The Two-World Consciousness of North Wind: Unity and Dichotomy in MacDonald's Fairy Tale

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In the past decade, there has been increasing work devoted to George MacDonald's books, including his enigmatic "children's tale" *At the Back of the North Wind*. From the more general studies we have received insights into the methods and materials MacDonald chose to utilize in many of his books, while from the more focused researches, there have emerged some interesting readings, explaining individual aspects of *North Wind*. For all that, *At the Back of the North Wind* remains enigmatic and suggestive of deeply hidden ethereal meanings. So, how is the curious reader to interpret the linguistic eddies and mythological whirlwinds still left behind by this long intriguing fairy tale?  

A general exposition of one of MacDonald's main recurring themes is provided by Stephen Prickett's "The Two Worlds of George MacDonald." Just as the title of this article suggests, MacDonald, according to Prickett, was very interested in separate yet inter-related realities or worlds that could be visited by some of the characters in his stories. This insight is helpful in understanding many of MacDonald's works, however, Prickett appears to visualize the two worlds mainly in spatio-temporal terms.1 In a similar vein, Nancy Willard's "The Goddess in the Belfry: Grandmothers and Wise Women in George MacDonald's Books for Children" (*Childlike*, pp. 67-74) and Nancy-Lou Patterson's "Kore Motifs in *The Princess and the Goblin*" (*Childlike*, pp. 169-82) have identified or intuited MacDonald’s recurring use of Greek

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mythological material, although this has not been thoroughly studied nor expanded to include *At the Back of the North Wind*.

On the other hand, more particular and focused insights into MacDonald's tale are provided by Roderick McGillis in his "Language and Secret Knowledge in *At the Back of the North Wind*" (*Childlike*, pp. 145-59) and by Lesley Smith's "Old Wine in New Bottles: Aspects of Prophesy in George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*" (*Childlike*, pp. 161-68). McGillis's and Smith's articles are helpful; however, they appear to explain only parts of one side of the story. McGillis puts most of his emphasis on a Christianized reading of a poetic language as it relates to secret knowledge at the expense of other types of language and knowledge. Smith, in similar fashion, concentrates solely on the Judeo-Christian mythological material to the detriment of the wealth of Greek mythological dimensions in the book.

Scholars appear well aware of the wealth of Judeo-Christian references and allusions in *At the Back of the North Wind*. Little attention, however, has been devoted to the equal if not more important direct and indirect Greek references and allusions present in the story. In the first short paragraph of *North Wind*, MacDonald introduces some of the important Greek mythological material he will use in his story. By using a direct reference to Herodotus, the indirect reference to the Hyperboreans, and by mentioning the strange fate of these mythic people, MacDonald underscores the crucial importance of Greek mythology for his book. In addition, by drawing attention to the supposed mass watery deaths of the Hyperboreans, something which does not appear to be mentioned anywhere by Herodotus, MacDonald makes sure to convey to the reader that his story will give an extremely creative reading of some interesting yet obscure and sometimes confused Greek mythological stories and traditions.

Some of the main references in MacDonald's book are those to the Greek god Boreas, the north wind itself/himself. The ancient Greeks did not leave us much material on Boreas, their personification of the north wind. Much of the mythological material the Greeks did provide, however, appears to have inspired MacDonald when he wrote his *North Wind*. Some of this inspiration may be gleaned by reviewing parts of the mythology surrounding Boreas:

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3MacDonald claims that the Hyperboreans committed mass suicide because they were too comfortable. This is a very creative but misleading interpretation of the tradition. According to the myth, once the older Hyperboreans had lived a long and prosperous life, they individually committed suicide by jumping from a cliff into the sea. In similar fashion MacDonald will give his own creative readings of other Greek myths throughout the book.
Boreas... The god of the North Wind. He lived in Thrace which to the Greeks represented the ultimate in a cold climate. He is depicted as a winged demon... In one image he is shown, like the Roman Janus, with two faces looking in opposite directions... Boreas, in the shape of a horse, is said to have sired by the mares of Erichthonius twelve colts... Boreas also sired swift horses by one of the Furies as well as by a Harpy.4

Thus, the Greeks generally associated their North Wind with horses, and more particularly with a black steed as we read in The Iliad:

For him were pastur’d in the marshy mead,
Rejoicing with their foals, three thousand mares;
Them Boreas, in the pasture where they fed,
Beheld, enamour’d; and amid the herd
In likeness of a coal-black steed appear’d;
Twelve foals, by him conceiving, they produc’d.
These, o’er the teeming corn-fields as they flew,
Skimm’d o’er the standing ears, nor broke the haulm;
And, o’er wide Ocean’s bosom as they flew,
Skimm’d o’er the topmost spray of th’ hoary sea.5

Black is not only the color of the mythological Boreas in the form of a horse. It is also the color that Arthur Hughes, the original illustrator of MacDonald’s book, perhaps with the help of the writer, chose to use in his depiction of Diamond the horse.6 That old Diamond is black is also found to be significant with regards to the mythic symbolism a black horse has for modern scholars (Smith, Childlike, pp. 164-5). More importantly, just as Boreas is closely associated with a black stallion in Greek mythology, so is North Wind identified with old Diamond in many parts of the book.


