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"Unsaying" refers to MacDonald's indirect method of argument: rather than directly refute a disputed idea, he vividly presented what he believed instead. "The commonplace," for MacDonald, was the worldly, the selfish, the conventional.

This book originated as papers delivered at the 2016 conference of the George MacDonald Society, which focused on MacDonald's relationship with the university group known as the Cambridge Apostles. The book, however, broadens its focus so as to situate MacDonald's thought in the context of Victorian culture, literature and theology, which comprise the three divisions of the book.

Essays in the Volume

Stephen Prickett's "George MacDonald and the Cambridge Apostles" describes MacDonald's personal and intellectual links with various members of this group, an undergraduate society limited to 12 members and founded, in part, to unravel the "social and religious" thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a writer to whom MacDonald was both devoted and indebted. Other links between MacDonald and various Apostles include a deep immersion in German literature and fairy tale (at a time when only perhaps a half-dozen Britons were fluent in German) unconventional Christian theology, and dedication to social reform, particularly an expansion of education at all levels to previously excluded groups, such as women and the working class. MacDonald had a particularly longstanding and intimate relationship with F. D. Maurice, an

Apostle whom MacDonald referred to as his "Master" and whose church MacDonald attended. In addition to focusing on their relationship to MacDonald, the essay includes informative tidbits about the eminent Victorians who belonged to the Society in their youth: Tennyson, for example, was known for lying down mutely during meetings.

Elizabeth Jay's "George MacDonald: Unorthodox Anglican" explores MacDonald's fraught relationship with the Anglican establishment. MacDonald was raised a Scottish dissenter but joined the Church of England in adulthood. Jay unearths what can be detected about his denominational leanings from his "Anglican Trilogy": *Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood, The Seaboard Parish, and The Vicar's Daughter*, the first two of which focus on the experiences of an Anglican clergyman while the third features his daughter.

MacDonald's "mixed" religious leanings can perhaps be represented by the fact that, though MacDonald was a C of E member writing about a C of E clergyman, the novels were serialized in a dissenting publication called *Good Words for the Young.* Jay observes that this choice of publisher was potentially offensive to many Anglicans, especially clergy, because the specter of disestablishment was a live issue at the time. And MacDonald's hero, though an Anglican clergyman, has opinions and circumstances far more typical of dissent than establishment religion, such as an emphasis on preaching as the chief means of grace offered in church (rather than liturgy and sacrament), essential free agency in relation to his congregation, preference for wooden communion vessels, discomfort with liturgical prayer, and a rather dismissive attitude toward "holy orders." In short, while MacDonald went to an Anglican church and some of his literary protagonists were Anglican clergyman, Jay concludes by endorsing

Greville MacDonald's opinion that George was at heart a "theocratic individualist" who was largely indifferent to denominational affiliation.

Franziska E. Kohlt's "'A Guiding Radiance:' George MacDonald's Science and Fantasy as a New Dialectic" asserts that MacDonald's texts include a strong "science-historical dimension." There was a lively debate going in in Victorian intellectual communities about the proper relationship between science, religion, and the imagination; whether the imagination might have a place in formulating scientific hypotheses; and whether poetic analogy could be useful to conceptualize and communicate scientific theories and discoveries. Kohlt demonstrates that MacDonald's fantasy engages with these debates. MacDonald, himself scientifically trained, believed that science and poetry needed each other, and both required the imagination. Kohlt asserts that *Phantastes,* in particular, is "grounded" in the framework of scientific analogy used in Victorian science writing.

Anodos is seeking his own identity, but his mind is "unbalanced" because his scientific education has divested him of fantastic imagination, one of the "two wings" that are needed in order to discover truth. His journey into Fairyland "rebalances" his mind by counteracting his materialism. Kohlt demonstrates how the processes and events by which Anodos gains insight into his own shortcomings and which create the evolution of his character constitute a "serious, scientifically informed participation" in contemporary discussions about the imagination, the unconscious, and the dream, thus joining a conversation held by some of the best-known scientists of the day. Kohlt's recounting of these debates and presentation of the thinking of these scientists shows a masterful grasp of the history of Victorian science and is far too detailed to be summarized here, but effectively refutes the common belief that MacDonald devalued or rejected

science. In fact, he clearly believed that the imagination can be a tool for scientific discovery and that fantasy can be a means of expressing scientific truth.

