

“The Cruel Painter” as a Rewriting of the Shelley-Godwin Triangle

Jennifer Koopman

While twenty-first century audiences know MacDonald best for his fantasies, novels, and children’s fiction, he was equally or better known to his Victorian contemporaries as a literary critic and historian, who filled letters, lectures, and essays with critical debate, and who outlined the evolution of English poetry in his 1868 anthology *England’s Antiphon*. His critical contributions merit study, particularly his preoccupation with fixing literary history—fixing both in the sense of drawing a line of genealogical descent (the goal of *England’s Antiphon*), and in the sense of correcting history where it has gone awry (a less overt, but equally important function). MacDonald was especially concerned with the spiritual state of his immediate forebears, the English Romantic poets, whose visionary tradition he inherited. A late but enthusiastic flagbearer of Romanticism, MacDonald strove to emulate Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. Yet he was equally a critic, who sought in his fiction and essays to correct what he perceived to be their flaws. His critical concerns work their way into his fiction, both on the literal level of his stories—with characters debating the merits of various writers¹—as well as on a more allegorical and symbolic level. The result is fiction that mythologizes literary history, offering fables about the transmission of the poetic spirit down through the generations. He was particularly obsessed with Percy Shelley, with whom he seemed to identify. Shades of Shelley haunt his fiction, as MacDonald idealizes and reshapes the Romantic poet into an image that is much like MacDonald himself.

1. MacDonald’s Shelley

MacDonald’s fascination with Shelley finds explicit expression in the entry on Shelley he wrote for the 20th edition (1860) of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The essay (later reprinted in *A Dish of Orts*) Christianizes Shelley, as it attempts to reconcile Shelley’s radical atheism with MacDonald’s devout beliefs. MacDonald demonstrates a surprising affinity for his revolutionary predecessor, and is at pains to excuse Shelley’s apostasy, as he depicts Shelley as a Christian *manqué* who needs MacDonald to complete him. He characterizes Shelley as well-meaning but misguided atheist whose “character . . . has been sadly

maligned” (“Shelley” 101) by an unsympathetic public. Lamenting “how ill he must have been instructed in the principles of Christianity!” (102), MacDonald blames Shelley’s poor education and spiritual models, as he envisions “what a Christian he would have been, could he but have seen Christianity in any other way than through the traditional and practical misrepresentations of it which surrounded him” (102). In Shelley’s poetry, he perceives an innate goodness—evidence that “Shelley’s own feelings toward others . . . seem to be tinged with the very essence of Christianity” (102). He concludes that Shelley’s particular brand of atheism is “the next best thing to Christianity” (102) and of negligible threat to the faith of the true believer.

Besides excusing the “misunderstood . . . [and] misrepresented” (104) Shelley for his atheism, he manages also to overlook the more notorious events of Shelley’s life, which had horrified earlier audiences: Shelley’s expulsion from Oxford on charges of atheism; his elopement with Harriet Westbrook; his abandonment of Harriet so he could run away with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, the daughter of his estranged mentor William Godwin; their adventures in the Swiss Alps with Byron (who was already an infamous character); Harriet’s suicide; the suicide of Mary’s half-sister; the many infants who died; and finally Shelley’s own suspicious drowning in the Bay of Spezia in 1822. On these darker aspects of Shelley’s life MacDonald casts a most forgiving eye.²

MacDonald’s idealization of Shelley falls under a more general impulse in the Victorian world to mend Shelley’s image. This movement arose twenty years earlier, with *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1839), in which Mary Shelley attempted to reshape her husband’s posthumous reputation. In her preface to the first volume, Mary skirts over Percy’s troubling behaviour by declaring her intention to “abstain from any remark on the occurrences of his private life; except, inasmuch as the passions which they engendered” (Preface vii). She portrays Shelley as a semi-divine being whose errors ought to be forgiven implicitly: “Whatever faults he had,” she argued, “ought to find extenuation among his fellows, since they proved him to be human; without them, the exalted nature of his soul would have raised him into something divine” (Preface viii).³ Subsequent Victorians would echo Mary Shelley’s optimistic assessment. Robert Browning’s appraisal of Shelley particularly anticipates MacDonald’s, as he argues that “had Shelley lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians” (Browning 147). Matthew Arnold, by contrast, acknowledges Shelley’s faults, but insists that his angelic image would ultimately outweigh any wrongdoing: his 1888 essay “Shelley” proposes first “to mark firmly what is ridiculous and odious” in Shelley, and then to show

“that our beautiful and lovable Shelley nevertheless survives” (Arnold, “Shelley” 389). MacDonald’s emphasis on Shelley’s essential Christianity contributes to the Victorians’ growing idealization of the fallen poet. His effort to revise Shelley’s image extends beyond the encyclopedia, moreover, as Shelley finds his way into MacDonald’s fiction. His gothic fable “The Cruel Painter” offers a veiled retelling of Shelley’s life in which MacDonald corrects Shelley’s flaws. In the process, Shelley’s image becomes mingled with MacDonald’s own.

2. The Story Within: “The Cruel Painter”

Scholars have generally overlooked “The Cruel Painter,” a lurid tale published in *Adela Cathcart* in 1864. From the beginning, as Nancy Mellon recounts, “The Cruel Painter” “has been much denigrated by critics,” and she suggests that its reprinting in his 1871 story collection *Works of Fancy and Imagination* was “probably against MacDonald’s better judgment” (Mellon 37). Faced with “The Cruel Painter,” Richard Reis’s penchant for psychoanalytic interpretation escapes him, and he dismisses the story as being “entirely without symbolic resonance” (Reis 85). William Raeper admits the story’s flaws, calling it a “problematic tale . . . of cruelty and mock vampirism, whimpering out in a rather pathetic joke” (Raeper 316). Taking its grimness in stride, he suggests that the story’s exploration of “the dark side of the psyche, adapted from German romanticism” (Raeper 316), offers “a salutary reminder that even in a man as humane as MacDonald such elements have a powerful existence” (Raeper 316).⁴ Certainly, its focus on torture and vampirism, which “reveal[s] an unexpected element of violence in MacDonald’s imagination” (Raeper 316), flies in the face of his popular image as a teller of imaginative but ultimately benign tales. Most critical discussions to date are source studies: Wolff touches on “The Cruel Painter” in his consideration of MacDonald’s German influences, observing the story’s indebtedness to E. T. A. Hoffman’s tales, particularly his 1816 story *Der Artushof* (Wolff 117, 120-23, 398, 409). Roderick McGillis notes its similarity to Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (“George MacDonald and the Lilith Legend” 6), while Coleman Parsons discusses MacDonald’s use of an earlier English source, Cambridge Platonist Henry More’s 1655 religious tract *An Antidote Against Atheism*, from which MacDonald transplants several excerpts (Parsons 180-183). More recently, scholars have begun to examine the story’s gothic trappings, with Susan Ang drawing attention to MacDonald’s gothic imagination in her 2005 address to Baylor University’s centennial MacDonald conference.⁵ In a similar vein, Scott McLaren shows how “The Cruel Painter” reworks gothic conventions to

promote MacDonald’s belief in universal redemption (245-269).

I want to position “The Cruel Painter” in a new light: as a Victorian fable about literary history, one that recounts in gothic mode the transition from eighteenth-century Enlightenment to nineteenth-century Romanticism. In particular, “The Cruel Painter” contributes to MacDonald’s evolving myth of Percy Shelley, as it fictionalizes Percy and Mary Shelley’s love story—a real life source that has never been noted before. Featuring William Godwin brought to diabolical life as the sadistic “cruel painter” Teufelsbüst, the tale reworks the Shelley-Godwin triangle in fanciful form, as MacDonald excises the indecorous elements of Shelley’s personal history—his real-life abandonment of his wife Harriet Westbrook, elopement with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, and subsequent estrangement from her philosopher father. Instead, the Shelleyan hero Karl von Wolkenlicht becomes the Godwinian villain’s redeemer, saving Teufelsbüst from his wretchedness, and marrying his daughter with due decorum. As a fable about literary history, “The Cruel Painter” mythicizes Shelley’s inheritance of Godwinian ideals of freedom and justice, a transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism that MacDonald endows with all the miraculous resonances of the Christian resurrection. The tale ventures also into the realm of self-mythologizing: as the story of Shelley becomes intertwined with MacDonald’s story, it creates a history in which the heir to the Romantic tradition is MacDonald himself.

