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IMAGINING EVIL: GEORGE MACDONALD'S *THE WISE WOMAN: A PARABLE* (1875)

Colin Manlove

George MacDonald has some claim to the title of “a neglected Scottish writer.” A great man and author in his day, he is now largely forgotten in his own country. Only his children’s fairy tales still spark an occasional glimmer of recognition, particularly his *At the Back of the North Wind* (1870) and *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872). Recent academic interest in MacDonald as a fantasy writer, and particularly as the forerunner of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, has however begun to rescue him from obscurity, particularly in the U.S.. Here I want to carry on this process by showing the power of a story which where noticed is too often condemned—*The Wise Woman: A Parable*. This story was included by C.S. Lewis among MacDonald’s “great works.”¹

Coming after the innocence of young Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind* and the cheerful view of children in *The Princess and the Goblin*, the portrait in *The Wise Woman* of two wickedly selfish girls who are removed from their parents by a strange fairy woman to be educated in a wilderness seems quite anomalous. Even when set in the ‘real’ world MacDonald’s work never directed itself at evil children—witness *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865), *Robert Falconer* (1867) *Guild Court* (1868), *Ranald Bannerman’s Boyhood* (1871), or *Sir Gibbie* (1879). It is possible that MacDonald was underlining his distinction between the child and the childlike;² just possible too that home-based as he was, he

¹ C.S. Lewis, “Preface,” in *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (London: Bles, 1946), 17.

² George MacDonald, “The Child in the Midst,” *Unspoken Sermons*, 3 vols. in one (Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1997), 2-6. In his essay “The Fantastic Imagination,” on the nature of fairy tales and their proper readers, MacDonald

was becoming irritated by his own eleven progeny, ranging from under ten to teenage and doubtless at times exasperating. It may be too that he was suffering long-term exhaustion from an often harrowing lecture-trip to America in 1872-3; certainly he had to struggle with illness through the winter of 1873-4. On the other hand, the years 1873-74 are remembered by Greville MacDonald as among the happiest that the family ever enjoyed.³ But it should be noted that the darker idiom of *The Wise Woman* is continued in the very pessimistic view of humanity in *The Princess and Curdie* (serialised in 1877), and even beyond to the picture of human evil in *Lilith* (1895).

The moral drive of the book against the bad behaviour of two pampered children has seemed excessive to some commentators, who find a tone of harsh moralising in the story that makes it seem unbalanced. The impression is even that MacDonald is indulging in a vengeful attack on bad behaviour with a fairy woman who abducts and tortures two recalcitrant children into reform. Here, it is felt, MacDonald has lost his temper, and proceeded to an elaborate moral indictment quite disproportionate to the facts.⁴ And it is remarkable that in no other of MacDonald's children's fairy tales is this sort of attack on juvenile behaviour to be found.

That this story is a comparative anomaly in MacDonald's own work cannot be challenged: but the negative view of it may. And in the wider context of nineteenth-century children's literature it is not the exception it looks. What will be argued here is, first, that the story does belong to a tradition of such tales; and secondly, that far from being shrill or over-harsh, it is actually a subtle and vivid analysis of the nature of evil as it poisons the imagination and the spirit. The use of children to demonstrate primal moral failings is arguably not disproportionate: they

comments, "I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five": MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts, Chiefly Papers on the Imagination, and on Shakspeare* (London: Sampson Low Marston, 1893), 317.

³ Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London: George Allen, 1924), 465.

⁴ See especially Robert Lee Wolff, *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* (New Haven. Yale University Press, 1961), 168-170; and see also Richard Reis, *George MacDonald's Fiction: Twentieth-Century Views* (Eureka, CA: Sun-rise Books, 1988), 84-85; Mark Zaitchik, "Preface," in George MacDonald, *The Wise Woman* (New York: Garland, 1977), vi; and Humphrey Carpenter, *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 83.

are there to show how self-love is innate, how it is encouraged and grown by bad parenting, and how, children being still malleable, it may be subdued or even corrected. The ultimate vision of the book, however, is not simply moral but Christian; salvation does not come through training so much as through grace working in the imagination to heal the soul.