Kerry Dearborn, in "Rethinking the Dark Side," explicates MacDonald's fiction and fantasy as combatting the Victorian Social Darwinism that judged non-Anglo, female, and disabled people as less intelligent, self-controlled, capable, and ultimately less human, than Anglo males.

At the metaphysical level, MacDonald deconstructed the Western cultural binary that privileges light—in all of its literal and metaphorical senses-- over darkness. Instead, he characterizes light and dark as complements. Night, darkness and sleep are sources and loci of wisdom, particularly about one's own limitations: "The darkness is the nurse of light," he says in "The Shadows." Anodos' wisdom is nurtured in the nights he spends self-imprisoned in the square tower, and at night Diamond encounters North Wind. The most extended of MacDonald's inversions of the light/dark binary is presented in the short tale "Photogen and Nycteris," in which the raven-haired girl who can only function at night ia shown to be more inquisitive, more imaginative, and more compassionate than the blond boy habituated to daylight. MacDonald routinely makes his wisest, most saintly characters either poor, mentally or physically disabled, non-white, female, or some combination thereof. He also interrogates the Victorian devotion to the idea of "development" by showing that "development" can actually be devolution, as, in *Lilith,* loving Little Ones can develop into Bad Giants and innocent peasants "develop" into the predatory citizens of the corrupt city Bulika.

Dearborn attributes MacDonald's high valuation of the disenfranchised and the different to his "Celtic Christian" belief in the value of all people, and Jesus' acceptance of and ministry to the socially despised and the excluded.

In “Servants to Literature,” **Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson** describes how two of MacDonald’s strongest influences and closest friends, Fredrick Dennison Maurice and Alexander John Scott, were at the forefront of the creation of English Literature as an academic discipline and, as a result of their study of pre-Reformation English literature, became deeply involved in the Medieval Revival. By the 1850s, medievalism and the aspiration to chivalry were national trends, and Arthurian legends were increasingly co-opted as vehicles for nationalism. MacDonald’s work, says Johnson, utilizes themes from medievalism, but uses the concept of knighthood in a way that de-emphasizes the knights’ “heroic deeds” that gain him personal glory in favor of the literal meaning of “knight” as “one who serves.” MacDonald sees the peregrination of the knight-errant as a process of confronting and defeating the monstrous, not only in others, but also in oneself.

Johnson traces these themes in *Phantastes* and in *The Seaboard Parish*, both of which describe journeys entered on by an older, experienced “knight” and a young beginner. Anodos develops chivalric aspirations as he reads in the Fairyland library, and then spends the rest of his journey learning to put what he has read into practice by relinquishing his claim on the White Lady and by learning to serve rather than seek glory. This culminates when he takes service under the older knight, realizes that his master’s nobility consists in loving-kindness to all he meets, and eventually gives up his own life to save his master. In *The Seaboard Parish*, the older “knight” is the clergyman Mr. Walton, who takes his family on a “peregrination” to Tintagel and meets an artist named Percival, who is not a Christian believer but, like his Arthurian namesake, is dedicated to seeking the truth. Walton fights his own possessiveness and anxiety in order willingly to relinquish to Percival the hand of his beloved daughter. MacDonald, says Johnson,

was concerned to show that it was possible to practice chivalry—to be a "knight" in its original sense—even in modern England.

