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A Reading of *At the Back of the North Wind*

Colin Manlove

MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) was first serialised in *Good Words for the Young* under his own editorship, from October 1868 to November 1870. It was his first attempt at writing a full-length "fairy-story" for children, following on his shorter fairy tales—including "The Selfish Giant," "The Light Princess," and "The Golden Key"—written between 1862 and 1867, and published in *Dealings with the Fairies* (1867). *At the Back of the North Wind* is, in fact, longer than either of the *Princess* books that were to follow it, *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1882). It tells of the boy Diamond's life as a cabman's son in a poor area of mid-Victorian London, and of his meetings and adventures with a lady called North Wind; and it includes a separate fairy tale called "Little Daylight," two dream-stories, and several poems. Generally well received by the public, it has hardly been out of print since.

At the Back of the North Wind is MacDonald's only fantasy set mainly in this world. In *Phantastes* (1858), Anodos goes into Fairy Land and in *Lilith* Mr. Vane finds himself in the Region of the Seven Dimensions. In the *Princess* books we are in a fairy-tale realm of kings, princesses, and goblins; and the worlds of the shorter fairy tales are all full of fairies, witches, and giants. But Diamond's story nearly all happens either in Victorian London or in other parts of the world where North Wind takes him. By weaving together these two contexts, the one urban and organised, the other natural and violent, MacDonald is trying to show how both ordinary human life and the wild elemental forces of this world are joined in God. This mingling of order and disorder, structured city life and rough nature also suggests that our organised lives and our random-seeming sufferings are alike parts of a larger reality than we know. North Wind says that she does what she often does as part of a larger plan that she does not understand. In the city, the order made by man produces as much real chaos as North Wind only seems to, with "gentlemen" such as Diamond's father at the bottom of society, and children forced to work as crossing-sweepers: yet chance, if not man, may sometimes level things a little, as a shipwreck makes the rich Colemans poor, or a poor cab driver's son one day takes a Mr. Raymond as a fare.

In *At the Back of the North Wind* MacDonald can be seen as trying to reconcile the idiom of the novels of "real life" he had been writing since

David Elginbrod (1864) with the remoter-seeming worlds of his fantasy stories. Two of the novels written at the time of *At the Back of the North Wind*—*Robert Falconer* (1867) and *Guild Court* (1868)—concerned the miseries and temptations of London life and the need for Christian faith to look beyond them. Now MacDonald tries to show that for those who have eyes to see—and for him that usually means children and some mothers—the world is full of ultimately benign supernatural forces that control its workings.

In this he is close to Charles Kingsley, in his strange “fairy-tale for a land-baby,” *The Water-Babies* (1863), which is the main source for *At the Back of the North Wind*, and which introduces us to the “great fairies” who run the world. Kingsley’s little hero Tom is a poor child, a chimney sweep’s boy, living in a hard world in Victorian Yorkshire. One day Tom runs away to the moors, falls into a stream, and is turned into a water-baby. Thereafter he travels down to the sea, where he meets the grand ladies Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby. They are the laws of action and reaction, which work both physically and morally: if you hit a tree, it hurts you; if you hit somebody else, the world will find a way of punishing and improving you. The parallel in MacDonald is North Wind, but the sufferings she causes people often seem much less deserved; MacDonald’s universe is less evidently just than Kingsley’s.

Tom later meets Mother Carey, who sits frozen on an ice throne in the Arctic, “mak[ing] things make themselves” (149): she is the generative urge. MacDonald’s North Wind sits just like this as a block of ice when Diamond goes through her to the country at her back, but in his story she symbolises death. As a naturalist Kingsley is more interested in this world than in the world beyond, though he insists on that too. MacDonald, however, gives us an account of the land behind the North Wind. Kingsley comes closest to the more mystical MacDonald at the end of his story, when Tom meets the greatest of the fairies, and finds that she contains all the others, and shines with so blinding a light that he cannot yet read her name.

Kingsley sees the deity as a rational scientist as much as a mystic and loving God, who has designed his creation so that, read aright by the human intelligence, it will reveal both its order and God’s existence. *The Water-Babies* progresses from physical to moral to divine principles, ending with an intuition of the being that is all of them and much more. Kingsley’s procedure is fundamentally analytic, going deeper and deeper (as in the deepening waters of the story, from stream to river to ocean), where MacDonald works much more from immediate intuition. For MacDonald God is not found beneath or

behind nature, but right on top of it. North Wind appears to Diamond in the very first chapter of his story, on its surface. “The show of things is that for which God cares *most*, for their show is the face of far deeper things than they . . . It is through their show, not through their analysis, that we enter into their deepest truths” (MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons* 350). MacDonald is not an evolutionist like Kingsley. He looks for God at the source rather than the end of rivers, as at the end of *Lilith*. His North Wind goes backwards to her home in the north, and Diamond then goes through her to a land that lies behind her.

If we recall that this was the time when Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) was causing so much consternation, we will see how MacDonald’s story may be an attempt, like Kingsley’s, to refute the materialistic implications of Darwin’s theory—namely, that the universe is merely the physical setting for the working out of the natural laws of selection. Both want to “show,” in Kingsley’s words, “that there is a quite miraculous and divine element underlying all physical nature” (*Letters*, II 137). Kingsley shows this in the element of water, MacDonald in that of air. But the procedures by which each sets about this are radically different (Manlove, “MacDonald and Kingsley”).

MacDonald hardly ever refers to Darwin in his work, and yet as a trained scientist Darwin’s ideas would have been deeply interesting to him. The plain reason for this omission was that arguments for or against the existence of God were for MacDonald nothing to do with Christian faith. “No wisdom of the wise can find out God; no words of the God-loving can reveal him. The simplicity of the whole natural relation is too deep for the philosopher” (MacDonald, *Hope of the Gospel* 153-4). “To know Christ is an infinitely higher thing than to know all theology, all that is said about his person or babbled about his work” (*Unspoken Sermons* 350). No one can come to a belief in God through a mere proof of his existence: belief only comes from knowing Him, from a relationship. And for MacDonald the same thing would go for “proofs” against God: they miss the point. Follow in God’s ways, MacDonald says, and you will find Him; be faithful and you will find truth.

The present writer once saw MacDonald’s repudiation of arguments about God as a self-protective silencing of his intellect in order to save his faith (*Modern Fantasy* 58-60; 63-4). But it is now clear to him that MacDonald believed that Christianity had much more to do with lived than with proved truths, and with faith through obedience rather than certainty. MacDonald always disliked theology, which for him attempted to reduce

God to a system; and he disliked even more those Christians of his day who let their faith be shaken by mere argument. “Oh, the folly of any mind that would explain God before obeying Him! That would map out the character of God, instead of crying, Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?” (*Unspoken Sermons* 504). MacDonald even ignored the whole structure and doctrines of Christianity—the six-day creation, the original innocence and fall of man, the devil and hell as final realities, the idea of a last judgement; he had little time for churches and the ecclesiastical establishments of any faith; and he did not see the Bible apart from the gospels as being the word of God (Manlove, “MacDonald’s Theology”). *At the Back of the North Wind*, though it deals intensely with the God-man relationship, says nothing about any of these, apart from criticising a cathedral and showing the biblical references of the names “Diamond” and “Dulcimer” (MacDonald, *North Wind* 11; 227).

