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The Polluted City and the Healing Power of Nature: Wordsworthian Idealism in *Guild Court*

Jeffrey W. Smith

Throughout his life, George MacDonald (1824-1905) observed the gradual development of an industrialised Britain, including his birthplace in Aberdeenshire, as wealthy landowners purchased smaller farms. David S. Robb argues that MacDonald, George Gray, William Alexander, and others “were profoundly disturbed by change driven by economic considerations, to what they regarded as the detriment of the social structure of Scottish rural life when the ‘patriarchal’ (as they often termed it) relation of landlord and tenant was denied” (6-7). On a much larger scale, Britain was becoming a metropolitan state as many rural residents moved their families into the already overcrowded cities such as Manchester and Wolverhampton. This mass movement from the country to the city became one of the major themes in the “condition of England” novels of the 1840s-50s produced by writers such as Charles Kingsley, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens. Walter E. Houghton, in his extensive study of the nineteenth century, writes:

The modern city was the creation and the symbol of liberal-industrial society. When the ties that had bound men to their country neighbors and their ancestral village were snapped by the exodus to the factory towns and metropolitan London, the sense of community was permanently lost. (79)

London, although not strictly an industrial city such as those emerging in the north of England, was in a perpetual state of growth and had been since the time of Shakespeare. This growth became a major source of discussion amongst writers, especially the British Romantic writers. Raymond Williams notes that “London was already a city of half a million inhabitants in 1660, . . . Between 1700 and 1820 it rose to a million and a quarter” (146). Williams also makes an interesting comparison between the different views of London perceived by William Blake and William Wordsworth. According to Williams, Blake’s vision of the city is spiritual—“to build the holy as against the unholy city,” whereas Wordsworth’s

vision derives “with his country experience behind him” (149). With this experience, Williams argues, Wordsworth discovers “a new way of seeing men in what is experienced as a new kind of society” and is thus faced with “a new kind of alienation” (150). As Peter Coveney notes, Wordsworth commanded a powerful influence upon his century. Coveney argues that Wordsworth’s

antithesis of town and country became of increasing importance to a century disfigured by the urban outrage of the Industrial Revolution. His plea for a sensuous relation between Man and Nature became a force among a whole generation of intellectuals at the end of the century dissatisfied with the human sterilities of the vulgarizers of Benthamite utilitarianism. His assertion for the power of the imaginative life . . . became a potent romantic influence. (83)

This influence spread not only to other writers like MacDonald, but also reached those involved with other arts, such as those of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. Ford Madox Brown’s *Work* (1852-65) is a potent example of this theme in the fine arts.

MacDonald, inspired by the poetry of Wordsworth and other Romantic writers, believed that spiritual truths could be found within Nature. Like Wordsworth, MacDonald’s early years were spent in the country and he eventually entered the city for the sake of his education and career. His past, shaped by Nature, directly affected his mode of thinking within the city. Similar experiences also inspired many other city-dwellers across Britain.

Houghton points out that, for nineteenth-century novelists, these ideas

became the nostalgia for a lost world of peace and companionship, of healthy bodies and quiet minds. The image had its basis in memory, for every Victorian in the city had either grown up in the country or in a town small enough for ready contact with the rural environment. (79)

In MacDonald’s novels, he theorised that God seeks harmony with man through his presence in Nature. MacDonald’s interpretation of Wordsworth’s major works such as *The Prelude* (1850) and *The Excursion* (1814), led him to believe that obtaining this union with God comes, first, through seeking harmony with Nature and, second, by loving service, as opposed to obligatory service, to others. In his Scottish novels, such as *David Elginbrod* (1863), *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865), *Robert Falconer* (1868), *Malcolm* (1875), or *Sir Gibbie* (1879), MacDonald’s male “hero” characters illustrate these

phases as they become more spiritually advanced. These characters have rural origins, but then enter cities such as Aberdeen or London, where they are astonished and appalled by both the moral and physical states of degradation.

