North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies

Volume 13 Article 1

1-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Broome, F. Hal (1994) "Dreams, Fairy Tales, and the Curing of Adela Cathcart," North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies: Vol. 13, Article 1.

Available at: http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol13/iss1/1

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Dreams, Fairy Tales, and the Curing of Adela Cathcart

F. Hal Broome

[This is an edited version of pages 78-101 of Dr. Broome's unpublished Ph.D thesis, "The Science Fantasy of George MacDonald," Edinburgh, 1985. It illustrates a discussion of MacDonald's ideas of hypnotic states and dream states which appears earlier in the thesis and is summarized in Broome's essay: "The Scientific Basis of MacDonald's Dream-Frame."

he novel *Adela Cathcart*, published in 1864,² has been seen as a rather weak English novel of MacDonald's, its sole importance coming from the inclusion of his early fairy tales. The plot is relatively simple: a young woman, the Adela Cathcart of the title, is ill, but the illness is suspected by the narrator, "John Smith," to be of a mental nature. The successful treatment involves the reading of fairy tales, parables and stories to her, with the addition of songs and poetry, in what is truly an early form of group therapy. Aiding Smith are the two Armstrong brothers, one a curate and the other a doctor who provides a romantic interest for Adela. "Health might flow from such a source" (44), thinks Smith, who is a very thinly disguised MacDonald.

What is Adela's problem? First there is a diminished vital force: "If she is tired inside first, everything will tire her" (12). Since physical remedies "act most rapidly in a system in movement" (51), she needs a stimulus which the tales and social situation can provide. The mental action becomes the stimulus. "And [so] I partly took the homoeopathic system," Smith tells us, "—the only one on which mental distress, at least, can be treated with any advantage" (13). This suggests that MacDonald was rather dubious (publicly, at any rate) about the physical effect of homoeopathy, while holding to a mental equivalent. Adela suffers from "moral atrophy" and needs "interest, the digestion of the inner ears" (110). MacDonald adds that "the operation of mind on body is far more immediate than that I have hinted at." The fairy tales are intended to work by reviving the mental interest, the inner will, to live, and this is also sparked by Adela's romantic interest in the young doctor.

"But what good can stories do in sickness?" queries a sceptic. Smith

suggests: [end of page 6]

That depends on the sickness, My conviction is that, near or far off, in ourselves or in our ancestors—say Adam and Eve, for

comprehension's sake—all our ailments have a moral cause. (110)

So MacDonald not only attributes psychosomatic reasons for nearly all illnesses, he goes further in finding a moral cause behind this imbalance of body and soul. Here is a turning point from Liebig's battle between the inner vitality and outer atmosphere; the inner vitality is controlled, as mesmeric theory maintains, by the will, and this comes from a moral source. As MacDonald adds later in the story:

the subjection of man to circumstance, is to be found, not in the deadening of the nervous condition, or in a struggle with the influences themselves, but in the strengthening of the moral and refining of the spiritual nature. (222)

Smith, in fact, counts "harmony and health all one" (48)—a holistic approach. With MacDonald, all of this, of course, leads to some sermonising. Although a sermon, which could be considered a direct appeal to the intellect and emotions, is contrasted with the fairy tales, which have an indirect appeal.

MacDonald thought that the direct appeal could be avoided. (This is perhaps a "sour grapes" attitude, given his lost ministry. And the division of the admired Armstrongs into curate and doctor, two fields in which MacDonald had failed, is enlightening.) A story might—and in MacDonald's fairy tales certainly does—contain an intellectual framework; but the reader does not have to be aware of its presence. Children, without a fully developed intellect, can glean an influence from the tale, yet the child, contrary to much critical opinion on MacDonald, is *not* the author's most favoured audience. Realizing he has introduced a complex intellectual concept into *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood*, he remarks:

Let it remain, however, for those older persons who at an odd moment . . . may take a little one's book, and turn over a few of its leaves. Some such readers, in virtue of their hearts being young and old both at once, discern more in the children's books than the children themselves. (182)³

Nevertheless, it must be agreed with Manlove that MacDonald does not want the reader's intellect to be too active, because the influencing function of the tale would be damaged by intellectual analysis. This is the gist of MacDonald's statement that: [7]

The wise and prudent interprets God by himself, and does not understand him the child interprets God by himself and does understand him. The wise and prudent must make a system and arrange things to his mind before he can say, *I believe*. The child sees, believes, obeys—and knows he must be perfect as his father in heaven is perfect. (*Unspoken Sermons III*, 224-25)⁴

Self-loss, so evident in a child, aids in lowering the barriers of the will to external influence. Yet, presuming MacDonald himself was wise and prudent, he had to have an intellectual system in his stories, as much as he disliked them, not because it was necessary for the child, but because it is necessary for the older reader—himself included.