Religions and churches are ways by which humans try to impose form and certainty on the ineffable. But MacDonald does not want such settled schematics, nor such human interpositions between people and God. He wants a living, changing faith based simply on a direct relationship. Such a faith makes uncertainty as much a part of our relation with God as assurance. This is the subject of MacDonald’s sermon “The Voice of Job”: “Doubts are the messengers of the Living One to rouse the honest . . . Doubt must precede every deeper assurance; for uncertainties are what we first see when we look into a region hitherto unknown, unexplored, unannexed” (*Unspoken Sermons* 355). Man is meant to be unsure in order that he should look for certainty. Man is meant to argue with God, as part of an ongoing friendship with him.

And this is what we have imaged in lesser degree in Diamond’s friendship with the lady of the North Wind who, like assurance itself, comes and goes. Diamond is never quite sure that North Wind is real. She visits him at night when he is asleep, and he has to wonder whether she is only a dream, an illusion. Other people too think he may be a little touched in the head: his friend Nanny thinks he may have “a tile loose,” and even his mother worries that his fever may have affected his mind. Some call Diamond “God’s baby,” which, unknown to them, may be literally true. He has to live as an oddity, marked out from his fellows. Doubt as to the reality of North Wind afflicts Diamond to the last, even while his relationship with her grows ever closer. He says to her, “I can’t help being frightened to think that perhaps I am only dreaming, and you are nowhere at all. Do tell me that you are my own real beautiful North Wind” (310).

If God would not give Job any answers, North Wind cannot satisfy

Diamond. She is uneasy at his questions, and admits there are many things she does not understand herself. She argues that Diamond could not have loved her truly, if she were only a dream, “You might have loved me in a dream, dreamily, and forgotten me when you awoke, I dare say, but not loved me as a real being as you love me” (311). She says she has many forms beside the one she shows to Diamond. And she claims that somewhere every dream has its reality. But at the end Diamond is still not “quite sure yet” (314). Later, the narrator becomes involved in the story, telling Diamond that “even if she [North Wind] be a dream, the dream of such a beautiful creature could not come to you by chance” (324). Still Diamond is left “more thoughtful than satisfied.”

All these arguments, good though they are, are in the end really there to demonstrate their own limitations. Proofs and reasons will never bring us to conviction; and the cynicism of others will not alone shake our belief. In the end love, trust, and faith will take us far closer to the reality of God. The best answer North Wind gives Diamond is that he could not have been in love with a lie: the relationship between her and Diamond is the ground of her—and his—reality and truth. One way the book could be said to work on us is by using the frustrations of intellectual uncertainty to drive us towards simply testing the water through a relationship with God. And actually Diamond’s friendship with North Wind proves the point: for in order to ask her whether she is real or not, he must already believe that she is; one could not ask for a truth from an illusion. All through the story he has been taught to trust her when she has borne him into the air, he has put himself literally in her hands, as man must with God. Reality exists in their relationship itself, in the giving to each other of two individuals. MacDonald believed that “the bond of the universe . . . is the devotion of the Son to the Father . . . For the very beginnings of unity there must be two. Without Christ, therefore, there could be no universe” (*Unspoken Sermons* 428). Equally, relationship between two supposes distance, which is the ground of doubt, as Christ experienced it on the Cross. Without such doubt, faith could not exist. But always such relationship implies intimacy: “Here and here only, in the relation of the two wills, God’s and his own, can a man come into vital contact with the All-in-all” (*Unspoken Sermons* 310).

At the Back of the North Wind is unique among MacDonald’s fantasies in putting doubt at its core beside faith. To the end Diamond cannot be sure of North Wind’s reality nor we of Diamond’s sanity; and in his early death we can only trust that he has gone to the back of the North Wind. In other

of MacDonald's fairy tales for children everything ends happily and with assurance. Mossy and Tangle in "The Golden Key" reach "the land whence the shadows fall," the princess is rescued from her curse and the prince from near-death in "The Light Princess," in the *Princess* books Princess Irene is saved from the goblins, and she and her father the king from the evil counsellors. Only *The Wise Woman* (1875), where just one of two children being spiritually educated is reformed, is different. In the adult fantasies *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895), the protagonists do not doubt the reality of their wonderful experiences while they are having them, but only at the end, when they are abruptly returned to this world and now have to believe in the other.

Part of the reason for the continual doubt in *At the Back of the North Wind* is that Diamond does not live in a fairyland where marvellous or supernatural events are relatively common, but in a material world that does not believe in such things, and sees all his experiences with North Wind as delusions. MacDonald is trying to bring his fairy vision together with real life. Equally, however, he is working the other way round, to show that what we take to be real life is just as wonderful, just as much a thought in God's mind, as an imagined world.

North Wind is to be seen as a creature not just of dream but of vision, which for MacDonald means that she can be more true than true, in that she is the world seen most deeply. She can come to Diamond because as a young child he sees with his innocent imagination rather than with his intellect or reason; when he is a boy, he does not see her again until he is dying and his rational mind goes away. While he is a child, Diamond lives easily in the world of the imagination; when he is a boy the adventures with North Wind stop and he enters more into the material human world of sense perception. His commitment to the truth of North Wind remains, but now in her absence. Rather than finding her within his own life, he meets her at one remove, through poems, visions, and the fairy tale "Little Daylight."

MacDonald writes *At the Back of the North Wind* in such a way as to throw us out of our conscious, organising, formalising selves. He wants to break down our way of reducing life and art to schemes and patterns, and to respond at a much more intimate level. For him the discovered meaning of a story can get in the way of its *being*. That is why he writes the book for children, who put no structures between themselves and direct experience.

To reveal is immeasurably more than to represent; it is to present to the eyes that know the truth when they see it . . . to see God

and to love him are one. He can be revealed only to the child; perfectly, to the pure child only. All the discipline of the world is to make men children, that God may be revealed to them. (*Hope of the Gospel* 153)

And that is the object of *At the Back of the North Wind*: it seeks to take us back to the way of seeing of an innocent child. That vision perceives the world directly, without connecting things together with the mind and so distancing them. Moreover everything is seen as strange, so that a lady called North Wind breaking into Diamond's sleep at night is not much more odd to him than having the family horse stabled downstairs, or a poet in a rowing boat. It is just our habit of making connections among things rather than regarding them for themselves, that MacDonald wants to remove, so that we can perceive the world not only as wonderful, but as a miracle continually being worked by God.

How does MacDonald do this? He writes a fantasy. And in his case this means that he makes a book that in part embodies the imagination that is the source of his fantasy, being an apparent chaos, full of interrupted narratives, songs, strange dreams, visions and fairy stories; a book that often frustrates its readers' desires for sense and clarity, and drives them to a more intuitive and intimate experience of its material. As in *Phantastes*, but here in a different mode, he partly follows Novalis's view of the ideal art form, the fairy tale, which has no form at all: "A fairy tale is like a unconnected dream picture, a wonderful collection of things and events, like a musical fantasy, the harmonious patterns of a wind-harp, or nature itself."¹

The particular way in which *At the Back of the North Wind* works to wear away our intellects is through subversion, the undermining of our assumptions. Our sense of what is the "norm" is being constantly upset. For in *At the Back of the North Wind*, we do not entirely lose a norm, a "reality" against which to see things, as we do in *Phantastes*. We feel that Diamond is a child in a mid-Victorian world, son of a poor London family, and eventual assistant to his father in the cab-driving trade. Indeed we do not leave the earth itself for any magic place, except once, when Diamond travels to the back of the North Wind.

