

Some Aspects of the Oeuvre of George MacDonald in a Curriculum of Philosophy Courses and in the Production of a Play at a German Gymnasium

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1. Background

In the seventh of Plato's *Epistles*, in the context of hints at what he calls the "non-written" teaching, he comments on the adequate manner of conveying such teaching; "for it cannot be put into words like other disciplines, but by long familiarity, and from living in conjunction with the thing itself it suddenly arises like a light, which is kindled by a leaping spark within the soul and keeps on feeding itself" (341c-d). This manner of conveying knowledge does not work by a *techne*, which Sophist teachers in Plato's time employed to train their students. Plato rather refers to the *dynamis* and *energia* of the mind, which, as a divine element, is present in both the student and the teacher. It causes "comprehension and insight to light up" only if the thing sought after is pursued by "well meaning investigation" and a motivation "without any envy" (344 b). Platonic tradition unfolds this thought in the concept of the *nous*. Humankind, along with the angelic hierarchies and other rational beings, participate essentially in the *nous*. It is the *nous* that makes knowledge possible, both as a procedure and as an act. Within this frame of thinking the conventional roles of teacher and student are abolished. Everyone who dedicates himself to the quest for knowledge is, as it were, ennobled by the dignity of the *nous* and commands deep respect. Any egotistic and envious competitiveness has become superfluous. This is made clear in a fragment by the Neoplatonist Numenius:

Imagine, for example, a torch. When lit by another torch it possesses a light which is kindled in its own substance and which does not reduce the light of its source. Of the same kind is the treasure of knowledge. Given away and received, it nevertheless remains within the communicator and is one and the same in the receiver. The reason for this, O stranger, is nothing human: the vigour and essence of one who possesses knowledge is one and the same with God, who grants knowledge, and with you and I who receive

it. (qtd. Halfwassen 32-33).

Alluding to this fragment; (“*Vom Geist des Christentums*”), Hegel says: “For in every man himself is the light and the life. He is the property of the light; he is not illumined by the light like a dark body, which then carries a foreign splendour, but his own inflammable substance catches fire and is its own flame (*Werke* 1. 382). Coleridge’s eighth essay of the *General Introduction or Preliminary Treatises on Method* may be read as a development of this image of thought. It does not stop there, but is at work in the beginnings of phenomenology where Vladimir Solovyov defines the fundamental philosophical acts. According to Solovyov, *no* objective knowledge is possible without an intuition, based on enthusiasm (1. 2.231; 9. 2.157). He further stresses that mutual respect between people concerned with the search for knowledge additionally depends upon the resolve to overcome all interests contrary to the search for truth (9. 2.99). **[end of page 14]**

A work of art, a complex of thought, the example of some outstanding personality, can only be of educational relevance if the thing in itself, and its mediation and reception, are related to a dimension situated beyond mere rational calculation. They should rather correspond to the “light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not even soar,” as Shelley remarks in *The Defence of Poetry*, using the light-fire imagery of the Platonic tradition.

To make use of a famous person’s biography, or an important work of art or thought, as exemplar, whether to serve educational or other narrower purposes, is a dangerous procedure bordering on ideology. A work of high value cannot be destroyed, but it can be selectively degraded. This usually happens today, now that it has become normal for a mere rational view to be taken of noumenal topics. All who participate in such a procedure are affected, whether in an active or passive way. For example, an “idealisation” of George MacDonald’s personality, associated with a programme of re-writing all his novels, is being extensively employed at the present time for proselytising.¹ Accordingly, when first considering the possibility of working with MacDonald’s ideas and imagery, I did not initially explore teaching techniques drawing upon MacDonald’s writing and appropriate them to the requirements of the present day. Instead, we (my students and I) immersed ourselves in MacDonald’s oeuvre.

2. Introduction

Before explaining how the students and I worked practically in relation

to MacDonald's thoughts and ideas, I will give a survey of the frame within which his work was explored.

