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“Travelling Beastward”: An Ecocritical Reading of George MacDonald’s Fairy Tales

Björn Sundmark

Perhaps our highest poetry is the expression of our aspirations in the sympathetic forms of visible nature
(*A Dish of Orts* 320)

Horses ain’t got any ankles: they’re only pasterns
(*At the Back of the North Wind* 330)

Diamond, the young protagonist of *At the Back of the North Wind*, lives in the hayloft over the stables. He is separated from the wind and weather by old boards only. He is close to a harsh outside world and to animals: “the room . . . was always cold, except in summer when the sun took the matter into his own hands” (9); and when the boy lies in his bed he can “hear the horses under him munching away in the dark, or moving sleepily in their dreams” (10). As for his name, the boy’s connection to the natural world can hardly be made more explicit, suggestive as it is of both gemstone and animal. Now, personal names that deal with the natural realm are of course interesting in themselves—in, for instance, “The Golden Key” we encounter two others: Mossy and Tangle—but in Diamond’s case the name has an equalizing function too, for he has rather surprisingly been named after his father’s favourite horse. But the boy’s separation from the rest of the family in a cold hayloft, and his seeming animal name/status does not worry him the least: “Diamond is a great and good horse; and he sleeps right under me. He is Old Diamond, and I am Young Diamond; or, if you like it better . . . he’s Big Diamond, and I’m Little Diamond; and I don’t know which of us my father likes best” (17). No trace of speciesism here, either in the father or the son! Let me add that in this situation Diamond is addressing North Wind and the picture is complete: Diamond is a harmonious child of the elements and a natural being (in several senses of the word), who is able to cross the line between the human and the non-human.

As this example suggests, an ecocritical reading of George MacDonald can be rewarding. In this article I will explore some of the

possibilities such an approach has to offer. The idea is not to call into question other modes of interpretation—allegorical, Jungian, etc.—nor to reduce MacDonald’s marvellous narratives to ecological considerations. My aim is rather to add a “green” dimension to our understanding of MacDonald. This implies a foregrounding of, for instance, natural processes and setting, as well as exploring his use of ecological tropes, such as pastoral and apocalyptic.

MacDonald may seem an odd choice—a Christian, a fantasist, an otherworldly Victorian—to have a say about ecology, about man, nature, and animals. Other periods and genres connect more clearly with ecological concerns; and some writers of MacDonald’s generation, like Charles Kingsley in *The Water-Babies*, relate more directly to the environment and to scientific discourse about nature (Wood). I would argue, however, that it is as interesting (if not more so) to discover such aspects in a writer who is not regularly associated with ecological writing. Furthermore, a green reading of MacDonald deepens our understanding of his fiction, while it gives us a glimpse of how (some) Victorians regarded and responded to nature. Finally, such an endeavour provides a perspective on the ways in which the relationship between man and nature is expressed today.

MacDonald is often regarded as a mythopoeic writer (as in C. S. Lewis’s introduction to *Phantastes*) and a maker of symbols. However, the very instances of writing which can be read symbolically can often be read literally. This has to do with the nature of symbols. A symbol “throws together” what it is with what it represents. A sceptre is a stick, but at the same time a royal attribute; wielded by a king it has real power. And a cigar is a cigar, although it can also quite plausibly be symbolic of the phallic order or of capitalism or of time-consuming bureaucrats (in Michael Ende’s *Momo*). According to modern linguistic and semiotic theory, the connection is arbitrary—as in the cigar example—but this is not how real symbols are experienced when they “work” (and certainly not to MacDonald). Thus, symbols draw their strength from their ability to merge the real and the imaginary. This ties in with what Stephen Prickett says about MacDonald’s (and Coleridge’s) idea of a symbol as “essentially bifocal; its characteristic quality [being] that it belong[s] simultaneously to two different planes of existence” (“The Two Worlds of George MacDonald” 23). I believe, however, that the force of the symbol is diminished if its function as referent is over-emphasised: birds and forests and grandmothers should be allowed to be precisely birds and forests and grandmothers in MacDonald, at the same time as they express religious and/or psychological meanings. Hence, when Curdie

shoots the pigeon (*The Princess and Curdie* 181) it is certainly a deeply symbolic action, but not due to the allegorical or referential implications mainly, but because Curdie realises fully that he has killed another living being: “It was nothing but a pigeon, and why should he not kill a pigeon? But the fact was, not till this very moment had he known what a pigeon was” (181).¹ My aspiration, then, is to emphasise the literalness of the environment and natural images and tropes in MacDonald. While doing this, I should add that I am aware of the risk I am running (but trying to avoid) of merely constructing another grand (symbolic) narrative of “nature.”

