

Allegory and Aestheticism in the Fantasies of George MacDonald

Yuri Cowan

*“The demand for perfection is always
a misunderstanding of the ends of art.”*

—Ruskin, “The Nature of Gothic.”

George MacDonald’s first work of fantasy for adults, *Phantastes*, was published in 1858, the same year as William Morris’s *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. Morris’s collection received a great deal of attention, and was the foundation of his reputation as a poet; MacDonald’s fairy romance, on the other hand, sank almost without a trace. Walter Pater looked back on *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* as “the first typical specimen of aesthetic poetry” (*Appreciations* 521), but *Phantastes* was neglected until its rehabilitation by the Christian fantasists C. S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton in the early twentieth century. Chesterton’s and Lewis’s own particular interpretations of MacDonald have since become orthodoxy. MacDonald has consequently been seen by recent scholars primarily as a “mythopoeic” writer, to the detriment of our understanding of him as a Victorian novelist, as David Robb has pointed out (279), as well as of our understanding of him as an allegorist in the context of the Aesthetic movement in nineteenth-century literature. To see MacDonald as a shaper of Christian myths is to ignore both the non-dogmatic nature of his views on moral and social renewal and the emphasis on individual interpretation that colours his views on art, both of which are characteristic of the concerns of the Aesthetic movement in general.

George MacDonald is certainly not the first writer one would include in a study of the movement. His tone, though genial, is too serious, and his preoccupation with good and evil has few parallels in the more worldly aesthetic movement (and certainly not among the near-amoral Decadent coterie). Where Pater and his followers saw life as a series of ecstatic aesthetic moments, MacDonald saw it as a journey like Anodos’s in *Phantastes*, and the world as a vale of soul-making (he was above all a Christian, and a product of Romanticism). Where the aesthetic movement claimed art was important in and for itself, MacDonald wanted his fantasies to help his readers better come to terms with their own spirituality.

But MacDonald was associated with many of the major figures of the early Aesthetic movement, and of fantastic Victorian literature in general. He and John Ruskin, for example, were fairly close, and it was at MacDonald's home in Hammersmith that Ruskin met with Rose LaTouche after her parents had forbidden her to see him (Greville MacDonald 370). That same house, then known as The Retreat, was, after MacDonald's family left, taken over by William Morris and renamed Kelmscott House (MacCarthy 391-2). The Burne-Joneses were also numbered among the MacDonalds' "intimate" friends (Greville MacDonald 503), and the MacDonald children were enthusiastic guinea pigs for the Reverend Charles Dodgson's *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* (Greville MacDonald 342).

The Aesthetic movement encompassed more than a simple devotion to blue china and sunflowers. It was best characterised by the belief that Art could change people's lives for the better—socially, politically, and even morally. For John Ruskin and William Morris, this meant giving the worker contentment in his work. For Walter Pater, art would "give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass" (*Renaissance* 220). And for Oscar Wilde, the aesthetic life and one's everyday life were inextricably linked. "Life and literature, life and the perfect expression of life" ("Critic as Artist" 1114)—and Wilde's pronouncement here shares an earnest exalted tone, and an intentional infuriating vagueness of terminology, with some of MacDonald's own formulations—were for Wilde the two highest arts, and he prized individual expression and expressiveness above all else. For many writers in the nineteenth century, from the Oxford Movement in the 1840s to the Decadents at the *fin de siècle*, art was seen as a possible medium of social renewal. The industrial revolution had brought with it a century of social upheaval, and the Victorian project was to make sense of its consequences, to come to grips with them, and if possible, to solve them. The Victorian intelligentsia grasped at Utilitarianism, Darwinian capitalism, Communism, Catholicism and a host of other religious, moral, and political systems to make sense of the era's hard times. Aestheticism was simply one of many possible solutions, and it attracted a diverse mix of adherents, from nostalgic advocates of paternal social orders (Ruskin), to radicals like Morris, to decadent Catholics such as Lionel Johnson.

Hilary Fraser finds in the work of the Oxford Tractarians in the 1830s the origins of the Aesthetic movement's involvement with religion. John Keble and John Henry Newman sought to renew their religion through poetry, and their emphasis on individual development and imagination prefigures the

theories of the later movement. For example, Fraser traces the influence of religion on Pater's aesthetic theory:

For Pater ... it was important to distinguish between the rigid, dogmatic forms of religion, and the flexible, developing, imaginative aspect. Only the latter could fit in with the preoccupation with relativism which is characteristic of both [Pater's] essay on 'Coleridge's

Writings' and his most-quoted work, *The Renaissance*. (214)

If we take the journey through Fairy Land to represent spiritual growth, then MacDonald's view of religion is not that different from Pater's. If, as the woman in the cottage on the outskirts of the forest tells Anodos, "[f]or those who enter Fairy Land, there is no way of going back. They must go on, and go through it. How, I do not in the least know" (*Phantastes* 53-4), then MacDonald has as individualised a notion of religion as Pater does in his writings.

