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Wilfrid Cumberland: A Novel in the Context of European Symbolism

Adelheid Kegler

“**S**ee that cloud! Isn’t it like death on the pale horse? What fun it must be for the cherubs, on such a night as this, to go blowing the clouds into fantastic shapes with their trumpet cheeks!” (300).¹ This comment by Charley Osborne, a central figure in George MacDonald’s novel *Wilfrid Cumberland*, uttered suddenly during a philosophical discussion, illuminates the mental landscape of the novel. The apocalyptic ghost horse galloping across the sky of night, fun for the cherubs? As a metaphysical shadow-show it reflects both the role of Wilfrid as the White Horseman of the Apocalypse and the Judge (19.11-21) pointing to the future, and the destiny of his darker soul-twin Charley, whose despairing life is ended by suicide.

This quotation (by its multi-layered allusions, its central topics of death and apocalypse, and its concern with the partly visible, partly invisible hereafter) represents the form of art the novel is moulded into, and reveals it as a work of Symbolism. Symbolism here is understood as an all-pervading movement within the arts in Europe during the period from the 1850s to 1890s, a movement concerned with penetrating the veil of appearances—with discovering “rifts in the veil.”²

Alongside the realistic and materialistic tendencies of the later nineteenth century, Symbolism manifested itself in the fields of painting, sculpture, narrative and lyrical forms of literature, and—no less importantly—in the beginnings of psychology, in some branches of science, in comparative religion, and in research on myths—all, in the words of G. F. Watts, the Symbolist painter, as an expression of “a spiritual yearning.” He recognises that deep in the human mind exists a spiritual yearning which does not derive from any definite religious faith: questions which remain unanswered by Nature, longings which cannot be expressed by even the most perfect knowledge of material things. The true prophet, he suggests—whose language may be prose or lyrics, art or music—is able to take us into regions where the earth takes its place among the stars and something seems to be present from beyond the infinity of the sky.³

The distance between yearning and its aim creates a form of duality. This manifests in the tension between the “product of art” and the dimension which finally escapes from every sensational manifestation:

the “mystical contents” (Knigge, 156). Yet the artistic techniques (form of words, choice of colours and so on) which are an echo of this dimension and at the same time its **[end of page 71]** representative, achieve an unprecedented weight. In literature, especially in lyrics, this expresses itself by an excessively “maximalistic” language and a wealth of fetish-like word-symbols. Among these are the colour images which function as messengers or representatives of the ideal, especially the “colour of light,” white, and the “colour of transcendency,” azure. In the realm of art the duality shows itself in the mysteriousness and hence decipherability of the images. They only disclose their meaning through their titles, which again are allusions to a sphere beyond the pictures. Three examples (each of women with inward-looking eyes) are G. F. Watts’ *The Dweller in the Innermost* (1885-86, Tate Britain) and the paintings by Fernand Khnopff, *I Lock my Door upon Myself* (1891 Neue Pinakothek, Munchen) and *Who Shall Deliver Me* (1891, private collection, Belgium) both of which quote lines by Christina Rossetti.

This deeply romantic symbolism is centred upon the topics of love and dream, ideal and death, which are depicted mostly in the forms of “romantic agony”: enticement, seduction, bereavement, loss, isolation, doom and guilt. The very darkness of these topics makes the ideal all the brighter and clearer. It is, in Solovyov’s words, a “reliable dream not-from-here.” In the framework of everyday reality it appears like a strange illusion. Yet, paradoxically, the illusion is true reality for which there is no place any more in the wasteland of facts. Solovyov says: “These stars send to me on their milky way reliable true dreams, and they make flowers from another world blossom in an infinite waste land” (Knigge 87).

Contemporary etchings and paintings by the Belgian painter J. S. Ensor reveal the same state of consciousness where, as it were, the manifestation of the ideal world stands out with blossom-like exquisiteness from the grotesque and vulgar phenomena of the emerging mass-society, for example in *Christ’s Advent in Brussels*, *Seizure of a Foreign City* and many others.

