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## *Phantastes* as Theological Critique of Hoffmann's *The Golden Pot*

Charles Beaucham

**T**his paper is an exploration of how F.D. Maurice's theological writings influenced MacDonald's fantasy writings, specifically *Phantastes*. Maurice's influence on MacDonald's *Phantastes* becomes especially clear when it is isolated as a differentiating factor between *Phantastes* and perhaps its primary literary antecedent, E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Golden Pot*. MacDonald's enthusiasm for E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Golden Pot* is well documented, and Hoffmann's tale is commonly regarded as a source for MacDonald's *Phantastes* due to obvious similarities in plot and theme; however, the plot of *Phantastes* is actually an inversion of *The Golden Pot*. *The Golden Pot* is almost entirely set in the mundane world with the ideal world miraculously breaking into it in the form of Serpentina, the green snake; however, in *Phantastes*, the exact opposite is true. Anodos spends nearly all of his time in the ideal realm of Fairy Land, while the mundane world occasionally breaks into Fairy Land in the form of the shadow's disenchanting effect on Anodos' perception. And while Anselmus leaves the world of men behind forever, Anodos returns to it. These divergent endings articulate equally divergent theological conceptions of the spiritual journey and man's relationship to ultimate reality. In *The Golden Pot*, the goal of the spiritual journey is to escape the mundane world in a Platonic flight to ultimate reality. In *Phantastes*, the goal of the spiritual journey is to discover the divine inherent in the seemingly mundane and to selflessly contribute to the mundane world's ultimate redemption. In this way, *Phantastes* functions as a theological critique of *The Golden Pot*. In reading *Phantastes* as a critique of *The Golden Pot*, we can see what aspects of Platonic philosophy MacDonald affirms and what aspects he rejects in favor of Maurice's theology of the incarnation and revelation.

Before I analyze Maurice's influence on *Phantastes*, I will first consider the extent to which both stories embody Platonic philosophy. In *Phantastes*, Fairy Land is quite literally an other-worldly realm filled with beings, forms, and tangible realities that correspond to humanity's deepest desires as well as its existential dread. The novel's epigram from Novalis offers insight into MacDonald's creative vision of Fairyland and its function in the novel. In a true Märchen, writes Novalis, "the whole of nature must be wonderfully infused with the spirit-world" and "the world of the Fairytale is completely antithetical to the world of reality" (*Phantastes*). In the "world of reality," as Novalis terms the everyday world, one's deepest longings are

mutated and obscured, but in the world of Fairy, the realm of spiritual longing assumes the form of tangible reality.

Anodos is first introduced to Fairy Land by his fairy-grandmother, whose beauty partakes of Fairy Land's transcendence. As he looks into her eyes, "they [fill him] with an unknown longing," and Anodos feels as if those eyes contained a vast sea in whose waters he would gladly sink (MacDonald 19). When Anodos comes out of his reverie, he realizes that he is only looking at a "low bog burnished by the moon," and declares, with hopeful longing, that "surely there must be such a sea somewhere!" (MacDonald 19). In "a low sweet voice," Anodos hears his grandmother reply, "[i]n Fairy Land, Anodos" (MacDonald 19). Although Anodos will never find the ocean he longs for in the world of men, such an ocean does exist in the world of Fairy, a world in which poetic reality takes definite shape. In the novel's first chapter, Fairy Land is defined as the realm of the ideal that transcends the mundane.

Anodos encounters the most perfect form of Fairy Land's otherworldly beauty in the Marble Lady: "What I did see appeared to me perfectly lovely; more near the face that had been born with me in my soul than anything I had seen before in nature or art" (MacDonald 67-68). The Platonic overtones are striking in Anodos' description of the Marble Lady. She is "perfectly lovely," with a face and form that are beyond "art and nature." Anodos' desire for the Marble Lady clearly transcends the physical; it is his soul that thirsts for her beauty because it "had been born with [him] in [his] soul." This Marble Lady functions as a Platonic form in the inner life of Anodos. Although the Platonic form of beauty is, according to Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*, "absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other great nonsense of mortality", MacDonald must necessarily represent the ideal in concrete rather than abstract terms in a work of fantasy; his purpose is not to philosophize about ultimate beauty in the abstract but to suggest it; however, MacDonald is careful to emphasize that the Marble Lady's beauty transcends both art and nature, corresponding to the ultimate beauty of Platonic philosophy (Plato 494).

