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*Adrian Gunther*

## The Multiple Realms of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*

Critics have often referred to George MacDonald's dualism. Recently a book has been published centered around this concept and opening with an essay entitled "The Two Worlds of George MacDonald."<sup>1</sup> These two worlds are variously seen as those of "reality" and "fantasy", of "intellect" and "imagination", of the traditional and the personal, of the pagan and the Christian and so on. I would suggest that a more useful approach to the understanding of *Phantastes*, is to see it as the embodiment of *multiple* worlds, as a text whose subsuming vision may be seen to embrace, not two realms, but the possibility of an infinity thereof.

*Phantastes* is structured around a system of interconnecting and co-existing worlds, of multiple realms on different spiritual levels interpenetrating at significant moments in which time and space are transcended. Such a system utilizes an approach to time which is essentially very modern and more typical of twentieth,<sup>2</sup> than of mid-nineteenth century, fantasy. The basic premise of MacDonald's system is, however, profoundly religious, and hinges on his conception of God and His relation to His creation, a relationship which must surely have seemed extremely unorthodox to MacDonald's Christian colleagues. From the

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<sup>1</sup>*For the Childlike: George MacDonald's Fantasies for Children*, ed. Roderick McGillis (Metuchen, NJ & London, 1992).

<sup>2</sup>See for example, Clive Barker, *Weaveworld* (London, 1988), in which many of MacDonald's favorite ideas are utilized.

sacred center is generated a great flux of energy. This energy is embodied in an infinity of forms falling into patterns of time and space which combine to create realms, "the mighty hosts of life bearing worlds" as he calls them in his sermons.<sup>3</sup> One of his most specific assertions of this process lies at the heart of *Phantastes*, in the first of the book's two central and key chapters. Here he postulates multiple worlds radiating out from the sacred "center" and all, of necessity, interconnected, whether individuals within individual realms can recognize these connections or not. Each individual it is assumed, has both future and past lives:

Worlds cannot be without an intermundane relationship. The community of the centre of all creation suggests an interradiating connection and dependence of the parts. Else a grander idea is conceivable than that which is already embodied. The blank, which is only a forgotten life, lying behind the consciousness, and the misty splendour, which is an undeveloped life, lying before it, may be full of mysterious revelations of other connexions with the worlds around us, than those of science and poetry. No shining belt or gleaming moon, no red and green glory in a self-encircling twin-star, but has a relation with the hidden things of a man's soul, and, it may be, with the secret history of his body as well. They are portions of the living house wherein he abides.<sup>4</sup> (XII, 97)

Each world of form in its miraculous dance is struggling towards its next embodiment, a process which ultimately leads to the still center which generates and controls this great dance of forms. Some realms parallel each other; others fall into a sequence whose controlling principle is distance from this center. As MacDonald elsewhere expresses it, "The whole system of the universe works upon this law—the driving of things upward towards the center."<sup>5</sup> However, at any particular time, the forms of any one realm (and of any one person within that realm) can be developing towards higher spiritual embodiments or deteriorating towards grosser forms. MacDonald refers to this system of metempsychosis or reincarnation in *The Princess and Curdie*, where he calls it, "the whole science of natural history—the heavenly sort." The princess tells Curdie:

. . . all men, if they do not take care, go down the hill to the animal's country. . . many men are actually, all their lives, going to be beasts. People knew it once, but it is long since they forgot it . . . it is always what they *do*, whether in their minds or their bodies, that makes men go down to be less than men, that is, beasts . . .

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<sup>3</sup>*Unspoken Sermons. Series One*, (Eureka, CA, 1989), p. 132. All references are to this edition.

<sup>4</sup>George MacDonald, *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance*. Introd. Greville MacDonald (London, 1940), Ch. XII, p. 97. Chapter and page numbers will be included in the text.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 195.

They do not know it of course; for a beast does not know that he is a beast, and the nearer a man gets to being a beast the less he knows it.<sup>6</sup>

When describing the evolution of the goblins' animals in *The Princess and the Goblin* he uses similar terms and in this case, his description is clearly influenced by current theories of evolution:

... in the course of time, all had undergone even greater changes than had passed upon their owners. They had altered ... their countenances had grown in grotesque resemblance to the human. No one understands animals who does not see that every one of them, even amongst the fishes ... yet shadows the human: in the case of these the human resemblance had greatly increased: while their owners had sunk towards them, they had arisen towards their owners. But the conditions of subterranean life being equally unnatural for both, while the goblins were worse, the creatures had not improved by the approximation ... (p. 72).