In the modest amount of (usually morally analytic) criticism so far written on this story,⁵ it has not so far been observed that it belongs to a tradition of nineteenth-century children's conduct fantasies—even if it is by no means as censorious or punitive as some of them. These stories were designed to educate their readers in good behaviour in the world by showing naughtiness punished by supernatural figures from fairies to brownies. Simply being good like Irene in the other "Princess" books, or the innocent Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind*, or Prince Dolor in Dinah Mulock's *The Little Lambe Prince and his Travelling Cloak*

⁵ By Battin, Jarrar, Holm and Anon. Melba N. Battin, "Duality Beyond Time: George MacDonald's *The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story*," in Roderick McGillis, ed., *For the Childlike: George MacDonald's Fantasies for Children* (Metuchen, N.J.: Children's Literature Association and Scarecrow Press Inc., 1992), 207-18, traces the duality of Princess Rosamund and shepherdess Agnes through their different moral narratives, concluding that Rosamond's moral change comes when she recognises that the Wise Woman was once just such a lost princess as she, and that she herself can become a new Wise Woman. Osama Jarrar, "*The Wise Woman, or The Lost Princess: A Double Story: A Critique of Victorian Parenting*," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies* 32 (2013): 61-84, argues that the parents of the two girls are entirely responsible for their wicked natures, with a useful discussion of MacDonald's own parenting ethic, which was a mixture of "Calvinist" insistence on obedience and punishment, and loving treatment of the conforming child. Deborah Holm's dissertation draft, "Tendering Greatness: George MacDonald's *The Lost Princess* and the Bible," *North Wind* 32 (2013): 85-118, argues that the Wise Woman is a pattern of God in the Bible. She discusses how far the Wise Woman tries to break her subjects' wills and MacDonald's possible feminisation of God. She also says that Agnes remains a nasty child, while Rosamond is on the road to becoming innocently child-like. More generally she links various elements of the story to episodes in the Bible. Anon., "The Wise Woman as an agent of identity in George MacDonald's story *The Wise Woman*," which is on the web at library.taylor.edu, and eprints.worc.ac.uk/3196/1/WWasagentofidentityfinal1.pdf, discusses how far Rosamund has free choice in her moral improvement under the Wise Woman's instruction, and concludes that she shares in the construction of her new identity, not for the sake of self-determination, but so that she may re-educate her parents and prepare to serve her country as its future queen.

(1874), was not enough: one had to be seen to become good and to do good to others. Perhaps the earliest Victorian example is Elizabeth Sinclair's "Uncle David's Nonsensical Story of Giants and Fairies," in her *Holiday House* (1839), where the idle boy No-book is delivered by the Fairy Do-nothing to the Giant Snap'em-up, to be hung by his hair in the giant's larder prior to being consumed—until the sight of the Fairy Teach-all and her happy little charges on a sunny hillock outside changes his ways. Comic grotesquerie flavours and sometimes partly blunts the moral pill.

This impulse to improve the child reader, often by sending children to fantastic reformatories, is continued through such books as the Reverend Francis E. Paget's *The Hope of the Katzekopfs: or, The Sorrows of Selfishness* (1844), the translation of Heinrich Hoffman's *Struwwelpeter* (1848), Margaret Gatty's *The Fairy Godmothers* (1851), Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863), Annie Keary's *Little Wanderlin and Other Tales* (1866) and A.L.O.E.'s [A Lady of England's] *Fairy Know-a-bit: or, A Nut-shell of Knowledge* (1866). Julia Horatia Ewing's moral tales "The Land of Lost Toys" (1869), "Amelia and the Dwarfs" (1870) and "Benjy in Beastland" appeared in her *The Brownies and Other Stories* (1871) and *Lob Lie-by-the-Fire and Other Stories* (1873). They are respectively about the correction of children who will not care for their possessions, clear up after themselves or treat animals kindly. They are rather more aimed at instilling good manners than morals; but nevertheless they are a strong influence on the form and method MacDonald uses in *The Wise Woman*. Indeed the account in *Amelia and the Dwarfs* of a little girl being dragged away from home by goblins to learn by force the housework she will not do at home was almost certainly adapted by MacDonald in *The Wise Woman*.

Nearest to MacDonald in time is the story in Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* (1874) where spoilt little Flora's birthday party becomes quarrelsome and violent, and she, escaping it, comes upon another and more fantastic birthday party where all the children are covered with quills, fish-hooks, or sticky or slimy fluids. These horrors seem to express the feelings displayed at Flora's party. The frequent punishments of bad children in Victorian fantasy could become excessive or even sadistic, and as seen there are those who have found *The Wise Woman* so: no doubt the reason for this was that such stories dealt with the everyday naughtiness of children, and the authors were therefore acutely aware of the gap between the recommended ideal and often intractable reality.

