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# Getting Lost in *The Princess and the Goblin*

Natalie L. Merglesky

## 1. Introduction

Struck by the late nineteenth-century's preoccupation with rationality and empirical modes of understanding the world, George MacDonald began to identify a problem to which he posited Romance<sup>1</sup>—and the fairy tale, in particular—as a solution.<sup>2</sup> Science and its governing laws, as he understood them, offered individuals important insights into Nature and the human condition, but they were ultimately incapable of fulfilling the expectations of a society that had begun to make them “the sole interpreter[s]” of such phenomena (“The Imagination” 1-2).<sup>3</sup> Deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, MacDonald believed in a divinely wrought Earth, one that was infused with mystery and truths that lay far beyond the rational mind's “region of discovery” (“TI” 2). For humanity to realize its utmost potential then—to know God and be alive to the fullness of creation—“infinite lands of uncertainty” within the world had to be sought out and explored (“TI” 29). MacDonald maintained that the imagination alone was fit to undertake such work (“TI” 10-11). Convinced that this faculty had been made in the image of God's, he described it as creative, bold, adventurous, and inherently sensitive to “undefined, yet vivid visions” of the world's numinous realities<sup>4</sup> (“TI” 10, 28). Venturing forth into these undiscovered realms of existence and thought, one's imagination could bring back knowledge and certainty of things unintelligible to the intellect. But it had to be cultivated, nurtured, fed. And for MacDonald, the best food was found not in science, but in the fairy tale, a genre designed to “wake things up” in readers with “the greatest forces [that] lie in the region of the uncomprehended”<sup>5</sup> (“The Fantastic” 139).

This remarkable envisioning of Romance imbues *The Princess and the Goblin* with revolutionary potential. Indeed, scholars have been (and continue to be) captivated by this notion, engaging with MacDonald's philosophy in different ways to uncover what Irene's adventures with Curdie and her great-great grandmother make possible.<sup>6</sup> Even so, for an overwhelming majority, MacDonald's unique fusion of theology and the fairy tale has encouraged a very particular approach to the text, one that uses the Judeo-Christian mythos to see God in the great-great grandmother and a quest for faith in Irene's and Curdie's exploits.<sup>7</sup> My own understanding of what makes this approach valuable is its capacity to inspire scholarship that takes MacDonald's philosophy seriously. In my mind, this means allowing for the radical possibility that what Irene's and Curdie's journey towards belief in the great-great grandmother can “wake up” in individuals is an

imagination that enables them to realize their “utmost potential”: knowledge of the unknown, the Divine. Of all the questions that arise out of this striking possibility, the one that intrigues me most is *how*—how does the text strive to enliven this revolutionary imagination in readers?

My engagement with *The Princess and the Goblin* offers an answer to this question by exploring how Irene and Curdie develop (and fail to develop) this faculty. Inspired by MacDonald’s description of the imagination’s presidency over “infinite lands of uncertainty” (“TI” 29), I attempt to illuminate how the evolution of both Irene’s imagination and Curdie’s is intrinsically linked to their encounters with such lands. My focus here is on specific moments in the narrative where each gets lost. As I read them, these moments of geographical or spatial disorientation inevitably lead to an analogous experience in the intellect,<sup>8</sup> one in which the rational mind’s ability to comprehend or exercise control over this new space is challenged. Here, in this confluence of disorientations, the imagination’s development depends upon one’s ability to fully embrace the experience of being lost. I begin by exploring how Irene’s inherent curiosity makes her particularly adept at this, showing how her openness to spatial and intellectual disorder cultivates an imagination that enables her to know the unknown—her great-great grandmother. I go on to consider Curdie’s progression towards knowing the ancient, mystical Queen, first attending to how his resistance to intellectual disorientation stunts his imagination, and then reflecting upon how he manages to overcome this. In doing so, I ultimately argue that MacDonald, in *The Princess and the Goblin*, transforms the ordinary experience of getting lost into an extra-ordinary one, one capable of “waking up” a revolutionary imagination.