So MacDonald's type of literature calls for a certain type of reader, one who can suspend disbelief: in other words, someone who likes to read fantasy—of the sort MacDonald wrote—and who can trust the sage who is delivering the message. Kaplan says of Dickens that he too "believed that mental power could be brought to bear on bodily illness" (158)—a common tenet of mesmerism. He notes that in Dickens's works there is:

the close relationship between repulsion and attraction, the conspiracy between dominating male and subjugated female, between operator and subject, that flourishes in a certain psychological-sexual ambience so common to both the fairy tales and the actual arrangements of Victorian culture. (194)

Examining Adela Cathcart it is obvious that MacDonald builds the confirmed bachelor John Smith into the role of Adela's "uncle" so that the sexual elements are proper. The sexual relationship is saved for the doctor (who, by the way, is seen as socially inferior to Colonel Cathcart, a sign of the place doctors held in Victorian society). Attention is placed on the doctor's eves and on his health, the eyes being central to the transmission of mesmeric influence. Yet Smith is undoubtedly the leader of the group; he seems to be the wisest character; and is certainly someone that the young Adela can trust, being not in the least stuffy. This is highlighted by his acceptance of a cigar from the curate on the train, for smoking in trains was an illegal activity at that time.⁵ Smith claims to be old, but makes plain that he is young inside. In this, he is really an opposite of Herr von Funkelstein in *David Elginbrod*, who claims to be young, yet is not. Funklestein commands his subjects, whereas Smith persuades. And the moral opposition between the two men is all too apparent: they are, in MacDonald's phrase, "moral antipodes" (Hamlet 85).6 **[8]**

Since, however, the main influence upon Adela is coming from the tales and not the operators, then what is in the tales to produce such an effect?

First of all, it is made plain that their subjects should be in sympathy with Adela's feelings as moved by them (110). This is produced by creating a correspondence between the essential character of the tale and Adela herself. The correspondence does not need to be direct, and the heavy-hearted Adela is read a light-hearted tale by Smith—"The Light Princess." There appears here something of MadDonald's propensity for reversal, as the princess of the tale needs more gravity—needs to be less light-hearted. Yet Adela is conversely given a direct correspondence by the clergyman, who reads "The Bell." "I believe," Smith says about this mournful tale, "that he had chosen the story on the homoeopathic principle" (112). In these instances, we can clearly see how MacDonald's mind looked on both sides of an issue.

These correspondences are further induced by the mesmeric use of sleep. Smith argues that since "so much of our life is actually spent in dreaming, there must be some place in our literature for what corresponds to dreaming" (226-27). Dream states are a source of "new mysterious feelings" which are:

indications of wells of feeling and delight which have not broken out of their hiding places in our souls, and are only to be suspected from those rings of fairy green that spring up in the high places of our sleep. (227)

This subjective state brings the subject closer to his or her inner self; and subjective feeling replaces objective thought. In a later novel, *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, 8 MacDonald states that:

No one can deny the power of the wearied body to paralyze the soul; but I have a correlate theory which I love, and which I expect to find true—that, while the body wearies the mind, it is the mind which restores vigour to the body, and then, like the man who has built him a stately palace, rejoices to dwell in it. I believe that, if there be a living, conscious love at the heart of the universe, the mind, in the quiescence of its disturbed contact with its origin, the heart of creation; whence gifted with calmness and strength for itself, grows able to impart comfort and restoration to the weary frame Mere physical rest could never of its own negative self build up the frame in such

light and vigour as come through sleep. (III. 73-74) [9] Liebig's "inner vitality" is equated with the soul, and here in sleep occurs the inner-outer link of soul and external forces.

