

Fantasy Elements in *Castle Warlock*

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Judging by the popularity of the new Johannesen editions, and the speed with which old editions are being snapped up, there would seem to be a resurgence of interest in George MacDonald's Scottish novels. It may therefore be appropriate to recommend the one that instigated my long-term fascination with his writings. *Castle Warlock* must be one of the most interesting and easy to read of all his so-called "realistic" writings. With several other critics I find in his novels the same patterns of symbol and imagery and the same central themes as in his fantasy works. Anyone interested in his fairy tales and fantasy works would do well to dip into the novels for detailed elucidation of their central preoccupations.

Castle Warlock, in characteristic MacDonald mode, establishes instantly the themes and patterns of imagery which will form the core of the text. All MacDonald's favourite symbols are evident from the outset—as is the power and beauty of his writing. The opening pages must surely be the match of any Victorian novel for their tender capturing of the atmosphere of a time and place with all the associated nostalgia and fascination. What immediately impresses the reader is how convincing and utterly *natural* this description is—how lacking in obvious contrivance, contrived though it must of course be. This is MacDonald at his best. Instantly established is the power and beauty of nature:

A rough, wild glen it was, to which, far back in times unknown to its annals, the family of Warlock had given its name, sharing in return no small portion of its history, and a good deal of the character of its inhabitants. Glenwarlock lay in debatable land between Highlands and Lowlands; most of its people spoke both Scotch and Gaelic, and there was in them a notable mingling of the chief characteristics of the widely differing Celt and Goth. The country produced more barley than wheat, more oats than barley, more heather than oats, more boulders than trees, and more snow than anything. It was a thinly peopled region, consisting mostly of bare hills and partially cultivated glens, each glen with its small stream, on the banks of which grew here and there a silver birch, a mountain ash, or an alder tree; but the trees were small, and there was nothing

capable of giving much shade or shelter, except cliffy banks and big stones. (1)¹

When the human world, in the form of the castle, is placed in this wild and hostile context it is equally extraordinary and equally powerfully captured:

Upon a natural terrace of such a slope to the south stood Castle Warlock. But it turned no smiling face to the region whence came the **[end of page 6]** warmth and the growth. A more grim, repellent, unlovely building would be hard to find; and yet, from its extreme simplicity, its utter indifference to its own looks, its repose, its weight, and its gray historical consciousness, no one who loved houses would have thought of calling it ugly. It was like the hard-featured face of a Scotch matron, with no end of story, of life, of character, holding a defensive if not defiant front to the world, but within warm, and tending carefully the fires of life. Summer and winter, from the chimneys of that desolate-looking house issued smoke; for though the country was inclement, and the people that lived in it were poor, the great, sullen, almost unhappy-looking hills held clasped to their bare cold bosoms exposed to the bitterness of freezing winds and summer hail, the warmth of household centuries: their peat bogs were the store-closets and wine-cellars of the sun, for the hoarded elixir of physical life. (2)

Then, with the introduction of the hero, come MacDonald's favourite themes: Cosmo is associated with the sun, which is "pouring torrents of heat and light into the valley," and with flowers and blooming verdure. He straddles effortlessly the worlds of man and nature, meditating in the garden which links castle to countryside. He is instantly identified as one of God's children, as yet unspoiled by self-consciousness and artifice. He ponders profound questions and is already "an incipient philosopher" and poet, his life a celebration of the senses in the best MacDonald manner:

He was already more than an incipient philosopher, though he could not yet have put into recognisable shape the things that were now passing through his mind. He thought how glad the bees would be when their crop of heather was ripe; then he thought how they preferred the heather to the flowers; then, that the one must taste nicer to them than the other; and next awoke the question whether their taste of sweet was the same as his own. "For," thought he, "if their honey is sweet to them with

the same sweetness with which it is sweet to me, then there is something in the make of the bee that's the same with the make of me; and perhaps a man might some day, if he wanted, try the taste of being a bee all out." But to see him, nobody would have thought he was doing anything but basking in the sun. The scents of the flowers about his feet came borne on the eddies of the air . . . the windy noises of the insects, the water noises of the pigeons, the family noises from the poultry yard, the rushing sound of the mountain river, all visited him through the portals of his ears; but at the moment the boy seemed lost, not in thought as was the fact, but in the fundamental enjoyment of mere existence. (3) [7]

