George MacDonald as a Mythopoeist

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In George MacDonald, two currents, strong Christian belief and romantic imaginativeness, combined to form something new: romantic fantasy in the service of Christian ethics, a special kind of moral fiction. C.S. Lewis characterized MacDonald's fantasy writing as hovering between the allegorical and the mythopoeic and as affecting us at a level deeper than our thoughts and passions.[1] Myth, Lewis has said, must be grasped not with the intellect, but with the imagination.[2] This may be taken to mean that mythopoeic writing springs from visceral perception of universal truth; it will couch intuitively known truths in the symbols which most vividly present themselves to the mind of the writer and will inspire a variety of interpretations. MacDonald himself wrote that a true (good) fairy tale will vary according to the person interpreting it and should awake in the reader "things which are in him" and make him "think things for himself."[3]

It is almost impossible to analyze completely in what MacDonald's mythopoeic gift consists, but an attempt may be made by stating that it is the melding of a specific set of spiritual and religious convictions, supra-sectarian and universalist in nature, with a particular romantic symbology.

In literary terms, a symbol *in vacuo* may contain a variety of potential meanings. The author's specific purpose determines which of these should be highlighted in order to convey the intended message. Such usage may vary in complexity, of course, according to the number of meanings, or interrelated **[end of page 26]** main and ancillary significances, which the symbol is permitted to retain. But while this selective process may reduce a symbol's hydraheadedness, in which its shimmering vagueness so often consists, it is also true that the intended message, in passing into the code form of the symbol, may become less accessible and itself acquire an aura of mystery, of implying other meanings which are related to it or which flow from it. For while one may speak of writers "using" symbols or "permitting" them to retain certain meanings to the exclusion of others, it is not always possible to exercise complete control. Symbols, especially those from folklore, pagan or Christian, which constitute so many of MacDonald's motifs, have a life of their own, a set of associations which date so far back in time and which are so deeply rooted in the consciousness, that they cannot

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always be prevented from adding subtle overtones to the writer's message.

But what is it about the particular amalgam of message and symbol in MacDonald's fantasies that prompts the use of the term "mythopoeic"? The answer seems to lie in the particular nature of his message and the overtones of the particular symbols (fantasy motifs, preternaturals and impossibles) which he used.

First, the message conveyed in his books and sermons deals with matters of universal concern: That there is a God and that each human being has a soul; that temporal life is the soul's journey either towards reunion with God ("getting home") or away from him; that God is "easy to please and' hard to satisfy"[4]; and that while human beings are free to choose God or reject him, the way back to him is always open through repentance. In MacDonald's two fantasy novels for adults, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, specifically, none of this is **[27]** tied down to any body of dogma or ritual, nor, if one looks closely, is it exclusively within the Christian framework, but rather is applicable to all humankind, envisaged as children of a cosmic and universal Father.

MacDonald chose symbols which could be used to embody his cosmic religious views. Part of his skill as a fantasist lies in his ability to use symbols which allow of both psychological and theological interpretation—the figure of the Shadow(s) in *Phantastes* and *Lilith* is a case in point—and whose appeal lies in their being simultaneously both familiar and mysterious figures. A good many of these symbols are old and familiar motifs from traditional folklore. In Jungian terms they are archetype figures which spring from the collective unconscious, that is, the common inner source of experience in the deeper stratum of the human psyche. The Jungian view is that these archetypes are basic organizing structures of this source of experience. If this is true, and the shape of the archetypes is determined by a common deep-seated psychic mechanism, there is nothing mysterious in the fact that conscious use of the archetype will awake in most people an automatic response of recognition of the underlying meaning, without their being able to explain why. This process could be described in C.S. Lewis's words as affecting us at a level deeper than our thoughts or our feelings. Even if the explanation of the symbols' appeal lies elsewhere—in, for example, associations arbitrarily derived from the repetition of stock figures and ideas in tales read in early life[5]—the fact remains that they evoke, a common associative response.

MacDonald added a new feature to the archetypes. The traditional

archetypes in the folkloric sense in which we are discussing them are not set within a religious, moral **[28] [29]** **[Note: image not available]** or ethical framework. In MacDonald they are. The motifs which he chose—probably intuitively—proved to be extremely adaptable to the religious significance (chiefly but not exclusively Christian) which he gave them.

