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## The Structure of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*

Adrian Gunther

Critics have tended to see *Phantastes*<sup>1</sup> as a fantasy without structure, as a picaresque series of random events, a book without a plot, a work put together in a hurry and therefore without proper form, a stream-of-consciousness work spontaneously emerging from its author's subconscious and therefore having no rational controlling framework.<sup>2</sup> More recently, two critics<sup>3</sup> have taken issue with this view and we have begun to see a more respectful approach to the intellectual organisation of *Phantastes*. There can be no doubt that the principles of structural form underlying this book are both elaborate and extraordinarily self-conscious and some understanding of these principles is essential for a true appreciation of it.

*Phantastes* is structured around a pattern of paradoxical oppositions, parallels and key transition points. It progresses in both a centripetal and a centrifugal manner as well as in a more conventional linear mode. On this most obvious linear level its protagonist Anodos begins a typical fairy-tale quest as a young and ignorant boy and his journey traces his development through certain emotional, sexual and chivalric adventures from ignorance and self-indulgence to a conscious sacrifice of ego, presaging an adult male role on his return to his "normal" reality. This linear mode is reflected in the changing forms of his adventures, which develop from somewhat mawkish childish experiences with fairies, through adolescent romance and sexual preoccupation, to an adult male role of chivalrous action. His quest can also be seen as cyclic in the obvious sense that it begins and ultimately returns to the same place.

However the structure is far more complex than this suggests. On its periphery lie two chapters outside of Fairy Land and functioning rather as prologue and epilogue. At its centre are seven chapters during which Anodos resides at the Fairy Palace. At the heart of the book and centre of this sevenfold section are two chapters in which he retells, and lives through, stories he has read in books in the palace library. Critics have variously found these chapters irrelevant or obtrusive and even insisted that the book would be better without them.<sup>4</sup> However, as I will show, these two tales give the key to much of what Anodos experiences. Hence their central place in the [43] structure. In fact the external form of the book is largely determined by the principles implicit in these stories. So too the

forms which characterise Anodos's experiences in the Fairy Palace, even though he cannot fully grasp their significance, are the pivot on which all his other experiences turn. They provide an ideal in the sense that they offer a glimpse into the *source*, the "harmony of the centre," on which all the secondary events depend. He is cast out of this centre because he fails to grasp the full significance of his experiences there, perhaps partly because these experiences are granted through grace rather than his own merit. It is a significant part of MacDonald's scheme of things that despair provokes the granting of grace, as it does here. Anodos's most profound experiences occur in two sacred centres, the Fairy Palace and the island cottage, and both these high points are preceded by moments of despair. In each case the plunge into despair frees a magical boat<sup>5</sup> which carries Anodos to the centre. As with all Anodos's adventures the external forms are to a large extent dependent upon his internal imaginative state, but in these two centres there is an added dimension not present elsewhere. The Fairy Palace is "real," and, in some profound sense, separate from and beyond Anodos and his personal limitations. He is aware all the time of a wealth of potential experiences present in the palace but just eluding him, mysteriously unactualised, in the sense that he cannot quite see or hear them. He comments:

nor, I grieve to say, did I ever come much nearer to these glorious beings, or ever look on the Queen of the Fairies herself. My destiny ordered otherwise. (93)

The Fairy Palace therefore offers him a crucial glimpse into what transcends and gives meaning to his suffering, a glimpse which colours all his experiences thereafter, but also retrospectively places his previous adventures in their true context. That he is unable fully to absorb the lessons implicit in this exposure in no way invalidates the fact that they are there.

