

# George MacDonald and Lewis Carroll

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## I. Friendship<sup>1</sup>

**I**n October, 1856, the MacDonald family went to Algiers. The visit was undertaken for health reasons—George MacDonald suffered from bronchial ailments—and was made possible by the generosity of Lady Byron, who had been much impressed by MacDonald’s first published book, *Within and Without*, a drama in blank verse which appeared in 1855. On their return in April 1857, the family moved to Hastings, and took up residence in a house in the then unfashionable Tackleway, near All Saints. A glimpse into the MacDonald’s home at this time was recorded by a visitor:

I was delightfully received by a strikingly handsome young man and a most kind lady, who made me feel at once at home. There were five children at that time, all beautifully behaved and going about the house without troubling anyone. On getting better acquainted with the family, I was much struck by the way in which they carried on their lives with one another. At a certain time in the afternoon, you would, on going up stairs to the drawing room, see on the floor several bundles—each one containing a child! On being spoken to they said, so happily and peacefully, “We are resting,” that the intruder felt she must immediately disappear. The nurse was with them. One word from the father or mother was sufficient to bring instant attention . . . . In the evenings, when the children were all in bed, Mr. MacDonald would still be writing in his study—”Phantastes” it was—and Mrs. MacDonald would go down and sit with her husband, when he would read to her what he had been writing; and I would hear them discussing it on their return to the drawing room. To hear his reading Browning’s “Saul” with his gracious and wonderful power was a thing I shall never forget. Mrs. MacDonald’s energy and courage were untiring, and her capabilities very unusual. (*GMD & Wife*, p. 289)

1. Grateful acknowledgements are due to the authors and publishers of works

referred to in the text. For abbreviations see p. 30.

2. The house, marked with a plaque, is still standing. **[Note: mark for footnote 2 missing in original] [end of page 10]**

A friend of the MacDonalds at Hastings was Dr. Hale, a homoeopathic doctor. He, in turn, knew Dr. James Hunt, a leading authority on stammering, who lived at nearby Ore. One of his patients was Lewis Carroll, who also used to visit his aunts, the Misses Lutwidge, at Hastings. Thus Lewis Carroll came to be introduced to the MacDonalds, though we do not know exactly when this took place. Carroll's diaries for this period are missing. However, Greville MacDonald tells us that MacDonald's friendship with Carroll dated from the days of the Tackleway (*GMD & Wife*, p.301). The MacDonalds moved from Hastings to London in October 1859, and so the first meeting must have taken place between the spring of 1858 and the autumn of 1859.

Outwardly, Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald differed in many respects. Carroll's background was English High Church, he was a bachelor, and was already settled as Mathematical Lecturer at Christ Church, Oxford, where he was to reside for the rest of his life. MacDonald's background was Scottish Calvinism, he was married with a growing family (he was to have eleven children), and constantly changing residence. He was highly effective as a public speaker: Carroll was quite the reverse (only towards the end of his life did Carroll speak in public with some confidence). The MacDonalds often entertained large gatherings at home: Carroll was excessively shy in a crowd. Mark Twain once met Lewis Carroll at the MacDonalds, and recorded his impressions in his autobiography (1906, vol. 2, p. 232):

We met a great many other interesting people, among them Lewis Carroll, author of the immortal "Alice"—but he was only interesting to look at, for he was the stillest and shyest full-grown man I have ever met except "Uncle Remus." Doctor MacDonald and several other lively talkers were present, and the talk went briskly on for a couple of hours, but Carroll sat still all the while except that now and then he asked a question. His answers were brief. I do not remember that he elaborated any of them.

But what Carroll and MacDonald had in common was more important than their differences. Both showed in their work influences of the German and English Romantics, whose common theme of an underground realm inhabited by gnomes and goblins could have found a reflection in

*Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, and in MacDonald's two *Princess* books and others. (See Robert Lee Wolff's *The Golden Key*, 1961). [11] Tennyson's *The Princess* (1847), with Lilia, "half child half woman," might have give MacDonald the name of the child Lilia in *Within and Without*, which was commenced in 1850. There seems little doubt that part of the poem beginning "The splendour falls on castle walls," inserted in later editions of *The Princess* (1851, p. 73), inspired Bruno's song in *Bruno's Revenge*:—

Here, oh, hear! From far and near  
The music stealing, ting, ting, ting!  
Fairy bells adown the dells  
Are merrily pealing, ting, ting, ting!