When Curdie begins to lose his path and become commonplace MacDonald comments:

There is this difference between the growth of some human beings and that of others: in the one case it is a continuous dying, in the other a continuous resurrection (p. 180).

and this concept remains central to all his writings. In his *Unspoken Sermons*, this "resurrection" is seen as "gradations of an *infinite* progress" (my emphasis).<sup>7</sup> All creatures are, *of necessity*, either going forward towards the sacred center, returning to that center one might say, or drawing further away. However, MacDonald's philosophy is essentially optimistic in that he sees all beings as ultimately returning to the source and being reunited with the divine. As he says, all it requires is time and there is an infinitude of that. The princess tells Curdie that she may take "a few thousand years" to answer his questions. "But that's nothing. Of all things time is the cheapest."<sup>8</sup> So too, in his sermons, MacDonald repeatedly refers to the huge periods of time needed to achieve this union: "God ... takes millions of years to form a soul that shall understand him ..."; "God's day is a thousand years": "not by a stroke of grandeur, but by years of love, yea, by centuries of seeming bafflement ... must he grow into the

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<sup>6</sup>George MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin*. *The Princess and Curdie*, ed. Roderick McGillis (Oxford, 1990), pp. 219-20. All references are to this edition.

<sup>7</sup>*Unspoken Sermons*. *Series One*, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup>*The Princess and Curdie*, p. 208.

heart of (his) sons and daughters”<sup>9</sup>

Thus the basic challenge offered individuals on their life journeys is to glimpse the sacred process underlying the forms of the adventures that befall them. In this way, they are able to *use* these experiences, perhaps even transform and thence transcend them. They cannot see the complete pattern, but they *can* get a glimpse into the true meaning of things, or at least a hint that there is a meaning, a pattern of cause and effect in action.<sup>10</sup> This brief insight is, by definition, elusive, and as so often occurs to Anodos, protagonists spend much of their time struggling to recollect the details of these moments and to express them in words.

The concept of multiple realms controls the text on all its levels. From the moment Fairy Land invades Anodos’ bedroom dissolving its fixed forms into energy, his experiences are characterized by a sense of mystery, of everything being more than it appears to be, of individual forms directing attention beyond themselves to further states towards which they are striving. He feels this sense of expectation all about him:

here I was struck with utter stillness. No bird sang. No insect hummed. Not a living creature crossed my way. Yet somehow the whole environment seemed only asleep, and to wear even in sleep an air of expectation. The trees seemed all to have an expression of conscious mystery, as if they said to themselves, “We could, an’ if we would.” They had all a meaning look about them (IV, 10).

He immediately links this mysterious ambiguity to the processes of the subconscious as embodied in the world of dream and of the night, because it is to these realms that Fairy Land belongs:

I, being a man and a child of the day, felt some anxiety as to how I should fare among the elves and other children of the night who wake when mortals dream, and find their common life in those wondrous hours that flow noiselessly over the moveless death-like forms of men and women and children, lying strewn and parted beneath the weight of the heavy waves of night, which flow on and beat them down, and hold them drowned and senseless, until the ebb-tide comes, and the waves sink away, back into the ocean of the dark (IV, 10).

Later, as he leaves the first cottage, he notices that the woods are full of a strange “feeling of presences.” All about him are creatures whom he cannot quite see, levels of existence which he cannot quite penetrate. As Anodos puts it:

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<sup>9</sup>*Unspoken Sermons. Series One*, pp. 23, 153, 197.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. *Phantastes*, XIII, 107.

All this time, as I went through the wood, I was haunted with the feeling that other shapes, more like my own size and mien, were moving about at a little distance on all sides of me. But *as yet* I could discern none of them ... I constantly imagined, however, that forms were visible in all directions except that to which my gaze was turned; and that they only became invisible, or resolved themselves into other woodland shapes, the moment my looks were directed towards them (IV, 28, my emphasis).

We notice therefore that in Fairy Land a mysterious ambiguity characterizes Anodos' adventures. The different forms taken by these adventures, are in flux, in the process of shifting and changing. All is in the process of *becoming* and much of what Anodos experiences has a dreamlike unreality, at times bordering on nightmare. MacDonald captures this nightmare quality brilliantly. What could be more horrific than Anodos' pursuit by the Ash? In this event the horror lies in what is *not* stated, in the suggestion of other dimensions on the verge of breaking through into the "normality" of this one. When Anodos is found by his shadow, the horror lies in exactly this shifting of dimensions. From the depths of some distant realm, from the "luminous extremity" of a "night sky" in the "remote" distance, his shadow rushes at him (VIII, 69-70). Even the first cottage which Anodos enters, resonates a sense of sinister anticipation quite at variance with the kind "homeliness" of his treatment there. The woman pushes him back from the window "with an expression of impatience and terror" (III, 13). She predicts "foul weather" and the impression created is one of hostile realms threatening to invade and barely being held at bay. The naive world of garden fairies squabbling and teasing the cat, exists side by side with, and in total opposition to, the nightmare world of the Ash which later reduces Anodos to a state where he is "simply imbruted with terror" (IV, 32).