In such an area of thought, Swedenborgian philosophy and mysticism, according to which “natural causes only seem,” wins a new and well-attested relevance: the correspondences between the immanent and transcendent worlds are not easily recognised, but they challenge us to look “beyond the fence.” The interest in Swedenborg shown by the Romantics, especially the English Romantics, was continued by the Symbolists. Their art finds possibilities of a theoretical basis in Swedenborgian thought-structures.⁴

So we can say that Symbolism, as the development of a romantic access to the world, points to a high and distant good, only to be approached by a *via negativa*. On the other hand, it equally anticipates the feeling of life in Late Modernism: the definite disappearance of the ideal, a widespread sense of depersonalisation, besiegement by fears and a sense of floating into darkness (as in David Lynch's lyric "Floating into the Night"). This outlook is vividly [72] depicted in the fate of Paolo and Francesca di Rimini in Canto 5 of Dante's *Inferno*. Caught in the act of adultery, murdered and delivered to eternal damnation, they *float*, together with others guilty of carnal lust, in a never-ending storm of hell. The fascination of this image for Symbolists must have been immense, because (leaving aside the early Romantic depictions by Blake and Flaxman) it has been painted by the Symbolist artists Ary Scheffer, Gustave Dore, Dante Rossetti, G. F. Watts and Gaetano Previati. Rossetti and Watts in particular worked at this theme until they were able to show the misery of lovers floating in boundless empty space as a statement of the feeling of life of their own times.

Awareness of the dark realm has been increasing and deepening ever since the Enlightenment, accompanied by a plexus of literary and pictorial attempts at its delineation. From "Monk" Lewis' *The Monk* and Goya's *Caprichos* to films of Jim Jarmush (*Ghost Dog*) and David Lynch (*Mulholland Drive*) in our own time, artists have testified to their experience that the world we perceive no longer tells the truth: in other words, that it withdraws from colonisation by enlightened reason. Symbolism especially does justice to such an experience, because it shows its double aspect. On the one hand it affirms the non-transparency of the phenomena, and on the other it points to their backgrounds which reveal themselves to be beyond all conjecture and, therefore, to have a "Nirvana-like" character. The Symbolist work of art is an expression of these "intersections."⁵

MacDonald's oeuvre is not only contemporaneous with the principal period of Symbolism. In all essential traits it bears witness to the structure of Symbolist art. This is not only noticeable in his partiality for topics such as love, death, dream and ideal. It appears also in his use of Symbolist motifs, such as colour symbolism, and Symbolist techniques, such as a fondness for parable-structure and for suggesting but withholding. Most importantly, it displays features of Symbolist mentality in depicting the experience of darkness and the suggestion of a "Nirvanian" promise. The latter is grounded in Swedenborgian mysticism. *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, perhaps MacDonald's most consummately conceived novel, is an impressive example.

Wilfrid Cumbermede looks like an autobiographical *Bildungsroman* (Hein 217), but this is in the somewhat unusual sense of the integration of existential experiences into the innermost being of the protagonist. Wilfrid, the orphaned heir of an old aristocratic family, grows up under the tutelage of his uncle, a highly educated but unobtrusive personality. His education enables him to feel a deep closeness to nature, which is the reason for his particular religious ideas and for his role as an ideological outsider. The presence of heirlooms in the old house of his ancestors, and some accidental information—which can be legally [73] established—about the history of his family, enable him to recognise his social identity. His uncle, whose interests lay in essential human verities, had not informed him of this. Though Wilfrid could claim his inheritance, this has become unimportant to him. For, during his youth, he has lost everything which was dear to him: his beloved Mary, his friend Charley, even, for some time, his horse and the heirloom by which he identifies himself. Whether he will be able, or even willing, to win back Mary is not answered at the end of the novel.