MacDonald was on the fringes of both the nineteenth-century British religious ferment and the growing social justice movement. The story of MacDonald's "entertainments" for the tenants of Octavia Hill's experiments in low-income housing is illustrative of his passion for storytelling, his devout spirituality, and, above all, the non-authoritative character of his narrative style:

The basement of one house was converted into an entertainment room, and there George MacDonald would gather round him the worst of characters; or rather Octavia Hill did so in the first place.

'Will you come and hear a friend of mine read something fine on Sunday?' she asked them one day.

'Parson, Miss?'

'No.'

'White choker, Miss?'

'No, he generally wears a red tie.'

'Done! I'll come!'

And hands were shaken on the bargain. So in that room in tweeds and a red tie my father would tell them stories and awaken keen and sympathetic interest; he would touch 'the red spot.' And when his stories were gradually understood to have originated in a man named Jesus Christ, the audience forgot any suspicion they may have had of a white choker; and many became constant attendants and helpers

at such entertainments. (Greville MacDonald 383)

He had rejected his strict Calvinist upbringing (although he never ceased to admire and love his father's stern devotion), but he spent time as minister of a Congregational church in Arundel, and his particular brand of non-conformist Christian spirituality must colour all his storytelling. It is important to recognise here MacDonald's emphasis in his storytelling, first upon the universally human and only second upon the specifically Christian. His sermons are thereby made more accessible to all, more palatable to the skeptic, and more effective in general. It is in MacDonald's nature to preach; but the literary forms he chooses to preach in—the romance, the fairy tale, the dream-vision—and the allegorical mode he adopts, prevent his moralising from becoming a burden to the reader.

Allegory (defined here as a non-restrictive, open-ended mode that relies for its interpretation upon the reader, rather than as a system of concordances) is essential to understanding George MacDonald's fantastic works, MacDonald's theology as a whole, and his place in the aesthetic movement. Gordon Teskey, in his tightly-argued entry in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, proposes a model of allegory as

a game designed by the writer and played by the reader ...
Allegory differs from the related forms, parable and fable,
by including in its narrative conspicuous directions for
interpretation (such as naming the serpent of F[*aerie*]
Q[*ueene*] I i 18 'Errorr'). Whereas in parable or fable we
are offered a complete (and sometimes surprising)
interpretation when the story is over, in allegory we find
only the iconic rudiments of an interpretation we must build
for ourselves, within certain constraints, as we proceed. (16)

Those "constraints" are important, however. They consist partly in the "directions for interpretation," and partly in the overall structure of the allegorical work. It would be no use reading about the kitchen in the Castle of Alma (*Faerie Queene* II.ix.29-32) out of context, for instance, since it only makes sense as part of a coherent whole, just as a book on the workings of the digestive system would be too specific for a devotee of holistic medicine.

Readers of allegory are like the aptly named hero of *Phantastes*, Anodos ("the person without a path"—a conspicuous direction if ever there was one). The reader who joins the allegorical game is faced in the text with a series of landmarks, which there are a number of ways to interpret; some are easier to understand than others, and taken together they make a whole. A complete

and inflexible meaning is not necessarily in the text waiting to be discovered, but a recognizable truth can be read in part by each participant in the game. It is significant, moreover, that each participant in the game will probably recognize a different truth, within the constraints laid out by the text.

This theory of allegorical reading is entirely consistent with the emphasis in the writings of the Aesthetic movement on the role of the appreciator of a work of art. The Oxford Movement's John Keble, for example, was a rare and early advocate of nineteenth-century allegory. To him, allegory was a mode that met

the demands of expression and concealment. . . For Keble, there was an inherent similarity between reserve in poetry and mysticism in religion, and the poet, through his use of ideas, images, similes, and poetic forms, should, he thought, stimulate religious and moral associations in the imagination of the reader. (Fraser 17-18)

Both art and religion, then, seek to give some portion of the "truth" to their participants, whose duty it is in turn to actively involve themselves in the search for meaning, since ultimate truth stands always outside the text or sermon. Such active and ongoing individual participation, it was thought, would lead to the ultimate religious renewal of the Anglican Church; when such widespread aesthetic education was not forthcoming, the Oxford Movement's major proponents secluded themselves or turned to Catholicism. A similar fate met Pater's disciples at the end of the century.

Oscar Wilde in "The Critic as Artist" gave the critic a creative role. Indeed, he claimed, all readers should be critics and artists at once. Social renewal would come from bringing the world of art into the world of everyday life; where Morris was an advocate of daily artisanship or creation with one's hands, Wilde advocated going to the raw materials of art and creating in conversation and on paper new and more beautiful worlds. The act of criticism, he says, "treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation. . .it does not confine itself. . .to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final" (1127). MacDonald himself recognises the highly individualised nature of allegorical reading. In his essay on "The Fantastic Imagination," he imagines his reader asking, "'How am I to assure myself that I am not reading my own meaning into it, but yours out of it?'" To which he answers, quite rightly,

Why should you be so assured? It may be better that you should read your meaning into it. That may be a higher

operation of your intellect than the mere reading of mine
out of it: your meaning may be superior to mine.