At first we experience Diamond's dreams as departures from his main life. But such departures are not single and once for all as in *Phantastes*, when Anodos leaves one world and enters another only at the beginning and the end of his story. Here they happen again and again with every visit of North Wind, every interpolated dream or fairy story. When Diamond is in the middle

of trying to answer the prim stained glass Apostles in the cathedral by the sea, he suddenly finds himself back in his own bed in London with the old horse Diamond rising and shaking himself below him. When he returns from the back of the North Wind, he is back again in Sandwich by the sea; when he visits the children's hospital where Nanny is, she tells him the story of her dream about the Man in the Moon. The result of all these changes is to make the story continually subversive: we have the ground taken from us and then replaced before being taken away again. And we are not sure which world is real, the Victorian one, or the fantastic ones.

As for the story as a sequence of events, no sooner do we feel there is such a sequence than it is gone, and the other way round. In the first part of the book North Wind comes to Diamond only at odd intervals. As the wind, we suppose, she is variable; and as a child, so is he. She visits him first when he is asleep, and tells him to get up and follow her, but he stops to stroke the horse Diamond in the stall under his room, and when he goes out she is gone – although a cold wind blows him along a path and through a door into the next-door garden of his father's employers the Colemans. He is seen in the garden by the Colemans' old nurse, and taken in and returned home. Immediately he wakes up, he hears the horse moving below, and goes down and gets into difficulties climbing on to his back. He is not surprised by these transitions, but we are.

Thereafter Diamond is kept indoors for some days and we watch him play. Then he is allowed out; and shortly after that, North Wind comes back to him again at night, and takes him flying with her over London, in her work of sweeping the streets with her "great besom" (34). But when Diamond sees a little girl being blown about by her, he asks to be set down to help her. So that abruptly ends that contact too, and we are back with the "real" world again. Again we follow Diamond's everyday life for some time; until, a few months later he finds North Wind in the garden next door, chasing a sleepy bee out of a tulip. They talk together, until Diamond finds that she has gone. And so it goes on. We do not know why North Wind has attached herself to Diamond, often what she does seems inconsequential, we can never settle with her before she is away, and we are kept flickering between outings with her and Diamond's daily family life.

However the mere fact of there being such an figure as North Wind adds excitement to the story, and we suppose that there is some purpose to her visits yet to be seen. And we begin to realise that by alternating the episodes with North Wind and Diamond's family life, MacDonald is suggesting that

the one is not necessarily more exciting or momentous than the other, and that the wonderful is interwoven with the fabric of this world. Also linking the different episodes is the developing relationship between Diamond and North Wind: at first she is a little imperious or else mocking, but as Diamond gets to know her he realises some of her weaknesses and they become more equal and loving. Last, there is a sequence at a deeper level: for each of Diamond's journeys with North Wind takes him further and further from home. At first he finds himself in the Colemans' garden next to his house, next he travels round the streets of London, the third trip takes him to the Kent coast, and the last to the North Pole and the country behind North Wind's back. Each journey takes him further out of himself; each shows him more of the wonders of the world and the mystery that surrounds it; and each deepens his love and trust in North Wind, while making him more painfully aware of the sufferings she causes.

But when Diamond returns from the country at the back of North Wind, she disappears altogether from the story; and we enter on an entirely new prospect concerning Diamond's later boyhood in London, and the changing fortunes of his family. This part of the book is less a continuous story than a sequence of vignettes, for it is still continually interrupted by fantastic episodes, poems and stories—a visionary experience Diamond has with some star-children, a long fairy story, "Little Daylight," a dream of Nanny's about visiting the Man in the Moon, a conversation between two horses, one of which is an angel in disguise, a long poem, and numerous nursery rhymes. Every one of these interpolations is mysterious, and has no explanation or interpretation. Just as in the first part of the book, we are still being switched continually between Victorian reality and fantasy. And at the end of all this, without much introduction, North Wind returns and Diamond is shown to be dying.

There is no evident connection between the first section of the book with North Wind and the rest, apart from Diamond's continuing to be the central figure. And we have moved away from dreams to waking, from night to day, and from the world of the mind to one that is much more of the body and its needs—cab driving that moves people about, houses for shelter and security, hospitals for sick children, babies to be fed and cleaned, men who beat their wives. Diamond's father loses his job after the Coleman family is ruined, and the family move to Bloomsbury; Diamond then helps at home with the new baby, learns how to drive a cab, is taught to read, takes over the cab driving from his father when the latter falls ill, and supports the family; then his father's fortunes change and he is made coachman to Mr. Raymond

at his country house. The randomness of the story is now coming from its realism as much as its fantasy, for it will not turn life into a fiction, will not make a plot that dominates everything and stops us attending to the immediate moment. MacDonald says that God cares only for the present action, not for the future, “the next is nowhere till God has made it” (*Unspoken Sermons* 211). There are no plans, for where life is subject to continual revision there cannot be. This is a story of a boyhood in Victorian London, of everyday life on the edge of poverty, of chances that help and accidents that hinder, and of good acts occasionally rewarded.

Thus while the book as a whole gives us an underlying story concerning Diamond’s young life, that life is so multifarious and peculiar as to challenge sense. In this way *At the Back of the North Wind* refuses certainties, and demands to be read at an intuitive level. MacDonald said of the fairy tale that we are to read it as a child would, for whom the connections among things are not logical but magical:

The best way . . . is not to bring the forces of our intellect to bear on it, but to be still and let it work on that part of us for whose sake it exists. We spoil countless things by intellectual greed If any strain of my ‘broken music’ make a child’s eyes flash, or his mother’s grow for a moment dim, my labour will not have been in vain. (*Orts* 322)

The unsettled manner of *At the Back of the North Wind* helps to wear our minds away so that we may feel the story at a deeper and more intimate level. Intimacy is the thing, for it is our standing back that is wrong. MacDonald always felt that closeness with people and things was the only way to understand them aright, and for him that closeness came from the body rather than the mind. “It is by the body that we come into contact with Nature, with our fellow-men, with all their revelations of God to us” (*Unspoken Sermons* 161). For him “the deepest truths of nature are far too simple for us to understand. One day, I trust, we shall be able to enter their secrets from within them—by natural contact between our hearts and theirs” (*Unspoken Sermons* 351). This emphasis on understanding through intimacy is founded on MacDonald’s belief in loving relationship as the heart of life. In *At the Back of the North Wind* it is seen in Diamond’s often physical closeness to North Wind, feeling the cold of her breath, being pulled up to her by her huge arm, being warm when he is close to her, being kissed and hugged by her, flying half buried in her hair.

The scrambling of sequence in the book, and the continual

uncertainty, is seen in small as in large. The book begins with an “I” narrator telling us enigmatically that he has been asked to write about the country at the back of the North Wind. He mentions Herodotus’s account of a people who lived there and found it so pleasant that they drowned themselves. But then he says he is not going to tell that story because Herodotus did not have the right account of the place. In fact, “I am going to tell you how it fared with a boy who went there.” We wonder who has asked this narrator to write about the other country Diamond visits, and why. Then all his statements seem rather ill fitting. He introduces Herodotus only to set him aside. He tells us of a people who killed themselves because they were “so comfortable.” And in the end it seems he is not going to tell us about the country as about “how it fared with a boy who went there.”

