

Die Aufhebung in George MacDonald

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*This essay demonstrates the similarities between George MacDonald's portrayal of human spiritual development and Hegelian dialectic. Hegel described human consciousness as evolving through a process he called *aufheben*, which involves the transcendence of conflict. At each successive stage of development, formerly conflicting elements are seen as necessary parts of a larger whole. This model was extremely influential among Romantic writers and became an important element in Jung's psychology. We can clearly see it at work in "Birth, Dreaming, and Death," one of the brief narrative sketches originally included in MacDonald's Adela Cathcart.*

In this essay I propose to demonstrate that George MacDonald, at least sometimes, portrayed human spiritual development as occurring along the lines of Hegelian dialectic. This similarity is unsurprising, since Hegel's philosophical system helped develop the ideas collectively called German Romanticism, and MacDonald, as is widely known, was heavily influenced by Romanticism, both German and English. Though I am aware of no evidence that MacDonald read Hegel, he was intimately acquainted with the works of Novalis, Hoffmann, Goethe, Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, whose ideas about human development closely resemble those of Hegel's philosophical school.¹

Hegel adopted Aristotle's definition of God ("the Absolute") as "Thought thinking itself," and postulated that the Absolute was in the process of "realizing itself in the evolution of human consciousness (Copleston 206-08). In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he traces this evolution through a crude perception of self/object up through the highest state of "Absolute Knowledge," in which God, through humans, has a clear philosophical knowledge of himself who is All. Human consciousness evolves from one discernable stage to another, through a process Hegel calls *aufheben*, which means to annul, preserve, and transcend. (Abrams 230). In this process, the tensions or conflicts inherent in one stage of consciousness are seen, from the perspective of a higher stage, as necessary parts of a larger whole. The earlier stage is thus cancelled—one grows beyond it—but is retained as part of the

larger view.

For example, in the famous Master/Slave dialectic, Hegel describes a state of consciousness in which two self-conscious entities perceive one another. Each needs the other's recognition to support its own sense of independent selfhood, so they engage in a struggle over "life," each wishing to establish itself as the independent [41] being through the subordination of the other. In this life-or-death struggle, the one who risks death becomes the Master, while the one who fears death becomes the Slave. The Slave works for the Master; the Master consumes the work of the Slave, and the Master clearly seems the superior consciousness (*Phenomenology* 111-16).

However, moving outside of the Master/Slave antithesis, one can see that, while the Master is *fixed* in a repetitive and ultimately empty cycle of desire and consumption, Slave-consciousness *develops* through its traumatic brush with death, its relationship to its work, and its recognition of the independent selfhood of the Master. From this perspective, Slave-consciousness seems the superior (*Phenomenology* 111-19). And the Master/Slave opposition itself is swallowed up (or resolved) in the emergence of Stoicism, a "higher" level of consciousness which, "whether on the throne or in chains," seeks truth and self-affirmation, not in particularity and dominance, but in abstract Thought (*Phenomenology* 121).

In Stoicism, the self withdraws from the variable world into the serenity of its own thought, so the hierarchy of stable thought over changeable circumstance is established. Stoicism easily passes into Skepticism, which refuses to form conclusions about anything exterior and remains certain only of itself. However, the Skeptical consciousness eventually realizes that, in order to live and act in the world, it has in fact formed convictions about all sorts of matters, and finds itself oscillating between serene detachment from all belief and a confused whirl of inconsistent positions. Thus, the hierarchy of "draught" over "world" breaks down. (*Phenomenology* 122-26). Upon this realization, Skeptical consciousness becomes what Hegel calls Unhappy Consciousness, which recapitulates the Master/Slave conflict but on the higher level of interiority; the Master (Unchangeable) and Slave (Variable) perceived as two parts of itself. At first Unhappy Consciousness identifies with the Variable, reversing the Skeptical hierarchy (this is why it is unhappy) but perceives the Unchangeable as its "true" essence (*Phenomenology* 126-27). This true, unchangeable essence is regarded with longing and devotion and might be projected as God (*Phenomenology* 127-30). Finally conceptualizing its own variability and relative nullity as sin, the Unhappy Consciousness

surrenders itself to the offices of a priestly mediator and accepts forgiveness. This establishes, at least “in principle,” the unity of the Variable self with the Unchangeable (*Phenomenology* 135-38). Thus Consciousness enters the still-higher dialectical stage Hegel calls Reason and achieves Idealism. The movement from Unhappy Consciousness to Idealism recapitulates the movement from the Master/Slave conflict into Stoicism, but, rather than transcending conflict by withdrawing from the world, as did Stoicism, Idealism sees both subjective and objective Reality as itself, and thus is able to affirm and accept the world rather than negate it (*Phenomenology* 139-40).