The story to which MacDonald seems particularly indebted is Francis Paget's *The Hope of the Katzekopfs*. Paget's story describes a pampered little prince called Eigenwillig (Self-will), only son of King Katzekopf and the aptly named Queen Ninnilinda, whose behaviour grows so gross that he even insults his fairy godmother Abracadabra. She removes him from his parents and his royal home, determined to reform him, just as happens to Princess Rosamond in *The Wise Woman*. After a range of comic physical tortures, including Eigenwillig's being pulled into a string through a royal keyhole and then rolled up and kicked about as a football, Fairy Abracadabra leaves him in Fairy Land to the tender mercies of the parasitic dwarf Selbst (Self) and the increasingly attractive ideas of an old man called Discipline.

In *The Hope of the Katzekopfs* the lessons are made explicit by the figure of Discipline who utters them in bold Gothic print: "**Learn to live hardly; Deny yourself in things lawful; Love not comforts; Think of others first, and yourself last.**"⁶ But as we shall see *The Wise Woman* has no such easy morals. The two heroines have very individual forms of evil which require quite different methods to defeat; and every moral decision is difficult in a way that renders mere obedience to a mnemonic irrelevant. Habit itself, that thickens evil, is hard to overcome; injured merit, that thinks itself ill-treated beside another, will brook no humility; self-complacency, shown its own evil, will only bend like seaweed in the tide.

MacDonald is much more true to the moral complexities of real life, and offers no easy or self-pleasing answers. Despite some backsliding, Paget's Eigenwillig quickly reforms, improving in more or less a straight line; but in *The Wise Woman* Rosamond's victory over herself is only a beginning, and Agnes becomes if anything worse. The two girls are continually slumping back into their old selves; and the story itself mirrors this process, going back and forward from place to place, from palace to cottage to palace, and to and from cottage and shepherd life. At the same time, the Wise Woman does not succeed in many of her plans. Bringing Rosamond to do housework in order to get a meal does no more than restrain a still existent evil; and showing Agnes her inner nature produces in her little more than passing horror.

⁶ Rev. Francis E. Paget, *The Hope of the Katzekopfs; or, The Sorrows of Selfishness*, 2nd ed. (London. Joseph Masters, 1847), 204.

In *The Hope of the Katzekopfs* Fairy Abracadabra, Selbst and Discipline are moral trainers with a clear programme that works: input one refractory boy prince into a moral production line and arrive at a man who is king over himself. Indeed there is a sense that Eigenwillig's new self is made by others rather than himself. But in *The Wise Woman* the lady may take the children away from their corrupting parents, and may show them what they are truly like: but she cannot change them herself, she can only lend a hand when they have chosen the right way for themselves.

However, simpler in approach though *The Hope of the Katzekopfs* may be, Paget is one of the few children's writers to direct his attack at the root cause of evil, love of self; and this is MacDonald's theme in *The Wise Woman*. The self-willed prince meets himself in the repulsive dwarf Selbst. Each of MacDonald's heroines has been brought up to think herself "Somebody," and each is led to meet that self and see just how repellent it is. But again MacDonald's characters see more of the complexities of the situation: as Rosamond puts it, "I hate myself, and yet I can't help being myself!" (123).

The Wise Woman has laboured throughout its history under an uncertainty as to its title. First serialised as "A Double Story," and then published as *The Wise Woman: A Parable*, the book later appeared variously as *A Double Story* (New York, 1876), *Princess Rosamond, a Double Story* (Boston, 1879), *The Lost Princess; or The Wise Woman* (London, 1895), *The Lost Princess: A Double Story* (London, 1965) and, having it all ways, as *The Wise Woman or The Lost Princess: A Double Story* (1973). It seems that MacDonald approved the 1895 double title.⁷ Part of the difficulty is that the story focuses on two central characters who do not meet until the end. The two "*Princess*" books have similar divisions of interest, but the various characters are brought together. (All four of MacDonald's longer children's books have multiple centres to which their titles are varying inadequate.) It is likely that publishers felt that "A Double Story" or "The Wise Woman" were not attractive titles for a children's book, and eventually fixed on "The Lost Princess": but if this was meant to draw in more readers it seems signally to have failed, for the book was not republished from 1895 to 1965, and even

⁷ Elizabeth Yates, "Introduction," in Macdonald, *The Lost Princess* (London: J.M.Dent, 1965), vii.

thereafter has had sparse interest, usually appearing together with other stories.⁸

The uncertainty of title fits with the mysterious nature of this book. Some, including this writer in earlier discussion, have tried to see it simply as a mere fable with moral lessons attached.⁹ Indeed MacDonald himself probably considered it in these terms: when he first called his tale "A Double Story" he seems to have meant to present us with contrastive individuals from whom lessons might be learned; and similarly with the subtitle of the first publication, "A Parable." Perhaps because of its frequent didacticism the book has not been either widely read or frequently discussed. In the forty years of the journal of the George MacDonald Society *North Wind* there are two essays on it, compared to the ten each devoted to *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*.

