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Unpublished Writings of Northrop Frye: MacDonald's *The Portent*

Northrop Frye

Northrop Frye (1912-1991) is one of the most influential critics of the 20th century, and his impact continues to be significant. His work includes *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947), *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957), *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (1976), and *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1981). The University of Toronto Press has released the 30-volume *Collected Works of Northrop Frye* that, according to its website, “examines the development of Northrop Frye's thought and life as documented in his diaries, correspondence, speeches, interviews, fiction, notes, book drafts, student essays, and love letters.”

One particular volume will be of interest to MacDonald scholars and lay readers: *Northrop Frye's Uncollected Prose*. In this volume, editor Robert D. Denham collects Frye's musings and notes about the romance genre, which were notes that led to *The Secular Scripture*. Harvard University Press, on its website, provides a detailed overview of the importance of Frye's critical study on romance:

Romance, a mode of literature trafficking in such plot elements as mistaken identity, shipwrecks, magic potions, the rescue of maidens in distress, has tended to be regarded as hardly deserving of serious consideration; critics praise other aspects of the *Odyssey*, *The Faerie Queene*, Shakespeare's last plays, and Scott's *Waverley* novels, for example, while forgiving the authors' indulgence in childishly romantic plots. Frye, however, discerns in the innumerable romantic narratives of the Western tradition an imaginative universe stretching from an idyllic world to a demonic one, and a pattern of action taking the form of a cyclical descent into and ascent out of the demonic realm. Romance as a whole is thus seen as forming an integrated vision of the world, a “secular scripture” whose hero is man, paralleling the sacred scripture whose hero is God.

In *The Secular Scripture*, Frye refers to MacDonald several times as an important contributor to the development of romance. He calls *Phantastes*

a “psychological quest carried out in inner space” (57-58) and argues that *At the Back of the North Wind* contributes to the motif of the innocent child rejecting experience to fuse with the higher spiritual world, similar to Blake’s *The Book of Thel* (100). Frye categorizes MacDonald’s brand of romance as a “conservative, mystical strain of social or religious acceptance [that] runs all through romance, from the Grail stories of the Middle Ages through Novalis and George MacDonald . . . to C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams . . .” (171).

In *Uncollected Prose*, Frye presents notes on *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, though the notes are primarily plot summary with some witty remarks tossed in. It is clear that Frye is focusing on plot summary under the assumption that he will need to be reminded of these fantasy romances if he is to use them in this further studies. Frye’s notes on “The Imagination: Its Functions and its Culture” (from *A Dish of Orts*) are illuminating, for he finds value in MacDonald’s structural analysis of imagination. Frye writes: “Remarkable essay: there are others in the book I’ve not yet read, including one on Individual Development, on education of children, which says ‘What can the world be to him who lives for thought, if there be no supreme and perfect Thought,-none but such poor struggles after thought as he finds in himself?’ [60]. Essay on Shakespeare with two things I need. ‘But, besides *the Bible*, every nation has *a Bible*, or at least *an Old Testament*, in its own history [83].” That quotation from “St. George’s Day, 1564” is included in *The Secular Scripture* on page 8, which suggests that MacDonald was important to Frye’s conception of romance. The following selection also highlights Frye’s devious and irreverent use of language.

North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies reprints the notes that Frye made on *The Portent*. The excerpt is used by permission of Robert D. Denham and the University of Toronto Press (© University of Toronto Press 2015). The editor would also like to acknowledge Douglas Sly, who suggested that the journal might want to include an excerpt from Frye’s unpublished writings.

John Pennington

36. George MacDonald, *The Portent*

Frye’s edition of *The Portent*, which he annotated, published along with *Phantastes*: Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964. Frye has inserted page numbers in parentheses. *The Portent* was first published in 1864. [Denham’s note]

Starts with a solitary boy-hero whose mother died in his infancy, brought up by an old nurse or foster-mother. Father owns a hill which is a

weed-sand-wilderness type of point of epiphany; purple; looks like gems in the dew; no sound but a bird; great blocks of stone looking like petrified corpses after a battle, and a big trilithon on the side of a hill, forming a cave. This was his favorite haunt, associated with wind and sea imagery: sea of darkness flooding the faces of the stars; then he'd go home "as if I had been descending a dark staircase in my father's house" (11). Also falling streams in "that uplifted land" (12). He has visions of the dead at night, like De Quincey; not frightened by them: "I could call up from underground all who had passed away." He has, not second sight, but second hearing, the title of the second chapter. Mountains in background; star on tip of highest one, "which seemed the spire of a mighty temple" [16].

