

The Sources of *Phantastes*

John Docherty

MacDonald's *Phantastes*, with its numerous literary allusions and its considerable autobiographical content, is a typical novel. In most other respects, of course, it is highly atypical, not least in its relationship to its sources. David Robb¹ suggests that "an awareness of sources does not merely help us to explain the work's genesis, but can conceivably take us to the heart of it."

MacDonald quotes from many authors for his chapter headings. However, most of these quotations—with the notable exceptions of those from Novalis—seem to do no more than underscore what is already self-evident in MacDonald's text. Several could have prefaced almost any chapter. Robb² draws attention to the passage from Coleridge's *Dejection* ode which heads Chapter IX, noting that the alternation of Joy and Dejection is a major theme throughout *Phantastes*. This is true, but these contrasting moods are part of a deeper pattern of systole and diastole which MacDonald seems to borrow from the mainstream tradition of Scottish story telling.

Robb suggests that: "Anodos's shadow seems to be MacDonald's version of Coleridge's *Dejection*." But it may be truer to say that MacDonald is responding to the criticism of the *Dejection* ode in Shelley's short collection of poems *Alastor* (1815). The first chapter of *Phantastes* is prefaced by a quotation from the final part of Shelley's title poem, where the poet seems to lose his avenging demon (his *alastor*) **[end of page 38]** as he approaches death. In this poem the demon is only alluded to obliquely. However, in *Oh! There are spirits of the air*, a critical poem addressed to Coleridge in the same volume, Shelley describes an apparently similar demon as: "This fiend whose ghastly presence ever/ Beside thee like thy shadow hangs."

MacDonald seems to draw much of the character of Anodos from Shelley, as he appears as the protagonist of *Alastor*, reflecting his negative as well as his positive traits. He makes extensive use of inversion, so that, for example, the Shelley quotation heading the first chapter of *Phantastes* appears to allude primarily to the *end* of the story, just as the Novalis quotation heading the last chapter appears to allude primarily to the beginning. In *Phantastes*, MacDonald uses Shelley's *Alastor* as his starting

point in an imaginative effort to penetrate the heart of the Romantic dilemma.

While some of MacDonald's chapter-head quotations have not been understood, the quotation he appends to his title has proved actually misleading. "Phantastes from 'their fount' all shapes deriving,/ In new habiliments can quickly dight," is modified from Phineas Fletcher's *The Purple Island*. Phantastes, in Fletcher's allegory of the human body, is the creative imagination, one of the counsellors of the brain. However, Phantastes is not the only hero of MacDonald's story. The same stanza of Fletcher's also mentions old "Eumnestes," the memory, and Robb³ explains the importance, in *Phantastes*, of the interaction of Phantastes and Eumnestes. MacDonald himself emphasises this in his exquisite myth of the dung beetles in Chapter IV. The behaviour of these beetles is a clever development of their traditional role as symbols of rebirth. The Egyptian Kephri daily brings the fructifying dunghall/sun to the world; MacDonald describes an opposite ritual. His beetles, in the evening, [39] bring light to the dung, causing each fragment to shoot into the air as a glorious sky-rocket. (Of course, as true myth, the episode is not exhausted by extracting this one meaning. It is noteworthy, for example, that both sexes of beetle appear to be necessary to perform the operation.)

What is sometimes forgotten about MacDonald's allusion to Fletcher is that Fletcher borrows all his essential imagery from Spenser's allegory of the human body, the House of Alma, in Cantos IX to XI of Book II of *The Faerie Queen*. MacDonald presumably alludes to Fletcher's Phantastes because this character approximates more closely to his own conceptions than does Spenser's Phantastes. Otherwise, however, all MacDonald's very many borrowings from *The Faerie Queen* seem to be directly derived from Spenser, not via Fletcher. We should, it seems, take MacDonald's misquotation seriously and ourselves look to "the fount."

