Between Two Worlds: The Believer’s Exile in At the Back of the North Wind

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MacDonald Scholar in the Making

This is a new, occasional feature to North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies. In this section the journal highlights students at the undergraduate level who are writing criticism on George MacDonald. The future of MacDonald studies depends, to a large degree, on younger scholars interested in MacDonald.

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“Even books must be buried and raised to the glory of God. Scholarship is otherwise mere meaningless pedantry, performed only as an ego-trip for the wormlike academic.”

Stephen Prickett

In *At the Back of the North Wind*, one of MacDonald’s most famous fairy tales, the child Diamond is taken on a series of adventures by a god-like character who calls herself North Wind. The novel bears great similarity to many fairy tales in its bizarre un-reality. But rather than meandering into a glib happily-ever-after, Diamond dies of an incessant illness that has dogged him through his travels. Our empathy as readers is piqued by this child who hovers somewhere between life and death, never fully belonging to the world he was born into, and prevented until his ultimate demise from entering the world at the back of the North Wind. Diamond’s state of expectant waiting epitomizes the human condition, particularly for members of the Christian faith.

Salvation creates for the saved person a conundrum. Those desiring salvation look to a hope for the world to come, but are not yet permitted to enter into it. At the same time, the world they reside in metamorphoses into what sometimes seems to be nothing but a shadow of the shining one promised. In this way, Diamond fits the archetype of a believing Christian: he lives in a world of shadow, in permanent exile from the world he was born into, just as believers die to self and live in God, but are not yet together with

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Like many tropes of that literary age, the child in the house was in full force during the Victorian era. In the words of Glenn Edward Sadler, children exemplified “universal love and immortality” and were the purest example of humanity capable of influencing their elders for good (1). In a deeper, theological sense, a believing person is meant to model the innocent trust of children. This faith-journey is what Adelheid Kegler believed would take us “backwards to the origin and forwards to the trans-temporal aim” (6). We are taken in a sort of circle from where we began, physically, to where we are meant to be, spiritually. The child Diamond exemplifies what a true attainment of this ideal state looks like in the real world. His innocence and purity are baffling to all witnesses, including his own parents. So too is the behavior of a saved person to unbelieving acquaintances, witnessing what might be called this person’s second childhood. Rather than being born of immaturity and denial, however, this childlike behavior is a product of the deeply changing power of spiritual redemption.

At the novel’s beginning, Diamond’s tender age renders this unpolluted behavior understandable, but rather than becoming tainted by the world, his journey to the world at the back of the North Wind causes his purity to increase in its intensity. The reasoning behind this change is that during his time at the back of the North Wind, Diamond is passing “from real time to liminal time,” the “period between the fixed state of life and the fixed state of death . . . or the moment of death and the last judgement” (Pemberton 39). His journey between states is marked in the physical world by his illness, as he drifts somewhere between life and death. Diamond is, throughout the novel, not entirely comfortable in the world he was born to, but when he receives a “picture” or “a foretaste” of the world to come, he finds that the people there “look pleased” but also “a little sad . . . as if they were waiting to be gladder someday” (MacDonald 125). Even the enlightened child understands that he is not yet ready to inhabit the world of his future, and that he must remain behind for the time being in a world he is no longer entirely “of” (Pemberton 47).

Stephen Prickett’s analysis of MacDonald’s work uncovers this theme that is shared by many of the author’s characters, and that they are “poised in some way between this world and another” (2). So must the redeemed individual wait, expectantly, and run the race set before them on a road that is simply a part of one creation mirroring its perfect counterpart. For Diamond, “to die was to be dressed up in a fuller awareness of immortality”
(Sadler 11), and likewise for the Christian, dying to one’s self creates within the individual the same awareness.

Creation is charged, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, with the glory of God. Our world is a sacramental one, wherein God’s presence is visible but indirect, like the reflection of trees on unquiet water. Frequently this viewpoint imbues nature with a beauty for the believing observer, giving them a sense of communion with the natural world. There is, however, a somewhat darker side to this ideology, described by Chris Brawley in his article as the “shadowland of Christianity” (91). Like Diamond, the saved sinner has been given a foretaste of the world to come, the consequence of which is to live out their earthly existence constantly looking through what is physically presented to what is spiritually perceived. In this way, Christian life is also a constant state of being between two realities. This theme of “two worlds coexisting in time and space superimposed on one another and yet . . . totally invisible to one another” is one of MacDonald’s most persistent themes (Prickett 1).

The ever changing stages of life and life-in-death create a greater conundrum for the believing individual than simply the in-betweenness of salvation in the time between our first birth and our physical death. “Death,” after all, as Pemberton argues “is not an end of time but merely a gateway to a different place where linear time has no bearing.” We have not yet completed our cycle of change at the time of death, which Pemberton further explains, “is not final, but rather part of a continual cycle of decline and renaissance” (48). We have simply entered into another period of waiting expectantly for that final stage, one that comes like a thief in the night, totally unexpected and unpredictable.

If professing Christians were to believe that their salvation were simply a pardoning of their sins, it would be easy to consider God an inattentive parent, fulfilling needs and ticking boxes for His unruly children. God is, however, much more to us than this according to Bonnie Gaarden, “present and in both life and death” (61). MacDonald also rejected this legalistic idea, returning instead to “Dante’s expression of the old Catholic theology of union: salvation . . . is union with God, imaged Biblically” as the marriage between the bride, the church, and the bridegroom, Christ (Gaarden 60). The bride, the church, must first be purified by passing through the refiner’s fire, making earth a kind of “reformer’s purgatory” in order to “purify people mired in ignorance and error” (Gaarden 60). North Wind is, in a sense, taking Diamond through the refining fires of earthly trials, preparing
him for the perfect world he must soon inhabit.