The above summary traces some of the lower steps in Hegel’s model of human spiritual development, but it is enough to demonstrate the pattern involved. The dialectical process proceeds from consciousness of a duality to conflict. Out of this [42] conflict comes a hierarchy; in which one element is perceived to be dominant over the other. The hierarchy thus established, however, will not stay put, for, when examined, its terms are seen to be reversible, and the subjugated element becomes the superior. This prompts (or is simply followed by) *Die Aufhebung*, the lifting of the whole struggle onto another, “higher” or more abstract level. Here both states of consciousness are seen to be necessary developmental “moments,” and lose their antagonistic energy as the thrust of the dialectic—the developmental “action”—moves to a higher plane.

A process remarkably like *Die Aufhebung* goes on continually in many of MacDonald’s characters. His son, Greville, called it “ethical Evolution” (217).

MacDonald was a Universalist; that is, he believed that all people would ultimately be brought into union with God. He postulated the existence of a divine nature, a “Christ-self,” (*Diary* 17) not merely (as his native Calvinism would have it) in the elect, but in all people. He was also a pantheist,² seeing Nature as Divine self-revelation. Thus “[T]he same God who is in us, [...] also is all about us [...] And the two are ever trying to meet in us?” (qtd in Greville MacDonald 280). According to most Christian orthodoxies of the period, one was either “saved” or “not saved”; “in grace” or “out of grace.” MacDonald conceived of salvation, however, not as an absolute state, but as a continuing transformation (spiritual evolution) undergone by all people, lasting through and beyond earthly existence. To make this unfamiliar concept clear to his readers he depicted hell as a sort of divine reform school. “Away with him to the outer darkness,” MacDonald paraphrases Matthew 22.13 and 26.30. “Perhaps *that* will make him repent” (*Sermons* 65). He asserted

that God was obligated, not simply to defeat sin in Creation, but to destroy it altogether (*Sermons* 514ff), and believed that one day even “Death and Hell” would be purified in the “Consuming Fire” of the Divine Being, so that God would indeed be “all in all” (*Sermons* 32). The logical outcome of this position, expressed imaginatively in the conclusion of his final major fantasy, is the ancient (but subsequently rare) opinion of Origen that even Satan will at last be reconciled to God (*Lilith* 228).

There is much more to the Good News According to St. George, but this is enough to establish some gross similarities between his “system” and Hegel’s. Some Christian world-views, particularly those which, like Calvinism, adhere to the doctrine of total depravity, are “Kantian” in seeing a closed ceiling between the transcendent and the empirical, the realm, of Divine knowledge and the realm of human consciousness. The transcendent gleams uncannily through the cracks in this closed ceiling, and sometimes, via the lightning rod of particular genius or sanctity, blasts into the empirical to make a spectacular, thought isolated, display; but, generally speaking, there is not only no *getting* there from here, there is no *perceiving* there from here. There is no such thing as a “natural” knowledge of God.

This theory of total divorce between the Divine and human, the transcendent and the empirical, horrified MacDonald, and he protested against it strongly and explicitly [43] in his theological writing. The logical consequence of such a divorce is, of course, that what is “good” in the transcendent realm might be base or wicked by human, empirical standards. “Where would be the good news” MacDonald inquires indignantly, “if John said, ‘God is light, but you cannot see his light [...] you have no notion, what light is; [...] what God calls light may be horrible darkness to you, for you are of another nature from him!’” (*Sermons* 545).