Spenserian symbolism is evident throughout *Phantastes*. The story proper begins in the second chapter with the much-quoted transformation scene, where Anodos's bedroom metamorphoses into a meadow. This is a literal fulfilment of Novalis's dictum that "Unser Leben ist kein Traum, aber es soll und vielleicht einer werden," but its immediate source appears to lie in the transformation scenes which were very popular in stage productions at that time. Ostentatious naturalism on the stage is less esteemed today. Nevertheless, we can accept such representations of the Ideal as the Ideal, because the naturalism is primarily intended to assist the imagination, not to deceive it. In Anodos's bedroom, however, art and nature seem

to be interchangeable, and when this occurs we become deeply uneasy. One of the best-known examples of utilisation of such unease for didactic purposes is Spenser's Bower of Bliss (F.Q. II, XII). [40] Immediately upon encountering the artificial ivy the ordinary reader has an instinctive urge to see the bower torn down. And the naked young women whom we meet immediately afterwards are traditional inhabitants of "Enchanted Ground." MacDonald clearly wants us to believe that his Fairy Land is in a sense *more* real than the world Anodos leaves, yet ivy forms "the chief part" of the metamorphosing ornamentation on his furniture, and upon entering Fairy Land he is soon pursuing, if not a naked, at least a diaphanously-clad maiden.

MacDonald loved *The Faerie Queen* and could scarcely have forgotten Spenser's negative use of these symbols. It seems likely, therefore, that he is consciously opposing Spenser in order to disorient us and shake us into awareness. By temperament he was more prone to associate diaphanously-clad maidens with the Golden Age than with Acrasia's bower. The "ideal woman" pursued by Anodos seems to be one element in MacDonald's recreation of the theme of the fifth of Novalis's *Hymns to the Night*, which describes the Golden Age, its undermining by Fear, and Man's subsequent redemption through the sacrifice of Christ.

This pattern recurs frequently in *Phantastes*. "Inversions" of episodes from *The Faerie Queen* are underpinned at a deep level by concepts derived from works of Novalis which MacDonald had himself translated.⁴

Robert Lee Wolff⁵ recognises one such crucially important but inconspicuous allusion to Novalis. The marble lady whom Anodos sings into visibility in the fairy palace has some affinities with the maiden Shamefastnes whom Sir Guyon accosts in Alma's hall (F.Q. II, IX). However, Anodos addresses the lady as Isis, and Wolff points out that this is an allusion to where Hyacinth unveils Isis (Wisdom) and discovers Rosebud (Erotic love) in Novalis's parable *Hyacinth and Rosebud*. Wolff [41] does *not* mention that the song Anodos sings draws upon Novalis's *Hymn*, the seventh of his *Sacred Songs*. Of this, Owen Barfield comments:⁶

Is there not in this poem a certainty, a grounded *knowledge*? It is not content to stop in imagination and hint and suggestion. One feels that its meaning, its *openly expressed* meaning, reaches right down into the solid earth and right up into the empyrean. It is the resurrection of the body—in terms of the body.

MacDonald himself is attempting a similar stupendous Dantean resolution,

but at the crucial moment Anodos fails him.

Only a few of MacDonald's allusions to *The Faerie Queen* can be mentioned here. Most are pieces of subtle self-parody based upon inversions. A good example occurs in Chapters XVIII and XIX where MacDonald inverts the image of Phaedria and her self-propelled boat (F.Q. II, VI) to describe Anodos's visit to the wise woman. Both accounts mark a major turning point in their respective narratives, and both Phaedria and the wise woman are at one with nature, although in very different ways. The depraved Cymochles finds "wondrous great contentment" in Phaedria's presence and in her boat, as does Anodos with the wise woman and in her boat; but the sober Sir Buyon does not!

Spenser's preference reproduces a letter to Raleigh indicating that he originally planned to describe the adventures of twelve knights exemplifying the twelve Aristotelian virtues. He never completed this plan, but it is reflected in reverse in the existing text where Maleger leads twelve battalions of vices against the House of Alma (F.Q. II, XI). Anodos is oblivious of any evil menacing *his* House of Alma, the "fairy palace." However, this palace contains twelve halls of dancers/statues representing shades of feeling. (These twelve satellite halls reappear as the mood chambers of the wise woman in *The Lost Princess*.) Presumably it is because MacDonald is describing only the areas of life which are [42] the concern of Phantastes that his fairy palace is solely a palace of the feelings. Anodos, however, does experience "wilful" aspects of feeling when he pursues the marble lady out of the palace, and "intellectual" aspects of feeling in the library of the palace. And his paraphrasing of two books he reads in the library—as Chapters XII and XIII—recalls Spenser's paraphrasing of the two books which Prince Arthur and Sir Guyon read in the library of the House of Alma (F.Q., II, X).