At key stages in Anodos' adventures, worlds merge, space shifts, linear time ceases and words fail to convey what is happening. These experiences take the form of trances or visions. The fairy "form" who enters Anodos' castle "reality," instigates the first of these visionary revelations. On looking into her eyes he "sank in their waters . . . forgot all the rest" and sees the world of form as a great sea of energy, a vision which fills him with an intense longing which she then directs towards the realm of Fairy Land. He experiences a second trance-like vision in the arms of the Beech tree. As always he has trouble describing the experiences her "strange, sweet song" provokes. He is "wrapt in a trance of still delight" and learns the "secret of the woods, and the flowers, and the birds" (IV, 36) and seems to relive "childhood" experiences of nature and its seasons. This reinforcement of childlike insight into the world of nature, is an important experience in MacDonald's scheme of things, and it leaves Anodos strengthened and feeling "as if new born" (V, 38). This encounter is also characterized by suggestions of a potential for different future embodiments. The Beech tree longs "for the world of men" as Anodos "had . . . longed for Fairy Land" and she looks forward to being a woman, predicting also that the ash trees will make "horrid men" one day (IV, 35). Anodos' reluctance to leave

her, is minimized by his comforting himself with the notion that he might meet her again in some different realm: "if ever she is a woman, who knows but we may meet somewhere? There is plenty of room for meeting in the universe" (V, 38).

These trance-like insights into other times and other places are always conveyed in terms of a direct experience defying expression in language. Because they represent revelations into realms transcending that of the protagonist at the time, this fundamental failure of language is inevitable and our attention is repeatedly drawn to it throughout the text. In this experience with the Beech tree, Anodos says of her song that he could not understand it but that it left him with a feeling which he then tries to convey in poetry, at the same time apologizing for the inadequacy of this attempt: "I cannot put more of it into words" (IV, 36). When, transformed by drinking the magic water in the Marble Lady's cave he falls into "a delicious reverie," he describes the "assembly of forms and spiritual sensations" this trance-like state produces, as "far too vague to admit of being translated into any shape common to my own and another mind" (V, 41). Then, as he is inspired by this vision to sing the imprisoned form into life, he comments:

I sang something like this: but the words are only a dull representation of a state whose very elevation precluded the possibility of remembrance and in which I presume the words really employed were as far above these, as that state transcended this wherein I recall it (V, 45).

This failure of memory characterizes his next experience also, that with the Alder Maid. She tells him a tale which he cannot recollect but which "at every turn and every pause" focuses him on her "extreme beauty." Once again he lies "entranced" as her tale draws him into its magic realm "till she and I were blended with the tale, till she and I were the whole history." However, where the experience with the Beech tree left him "new born," this trance-like exposure to the realm of the Alder Maid leaves him with such horror that his very memory of it is "almost obliterated" (VI, 55) and he is left feeling emasculated.

The central section in the Fairy Palace provides keys to the understanding of the text as a whole. It also contains key passages where these concepts are embodied in powerful symbolic form. In such passages MacDonald is at his most brilliant. Every detail of description resonates mysteriously with subtle suggestions of other forms just beyond the experience of the protagonist. Other dimensions, other realms, impinge on, lead out of or into, parallel or contradict, this one, and this complex of relationships in process is brilliantly captured, for example, in Anodos' baptismal bathing or his experience of the dance at the palace's heart. Water, music and dance are powerful symbols for sacred energy, for the paradoxical concept of unity in multitude or motion in stasis and MacDonald uses them in this way consistently throughout his works. I will look at these two sections in detail.

At the center of the palace courtyard is a “great fountain . . . throwing up a lofty column of water” the top of which “caught the moonbeams, and like a great pale lamp, hung high in the night air, threw a dim memory of light . . . over the court below” (X, 86). Anodos as usual follows this water energy which leads into the heart of the palace building, where he finds next day a “huge basin . . . filled with the purest most liquid and radiant water” in which he has a series of baptismal immersions. These baths are conveyed in terms of a shift in dimension, a movement into another realm where all is enigmatic and elusive yet at the same time profoundly transforming so that with each immersion he feels as if he has gained expanded insight into the true nature of this realm wherein he finds himself. The pool itself is, as already stated, deeply symbolic, embodying as it does, this sacred energy underlying all the forms of the palace. It is a “harmonious confusion,” thus combining order and chaos. It looks as if “there was no design” but Anodos realizes that “not one little pebble could be displaced without injuring the effect of the whole.” Realm upon realm is contained within, and yet at the same time “unfolded” by this pool, which ultimately links to the great ocean itself: “Beneath [the] . . . floor of the water, lay the reflection of the blue inverted roof, fretted with its silver stars, like a second deeper sea, clasping and unfolding the first” (XI, 91). When Anodos plunges in, the waters “seemed to enter and revive [his] . . . heart.” He swims “as in a rainbow,”<sup>11</sup> and when he dives, finds himself enchanted, in an underwater realm, in “the heart of a great sea.” He is in the great ocean itself, with “wondrous caves,” glowing corals and “the glimmer of what seemed to be creatures of human form at home in the waters.” When he emerges “deeply refreshed,” he feels as if “clothed . . . with a new sense” and finds that his consciousness is subtly altered. He begins “to discern faint, gracious forms” hitherto invisible to him (XI, 92), although they are still unclear: “Nor were they plainly visible to my eyes. Sometimes a group or . . . individual, would fade entirely out of the realm of my vision as I gazed.” His insights increase steadily with each bath but he is always aware that he is still only seeing a shadow of what is there. He never sees the Queen for example and is aware that to do so is not his destiny (XI, 93). His needs are different, presumably being on a much lower level than that would imply.