In *Phantastes*, much of Anodos' education revolves around his ability to perceive and recognize the ideal. Anodos' first great failure in Fairy Land is his inability to distinguish the true Marble Lady from the deceptions of the Alder maiden. The maiden of the Alder claims to be the white Marble Lady, and in the "gathering darkness," Anodos is unable to see that she is lying. He does, however, have a faint premonition that something is not right:

Yet, if I would have confessed it, there was something either in the sound of the voice, although it seemed sweetness itself, or else in this yielding which awaited no gradation of gentle approaches, that did not vibrate harmoniously with the beat of my inward music. And

likewise, when, taking her hand in mine, I drew closer to her, looking for the beauty of her face, which, indeed, I found too plenteously, a cold shiver ran through me; but “it is the marble,” I said to myself, and heeded it not. (MacDonald 80)

Anodos’ desperate desire to find his white lady compromises his ability to carefully discriminate between the true and the false, and, rejecting his intuition, he lets his rash, undisciplined longing get the best of him. The mistake nearly costs him his life and serves as a painful means of sensitizing and disciplining his sense of ultimate beauty.

Even after experiencing the most beautiful and terrifying aspects of Fairy Land, Anodos succumbs to the materialistic influence of a farmer who lives on the outskirts of Fairy Land, momentarily ceasing to believe in Fairy Land’s very existence. Anodos’ next challenge is to maintain his very belief in the ideal realm of Fairy Land when its reality is not immediately evident to him. Even after he has encountered his ideal woman in the Marble Lady and pure terror in the form of the Ash, he is lulled into a malaise of unbelief when he flees to the more mundane outskirts of the Fairy forest. A “kind-looking, matronly woman” provides a refuge for Anodos in her home after his near fatal encounter with the Alder maiden and helps him make sense of the deception he had fallen for (MacDonald 89). The woman, however, begs Anodos “not to say a word about these things” (MacDonald 89) to her husband due to his inability to perceive Fairy Land and his annoyance with those who acknowledge its existence:

He thinks me even half crazy for believing anything of the sort. But I must believe my senses, as he cannot believe beyond his, which give him no intimations of this kind. I think he could spend the whole Midsummer-eve in the wood and come back with the report that he saw nothing worse than himself. (MacDonald 89-90)

When the farmer, the lady’s husband, walks in and speaks, his “kind and jovial” voice “seemed to disrobe the room of the strange look which all new places wear—to disenchant it out of the realm of the ideal into that of the actual” (MacDonald 92). The farmer’s limited, materialistic mode of perception gradually rubs off on Anodos:

In the morning I awoke refreshed, after a profound and dreamless sleep. The sun was high, when I looked out of the window, shining over a wide, undulating, cultivated country. Various garden-vegetables were growing beneath my window. Everything was radiant with clear sunlight. The dew drops were sparkling their busiest; the cows in a near-by field were eating as if they had not been at it all day yesterday; the maids were singing at their work as they passed to and fro between the out-houses: I did not believe in Fairy Land. (MacDonald 97)

The influence of the lady's daughter, who perceives Fairy Land quite clearly, eventually awakens Anodos' belief again. When he looks out of the window of her room, he says that "a gush of wonderment and longing flowed over my soul like the tide of a great sea. Fairy Land lay before me, and drew me towards it with an irresistible attraction" (MacDonald 99). The rhythms of everyday life and its practical focus on material concerns make Anodos view his longings as foolish and his recent experiences in Fairy Land as delusions; however, once awakened, his desire for the ultimate beauty and terror of Fairy Land again hold sway.

Anodos' ability to perceive the beauty of Fairy Land is most hindered by his shadow, whom he meets shortly after leaving the farmer's house and who becomes his near constant companion until near the end of his time in Fairy Land. In chapter IX, we learn how exactly the shadow affects his experience of Fairy Land. Anodos meets a "lovely fairy child," whom Anodos looks at with "wonder and delight," but as soon as the child steps into Anodos' shadow, "[s]traightway he was a commonplace boy, with a rough broad-brimmed straw hat" (MacDonald 110). Throughout Anodos' time in Fairy Land, the shadow continues to rob Fairy Land of its sublime and beautiful qualities. Stephen Prickett sums up Anodos' experience of his shadow in *Victorian Fantasy*:

Anodos is both frightened and disgusted by the dark menacing presence of the shadow, always with him: it insidiously destroys all sense of beauty and wonder in the world around him as he travels, imprisoning him into something like Blake's "cavern'd man" lit only by the fragmented evidence of the five senses as Locke imagined them to be. (Prickett 177)

The shadow forces onto Anodos the limited perception of the farmer on the outskirts of Fairy Land, who cannot perceive the existence of Fairy Land beyond the mundane, despite the fact that he lives on its very borders. Even though Anodos is in Fairy Land, where the ideal is more immediately apparent, he is still unable, at times, to see its beauty due to the aesthetically nullifying effects of his shadow.