On the one hand, a course in Philosophy (five hours a week) through the seventh, eighth and ninth years of the German Secondary School Curriculum made it possible to deal with such a topic; on the other hand, topics and motifs from MacDonald's fiction, studied as part of the Literature curriculum, could be integrated into theatre productions. These productions I directed in close collaboration with my daughter, the authoress Hella Kegler.

The curricular frame of philosophy lessons is fixed by the Department of Education. It includes six half-year courses: 1) a general introduction into the subjects and methods of Philosophy; 2) Anthropology; 3) Ethics; 4) historical and political Philosophy; 5) theory of knowledge; 6) Philosophy of religions or another topic chosen by the students. Courses in literature and school theatre allow a greater freedom. Classes are obliged to show a final production, but there is relatively little restriction on the choice of topics and methods.

On two occasions I perceived that MacDonald's world of ideas and his poetry were felt as fascinating by the students. During an introductory Philosophy course I had them work on a comparison of Plato's famous question: "Is not the

1. Although this case of the rewriting of most of an author's œuvre is unique, misuse of literature for proselytising has a long history. It is potentially most dangerous when employed by governments, as with the German National Socialists use of Eddie poetry and the Song of the Nibelung. [15]

love of wisdom a practice for death?" (*Phaedo* 64) with the passage from chapter 24 of *Phantastes* where Anodos looks at the world from the realm of the grave (from "He has died well," said the lady" up to "Yet all love will, one day, meet with its return"). Contrary to my expectations, the students did not complain of the difficulties, instead they assured me they had been inspired by the imagery and beauty of the passage. The second occasion of such an experience was the integration of "The Ballad of Sir Aglovaile" from chapter 18 of *Phantastes* into our black comedy "*Sein und Schein*." The audience actually shuddered when the girl acting the part of "the murdered bride" recited the ballad while her colleague "the drowned nanny" spoke the chorus. The whole group was astonished at such a forceful echo.

I think there are two reasons for these positive responses. They are a reaction to an approach, much recommended for successful teaching, that does

not follow the principle of employing exemplary texts. This has led to a decrease in reading amongst the students, who are often bored to death. The experience of an unknown yet fascinating text is like a glimpse from an unknown window into a foreign world. Their responses also express relief that imaginative thinking is still valid. The Kant-renaissance during the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century has had enormous consequences for the curricula of German Secondary Schools, with the loss of a whole spectrum of spiritual perception.

The central aim of my philosophy lessons over the past thirty years has been a double one. First, to give an insight into the dimensions of both the history of ideas and of consciousness, because the encounter with history is a help towards forming one's identity; second, to encourage a consciousness of problems and to cultivate strength to deal with those problems and to find solutions, in the ideal case, the students would be able to combine analytical methods with the ability to perceive imaginative worlds, worlds beyond the mere rational powers. In carrying out the curriculum, these basic concepts were related to the actual topics of the individual courses. The texts and thoughts of George MacDonald were of considerable importance for the imaginative clarification and the analytical shaping of terminology.

3. The Philosophy Curriculum and George MacDonald

The Anthropology course has as a central subject the development of consciousness: from the manner of archaic participation, leading to the “pontifical” man of Plato's philosophy, and going on to show how man began to imagine himself as a Prometheus and Sisyphus figure during the era of modernism. A look at the newly found traditional view of man created by the Romantics is the final item. I have used the first chapter of *The Princess and Curdie* to show the many dimensions of the human being, having translated this book (along with many other MacDonald texts) into German. Motifs from the same story were introduced to exemplify some experiences of shamanism (Curdie's magic hands, the animal companion Lina, and so on); of Platonism (the different levels of the king's palace); and of the experiences of isolation and stagnation (the sick, poisoned king and his court) in a post-modern—or late-modern—world. [16]

For a final definition of traditional man I often read with the students the last passage of chapter 18 of *Lilith* from “Now first I knew what solitude meant...” sometimes confronting this with a contrary text, for example from Albert Camus.

