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Outworn Liberal Humanism: George MacDonald and “The Right Relation to the Whole”

Roderick McGillis

“what an end lies before us”

(George MacDonald)

The case of George MacDonald is curious. On the one hand, he continues to sit on the margins of mainstream canonical literature, finding his place by virtue of his undoubted skills as a writer of fantasy. On the other hand, he continues to hold the imaginations of a specialized group of readers—both academic and non-academic—who look to him for spiritual guidance. For this group of readers, MacDonald is important for what he has to say about matters of spirit and devotion. For some readers who glance at his work as interesting but minor examples of an “other” Victorianism, MacDonald represents either a tradition of liberal humanism or a tradition of Christian spirituality that looks distinctly old-fashioned in these days of cultural construction and decentered selves. Terry Eagleton refers to this humanist tradition with its autonomous human subject as “embarrassingly out of gear with certain alternative versions of subjectivity which arise more directly from the late capitalist economy itself” (377). Capitalism, late or early, as far as I can tell, wants willing producers and compliant consumers. As far as fantasy is concerned, the capitalist enterprise welcomes projections that envisage utopia in such a way that they do not, as Rosemary Jackson points out, “directly engage with divisions or contradictions of subjects inside human culture” (154; Jackson’s emphasis). In other words, the fantasy of a unified psychic order as well as a unified social order is well and good as long as it remains at a remove from action in the world we must adapt ourselves to. We need never [end of page 5] worry about changing this world we actually live in when we have visions of better (and worse) worlds available to us in fantasy. And fantasy such as George MacDonald’s diverts us from engaging in social critique and hence social action by looking always toward a metaphysical reality independent from the economy of our workaday world.

My drift implies that MacDonald presents us with a vision that is, again as Jackson suggests, deeply conservative and non-threatening to the
social and economic status quo precisely because of his faith in individual perfectibility, his belief in the unified individual, his intense gaze at a transcendent rather than an actual world—in short, because of his belief in a liberal and humanist sensibility. It is this sensibility Colin Manlove refers to when he states that the “whole orientation of MacDonald’s fantasy is towards the spiritual and metaphysical” (155). If indeed I seem to be implying this, then let me quickly disclaim my implication. What I wish to argue here is that MacDonald’s fantasy (or at least the example of it I intend to examine) presents the reader with a radical critique of totalizing systems—whether these systems be political, economic, or religious—and an understanding of the self as a function of desire. My focus is one scene in MacDonald’s fantasy for children, *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871).

The scene I have in mind is in Chapter 8, “The East Window”; in the previous chapter North Wind leaves Diamond in a cathedral by himself while she continues on her mission to sink a ship. Before she leaves him, North Wind informs Diamond that “a beginning is the greatest thing of all” (65). In MacDonald’s world, a beginning is the condition in which main characters almost always find themselves. Beginnings are a function of desire, the desire to get somewhere or something. We might view beginnings as teleological, as oriented by their very nature toward ends, but the condition of beginning defers ending, just as the elusive nature of self eludes fixity or the odour of music (cf 61) hints at but does not deliver clarity of meaning. When I speak of desire, then, I invoke a Lacanian lack. In MacDonald’s romantic worlds, the self is a desiring self and is in consequence incomplete, always experiencing simulations. Even Diamond’s trip to the back of the North Wind early in the book shows him (we later learn) “[o]nly a picture” of that place (278). Finality can only come after endings, and endings are not for time-bound existence this side of the grave. Here there are no endings, only beginnings. Or if endings do occur, they are “endless endings” such as we have in the last chapter of *Lilith*. The end of the fiction that is *At the Back of the North Wind* is the beginning of Diamond’s new life and the beginning of the reader’s search for understanding. We begin something because we desire something. Desire is the motivation for beginning. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, young Diamond desires, and one manifestation of this desire is his eagerness to understand the things North Wind shows and tells him. She initiates in Diamond the beginning of knowledge. The book does the same for the reader.