## 2. Irene

Out of all the characters in MacDonald’s text, Irene is the only one to have a chapter explicitly devoted to describing a moment in which she gets lost: chapter 2, “The Princess loses herself,” chronicles her first journey up the mysterious staircase, and initiates readers into a meditation upon her particular propensity for disorientation. As the narrator informs us, the princess’ venture into the confusing geography of her home is preceded by a miserable bout of cabin fever. Housebound by the weather and no longer interested in her mountain of toys, Irene sits bored at her table in the nursery, “not even knowing what she would like” (6-7). But her feelings of indifference and the monotony of her environment take a surprising turn when her nurse, Lootie, departs from one door, prompting Irene to run out of another (7). Describing the scene in real time, the narrator writes:

Then [Irene] tumbles off her chair, and runs out of the door, not the same door the nurse went out of, but one which opened at

the foot of a curious old stair of worm-eaten oak, which looked as if never anyone had set foot upon it. She had once before been up six steps, and that was sufficient reason, in such a day, for trying to find out what was at the top of it. (7)

Unlike the nursery's mound of familiar toys, the staircase captivates Irene with its mystique. "Curious," "old," and seemingly unexplored, its steps promise adventure and a solution to her ennui. Yet, the fact that Irene "had once before been up six steps" allows readers to understand her sudden compulsion to climb the rest as more than a desperate attempt to escape boredom. Once again drawn in by the staircase's allure, she betrays a characteristic curiosity, an inherent desire for knowledge of the unknown. Here, this desire translates into a profound (if not also careless) openness to the dangers of exploration: longing to "find out what was at the top," Irene "runs up and up" the steps without pausing to consider the possibility that what lies in wait for her might prove distressing (7-8).

That this reckless privileging of curiosity constitutes a significant pattern of behaviour for the princess is made apparent in her experiences three flights up. Wandering into a series of labyrinthine hallways, Irene quickly gets lost exploring and becomes frightened at the prospect of never again finding "her safe nursery" (8). At first, this fear prompts a rational response. "Going wisely to work," she methodically retraces her steps, looking "in every direction for the stair" (9). But as the narrator explains, Irene goes "over the same ground again and again without knowing it" (9). The notion that "wise" work—work that the princess' reason is meant to undertake—proves fruitless in this moment is instructive, for it underscores the extent to which spatial disorientation evokes an analogous experience in Irene's intellect. As she remains physically lost in this "land of uncertainty" ("TI" 29), her rational mind loses its efficacy and control. One sees the strongest evidence of this in tracing what happens to the fear that initially inspires her "wise," unsuccessful work. While trying to locate a pathway down to the nursery, Irene spies another flight of stairs going up, and the narrator describes her curious reaction: "Frightened as she was, however, she could not help wishing to see where yet further the stair could lead. It was very narrow, and so steep that she went on like a four-legged creature on her hands and feet" (9). Structurally, these statements convey the irrationality of Irene's behaviour. In particular, "Frightened as she was," reminds readers that her predicament is a severe one, and causes the "however" that follows to seem rather ineffective in justifying her decision to re-enact what brought this predicament about in the first place. Indeed, "Frightened as she was," also reminds readers that fear is the logical response to being lost, which makes Irene's willingness to do it again seem especially illogical. Even so, her curiosity conquers her intellect, and she ventures forth into a "land of

uncertainty” (“TI” 29) once again.

Rendering rationality subordinate to her desire for the unknown in this way, Irene makes it possible for readers to perceive the ascension of her imagination in what she experiences at the top of this “very narrow” staircase. Here, in a secret turret room, “[she stands] for a moment, without an idea in her little head what to do next” (10). One expects this intellectual disorientation to take place now, especially given Irene’s precarious position in a new, unfamiliar space, and the events of one flight below. Contrary to the “wise work” that she immediately engages in down there, however, she makes no attempt to escape up here. Holding her intellect in abeyance, she embraces her uncertain surroundings by slowly “waking up” to them:

As she stood, she began to hear a curious humming sound. . . .  
It was much more gentle, and even monotonous than the sound of rain. . . . The low sweet humming sound went on, sometimes stopping for a little while and then beginning again. . . . Where did it come from? . . . What could it be? (10-11)

The sensitivity with which she attends to what she cannot see signifies that her imagination has begun to do its revolutionary work. No longer attempting to balance rational concerns with a desire for the unknown, the princess unbridles her curiosity and directs all of her energy towards identifying the mysterious sound. Notably, this means exploring her environment with another form of consciousness, one that senses rather than reasons. Through listening and imagining (“Where did it come from? . . . What could it be?”), Irene quests after the unknown and her imagination finds it: she discovers the great-great grandmother, sitting in her magical apartment spinning gossamer into thread (11).