But if the book is moral, the moral analyses are often much more complex than we might suppose. This is no straightforward tract, for the children involved are not simply judged, but are seen as having good interwoven with their evil, and as being egoistic in very different ways. This complexity of approach to evil is not common in MacDonald, and indeed the way in which he frequently sees the world from the point of view of the bad characters is unmatched until *Lilith*. MacDonald's usual attitude to his evil characters is simply condemnatory.

In *The Wise Woman* we have first the Princess Rosamond, whose royal parents so pamper her that she becomes full of her own importance, always wanting more than she has and furious at any opposition, to the point where she has so exasperated her parents and the entire court that they ask the Wise Woman for help. On the other side is the shepherd girl Agnes, whose parents have so boasted about her virtues and abilities that she has become convinced of her own supreme importance. Where Rosamond's parents indulged her with things, these others inflate Agnes with praise. The result is that Rosamond's vanity is shown on the outside, in rages and refusals, and Agnes's is largely invisible, feeding an imagined self within. Agnes is perfectly prepared to obey the Wise

⁸ Raphael B. Shaberman, *George MacDonald: A Bibliographical Study* (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies; Detroit, IL: Omnigraphics, 1990), 55. It is included for instance in George MacDonald, *The Complete Fairy Tales*, ed. U.C. Knoepfelmacher (London: Penguin, 1999).

⁹ Reis, as in n. 4 above, 84-5; Colin Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 82-3.

Woman where Rosamond is not: she knows how to serve her turn by waiting; she is a false-seemer, a hypocrite. Her parents see no reason to dislike her at all, because unlike Rosamond she does not show her true evil. With each child the parents bear half the responsibility for its wickedness (9).

Rosamond, we might say, is centrifugal in her egotism, Agnes centripetal. Rosamond explodes outwards when frustrated: she rages, stamps, sulks, throws rabbits, pushes a boy out of a boat to drown, refuses advice, disobeys orders. Her evil always emerges with outside stimuli, from refusals or frustrations of her wishes, from obstructions, commands she dislikes, where the pride of Agnes is a steadily growing thing within her. Rosamond's behaviour is also dependent on her moods: she is impulsive, and cannot calculate like Agnes. While she is at the shepherd's cottage the dog Prince (who in fact belongs to the Wise Woman) stops her running away and the threat of no food keeps her obedient and hard-working, so that "Prince was her first and hunger her second dog-counsellor" (79). The result is that "The improvement upon her in the course of a month was plain. She had quite ceased to go into passions, and had actually begun to take a little interest in her work and try to do it well" (80). But, we are told, "the change was not in *her*, only in her mood. A second change of circumstances would have brought a second change of behaviour; and so long as that was possible she continued the same sort of person she had always been." Where Agnes has self-control, Rosamond has none. Rosamond is 'the mere puppet of her moods' where Agnes "seldom changed her mood but kept that of calm assured self-satisfaction" (59).¹⁰

This might make Rosamond seem less fixedly evil than Agnes. But the story does not accept this. Her evil may be more volatile, but it is also more dangerous:

¹⁰ SSL's reader has suggested a literary source for Rosamond, in the character of Rosamond, wife to Dr Lydgate in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, published in 1872, three years before *The Wise Woman*: "there we find a Rosamond whose deep and near-disastrous failings are well summed up by stressing her total self-centredness and lack of imagination." I find this very persuasive, but much more in relation to Agnes, who has almost exactly the steady and complacent self-regard that George Eliot's Rosamond displays. And it is a giveaway that MacDonald uses the name Rosamond in his own story, while as usual covering his tracks, here by making the intended target not Rosamond herself but Agnes.

