

“Amiable Infidelity,” “Grim-Faced Dummies,” and Rondels: Robert Louis Stevenson on George MacDonald

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Despite the considerable differences in their lives and literary productions, there are nevertheless some intriguing connections between George MacDonald and Robert Louis Stevenson. Although both were Scots, they came from different parts of Scotland, and from different social classes.¹ The specific religious affiliations of their families differed: Stevenson’s father was a staunch upholder of the principle of Establishment. Nevertheless MacDonald and Stevenson both wrestled as young men with religious questions in a broadly similar context (one dominated by various inflections of Calvinism), and both followed paths which, in terms of that shared context, were far from orthodox. Lung problems meant that both writers spent the majority of their life outside Scotland; yet “that grey country, with its rainy sea-beat archipelago,” as Stevenson called it,² continued to haunt the work of both writers. Both men spent periods convalescing in the Riviera; both tasted, and resisted, celebrity status in America. And although over the years both have often been consigned (indeed relegated, in terms of the hierarchy of genres in the literary establishment) to the status of children’s writers, both have nevertheless had powerful literary advocates. In MacDonald’s case this advocacy came most famously (and as something of a mixed blessing) from C.S. Lewis, as well as from W.H. Auden and J.R.R. Tolkien; in the case of Stevenson, Graham Greene and Jorge Luis Borges have acknowledged him as their literary master.

The connections between Stevenson and MacDonald which I wish to trace here are not so much references to, or echoes of, Stevenson in the writings of MacDonald, though these may well exist. Rather, I have tracked down references to, and perhaps echoes of, George MacDonald in the writings of Stevenson. Primarily I shall be referring to Stevenson’s correspondence, though I believe I have discovered at least one literary echo of MacDonald in one of Stevenson’s most famous pieces of fiction.

The first letter by Stevenson referring to MacDonald is to Stevenson’s father on 1 September 1868 when Stevenson was seventeen years old. He was staying in Wick, getting some hands-on experience of me family business of engineering; the Stevenson firm was in the process of constructing (abortively, as it turned out) a breakwater for the new harbour at Wick. The titanic struggles between the free-thinking young Stevenson and his religiously

conservative father were still to come, but perhaps they can be seen looming here as Stevenson tells his father of a Free Church minister in Wick: “Ah fie! What a creed!” the young Stevenson exclaims; “He told me point blank that all Roman Catholics would be damned. I’d rather have MacDonald’s amiable infidelity, than this harsh, judging, self-righteous form of faith.” He assures his father that he is referring not to the engineer MacDonald who was in charge of the harbour works, but to “George MacDonald, the writer” (L1 139-40). The seventeen-year-old Stevenson is here doubtless pandering to his father’s prejudices in favour of the Established Church in Scotland. Typically, though, while he was willing at this stage to pay lip-service to his father’s religious convictions, the [21] young Stevenson was in fact far more interested in people than in intellectual systems; he wrote to his mother a few days later that: “The Free Church minister and I got quite thick. He left last night about two in the morning” (L1 142).

The following June, Stevenson just missed meeting MacDonald in Lerwick. Stevenson was accompanying his father on a tour of inspection to the Orkney and Shetland islands on board the *Pharos*, the official steamer of the Commissioners of Northern Lights. They arrived at Lerwick just a few days after MacDonald had stopped there in the yacht *Blue Bell*, en route for Norway. A doctor had had to be called on board to treat MacDonald who was “ill of inflammation of the knee-joint,” as Stevenson wrote back to his mother (L1 183). The leeches prescribed by the Lerwick doctor, who passed on this gossip in his “interesting talk” (ibid.) with Stevenson, do not seem to have been very effective. As Greville MacDonald tells us in the chapter entitled “The Blue Bell” in *George MacDonald and His Wife*, MacDonald’s condition worsened, so that by the time he arrived back in London via Trondheim and Newcastle, “the emaciated look of my father” led Greville to think that his father was dead (*GMAW* 394). Ironically, while it was a yacht trip taken as a last resort that gave Stevenson the bonus of such life as he was able to enjoy before his early death (the yacht *Casco* figures as Stevenson’s “ship of death” through the South Seas),³ in MacDonald’s case a yacht trip was almost the death of him, as Louisa MacDonald wrote in a letter of July 1869 (*GMAW* 395).

