

1-1-1996

Truth and Appearances: Aspects of Illusion and Reality in Robert Falconer

Deirdre Hayward

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind>

Recommended Citation

Hayward, Deirdre (1996) "Truth and Appearances: Aspects of Illusion and Reality in Robert Falconer," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*: Vol. 15 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol15/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. It has been accepted for inclusion in North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ St. Norbert College. For more information, please contact sarah.titus@snc.edu.

Truth and Appearances: Aspects of Illusion and Reality in *Robert Falconer*

Deirdre Hayward

Robert Falconer,¹ although often cited as an outstanding example of MacDonald's realistic novels on account of its colourful portraits of actual characters, its awareness of social problems, the vividness of its childhood world, and its largely autobiographical nature,² is nevertheless permeated with a sense of unreality and contains much in the way of the mysterious and the extra-mundane. David Robb has already challenged the perception that novels such as *Robert Falconer* are predominately "realistic" works, rightly asserting that MacDonald "could not help giving expression to a conception of reality which far transcends what he often referred to as the commonplace world."³ I want to develop this insight further, concentrating upon two particular aspects of MacDonald's approach: firstly, his fluid sense of time and space, and his ability to loosen apparently fixed temporal-spatial boundaries, and, secondly, his method of constantly redefining what normally counts for reality, primarily in the areas of religious truth, worldly expectations and individual human desires. He repeatedly asserts that human reality is never God's reality, and Robert's life is a continual affirmation of MacDonald's literal belief that only in God can man live, move and have his true being. He declares: "There is nothing for man worthy to be called life but the life eternal—God's life, that is, after his degree shared by the man made to be eternal also."⁴ This definition of reality as being-in-God is a fundamental truth for MacDonald. It is woven into Robert's story as he is guided through life, abandoning the illusions of a false God and a life outside God, and embracing the true, vision of personal involvement and union with a loving God. Robert learns of a world where truth lies in the eternal and not in the temporal: in a reality which is ordinarily seen to be unattainable by the finite human being.

Within this framework of belief, MacDonald attempts to show how God's reality can be brought into the realm of human experience, and he does this by manipulating the parameters of the "ordinary" or "commonplace" at certain stages of the narrative and giving them new significance. Thus the "angelic" nature of Mary St. John (I.ch.8 p.46) is no illusion: she becomes in reality such a being, not just for Robert, but for his friend Ericson and for the poor in London also. Indeed, although Robert soon learns who she is,

MacDonald notes that “the impression made upon him that night [that she was an angel] was never effaced” (46). The significance of such an “illusion” lies in the fact that it is, in essence, no illusion but reality—even to the extent that she remains unattainable to the adoring Robert. Conversely, Robert’s initial impression that **[end of page 19]** the Deity is dogmatic and vengeful is an illusion that he must transcend to discover the divine truth. The ultimate human illusion of being separate from God, in some part inevitable as a consequence of the finitude of being human, is destroyed for Robert at his death, finally subsumed in a unifying spiritual reality.

In *Robert Falconer*, then, MacDonald deliberately works to loosen the conceptual limits of “true” and “false,” and, in deconstructing these concepts, conveys an underlying sense of fluidity and openness to a narrative which at a more direct level seems to offer an unyielding and bleak account of human experience. His ability to re-work such constructs is further demonstrated by his imaginative manipulation of space and time, actuality and possibility. His account of Robert’s experiences in the deserted weaving factory, the place where he first practices his violin, is a case in point (I.11).

The episode in the weaving factory is a significant and forming one, created with deliberate care and anticipation by MacDonald. It is managed with such purpose because it announces a new and important phase in Robert’s development: his discovery of music, which introduces him to tenderness and beauty, and will become a fundamental part of his life. Importantly, this aesthetic discovery is presented in terms of feminine imagery: the violin is Robert’s “bonnie leddie.” This is an element which has been conspicuously absent in a life of paternalistic theology and motherless upbringing. In his experiences in the factory, everyday perception of time dissolves and the dream-like and the real merge into each other until barriers disappear: the narrative actually becomes the vehicle of new possibilities.