Belief in and commitment to the ideal world plays an even more central role in Hoffmann's *The Golden Pot* (published in 1814), and, considering his well documented love of the story, it seems likely that MacDonald used Hoffmann's portrayal of a character caught between the pull of the everyday and ideal worlds as a model for *Phantastes* (published in 1858). Like Anodos, Anselmus' longings for ultimate beauty are awakened by and meet their object in an other-worldly female, albeit at first in the form of a green snake with "a pair of glorious dark-blue eyes" that looked "at him with unspeakable longing; and an unknown feeling of the highest blessedness and deepest sorrow was like to rend his heart

asunder” (Hoffmann 28). Anselmus is told by the beautiful Serpentina that “thou shalt now soon be wholly mine; by thy Belief, by thy Love, thou shalt obtain me” (Hoffmann 80). The plot of the entire story revolves around Anselmus’ struggle to maintain his belief in and love for Serpentina despite the numbing influence of bourgeois Dresden society. His encounters with Serpentina are infrequent enough to make him vulnerable to the seductive lure of a comfortable, respectable life as Court Counselor with the charming, but superficial, Veronica as his wife. Even after he declares his love for Serpentina to be “eternal” and asserts that “before [he] would leave her, [he] would die altogether” (Hoffmann 69), Anselmus still finds himself doubting Serpentina’s reality:

And now Anselmus felt as if a battle were beginning in his soul: thoughts, images flashed out—Archivarius Lindhorst,—Serpentina,—the green Snake—at last the tumult abated, and all this chaos arranged and shaped itself into distinct consciousness. It was now clear to him that he had always thought of Veronica alone . . . He could not but laugh heartily at the mad whim of falling in love with a little green Snake; and taking a well-fed Privy Archivarius for a Salamander. (88)

Like Anodos, Anselmus has moments in which his longings for and belief in the ideal world seem ridiculous. And like Anodos, Anselmus at times fails to distinguish between the true female embodiment of the ideal and a counterfeit.

At the end of *The Golden Pot*, Anselmus, after proving his loyalty to Serpentina, quenches his thirst for ultimate Beauty in union with her:

Serpentina! Belief in thee, Love of thee has unfolded to my soul the inmost spirit of Nature! Thou hast brought me the Lily, which sprung from Gold, from the primeval Force of the world, before Phosphorus had kindled the spark of Thought; this Lily is Knowledge of the sacred Harmony of all Beings; and in this do I live in highest blessedness for evermore. (Hoffmann 113)

Not only does Anselmus possess his beloved Serpentina, but, in her, he has access to “the sacred Harmony of all Beings” and lives “in highest blessedness forevermore.” The completion of Anselmus’ Platonic flight to ultimate reality is also represented by Anselmus joining her in Atlantis, leaving the everyday world of bourgeois Dresden behind forever. The narrator, who turns out to be a character within the story, is permitted by Serpentina’s father to see a vision of the happy couple in Atlantis, and with envy exclaims, “[a]h, happy Anselmus, who has cast away the burden of week-day life, who in the love of thy kind Serpentina fliest with bold pinion, and now livest in rapture and joy on thy Freehold in Atlantis! (Hoffmann 113). He goes on to lament that “enthralled among the pettiness

of necessitous existence, my heart and my sight are so bedimmed with thousand mischiefs, as with thick fog, that the fair Lily will never, never be beheld by me” (Hoffmann 114). It is precisely this “alltäglich” or mundane world of Dresden, in which one’s heart and sight are “bedimmed” by the “pettiness of necessitous existence,” that Anselmus is abandoning forever to live in the mystical realm of Atlantis, where the “sacred harmony of all beings” is completely unobscured by mortal concerns. In *The Golden Pot*, the “alltäglich,” week-day world is portrayed as something that needs escaping from because it limits man’s perception of and communion with the world of ultimate beauty. Hoffmann depicts the Platonic flight from the mundane and material to ultimate reality described in Plato’s *Symposium* in which “[o]ne goes always upwards for the sake of . . . Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs” (493, *Symposium* 211c). Anselmus learns to agree with Socrates’ statement in Plato’s *Theaetetus* that “a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven” (*Theaetetus* p. 195, 176b). In his portrayal of Anselmus’ abandonment of the mundane in pursuit of the ideal at the end of *The Golden Pot*, Hoffmann maintains a striking adherence to Platonic philosophy.