So too his experience of the dancers in the great pillared hall is characterized by this sense of mystery and elusiveness. Just beyond Anodos’ consciousness, realms are lying in “misty splendour . . . full of mysterious revelations of other connexions with the worlds around him.” He is aware of a great dance of forms and longs to see it in order to glimpse the “music” which controls it:

I seemed to hear something like the distant sound of multitudes of dancers, and felt as if it was the unheard music, moving their rhythmic motion, that within me blossomed in verse and song. I felt, too, that could I but see the dance, I should, from

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<sup>11</sup>This is another favorite MacDonald symbol for this elusive and magical energy.



the harmony of complicated movements, not of the dancers in relation to each other merely, but of each dancer individually in the manifested plastic power that moved the consenting harmonious form, understand the whole of the music on the billows of which they floated and swung (XIV, 135).

He feels that if he could only see it *completely*, he would understand the music controlling its forms. He struggles vainly to see the solid shapes and patterns of movement and sound with which he *knows* he is surrounded. He *knows* there is a great Truth behind and informing these strange occurrences, but he can never get more than the faintest hint as to its real nature. As he says of the Fairy Palace:

I was convinced there must be music in it, but that *my sense was as yet too gross* to receive the influence of those mysterious motions that beget sound. Sometimes I felt sure, from the way the few figures of which I got such transitory glimpses passed me, or glided into vacancy before me, that they were moving to the law of music; and, in fact, several times I fancied for a moment that I heard a few wondrous tones coming I knew not whence. But they did not last long enough to convince me that I had heard them with the bodily sense. Such as they were, however, they took strange liberties with me, causing me to burst suddenly into tears, of which there was no presence to make me ashamed, or casting me into a kind of trance of speechless delight, which, passing as suddenly, left me faint and longing for more (XIV, 133, my emphasis).

It becomes evident that the revelations that a quester has, are dependent on his spiritual level, a level also controlling the forms created by his imagination. Thus from the multitude of realms with which each quester is potentially surrounded, the path he experiences as his, is directly related to this spiritual level. As a consequence of these ideas, time and space as they are normally viewed, are revealed as an expression of our own limitations. Moments of insight break through these normal experiences of time and space. The protagonists move onto a different level of consciousness in which moments can seem like years and vice versa; space can be experienced as totally illusory or as shifting according to the state of mind of the protagonist. There is some sense in which any world of forms is objectively real, but how the protagonists experience these forms is very much a product of their spiritual states. In fact the suggestion is that the questers produce the forms out of their own needs. One could express this variously: that they *free* the forms which are specifically needed for spiritual development, or that they attract or even generate these forms from the depths of their imaginations. The imagination, being grounded in the subconscious, is the link which connects human beings to God's divine energy and it is therefore the key factor in a quester's progress.

As MacDonald quite specifically expresses it, the form a man finds to “embody his thought” arises “within him without will or effort” because

Such embodiments are not the result of the man’s intention, or of the operation of his conscious nature. His feeling is that they are given to him; that from the vast unknown, where time and space are not, they suddenly appear in luminous writing upon the wall of his consciousness . . . [and he continues] can we not say that they are *the creation of the unconscious portion of his nature?* (my emphasis).

He answers his own question in the affirmative with the proviso that “that unknown region whence such embodiments come,” be recognized as finding its ultimate source in God’s energy which is, by definition, Truth.

. . . God sits in that chamber of our being in which the candle of our consciousness goes out in darkness, and sends forth from thence wonderful gifts into the light of that understanding which is His candle. Our hope lies in no most perfect mechanism even of the spirit, but in the wisdom wherein we live and move and have our being. Thence we hope for endless forms of beauty informed of truth. If the dark portion of our own being were the origin of our imaginations, we might well fear the apparition of such monsters as would be generated in the sickness of a decay which could never feel—only declare—a slow return towards primeval chaos. But the Master is our Light.<sup>12</sup>

MacDonald repeatedly asserts this distinction between conscious and subconscious levels of personality. The fact that God works through the latter gives it a quite remarkable importance in his scheme of things. As he elsewhere expresses this:

To give us the spiritual gift we desire, God may have to begin far back in our spirit, in regions unknown to us, and do much work that we can be aware of only in the results; for our consciousness is to the extent of our being but as the flame of the volcano to the world-gulf whence it issues; in the gulf of our unknown being God works behind our consciousness. He may be approaching our consciousness from behind, coming forward through regions of our darkness into our light, long before we begin to be aware that He is answering our request—has answered it, and is visiting His child.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the freeing of the subconscious is to give play to God’s sacred energy, allowing it to find its own forms which will of necessity, be the right ones for any person’s spiritual development at that time in that place. The freeing of the subconscious in dreams or in trance-like states is therefore of crucial im-

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<sup>12</sup>George MacDonald. *A Dish of Orts* (London, 1893), pp. 24-5.

