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Nature and Fantasy

John Pridmore

Nature is a powerful presence in George MacDonald's work, encountered in many moods but always as a force for good. In this respect, like many another nineteenth century writers, MacDonald is swayed by the strong currents of the romantic movement, above all by the commanding influence of Wordsworth who, as Stephen Gill has recently shown, retained iconic status throughout the Victorian age: It is significant that the nearest we have in MacDonald's work to a considered analysis of the role of nature is the essay entitled "Wordsworth's Poetry." MacDonald claims that for Wordsworth nature is "a world of teaching." That teaching is given progressively, nature engaging with the human spirit at successively higher levels. Nature, begins by merely providing "amusement." But stage by stage nature works more potently on us. The loftiest level at which nature affects the human heart and mind is reached when nature forms in us a lasting disposition open to unbidden insights and perceptions and, above all, conscious of what is required of us. The love of nature leads at last to the love of man. At this stage nature's work is, in a sense, done.

MacDonald repeatedly describes the influence of nature in these Wordsworthian terms. His account of the spiritual development of Alec Forbes, for example, reflects his reading of Wordsworth and the faith he shares with the poet that we are progressively shaped by nature. For the young Alec, perception of nature as a beneficent power is a gradually dawning awareness:

he began . . . to become aware of a certain stillness pervading the universe like a law; a stillness ever being broken by the cries of eager men, yet ever closing and returning with gentleness not to be repelled, seeking to infold and penetrate with its own healing the minds of the noisy children of the earth. (140)

This, MacDonald tells us, is only the beginning of Alec's awareness. Nature has not yet taken hold of him and he is soon distracted, caught up in a succession of wayward adventures. Much later, nature will claim his attention more deeply and, together with the fidelity of those who love him, begin to effect his restoration:

Alec lingered behind. An unknown emotion drew his heart

towards the earth A wide stillness and peace, as of a heart at rest, filled space, and lying upon the human souls with a persistent quietness that might be felt, made them know what *might* be theirs All was marvel. (220-21).

The tale of Alec Forbes' development is the story of how nature conspires with those who hold him dear to bring him to his senses. MacDonald pictures nature, together with those who never despaired of Alec, rejoicing at his home coming. A lark is within earshot "pouring down a vocal summer of jubilant melody" (374). Nature, co-operating with the love of family and friends, is seen by MacDonald to work for our healing.

Here, as on many other pages, MacDonald writes with Wordsworth at his shoulder. But it is not to underestimate Wordsworth's influence to insist that MacDonald's account of nature is far from derivative. MacDonald believed that the experience of nature itself should precede exposure to other people's published opinions about it—even Wordsworth's. The pale young Harry Arnold to whom Hugh Sutherland is **[end of page 2]** appointed as tutor is so immured in his father's library that the first task is to make him put away his books and get him out of doors (*David Elginbrod* 115-20). MacDonald himself was a child roaming the hills above Huntly long before he read Wordsworth, and his view of nature and how it shapes us is in important respects his own and to be studied on its own merits. My purpose here is not to dwell on how MacDonald's remarks on nature echo more famous voices but to draw attention to what I find most original and suggestive in his account of nature and how it fashions us, his association of nature with fantasy.

Nature for MacDonald is formative but not didactic: it does not force its truth on us. Thus nature is like a fairy tale. This richly evocative notion is found in MacDonald's beloved Novalis. "The nature of rock and plants has more of the aura of fantasy" (Bd 5, 221). That nature is a kind of extended *Märchen* is implied in the problematical and much discussed passages from Novalis with which MacDonald prefaces *Phantastes*. MacDonald makes this idea his own and develops its implications in his own distinctive manner. The landscape we inhabit, like the landscape we enter in reading a fairy tale, is charged with meaning, not one single meaning imposed by its creator, but whatever meaning it holds for each of us.

The idea of nature as a book was of course a Victorian commonplace. Stephen Prickett (126) reminds us of John Keble's lines, "There is a book who runs may read, / Which heavenly truth imparts," from *The Christian Year*

(lines for Septuagesima Sunday). Nature is a book. What is fascinating in MacDonald's use of the familiar metaphor is the kind of reading-material he implies nature to be.