(*A Dish of Orts* 316)

This denial of authorial intention is both characteristic humility on MacDonald's part and a shrewd strategy to incite the reader's own creativity, an interpretative activism that MacDonald's own characters tend to find themselves pursuing, often to their own surprise.

Anodos, like the aesthetic critic or the reader of an allegory, stumbles through Fairyland attempting to find the right course of action, and occasionally acting impulsively.¹ Unlike most conventional fairy-tale heroes, he often goes against the advice of his supernatural helpers ("I told you," said the woman, 'you had better not look into that closet,'" 57). In the end, the things he carries away from his experience are imperfect, but they are his own:

I began the duties of my new position, somewhat instructed, I hoped, by the adventures that had befallen me in Fairy Land. Could I translate the experience of my travels there, 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? (184)

When MacDonald calls experience in this world "parallel to that of Fairy Land," he is giving a concrete geographical dimension to the spiritual development he wants to invoke. This reification of spirituality is typical of MacDonald's writing, and typical of allegory as a whole.

Theorists from C. S. Lewis onward have recognized the interpenetration of the real and ideal in allegory. Lewis tells us to read allegories

as they are meant to be read: by keeping steadily before you both the literal and the allegorical sense and not treating the one as a mere means to the other but as its imaginative interpretation, by testing for yourself how far the concept really informs the image and how far the image really lends life to the concept. (125)

For Teskey, the place where concept and image meet is a "rift" ("Allegory, Materialism, Violence" 295) and a place of conflict, but I prefer to see it, as Lewis does, as the site of a more creative union. This would probably have been MacDonald's point of view, as well:

As through the hard rock go the branching silver veins, as
into the solid land run the creeks and gulfs from the

unresting sea, as the lights and influences of the upper worlds sink silently through the earth's atmosphere, so doth Faerie invade the world of men, and sometimes startle the common eye with an association as of cause and effect, when between the two no connecting links can be traced.

(*Phantastes* 85)

And at the end of the novel, when he has returned to the “real” world, Anodos sees for an instant in the leaves of the beech tree the face of the lady of the beech (185). The aesthetic project is to sustain that sense of wonder; to find the Earthly Paradise; to make “modern art . . . so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit” (Pater, *Renaissance* 215); and to bring the art world into the real world, making them both that much richer.

Mr. Vane, the hero of MacDonald's last fantasy *Lilith* (published in 1895), finds his spiritual vision reified in much the same manner as Anodos does. *Lilith* concludes with an even higher vision than *Phantastes*—with an ascent to the enclouded throne of God itself from which issues “the river of the water of life,” and the tactile image inside the cloud of a “hand, warm and strong” (chapter 46, 250)—and ends even more abruptly. The hand only leads Mr. Vane back to the library of his home, where his strange adventures began. Unlike some of his contemporaries in the aesthetic movement, MacDonald is no medievalist; but if he were, his reader would be reminded of the narrator of *Pearl*, who, in attempting to cross over and join the pearl-maiden in the heavenly city on the other side of the stream, is rudely awakened from his allegorical vision.

Allegory, then, does not pretend to absolute knowledge; in fact, it denies outright such absolutes. Part of this is due to the limitations of language itself, and in his awareness of those limitations, George MacDonald anticipates modern allegorical theory. His imaginary interlocuter exclaims that

“words at least are meant and fitted to carry a precise meaning!”

It is very seldom indeed [answers MacDonald] that they carry the exact meaning of any user of them! And if they can be so used as to convey definite meaning, it does not follow that they ought never to carry anything else.

(*A Dish of Orts* 318)

The limitations of language become, in MacDonald's works, its strengths.

Later he writes in a characteristic passage that “the best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is—not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; or say, to make him think things for himself” (319).² This is the red tie, not the white choker, model of moral storytelling.

In the most simple kind of allegory, only a few, mostly similar, meanings may be found by any number of readers; in more complex ones, various readers may find that the same texts call up vastly different images. Teskey writes that

because the reader, in seeking to close up the gaps perceived in the text, only opens up more, and because the work is designed precisely to sustain that effect, the goal of a complete interpretation always recedes beyond grasp ... This may be accounted for in part by the conventions of the form. But it is also a consequence of a theory of language of which allegory is the most extreme expression, a theory in which meaning, at some ideal level of visual form, always floats free of any acoustic involvement with words. Words, therefore, are thought of as imperfect pictures of meanings that exist in their purest state, outside the linguistic requirement of sound, in icons and symbols. These may be combined, like pixels, into larger pictures of states of affairs. We may then think of language as an organized whole composing a universe of signs in a total picture that is a “mirror of nature.” (“Allegory,” *Spenser Encyclopedia* 21)

Teskey might merely have used the verb *evoke* here to describe what allegory does. But his discussion of the relationship of meaning to sign is central to any application of allegory (his location of meaning in its “purest state. . . in icons and symbols” seems wrong here, however, since so much in the uncovering of allegorical meaning relies upon the reader). A number of analogies can be made along the same lines: the relationships of content and form, of body and soul, of real and ideal, of a text and its interpretations. When C. S. Lewis writes of the “fundamental equivalence between the immaterial and the material” (44) in allegory, he might as well be referring to the equivalence between the art world and the real world which was the Aesthetic Movement’s primary contribution to nineteenth-century social and artistic thought.