We therefore have a work where the central section places all that precedes and all that follows it in its true perspective, working from the centre outwards. We also have adventures on both sides of this centre, structured from the outside and directed towards this central ideal. However the structural principles at work go well beyond this, with the sections on either side of this centre balancing each other in a whole range of ways. Key stages in Anodos's travels are marked by sojourns in a series of different buildings which parallel and contrast with each other. The two cottages with positive [44] but limited mother figures, in the first half, culminate in the cottage on the island with the wise young/old mother figure in the second. Here Anodos undergoes his most important rite of passage and rebirth. The

“church of darkness” with its ogress, in the first half, is the negative side of these cottages, and it is here Anodos experiences his greatest evil in the finding of his shadow. This church finds its structural counterpart in the final section, in the great and evil open air “temple” where Anodos experiences his “real” death and rebirth in conscious sacrifice of self, and hence destruction of that same shadow. Between the nurturing and transforming island cottage and the evil cathedral lie two parallel and contrasting towers, one round and the other square. The first tower provides Anodos with the crucial opportunity for heroic action (in obedience to the wise lady in the cottage), the second, as a result of the false pride engendered by this action, imprisons him in subjection to his shadow.

Even the noble labyrinthine palace, with its harmonious blending of nature and art, has its structural negative counterpart outside its gates, in the dead, entombing underground labyrinth of tunnels and caves which brings Anodos to despair. The ideal white lady and the lady of the beech tree combine to find their negative counterpart in the monstrous Alder-maid. And the different female characters, as a whole, are deliberately blurred together as if they form a continuum of female experience. One needs only examine MacDonald’s recurring association of his female characters with images of marble statues to see this deliberate confusion in action.<sup>6</sup>

A “maiden” whom Anodos encounters in the first part is “happy as a child,” but she provokes one of Anodos’s most negative experiences when, under the influence of his shadow, he breaks her “globe” (a passage conveyed in images suggestive of rape). This negative event is balanced in the second half of the book by her delivering him from his deathly confinement in a tower. The positive cancels out the negative, her disinterested action freeing him from the “shadow” which initially provoked his violence against her. Each negative has its positive counterpart and vice-versa, the implication being that both experiences are necessary for their transcendence. Anodos’s singing into being of the elusive and ideal marble lady has its sinister counterpart in the same singing into being of the horrific and destructive Alder-maiden. So too, his seduction by the Alder-maid is balanced in the second half by his refusal to be seduced by the goblin woman underground.

**[45]** As MacDonald expresses this principle elsewhere: “Our human life is often, at best, but an oscillation between the extremes which together make the truth.”<sup>7</sup> Anodos too recognises its importance when, in the Fairy Palace, he finds himself:

trying to find the root of a manifestaton, the spiritual

truth whence a material vision sprang; or to combine two propositions, both apparently true, either at once or in different remembered moods, and to find the point in which their invisibly converging lines would unite in one, revealing a truth higher than either and differing from both; though so far from being opposed to either, that it was that whence each derived its life and power. (95)

Thus *Phantastes* reveals a network of interradiating contrasts and parallels, within sections, between sections, and between first and second halves, such as no critic has begun fully to elaborate, and these parallels function on major and minor levels. Goblins in a desert region of rocks mock Anodos as he approaches the baptismal experience in which the magic boat carries him to the Fairy Palace. When cast out of that palace he returns to a parallel “country of rock” (158) underground and is tormented again by malevolent goblins, an experience which leads into his second major baptismal rite of passage when carried in the second magic boat to the island cottage. Add to these structural devices MacDonald’s recurring use of key symbols such as water, music, statues, mirrors, caves and shadows, and one has some idea of how complex this work is. Even a minor image such as the beech tree slips in and out of the text until by the final scene it carries associations of profound significance.

One of the most interesting aspects of MacDonald’s organisation of *Phantastes* is the way in which he plays with notions of fiction and reality, and how they relate to each other and to us the readers. What one finds in this book is a progressive undermining of any clear distinction between realms, whether of fiction, fairyland, fantasy or “normal” reality. The fact that the first fairy lady actually emerges into Anodos’s ‘normal reality’ and can manipulate its forms at will, is symptomatic of MacDonald’s deliberate blurring of such distinctions. Not only is she totally “natural” and at home in his father’s chamber, but Anodos is only mildly surprised to see her. Even the extraordinary dissolution of the “fixed forms” of his bedroom until they [46] become “fluent as the waters” in no way upsets him. And we later find this scene is paralleled and reversed in the Fairy Palace when Anodos’s “normal” reality, in the form of his bedroom, invades Fairy Land. This interweaving of the two worlds culminates in the discovery Anodos makes at the end of his journey when, back in his castle, he learns that Fairy Land really did invade his castle bedroom:

On the morning of my disappearance, they had found the floor

of my room flooded; and all that day, a wondrous and nearly  
impervious mist had hung about the castle and its grounds.  
(235)

Initially Anodos does remind us at key points that he is in “the Fairy-country” and that things are different there, although many of these comments tend to have ironic undertones suggesting that actually it is not so different. However the overall effect of such comments is to give *Phantastes* a remarkable generic, self-consciousness. When Anodos describes the games of the fairies in the first cottage garden he comments: “I cannot help wishing . . . that my readers could see for themselves” (23), thus asserting a clear reader/writer/fiction relationship; but this becomes undermined almost immediately. His role as controlling author of the text is instantly demolished when the flowers mock him: “Look at him! Look at him! He has begun a story without a beginning and it will never have any end” (26), suggesting that far from creating the fiction he is inside one controlled from elsewhere. When he leaves the beech tree he comments: “my unfinished story urged me on” (37), reinforcing this notion of the story having some separate life of its own under whose control he is. Nevertheless, as already stated, he does initially make comments on the difference between “reality” and Fairy Land and on his struggles to understand the strangeness of the latter. Early on in his travels he decides “it is no use trying to account for things in Fairy Land; and one who travels there soon learns to forget the very idea of doing so, and takes everything as it comes” (27), and the knight towards the end of the book makes a similar statement. Most notable however are the regular references to fairy tales and to the reading of such stories. When in the Fairy Palace he is delighted to find “as in many instances before, how true the fairy tales are” when he is “waited upon by invisible hands” (88). Thus quite self-consciously he reminds readers that what they are reading is a fairy tale and that it will have the characteristics of that genre. [47]

The connection between the reading of tales (within the text of the tale) and “real” events is very complex, and MacDonald makes a humorous and clever game of this. When Anodos first meets the knight he reminds him of the knight in a story he has just been reading (a legend of Sir Percival) and the knight’s first question is: “Hast thou ever read the story of Sir Percival and the . . . Maiden of the Alder-tree?” (49). In the second cottage Anodos visits, at a time when he is on the verge of losing faith in Fairy Land altogether and deciding that all he had experienced had been “the wandering dream of a diseased imagination” (60), the mere sight of the daughter reading

a fairy tale is sufficient to make him instantly regain his faith: "I believed in Fairy Land again" (61).

The rest of this interlude in the second cottage provides us with an excellent example of how MacDonald uses this kind of generic self-consciousness to undermine the notion of any clear distinctions between fiction and reality. The daughter and father embark on a discussion as to the truth or otherwise of fairy tales. He discounts them, only to have her remind him: "You know very well that mother is descended from that very princess who was changed by the wicked fairy into a cat!" Nor does Anodos miss the opportunity to admit that he knows the tale (62). The fairy tale they then discuss introduces the ogress who is at the centre of Anodos's next adventure, thus providing another example of "fiction" breaking through into Anodos's "reality."

There are additional implications to this scene. The father knows nothing of Fairy Land because he has "been too busy to make journeys of discovery into it" (63). Significantly his entrance into the cottage (and into the story) specifically associates him with the worst excesses of a greedy materialism. He calls for the pigs' trough to be filled and adds: "Let them swill, lass! . . . Gluttony is not forbidden in their commandments," and his entrance disenchant the room "out of the realm of the ideal into that of the actual" (60). He is living in Fairy Land, yet ignorant of and impervious to it. Anodos, who left "normal reality" behind when he entered Fairy Land, meets in him a character who can reduce even Fairy Land to "normal reality" and sees none of the magical events, occurring all around him all the time. The key to this lies in the mother's statement, later repeated by the father, that "in the wood . . . he saw nothing worse than himself"; and she adds: "Indeed . . . he would hardly find anything better than himself, if he had [48] seven more senses given him," and she explains: "I must believe my senses, as he cannot believe beyond his, which give him no intimations of this kind" (59). Because whether in Fairy Land or "normal reality" we are all restricted by what we are. In fact whether we inhabit Fairy Land or "normal reality" depends on what we are.<sup>8</sup> The world of form depends upon our spiritual level and it can appear as a fairy palace or as pigs' swill. This is as true for us the readers as it is for Anodos on his journey. The reading of the text can open us to sacred energy or function on the level of a gross materialism.

