Addendum to an article previously published

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The Editor, North Wind

Dear Sir,

A couple of points have arisen in connection with my paper “The Sources of Phantastes” which appeared in the last number of North Wind.

Firstly: Richard Reis has written to observe that he demonstrated in his critical biography of MacDonald that where the two princes and Anodos fight against the giants this is primarily an allegory of the fight by MacDonald and his brothers against tuberculosis. I completely forgot this when I wrote. Reis is undoubtedly correct. Greville MacDonald’s description of his Uncle John (G.M & W pp. 165-66) coincides perfectly with Anodos’s description of the younger prince. Since John did not die until the summer of 1858, the episode must be a late insertion into Phantastes. Its positive mood, and that of the other inserted episode of the beggar girl, are in complete contrast with the mood of the rest of the book.

Secondly: much that I mentioned has been superceded by Stephen Prickett’s paper in The Gold Thread, associating Phantastes with Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister. I emphasised that the comic irony of Phantastes builds up to a climax at the end of the story. Prickett points out that this also happens in Wilhelm Meister. He alludes to a study of German Bildungsromane: The Fiction of Humanity Cambridge University Press, 1982, by Michael Beddow, who observes that the irony at the end of both parts of Wilhelm Meister “is an attempt to insure that the reader grasps that the novel does not rest its claim to truth on its external teleology, of which the ironised ending is the last manifestation- [end of page 28] tion, but on the unironised internal teleology” (p. 140).

MacDonald’s use of irony, as Prickett observes, is deeper than this. At one level, the end of Anodos’s Fairy-Land adventures is pure irony; yet it is concurrently pure Eucatastrophe—to borrow Tolkien’s term. Anodos, exploring “the way back up” through his life, has reached infancy. The knight and lady look down upon him as if he were a newborn babe in his cradle; then he is buried, and seems “to feel the great, heart of the mother beating
into” his own; finally, when his soul leaves the body, his aspirations resemble those to be expected of a soul entering incarnation. He is being given nothing less than the opportunity to restate and improve upon the vows he made them.

This is a total contrast to Anselmus at the end of Hoffmann’s *The Golden Pot*, who (as Wolff notes in *The Golden Key*) withdraws into the enclosed world of his “freehold in Atlantis.” It contrasts equally with the attitude of the protagonist of Shelley’s “Alastor,” a poem which MacDonald satirizes at the beginning of *Phantastes*. Shelley closes his introduction to *Alastor* by ironically quoting Wordsworth to dismiss the mature attitude held by Wordsworth and Coleridge towards the Imagination: “‘The good die first, / And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust, / Burn to the socket!’” In *Phantastes* MacDonald attempts to demonstrate that these are not the only two options for the human soul. A third possibility is death and rebirth. [29]