MacDonald was not the first writer to fictionalize Godwin’s story. “The Cruel Painter” has earlier analogues in the reactionary anti-Godwinian movement that arose around the turn of the nineteenth century. Following the Reign of Terror, disillusioned writers singled out Godwin as the ideological source of everything that had gone wrong in France. The decade from approximately 1795 to 1805 saw a flourishing of works that lambasted Godwin, parodying him, dismantling his doctrines of radical anarchism and his optimistic theory of the perfectibility of man, and in general reversing the Enlightenment association of Godwin with clarity, hope, and reason. Instead, many of these texts demonize him, aligning him with forces of darkness, representing him as a ruthless, depraved, and villainous Machiavell.⁶

MacDonald published “The Cruel Painter” in 1864, which by anyone’s reckoning makes it several decades too late to belong to the post-revolutionary anti-Godwinian furor. However, it is perhaps appropriate that MacDonald, as a late Romantic, should, in his own time, offer a literary response to the Revolution, which he would discuss later more directly in his 1868 *England’s Antiphon*. (By comparison, Wordsworth had published his anti-Godwinian

drama *The Borderers* quite late himself, in 1842.)⁷ For all its tardiness, “The Cruel Painter” possesses the advantage of historical perspective: unlike the earlier anti-Jacobians, MacDonald knew that post-revolutionary disenchantment would find new energy in Romanticism. Specifically, he knew that Godwin’s “expiring cause” (Allen 75) would find “a new, young disciple” in Percy Shelley, a poet who, as B. Sprague Allen describes him, “was destined to embody the sophistries of *Political Justice* in forms of intense, imperishable beauty” (75). MacDonald captures this succession in “The Cruel Painter,” evoking, in Wolkenlicht’s involvement with Teufelsbüst, Shelley’s renewal of Godwin’s visionary ardour.

The idea that Romanticism revived a world exhausted by the Enlightenment informs much of MacDonald’s writing on literary history. In the “The Cruel Painter” and other works, he portrays this historical transition as a process of spiritual renewal, in which Romanticism comes to the rescue of the degenerate Enlightenment. *England’s Antiphon*, for instance, describes Wordsworth’s poetry as the divine cure sent by God to “heal the plague” (304) of a world ravaged by revolution and misguided scientific thinking. In “The Cruel Painter,” the passage from Enlightenment to Romanticism takes on the miraculous overtones of the Christian resurrection, as MacDonald presents the Shelleyan hero as the risen savior of his fallen Godwinian mentor.⁸ “The Cruel Painter’s” hero is also a decidedly MacDonalidian hero, a resemblance that evokes MacDonald’s role in redeeming history: as Shelley rescued the fallen Godwin, taking on his visionary mantle, so MacDonald rescues Shelley, correcting his spiritual errors and redirecting the Romantic tradition onto brighter paths.

Into this tale of artistic redemption, MacDonald weaves two other myths of animation—or reanimation: the classical myth of Pygmalion, and the gothic myth of the vampire. A reanimated body without a soul, the vampire is the demonic inversion of the Christian resurrection, and embodies Teufelsbüst’s devilish art. By contrast, the story’s evocation of the Pygmalion myth suggests the Christian resurrection, while also highlighting art’s capacity to come to life and transform the world.⁹ All three myths become mingled in Wolkenlicht’s pseudo-vampiric resurrection in the creator’s studio. MacDonald’s comic merging of Christian rebirth, Pygmalionesque vivification, and vampiric reanimation redeems the vampire myth, transforming it into an optimistic myth about spiritual renewal,¹⁰ as it illustrates the Romantic belief—encapsulated in Novalis’s oft-quoted dictum “*Unser Leben ist kein Traum, aber es soll und wird vielleicht einer werden*” (Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will)—that art can and will alter reality.¹¹

Set in Prague of the 1590s, “The Cruel Painter” recounts the love story of the university student Karl von Wolkenlicht, and Lilith, the daughter of the titular “cruel painter,” Teufelsbüst. Teufelsbüst’s name, which means Devilsbrush, reflects his perverse obsession with painting scenes of torture. His tableaux all feature a lovely woman, who floats in pristine detachment from the surrounding horror, and who is generally identified as either his daughter Lilith, or his late wife, who is often confused with their daughter. Wolkenlicht first meets young Lilith in the cemetery, where she weeps upon her mother’s grave, and where Wolkenlicht instantly falls in love with her. In order to win her heart, he applies to study painting with Teufelsbüst, who accepts the new pupil for sadistic reasons of his own. The apprenticeship is a sham on both sides: what Karl really wants is to get close to Lilith, and what Teufelsbüst wants is an unwitting subject on whom he can carry out secret drug experiments. As time passes, Teufelsbüst relishes observing Karl’s deterioration, while Karl, in spite of his nightly dose of drugged wine, falls increasingly in love with Lilith, who remains aloof. Meanwhile, a plague of vampires descends upon the city, wreaking mayhem and terror.

One dark and stormy night, Karl collapses from the drugs. Believing him dead, Teufelsbüst encases Karl’s body in plaster to make a mould of his attractively proportioned body. Reports of vampires prime Teufelsbüst for terror, so that, when a blast of lightning shakes the studio, he abandons his work and flees. The electrical storm revives Karl, who was not dead but comatose. Disoriented by the drugs, the storm, the plaster chrysalis, and the black velvet pall draped over him, Karl initially believes himself to be a newly awoken vampire; however, his hot-blooded love for Lilith convinces him that he is alive after all. Nevertheless, he continues the vampire charade, haunting the house and secretly altering Teufelsbüst’s paintings so that Lilith is erased from each picture, and Teufelsbüst added as the torturer of each scene. Lilith discovers Karl’s secret and becomes his collaborator in the ghostly farce, while the terrified Teufelsbüst succumbs to complete anguish. Finally, Karl reveals himself to be alive, a shock that brings Teufelsbüst’s gruesome work to an end. After a season of inactivity, Teufelsbüst emerges from creative paralysis and resumes painting. Purged of badness, his art has a prophetic—and a Pygmalion—effect: his first new painting, depicting Karl and Lilith united in domestic bliss, comes to life, as Karl and Lilith confess their love and marry at last. The story’s conclusion finds Teufelsbüst transformed into a jolly grandfather “half smothered in grandchildren” (414).

If it is not enough that the hero, a brilliant university student, romances the

unhappy heroine on her dead mother's grave, and that the heroine should be lonely and neglected by her crabbed, cynical, outcast and authoritarian father, numerous other details point to the parallel between "The Cruel Painter" and Percy Shelley's involvement with the Godwin household.