The first evidence we have that Stevenson had actually read any of MacDonald’s works comes over three years later, when he refers to *Phantastes* in a letter to his cousin Bob Stevenson in October 1872.⁴ The young RLS was exploring agnosticism—declaiming Walt Whitman, reading Herbert Spencer “very hard,” and offering papers to the exclusive Speculative Society, housed in Edinburgh University’s Old College, on such topics as “Christ’s Teaching and

Modern Christianity” and “The Authority of the New Testament” (L1 259 and n.13). He had become a member of the so-called L.J.R. Society (standing for Liberty, Justice and Reverence). This was a freethinking offshoot of “the Spec.” and met in a pub in Advocate’s Close. Its tenets included the abolition of the House of Lords and a freedom from the doctrines of the Established Church; these tenets, and indeed the very existence of the L.J.R., shocked the profoundly conservative Thomas Stevenson. As Stevenson and Charles Baxter were to recall in their correspondence almost twenty years later, there had been hell to pay when Thomas Stevenson had discovered the L.J.R constitution, probably in the early months of 1873 (L1 192 n.6; *LI* 273 n.1). In February 1873, RLS wrote to Baxter: “My dear Baxter, The thunderbolt has fallen with a vengeance now. You know the aspect of a house in which somebody is awaiting burial—the quiet step — the hushed voices and rare conversation—the religious literature that holds a temporary monopoly—the grim, wretched faces; all is here reproduced in this family circle in honour of my (what is it?) atheism or blasphemy” (L1 273). It was in the context of this developing religious crisis in the Stevenson household that in October 1872 RLS wrote desperately to his cousin Bob—who, when accused by Thomas Stevenson of causing Louis to lose his faith, had replied with some sarcasm “that he didn’t know where [Louis] had found out that the Christian religion was not true, but that *he* hadn’t told [him]” (L1 295). If Bob Stevenson was noted for the outrageousness and wit of his talk (W.E. Henley—who knew both men—placed him **[22]** above Oscar Wilde in this respect), Bob’s younger cousin Robert Louis was much more serious about the importance of being earnest. In this letter to Bob, who figures as a mentor, RLS writes:

My dear Bob, A lot of waves and counter-waves have been beating upon me of late, as this new creed of mine is not ballasted as yet with many Articles, it has tossed terribly about and made my heart sick within me.—There are a sight of hitches not yet disentangled in this Christian skein. [...] One does get so mixed—my ears begin to sing, when I think of all that can be said on either side; and I do feel just now that hopeless emptiness about the stomach and desire to sit down and cry [...] It is all very well to talk about flesh and lusts and such like; but the real hot sweat must come put in this business, or we go alone to the end of life. I want an object, a mission, a belief, a hope to be my wife; and, please God, have it I shall. (L1 254)

When the twenty-one-year old Stevenson, a rebel without a cause, but desperately in search of *something* to believe in, goes on to refer to *Phantastes*, it is precisely to chapter 23 where the twenty-one year old Anodos (one translation of whose name is of course “pathless”) decides to offer himself as squire to the knight. The latter accepts Anodos and offers him the much-needed hand of friendship (295). The dialogue between Anodos and the knight develops in a vein very similar to that between the young RLS and his older cousin. The knight counsels Anodos that it is sufficient if a man “will settle it with himself, that even renown and success are in themselves of no great value, and be content to be defeated, if so be that the fault is not his” (298-99). The knight’s advice must have struck home to the young RLS who four years earlier had confessed to his cousin Bob: “Strange how my mind runs on this idea. Becoming great, becoming great, becoming great. A heart burned out with the lust of this world’s approbation: a hideous disease to have” (L1 143). Anodos then enquires about the little beggar-girl whom the knight had helped, which prompts the knight’s tale of the little girl begging butterflies for wings in order to fly to the country she came from. The terrorization of this little girl by great effigies “made of wood, without knee or elbow-joints, and without any noses or mouths or eyes in their faces” (300), and the knight’s vain attempts to destroy them by cutting them to pieces, is what remained in Stevenson’s imagination: it surfaces in this letter to Bob when he writes:

Here is another terrible complaint I bring against our country. I try to learn the truth, and their grim-faced dummies, their wooden effigies, and creeds: dead years ago at heart, come round me, like the wooden men in *Phantastes*, and I may cut at them and prove them faulty and mortal, but yet they can stamp the life out of me. (L1 255)

Stevenson’s allusion to this chapter of *Phantastes* in his outcry against the religious oppression he felt he experienced in his native country is apt, in that the chapter goes on to describe Anodos’ encounter with corrupt religious ritual.