In "Being and Truthfulness," **Gavin Budge** says that for MacDonald, religion must be embodied in order to be authentic. It cannot be accurately presented as abstraction; it must be lived. This necessity of "incarnating" religious ideas to truly communicate or even experience them is akin, says Budge, to a medical theory of his period called "vitalism" or "Brunoian" medicine, which saw the physical processes of the body as influencing, and influenced by, the operations of the mind. This theory could account for the malaise of Adela Cathcart, the heroine of MacDonald's novel of that name. According to vitalism, women starved of the mental and spiritual "food" of education might go into the physical decline of a consumption. Adela is healed by hearing spiritually provocative stories, which vitalism might consider appropriate "pablum" for someone in her vitiated mental state—able to be assimilated, and therefore to nourish and to heal. Similarly, Budge says, religious ostentation or hypocrisy might indicate an inability to "digest" the truth of religious doctrine into one's everyday life, so that a person's expression of it remained abstract or "inauthentic." This is analogous to the way MacDonald perceived that a theology of atonement, emphasizing Christ's theoretical "payment" of the debut of our sin, takes the guts—the real life—out of religion by erasing a believer's personal responsibility to confront and abandon his sins and faults.

"Uncommon Interpretation" by **Amanda Vernon** compares the way MacDonald and Charles Kingsley reference Dante's *Commedia* in their fairytales. Though both utilize Dante, they develop contrasting themes. MacDonald highlights an aesthetic engagement with nature (and

human art) as a window into the Divine creativity and love, while Kingsley advocates a scientific exploration of nature to uncover God's natural and moral law. Kingsley tried to reconcile the eat-and-be-eaten character of the natural world with the Scriptural revelation of God, and saw the stern destroyer deity of the Old Testament reflected in a violent nature. He saw Dante as an early natural theologian, portraying a God of "infinite love" but also "infinite rigor."

Water Babies attempts to show that scientific and theological interpretations of nature are compatible. Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid, Kingsley's personification of the moral law, is akin to Dante's notion of *contrapasso,* that the sinner creates his own punishment. One only sees the beauty of Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid's punishing activity, or of the natural law, when one experiences the results—that is, when one becomes, oneself, personally evolved, or morally good.

While Kingsley saw scientific inquiry as the way to see God in nature, MacDonald advocated the way of aesthetic appreciation and affective response. The central fact of God is love and creativity, not the mechanical ingenuity one can find in nature by means of scientific analysis. Nature is God's work of art, capable of communicating spiritual truth even to those who don't know God—as are human works of art, story, and music. In *Water Babies,* Tom's moral development takes place through encounter with the moral law, while in MacDonald's *The Princess and Curdie,* moral development happens through Curdie's affective encounters with nature, music, and story. Unlike Kingsley, MacDonald rejected Dante's hell as a true interpretation of the Divine nature, preferring to Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid's mechanical retribution the Old Princess' "fair play," which takes account of motive and circumstance and has rehabilitation as its goal.

The thesis of **Charles Beaucham**'s essay is clearly stated in the title: "*Phantastes* as a Theological Critique of E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Golden Pot.*"

The Golden Pot was a favorite story of MacDonald's, and Beaucham shows that the plot of *Phantastes* directly reversed it. Hoffmann's tale is set in the everyday world, with the realm of the Ideal sometimes "breaking through." *Phantastes* is set mostly in Fairyland, with the everyday world occasionally breaking through in the workings of Anodos's Shadow. Hoffmann's hero Anselmus happily leaves this world at his story's end, while Anodos returns to it. This reversal, Beaucham observes, reflects the stories' different themes: the goal in *Pot* is to escape the mundane, while the goal in *Phantasts* is to discover the Ideal *in* the mundane, and to help others do so.

Given all that, says Beaucham, there is much the stories have in common. Both Hoffmann and MacDonald are combatting the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution's "desacralizing" of human life to enthrone profit and efficiency as prime goals. Beaucham's word for this new outlook is "misenchanment": conceptualizing salvation as material wealth and social status. Even Christian theologians, he says, recast "economic productivity" as the chief means of glorifying God. Sociologist Thomas Malthus asserted that the free market was God's means of inculcating virtue and discouraging vice. Both Hoffmann and MacDonald looked down on the pursuit of wealth and valorized their own artistic/spiritual vocations.