Though romantic in regard to topic and motifs, this novel depicts the social relationships and codes of behaviour of its time. But that does not define the book. The description of the phenomena in question serves only as the means by which the essential message is conveyed. In the same way, Ensor's *Les Médecins* is not a group portrait but something altogether different, and Watt's (or Rossetti's) painting *Paolo a Francesca* represents a feeling about life and not just a story about two beautiful young people.

Wilfrid Cumbermede is about the intersection of the impenetrable labyrinthine visible world and the fugitive vision of the ideal, including its scattered traces and its signposts, although these may not be easily recognised.

The Impenetrable Labyrinthine World and the Drift into Darkness

“There will be rain before morning. It is late Autumn and most of the crops are gathered in. A bluish fog is rising from the lower meadows. As I look I grow cold.” (3). These sentences from the narrator's introduction give a presentiment of the atmosphere of the novel. The motifs in the following chapters of the storm and the pendulum, connected with that of the Apocalyptic Rider (“the Prince of the Power of the Air,” 26) define it more closely. It is the apocalyptic atmosphere of a world whose time is running out. The figures in the novel are lonely. They are surrounded by characteristic landscapes which are landscapes of the mind. The characters are a sort of

swimming islands (or airships) which float into the dark and have berthed at these landscapes. MacDonald's "external" landscapes mirror the characters' landscapes of the mind so closely that the match seems inevitable and irreversible. The following passage may clarify this:

I remember that night so well! I can recall it now with a calmness equal to its own. Indeed in my memory it seems to belong to my mind as much as to the outer world; or rather the night filled both, forming the space in which my thoughts moved . . . I wandered in the grass until midnight was long by, feeling as quietly and peacefully at home as if my head had been on the pillow and my soul out in a lovely dream of cool delight . . . But ah! I little thought to what a dungeon of gloom this lovely night was the jasmine-grown porch! (277-78)

How such landscapes of the mind easily drift into darkness is shown even more clearly in the following passage: [74]

crossing a field or two by jumping the stiles, we entered the loveliest lane I had ever seen. It was so narrow that there was just room for horses to pass each other; and covered with the greenest sward, rarely trodden. It ran through the midst of a wilderness of tall hazels. They stood up on both sides of it, straight and trim as walls, high above our heads as we sat on our horses; and the lane was so serpentine that we could never see further than a few yards ahead . . . It ceased at length at a small double-leaved gate of iron, to which we tied our horses before entering the churchyard. But instead of a neat burial place, which the whole approach would have given us to expect, we found a desert. The grass was of extraordinary coarseness, and mingled with quantities of vile-looking weeds. Several of the graves had not even a spot of green upon them, but were mere heaps of yellow earth in huge lumps, mixed with large stones . . . One lay open . . . and completed the desolation. The church was nearly square—small but shapeless . . . the roof waved and broken. . . Except a few lichens, there was no mark of vegetation about it. Not a single ivy leaf grew upon its spotted and wasted walls. It gave a hopeless pagan expression to the whole landscape. (384-85)⁶

As a final example, Wilfrid's dream of death shows, less coded, the meaning of the landscape of the mind, because, in general, the characters'

dreams super-elevate the events of the novel. Looking for his lost love, meaningfully called Athanasia, the dreamer roams through a spacious palace. At last, lured by an odour like music, he gets into a little chapel (the chapel of Moldwarp Hall) which stretches out before him as he crosses it. When he reaches the eastern end of the building, a large veiled figure expects him. "I am Death—dost thou not know me?" (340). Wilfrid expects to be lead into the open, but beyond a huge iron door steps and passages lead down, ending finally in front of a second door. When this is pushed open the dreamer has the vision of a great river beyond which a glorious landscape reveals itself, the sun is about to rise. The menacing figure turns towards him and he recognises the features of his beloved Athanasia. But when he wants to follow her through the door she sadly closes it in his face. This image appears again at the end of *Lilith*. It is an old motif from the Orphic tradition well-expressed by Dino Buzzati: "'May I enter?' 'No, but you are living.' 'And what about you?' 'Vanished.''" (50).