It becomes obvious that any talk of *Phantastes* being structured around two clear worlds of fantasy and of reality is inappropriate to the experience of this book. Anodos may talk in this way, as if the reading

experience is distinguishable from the actual experience of Fairy Land and both from the experience of his “normal” reality, but we as readers find this distinction impossible to maintain. MacDonald, from the moment the fairy “form” first appears in Anodos’s “reality,” deliberately and brilliantly confuses all such divisions and maintains this confusion right through to the final pages where Anodos, although back in “normal reality,” is aware of Fairy Land and fairy energy constantly trembling on the edge of breaking through into it.<sup>9</sup> In fact, as one might by now expect, it is Fairy Land which has become his “true” reality, that “great good” for which he longs, whereas life in his castle is now an unreal period of transition in which he must do his “duty” and endure. The terms used here are of great significance, for Anodos says: “I often feel as if I had only left [the old woman’s] cottage for a time, and would soon return *out of the vision* into it again” (236, my emphasis). By the end of the book then, normal reality so-called has become “the vision” and the world of Fairy Land, at its most positive, as represented by the old woman and her island cottage, the “true.” As the Novalis quote which opens this last section suggests, this life may not seem a dream but, if we understand it correctly by opening ourselves to its energy, we can experience its forms for what they really are: the dreams of the Great Dreamer himself.<sup>10</sup>

There are yet further dimensions to this discussion. Anodos, as already shown, initially does convey the impression of a clear duality between fantasy and reality. Part of his development in the quest involves his experiencing the disintegration of any such clear duality. As his adventures accumulate, he (like the reader) is exposed to a bewildering and mysterious network of interrelated worlds of form, all ultimately dependent for their [49] source and their meaning on “the community of the centre of all creation” (97). Reference to this centre occurs in a passage at the centre of the book, immediately preceeding the telling of the stories which, as already suggested, provide keys to understanding the structure of the book as a whole. This passage therefore requires quoting in full:

They who believe in the influences of the stars over the fates of men are, in feeling at least, nearer the truth than they who regard the heavenly bodies as related to them merely by common obedience to an external law. All that man sees has to do with man. 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 imbodyed. 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 connections 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. (97)

One portion of this "living house" is revealed in the story which follows. This propounds a 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.

The implications of this story are profound. What it conjures up is a multitude of interpenetrating co-existing worlds, "an interradiating connection and dependence of . . . parts of creation." 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, becomes an embodiment of this concept. Anodos, as his spiritual [50] awareness develops, becomes increasingly conscious of it as a truth. Each world of form in its miraculous dance is struggling towards its next embodiment, a process which ultimately leads to the still centre which generates and controls this great dance of forms. Anodos yearns to see this dance in the Fairy Palace:

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 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. (135)

He feels that if only he could see it *completely* he would understand the

pattern underlying its music and controlling its forms, just as we the readers do as we struggle to see through the multiple levels of form and music to the controlling intelligence behind them.

Anodos, coming from a realm beyond the strange planet, acts as a kind of spiritual guide to its inhabitants. He sees that the women's wings, "glorious as they are, are but undeveloped arms" (103), and that their sexual relationships are essentially deficient, and he tells these people about birth and sexuality on Earth: "in the vaguest manner I could invent" (102). This vagueness is nevertheless sufficient to meet with an instant response, since it gives form 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, until the body fails" (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.

The textual self-consciousness in this section is most interesting. Anodos is purporting to be merely reading books in the palace library. He is ostensibly retelling for our benefit one of the multitude of tales he read there. It seems a deceptively innocent red herring to the main thrust of the text which is Anodos's quest. What MacDonald does with it however is fascinating. Anodos 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 [51] 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 wider knowledge of his own realm to help them direct their energies towards their true future embodiments, instead of experiencing a vague longing for they know not what and therefore, presumably, dissipating this energy. In his own quest the various guides he meets function in a parallel fashion, giving him insights into how to direct the vague yearning which drives him towards the future forms his spiritual development requires. Without this yearning, humans can remain blocked in a crude materialism, as does the farmer feeding his pigs with all his horrifically cheerful insouciance.