In both *Phantastes* and *Lilith* MacDonald acknowledges the weakness of language in its inability to properly capture expressions of the ideal. In

Phantastes, for example, Anodos always claims to have forgotten more than he tells: “This was one of the simplest of her songs, which perhaps, is the cause of my being able to remember it better than most of the others” (134). That is a romance convention: the clothes are always more rich, the women always more beautiful, and the knights always braver than words can relate. And in *Lilith*, Mr. Vane claims that his experiences in the other world (he doesn’t call it Fairy Land, as Anodos does) are so indescribably different from what he is used to

that I can present them only by giving, in the forms and language of life in this world, the modes in which they affected me – not the things themselves, but the feelings they woke in me ... A single thing would sometimes seem to be and mean many things, with an uncertain identity at the heart of them, which kept constantly altering their look. (46)

The ideal always floats beyond any attempt to capture it in words or images. Because it is a prime tenet of allegory and of Aestheticism that images can often come closer to the ideal than words can, however, Anodos and Mr. Vane speak in images, the better to evoke insofar as possible the spiritual experiences they have had. What is more, MacDonald’s protagonists want to describe “not the things themselves, but the feelings they woke in me,” integrating their experiences into their lives just as the aesthetic critic and the interpreter of an allegory are supposed to do.

The signs in an allegory, then, must point beyond themselves to something larger: to a moral system, a macrocosm, and/or a world of interrelated parts, even to a way of reading the allegory itself. The larger concern might be something as basic as the body (Spenser’s *Castle of Alma* or Phineas Fletcher’s *The Purple Island*, incidentally a favourite mine of epigraphical ore for *Phantastes*) or as complicated as the emotional and social consequences of courtly love (the *Roman de la Rose*). Allegory is fantasy, in a way, since its outward shows are so alien to the experience of everyday existence, but the things or concepts to which it points are always comprehensible to the reader in one way or another. As J. R. R. Tolkien writes in his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” “creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it. So upon logic was founded the nonsense that displays itself in the tales and rhymes of Lewis Carroll” (55). “To the aesthetic temperament, the vague,” as Wilde says, “is always repellent” (1137).

MacDonald clarifies his views on fantastic writing in his essay “On Polish”:

True polish in marble or in speech reveals inlying realities
 ... I would admit of no ornament [in style] whatsoever. . .

But let me explain what I mean by ornament. I mean anything stuck in or on, like a spangle, because it is pretty in itself, although it reveals nothing. Not one such ornament can belong to a polished style. It is paint, not polish. (*A Dish of Orts* 184-5)

It might seem odd that MacDonald, a writer with such an imaginative pen for fantastic incident, should be so disapproving of writing that is meant to please the reader’s eye. Can this have been written by the author of the passage describing the mad rout of fairies in the third chapter of *Phantastes*, certainly a bit of Pigwiggentry such as J. R. R. Tolkien rightly derided in “On Fairy-Stories” (7)? What MacDonald really means, however, is that everything in his stories is (or should be) significant to his overall allegorical direction.³

It is also significant that MacDonald connects polish very distinctly with the reader-critic’s response: “The most polished style will be that which most immediately and most truly flashes the meaning embodied in the utterance upon the mind of the listener or reader” (184). The language he uses here is more evocative than exact (“*most* immediately and *most* truly *flashes* the meaning. . .”), suggesting that MacDonald has not betrayed the principle he states in “The Fantastic Imagination.” The utterance still does not contain a particular meaning to be read out of it, but relies upon the reader’s critical faculty to extract one or more of many possible interpretations. Feelings are not objects to be described scientifically in clinical, exact language; their description should rather be felt in the blood, and felt along the heart, than laid upon a table and dissected. Lewis finds in fourteenth-century allegory a particular manner of writing that relies upon reading:

Descriptions of the act (or passion) of falling in love tend to be among the most banal passages of fiction. . . A love story of considerable subtlety and truth is hidden in the *Romance [of the Rose]*. It would be a work not of creation, but of mere ordinary dexterity, to strip off the allegory and retell this story in the form of a novel. Nor would the change be an improvement. (129, 135)

Allegory was so immensely popular in the fourteenth century, argues Lewis, because the readers of the time were—far from being confused by the apparent fantastic incongruities of allegory—particularly open to reading

allegorically. Such readers were precisely the type that MacDonald describes in “The Fantastic Imagination,” and that Pater wanted to create in his famous “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*. The Aesthetic movement was diverse and, far from attempting to impose a particular kind of art upon the populace, sought to educate people in the appreciation of all art, no matter how apparently obscure. Just as William Morris called for a society in which everyone was an active artisan and Pater called for a society in which everyone was an active lover of beauty, MacDonald wanted to encourage his readers to have active spiritual imaginations, engaging at once with the world as created by God and with the sub-created worlds of allegory and art.