In the next paragraph the narrator sets a scene that is the reverse of comfortable. He says his boy hero lived in a room above a coach house, but he describes no more of this room than one thin and rotten wall against which the north wind blows. Then he says,

Still, this room was not very cold except when the north wind blew stronger than usual: the room I have to do with now was always cold, except in summer, when the sun took the matter into his own hands. Indeed I am not sure whether I ought to call it a room at all; for it was just a loft where they kept hay and straw and oats for the horses. And when little Diamond—But stop: I must tell you that his father, who was a coachman, had named him after a favourite horse, and his mother had no objection: when little Diamond lay there in bed he could hear the horses under him. . . .

We are told how biting the wind was against the thin wall; then that the room within was not usually so cold at all; then that there is another room that is to be our main concern; then that this unlocated room is not properly a room at all. He tells us it is always cold, and then retracts, “except in summer.” When the narrator starts to describe this last place he happens on little Diamond, who could as well be a horse as a boy (which in fact is true), and then veers off to tell us how he got his name and what his mother thought of it. He uses orotund phrases, “took matters into his own hands,” “had no objection.” In and out of this ill-fitting assemblage of rambling statements details gleam, “always cold, except in summer,” “where they kept hay and straw and oats for the horses,” “he could hear the horses under him.” Everything no sooner is, than in a sense it is not, and slips from our grasp. Nothing is articulated

without a qualification. And in fact this sense of things slipping out of reach is going to be uniquely appropriate to describing Diamond's strange and mystical experiences in this book. He will always be just on the edge of what he saw and heard at the back of the North Wind, but unable quite to recall or articulate it.

At the same time we are made unsure of the identities of things. The constant mingling of fantastic elements with the "reality" of Diamond's family life in London begins to make uncertain the final difference between them. This is added to by London itself being made strange, when we find that besides Diamond's family this is a place that has a Mr. Dyves or a Mr. Raymond in it, not to say one that is peopled with alchemical symbolism in the names Mr. Coleman, Old Sal, Diamond, and Ruby. Even a lazy cab horse maintains that it is an angel in disguise. This is a world that for all its apparent Victorian solidity, is also based in ancient signatures of the mind and the imagination.

And who is Diamond? However honest and good his parents are, this well-spoken, angelic child seems hardly the product of his impoverished background. Is he more a child of God than of man? Is he, born to poor parents and living above a manger, a kind of Christ? Here even the fact that his family are living in the grounds of a house called "The Wilderness," from which they later move, may recall the journey back from the refuge from Herod. MacDonald has Wordsworth's view of the child as nearest to God, and has to reconcile this with the real life child who lives in urban Victorian poverty. Diamond as an innocent child is attuned to the spiritual world, and able to see and speak with the beings of that world. Yet at the same time we also have to accommodate the possibility that he is deluded, and maybe not quite right in his head.

Who also is North Wind? She tells Diamond that she is not always so pleasant as she is to him, particularly when she has to ruin or kill people in storms. She has two selves, or, as she says, she is two "me's" in one. To Diamond's "Here you are taking care of a poor little boy with one arm, and there you are sinking a ship with the other," North Wind says that she cannot be two people, but is simply the same person with different faces. Therefore since Diamond is sure of the goodness of one of her selves, the other must be good too, however ugly it may look. It is a fair argument, but arguments do not really get rid of feelings. And there is a reverse argument from her other harsher side, namely that she is really bad all through and that her "kindness might be only a pretence for the sake of being more cruel afterwards" (60).

At which notion Diamond clings to her terrified, crying, “No, no, dear North Wind; I can’t believe that, I don’t believe it. That would kill me. I love you, and you must love me, else how could I come to love you?”

Even this argument is but a straw in the wind herself. It is the logic of a child who has never met and fallen in love with a Lilith. All arguments are for MacDonald helpless to prove either the existence or the nature of God. So we cannot finally be certain which kind of being North Wind is, and her two selves remain as irreconcilable to mortals as their sufferings at the hands of a supposedly loving God. An interpretation of this book that said that North Wind was a form of the devil tempting Diamond as Christ, and bringing him to eventual ruin could not be disproved. Certainly, “nice kind lady” aside, North Wind must remain a problematic, Janus-like figure to our intellects, for it is only through faith that one can feel and trust in her essential goodness.

Part of the reason for this uncertainty is that, alone of all the great female figures in MacDonald’s fantasies, North Wind is not omniscient. She says she is only the agent of a greater power whose purposes she does not fully understand. Often when she is consoling Diamond, she is also trying to reassure herself. Nor is she in the position of authority that the all other great ladies have. Irene’s grandmother is the wellspring of spiritual truth in the *Princess* books, the Wise Woman is the arbiter of the moral fates of Rosamond and Agnes in *The Lost Princess*, but North Wind has been left to fend for herself as a force of nature, with only “a far-off song” to reassure her. Even Kingsley’s fairy Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid, North Wind’s natural equivalent in *The Water-Babies*, is more confident of her role “I never was made, my child; and I shall go on for ever and ever; for I am as old as Eternity, and yet as young as Time” (*Water-Babies* 108). But North Wind can only say, “I don’t know. I obeyed orders” (79). In *At the Back of the North Wind* MacDonald has dared to do without an authority figure who gives us certainties.

Another “two-faced” aspect of the book lies in the way in what we think to be real at one time is later said to be a fiction. When we first read the story Diamond seems actually to go on his adventures with North Wind. We do not doubt in the reality of his flight with her over London and his being set down with the little crossing sweeper Nanny: how else could he know what London looked like from above, and what otherwise would he be doing so far from home in the streets? It is as real as a helicopter flight over the city would be to us. But then he asks himself whether it was a dream, which reminds us that North Wind comes to him when he is in bed; and this introduction of doubt is not helped by Nanny’s plain disbelief.

Then again Diamond seems to have been with North Wind on his later journey to the cathedral by the sea, for how else could he know of it? The shipwreck North Wind later tells him she caused seems real enough, especially since it has a real enough outcome in impoverishing Mr. Coleman. Later Diamond's journeys on two successive ships going towards the Arctic seem very solid and real,² but then when he passes through North Wind's ice-cold body to the country at her back he enters a dream-like world that he cannot fully describe. After this journey North Wind is gone from Diamond for some time, and people around Diamond begin to doubt whether he is "all there," which increases the uncertainty about her. Altogether we are left with the conflicting sensation that Diamond both travels and does not, both has what is literally a bosom friend and remains alone; for both readings are given equal validity.

And then we have the dual status given to dreams themselves. Does dreaming your experiences necessarily make them unreal? Diamond wants to believe not, but is made unsure by others, particularly Nanny, until she herself has a dream that exposes her moral nature to her. At the end of the story we are left with two realities, a mentally unbalanced child who has died, and a child who has gone to the back of the North Wind. For MacDonald there is no difference in solidity between the "real" world and the dream world because each is a thought in the mind of God (*Orts* 2-5), but his own resolution of the duality is not offered here. In the world of *At the Back of the North Wind* he stands back, far more than in any other of his children's books. Like Diamond, we are to find our own way through and beyond this world, in which opposites can both be true.

