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# George MacDonald's Fairy Tales: Their Roots in MacDonald's Thought

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The fairy-tales of George MacDonald (1824-1905)—*Phantastes* (1858), *Dealings with the Fairies* (1867), *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), *The Wise Woman,* or *The Lost Princess* (1875), *The Princess and Curdie* (1883) and *Lilith* (1895)—are the subject of this and succeeding articles. Given the growing academic interest (primarily American) in the literature of fantasy this subject requires little justification; given also that MacDonald begins in England a literary genre of "Romantic Theology" which is continued in the work of Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien some investigation of his work should throw light beyond it.

The argument of these articles will concern the meanings of MacDonald's fairy-tales; a subject which is best approached from some understanding of the thought which lies behind MacDonald's statement that

> A fairy tale is not an allegory. There may be allegory in it, but it is not an allegory.[1]

This statement is made in the course of an essay on fairy-tales in which MacDonald declares that the best works of art are those that cannot be found to have anything definite or articulate to say about the world, because "The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended." [2] Indeed he links his objections to allegory with strictures on the intellectual, the fixed and the definite—in short, on the conscious part of the human mind. The various factors—and they are indeed various—behind this standpoint must now be shown, before an examination of

1. From the prefatory essay on fairy tales (hereafter known as *OFT*) in George MacDonald, *The Light Princess and Other Fairy Tales* (N.Y., 1893) [repr. as "The Fantastic Imagination" in *A Dish of Orts* (1908)], p. viii; cf. *Adela Cathcart,* 3 vols. (London, 1864), vol. II pp. 149-50, 265 and vol. III pp. 283, 315; Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife* (London, 1924) [hereafter *G.M.H.W.*], p. 297; and see M. M. McEldowney, "The Fairy Tales of George MacDonald," M.S., B.Litt., d.257 (Oxford, 1934) pp. 63-5.

2. *OFT,* p. ix.

the fairy-tales themselves can be begun. It is important to mention at the outset however that MacDonald's thinking on the subject is by no means consistent.

From the swirl of MacDonald's dictates one can extract what appears to be an assured Christian and extreme Romantic position which can be summarised thus:

> 1. Nature is God's book, constructed on principles which are beyond the reach of science and the human understanding, but are immediately apprehended by the sympathetic childlike imagination.
> 2. The creative imagination, which exists in his subconscious, is man's highest mental faculty: not only because in giving form to thought it imitates the creative work of God, but because it *is* God, who inhabits this area of the human mind and is the author of its workings.
> 3. For this reason the human artist has no final control over the products of this imagination however he may try to order and fix its promptings.
> 4. The works of the creative imagination, considered both as the products of divine afflatus and as imitations of the Nature described above, will appear connectionless, dreamlike and chaotic. Such works are known as fairy-tales, and, so conceived, the fairy-tale is the highest condition of life and art.

Thus as far as MacDonald is concerned the fairy-tale is not centrally about Man, but about God. It speaks of the things of God in God's language and, as St. Paul says ". . . the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."[3]

Nature is not to be understood in terms of analysis: the truth of Nature is not what it means but what it *is,* to the unthinking child:

> . . . the appearances of nature are the truths of nature, far deeper than any scientific discoveries in and concerning them. The show of things is that for which God cares *most* . . . What they say to the childlike soul is the truest thing to be gathered of them. To know a primrose is a higher thing than to know all the botany of it—just as to know Christ is an infinitely higher thing than to know all theology, all that is said about His person, or babbled about His work.[4]

MacDonald seems here to be speaking of the ideal observer of nature as one who enjoys Being-for-Itself: "knowing" a primrose and "knowing" Christ suggest a personal and immediate relationship with that which is perceived; and indeed MacDonald speaks of this knowledge

3. 1 Cor. 2, 14.