How, then, are we to actively read MacDonald’s allegories? What is the solid subject-matter of, say, *Phantastes*, *Lilith*, or “The Golden Key”? MacDonald’s primary concerns are right action and the growth and development of the individual psyche, up to and after death (when, in his optimistic theology, *life* in the sense of aesthetic perception and spiritual knowledge really begins). To illustrate those concerns, he uses a mode—allegory—that takes into account the variety of individual experience and the importance of individual effort in action and interpretation. Reading MacDonald’s fantastic allegories one is struck, not by the ethereality of his work, but by its constant grounding in real experience. The dreamlike shifts in, say, *Phantastes* from one fantastic scene to another simply denote the variety of encounters a person experiences over the course of a “real” life. His protagonists may find themselves in extraordinary situations, but they react in the same, often flawed, manner that we act in our mundane lives. No person today has met with a knight in soiled armour, still less with one whose armour was once soiled and now gleams, and who approaches dragging the corpse of a dragon behind his steed. Most of us, however, know the experience of reacting with “surprise and pleasure. . . [and] a sudden pain” (*Phantastes* 168) to some enviable stroke of kindness, genius, or strength on the part of an acquaintance. Apprenticeship to such a one may be the best—albeit most difficult—course we can take, and it is part of Anodos’s spiritual development when he does exactly that, offering himself as squire to the unnamed knight.

Apprenticeship is, in the real world and in the context of a lifetime, brief. Since MacDonald’s protagonists are involved in no less a project than lifelong spiritual growth, such interludes are also fleeting; it is this that accounts for the often confusing episodic nature of *Phantastes* and “The Golden Key” (*Lilith* is less disjointed). Just as in real life there is no one

teacher at whose feet one learns everything one needs to know, Anodos and Mossy and Tangle receive the aid of many natural and supernatural helpers. Most importantly, perhaps, MacDonald's heroes remain rightly imperfect, even unto their lives' conclusions. The knight, for all his strength and chivalry, is unable to sense the real nature of the ritual he and Anodos witness in the clearing among the yew trees.

I looked up at my master: his noble countenance was full of reverence and awe. Incapable of evil himself, he could scarcely suspect it in another, much less in a multitude such as this, and surrounded with such appearances of solemnity. I was certain it was the really grand accompaniments that overcame him; that the stars overhead, the dark towering tops of the yew-trees, and the wind that, like an unseen spirit, sighed through their branches, bowed his spirit to the belief, that in all these ceremonies lay some great mystical meaning, which, his humility told him, his ignorance prevented him from understanding. (*Phantastes* 177)

It is not an irony that Anodos's fallen state and his capacity for wrong action enable him to see, where the good knight does not, the sinister nature of the proceedings. Human imperfection, for MacDonald, serves to open up possibilities rather than to restrict spiritual growth: if we had never sinned, we would not need forgiveness. If an allegory were capable of only one interpretation, it would be incapable of properly evoking the great variety of individual experience in the real, fallen world, and would not be successful.

Accordingly, the endings to MacDonald's fairy tales—*Lilith's* above all, but *Phantastes's* too—do not offer authoritative and final conclusions. Even though he has done his great deed and experienced a fitting end (“I was dead, and right content,” 179), Anodos sinks back again from his bliss to the sublunary world. In the coda to *Phantastes* he even wonders whether he will have to relearn the lessons he learned in Fairy Land. The great vision of the throne of God that comes to Mr. Vane after his death in *Lilith* is the cause of equally great confusion after he is returned (or so it seems) to his library:

Can it be that that last waking also was in the dream? that I am still in the chamber of death, asleep and dreaming, not yet ripe enough to wake?. . .If that waking was itself but a dream, surely it was a dream of a better waking yet to come, and I have not been the sport of a false vision! Such a dream must have yet lovelier truth at the heart of its dreaming! (251)⁴

It is an important characteristic of allegory that it at once holds out the possibility of ultimate truth and denies that truth's immediate attainment. The abrupt ending, whether intended or not, to Chaucer's *House of Fame*, with its silent and undescribed "man of grete auctorite. . ." is entirely apt in its denial of an authoritative summation of the allegory.