6Even though the color of old Diamond is never directly mentioned by MacDonald, Arthur Hughes, perhaps at the author’s instigation, depicted a black horse. This can be further deduced insofar as MacDonald does tell the reader that North Wind’s hair is black (p. 18) while old Diamond’s coat always appears darker than North Wind’s hair in Hughes’ illustrations.
Similarities and intricate connections between North Wind and old Diamond abound. Smith sensed some connection between these two characters, but did not pursue the matter in this passage:

Diamond's relationship with North Wind begins when his family is living in The Wilderness and develops further when he (apparently) visits the country at her back. But, though North Wind's influence is considerable during the Bloomsbury section of the book, personal contact between the two is suspended; the boy never sees her when Horse Diamond is present or playing a key role... (Childlike, pp. 161-62).

MacDonald prevents old Diamond and North Wind from meeting because they are very closely related and may at times merge into one and the same being. This merging becomes more and more apparent as we continue to consider the web of connections between old Diamond and North Wind.

One of the easiest connections to consider between the two is in the way they are both portrayed in relation to young Diamond. It may be recalled that there are only two creatures on whose backs the boy mounts: old Diamond and North Wind. It must also be remembered that the Greek name "Hyperborean" means "over the north wind" or "one at the back of Boreas/North Wind" and that MacDonald, in the first page of the book, makes the reader aware that young Diamond sleeps directly above the back of old Diamond: "For Diamond's father had built him a bed in the loft with boards all around it... and Diamond's father put old Diamond in the stall under the bed...." Therefore, every night young Diamond is directly over or "at the back of old Diamond," and insofar as the boy is a "Hyperborean," his natural place is also at the back of the North Wind or Boreas.

MacDonald, however, goes further: he has the boy compare the two entities: "To have a lady like that for a friend—with such long hair, too! Why it was longer than twenty Diamonds' tails!" (North Wind, p. 21). The boy also appears intuitively aware of some connection between North Wind and old Diamond from the beginning of his encounters with North Wind. Young Diamond not only consciously stops following North Wind and uses the ladder...

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8According to the definition given in *Lemprière's Classical Dictionary*, as revised by F. A. Wright (London, 1990), p. 319, Diamond, by living in a cold climate, may very well qualify as a Hyperborean: "The word Hyperborean is applied in general to all those who inhabit any cold climate." Since Hecateus, through Diodorus Siculus, places the Hyperborean region in Britain, MacDonald may have had even more reason for assigning Diamond the title of "one at the back of the north wind" (i.e. a Hyperborean). For this latter information, see Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (New York, 1957), section 21.1. Henceforth Lemprière and Graves.
leading to old Diamond instead of the one "he would naturally have gone
down" (*North Wind*, p. 21), but he also talks to both creatures in a similar
fashion. Furthermore, young Diamond notices the peculiar coincidence of
being driven to exactly the same spot—by the wall—on two separate occasions
by both old Diamond and North Wind (*North Wind*, p. 31).

The similarities continue as young Diamond soon actively begins to climb
on the back of both creatures. Diamond first climbs on the horse's back in
Chapter 3 before attempting a similar feat at the back of North Wind in
Chapter 4. MacDonald describes these related events in similar terms:

'I'll give old Diamond a surprise,' thought the boy; and creeping up very
softly, before the horse knew, he was astride of his back. Then it was young
Diamond's turn to have more of a surprise than he had expected; for as with an
earthquake, with a rumbling and a rocking hither and thither, a sprawling of legs and
heaving as of many backs, young Diamond found himself hoisted up in the air, with
both hands twisted in the horse's mane. The next instant old Diamond lashed out
with both his hind legs, and giving one cry of terror young Diamond found himself
lying on his neck, with his arms as far round it as they would go. But then the horse
stood as still as a stone, except that he lifted his head gently up, to let the boy slip
down to his back (*North Wind*, p. 28).

The first time Diamond is placed on North Wind's back, this important event is
described thus:

She took him in her hands, threw him over her shoulder, and said, 'Get in,
Diamond.'

And Diamond parted her hair with his hands, crept between, and feeling about
soon found the woven nest. It was just like a pocket, or like the shawl in which
gipsy women carry their children. North Wind put her hands to her back, felt all
about the nest, and finding it safe, said,—

'Are you comfortable, Diamond?'

'Yes, indeed,' answered Diamond.

The next moment he was rising in the air. North Wind grew towering up to the
place of the clouds. Her hair went streaming out from her, till it spread like a mist
over the stars. She flung herself abroad in space.

Diamond held on by two of the twisted ropes which, parted and interwoven,
formed his shelter, for he could not help being afraid (*North Wind*, pp. 38-9).

There are many similarities between the two events and some interesting
horse riding references in the account of Diamond at the back of North Wind.
For instance, some of these similarities are: the throwing over the shoulder, the
violent rising up in the air, Diamond twisting his hands in the hair of both
creatures. Comparing North Wind's hair to two twisted ropes is also a curious
method of describing what young Diamond held in his hands, unless
MacDonald had the reins or a bridle in mind. MacDonald's verbal descriptions
are further accentuated in Arthur Hughes' jockey-like depiction of Diamond on the back of North Wind.