4. Ἔπεα Ἄπτερα. *Unspoken Sermons,* 3 Series. (London, 1867-89), *Second Series* (1885) [Hereafter *US 2*], pp. 235-6.

in terms of a fusion of the perceiver with the object, when he looks forward to a day when "I trust, we shall be able to enter into Nature's secrets from within them—by natural contact. . . ." [5] It is the insistence on the self as a separate entity, that cold self-distancing from its object which consciousness involves, that MacDonald rejects

> Human science is but the backward undoing of the tapestry-web of God's science, works with its back to Him, and is always leaving Him—His intent, that is, His perfected work—behind it, always going farther and farther away from the point where His work culminates in revelation.[6]

Hence, for MacDonald, "Analysis is well, as death is well." [7] Divine unreason is the source and pulse of the universe

> . . . no one loves because he sees why, but because he loves. No human reason can be given for the highest necessity of divinely created existence. For reasons are always from above downward.[8]

The primacy of the imagination over other mental faculties is central to this area of MacDonald's thought, and he draws frequent parallels between its operations and God's:

> The imagination is that faculty which gives form to thought . . . It is, therefore, that faculty in man which is likest to the prime operation of the power of God, and has, therefore, been called the *creative* faculty and its exercise *creation* . . .[9]

This likeness of the human imagination to the divine is not complete, MacDonald hastens to add; the human imagination is a kind of second edition of God's.

> . . . It is better to keep the word *creation* for that calling out of nothing which is the imagination of God . . . The imagination of man is made in the image of the imagination of God. Everything of man must have been of God first . . .[10]

The wheel comes full circle with a swing to the original position, with modifications

> But although the human imagination has no choice but to make

5. Ibid., p. 237.

6. Ἔπεα Ἀπτερα. *Unspoken Sermons,* 3 Series. (London, 1867-89), *Third Series* (1889) [Hereafter *US 3*], pp. 62-3; cf. pp. 64-8.

7. *US 3,* p. 63.

8. Ἔπεα Ἀπτερα. *Unspoken Sermons,* 3 Series. (London, 1867-89), *First Series* (1867) [Hereafter *US 1*], p. 202.

9. "The Imagination," *Orts* (London, 1882) [Hereafter *IO*], pp. 2, 3.

10. *IO,* p. 3.

> use of the forms already prepared for it, its operation is the same as that of the divine inasmuch as it does put thought into form.[11]

Thus although one can perceive MacDonald's stress on the imagination as man's highest faculty he himself is never certain of its teleological status.

However, one solution is to say that the human imagination is God working in Man. Thus while the operations of the imagination are subconscious

> Lo, I must wait, unknowing
> What thought in me is growing
> Until the thing to birth be brought! . . .
> . . . I cannot say I *think*
> I only stand upon the thought-well's brink:
> From darkness to the sun the water
> bubbles up . . . ,[12]

this water comes not from a self-governing unconscious but from one which is God in Man. ". . . for our consciousness is to the extent of our being but as the flame of the candle to the world-gulf whence it issues: in the gulf of our unknown being God works behind our consciousness" [13] and hence

> If we consider the so-called creative faculty in man, we shall find that in no *primary* sense is this faculty creative. Indeed a man is rather *being thought* than *thinking,* when a new thought arises in his mind.[14]

The consequence of this is that the productions of the creative imagination are outside the control of the artist's conscious ordering faculty, because the human oracle ". . . was dealing all the time with things that came from thoughts beyond his own" [15] (i.e., it would be as impossible to control with one's human consciousness meanings which are divine as it would be to comprehend an unknown language which one took down as dictation). MacDonald provides another reason

> One difference between God's work and man's is, that, while God's work cannot mean more than he meant, man's must mean

11. Ibid., pp. 6-7.

12. "A Cry," *The Poetical Works of George MacDonald,* 2 vols. (London, 1893), vol. II, p. 214. Cf. *Adela Cathcart,* ed. cit., vol. II, pp. 59-60.

13. *US 2,* p. 113. Cf. *Poetical Works,* vol. I, p. 181; *A Book of Strife, in the form of the diary of an Old Soul* (London, 1880), p. 49, st. 5, p. 145, sts. 15-16 and p. 171, st. 21; *The Hope of the Gospel* (London, 1892), p. 37.

14. *IO,* p. 4.

15. *OFT,* p. xi.