The two last examples show the landscape of the mind as labyrinth. The motif occurs so frequently in the novel that it cannot be overlooked. As a child, Wilfrid, at one time, is lost in the passages and the leads of the roof of Moldwarp Hall (his own possession, although he does not know this); during his adolescence in Switzerland the motif appears as both the winding passage of an ice-cave, where he (symbolically) encounters death, and the waste land of rocks between the Jungfrau and the Eiger, where he hardly escapes a fall into the [75] abyss; then it is the library of Moldwarp Hall, so disorganised as to be a maze.⁷ The winding path through the hazel thicket to Umberden church, with its broken roof and its desolate graveyard is followed several times in the novel. In its apocalyptic atmosphere it is an image of deep hopelessness and disillusionment, not least in relation to the Christianity of the established churches.

One of Wilfrid's dream-encounters with his beloved Athanasia connects the ice cave (which is related significantly to the hazel maze) with the picture of being lost by floating away: "on its last billow she floated away through the winding passage of the cave. I sought to follow her, but could not" (470).⁸ The labyrinth suggests panic, floating away, hopelessness. Like Paolo and Francesca, Wilfrid and Mary are the victims of a fateful drift, but unlike Dante's lovers they cannot embrace in the realms of death: they are driven apart.

The atmosphere of getting lost in the dark seeps into MacDonald's later works, especially into *The Princess and Curdie* and *Lilith*. But whereas

Late Modernism interprets the non-transparency of the world as the absence of every hope, a dream-like promise becomes evident in MacDonald's oeuvre, which is therefore in total agreement with the ideas of Symbolism.

Without being insistent, the narrator, by delicate hints, points to the ambivalent character of the labyrinth. On the one hand it means danger, the danger of being lost, of never finding one's way back; on the other it means insight, for whoever succeeds in finding the centre encounters truth.⁹ In the ice-cave Wilfrid recognises that Charley and Clara are lovers. Alone in the stony waste of the mountain, with precipices all around, "something divine" awakens in him "to outface the desolation" (147). It manifests again in Umberden church when Wilfrid finds his true identity with the help of the church registry, and then in the hazel labyrinth where—as it were in the maze of the world—he encounters the gentle Christ in the shape of his white mare Lilith (509).

White Things

In the dark atmosphere of *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, white things stand out. The first are the dazzling white of his great-great-grandmother's bed curtains and her old-fashioned bonnet (15-16). Then it is Clara, "a white thing" (84) the sweetheart of his youth (later she will radiate an ambivalent fascination, fateful for Charley Osborne). But it is the vision of the white mountain, the Jungfrau, seen through "clouds . . . broken into a mighty window," that makes Wilfrid look at the Sublime and experience the Numinous:

a God-like vision [appeared] in clouds as white as its own whiteness The vision vanishes from the words as it vanished from the bewildered eyes. But from the mind it glorified, it has never vanished. I have *been* more ever since that sight. To have beheld a truth is an apotheosis. (135-36)

[76]

The encounter has the character of an initiation, which is reinforced by the enigmatic episode in which Wilfrid is dressed up as a girl. This takes place in a lonely inn. Through a window "the great Jungfrau" looks in while two women, mother and daughter, encouraged by the rain-drenched Wilfrid's pale face, first put on him the daughter's spare garments, then the embroidered velvet and silver collar of the local dress, with the pendant chains and all. That this is a ritual is clearly suggested by the repetition of the Jungfrau-window motif of revelation. and by the expressions: "Let us finish what we

have begun” (before the collar is put in place) and “you’ve almost finished your work” (before Wilfrid’s hair is dressed (151-52). What this initiation really means belongs to an area of hinting and withholding (but see below).