It is true that MacDonald once rejected the characterisation of *Phantastes* as an allegory: in a letter to Mrs. A. J. Scott, he writes that "I hope Mr. Scott will like my fairy tale. I don't see what right the *Athenaeum* has to call it an allegory and judge or misjudge it accordingly – as if nothing but an allegory could have two meanings!" (qtd. Greville MacDonald 297). The *Athenaeum* article to which he refers is a rather patronizing review of *Phantastes* that concludes— "One mistake is said to be permitted to every writer of books: Mr. MacDonald has made his. Happy is the author who makes only one!"—a comment that would make any author wince. Patronizing as the review may have been, the reviewer does seem to have grappled with the work, and to have thought deeply about allegory in general:

Now the great masters of allegory succeed by their firm grasp of reality. . .Mr. MacDonald has given us the shadow without the life which should cause it to him, and account for it to us. Thus 'Phantastes' is a riddle that will not be read. He has made his voyage into Dreamland with the Phantom bark, but when he tries to bring it home to us and reveal something of the far wonder-world we cannot get on board. He has not anchored fast to the earth on which we stand. (580)

Whether it was unfair or not to say that MacDonald has no grasp of reality in his fantasies, much the same judgement would be passed on the Aesthetic movement in general. The pernicious doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* was to damage the movement in the eyes of the sensible Victorian middle classes, accustomed to appraising in terms of utility if not of guineas; and it would prove easy to mistake for ivory-tower escapism the movement's refusal to put a tangible value on art. The failure of the major Aesthetic authors to do more than flirt with respectability would also be grounds for suspicion. Burne-Jones might have received a baronetcy, the moneyed classes might be flocking to Morris's shop in Oxford Street, and there could be little doubt that Ruskin was the preeminent art critic of the age, but by late century there was still something unseemly about Ruskin's quixotic social schemes, Morris's socialism, Wilde's and Pater's barely-disguised homosexuality, and Rossetti's

and Swinburne's fleshliness. MacDonald's own non-conformity lost him his parish in Arundel, and the obscurity of his fantasies denied them the popular audience that his novels received. The *Athenaeum's* reviewer had offhandedly set the tone for Victorian criticisms of the *Aesthetic* movement.

When MacDonald scoffs "as if nothing but an allegory could have two meanings!" he is not rejecting outright the characterisation of *Phantastes* as an allegory, and as Greville reflects, "I do not quite see why my father should object to the definition" (297). At the very least, his statement could be written off as pique. But clearly George MacDonald was hoping at the time of his letter that *Phantastes* would be seen as something greater than the conventional allegory of one-to-one correspondences. It must be remembered that in the staid Victorian age, allegory was an outdated genre appreciated only by antiquarians or a mechanical device for children's tales; it was certainly not one of the acknowledged fashionable modes.

Paul De Man, in his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality," describes the growth of an allegorical mode in the relation of subject to object and of the individual to nature in the early nineteenth century. De Man makes an important distinction between dogmatic (i.e. eighteenth-century) allegory, with its very straightforward relationship between subject and object (between signifier and signified), and allegory that is "located entirely in the temporal relationships that exist within a system of allegorical signs," a form of allegory that he finds in the very German Romantics, such as Schlegel and Novalis, that were such a formative influence upon MacDonald:

At the very moment when properly symbolic modes, in the full strength of their development, are supplanting allegory, we can witness the growth of metaphorical styles in no way related to the decorative allegorism of the rococo, but that cannot be called 'symbolic' in the Goethian sense. (190)

The "decorative allegorism of the rococo" here (a properly *Aesthetic* association of the decorative and literary arts) is the simple one-for-one allegory used by the neo-classical writers of the eighteenth century: what C. S. Lewis calls "the platitudinous allegory produced in ages to which allegory is a toy—the allegory of Maeterlinck or Addison" (114-5). However, De Man adds, "it does not take long for a symbolic conception of metaphorical language to [re-] establish itself everywhere, despite the ambiguities that persist in aesthetic theory and poetic practice" (208).

Everywhere, that is, save in the pockets of Romanticism that held out in certain aspects of the *Aesthetic* movement – and in the poetic theories and

allegories of George MacDonald. De Man locates his interpretation of Romantic allegory in

the tendency shared by all commentators to define the romantic image as a relationship between mind and nature, between subject and object. The fluent transition in romantic diction, from descriptive to inward, meditative passages, bears out the notion that this relationship is indeed of fundamental importance. (193)

It is easy to see here the example of Wordsworth, an important precursor of the aesthetic reader and the subject of one of Pater's "Appreciations." Pater reacts strongly to Wordsworth's capacity for vivid sensation and to his "intense susceptibility" (424) to the influence of natural things around him. MacDonald, in his essay on "Wordsworth's Poetry," frames his study of Wordsworth in much the same manner:

Let us go further; and, looking at beauty, believe that God is the first of artists; that he has put beauty into nature, knowing how it will affect us. . . Then, let us go further still, and believe that whatever we feel in the highest moments of truth shining through, beauty, whatever comes to our souls as a power of life, is meant to be seen and felt by us . . . Now, Wordsworth is the high priest of nature thus regarded . . . the life of Wordsworth was so ordered as to bring this out of him, in the forms of *his* art, to the ears of men.
(*A Dish of Orts* 247)