And from *The Princess*:—

O hark, O hear! how thin and clear,  
And thinner, clearer, farther going!  
O sweet and far from cliff and scar  
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!

Nor is the idea of dreaming and waking absent from *The Princess* (1851, p. 14-15):—

And, truly, waking dreams were, more or less,  
An old and strange affection of the house.  
Myself too had weird seizures, Heaven knows what:  
On a sudden in the midst of men and day,  
And while I walk'd and talk'd as heretofore,  
I seem'd to move among a world of ghosts,  
And feel myself the shadow of a dream.

—as did the narrators in *Sylvie and Bruno*, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*.

Both MacDonald and Carroll were deeply-committed Christians, with an aversion to irreverence, though they were by no means always solemn.

My father, wrote Greville, who hated any touch of irreverence could laugh till tears ran at his friend's ridicule of smug

formalism and copy-book maxims. (*GMD & Wife*, p. 343) [12]

Both loved animals and wrote against the growing practice of vivisection. A part of MacDonald's novel, *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, was reprinted as an anti-vivisectionist pamphlet.

Both were believers in homoeopathy—in George MacDonald's case, as early as 1850, as a recently-discovered letter shows, and his wife shared his enthusiasm. In *The Rectory Umbrella*, Carroll poked fun at

homoeopathy—but that was before he met the MacDonalds. Later, in the diaries, we find numerous references to various homoeopathic remedies that Carroll took, and which he claimed were effective. We have already noted that a homoeopathic doctor was instrumental in bringing Carroll and the MacDonalds together. MacDonald dedicated a novel, *Adela Cathcart*, to John Rutherford Russell, physician to the Homoeopathic Hospital in London. (In an unpublished diary entry, dated July 30, 1863, Carroll recorded that he met Dr. Russell).

Then there was the theatre. Carroll was a life-long theatre-goer. The MacDonalds went one better, and formed their own theatrical company, with a repertoire including *The Three Bears* (with George MacDonald as Father Bear) and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In *Beauty and the Beast*, Greville relates that his father played the Beast with such pathos that he made the children cry. A photograph of George MacDonald as Macbeth forms one of the illustrations in his friend Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson's memoirs (1925). The MacDonald company later performed in public, with their daughter Lilia as star (she had a genuine talent for acting, and turned down an offer of marriage because it was made conditional on her leaving the stage). Mrs. MacDonald published a collection of plays for children in 1870.

The MacDonalds were thus an unusual and gifted family. Greville, after a slow start at school, became an eminent nose and throat surgeon, and published fairy tales and works on medicine and philosophy. Another son, Ronald, wrote several novels. George MacDonald himself produced some 50 books, comprising poems, novels, criticism, sermons, fairy tales, and two highly original fantasies for adults, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. He was also for a time editor of the periodical *Good Words for the Young* in which many of his best-known fairy tales first appeared. He began his career as Congregationalist [13] [14] [Note: image not available] Minister in Arundel, Sussex, but was forced to resign, his views having been considered too unorthodox. He then gave up preaching, professionally, and concentrated on writing. And it was in his writing, especially in his expression of the dream-vision, that he came closest to sharing—and influencing—the dream-vision of his friend Lewis Carroll.

It did not take Carroll long to make friends with the children. The earliest surviving reference by Carroll to the MacDonalds is a diary entry for 1860. It tells of a meeting with Greville and Mary, in the studio of the sculptor Alexander Munro, for whom Greville was sitting as a model for the fountain group, "Boy Riding a Dolphin" (now in Regent's Park, London).

They were a girl and a boy, about 7 and 6 years old, I claimed their acquaintance, and began at once proving to the boy, Greville, that he had better take the opportunity of having his head changed for a marble one. The effect was that in about 2 minutes they had entirely forgotten that I was a total stranger, and were earnestly arguing the question as if we were old acquaintances. (*Collingwood* p. 85)

A drawing associated with this incident, that Carroll drew for Greville, is reproduced in the *Reminiscences*.