Rejecting the unreachable Transcendent of Kant and Calvin, MacDonald’s own model is Hegelian in that he sees the transcendent working immanently and intimately in every cranny of the empirical world like yeast in bread, gradually but inexorably raising all human consciousness toward participation in the Absolute. MacDonald, like Hegel, insists that God is knowable by human consciousness (*Philosophy of History* 25, 30-31) though what MacDonald means by “knowing” has little to do with Hegel’s notion of clear intellectual comprehension. For MacDonald, human “knowing” of God is like the loving, intimate and individual intercourse between parent and child. Fredrick Copleston characterizes Hegel’s description of “religious consciousness” (several steps above Idealism) as perceiving “Nature as the

creation and self-manifestation of God, with whom it is united in the depth of its being and through whom it is united with other selves.” (224). This is an exact statement of MacDonald’s belief about the relationship of God, humanity and Nature.³ However, students and interpreters of Hegel disagree over whether Hegel saw God (the Absolute) as having a transcendent existence separate from and independent of the empirical world (Copleston 210, 218) as MacDonald most certainly did. And, while Hegel, in his portrait of the Absolute realizing itself through human history, focuses on the “big picture” of nations, peoples, and cultures, MacDonald is exclusively concerned with the evolution of individual consciousness. Nonetheless, both MacDonald and Hegel conceive of the transcendent and the empirical, not as separated, but interpenetrating one another, and human consciousness, not as leaping from one absolute state to another, but evolving through the experiencing and overcoming of painful conflicts and oppositions which are progressively subsumed into higher and more complete perceptions of reality.

In “Birth, Dreaming, and Death,” MacDonald explicitly delineates a process of spiritual growth very like Hegel’s dialectic. While I would claim that a Hegelian progress through increasingly higher states of consciousness is typical of MacDonald’s characters, in this story there is little to distract from it: as a narrative, the story is not much. Originally published as one of the interpolated tales in *Adela Cathcart*, it is really a reflective meditation on the meaning of human suffering.

In his writing, MacDonald regularly and resolutely confronts the implications of the cosmic optimism he expressed bluntly in *Phantastes*: “what we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good” (324). The dialectic that dominates much of his fiction is [44] that between the realm of God’s eternity, in which all is One in God, and human temporal experience, which contains both good and evil. The end of the dialectic is that evil will be perceived to be a “developmental moment” in the evolution of the good;⁴ as Lady Julian says, “Sin is behovable, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well” (35, 103). For MacDonald, life is a Purgatory readying God’s children for the bliss of Divine Union, and all pain is potentially birth pain. This brief narrative clearly demonstrates that MacDonald’s model of human spiritual development is extremely like Hegel’s.

“Birth, Dreaming and Death” portrays God as the ultimate Schoolmaster, guiding a young couple toward the “Really Real.” The goal of MacDonald’s spiritual evolution, dramatized in his fiction and fantasy, is

explicated in his sermon “The Child in the Midst” (*Sermons* 1-17). His central text is Matthew 18.3 and its cognates: “Unless ye become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Here he asserts that, “God is childlike” (18) and “Childhood belongs to the Divine nature” (19). The Childhood of God, according to MacDonald, consists in the simplicity of his loving devotion: “He has not two thoughts about us. With him all is simplicity of purpose and meaning and effort and end—namely, that we should be as he is, think the same thoughts, mean the same things, possess the same blessedness [...] he alone can be perfectly, abandonedly, simple and devoted” (22,24). The blessedness of God, to which he seeks to raise his children, is “that he wants nothing for himself, but finds his blessedness in the outgoing of blessedness [...] He gives himself to us—shall we not give ourselves to him? Shall we not give ourselves to each other whom he loves?” (21). Thus, for MacDonald, growth in wisdom and goodness is an ever-deeper participation in a Divine Childhood whose essence is self-giving love.

The first three pages of the story elaborate the two opposing sets of values available to the young couple who are its focus: the hierarchy of human society, which puts a premium on achieving wealth and social status, and the eternity of God, which puts a premium on each “man’s becoming that which God meant him to be,” whether (figuratively speaking) God means him to be a glow-worm or a star according to the “relative” values of the human social economy. “God and man can meet,” MacDonald’s narrator asserts, only by a person’s being true to God in his “own being” and realizing his divinely-appointed *telios*. Only thus can one rise above entanglement in the relative and temporal and “behold and love and live the unchangeable, the essential, the divine” (175).