The ending of Anodos’ journey is conspicuously different from Anselmus’, considering the stories’ many similarities, and it is here that MacDonald breaks with Hoffmann’s Platonism. When Anodos returns to the mundane world, he wonders: “Could I translate the experience of my travels [in Fairy Land], into common life? This was the question. Or must I live it all over again, and learn it all over again, in the other forms that belong to the world of men, whose experience yet runs parallel to that of Fairy Land” (MacDonald 317-318). In the very asking of the question, it is clear that Anodos’ perception of “the world of men” has changed in that he now realizes that it “runs parallel to that of Fairy Land.” He has an unshakable feeling that these two worlds are not two separate, antithetical realms as Anselmus’ Dresden is to Atlantis: “Nor could I yet feel quite secure in my new experiences. When, at night, I lay down once more in my own bed, I did not feel at all sure that when I awoke, I should not find myself in some mysterious region of Fairy Land” (MacDonald 317). Now that Anodos has experienced Fairy Land, the human world feels shaky and insecure, as if it could easily merge with and be sublimated into the realm of Fairy Land. The blending of the two worlds becomes even more obvious when Anodos lays beneath a great, ancient beech-tree, listening to the sound of its leaves:

At first, they made sweet inarticulate music alone; but, by-and-by, the sound seemed to begin to take shape, and to be gradually moulding itself into words; till, at last, I seemed able to distinguish these, half-dissolved in a little ocean of circumfluent tones: “A great good is coming—is coming—is coming to thee, Anodos”; and so over and

over again. I fancied that the sound reminded me of the voice of the ancient woman, in the cottage that was four-square. I opened my eyes, and, for a moment, almost believed that I saw her face, with its many wrinkles and its young eyes, looking at me from between two hoary branches of the beech overhead. (MacDonald 319)

Not only does Anodos begin to see the images and hear the sounds of one world in the other, but he is now able to receive spiritual messages and mystical insight through the mundane world, because, to him, it is no longer quite so mundane or separate from the ideal realm of Fairy Land. Anodos' time in Fairy Land has reoriented him to the inherent divinity in the world of men.

An examination of MacDonald's theological orientation and influences will serve to elucidate the theological implications of *Phantastes* and his complicated relationship with platonism. In *Storied Revelations*, Gisela Kreglinger analyzes MacDonald's nuanced theology concerning the relationship between the physical and the spiritual: "He understands the world to be created by God, and any correspondence between the physical and spiritual dimension exists because God placed it in his creation" (Kreglinger 94). Kreglinger goes on to explain how MacDonald's thinking differs from Platonic idealism:

It is true that MacDonald saw a high correspondence between the physical and spiritual worlds, and some of his statements might lead one to think that his view of the world was Platonic in the sense that this world is a mere ladder that serves to ascend to higher spheres. A more careful look at his argument, however, shows that MacDonald's concern was not to devalue the material world by relegating it to the status of a ladder. Rather, he sought to recover a theological understanding of the material world in the face of the dangers that came with the Industrial Revolution. MacDonald saw, in a rather prophetic way, a worldview emerging that was purely empirical and void of any sense of wonder and awe. (Kreglinger 136)

Neither Pantheist nor Platonic idealist, MacDonald seeks to articulate a view of creation that sanctifies it without deifying it, in an attempt to avoid the devastating consequences, experienced in our own age of Climate Crisis, of the spiritual devaluation and disenchantment of the material world. Kerry Dearborn expresses MacDonald's theological nuance concisely in *Baptized Imagination*: "Here is immanence without pantheism, and harmony without loss of God's transcendence" (Dearborn 75). Referring to "the Kantian tendency to abstract aesthetic experience from physical reality" (Dearborn 26), Dearborn asserts that "MacDonald would contend against this tradition that the imagination and the Christian faith offer a way to integrate aesthetic experience and physical reality" (Dearborn 26). In Christianity, MacDonald



found a *via media* between Platonic idealism and Pantheism that could challenge the worldview emerging out of the Industrial Revolution economy that viewed the material world merely as a means to purely economic ends. More specifically, it is through the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation that MacDonald successfully integrated “aesthetic experience and physical reality,” the spiritual and the material, the holy and the mundane.