In Chapter 5, Diamond is placed on old Diamond's back by his father, very much as he had previously been placed on the back of North Wind. Here, once again, there is an emphasis on young Diamond reaching for old Diamond's bridle (North Wind, pp. 48-9). More important, however, is what follows: the direct comparison or confusion by Nanny of old Diamond and North Wind. This is what takes place once young Diamond drops in on her once off North Wind and once off old Diamond:

He had a penny in his pocket, the gift of the same lady the day before, and he tumbled off his horse to give it to the girl... She thought first: 'Then he was on the back of the North Wind after all!' but, looking up at the sound of the horse's feet on the paved crossing, she changed her idea, saying to herself, 'North Wind is his father's horse! That's the secret of it! Why couldn't he say so?' (North Wind, p. 50).

This should make us reconsider the identity of North Wind and old Diamond, and also the role of Nanny, who is not so shallow and dense as she has been portrayed by some scholars. Momentarily she correctly identifies North Wind with old Diamond—something which young Diamond never consciously appears able to do.

The similarities between North Wind and old Diamond go much deeper than merely having both entities ridden by young Diamond and identified by Nanny. Both North Wind and old Diamond, in classic Greek tradition, appear
to be flesh/meat eaters. The reader of *At the Back of the North Wind* is reminded at least twice of old Diamond’s proclivities or appetite for flesh/meat. The first instance is found in Chapter 1, when young Diamond fears being eaten by the horse:

...Diamond’s father put old Diamond in the stall under the bed, because he was a quiet horse, and did not go to sleep standing, but lay down like a reasonable creature. But, although he was a surprisingly reasonable creature, yet, when young Diamond woke in the middle of the night, and felt the bed shaking in the blasts of the north wind, he could not help wondering whether, if the wind should blow the house down, and he were to fall through into the manger, old Diamond mightn’t eat him up before he knew him in his night-gown (*North Wind*, pp. 11-12).

Here is what Euripides wrote:

...he [Heracles] mounted on a car and tamed with the bit the steeds of Diomede, that greedily champed their bloody food at gory mangers with jaws unbridled, devouring with hideous joy the flesh of men...  

The second instance is a much more direct reference presented by the narrator, not by a scared and imaginative, yet intuitively perceptive, child:

During all that month, they lived on very short commons indeed, seldom tasting meat except on Sundays, and poor old Diamond, who worked hardest of all, not even then—so that at the end of it he was as thin as a clothes-horse (*North Wind*, p. 241).

On the other hand, the reference to North Wind as a flesh/meat eater is not as pronounced. In Chapter 3, while young Diamond believes that North Wind has eaten a child, she first leaves him in suspense and only later denies the charge of cannibalism:

'Surely,' he thought, 'North Wind can’t be eating one of the children!' Coming to himself all at once, he rushed after her with his little first clenched... Before he reached the head of the stair, however, North Wind met him, took him by the hand, and hurried down and out of the house.

'I hope you haven’t eaten a baby, North Wind!' said Diamond, very solemnly. North Wind laughed merrily, and went tripping on faster...

'No,' she said at last, ‘I did not eat a baby’ (*North Wind*, p. 35).

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9MacDonald appears to follow the ancient Greek lack of differentiation between some of the higher animals, such as horses, and humans, and also in the lack of distinguishing between meat and flesh.

These references to old Diamond and North Wind eating flesh/meat both reflect the other possible meaning of the name Boreas—"Devouring" (Graves, p. 384)—and the general way the ancients visualized the double-edged power of the winds. For instance, here is how a more modern scholar explains the way the power of the winds was understood:

It is easy enough to see how winds were conceived of as Snatchers, death-demons, but why should they impregnate, give life? It is not, I think, by a mere figure of speech that breezes... are spoken of as 'life-begetting'... and 'soul rearing'. It is not because they are in our sense life-giving and refreshing as well as destructive: the truth lies deeper down. Only life can give life, only a soul gives birth to a soul; the winds are souls as well as breaths... (Harrison, p. 179).

Both old Diamond (the "reasonable creature") and North Wind possess the power of speech. Young Diamond is able to speak to them and can understand then in turn. However, old Diamond does not, as might be expected, speak English. A possibility is that old Diamond may follow Boreas, the Greek god of the north wind and father of horses, by speaking Greek. When young Diamond first hears old Diamond speak, this is the way the narrator describes the peculiar event:

He heard the two horses talking to each other—in a strange language, which yet, somehow or other, he could understand, and turn over in his mind in English. The first words he heard were from Diamond... (North Wind, pp. 246-7).

This type of flesh/meat eating, speaking horse is reminiscent of some of the ancient Greek-speaking horses such as Boreas in the form of a stallion or, among others, Xanthus, Achilles' horse, or the horses of Diomedes.