At this point, the term “ecocriticism” warrants some justification.² According to Cheryll Glotfelty, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xix). In other words, ecocriticism is not just about “nature writing,” but opens up all literature to ecocritical examination. Still, some kinds of literature hold a privileged place in the ecocritical canon—and the national preferences differ. In the United States ecocritics often seek inspiration in the transcendentalists of the 1840’s—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau—writers who celebrate nature, the life-force, and the American wilderness. In Great Britain, Green Studies (which is a term sometimes used instead of ecocriticism) tends to be more radical and less celebratory than the American variant. Here, a starting point has been the British Romanticism of the 1790’s. Beside these different backgrounds, the ecocritical approach is also coloured by different political and theoretical views, including feminist, neo-Marxist, Heideggerian and “deep ecologist” positions (Garrard 16-32). As this list suggests, ecocritics as a rule have a political and eco-ethical agenda. However, the foregrounding of ecological concerns and the tenet embraced by most ecocritics that nature is not just a social and linguistic construction but is an irreducible reality has invited criticism. Admittedly, if “nature” is seen as a given, the constructedness of human representations of nature may be obscured, and so “have the side-effect of disguising politics and . . . legitimating inequalities and injustices” (Barry 253). In my opinion, however, it is quite possible to keep these two attitudes to nature in creative tension. As for my own approach, I do not subscribe to any particular position, but will eclectically use various insights from the ecocritical toolbox.

One of the main issues in ecocritical writing is how animals are represented and what status they are awarded, especially in relation to human beings. In *At the Back of the North Wind* MacDonald, in numerous ways, crosses the “insuperable line,” that is, the categorisation in absolute terms of

human/animal. I have already briefly touched upon how Diamond through his name, status, and dwelling place is associated with animals. What is startling is that his “animality” is in no way described in derogatory terms. Diamond is not pictured as wayward or wild or primitive in any way. It is true that some of the other characters regard him as “silly,” having “a tile loose,” or as being a “God’s baby,” but this refers to his extreme selflessness, goodness and naïvete, not to any feral qualities. Indeed, when Diamond behaves like an animal, he is angelic. The natural state is to be good, it seems and a child-animal serves the purpose of illustrating this. Noble animals³ as well as noble savages⁴ and children (noble or not) hold a paradoxical function in our (and MacDonald’s) society and culture because they embody virtues that civilization/culture/religion needs (but lacks), while being excluded from that society precisely because they are not civilized. In fact animals and children (or savages) are supposedly the antithesis to what it is to be human (that is, not animal) or civilized (that is, not child).

But MacDonald’s championing of the wild child (albeit a meek wild child) and of animals is unusual because Diamond (boy) and Diamond (horse) are not one-dimensional, but held up as all-round examples, shown again and again to function perfectly socially as well as in work situations. Young Diamond’s increasing isolation by the end of the book seems to belie this point, but the fact is that he is not being excluded by his peers or parents because of his wild temperament (which would be the negative side of the savage child), but because he is ill and dying and because he is “too good for this world.” Diamond is hyper-civilised in his childishness, animality, and proximity to death.

Animals (represented by the horse Diamond) are essentially of the same order as human beings in *At the Back of the North Wind*. They communicate, they are moral beings, and they are in possession of souls. The silent communication between Old Diamond and his “young godson” is flawless and two-way: when riding, the boy reflects, “in order to guide the horse, he had to obey the horse first” (62). Later, he actually overhears and understands Old Diamond and Ruby when they are quarrelling. It is also clear from this equine dispute that at least some horses have a lot of moral fibre. Old Diamond is enraged with Ruby, who is not pulling his weight. Interestingly, Ruby turns out not to be a real horse, but an angel, thus proving Young Diamond’s view (as revealed when talking to Mr. Raymond) that horses can go to heaven:

“Don’t you think he will go to heaven, sir?”

“That I don’t know anything about,” said Mr. Raymond. “I confess I should be glad to think so,” he added, smiling thoughtfully.

“I’m sure he’ll get to the back of the north wind, anyhow,” said Diamond to himself; but he had learned to be very careful of saying such things aloud. (294)

MacDonald himself had learnt what it cost to express such views; it had lost him his position as congregational minister at Arundel. Animals were not supposed to be saved. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, by contrast, they are companion souls, workmates and family.