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

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

that I had. (103, my emphasis)

Anodos has slipped from reader of, to narrator of, to protagonist in the fiction, these shifts in function reflecting the shifting nature of the worlds 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. Only the Fairy Palace and the island cottage remain stable centres in a flux of forms. All else is like Anodos’s bedroom, in the process of dissolving and becoming “fluent as the waters.”

We are thus presented with a continuum of parallel and complementary worlds of form which together participate in a great movement of energy striving to regain the harmony of the centre from which it came. Through “chinks of Time” (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 “may be full of mysterious revelations of other connections with the worlds around us.” Inevitably these glimpses are difficult to communicate. In particular the language of any one [52] 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 experiences resonated back by realms on more advanced spiritual levels. 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 memories, 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.

Anodos in the Fairy Palace struggles vainly to perceive the 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:

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. (133)

In parallel manner, we the readers are aware of a great structural vision controlling the music and form of this book and we too struggle to see its patterns more distinctly in order to reach the great truth at its centre.

This is [53] how MacDonald sees real art as functioning and why he expects readers to respond to a single text in a multitude of ways determined by individual limitations. We too may find that our senses are as yet “too gross” to do more than glimpse “faint gracious forms, here and there through the building” of the text. Hopefully, as MacDonald believed, all great artists function as spiritual guides helping us to break through these barriers, to experience deeper and deeper levels of meaning, as each baptismal revelation forces us beyond our limitations and paves the way for the next insight. After his baptismal immersion in the “fairy bath” of the palace, Anodos feels as if “clothed . . . with a new sense” (92) and is able to “discern faint . . . forms.” His insights increase steadily with each daily 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.” His “needs” are different, presumably being on a much lower level than that would imply.

If the first of the central stories in *Phantastes* establishes a basic principle for understanding the structure of the book one would expect the second to do likewise. The preoccupation with the limitations of language which, as we have seen, underlies so much of the self-consciousness evident in the text, finds explicit expression in the opening paragraph of the chapter dealing with the second of these key stories. Anodos is once again struggling vainly to find words adequate to his *experience* of the story:

One story I will try to reproduce. But, alas! it is like trying to

reconstruct a forest out of broken branches and withered leaves. In the fairy book, everything was just as it should be, though whether in words or something else, I cannot tell. It glowed and flashed the thoughts upon the soul, with such a power that the medium disappeared from the consciousness, and it was occupied only with the things themselves. My representation of it must resemble a translation from a rich and powerful language, capable of embodying the thoughts of a splendidly developed people, into the meagre and half-articulate speech of a savage tribe. (106)

The identification of our human world and its language with “a savage tribe” of “meagre and half-articulate speech” is telling indeed. We are once again faced with a continuum of embodiments of both sound and shape, some primitive and some sophisticated and all part of a process. On this level also [54] the second story develops the themes of the first, and both relate directly to Anodos’s experiences on his journey. The prologue in front of the first story sets the focus on those “chinks of Time” through which “heaven peepeth out” (97) and thus, as already stated, on interrelating realms and how they impinge on and influence each other through permitting glimpses of the “heavenly” energy underlying and giving them meaning. The prologue to the second story focusses our attention on the process set in motion in the first story, that is, the development from isolation and lovelessness through limited forms of love towards what can be seen as *real* embodiments of this great yearning. We can therefore expect this story to deal with love, its depths and its mysteriousness. As the epigraph (from Suckling) expresses it:

Love is such a mystery  
I cannot find it out:  
For when I think I’m best resolved  
I then am most in doubt. (106)