Many ancient sources agree that Boreas, as a horse and giver of life, was the father of flesh/meat eating and talking horses, but several of these sources are confused or incomplete regarding Boreas' parentage or progeny. David Kravitz lists the following under the heading of Boreas:

The north wind. Son of Eos and Astraeeus. Had many offspring. 1. Father of the horses of Ares, by one of the Erinnyes. 2. Father of the horses of Erechtheus, by one of the Harpies. 3. Father of the immortal horses of Achilles, Balius and Xanthus, by the Harpy, Podarge. 4. Father of twelve fast horses by the twelve mares of Dardanus... Boreas was renowned as a father of horses because of their speed.11

There are numerous sources that agree that many of the above horses ate flesh/meat, while at least Xanthus is well known for his speaking abilities, but not so well know for his flesh/meat eating tendencies (Graves, 130.a and

Even though a few of the above equine sexual exploits are credited in some sources to Boreas' brother Zephyr, the west wind, this would still make the former a grandfather, father or uncle to many of the flesh-eating and talking horses. Merely by scratching the surface of some obscure Greek traditions, it becomes apparent that MacDonald borrowed much from Greek mythology for his *At the Back of the North Wind*. This revelation should not come as a surprise to readers, as similar Greek mythology is used by MacDonald in several of his books for children, and because the mythology dealing with Boreas/North Wind, as stated earlier, is directly alluded to in reference to Herodotus, the Hyperboreans, and North wind.

In order to understand the more obscure connections between North Wind/Boreas and his equine prodigy, we need to probe further into some of the mythological traditions emerging out of and dealing with Thrace. It is in Thrace, a northern region for the Greeks, where most of the traditions of gods and mortals associated with Boreas/North Wind and flesh/meat eating, talking horses, are placed. For instance, the flesh-eating horses of Ares—originally a Thracian war god—which were passed on to the Thracian king Diomedes, were Boreas' offspring.

MacDonald may also have had in mind traditions which trace many of North Wind's characteristics to his mother, Eos. Some obscure traditions have Eos, not Zeus, kidnap Ganymedes (in a whirlwind?), the young and beautiful son of Tros, and it is to repay this boy's father for the abductions that two flesh-eating and talking horses, Balius and Zanthus, are provided (Graves, 29.c; 75.5; 130; 137.5, and 153.e). In addition, Boreas, like his mother also was a kidnapper, however, he did not direct his attention only to beautiful females: he is also known to have fallen in love with Hyacinthus. In this myth, Boreas falls in love with him and later kills him through the action of the wind when the boy chooses Apollo instead of the god of the north wind (Lemprière, p. 119).

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12 Homer does not assign Xanthus' paternity to Boreas nor discuss the flesh eating tendencies of Achilles' horse, many other sources do so.


14 For an account of the spreading of the Boreas Cult see Graves, 48.3. It should also be noted that Thrace was the "kingdom" just south of the Hyperborean region. This is probably the reason why North Wind, as Boreas, cannot get to "her own back."

15 In regards to Eos' snatching of young men and disease, Graves makes the following connection which may be relevant for our understanding of North Wind: "Eos's constant love affairs with young mortals are also allegories: dawn brings midnight lovers a renewal of erotic passion, and is the most usual time for men to be carried off by fever" (Graves, 40.2).
Another aspect which should be apparent is that MacDonald follows some of these Greek traditions of naming different beings by the same name and then proceeding to confuse their characteristics and identities. For instance, the name Xanthus was, among others, the name of one of King Diomedes’ flesh-eating horses, Hector’s horse, Achilles’ horse, and as well another name for the river Scamander which/whom Achilles fought in *Iliad* XXI.16 Interestingly, Scamander/Xanthus was the father of the wife of Tros/Laomedon—the king who in some traditions was given the horse Xanthus in return for his son Ganymedes. On the other hand, Podarces, who later became Priam, was the son of Laomedon and in turn Hector’s father, which would tend to make Ganymedes Hector’s uncle! In addition, Podarge (for whom Podarces/Priam was supposed to be the daughter and/or mate of Boreas—who through her or by her became a grandfather, father, or uncle to Achilles’ Xanthus. This all seems very incestuous and confused, and while MacDonald only confuses a few names/characters, he nevertheless manages to keep the mood and flavor of the Greek tradition of overlapping histories, names, and identities.

According to William Raeper:

MacDonald’s stature as a Scottish writer (and his use of tradition and dialect) has still to be fully assessed. As a Victorian, MacDonald’s fantasy writing and novels comprise a collection of texts that must be increasingly valuable to anyone interested in that age.17

There are many more types of worlds to discover in MacDonald’s book. In “Language and Secret Knowledge in *At the Back of the North Wind*” McGillis outlines the use of poetry and secret knowledge in MacDonald’s book (*Childlike*, pp. 145-59). However, while poetry plays a role in transmitting some secrets to the boy, another world of hidden language appears to have been completely overlooked. Just as there is an earthier, darker Greek aspect to strongly counter-balance the light Judeo-Christian one, there is a folksy prose and an earthy dialectal secret language to counter-balance the elevated poetic language.