Diamond is also being prepared for heavenly life in another sense: that of now belonging to a greater community of believers, no longer limited to the earthly family he was born into. After his adventure to the North Wind’s back, he is changed in a way that is immediately noticed by the members of his community, who henceforth believe him to be somewhat “touched,” ironically called by the derogatory name “God’s Baby.” His exile from earthly life, therefore, includes his earthly community as well, evolving his “holy family of divine influence over the world” to include a choice few characters. The clever and perceptive poet, Mr. Raymond, in spite of never having been to the North Wind’s back, is the only adult person who can understand Diamond’s poem “pretty well.” By the eleventh chapter of the novel, Diamond has become a maverick in his lower class Victorian society. Living in faith renders the believing person a necessary misfit with regards to their original, earthly community.

MacDonald, a migrant from Aberdeen to London, wrote from a place of empathy with the misfit personality. His journey from what Stephan Prickett called “Calvinistic hell-fire, oatcakes, horsemanship” to English Congregationalism took him through “two nations, two cultures, two religions” (4). The dual aspect of life was no shock to this man, then, and this sense of inhabiting two worlds is “rooted at any rate on the most obvious level in the facts of his own outward existence” (Prickett 5). The remarkable aspect of this characteristic is MacDonald’s ability to make “aesthetic and philosophical use” of it (Prickett 5). The peculiar talent of this particular writer, however, was not to show that “to live in two juxtaposed worlds is . . . an accident of geography or psychological quirk,” but to express that this is a “part of man’s normal condition of existence” (Prickett 3).

This normal condition of existence, however, was growing less and less to be an accepted reality by the world MacDonald inhabited in the mid-19th century. A growing acceptance of spiritualism was being counteracted by enlightenment ideals, and the idea of an afterlife was swiftly becoming more of a desire to believe that the living could be in communication with the deceased. MacDonald’s desire to make the spiritual realm more of an albeit implied reality was heavily influenced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ideology of revealing what Prickett called “the special in the individual, the general in the especial, or the universal in the general; above all, the translucence of the eternal in and through the temporal” (6). The symbolic landscape so finely manicured by Coleridge had a “defining quality”: that “it
brought two separate worlds into relationship with each other” (Prickett 6). The similarities between the two authors’ ideologies can easily be seen in Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, wherein the moon represents to us a truth gotten at indirectly, illuminating the symbolic world of the poem, just as North Wind’s eyes allow Diamond to see her, making her face “like a moon out of a cloud” (MacDonald 52).

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), Coleridge’s imagination “bodied forth” an entire landscape of symbolism, gracing the literary world with a new way of expressing the ineffable. Symbolists sprang forth from every direction during the Victorian era, led by Coleridge’s example. MacDonald, prominent in the vanguard of symbolists, frequently utilized the fairy-tale format in order to relate the ineffable to his audience, comprised of both young and old. Pemberton describes the fairy-tale trope as creating worlds that are “rarely fixed in time and space” and rarely lead to a definite ending, while reality leads us all to a definite end. Pemberton further comments on MacDonald’s rejection of the trope in favor of a surprisingly realistic and morbid ending in *North Wind* (35). But the most surprising aspect of MacDonald’s use of this literary form is how effective it is in conveying some of the most difficult aspects of Christian life to minds that might otherwise be lost in the ether of theological language.

In fact, symbolism is the only way for many aspects of the human experience to be expressed, “stretching us—literally—between impossible alternatives in order to discover a new meaning that is neither” (Prickett 9). After all, we are meant to “mirror God’s own creative impulse,” and one of MacDonald’s beliefs for the writer’s life was that “the closer a piece of art was to the truly dreamlike or chaotic state of mind,” the closer it would be to creating that mirror (Brawley 91). This concept brings us once again to the idea of the world as simply a shadow of the world to come. A writer attempts to create with symbolism a shadow of divine truth, the Platonic ideal of “what a thing is rather than what it means, “much as North Wind attempts to relate to Diamond who she really is instead of simply what she is called (Brawley 93): “to know a person’s name is not always to know the person’s self”

Brawley states that “in order for the eternal to be perceived through the temporal, an act of imagination is required” that we may live in these two worlds at once, the material and the mystical, which, when separated, do not “fully account for the full scope of reality,” but together may give the attentive imaginer a shadow of that divine truth (95). Kirstin Johnson states that MacDonald’s purpose in writing was to communicate to his fellow man
not “what they already know, nor indeed what they want to know” but the old knowledge necessary to the essence of humanity. According to MacDonald, “A book is a door in, and therefore a door out” (Johnson 94), drawing us into a world created by an author in order to give the reader a better understanding of the real world, pointing us outward by first drawing us in. The act of writing creates bridges between material and symbolic worlds, between our world and the heavenly kingdom, and between the minds of those who express and those who absorb. Not only is it natural, but it may be the very purpose of authorship to express this innate duality possessed by mankind.

In At the Back of the North Wind, MacDonald succeeds in revisioning the world through the medium of the fairy tale, thus “recovering the sacramental vision” to which the “indescribable nature of feelings” is so central (Brawley 93). His triumph in expressing the complex duality of Christian life stems largely from the duality of his own life, both as an inhabitor of “two nations, two cultures, two religions” and as a writer of both the real and the symbolic worlds. The hearts and minds of adults are touched deeply by the words of what would otherwise be described as a children’s story, expressing to us through a symbolic, mythopoeic world the ineffable awareness the Christian person has of being in two worlds at once, but not belonging in entirety to either one.

Works Cited


Prickett, Stephen. “The Two Worlds of George MacDonald.” North Wind: A