To suggest that the story of Cosmo has cosmic significance is to state a tautology. The ambiguous and multilevelled nature of his story is stressed from the outset. Anodos notices that: “at the time I seemed to have a kind of double consciousness, and the story a double meaning” and hints at all kinds of further dimensions. Although it is only “a simple story of ordinary life,” he then adds mysteriously, “perhaps almost of universal life.” The “two souls” who long to come nearer apparently fail to do so; they “but behold each other as in a glass darkly” (106). However, the processes of cause and effect are in motion, the sacred energy directing the great longing of the lovers is

present. "Faerie invade[s] the world of men" in mysterious ways resonating the meaning which is there, even when, to "the common eye," "no connecting links can be traced" (107). The death and separation which ends the story is not the whole picture. It is not an end but a beginning of the next stage in the process of love's yearnings, which is why Cosmo smiles in response to the lady's question: "but what do you say about death?" (132).

The first story is set on a strange planet; this second story seems to be set in "normal reality." It occurs in a real city, Prague, and its characters are all human beings identified by names and surnames. In the context of the book as a whole, this is quite shocking. It creates the impression of this world being just as strange as that of the women with wings. We immediately become aware of the multiple layers of fiction superimposed upon each other.

**[55]** Anodos, a fictional character, has left his own world for that of Fairy Land. He is absorbed into the world of the book he is reading, yet this world turns out to be an actual place in the real world of the reader, a world in which Fairy Land becomes a fiction.<sup>9</sup>

Let us return to the narrative level of Cosmo's story. The winged inhabitants of the strange planet die of their inability to give form to love. They "wander away . . . and die of their desire" (93). Cosmo experiences a parallel overwhelming longing such that "the form" of his lady possesses "his whole soul" and his "bitter need" provokes him into "the exercise of unlawful and tyrannical power" in the form of magic spells with which he attempts to draw her out of her realm into his "reality." What drives him with such an exclusive obsession is the need for direct contact with what he regards as "his treasure" (120): the need to look at her directly "face to face," "to kiss her feet" (121), to "speak to her" (120). The parallel with Anodos here is clear. He too recognises that his "unspeakable" tenderness for the white lady is "accompanied with a kind of feeling of property in her" (157). However, the lady, when she does come to Cosmo, is able to teach him the true nature of human love, a lesson which is then freed to embody itself in the forms of Anodos's adventures thereafter. She first assures Cosmo/Anodos that his manipulation of magic was not what drew her: "it was your longing desire to see me that beat at the door of my heart till I was forced to yield." And she teaches him that true love involves a freeing of the beloved: "Cosmo, if you love me, set me free even from yourself" (125). But this is a painful wisdom which Cosmo can gain only through self-sacrifice and death. Anodos is then able to learn a parallel lesson, one expressed succinctly in the wise woman's song:

Better to sit at the water's birth,  
Than a sea of waves to win;  
To live in the love that floweth forth,  
Than the love that cometh in. (178)

And he too must endure conscious self-sacrifice and death.

MacDonald portrays both these sacrifices with an unmistakable touch of irony, suggesting that this is not the whole story. It too is open-ended. There are presumably many more doors waiting to be opened by love's great yearnings. The gothic overtones of Cosmo's tale draw attention to themselves in what can only be called a humorous manner, and MacDonald employs a [56] similar humorous undercutting when describing Anodos's ritual self-sacrifice. Subtle suggestions of humorous undercutting permeate *Phantastes* and are further evidence of the extraordinary self-consciousness which characterises the book as a whole, although they are ignored by most critics.

Even without Anodos's insistence that: "I was Cosmo, and his history was mine" (106), it is obvious that his story parallels that of Anodos. Both begin their histories in a twilight state between waking and sleeping, one which is specifically related to a freeing of the subconscious in dream, and both initially are driven by great yearnings but have no specific direction for this yearning. When the longing receives embodiment in "an absorbing passion" for the "form" of the enchanted lady this passion must pass through certain stages (in particular through that of desire for possession of the beloved) before an unselfish love can be generated in which the welfare of the beloved is the key preoccupation and giving love becomes sufficient in itself. This key transformation is conveyed in terms of death, a death to the ego with all its selfish grasping and false pride, and thence a rebirth into the next stage. It is at this point that both Cosmo and Anodos are left. The open-endedness is insisted on and the future left ambiguous. What *does* Cosmo "think of death"? Has he "atoned"? Can he:

translate the experience of [his] travels . . . into common life?  
. . . Or must [he] live it all over again, and learn it all over  
again, in the *other forms that belong to the world of men*, whose  
experience yet runs parallel to that of Fairy Land? (236, my  
emphasis)