And so the princess begins her relationship with the mystical, ancient Queen. Yet their bond takes time to strengthen and grow. While Irene evidently possesses the imagination needed to know her great-great grandmother, she initially struggles with the ratiocinations of others.<sup>9</sup> Lootie “cannot believe” that an old woman lives in the uppermost apartments of her home (22), and Irene’s king-papa<sup>10</sup> confesses that he has never encountered anyone upstairs either (78). Together, these opinions prompt Irene to conclude that “it must all be a dream” (78), and she is unable to fully accept evidence to the contrary until one night, frightened by one of the goblin’s creatures, she gets lost<sup>11</sup> (104-105). Utterly terrified by the prospect of seeking refuge from the animal up a staircase “*which, after all, might lead to no tower!*” (106), Irene runs out of the house and into the mountains (107). Here, readers immediately recognize signs of disorientation. “She could see nothing,” the narrator writes, and “could not even tell in what direction the house lay” (107). But accompanying this moment of geographical confusion is an experience of intellectual disorder that proves critical: “lost in

astonishment,” Irene sees “a great silvery globe . . . hanging in the air” (108). Curiosity revives:

What could that light be? Could it be—? No, it couldn’t.  
But what if it should be—yes—it must be—her great-great  
grandmother’s lamp, which guided her pigeons home through  
the darkest night. She jumped up: she had but to keep that light  
in view and she must find the house. (108)

Tracing the trajectory of Irene’s thoughts, one sees how the mysterious lamp’s ability to arouse her curiosity dispels doubt and restores belief in her great-great grandmother. Initially, the princess’ wonder at the “silvery globe” (“Could it be—?”) prompts her to respond in a way that echoes the confident rationality of Lootie and her king-papa (“No, it couldn’t”). The fact that she finds this answer immediately unsatisfying, however, deadens its impact, encouraging readers not to understand it as a possibility that Irene really believes in, but rather one that she is in the process of purging. In this way, she makes room for her imagination to revive, and indeed, “No, it couldn’t,” quickly becomes, “yes—it must be.” Convinced afresh of her great-great grandmother’s existence, she follows the wonderful lamp home, effortlessly negotiates the staircase and communes with the benevolent, old woman in the secret turret room (109).

The extent to which this event represents a turning point for Irene—both in terms of the development of her imagination and the bond she shares with her Benefactress—is made evident in the ways she re-experiences it several months later. Once again, the princess is frightened by a “snarling” animal (150) and proceeds to get lost, only this time her journey into the mountains is motivated by her belief (rather than disbelief) in the ancient Queen. Feeling for the gossamer thread that her great-great grandmother promises to guide her with in times of danger (119), Irene finds it by her bedside and follows it out of doors (151). That this departure from her home signifies the beginning of spatial disorientation is all too evident to readers. As she ascends the mountainside, familiar sights vanish, like the road “along which she had so often watched her king-papa and his troop come shining” (153), and the smooth path that she and Lootie have traveled before transforms into “rugged” and “wilder” terrain (153). Irene too understands that she is getting lost, as she notices “the level country” disappearing and “the rough bare mountain clos[ing] in about her” (153). Yet the fear that traditionally accompanies her in such moments—her sign of intellectual disorientation—seems markedly absent here, and one wonders how best to understand this. For me, the fact that Irene knows the thread is “leading her she knew not whither” (152) becomes important to this task because it indicates the extent to which she not only becomes lost willingly, but with purpose. Using her imagination to know that her great-great grandmother

holds the other end of her thread (150), she follows its lead without question, certain that if she does she will meet her Benefactress (154). And so she “[does] not hesitate” to get lost, following her line of gossamer into the very depths of the earth (153).

Having said this, to suggest that Irene’s fearlessness never gets challenged during her sojourn in the subterranean caves is to propose something that the text does not support. It is also (and this seems more important to me) to risk overlooking a significant development in her approach to managing intellectual disorientation. For instance, after making her first turn off of the pathway that she descends into “the hole” (153), Irene’s experience of spatial disorientation intensifies dramatically when she finds herself in “total darkness,” and she “[begins] to be frightened indeed” (154). Describing her responses to this fear, the narrator writes:

Every moment she kept feeling the thread backwards and forwards, and as she went farther and farther into the darkness of the great hollow mountain, she kept thinking more and more about her grandmother, and all that she had said to her, and how kind she had been, and how beautiful she was, and all about her lovely room, and the fire of roses, and the great lamp that sent its light through stone walls. And she became more and more sure that the thread could not have gone there of itself, and that her grandmother must have sent it. (154)