MacDonald's English novels are different. The novels in this category, such as *Guild Court* (1868), *The Vicar's Daughter* (1872), *Mary Marston* (1881), and *Weighed and Wanting* (1882), present female "heroines" that begin life in the city and must establish some form of literary contact with Nature, usually by reading a volume of Wordsworth along with the Bible. Prompted by the spiritual power of Nature, they then seek to bring about some form of moral reformation within the city by targeting, not its leaders and political systems, but its poor inhabitants, restoring a sense of spiritual renewal within the metropolis.

In *Guild Court*, MacDonald addresses the beneficial effects that Nature has upon two young girls, Mattie and Poppie, who have never left the city of London. MacDonald depicts both girls as suffering from some form of either mental or physical degenerative growth. Perhaps more central to MacDonald's theory, however, is that the absence of Nature within the metropolis has affected their spiritual progression towards God. It is up to the novel's protagonist, Lucy Burton, a young and budding social worker and admirer of Wordsworth, to mentor the two girls. Based upon her reading of Wordsworth's poetry, Lucy formulates an idea that Nature and God are connected and that exposure to Nature brings one closer to God.

The basic plot of *Guild Court* tells of Tom Worboise, a clerk who comes from a wealthy family. At the novel's beginning, MacDonald reveals that he had formed an attachment with Lucy. She genuinely loves Tom and believes that his attentions to her are honest. Tom loves Lucy as well, but he is immature and wrongfully flirts with another girl, producing a disastrous result. He continues to err even more by failing his work-related duties as a clerk and eventually falls into a state of obsessive gambling. After finding himself financially ruined and guilty of a theft, both results of his gambling, he flees to sea, but later returns and repents. Yet there is a subplot involving Lucy's work that is of greater interest to the study of this chapter. In *Guild Court*, Lucy's neighbourhood, there dwell two girls, Mattie, the daughter of Mr. Kitley, a bookseller, and Poppie, a homeless waif. *Guild Court* also harbours a tailor named Mr. Spelt, whom Mattie calls "Mother." Lucy discovers Poppie's homeless condition one day and is determined to help her. As well, she discovers that the other child, Mattie, is showing signs of a diseased mind, which she assumes is the possible result of her confinement

within Guild Court, away from the country. After various trials, she is finally successful at gaining the trust of the two girls and effectively aids their physical and spiritual restoration.

In various ways, *Guild Court* is similar to a Dickens novel, offering a large assortment of highly colourful and complex characters. Themes of capitalistic greed and the tribulations of the ever-suffering poor abound. The novel also reveals MacDonald's knowledge of the city. Here, London is displayed as a fragmented city where pockets of slum housing projects and squalid conditions may be found neighbouring more well-respected corners. Though MacDonald illustrates that the city is both physically and morally grimy, he does reveal that there are many elements of good scattered throughout, though they may not be so easily detected. These characters, beacons of light in darkest London, most resemble Dickens.

Robert L. Patten argues that the protagonists in a Dickens novel must learn to find hope and salvation in the city, amongst society, thereby rejecting the healing power of Nature (168-70). Patten's theory suggests the discontinuity between Nature and the city within nineteenth-century literature. Though some novelists and poets appeared to find inspiration only from the country, other writers, such as Dickens, find no comfort in Nature. Patten states:

Dickens does not look at Nature directly. What was of value in Nature to some Romantics Dickens relocates in the heart and hearth, domesticating natural impulses to a social setting. Thus a power analogous to the healing virtue of Nature can be found in the city, and transformation can take place in that man-made environment. (169)

If this theory is applied, then *Guild Court* is best read as an anti-Dickens novel, for it is neither the hearth nor the presence of community, but parks and the countryside surrounding London that offer spiritual and moral growth for its characters.

In *Guild Court*, MacDonald presents the idea that humans become blinded by the turmoil and pollution of the city and, as a result, are unable to see and experience the nature of God which is paramount to their spiritual life. Yet, in the novel, only the wealthy have access to green spaces and are able to benefit from them; those who are bound to toil in squalor are seldom free to escape the city. Their outlook upon life becomes tainted with noise and smoke, covering forms of beauty which should inspire them to seek after higher thoughts. Salvation, then, lies in the hands of social workers and

caring individuals to work for the good of the poor by bringing them into contact with Nature.