All this makes for a measure of relativism in the book. It is seen in poor houseless Nanny who is helped by Diamond and taken to hospital when she is ill: we are inclined to see her as (streetwise) innocence wronged, but she is not only that, for later on she turns against Diamond when she is with her boyfriend Jim, and in her dream she shows herself untrustworthy when she opens a box of bees that cause trouble. In the opposite direction the cabman who is a brutal drunkard and a wife-beater comes to see some of the error of his ways, and helps Diamond when he is once in difficulties with cabmen at another station. The Colemans seem good benefactors to Diamond's family, yet they do not provide them with good lodgings, they do not care for children, and Miss Coleman does not give Nanny a penny at the crossing she sweeps for her. Even Mr. Raymond—"Light of the World"—may from one point of view be the rescuer of Diamond's family from misery, but from the

human point of view he is cruel, testing Diamond's father by giving him a bad horse to see how well he survives.

The book's relativism is partly expressive of its having several realities—London, travels with North Wind, the country at her back, a fairy story, dreams, poems about another world. With so many different contexts there are bound to be opposed ideas of what is real. These stories, poems, and dreams are partly symbolic versions of what is happening to Diamond in his London and North Wind lives, but they are not just narrative adjectives. They are just as "real" experiences for Diamond as London itself. MacDonald never divided fiction or dreaming from experience, but saw them both as another and deeper form of being. We have to consider *At the Back of the North Wind* as a collection of different realities, or, equally, different fantasies. In that sense the world of the nursery rhyme Diamond reads about Little Boy Blue is as real as the world in which Nanny is shut out in the cold London streets by her grandmother.

Just as we have narratives that are continually interrupted, and adventures that are both dreams in bed and journeys abroad, so we find a juxtaposition of stillness and movement throughout the book. North Wind frequently tells Diamond that she has no time to stop and must be about her business, before stopping indeed to have a conversation with him (27, 31, 52, 63, 68). When Diamond is left by North Wind in the cathedral while she goes off to sink a ship, the still figures of the Apostles in the stained glass windows move down from their frames to talk disapprovingly about him; and meanwhile Diamond lies still on the altar steps, at once asleep and conscious, and unable to move. At her home in the Arctic, North Wind, whose essence lies in movement, is turned into a motionless block of ice. In the inset fairy tale "Little Daylight," the princess dances in the full moon and is torpid and still when the moon wanes. Little Boy Blue in the poem about him calls together all the creatures and leads them out into the country, only to reveal that he does not know what he wants to do with them, and that they can all go home again: all the movement ends in stasis. Diamond the horse works all he can when pulling a cab, but the other horse Ruby is fat and idle. A policeman forever tells people to "move on" who have nowhere to go. Diamond's family moves house in the middle of the story, but then his father becomes bedridden and "still" with illness. Diamond's song about the stream flows ever onward, and ends where it began, moves forward only to stay. And whenever Diamond is at the heart of movement with North Wind, he is still: with her in a storm, "nestling in. . . [the tempest's] very core and formative centre,"

It seemed to Diamond . . . that they were motionless in this centre, and that all confusion and fighting went on around them. Flash after flash illuminated the fierce chaos, revealing in varied yellow and blue and grey and dusky red the vaporous contention; peal after peal of thunder tore the infinite waste; but it seemed to Diamond that North Wind and he were motionless, all but . . . [her] hair. It was not so. They were sweeping with the speed of the wind itself towards the sea. (61)

The experience is at once physical, an anticipation of human flight, and mystical, partaking in the nature of the unmoved mover.

The oscillation between stillness and movement is also seen in the way there both is and is not a story of spiritual growth in the book. Diamond is the perfect innocent from the outset, and yet his innocence is also seen as inadequate, needing refinement. From one point of view Diamond does not develop, or become better, throughout the narrative, even if he gains more knowledge, because he is perfect already: he is “God’s baby” both when he starts and ends, which is why North Wind comes to him; and his very name, Diamond, suggests the unchanging and pure. When he becomes a cab driver, his simple goodness, humility, and charity still shine through, bringing even the most brutish driver among his fellows to amend his life. And at the end he is still the child nestling to North Wind’s bosom and asking to be comforted. And North Wind herself, who has been continually subversive in appearance, now tiny, now vast, now omnipotent, now helpless, now a wolf or a tiger, and now a loving woman, is still to Diamond the same mixture of teasing girl, beautiful lady, and caring mother as she was when he first met her.

Yet at the same time, there may be a contradictory pattern beneath the story suggesting that Diamond *is* purified, and that there is movement through growth. This pattern comes from alchemy, with which MacDonald was familiar from his reading of Paracelsus and particularly Jacob Boehme. There are three stages in the narrative that parallel the three of alchemical transformation, *nigredo* (black), the breakdown of the original substance, *albedo* (white), or the making of a new substance out of this reduced material, and *rubedo* (red), the purification of the new substance to the *prima materia*. In *At the Back of the North Wind* these stages are first, Diamond’s adventures with North Wind, nearly all by night (black); then his life in London, almost all in daylight (white)³; and last the ruby ring Nanny is given in hospital by a lady visitor, the ruby glass in her dream and the arrival of horse Ruby (red).⁴

Diamond also moves away from the ignorance of early innocence.

Where at first we see him taught by North Wind and in a position of inferiority, later he is able to hold his own in looking after his family, and finally as able to impart wisdom to others. And we could say that in the first part, his old self and assumptions about the world are broken down as he comes to believe in North Wind; that in the second, he moves away from personal experiences towards a new and social self that helps others; and that in the last part he is refined to the point of being ready to leave this world and enter another. It is a steady move outwards. The book begins with Diamond's snug bed in the hay, reached through a maze of hay bales in the attic, yet with only a thin wall of rotten wood between it and the outside world. It is a perfect symbol of the complacent self in what it thinks is security, but with only a thin film between it and wild reality. North Wind breaks in on Diamond, chills him, and leads him out into the garden beneath, where he loses her. Back she comes later, and again, to take him from his bed to travel the streets. Then as we have seen, on further visits he goes on progressively longer journeys with North Wind, until on his return from the country at her back he is ready to move out of himself without help: for now he begins to help in the family, and later travels the streets beyond home, as a cab-driver. Here Diamond's initial naïve innocence has been modified and strengthened by experience, without changing its heart.

Diamond is an odd mixture quite apart from his being both pure innocence and educated ignorance. Though he seems so unworldly, so much the "baby" as Nanny sees him, he is far more practical than most. Even as a child he adapts the family's broken furniture to make for himself a two-horse cart. While still a young boy, he learns how to drive a cab to help the family when his father is ill. He becomes a skilful driver, and he knows how to drive an honest bargain (187-9). In this way Diamond comes more alive, more a part of the world, during the narrative. He has often shown himself ready to jump into life with both feet, as when he has North Wind set him down so that he can help Nanny in the streets, or when later he intervenes to stop some boys tormenting a girl (who turns out to be Nanny again).

