1-1-1994

The Phenomenal as a Channel to the Real in MacDonald’s Fantasy

Adrian Gunther

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol13/iss1/5
The Phenomenal as a Channel to the Real in MacDonald’s Fantasy

Adrian Gunther

[Parts of this article were previously published in the Journal of Myth, Fantasy and Romanticism, vol. 2, No. 1, 1993.]

Progress along a spiritual path is measurable in terms of the extent to which a quester is able to perceive the unity underlying apparent multiplicity, or, in other words, the extent to which he or she is able to use the phenomenal as a channel to the Real. With each stage, the insight becomes clearer; the single energy permeating individual: forms becomes increasingly “the real,” and the surface static form “the dream.” In What’s Mine’s Mine, MacDonald describes his ideal reader as “one who not merely beholds the outward show of things, but catches a glimpse of the soul that looks out of them, whose garment and revelation they are” (2). Of his hero in There and Back he says: “It was one force in all the forms that drew him” (140).

It is the sacred energy underlying forms which gives them their true beauty. Thus an openness to this energy transfigures surface reality. As the great-great-grandmother explains to Irene in The Princess and the Goblin:

“If that light were to go out, you would fancy yourself lying in a bare garret, on a heap of old straw. And you would not see one of the pleasant things round about you all the time,” (65)

which is of course what happens to Curdie later in the book. The “light” which transforms surface form here is external in a sense, but it depends equally on Irene’s inner light in order for it to be visible at all. The sacred energy transforming external form is visible only to those in whom that sacred energy is already awakened. When such inner energy fails, external forms alter dramatically. Thus when Anodos becomes “weary” of Fairy Land, after his expulsion from the palace, his environment reflects, and is a product of, his spiritual state. It is “bare . . . waste and gray,” and is portrayed in images of death and desolation.

How questers experience the external world depends wholly upon their spiritual level. In a sense, MacDonald’s protagonists can be said to generate their own “reality.” Different characters experience the same
external reality quite differently, according to their own internal spiritual development. In [end of page 34] particular, their varying abilities to penetrate into the true sacred nature of things will hinge on this level of spiritual being. So too, a specific point of progress in a quester’s development will be marked by a shift in his or her experience of external reality. This shift takes many forms, but is usually portrayed as a movement away from experiencing this reality as made up of solid disparate forms—of separate material objects—towards experiencing it as energy.

This shift in consciousness, as it may be called, is also usually signalled by a movement out of mundane time into sacred time. Both space and time lose their solidity. Curdie steps into an apparently substanceless room with “a great wheel of fire, turning and turning, and flashing out blue lights” in its darkness—a clear image of cosmic energy.

A spiritual guide is for one purpose only—to provide seekers with what they need for spiritual growth. The guide can appear in a myriad forms behaving in a equally varied number of ways. These surface appearances do not in themselves have any significance. In The Princess and Curdie, the goddess tells Curdie: “those who know me well, know me whatever new dress or shape or name I may be in” (210); and when he begs her for a sign: “that would be to keep you from knowing me. You must know me in quite another way from that . . . . It would be no better than if I were to take this emerald out of my crown and give it to you to take home with you, and you were to call it me . . . . Much good that would do you, Curdie!” (210-11)

Like all the spiritual guides in MacDonald’s stories, Irene’s “grandmother” changes shape and behaviour according to the level of spiritual development of the seeker. When she first appears to the eight-year-old Irene, it is as her great-great-grandmother, and her behaviour is gentle and reassuring as befits Irene’s age and vulnerability. Even the grandmother’s environment is experienced by Irene in a very realistic and unthreatening way, with all sorts of specific details given, such as how the pigeons are fed. It is more an extension of her “normal” reality that anything outside it. The “grandmother” leads her carefully downstairs to make sure she returns safely to her nursery, a transition quite at odds with the magical returns to “normality” she experiences later. This experience of her grandmother as static form alters dramatically in later encounters as Irene develops spiritually. She increasingly experiences the divine as energy, and the line between “dream” and “reality” becomes progressively undermined with
each encounter. After lying in the sacred centre, clasped in the arms of the
diety, when Irene next [35] sees her grandmother it begins to be in terms of
energy: “her hair . . . streamed like a cataract, here falling . . . there rushing
. . . . pouring down from her head and vanishing” (79). The guide appears in a
form directly suited to the current spiritual needs of the young princess.