The influence Nature has upon the soul is theorised within MacDonald's analysis of Wordsworth in his *England's Antiphon*, published the same year as *Guild Court*. In *England's Antiphon*, MacDonald claimed that for Wordsworth, "the benignities of nature restored peace and calmness and hope—sufficient to enable him to look back and gather wisdom" (304). MacDonald goes on to suggest that

such presence of the Father has been an infinitely more active power in the redemption of men than men have yet become capable of perceiving. The divine expressions of Nature, that is, the face of the Father therein visible, began to heal the plague which the worship of knowledge had bred. And the power of her teaching grew from comfort to prayer . . . Higher than all that Nature can do in the way of direct lessoning, is the production of such holy moods as result in hope, conscience of duty, and supplication. Those who have never felt it have to be told there is in her such a power—yielding to which, the meek inherit the earth. (304)

MacDonald's point in this passage is explicit: through Nature, the spiritual God becomes physically apparent and may be experienced by human senses. During a time when scientific studies raised controversy within the established religion of the church, MacDonald, sympathetic to both sides, attempted to combine the responses of natural discovery and man's spiritual pursuit for God by claiming that what humanity learns and loves within Nature is beauty: "beauty counteracting not contradicting science" (332). Such beauty, then, can be "a fair channel back to the simplicities of faith in some, and to a holy questioning in others; the one class having for its faith, the other for its hope, that the heart of the Father is a heart like ours, a heart that will receive into its noon the song that ascends from the twilighted hearts of his children" (332).

MacDonald strongly believes that experiencing Nature is essential to an individual's physical and spiritual growth, regardless of their social class. In *Guild Court*, MacDonald uses the social efforts of the aptly-named Lucy, combined with Wordsworthian idealism, for the moral betterment of both Mattie and Poppie to illustrate his theory. MacDonald carefully juxtaposes the relationships Mattie shares with both the city and Nature and how they affect her physical and spiritual progression. Having lost her mother at a

young age, Mattie is left with only her father, a second-hand bookseller in the claustrophobic neighbourhood of Guild Court, for whom she cares. Because of the mature duties that Mattie assumes, she loses her childhood and develops a rather stern demeanour. Thus, MacDonald consistently labels her mannerisms and speech as “old-fashioned.” Poppie, on the other hand, is a homeless orphan who freely roams the city streets. Though she is older than Mattie, her mannerisms are a blend between those of a toddler and a wild animal. As the story progresses, Mattie, isolated within Guild Court and burdened with premature adulthood, begins to suffer from signs of a developing mental disorder. However, MacDonald is careful to show that Mattie’s degenerative condition is not mental but is, in fact, spiritual. Lucy, troubled by Mattie’s symptoms, believes that spending some time away from London may do her good and suggests they take a holiday together to the countryside near Hastings.

In a rather comical way, MacDonald details Mattie’s perceptions of her journey out of London. Trying to hold on to the familiar, Mattie prejudices the country by the small bit of greenery the train passes whilst still within greater London. She argues in favour of seeing shops versus *green things* that are destined to die. In fact, her greatest argument about whether any good can come from the country rests on the idea that all things point towards death; therefore, she is unable to appreciate the significance of life. MacDonald is thus using Mattie as a metaphor for the human consciousness which has not yet encountered the divine plan of God. When this encounter does occur, it often results in rebellion against God, wherein the human soul seeks to promote self-independence.