So too, that yearning for the Ideal, which is the defining characteristic of MacDonald's protagonists, inspires all Cosmo's behaviour. This *Sehnsucht*, as always in MacDonald's vision, is directly connected to his love of the natural world, in particular his love of water. It is also the force inspiring his poetic impulse such that:

Neither, although broad summer was on the earth, and all the hill-tops and as much of the valleys as their shadows did not hide were bathed in sunlight, although the country was his native land, and he loved it with the love of his country's poets, was the consciousness of the boy free from a certain trouble connected with, if not immediately arising from the landscape before him. A Celt through many of his ancestors, and his mother in particular, his soul, full of undefined emotion, was aware of an ever-recurring impulse to song—ever as it came, checked and broken, and thrown back upon itself . . . in the midst of his enjoyment of the world around him, he sighed after a lovelier nature than he beheld . . . , and sometimes he would wake weeping from a dream of such or yet grander mountains, such trees, or such endless wilds of water There seemed to be in the boy a strain of some race nursed in a richer home, while yet all the time the frozen regions drew his fancy more than the azure glories of the south. (3-4)

Water, initially in the shape of a mountain stream, is instantly established as the major symbol for that sacred energy subsuming all natural things and directly inspiring this yearning. Throughout his whole genre MacDonald uses water (and to a lesser degree wind) in this way. It is the central symbol in his

writing. Here its association with the infinite and the divine is made quite explicit. One of the “unfailing delights” of Cosmo’s world is a particular mountain stream:

a preacher whose voice, inarticulate it is true, had, ever since he was born, been at most times louder in his ear than any other. It was a mountain stream which, unlike most of the rest, ran through a channel of rock, and went roaring, rushing, sometimes thundering, with an arrowlike foamy swiftness, down to the river in the glen below

The boy stood and gazed, as was his custom. Always when he grew weary, or when the things about him put on a too ordinary look, he would seek this endless water. Let the aspect of this be what it might, it seemed still inspired and sent forth by some essential mystery, some endless possibility. (5)

A clear distinction is made here between form and essence, or between sacred energy and the shapes taken by that energy in the material world: [8]

There was in him an unusual combination of the power to read the hieroglyphic aspect of things, and the scientific nature that bows before fact. He knew that the stream was neither in its first nor its second stage when it rose from the earth to rush to the river, that it was pumped from the great ocean up to the reservoirs of the sky, and thence descended in snows and rains to wander down and up through the veins of the earth; but until now his growing knowledge had never assailed his feeling of its mystery. The poetic nature was not merely predominate in him, but dominant, sending itself a pervading spirit through the science that else would have stifled him. For there is nothing in the outer fact by which man can live, any more than by bread; it needs the poetic eye, illuminating, with polarised ray as it pierces, to reveal in the heart of fact its life, that is, its eternal relations. (5)

We find Cosmo at that crucial point in his development described by MacDonald in his essay “Individual Development.”²² He is being exposed to “the killing power of a godless science,” for, “at the entrance of science . . . young Poetry shrinks back startled, dismayed.” How brilliantly through water imagery MacDonald conveys this conflict between science and the poetic or religious impulse. Cosmo is sadly aware of a destructive shift from seeing the world in emanationist terms to seeing it in reductionist terms. He experiences

this as a death:

now he stood gazing in a mood different from any that had come to him before, for he had discovered something very sad about the stream. He had long vaguely known that what in the stream, from earliest childhood, drew him with an unflinching power, was the sense, for a long time an evergrowing one, of its *mystery*—the form the infinite takes to the simplest and liveliest hearts. He loved it because it was *always* flowing, because it could not stop: whence it came was unknown to him, and he did not care to know. When he learned that it issued from the dark hard earth, the mystery had only grown. He imagined a wondrous cavity below, in black rock, where the water gathered and gathered, nobody could think how—not coming from anywhere else, but beginning just there. When, later on, he had to shift his idea of its source, and think of it as in the great sky, the marvel was no less marvellous, and more lovely; it bound closer the gentle earth and the awful, withdrawing heavens. The sky was a region of endless hopes and ever-recurrent dispairs; that the beloved earthly thing should rise there, gave him one homely fact concerning the unknown and appalling. But from the sky he was sent back to the earth in yet farther pursuit; for whence came the rain, as his books told him, but from the sea? The sea he had read of, though never yet beheld, and he [9] knew it magnificent; gladly, as he thought with himself under the wall would he have hailed it as an intermediate betwixt the sky and the earth with the sky coming first, but, alas, the sea was before the sky in the order of the stream's genesis! And then, worse and worse! how was the ocean fed but from the torrent? How was the sky fed but from the ocean? How was the dark fountain fed but from the sky? How was the torrent fed but from the fountain? As he sat in the hot garden, leaning against the old gray castle, the nest of his family for countless generations, with the scent of the flowers in his nostrils, and the sound of the bees in his ears, he became aware that he had lost the stream of his childhood—the mysterious, infinite idea of endless, inexplicable, original birth, of outflowing because of essential existence within . . . He grew very sad, and well he might. Moved by the spring eternal in himself, whereof