Since the dream state has close parallels with the mesmerised state,

then the subject's reaction to the fairy tale will parallel the entry into the dream state and into the mesmeric state. Adela's reaction to the clergyman's reading of "The Bell" exhibits this entry. First of all he reads:

in a great, deep, musical voice, with a profound pathos in it—always suppressed, yet too much for me in the more touching portions of the story.

"One interruption more," he said, before he began, "I fear you will find it a sad story."

And he looked at Adela. (112)

When the story has been told, MacDonald is careful to describe Adela's visible response:

Adela offered no remark upon the story, and I knew from her countenance that she was too much affected to be inclined to speak. Her eyes had that fixed, forward look, which, combined with haziness, indicates deep emotion, while the curves of her mouth were nearly straightened out by the compression of her lips. I had thought, while the reader went on, that she could hardly fail to find in the story of Elsie some correspondence to her own condition and necessities: I now believed she had found that correspondence. (128)

Her eyes, however, being fixed and forward, are not in the inward position of the self-hypnotic state; instead, she has her attention on the clergyman, whose euphonious words influence her. She seems, as Smith thinks, to "digest" the story (150).

This mental digestion spurs Adela's psychic condition, but to make it work she has to will it herself. Among the group that tell Adela stories, a few balk at Smith's fairy-tale prescription, and here MacDonald takes the platform to defend it. The Colonel, Adela's father, is criticized by Smith for "observing only *ab extra*, and not being in rapport with her feelings as operated on by the tales" (109). Much more irritating to Smith is Mrs Cathcart, Adela's aunt, who denigrates the tales and as a result derives no obvious benefit from them. She doubts the reality of fairy tales and, referring to "The Light Princess," asks if it is right to introduce church ceremonies into them. Evidently this was John Ruskin's view as well, for the famous critic, who first met MacDonald while *Adela Cathcart* was being written in 1863,

sent [10] him a letter in which he declined to be godfather to the newlyborn Maurice MacDonald on the grounds that he himself was a "Pagan." He complained that: You *did* make me into Mrs. Cathcart. She says the very thing I said about the fairy tale. It's the only time she is right in the book—you turned me into her first and then invented all the wrong things to choke up my poor little right with. I never knew anything so horrid.⁹

MacDonald retorts to Ruskin's view through Smith, who argues that:

"if both church and fairy-tale belong to humanity, they may occasionally cross circles, without injury to either. They must have something in common. There is the 'Fairy Queen' [sic] and the 'Pilgrim's Progress,' you know, Mrs. Cathcart. I can fancy the pope even telling his nephews a fairy-tale."

"Ah, the pope! I daresay," [responds Mrs. Cathcart]. (60) Oddly enough, MacDonald does not seem to have followed his own advice, as the preface to *Dealings with the Fairies* admits. "You know," MacDonald writes there to his own children, "I do not tell you stories as some papas do." It is just possible, however, that because of his lung problems, he had at that time been forbidden to talk for prolonged periods. Yet Greville states that he recalled his father's readings of "The Giant's Heart." MacDonald may be saying that his stories were different. Anyway, the Victorians' practice of reading bedtime stories to their children must have aided the ability of the tale to induce the dream state. Note too that the clergyman has a deep and musical voice. MacDonald maintained that with music, as with a fairy tale:

The best way . . . is not to bring the forces of our intellect to bear upon it, but to be still and let it work on the part of us for whose sake it exists. (*Orts* 321-22)¹⁰

The obsessing and emotional power of the fairy tale would be hindered by intellectual analysis, but this does not preclude intellectual content. Smith himself stands aloof from the tales, analysing how their power works on Adela, even though he acknowledges that he feels the emotional power as well. The tales are able to work on those two main areas which have close contact with the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems: the brain and the heart. "If any strain of my 'broken music' makes a child's eyes flash, or his mother's grow for a moment dim, my labour will not have been in vain," writes MacDonald in "The Fantastic Imagination" (*Orts* 322). But the critic, [11] while acknowledging the emotional impact of the story, must follow Smith and look at the tales intellectually. And, in this connection, one tale told to Adela, "The Shadows," is revealing for the way in which it shows

how a person overcomes illness mentally, and with the aid of phantasms.