Carroll often took the children out for treats, visiting the Polytechnic to see the entrancing “dissolving views” (a kind of magic lantern show introduced from France soon after 1800 and known as *Phantasmagoria*, from which Carroll got the title for his first book of poems, published in 1869), followed by cakes and ginger beer, and gifts of toys. His letters to Lilia and Mary MacDonald are the earliest of his numerous letters to child-friends.

In the 1860’s, Carroll saw the MacDonalds frequently, taking numerous photographs. On July 31, 1863, he recorded in his diary:

I have now done all the MacDonalds.

In the late seventies, the MacDonalds settled in Bordighera, on the Italian Riviera. They made regular trips to England, but Carroll [15] gradually lost touch with them. On June 12, 1879, he wrote to Lily:

I have been living for a very long time in the belief that you were all in Italy, and only learned the fact of your being in England, a few days ago, from Miss Willets, step-daughter of Professor Legge (our Chinese Professor).<sup>3</sup> Please send a line to tell me how you all are, and specially Mrs. MacDonald, who was too ill to see me when I called (it seems a long time ago now) at the house in Hammersmith, and saw only Greville and Winnie.

Lily was then 27. The last references to the MacDonalds are for Sept. 22, 1882, when he took two girls to see the MacDonalds perform in Brighton “ . . . and afterwards had a short interview with Mr. and Mrs. MacDonald,” and for Nov. 6, 1882, when he invited Ronald MacDonald, then an undergraduate at Trinity, to a tête-à-tête dinner at Christ Church.

Carroll’s friendship with the MacDonalds thus extended for more than twenty years, and was at its most intimate during the crucial period immediately before and during the writing of the *Alice* books. But before passing on to this aspect, we must not forget a little souvenir of Hastings that

Carroll included in *Rhyme? and Reason?* (1883). One verse begins:

For I have friends who dwell by the coast—  
Pleasant friends they are to me!

This poem first appeared in *College Rhymes*, 1861; a revised version was included in *Rhyme? and Reason?*. The original version included a stanza beginning:

Once I met a friend in the street,  
With wife and nurse and children three:

which considerably strengthens the association of this poem with the MacDonalds.

3. see footnote p. 28 [16]

## II. Influences

Lewis Carroll first met George MacDonald around the time of the publication of *Phantastes* (Oct. 1858) or shortly after. We can be sure that Carroll read this book—in later diary entries, other books by MacDonald are mentioned. Certain passages in *Phantastes* undoubtedly influenced the *Alice* books, as the following quotations will show:

(a) *The White Rabbit and the descent underground*

In *Phantastes* ch.17 we find the hero going down a perpendicular hole “like a roughly excavated well” and then along a horizontal passage. He is searching, not for a white rabbit, but for a white lady. But in ch.5 he had indeed met a white rabbit—“a large white rabbit with red eyes,” and one is also mentioned in ch.3.

(b) *The Mirror Image*

What a strange thing a mirror is! And what a wondrous affinity exists between it and a man’s imagination! For this room of mine, as I behold it in the glass, is the same and yet not the same. It is not the mere representation of, the room I live in, but it looks just as if I were reading about it in a story I like. All its commonness has disappeared. The mirror has lifted it out of the region-of fact into the realms of art . . . . I should like to live in that room if I could only get into it. (ch. 13);

All mirrors are magic mirrors. The commonest room is a room in a poem when I turn to the glass. (ch.10)

(c) *Snowdrop*, a flower-fairy (ch. 3)

Mary MacDonald had a white kitten named Snowdrop, which is also

the name of the white kitten in *Through the Looking-Glass*.

“Lily,” the White Pawn in *Through the Looking-Glass*, was named after the first of the MacDonald children, who was, in turn, named after the child in *Within and Without*. [17]

Almost forty years after *Phantastes* came *Lilith*, another allegory of a quest cast in rich symbolic imagery. In *Lilith* the hero actually begins his dream-journey through a looking-glass, which he finds in a garret (ch. 2).