> more than he meant. For in everything that God has made there is layer upon layer of ascending significance . . .[16]

For this reason neither the artist nor the reader can ever grasp more than the tiniest significance of such a work. MacDonald, however, elsewhere tries to argue in reverse

> . . . the fact that there is always more in a work of art—which is the highest human result of the embodying imagination—than the producer himself perceived while he produced it, seems to us a strong reason for attributing to it a larger origin than the man alone—for saying at the last, that the inspiration of the Almighty shaped its ends.[17]

This is not only specious reasoning: it seriously undermines MacDonald's actual belief, seen above, that God actually *does* exist in a subconscious mind which is not autonomous. That is, this wavering gives grounds for thinking that the creative imagination may not be God but rather Freud or Jung talking.

Still, the reader is guaranteed a hard time of interpreting artistic works which, considered both as imitations of a universe devoid (to the human mind) of any ordering pattern, and as the products of the subconscious area of mind alone, are going to appear totally chaotic. MacDonald follows Novalis, his literary mentor, in terming such works 'fairy-tales,' and cites Novalis' description of them as "Erzählungen ohne Zusammenhang" at the beginning of *Phantastes*

> Ein Mährchen ist wie ein Traumbild ohne Zusammenhang. Ein Ensemble wunderbarer Dinge und Begebenheiten, z.B. eine Musikalische Phantasie, die harmonischen Folgen einer Aeolsharfe, die Natur selbst.

The fairy-tale is at the same time the highest form of artistic creation because it alone imitates the true condition of reality. "Das Mährchen ist . . . der Kanon der Poesie"; "Alles ist ein Mährchen" [18] trumpets Novalis and again, before *Phantastes*

> . . . hier tritt die Zeit der Anarchie, der Gesetzlosigkeit, Freiheit, der Naturstand der Natur, die Zeit vor der Welt ein . . .

Of course Novalis is revelling in the chaos of fairy-tale and Nature for themselves, while MacDonald views them as God's mode of self-expression. Thus though they seem connectionless and dreamlike to the human mind, they are in fact informed by principles beyond man's com-

16. Ibid., p. x.

17. *IO*, p. 25.

18. Novalis, *Die Fragmente*, in *Briefe und Werke*, ed. Ewald Wasmuth, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1943), vol. III, pp. 631 and 628 resp.

prehension; the very confusion of the fairy-tale becomes a function of divine patterning. "Unser Leben ist Kein Träum, aber es soll und wird vielleicht einer werden":[19] MacDonald quotes this from Novalis at the end of both *Phantastes* and *Lilith*; but to this he adds (at the close of the latter) an affirmation which puts his thought in another dimension from that of the German—

> Man dreams and desires; God broods and wills and quickens. When a man dreams his own dream, he is the sport of his dream; when Another gives it him, that Other is able to fulfil it.

When man first realizes that the universe is inexplicable in human terminology he has begun to approach that which does explain it: "Doubt" says MacDonald of the religious life "must precede every deeper assurance";[20] and Mr. Raven tells Vane in *Lilith*

> The fact is, no man understands anything; when he knows he does not understand that is his first tottering step—not towards understanding, but towards the capability of one day understanding.[21]

One must initially at least assume that this is the best that the baffled reader of MacDonald's chaotic fantasy can hope for. MacDonald however insists that the fairy-tale exists not as an intellectual puzzle, but as an emotional construct like music: "The true fairy-tale is, to my mind, very like the sonata." [22] That is to say, the reader will be moved by it, even though he does not understand finally what it means, just as Nature herself "rouses the something deeper than the understanding—the power that underlies thoughts." [23] Thus one is "seized" and carried away by the fairy-tale. His thought on this becomes a trifle shaky, however, when a little later on in the same essay in which he likens the fairy-tale and the sonata in their effects MacDonald parallels the workings of the fairy-tale on the reader with the random play of the wind on that familiar Romantic instrument, the Aeolian harp. On the one hand, structured music which holds the reader rapt from start to finish; on the other, haphazard twangings which make him twitch spasmodically, or what MacDonald calls the "broken music" of fairy-

19. The same quotation is the centre of a passage in *The Portent: a story of the inner vision of the Highlanders, commonly called the Second Sight* (London, 1864), pp. 52-3. For the source, see Novalis, op. cit., p. 254.