Karl von Wolkenlicht is a glowing, air-brushed image of Percy Shelley. He resembles actual descriptions of Shelley, both those offered by MacDonald in his 1860 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry, and by contemporary biographers. A "somewhat careless" (380) university student noted for his "mental agility" (380) and fondness for logical propositions, Wolkenlicht resembles Shelley of the *Encyclopaedia* entry, who "dressed well but carelessly" ("Shelley" 103), and was "especially fond of logical discussion" at Oxford ("Shelley" 101). Like Shelley, Wolkenlicht is a feminized figure, who displays a "softness of muscular outline" (380), "gentleness of manner and behaviour" (380), and "such a rare Greek-like style of beauty" (380) that he is "known throughout the university by the diminutive of the feminine form of his name" (381), *Lottchen*. His girlish good looks echo MacDonald's descriptions of Shelley, whose "complexion was delicate; his head, face, and features, remarkably small. . . in expression, both intellectual and moral, wonderfully beautiful" ("Shelley" 103). Shelley's contemporaries Edward Trelawny and Thomas Hogg also described Shelley in similar terms. Trelawny depicts his friend as a "mild-looking beardless boy" (13-14), "blushing like a girl," with his "flushed, feminine, artless face" (13), and Hogg describes Shelley as possessing "'a softness, a delicacy, a gentleness'" (qtd. in Arnold, "Shelley" 388). At the same time, Wolkenlicht displays conventional manly athleticism, in his "corporeal excellence" (380), "remarkable strength" (380), and success in "all games depending upon the combination of muscle and skill" (380). This union of masculine and feminine characteristics further recalls Shelley: as Trelawny recorded, though Shelley's "head was remarkably small, and his features . . . expressive of great sensibility and decidedly feminine; his softness of expression and mild bearing were deceptive," as "you soon found out he was a resolute, self-sustaining man" (149). Wolkenlicht's embodiment of Shelleyan opposites extends to his German surname, which translates as "cloud light," and suggests Karl to be a kind of walking, talking incarnation of Shelley's Mont Blanc, with its "cloud shadows and sunbeams" ("Mont Blanc" 15), or the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty's" "clouds in starlight" (9).

Wolkenlicht and Lilith's romance replays Shelley and Mary Godwin's relationship, but without the unsavory details. The essentials nevertheless remain. Lilith, like Mary, is easily confused with her mother: Mary shared her

mother’s name, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, while Lilith shares her mother’s appearance (as evident in people’s identifying the mystery woman in her father’s paintings as both his wife and his daughter). Lilith’s social withdrawal—she “went nowhere . . . knew nobody . . . was never seen at church, or at market; never seen in the street” (383)—evokes Mary Godwin’s lonely and deprived childhood, as does her father’s refusal to discuss her mother: ““Child!. . .you have no mother. Put no name in my hearing on that which is not”” (391). Even more telling, Karl’s discovery of Lilith “seated upon [her mother’s. . .] new-made grave. . .with her face in her hands . . . and weeping bitterly” (382), recalls Percy’s early encounters with Mary, whom he romanced at her mother’s gravesite. As the indignant Godwin reported in 1814, “On Sunday, June 26, he [Percy Shelley] accompanied Mary, & her sister, Jane Clairmont, to the tomb of Mary’s mother, one mile distant from London; & there, it seems, the impious idea first occurred to him of seducing her, playing the traitor to me, & deserting his wife” (Godwin to John Taylor, 1814, in *The Elopement of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin* 11). MacDonald’s fictionalization, of course, leaves out the adultery, impiety, desertion, and elopement. Instead, MacDonald makes the Shelleyesque Wolkenlicht a heroic figure that renews familial bonds.

In dark contrast to Wolkenlicht’s glowing perfection looms Teufelsbürost, the gothic incarnation of William Godwin’s scientific rationalism. In real life, Godwin became the target of popular fear and loathing in the years succeeding the French Revolution. In his own account, “after the excesses in France had started a violent reaction against those principles of the Revolution which were held responsible for the crimes committed to the cry “Liberty and fraternity,” many of his friends deserted the cause of freedom, and he, alone having remained faithful, had found himself the object of criticism, at first respectful and judicial, and later by degrees more bitterly hostile and insulting” (Godwin, in Allen 57-58). His 1798 *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Godwin’s biography of his late wife Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, stirred further public outrage. The *Memoirs* shocked readers and shattered literary decorum in their unstinting depiction of Wollstonecraft’s love affairs, suicide attempts, and the gynecological details of her death following childbirth. As Richard Holmes explains, while Godwin’s “frankness and sincerity were of course nothing less than revolutionary at the time . . . aris[ing] directly from the anarchist principles of sincerity and plain-speaking which he enshrined in *Political Justice*” (44), his laying bare of Wollstonecraft’s life damaged her posthumous reputation, and undermined what little respect remained for their

political cause. Eventually, public hostility and personal disappointment led Godwin to retire from public life.

MacDonald captures Godwin's bitterness in Teufelsbüst's misanthropy. Like Godwin, the painter is a prominent figure "Belonging . . . to the public" (384); yet, again like Godwin, his public has vilified him, as the citizens of Prague take "the liberty of re-naming him Teufelsbüst, or Devilsbrush" (384). Teufelsbüst's "hate of humanity" (385) and the "dreary, desolate aspect" (383) of his home suggest the increasingly "prickly and truculent" (St Clair 476) Godwin. Teufelsbüst's paintings of tortured figures, "all beautiful in the original idea" (384), but marred deliberately with "the artillery of anguish" (384), recall the failure and deterioration of Godwin's grand ideas. Rumours about Teufelsbüst's late wife hint also at the *Memoirs*' account of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin's infidelity: "Some had said . . . she had been false to him; that he had killed her; and, finding that that was not sufficing revenge, thus half in love, half in deepest hate, immortalized his vengeance" (386) by inserting her image into each of his grisly paintings.¹² Her supreme indifference to the surrounding torture victims—"She did not hate, she did not love the sufferers" (385)—suggests, moreover, the emotional detachment and perceived heartlessness of Godwin's writing style. Godwin's memoir of his wife offended readers not simply in the intimate details it divulged; equally shocking was its unembellished language. Today's readers, accustomed to minimalist writing styles, easily grasp the anguish of Godwin's understated prose; however, readers of the 1790s, used to sentimental, overwritten melodrama, were horrified by Godwin's dry, rational style. The emotional removal of the mystery woman in Teufelsbüst's paintings, caught "smiling over a primrose or the bloom on a peach" (386) while beside her "the red blood was trickling drop by drop from the crushed limb" (385-86), suggests the chillingly distant tone of rational, objective writing.

Teufelsbüst's art illustrates more broadly MacDonald's misgivings about scientific rationalism. In general, MacDonald upholds Romantic mystery over rational inquiry, a preference typical of many thinkers of the time, who found the pursuit of scientific knowledge to be a dubious enterprise, and agreed with Wordsworth that "we murder to dissect" ("The Tables Turned" 28). His suspicion of rational systems seems to have emerged quite early on. As a student at King's College, Aberdeen, where he studied Natural Philosophy (what we would now call Physics), MacDonald wrote to his father that "we are far too anxious to be definite and to have finished, well-polished, sharp-edged systems—forgetting that the more perfect a theory about the infinite, the surer it

is to be wrong” (15 April 1851; in *George MacDonald and His Wife* 155). Teufelsbüst exemplifies the danger of forsaking divine mystery for rational inquiry, as his art becomes a monstrous scientific pursuit. He executes his art with cold logic: working “in perfect accordance with artistic law, falsifying no line of the original forms” (384), he paints with scientific precision, producing work that is both well-polished and sharp-edged. Wolkenlicht goes to him not to learn the art of painting, but rather to “grind his colours” and learn “the mysteries of the science which is the handmaiden of art” (386). Like any good scientist, Teufelsbüst loves to conduct experiments, and relishes the chance to use Wolkenlicht as an unwitting subject:

His opportunities of seeing physical suffering were nearly enough even for the diseased necessities of his art; but now he had one in his power, on whom . . . *he could try any experiments he pleased for the production of a kind of suffering of which he did not consider that he had yet sufficient experience.* He would hold the very heart of the youth in his hand, and torture it to his own content. (388, emphasis added)

The description of Teufelsbüst’s experimental bent recurs in near paraphrase four years later in *England’s Antiphon*, in MacDonald’s description of eighteenth-century rationalists: “The worshippers of science will themselves allow, that *when they cannot gain observations enough to satisfy them upon a point in which a law of nature is involved they must, if possible, institute experiments*” (316, emphasis added). The “torture” (388) of Teufelsbüst’s drug experiments suggests anxiety about scientific research, as does the painting of Karl’s (imagined) vivisection, which portrays Karl “just beginning to recover from a trance, while a group of surgeons, unaware of the signs of returning life, were absorbed in a minute dissection of one of the limbs” (407).