And so what does Diamond begin to learn inside the great cathedral
as a storm rages without? He falls asleep near the east end of the building, beneath the great Apostles’ window, and thinks he wakes to hear the Apostles in this window whispering about him. Before we consider what they say, we might examine this window and the others MacDonald mentions. Diamond hears the Apostles from the east window talking, and St. Peter says that he thinks he saw him earlier in the evening in the gallery near the Nicodemus window. Shortly after, St. Luke joins the conversation “from the next window” (68). The mention of the Nicodemus window draws attention to late night conversations concerning truth, the flesh, and the spirit. Nicodemus, like Diamond, has a difficult time understanding the words of a miracle worker; he wonders how one can “enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born” (John 3.4). From a psychoanalytical perspective, Diamond’s trips with North Wind are manifestations of his desire to return to (or perhaps to remain in) the womb; from a spiritual perspective, they are reminders of the manner in which spirit intersects with this material world in which we live. Diamond, like Nicodemus, [7] is a doubter; he needs to learn how to understand that living in doubts and uncertainties need not mean living without hope and faith. The participation of St. Thomas in the conversation also makes this point about doubt. Diamond is a doubter who must learn trust and acceptance.

His conversations with North Wind in the previous chapter remind me of Asia’s conversations with Demogorgon in Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound, in that Demogorgon speaks in riddles. Riddles, we will learn later in At the Back of the North Wind, are of two kinds—the kind that are tricks (162) and the kind that lead to mysterious truths. Demogorgon, like North Wind, is riddle itself, an amorphous shape, a shape without shape. He must take the form of him or her who perceives him; the same is true of North Wind. My pronoun here in reference to Demogorgon is a mark of uncertainty since the deep truth is not only imageless but also genderless. The genderless quality of deep truth may have something to do with MacDonald’s well-established construction of the deity as both female and male. Diamond perceives a maternal and yet erotic female in North Wind because this figure best meets with his own desiring self. Asia perceives a male Demogorgon because this figure best meets with her desiring self. I invoke Shelley remembering that Shelley’s Prometheus, for MacDonald, contains “fundamental ideas” that are “grand” (Dish of Orts 278). Perhaps the grandest vision of all in Prometheus Unbound is the connection of metaphysical with physical truths. Shelley’s poem plays out in a mythic and fantastic landscape,
but it deals with concrete social, economic, and political realities. The same is true of *At the Back of the North Wind*.

The Nicodemus window, then, might remind us of a stage in Diamond’s life that he will pass through. In Christian language, he learns what it means to be born again; he experiences a new birth. Diamond passes from beneath this window in the gallery down into the nave and along to the east end of the cathedral where he comes near two other windows: the Apostles’ window and the one from which St. Luke speaks. The narrator mentions several persons by name: St. Peter, St. Matthew, St. Thomas, and St. Luke. The text implies that at least one other unnamed Apostle speaks. What strikes me about the men named is the various occupations they represent: Peter, a fisherman; Matthew, a tax collector; Thomas, a carpenter; Luke, a physician. Nicodemus, we might recall, is a Pharisee and member of the group who opposed Jesus. The men the narrator names form a disparate company, and yet they all have something in common: their devotion to truth and understanding. What I argue here is that this disparate company presents something akin to the disparateness of North Wind herself. The notion of a self for MacDonald is, undoubtedly, related to the notion of the perfectible individual, the unified self of the liberal humanist tradition. But the unified person is not a person we meet here in this sublunar world. MacDonald tells us in his sermon on “The New Name” that each person’s “true name” is “the meaning of the person who bears it” (*Unspoken Sermons* 106; MacDonald’s emphasis), and that this name can only come directly from God because “no one but God sees what the man is or even, seeing what he is, could express in a name-word the sum and harmony of what he sees” (106-07). The unified person is an aspect of human becoming, and becoming proceeds into an indefinite future, as perhaps the fantasy *Lilith* expresses as well as anything in MacDonald’s work. MacDonald reminds us many times of the several selves inherent in each person, even while he gestures toward a time when these several selves find harmony and unification in “right relation to the whole” (*Anthology* 190).