It is of course impossible to offer conclusive proof of the way in which MacDonald's fantasies evoke the kind of subjective emotional reaction which readers such as C.S. Lewis have described. But for the sake of argument let us accept the following premises: i) that the collective unconscious exists; ii) that an innate religious instinct also exists; iii) that both of these are highly responsive to certain stimuli; and iv) that such activation can arouse a strong and involuntary emotional reaction. One may then conjecture that MacDonald produces the effect which Lewis describes by simultaneously activating deep-seated psychological responses and the basic religious instinct (or, depending on one's point of view, the superstitious instinct) through the use of archetypes which, after his "Christianising" of them, are powerfully evocative, affective, and effective on both levels. The sustained effectiveness of his fantasy technique seems to consist largely in the skill with which he maintains—again, probably intuitively—an exquisite balance between the twin functions of his symbols. The extraordinary double consciousness which this process induces seems to be a unique and satisfying experience for readers who, like Lewis, enjoy mythopoeic fantasy.

MacDonald's skill in lending Christian significance to non-religious folklore motifs is illustrated by his use of the figure of the ancient wise woman, who is both wrinkled and beautiful, very old but eternally young, and who possesses magical powers. She appears several times in *Phantastes*: **[30]** there is, for example, Anodos' great-grandmother (many times removed), who may assume whatever size she chooses, who must not be touched because it would hurt the one who touched, and who enables Anodos to enter fairyland (ch. I); another example is the ancient woman with the beautiful eyes and sweet voice who lets Anodos pass through the four doors of her magic cottage (ch. XIX). The figure of the wise old woman who directs the hero on his way occurs in many traditional folktales. Her intentions are in some instances kindly, and evil in others. If she is benevolent she is generally referred to by a term such as "wise woman"; the evil figures are referred to as "witches," "ogresses," or the like. (The term "good witch" is generally foreign to these tales.) Both types are, however, very old and if one explains them in terms of archetypes the former might be said to be related

to the principle of benevolence contained in the figure of the protective Earth Mother, and the latter to the Shadow. Whatever their source, they represent a contrast between what is helpful and protective to human beings, on the one hand, and what is inimical and hurtful to them, on the other. Both are conceived of as possessing powers which are beyond human understanding.

An added complication in these folktale figures is that a witch, though evil at heart, may be beautiful in appearance; and, conversely, a well-disposed enchantress may take the shape of an ugly crone. The theme of illusion and the untrustworthiness of surface appearances is thus common even in the old tales.

In MacDonald's fantasies the old women lose none of their folktale associations, but become more complex figures in conception because, unlike their folktale prototypes, whose **[31]** magical powers seem largely self-endowed, MacDonald's women are supernatural beings who have been assigned missions by some higher guiding authority. As Louis MacNeice has pointed out, they are neither goddesses, angels, enchantresses or fairies, but have something of all these,[6] and, although they are timeless like their prototypes, they are not self-created. They embody principles which MacDonald clearly regarded as inherent in a universe created by a knowing, good Power.

Keeping the fairy association of almost inconceivable age, MacDonald's good supernatural women, by dint of their moral function, imply that they are as old as humankind's transgression. The function of the woman with the many-doored cottage in *Phantastes*, for instance, is to usher her guests into past or future, where they may experience a true vision of their faults through tears, sighs, and dismay—that is, through recognition and repentance. She suffers with Anodos before he undergoes his trial, and rescues him when he goes through the door of the Timeless because, although remorse has brought him nearer to losing his evil shadow—that is, freeing him from his baser self—he must complete his pilgrimage before he may die. The old woman is therefore a spiritual guide and her magic cottage a way-station for spiritual self-questioning. She pities and comforts Anodos, although she makes no attempt to shield him from the unpleasant experiences she knows he will undergo; he recognizes in her a comforting and beautiful mother, her beauty deriving from the nobility of her function, and her youth-in-age from the joy which she takes in that function.

The Alder-maiden in *Phantastes*, on the other hand, is an example of an ancient witch who wears a beautiful mask. Her function is to secure

victims for the Ash Tree, a devil-like **[32]** spirit whose appetite for blood is only increased with his consumption of victims. On the surface this is a traditional folktale situation. In MacDonald it acquires spiritual overtones. Anodos, despite some uneasiness of mind, spends the night with the Alder-maiden in her cave. Having allowed himself to become illusion's victim, his eyes are opened to the fact, too late, that she is beautiful only in front (which she presents as an enticement), and hideously corpse like behind, a fact which she no longer cares to conceal when, as she thinks, the victim is past rescue. The parable is fairly obvious; but what is especially interesting is that the Alder-maiden is not merely an allegorical personification of illusion, or of humankind's tendency to let themselves be led astray by a weakness for what seems pleasant. She is a traditional folktale image into which the allegorical function has been absorbed.