<sup>13</sup>*Unspoken Sermons. Series Two* (Eureka, CA, 1989), p. 94.

portance.<sup>14</sup> As already stated, it allows individuals key revelations into the true nature of the phenomenal world. In these moments "chinks in time" are created, through which "heaven peepeth out."<sup>15</sup> Time and space are both transformed. The limits of any one realm are briefly transcended and future stages of development embodied in other realms, can reveal themselves, thus giving meaning to present yearnings. Realms can thus invade each other and these invasions take many forms. Sometimes more enlightened realms penetrate lesser worlds, in the process thereof revealing the true direction of the latter. However, individuals can experience insights into past experiences and into events from other time periods and other worlds. The insights therefore can be on the level of the macrocosm or of the microcosm. They can be so profound as to take the form of mystic visions or simple enough to consist merely of a shift in the experience of the protagonist, from for example, dark wood to lonely tower. Thus these experiences can be within one realm or between different realms. However, the purpose is always the same: to gain understanding of present experiences, an understanding which then gives direction to the transcendence of those experiences.

As suggested above, Anodos experiences trance-like insights under the influence of each of the four female anima figures in the first half of his journey, the fairy grandmother, the Lady of the Beech, the Marble Lady and the Alder Maid, and his sojourn in the Fairy Palace is characterized throughout by a sense of imminent revelation. He is aware that these mystical experiences of other realms or other levels of being are potentially all around him if he could only break through into them, and he does succeed in doing so many times over this period. These insights are provoked variously by baptismal bathing or by exposure to the magical literature, music and dance of the palace and because this is the nearest Anodos gets to the "harmony of the centre," they are of profound significance in his quest.

The second half of the book, those adventures which occur to Anodos *after* his expulsion from the Fairy Palace, take on a more profound multidimensional quality. They are characterized by a more complex and shifting pattern of interweaving dimensions. His experiences through the doors of the wise old lady's cottage are confusing and dreamlike, as are the mysterious transitions between day and night in the square tower. There is no question of dual worlds, of one realm being real and the other not. All is shifting and all is equally *unreal* and enigmatic until this irrationality takes on the power of claustrophobic nightmare with life and death implications. MacDonald employs a variety of threshold and transition imagery in this section and makes powerful

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. MacDonald's statement: "the mind, in the quiescence of its consciousness in sleep, comes into a less disturbed contact with its origin, the heart of creation" (*Wilfred Cumbermede* [London, 1872], Ch.48).

<sup>15</sup>See *Phantastes*, Epigraph, Ch. XII, 97.

use of the symbolism of reflection whether through images of water or of mirrors.

I have already noted the way in which the pool in the Fairy Palace reflects the sky/roof "fretted with . . . silver stars." When thrust out of the palace into the subterranean world which brings him to the point of despair, Anodos moves down into a bottomless chasm leading into a shaft "smooth as glass" which yet reflects the world of stars and heaven above. He turns determinedly away from this heavenly upward realm and creeps inwards to a world in which the sky is of rock and "whenever a choice was necessary . . . [he] always chose the path which seemed to lead downwards" (XVII, 151). This symbolic plunge into the abyss (XVII, 150) occurs in some strange timeless realm where Anodos finds "such a discrepancy between the decisions of [his] . . . imagination and . . . judgement, as to the length of time that had passed . . . that [he] . . . gave up all attempts to arrive at any conclusion on the point" (XVII, 158). He is caught in a gray mist which in some mysterious way embodies his past so that when he "looked back towards the past, this mist was the medium through which [his] . . . eyes had to strain for a vision of what had gone by." The shedding of this gray mist of his past life is brilliantly conveyed. With Anodos' despairing yet courageous assertion of will,<sup>16</sup> the gray entombing ocean with its "hopeless" waves "flung . . . in raving heaps upon the desolate shore," is transformed into a benign nurturing force in which the waters themselves lift him "with loving arms" (XVIII, 160). The little "rainbow" boat which then rescues him carries him through another multidimensional water realm where reflections are once more from above and therefore benign ("The stars . . . bent down lovingly towards the waters; and the reflected stars within seemed to float up, as if longing to meet their embraces") and the waves reveal such a vision of his past ("vaguely revealed beneath the wave, I floated above my whole Past" [XVIII, 161]) that he is symbolically freed from its burdens. He awakes "with the feeling that [he has] . . . been kissed and loved to his heart's content," (XVIII, 162) which then frees him to enter the magic sphere of the wise old/young lady's square cottage.

This cottage appears to be another stable center in this flux of shifting interpenetrating realms, although one presumes it is of lesser symbolic importance than the Fairy Palace. Characteristically too it is portrayed as mysterious and enigmatic, resonant with hidden significance which Anodos is as yet unable to grasp. The worlds of form which radiate out from this still center provide Anodos with the final experiences he needs to come to terms with and shed his past, but that this is only a tiny part of its potential is clear. MacDonald brilliantly creates this sense of everything being in process and containing significances beyond the protagonist's (and the reader's) wildest imaginings. It is the essence of his skill as a writer.

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<sup>16</sup>"I will not be tortured to death . . . I will meet it half way" (XVIII, 160).