Foster-mother lives at the bottom of "a deep green circular hollow"; he tells her he heard a horse's loose shoe, and this prompts a story. Two brothers, one amiable, one sinister, riding a powerful and savage black horse; heroine loves first and is loved by second. Drives amiable brother over a precipice and manages to turn his horse around on a narrow ledge over a precipice. Picks up heroine who's dead; goes mad and plunges over the cliff with his horse, who had a loose shoe. Recurrently seen with heroine on his saddle with her long hair: the hair grows and at the Last Day "the hair will twist, and twine, and wreath itself like a mist of threads about him, and blind him to everything but her. Then the body will rise up within it animated by a fiend" (37-8). She sees him now as a wild hunt figure, tearing around on the dame—I mean with her on the horse. She suggests that he's a reincarnation of the amiable youth and that the sinister brother is still after him. On leaving her cottage he loses his way and very nearly gets drowned in a bog or something.

He's poor and gets a job tutoring two young sons of a Lord Hilton, though what he wants is a commission in the army. First thing he sees in his new home is a white statue; then he sees the statue within a rainbow, being that kind of weather; then "a figure in white" rises from the base of the pedestal and glides past him. So he turns to the front door: "I passed under its flat arch, as if into the midst of the waiting events of my story" (61). Strong *deja vu* feeling when inside. Interesting that in a culture where reincarnation is not believed in the theme should turn up as part of an Adonis pattern of anamnesis repetition. Well, the Woman in White is very like the one in Collins, who's also associated with a statue: she passes for an idiot, or at least a natural, though he's sure she isn't one. Lady Alice. Parenthesis: "What is time, but the airy ocean in which ghosts come and go" [65]. Deep marbly

whiteness of her arms; profuse ravenblack hair. Heroine-medium type; can't read or spell. She's an heiress in her own right, but Lord and Lady Hilton want her to be as dumb as possible so they can embezzle what she's got.

His room is the usual mysterious one that turns up in *Phantastes* and *Lilith*; secret door opening into a hall, allegedly haunted. Asks to catalogue books in the library—another Lilith theme. It's "dusty as a catacomb, the private room of Old Time himself" (84). She walks in her sleep; he explores the haunted hall, filled by moonlight with "an ancient dream—light which wrought strangely on my brain, and filled it, as if it, too, were but a deserted, sleepy house, haunted by old dreams and memories" (88). Staircase. Well, she walks in her sleep; he finds her and carries her to his own room and wraps her in a plaid, "for she was as cold as the dead" (92); snow maiden theme; associated with statues; hears the clank and fears the "common-minded domestics," i.e., the fuck-minded flunkys. She wakes and does the haughty-beauty act; however, she gets reconciled and he takes her back to the haunted hall: "I seem to see the ghosts and the memories flitting together through the spectral moonlight, and weaving mystic dances in and out of the storied windows and the tapestried walls" (99). Repetition of his infantile ghost-fantasies.

Next time (he's fallen in love with her, natch), he compels her to come to his room by an act of will. "In something deeper than sleep she lay, and yet not in death" (108). Sleeping beauty archetype. Parallel with his foster-mother, who goes into trances where she's not technically dead but does leave this world for the world of the dead. Well, Lady Alice wakes up finally; the waking signs are faint blushes in the white face, "dawn of a soul on the horizon of the visible." More haughty-beauty act, but "the Lady Alice of the night, and the Lady Alice of the day, were two distinct persons. I believe that the former was the real one" (113). Seemed like calling "the real immortal Alice forth from the tomb in which she wandered about all day" (114). Well, she thaws a bit and wants to learn to spell. He suggests a double heroine. Her efforts to become sane are thwarted by the parental figures, but she turns out to be a poet, improvising songs. Some obstruction dams her up, he thinks, but "a fresh surge from the sea of her unknown being, unrepressed by the hitherto of the objects of sense, had burst the gates and bars" (129). Note (a) the creative sea (b) the explicit Job echo (c) the association of creative power with the release from repression in the unconscious. Well, she realizes she's in love too, and there's an echo of the coming-of-spring passage from the Song of Songs to celebrate.

Her “parents” are, of course, a stepmother and her husband. “It would be to tell the soul which you have called forth, to go back into its dark moaning cavern, and never more come out to the light of day” [135]. I suppose these dumb medium-like child-dames in such fiction are emanation figures, but God they’re wraith-like. Rather silly chapter on “jealousy,” where he wonders if she’s making the scene with some other guy in her dreams; I suppose he needed that to outline the two-brothers theme. She keeps coming to his room and waking up, which he calls resurrection (140), and he untwines “from the heart the cold death-worm that twisted around it” [139], i.e., his jealousy: the image comes from a thread in the plaid cloak he wrapped her in, which he preserves, as a fetish. Echoes from *The Tempest*. Well, she calls him to her by the same power he used once on her, and he goes to the “haunted chamber,” where the ghosts are produced by moon shining through stained-glass windows. General hero-sun-red-intellect-day-creator-body and heroine-moon-white-imagination-night-emanation-ghost antithesis. “A white figure, flitting across the chaos of lights, bedewed, besprinkled, bespattered, as she passed, with their multitudinous colors” (147). Room is “a rendezvous for the ghosts of the past” or chamber of recognition; but their love keeps the ghosts at a distance. In the library he finds a translation of a hymn or poem about Psyche from the German, made by someone who left it unfinished at the exact moment hero was born, so hero is his reincarnation. Then he finds Alice was born at exactly the same time he was, and that they’re related, though not so closely as to stir up the wrong feelings (note the incest and nightmare associations). Cf. p. 174.