There is a third example in *Phantastes* of the old wise woman whose function falls midway between the very good and the very evil. This is the ogress in the cottage where Anodos acquires his unwanted shadow. She has neither the beauty of the Alder-Maiden nor the youth-in-age of the lady of the cottage with four doors, but is an ugly old woman with long white teeth (which Anodos does not actually see until it is too late), who sits mumbling to herself from "a dark old volume" concerning the inevitable triumph of darkness over light. Anodos disobeys her warning not to look into a certain closet; upon doing so he sees a dark figure rushing towards him from far off. Having reached Anodos it is henceforth his companion. It is interesting to note that the ogress is almost a neutral figure; she does not conceal Anodos' danger, but her warning is almost casual.

Anodos' successive meetings with the Alder-Maiden, the ogress, and the lady of the cottage form a logical spiritual progress, all the turning-points of which hinge upon his exercise of free **[33]** choice. There is first the meeting with evil, to which he yields because he is taken in by its illusory appearance of beauty; then the moment of renewed disobedience when he opens the ogress's closet. The point is clearly made here that while he might avoid trouble by obeying the ogress's warning, his encounter with the Alder-maiden has reduced the possibility of his being able to do so:

> "It is only your shadow that has found you," she replied. "Everyone's shadow is ranging up and down looking for him. I believe you call it by a different name in your world; yours has found you, as every person's is almost certain to do who looks into that closet, especially after meeting one in the forest, whom

I daresay you have met." (*Phantastes*, ch. viii)

The man who yielded to illusion is now tormented by his shadow, "the maleficent part of him that vulgarises all it touches."[7] It begins to darken and distort his ability to distinguish the true nature of people and objects around him, showing them in their most commonplace and unbeautiful aspect and causing him to commit acts of cruelty. Utimately Anodos' visit to the third lady sets him on the road to atonement, to freedom from the shadow and the recovery of his ability to see what is beautiful.

This consideration of one example of MacDonald's method of adapting a folktale fantasy motif may also be taken to illustrate what C.S. Lewis was describing when he spoke of MacDonald's fantasy as hovering between the allegorical and the mythopoeic. The Christian facet of his fantasy motifs tends towards the allegorical, whereas the archetypal nature of these same motifs, considered apart from their Christian connotation, is mythopoeic. Thus the third wise woman in *Phantastes* might, when viewed as a Christian figure, be construed as a representation of human penitence, at least in part. But a simple one-to-one allegorical equation fails **[34]** to apply: she is also a representation of something more than human, the idea of divine compassion. At the same time, in her non-Christian archetypal aspect she recalls a kind of benevolent earth-mother principle. In this, as in other of MacDonald's fantasy motifs, the archetypal and allegorical aspects constantly interweave; the open-endedness of the former tends to blur the simple definitiveness of the latter, while itself taking on some definition from the Christianizing "pull" of the allegorical component. Both aspects operate simultaneously and are superimposed in such a way as to make it extremely difficult to determine where the one melts into the other. This is not, of course, to say that MacDonald consciously evolved this technique. His view was that everything arising in the human mind is created within the mind of God. This would no doubt have applied as well, to his way of thinking, to the theory of archetypes and their provenance. In other words, the Christian God would be at the root of the archetype, and it would only be another of his emanations. Thus the conception comes round full circle. MacDonald perhaps would not even have distinguished between the allegorical and the mythopoeic in his own work, since he looked upon all human thought as a continuum flowing from a single source.

Endnotes

1. C.S. Lewis, Preface to *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1948), pp. 14 & 17.
2. C.S. Lewis, Preface to *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity Reason and Romanticism* (London, Geoffrey Bles, 1958), p. 13.
3. George MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination" in *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination and on Shakespeare* (London, Edwin Dalton, 1908), p. 319. **[35]**
4. A saying of George MacDonald, quoted by G.K. Chesterton in his introduction to Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife* (New York, Lincoln MacVeagh, The Dial Press Inc., 1924), p. 12.
5. Leaving aside the question of why these figures and ideas took the shape they did and had such universal appeal and longevity as to become stock motifs.
6. Louis MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable* (Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 99.
7. Greville MacDonald, Introduction to *Phantastes* by George MacDonald (London, J.M.Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1940), p. vii. **[36]**