Let us return to the Tackleway, to another sphere of interest shared by Carroll and MacDonald—the occult, a term which, in its widest sense, embraces all manner of psychical and supernatural phenomena, including the world of fairies. Lewis Carroll was deeply interested in occult phenomena: he had many books on this subject in his library, and was a founder member of the Society for Psychical Research, remaining a member until his death. This kind of interest was common in Victorian times, and prominent personalities from all walks of life were members of the SPR. Carroll went as far as to tabulate the incidence of psychic states in *Sylvie and Bruno*. George MacDonald, being a mystic, had little interest or need for the verification of psychic phenomena. However, he did attend lectures in Hastings given by a Polish mesmerist named Zamoiski, putting him into *David Elginbrod* (1863) as “von Funkelstein.” His story *The Portent* (1860) featured as its heroine a girl named Alice (!) who was somnambulistic. (*The Portent* deals with the Highland belief in “second sight”). That some of Carroll’s knowledge of fairies came from a Scottish source is acknowledged in *Bruno’s Revenge*:

. . . . What is the best time for seeing fairies? I believe I can tell you all about that. The first rule is, that it must be a *very* hot day—that we may consider as settled: and you must be just a *little* sleepy—but not too sleepy to keep your eyes open, mind. Well, you ought to feel a little—what one may call ‘fairyish’—the Scotch call it ‘eerie,’ and perhaps that’s a prettier word; if you don’t know what it means, I’m afraid I can hardly explain it; you must wait till you meet a fairy, and then you’ll know.

*Bruno’s Revenge* appeared in 1867, the same year as MacDonald’s *Dealing with the Fairies*. Three of the five stories in that collection had already appeared in *Adela Cathcart* (1864). But Carroll had seen one of them, *The Light Princess*, as early as 1862. The surviving diaries resume on May 9,

1862: on July 9, Carroll wrote: [18] [19] [Note: image not available]

To Tudor Lodge (Regent’s Park) where I met Mr. MacDonald coming out. I walked a mile or so with him, on his way to a



publisher with the MS of his fairy tale ‘The Light Princess,’ in which he showed me some exquisite drawings by Hughes.

That was on a Wednesday: the previous Friday was July 4, the day of the famous river trip to Godstow with Alice, Lorina and Edith Liddell. On Saturday the 5th he came to London, on the same train as the Liddells, and wrote out the ‘headings’ of *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground* during the journey.

On May 9, 1863, Carroll noted:

Heard from Mrs. MacDonald about ‘Alice’s Adventures Under Ground,’ which I had lent them to read, and which they wish me to publish.

Greville, then about 6, recalled that reading in his *Reminiscences* (p. 15):

I remember that first reading well, and also my braggart avowal that I wished there were 60,000 volumes of it.

There is some discrepancy here concerning the illustrations. Greville stated that the copy that his mother read to the family was illustrated by Carroll. Yet, according to Carroll’s diaries, he did not complete the illustrations until Sept. 13, 1864. Possibly the illustrations were incomplete, assuming that Greville was correct in this detail.

There have been many who have claimed a share in bringing about the publication of the first *Alice* book. Yet the MacDonalds must be granted a foremost place. Indeed George MacDonald may even have influenced Carroll in his choice of Tenniel as illustrator. MacDonald’s favourite fairy tale, as he tells us in his essay, *The Fantastic Imagination*, was Fouque’s *Undine*. This story was published as part of a quartet, *The Four Seasons*, and reissued by Edward Lumley in 1861 with *Undine* illustrated by John Tenniel. And *The Four Seasons* was Carroll’s original title for *Sylvie and Bruno*. [20]

The Carroll/MacDonald friendship has even more significant ramifications when considered in relation to what each had written before they met. Prior to 1858, Carroll had published only a few poems and short stories in *The Whitby Gazette* (1854), *The Comic Times* (1855), and *The Train* (1856/7). The two anonymous poems which he claimed were published in *The Oxonian Advertiser* in 1854 are so undistinguished that they cannot be identified. In these early poems the chief influences are Tennyson and Thomas Hood.