It is of course tempting to see MacDonald’s animal portrait of Old Diamond as an example of the pathetic fallacy of reading human qualities into the non-human; in other words, a kind of colonisation of the animal world by the human. But since we experience Old Diamond’s animal-humanity largely through (and beside) Diamond’s human-animality—a “silly,” pathetic boy—one could argue that the fallacy becomes “doubly pathetic” and implodes. The doubling of Diamond (boy/horse) poses us with a problem—“what is human”?—rather than an answer, such as “humans are like animals,” or “animals are like humans.”

A related way of regarding Old Diamond would be to see him as merely referential, that is, emblematic or symbolic. But that makes no sense. Old Diamond is described in so much detail and in such hum-drum circumstances, and his personality is so pronounced that symbolism recedes before the onslaught of realism. After all, this is a cockney-speaking, hard-working horse, who calls a spade a spade, and a pastern for what it is! This is not to say that MacDonald gives a correct view of animal nature, or that he even attempts to do so; as the narrator puts it: “I won’t vouch for what an old horse is thinking, for it is very difficult to find out what any old horse is thinking” (176). The salient point is that he awards animals the same rights and status as human beings—almost. The rights are similar in kind, not in degree. MacDonald’s world—and otherworld—is hierarchically structured. There are those who are better and those who are worse. This applies to both human beings and animals. And animals, although in possession of a soul, are meant to serve man, even in the afterlife. Ruby explains this to Diamond:

“There’s young Diamond listening to all we’re saying; and he knows well enough there are horses in heaven for angels to ride upon, as well as other animals, lions and eagles and bulls, in more important situations. The horses the angels ride, must be

angel horses, else the angels couldn't ride upon them. Well, I'm one of them." (332)

The idea that animals are somehow lesser men is more developed in *The Princess and Curdie*. Here, too, we find the idea that animals can become human, and humans can become animals. The hideous creatures that follow Curdie on his mission to Gwyntystorm are human beings who have metamorphosed because of bad deeds in the past, such as Ballbody who plausibly (in Curdie's opinion) has once been "a gluttonous alderman whom nature had treated homeopathically" (309). Through their faithful service to Curdie and the Princess, the "Uglies" make penance of their own volition. Lina, the first and foremost of the creatures, is rewarded by being allowed to be burned to dust in the fire of roses. As for the other creatures they are sent back to "their place" by the king after the battle, taking with them the seven worst villains, and never heard of again. A qualified guess is that the seven villains will metamorphose into new creatures, while the repentant servant-creatures have begun the long and arduous journey towards humanity and/or soul-healing.

With Curdie there is also the question of hands. Curdie is given the gift of recognizing the beast in man, by holding a man's hand. As the princess tells Curdie, "it is always what they do, whether in their minds or their bodies, that makes men go down to be less than men, that is, beasts, the change always comes first in their hands" (220). The idea is that although outward resemblance may be human, the inner quality will out; and Curdie, having held his own hands in the rose-fire, will know what kind of man-beast he is dealing with.

What should one make of MacDonald's conception of "beast" and "creature" in the *The Princess and Curdie*? Well, one interesting point is that he avoids using the word *animal*, which on the whole has positive connotations, whereas "beast" and "creature" are negatively charged. It is worth noting too that the "creatures" are not true animals at all, but fallen men whose form is, in consequence, weird and un-natural. Indeed, the beast-and-creature-vocabulary has more to do with moral qualities—in animals as well as humans—than with intra-species status. All the same, "humans" as a class are per definition higher in MacDonald's scheme; the general hierarchy between human and animal is clearly fixated in *The Princess and Curdie*. At the same time, the hierarchy is open and fluid. Individuals of any ilk can rise or fall, and occupy different positions in the hierarchy. No doubt the hideous creature Lina is higher in the heavenly order by the end of the book than the

traitorous human Lord Chamberlain.⁵

When *The Princess and Curdie* is examined closely, one wonders where MacDonald’s real loyalty was—with mankind or with “animalkind”? The battle is such an instance. When the moment of truth has come, Curdie and company are hard put to find any human beings loyal to the king. So when they set out to do battle there is just a handful of human beings in the ranks: the king, Curdie, little Irene, a colonel, a page, Derba the baker’s wife, and the girl Barbara. Curdie’s father, Peter, joins later. Instead, the “Uglies” do most of the soldiering, later reinforced by “a feathered multitude” of pigeons who have been summoned by the Princess. One way of describing the outcome of the battle would be to say that the creatures/animals won over the humans. The king and Curdie and the divine presence of the Princess are victorious, but most of the fighting (a “lion’s share,” perhaps) has been performed by the animals.