Wilfrid’s beloved, Mary Osborne, is pale to whiteness: “a complexion without spot. It was very fair and delicate, with little more colour in it than the white rose, which but the faintest warmth redeems from dead whiteness” (303). Her face looks “pallid” when they meet silently for the last time.¹⁰

God appears to Wilfrid a second time as the gentle and silent sufferer, Lilith. Driven to rage by attacks upon himself and Lilith by his enemy Brotherton, Wilfrid has overpowered him and is strangling him when:

Glancing up without relaxing my hold, I saw the white head of Lilith close to mine. Was it the whiteness—was it the calmness of the creature?—I cannot pretend to account for the fact, but the same instant before my mind’s eye rose the vision of one standing speechless before his accusers, bearing on his form the mark of ruthless blows. I did not then remember that just before I came out I had been gazing . . . upon an *Ecce Homo* of Albert Dürer’s that hung in my room. Immediately my heart awoke within me. (509)

The white pictures of the novel are the expressions of a colour mysticism which, by immediate awareness, connects the sensory impression of the light-colour, white, with the metaphysical dimension. Traces of this will remain in the consciousness—a phenomenon we may observe in both the art and the poetry of Symbolism. It shows itself in the series of paintings which Rossetti called “white paintings.” He regarded his own *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1848-49) as the first of this series. Whistler’s *The White Girl* (1861-62) moves away from the religious to an ambiguous, erotic allusion. His *The Little White Girl: Symphony in White Number 2* (1864), a further key work of British Symbolism, inspired A. C. Swinburne to write the poem “Before the Mirror” (which, written on golden paper, was inserted into the picture’s frame). Its last stanza reads: “Face fallen and white throat lifted / With sleepless eye / She sees old loves that drifted, / She knew not why, / Old loves and faded fears / Float down a stream that hears / The flowing of all men’s tears beneath the sky.”¹¹ [77]

A counterpoint to *Ecce Ancilla Domini* in regards content is Rossetti’s *Lady Lilith* (1868). Here the colour white becomes the agent of Lilith’s powers of seduction. It was famous even before it was finished, and is

likely to have been seen in Rossetti's studio by MacDonald.

The ambiguity of the light-colour white may also be verified in the poetry of the Russian symbolists quoted by Knigge. Solovyov's lines "We live as thy white thoughts, at the stealthy paths of the soul" (136) show the pure ideal; Blok's lines show the going-cold of beauty: "On the white, cold snow he killed his heart, and he believed he walked with her in a meadow among white lilies" (239).

In the broad array of "white things" in European Symbolism during the second half of the nineteenth century, Wilfrid's white mare Lilith is unique as a symbol of Christ. But it is a displeasing symbol, for, in spite of the positive connotations, the whiteness radiates something cold and menacing. A goddess in the shape of a white mare brings fertility to a kingdom in Irish and Gaulish legends. But fertility is not a topic in *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, for it cannot be overlooked that all protagonists in the novel—the good as well as the bad—remain childless and are the last representatives of their families. This is stressed by the symbols of "The Frozen Stream" (ch. 21) and the sword between the two lovers asleep unaware of each other (342-44), underlined in the latter case when Wilfrid returns her ring to Mary (358-59).

Wilfrid's horse has menacing traits which lead back to the White Horse of Revelations, the horse of the Judge:

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war . . . And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God . . . And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations. (19.11-21)

An ancient sword of an ancestor is Wilfrid's most treasured heirloom. Without any doubt, with these attributes of white horse and sword, he is supposed to be understood as the "Judge." But because his character is gentle and quietistic, it does not in any way correspond to the potential of violence of the quotation.