One of the best examples of this, as it relates to language and young Diamond’s and North Wind’s relationship to secret knowledge, occurs in the first chapter of the book. Here it is young Diamond who attempts to impart to North Wind a linguistic secret and it is she who misunderstands him. When

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16 For an explanation of how Xanthus, Achilles’ horse, could have been identified with Xanthus, Hector’s horse, see Graves 29.1. For the information on Xanthus, one of King Diomedes’ flesh-eating horses, see Carlos Parada, *Genealogical Guide to Greek Mythology* (Jonsered, Sweden, 1993), p. 184.

North Wind is confused by young Diamond use of, and the value he attaches to, the word “Diamond,” the following exchange occurs:

‘Diamond is a very pretty name,’ persisted the boy, vexed that it should not give satisfaction.

‘Diamond is a useless thing rather,’ said the voice.

‘That’s not true. Diamond is very nice—as big as two—and so quiet all night! And doesn’t he make a jolly row in the morning, getting up on his four great legs! It’s like thunder.’ (North Wind, p. 17).

This knowledge regarding the horse, passed on from young Diamond to North Wind, is just the beginning of Diamond’s attempts to share certain knowledge with his airy godmother. Even though North Wind appears to think she is the only one sharing a secret knowledge with the boy regarding his name, a deeper type of secret linguistic knowledge is missed by her. Parts of this hidden lesson may be seen in the following conversation:

‘Our window opens like a door, right over the coach-house door. And the wind—you, ma’am—came in, and blew the bible out of the man’s hands, and the leaves went all flutter flutter on the floor, and my mother picked it up and gave it back to him open, and there—’

‘Was your name in the bible,—the sixth stone in the high-priest’s breast-plate.’

‘Oh!—a stone, was it?’ said Diamond. ‘I thought it had been a horse—I did.’

‘Never mind. A horse is better than a stone any day. Well, you see, I know all about you and your mother.’ (North Wind, pp. 19-20).

What Diamond appears to know due to his rural upbringing is that a horse was not better but equal to a stone! The English Dialect Dictionary makes this equality clear. Thus a stone, in some dialects of Scotland and England, was linguistically equal to a stallion or a horse. And it is this dialectal knowledge of a stone being a stallion that young Diamond appears to want to refer to, instead of the Biblical, and perhaps useless, precious stone North Wind has in mind. However, North Wind does not appear to understand this other type of earthier, secret linguistic knowledge and thus retains her idea of a gem throughout the conversation.

The next major debate between the rustic young Diamond and the airy North Wind involves the nature of poetry. Here, once again, there appears to be much more to Diamond’s position than meets the eye. There is some rational linguistic method to Diamond’s thinking when he argues with North Wind in the following exchange:

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18 MacDonald appears well aware of the connection between a stone and a horse. In at least two other instances he compares old Diamond to a stone, while Ruby is also associated with stone in the latter part of the book—see North Wind, pp. 28, 129 and 229.
‘You darling!’ said Diamond, seeing what a lovely little toywoman she was...

‘I am quite as respectable now as I shall be six hours after this, when I take an East Indiaman by the royals, twist her round, and push her under.’...

‘But look there!’ she resumed. ‘Do you see a boat with one man in it—a green and white boat?’

‘Yes; quite well.’

‘That’s a poet.’

‘I thought you said it was a boat.’

‘Stupid pet! Don’t you know what a poet is?’

‘Why, a thing to sail on the water in.’ (North Wind, p. 54).

Diamond, in response to the ambiguity created by North Wind, appears to be concentrating on two linguistically interesting things: the word “man” used to describe a boat (as the “East Indiaman” mentioned by North Wind, or the more common merchantman, man-o-war, man-at-arms, or just plain “man” used to describe a boat during Victorian times), and the poetship or the poet-craft involved. These types of clever linguistic connections become more apparent when North Wind “gets wind” of Diamond’s meanings as she continues the above discussion:

‘Well, perhaps you’re not so far wrong. Some poets do carry people over the sea. But I have no business to talk so much. The man is a poet.’

‘The boat is a boat,’ said Diamond (North Wind, pp. 54-5).

As Diamond had not mentioned a sea-going craft (i.e., a “man”), it may be safe to guess that North Wind, who had just used the word “Indiaman,” may be intuiting some meaningful parts of the man-boat relationships or the special craft used by poets to carry people over a metaphorical sea. It would not be illogical for Diamond to suppose that if a poet is a man and a man is a boat, then a poet must also be a boat. Furthermore, if poets are to carry anyone over the sea, this transportation would most likely be performed with the poet’s ship or by the poet’s craft (i.e., poetry). For the creative and logical young Diamond, a poet is a boat, and as the boy cannot spell very well, it is easy to see how for him the poetship may very well be the poet’s ship and the poet-craft may be the poet’s craft. Therefore, the reader may assume that Diamond is not as simple as he has been portrayed by scholars, nor is North Wind the omniscient entity who attempts to teach a somewhat dull and opinionated boy.

Given the above arguments, I believe that McGillis’ theory that North Wind attempts to teach Diamond the language of poetry and the secret knowledge this entails should be expanded to include Diamond’s attempts to teach her the creative wisdom and logic inherent in his rural speech. In other words, North Wind’s conclusion, presented early in the book that “you see I know all about you and your mother” need not be accepted uncritically. North Wind, as it will be shown later, knows young Diamond’s mother intimately, but she does
not appear to know all about Diamond. She could stand to learn something from her pupil.