Science itself is not to blame, however. For MacDonald, who believed in the primacy of the imagination above other more intellectual faculties,¹³ the real problem lies not in the scientific mind, but in the depraved imagination it serves. “The Cruel Painter” reflects MacDonald’s preoccupation with imaginative experience, particularly his Romantic concern with the nature and state of the dreaming mind. Teufelsbüst’s art and experimentation are part and parcel of the same bad package: a diseased imagination that has succumbed to godless influences. His inspiration emerges from distinctly Romantic visions, as his ideas come “In the moments that precede sleep, when the black space before the eyes of the poet teems with lovely faces, or dawns into a spirit-landscape” (384). Instead of lovely faces, however, Teufelsbüst’s “evil fancy” (384) summons

infernal visions, as “face after face of suffering, in all varieties of expression, would crowd, as if compelled by the accompanying fields, to present themselves, in awful levée, before the inner eye of the expectant master” (384). His drug experiments target Karl’s imagination, “exercising specific actions upon the brain, and tending to the inordinate excitement of those portions of it which are principally under the rule of the imagination” (391). The drugs heighten the imagination’s natural function: as a result of “these stimulants, the imagination is filled with suggestions and images . . . They are such as the imagination would produce of itself, but increased in number and intensity” (391-392).¹⁴ Karl’s consequent physical deterioration emphasizes that the overall effect of drugs is not enhancement, but rather degeneration.

While Karl’s collapse measures the physical consequences of Teufelsbüst’s devilish pursuits, the plague of vampirism suggests even graver spiritual consequences. The epidemic originates in Teufelsbüst’s shadowy neighbour, John Kuntz,¹⁵ a name close enough (for English ears) to the German Kunst, or “art,” to suggest that the vampire plague is the demonic incarnation of Teufelsbüst’s art.¹⁶ An animated body with unresurrected soul, the vampire offers a diabolical inversion of the Pygmalion story, highlighting the godless, destructive, and devouring nature of Teufelsbüst’s unredeemed imagination. The vampire plague suggests also the extreme outcome of Godwinian thinking: the French Revolution. Like many critics, MacDonald believed the revolution to have been the natural outcome of misguided Enlightenment thinking, the “supreme regard for science, and the worship of power” (*England’s Antiphon* 303) gone terribly wrong:

the antidote to the disproportionate cultivation of science, is simply power in its crude form—breaking out, that is, as brute force. When science, isolated and glorified, has produced a contempt . . . for the truths which are incapable of scientific proof, then as we see in the French Revolution, the wild beast in man breaks from its den, and chaos returns. (*England’s Antiphon* 303)

As is typical of vampire literature, MacDonald describes vampire activity as an infectious illness—vampires are an “epidemic” (394) that “infested” (394) the city with an “infection” (394) of fear; yet the spectral plague manifests itself not in any conventional signs of pestilence, but in violence, murder, and mayhem—conditions that are more suggestive of revolutionary chaos than of plague. The vampire Kuntz

strangled old men; insulted women; squeezed children to death;
knocked the brains of dogs against the ground; pulled up posts;
turned milk to blood; nearly killed a worthy clergyman by

breathing upon him the intolerable air of the grave; and, in short, filled the city with a perfect madness of fear. (394-395)

Earlier writers also evoked vampirism to describe France’s revolutionary bloodbath, notably Edmund Burke, who, as Pamela Clemit observes, frequently “drew on images of monstrosity and disease to bring home the revolutionaries’ perversion of the natural order” (Clemit 149).¹⁷ Appropriately, the vampire reports affect Teufelsbüst more than anyone else: “the philosopher himself could not resist the infection of fear that was literally raging in the city; and perhaps the reports that he himself had sold himself to the devil had sufficient response from his own evil conscience to add to the influence of the epidemic upon him” (394). At the height of the vampire infestation, when all hell literally seems to be breaking loose, MacDonald, hinting strongly at Godwin, stops calling Teufelsbüst a painter, and calls him outright “the philosopher” (394).

Whereas Teufelsbüst is associated with the unhallowed raising of the dead, his daughter is associated with the inverse: the inability to come alive. MacDonald’s depiction of Lilith as a frozen flower offers a sentimental image for her thwarted development: dwelling “in the condition of a rose-bud, which, on the point of blossoming, had been chilled into a changeless bud by the cold of an untimely frost” (389), Lilith “seemed like one whose love had rushed out glowing with seraphic fire, to be frozen to death in more than wintry snow” (391), “a frozen bud . . . [that] could not blossom into a rose” (391). The impassive female figure in her father’s paintings offers a more chilling image of Lilith’s emotional frigidity, earning her the reputation for being “a beauty without a heart” (386). Her sepulchral meditations—not to mention her habit of lingering in the cemetery—further link her to the realm of the dead, as she mourns the loss of her loved ones—“the earth could not bear more children, except she devoured those to whom she had already given birth” (397)—and fantasizes about meeting Karl beyond the grave: “What if men and women did not die all out, but some dim shade of each, like that pale, mind-ghost of Wolkenlicht, floated through the eternal vapours of chaos? And what if they might sometimes cross each other’s path, meet, know that they met, love on?” (397). In her funereal outlook, Lilith resembles Mary Godwin, who, as Maggie Kilgour observes, “was haunted by death and loss since her birth” (Kilgour, “One Immortality” 564), and yearned to reunite with Shelley in the afterlife.¹⁸ Lilith’s preoccupation with death also recalls MacDonald’s obsession with death.

For MacDonald, however, the grave is only a road stop on the path to rebirth and transcendence. He portrays Lilith’s transformation as a Pygmalionesque release from the soulless aesthetic realm and into life and love. Karl and Lilith’s

macabre charade, in which they disguise themselves as revenants in order to terrorize Teufelsbüst into submission, signals Lilith's liberation from passivity, as she springs into action for the first time. While their pseudo-haunting is only a play on the idea of union in death, it has real-life results, as it prompts Teufelsbüst's spiritual rebirth, and ultimately the lovers' marriage. The description of Teufelsbüst's transformation emphasizes the regenerative capacity of redemption, evoking conventional oppositions of sterility vs. fertility, as "the ice of silence and inactivity was broken, and . . . the spring of his art flowed once more" (414). Karl and Lilith's literal proliferation further suggests renewal, as they produce enough babies to keep Teufelsbüst "half-smothered in grandchildren" (414).

MacDonald's fable about the Godwins and the Shelleys evokes another—and far better known—story about the Shelley-Godwin family, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.¹⁹ Like "The Cruel Painter," Shelley's tale about "the enticements of science" (*Frankenstein* 33) grapples with the problem of creative energy gone wrong. Parallels abound, beginning with the fact that each creator appears in the work's title. While Shelley's tale explicitly evokes the myth of Prometheus, both it and MacDonald's story address the dark side of Ovid's myth of Pygmalion, as they depict the horror of having one's art come to life. "The Cruel Painter" mirrors key scenes from *Frankenstein*: Teufelsbüst encases Karl's body alone, at night, in his studio, during an electrical storm—a scene that replays *Frankenstein*'s "dreary night of November" (*Frankenstein* 38). Like Victor Frankenstein, whose employment is "loathesome in itself" but has "an irresistible hold" on his imagination (*Frankenstein* 37), Teufelsbüst's work at once absorbs him "in the artistic enjoyment of a form" (399), and terrifies him, as the "gnomes of terror" (399) set to work in his brain. Moreover, like Shelley's fearful creator, Teufelsbüst flees at the moment of the creature's awakening (399). The electrical storm that revives the comatose Karl offers another nod to Shelley's novel: MacDonald, who would have known from Shelley's introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* of the Shelleys' interest in Galvanic experiments, attributes Karl's revival to the "influence of the electric condition of the atmosphere" (400).²⁰ Both creators, moreover, consider their creatures to be vampires, who, in both cases, provide an image for the destructiveness of their creator's power: while Victor regards his monster "nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave" (*Frankenstein* 57), Teufelsbüst believes he has created a real vampire in Karl. Both creators project their self-loathing onto their creations. Frankenstein abhors his "filthy creation" (*Frankenstein* 36), which reflects the "horrors" of his

“secret toil . . . among the unhallowed damp of the grave” (*Frankenstein* 36). His creature shares his hatred, calling himself “an abortion to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on” (*Frankenstein* 222). Teufelsbüst also hates his work: “disgusted at the abortions of his own mind” (407), he begins to “experience a kind of shrinking from” (407) his artistic employment, a visceral revulsion that recalls *Frankenstein*’s gestational nightmare. Both men are haunted by their dark art, a theme developed in both works through the use of window scenes in which the creator finds himself the object of his creature’s observation. The moment in *Frankenstein* when Victor looks up to see, “by the light of the moon, the dæmon at the casement” (*Frankenstein* 252), is repeated in a similar scene of “The Cruel Painter”: “The moon was shining clear, and in its light the painter saw, to his horror, the pale face staring in at his window” (402). That both Teufelsbüst’s faux-vampire and *Frankenstein*’s creature see themselves as fearful, solitary monsters reinforces the similarities—*Wolkenlicht* believes himself to be “the last-born vampire of the vampire race” (400), and *Frankenstein*’s unfortunate creature languishes in self-hatred from beginning to end.