the lave in his heart was a river-shape, he turned away from the deathened stream, and without knowing why, sought the humanity in the castle. (6)

The second chapter, which takes us into the social realm, establishes some of MacDonald's key ideas. He entitles it "The Kitchen," placing at the centre of the human domain what he sees as its heart in terms of both activity and gender. For it is the female who carries the weight of all that is moral and tender. His insistence on the pre-eminence of the female is an original and consistent aspect of his work. At the heart of this household is Cosmo's dead mother, still exerting her benign and inspiring influence over the lives of her males. The grandmother is not as sympathetic a character as is usual in his novels, but she is a powerful presence. We also meet Grizzie, the epitome of the noble-minded peasant servant and perhaps the most convincing character in the book; MacDonald celebrates her loyal and tender devotion with great tenderness.

The females may hold the household together, but the father-son relationship is of profound importance on both symbolic and literal levels and rarely has it been portrayed more tenderly and movingly. The father's initial entry is conveyed with great delicacy:

The moment young Cosmo saw whose shadow darkened the doorway, he had risen in haste, and now stood with his hand upon the arm of the chair, waiting for his father, as if it had been a horse he held for him. The laird acknowledged the attention with a smile, sat down, and looked like the last sitter grown suddenly old. He put out his hand to his boy across the low arm of the chair; the boy laid his hand in his father's, and so they remained, neither saying a word. The laird leaned back, and sat resting. All were silent. (11-12)

This mood continues: **[10]**

As soon as they were out of the kitchen, the boy pushed his hand into his father's; the father's grasped the boy's, and without a word spoken, they walked on. They would often be half a day together without a word passing between them. To be near, each to the other, was for the time enough. (14)

Throughout the book the laird is the epitome of the wise father, allowing his son a freedom which is clearly being portrayed as extremely liberal for the times.³ MacDonald of course uses the father-son relationship as a metaphor for that between God and his children. While, in most of MacDonald's texts,

the mother figure functions as a powerful absence, the father is usually present, his relationship with the male protagonist of profound importance. The laird's tender and yet righteous relationship with Cosmo is one of the most effective and convincing in all MacDonald's fiction.

In both *Lilith* and *Phantastes* the quest is initiated by the hero's coming of age in the symbolic form of a penetration into secret areas which are both physical and metaphorical. Anodos gains the keys to his father's desk and thus brings "light" into the "deepest folds" of darkness in a hitherto unopened room "shrouded in mystery" (2). Mr Vane returns to the family castle, both mother and father dead, and embarks on his journey through the medium of an exploration of "the top" region of his castle, an area previously unknown to him and one which is accessible only through the climbing of many stairs. He finds himself in a neglected and mysterious realm centred upon an extraordinary mirror which then effects his transition into the magical realm of his adventures. Cosmo, although not so obviously in a world of fantasy, sets off on his quest in a similar way. It is his birthday, his fourteenth year with all its connotations of a sexual and intellectual rite of passage into adulthood. His father takes him into a mysterious room in an unused section of the castle, a room which "looked as if it had done with life—as much done with it as if it were a room of the dead hollowed in Egyptian rock." Here, in ceremonial fashion, the father has a "man-to-man" talk with his son: "I am going to treat you like a man and talk to you about things I have not talked about since your mother left me" (16). He firsts revives the memory of the mother, insisting upon her benign and sacred significance, and then tells him the family history, as: "It is time you should know a little about the family of which you come." We are thus introduced to those depths of the castle whose secrets it will be Cosmo's task to penetrate and bring out into the light, thus restoring his family's fortunes and achieving his own spiritual maturity in the process.

