation, Wynnie tells her father, “I think I understand you a little” (253). It seems that romantic attraction and even blossoming love can begin to open eyes that are closed to natural revelation and its Creator. Eventually in the novel, Wynnie expresses a strong desire to find God, despite her doubts, and it is suggested that both she and Percivale may be helpful to each other in their mutual struggle with doubt.

Meanwhile on a family day-trip, Percivale assists Walton in carrying Connie’s litter or pallet over a narrow land bridge that leads to a Cornwall landmark, the ruins of Tintagel, legendary birthplace of King Arthur. Connie is blindfolded lest she become distressed when viewing the abyss below, but finally the two men lay down the pallet near the ruins of a Gothic chapel and leave to help Mrs. Walton. When the company regroups, the narrator reports that Connie “lay in such still expectation, that you would have thought she had just fallen asleep But she heard our steps and her face awoke.” (361). When Connie’s blindfold is removed, she weeps at the glorious view:

Through the gothic-arched door in the battlemented wall, which stood on the very edge of the precipitous descent, so that nothing of the descent was seen and the door was as a framework to the picture, Connie saw a great gulf at her feet, full to the brim of a splendour of light and colour.

At the foot of the rocks, hundreds of feet below, the blue waters breaking in white upon the dark gray sands; all full of the gladness of the sun overflowing in speechless delight, and reflected in fresh gladness from stone, and water, and flower, like new springs of light rippling forth from the earth itself to swell the universal tide of glory. (363)

Clearly, Connie has attained a brilliant vision of the Atlantic like the one that moved her father in his youth. Moreover, the sharp contrast from darkness to light that is orchestrated for Connie, figuratively links Connie’s human experience to divine patterns in the natural world that the Rev. Walton talks about in more than one of his Sunday sermons.

Walton contends that the world is full of types of resurrection: “Every night that folds us up in darkness is a death; and those of you that have been out early and have seen the first of the dawn, will know it—the day rises out of the night like a being that has burst its tomb and escaped into life” (410). Explicitly or implicitly, the text of *The*

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Seaboard Parish offers up numerous other patterns of resurrection, ranging from the new plant life of spring appearing following winter, to the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly, to a human being waking up from a long night's sleep. Walton stresses that spiritual changes also are resurrections:

Every blessed moment in which a man bethinks himself that he has been forgetting his high calling, and sends up to the Father a prayer for aid; every time a man resolves that what he has been doing he will do no more; every time that the love of God, or the feeling of the truth, rouses a man to look first up at the light, then down at the skirts of his own garments—that moment a divine resurrection is wrought in the earth. Yea, every time that a man passes from resentment to forgiveness, from cruelty to compassion, from hardness to tenderness, from indifference to carefulness, from selfishness to honesty, from honesty to generosity, from generosity to love—a resurrection, the bursting of a fresh bud of life out of the grave of evil gladdens the eye of the Father watching his children. (421)

In conclusion, *The Seaboard Parish* follows the developing characters of Walton's eldest daughters as they awaken to or move closer to appreciating nature's aesthetic and spiritual bounty. The novel also invites the reader to awaken to the divine artistry and meaning in creation, finding symbolic parallels between humans and the rest of nature. One may conclude that *The Seaboard Parish* is more than a frame allowing MacDonald to insert ecstatic prose paintings and to present his aesthetic philosophy on beauty and art. The novel is unified through its resonant symbolism of resurrection, symbolism that permeates the novel and suggests the degree to which the Creator is reveals new life throughout the creation.

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