MacDonald’s tendency to rewrite and correct Percy Shelley extends to Mary Shelley’s work as well. No mere copy of *Frankenstein*, “The Cruel Painter” offers a happy undoing of Shelley’s dismal fable. *Wolkenlicht*’s trajectory is comedic rather than tragic: unlike *Frankenstein*’s wretched creature, Karl discovers that he isn’t a fiend, but a legitimate mortal. Karl’s story ends with plenty of joking about as he saves his master, gains a wife, and lives happily ever after in domestic complacency—all inversions of *Frankenstein*’s story of revenge, isolation, and exile. Furthermore, in contrast to *Frankenstein*’s monster, who models himself after Milton’s Satan, *Wolkenlicht* becomes the opposite, a Christ figure who redeems the tale’s satanic star, as he descends into a death and is resurrected a half-week later. MacDonald even evokes Christ’s legendary harrowing of hell in Karl’s vampiric visit to the home of his fellow-student, Heinrich *Höllentrachen*, or “Hell’s Jaws” (404), where he and his friend plot how best to trick Teufelsbüst: “somehow or other the old demon-painter must be tamed” (404). Karl’s entombment in the “awful white chrysalis” (399) of his plaster mould offers another image of resurrection, hinting at the butterfly / Psyche imagery conventionally associated with the Christian resurrection. The description of his tomb as a “huge misshapen nut, with a corpse for its kernel” (399) that looks as “if dropped from some tree of chaos, haggard with the snows of eternity” (399) also implies seasonal regeneration.²¹ The images of the giant chrysalis and deformed nut, though grotesque, both suggest the possibility of

redemption: the cocoon will give way to the butterfly, the nut will yield a tree. Unlike *Frankenstein*, monstrosity is not a final condition, but a temporary state that heralds the advent of change and improvement.

“The Cruel Painter’s” redemption of a satanic figure enacts one of MacDonald’s pet heresies, his preoccupation with the possibility that the devil might (at least in theory) achieve salvation. MacDonald never explicitly professed such a belief; the closest he came was to suggest, as his son reported, “that some provision was made for the heathen after death” (*George MacDonald and His Wife* 178). His novels, however, such as *Robert Falconer* (1868) and *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865), articulate more overtly the possibility of satanic redemption. In *Robert Falconer*, Eric Ericson declares that “if God was as good as I would like him to be, the devils themselves would repent” (101). Robert Falconer offers a distinctly Shelleyan response to *Paradise Lost*, as he “could not help sympathizing with Satan, and feeling—I do not say thinking—that the Almighty was pompous, scarcely reasonable, and somewhat vengeful” (*Robert Falconer* 93).²² In *Alec Forbes*, Cosmo Cupples, another fallen visionary, challenges the troubled Calvinist Thomas Crann (whose doctrine of predestination has the devil damned from the beginning) to “jist suppose . . . gin the de’il war to repent” (422). Cupples reasons that Satan’s damnation is uncertain, because the Bible does not tell us one way or the other, and he suggests that God might be leaving the matter vague for the good reason that “maybe, whiles, he [God] doesna tell’s a thing jist to gar’s think about it, and be ready for the time when he will tell’s” (422). Whether the cruel painter’s fate arises out of MacDonald’s Romantic sympathy for the devil’s party, out of his post-Calvinist resistance to predestinarian doctrine, or (most likely) out of a combination of the two, the story offers a striking parable about the possibility of infinite grace, grace that hinges on the prophetic capacity of art to change the living world. Certainly, MacDonald seems to be attempting to bring the anarchic Godwin into the fold—the pun on his name, Godwin, was surely not lost on MacDonald—and along with him his lost sheep of a son-in-law Percy Shelley, and, though perhaps not Mary Shelley herself, then at least her forlorn Frankensteinian creature. While Mary Shelley may not need redeeming, “The Cruel Painter” at least grants her the happy ending she lacked in real life, a stable marriage and placid home life.

“The Cruel Painter” captures faithfully many of the details of Percy and Mary Shelley’s romance (idealized dead mother, authoritarian philosopher father, neglected daughter, brilliant suitor, graveyard romance). However, the new world revealed at the end fails to follow through, even metaphorically, with the

reality of the Shelley-Godwin story. There is no abandonment, elopement, estrangement, suicide, dead babies, or drowning. Instead, the tale ends with a Victorian vision of domesticity. The tale illustrates best MacDonald’s tendency to Christianize Shelley, suggesting a desire to correct and redeem the indecorous elements of his personal history.

Even more suggestively, MacDonald redeems Shelley and Godwin in a way that identifies both men with MacDonald. With the tale concluding in a family castle with heaps of children running about, the vision looks increasingly like MacDonald’s life.²³ While MacDonald the mystical writer of theological fairy tales may seem worlds apart from Godwin the radical atheist philosopher, they share numerous similarities. Both Godwin and MacDonald were educated by strict Calvinists, an upbringing against which both rebelled, although this did not stop either from becoming ordained in the church. Both later gave up the ministry, and turned to writing to earn their livelihoods. Both suffered from debilitating illnesses as they struggled to support their families. Both possessed a certain naivety and disingenuousness. Both wrote books for children. From a letter to his wife, we know that MacDonald was surprised to discover that Godwin had attended the same theological school as himself: he writes of having read Godwin’s novel *Caleb Williams*, but being “more interested in the fact that Godwin the writer and father of Mrs. Shelley was at Hoxton Academy then Unitarian in his youth, but himself a Calvinist and preached like the other students in the dissenting chapel than in the powerful story about London” (George MacDonald to Louisa MacDonald, 4 Oct. 1853).²⁴ To what extent MacDonald might have identified with Godwin beyond this fact is impossible to say. On the whole, MacDonald handled life’s adversity with more grace than Godwin, but then MacDonald never faced quite the slings and arrows that Godwin did—there was no Percy Shelley swooping into his life and running off with his daughters—nor did he tempt public disapproval by writing inflammatory political works. While I would not want to make too much of the parallels between MacDonald and Godwin, the similarities are very suggestive. “The Cruel Painter” is a story of succession that recounts more than Percy Shelley’s transformation of William Godwin’s revolutionary legacy. As Shelley’s story becomes MacDonald’s story, the tale positions MacDonald as the heir apparent to their visionary tradition.

3. The Story Within: Adela Cathcart

So far I have treated “The Cruel Painter” as an independent story; however, the plot thickens as the surrounding narrative layers enter into play. Though

often anthologized independently, “The Cruel Painter” appeared originally in the novel *Adela Cathcart*. The novel’s narrative frame amplifies the Shelleyan resonances and complicates the problem of artistic redemption. *Adela Cathcart* combines the domestic romance plot of the Victorian three-volume novel with a Boccaccian frame story, as the book recounts the tales told by a “story club” formed by Colonel Cathcart and his friends over the Christmas holiday. The story club has a dual purpose: to while away the winter nights, and, more ambitiously, to cure Adela, Colonel Cathcart’s daughter, who is “dying of ennui” (376)—a malady that her physician, Harry Armstrong, believes to be of a spiritual rather than a physiological nature. Armstrong hopes that the story club will “furnish a better mental table” (52) for Adela, by offering “good spiritual food” (53) that will “set her foraging in new direction for the future” (52).