When Robert finds the violin in the garret, he needs somewhere away from his grandmother to practice it. The old weaving factory seems ideal. It is a peripheral place, neither in town nor outside it, but on the outskirts; half-alive, with thread still on the spools, but deserted, seemingly from time “immemorial.” Half is well-built of stone and lime, half of wood in “considerable decay” (I.2.68). MacDonald’s placing it on so many borderlines conveys its strange import. Here, past and present co-exist, as Robert comes to imagine ghostly workers creating a “bewildering, tumult” of activity, fancying he hears them as he himself “haunts” the place. It is a space in which the commonplace can be transcended. To this factory will Robert

carry his violin, and here, as MacDonald explicitly states, will he woo her (68).

Describing the interior of the factory, MacDonald expands the normal sense of spatial awareness. His description strongly suggests feminine imagery: space becomes illusory and loses its perspective as “one room open[s] into another through the length of the place” revealing—in an ever inward direction—a mirror-like infinity of images, “a vista of machines . . . the sense of deeper [20] and deeper sinking into the soundless abyss” (68). Reality emerges from this illusion in that the feminine, “the realizer of dreams and awakener of visions” (72); becomes a passage way through dreams to an enhanced vision of reality. Here, deep in the factory, Robert begins a relationship with his “bonnie leddie.” The feminine, in terms of love, the maternal, and tenderness, is a dimension of the personality that MacDonald feels must be developed. Indeed, William Raeper notes that God was both father and mother in MacDonald’s theology, commenting that the God revealed in the book is the motherly God whose existence is unacceptable to Mrs Falconer’s Calvinism.⁵

The opportunity for Robert to experience music has come “out of the unknown in God through the unknown in man” (III.2.333). MacDonald is stating that any true revelation from God to man must come in this way—that is, by breaking through the conventional barriers of realism. So, Robert’s emotional discovery has emerged from potential to actuality in this ambivalent region of illusion and reality. Here too the quasi-ghost of his father will emerge to confront him before mysteriously disappearing, only later to become a real entity for Robert. It is Robert’s playing on the “matrix of sweet sounds” (the primary meaning of “matrix” is “womb”) that “awakens the vision” of an addled old woman, an ex-factory worker, who believes she is back in the past, but experiences, in Robert’s present, communications with his grandfather and father. From this he learns that the latter has “behaved ill to his mother” (74). Words from the past become truth for the present. Past and present, dead and alive, meeting in this place, give an open fluid framework for Robert’s awakening to the feminine and thence to the infinite—a link MacDonald specifically makes (72). Such a place of otherworldliness and illusion, once entered by the searching soul, becomes a region in which true reality can be encountered. Thus a dream Robert has of his father removing documents from his grandmother’s bureau actually occurs. So, also, Robert’s and Ericson’s morbid apprehension of the pale “eye of ghastly death” in the form of the full moon one winter’s

night (II.14.352) is no fanciful vision since it presages the death of both of them. Once the intellect has freed itself from the perceptible and the quantifiable—the “visible”—the mind is free to experience a new level of reality. For MacDonald, as this happens to the developing spirituality, the objects of former adherence fade away, eventually to re-appear, presented in a new essence of truth and transcendental reality. Thus, for example, the God of Calvinist orthodoxy is humanly defined, contained and explained within strict parameters; but MacDonald’s God of Love cannot be bound within quantifiable limits. Hence MacDonald’s stretching of these enclosing limits to allow Robert’s experience to open out and accept the true God into his life. In this particular episode in the deserted factory, MacDonald is attempting to **[21]** demonstrate this notion in Robert’s fresh original response to the new and the “higher” world which, among other things, contains music and the feminine. However, MacDonald’s plan is that Robert will not fully break through into that world until he understands that it comes from the One, and is no longer surrounded by the shadows of false doctrine, or disguised by “a garment of nature,” or music, or any similar aesthetic or emotional experience.