On one level, the mechanisms that Irene uses to cope with her fear seem to belong solely to her imagination. Instead of setting about the “wise work” of retracing her steps back into the light, she relies upon the feel of her invisible thread to establish some form of bearing in the dark. Rather than attempting to soothe her anxiety with rational thoughts, she rehearses all that her imagination has enabled her to know about her wonderful great-great grandmother. Yet, on another level, it seems difficult not to view these procedures as also belonging to the intellect. After all, “feeling the thread backwards and forwards” is a rational course of action, as it is (perhaps ironically) all that Irene can do to keep herself from being led astray. Indeed it is her only hope of ever being able to return to the light, and so her persistence in following the gossamer gets cast as a new, wiser kind of “wise work.” Similarly, one might read her catalogue of the great-great grandmother’s magnificence as an attempt to reason away fear. Reminding herself of everything that makes the old woman “kind” and good leads her to the logical conclusion that “the thread could not have gone there of itself,” and she becomes “more and more sure” that she is doing what she should (154). Here, then, in this terrifying moment of “total darkness,” Irene’s rationality works with (instead of against) her imagination to re-orient her—to make sense of her circumstances—and it continues doing so when she



encounters a “dead end” in the cavern (155). Much to her distress, she loses the thread as it passes through a wall of rocks, but she combats her anxiety by “pok[ing] her finger in after it,” reasoning that “she might remove some of the stones” in order to resume following the line out (157). “Once more she was certain,” assures the narrator, “her grandmother’s thread could not have brought her there just to leave her there” (157-158), and Irene is rewarded for her intellectual-imaginative belief by finding Curdie on the other side of the wall. Resolving to do whatever her thread does, Irene leads him (and herself) out of the caves.

Together, these two instances illuminate how Irene’s intentional descent into disorientation proves integral to her imagination’s revolutionary work. For they show how the impossibility of her predicament underground forces her intellect to cling to the only things of which she can be certain: that which her imagination knows. Strong enough to be convinced of the great-great grandmother’s benevolence and the providence of her thread, Irene’s imagination transforms her rational mind into a partnering faculty, one that works alongside it to make the inconceivable (that she might be led to safety by following an invisible line) not only seem conceivable, but inevitable. And so, as she traces that line back down the mountain, into her home and up the staircase, Irene approaches her great-great grandmother with a new kind of consciousness, certain of her in a way that she has never been before, nor ever would have been had she not first gotten lost.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Curdie

While Irene’s adventure underground evidently leads to the joint baptism of her imagination and intellect,<sup>13</sup> Curdie’s experience of the same event represents only the beginning of his own imagination’s development. Interestingly, his disorientation in the caves also begins with a thread, but it is a thread markedly different from the princess’ (130). Tangible to all and ordinarily manufactured, Curdie’s “ball of string” (94) hardly resembles the imperceptible line that Irene’s Benefactress spins for her in the moonlight. Nor is his string infallible, like her bit of gossamer.<sup>14</sup> Notably, Curdie purchases his string to keep from getting lost on his treks into goblin territory. Fastening one end to a pickaxe that he anchors in the mines, he then roams with the other in hand, eventually following the trail it leaves back home. This always works well for him, and so he is caught off guard when he begins to see unfamiliar sights on one evening’s walk back. The narrator writes:

He began to feel bewildered. One after another he passed goblin houses, caves, that is, occupied by goblin families, and at length was sure they were many more than he had passed as he came. . . . Could his string have led him wrong? He still followed winding it, and still it led him into more thickly



populated quarters, until he became quite uneasy, and indeed apprehensive; . . . he was afraid of not finding his way out . . . if his string failed him he was helpless. (133)

The image of Curdie following a string that he expects to protect him from the very predicament into which it is leading him is a disorienting one indeed. As he gathers up the familiar line, he begins to travel down an unfamiliar path and the contradiction of these realities confounds him. “Could his string have led him wrong?” he wonders. Moving deeper into the goblin community, he realizes that it must have, and once again, readers witness a spatial disorientation that prompts an analogous experience in the intellect. Curdie finds the change in landscape “bewilder[ing],” not just because he cannot recognize the houses, but because these houses evidence the limitations of his own rationality. They call attention to the failure of his string and the more he looks at them, the more aware he becomes of his “helpless[ness],” of his inability to reason his way out of this geography. He becomes “quite uneasy,” “afraid,” “indeed apprehensive,” feelings that only intensify when he accidentally tumbles down a slope that leads into the goblin king’s lair (140). Brave though ultimately defenseless, Curdie loses the battle that quickly ensues and the goblin queen throws him into a hole in the wall, blocking it up with a rock slab and “a great heap of stones against it” (141). Here, lost in “utter darkness,” he is “at last compelled to acknowledge himself in an evil plight” (141).