20. *US 2*, p. 242.

21. *Phantastes and Lilith* (London, 1962), pp. 326-7; cf. *US 3*, pp. 91-2.

22. *OFT*, p. viii.

23. Ibid., p. x.

tale that goes "for a firefly that now flashes, now is dark, but may flash again." [24]

The main point, however, is that both these musical analogies imply that the reader responds involuntarily, that he is passive before the heart-pluckings of the fairy-tale. In fact, MacDonald is by no means certain of this. Thus it is that he sees his ideal reader as a child or a mother because they do not ask questions: "They [fairy-tales] can . . . throw a shadow of her child's dream on the heart of a mother";[25] "If any strain of my "broken music" make a child's eyes flash, or his mother's grow for a moment dim, my labour will not be in vain." [26] But suppose the reader is a querulous academic?—"The best way" answers MacDonald "is not to bring the forces of our intellect to bear upon it but to be still and let it work on that part of us for whose sake it exists." [27] And if the reader finds himself unable to do even this?—"Obedience is the opener of eyes" [28] thunders MacDonald

> . . . obedience alone places a man in the position in which he can see so as to judge that which is above him. In respect of great truths investigation goes for little, speculation for nothing; if a man would know them, he must obey them. Their nature is such that the only door into them is obedience.[29]

These remarks occur in passages concerning man's doubts of God's existence, but given MacDonald's linkage of God and the creative imagination, are by implication directed at the reader of fairy-tale also. Here the intellect has to be suppressed voluntarily. It can be seen, then, that MacDonald was fully aware of the persistence of the intellect in the reader of fairy-tale, and indeed it is with just such a reader that in his essay on fairy-tales MacDonald has a long debate. And as we read this essay and find the pontificate MacDonald increasingly floundering on the subject of the definite and the indefinite in the fairy-tale, we begin to realize that his "straw man" represents part of himself—that he, too, MacDonald, is in part the very reader he castigates and the essay is in fact a soliloquy.

For instance, to MacDonald's claim that the fairy-tale and music are identical in their workings the "stooge" asserts all too aptly, " 'But words are not music; words at least are meant and fitted to carry a pre-

24. Ibid., p. xii.
25. Ibid., p. ix.
26. Ibid., p. xii.
27. Ibid.
28. *US 2*, p. 22; cf. pp. 75, 119-20, 185; *US 3*, pp. 43, 115, 152, 226.
29. *Orts* (1882), p. 72.

cise meaning!' " [30] In reply, MacDonald says that words may convey meaning, but they can also be used to carry emotion. "Have they only to describe, never to impress?" If this meant "Is it not possible for a word simultaneously to convey a meaning *and* provoke a feeling?" one might agree, but in fact MacDonald is asserting that words can operate at a purely emotive or impressive level without any meaning, like music "that may be strong in colour which has no evident outline." Whether words can ever do this is surely very questionable: as Deryck Cooke says in his *The Language of Music* (1959) ". . . the difference between literature and music is that a word awakens both an emotional response and a comprehension of its meaning, whereas a note, having no meaning, evokes only an emotional response." [31] Moreover one is left wondering why, if they cause so much trouble with the intellect, MacDonald uses *words* in his fairy-tales when words are no different from music.[32] But on these matters the "straw man" is allowed no reply. There is indeed a lot more that he could have questioned: the essay is scattered with inconsistencies. Here the fairy-tale operates like a sonata, there like an Aeolian harp, now it has meaning, now it is without one;[33] here the sonata evokes the same feelings in its hearers ". . . mind may approach mind, in the interpretation of a sonata, with a more or less contenting consciousness of sympathy" [34] and there, on the next page, no man feels the same as another concerning the sonata—

> The law of each is in the mind of its composer; that law makes one man feel this way, another man feel that way. To one the sonata is a world of odour and beauty, to another of soothing only and sweetness.[35]

These intellectual oscillations are symptomatic of a tension in MacDonald's thought between thinking and feeling—he suffers from a peculiarly Victorian "dissociated sensibility."