True, there is more hope of helping the angry child out of her form of selfishness than the conceited one out of hers; but on the other hand the conceited child was not so terrible or dangerous as the wrathful one. The conceited one however was sometimes very angry, and then her anger was more spiteful than the other's; and again, the wrathful one was often very conceited too. So that on the whole, of two very unpleasant creatures, I would say that the king's daughter would have been the worse, had not the shepherd's been quite as bad. (54)

The last sentence raises the possibility that one may be better than the other, only to deny it. MacDonald has given the story two girl-protagonists because he wants us continually to compare them. That is why we have this passage explicitly doing so just as we first meet Agnes. Throughout we are two trace likenesses and differences between the two so that we more intimately understand the varying nature of evil in human behaviour. In others of his works such as *Phantastes* or *Lilith*, which have single protagonists, MacDonald does not analyse or compare the evil but shows it in action: and its manifestation, as impulsive disobedience, is much the same in both young men.

What MacDonald does in *The Wise Woman* is search out the very origins of our evil. He is not content simply to blame Rosamond's or Agnes's parents, even though they are the original nurturers of their daughter's evil. Rather he takes what he sees as the primal evil of man, the love of self. Antagonism to this evil is a constant theme of all his writings, and is particularly evident in his sermons. His constant assertion is that "The one principle of hell is—'I am my own.'"¹¹ The self is in its right place only when we see it as dependent on God. When we put self first we turn our backs on Him. In using the self as the evil in his story, MacDonald is not attacking just one of the deadly sins but the ultimate source of all of them. It is the evil we are all born with, though it can manifest itself in quite opposite ways. *The Wise Woman* is no mere story of childhood naughtiness, but an analysis of the origin and growth of all evil.

This analysis is often extremely subtle, while at the same time being expressed very clearly. This for instance (in a passage this writer once condemned as mere didactic bullying):

By this time her old disposition had begun to rouse again. She had been doing her duty, and had in consequence begun again to think herself Somebody. However strange it may well seem, to

¹¹ MacDonald, "Kingship," in his *Unspoken Sermons*, as in n. 2 above, 495.

do one's duty will make anyone conceited who only does it sometimes. Those who do it always would as soon think of being conceited of eating their dinner as of doing their duty. What honest boy would pride himself on not picking pockets? A thief who was trying to reform would. To be conceited of doing one's duty is then a sign of how little one does it, and how little one sees what a contemptible thing it is not to do it. Could any but a low creature be conceited of not being contemptible? Until our duty becomes to us common as breathing, we are poor creatures. (66)

The psychological penetration here is real. First we are inclined to blame Agnes for returning to her old ways. But then she is given a kind of justification for this: it is natural that an occasional virtuous act will make us proud, precisely because it is so rare. But at the same time that this offers a quasi-excuse, it also tells us that Agnes's once is not enough. We continue with what is natural, with matters of obvious fact: someone who did their duty all the time would not feel it exceptional and would not consider it a virtue. The wonderful down-to-earth analogy with eating one's dinner tells us that doing our duty and feeling pleased with ourselves are categories that have nothing to do with one another. And so it is again with the no less absurd idea of the honest boy priding himself on not picking pockets. All this shows how our pride is actually nonsense, non-sense. MacDonald is as much concerned to analyse behaviour as to teach directly. And now the diagnosis grows naturally into more moral terms, as we shift back to Agnes, "Could any but a low creature be conceited of not being contemptible?" The whole passage has prepared the way for the direct moral to the reader that ends it: "Until our duty becomes to us common as breathing, we are poor creatures." This is MacDonald at his didactic best. And it is done as a parable through a children's fantasy.

At first it might not seem that this story has much to do with the imagination inside us. The wise woman seems in no way part of either girl's mind. She does not seem to be conscience, for both girls have no conscience, although Rosamond develops one. She is described as coming many miles from her home to the royal palace or to the shepherd's cottage. She appears more of a force of correction from outside, like the goblins in Mrs Ewing's "Amelia and the Dwarfs" (1870) who hale the lazy and careless Amelia to their underground realm to clear up and wash up after them for days on end. Yet this old woman, who seems so remote from the two girls, is in fact from the depths of their minds in which, however bad they are, God has his dwelling. She has

travelled up from this dark region into their conscious "at home" selves to care for them when they cannot, or will not, care for themselves. God, MacDonald believed, took care, whether in life or after it, that we should turn to love him. In this the wise woman is like the grand ladies of the imagination we meet in the attics of *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*. At this point we come to the spiritual and imaginative side of the story.