Though multiple characters tell stories in *Adela Cathcart*, the storytellers are all pronouncedly MacDonalidian. As Nancy Mellon point out, John Smith the narrator, for all his conspicuous anonymity—he introduces himself as an undistinguished middle-aged bachelor who is “none the worse” (5) for the anonymity of his name—is “an obvious portrait of George MacDonald” (29)—minus marriage and children, of course—and the various male members of the story-club, Dr. Armstrong included, “are exaggerated portraits of different types of person whom MacDonald himself might have become” (Mellon 29). The club’s multiple MacDonalidian storytellers suggest the transformational power that MacDonald may have hoped his work would have, as they enact the Romantic hope that art can and will rescue benighted souls from spiritual distress. His fictional self-projection, in which he splits himself into different types, also allows him to identify with particular people whom he admired, as I have shown above in the discussion of Godwin and Shelley.

While MacDonald’s self-projection allows him to identify with certain people, it also allows him to repress the less desirable characteristics of his favorites. One male character stands out as distinctly unMacDonalidian—and strongly Shelleyan: Percy Cathcart, Adela’s ne’r-do-well cousin. Percy hopes to marry Adela, yet he scarcely shows his affection, “paying ten times the attention to the dogs and horses” (376). He attends the story club, but never contributes a tale, dismissing it as “all a confounded bore. They’re nothing but goody humbug, or sentimental whining” (277). Instead, he uses the opportunity to stare at Adela (243) and to keep his eye on his rival for her affection, Armstrong. Like Percy Shelley in MacDonald’s *Encyclopaedia* entry, Percy Cathcart resists Christianity, a rebellious stance that (as with Shelley) results from his misdirected upbringing: as Percy complains, “My old mother made me hate

[going to church]” (23). Unlike the poet, however, the “common-place [and] selfish” (14) Percy is an irreverent boor, who sprinkles his conversation with *devil* and *damnation*, declares Sundays to be “a horrid bore” (23), and skips church services (17)—yet is haunted continually by the feeling that somehow he “ought to be there” (23) and lingers in the churchyard so he can catch Adela on the way out (21). With his “repellent” (8) countenance, “reddish” (276) eyes, “self-approving tone” (8), and “drawl” (8), Percy Cathcart offers the darker, more realist counterpart to the fabular perfection of “The Cruel Painter”’s Karl Wolkenlicht.

Percy Shelley and Percy Cathcart’s identities become intertwined in the winter landscape, which provides a key image for the dormant state of their souls. On Christmas Day, Smith observes the earth’s “wintered countenance” (16), which reminds him of verses by Crashaw, who “always suggested to me Shelley turned a Catholic Priest” (16). MacDonald echoes Smith’s comparison in *England’s Antiphon*, commenting that Crashaw, “reminds me of Shelley, in the silvery shine and bell-like melody both of his verse and his imagery” (*England’s Antiphon* 238). Like Shelley, Crashaw “belongs to that class of men who seem hardly ever to get foot-hold of this world, but are ever floating in the upper air of it” (*England’s Antiphon* 238). Smith’s projection of Shelley onto Crashaw repeats the strategy of “The Cruel Painter,” in which MacDonald reads an earlier writer, Henry More, through a later one. This superimposition of Shelley on past writers suggests how peculiarly central Shelley was to MacDonald, as Shelley becomes the lens through which MacDonald reads literary history, including his own role in that history.

The winter imagery suggests hope for Percy Shelley’s redemption, as MacDonald highlights winter’s implicit promise of renewal. As in “The Cruel Painter,” which depicts Teufelsbüst’s conversion and Lilith’s transformation as a process of vernal regeneration, the promise of spring always accompanies *Adela Cathcart*’s descriptions of winter. For Smith, snow symbolizes the chief error of Shelley’s poetry, which destroyed the truth even as it tried to beautify it: “This white world is the creation of a poet such as Shelley, in whom the fancy was too much for the intellect. Fancy settles upon anything; half destroys its form, half beautifies it with something that is not its own” (312). To restate matters in the language of veiling and revelation that both MacDonald and Shelley use in other works, Shelley’s poetic veil, like the snow, concealed and distorted, rather than revealed. As Smith argues, the fancifulness of Shelley’s vision prevented his imagination from exercising fully its regenerative power: “the true creative imagination, the form-seer, and the form-bestower, falls like the rain in the

spring night, vanishing amid the roots of the trees; not settling upon them in clouds of wintry white, but breaking forth from them in clouds of summer green” (312). Smith’s positioning of Shelley amid images of seasonal change suggests that even Shelley might be transformed and renewed: his musing on Shelley and the winter landscape proceeds to observations of nascent spring in the “green grass . . . peeping up through the glittering frost” (17). The winter imagery is also pronouncedly Shelleyan, as it recalls “The Ode to the West Wind”’s mingling of seasonal and spiritual resurrection in its hopeful question, “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (70).

Ralph Armstrong’s subsequent Christmas sermon reinforces the promise of cyclical regeneration that Smith saw in the winter landscape. Armstrong uses the metaphor of seasonal change to illustrate how human sin and error are all part of God’s plan for redemption:

“It is not high summer alone that is God’s. The winter also is His . . . Winter . . . does not belong to death, although the outside of it looks like death. Beneath the snow, the grass is growing. Below the frost, the roots are warm and alive . . . Winter is in truth the small beginning of spring.” (18-19)

In typical MacDonalidian inversion, Armstrong’s sermon reverses beginning and end, so that winter, conventionally a sign of age and death, heralds instead Christ’s birth, and the infancy of spiritual rebirth:

“Into this childhood of the year must we all descend. It is as if God spoke to each of us according to our need: My son, my daughter you are growing old and cunning, you must grow a child again, with my son, this blessed child . . . You are growing old and petty, and weak, and foolish—you must become a child—my child, like the baby there, that strong sunrise of faith and hope and love, lying in his mother’s arms in the stable.” (19)

The sermon provides a thematic bridge connecting discussions of Percy Shelley and Percy Cathcart, with winter offering a unifying thread of imagery over the course of events. First, Smith meditates on Shelley and the winter landscape on the way to church. At church, Armstrong preaches about winter and spiritual redemption. Finally, on the way out of church, Smith encounters Percy Cathcart lounging in the snowy graveyard, where he waits for Adela, “standing astride of an infant’s grave, with his hands in his pockets and an air of condescending satisfaction on his countenance” (21). Percy’s cavalier posturing reflects his rejection of the Christmas miracle, and situates him literally in the realm of wintry death. The scene repeats the death-baby imagery of Armstrong’s sermon, hinting that the infancy of his spiritual birth may be at hand. His graveyard

loitering recalls also Karl Wolkenlicht’s romancing of Lilith on her mother’s tomb, with all its Shelleyan resonances. As a result, Wolkenlicht and Cathcart appear, respectively, as dark and light replayings of Shelley’s cemeterial romancing of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. Percy Cathcart embodies the unsaved, degenerate Shelley, providing a dark double of Karl Wolkenlicht, who is a glorious projection of the redeemed Shelley. Bad as he is, however, Percy Cathcart is not beyond redemption. MacDonald endows him with a promising sense of uncertainty: for all Percy’s desire to reject his mother’s church-going ways, he “‘can’t get it out of my head that I ought to be there, even when I’m driving tandem to Richmond” (23), a state of doubt that is reflected in the vernal promise of the thawing landscape.