Yet MacDonald believes that this self-made image of the human must die in order that the God-dependent self may rise forth in its place, an idea which he perfected in his final fantasy novel, *Lilith* (1895), where the title character must confront and put to death the image which she has masked over the God-given image for herself (see chapters 29 and 39). Though perfected in *Lilith*, the origin of this theory is to be found at the foundation of MacDonald’s theology and understanding it reveals insight into what is at the core of Mattie’s trepidation. With this mindset, Mattie shares a similarity with Lilith, though Lilith is MacDonald’s most extreme example of this character type. Mattie’s rejection of anything beautiful, due to her fear that its beauty will fade, signifies her own personal fear that she too will die into nothingness. In the second series of his *Unspoken Sermons* (1885), MacDonald writes that the single-most need for which all life yearns

is harmony with God:

‘More life!’ is the unconscious prayer of all creation, groaning and travailing for the redemption of its lord, the son who is not yet a son. Is not the dumb cry to be read in the faces of some of the animals, in the look of some of the flowers, and in many an aspect of what we call Nature?

... The problem is, so far to separate from himself that which must yet on him be ever and always and utterly dependent, that it shall have the existence of an individual, and be able to turn and regard him—choose him, and say, ‘I will arise and go to my Father,’ and so develop in itself the highest *Divine* of which it is capable—the will for the good against the evil—the will to be one with the life whence it has come, and in which it still is—the will to close the round of its procession in its return, so working the perfection of reunion—to shape in its own life the ring of eternity—to live immediately, consciously, and active-willingly from its source, from its own very life—to restore to the beginning the end that comes of that beginning—to be the thing the maker thought of when he willed, ere he began to work its being. (“Life” 297-8)

MacDonald’s claim here is that the body and soul of an individual must divorce its self-made image, thereby gaining freedom to attain oneness with Christ. The result is divine harmony and is seen by MacDonald as the pinnacle of man’s evolution. Of equal importance here, is that such oneness with Christ leads man to perform the work of Christ.¹ Later in the sermon, MacDonald claims:

For we are made for love, not for *self*. Our neighbour is our refuge; self is our demon-foe. Every man is the image of God to every man, and in proportion as we love him, we shall know the sacred fact. The precious thing to human soul is, and one day shall be known to be, every human soul. (312)

The argument MacDonald appears to make in this sermon recalls Wordsworth’s claim in “The Old Cumberland Beggar” (1800): “That we have all of us one human heart” (445, line 153). All of his hero and heroine characters strive to reach this end. Strangely, MacDonald never fully depicts a character as having actually reached this state, though many may be argued as having come close to the mark. Characters such as Robert Falconer, Gibbie Galbraith, and David Elginbrod surely appear to be examples of what

MacDonald is trying to convey to his readers. Instead, MacDonald completes their tales with either their deaths, signifying the continuation of their spiritual journey within another realm, or else with an affirmation that the character was well on their way. In the end, his characters must set to their journeys. In Mattie's case, her journey physically begins with her temporary removal from the city.

Once in the countryside of Hastings, Mattie's fears overtake her senses. The full expanse of the open sky, the immense sea, and the broad landscape which stretches for miles beyond her sight opens her inner eyes to realise the infinite nature of the universe and to perceive just how small she is within it. Mattie feels that she is in danger of becoming lost in the vastness of the world where God cannot find her. MacDonald, then, uses Mattie's fear to explore mankind's faith in God by writing:

[T]he child symbolized those who think they have faith in God, and yet when one of the swaddling bands of system or dogma to which they have been accustomed is removed, or even only slackened, immediately feel as if there were no God, as if the earth under their feet were a cloud, and the sky over them a color, and nothing to trust in anywhere. They rest in their swaddling bands, not in God. The loosening of these is God's gift to them that they may grow. But first they are much afraid. (*Guild Court* 202)

MacDonald's claim here is that humans must overcome the initial feelings of fear and isolation inspired by Nature in order to shift the focus of their thoughts from themselves to the infinite nature of God.

To aid in conquering these feelings of fear, MacDonald often provides an encounter with the ideas of Wordsworth. During their time in the countryside, Lucy reads to Mattie from a volume of Wordsworth's poetry and implies that natural elements of beauty, such as flowers, point towards the divine, even stating that flowers speak the words of God and will continue to speak after man's voice has diminished (203). Although initially puzzled by the meaning behind these words, Mattie eventually comes to appreciate the beauty of the flowers. MacDonald states:

[I]f she did not learn their meaning with her understanding, she must have learned it with her heart, for she would gaze at some of them in a way that showed plainly enough that she felt their beauty; and in the beauty, the individual loveliness of such things, lies the dim lesson with which they faintly tincture our

being. No man can be quite the same he was after having *loved* a new flower. (204)

Having been exposed to Nature in her visit to the countryside, Mattie's worldview is challenged, prompting her imagination to ponder things which point towards the divine.