The time that Curdie spends imprisoned in this space is interesting because it illustrates his way of coping with disorientation. Like Irene’s initial response to getting lost in her labyrinthine staircase, his first reaction to being stuck in the hole is a rational one: he begins the “wise work” of trying to re-orient himself, of trying to figure a way out. He attempts to widen a chink between the stone slab and the rock wall. He rushes at the barricade with his shoulder, trying to force it over. Each of these efforts fails though, and so he “think[s] again,” this time devising a more abstract plan in deciding to pretend that he is dying (148). Curdie reasons that this will prompt the goblins to “take him out before his strength [is] too much exhausted to let him have a chance” (148). Logical and plausible, this strikes him as the best course of (in)action and he takes it, biding his time. The attempt to orchestrate an escape in this way—to manipulate his captors into liberating him from the hole—evinces Curdie’s attempt to regain control over his plight through rationality. Though lost in the geography of the goblin’s underworld, he refuses to stay lost intellectually.

Embedded within this illustration of Curdie’s resilient intellect is a picture of his impoverished imagination. As readers discover in the text’s opening chapters, Curdie possesses a particular talent for poetry,<sup>15</sup> a knack for creating original rhymes that he recites to ward off the goblins. Here,

imprisoned in his hole, he puts this talent to work in anticipation of his planned escape:

there was nothing for him to do but forge new rhymes, now his only weapons. He had no intention of using them at present, of course; but it was well to have a stock, for he might live to want them, and the manufacture of them would help to while away the time. (149)

Admittedly, Curdie's ability to compose "a stock" of "new rhymes" that will serve as "weapons" hardly implies an ineffective imagination. And when he views these verses as his "only weapons" in particular, his awareness of the faculty's power and its ability to assist him in escaping is evident. But the fact that he has "no intention of using [these new rhymes] at present, of course," and subsequently views them as a means to "while away the time," invites readers to pause. If indeed his verses drive goblins away and are powerful enough to be described as "weapons," why does he have "no intention of using them at present"? "Of course" indicates that for Curdie to do so would be illogical, drawing readers back to the logistics of his planned escape. One infers that were he to begin reciting his rhymes the goblins would never believe that he was dying, and his chance of breaking free from the hole would be ruined. Yet subordinating his imagination to his intellect in this way makes the former nothing more than Reason's handmaiden. Confined to the parameters set by Curdie's rationality, the imagination's revolutionary work—its rendering known what is unknown—becomes a means of "whil[ing] away the time." And as Curdie waits, watching for the logical steps of his plan to unfold, his impoverished imagination is too busy entertaining him to be able to discern Irene's thread poking through the wall.

This privileging of the intellect is a habitual practice for Curdie, a mode of behaviour that continues to hinder his imagination's development as the princess leads him out of captivity. Overjoyed, but also stunned and perplexed by her sudden appearance, he struggles to maintain intellectual control over the situation. "I can't think how you got here," he says to Irene, and incredulous, asks, "What *do* you mean?" after she explains (159-160). That the princess' great-great grandmother should send an invisible thread for her to follow into the heart of the mountain in order to rescue him proves too much for Curdie to fathom. "I can't understand it," he repeatedly declares (163), and intellectual disorientation sets in once again as Irene begins to navigate him through impossible terrain with her impossible thread. The narrator relates:

Curdie, utterly astonished that she had already got so far, and by a path he had known nothing of, thought it better to let her do as she pleased.

"At all events," he said again to himself, "I know nothing

about the way, miner as I am; and she seems to think she does know something about it, though how she should pass my comprehension. So she's just as likely to find her way as I am, and as she insists on taking the lead, I must follow. We can't be much worse off than we are, anyhow."

Reasoning thus, he followed her. . . . (163)

Traversing a path "he had known nothing of," Curdie gets lost once more in the subterranean caves. What confuses him most about this strange environment, however, is the extent to which Irene "seems to think she does know something about it." How is it that she—a princess—should know more about the mountain than him—"miner as [he is]"? Her apparent confidence in the pathway that she follows "passes his comprehension," leaves him "utterly astonished," intellectually disoriented. But rather than letting this feeling awaken his imagination to the possibility of Irene's thread, he sets about overcoming it with "wise work." By focusing on what he does know instead of what he does not, Curdie turns the question of Irene's remarkable guidance into a question of probability. Knowing that he "know[s] nothing about the way" makes Irene "just as likely to find her way" as he is, and so he sees no reason not to follow her, for they "can't be much worse off than [they] are, anyhow." "Reasoning thus," he lets her guide him and pays no attention to what or who is guiding her.