With this movement to the interior of the great house, all MacDonald's characteristic imagery emerges: thresholds are crossed; heavy oak doors open with difficulty on to narrow passages up spiral staircases into ancient rooms [11] closed for decades, resonant of hints of further secret enclosures and waiting for the hero's breaking of their barriers and thence the illumination of their mysteries. MacDonald's novels repeatedly exploit this theme. His ancient houses abound with secret centres locked in darkness as the result of some moral fall on the part of an ancestor. These centres consist of walled-up rooms full of tapestries and ancient dusty

furniture, secret passages and various other Gothic devices. They usually provoke a variety of supernatural events which can only be exorcised when the protagonist ventures into the heart of their sinister depths, casting light on their darkest mysteries and thereby redeeming the corruption which has been contaminating the whole family realm. Thus he becomes the medium for reversing the family fortunes and restoring the inheritance to spiritual health. In *Cosmo's* case, the melodramatic events which lead to his discovery of secret chambers and hidden treasure are even less skilfully handled than usual in a MacDonald text. His exposure of the secret is artificially postponed in a very heavy-handed fashion. Even at best he is poor at creating suspense. In this novel he fails to create any at all! We are alerted to the denouement in the most obvious fashion and from an early stage. Although brilliant at creating atmosphere he is less successful at putting elements of plot together convincingly. This is probably why he is so at home with the picaresque style of his fantasy works.

The notion of some central “fall” corrupting the whole realm is a commonplace, but MacDonald’s handling of this archetype is most interesting. Castle Warlock has its closed-off central linking region, but the castle of the insipid heroine Lady Jane is far more pervasively corrupted, and MacDonald links this with the spiritual barrenness of her father and brother. Here the spiritual fall is reflected in the state of nature, thereby, one presumes, indicating its extensiveness. The garden at the centre of the estate is a wasteland, the fountain—a dead thing long devoid of water and so cracked as to be incapable of redemption. One after another MacDonald shows us the symbols of a profound decay; “the ragged desolation” of the garden “looked as if it had the Devil for its gardener. Worse than a grief, if was a pain, a disgust, to see” (181). The fruit trees have fallen into chaos; the paths are a mass of weeds and “almost impassable”; rubbish is everywhere. The sundial is “without a gnomon” “leaning wearily away from the sun,” and the marble statue, so powerful a symbol of creative harmony in other works, is here “noseless” and decayed, “streaked about with green.” These are the “careless sentinels of an army of desolation” which lead Cosmo to the castle itself—a castle whose “inner court” backs onto a wing in “dilapidated, almost dangerous condition.”

Thus in Lady Joan’s world, both human and natural worlds are in such fallen condition as to seem beyond redemption and we are prepared for the fact [12] that in order to free her from their contaminating influence she must physically leave them behind her. On a mythical level MacDonald

does succeed here. The atmosphere is most effectively contrived and the symbolic structure powerfully put together. But at the level of the plot it is unconvincing in the extreme. Lady Joan, for example, is terrified by her environment, as the symbolic structure demands. The general corruption, in particular as manifested by her brother, fills her with an extreme horror that makes any spiritual development impossible. Yet there is nothing in the plot to justify the extremity of fear inspired in her by her brother. Particularly unconvincing is the scene in which this fear drives the lovers into the very heart of this corruption in the symbolic form of a small house or “temple” in the centre of the ruined garden. Usually a key event in a MacDonald text, this penetration into the centre is here of little relevance in plot terms and is in fact melodramatic and unconvincing. MacDonald coyly hints at the wicked excesses that have made this place what it is (“the house had a worse reputation than mere ghost could give it”) and shows it to the reader through the eyes of the virtuous Cosmo:

But the room they were in seemed the most fearful place he had ever beheld. His memory of the guest-room at home, in its age and outworn stateliness and evil report, showed mere innocence beside the small, ordinary, square, low-pitched apartment in which he found himself. If a room dead and buried for years then dug up again be imaginable, that is what this was like. It was furnished as a drawing-room or boudoir, and everything in it was, as to its position, plainly just as it had been left by her who last occupied it. Many things only to be seen in a lady's room, were at once recognisable here and there, but the aspect of the whole was indescribably awful. The rottenness and dust and displacement of simple decay looked enough to scare even the ghosts if they had any scare left in them. No doubt the rats had at one time had their share in the destruction, but it was long since they had forsaken the house. And there was no disorder. The only thing that suggested hasty abandonment was the door of a closet standing wide open. (220)