In his essay "The Fantastic Imagination" MacDonald begins to explain, albeit very reluctantly, some of his reasons for writing fairy tales. Here he makes the connection directly. Nature's role and that of the fairy tale are alike. Nature, like the fairy tale, awakens us and arouses our perception. But our perception is not of some one thing so that if nature moves two people differently one of them at least must be mistaken. The function of nature is "to work in us such moods in which thoughts of high import arise" (319)—the meaning of them is not to be explained intellectually but is that which is aroused in the heart of the reader, the listener, the wanderer on the hillside.

This association of the natural world with the alternative world of the fairy story is both bold and extraordinarily suggestive. It is possible to take a paragraph from MacDonald's observations about the significance of the fairy tale and, without modification, apply it to nature:

It cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has. vitality, and vitality is truth. The beauty may be plainer in it than the truth, but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairy tale would give no delight.

Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another. (316)

We do not misinterpret MacDonald if in that passage we substitute "nature" for "fairy tale." Nature, like a fairy tale, is a text to be read, and, as with a fairy tale, the task of tracing its meaning is deferred to the reader.

The features of natural landscape—the wind in the trees, the river running between the hills, shy creatures nearby but hidden from us—all are also the images of fantasy [3] and neither in nature nor in fantasy can these moving, flowing, growing things be arrested, captured and defined. Nature invites us, as does such a text as *Phantastes*, to enter "a world of becoming." Nature, still more manifestly than fantasy, is no finished artefact. To observe the countryside is not to contemplate a Chinese vase. It follows that the role of nature, as that of fantasy, is not to fashion a finished product, any more than it is to command our acquiescence to series of propositions. It is to promote a journey which—like that of Anodos—is essentially open-ended.

The two realms of nature and fantasy are mutually interpretative. The

same literacy which allows us to respond to fantasy and to be open to what it teaches us alerts us also to nature and makes us susceptible to its formative power over us.

Nature is mysterious and elusive, betraying different dispositions—sometimes comforting, sometimes terrifying, sometimes indifferent. Nature perplexes us with questions, yet presents us with images which invite meaningful construction. Nature shapes us long before we are aware of her presence, more deeply as we come to accept Her formative role. Such is the model of nature emerging from page after page of MacDonald's writings. And that model is inescapably anthropomorphic. It is as if we were describing *someone*.

Who then is this "someone"? We have strong hints as to her identity in two of MacDonald's early works. The protagonist of "A Hidden Life" senses a presence in the Hills and the "fancy" rises in his mind:

That on the other side those rampant walls
A mighty woman sat, with wailing face,
Calm as that life whose rapt intensity
Borders on death, silent, waiting for him,
To make him grand for ever with a kiss. (1.159)

Hugh Sutherland too at last becomes aware of her:

But now she herself appeared to him—the grand, pure, tender mother, ancient in years, yet ever young; appeared to him, not in the mirror of a man's words, but bending over him from the fathomless bosom of the sky, from the outspread arms of the forest trees, from the silent judgement of the everlasting hills. (*David Elginbrod* 448)

But it is in a later work that the identity of this personal presence in nature becomes unmistakable. In a remarkable series of chapters in *What's Mine's Mine*, a fine novel undeservedly neglected, we recognise who she is. This figure, so elusive and yet so engaged with humanity's fortunes and so concerned for its flourishing, is, it seems, none other than "the Wise Woman," the mysterious grandmother figure whom we meet in MacDonald's fairy tales and fantasies. Nature, it seems, is but one more of the Wise Woman's many guises.

The details of the plot of *What's Mine's Mine* need not detain us. Suffice it to say that the setting is Scotland and all turns on the contrast and conflict between, on the one side, a clan chief and his brother, the noble but impoverished Alister and Ian; and, on the other, the rich but boorish owner of

New House who has designs on the clan's ancient patrimony. The latter has two daughters, Christina and Mercy. While the father remains obdurate they, although woefully small-minded, are open to the spiritual [4] development which here, as in every MacDonald novel, is the central theme of the narrative.