The empty house of Bogbonnie is another instrument for MacDonald’s imaginative manipulation of appearances. Returning to Rothiden from college at the end of the autumn term, Robert and Ericson are stranded on a wild winter’s night when their coach—also containing Mary St John—meets with an accident in the storm and they all take shelter in the old house (11.16.262). Reflecting the oppositions of illusion and reality, its name implies both danger and beauty. Grandiose from a distance, it has never been inhabited, and closer acquaintance reveals its neglected state. It is a house with no history and no reality (265). Again MacDonald describes the building with great precision and care and acknowledges in passing that he does this: “but why should I give such a minute description, making my reader expect a ghost story, or at least a nocturnal adventure?” (264). He wishes, he states, to emphasise its “strange and unusual horror . . . like a body that had never had a human soul in it” (265). In this sense its existence is only conditional: it represents what might have been; the proposed dwelling-place of an unhappily married couple who died before they could occupy it. Here Robert effectively loses Mary to Ericson, a loss which has a devastating effect upon him when he later discovers their relationship. Ericson and Mary are ineluctably drawn together in a scene where Ericson despairingly voices his sense of alienation from God and Mary mysteriously answers him from

the darkened balcony (268). He is first stunned then calmed by this unknown voice of angelic intervention, and their relationship develops when he understands her agency in the dramatic moment.

From this point on, Robert is cut off from any possibility of marriage and a future with her—at least a future as a husband, for he does later work with her in London. Any inner personal dream he may have had is destined to remain, like the house, empty; and unfulfilled, gradually falling away as lost desire. Robert is at first happy to be with these two people whom he loves, and he initiates an illusory domesticity of warmth and light in the house, lighting a fire and looking for supper. But this is short-lived, a chimera which dies to reality, as MacDonald says, “in the cold gray light of the morning” (269). The possibility is only half-glimpsed and, transient, it becomes part of the wind’s echoes. Bogbonnie is an illusion: empty in itself, empty of reality or meaning for Robert’s life. God has other plans for him which will, as Robert’s journey [22] progresses and his life unfolds, lift him from the realm of worldly expectations and desires to a higher reality.

In book III, when God is in Robert’s life, MacDonald returns him to his old haunts near the Rothiden bleaching fields. He sees no more bleaching, no mill-race, no fire in the boiler, but empty houses, under the dominion of grass and weeds (111.6.359). The condition of the deserted factory of his childhood and the empty Bogbonnie of his youth has become that of the bleach-field in his manhood. Again the feeling of transience is inescapable, but now it is accompanied by a positive sense of progressive development, as if, in a Plotinian sense, a set of circles has been completed and another has begun, spirally, at a higher level. Robert knows there are no more living traces of his youth here, but he denies that everything has vanished away, like an illusion, or is lost. The present, he says, is filled with the past, and the past still exists, caught in an eternal present. Robert’s past, including all his pleasure and pain, his hopes and illusions, has made him what he now is, and nothing of its value is lost in the eternity of God’s universal time in the preciousness of the eternal now:

All the old things, the old ways, the old glories of his childhood—were they gone? No. Over them all, in them all, was God still. There is no past with Him. An eternal present, He filled his soul, and all that his soul had ever filled. His history was taken up into God: it had not vanished: his life was hid with Christ in God. To the God of the human heart nothing that has ever been a joy, a grief, a passing interest, can ever cease to

be what it has been; there is . . . no dimming of old memories in the heart of him whose being creates time . . . that which has been, is. (III. 6.360)

Time, MacDonald seems to be saying, issues forth in an undivided flow from the Eternal, who, in every individual moment is eternally present. This is the true reality: when the sense of the eternity and constant presence of God is consciously with humanity in every moment of life's existence.