Nothing more is made of what one might expect to be a key event. We never find out more about this garden-house, nor why the brother inspires such terror. Like his incessant chemistry experiments, the scene functions virtually not at all on a plot level. No transforming light is brought into the sick centre. No redemption follows from their anguished flight through the “wilderness,” across the broken threshold, up ruined stairs into the tomblike

room at the top and thence into the innermost regions of the closet where they are then imprisoned. Nor when Cosmo breaks the lock and they escape and are pursued into the depths of this decayed realm—down from the highest point to the lowest in the [13] cellar. All this is ideal MacDonald material for instigating a cleansing and restoration of spiritual health, yet he does nothing with it at all. The reader recognises this as a major weakness in MacDonald's art; his often brilliant creation of symbolic atmosphere is commonly at the expense of plot, which then tends to be drawn out and unconvincing, with little genuine suspense.

Another characteristic MacDonald theme introduced early in the story is the corrupting power of riches.⁴ All the good characters are poor—until ironically enough Cosmo gains a massive fortune only to be left with the devastating problem of how to use it without being debased. Aggie has the final word on riches when she refuses to take any on the grounds that she needs none (355). Then, in case we have missed the point, a long authorial lecture on riches immediately ensues. This brings us to another problem with MacDonald's style—his tendency to authorial intrusions into his text. In most cases the ordinary reader is not going to be disturbed that this transgresses stylistic conventions, because the intrusions are often amongst the finest passages in the novels. But although that is true in the earlier chapters of *Castle Warlock*, in later chapters the pedantic style of most of the intrusions weakens what has just been sensitively expressed by the characters themselves.

I have already indicated the special role allotted to the female in MacDonald's fiction. In this respect he is unusually modern. In terms of spiritual potential, of the natural and effortless embodiment of sheer goodness, the female characters in almost all his texts are pre-eminent.⁵ In his fairy tales it is nearly always the female figures who have courage and insight, who take the initiative and who, often even on the level of plot, show the way to the hero. In *Castle Warlock* the most interesting female figure apart from Grizzie is undoubtedly Aggie. She is a raw peasant girl, but one who embodies all the virtues usually associated in MacDonald's texts with poverty and a close contact with nature. Lady Joan, the aristocrat with the delicate feet and hands pales into insignificance beside Aggie's earthy integrity and loving courage. Modern readers will be disappointed in the hero's choice of Lady Joan and disturbed by MacDonald's acceptance of the assumptions underlying such a choice. When Aggie, out of the depth of her own love for Cosmo, asserts as a natural principle the impossibility of any

union between them, MacDonald seems to endorse this position:

after a', Cosmo, I wad be some oot o' my place!—wadna I noo? The hen-birds doobtless are aye the soberer to luik at; they haena the gran' colours nor the gran' w'ys wi' them 'at the cocks hae'; but still there's a measur i' a'thing. It wad ill set a common hen to hae a paicock til her man. My sowl, I ken, wad gang han' in nan', in a heumble w'y, wi' yours, for I un'erstan' ye, Cosmo; but wha like me cud help a sense o' oonfitness, gien

[14] it war but gaein' to the kirk side by side wi' the like o' you? Luik at the twa o' 's i' the munelicht thegither! Dinna ye see 'at we dinna match? (360-61)