Wordsworth, in MacDonald's view, is both reader and writer, leading a life of experience and expressing that experience in his life's work. His book is (God's) nature, and his work the record of his reading therein. The religious aspect of Romanticism survived, as I have hinted and as Stephen Prickett describes more fully in *Romanticism and Religion*, well into the nineteenth century; Hilary Fraser traces its influence upon the Aesthetic movement in *Beauty and Belief*. It is an error to see the nineteenth century's "religion of art" (Fraser 228) as diametrically opposed to religion proper, for the devout far outnumbered the atheists in the Aesthetic Movement. If George MacDonald is to be excluded from the Aesthetic canon, it cannot be on the grounds of his religion, or on the basis of his Romantic antecedents.

It must be cautioned that the Victorians were the product of the Enlightenment as well as of the Romantic era: orthodoxy and literalism were, if anything, more prevalent than individualism and aestheticism (as the *Athenaeum's* clear-headed critic, longing for solidity, attests). Citing Edwin

Honig, Lynette Hunter writes that in the post-Renaissance period, Allegory became moralising without art, rhetoric without imagination, symbolism without mastery, and ... fantasy without reality. No tension remained between the fictional and the actual and there was a correlative attempt to control within the extent of its man-made authority. (141)

It is quite possible to see examples of Hunter's "moralising without art" in the period; allegory was enlisted heavy-handedly in moral tales for children, a vast industry in the nineteenth century (see, for example, Bratton 69-80). That the suppression of tension between "the fictional and the actual" is designed to control the reader and should be avoided is a primary tenet of the Aesthetic philosophy. "Life," proclaims Vivian in Wilde's "Decay of Lying," imitates art far more than Art imitates life. We have all seen in our own day in England how a certain curious and fascinating type of beauty, invented and emphasised by two imaginative painters, has so influenced Life that whenever one goes to a private view or an artistic salon one sees, here the mystic eyes of Rossetti's dream ... there the sweet maidenhood of [Burne-Jones's] 'the Golden Stair'. . . And it has always been so. A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher. (1082-3)

But the process cannot end there: Wilde would hardly be one to call for a merely imitative existence. The Aesthetic project is one of continuing to receive impressions of art and to create new forms from them, and of absorbing them into one's life on a daily basis, thereby making one's character more refined and individual.⁵ If there is one agreement among the diverse writings of the Aesthetic movement, it lies in their desire to maintain the tension (or harmony) between the fictional and the actual, the real and the ideal, life and art. It is not "the Truth" that will make us free, it is Art.

"Allegory, besides being many other things, is the subjectivism of an objective age" (Lewis 30). Allegory is a particular kind of subjectivism—one that simultaneously embodies and denies an objective truth. The "objective age" to which Lewis refers here is the late Middle Ages, with its reliance upon the absolute model of the Christian Church, but his characterisation might well be applied to nineteenth-century England. The Victorians were systematic thinkers: their religion and their science were systematic, as were their social philosophies (utilitarianism and the industrial complex). Just as high medieval Europe, however, could never quite create a uniform religious

society (individualist heresies like Lollardy and self-fashioning geniuses such as Chaucer continued to thrive), so Victorian England had to be the (often unwilling) heir to Romanticism's subjectivity and individualism.

Although allegory was not one of the genres or modes that the Aesthetic movement claimed for its own, the movement's desire to realise dreams and its emphasis on the individualised nature of the reading, interpretation, and appreciation of art are entirely in tune with the allegorical mode. Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, like MacDonald's works an extended examination of the spiritual growth of an individual soul, ends in no dogmatic manner. Marius gains a new portion of truth from each of his experiences, and the work finally places the responsibility with the reader to decide whether Marius is an example of Hebraism or of Hellenism or of both, in a process like that of allegorical reading. Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* is probably a moral allegory on the dangers of finding too much significance in the artistic critical existence that Wilde, following Pater, encouraged. Its signs can, over the course of successive reading, be read in a number of ever more intriguing ways. Even Ruskin's chapter in *The Stones of Venice* on "The Nature of Gothic" at first offers its social commentary in the form of an analogy, giving the reader Ruskin's interpretative account of the medieval artisan at work. It is only when Ruskin drops the veil and makes his point by addressing the reader directly—ironically in such phrases as "You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both" (177)—that the red tie comes off and the white choker puts in an appearance. The clerical collar constricts its wearer's voice; but MacDonald found (in his life and in his art) his own ways of avoiding its narrow compass, and the emphasis in his allegorical fantasies on individual growth and choice indicates that he wanted to extend that freedom to his readers as well.