However, there is another fascinating, and to the best of my knowledge hitherto undetected, echo of this scene in *Phantastes* where wooden monsters seek to trample the little beggar-girl. This echo comes in Stevenson’s most celebrated work, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, published more than a decade after the letter to Bob containing the *Phantastes* reference, and famously based on a dream which was written up in circumstances almost as well-known as the story itself.⁵ The opening sequence of *Jekyll and Hyde* is dominated by the image of the creature (who we will later discover is Henry Jekyll’s *alter*

ego Mr Hyde) trampling on a little girl: “the man [23] trampled calmly over the child’s body and left her screaming on the ground. It sounds nothing to hear, but it was hellish to see. It wasn’t like a man; it was like some damned Juggernaut” (T5 3). In his essay “A Chapter on Dreams,” Stevenson divides the labour of his literary production (of his creative work in general, and *Jekyll and Hyde* in particular) between his conscious and his unconscious, or what he calls his “Brownies.” Although Stevenson does not attribute the trampling scene specifically to the Brownies (in fact he only attributes three scenes in *Jekyll and Hyde* wholly to them), nevertheless it is difficult to resist the idea that the trampling scene in *Phantastes* had strongly affected him (as the letter to Bob shows), and was lurking more or less unconsciously in his mind, ready to emerge as the central image in the shocking opening sequence of *Jekyll and Hyde*.

The next reference to MacDonald in Stevenson’s correspondence comes more than a decade later in a letter to W.E. Henley of April 1883 from Hyères in the French Riviera, where Stevenson and his wife Fanny lived from March 1883 until they moved to Bournemouth in July 1884. Stevenson sent Henley regular critical responses to *The Magazine of Art*, which Henley edited between 1881 and 1886. This so-called “monthly cricket” that Stevenson sent Henley took the form of responses to published issues of the magazine. Stevenson also commented critically on a list of articles, originally written by Henley for his magazine *London*, on a variety of British authors; Henley’s (in the event abortive) plan was to turn these into a book entitled *Living Novelists* (L4 85 n.4). The list of Stevenson’s responses contains such comments as: “Meredith. It has lines: I should rewrite it”; “Blackmore. Overhaul. Don’t you like the *Maid of Sker*? Madman!” (L4 98). When it comes to Henley’s piece on MacDonald, Stevenson comments: “MacDonald. Some cuts. Fifteen minutes of touching. Good.”; and adds with reference to MacDonald’s friend Charles Dodgson: “Carroll. Heu! One of the doubtfuls, but some good fooling at the start.” (ibid.)

It was also from Hyères in the following year that Stevenson offered his warmest tribute to MacDonald. This comes in a letter of March 1884 from Stevenson to Alfred Dowson, father of Ernest Dowson, the *poète maudit* of the 1890s. Stevenson had got to know the Dowsons eleven years previously when they had all been resident at the Riviera resort of Mentone (or Menton). It was the six-year-old Ernest who had fetched for Stevenson, high on opium, the bunch of violets which occasioned the following ecstasy:

The first violet. There is more secret trouble for the heart in

the breath of this small flower, than in all the wines of all the vineyards of Europe. I cannot contain myself. I do not think so small a thing has ever given me such a princely festival of pleasure. I am quite drunken at heart; [...] The first breath, veiled and timid as it seems, maddens and transfigures and transports you out of yourself; [...] It is like a wind blowing out of fairyland.—No one need tell me that the phrase is exaggerated, if I say that this violet *sings*. (L1 401)

The fact that we know that Stevenson had read *Phantastes* makes it difficult to resist seeing in the image of the vocal violet a distant echo of the flower-fairies in chapter 3 of *Phantastes* who “talked singing” (28). At any rate, it was to Alfred Dowson that Stevenson wrote in 1884, inviting him to visit the Stevensons at Hyères, if he were travelling along the Riviera from Mentone. Stevenson then asks Dowson: “Will you also salute Mr MacDonald [at nearby Bordighera] from me? I have had great pleasure from his works” (L4 243).