Yet at the same time Diamond's whole journey is a process of dying. Not just physically dying, for his illnesses come as randomly as North Wind, but rather spiritually, inasmuch as he increasingly moves away from the world and speaks from his knowledge of another. He plays with his baby brother because he loves his strange songs and seems to Diamond to have arrived freighted with joy from another place. He begins his adventures with North Wind by following her out of his loft into the garden; and ends by moving to

a nest in the treetops, where he can be nearer to her. His early journey to the country at North Wind's back pulls at him for the rest of his short life, during which he is rather like Marvell's soul in "The Garden" that leaves his body and flies into a tree:

There like a Bird it sits, and sings,
Then whets, and combs its silver Wings,
And, till prepar'd for longer flight,
Waves in its Plumes the various Light. (Stanza 7, 5-8)

So when in the end Diamond dies, his death comes partly because he wishes it. The whole duality of Diamond's life-ward and death-ward histories is caught up in North Wind herself, who is at once life-giving energy and death-dealing inertia.

At the Back of the North Wind is full of double views and contradictions. It is also the most argumentative of MacDonald's fantasies: there is none in which people are so continually stirred up and "got at" by others. The book is full of conversations and arguments; everybody has a different point of view, and they all "bounce off" one another in continual contradiction. The story begins with North Wind waking Diamond up and telling him he must follow her downstairs, when there seems no reason why he should. Diamond pesters Nanny with his visions until she herself has a discomposing dream. Meanwhile she continually mocks him. The Apostles in the cathedral window stand over the sleeping Diamond and criticise both him and North Wind. Even the horses Diamond and Ruby in their stable have a long squabble about Ruby's sloth and greed. People are continually doing violence to one another: Aunt Sal beats Nanny and shuts her out in the streets, a drunken cab driver strikes his wife, some boys attack Nanny and Diamond is beaten by them when he intervenes, cab drivers and thieving women assault Diamond, some East End idlers try to throw him off his box and steal his money. And the whole book is packed with questions. Why are things as they are? Is North Wind real? Is she good? Is Diamond mentally disturbed? Everybody is forever challenging each other—as in the following snippet, when Diamond is listing his father's friends, and includes the brutal cabby and his family next door:

"They're no friends of mine," said his father.
"Well, they're friends of mine," said Diamond.
His father laughed.
"Much good they'll do you!" he said.
"How do you know they won't?" returned Diamond.

“Well, go on,” said his father. (157)

Or again, when a policeman saves Diamond from being robbed by the poor women—

“You came just in the right time, thank you”. . . [said] Diamond.

“They’ve done me no harm.”

“They would have if I hadn’t been at hand, though.”

“Yes, but you were at hand you know, so they couldn’t.”

Perhaps the answer was deeper in purport than either Diamond or the policeman knew. (173)

Even the narrator cannot resist putting in his pennyworth.

As for North Wind’s relationship with Diamond, that is often an argument, or mockery, or doubt. When she is a very small breeze trying to get a bee out of a tulip Diamond thinks North Wind is a fairy, and she retorts that size is no determinant of anything, ending, “You stupid Diamond! Have you never seen me before?” (47-8). She teases him like a girl when he will not come out of his bed, or cannot jump over a wall, or does not know the difference between a boat and a poet. At other times North Wind is the grand lady who must sink a ship at sea, and Diamond cannot accept this, even when she argues that in the end she is doing as much good and kindness here as she is doing more obviously and immediately to Diamond himself. Diamond’s sympathy for the drowning people makes him unable to take North Wind’s Olympian view of things. The often ruffled friendship of the two is some reflection of what MacDonald said of God’s relation to his creation: “there can be no unity, no delight of love, no harmony, no good in being, where there is but one. Two at least are needed for oneness” (*Unspoken Sermons* 298). In his sermon “The Voice of Job” MacDonald declares that it was far better that Job argued with God. In the quarrel with God lives a relationship; only by challenging him may we come to accept him (*Unspoken Sermons* 355). Such a relationship is no settled thing, however, for in this life it is based on continual oscillations between assurance and doubt.

At the Back of the North Wind also unsettles us by its frequent use of inversion. North Wind tells Diamond that the hole she makes into his hayloft bedroom is for her a window out from her world into his, whereas Diamond thinks of windows as looking outside to the wide world of North Wind (5). When Diamond and North Wind enter the cathedral on the coast by a door in the tower, this door is so described that it seems they are going out, not in by it (64). The painted Apostles of the cathedral’s eastern window are angry at North Wind because she blows their windows in, but they face only inwards,

not outwards like true apostles. In dreams Diamond and Nanny have they see people look in at them from the stars or the moon, but for these people this is looking out, both star-realm and moon being described as spheres. Later we have Diamond reaching the stars by going underground (200-03): he pulls up the “plumb-line [of] gravitation” (208). The aim behind this is that distinctions between inside and out, “here” and “there,” or “up” and “down,” all divisions between this world and others, should finally dissolve. This is partly why we have such strangely named people as Mr. Dyves, Mr. Raymond, or Diamond himself in the London world, for it too is part of another world, and vice versa. The fixity implied in making divisions is opposed by the story. So too is fixity of size and, by implication, importance. North Wind constantly changes size according to whether she is a breeze or a gale. When once Diamond sees her in tiny form, he makes the mistake of seeing her as a fairy, at which she scolds him (47-8).

Other forms of inversion come from the nature of North Wind herself. The further away from her one moves, the more one feels the cold of her breath; but when one is right up close to her, as Diamond often is, the wind is still, and one can be quite warm. This is itself an inverted analogy to MacDonald’s idea that it is only when we are at a distance from God that his love burns us (*Unspoken Sermons* 18-33). Then there is the odd situation whereby North Wind is least “herself” when she is at home: she becomes weak and helpless, and freezes to a block of ice. For all she is North Wind is always going from and not to the north: she can only get there by shrinking backwards practically to nothing. She flies southwards to find a ship that will take Diamond northwards. And in her very act of blowing southwards she provides sailing ships with the power to travel north. Paradox upon paradox, some found in embedded in the nature we know, some in a nature we have not yet seen. And all of them turn the world into a perpetual surprise.

When the world is seen this way, when down is up and out is in, the separate things in it begin to come together, and to share their natures with one another. North Wind’s hair is indistinguishable from the wind itself, houses seen from North Wind’s back become “a great torrent of bricks and stones” (33), a poet is a boat (51). Nothing then stands on its own, for the world is founded on relationship and the exchange of love. In the poem about a river that Diamond’s mother finds in the sand by the sea, everything in it, flowers, swallows, lambs, wind, clouds and grass, joins with the flowing water in one long unpunctuated sentence with neither beginning nor end:

it’s all in the wind

that blows from behind
and all in the river
that flows for ever
and all in the grasses
and the white daisies
and the merry sheep
awake or asleep
and the happy swallows
skimming the shallows
and it's all in the wind
and blows from behind (119)

“It’s all in the wind/ that blows from behind”: “The whole system of the universe,” declared MacDonald, “works upon this law—the driving of things upward towards the centre” (*Unspokne Sermons* 132). Where creatures join in love they partake in love’s creator, who reconciles all things, draws all things to him.

And yet to common sight how little do daily things seem to share with one another like this. London is a hard place of often cold hearts, where one man jostles another. Life is governed by a struggle to find work and feed one’s family. Lower down the scale her grandmother Old Sal shuts Nanny out of her house. But even the rich, seen by Nanny passing in their carriages, are bitter: “Oh my! How they do look sometimes—fit to bite your head off!” (43). Everyone, but for stray occasions of love, cuts themselves off from a wider community: even Diamond’s father will only have the friends he chooses. People are divided by their class and their money; everybody is concerned with their own interests; the only reality is a physical one. The city, an image of people living together, also separates them from one another. It takes the pure love of Diamond to show some of the people around him what they lack; yet still Nanny and her friend crippled Jim, for both of whom Diamond has done so much, later spurn him as an idiot. In such a world Diamond’s evident goodness makes him something of an angel or a freak. In the more normal way of things, such charity as there is goes disguised, and even compromised with evil, as when Mr. Raymond leaves the idle horse Ruby to the care of Diamond’s father in a cruel-seeming test. Here things seem not joined in their separation but rather at odds with one another.