Spenser's proposed twelve knights were to depart upon their quests over the twelve days of Christmas. MacDonald, by a pun on this, seems to draw another element of his story from *Twelfth Night*. Both *Phantastes* and *Twelfth Night* portray the experience of a young man of high birth who pursues a lady who has "abjured the company and sight of men" but who ultimately weds a better man. Anodos, in switching from a feckless eroticism to what amounts to childish "purity,"⁷⁷ ignores the moral of Shakespeare's sub-plot—that both extremes of sexual pretension (exemplified in Sir Andrew and Malvolio) are equally ridiculous.

Anodos adopts his attitude of purity upon leaving the tower of self at the end of Chapter XXII, and subsequently in the story an understanding

of the allusions to Spenser becomes particularly crucial. Anodos's first encounter after this is with his old acquaintance the knight, who is in the process of rescuing a babe. The life of the babe is seriously threatened because the knight is wasting precious time taking the body of the dragon which attacked it to display to the child's parents. When he does eventually get round to tend the babe's wounds, MacDonald's text draws directly upon the scene in *The Fairie Queen* where Calepine succours the babe he has rescued (F.Q. VI,IV). The crucial point is that Calepine is only able to rescue his babe because: **[43]**

Well then his chaunst his heavy armes to want,
Whose burden mote empeach his needful speed.

MacDonald's knight can make "but slow progress" because the great dragon is a great drag on his horse. *The pun is intentional*. And we realise we are expected also to laugh at the absurd Romantic trappings: idyllic setting; knight in shining armour; distraught parents in lowly cottage. The knight, valiant and loveable yet obtainless, ludicrous yet noble, must surely be based upon Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. It is noteworthy that we have only his own accounts of his exploits—all described in terms of wood chopping! Anodos nearly always accepts the knight's interpretation of events without question and ultimately becomes his Sancho Panza.

Robb⁸ emphasises that "the sheer experience of entering the domain which MacDonald's imagination has created is the heart of what the book has to offer." As the story approaches its end MacDonald must begin to extricate his readers from this domain, encouraging us not simply to adopt Anodos's moral improvements as our own, but to recognise their limitations and, like Sir Guyon, strive for an outlook of Temperance.

For Anodos's final adventure in Fairy Land, MacDonald combines two opposite images from Spenser,⁹ the Bower of Bliss and the Garden of Adonis (F.Q. II, XIII & III, VI). These are, respectively, negative and positive developments of the mediaeval image of Garden of Love, where the "rites of spring" were formalised into the conventions of courtly love. MacDonald builds up an image of utter decadence, where young people are thoughtlessly sacrificing themselves to an evil religion. Anodos gives to these young people an example of intelligent (far-seeing) self-sacrifice, and, as such, his overthrow of the idol is the culmination of his deeds in Fairy Land. However, his actions are also a terrible self-mutilation,¹⁰ and his perception of events is decidedly biased. **[44]**

In Spenser's Garden of Adonis, Venus has ensured that the boar is

“firmly emprisoned for ay” beneath the central mount; in the outdoor temple Anodos visits, the werewolf beneath the central mount is appeased only by regular human sacrifices. Adonis exists “eterne in mutabilite”; the “king” whom Adonis overthrows is an idol, apparently “eterne” because wooden, but in fact rotten within. After overthrowing the Bower of Bliss, Sir Guyon embarks upon an orgy of destruction in the surrounding groves; after Anodos has overthrown the idol, the knight hews down “like brushwood” the great multitude of priests who rush up to the mount.