The four doors through which Anodos ventures lead him into realms associated with his past and yet different from it and there is some sense in which these realms seem independently real and not merely projections of his own longings. The complex nature of all this is epitomized by the mysterious world he meets through the "door of Sighs." He is in the castle of his white lady and her knight. Significantly, she is quite different from his previous experience of her. She is no longer "marble" but "altogether of the daughters of men," so much so that he feels doubt as to whether it is really she. The implication of this invisible invasion of Anodos into their world, is that theirs is the "reality" and he is being granted a glimpse into it. His form has no place in their mirror although strangely, he sees "a dim shadow of [himself] . . . in the shining steel" (XIX, 175) of the knight's armor. In this scene Anodos is fully conscious that he is the "unreal" one. He says: "I could not enter the sphere of these living beings . . . I moved in a vision while they moved in life" (XIX, 178). Yet later he is able to rejoin the knight as his squire even asking him about the conversation he overheard when invisible. This puzzles the knight but provokes his long and apparently irrelevant explanation about the beggar girl. The point here is that yet again multiple realms are interconnecting. The girl is one from the "strange planet" read about by Anodos in the library of the Fairy Palace and sent to Fairyland to gather wings with which to fly back to "the country she came from." Once again, characteristic of this experience is the knight's difficulty in remembering what she said and in expressing it verbally: "it seemed to me, all the time, as if I were hearing a child talk in its sleep. I could not arrange her story in my mind at all, although it seemed to leave hers in a certain order of its own" (XXIII, 222).

As usual, when realms interconnect, memory and language fail. Reason and intellect cannot grasp the insights gained because they speak of necessity to the subconscious and the imagination.

The interlude when Anodos is imprisoned in the square tower has similar irrational and nightmare qualities. Night time with its connotations of a freeing of the subconscious, rescues him from the nightmare of the day's deathly barrenness. The rays of the moon touch him and he is free, insisting "I should have died but for this" (XXII, 207). All binary distinctions between reality and illusion, dreaming and waking, conscious and subconscious, are however characteristically confused to the point of irrelevance. His night dream experiences are life-giving and "real." In them he returns to his "real" home—the castle he initially left—and is welcomed by his sisters. This is the illusion because he wakes back in the tower—or is it? MacDonald plays quite self-consciously with these confusions, moving the text in and out of different levels of experience in what, one realizes by now, is a totally characteristic fashion. Anodos' night, moon-inspired experiences seem utterly "real"; the deadly tower "vanish[es] away like a mist" and he rejoices: "Oh joy! it was only a dream," only to have "the glorious night . . . swallowed up of the hateful day" (XXII, 207). The symbolic connotations of intellect battling with imagination are there

but the power of the episode carries it well beyond such a simple opposition. Anodos initially rejoices in the day tower being a dream, but then comes to see his night experiences as “only” dreams, thus reducing them to illusory status, and being unable to get real comfort from them. He is “somewhat consoled” by his dreams, “but all the time I dreamed I knew that I was only dreaming” (XXII, 207). When his “real” world breaks through into this dismal one, provoking the great yearning for primal childlike innocence and thence for freedom, which then permits of his liberation, it is in the form of the original “real” world of his castle, sisters, friends, and the vintage—presaging the events which will actually (?) occur at the end of the book, thus transgressing yet again boundaries of time as well as space. At this point it is the dreams that become reality for Anodos. They are no longer “only” dreams. He is “waiting only for the dreams of the night” to liberate him from the nightmare of the day. Night and day are placed in confrontation but interwoven and confused until Anodos transcends the opposition altogether by discovering that his whole imprisonment was an illusion, his own creation. The door was open all the time. The maiden’s songs “suddenly invaded [him] . . . as if something foreign to all [his] . . . senses and all . . . experience” and he strains “to catch every syllable of the revelation from the unseen outer world” (XXII, 208) which then inspires him to open the door and leave. Once again energy from one dimension “invades” another giving it direction, enabling it to transcend the constraints of conflicting oppositions and thus move onwards towards the next trial.

Experiences of this nature characterize each stage in Anodos’ quest but, as already suggested, those insights he is granted in the Fairy Palace are key. They place all the others in their true perspective by establishing the scheme of which they are part. The possibility of a “music” governing and subsuming the dance of forms is established. So too is the “harmony of the centre” to which all “worlds” relate in “an interradiating connection.” As one might expect, the stories Anodos reads in the palace, are clear illustrations of what MacDonald is saying here. The first opens with the statement establishing the existence of multiple worlds (XII, 97) and then proceeds to give an example of these worlds, in the “strange planet.” The second story opens with MacDonald’s most specific statement of the failure of language in attempting to convey these experiences, then establishes the nature of the great yearning which drives beings upwards towards the center, through realm after realm in an endless process. The story of the “strange planet” propounds exactly this system of different realms of existence interpenetrating and influencing each other. The world described in the story is profoundly limited; its inhabitants are undeveloped in key ways, in particular in terms of sexuality and loving relationships. However, the very fact that they *are* undeveloped, creates in them as they approach death, “an indescribable longing” for the next phase in this development and this controls the form (and presumably the world) of their next incarnation. Anodos coming as he does from a realm *beyond* that of this planet, acts as a kind of spiritual guide to these people. He sees that their wings, “glorious as they are, are but unde-