Percy Cathcart faces a more palpable double in the figure of his rival, the surgeon Harry Armstrong, who embodies, in name and physique, MacDonald’s muscular Christian ideal. An accomplished horseman with “well-opened hazel eyes”(21) and a “fine, frank, brown, country-looking face” (21), Armstrong possesses, as Colonel Cathcart recognizes, a true Christian heart: “‘A fine muscle is a fine thing; but the finest muscle of all, keeping the others going too, is the heart itself. That is the true Christian muscle” (424). Armstrong’s piety marks him as unusual in his field: as Bloomfield the schoolmaster recognizes, Harry stands out in his possessing “‘queer notions” (29) of belief, “‘for a medical man. He goes to church, for instance” (30).²⁵ His Christian allegory “The Cruel Painter” has the most decisive impact on Adela’s health—appropriate in a book in which storytelling provides the medical cure for spiritual ailment. While the tale disturbs some listeners—it “made . . . [Mrs. Bloomfield’s] flesh creep” (415) and Mrs. Cathcart “could not see any good in founding a story upon a superstition” (415)—Adela’s response is the opposite: “it was not the horror of the story that had taken chief hold of her mind. Her face was full of suppressed light, and she was evidently satisfied—or shall I call it gratified?—as well as delighted with the tale. Something or other in it had touched her not only deeply, but nearly” (416). With “The Cruel Painter,” Adela’s health tilts toward improvement, a transformation reflected in the changing weather: a “slow thaw set in; . . . islands of green began to appear amid the “wan water” of the snow The graves in the churchyard lifted up their green altars of earth, as the first whereon to return thanks for the prophecy of spring” (419). The curative power of Armstrong’s story implies the significance of MacDonald’s career choice, suggesting that a life devoted to writing fiction is as useful as—and possibly better than—the physician’s career. While the medical man may cure a diseased body, the writer can do something

even more exalted: he can save the ailing soul.

The story that cures Adela and redeems Shelley also marks the onset of Percy Cathcart's improvement. A mirroring effect occurs, as MacDonald embeds "The Cruel Painter's" story of redemption within the story of Percy Cathcart's transformation. The chapter that immediately precedes "The Cruel Painter" is entitled simply "Percy" (Volume 3, Chapter 5 in the triplex edition), an ambiguity that hints at the connection between Percy Cathcart in the outer story, and the veiled Percy Shelley of the inner tale. On a literal level, "Percy" recounts the climactic meeting of Adela's two suitors, the dissolute Percy and the idealized Harry; yet their confrontation also mirrors the unspoken tension at the root of "The Cruel Painter," between the actual Shelley and MacDonald's idealized version. During the altercation, identities become blurred, as Percy and Harry, for all their differences, begin to merge. Heightening this effect of convergence, the narrator recedes, as John Smith steps out of the conflict: Smith's narration opens and closes the chapter, but he disappears in the middle, so that Percy and Harry's interaction appears in a form closer to dramatic dialogue, with quotation marks but lacking Smith's framing narratorial voice. As a result, Percy and Harry's voices become practically indistinguishable, save for Percy's profane interjections of "how the devil" (377), "By Jove" (376), "By Jupiter" (376) and "Damned if I do!" (378). Similarities become explicit, as each admits his desire for Adela, and concedes that the other is, after all, a gentleman. Negative similarities are revealed, too: both men lack wealth, with Percy confessing that his motive for wanting Adela is greed—"it was her money, after all, I was in love with" (378). Armstrong reminds them of another failing: neither has presented a tale in the Story Club yet: "I am in disgrace as well as yourself on that score, for I have not read a word of my own since the club began" (377). Their coalescing identities suggest that Percy may not be all bad—and Harry may not be all good. Smith's framing commentary reinforces the possibility of Percy's improvement: "I learned afterward that something of an understanding had also been arrived at between Percy and Harry; ever since learning the particulars of which, I have liked the young rascal a great deal better" (375). The chapter's conclusion reflects this hope for transformation in its return to the language of seasonal regeneration: "the poor fellow [Percy] looked grave enough as he went away. And I trust that, before long, he, too, began to reap some of the good corn that grows on the wintry fields of disappointment" (378). MacDonald's pun on *grave* reiterates the necessity of death in the process of rebirth, recalling Armstrong's sermon and anticipating the sepulchral themes of "The Cruel Painter," which begins on the following page.

This breaking down and reconstitution of identity resembles what happens in “The Cruel Painter’s” vampire farce, and suggests a process whereby one person may influence, and even transform the other. The hope of Percy’s reformation is matched by his rival’s symmetric but opposite movement downward, as Armstrong begins to inch off his pedestal. In Volume 3, Chapter 7, the chapter immediately following “The Cruel Painter” and two chapters after “Percy,” Harry steals a kiss from Adela in the drawing-room—without her father’s approval of the match—and is “caught . . . in a perfect trap of converging looks” (442) when the household discovers them. The event marks Armstrong’s fall from grace, as the Colonel forbids their marriage, not wanting to have a poor surgeon for son-in-law. “The Cruel Painter” thus functions structurally as the fictional centre where the two opposing Shelley figures in the outer story meet and transform: the bad Shelley improves, the good Shelley gets worse, as their fates wind about the fable of redemption embedded in the narrative. “The Cruel Painter” may offer a glossy version of a redeemed Shelley; however, the more realistic story that surrounds suggests that real life redemption is a more complicated affair.

In a return to concerns about literary transformation, *Adela Cathcart* shifts the emphasis away from the characters and onto the narrator, as the novel’s conclusion grapples obliquely with the possibility that Shelley might never be saved. Though the “*elixir vitae*” (376, 377) of Smith’s Story Club may work its renewing magic on Adela’s health, Smith admits the limits of his power to improve Percy: “I have my eye upon him, but it is little an *old fogie* like me can do with a fellow like Percy” (378). Smith’s words—which conclude Chapter 5, “Percy”—might serve as a reminder of the limits of MacDonald’s efforts to redeem Shelley. Smith’s comment on the efficacy of the Story Club implies the impossibility of measuring the precise effects of literature. He imagines his reader asking, ““Pray, Mr. Smith, do you think it was your wonderful prescription of story-telling, that wrought Miss Cathcart’s cure?””(459). His answer is equivocal: ““How can I tell?”. . . . Whether *I* have succeeded or not is of no consequence, if I have tried well Except in physics, we can put nothing to *experimentum crucis*, and must be content with conjecture and probability”” (459).

For all Smith’s claims that an old fogie like him could do little with a fellow like Percy, MacDonald seems to know exactly what he could do—on paper, at any rate—to improve a life like Percy Shelley’s. Yet the novel’s open-ended conclusion undercuts, or at least seriously qualifies “The Cruel Painter’s” reworking of Shelley, as it closes with an atmosphere of indeterminacy. The

outcome of the marriage plot remains uncertain, but, as with Percy, things look promising. The Colonel, having forbidden Armstrong and Adela's match, promptly loses his entire fortune on a speculation, and reconsiders the union: the final scene finds Adela and Harry "standing by the bedside, and the old man holding a hand of each" (459), a reconciliation that hints at the likelihood of marriage.

Smith's concluding dream evokes even more explicitly the fallibility of revisionary artistic endeavors, while simultaneously amplifying their prophetic power. Resuming the Pygmalion theme that informed "The Cruel Painter," Smith dreams that he is a "great sculptor" (460), in a "cemetery in a pine-forest" (460)—a landscape that anticipates the graveyard world of *Lilith*. Upon every grave he has placed "a marble altar, and upon every altar the marble bust of the man or woman who lay beneath" (460)—an image that recalls the marble perfection of *Phantastes*'s white lady. Smith's sculptures, like MacDonald's stories, are improvements on the real thing, as he designs them "each in the supreme beauty which all the defects of birth and of time and of incompleteness, could not hide from the eye of the prophetic sculptor. Each was like a half-risen glorified form of the being who had there descended into the realms of Hades" (460)—a vision that recalls the Christlike Karl Wolkenlicht. Smith's dream next shifts out of the cemetery world and into "a great market-place" (461) in the realm of the dead, where he discovers, to his dismay, that eternity has not improved his loved ones. Quite the contrary, "the faces of my fathers and brothers, my mothers and sisters, had not grown nobler in the country of the dead . . . the dim forms of the ideal glory which I had reproduced in my marble busts, had vanished altogether" (461). Smith turns doubter, as he bemoans their imperfections, and wonders whether there was "then no world of realities—only a Vanity Fair after all?" (461). His Bunyanesque vision questions the redeeming power of art, emphasizing the *perhaps* in Novalis's dictum "Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will," and suggesting a fundamental uncertainty in MacDonald's artistic attempts to rework Shelley's life for the better.