The dichotomies in *At the Back of the North Wind*, while very important for MacDonald, are only one part of his project in the book. Separation is balanced by unity in the book. Both Diamonds and North Wind have already been presented as the uniters of disparate things or mediators of the different worlds, but MacDonald also attempts at many levels to join other characters and parts of the book.

One of the connections made in numerous episodes in the book is that involving North Wind and Martha, Diamond’s mother. In the first chapter the narrator tells the reader that young Diamond thought that North Wind’s gentle voice “sounded a little like his mother’s” (*North Wind*, p. 16). In the same chapter, North Wind tells Diamond that she knows and loves his mother, that she was present at his birth, and that she had a part in naming him (p. 19). Later on we are reminded by Diamond of the possible friendship between North Wind and his mother (p. 48) and that North Wind’s voice is as close as it can be to his mother’s (p. 58). It is the narrator who next reminds the reader of this connection—when the boy is forsaken in the cathedral (p. 71). The relations between both females appear to become strong as the book progresses: North Wind, when Diamond does not recognize her at the toy shop, compares young Diamond to “a baby that doesn’t know his mother in a new bonnet” (p. 81). Later, along the way to her back, North Wind tells Diamond: “Coil yourself up and go to sleep. The yacht shall be my cradle, and you shall be my baby” (p. 86).19 The last instance to be noted here involves the transportation of a very ill Diamond from the arms of North Wind to his sick-bed, where he holds and is held by his mother (p. 101). It is difficult to know why MacDonald associated Martha, the good housewife, with North Wind.20 This connection also helps to explain other enigmatic parts of the book.21

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19It is interesting to note that MacDonald appears to know and use the very ancient Chthonic associations between North Wind/Boreas and snakes. In the above, North Wind implies that Diamond must coil himself if he is to play the part of her baby while in Chapter 1 (p. 20) she tells Diamond that she has the power to change into a serpent. For some of the snake nature of north wind/Boreas see Harrison, p. 181, and Graves, 1, a and b.

20There is at least one more connection between Martha and North Wind. North Wind is continually described as a lady and the meaning of the name Martha, in Aramean, is “a lady.”

21One explanation may have something to do with the unifying tendency present by having both the boy and the horse named Diamond. As North Wind appears to recognize her role as the possible parent of young Diamond, then she also becomes the mother of the other Diamond. The mythological parentage of the flesh/meat eating, talking horses suits Boreas/North Wind quite well and so may provide an affinity between the two mothers of the respective
There are other references to Diamond being like North Wind’s baby and these may help explain another little understood, but important and recurring reference. Diamond is referred to as God’s baby, North Wind’s baby, and once as old Diamond’s godchild (North Wind, p. 136). All of these can now be accounted for given that North Wind is closely associated with Martha, that North Wind may see herself breathing life into young Diamond at his birth, that North Wind is very closely related if not identical to old Diamond, and finally, that North Wind is the Greek god Boreas. An inkling of his parentage may account for young Diamond’s accepting the supposed insult, with which he is continually confronted, as a compliment instead. Here is one of the instances:

‘The cabbies call him God’s baby,’ she whispered. ‘He’s not right in the head, you know. A tile loose.’

Still Diamond, though he heard every word, and understood it too, kept on smiling. What could it matter what people called him, so long as he did nothing that he ought not to do? And, besides, God’s baby was surely the best of names! (p. 149).

Diamond, therefore, may not only be “‘God’s baby,’ a Christ figure who spread his message of love, obedience, and duty through his actions and his words,” according to McGillis. Diamond also shares aspects of his father’s, the Greek god Boreas’, character. Another set of clues regarding young Diamond’s associations with Boreas emerge as one considers the interesting games young Diamond plays near the beginning of the story. Two of these are described by MacDonald:

Although the next day was very stormy, Diamond...was busy making a cave by the side of his mother’s fire with a broken chair, a three legged stool, and a blanket, and then sitting in it (p. 13).

Diamonds. Diamond calls his sister Dulcimer (or sweet air) and this implies that she is also a daughter of North Wind.

Roderick McGillis, “Language and Secret Knowledge in At the Back of the North Wind,” in Childlike, p. 145 (henceforth Language). It may be due to an intuition of the incongruity between the ancient Greek and the Christian aspects of Diamond that gave rise to the very different and surprising scholarly opinions regarding him. For instance Stephen Prickett in his Victorian Fantasy (Hassocks, Sussex, 1979) does not appear to like Diamond and ends up calling him a prig. This is almost in direct opposition to McGillis who seems to like and revere Diamond as he casts the mantle of Christ over him in his article. However, the so called angelic or Christian aspects of the boy may also be accounted for by referring to his Greek winged father as well as to the mild manners Diamond learned by traveling to the Hyperborean regions—a land known for its highly civilized people and institutions. For MacDonald’s descriptions of the “free and so just and so healthy” Hyperboreans, see North Wind, p. 92.
The second game is this:

He played all his games over and over indoors, specially that of driving two chairs harnessed to the baby's cradle (pp. 30-31).