Ultimately, MacDonald's primary concern throughout his writing deals with spirituality. For Mattie, her spiritual state was weakened due to her confinement within Guild Court. One of the ways that Mattie reveals her spiritual malady is through *Syne*, the malevolent entity which she associates through her father's second-hand books. It is not until she breaks from her confinement, that she is able to fight against *Syne* and spiritually progress. Secondly, MacDonald felt that such natural encounters as these were needed for the physical well-being of children. As a result of spending adequate time in the countryside, MacDonald writes: "Thus, by degrees, Mattie's thought and feeling were drawn outward. Her health improved. Body and mind reacted on each other. She grew younger and humbler" (204). Just as Nature re-formed Margaret Elginbrod into a highly attractive female character, so has it smoothed away the figurative wrinkles of premature adulthood.² However, Mattie is unable to receive the lessons from Nature without the help of Lucy (and, indirectly, Wordsworth). After experiencing Nature for herself, the child's intellect is inspired to seek after the origin of her thoughts which are, in turn, directed towards God. MacDonald concludes the scene by stating, "Before she left Hastings, Mattie was almost a child" (205).

This is a core point of MacDonald's theology, which implies that the journey towards God involves refining the individual soul and growing child-like, as opposed to remaining or becoming childish. Eventually, for one to fully face God, one must reach perfection—to be on equal terms with Christ. Thus, part of Mattie's experience contributes to her mental and emotional health but also aids her journey towards God's perfection. MacDonald is suggesting in this scene that God's original intention was for her to be a child, though by circumstance, her childhood is neglected. However, in seeking after God's nature, she begins to grow into the child he intended her to be. Such a spiritual progression confirms MacDonald's theory that Nature's greatest lesson to humanity is to awaken thoughts within man that have as yet slumbered.

In his essay, "Wordsworth's Poetry," MacDonald indicates that Wordsworth discovered and illustrated four significant stages of spiritual growth from his experience with Nature. In ascending order, MacDonald

states that the first stage to be found in Nature is simply amusement; though the lowest stage in the grand scheme, simple amusement with an object such as a flower turns the attention of the individual upon the object itself—which may initiate a further and deeper search into its origins. Although it is the simplest and most child-like reaction to Nature, amusement may lead to the provision of joy, which then becomes the second stage of discovery and spiritual growth. MacDonald mentions Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1807) to illustrate his example of how joy affects such an individual, suggesting that the power of joy is more potent than amusement and has a long-lasting effect upon the soul. MacDonald clearly understood the point Wordsworth tried to make. In *The Marquis of Lossie* (1877), after Alexander Graham left Scotland and moved to London, where he once again attempted a pulpit ministry, he is met by his former student, Malcolm. Living in poverty with a heart reminiscing for his home country, Graham confesses to Malcolm that the memory of what he once felt and experienced in Nature, the "outer things that have contributed to his inward growth," provide him with peace in the city. With confidence, Graham states:

The sights which, when I lie down to sleep, rise before that inward eye Wordsworth calls the bliss of solitude, have upon me power almost of a spiritual vision, so purely radiant are they of that which dwells in them, the divine thought which is their substance, their *hypostasis*. My boy! I doubt if you can tell what it is to know the presence of the living God in and about you.
(76)

The heart of this idea is expressed in *Guild Court* during a scene when Lucy takes the girls to an outing at the zoo. Towards the end of their outing, Lucy explores the gardens and falls within a dreamy state. MacDonald powerfully illustrates the spiritual effect of Nature, stating:

There the buds were bursting everywhere. Out of the black bark, all begrimed with London smoke and London dirt, flowed the purest green. Verily there is One that can bring a clean thing out of an unclean. Reviving nature was all in harmony with Lucy's feelings this day. It was the most simply happy day she had ever had. (360-1)

The element of joy derived from Nature often comes with a deeper understanding, or perhaps simply a feeling of divine harmony, in MacDonald's characters.