In spite of MacDonald's reverence for the peasant virtues which she represents it is accepted here that class differences are almost insurmountable. This makes Aggie's role in the text even more remarkable. The scene which introduces her so reverses accepted Victorian sex roles as to be genuinely radical. When Cosmo is bullied by the teacher it is she who leaps to his defence, not only confronting the teacher herself but then physically coming to Cosmo's rescue when he is hurt. She is so strong as to be able to actually pick him up and run with him in her arms through the village. Then when Cosmo studies with a tutor MacDonald makes a firm statement on behalf of female education when he contrives to have Aggie not only join Cosmo in his studies but prove more able as well. As MacDonald puts it: "being a woman she was keener of perception" (51); and later we hear; the tutor's opinion that Agnes was "understanding Euclid and algebra . . . better than any boy he had ever had to teach, Cosmo himself included" (223). The subversive element in this text is consistent with that in all MacDonald's work. His writing is always a vehicle for social criticism on all levels. It particularly attacks contemporary attitudes to child-rearing and education, where he is remarkable in his tolerance and understanding of the child-mind. So too, few Victorian writers were so modern in their insistence on female rights. He allows his female characters an extraordinary degree of physical and intellectual freedom. In "The Light Princess" the narrator regrets that liberties are allowed princes which are denied to princesses: "These forests are very useful in delivering princes from their courtiers . . . Then the princes get away to follow their fortunes. In this they have the advantage of the princesses who are forced to marry before they have had a bit of fun. I wish our princesses got lost in a forest sometimes."⁶ When Cosmo visits Agnes it is she who walks him home and then returns alone. On one occasion this is

on a night in midwinter in a storm in which Aggie, in a most un-Victorian manner, is portrayed as totally fearless, laughing and striding ahead into the violence of a savage wind. Even the insipid Lady Joan is allowed to run free and wild over Scottish hill and dale—an experience which opens the door to her relationship with Cosmo and her own spiritual development.

The characteristic MacDonald symbol of the wise grandmother is present as Aggie's grandmother, who is endowed with a folk-wisdom and natural poetry which places her amongst the best of MacDonald's magical grandmother figures. She spins elusive "dream tunes" into Cosmo's consciousness in much the same way as does Irene's great grandmother in *The Princess and Curdie*. [15] So too, the dreams which characterise Cosmo's youth belong to a consistent preoccupation in MacDonald's fiction. He repeatedly explores the relation between "dream" and "reality," insisting on the essential nature of the former as a link with the divine.⁷ Cosmo's dreams when sick are key experiences in that they open his imagination and subconscious to divine influence and thus profoundly enrich his spiritual world. In this case MacDonald does effectively integrate plot and symbolism in that it is through dream that Cosmo discovers the key to his family mystery. Dreams are key experiences, but those like Cosmo's which emerge from severe illness are especially important. MacDonald insists on the transforming potential of illness, a theme he develops in *Adela Cathcart*. A profound illness contains within itself the potential for real insight because it strips down that conscious rational mind which interferes with the natural wisdom of the imagination and the subconscious. In the grip of fever, the subconscious expresses itself in the form of dreams or of visionary insights which to the pure soul are revelations of God's truth. The sickness Cosmo endures in Aggie's grandmother's cottage reveals the muse/mother-energy which is to inspire his poetic imagination. He also has a direct visionary experience of the energy underlying and connecting all things, perceiving an ideal "city" of sylphs reminiscent of the fairy palace in *Phantastes*. Here all is in motion; all is in constant yet harmonious flux, all living things interrelated. Significantly, wind and water are identified as symbols for this energy holding transience together: "the wind swung the whole city with a rhythmic roll and time and the sway of tempest waves" (35). The vulnerability effected by illness also renders the sick person open to the healing energies of "true" literature, in particular (as in *Adela Cathcart* and *At the Back of the North Wind*) to the healing power of fairy tales. Cosmo has his second experience of extended illness and fever in the care of Lady Joan, who reads to him daily.

His two illnesses are quite explicitly linked. Joan is identified as the heavenly mother-figure presaged in those visions inspired by the old grandmother's spinning-wheel:

the vapours of fever had just lifted from his brain, and were floating away in the light of the sun of life; he felt the pressure of no duty, no responsibility—was like a bird of the air lying under its mother's wing; while around him the most cherished of his childhood dreams had grown fact: there was the sylph, the oread, the naiad of them all—a live lady before his eyes—nor the less a creature of his imagination's heart! From her, the centre of power, the marvellous transformation proceeded! And the lovely strength had kissed him on the forehead! Well might the soul of Cosmo float in rapturous quiet, like the evening star in a rosy cloud! (196) [16]