Here, MacDonald's closeness to Swedenborg's philosophy and mysticism offers a possibility of interpretation. Swedenborg wrote a short study on the above passage in Revelations which was published posthumously in 1832. There he expounds that the rider is the Word of God, not in the literal but in the figurative sense. The horse is Reason which bears the rider. The unity of both means that the Word of God is to be understood in

its spiritual or inner sense: “The Word in its inner sense is Glory.” (53). This is “the real true doctrine of the Church.” It “is the teaching both of the love to the Lord and of loving-kindness toward fellow men” (53). Here, finally, we reach an adequate understanding of [78] the white horse Lilith in *Wilfrid Cumbermede*: Wilfrid has been educated by his uncle to be a Christian who is able to renounce every form of emotional and mental violence. Before the uncle dies, he gives Lilith to Wilfrid, and she accompanies him during the most problematic and dangerous periods of his life, standing by him as what Novalis would call his “tutelary spirit.” Wilfrid is the judge by being an example of kindness—by nothing else. This is stressed even more by the ancestral sword, which is split and can never be used again.

The Animal-Men

The Princess and Curdie, drafted at about the same time as *Wilfrid Cumbermede* was written, takes up the same topics, but on a more theoretical, parable-like level. It depicts man’s journey through the waste lands and labyrinths of the world. Some of the more important symbols common to both books are the labyrinths, the mountain regions, the ambiguity of the light-colour white, and the noble descent of the main characters, which remains (socially) unimportant for a great part of the stories until there is, as it were, an heraldic appearance brought about by their animal companions (Curdie’s Lina and Wilfrid’s Lilith). These animal figures are their emanations. Emanations in animal form are typical of Symbolist art, as with the wolf-mask on the floor in Whistler’s *White Girl* or the huge black horse in Millais’ *Sir Isumbras at the Ford* (1857).

There is a sharp distinction between these heraldically conceived man-animal symbioses and the animal-men who appear as a further common motif in both narratives. The animal-man wears the human being as a mask concealing the animal within. Drawing attention to the masking phenomenon is a central topic of Symbolism. In Belyi’s *Second Symphony*, the human mask is reduced to the elegant garments: “5. Out of a shop a fat pig jumped, with a snout-like nose and dressed in an elegant coat 6. It grunted as it spotted a fairy lady and leaped sluggishly into a coach” (Knigge, 202).

In the parable *The Princess and Curdie*, Curdie is able by a divinatory gift to perceive the animal nature behind the human mask. In *Wilfrid Cumbermede* the unmasking is mostly left to the human reader, only in the case of Mr Coningham the lawyer is the hidden nature named explicitly. The detailed descriptions here, connected with indirect

metaphorical hints, leave the reader with an uncanny feeling. Mr Coningham wants to help Wilfrid gain his inheritance. At the beginning of the novel the child Wilfrid, gazing out of his bedroom window, sees him as an apocalyptic rider, driven by the storm. When he enters the house, Wilfrid's vision of him is a frightening one:

The forehead was very projecting and the eyes very small, deep-set and sparkling. The mouth—I had almost said muzzle—was very projecting likewise, [79] and the lower jaw shot in front of the upper. When the man smiled the light was reflected from what seemed to my eyes an inordinate multitude of white teeth. His ears were narrow and long, and set very high upon his head. The hand . . . was white, but very large, and the thumb was exceedingly long. (27)

At the end of the novel Wilfrid describes him as an ape: "The old ape-face, which had lurked in my memory ever since the time I first saw him, came out so plainly that I started: the child had read his face aright!" (502).

The second figure characterised as an animal-man is Wilfrid's arch-enemy, Sir Geoffrey Brotherton, who unlawfully withholds the possession of Moldwarp Hall from him, steals his sword, nearly ruins his "soul-animal" Lilith, and finally marries his beloved Mary:

The upper part of his face was fine, the nose remarkably so, while the lower part was decidedly coarse, the chin too large, and the mouth having little form . . . His hands were very large, a pair of merely blanched plebeian fists, with thumbs much turned back, and altogether ungainly. He wore very tight gloves. (197)

When the reader connects this picture with his utterances: "bellowing" laughter (206), and "he roared" (364) it is not clear which aggressive, non-domesticated animal is alluded to.