As the story opens, the young couple have already begun to grasp eternal, as opposed to temporal and relative, values. They are poor. The young man’s former aspirations to the ministry were blocked by “either poverty or [...] theological difficulty” and he is now a village schoolmaster. The death of his worldly ambition, the narrator asserts, was actually a positive good, because an exchange of love and reverence with boys and girls (teaching) is far better than “pour[ing] one’s words into the filter of religious suspicion” to be judged by “ignorant party-spirit” (preaching). [45] He has married a “simple village girl,” and he and his wife are windows into Divinity for one another. Through him, she is able to see “the real forms of all things around,” and through her he looks “into the great depths that could not be measured or represented,” possessing “the eternal and the unchangeable” and finding “in her love the

verdict of God, that he was worth loving” (174). That their material poverty is a spiritual asset is suggested by the description of the young man’s relation to his scanty collection of books: “But his love for the souls of his individual books was the stronger that there was no possibility of its degenerating into avarice for the bodies or outsides whose aggregate constitutes the piece of house-furniture called a library” (173-74).

Initially we find earthly values dominating their thinking. The young wife has just given birth to the couple’s first child. The husband, anxious about his poverty and his wife’s “feeble health,” cannot help but see the new baby as a liability (176). The wife is often troubled because she is simple and uneducated and therefore, she fears, unworthy of her husband’s love (179). We might characterize this stage as the consciousness of Lack.

But into this spiritual conflict, when temporal values have assumed ascendancy, God shows them eternal truth in dreams that effect an inversion of this perceptual hierarchy. The husband dreams that, out of a winter storm, a little orphan child comes to his door. He takes the child in, bathes him, and even in his economic difficulties “he felt that he could not part with [the child] again.” The child then tells him “I am the child Jesus,” and “Any other child is like me” (177). The wife dreams that she is a humble nosegay of wildflowers lying for sale in a shop window along with much fancier bouquets, when her husband enters the shop and selects her from among the others to take home. When they wake from these dreams, their external situation remains unchanged, but the wife now sees that, in the fatherly embrace of God, she has the worth of a “beautiful singing angel” to her husband and child. To the husband, God’s providence is now more real than his own poverty, and the child, instead of being a liability, has become a supreme asset: he is now identified with the child Jesus, and thus a divine incarnation. In receiving the baby, the couple has received God. Thus the hierarchy of the first stage is inverted, and divine “reality” takes dominance over material “appearance.” Consciousness of Lack has been displaced by a consciousness of Wealth.

In this second-stage consciousness, the couple, who already “knew” that God was their father, have been brought to a more powerful realization of what it means to be God’s children. The husband goes joyfully to his schoolhouse, knowing that “he was God’s child doing God’s work,” (178) while the wife knows that God will “richly meet the fearing hope of thy child’s heart” with a transforming love even more potent than her dream-husband’s (180). In this perceptual inversion from Lack to Wealth, then, we might say that, from seeing themselves as needy children, they have become conscious of themselves

as children provided for. [46]

However, as the narrator warns us, there are higher states than that of childlike trust, and a harder “lesson” is coming from the Divine Schoolmaster: the baby dies. This produces the second-stage conflict: the wife cannot relinquish the child but keeps his body beside her in his cradle, and the grief-stricken husband supposes that God is punishing him for his earlier doubt. But this conflict is soon followed by *Die Aufhebung*, a movement to a higher plane of consciousness. No longer are the couple to be simply children of God—that is, appreciative recipients of his love and providence. Instead, they begin to participate in the Divine Childhood, itself, and manifest the self-giving love of a God who/ finds his blessedness in the outgoing of blessedness” (*Sermons* 14).