So far we have isolated a none-too-assured extreme Romantic and Christian position in MacDonald's thought. No doubt he would have objected that his thought was not meant to fit into any scheme. "We are far too anxious to be definite and to have finished, well-polished,

30. *OFT,* p. viii. The debate covers pp. viii-ix.

31. Op. cit., p. 26; cf. pp. 20-1 et seq.

32. It is no use to reply that MacDonald was musically ignorant (*G.M.H.W.*, p. 126): one would simply retort that this is having his cake and eating it.

33. Contrast *OFT,* pp. vi-vii with pp. viii-ix.

34. Ibid., p. viii.

35. Ibid., p. ix.

sharp-edged systems. . . . To no system would I subscribe";[36] but one can justifiably retort that he has at least intended to give a systematic account of the workings of the imagination, and moreover, that the very provision by him of a theoretic background for the comprehension of works supposedly incomprehensible is a contradiction in terms. To the larger inconsistencies of MacDonald's thought, then, we now turn.

How, for example, does the artist manage to view the world as a chaos without connection? Does such a vision come to the artist in a passive state, as it does to the Wordsworthian child, or does it require effort on the perceiver's part to see it as it did for the adult Wordsworth and Coleridge? MacDonald may repeat Novalis' dictum "Die Welt ist ein Universaltropus des Geistes, ein symbolisches Bild desselben" [37] as "All that moves in the mind is symbolized in Nature . . . the world is a sensuous analysis of humanity";[38] but, in fact, such a mirror-relation does not precede but follows the operation of the imagination which, working as a lamp, *adjusts* Nature until she is *made to* imitate mind

> . . . the world around [man] is an outward figuration of the condition of his mind . . . God has made the world that it should thus serve his creature . . . The man has but to light the lamp within the form: his imagination is the light, it is not the form. Straightway the shining thought makes the form visible and becomes itself visible through the form.[39]

Neither the implied ease of the "has but to" or the "straightway" removes the element of man selecting and ordering his experience, even if this process is unconscious. Clearly the imagination operates by some sort of principles; moreover, they are human and not divine principles—it is "the man" who does the lighting and focussing.

Nor is this all. As we saw above, MacDonald could revel in Novalis' "Naturanarchie" so long as this seeming chaos was a function of divine and incomprehensible principles; but it was the essence of these principles that they were not available to any human interpretation or patterning. When, however, we find MacDonald paying frequent court to the Coleridgean distinction between imagination and fancy in terms of law versus lawlessness, we sense his reluctance to allow even an *apparently* chaotic art. Distinguishing Shelley by the excess in his work of fancy over imagination MacDonald declares:

> There are not half the instances of the direct embodiment of idea

36. Cited in *G.M.H.W.*, p. 155.

37. Novalis, op. cit., p. 236; cf. p. 695, "Was ausser mir ist, ist gerade in mir, ist mein—und umgekehrt."

38. *IO*, p. 9.

39. Ibid., p. 5.

> in form that there are of the presentation of strange resemblances between external things.[40]

If this implies the beginnings of an allegorical approach to art, MacDonald goes further: the imagination is dutiful, responsible and deliberate

> Licence is not what we claim when we assert the duty of the imagination to be that of following and finding out the work that God maketh. Her part is to understand God ere she attempts to utter man. Where is the room for being fanciful or riotous here? It is only the ill-bred, that is, the uncultivated imagination that will amuse itself where it ought to worship and work.[41]

"Following and finding out" suggests a mode of conscious inquiry, especially when, as here, it is directed to a particular end (i.e., tracing God's image): where now are the surface truths of nature which no probing will reveal ("Nature . . . exists primarily for her face, her look, her appeals to the heart and the imagination, her simple service to human need, and not for the secrets to be discovered in her")? [42] And where now the abolition of human responsibility that has been seen in MacDonald's thought so far? Then the poet seemed a passive Aeolian harp, played on by God and Nature; now MacDonald asks, "Is not the *Poet,* the *Maker,* a less suitable name for him than the *Trouvère,* the *Finder?*" [43]

Perhaps aware of some of these contradictions, MacDonald declares, in that essay in which he identifies fairy-tale and music that imagination and fancy co-operate in artistic creation, though the latter has an inferior role; but in so doing makes yet another statement completely at variance with his view of art and nature as chaos