When, in the second volume, the goddess appears to Curdie, she
takes a completely different shape. Her grandmotherly aspect disappears.
She is now called “The Princess of the Silver Moon,” and she is severe
and demanding, as befits a guide pulling a lapsed quester back onto the
path. Her physical form alters dramatically as Curdie’s spiritual awareness
slowly develops through exposure to her revelations. She initially appears
“a filmy thing that seemed a puff would blow away” (187). However, as his
confidence grows and his faith returns, so the divinity gains substance until
she reveals herself as “a tall, strong woman . . . . [s]traight as a pillar” (192).
When she appears to him and his father in the mine it is as energy in the form
of light:

the whole cavern [was] blazing with lights innumerable, and
gorgeous yet soft and interfused—so blended, indeed, that the
eye had to search and see in order to separate distinct spots of
special colour. (207)

The fact that on this appearance she comes to him in the mine is also clearly
of great significance. It indicates a strengthening of his spiritual being such
that he carries the protective aspect of the divinity with him and no longer
needs to seek her in her tower, a development which is of course necessary,
as he is about to leave home and embark on a quest into the unknown.
This appearance of the goddess in the mines serves another purpose also.
It confirms the great symbolic opening passages in the book, where what is
stressed is the cyclic pattern of energy, linking “within” with “without,” the
Earth’s core with the distant heavens.

“The Mistress of the Silver Moon” is also “The lady of Emeralds”:
“the mother of all the light that dwells in the stones of the earth.” As she
insists to Curdie:

“I could give you twenty names more to call me, Curdie and
not one of them would be a false one. What does it matter how
many names if the person is one? . . . Shapes are only dresses
. . . and dresses are only names. That which is inside is the same
all the time.” (209)

Later in the story, no one can recognise the ‘housemaid’ for her true self until
the corruption which has contaminated the whole realm is cleansed. As always in MacDonald, corruption at the centre spreads outwards, and until this centre is purified the vision of every protagonist is obscured. This includes Curdie, and we remember the grandmother’s original statement to him when setting him on his quest: “I have one idea of you and your work, and you have another” (224). When he does recognise her as she pours the wine in that profound symbolic gesture of service, the suggestion is that she has revealed herself to him, not that he has really reached that level where “seeing” her is natural. There are hints here that all is not yet well, hints realised in the devastating final chapter. As she returns clad in her true radiance: “Her face was radiant with joy, the joy overshadowed by a faint mist as of unfulfilment” (339). There is as yet a long way to go.

In *A Dish of Orts*, MacDonald insists that fairy tales function “not so much to convey a meaning as to wake a meaning” (317), and he is saying the same thing when he talks of different readers finding different meanings in his works. A great work of art will successfully make the link between surface form (“without”) and and underlying sacred energy (“within”), revealing the latter through the former, and readers will respond to this revelation from whatever level of being they are on. To the extent that they can free the sacred energy in themselves, the energy “without” will awaken the energy “within,” thus creating a “channel” to the “true.”

Thus from all directions we return to the same basic principle: a quester’s level of spiritual being determines his or her experience of so-called external reality. This experience of external things is ultimately aimed at using these things to reach the sacred energy underlying and differentiating them. As questers successfully achieve this, they increasingly recognise that actually the two are the same; within is without. So too they recognise their own place in this process. Their own separation is gradually undermined; they too are part of this cosmic energy, and openness to it increasingly awakens the same sacred energy or truths or “dreams” in themselves. All becomes the dream. The dream dreams them, and all becomes a revelation of the dreamer at the source, who is God.

MacDonald rarely attempts to verbalize this last level of revelation. It is, as he says, indescribable. However, metaphors can convey a certain amount, which is why so much of his questers’ experiences are conveyed in terms of music, poetry or “spinning” a revelation into someone. Appropriately also, MacDonald always signals these transforming experiences by the presence of water. Water is not just baptismal, a symbol
of new life; it is also a great symbol of energy, of the constant movement
underlying surface form. [37] He uses light, music, fire, wind as symbols
of this energy. But the central symbol is water. Each key stage in a quester’s
development is accompanied by the lesser or greater presence of water. At
one extreme it is merely the sound of water; at the other it takes the form
of floods or total immersion in sacred pools specifically linked to the great
ocean itself. Obviously the ocean is the ultimate water symbol, embodying
to perfection the combination of underlying unity and surface forms, and
MacDonald uses it throughout his work in just this way.

*The Princess and the Goblin* opens with the establishment of
opposition. Its sequel, on the contrary, stresses the illusory nature of such
opposition and focuses on the unity underlying it, the great cyclic movement
of energy on which individual form depends (175). Another key passage
where MacDonald comes close to capturing this concept in poetic form is in
*At the Back of the North Wind*, where Diamond, secure in the still centre of
the sacred—North Wind herself—experiences and is part of the incredible
energy generated from this centre (73-75). He feels as if he is “motionless”
in the centre of “fierce chaos.” In this visionary moment he experiences the
sacred centre from which the energy subsuming individual form is generated.
He is also generating, and part of, this energy himself. Still centre, energy and
form are momentarily one. “Within” is “Without,” and the Phenomenenal is a
channel to the Real.

Works Cited
—. *The Princess and the Goblin & The Princess and Curdie*. Oxford: World’s
—. *What’s Mine’s Mine*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1991. [38]