These girls are bored with talk about nature—or, as MacDonald has it, they “appeared unaware of the least expression on the face of their grandmother” (207) They are bound to receive “some good from the aspect of things” because “Grannie's hidden, and therefore irresistible power was in operation” (207), but even nature's most magnificent manifestations “were to them poor facts, no vaguest embodiment of truths eternal” (207). The brothers have to explain to them:

We mean by *nature* every visitation of the outside world through our senses . . . But that is not all. We mean the things themselves only for the sake of what they say to us. As our sense of smell brings us news of fields far off, so those fields, or even the smell only that comes from them, tell us of things, meanings, thoughts, intentions beyond them, and embodied in them. (211)

For Alister, nature's influence is God's, but also the Wise Woman's:

God is the only real person, being in himself, and without help from anybody; and so we talk even of the world which is but his living garment, as if that were a person; and we call it *she* as if it were a woman, because so many of God's loveliest influences come to us through her. She always seems to me a beautiful old grandmother. (212)

Nature, like the Wise Woman of the fantasies and fairy tales, is encountered in many moods. The novel recounts how Ian rescues Christina who is at risk of being swept away by a sudden and terrible flood. The chapter (Ch.30) describing what is a familiar turn of events in a MacDonald novel is entitled “Granny Angry,” an infelicitous title to be sure, but again it demonstrates the correspondence between the formative role of nature and the pedagogical procedures of the fantasy grandmother. Both, it seems, must sometimes adopt stern measures to bring us to our senses.

To the bemusement of the sisters, the brothers converse about the understanding of nature found in Keats, Shelley and—again—Wordsworth. Ian illustrates Chaucer's feelings about flowers by quoting him at length. Dante too is brought into the frame. All this is indicative of the reservoir of

reading informing MacDonald's view of nature, but what is most striking is what is absent from those sources—the association of nature with the Wise Woman.

Ian tells the sisters that nature shapes the one who is alone with her: make yourself alone in one of Nature's withdrawing-rooms, and seat yourself in one of Grannie's own chairs No book, mind! . . .

[S]it down and be lonely. Look out on the loneliness, the wide world around you, and the great vault over you, with the lonely sun in the midst of it; fold your hands in your lap and be still. Do not try to think anything. Do not try to call up any feeling or sentiment or sensation; just be still. By and by, it may be, you will begin to know something of Nature. (220)

Mercy takes to heart what Ian has told her and to test the truth of it she wanders by herself high into the hills. There, in the words of the title to the chapter (ch. 32), "Mercy Calls on Granny." Again the title is infelicitous, but the account of what she experiences is one of the most powerful passages in MacDonald's fiction. The sequence [5] of sensations Mercy feels is registered with an insight and acuity as remarkable in its way as comparable passages from Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. There is, first, a sense of release and exhilaration. But that initial delight fades, yielding to a feeling of "loneliness absolute" as she becomes aware of her isolation. Not only is she alone in that vast landscape, she is conscious of an inner alienation, a sense of separation from the heart of things. That loneliness yields in its turn to terror—Mercy is possessed in the great silence of the hills by a sense of being hunted. But at the same time there comes home to her that "[t]here must be some refuge" (250), that alienation is not inevitable or final. At last these successive waves of feeling, each yielding to the next, are succeeded by the overpowering conviction that "something was required of her." All is for her final good though Mercy does not understand this. "She did not suspect that her grandmother had been doing anything for her" (251).

"I have to shape myself," North Wind tells Diamond "in various ways to various people" (*Back* 363). Curdie is bewildered that Irene's great-grandmother can appear in so many different forms. She attempts to reassure him. "Shapes are only dresses, Curdie, and dresses are only names. That which is inside is the same all the time" (*Curdie* 76). Nature, it seems, is but another dress of one who wears so many.

Two conclusions may be drawn from MacDonald's association of

nature with the Wise Woman and with the fantasies and fairy tales where we meet her.

First there is the fundamental hermeneutic issue of the frame of reference within which the realm of nature is to be construed. If, like a fairy tale, nature is a text to be read, the same question arises that we must ask about MacDonald's fantasy. Does nature's "text" require the acceptance of the traditional concepts and categories of a received religious tradition for its elucidation? Just as we wonder whether *Phantastes* can only be rightly understood within the Christian world-view MacDonald held, so we ask about nature, about its waste and pain as well as its sublimities. Do we have to accept the traditional Christian truth-claims if we are to make sense of nature's mystery and for nature to serve our highest good?