Hard too are the houses and roads. Only when North Wind flies over the London streets and the roofs of the buildings below are they turned to seeming water by her speed. Houses can cut off the self from the world,

and as manufactured objects they are images of the conscious mind. North Wind's house by contrast is the open air under the sky, and she is always trying to look out of her "windows" into what is to her the outside world of house interiors. She is forever breaking in to them, whether to bring Diamond outside, or to punish a wicked nurse, or to coax a bee out of a tulip, or to try to shatter the windows of the cathedral. The home of the gin-soaked Old Sal is a dark basement with filthy windows and no less filthy interior, where the sick Nanny is abandoned to die. "The Mews" in Bloomsbury, where Diamond's family go after his father has become a cab driver, looks out on "a dirty paved yard" into which North Wind rarely penetrates because "there was such a high wall, and so many houses about the mews" (126). The best houses are those high up, like that of the Man in the Moon, with many well-cleaned windows to see out of: Nanny is delighted at the recall of it, "Oh, it was beautiful! There we were, all up in the air, in such a nice clean little house!" (257). And the country house of the Raymonds is very high on a mound, so that one can see a long way out into the world and the sky. Diamond is given a room at the top of it with which he is very pleased, but he soon forsakes even this for a nest he makes for himself at the top of a high tree in the grounds. He has "got out" in a final sense, for he has now entered North Wind's house. In this sense the impulse of the book is a Platonic one towards elevation above the world.

But it is not so much houses themselves that are problem, but the souls they express. As houses, in fact, can also be good things. They keep us out of the wind and the cold—though, as MacDonald shows with Diamond and Nanny, an old barrel will serve as well at need. They are the sanctuaries of our private lives, good or bad, and essential to the rearing of families. Diamond's parents are good people, and out of the wretched homes in which they live come happy children. Though many have closed their eyes to the truth, the city is not outside God's love; it is as much a part of it as the wild world of North Wind or the country at her back. And within the city good is still done, if often it does not seem that way. North Wind sinks Mr. Coleman's ship to amend his life. Though Diamond's father loses his position, his new job as cab driver and his later illness produce acts of love from Diamond that would otherwise not have been seen. And sometimes seeming chance will throw good fortune as well as bad in our way—hence Mr. Raymond. And hence too Diamond, whose innocence lights people's lives, whose love helps bring them together. All are parts of the city.⁵

And nothing, not even houses, stays still in this book. Everything that seems so solid and enduring is in movement, symbolised in North Wind and

in Diamond's constant journeying with her; everything, bricks, walls, streets, cities, is "moving on." The four different houses Diamond lives in—the stables at the Colemans, the Bloomsbury house, "The Mound," and finally the tree-top nest shift from one to another like time itself. The changes from "waking" to "dream," from poetry to prose, from "reality" to "fantasy" and from life to death, not only shows all these categories moving towards one another, but also that all worlds are contingent in the mind of God. For in the end the shifts of reality and subject in the book reflect the nature of God himself, who can freely change his plans as he will, because he "lives by the vital law of liberty:

What stupidity of perfection would that be which left no margin about God's work, no room for change of plan upon change of fact See the freedom of God in his sunsets—never a second like one of the foregone!—in his moons and skies—in the ever-changing solid earth!—all moving by no dead law, but in the harmony of the vital law of liberty, God's creative perfection.
(*Unspoken Sermons* 241-2)

And later, "If we can change, God can change, else is he less free than we" (244).

And this brings us to the act of reading the book *At the Back of the North Wind*. Just as Diamond has to live through his doubts about North Wind, so do the readers of MacDonald's story. We will feel partly that it is a fantasy, meaning that is not true. But for MacDonald, fantasy, which of its very nature invites disbelief, is actually the sole means of awakening it. Fantasy is like dreaming and imagining, but dreams can come from the deepest truth. "When a man dreams his own dream, he is the sport of his dream; when Another gives it him, that Other is able to fulfil it" (*Phantastes and Lilith* 420). Without the imagination, man becomes spiritually dead. For MacDonald this was happening in his own time: science with all its achievements was held to be the product of reason, to the detriment of the imaginative faculty and therefore of the soul. In 1867, a year before he began writing *At the Back of the North Wind*, he wrote an essay, "The Imagination: Its Functions and its Culture" to warn against this. He argued that scientific discovery came not from reason but for the very imagination that nourished poets and children; and he showed that the imagination had moral as well as perceptual value.

In very truth, a wise imagination, which is the presence of the spirit of God, is the best guide that man or woman can have; for it is not the things that we see the most clearly that influence

us the most powerfully; undefined, yet vivid visions of something beyond, something which eye has not seen nor ear heard, have far more influence than any logical sequences whereby the same things may be demonstrated to the intellect. (Orts 28)

It is to show this that *At the Back of the North Wind* is written. The perceptual issue concerning the imagination—is it true or false?—is present throughout Diamond’s discussions of dreams with North Wind. The importance of the imagination to human spiritual health is the underlying subject of the fairy story “Little Daylight” told by Mr. Raymond to the young patients in the children’s hospital. As a fairy tale this story deals with essences, and shows what is fundamentally needed in the society of the book. It describes a princess cursed at her christening by a wicked fairy to sleep by day, wake at night, and wax and wane with the moon, until a prince comes and kisses her without knowing who she is. It is because her family have cut themselves off from the dark wood of the imagination, that the princess is cursed with her inverted half-life, both night and moon being symbols of the imagination. Eventually she begins to live in the forest that surrounds the royal palace. Thither chances one day a dispossessed and disguised prince—both adjectives symbolising that his life is in the imagination rather than in controlling reason. This prince finally breaks the spell that holds the princess by kissing her when she is in the form of a withered and sick old woman, at which she regains her native beauty. Thus restored to itself in the unity of prince and princess, the world of the imagination can come out of the dark wood back into its own in the sunlight. It is no accident that this vision is conveyed through a fairy tale, for a fairy tale is in MacDonald’s view one of the highest forms of the imagination, and using one here is a way of further celebrating that faculty.

“Little Daylight” symbolises almost exactly what MacDonald felt had gone wrong with Victorian scientific and materialistic culture, and what was needed to put it right. What was real, MacDonald felt, had sunk to the level of what could be grasped or used; and the imagination, which was the source of all love, had been degraded as illusion. Shortly following the fairy tale, we are given another image of the illness of the day in the dream Nanny has about the moon while in hospital. This dream describes how the conscious self so often damages the imagination. Nanny dreams that the moon comes down to her, and the Man in the Moon helps her inside to meet his lady, while they fly upwards. The dream is full of alchemical symbolism, but the main point for us is that the moon Nanny enters is her own imagination, which she eventually

betrays. She is asked by the old Man in the Moon to clean the windows of its sphere, which may be construed as opening her imagination more fully to the wonder about it, but while doing so she disobeys the advice he gave her against opening a strange humming box of bees, who may be the light of the moon, and so is thrown out of the moon and her dream. She the meddling intellect that will not let a thing be, but must possess it and seek to unlock its secret, to reduce it to her way of seeing. She is like Anodos in *Phantastes*, who seizes a little girl's strange musical globe and so destroys it. "Caught in a hand which does not love its kind," MacDonald said of the fairy tale in "The Fantastic Imagination," "it . . . can neither flash nor fly" (*Orts* 319).