Although MacDonald did not write what could be considered academic theology, one can look to the theological writings of his friend and mentor F.D. Maurice to gain insight into MacDonald’s own understanding of incarnational theology. In *The Kingdom of Christ* (published in 1842), Maurice asserts that, for the Jew and Christian, “there was no contradiction in the perfectly Holy One inhabiting a body of human clay; that it was a low, carnal, sensual notion of the Godhead, one which really identified Him with physical things, and therefore subjected Him practically to the laws of space, which made it seem to be a contradiction” (Maurice 324). Unlike the pure Platonist, who views the material world as a dim, even misleading likeness to the transcendental realm of ideal forms, the Christian, according to Maurice, believes that the ideal can be expressed through the material world, just as God became man in Jesus Christ. Like Christ’s human life, the sacraments are “a perfectly transparent medium, through which His glory may be manifested” (Maurice 328). And according to Maurice, “the world is full of sacraments. Morning and evening, the kind looks and parting words of friends, the laugh of childhood, daily bread, sickness and death ; all have a holy sacramental meaning, and should as such be viewed by us” (Maurice 328). For Maurice, the human world is inherently sacramental, and, therefore, serves as a medium for the divine. The everyday world of men is not a burden to be cast off or an inferior realm to be escaped from as Hoffmann depicts in *The Golden Pot*. Such a purely Platonic understanding of the world fails to appreciate the revelatory power of creation and human activity. In his chapter on Maurice in *Romanticism and Religion*, Stephen Prickett connects Maurice’s theology of the Incarnation to his theology of revelation:

Thus Revelation is not to be thought of as something breaking in from the outside, but rather as the discovery of the in-dwelling of the supernatural growing up and out of the particular, the concrete, and the ordinary. It is not a divine light shining on a darkened world, nor yet ‘evidence’ for a miraculous design in Creation, but (to continue the metaphor of light) a translucence of the mundane to produce a symbolic and sacramental universe. (Prickett 128)

This “translucence of the mundane to produce a symbolic and sacramental universe” is exactly what Anodos is able to perceive on his return to the world of men, and this realization is why his return is not a sorrowful one. Anselmus must escape from the mundane world to achieve his happy ending,

but because Anodos now sees the “translucence of the mundane,” his return is accompanied by a profound sense of hope and peace communicated to him through the mundane.

Another striking difference between the two endings is that, while Anselmus shows absolutely no concern for those whom he leaves behind, Anodos’ experience of bliss in Fairy Land, after his bodily death, engenders a deeply compassionate desire to serve and comfort those who live lives of suffering in the mundane world:

“How many hopeless cries,” thought I, “and how many mad shouts go to make up the tumult, here so faint where I float in eternal peace, knowing that they will one day be stilled in the surrounding calm, and that despair dies into infinite hope, and the seeming impossible there, is law here! But, O pale-faced women, and gloomy-browed men, and forgotten children, how I will wait on you, and minister to you, and, putting my arms about you in the dark, think hope into your hearts, when you fancy no one is near!” (MacDonald 314)

Anodos is filled with a profound sense of mission. Even from his position in the purely spiritual realm of “eternal peace,” he considers the suffering of others and desires to minister to them. In having Anodos, from the realms of bliss, desire to minister to those in the world of men, MacDonald embodies another aspect of incarnational theology. The world of men is sacramental, but it is also filled with suffering. Because Anodos has learned to see the inherent divinity in the mundane, he believes that it is worth redeeming, and longs to participate in the process of its redemption.

Although there are significant similarities between *The Golden Pot* and *Phantastes* both thematically and structurally, MacDonald actually inverts the plot of *The Golden Pot* in *Phantastes*, and in doing so, defines the relationship between the mundane and the ideal in a way that is theologically opposed to the relationship portrayed in *The Golden Pot*. While Anselmus’ spiritual fulfillment is represented as leaving the mundane world behind forever to be united with Serpentina in the mystical kingdom of Atlantis, Anodos returns to the everyday, familiar world with a refined perception of its inherent spiritual realities and a newly found sense of mission. We can account for this difference with the influence of MacDonald’s priest and mentor, F.D. Maurice, whose theological understanding of the Incarnation, sacraments, and revelation gave MacDonald an alternative to the purely Platonic view of the spiritual journey represented by Hoffmann. MacDonald knew Maurice personally years before the publication of *Phantastes* in 1858 and had most certainly read *The Kingdom of Christ*, published well over a decade before *Phantastes* in 1842. By embodying Maurice’s theology in *Phantastes*, MacDonald Christianizes Hoffmann’s Platonic flight to ultimate reality by insisting on the need for his enlightened hero to participate in the

redemption of the mundane world and reorient himself to its inherent divinity. Read as a reaction to and critique of *The Golden Pot*, *Phantastes* serves as a revelatory embodiment of MacDonald's understanding of the Incarnation and its centrality to his theology.

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