Both of the games fit well with Diamond's status as Boreas' son because not only was the God of the north wind closely associated with horses but he, like all of the other winds, was generally known to live in a cave. Given the above evidence, Diamond may very well be God's baby, Boreas' son. What also follows from these conclusions is that both Diamonds are intricately related if not unified in parts of the book and that Macdonald appears to be conflating Martha and North Wind into one character.

The Martha-North Wind connection also explains something that McGillis picks up on but has some trouble explaining: the misunderstanding between mother and son (Language, p. 145). This parallels not only the identification of Martha with North Wind but also the lack of understanding on the parts of North Wind and Martha in regards to Diamond's prosaic and poetic outbursts. Thus, Diamond's mother(s)—Martha/North Wind—individually appear to miss both types of secret knowledge emerging from her/their son. However, this is not so much because "Diamond...is with Christ in not caring for the morrow. He has befriended the spirit of change, North Wind" (Language, p. 145), but probably because he was with his father, Boreas, and may be partaking of the God of the north wind's essence, flux itself.

It is this type of obscure set of references to ancient mythology which gives further support to the arguments regarding a connection between North Wind and Martha. First, another linguistic puzzle found in the book should be explained in order to give further weight to the connection between both mothers. It must be remembered that in At the Back of the North Wind, there are several references to old Diamond's associations with a stone. These references have already been explained by the dialectal connection between a horse/stallion and a stone. This information, then, can be further used to explain the curious name of the mysterious horse owner, Mr. Stonecrop. And, while Macdonald is very secretive regarding the name of the horse owned by Stonecrop—something which would have proved helpful for identification purposes—he does supply relevant information in other parts of the book. If a stone is a horse, then the name Stonecrop may mean horse crop. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Macdonald appears to be playing with exactly this meaning (i.e., horse crop/whip) when he has Stonecrop state: "Give the boy a whip, Jack. I never carries one when I drives old—" (North

23Macdonald appears to be reverting to some mythological ideas regarding the ancient unifying conception of things. In Greek mythology many categories accepted today were not as rigid at an earlier time. Natural forces, animals, people, and gods were not as separate in the ancient Greek mind as they are today.
Unity and Dichotomy in MacDonald’s North Wind

This name can be further analyzed by reviewing the close linguistic connections between the word crop and the word head. Thus, the name Stonecrop may also mean horse head. Interestingly, there are many signs of the existence of Thracian cannibalistic horse worshiping cults where the devotees wore horse masks during the ceremonies (Graves, 130.1). It was probably some of these masked rituals which gave rise to much of the mythology of flesh-eating, verbose Thracian horses fathered by Boreas. If even part of the above is accepted, then Martha as the mother of Diamond may be seen as related to the horse cults and thus can, be wearing a horse mask, represent North Wind Him/Herself while retaining her own identity.

It is not only in his fiction (with the help of Stonecrop) that MacDonald is secretive regarding the name of a horse. In one of his letters it becomes apparent that MacDonald named one of his own female ponies Zephyr, while remaining tight-lipped regarding the name of the other (brother/sister or son/daughter?) horse. Some of this somewhat ironic information, from the perspective of North Wind, is gathered from a letter MacDonald wrote to William Cowper-Temple in 1879, some eight years after publishing his airy tale.

Now about your guests the highly privileged ponies. I am sorry to hear they have so little to do for that shows they have not been so useful as I had flattered myself they might be... I wish they had been useful and then we could have begged you to keep them. Now we can only ask you whether you know of any one who would buy them or accept them. There is this difficulty about selling them, that Zephyr is really worth nothing, and the other though not eight quite, I fancy is not worth much without her. I should not like to part them, and much rather than do so I would give them to anybody who would be kind to them...24

Thus the mystery horse, perhaps related to Zephyr (i.e., the Greek West Wind), is never named, and s/he appears to have been born at approximately the same time as was the fictive Diamond, sometime in 1871.25

MacDonald appears to know not only about the ancient cannibalistic horse-masked women, but also about the purpose and later changes to the rituals involved. One of these was the replacement of an old king by a new one.


25 MacDonald gives one of his horses in A Rough Shaking very special human attributes and an extremely significant name, Memnon. Memnon it the almost human horse that is intelligent enough to be sent on his own to deliver messages. It is interesting to note that the mythological Memnon was black, a son of Eos and thus a half brother to Boreas and Zephyr. Furthermore, by being named after Memnon—the son of the ever-babbling Thitonus (and Eos)—who is himself a brother of Priam/Podarces—this particular horse, like old Diamond/Boreas/North Wind, may, in MacDonald’s mind, deserve to be considered almost human and linguistically able to deliver messages.
This ritual is paralleled to some degree by both Diamonds replacing their parents in the middle of the book. The horse Diamond, as noted by Lesley Smith, becomes prominent in the Bloomsbury section of the book when North Wind is not present. On the other hand, young Diamond takes on the role of his father as cab driver and provider for the family. Both of these events are portrayed as anything but unnatural in the book. Graves (in sections 71.1, 101.g and 109.j, and 130.1) goes on to describe how the ritual was changed by Heracles from a cannibalistic one to one having to do with an organized chariot crash. It is young Diamond, in the company of Stonecrop, and his father who almost crash into one another as the former is learning to drive a cab (North Wind, p. 131). It should also be noticed Joseph hands over the reigns of his own cab/chariot to Diamond after this close call which may represent a rite of passage from boy to man in MacDonald's tale. A few chapters after this incident Diamond replaces his father Joseph as cabman and bread-winner.