The ending of *The Princess and Curdie* is also highly illuminating. Irene and Curdie marry and become king and queen, but they do not beget any children. When they die a new king is chosen. In his greed he undermines the city in his hunt for gold:

One day at noon, when life was at its highest, the whole city fell with a roaring crash. The cries of men and the shrieks of women went up with its dust and there was a great silence.

Where the mighty rock once towered, crowded with homes and crowned with a palace, now rushes and raves a stone-obstructed rapid of the river. All around spreads a wilderness of deer, and the very name of Gwyntystorm has ceased from the lips of men. (342)

This is apocalyptic—both in a theological and ecological sense. Human civilization ultimately bears no fruit. When not even the best produce offspring (Curdie and Irene), and leaders and followers alike look only to profit, civilization and mankind is doomed. Apocalypse and extinction—but for man only: animals live on in “a wilderness of deer;” creation is unscathed. It strikes a deeply troubling endnote, or pause—“a great silence.” Here, the “silent spring” (to borrow the title of Rachel Carson’s seminal book) is not the silence of birds killed by pollution, but human silence—the ecological disaster that equals termination. Or would it be a disaster? And would MacDonald have seen it as a disaster? As deep ecologists would have it, the earth could do with a considerably smaller human population in order to extend areas of wilderness. “All around spreads a wilderness of deer” sounds like an attractive

alternative from these premises. The ending seems to suggest that nature is superior to culture, that nature is of another magnitude altogether, or at the very least that it has much longer duration than human history.

This is true of the beginning of the world as well. Human history is framed by silence evocative of un-peopled time: “an everlasting stillness” in the beginning and a “great silence” at the close. Indeed, *The Princess and Curdie* is a mini-history of the world, from Genesis to Apocalypse, but curiously adapted to Victorian science, not least the discovery of “geological time” which revealed how brief, relatively, human history is in comparison to the aeons that predate it (and will postdate it). MacDonald’s narrative begins with a lengthy and poetic, but essentially scientific description of the geological formation of mountains. Then animals come and live on the mountainsides: “creatures scampering over and burrowing in it, and the birds building their nests upon it, and the trees growing out of its sides, like hair to clothe it” (174). Finally, human beings arrive on the scene “to see what they can find there. With pickaxe and spade and crowbar, with boring chisel and blasting powder . . .” (175). Human industry and civilisation inevitably change the face of the earth, affect nature violently and noisily.

In *The Princess and Curdie* we encounter apocalyptic writing which wavers between a comic and tragic vision. Agency is certainly allowed room (Curdie, Lina, etc.), and evil is conceived of as error rather than as guilt; few are actually killed or victimised. All of this points in the direction of comic apocalypse. At the same time the battle between good and evil and the destruction of Gwyntystorm have the ring of millenarianism (or tragic apocalypse). It is also interesting that the last battle is not really decisive since greed and wickedness persist and that the real end is put on hold. One senses a genre conflict between apocalyptic writing which demands that a new heavenly order should follow, and the strictures of the fairy tale, which demand gratification in this world (not beyond) by rewarding the heroes with status elevation, such as marriage and kingship. However, the tension created in this way is not necessarily bad. The ending is curiously satisfying (as I see it) precisely because of the differing narrative (and theological) expectations that are made to lock with each other.

Both apocalyptic and pastoral tropes are central to ecocriticism and to our constructions of nature. But where apocalypse is about last things and the end of the world as we know it, either in environmentalist or in eschatological terms, pastoral is concerned with beginnings, or rather, the notion of a better, more natural way of being in and with nature. This seems to be true whether

one refers to Classical pastoral (as in Theocritus’s *Idylls*), Romantic pastoral (as in Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*) or American pastoral (as in Thoreau’s *Walden*). Garrard notes, “[a]t the root of pastoral is the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies” (56).