Endnotes

1. It might be argued here that one can hardly imagine Wilde's elegant artist-critics "stumbling" – but it should also be noted that in their ongoing search for the *mot juste*, his protagonists do not always succeed. A consistently high level of style is, after all, impossible to maintain, and the form of the dialogue relies upon incomplete comprehension between its participants.
2. In the next sentence, MacDonald shows his debt to Romanticism, and especially to Wordsworth: "The best Nature does for us is to work in us such moods in which thoughts of high import arise. Does any aspect of Nature wake but one thought? Does she ever suggest only one definite thing?"
3. There is no doubt a place for the fairies in an allegorical interpretation of *Phantastes* if the reader is willing to look deeply enough for it. For example, the

fairies are Anodos's introduction to geographical Fairy Land: they acclimatize him. They even set up the allegorical distinction between real and ideal, form and matter: "whether all the flowers have fairies, I cannot determine, any more than I can be sure whether all men and women have souls" (18).

4. The passage continues:

In moments of doubt I cry,
 'Could God Himself create such lovely things as I dreamed?'
 'Whence then came thy dream?' answers Hope.
 'Out of my dark self, into the light of my consciousness.'
 'But whence first into thy dark self?' rejoins Hope.

There is a foreshadowing in this passage of J. R. R. Tolkien's theory of subcreation ("Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker," "On Fairy-Stories" 55). Oddly enough, while C. S. Lewis in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* acknowledges *Phantastes* and *Lilith* as enormous influences on his writing, Tolkien is less than enthusiastic about MacDonald in his letters, although he remembers having enjoyed the Curdie books as a child.

5. As Arthur Symons writes in his defense of the unsavoury scent of Decadent writing, "and if patchouli pleases one, why not patchouli?" It is, of course, ironic that patchouli, like sunflowers and blue china, became itself an orthodoxy of sorts.

Works Cited

- Ankeny, Rebecca Thomas. *The Story, the Teller, and the Audience in George MacDonald's Fiction*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2000.
- Bratton, J. S. *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction*. London: Croom Helm, 1981.
- De Man, Paul. "The Rhetoric of Temporality." *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd rev. ed. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983. 187-228.
- Filmer, Kath. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci: Cultural Criticism and Mythopoeic Vision in *Lilith*." *The Victorian Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in the Mythopoeic Fiction of the Victorian Age*. Ed. Kath Filmer. London: Macmillan. 90-103.
- Fraser, Hilary. *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- Hunter, Lynette. *Modern Fantasy and Allegory: Rhetorical Stances of Contemporary Writing*. New York: St. Martin's, 1989.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Allegory of Love*. 1936. New York: Galaxy, 1958.
- MacCarthy, Fiona. *William Morris: A Life for Our Times*. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.
- MacDonald, George. *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination and Shakespeare*. London: Edwin Dalton, 1908.

- . “The Golden Key.” *The Victorian Fairy Tale Book*. Ed. Michael Patrick Hearn. New York: Pantheon, 1988. 229-51.
- . *Phantastes*. 1858. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981.
- . *Lilith*. 1895. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981.
- MacDonald, Greville. *George MacDonald and his Wife*. 2nd ed. London: Allen and Unwin, 1924.
- Michalson, Karen. *Victorian Fantasy Literature: Literary Battles With Church and Empire*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990.
- Pater, Walter. *Appreciations*. 1889. *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*. Ed. William E. Buckler. New York New York UP, 1986. 391-550.
- . *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. [1873]. *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*. Ed. William E. Buckler. New York New York UP, 1986. 69-220.
- Pennington, John. “From Fact to Fantasy in Victorian Fiction: Dickens’s *Hard Times* and MacDonald’s *Phantastes*.” *Extrapolation* 38: 3 (1997): 200-206.
- Prickett, Stephen. “George MacDonald and the Poetics of Realism.” *The Victorian Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in the Mythopoeic Fiction of the Victorian Age*. Ed. Kath Filmer. London: Macmillan, 1991. 82-9.
- . *Victorian Fantasy*. Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester, 1979.
- . *Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976.
- Rev. of *Phantastes*. *Athenaeum* 1619 (November 6th, 1858): 580.
- Robb, David S. “Realism and Fantasy in the Fiction of George MacDonald.” *The History of Scottish Literature, Volume 3: Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Douglas Gifford. Aberdeen: Aberdeen U P, 1988. 275-290.
- Ruskin, John. *The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections From His Writings*. Ed. John D. Rosenberg. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.
- Teskey, Gordon. “Allegory.” *The Spenser Encyclopedia*. Ed. A. C. Hamilton. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990. 16-22.
- . “Allegory, Materialism, Violence.” *The Production of English Renaissance Culture*. Ed. David Lee Miller, Sharon O’Dair, and Harold Weber. Ithaca, NY: Cornell U P, 1994. 293-318.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. “On Fairy-Stories.” *The Tolkien Reader*. New York: Ballantine, 1966. 1-73.
- Wilde, Oscar. “The Critic as Artist.” *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan, Kibard, and Merlin Holland. 2nd. ed. Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1994. 1108-55.
- . “The Decay of Lying.” *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, Terence Brown, Declan, Kibard, and Merlin Holland. 2nd. ed. Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1994. 1071-92.