There is a strange passage at the beginning of the book that images the Wise Woman's nature. The narrator is describing rain falling. In a certain country, "in the midst of a shower of rain that might well be called golden" a princess is born. The reference is most directly to the myth of Danaë whom Zeus seduced in a shower of gold; but that in itself for Renaissance iconographers can be a pagan figure of the unceasing grace of God.¹² In *The Wise Woman*, however, this rain falls not only as a golden shower, but elsewhere in the bleaker mountain parts of the country "the same cloud that was dropping down golden rain all about the queen's new baby was dashing huge fierce handfuls of hail upon the hills": and in the midst of, or as a result of this, another baby is born to a shepherd's wife. These two forms of rain symbolise the two forms of grace descending—on the one hand as a comforter to afflicted good, and on the other as a shock to the sinner. But this is also nature: what falls as soft rain in one place is hail in another. In that sense it is random: it does not privilege baby Rosamond in the court any more than baby Agnes in the country. What we are left with is an image of grace falling from the sky both as pleasure and as pain. It is pleasure for those who try to obey God and Christ, pain for those who do not. Its two aspects are contained in the mysterious Wise Woman, who makes evil painful and good the soul's delight: she is God's grace working within nature to bring men and women back to Him.

In this sense the wider context of the story, in which the old woman comes from the wilderness to court or country, is also the image of a mental journey. But the mental reference of the story is much more immediate when we come to her cottage. Princess Rosamond ("Rose of the World"), who broke away from the old woman during her journey, finds when she arrives at the cottage that she cannot get in because it has

¹² See, e.g., Abraham Fraunce, *The Third part of the Countesse of Pembroke's Vvychurch, Entitled, Amintas Dale* (London: T. Orwyn for Thomas Woodcocke, 1592), 14: "Danae may represent man's soule, and Jupiter's golden showre, the celestiall grace and influence deriued into our mindes from aboue."

no door. At length it occurs to her, who has never had to ask for help before, to knock with a stone on the wall: and as soon as she does so she finds herself striking a door that opens. The biblical reference seems plain: “to him that knocketh shall be opened” (Matt.7.8; Luke.11.10). Rosamond has entered her own imagination, which is also God’s imagination working in her. And she is made to learn that while her hostess is absent she must keep the cottage clean, stoke the fire, and regularly water her heather bed to keep it fresh. At first she fails, and but for the old lady’s magic fir-cone keeping the fire alight, she would have been torn to pieces by the creatures of the air she hears raving round the house all night.¹³ These creatures are the darker forces of the imagination which seek to take over the better part and come closer the more dirty, cold and neglected it is.

In this story MacDonald has given a particularly clear picture of the divinely-based imagination. Behind a large old clock in the cottage Rosamond sees a door; and squeezing behind the clock is able to get out. But she has gone behind time itself, and instead of being outside, she has gone further in:

Instead of the open heath, she found herself on the marble floor of a large and stately room, lighted only from above. Its walls were strengthened by pilasters, and in every space between was a large picture from cornice to floor. She did not know what to make of it. Surely she had run all round the cottage, and certainly had seen nothing of this size near it. She forgot that she had also run round what she took for a hay-mow, a peat-stack, and several other things which looked of no consequence in the moonlight! (47).

And we are told that “Had the princess been tolerably tractable she would by this time have known a good deal about the wise woman’s beautiful house, whereas she had never till now got farther than the porch. Neither was she at all in its innermost places now.” Rosamond’s slight improvement, in cleaning the cottage, has revealed the door. Clearly what she sees depends on spiritual, or for MacDonald imaginative advance. Here we have an image of the divinely based imagination, going further and further in while growing larger.

In one of the pictures in the hall Rosamond sees a pastoral hillside scene, with a shepherd and his dogs, sheep and lambs feeding, and a little

¹³ This fir cone in the fire recalls the fire that preserves the mid-sea cottage in *Phantastes* when it sinks beneath the wave (end of ch. 19).

girl standing in a brook trying to make a bridge of stones across it. Entranced, she resolves to go there, and after looking at the picture a long while no longer believes it to be a picture, but a reality, into which she steps over the frame.¹⁵ She finds herself outside the cottage, with the door gone, and the sheep-covered hill before her. She has, in going through the picture, apparently gone through the imagination to reality. Indeed, she has in fact entered the country world where Agnes lives. But at a deeper level she has gone into a reality that was pictured. And here the world is revealed as a work of imagination also. And, we are left to ask, whose imagination is that?