Pastoral implies a contrast between urban and countryside, between culture and nature. MacDonald’s fairy tales are pastorals in that sense. We have already seen how the city of Gwyntystorm compares unfavourably with the countryside and with country people in *The Princess and Curdie*. And on the first page of *The Princess and the Goblin* the reader learns that the princess was sent “to be brought up by country people in a large house, half castle, half farmhouse” (5). Even when no contrast is made explicit, MacDonald’s fairy tales employ the conventional pastoral setting of fairy tales. A palace must have a wood near it to be more than a “house” (“Little Daylight”)⁶, and Mossy (in “The Golden Key”) lives near “the forest which fringed the outskirts of Fairyland” (121). The castle in “The Light Princess” is near a lake. Such examples could be multiplied.

One could argue that the literary fairy tale itself is a pastoral genre in essence, since its narrative universe represents a retreat to a more archaic or natural state than that of its intended readers. Hence the forests and animals and archaic human societies that constitute fairyland. In the Romantic Märchen tradition, there is certainly a nostalgic looking back to a more natural state, but I believe too that a case could be made that in many oral traditional storytelling events a similar (pastoral) contrast is established between the narrative universe of the fairy tale and that of the intended audience.⁷

The idea of the fairy tale as pastoral is linked to the notion that the fairy tale is a natural genre and therefore affective. This view is developed by MacDonald in “The Fantastic Imagination”: “Nature is mood-engendering, thought-provoking: such ought the sonata, such ought the fairytale to be” (9). By employing the genre of the fairy tale and pastoral tropes, stories approximate nature. They are natural, and like nature they affect its “readers.” As U. C. Knoepfelmacher has pointed out, the three fairy tales inserted in MacDonald’s 1864 novel *Adela Cathcart* (“The Light Princess,” “The Shadows,” and “The Giant’s Heart”) are told by the narrator, Mr. Smith, in order “to rouse Adela from a static he finds ‘difficult to define.’ Her soul, he believes, is asleep” (13)—fairy tales are a “natural” tonic, in other words.

Nature’s ability to affect human beings is developed in some of MacDonald’s fairy tales. “Little Daylight,” for example, is described as “a

creature of the elements” (159), and the account of her almost symbiotic relationship with the different phases of the moon shows her total relatedness to nature:

When the moon was at the full, she was in glorious spirits, and as beautiful as it was possible for a child of her age to be. But as the moon waned, she faded, until she was wan and withered like the poorest, sickliest child you might come upon in the streets of a great city in the arms of a homeless mother.⁸
(152)

According to Gunther “these oppositions are placed in the context of daily and seasonal flux, the ebb and flow of the natural rhythms which ultimately control and transcend them” (110).

Although her physical condition is subjected to the phases of the moon Little Daylight does not try to evade the moon’s influence. Instead of relying on medicine and the comforts of the palace, or indeed the company of other human beings, she takes up her lone abode in a “great open glade, covered with the greenest and softest grass” (153). In this place she has a “little rustic house built for her.” However, she takes to leaving even this place when the moon is waning, “retreating further into the wood.” In nature is solace. Yet nature, too, is a destructive force when there is no balance, in this case between nature’s nocturnal and diurnal aspects. Through the machinations of the evil fairy the influence of the moon is allowed free rein with the princess. When the moon is full, she is beautiful, brimming with life; when the moon is “all but gone,” she has the appearance of an old crone close to death. The sun can exert no counter-influence since she has been spelled to sleep in the daytime and is unable to see the sun (hence the name “Little Daylight”—yet another “nature name” in MacDonald’s fairy-tale oeuvre). The prince’s kiss eventually breaks the spell, however, and gives her access to both night and day: “is that the sun coming?” are the final words of the story (164). The kiss also reinstates her in the natural life cycle of aging, waking/sleeping and human community. Interestingly, too, the prince’s kiss in MacDonald is not just a sign of awakening sexuality; it is given to the princess when she is in her old crone embodiment, thus showing acceptance of youth and age, day and night, eros and agape—that is, nature (not least human nature) in its totality.

If “Little Daylight” demonstrates, for better and worse, a human being’s utter dependence and relatedness to nature, in “The Light Princess” MacDonald explores what would happen if a person is separated from nature

and the natural order. The Light Princess, we learn, has no gravity. Again an evil witch is to blame. In any case, lack of gravity implies that she is not properly connected to the world; she risks floating away into the blue sky. What is worse, this means that she is unable to form any attachments to other people. She is unable to relate to other human beings. For instance, she cannot “fall in love” since she is unable to fall, either literally or metaphorically. Not that this matters to her in her buoyant state; she is cheerful enough due to her lack of weight. In fact she laughs too much, mindless that her laugh is missing something—“the possibility of sorrow” (24).