Even after it becomes clear that the princess' path has led them to safety, Curdie's desire to maintain intellectual control over their extraordinary escape persists and his imagination continues to be shackled. Darting through "a very narrow opening" in the cave wall (165), he and Irene escape the goblins' lair and the narrator records their conversation:

"Now," said Curdie; "I think we shall be safe."

"Of course we shall," returned Irene.

"Why do you think so?" asked Curdie.

"Because my grandmother is taking care of us."

"That's all nonsense," said Curdie. "I don't know what you mean." . . .

"But why do you think we shall be safe?"

"Because the king and queen are far too stout to get through the hole." (165-166)

The contrast between Irene's and Curdie's reflections on how one knows when one is safe in strange, uncertain spaces is striking and instructive. For the princess, security depends upon the providence of her Benefactress: because she is sure that her great-great grandmother is "taking care of [them]," Irene can also be certain that she and Curdie will be safe. But "that's all nonsense," objects Curdie, and in a way, he is right. Irene's unabashed confidence in her great-great grandmother, in her care and her auspicious

thread, is nonsensical. For it does not rely upon “sense”—upon logic, reason, or rationality. It is predicated upon “non-sense,” upon her imagination and the realities that only it can enable her to know. That Curdie is unwilling to become entirely open to such “non-sense” is all too evident. Clinging once again to what is rational in an effort to avoid the disorienting effects of what is not, he deduces that he and Irene will be safe because “the king and queen are far too stout to get through the hole.” Even so, this kind of logic only enables him to “think” that they will be safe, while Irene’s imagination empowers her to be certain (“Of course we shall”). Evidently, rejecting the princess’ “non-sense” limits what Curdie can know by inhibiting his imagination. He cannot see the thread that ensures security. Nor can he see the one who spun it when the princess eventually leads him out of the caves and up to the secret turret room.

For Curdie, encountering the great-great grandmother occurs months later, in a moment where resisting “non-sense” proves impossible. Having learned of the goblins’ plans to tunnel their way to Irene’s home and kidnap her for Harelip (the cob prince), Curdie begins traveling to the royal gardens each night in an effort to assess their progress. One evening, lying on the ground and listening for “some indication of the whereabouts of the goblin miners” (201), he is spotted by the king’s men-at-arms, mistaken for a thief and shot in the leg with the captain’s cross-bow. A confrontation ensues in which Curdie tries to explain himself, but before he can he “turn[s] faint,” weakened from the loss of blood, and falls to the ground “senseless” (202).

And so he gets lost again. Carried to one of the “disused room[s]” in the princess’ home, Curdie “passe[s] a troubled night” and upon waking, “wonder[s] where he [is]” (203). For a brief period he is able to recall the events of the night before, but his fever returns quickly, as do his “ravings” (204), and in this state of intellectual confusion he slips into a “profound” sleep (204). Yet it is not a “peaceful” slumber (no matter how it appears to the King’s soldiers) (204), for all of the disorientation that he experiences in this strange, “disused room” only intensifies when he lies within it unconscious. Readers are told that “when Curdie fell asleep he began at once to dream” and at first (admittedly), everything that he envisions seems remarkably familiar (209). Indeed he seems to re-live “everything that had happened to him since [having] met the princess” (209). When he catches up to his stay in the “disused room,” however, all familiar experiences disappear. Thinking that he is “wide awake,” Curdie hears “a great thundering sound” and believes that it signals the goblins’ arrival (210). Absolutely determined to save Irene from being captured, he springs into (in)action:

He jumped up, as he thought, and began to dress, but, to his dismay, found that he was still lying in bed.

“Now then, I will!” he said. “Here goes! I *am* up now!”

But yet again he found himself snug in bed. Twenty times he tried, and twenty times he failed; for in fact he was not awake, only dreaming that he was. At length in an agony of despair, fancying he heard the goblins all over the house, he gave a great cry. (210)

“For in fact he was not awake, only dreaming that he was”: stuck somewhere in between wakefulness and nightmarish slumber, Curdie occupies a “land of uncertainty” (“TI” 29), a land of “non-sense.” Here, in the “disused room,” the things that he thinks himself to be doing—jumping out of bed, getting dressed—are actually the things that he is not, and the effect of this new world order is, for him, intellectual disorientation. He feels “dismay,” a bewilderment that stems from the unforeseen disconnect between what “he thought” and what is. As one might expect, Curdie responds by attempting to regain intellectual control over his perplexing situation. “Now then, I will!” he says. “Here goes! I *am* up now!” Even so, here, it does not matter what he “will[s]” or what his intellect is certain of (“I *am* up now!”). Nor does it matter how often he “will[s],” or how often he is certain, for “twenty times he tried, and twenty times he failed.” Struck with the inefficacy of his “thought” and the ineffective resilience of his intellect, Curdie cries out “in an agony of despair.”