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The final reference to MacDonald that I can find in Stevenson’s correspondence comes in a letter to W.E. Henley of October 1887 from Saranac Lake, a health resort in the Adirondacks in upper New York State. Stevenson is discussing Gleeson White’s 1887 anthology *Ballades and Rondeaux*, at the beginning of which Stevenson and MacDonald stand together, with Stevenson receiving the dedication, and MacDonald providing the epigraph. The fitness of the dedication derives from Stevenson’s role as “among the earliest to experiment in these French rhythms, and to introduce Charles d’Orléans and François Villon to the majority of English readers.”⁶ The epigraph comes from chapter 11 of MacDonald’s *Home Again*, published in 1887, and runs:

these old French ways of verse making that have been coming into fashion of late. Surely they say a pretty thing more prettily for their quaint old-fashioned liberty! That *triolet*—how deliciously impertinent it is! [...] Their fantastic surprises, the ring of their bell-like returns on themselves, their music of triangle and cymbal. In some of them poetry seems to approach the nearest possible to bird-song—to unconscious seeming through the most unconscious art, imitating the carelessness and impromptu of forms as old as the existence of birds, and as new as every fresh individual joy in each new generation.⁷

In his letter to Henley, Stevenson gives high praise to the former’s work, which is largely represented in the anthology. He opines that, apart from

one piece, Andrew Lang “cuts a poor figure” (*L6* 26). Although MacDonald has several triolets in the anthology, it is his rondels that Stevenson singles out for comment: “G. MacDonald comes out strong in his two pious rondels” (*ibid.*). These “Two Rondels” had appeared in *A Threefold Cord* in 1883. One can guess why the following lines might have appealed to Stevenson, the night terrors of whose childhood were expressed in the sequence “North-West Passage,” including the famous “Shadow March”; who also compared his bed to a little boat (“My Bed is a Boat); and who had more than a passing interest in pirates:

When on the mid sea of the night,
I waken at thy call, O Lord.
The first that troop my bark aboard
Are darksome imps that hate the light,
Whose tongues are arrows, eyes a blight—
Of wraths and cares a pirate horde—
Though on the mid sea of the night
It was thy call that waked me, Lord.⁸

The resolution of the “Two Rondels” might also have appealed to Stevenson, who like MacDonald had wrestled with Calvinism and its “martinet of a God”;⁹ this resolution resists any *deus ex machina* and finds instead a kind of inner light which is, so to speak, in tune with the infinite:

There comes no voice; I hear no word!
But in my soul dawns something bright:—
There is no sea, no foe to fight!
Thy heart and mine beat one accord:
I need no voice from thee, O Lord,
Across the mid sea of the night.

Here indeed, as Stevenson puts it, “G. MacDonald comes out strong...”. [25]

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- . “The Scot Abroad” in *The Silverado Squatters* (77& 172-75).
- . *A Child’s Garden of Verses* [1885] in *Poems I* (T22).
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Notes

1. On Stevenson’s Scottishness, and especially his relation to the Scottish *Lowlands*, see Gray 2004, chapter 3 (“Forever Scotland”) *passim*. Stevenson’s fascination with the Highlands (about which he planned to write a book) was not based, as was MacDonald’s, on a direct family connection, though he did fantasise that “Stevenson” was a name adopted by the MacGregors when their name was banned.
2. “The Scot Abroad” in *The Silverado Squatters*, T18 172.
3. See Gray, 110.
4. While the previous two MacDonald references are indexed by Ernest Mehew in volume 1 of his edition of the *Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, the normally scrupulous Mehew has omitted this important reference from the index.
5. On the twists and turns of the myth about the writing of *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* see Gray 176, note 15.
6. On Stevenson and rondels see Gray 37-38.
7. Sadly, this passage was heavily cut in later editions (ed.).
8. See *The Poetical Works of George MacDonald* (1893) II 211 where the rondels appear with slight differences from the version in Gleeson White’s anthology.
9. Unspoken Sermons, 3rd Series 161, Quoted in Raeper 242. **[26]**