The imaginative transformation she wreaks in his room—from a vision of wretchedness to one of luxury—is clearly a metaphor for the transformation which takes place on both spiritual and emotional levels for the pair under the influence of what is clearly a blessed illness. Here is one of MacDonald's symbolic deaths presaging rebirth or resurrection, a rite of passage into adult love and sexuality. Before being taken into the care of his dream-muse, Cosmo has lain feverish and only semi-conscious for seven days and nights, during which he has been as one “adrift in a rotten boat on the ebbing ocean of life.” This death experience leads directly into “pleasant dreams” in which he thinks himself already dead, but drawn back into life by his yearning for Joan. As usual in a MacDonald text, this yearning generates its own embodiment and he awakens to find above him “the face of his dreams.” When he awakens to his magically transformed room the awakening is a rebirth:

He felt like a tended child, quiet with absolute peace and bliss—or like one just dead, still weary with the successful struggle to break forth. He seemed to recall the content, of which some few vaguest filaments, here and there a glancing line and no more, yet float in the summer-air of many a memory, wherein the child lies just awakened to consciousness and the mere bliss of being, ere wrong has begun to cloud its pure atmosphere. (195)

Illness can put us in touch with our true nature—that prelapsarian childlike essence freshly emerged from its divine source which MacDonald values above all else.

Literature also finds its true function under the influence of a serious illness. Stories trigger the imagination of the “childlike” mind and can exert a profoundly healing influence by doing so. Adela Cathcart is cured through story telling, and in *At the Back of the North Wind* Mr Raymond tells stories to children in a hospital for the poor. Lady Joan’s stories to Cosmo trigger “visions,” and even when the stories are “foolish” they still have the potential for freeing that crucial subconscious energy which links the protagonist to his divine origins. The haunting influence Joan’s voice has over Cosmo is reminiscent of his experience of the grandmother’s spinning wheel. It offers an interesting insight into how MacDonald sees fairy tales working on the subconscious mind and the imagination:

She did not know much about books, but would go into the library and take anything she fancied looked interesting; and Cosmo cared little what she read, so long as he could hear her voice. Often it beguiled him into the sweetest sleep, in which were sure to come visions of home and his father. If the story she read was foolish, not the less would he mingle it, as his soul sank under the waves of sleep, with his own livelier fancies, [17] weaving all into the loveliest of foolish dreams, made up of the most reasonable incongruities: the most puzzling of things to him who would fathom his own unreason, is the sensible look in dreams of what to the waking mind is utterly, absurdly incoherent. Nor were the wild *märchenschaft* lovelinesses that then fashioned themselves in his brain—outwardly lawless, but inwardly harmonious and credible—scattered in the fluttering limbo of outlawed foolish invention, but appeared again, with gait more gracious and form less fantastic, when in after years he sought vent for the hardly utterable. (198)

It is interesting to compare this statement with others on the importance of fairy tales in his essay “The Fantastic Imagination” in *A Dish of Orts*. This section of *Castle Warlock* splendidly illustrates the ways in which MacDonald’s basic vision inspires all his writing, thus rendering cross-referencing an invaluable activity for the critic desirous of clarifying any of his ideas. *Castle Warlock* casts light on *Phantastes* and visa-versa. The essays in *A Dish of Orts* offer invaluable insights into these texts and into his whole oeuvre. The texts are fundamentally interconnected to an extraordinary extent. The same vision inspiring his fantasies is behind his “serious” novels,

which employ the same symbols, patterns of imagery and even the same themes.

Castle Warlock makes particularly clear use of MacDonald's characteristic themes and symbols. This, plus the brilliance of much of the writing and the enduring profundity of his vision, compensates for the weak characterisation of the heroine and the equally weak structure of parts of the plot, making the novel compulsory reading for any MacDonald fan.

Notes

1. George MacDonald *Castle Warlock*. Whitethorn: Johannesen 1991. All references are to this edition.
2. See *A Dish of Orts* London 1895, p. 51.
3. For example p. 51: "his father allowed him . . . plentiful liberty, and would'na have the boy feel the night holy as the day, therefore never, save from loving interest, asked him where he had been or at what hour he had come home."
4. See, for example p. 51: "Riches indubitably favour stupidity; poverty . . . I favours mental and moral development."
5. See Adrian Gunther, "'Little Daylight': An Old Tale Transfigured." *Children's Literature in Education* 26 (1995), 107-117.
6. MacDonald *The Light Princess* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980 p.24.
7. c.f. *Phantastes* where Anodos' movement over into "fairyland" is effected by a dream and MacDonald quotes Novalis: "Our life is no dream, but it ought to become one, and perhaps will" (234). **[18]**