Anodos does not undertake the overthrow of the idol out of any sympathy for the youths and maidens, but because he feels the knight may be embarrassed on discovering that he has misunderstood the nature of the religious ceremony! Anodos is under some degree of mental strain, so we can excuse the alliteration in his description of the priest’s reaction as one of “rath and revenge and rescue.” However, we cannot help smiling when, immediately following this, he tells how there was “a universal hiss of steel, as every sword was swept from its scabbard.” And, clearly, MacDonald *intends* us to smile. Subsequently, Anodos’s descriptions of his burial is as fine as anything MacDonald ever wrote on “good death.” Thus it is extremely disconcerting for the reader when this passage passes into a comic parody of an adolescent fantasy¹¹ with Anodos’s description of the knight and lady weeping over his coffin. This bears no relation to the standard technique of introducing humour directly *after* scenes of high drama, nor to the technique of having an ever-present irony behind the seriousness. It may be an example of Novalis’s “zusammenhang,” but, if so, is very different from Novalis’s use of the concept. More probably it is another deliberate attempt by [45] MacDonald to disorient his readers.

This bathos prepares the reader for Anodos’s ultimate insufferable presumption when, floating upon his cloud, he declaims about all the good he intends for suffering humanity. To have him disappear in (literally) a cloud of glory would be contrary to MacDonald’s desire to make *Phantastes* a never-ending story. Moreover, Anodos, like the Ancient Mariner, has to be returned alive to be able to tell his story. The comic self-depreciation MacDonald employs here recalls similar techniques used by traditional tellers of fairy tales to close a story and bring the listeners down to earth. However, Anodos’s description of his physical symptoms as he leaves Fairy Land is clearly based upon accounts by people who have undergone near-death experiences. In a similar way, his description of the flower-fairies at the beginning of his adventures is, as he claims, in accord with other first-

hand reports. These two framing episodes are intended to give an ironic verisimilitude to the story.

It is not particularly remarkable that MacDonald should parody the very ideals he wishes to affirm. Charles Kingsley, for example, does this in *The Water Babies* (1864). MacDonald was probably inspired by the blend of passionate advocacy and satire in Carlyle's *Sator Resartus* and, even more, by the style of E.T.A. Hoffmann's fictional writings. Ruskin told MacDonald apropos *The Light Princess*: "you see too deeply into things to be able to laugh nicely,"¹² but depth of perception and boisterous humour are not incompatible; Kingsley's principal source is Rabelais's *Gargantua*, with its comparable combination of both qualities. The humour of Hoffmann, however, is much more subtle, and is closely associated with the other emotions, as well as with the intellect. Either deliberately or unconsciously, MacDonald appears to be attempting [46] to model elements of his style upon Hoffmann's, but in *Phantastes* his shock tactics work against an integration of his humour with his mythopoeia. C. S. Lewis, profoundly affected by the mythopoeia, argues that one can throw the rest away.¹³ Many readers probably fare far worse than Lewis, like him rejecting the bathos and other elements of the self-satire as incompetence, but because of this discarding the book without penetrating to the mythopoeia. MacDonald in his later stories does not give up shock tactics, but they are better orchestrated.

In the course of developing his own style out of that of Hoffmann, MacDonald borrows many of Hoffmann's images, but most of his borrowings are not true allusion since a study of the originals does not appreciably enhance one's understanding of MacDonald's text. (In *The Golden Key*, MacDonald seems to forget he *has* borrowed from Hoffmann, believing Novalis to be the source for an image which actually comes from the first chapter of Hoffmann's *The Devil's Elixirs*.)

The differences between the ways MacDonald borrows from Spenser, Novalis and Hoffmann are considerable, and this applies also to his borrowings from other authors. For example, with *The Divine Comedy*, another of MacDonald's great loves, he copies Dante's Trinitarian framework,¹⁴ but apparently without borrowing any details of incidents from the work.

In that *Phantastes* is a tale of spiritual search and knightly deeds, MacDonald could scarcely ignore Mallory, but, in his allusions to the *Morte d'Arthur*, Mallory's characters are recognised as characters from a tale. This is very like Spenser's distanced attitude to Mallory.¹⁵ In Chapter III Anodos

reads a story written in the style of the *Morte d'Arthur* which alludes to an episode in Chapter X of Book XIV of Mallory's work. The knight refers to this later in the story when he asks [47] Anodos: "'hast thou . . . ever read the story of Sir Percival . . . as it befell him, so has it befallen to me.'" This is unequivocal, yet, strangely, nearly all critics except Wolff refer to the knight as "Sir Percival"! Later again, in Chapter XIX, the wise woman sings the beautiful *Ballad of Sir Aglovaile*. And, since Mallory's Sir Aglevaile is the brother of Percival, MacDonald's allusions here may be no less deep than those to *The Faerie Queen*.