The prose pieces likewise give no hint of things to come. “Novelty and Romancement” leans heavily on the division of “Romancement” into “Roman” and “Cement.” There followed another group of poems, in *College*



*Rhymes* (1860-63) and some mathematical items published under the name of Dodgson. The anonymous *Index to "In Memorium"* (1862) showed his preoccupation with poetry at this time. There is then, no indication that Carroll intended to write fairy tales,—and he regarded *Alice* as a fairy tale, though there are no fairies in it—until the period of the MacDonald friendship,

George MacDonald also began his writing career as a poet, and produced most of his fairy tales for children at the time of his closest association with Carroll. (*Phantastes* was called by the author *A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*). It is therefore reasonable to conclude that these two writers, who shared a common—or rather uncommon—imagination, influenced each other, while retaining their own marked individuality of expression.

It was appropriate that in 1867, the year which saw the publication of *Dealings with the Fairies* and *Bruno's Revenge*, MacDonald, in his essay *The Imagination*, (later collected in *Orts*, 1882), should pay a tribute to that quality in his friend. He was illustrating the point that “the imagination often gets a glimpse of the law before it can be *ascertained* to be a law”:

. . . a mathematical friend, a lecturer at one of the universities . . . had lately *guessed* that a certain algebraic process could be shortened exceedingly if the method which his imagination suggested should prove to be a true one . . . He put it to the test of experiment . . . and found the method true. It has since been accepted by the Royal Society.

The work in question was the *Condensation of Determinants* (1866), published under the name of Dodgson. [21]

### III. Stones From Buried Temples

A comparison of the fairy tales of MacDonald and Carroll will reveal certain common elements of symbolism and association.

A collection of three of MacDonald's fairy tales, *The Wise Woman*, *The Carasoy*, and *The Golden Key*, was published in the Ballantine series in 1972 under the collective title of *Evenor*. This was not MacDonald's title, but was taken by the editor, Lin Carter, from Plato—“Evenor the Earth-Born,” an Adamic figure. Lin Carter explains his choice:

MacDonald sees terrestrial nature as a maternal or paternal figure, and his stories, which contain numerous enigmatic and mysterious figures of divine authority, almost seem to share this

element of Platonic mysticism. (p. xiv)

In fact, most of these figures were feminine, and an obvious symbol of Mother Nature. She appears very early in MacDonald's work, in the poem "A Hidden Life" (1857), a quotation from which prefaces the Ballantine collection:

. . . Behind those world-enclosing hills  
There sat a mighty woman, with a face  
As calm as life, when its intensity  
Pushes it nigh to death . . . .

In Carroll's unpublished diaries, we find, opposite the entry for Jan. 9, 1855, the following extract from Shelley's "Vision of Ocean"

. . . At the helm sits a woman more fair  
Than Heaven, when, unbinding its star-braided hair,  
It sinks with the sun on the earth and the sea.  
She clasps a bright child on her up-gathered knee,  
It laughs at the lightning, it mocks the mixed thunder  
Of the air and the sea . . .

Could this be an anticipation of the motherly "Sylvie" and "the merry mocking Bruno"?

She appears as "North Wind," as the "Wise Woman," as the Grandmother in the *Princess* books, and—earliest of all in MacDonald's prose [22] works—as the mysterious lady in the first chapter of *Phantastes*. She is the same figure as Mother Cary, in *The Water Babies*, and the Fairy Godmother, or Good Fairy, in fairy literature. But in MacDonald she is more personalised than in the works of other writers. She is, in fact, a symbol of Divinity in the feminine aspect, worshipped in ancient times as Isis, Aphrodite, and in many other forms, surviving today in the Madonna cult of the Mediterranean countries. In Carroll, she appears as "Alice," who acts as a mother when the Duchess throws her baby to her, and "Sylvie," who is more of a mother than sister to Bruno. Appropriately, "Alice" was born on the Isis, as the Thames is known at Oxford.

So far, these personifications have been of the positive aspect of love and goodness. But there is the other side of the coin—the negative aspect, of evil and destructiveness. These also we find in our authors, as the Alder-maiden in *Phantastes*, and in an exceptionally intense and savage form as *Lilith*, the very incarnation of evil. Many, including his son Greville, have claimed that *Lilith* (1895) was George MacDonald's greatest work. It is certainly his most disturbing book, and greatly upset Mrs. MacDonald.