By such symbolic means as this MacDonald puts over the essential value of the imagination, and shows how the conscious greedy self that wants to possess and know everything is death to it. But more than this, he heightens our sense that our own entry into the "sphere" of his own book has itself been as much a climb into the imagination as Nanny's. Thus, the disconnected form of the book, and its constant undermining of our assurance, serves not only to draw us in by subverting our conscious minds, but to supply an image of the chaotic, metamorphic imagination itself. Such intimacy with his texts is what MacDonald desires: "A fairytale, a sonata, a gathering storm, a limitless night, seizes you and carries you away: do you begin at once to wrestle with it and ask whence its power over you, whither it is carrying you?" (*Orts* 319).

And whither is *At the Back of the North Wind* carrying us? Into whose imagination is it drawing us? North Wind talks of a far-off music she hears behind everything she does, coming nearer all the time: but perhaps in a sense it has arrived, indeed has always been here. Here we come to the very root of *At the Back of the North Wind*. For MacDonald believed that both our so solid-seeming world and our imaginary creations are all present thoughts in the mind of God. So far this is, if Platonic, not wholly unconventional theology. But MacDonald goes further than this metaphysical statement. For him God is immediately present in the human imagination, and the origin of all our best dreams and creations. These images and ideas are always felt by human dreamers and artists to come not from themselves, but from some unknown source; and that source is not merely the imagination on its own:

From that unknown region we grant they come, but not by its own blind working . . . God sits in that chamber of our being in which the candle of our consciousness goes out in darkness, and sends forth from thence wonderful gifts into the light of that understanding which is his candle. (*Orts* 24-5)

But the divine origin of such gifts is too often hidden from us, no more felt than the existence of an emerald under a mountain. It is only in such things as music, or wild storms, or fairy tales that the presence of God can most be felt, because these are all images of “that chamber of our being where the candle of our consciousness goes out in darkness.” And even then, it is only the child and not the rationalising adult to whom these things speak.

It is to make us such children that *At the Back of the North Wind* has the form that it does. And if this does not quite succeed for us, we have a child at its centre to point the way. There is no other fantasy of MacDonald’s that places quite so much importance on the vision of a child, nor that tests it so hard against reality. Diamond indeed is by being a perfect child more than a child. As the story proceeds his spiritual insights become deeper than those of the wisest of old men. When he tells the convalescent Nanny that she is coming to live with his family, and she says, “That’s too good to be true,” he answers,

“There’s very few things good enough to be true . . . but I hope this is. Too good to be true it can’t be. Isn’t *true* good? And isn’t *good* good? And how, then, can anything be too good to be true?” (252)

These are the words of a child who has never really left the country at North Wind’s back. These are the words of the sort of child MacDonald saw as God in man:

God is represented in Jesus, for that God is like Jesus: Jesus is represented in the child, for that Jesus is like the child. Therefore God is represented in the child, for that he is like the child. God is child-like. In the true vision of this fact lies the receiving of God in the child. (“The Child in the Midst,” *Unspoken Sermons* 12)

At the Back of the North Wind is in part a celebration of the childlikeness in Diamond that is also the essence of God’s nature. Our experience of Diamond is here not to be just with an innocent child, but with a child who embodies the divine nature. We are ideally to have a continuing mystical relationship with Diamond.

In truth, therefore, while we may think that North Wind is the great “supernatural” figure of the book, really it is Diamond. His preternatural innocence may mark him out for mockery, but he has nothing to do with the preciousness of a Fauntleroy. True, he is an “ordinary” child living in relative poverty in a city, but so was Christ, and Christ would have behaved with

the same innocent purity as Diamond. MacDonald has managed to create in Diamond a child who at once makes himself part of the workaday world he lives in, and yet has a nature quite above that of any other person about him. Those who judge by human standards will see him as a little mad, as Nanny does, or as an odious goody-goody as do some readers. But to see Diamond in human terms only is to misunderstand him. This is a child who perfectly embodies that childlikeness which MacDonald saw as the essence of God's nature and of Christ in and through him. This is a Victorian Christ, if one whose life creates no converts.

At the Back of the North Wind is unique in its mixture of historical and fantastic realities. What MacDonald is doing here is showing that our own everyday world is surrounded and interpenetrated by others, and that the distinctions we make to keep reality separate from fantasy are empty. Fiction itself in the form of this story, dreams, poems, inset fairy tales, all are as solid as our 'real' world, all bring us news of another world to which we more truly belong. In a larger view our world is a dream in God's mind as much as Diamond's experiences with North Wind. In the smaller world of struggle to which most of the characters are confined, life seems enmeshed in uncertainties and contradictions. And yet out of its impoverished heart Victorian London produces a child who is God's baby, a new Christ whom those about him fail to understand, a diamond or two-world soul who increasingly moves towards a world beyond ours. Meanwhile London itself is inhabited by living alchemical symbols, that transform it from a meaningless assemblage of colliding selves to a crucible of slow refinement. Deep within the world the incarnation continues, reminding those who have eyes to see that the ultimate truth of the universe is that heaven and earth are married.

Endnotes

1. MacDonald's translation of Novalis in the epigraph to *Phantastes*.
2. The description of Diamond stowed away beneath the decks of the first northward-bound ship, listening for days to the trampling of the crew's feet above and all the noises of the ship itself (85) must owe its vividness of detail to MacDonald's own below-decks journey north to Trondheim on the yacht *Bluebell* in June 1869, when he was so ill that he had to spend the entire trip in bed in a windowless cabin (Raeper 267-8).
3. The long poem Diamond's mother reads to him on the beach at Sandwich just after his return from North Wind's back (114-19) is dominated by the colours white and yellow (light and sunlight). It is in a strange book whose pages they see fluttering in the wind, and which is probably brought to them by North Wind's agency, for

Diamond is sure it is the song he heard in the world at her back.

4. Alchemical symbolism has a child as one symbol of the stone that is changed; has coal as the fuel of the furnace and as a symbol for the blackness of the *nigredo* (the Colemans, first employers of the family); it sees a house, particularly a glass house, as the alchemical vessel; views wind as an essential part of the reaction; considers bees to be the fiery action by which metals are transformed to the “prima material” that makes the philosopher’s stone; regards trees as symbols for the growth of the stone, and nests as the alchemical vessel in which it is engendered. All these items are prominent in *At the Back of the North Wind*, together with other alchemical symbols such as the moon or Luna, the sun (Mr. Raymond, “light of the world,” angels (Ruby the horse, the dragonfly in the well), circles (the princess’s dances in “Little Daylight”), sand and sea (Diamond at Sandwich), star (Diamond’s dream), stream (the long poem), garden (the Colemans’), serpent (the poem about Little Boy Blue), tower (The Mound), thick and thin (the fat and lean horses (274)).

5. In this MacDonald is close to the vision of Charles Williams, who knew his work.

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