The group of Apostles and the gospel-writer Luke speak in a manner that indicates to Diamond that they are not who they appear to be. He imagines that they can “only be the sextons and vergers, and such like, who got up at night, and put on the robes of deans and bishops, and called each other grand names, as the foolish servants he had heard his father tell of call themselves lords and ladies, after their masters and mistresses” (69). The invoking of the carnivalesque in this passage might remind us of necessary
reversals and shifting roles. What interests, me, however, is the melding of characters. The scene is replete with such dissolves. Apostles become sextons and vergers who in turn become foolish servants, waking becomes sleeping and vice versa, the cathedral becomes a stable with horses and hay, night becomes day, storm becomes calm, identity shifts. Instability is the order of things here. The “right relation to the whole” remains elusive. [9]

In *At the Back of the North Wind*, the layers of narrative voice also communicate the lack of a unified subject beyond the imaginary of Diamond’s still unmirrored life. From title page to final paragraph of the novel, we have a complex author-relationship to the text. Obviously, the author of this book is George MacDonald; the cover and title page inform us of this fact. But our sophisticated understanding of narrative prompts us to separate the named author from the narrator of the fiction. When we begin reading the work, we encounter the voice of an extradiegetic narrator, someone who has “been asked” (11) to tell this story. Near the end of the story, however, this extradiegetic narrator turns into a homodiegetic narrator, someone who actually interacts with the characters in the narrative. The narrator is both inside and outside the narrative. But a further complication occurs with the presence in the narrative of the character named Mr. Raymond. Mr. Raymond is a writer, one of whose books is the *Little Lady and the Goblin Prince* (261), a reference to a book by the author George MacDonald which is as yet unpublished. When it does appear it will have the title, *The Princess and the Goblin*. In other words, George MacDonald the author distances himself from the narrator of this fiction and at the same time duplicates himself in the person of Mr. Raymond. This raises the question: who is George MacDonald? How does one identify an author? What is an author? At the very least, this splitting of authorship raises the notion of constructed selves. The author of a book is no more unified, no more in a “right relation to the whole,” than anyone else in this incomplete world.

Raising questions is what this book is all about. And one of the questions it raises has to do with authorship itself. We might recall that authorship has something to do with authority, and in MacDonald’s world authority comes under question. The narrator remarks at one point: “I don’t know what I know, I only know what I think” (119). And he confesses at the beginning of chapter 36 that he could not regard Diamond’s experiences with North Wind “in exactly the same light as he [Diamond] did” (270); in other words, he could not see these experiences illuminated with the same clarity as Diamond. Diamond is the only character in the book who approaches a “right
relation to the whole,” and he is about to [10] depart this world for a place we cannot know about first hand. As long as we remain on this side of death, we are only moving toward that right relation. As long as we remain on this side of death, we are in a world of mundane concerns. And so speaking of mundane concerns, I return to the Apostles.