Also, both *The Golden Pot* and *Phantastes* express Platonic ideas. Both heroes must learn to differentiate True Beauty in feminine form (Anodos' White Lady and Anselmus' Serpentina/Sophia) from its worldly imitations. Anodos' encounters with the Alder Maid and the materialistic farmer cause his vision of Fairyland to waver and sometimes disappear, while

Anselmus is lured by the material comfort and social status represented by a career as Court Counselor and marriage to the socialite Victoria.

Both heroes succeed in learning to identify and be faithful to True Beauty, but the way the stories work out this process are much different. Hoffmann believed that art was Ultimate Reality, and Anselmus' marriage to Sophia and joining her in Atlantis represents the rejection of the bourgeois/material world for absorption in the Ideal; the two are incompatible. Anodos, however, eventually gives up his wish to possess the While Lady as a step in surrendering his egoism for disinterested love. His self-sacrificial death leads to his return to the mundane world, which he now experiences as laced with glimpses and intimations of the Ideal. Also, rather than longing to escape the material world, even in his short period as a disembodied spirit, Anodos deeply desires to serve and comfort those who suffer in it. Anodos does not wish to leave our world, but to redeem it. Thus, as Beaucham says in his introduction, the essential difference between Hoffmann's and MacDonald's tale is MacDonald's emphasis on Incarnation.

In "Another Serving of Orts," **Trevor Hart** takes a stroll among the commonalities of George MacDonald, F. D. Maurice, and Thomas Erskine regarding theology, literature and poetry.

Christian theology, Hart observes, has always wavered between emphasizing God's transcendence and God's immanence. A 19th century theologian, Aubrey Moore, suggested that one way to preserve both was to view God the Father as transcendent, but the Logos of creation as immanent, thus assigning immanence and transcendence to different Divine Persons. MacDonald and Maurice, however, viewed salvation as being drawn into the love existing between the Persons of the Trinity, and thus experiencing God the Father immanently as *our* father, as Jesus did. MacDonald particularly experienced the Father's immanent presence in

nature, which was for him "the expression of the face of God." For Thomas Erskine, the "spiritual order" was "shot through the material order like leaven in the lump" so we might "see, and hear, and love God in everything."

For Erskine, Maurice and MacDonald, in his Incarnation, Christ united himself with humanity—that is, every individual human being—so that divine life can flow through us. Creation for MacDonald was two-tiered, says Hart; it was spirit and matter, each reflecting the other, so that the language we use for inner (non-tangible) realities is developed from our language for outer realities, which is how ordinary language works and, in a more elevated mode, makes poetry. Human artistic creativity is not really "making," as God's is, but a matter of "finding" the correspondences that God has already knit into the spiritual and material realms. In this, poetry is like science—the discovery of what God has made.

Hart says that Erskine, Maurice and MacDonald understood the Atonement in a "distinctive and important way." Christ lived and died, according to this understanding, not to save us from the punishment of our sins, but to save us from the sin itself. In Christ's Incarnation, God bound us to himself, and now lives in our souls so that we might suffer and die as Jesus did, willingly, knowing and accepting that the suffering and death is the purification of a loving Father who is destroying whatever in us stands between us and full participation in the life and blessedness of the Trinity. And all three men thought this process would almost always occupy more time than is allowed for one human life, and thus accepted the idea of a Purgatorial state, despite their Protestantism.

It isn't possible to really summarize **Daniel Gabelman**'s essay "Children in the Midst," conveyed as it is in entertaining and intriguing Derridian-style wordplay. However, I'll try to

cover at least some of the major points. Essentially, the essay is a playful meditation on the relationship between the thought of Jacques Derrida and George MacDonald on the nature of language, examining the title page of the first volume of MacDonald's *Unspoken Sermons* and offering a close reading of parts of the first sermon, "The Child in the Midst."