That he is able to feel such “despair” in this moment is significant. Indeed, his “great cry” announces that he has lost hope in his intellect’s ability to re-orient him in this confusing dreamscape. Embracing (however reluctantly) the impotency of “sense,” he experiences the full force of disorientation, and his imagination, thus liberated, begins to perform its revolutionary work:

Then there came, as he thought, a hand upon the lock of his door. It opened, and, looking up, he saw a lady with white hair, carrying a silver box in her hand, enter the room. She came to his bed, . . . stroked his head and face with cool, soft hands, took the dressing from his leg, rubbed it with something that smelt like roses, and then waved her hands over him three times. At the last wave of her hands everything vanished, he felt himself sinking into the profoundest slumber, and remembered nothing more until he awoke in earnest. (210)

As Curdie ceases relying on his intellect, what he is able to know in this strange realm, and how he is able to know it, change. Contrary to his confounding experience of being certain that he is standing (even though he is “snug in bed”), Curdie’s belief that he hears “a hand upon the lock of his door” is never contradicted. Neither is his vision of “a lady with white hair.” He watches silently as the great-great grandmother comes to his bedside, never attempting to “make sense” out of who she is, or how she might help

him get up. Captivated by her presence, he loses all interest in escaping the “disused room,” and allows himself to “wake up” to her through touch, smell, sight. He feels her “cool, soft hands” caress his face and rub the wound on his leg. He smells her ointment of roses and sees her move “her hands over him three times.” Ushered into this new kind of consciousness—one based on sensation rather than “sense”—Curdie falls into “the profoundest slumber” and when he awakes “in earnest,” so does his imagination. Joining the battle against the goblins *in medias res*, he fights through the creatures, in search of Irene, and all of a sudden feels “the slightest touch” on his hand (218). Though he cannot see the thread, his fingers are able to feel it, and he follows the line of gossamer out of the castle and up the mountain without doubting that it will lead him to the princess. Surprised when the thread guides him to his own front door, Curdie opens it to find Irene safe in the arms of his mother. Here, by the fireside, he tells them everything that has happened, and as all three gaze at his miraculously healed leg, smelling the great-great grandmother’s ointment of roses, the only rational conclusion that Curdie can come up with is an imaginative one. “You do believe me now, don’t you?” Irene asks Curdie (219). “I can’t help it now,” he replies (219). And indeed he cannot, for he cannot help but be certain of what his imagination enables him to know while lost in the strange, “disused room.”

#### 4. Conclusion

*The Princess and the Goblin* participates in George MacDonald’s radical re-visioning of Romance by presenting readers with a complex meditation on the extra-ordinary possibilities of an ordinary experience. Through their individual and shared encounters with “lands of uncertainty” (“TI” 29), Irene and Curdie illustrate how embracing moments of spatial and intellectual disorientation develops an imagination that enables one to know the unknown. What results is a text that strives to “wake up” this revolutionary imagination in its readers, inviting them, as all good fairy tales do, to get lost.

While my exploration of *The Princess and the Goblin* has sought to understand the text in light of these observations, this essay ultimately constitutes a preliminary effort. In my mind, what I have presented leaves open several avenues down which the question of what it means to be lost in the text might be pursued. Entirely unconsidered here, for example, is how other characters, like Lootie and the goblins, relate to spatial and intellectual disorder. Like Curdie, Lootie (in particular) struggles with Irene’s “nonsense” (19) and exhibits a profound aversion to losing her way. Unlike him, however, she never outgrows these attitudes and one wonders what kind of connection(s) can be drawn between this failure to embrace disorientation and her characteristic inability to believe in (or experience) the great-great



grandmother. Or does the text offer another reason for her persistent lack of imagination that might work to illuminate the significance of getting lost in a new way? Related to this question (at least in my mind) is what one makes of the goblins and the fact that they never—individually or communally—get lost. How might one use these creatures to speak more specifically about the relationship between the imagination, disorientation and what it means to be human? Can their (non)connection to the state of being lost, for instance, be used to explain their devolution? And how might they, along with Lootie, Curdie and Irene, be viewed as a series of reflections upon the imagination’s ability to humanize? Although these lines of inquiry by no means exhaust the variety of ways in which *The Princess and the Goblin* needs to be explored, they do introduce a small sampling of routes that one might take in order to build on what has been offered here.