The references to animal features connected with human ones, together with Brotherton's gloves (which suggest a whole chain of uncanny and menacing associations) do not point to any particular animal. And as regards to Coningham, is it really an ape the reader thinks of in trying to picture the man—or is it not more like a wolf? It would not agree with MacDonald's understanding of animals to use them, *qua* animals, for negative character studies. Does not Blake say in "Auguries of Innocence": "The Bleat, the Bark, Bellow & Roar / Are Waves that Beat on Heaven's Shore"?

What is really being described is the “monster.” According to Swedenborg’s metaphysics, which runs through the whole oeuvre of MacDonald, a de-evolution from human beings to devils becomes apparent in such cases as far as their physiognomy. Unlike biological evolution, such a development does not happen automatically but is the result of free and conscious decisions, without any concurrent perception of the process of inner transformation (much as with Dorian Gray’s invisible transformation in Oscar Wilde’s novel). Only a person who can see with the mind’s eye is able to distinguish, while still on earth, between future angels and devils. Wilfrid, as narrator of the autobiography, sharpens the awareness of his readers for the conception of a “mask” and enables them to catch a glimpse of the true, unveiled face. [80]

The “Nirvanian” Figure of Light

“Nothing is what it seems to be.” This sentence may be understood in two ways. It may mean that reality is more than its appearances: that the appearances point beyond themselves. It may also mean that the world of appearances is deceptive just because it appears, although there is nothing beyond it. Reality seems unrecognisable—but which reality? A reality existent beyond a certain frontier established by our senses? Or the material world as a reality which responds to our senses, but does not answer to our deeper understanding? These questions define the framework of Symbolism.

“[W]hatever is must seem,” the statement made by Mr Raven in *Lilith* (97) might be considered as the formula of MacDonald’s Symbolistic view. In the numerous reflections and echoes in the labyrinths of existence we are reached sometimes by the appearance of the Eternal in its appropriate “true” shape. Most often it manifests only as the last echo of a sound, or faintest glimpse of the “light which is always dawning.”

To be able to see these different phenomena in a more extended context, a higher vantage point is required: one like that which Wilfrid, as the author of the introduction, has reached in his later years: “he sees the farthest cloud of the sun-deserted east alive with a rosy hue. It is the prophecy of the sunset concerning the dawn. For the sun itself is ever a rising sun” (1-2). This is the vantage point—or, better, range of vision—of the angels who are looking everlastingly to the (symbolic) east, and which Wilfrid describes here using Swedenborgian terminology (*Wisdom* 129, 105 and 99).¹² That range of vision is not distracted by the paradoxical structural details of existence, it is in accordance with the. “Nirvanian” vision of Symbolism in general.

There is only one figure in the novel who is in the possession of that visionary power, the narrator's uncle and educator. Although Moldwarp Hall and The Moat belong to him (409) he has renounced both, for a true nobleman is not defined by such trivialities. By his insight into the many dimensions of nature and his ability to withhold his own personality, he enables Wilfrid to develop independently into a man of romantic ideals; whereas Wilfrid's friend Charley becomes the victim of the restrictive religious education imposed by his father, the Reverend Osborne.

Thus Wilfrid and Charley represent the two faces of the Symbolistic world-view. Wilfrid has grown up under the tutelage of his uncle, an unworldly man of true wisdom. That is what makes him capable of surviving the disastrous events of his life: he has learnt to look beyond the misleading phenomena. But Charley, whose highly sensitive nature is crushed by his father's dogmatising Christianity, [81] has to live through the horrible fears of both depersonalisation and of being left in darkness. He ends his life by suicide.