Earlier I referred to at least one unnamed Apostle. This one complains of North Wind’s “disrespectful” conduct. He also confesses that he does not “understand that woman’s conduct” (69). This confession fits with my theme of incompleteness. But what is more striking here is the Apostle’s complaint. He notes that he and his fellows have “enough to do with our money, without taking care of other people’s children.” And he goes on to say that taking care of other people’s children is not “what our forefathers built cathedrals for” (69). In a similar vein, a voice (it is not clear whether this is the same voice or another one) remarks that North Wind’s goings on have dirtied his blue robe and that it “will cost me shillings to clean it” (69). Of course, we learn right away that these are the voices of sextons and vergers and such-like, and not apostles, but the fact that we learn this only after the words concerning the money and North Wind’s disrespect have been uttered (apparently by at least one of the Apostles) requires that we consider how the words might appropriately fit these authority figures. The reader of At the Back of the North Wind might either remain perplexed or else move on to take for granted that the words are not the Apostles’ but are decidedly those of falsely pious church authorities. Readers who know MacDonald’s distaste for “sharp-edged systems” (Expression of Character 51) or his difficulty with the congregation at Arundel during his only official pastorate will not find it difficult to realize he might have reason to criticize the church. The church as an institution has financial concerns just as businessmen do. When we take finance into account, we might remember that the scene in At the Back of the North Wind takes place while North Wind is out sinking a ship, and the sinking of the ship has something to do with business and economic practice of the time. Lurking in this critique of Mammon-worship is an implicit invocation of imperialism. The Church, no less than other institutions of the state apparatus, is in the business of colonizing.

The indictment of Church and State is evident in the transformation of the cathedral into the stable. Implicit in this transformation is a privileging of the small and meek over the powerful and authoritarian. MacDonald communicates this privileging in a number of ways, not the least of which is parody. The stable is, [11] in effect, a parody of the cathedral. The child
holds a parodic position in terms of the adult. The horses, Diamond and Ruby, parody humans. North Wind parodies Demogorgon and Romantic immanence generally. Mr. Raymond’s story of “Little Daylight” parodies “Sleeping Beauty” and other fairy tales. Intertextual references to Herodotus, Dante, and James Hogg imply more in the way of parodic elements in the book. In some curious way sleep parodies waking, death parodies life, and fantasy parodies reality. This is not simply a way of saying one thing is reflective of another in this book; rather, the force of the parodic here undermines the stability of “sharp-edged systems.” Parody, as Linda Hutcheon argues, “contests our humanist assumptions about artistic originality and uniqueness and our capitalist notions of ownership and property” (92).

Parody gives a curious twist to desire. I suspect that the parody reflects the parodist’s desire to be that which he or she parodies. Rarely does parody choose an inconsequential or ephemeral object for its reproduction. It reproduces that which has value, however we may articulate that value. And so when MacDonald parodies the fairy tale, we can, I think, take it for granted that he finds something of value in the old stories. When he parodies the Apostles, we can rest assured he knows they offer us something of value. When he parodies the human desire for completion, we may rightly assume he believes in the possibility of completion. Entelechy is, for MacDonald, reality. It is only that we have yet to fulfill that form towards which we are growing. The unfinished aspect of MacDonald’s vision of human life is apparent at the end of the book in North Wind’s seeming inability to answer Diamond’s questions. He insistently asks her to tell him that what he has experienced has not been a dream and that she herself is a reality, but she just as insistently avoids stating anything outright. She offers tentative statements of what she thinks, and she avows that she is “looking for something to say all the time” (276). She resolutely refuses, however, to answer Diamond’s questions categorically. A similar ambiguity adheres to the question of the body. Responding to North Wind’s distinction between “brain” and “mind,” Diamond remarks that she cannot know of what she speaks because she has not “got a body” (285). She quickly assures him that he could not know her if she did not have a body. The words “know” and “body” remind us of the pleasures of the flesh necessary for reproduction. Production and reproduction are aspects of this world’s economy, and they often reflect a masculine ethos. What North Wind does is to remind Diamond and the reader of an economy based not so much on production as on expansion. And I refer to an expansiveness of the self outward to others. Truly to produce is to give
of the self, not to gain for the self. MacDonald says as much throughout his work, and in his depiction here of Diamond who helps his family both inside and outside the home, who comes to Nanny’s aid, and who changes the life of the Drunken Cabman. Diamond produces the only thing worth producing in MacDonald’s scheme of things: good deeds. These good deeds set Diamond on a direct path to the right relation to the whole.

Works Cited

—. *A Dish of Orts*. London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1895.