"The Shadows" was MacDonald's first fairy tale, drafted when he was himself ill and was writing *Phantastes*. The tale concerns Ralf Rinkelmann, who is feverish and delirious, a state conductive for phantasms. Whilst on the indistinct but graduated border between life and death (a graduation found in its analogue, waking and sleeping) he is snatched away to be made King of Fairy-land. "For it is only between life and death that the fairies have power over grown-up mortals" (186). In Fairyland "the sovereignity is elective," which implies that Rinkelmann has some control over these phantasms if he so wills it. They may be rationalised as phantasms of his own making. His ailment is not specified, but we are told that he has been chosen because he makes a living by comic sketches, "and all but lost it again by tragic poems," a contrast pointing towards melancholy as the predisposing factor. This, of course, is Adela's problem as well, so she finds correspondence in the tale.

While Rinkelmann is in Fairy-land (Lewis Carroll's "c" state),11 gnomes, goblins and other nasty denizens of the place run amok around the sick king, but by "strong and sustained efforts, he succeeded, after much trouble and suffering, in reducing his subjects to order" (187). Having done this, Rinkelmann comes to himself and finds he is in bed in his own room. He has apparently ascended from Carroll's "c" state up to the "b" state; because even though he is aware of the normal room, there are still creatures in it, and "although they were like the underground goblins, they were very different as well, and would require quite different treatment" (188). However, they are still "his subjects." Then he almost falls asleep, indicating how, in the "b" state, he is drowsy but not fully asleep. One of the Shadows approaches him and, lifting a dark fore-finger, draws it "lightly but carefully, across the ridge of his forehead, from temple to temple" (190). This is a well-known device for inducing the mesmeric state, and afterwards Rinkelmann becomes even more "eerie" (190), and soon descends back into the "c" state. Here he meets the full panoply of "The Human Shadows. The Shadows of men, and women, and their children" (195). MacDonald is careful to state that these are not Platonic shadows, but living ones.

MacDonald has literary precedent for these Shadows. Otto Rank¹² notes the "equivalence of the mirror and shadow as images, both of which appear **[12]** to the ego as likenesses" (10). Rinkelmann's shadows do not bear his likeness, but they show him images which remind him of his own condition. They are most active when he is drowsy or asleep, which is in

accord with the shadows described by E. T. A. Hoffmann (Rank 57). Since they are personal, they have a personal effect. MacDonald portrays the effect of Shadows upon different people. With a writer, the shadows act out a play before him. Since they are subservient to him they act the part of his own imagination. With a clergyman, the Shadows work through his conscience. At first he studies his sermons "in the looking-glass" (203). This makes him "fair game," since it is his self-absorption which caused the doubles to appear. Darwin's influence on Victorian society is seen here, in that in the Shadow the clergyman sees himself as an ape. This shames him, and forces him to switch his centre of interest from himself toward other people—another method of transcending egoism.

Mirrors reverse, and so the Shadows are indeed opposites, but not exactly in the sense of Platonic Ideals: "Are you not the shadows of chairs and tables, and pokers and tongs, just as well [as of humans]?" (195) asks Rinkelmann. They are not: as souls they are the counterparts of living people. "It is only," a Shadow tells him,

"when one man or woman is alone with a single candle, or when any number of people are all feeling the same thing at once, making them one, that we show ourselves, and the truth of things." (195)

This borders on spiritualism (Rank 22-23); and one Shadow asks Rinkelmann about "the creatures that live in mirrors": "You call them ghosts, don't you?" But Rinkelmann is interrupted and cannot reply—MacDonald is deliberately side-stepping the issue.

Just as a mirror reverses an image, so a Shadow's sermon reminds its listeners that Shadows are reversed from people: they do not die like humans, they sleep all day and are awake at night (when a person dreams), they forget where people remember; and if they rebel with their will, they thicken into mortal bodies, casting shadows, and thus become human (203). A child suggests that "they're body ghosts; they're not soul ghosts" (209). Humans, on the other hand, will themselves into Shadows without a body (which means that they will their own death). So we find that whereas a Fall from grace brings death to humans, it brings a mortal life to Shadows. The preacher Shadow knows that if a Shadow wilfully fights sleep, it returns to a mortal [13] body. Since humans are the reverse, it follows that a human who does not fight sleep/death—loss of self—goes into an immortal body.