Through the process of her grief, before the child is buried, the wife resolves that, though deprived of motherhood, she will find her relief in being more childlike (“more simple, and truthful, and joyful”) toward God, for “is it not the same nature that makes the true mother and the true child? Is it not the same thought blossoming upward and blossoming downward? So there is God the Father and God the Son” (183). She will, she says, “go back” and be God’s child “more than ever,” and the Child of God with whom she explicitly identifies is God the Son: she will be like Jesus. MacDonald declares of God that “The Fatherhood and the Sonship are one, save that the Fatherhood looks down lovingly, and the Sonship looks up lovingly. Love is all” (*Sermons* 13). The essence of Divinity is giving love, and as the wife identifies with Divinity, she makes a gift of herself and her baby to God: “Thou wilt keep my little son for me [...] Here I am, do with me what thou wilt.” The baby, she realizes, is not less hers because God has taken him; he has only “gone home to be nursed” for her (183-84).

The father, too, comes to realize that God “givest not, to take again” (186). Upon hearing of the death of an old reprobate, he at first assumes that the “soiled” old man and his own pure baby must have nothing in common, and different eternal destinies (184). But when he hears of the old man’s childlike request that his nurse give him a kiss before he dies, the father thinks differently, imagining his baby interceding for the old man with a close paraphrase of Jesus’ words on the cross: “Lord, forgive this old man, for he knew not what he did” (186; Luke 23.34) And the father himself joins in this intercession. He paraphrases St. Stephen’s prayer as he was martyred: “have mercy upon the poor old man, and lay not his sins to his charge” (186; Acts 7.60).

As recorded in the book of Acts, the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, closely parallels the death of Christ, making Stephen the “type” of both Christ and all future Christian martyrs.⁵ The father, after his perceptual inversion, knew that in receiving his new baby he received Christ into his household and God into his heart. Now, however, like Stephen the martyr, he himself incarnates the Divine Childhood in an outflow of Divine love. As, with his baby (who has already been identified with the Christ-child), he performs the compassionate office of God the Son, he too is like [47] Jesus. He, like his wife, moves from receiving from God to giving himself and his family to God: “take my child and his mother and me, and do what thou wilt with us” (186). MacDonald says of Jesus: “giving himself with perfect will to God [...] He therein creates in himself a new and higher life [...] his disciple must live by the same absolute devotion of his will to the Father’s. Then is his life one with the life of the Father” (*Sermons* 422-24). This movement from receiving love to self-giving love is a critical step in MacDonald’s spiritual evolution:

Better to sit at the water’s birth
Than a sea of waves to win;
To live in the love that floweth forth
Than the love that cometh in.
Be thy heart a well of love, my child,
Flowing and free and sure;
For a cistern of love, though undefiled,
Keeps not the spirit pure. (*Phantastes* 244-45)

In Hegelian dialectic, appearances succeed one another, each, in turn, superseded in the progress toward Absolute Knowing (*Phenomenology* 95-98). A similar process occurs in this story, to the tide, “Dreaming” replaces “Life” as the middle term between Birth and Death. This might imply that life is dream, or that dream is life; I suspect that MacDonald meant both. For him, like earlier Romantics, the imagination was the gateway to truth, and in his fiction, dreams often convey God’s meaning, or the reality behind, a temporal appearance. In “Birth, Dreaming and Death,” their dreams brought the parents truths that were more real than the values and viewpoint of the material world. MacDonald was fond of Novalis’ statement, “Our life is no dream, but it may, and perhaps ought to, become one.” Late in his life he wrote that while earthly existence is a “splendid thing,” “but for my hope in God, I should feel it but a phantasmagoria” (Greville MacDonald 535).

For MacDonald, as for generations of Christian mystics, the Unseen is

realer than the Seen. This principle has an analogue in Hegel, who maintained that the concrete and particular (the material) only gains its significance through the general and abstract (the conceptual or spiritual) (*Phenomenology* 66-67). So the parents' values are inverted when they accept their dreams as the truth behind their waking perceptions of the material world, and they *aufgehoben* from being children of Deity into Divine Children when they suffer an apparent bereavement that actually eternalizes and generalizes their gain: the particular, concrete child, seemingly lost, has actually "gone home" to be "nursed" for them, and as they are able to perceive this, they are lifted into the "outgoing" blessedness of the Divine Childhood. The "loss" in one stage has left them, in the next, more able to give.