veloped arms" (XII, 103) and that their male/female relationships are essentially deficient, and he tells these people about birth and sexuality on earth, "in the vaguest manner I could invent" (XII, 102). However, this vagueness is nevertheless sufficient to meet with an instant response, giving form as it does, to what these people already feel as "an indescribable longing for something, they know not what, which seizes them, and drives them into solitude, consuming them from within, till the body fails" (XII, 102), so much so that two of them immediately go off and die in order to hasten this next stage which they now understand to be their direction. There is no suggestion that these deaths have any negative connotations whatsoever. "A great light shone in the eyes of one maiden" (XII, 102) who instantly walks away to her death.

Anodos, during this experience, is shifting in and out of different realms changing function as he does so. He moves from his role as narrator of a fiction into a role as one of its characters; he shifts from outside to inside the text and does it so that we barely notice, yet to such an extent that he directly alters the events he is describing. His penetration into his own story extends his function further, because as already suggested he becomes a spiritual guide to these people, able from the wider knowledge of his own realm to help them direct their energies towards their true future embodiments, instead of merely experiencing a vague longing for they know not what and therefore, presumably, quite possibly, from ignorance, dissipating this energy. In his own quest, the various guides he meets function in a parallel way, giving him insights into how to direct the vague yearning which drives him towards the future forms his spiritual development requires.

The self-reflexive quality of the text, as Anodos relates these central stories, is therefore quite remarkable. As he puts it:

But see the power of this book, that, while recounting what I can recall of its contents, I write it as if myself had visited the far-off planet, learned its ways and appearances, and conversed with its men and women. And so, *while writing*, it seems to me that I had (XII, 103, my emphasis).

Anodos has slipped from reader of, to narrator of, to writer of, to protagonist in, the fiction, these shifts in function reflecting the shifting nature of the worlds of form in which he finds himself. Sometimes one realm is "real," sometimes another, and sometimes contradictory realms seem to coexist and interact as if they shared the same reality and the same time period. Underwater worlds coexist and interact with magical boat trips, chivalric knights and dragons with winged maidens from distant planets and with invisible wooden figures of enigmatic origins. Only the Fairy Palace and the island cottage remain stable centers in this flux of forms. All else is like Anodos' bedroom, in the process of dissolving and becoming "fluent as the waters" (II, 7).

The text, in its confusing interweavings of different realms, of different historical periods, of different levels of fiction and literary genre, even of the

different roles filled by Anodos himself (as writer, reader, singer, protagonist, narrator) becomes itself an embodiment of this concept.

We are thus presented with a continuum of parallel and complementary worlds of form, which together participate in a process, a great movement of energy striving to regain the harmony of the center from which it came. Through "chinks of Time" (XII, 97) in the veils between worlds, at each level glimpses are given of further stages in this process. "Forgotten" past lives lie "behind the consciousness" like a "blank," while future lives, with all their "misty splendour," lie before this consciousness and "may be full of mysterious revelations of other connections with the worlds around us" (XII, 97). Inevitably these glimpses are difficult to communicate. In particular the language of any one planet or realm or stage in this process, will be unable to do more than hint at the full import of these mystical insights, because naturally this language is restricted to the experiences of this world and has no vocabulary for those resonated back by realms on more advanced spiritual levels. As already suggested Anodos, on the strange planet, can only hint at the extraordinary complexities of human sexuality. So too the wise old lady on the island can only suggest to him what he needs for his spiritual development. She is restricted to his language and the "forms" with which he is familiar. She uses his past earthly life, his failures and his fears, in order to push him beyond them. It is therefore the *feelings* associated with these revelations which leave the most powerful impression, and words fail totally to convey these feelings because there is always something deeply mysterious about them, which Anodos cannot quite remember. At moments like this, all forms become symbols hinting at mysterious meanings resonating out from them and transcending obvious significances.

The first story in the Fairy Palace establishes the process of progressive and interrelating worlds. The second develops this concept by indicating what drives this process. The motivating force behind the quests of both Cosmo and Anodos is *need*, a need which translates into a great longing. Initially this yearning is vague and directionless. Anodos' vague yearning for Fairy Land is what sets him on his journey. Cosmo lies, overwhelmed with a great longing, dreaming day and night, but having no specific object to give form to his needs (XIII, 108) until he finds the lady in the magic mirror. For both Anodos and Cosmo, this yearning is for the ideal feminine. Both must then learn to transcend this kind of egocentric longing or love and move onto the next stage in the process, which is an unselfish love where the welfare of the beloved is more important than one's own. Love is another term for the great longing which MacDonald sees as driving both individual protagonists and individual worlds ever upward towards the center. This is the driving energy. Each new insight or stage in this process opens up the next. As MacDonald expresses it in his sermons: "Nothing is inexorable but love . . . there is nothing eternal but that which loves and can be loved, and love is ever climbing towards the consummation . . ." and what he stresses here is once again the *process* that this involves: "It may be centuries of ages before a man comes to see a truth—ages



of strife, of effort, of aspiration . . . [but] to see a truth, to know what it is, to understand it, and to love it, are all one. There is many a dim longing for it as an unknown need before at length the eyes come awake" (*Unspoken Sermons. Series One*, p. 37); and elsewhere he expresses this principle thus: "The true revelation rouses the desire to know more by the truth of its incompleteness" (*Ibid.*, p. 36).