To consider the Bible as one of the extrinsic sources drawn upon by MacDonald makes little sense, since its teachings are as much a part of him as, for example, is his knowledge of basic syntax. However, one can recognise in *Phantastes* echoes of passages in the Bible where a general teaching is brought into particularly sharp focus. The most notable is Anodos's desire "to be a child again" when imprisoned in the tower of self, which is a total misrepresentation of Christ's teaching that we should become as little children. Also, *Phantastes* has a direct inversion of a biblical text where the ogre woman reads an inversion of John I in Chapter VIII.

Robb¹⁶ makes the interesting suggestion that *Phantastes* may embody a deliberate inversion of Matthew Arnold's view in *Dover Beach* that:

the world which seems
To lie before us like a world of dreams
So various, so beautiful, so new
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.

Robb conjectures that a passage in the opening chapter of *Phantastes* is a deliberate reflection of the tranquil opening of *Dover Beach*. The story opens with Anodos recalling coming into his material inheritance. On the threshold of the great desk which symbolises this inheritance a "woman-form" appears who, in a sense, symbolises his "spiritual [48] inheritance." At first the creature—Anodos's fairy grandmother—appears to him as tiny, but her eyes soon engulf him:

They filled me with an unknown longing. I remembered somehow that my mother died when I was a baby. I looked deeper and deeper, till they spread around me like seas, and I sank in their waters. I forget all the rest, till I found myself at the window, whose gloomy curtains were withdrawn, and where I stood gazing on a whole heaven of stars, small and

sparkling in the moonlight. Below lay a sea, still as death and hoary as the moon, sweeping away into bays and around capes and islands, away, away.

Dover Beach begins:

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits;—on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night air!

Robb's suggestion seems highly likely, since the reflection of the moonlight is not the only double reflection in MacDonald's text at that point. Anodos is looking out of the window of a room strange to him, he has just been comforted in an unusual fashion by a previously unknown relative, and he recalls his dead mother. This must surely reflect David Copperfield's experience at Miss Trotwood's villa in Chapter XIII of Dickens's story. At the end of that chapter David recalls looking out of the window of the room he was given:

I remember how I still sat looking at the moonlight on the water, as if I could hope to read my fortune in it, as in a bright book, or see my mother with her child, coming from heaven along that shining path . . . I seemed to float, then, down the melancholy glory of that track upon the sea, away into the world of dreams.

And Miss Trotwood's villa overlooks . . . Dover beach!

There must be many other literary allusions in *Phantastes* which, if recognised, would contribute greatly to our appreciation of the story. William Raeper, for example, shows that MacDonald introduces a note of

humorous irony at the very beginning. Anodos's fairy grandmother— [49] herself a humorous substitution for the more usual fairy godmother—alludes to a popular farce of the time—*You Can't Marry Your Grandmother*.¹⁷

Most critics recognise that, in *Phantastes*, autobiographical sources are in some respects as important as the literary sources. For example, the source of the battle with the three rather stupid giants in Chapter XXI is probably MacDonald's battle with the Arundel deacons—as representatives of a particularly religious outlook—transposed into traditional fairy-tale imagery. The valiant little tailor of fairy tales primarily represents the intellect. Since the garment Anodos fashions during his apprenticeship with

the king's sons is "a shirt of steel plates and rings," we may take it that *his* intellect is something out of the ordinary! His subsequent social successes at the court may, at this autobiographical level, recall the many female admirers MacDonald attracted by his lecturing.