When working on ethical problems and discussing ethical phenomena, I sometimes worked with non-fictional texts by MacDonald. A passage from the *Unspoken Sermons*, Third Series, “The Truth”: “We are here in a region far above that commonly claimed for science [. . .]” (463 *et seq.*) especially helped the students gain access to the difference between noumena and phenomena. And by this it led to a grasp of Coleridge’s foundation of a theory of value, (“*Wertbegründung*”) where he transcends Kant by his distinction between the primary and the secondary imagination (*Biographia Literaria* ch. 13). From these roots an ethical approach to the world of nature becomes possible.

In the context of considering the political and historical dimensions of philosophy, we concentrated upon the problems of modern and late-modern societies—the mutual increase of fears and aggressions (the fear—aggression—fear spiral). The typically modern intention to conquer nature, especially human nature, and to lock out what cannot be conquered, is an aggressive procedure to maintain a safeguard against fear. In the nineteenth century it expressed itself as a eurocentric colonialism, and has culminated in the genocide of the last remains of so-called primitive people. There are so many texts to be read in this half-year that we read only a single passage from MacDonald’s “circle.” This was pages 196-97 from his son Greville’s *Reminiscences of a Specialist*: “We had brought introductions [. . .].” There the author characterises the phenomenon of work in Modernism as a brutal attack on nature and especially on children.

The core of the Philosophy curriculum is the course on the genesis and the dogmatising/idolising of phenomena arising out of the Cartesian and Kantian theories of knowledge. Both these theories include options on “safeguarding”—the securing of certain concepts with the aims of subjecting nature to exploitation and guaranteeing the feeling of safety. These contradict the very nature of knowledge, because knowledge involves risk. Here we read chapter 3, “The Raven” and chapter 4 “Somewhere or Nowhere” from *Lilith*, and sometimes also passages from *Paul Faber, Surgeon* and *Weighed and Wanting*. These *Lilith* chapters may also be read as an excellent account of the experience of attaining knowledge. The true aim of philosophy emerges here. We follow it by discussing Plato’s “non-written” teachings (see above) and Plotinus’ metaphysics of the One, and finally those of Coleridge’s works, particularly his “Dejection” ode, where he transcends his discussion of Kant’s *Critiques*—the premises of modern subjectivism—and arrives at a philosophy of being.

These traditions are intensively present in MacDonald’s whole œuvre.

A particularly striking example occurs at the beginning of chapter 45 of *Lilith*, “the Journey Home”: “It had ceased to be dark [...]” which corresponds in every respect with Plotinus’ description of the world of the *nous* in his *Enneads* (5.8.31). [17]

Many topics are available for discussion in the final course. In the context of the present paper I should like to note the example of a comparison of “section First” of Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death* with chapter 39 “That Night” from *Lilith*. In Kierkegaard’s terminology, Lilith’s sickness consists in ‘Despair concerning Eternity or about Oneself followed by “Defiance,”’ which is situated “one single dialectical step beyond “Sickness” (Section First B. 2). According to Kierkegaard, defiance is the desperate misuse of the eternal element in the innermost self, at the same time very near to truth and infinitely far from it. With the help of G. F. Watts’ painting *The Dweller in the Innermost* used in conjunction with chapter 39 of *Lilith*, the students could grasp what it means to be desperate in being oneself.

4. MacDonald as Philosopher and Poet

The few examples mentioned above already confirm that MacDonald’s oeuvre is conceived in a dynamic and dialectic analysis of the central problems of modern philosophy. By its thought-worlds and its many-layered imagery, it covers the great distance from the primordial world of the “dreamer,” through his experience as a prisoner in the realm of mere facts, up to the wasteland of the “will to power” (Bulika). It shows the situation of painfully exploited and silenced nature and of the brutally silenced soul, both of which have lost the ability to realize their own forces and powers. Along with the work of philosophers of the calibre of Schelling, Kierkegaard and Solovyov, it gives an outlook to the regions “where the wasteland ends” (to employ Theodore Roszak’s expression). This outlook, however, is very far from bland optimism.