The great enigma of MacDonald's work is that his spirituality is expressed in parallel discourses. (I use the term "discourse" quite informally and untechnically to refer to a pattern of extended utterance with certain common characteristics.) The most important distinction of discourse, in MacDonald's work is between that which alludes to God and employs religious terminology and that which does not. Using the first discourse MacDonald articulates an understanding of spiritual growth and nurture in the familiar terms of traditional Christian piety, albeit a piety of vigorous dissent. We may speak of this as his "theistic discourse," and it is the discourse which predominates in MacDonald's novels as well as in his sermons and poetry. But we meet in MacDonald's work a second discourse, a discourse in which the same theme of spiritual development is explored yet which is largely free of traditional religious terminology. This, MacDonald's "non-theistic" discourse, is characteristic of his fairy tales and fantasies—although, as we have seen from *What's Mine's Mine*, the rich veins of such fantasy run deeply into his so-called "realistic" fiction.

In the passages we have highlighted from this remarkable novel the two discourses, the theistic and the non-theistic, unfold side by side. Nature is depicted as the channel of divine influence, it is God who is at work, acting through nature to bring two foolish [6] girls to a right frame of heart and mind and to lead them home to himself. The discourse is theistic, a discourse MacDonald consistently uses with integrity, conviction and unmatched eloquence.

But in these passages there is a deep tension with the alternative non-theistic discourse which runs alongside it. Nature is also "the beautiful old grandmother." She is the Wise Woman, the one who evokes what is beyond

our rational grasp and who can never be captured in a net of words. She is cloaked in mystery and her interventions in our experience are “from the nameless region beyond all categories” (Rahner 41-42). She has many names, although she herself is not many but one. Our destiny hangs by the invisible thread she spins. She teaches by parables; parables which do not deliver answers but which only pose questions. Her strange mercy burns us.

We are drawn to the conclusion that the discourse which thus speaks of nature has its own authenticity and autonomy, that it is not the case that nature only makes sense when explained within the traditional Christian framework. Nature is no more an allegory than is a fairy tale. MacDonald did not insist that we construe his fairy tales as Christian primers, nor does he require of us that we treat nature as a proof text from which, in tone with Keble, we are bound to read of Christian “heavenly truths.” To interpret nature theistically and in such Christian terms is of course possible and entirely legitimate, and most Christian believers would choose to do so: But every interpretation is a human construct—a theistic account of nature as much as a Christian decoding of a fairy tale. Nature is no more necessarily “about God” than are the adventures of Mossy and Tangle in “The Golden Key.” If the role of nature is formative, as for MacDonald it most surely was, it does not require, though certainly it does not preclude, the categories of a received religious discourse to account for how it functions. The theistic and the non-theistic accounts of nature are neither incompatible nor is the one to be reduced to the other. Both potentially express what lies beyond utterance, the reality which continues to beckon us beyond the penultimate stages of our spiritual journeys and which validates our attempts—whatever clumsy words we use—to allude to it.

Does it follow that we are free to make of nature what we wish? Not at all. If nature and fantasy are alike, then, as with fantasy so with nature, making sense of, things is a moral task. Here is our second conclusion. It is that the very same principle applies in seeking to interpret nature as applies in trying to make sense of a fairy tale, the principle that the path to understanding is the road of obedience. No principle is more fundamental to MacDonald’s thinking than this. In theistic terms it is the truth that MacDonald was taught by A. J. Scott: “If anyone will to do the will of God he shall know of the doctrine” (John 7.17). In the non-theistic terms of the fantasy it is the truth Mr Vane has to grasp: whether someone learns what a thing means “depends on the use he is making of it” (*Lilith* 146). The significance of nature is not to be discovered by the refinement

of our sensibilities. The response nature requires of us is not primarily aesthetic—fine feelings as we watch the sun go down—but ethical. There is no understanding of nature possible—any more than there is of the destiny of Anodos—which by-passes the next thing to be done. [7]

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