Well, they’re surprised in their love nest and he’s turned out of the house. He gets his army commission, fights at Waterloo, and is wounded in the head. Then he devotes the rest of his life to searching for Alice. “They say that Time and Space exist not, save in our thoughts. If so, then that which has been, is, and the Past can never cease. She is mine, and I shall find her,—what matters is where, or when, or how? Till then, my soul is but a moon-lighted chamber of ghosts; and I sit within, the dreariest of them all. When she enters it will be a home of love” (165). Wonders sometimes if there ever was a Lady Alice, and whether the sabre-wound on the head accounts for the whole story; if so, he’d rather be mad with Alice than sane without her. Sympathetic doctor, who says he some times thought there was a woman beside his bed. He’s in Wales convalescing, and goes for a walk. “I was delighted with the multitude of the daisies peeping from the grass everywhere,—the first attempts of the earth, become conscious of blindness,

to open eyes” (176). I get it: day’s eye. But there’s something missing, and eventually he sees a “gowan,” a white daisy with a red tip like the ones in Scotland, and this impels him to go back to the home of his childhood. Ingenious bugger, MacDonald.

Comes back with a black horse named Constancy—silly name for a horse. Soon there’s another storm—lousy weather they have in that country—and the horse goes through the manoeuvre in the nurse’s story, but falls with his rider and kills himself. Loose shoe, see. Goes to see his old foster-mother, name of Margaret, who spends most of her time now (she’s a hundred years old) in trance, seeing how he’s doing. Her murmurs in sleep are a summary of Eros themes: water, path, grass, hill, sleep (194). She goes into a trance to see if she can see where Alice is now; it appears she’s still at the Hilton place, where one of the hero’s tutees is now master, but away. Well, Margaret then dies and he has to attend her funeral; also his dead horse comes back to life—I don’t know why. Several repetitions of the word “home” in connexion with Alice (208); emanation symbolism. Margaret says she can’t see mirrors in her trances. He goes back to Hilton Hall, meets the housekeeper, who’s friendly, and finds that Alice is indeed there, but regarded as hopelessly mad. Worries about seeing her, feeling that to see a mad Alice would be seeing a “statue” like that of Hermione (explicit allusion). He can sneak back to the place at will, because he knows it so well, and sees “the same statue from whose base had arisen the lovely form which soon became a part of my existence” (225). Reference to the death of the lady in *The Sensitive Plant*. Sees Alice asleep, under the eye of the housekeeper, who keeps him there that night because there’s a- guess what- terrible storm. Well, Alice comes promptly to his room, eventually wakes up, and doesn’t realize twelve years have passed since they originally plotted to run away together when they were so rudely interrupted. Alice says she dreamed she was sitting on a “stone” in the dark; tried to answer his call, but “I could only make a queer sound”—cf. Apuleius. She feels mentally inadequate: “The red is withered; somehow” (251): shows he’s aware of his own symbolism. More moon, looking “almost malignant”; “I longed to climb the sky, and cut her in pieces” (252). Alice dreams normally, whereas most people’s dreams are insane; when she smiles in sleep, “That smile was the sign of the dream life beginning to leaven the waking and false life” (253). He starts teaching her again; she knows nothing until he tells her and then does know it, like Eve in *Paradise Lost*. “The moment she shared the light of my mind, all was plain” (256); sun and hero. He goes to the haunted hall and waits while the sun goes down and the moon comes

up and talks about the oblivion in her mind. “She had never ceased to live it; but had renewed it in dreams, unknown as such, from which she awoke to forgetfulness and quiet, while I awoke from my troubled fancies to tears and battles” [263]. Final Eve of St. Agnes type of flight under the nose of the returning owners; they get to Scotland and marry. Then they live happily ever after; Alice’s hair doesn’t turn gray.

Strong emphasis on the reality of the past: what has happened is. This is one of the most elusive but important themes of the book: the Eastern view of time as illusion is counter-balanced in the West by some sense of Blake’s Los’s Halls—the permanent reality of what has been, which I find growing in myself all the time. Note links with Ernest Jones’ book on the nightmare: horse and storm; dim incest wish (the word “sister” is used once); identification of hero with both the earlier brothers, one being clearly the shadow of the other: woman killed in earlier story has her hair grow until she becomes a terrible mother and strangles her captor with it. The Apuleius theme with the heroine associated both with Psyche and with Lucius. Blake’s spectre and emanation poem as archetypal of searches outside for what’s inside: cf. the “home” references. I should look at more Anne Radcliffe: De Quincey admired her and associates her with the north.

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