The author himself believed it was divinely inspired. Side-by-side with the allegory of a personal quest, is a theme few writers have ever tackled—the turning of a spirit that has pursued the path of evil to the path of atonement.

Carroll too was highly conscious of the problem of evil. He saw the very word as a reversal of “live” (*In Sylvie and Bruno*). He was, as we know from the diaries and the introduction to *Pillow Problems*, constantly battling with the “blasphemous thoughts” that assailed him. In *Alice*, it is the absence of love that causes the baby to change into a pig, and likewise Uggug, in *Sylvie and Bruno* becomes a porcupine (a prickly pig). The mothers here are negative “Aphrodite” figures, as we may call them, reminding us of Circe, who changed the followers of Odysseus into swine, one of the “totem” animals of ancient Aphrodite-worship.

Another of these figures, which appears early in Carroll’s work, is [23] the maiden in “The Three Voices” (1855), who torments the care-free stroller on the beach into a state of gibbering insanity. But the best-known of these negative types are in the *Alice* books—the Duchess, the Queen of Hearts, the Red Queen. In *Alice on the Stage* (1887), Carroll wrote:

I pictured to myself the Queen of Hearts as a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion—a blind and aimless Fury. The Red Queen I pictured as a Fury, but of another type; her passion must be cold and calm . . . .

The Furies were the avenging deities of the Romans, but their origin is older: so terrible were they that people were afraid to call them by their real name.

In both MacDonald and Carroll, dream-states, and the transitions from dreaming to waking and vice versa, are central features, and are treated in a direct and natural way.

. . . I suddenly . . . . became aware of the sound of running water near me, and, looking out of bed, I saw that a large green marble basin, in which I was accustomed to wash, and which stood on a low pedestal of the same material in a corner of my room was overflowing like a spring; and that a stream of clear water was running over the carpet all the length of the room, finding its outlet I knew not where. And, stranger still, where this carpet, which I myself designed to imitate a field of grass and daisies, bordered the course of the little stream, the grassblades and daisies seemed to wave in a tiny breeze that followed the water’s flow; while under the rivulet they bent and swayed with every motion of the changeful current, as if they

were about to dissolve with it, and, forsaking their fixed form, become fluent as the waters.

My dressing-table was an old-fashioned piece of furniture of black oak, with drawers all down the front. These were elaborately carved in foliage, of which ivy formed the chief part. The nearer end of this table remained just as it had been, but on the further end a singular change had commenced. I happened to fix my eye on a little cluster of ivy-leaves. The first of these was evidently the work of the carver; the next looked curious; the third was unmistakeable ivy; and just beyond it a tendril of clematis had twined itself about the gilt handle of one of the drawers. Hearing next a slight motion above me, I looked up, and saw that the branches and leaves designed upon the curtains of my bed were [24] slightly, in motion. Not knowing what change might follow next, I thought it high time to get up; and springing from the bed, my bare feet alighted upon a cool green sward; and although I dressed in all haste, I found myself completing my toilet under the boughs of a great tree (*Phantastes*, ch. 2)

In Carroll, these transitions are greatly condensed. “Wool and Water” (ch. 5 of *Through the Looking-Glass*) contains four such episodes. In the last, the Sheep places an egg that Alice has bought on a shelf at the end of the shop, for Alice to fetch (“I never put things into people’s hands—that would never do—you must get it for yourself.”)

“I wonder *why* it wouldn’t do?” thought Alice, as she groped her way among the tables and chairs, for the shop was very dark towards the end. “The egg seems to get further away the more I walk towards it. Let me see, is this a chair? Why, it’s got branches, I declare! How very odd to find trees growing here! And actually here’s a little brook! Well, this is the very queerest shop I ever saw!” . . .

So she went on, wondering more and more at every step, as everything turned into a tree the moment she came up to it, and she quite expected the egg to do the same . . . However, the egg only got larger and larger, and more and more human: when she had come within a few yards of it, she saw that it had eyes and a nose and mouth; and when she had come close to it, she saw clearly that it was HUMPTY DUMPTY himself.

The framework of *Through the Looking-Glass* is that of a game of Chess, with the looking-glass as the entrance to the dream world. But a new and disturbing element intrudes when Alice meets the sleeping Red King:

“He’s dreaming now,” said Tweedledee: “and what do you think he’s dreaming about?”