#### Endnotes

1. While I am aware of the problems attached to reading Romance and the fairy tale as synonymous, I have decided to conflate the two for the purposes of this essay.
2. Here, my reading of MacDonald’s philosophy on Romance is inspired (at least in part) by Michael McKeon’s theory that genres arise to solve particular problems that get articulated through historical and social frameworks. For more of McKeon’s thoughts on Romance, please see chapters 1 and 2 of *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, in particular. My approach to MacDonald’s philosophy is also influenced by Stephen Prickett’s writings on MacDonald’s sense of having occupied two worlds simultaneously. Please see Prickett’s “Adults in Allegory Land: Kingsley and MacDonald” and “The Two Worlds of George MacDonald.”
3. Hereafter, references to “The Imagination: Its Function and its Culture” will be cited as “TI,” followed by the respective page number(s).
4. For a wonderfully detailed account of MacDonald’s theology of the imagination, please see Kerry Dearborn.
5. For a more detailed discussion of MacDonald’s philosophy as it appears in “The Imagination: Its Function and Culture” and “The Fantastic Imagination,” please see Colin Nicholas Manlove’s “George MacDonald’s Fairy Tales: Their Roots in MacDonald’s Thought.”
6. For a small circle of academics, of which Roderick McGillis, Michael Mendelson and Jack Zipes are part, MacDonald’s unique fusion of theology and the fairy tale offers ways of speaking about the text as a catalyst for the “modernization” of romantic fantasy (Mendelson 31). Roderick McGillis in particular describes how *The Princess and the Goblin* ushers in a new literary tradition that C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Madeleine L’Engle inherit and carry on (146). Notably, C.S. Lewis famously said: “I have never concealed the fact that I regarded [MacDonald] as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him” (20).
7. This is not to say that this popular approach to the text has produced a body of stagnant scholarship. For evidence of this please see Gillian Avery, Roland Hein,



John Pennington, and Nancy Willard.

8. Here and throughout the body of this paper, “intellect,” “rationality,” “reason,” “logic,” “sense,” and their variations are used as synonyms and predominantly viewed in opposition to the imagination.

9. While I understand Roderick McGillis’ point that in *The Princess and the Goblin*, “the female communicates the noumenal” while the man, “on the other hand, communicates the phenomenal” (153), I ultimately agree with David S. Robb’s notion that one needs to be careful not to idealize Irene, as though she were unproblematically related to the noumenal (119). To idealize her is to place a limit upon who can undertake her journey towards the noumenal, and this appears to be counter-intuitive to MacDonald’s aims.

10. He does, however, eventually ascend the staircase to meet with her (128).

11. Irene does meet her great-great grandmother before she gets lost again, but it is in a dream-like state and the princess is unsure of whether or not she can fully believe what is taking place. Please see Chapter 11 of the text, “The Old Lady’s Bedroom.”

12. Perhaps relevant here—though it is made in reference to MacDonald’s *Phantastes* and *Lilith*—is Colin Nicholas Manlove’s assertion that “thanks to the supernatural the world is by the end seen differently, and characters may have been altered spiritually through their experience of it” (“Circularity” 71).

13. Readers recall that when Irene returns to the secret turret room after rescuing Curdie, her great-great grandmother gives her a mystical bath (179-180). Scholars, like David Holbrook and Nancy-Lou Willard, have interpreted this event as a symbol of Christian baptism. Here, I am implying that the bathing of Irene’s body also signifies her baptism into a new kind of consciousness, one in which her rational mind and imagination work together to envision the multiple dimensions of her existence.

14. Pennington notes these differences between Curdie’s “commonplace ball of string” and Irene’s “spiritual thread,” reading them as a body versus spirit dichotomy (139). He uses this juxtaposition as an example of “Irene’s spiritual development and Curdie’s physical and more frustrated spiritual development” (138). Here, my own understanding of the differences between Irene’s imagination’s development and Curdie’s resonates with Pennington’s presentation.

15. Admittedly, it is difficult (if not impossible) to separate the intellect from the production of poetry. That the “forg[ing] of new rhymes” (149) is an inherently creative act, however, cannot be denied, and this works to establish an intrinsic link between Curdie’s poetic enterprise and the imagination.

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