I have traced the "ethical evolution" of the characters in this story because MacDonald spells it out so explicitly that its Helgelian character is easy to see. But the process of a perceptual inversion, followed by a difficult renunciation that lifts [48] (*aufheben*) a character to a higher spiritual plane, is a frequent pattern in MacDonald's fantasy and fiction. The overall similarities between MacDonald's thought and that of Hegel are, generally speaking, those they share with other Romantics: the Pauline notion that the universal *telios* is that "God will be all in all"; that the end of the human journey is to arrive where we started, back home in God, but that the final unity is superior to the first in that it retains the individuality developed in the process; that the developmental road is a process of progressively overcoming painful contradictions and contraries that recapitulate the sufferings of Christ (Abrams 255). Their differences are, it would seem, the differences between panentheism and pantheism. Though MacDonald's descriptions of the ultimate unity between God and humanity can sound amazingly like Hegel's, MacDonald did not conceive of God as the "World-Spirit," or simply the Totality of what exists. He speaks of people as *from* God, *of* God, living and moving and having their being *in* God, but not of humanity *being* God. For Hegel, the "religious consciousness," though true, is only "picture-thinking" (*Phenomenology* 463). In the stage of Absolute Knowledge, humanity is "at home with itself in its Otherness," (Abrams 230) and recognizes the drama of creation, incarnation, redemption, resurrection, and ascension as an externalization of an internal process (*Phenomenology* 485). Although different interpretations exist, the preponderance of scholarly opinion seems to be that Hegel saw God and the World as the same entity regarded in different perspectives (Copleston 237, 292-94). MacDonald, like all Christian mystics, would affirm that the Divine drama mirrors human spiritual growth, and that knowing the

Divine drama as taking place inside oneself is a “higher” spiritual state than merely perceiving it as having happened outside, in the past, in the remote historical Christ. But he would not, I think, characterize the historical Divine drama as “picture-thinking.” His model of Divine-human unity is not Cosmic Consciousness in which the individual identifies with the Universe, but the Divine Father with all his children gathered around his hearth-fire. His model of unity-in-diversity is not the two-sided coin, but—as in “Birth, Dreaming and Death”—the family.

Look again at MacDonald’s story. Christ (the baby), comes to the family of humanity to show it that it is God’s beloved child. Then, as in John’s gospel, Christ (the baby) leaves, so that the Paraclete—the indwelling Holy Spirit, replicating in the human heart the outgoing love of God—may come. Hegel applies the same figure to the disappearance of the picture-Christ to give place to humanity’s Absolute Knowledge of itself as God (*Phenomenology* 475).

So, though their concept of the “Really Real” differs, both men see the Biblical story as recapitulated in human experience, as human consciousness progresses dialectically from the temporal experience of division and suffering to eternal unity and joy. [49]

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Notes

1. In his classic work on Romantic thought, *Natural Supernaturalism*, M. H. Abrams traces the common pattern of human development perceived by philosophers such as Fichte, Shelling, and Hegel and the German and English imaginative writers who have come to be called “Romantics.”
2. Wordsworth’s position MacDonalld called “Christian Pantheism.” He believed that, while Nature is God’s self-revelation, God is also transcendent and exists outside of nature and the material world, (panentheism). See the discussion in “Wordsworth’s Poetry” in *A Dish of Orts*.
3. See MacDonalld’s vision of the human *telios* as he describes it at the end of *Lilith*: “Now, the soul of everything I met came out to greet me and make friends with me, telling me we came from the same, and meant the same. I was going to him, they said, with whom they always were, and whom they always meant” (257).
4. Hegel says that evil—which is “self-centered being-for-self—and good—which is “simple and without a self”—are both “suspended moments” in the development of human consciousness, and, because God is All, they are therefore “suspended moments” in God as well. However, the other Hegelian antitheses, their opposition will be transcended when they are perceived as “a spiritual unity, or the unity in which the differences are present only as moments or only as suspended” (*Phenomenology* 472-73).
5. In Luke/Acts, both Stephen and Jesus work miracles and signs among the people, defeat their more traditional opponents in religious arguments, are brought to trial before the Sanhedrin and convicted on the evidence of false witnesses, and are executed forgiving their murderers. [50]