Alice said “Nobody can guess that.”

“Why, about *you!*” Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly. “And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you’d be?”

“Where I am now, of course,” said Alice.

“Not you!” Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. “You’d be nowhere. Why, you’re only a sort of thing in his dream!”

“If that there King was to wake,” added Tweedledum, “you’d go out—bang!—just like a candle!” **[25]**

The problem continues to worry Alice, and at one stage she considers waking the Red King, to see what happens. The book ends with Alice discussing the matter with the Black Kitten:

“Now, Kitty, let’s consider who it was that dreamed it all. This is a serious question, my dear, and you should *not* go on licking your paw like that it *must* have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too! *Was* it the Red King Kitty? . . . , *do* help to settle it! I’m sure your paw can wait!” But the provoking kitten only began on the other paw, and pretended it hadn’t heard the question. Which do *you* think it was?

The terminal poem ends:

Life, what is it but a dream?

The prefatory poem to *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889) begins with the same question:

Is all our Life, then, but a dream?

In the *Sylvie and Bruno* books, instead of the story being one continuous dream, there are constant alternations—sometimes very abrupt—between dreaming and waking. We are reminded, of MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind*, in which the story also progresses by such alternations, though the transitions are not so sudden. (*At the Back of the North Wind* was serialised in *Good Words for the Young*, 1868-70, before Carroll began expanding *Bruno’s Revenge* into *Sylvie and Bruno*.)

There is, however, an important difference in the way MacDonald

and Carroll treat the dreaming/waking sequences. With MacDonald, the dream is a way into the world of allegory. Carroll began by using the dream as a framework for “nonsense,” then became interested in the mechanics of the process, and in its metaphysical implications.

“ . . . either I’ve been dreaming about Sylvie,” I said to myself, “and this is the reality. Or I’ve been with Sylvie, and this is the dream. Is Life itself a dream, I wonder?” (*Sylvie and Bruno*, ch. 2) [26]

Others have, at various times in the past, been preoccupied with this problem. Martin Gardner, in his *The Annotated Alice* (1960), gives analogies with Bishop Berkeley and the Platonists. But there are even closer parallels, in the images and thoughts of the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu, who lived in China in the 3rd century BC:

Once upon a time, I dreamed I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither . . . Suddenly I woke up, and there I was, myself again. Now, I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man . . .

(Compare this with MacDonald: “It may be . . . that when most awake, I am only dreaming the more!” (*Lilith*, p. 350/351))

A butterfly appears in *Through the Looking-Glass* (ch. 3)—to be precise, a Bread-and-butter-fly—and could have appeared in ch. 4, had not Tenniel preferred to illustrate a Carpenter instead, in the poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter.” But to continue with Chuang Tzu:

While they dream they do not know that they dream. Some will even interpret the very dream they are dreaming, and only when they awake do they know it was a dream . . . Fools think they are awake now, and flatter themselves they know if they are really princes or peasants. Confucius and you are both dreams, and I, who say you are dreams—I am but a dream myself—

which is precisely what the Tweedle brothers said to Alice.

The above was from ch. 2 (of the first 33 “authentic” chapters, said to have been written by Chuang Tzu himself), called “The Identity of Contraries.” In the first chapter, we encounter the legendary bird called the Rukh, an enormous creature whose wings obscure the sky—like those of the Monstrous Crow, whose shadow darkens and indeed ends the episode of the Red King’s dream:

One starts out for Yueh today and arrives there yesterday.

Reversals of time and direction occur in *Through the Looking-Glass* and *Sylvie and Bruno*: [27]

It is easy to stop walking: the trouble is to walk without touching the ground.

The Red Queen manages this very well.

Is the blue of the sky its real colour, or the effect of distance? asks Chuang Tzu.

What makes the sky such a darling blue? asks Bruno (at the end of *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*.)

I'm afraid he'll catch cold with lying on the damp grass, said Alice of the Red King.

If you sleep on the damp ground you'll get lumbago, says Chuang Tzu.