The two friends represent the intertwined destinies of a light and a dark soul-twin, who stand towards each other as image and mirror image. Perhaps MacDonald suggests a homosexual relationship between them; but this is not of much importance, since it belongs to the realm of superficial phenomena. For sexual identity only seems. This is the very mystery that Wilfrid has been initiated into in front of the Jungfrau framed as in a picture. It belongs in the realm of mere outward appearance—the realm where the Brotherton's believe themselves to be the heirs of Moldwarp Hall. Here, as is usual with MacDonald, the names carry immense significance.

The religion of the Reverend Osborne is also appearance, but deceptive appearance: it tells lies about God. Charley's apparent damnation and the finality of Wilfrid and Mary's separation are likewise deceptive appearances.

Although MacDonald sets the novel in the early Romantic period, it depicts intensely the mental and spiritual trends of the second half of the nineteenth century. With great intellectual complexity and artistic subtlety he fashions his material into a Symbolic play of masks which confronts both the protagonists and the reader with the question: "Behind the veil, forbidden, / Shut up from sight, / Love, is there sorrow hidden, / Is there delight?" (Swinburne, qtd. in *Symbolismus* 39).

Wilfrid Cumbermede could be connected with the phantom world of Ensor. On the one side the reader's attention gets entangled in a web of

dreams, on the other it is confronted with challenging appearances of clarity. The Jungfrau/ Virgin in dazzling white appears to Wilfrid as a vision he aspires to. Sir David appears as a hidden sage, who shows by his example that there are ways leading out of a frightening and misleading world and towards the vision. Here we may see a parallel to Ensor's confrontation of alarming mob and mask scenes with the pale white light of the other world.

The topic and motifs of Wilfrid Cumbermede conspicuously connect it not only with *The Princess and Curdie* and *Lilith*, but also with the other works of MacDonald's later period. As works which are exemplarily Symbolistic, they should be understood in the historic context of Symbolism. C. S. Lewis's categorising of MacDonald's oeuvre into works of realism and works of mythopoeia is redundant.

Endnotes

1. Clouds are of great importance in Russian Symbolist literature and painting. A painting *Clouds* by Wiktor Borisow-Musatov at the State Museum in St Petersburg could easily be a [82] representation of one of Charley's cloud-angels (see below). Nikolaj Reirch's *Sky Fight* at the same gallery also employs cloud symbolism.
2. See the famous autobiographical poem "Trisvidanja" by Vladimir Solovyov, the father of Russian Symbolism.
3. This paragraph is a free retranslation from German back into English of part of G. F. Watts' article "The Aims of Art," *Magazine of the Arts* (1888), 254.
4. Cf. Barbara Bryant, "G. F. Watts und die symbolistische Vision," *Symbolismus*, 72. Cf. also A. Kegler.
5. Both the "Nirvanian" and "intersection" aspects in Elisor's painting are expounded in Fraenger page 300.
6. Cf. Emily Brontë's *Withering Heights*, chapter 34. A church which preaches a revenging, not a forgiving, God is in process of decay. There are further interesting parallels to this book in *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, such as the contrast of the old and simple and the more fashionable manor houses, the religious bigotry, the unfulfilment of love, the tension between storm and silence, and so on.
7. For the library as labyrinth see K. Kegler.
8. The frequent use of the verb "to float" in the course of the narrative is remarkable. It describes an unregulated flowing or gliding. [83] [Note: image not available]
9. The original purpose of the labyrinth seems to have been the *Hieros Gamos* at its centre. One aspect of this is truth, prior to its being seen as an abstract notion.
10. Mary's paleness reminds one of Blake's "pale Virgin shrouded in snow" in "Ah! Sun-Flower" where the snow symbolises the body as a grave. In one of Wilfrid's dreams he sees Charley floating up to a rose bush and into a white rose while he himself floats to a red rose (175). On the colour white in *Lilith* see A. Kegler (31).

11. Christopher Newell (*Symbolismus* 116-17) suggests that Charles Dodgson may have seen this painting, with the poem, in 1865. The poem seems to be critically parodied in the valedictory poem to his *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871).
12. Cf. "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" "The Tyger."

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