Another dichotomy which appears to be called into question is the role of gender in At the Back of the North Wind. Not only are old Diamond (a stallion), and North Wind (a female deity) continually confused, but young Diamond, after first meeting her and stating that North Wind's voice sounded like his mother's, appears to recall the male god Boreas when he calls her Mr. North Wind (pp. 16-17). This gender confusion is expanded by MacDonald as even young Diamond's gender appears to be ambiguous. It is Diamond's mother who first makes a remark regarding her son:

> 'Why, Diamond, child!' said his mother at last, 'you're as good to your mother as if you were a girl—nursing the baby, and toasting the bread, and sweeping up the hearth!' (p. 125).

After this compliment, Diamond is told by one of the cabmen that he looks like a girl:

> 'Well, you're a plucky one, for all your girl's looks!' said the man; 'and I wish ye luck.' (p. 177).

Even Diamond appears to view himself in an ambiguous manner in terms of gender. Near the end of the book, Diamond is once again in the habit of nursing his brother and sister when the narrator makes the following comment:

> Sometimes he would have his little brother, sometimes his little sister, and sometimes both of them in the grass with him, and then he felt like a cat with her first kittens, he said, only he couldn't purr—all he could do was to sing (p. 262).

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These examples of gender ambiguity would be strange were it not for all of the gender confusion present in much of the ancient Greek mythology MacDonald uses in his book. And while there are many other instances in the ancient traditions of transgendered and/or hermaphroditic gods, humans, and animals, MacDonald only hints at this in his story, just enough to keep the flavor of the old traditions which saw unity where we see dichotomies.

The last topic to consider in this paper involves the death of young Diamond. Throughout the story there are constant reminders of Diamond's illness and the proximity of death. His constant excursions with North Wind/Boreas, as the boy becomes ill, partially prepare the reader for Diamond's ultimate odyssey with North Wind at the end of the book. Interestingly, Diamond is not the only hero to travel to the Greek land of death with the aid of North Wind. In The Odyssey, Homer, through the mouth of Circe, includes the following directions to the "groves of Persephone" and the "home of Hades":

'Son of Laertes and seed of Zeus, resourceful Odysseus, let no need for a guide on your ship trouble you; only set up your mast pole and spread the white sails upon it, And sit still, and let the blast of the North wind carry you. But when you have crossed with your ship the stream of the Ocean, you will find there a thickly wooded shore, and the groves of Persephone, and tall black poplars growing, and fruit-perishing willows; then beach your ship on the shore of the deep-eddying Ocean and yourself go forward into the moldering home of Hades.'

This reference makes clear that MacDonald was well versed in Greek mythology and the ancient conception of the topography of the world. This knowledge allowed him to provide a guide for Diamond when the boy twice made his journey to the land of death. The first journey resembles that of Odysseus' in a ship, while the means used to get to the back of the North Wind the second time is the much more common type, death.

George MacDonald's At the Back of the North Wind, while being "understood" and enjoyed by children, offers adult readers some staggering meanings, allusions, and messages. This is a very complex book which will require much in-depth study for future readers to understand. And while scholars have commented on the fact that MacDonald attempts to place himself in a complex theological tradition, in a Christian tradition, and in a tradition of the "poetic," there are other traditions which MacDonald chose to enter into. There are darker and earthier aspects to At the Back of the North Wind which counterbalance the sweet, safe, and perhaps childlike Christian readings of the book. It is these deeper, darker aspects which are beginning to be illuminated, unearthed and understood by scholars and readers. While we sometimes note the close

similarities between MacDonald and Dante, we ought not to forget that Dante continually merged Greek and Roman mythology/history with his Christian stories. While MacDonald was guided by Dante, he also allowed Virgil, Herodotus and other Greek historians and mythographers to lead him. This type of myth exploration allowed MacDonald into the deep, dark genius of the ancient Greek mind when he wrote his *At the Back of the North Wind*.

While some of this complex book’s dark secrets have been noted in this article, it is far from a complete reading of *North Wind*. It is, however, hoped that now scholars will have more, and perhaps better, tools at their disposal when evaluating the ultimate meaning—if any overall meaning exists—of *At the Back of the North Wind*. Finally, I hope that two related conclusions appear certain: that Greek mythology and rural Victorian language will play very prominent parts in any new understanding of MacDonald’s book, and that *At the Back of the North Wind* must be studied carefully, and from several other dimensions or worlds than merely the Christian or the poetic, if we are to deepen our understanding of this enigmatic books and its writer.

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