To all appearances, the Light Princess seems to be unclassifiable, unnatural, “a fifth imponderable body, sharing all the other properties of the ponderable” (28). But one natural connection remains. In water, she has weight, and she delights in swimming. It is the only activity and state of being that makes her wish she had gravity, although why weight and swimming is pleasing to her is not explained. This remaining quality, however, connects her—albeit tenuously—to creation/nature/world, and is also what allows for a plot development where ultimately her humanity is restored: ability to grieve, feel anger, fall in love, be unselfish—and have weight!

The fairy tales analysed above illustrate points which are not scientifically accurate, in a conventional sense; rather, they explore deep and meaningful relations between the human and non-human and between self and other. If not scientifically logical, the connections are certainly eco-logical.

Finally, let us turn to MacDonald’s most sustained investigation into the effect of nature and the environment on human beings: “The History of Photogen and Nycteris: A Day and Night Märchen.” Here MacDonald uses the witch Watho to perform a scientific experiment on a boy and a girl—an experiment, it may be added, which is carried out without the benefit of ethical considerations. The girl Nycteris, like Little Daylight, is bereft of sun, raised in the darkness of a subterranean chamber. Photogen, the boy, on the other hand, grows up with no knowledge of night and darkness. Unlike the other witches, Watho does not use magic to prevent the children from experiencing more than either day or night. This in some ways makes the whole situation more sinister. There is something of doctor Mengele over Watho’s scientific experimenting on live human beings. She is also a kind of Faustus figure with a desire “to know everything” regardless of human cost. Her malevolent nature is explained as her having “a wolf in her mind.” At the end of the story she fittingly turns herself into a werewolf in order to kill the children. Again, a wolf who is a wolf is no doubt all right (as wolves go) but for a human to

possess the animal nature of a wolf is “to go beastward.” As I have already discussed in the section on *The Princess and Curdie*, it is not only evil but unnatural to do so.

Watho’s experiment fails, because both children manage to circumvent the daily/nightly routines and are themselves changed in the process. Watho realises her failure when Photogen loses his health (because he cannot face darkness): “ill indeed! After all she had done to saturate him with the life of the system, with the solar might itself!” (330). Watho starts to torment him, stinging him with an arrow and forcing him to lie in the darkness he cannot bear. Foiled in her plans she decides to kill Nycteris too: “The witch was like a sick child weary of his toy: she would pull her to pieces, and see how she liked it. She would set her in the sun, and see her die, like a jelly from the salt ocean cast out on a hot rock” (332). If her previous experiments have been inhuman, she is now plainly evil and bent on destruction. But this scheme fails too, because Nycteris and Photogen have learned something from their previous forays into the unknown, and from each other. United they are able to defeat and kill Watho.

Watho represents the sterility of a science which uses others as objects and which cuts up the totality of experience and creation in separate parts. She severs masculinity, light, knowledge, the outdoors and physical prowess from femininity, darkness, soulfulness, interiority, and musicality. Thereby she aspires, presumably, to cultivate in a pure form, certain qualities, such as health. The separation is forced and unnatural, however, and just like in the previous short stories discussed, de-natured nature has a way of returning with a vengeance. Nature becomes numinous, as when Photogen experiences his first sunset:

The moment the sun began to sink among the spikes and saw-edges, with a kind of a sudden flap at his heart a fear inexplicable laid hold of the youth; and as he had never felt anything of the kind before, the very fear itself terrified him. As the sun sank, it rose like the shadow of the world, and grew deeper and deeper. (319)

Or when Nycteris is caught unawares by sunrise:

Yes! Yes! It was coming death! She knew it, for it was coming upon her also! She felt it coming! What was she about to grow into? . . . Anyhow it must be death; for all her strength was going out of her, while all around her was growing so light she could not bear it! She must be blind soon! Would she be blind or

dead first? (327)

Both Photogen and Nycteris are handicapped vis-à-vis nature (or at least severely ecologically challenged). They are utterly unprepared for such aspects of nature that Watho has shielded them from. Nycteris is unaware even of gender, which is clear from her first conversation with Photogen: “We are both girls—are we not? . . . No, of course!—You cannot be a girl: girls are not afraid—without reason” (325). To make sense of their new-found world of opposites they have to re-assemble the world from bits they do not even know exist. For one of the themes of this story surely is that dualities must be embraced, and that synthesis can only be attained through the productive clash of thesis and antithesis. Moreover, opposites attract and are complementary: day-boy needs night-girl. This is the lesson that cannot be learnt by sterile science, by Watho. It can only be learnt through firsthand experience of nature in all its aspects.