However, as with amusement, this does not always prompt a genuine,

spiritual search into the truth of the object. Instead, it is in the third stage that a lesson is learned from Nature. MacDonald provides an example of how Nature may affect and comfort a troubled mind when Lucy takes Mattie to an evening church service. The scene is carefully constructed to match Lucy's mood, which, at the time, is hurt and filled with sorrow. Whilst walking towards the church using a wide lane rarely traversed, she begins to observe the contrasting effects of light and darkness within her surroundings. MacDonald writes that "long shadows lay or flitted about over the level street. Lucy had never before taken any notice of the long shadows of the evening" (144). The mesmerised Lucy begins to search for their meaning as MacDonald adds: "The reason she saw them now was that her sorrowful heart saw the sorrowfulness of the long shadows out of the rosy mist, and made her mind observe them. The sight brought tears to her eyes, and yet soothed her" (144). The scene takes a striking hold upon Lucy and she begins to feel the harmony and truth of suffering made clear through her knowledge of God in Nature.

Lastly, MacDonald gleans from Wordsworth that Nature "puts a man into that mood or condition in which thoughts come of themselves" ("Wordsworth's Poetry" 254). Alexander Graham, in *Malcolm*, believes in this idea and having met with Malcolm in a church-yard late one afternoon, after they had been conversing on the topic of death and spiritual resurrection, he persuades his pupil to remain alone in the churchyard for half an hour. Of Graham, MacDonald writes, "For he believed in solitude and silence. Say rather, he believed in God. What the youth might think, feel, or judge, he could not tell; but he believed that when the Human is still, the Divine speaks to it, because it is its own" (67). Ever trusting his schoolmaster, Malcolm agrees to remain in the churchyard as night falls around him. Though MacDonald only briefly details Malcolm's thoughts in the churchyard, he gives ample detail to Nature's presence. Recalling, perhaps, Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard* (1751), MacDonald writes:

The darkness had deepened, the graves all but vanished; an old setting moon appeared, boat-like over a great cloudy chasm, into which it slowly sank; blocks of cloud, with stars between, possessed the sky; all nature seemed thinking about death; a listless wind began to blow, and Malcolm began to feel as if he were awake too long, and *ought* to be asleep—as if he were out in a dream—a dead man that had risen too soon or lingered too

late—so lonely, so forsaken! The wind, soft as it was, seemed to blow through his very soul. Yet something held him, and his half-hour was long over when he left the church-yard. (67)

Merging his personal theology with Wordsworth's ideas of an inherent harmony between humans and Nature, MacDonald uses Graham's mystical instructions to Malcolm as a representative of his own belief that Nature brings humans closer to God, claiming that this is the highest benefit that Nature can offer humanity. This theory is later echoed in MacDonald's essay "The Fantastic Imagination" where he states:

The best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is—not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; or say, to make him think things for himself. The best Nature does for us is to work in us such moods in which thoughts of high import arise. (319)

Prompted by beauty, people are then encouraged to seek after God ("Wordsworth's Poetry" 256). In the end, MacDonald claims that God uses Nature to draw humanity back to Himself. This point is dramatically detailed in Mattie's spiritual conversion in the countryside near Hastings.

Throughout his writing, MacDonald consistently personifies Nature as the outward face of God. In *Guild Court*, this theory becomes a social ideal in itself, ever prompting human to seek its hidden truths. MacDonald theorises that once these truths are discovered, people should reveal them to his community and to help others become more like Christ; thus, by aiding another's spiritual growth, one becomes a fellow-worker with God.

Endnote

1. See this illustrated in pp. 171-2 of MacDonald's *What's Mine's Mine* (1886).
2. See this illustrated in pp. 45-6 of MacDonald's *David Elginbrod* (1863).

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