"Just fancy," speculates Rinkelmann, "what it might be like if some flitting thoughts were to persist in staying to be looked at," i.e., if these

phantasms were to take bodily form. A Shadow answers that with them it is only "when our thoughts are not fixed upon upon any particular idea, that our bodies are subject to all the vagaries of elemental influences" (196). This is the opposite of mesmerism, since a hypnotist has his client's thoughts fixed upon an object, such as a mirror or a watch, and thereby influences their mind and body with suggestions. Shadows who become hypnotised—by not focusing their thoughts on an object—become more material; humans become more spiritual.

Rinkelmann cannot hear shadow-speech because of his "corporeal organs," so a Shadow performs a

strange manipulation of his head and ears, after which he could hear perfectly, though only the voice to which, for the time, he directed his attention. (200)

He longs to take the technique back to the world of men and women. As the focus of attention tor him at this point is a helpful Shadow, following the reversing function, a helpful man or woman should be able to manipulate the Shadow of another. It must be noted that speech is emphasized as the reason and sense for the manipulation, as MacDonald always expressed the desire to spread the word orally.

We are told that the Shadows particularly like twins, for they are the human's twin in the mirror. The child's personal shadow stands, in MacDonald's words, "beside itself" (199). Because the Shadow reflects a person's inner life, the worse that person's inner condition becomes, the more dreadful the Shadow. An alcoholic reaches a point where he suffers *delirium tremens* (202), but he escapes by turning his attention away from himself.

There are other classes of Shadows. Angels are described as "the white shadows cast in heaven from the Light of Light" (216). And there are strange Shadows with human eyes, which Rinkelman knows do not belong to his dominion (i.e. his mind). "What their eyes said to him, [he] only could tell," for MacDonald believed that each person interpreted the eyes (the soul) of spiritual things differently. These Shadows were revealed to "a man who sat much alone, and was said to think a great deal": the vision was a mystical experience of the kind known to saints. The Shadows tell Rinkelmann they "could not cross the threshold" into such a mystical state and "felt ready

[14] to melt away"—he is glad he is a man! Men and women have bodies, which the Shadows lack, and so exist in both the inner and outer world. They also have long-term memory, which is what gives them their individual selves. (Life beyond the grave, it seems, would mean little if no memory of

the earthly life went with it.) In "A Hidden Life" MacDonald emphasizes that it is Memory which conjures up images for the mind to clothe; the Shadows are subject to this manipulation, but unable to perform it themselves.

Mrs. Rinkelmann gives an outside observation on her husband's state when she notes, immediately after he has brought his rebellious subjects to order, that he seems much better. Such integration of self seems antagonistic to MacDonald's insistence upon the loss of self. Probably the whole self must be lost, and this can only happen after it has been integrated.

The reading of tales like this to Adela, combined with her new love-interest and the doctor's prescriptions, finally sparks her will to live, improving her health. But, in keeping with both homoeopathic and mesmeric principles (because in the mesmeric, too, the subject is forced to undergo a crisis while in the sleep state), she has a small crisis before her illness totally disappears. MacDonald acknowledges this by remarking through Smith that "a disease sometimes goes out with a kind of flare, like a candle—or like the poor life itself" (367).

For the final diagnosis, MacDonald gives the *experimentum crucis* statement (459), that "there were other causes at work for Adela's cure" (374), In this way his rather eccentric belief in the healing power of fairy tales and homoeopathy could be conditionalized by disclaiming a complete power for them. But this did not exclude such power, and he kept his faith in them beyond the 1870s. Evidence for this comes from his "A Letter to American Boys."¹³ The letter was published in 1878, but most critics overlook the fact that the main portion of it also appears as "a parable" in the 1882 edition of Adela Cathcart, 14 indicating its relevance to that work. In both places MacDonald likens his fairy tales to the effect of a wizard who makes his thoughts take form, and who can control the dreams of a young boy. In the letter itself, MacDonald apologises that he is "uttering no word, only writing," but adds that words and writing are "in like manner, with divine differences" (I 10-11). Here again we see the frustrated Congregationalist subliminating his preference for the spoken sermon over the written word, and, more importantly, the mesmerist who works best by coercing his subject directly with spoken instructions. The dream wizard (MacDonald, of course) gives [15] the boy a specific dream in which a voice suggests ideas for selfcorrection. And when the boy does these things, outer objects respond to his new inner state. He is caught up within himself, and thus his mind puts him in a prison; his mind is dirty, like his cell, so he has to clean both. Inner states, then, are reflected in outer images. If we find Smith/MacDonald approving