MacDonald’s literary art is consequently *symbolistic*. That is: the appearances of the outer world are “nothing but the vehicle of an idea” (*Symbolismus* 49). This does not contradict MacDonald’s sharp-eyed analysis of social problems, especially in his Scottish novels. Symbolistic art often emphasises social problems as a central theme. Social phenomena reflect the mysterious worlds beyond our reality. Thus the true poet is “organ of the world-soul,” “clairvoyant” or “*theourgos*” (Ivanov qtd. Knigge 266), interpretations that are not far from how MacDonald understood himself.

5. A Theatre Production

When in 1995 the MacDonald Symposium of the Inklings Gesellschaft took place in Cologne, my daughter and I wrote a poetical drama *Durch den Spiegel—The Wanderer* to honour him. The German-English title was chosen because MacDonald was connected with both languages. The play was staged in collaboration with The Dreamsinters, the school theatre group we have directed for more than 25 years. Its members are between twelve and nineteen years old. The players are mostly members of the philosophy courses who like to give artistic forms to what they have learned or who are drawn to philosophy through the insights they had gained through their acting. At first we concentrated on a sort of “living image,” a multifaceted scene of intense power—for example, Mr Vane in front of the mirror seeing a foreign landscape. Then, by trying to [18] perform it on stage, we followed the inspirations we gained. From this we were led to enhance the initial image by other parallel ones; then these too were transformed into scenes. With the help of my daughter these have been worked into plays and performed, the whole process lasting about a year with each play. The MacDonald play was primarily inspired by the Philosophy course, where the imagery of crossing a border had been thoroughly discussed (see above). Additional impulses came from a course in European literature where the students and I had experimented with double action on a two-storey stage.

The crossing of the mirror as a transition into another world was conceived as the central motif of a collection of scenes each showing the experience of a foreign world by multiple literary “mirror-effects.” Experiences of this kind are not always “positive” ones. In many cases the central experience is a “negative”: an unfulfilled longing or a mere suggestion. This experience was also suggested by linguistic and artistic means: the symbolistic technique of suggestions. The technique was realised both by the joining of narrative structures with lyrical passages, and by the inter-connectedness of the action of the individual scenes, staged on the two-storey stage. By this device we wished to make visible the parabolic structure of symbolistic art.

Each of the eleven scenes ended with a “living image”: in most cases an iconographic quotation. Acoustic effects and music underlined the scenes. Here also we followed the “technique of suggestions” insofar as, by the musical effects, we introduced an estranging element. Our *leitmotif* was John Lee Hooker’s blues number “I Cover the Waterfront,” but there was also music from the Middle Ages and pieces by the groups Enya and Runrig. The Prologue was David Jones’ poem “When they proscribe the diverse uses and impose the rootless uniformities, pray for us...,” stressing the incommensurability of

true art and quoted in English and German. After the initial scene from *Lilith* of Mr Vane crossing the mirror we chose examples from Celtic poetry embedded in a poets' contest borrowed in some aspects from R. L. Stevenson's *David Balfour*; this was followed by the search for Merlin according to Robert de Boron; John Keats' ballad "La Belle Dame sans Merci" in the context of the poet's passion for Fanny Brawne; the encounter of Perceval and the Fisher-King according to Chrétien de Troyes, joined by lines from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* spoken by the polar explorer Scott; then the appearance of the White Goddess in Coleridge's *Ballad of the Ancient Mariner*. Attempts to escape from the prison of the world were pictured by scenes from Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*; Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*; Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*; and Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*. The two final scenes showed a ray of hope, tinged by melancholy: a passage from Harold Pinter's film script of *Turtle Diary* and finally Ludwig Tieck's "Liebe laßt sich suchen, finden ..." quoted by Overbeck's Italia and Germania. The conclusion was the last appearance of MacDonald's brother, John Hill MacDonald, read in the words of Greville MacDonald. So the audience gained a panoramic view of the "lonesome, houseless heath." [19]

[The passages from Plato, Numenius, Hegel and Ivanov were translated by me from the German. A fuller account of *Durch den Spiegel - The Wanderer* by Hella Kegler was published in volume 14 of *North Wind*, along with a transcription of scene 3.]

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