Later, the shepherd's girl Agnes (from "agnus," a lamb) repeats this process, except that the wise woman shows her to the picture gallery; and she goes through the picture showing Rosamond's royal home. However, unlike Rosamond, she takes no notice of the extraordinary hall, only of the pictures and what they can offer her: she sees she can do well for herself there. She has no sense of wonder, that first condition of imaginative awareness, only of want, whereas Rosamond wanted to go to the pastoral scene because it delighted her. Both girls desire their scenes, but Agnes's desire is of quite a different nature from Rosamond's. When Agnes goes through the picture "a terrible storm of thunder and lightning, wind and rain came on. The uproar was appalling"(72).

The motif of insides and outsides, of being inside a room or a house or outside in the wild world beyond the ego, is one that runs through the book. Inside the house is a measure of control and order: fires are to be made up, hearths swept, furniture and floors dusted, beds made up and mattresses sprinkled. Outside, in the world of wild nature, wolves and unknown monsters lurk in the dark, coming nearer the more-uncared-for the interior is, and kept finally from coming down the chimney only by the magic fire cone in the depths of the fire. That fire-cone is God's presence in the deepest part of the soul.

Yet there are wild things within the cottage itself in the shape of human passions and vanities that are far darker even than the things outside. The violent tempers of Rosamond whenever her will is thwarted,

¹⁵ Lewis probably took this idea from MacDonald in his *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* (London: Bles, 1953), ch.1, where the children walk into a picture of a galleon at sea that turns out to be real. The whole idea of a gallery of pictures entering any of which takes one to a different world was also used by Lewis in *The Magician's Nephew*, ch. 3, where there is a wood full of pools, immersion in any of which brings one to a different universe.

and still more the quiet, well-mannered wicked complacency of Agnes, are far less easily banished than wolves. The rages of the king and queen in their palace, and the fatuities of the shepherd and his wife in their cottage are alike images of the morally dangerous self.

Perhaps the most striking image of the dangers of the inner world is in the revelation of herself given by to Agnes. Immediately on bringing her to the cottage The Wise Woman places her in a large sphere made of invisible material. This strange sphere symbolises the interior world, this time that of the soul. The sphere is completely doorless and windowless, and whenever Agnes walks it turns with her, so that she gets nowhere. The sphere is filled by a cold blue glimmer, but apart from this there is nothing, not even a solid floor: nothingness characterises being in here. Whenever Agnes tries to walk, the sphere rotates unseen with her, so that she remains on the spot. Gradually all sense of place, of time and direction is lost, and Agnes is totally isolated from the world. All she has is her mind, of which the sphere is a symbol, and her sense of herself as "Somebody." The more she considers herself Somebody, the more she makes herself Nobody: the nothingness in the sphere is her own. And after three days Nothing itself takes form and sits down beside her.

Agnes now meets her true and stunted spiritual self, a naked child with her chin on her chest; she is "the colour of pale earth, with a pinched nose, a mere slit in her face for a mouth" (63), and she makes Agnes shudder. (J.K. Rowling will use this child as the remnants of Voldemort's soul at the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.) When Alice says anything, the creature emptily repeats it.¹⁶ Agnes realises this is herself. Each time she attacks the child it vanishes, to return ten times more hideous than before. Agnes has to sit with this self for another three days, seeing all her sin in the other's behaviour, until she is let out. Through this image we see how the innermost heart of man can be far more demonic than the most terrible horror from outside—and more powerful, because it lives at the heart of the inside from whence to work out, like a worm in an apple (52, 71).

There is a parallel trial for Rosamond later in the story, when the wise woman takes her beyond the big hall to a circular room with many doors, through one of which she pushes her, telling her that she is in a mood chamber. What Rosamond has to learn is how to go against her own arrogance, hasty temper and possessiveness—in short, she must learn to

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis uses this idea with the vacant repetitions of his Un-man in *Perelandra* (London: the Bodley Head, 1943), ch.. 9.

command herself. During her trials, Rosamond fails when she tries to manage on her own. In the first mood chamber she is back in her palace home and when her nurse tells her that she cannot see her parents she loses her temper and hurls a pet rabbit at her, whereupon the nurse reveals herself as the Wise Woman. In the next chamber she is boating on a lake with a little boy when a violent squabble develops and she throws him overboard, accidentally killing him in the process. His grieving mother eventually reveals herself as the Wise Woman.