Did Carroll know the works of Chuang Tzu? They were first published in an English translation in 1881. In 1889, a translation by Herbert Giles appeared, with notes by Aubrey Moore, who was an Honorary Canon of Christ Church, Oxford. But also in Oxford was Dr. Legge<sup>4</sup> "our Chinese Professor." Thus, even if Carroll did not know of a published version, he could have learned of Chuang Tzu from others in his circle. We know, from an unpublished diary entry dated Nov. 24 1857, that metaphysics was one of his subjects of special interest.

The first seven chapters of Chuang Tzu are traditionally called the 'inside' chapters, and the next fifteen the "outside." The meaning of these terms has been subject to dispute. But it is possible to accept them in the sense that MacDonald often uses them—as, for instance, in the title *Within and Without*, and in his fairy tales—a

4. I am indebted to Mrs. Freda Levson for the information that Professor James Legge (1815-1897) was Huntly born and related to George MacDonald and that they probably met (see also p. 16) [28]

sense that is very much in the spirit of Chuang Tzu. If you are without, (i.e. *outside*) one world, you are *within* the other, and vice versa, and this can apply to the realms of matter and spirit. The meeting ground is the dream, where forms of our waking world mingle with those of the spirit world; Carroll called it "Outland" in *Sylvie and Bruno*—an appropriate term, for it is outside our 'waking' world and Fairyland.

The idea of simultaneously existing and interpenetrating worlds



was also used by H.G. Wells (a letter from Wells to MacDonald pointing to similarities between *Lilith* (1895) and his novel *The Wonderful Visit*, published the same year, is given in the *Reminiscences*, pp. 323/4). But it was used earlier. *Lilith* is prefaced by an extract from one of Thoreau's essays, "Walking" (omitted from the Ballantine edition), which greatly influenced the early chapters of *Lilith*. Thoreau was an orientalist, and his writings and those of his friend Emerson are strongly Taoist in feeling.

Chuang Tzu was like Thoreau,  
wrote Lin Yutang, in the introduction to his translation of Chuang Tzu (1948);  
Emerson's two essays, "Circles," and "The Over-soul" are  
completely Taoist.

Emerson's poem "The Mountain and the Squirrel" might have come straight out of Chuang Tzu. It was included, with four of her father's pieces, in Lilia MacDonald's anthology of poems for children, *Babies' Classics* (1904), completed by her sister Winifred following Lilia's early death. Thoreau died in 1862, but both Carroll and MacDonald met Emerson in 1873.

The first *Sylvie and Bruno* book ends with a chapter entitled "Looking Eastward," in which the words "Look Eastward" are repeated many times. Carroll did travel eastward, in 1867, and got as far as [29] Moscow. He invented a game for Alice Liddell which he called "The Ural Mountains"—but she preferred him to continue the telling of *Alice's Adventures*. These were, first written down when Carroll journeyed eastward, on the railway from Oxford to London. Martin Gardner has noted, in his *The Annotated Alice*, that in the Red King's dream,

the monarch is snoring on a square directly *east* of the square occupied by Alice.

And from *Phantastes* (ch. 7):

"In what direction are you going?" asked the old man.

"Eastward," I replied.

This direction leads to China, the land of Chuang Tzu—another curious coincidence, perhaps best explained by Hubert Nicholson, in *A Voyage to Wonderland*:

It is safest to think of all these four books (the *Alices*, *Phantastes*, and *Lilith*) as having been built with stones fetched from the same ruined chapels and buried temples.

## Abbreviations

Unless otherwise specified, *Sylvie and Bruno* refers to the two

volumes, *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889) and *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893).

*Collingwood: The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll*, by Stuart Dodgson Collingwood; T. Fisher Unwin 1898.

*GMD & Wife: George MacDonald and his Wife*, by Greville MacDonald; Allen 8: Unwin 1924.

*Reminiscences: Reminiscences of a Specialist*, by Greville MacDonald; Allen & Unwin 1932.

*Diaries: The Diaries of Lewis Carroll*, edited by Roger Lancelyn Green; Cassell 1953.

*A Voyage to Wonderland* is the title-essay of a collection by Hubert Nicholson, published by Heinemann 1947. This perceptive yet little-known essay appears to have been the first to explore the relationship between the imaginative writings of Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald. **[30]**