First, the title page. On the surface, the title's significance is obvious: these sermons were never preached. Although some of them were. But Gableman favors the idea that the term "Unspoken" does not refer to MacDonald's content, but to the "commonplace, oppressive" doctrines that his essays were refuting, or "unsaying." The central epigraph, "Comfort ye my people," supports this reading, referencing as it does the Babylonian Captivity and thus implying that his audience is in some sort of spiritual bondage that his message will loosen. "Comfort" also evokes the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, and thus an appeal to the heart rather than the head. The dedication, referring to the book's contents as "Ears of Corn gathered and rubbed in my hands upon broken Sabbaths" also presents MacDonald as a disciple of Jesus breaking with tradition to satisfy human need.

Reviewers' criticisms of the book were mostly leveled at MacDonald's ignoring the historical-critical method of "fixing the plain meaning" of texts before plumbing their symbolic depths, thus producing confusion. Derrida, Gableman says, would have called this criticism an example of "logocentrism," misplaced faith in one's ability to pin down a true, original meaning of a word or saying.

Two Greek phrases are on the title page. The first, "Anchora Spei" (or "anchor of hope) is combined with the emblem of an unmoored anchor being grasped by a human hand coming out of clouds. Both emblem and phrase are openly paradoxical, for forward-looking hope is the opposite of a solidly fixed anchor, and it is ambiguous as to whether the hand is pulling the

anchor up, or the anchor pulling the hand down. The second, "Epea Aptera," literally means "unwinged words," which could have the boringly obvious meaning that MacDonald was writing in prose rather than poetry ("winged words) or it could indicate that the words of his text were not hasty, but carefully considered ("gathered and rubbed) over a long time.

Or, all of this could be MacDonald's way of pointing out the highly derivative and mediated nature of all communication, spoken or written.

Turning his attention to the text of "The Child in the Midst," Gableman reminds us that, in semiotics, a "sign" has three parts: signifier, signified, and referent. In his sermon, MacDonald asserts that Jesus, not the Bible, is "the Word of God," thus rendering the Bible, Gabelman says, as "words about the Word." This realization "dilates" the original formula, spelling out the Bible as the signifier, Jesus as the signified, the Father as the referent, and the Holy Spirit as "the play between the parts of the sign" which keeps the sign from "freezing up" into the dead idol of "plain textual meaning" venerated by fundamentalists and historical-textual critics alike.

In "The Child in the Midst," MacDonald explicate Jesus' saying that to receive a child in Jesus' name is to receive not only Jesus, but "him who sent me." Gableman observes that MacDonald emphasizes the textuality of the Bible from this sermon's beginning: in the first sentence he takes the story from Mark and immediately embellishes it with the passage from Matthew. He then dismisses its "plain meaning" (against ambition) in one sentence and begins to "show" (not logically demonstrate) what he believes Jesus is actually communicating: that God is like a child, and to receive a child, in awareness of this likeness, is to receive not only Jesus but also the Father. This notion, says Gableman, effectively "kills" the theologian's representation of God as king, replacing it with its antithesis: God as child.

Thus, MacDonald is not a "friendly dovelike pet" but a "serpentine fiend of the dull disciple's monarchical God and patriarchal father," and MacDonald, like Derrida, is not in favor of freezing language, but of letting it "play" among meanings.

What I have extracted here is the barest of bones; there is so much more in all of these essays. What most readers of MacDonald will find particularly enlightening is that they all provide MacDonald's texts with context: the people, the cultural climate, the scientific theories, the literary milieu, and the social movements in which MacDonald was immersed, and out of which (or in reaction to which) his own ideas were formed. Anyone with an educated interest in MacDonald will be powerfully enriched by *Unsaying the Commonplace.*

Bonnie Gaarden is an English professor retired from PennWest Edinboro. Her articles on George MacDonald's works have appeared in various literary journals and her book, The Christian Goddess: Archetype and Theology in the Fantasies of George MacDonald*, was published in 2011 by Rowman, Littlefield.*