> . . . beauty is the only stuff in which Truth can be clothed; and you may, if you will, call Imagination the tailor that cuts the garments to fit her, and Fancy his journeyman that puts the pieces of them together, or perhaps at most works their buttonholes. Obeying law, the maker works like his creator; not obeying law, he is such a fool as heaps a pile of stones and calls it a church.[44]

"Obeying law"? The Romantic position he elsewhere adopted was founded on a hatred of the definite, the systematic and the fixed: whence, therefore, this "law"? "Heaps a pile of stones and calls it a

40. *Orts* (1882), p. 279.

41. *IO,* p. 12.

42. *US 2,* pp. 235-6.

43. *IO,* p. 20.

44. *OFT,* pp. v-vi.

church"? But MacDonald has been adamant that the chaos of Nature is chaos necessarily to us because Nature is one of God's incomprehensible churches: surely His example should justify others? The clumsy violence and asperity of the tone of these passages is evidence enough of MacDonald's uneasiness.

What can MacDonald mean by "law" in art, when elsewhere he makes or applauds statements on the chaos of Nature and Art, and on man's inability to grasp the basic laws of his existence? In part he is referring to what we now call "inner consistency of reality"

> His [the artist's] world once invented, the highest law that comes next into play is, that there shall be harmony between the laws by which the new world has begun to exist; and in the process of his creation, the inventor must hold by those laws. The moment he forgets one of them, he makes the story, by its own postulates, incredible. To be able to live a moment in an imagined world, we must see the laws of its existence obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it.[45]

All this makes perfect sense from H. G. Wells but from a man who can also maintain that scientific and human laws have no ultimate validity, and that it is the business of art to found itself on just that degree of validity—God's—from such a man these statements make no sense at all. If Nature is, to human eyes, a chaos, how can art, which imitates it, be anything but a chaotic swirl itself? "Imagine," says MacDonald "the gracious creatures of some childlike region of Fairyland talking either cockney or Gascon!" [46] Yet such a yoking-together of heterogeneous ideas is the basis of much poetry and, thinking of the comic juxtaposition of the mundane and the magical in E. Nesbit's work, can be utilised by tellers of fairy-tales also. Particularly strange are these remarks from a man who views the world as a disconnected chaos: a chaos which not this watery Hartleian associationism but the violent clash of opposed contexts would presumably most suitably embody.

MacDonald's retreat into the despicable human consciousness goes one step further when he asserts that moral laws cannot be invented in a work of art: physical laws can be invented, provided, as has been seen, they thereafter remain unbroken; but moral laws must be the same in art as they are in real life

> The laws of the spirit of man must hold, alike in this world and in any world he may invent. It were no offence to suppose a world in which everything repelled instead of attracted the things around it; it would be wicked to write a tale representing a man

45. Ibid., pp. iv-v.

46. Ibid., p. v.

> it called good as always doing bad things, or a man it called bad as always doing good things: the notion itself is absolutely lawless. In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey—and take their laws with him into his invented world as well.[47]

Here one senses MacDonald ringing down a Victorian curtain on his own unorthodoxy. The passage in itself is small, but it is in fact symptomatic of the core of didacticism that is found in much of his work. The passage implies that any literary work must have morality in it; and it hints at that Victorian love of authorial intrusion—the author in person telling us how to judge—that at its worst could become a dishevelled and clumsy occupation of a fictional satellite.

The subject of the next article will be how far these anomalies force MacDonald's fairy-tales into allegorical frames: how far, that is, MacDonald himself tends to make sense out of what he declares should be "sense-less." And in a further article it is hoped to show whether such chaotic elements as he leaves unexplained are in any way available to understanding and interpretation by *us*.

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47. Ibid., p. vi. This rigidity is sometimes relaxed: in *Adela Cathcart*, 3 vols. (1864), vol. I, p. 181, Adela, with the support of the narrator who is a persona of MacDonald declares " 'We must not judge the people in fairy-tales by precisely the same conventionalities we have. They must be good after their own fashion.' "