However, before her third trial Rosamond asks the Wise Woman to help her, and this time she succeeds. MacDonald said, "It is the upstretched that meets the downstretched hand,"¹⁷ referring to the Christian notion that will of itself is not enough without divine grace. This time Rosamond is with a wonderful girl child in a garden, and growing angry at her own insufficiencies is about to fall into a rage and do harm, when a whisk from the child's pet horse knocks her over and gives her time to reflect on what she is doing. She sees a little primrose-like flower, and it withers when she touches it: at which Rosamond reflects how horrible she must be, and contrasts the other girl, who gives life and not death to flowers. And thus out of her excessive self-abnegation and the little girl's generous love, the two children come together in joy. Rosamond now finds that the flowers now do not wither when she touches them.

Rosamond may have done better, but she has a long way to go. The child now turns into "a woman perfectly beautiful, neither old nor young; for hers was the old age of everlasting youth" (125), who then reveals herself to be the Wise Woman. When Rosamond asks, "But which is the real you?," she is told "the one you have just seen is the likeliest to the real me that you are able to see just yet—but.... And that me you could not have seen a little while ago" (126). Now that they know one another, Rosamond will keep returning to the cottage of her mind, "For there are yet many rooms in my house you may have to go through...." (*ibid.*).

While in this story the inner world of the imagination is the theatre of much of the action, there is also much reference to nature and to animals. The opening pages of the book set us amid the very different landscapes in which the two children of the story will grow up—the gentle qualities of the lowlands, the harsher ones of the highlands. Neither of these landscapes has any influence on the character of either child. MacDonald

¹⁷ MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts*, as in n. 2 above, 72.

seems to have set them up partly in order to discount any environmental influence on their natures, just as he discounts any influence of birth—Rosamond being a princess, Agnes a shepherd's daughter. With the coming of the Wise Woman, however, the outer world begins not only to influence but to reflect the inner world. The scenery through which the Wise Woman carries Rosamond when she takes her from the court is a wide, houseless heath, then a wood full of wolves, and finally a great clearing in the wood in the midst of which is a cottage. Inside the cottage Rosamond becomes aware of the wolves and hyenas seeking entry, and also the terrible many-clawed birds that come howling about the cottage by night: these are as much creatures of her mind as physical threats.

Later, after she leaves the shepherds to go back to her mother and father, Rosamond snobbishly defies the counsel of an old heavy-laden peasant woman on her road (the Wise Woman in disguise) and takes a wrong turning, which leads her to a swamp country from which she can find no return. She is lost in a highly vivid reworking of Bunyan's Slough of Despond, and is only rescued by the grace of God working within her own soul, in the form of the old woman, who says, "Rosamond ... all this time, since I carried you from your father's palace, I have been doing what I could to make you a lovely creature; ask yourself how far I have succeeded" (103).

Now taken back to the Wise Woman's cottage, Rosamond is introduced to her mood chambers, in every one of which nature or animals are present—the pet rabbit Rosamond throws in the first, a garden landscape, with flowers and a lake in the second, and in the third "a forest, a place half-wild, half-tended," with the wondrous child and magic winged horse. We notice how the natural world is increasingly present through these chambers, from a pet rabbit in a room to a forest that is so natural it becomes supernatural. These shifts perhaps symbolise Rosamond's becoming steadily more open to the possibility of overcoming her self. While earlier she withered the flowers about her with her desire to pick and possess them, now, when she touches a silvery flower in innocent pleasure at its life, it grows, opens and turns gold. For MacDonald the natural world, the creation of God, is full of grace, and mirrors the imagination in which God is at the root of things. To love and where appropriate submit to nature is to go out of the old self into a new one where mystic relations become possible. MacDonald said of the unacknowledged gifts that nature daily gives us, "One day, I hope, we

shall be able to enter their secrets from within them—by natural contact.”¹⁸ Yet there are those such as Agnes the shepherd's daughter who, surrounded by nature all their lives, long only for their self-advancement in the town.

We can see how *The Wise Woman* is not simply a story of the attempted correction of two children, but a vision of good and evil in the mind and in God's creation. The book moves between the extremes of the infernal vision of herself given to Agnes, and the image of restored paradise Rosamond is finally able to see in the last mood chamber; and it shows that “There is no word to represent that which is not God, no word for the where without God in it; for it is not, could not be.”¹⁹ In its moral and spiritual complexity, and its picture of divine grace all about us if we will open our hearts, *The Wise Woman* has a profundity and a lucidity that gives it a place among MacDonald's best creations.

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¹⁸ MacDonald, “The Voice of Job,” *Unspoken Sermons*, as in n. 2 above, 351.

¹⁹ MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, 611.