He is doubtful, and perhaps we the readers are also. However there can be no doubt that both these stories end on a positive note. The protagonists may both be left with questions on their lips. Both texts nevertheless conclude on a clear note of hope, a reminder that there is a pattern "of cause and effect"



underlying these experiences, even if, to “the common eye . . . no connecting links can be traced” (107). Cosmo is left smiling; Anodos is left with one of the most unambiguously optimistic statements in all MacDonald’s works:

I know that good is coming to me—that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and the courage to believe it. What we call evil, is the only and best [57] shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good. (237)

Thus we find the keys to both structure and meaning at the heart of *Phantastes*, in the two stories Anodos reads in the Fairy Palace. These stories establish the concept of multiple interrelating worlds taking the specific forms required by the quester for his spiritual development, forms which are in a sense in answer to his longing. The stories also establish the fact that although love or longing takes many forms, it is ultimately love which draws beings ever onward toward the source of this great energy, which is God. The limitations of language when conveying visionary insight into this process are also clearly established in these stories, and *Phantastes* is structured around a series of such visionary experiences all characterised by this failure in language. At the heart of both the central stories is MacDonald’s concept of a process of progressive embodiments, in which the *forms* of any experience are there to be learnt from and transcended and not clung to for their own sake. These principles control the structure of the book on both technical and narrative levels. In fact *Phantastes*, with its multiple worlds shifting in and out of different times and spaces, is itself an embodiment of these concepts and determined by them.

#### Endnotes

1. References are to the Everyman edition of *Phantastes*. London: Dent, 1940.
2. For example Richard Reis (*George MacDonald*. New York: Twayne, 1972. p. 89) talks of the book’s “loose organisation” and sees the plot as “remarkably unstructured” and “rather incoherent.” William Raeper (*George MacDonald*. Tring: Lion, 1987. p. 145) describes it as “a novel without a plot.” Robert Lee Wolff (*The Golden Key*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1961. p. 50) talks of its “incoherence” and sees Anodos’s adventures as “entirely episodic,” while Colin Manlove (*Modern Fantasy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975. p. 75) describes it as having a “highly disconnected character” and W. H. Auden (*Forwards and Afterwords*. London: Faber, 1973. p.269) calls it a “chain adventure story.” [58]
3. See John Docherty. “A Note on the Structure and Conclusion of *Phantastes*.” *North Wind* 7 (1988) pp. 25-30, and Roderick McGillis. “The Community of the Centre.”



*For the Childlike*. Ed. Roderick McGillis. Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1992. pp.51-65.

This essay is greatly indebted to both these excellent articles.

4. For example Wolff (*op. cit.* p. 78) says of the Cosmo story: "MacDonald would have been well advised to omit it from *Phantastes* and publish it separately."

5. In the first of these instances Anodos, "listless" and "almost hopeless," comes upon the stream whose gradually increasing energy bestows upon him "a little boat." Significantly this occurs where the river is "still and deep as a soul in which the torrent eddies of pain have hollowed a great gulf, and then, subsiding in violence, have left it full of a motionless fathomless sorrow" (82).

6. For an excellent analysis of this aspect of the text see Joseph Sigman. "Death's Ecstasies: Transformations and Rebirth in George MacDonald's *Phantastes*." *English Studies in Canada* 2 (1976) pp. 203-226.

7. Quoted by C.S. Lewis. *George MacDonald: An Anthology*. London: Glasgow UP, 1955. p. 95.

8. In chapter 16 of *Lilith* MacDonald states: "That which is within a man, not that which lies beyond his vision is the main factor in what is about to befall him."

9. For an elaboration of these aspects of *Phantastes* see Graeme Muirhead. "Meta-Phantastes: A Self-referential Faerie Romance for Men and Women." *Scottish*

*Literary Journal* 19 (1992) pp.36-49. [59]