Towards the end of the novel, Robert converses with a rich and jaded society lady, Georgina Betterton, who questions the reality of life, wondering whether everything is simply empty, the "gilt" of appearances a mere false glow (III. 10.402). Robert answers that reality is the true life which results from the union of the human and the divine, and that without the knowledge of such a goal, or the experience of such a union, there is only frustration and spiritual sickness (408). Quoting Bacon, Robert states that: "Nothing can fill, much less extend the soul of man, but God, and the contemplation of God." MacDonald is quite adamant about this: to live without God is to live in appearances, in emptiness and delusion. The greatest delusion, according to MacDonald, is to [23] suppose that there is nothing "outside" the individual, that the self exists independently. He writes in one of his *Unspoken Sermons*:

The most frightful idea of what could, to his own consciousness, befall a man is that he should have to lead an existence with which God had nothing to do . . . It is always in, and never out of God that we can live and do. (II.110)

The isolated self is an alienated lost self, with nothing greater, and therefore with no God and no true existence. It is a "paltry dream that dreamed itself" (*U.S.* II.112): unreality and non-existence are its inevitable consequences. This state of existential isolation is articulated by the agonised Ericson: "I do not know—I cannot know if there is anything outside of me" (II. 12.233-4). Robert fully understands the implications of such a possibility, and they terrify him. Were this the case, he tells Ericson, there would be no one for him to love, and no one to love him; and then "ye wad be yer ain God, Mr Ericson . . . I canna imagine a waur hell" he declares. Instinctively he rejects the possibility in the conversation with Ericson which follows. He is unable to commit himself to an illusion of existence, an insubstantial dream isolated in its own dreaming (II.12 235-35). His response is an instinct for action, for doing God's will without necessarily understanding first. Crucial to his own understanding when he later struggles with his dark night of the soul is the tenacity with which he holds on to a gospel passage which addresses this

problem of belief. Jesus says: “If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God or whether I speak of myself,” and MacDonald immediately spells this out for the reader:

Here was a word of Jesus himself, announcing the one means of arriving at a conviction of the truth or falsehood of all that he said, namely the doing of the will of God by the man who would arrive at such a conviction. (III. 1.329)

MacDonald guides Robert and the reader) away from the ultimate dread possibility of God being an illusion—both in ontological and doctrinal terms—towards a conviction that only God is truly real in what is ultimately a world of appearances. MacDonald himself, although a great lover of nature, recognises that the things of the world are only stepping-stones, necessarily imperfect and transient, not the stuff of true reality:

If the things I have here come from him, and are so plainly but a beginning, shall I not take them as an earnest of the better to follow? How else can I regard them? For never, in the midst of the good things of this lovely world have I felt quite at home in it. Never has it shown me things lovely or grand enough to satisfy me. It is not all I should like for a place to live in.

(*Unspoken Sermons* III. 261) [24]

It is Robert’s journey from such beginnings and appearances to the reality of God’s truth that is the main thrust of *Robert Falconer*. By the end, the reader has been urged to understand that Robert has “come home” and will experience the spiritual reality which is true blessedness. The narrator who emerges towards the end of book III, Archie Gordon, describing how, when he, Robert and Robert’s father are walking home on a darkening evening, articulates MacDonald’s vision of the ultimate reality of man’s future existence, opening the door between the worlds of illusion and reality:

The autumn wind met us again, colder, stronger, yet more laden with the odours of death and the frosts of the coming winter. But it no longer blew as from the charnel house of the past; it blew from the stars through the chinks of the unopened door on the other side of the sepulchre. It was a wind of the worlds, not a wind of the leaves. It told of the march of the spheres, and the rest of the throne of God. We were going on into the universe—home to the house of our Father. (111,17.464)

All humanity will eventually “go home” to God, believes MacDonald. Death, mourning and loss will be transcended by the spirit of God which blows

from the infinite, bringing finite and infinite together, destroying the illusion of appearances and separation, and celebrating the eternal nature of man in God's reality.

Notes

1. Reis, Richard *George MacDonald's Fiction* 1972 Eureka: Sunrise, 1989, p.68; Hein, Rolland *The Harmony Within* 1982 Eureka: Sunrise, 1989, p.27; Robb, David *God's Fiction* 1987 Eureka: Sunrise, 1989, p.38; Raeper, William *George MacDonald* Tring: Lion, 1988, p.39.
2. MacDonald, George *Robert Falconer* 1868 Eureka: Sunrise, 1990.
3. Robb p.20.
4. MacDonald, George *Unspoken Sermons II* 1885 Eureka: Sunrise, 1989, p.151.
5. Raeper p.262. **[25]**