Chapter XXIII seems to begin with biography rather than autobiography. The description of the knights' rescue of the babe looks very like the portrait of a social worker whose tendency to romanticise his work sometimes has near-fatal consequences for his clients! MacDonald had been involved with social workers in Manchester in 1854, and also had contact with such people through F. D. Maurice. Subsequently in Chapter XXIII, in a wonderful and unique allegory, the knight describes to Anodos how he assisted a striving young person against stupid didacticism, standing faceless wooden men on their heads when they threatened the imaginative integrity of the child. His description of the beggar-child is highly reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's famous 1858 photograph of Alice Liddell as a beggar-girl (a photograph [50] which Tennyson described as the most beautiful he had ever seen). The knight's behaviour towards this child is likewise reminiscent of Carroll's attitude towards Alice. For example, the knight is confused by the child's incipient wings, which, at one level, certainly symbolise an emerging sexuality. The knight's thoughtful behaviour in this episode is totally out of character with his personality as depicted in the rest of the book, and the whole episode gives every indication of being a late insertion. Robb,¹⁸ on the basis of other photographic evidence, suggests that MacDonald and Carroll had become friends before *Phantastes* finally went to the printers. Carroll did not get to know the MacDonald children, with the possible exception of the eldest, Lilia, until 1860, when he met Greville and Mary at Alexander Munro's London studio. However, this is easily explained by the strict discipline which prevailed at the MacDonald's home in Hastings.¹⁹

What makes *Phantastes* so remarkable a work is the extent of MacDonald's reliance upon his own *Phantastes* to create his images and, equally, the depth of his understanding of other writers—particularly of Dante, Novalis and Spenser—and the way this enables him to create a complex dynamic structure for the material generated by his unconscious. As a writer in the Romantic tradition, he seeks to relate his own experience, including the experiences he has gained from literature, to his world picture; thus gaining a better understanding of the latter and assisting his readers to do the same for themselves. Clearly *Phantastes* does not represent a total assimilation of all the important experiences in MacDonald's life and reading

up to the time it was written, still less does it comprehend an exhaustive statement of his future aims. MacDonald attempts no less, but he is still too close to much of his experience to achieve that synthesis of attachment and detachment for which he strives. **[51]** Yet, without the catharsis he achieved completely through the creation of *Phantastes*, he would, never have been able to write such superbly balanced and positive stories as *The Light Princess* and *Cross Purposes* only a few years later.

Endnotes

1. David Robb, *George MacDonald* (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1987, p. 91).
2. Robb (op.cit., pp. 83-4).
3. Robb (op.cit., pp. 91-94).
4. MacDonald's Novalis translations were published in *Exotics* (1876) and reprinted with revisions in *Rampolli* (1897).
5. Robert Lee Wolff, *The Golden Key* (New Haven, Yale U.P., 1961 p.86).
6. Owen Barfield, *Of the Intellectual Soul*, in *Romanticism Comes of Age* (London, Anthroposophical Publishing Co., 1944).
7. John Docherty, "A Note on the Structure and Conclusion of 'Phantastes,'" *North Wind*, VII, (1988, pp.25-30).
8. Robb (op.cit., p.86).
9. MacDonald here also borrows from (but does not seem to allude to) the temple with its monster in F.Q. V, XI.
10. Docherty (op.cit.).
11. Wolff (op.cit.) recognises the adolescent fantasy, although not as a parody.
12. Letter of 22/7/63 quoted by William Raeper in *George MacDonald* (Tring, Lion, 1987, p. 222).
13. C. S. Lewis, *George MacDonald, An Anthology* (London, Geoffrey Bles, 1946, pp.14-16). Illogically, Lewis goes on to maintain (p. 21) that "There was no question of getting through to the kernel and throwing away the shell; no question of a gilded pill. The pill was gold all through"!
14. Docherty (op.cit.).
15. Vide C S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*, (Oxford, O.U.P., 1954, pp. 381-2). **[52]**
16. Robb (op.cit., pp. 80-3).
17. Raeper (op.cit., p.4 01).
18. David S. Robb, *The Fiction of George MacDonald*, VII, VI, (1985).
19. The effects of this discipline are charmingly described by a lady visitor who is quoted by Greville in his biography of his parents and by Raphael Shaberman in "George MacDonald and Lewis Carroll," *North Wind*, I (1982, p.10). **[53]**