melancholic tales for Adela on the homoeopathic principle, we also find the wizard/voice placing the boy in the dream where his imprisonment reflects his own mental state. The voice suggests work, cleansing, and self-correction, and no proper Victorian would disapprove. Then the boy, having corrected his dirty cell by sweeping, etc., awakens to the last "flare" of his illness, and is grouchy, with his soul disquieted. Mental correction, then, is not enough: there has to be a corresponding action in waking life, proving the will's resolve. This is not done until the boy hears his mother's voice and relates it to the voice in his dreams—his conscience, if you will. A correspondence is formed, the boy repeats the virtuous actions of his dream, and so improves.

Here is another situation where a wizard/mesmerist or wizard/homoeopath invokes in the dream-state a crisis corresponding to the illness, *similia similibus curantur*, and so spurs a healthy development. MacDonald was not in a position to invoke a dream-state with his voice, but through his writing he could simulate a dream for his reader, and hope to recreate the same effect. *Adela Cathcart* ends: "I had entered the secret places of my own hidden world by the gate of sleep, and walked about them in my dream" (460). To create this effect MacDonald relies on good scientific knowledge of dreams, although also on more suspect sources.

Notes

- 1. Broome, F. Hal. "The Scientific Basis of MacDonald's Dream-Frame." *The Gold Thread.* Ed. William Raeper. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1990 87-108.
- 2. MacDonald, George. *Adela Cathcart*, London, 1864: Republished Whitethorn CA: Johannesen, 1994. Page references are to the later edition.
- 3. MacDonald, George. *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood*, London, Blackie, 1911. Reprinted Whitethorn CA: Johannesen, 1993.
- 4. MacDonald, George. Unspoken Sermons III. London 1891. Reprinted S. Pasadena:

J.J. Flynn. 1987. [16]

- 5. For this and other/aspects of Victorian life, see Young, G. M. ed. *Early Victorian England*. London: Oxford UP, 1934. [Broome notes that readers may be shocked at the references to fox hunting in the story. However, there have always been people like MacDonald who join a hunt solely because of their obsession with horses and riding. As a youth, he delighted in being able to gallop freely on the hills around Huntly, and he was probably astonished and delighted to find that, by hunting, he could do the same thing in the intensely farmed South of England. At one time, when Louisa felt he needed a tonic outside the hunting season, they contrived to rent Great Tangley Manor, some five miles south of Guildford, for the summer, so that he could ride on the Surrey heaths as often as he wished. Ed.]
- 6. MacDonald, George. The Tragedie of Hamlet. London: Longmans, 1885.

- 7. In subsequent versions of "The Light Princess," chapter seven is titled "Try Metaphysics." One of the court philosophers in the story is dedicated to the material world, the other to the spiritual. Seperately they are inefectual; but together they come up with the correct assumption: that since outer water helps the princess, inner water (tears) would be even more effective.
- 8. MacDonald, George. Wilfred Cumbermede, London, 1872.
- 9. Ruskin, John. *The Winnington Letters of John Ruskin*. Ed. Van Akin Burd. London: Allen and Unwin, 1969. 487. Despite the banter, there is paranoia here, hinting at Ruskin's approaching mental illness. But Ruskin may well be right about MacDonald's use of his comment.
- 10. MacDonald, George. A Dish of Orts, 1893, London: Newnes, 1905.
- 11. In the preface to *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, Carroll recognises three psychic states: a) the ordinary state, with no consciousness of the presence of Fairies; b) the "eerie" state, in which, while conscious of actual surroundings, he is also conscious of the presence of fairies; c) a form of trance in which, while unconscious of actual surroundings, and apparently asleep, he (i.e. his immaterial essence) migrates to other scenes, in the actual world, or in Fairyland, and is conscious of the presence of Fairies. This was published in 1893, but Carroll seems to recognise these states in some of his writing of the 1860s.
- 12. Rank. Otto. The Double. Trs H. Karnac, New York: New America Library, 1980.

[17]

13. MacDonald, George. "A Letter to American Boys." Reprinted as the forward to *The Gifts of the Christ Child.* Ed. Glen Sadler. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973. 14. MacDonald, George. *Adela Cathcart.* London: Sampson Low, 1882. 335-42.

[18]