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“Beheld from the Other Side”

William L. Webb

George MacDonald possessed a remarkable imagination. It was a poet’s imagination, but its influence is felt equally strongly in his prose. In fact, it was more freely expressed in his prose than in his verse. He was most essentially a poet in his “other worldly” prose narratives, but even in his novels the element of poetic imagination is never absent for long.

It is chiefly this poetic element which makes his work of interest today. He wrote about forty novels and stories. In this long book-shelf-full of prose fiction one can find some narrative virtues. He sometimes starts a story with a briskly efficient setting of the scene. He is able to bring some characters to life, provided they have natures something like his own. He is at times master of a straightforward and gripping power of story-telling; but to counterbalance these qualities there are a number of faults. Mostly they come under the heading of preaching and pedantry. Simply as a novelist, he fails. No, it is the quality of imagination which it is worth-while trying to indicate.

The world of nature always sets his imagination working, particularly the sea, the sky, and the hills. Open space for him always has associations of infinity and immortality towards which he seems continually moving. One is reminded of the poet Rilke:

We’ve never, no, not for a single day
Pure space before us, such as flowers
Endlessly open into.

Unlike the everyday beings of whom Rilke is writing, MacDonald was familiar with this “pure space.” With a sure artistic instinct, he [end of page 14] often contrasts this sense of infinity with something closed up, intricate, evil. In the early pages of *Sir Gibbie*, for instance, he takes his boy hero out from the slums of a Scottish town where he has just been witness to a murder, higher and higher up into the hills; and thus sets a divine world of nature in the strongest contrast to the evil of men in the city:

he stood on the bare ground, the head of the mountain, and saw . . . that there was no going higher: in every direction the slope was downward. He had never been on the top of anything before. He had always been in the hollow of things In a glow with the climb, which at the last had been hard, his lungs

filled with the heavenly air, and his soul with the feeling that he was above everything that was, uplifted on the very crown of the earth, he stood in his rags, a fluttering scarecrow, the conqueror of height, the discoverer of immensity, the monarch of space.

For an example of his treatment of the sea we might consider a description of a fishing boat leaving the harbour at sunrise in *The Marquis of Lossie*. The heroine is moved by the other-worldly aspect of the scene and MacDonald succeeds in letting us share her feelings. He even alludes to Dante at this point without destroying the atmosphere.

They pulled carefully through the narrow jaws of the little harbour, and away with quivering oar and falling tide went the boat, gliding out into the measureless north . . . A kind of enchantment enwrapped and possessed the soul of Clementina. Everything seemed all at once changed utterly. The very ends of the harbour piers might have stood in the 'Divina Commedia' instead of the Morray Firth. Oh that wonderful look everything wears when beheld from the other side!

[15] In *Robert Falconer* the hero climbs the tower of Antwerp Cathedral, quite forgetting the dramatic pursuit which has brought him to Belgium.

He came out of stone walls upon an airy platform whence the spire ascended heavenwards . . . Still up they went, and at length stood on a circle of stone surrounding like a coronet the last base of the spire . . . He grasped the stones before him. The loneliness was awful . . . The all but featureless flat spread forty miles on every side, and the roofs of the largest buildings below were as dovescots. But the space between them was alive with awe—so vast, so real! . . . He hung in the air in a cloud of stone.

In these passages we feel MacDonald's love for the vast spaces which led him inevitably to thoughts of God. Nature was essentially a divine revelation to him. In such scenes of spiritual illumination his style becomes more direct and forceful than in the everyday parts of the narrative, and even the reader who does not share his religion knows that a vision is being communicated. Perhaps indeed he "too readily sheds the visible," to use a phrase of E.M. Forster's. The divine presence shines so clearly for him through the world of nature that he does not linger long on mere appearances. Even the most homely things can evoke the invisible. In *The Vicar's Daughter* a man and his

wife go boating on the Thames, first calling for their boat in Hammersmith:

That shed alone would have been worth coming to see—such a picture of loveliest gloom—as if it had been the cave where the twilight abode its time All about, above and below, lay the graceful creatures of the water—moveless and dead here on the shore, but there—launched into their own elemental world and blown upon by the living wind—endowed at once with life and

[16] motion and quick response.

Here the writing is non-visual; he has “shed the visible” almost at once, without describing the boats or any lesser details. The stranded craft are like souls waiting for fuller life; he seems to be thinking of, without actually referring to, a favourite image of his—the chrysalis before the butterfly emerges.

The examples so far have been taken from MacDonald’s stories for adults. Some of these are little known and hard to get hold of today. Very many readers, on the other hand, have vivid memories of the children’s stories, especially the two *Princess* books and *At the Back of the North Wind*. In *The Princess and the Goblin* there is a basic contrast expressing the theme of space, rather as in the passage quoted from *Sir Gibbie*: the underground world is inhabited by grotesque and evil goblins who bring trouble whenever they come up to the light. In *North Wind*, North Wind herself can fill the whole sky when in her giant form. The inhabitants of sky and space are mighty and usually benevolent (though North Wind has to explain that she does not always understand the work of destruction she has to perform).

There is really no sharp dividing line between the “fantasy” stories for children and those for adults. In many of the novels one can discern a myth or fairy tale, or elements of these, under the disguise of adult fiction. For instance, in *Paul Faber, Surgeon* there is the outline of a fantastic story which is effective on its own level.

MacDonald’s work, then, is essentially that of a visionary. Where others see the appearance of things, he approaches from a different angle, “beholds from the other side.” Or in a flash of illumination he looks right through them to the eternal world. This is often a gift of doubtful value to the novelist as a novelist, therefore it is not in **[17]** the ordinary world of fiction that he is most at home. Only in a few stories, which represent the quintessence of his art and thought, is he a fully successful creator. **[18]**