The very failure of Watho’s experiment makes it all the more interesting. If there had been no such thing as dualities or oppositions, the conjunction of the Photogen and Nycteris would have come to naught. If raising Nycteris in darkness had been inconsequential, her near-mystical experience of the moonlit garden would have been meaningless. For Nycteris the moon appears as “the mother of all lamps” and she sees what “many men are too wise to see” (313). Moreover, the air is “alive with motion,” and the river is “alive,” making her wonder “if what was brought into her rooms had been killed that she might drink it” (317). Thus, her nightly predicament has not “benighted her,” rather it has sharpened her perceptions beyond the ordinary. She can appreciate nature in ways that people normally do not do. The horrible situation she is in actually helps her realize that “life was a mighty bliss, and they had scraped hers to the bare bone!” (314). Nycteris would not have made this existential realisation, without Watho’s experiment.

Scientists/witches like Watho attempt to know nature, but are in error: “human science is but the backward undoing of the tapestry-web of God’s science” (*Unspoken Sermons* 3, 62-3). Instead MacDonald’s art is to present nature in a natural form, that is, in the form of the fairy tale. The cut-up, labelled, specimen means nothing; the flower is everything: “To know a primrose is a higher thing than to know all the botany of it” (*Unspoken Sermons* 2, 236). MacDonald does not contradict science, nor does he press a theistic interpretation onto his readers. In fact, allegorising too would come close to an “undoing the tapestry” which would be quite alien to MacDonald. Rather he replaces anthropocentric science with an ecological perspective

in which nature and its “sympathetic forms” come first, whether religious/fantastic or scientific/rational. I find myself in basic agreement with John Pridmore when he writes that “the discourse which thus speaks of nature has its own authenticity and autonomy—The theistic and non-theistic accounts of nature are neither incompatible nor is the one to be reduced to the other.”

The Victorian period was a time in which the relationship between human and non-human was being re-negotiated under the pressure of science. One of the architects behind this negotiation is MacDonald. His fairy tales remain important “architexts”—they remain open to both secular and religious interpretation and provide a new, less anthropocentric perspective. Thereby MacDonald’s fairy tales point to ways in which nature is written today.

Endnotes

1. According to Colin Manlove, “what MacDonald is after here is mystic knowledge: for him to know a thing aright is not to regard it from the distance of selfhood, but to become imaginatively identified with it, even to feel one’s way into its being” (63). But as I see it, this is as much part of MacDonald’s realism as his fantasy or “mysticism”. As Stephen Prickett has remarked (and before him Chesterton in the same vein): “some of the very elements that would seem to a modern reader to be most typical of MacDonald’s ‘fantasy’ writing are in fact intended to be read in terms of ‘realism’” (“Poetics of Realism” 87).
2. The term was first used in 1978 in the United States but did not gain widespread use until a Western Literature Association conference in 1989.
3. Later examples of boys who are fostered into good beings by good animals are Mowgli (*The Jungle Books*) and Nils (*The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, 1907).
4. I am thinking of for example Robert Baden-Powell’s use of “good” examples from “primitive societies” in *Scouting for Boys* (1908).
5. The idea of evolving and devolving nature examined above refer to Darwin’s theories of natural selection. The princess refers to evolution when she asks, “[h]ave you ever heard what some philosophers say—that men were all animals once?” (219). MacDonald’s scientific training and persisting interest in the natural sciences informs his texts in various other ways as well (see for example Broome’s treatment of the “Scientific Basis of George MacDonald’s Dream-Frames”).
6. Adrian Gunther argues that ultimately the opposition between castle and wood in “Little Daylight” is transformed: “the natural and the social worlds are interdependent” (109).
7. This is certainly true of the oral storytellers of 18th and 19th century Europe. Even when they were not relating their stories to the ears and notebooks of collectors like the Brothers Grimm or Asmundsen and Moe, but told tales in authentic situations, it would be a mistake, I believe, to think that the audience in these cases would have been unaware of the cultural distance between themselves and the narrative universe

invoked by the storyteller.

8. Note, too, in this quote, the connection between ill health and “the great city”—again a pastoral trope.

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