These are the two key principles behind *Phantastes*, and Anodos' adventures are an embodiment of this process. As already indicated, death is only a stage in an infinite number of embodiments. Any one realm is merely a stage in a process of realms. Nothing could be more compassionate, open-ended, tolerant and undogmatic than MacDonald's philosophy here. He is far from being a conventional or narrow-minded Christian. It is *because* MacDonald sees individual experience as relative to a person's spiritual level, that this system is so appropriate. The world of forms shifts and changes according to this ever shifting level. As the quester's needs and consequent yearnings develop, so do the forms which characterize his journey. His imagination finds the forms needed by him at any one time because this realm of form in which he finds himself is merely one of an infinite number. The particular "reality" he inhabits at any one time is in constant flux in the process of development which will carry it towards its next stage, driven always by that great yearning "upwards" towards the center of all creation.

George MacDonald's *Phantastes* is then on all levels an embodiment of these ideas. In terms of its story, in terms of its use of language, metaphor and symbol, and in terms of its employment of the quest archetype, it depends on this concept of multiple realms. All these interweavings of different realms and times, culminate in the final two chapters. Anodos' "death" experience is, on all levels, a revelation. As usual the prologue establishes the key ideas, in this case those already established in the stories he read in the Fairy Palace: life as one in a series, worlds as interradiating from a sacred center, and language as inadequate to convey real truth ("the meagre and half-articulate speech of a savage tribe" [XIII, 106]). We imagine this life to be "our Dwelling Place" when it is in fact only "one step" in the "Race," a mere "wretched Inn" along the way. Death is one stage in a long process of passages through lifetimes and through worlds on the long struggle back to the center. The "enlightened" recognize that this death is actually a birth. They also recognize the limited nature of our language and "scorn" its "nonsense." Death and the shedding of "these vanishing earthly garments," as both Cosmo (smiling as he dies) and the winged creatures of the strange planet learned to recognize, is a blessing. Anodos is emphatic: "I was dead and right content" is how this section opens. "I had never dreamed of such blessedness" (XXIV, 231). For a moment the process of death and rebirth and interradiating realms pauses; Anodos briefly lives "an unradiating existence . . . [his] soul a motionless lake, that received all things

and gave nothing back.”<sup>17</sup> He experiences the power of being able to embody his spirit at will. (“I felt that I could manifest myself in the primrose” [XXIV, 232].) The world of form is revealed for what it is, a transitory manifestation of “the essential being and nature” of the great mother earth. As has been implied throughout the book, the great play of form with its multiple realms, is *all* illusion. The truly “real” is the sacred energy underlying these forms, giving them their fragile and transitory beauty, and established once again is the key importance of love in this process. As the Epigraph (from Sir John Suckling’s “Song”) to Cosmo’s story states, “Love is such a Mystery” (XIII, 106) and its transforming power is what drives these shifting forms through their “infinite progress” towards the center. In this final section Anodos affirms this power as the key lesson he has so far learned in this quest. This is the culmination of all his experiences and it is no accident that MacDonald stresses it as an essential aspect of these death revelations. Love is “a power that cannot be but for good” and “all love will, one day, meet with its return . . . All true love will, one day, behold its own image in the eyes of the beloved” (XXIV, 233).

Anodos’ return to bodily form is a return to “the world of shadows” through “the door of Dismay,” a return in which he feels like a “ghost” (XXV, 236). Death is “bliss.” The return to the world of “normal reality” is conveyed in terms of death and limitation: “a writhing as of death convulsed me; and I became once again conscious of a more limited even a bodily and earthly life” (XXIV, 233). Back in his castle Anodos longs to return to the cottage of the wise lady which he recognizes as a stable factor beside which his present life is a brief vision. (“I often feel as if I had only left her cottage for a time, and would soon return *out of the vision* into it again” [XXV, 236, my emphasis]) from which he can only escape “through [his] . . . tomb.” Life is a dream from which one needs to awaken as Anodos is reminded in this concluding section of the book. He dreams under the ancient beech tree with which the revelations on his quest began. The sacred energy subsuming form is all around him threatening to break though the illusory surface of things, taking the shape of the wise ancient woman’s voice and leaving him and us with the final revelation on which all others hinge. Amidst all these paradoxical oppositions, interacting worlds of form, multiple interradiating realms and mysterious interconnecting dimensions of experience, there is this single great and optimistic truth. Ultimately all things are driven by love upwards to the harmony of the center. “Good is always coming; . . . What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good. And so, *Farewell.*”

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<sup>17</sup>Cf. The Fairy Palace where there was “no reflection . . . only . . . a ghostly shimmer” (X, 85).