The outcome of Smith's dream underscores the artist's ultimate subordination to God, who alone possesses the capacity to create and to redeem. For all the vanity of the fallen world, Smith nevertheless sees flickers of promise, as "Side by side with a greedy human face, would shimmer out for a moment the ghostly marble face; and the contrast all but drove me mad with perplexity and misery" (461). At last, a mysterious stranger arrives, "head and shoulders taller than anyone there" (461), with a "pale face, with an infinite

future in it” (461), at whose feet Smith throws himself, sobbing, ““I have lost them all. I will follow thee”” (462). Smith’s anonymous but suspiciously Christlike guide completes the job that Smith’s sculptures could not, as he transforms the people’s faces “into the likeness of my marble faces” (462). Smith is drawn back to the graveyard, where his “white marbles glimmered glorified on the altars of the tombs” (462), before it all vanishes, and he reawakens in the real world, at which point the book ends. Smith’s dream highlights the prophetic power of art, as it envisions how Christ, in a kind of reverse Pygmalionism, will transform people into the perfect forms anticipated by humans’ artistic vision. Art may reflect the ideal, but God alone can realize it. Life will turn into the artist’s dream, as in Novalis’s formula, but requires God to make it come true. Smith’s dream highlights the importance of artistic humility, as it emphasizes that art’s transformative power comes ultimately from God rather than from the mortal artist. At the same time, the conclusion of Smith’s dream tacitly suggests the audaciousness of MacDonald’s art, as it implies that MacDonald’s artistic vision is not simply his subjective human dream of how the world ought to be, but a dream that reflects and anticipates *God’s* will and ultimate plan.

The outer frame of the novel *Adela Cathcart* provides a realistic counterpoint to the rosy revisions of “The Cruel Painter,” complicating and qualifying MacDonald’s project of rewriting Shelley. “The Cruel Painter” redeems Shelley and offers a myth about the transformative capacity of art. MacDonald’s projection of himself onto various characters is also an act of self-mythologization, as he fabricates a version of literary history that grants him the important role of correcting and transforming his Romantic predecessor. The surrounding novel of *Adela Cathcart* comments on this fictionalizing endeavour, as it addresses more directly the inner state of the artist who would attempt this sort of artistic redemption. It illustrates the speculativeness and ambivalence of such a venture, and emphasizes the artist’s ultimate dependence on God.

Endnotes

1. See, for instance, Donal Grant’s discussion of Shelley (*Donal Grant* 10-12); *Sir Gibbie* and *Alec Forbes’* indictments of Byron (*Alec Forbes* 207-08; *Sir Gibbie* 368-370); and *There and Back’s* discussion of Coleridge—the last a striking example in which MacDonald devotes an entire chapter to comparing three versions of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (*There and Back* 119-134).
2. Far less forgiving was MacDonald’s patroness Lady Byron, who objected to MacDonald’s “intentional omission” of Shelley’s improprieties, and insisted that she “should very much have preferred an open vindication of Shelley’s defiance of social

law, to this attempt to gloss it over” (Lady Byron to George MacDonald, 6 August 1859, in Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* 308).

3. Lady Byron responded to Mary Shelley’s efforts with cynicism, suggesting to MacDonald that Mary Shelley was actually attempting to protect her own reputation: “I ask you as a judge of human nature whether the journals, after her husband’s death, are natural—whether *self-representation* is not their prevailing character, and his memory made subservient to that object” (Lady Byron to George MacDonald, 6 August 1859, in Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* 308). Lady Byron would know: as the widow of another n’er-do-well Romantic, she had meticulously cultivated her own image in order to avoid being tarnished by her youthful association with Byron (see David Crane’s *The Kindness of Sisters: Annabella Milbanke and the Destruction of the Byrons*).

4. Robert Lee Wolff considers the problem of physical violence in MacDonald’s novels, though he does not include “The Cruel Painter” in his survey of troubling tales, probably because the story does not, in the end, celebrate violence in the way that such novels as *Paul Faber* and *Sir Gibbie* (Wolff’s examples) do. Rather, Wolff reads the *Grand Guignol* of Teufelbüst’s paintings as a symptom of his diseased conscience (Wolff 306-314).

5. Ang’s lecture, “George MacDonald and the Gothic,” presented in 2005 at Baylor University’s conference “George MacDonald and His Children: The Development of Fantasy Literature,” will be forthcoming from Zossima Press, 2008.

6. See Pamela Clemit’s *The Godwinian Novel* 134, and especially B. Sprague Allen’s article “The Reaction Against William Godwin,” which offers an inventory and discussion of anti-Godwinian narratives.

7. Wordsworth began *The Borderers* much earlier, however, in 1796. Robert Osborn’s detailed edition (1982) offers a full account of the manuscript’s history.

8. Cf. *What’s Mine’s Mine*, in which Ian explains how Romantic poetry brought spiritual renewal: “‘It was Wordsworth’s bitter disappointment in the outcome of the French revolution . . . that opened the door to him’” (*What’s Mine’s Mine* 217).

9. The Pygmalion myth and the vampire myth form a pairing that recurs throughout MacDonald’s *oeuvre*, most notably in *Phantastes*’s White Lady and her demonic counterpart, the Alder maiden, where they suggest opposing models of artistic enterprise, namely, God-centered art vs. narcissistic, inward-looking art.

10. Cf. to McLaren’s contention that “MacDonald’s theological convictions prompted him to write stories that violate what has come to be perceived as the fundamental and persistent moral economy of the [gothic] genre when they fail to end in unambiguous “hopeless desolation” (McLaren 247).

11. MacDonald repeats Novalis’s line in *Phantastes* (315), *The Portent* (29), and *Lilith* (398).

12. Blaming Godwin’s madness on his wife’s sexual misconduct is in keeping with earlier anti-Godwinian texts, such as Charles Lucas’s *The Infernal Quixote* (1801), which describes Godwin’s *Memoirs* as the “History of the Intrigues of His Own Wife,”

and Mrs. Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* (1804), in which the wife’s adulterous liaisons drive her philosopher husband to insanity (see Allen 61, 72-73).

13. Cf. to the narrator’s comment in *Castle Warlock* (1882): “In the history of the world the imagination has oftener been right than the intellect, and the things in which is has been right are of much the greater importance; only, wherever Pegasus has shown the way through a bog, the pack-horse which follows has got the praise of the discovery; while many of the blunders made by the latter are attributed to the misleading influences of the former” (*Castle Warlock* 46).

14. MacDonald addresses more lengthily the deleterious impact of drugs on the imagination in his 1883 novel *Donal Grant*.

15. John Kuntz is MacDonald’s adaptation of More’s *Johannes Cuntius*; see Parsons 180-183.

16. Ang also noted the pun on the word *Kunst/Kuntz* in her address to the 2005 MacDonald conference.

17. In Burke’s own words: “Out of the tomb of the murdered monarchy in France has arisen a vast, tremendous, unformed, spectre, in a far more terrific guise than any which ever yet have overpowered the imagination, and subdued the fortitude of man . . . the poison of other states is the food of the new republic” (Burke, “Letter on the Proposals for Peace with the Regicide Directory of France” [1796], in Clemit 149).

18. Kilgour shows how Mary’s longing for Shelley finds its way into her novel *The Last Man*, which is “filled with examples of the Romantic *liebestod*” in which “Death brings together those whom life has torn asunder” (Kilgour, “One Immortality” 564).

19. U.C. Knoepfelmacher’s “Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters” (88-119) discusses how *Frankenstein* is a response to Mary Shelley’s family situation; see also Kilgour’s *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (190-92, 202, 216).

20. See Mary Shelley, “Author’s Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition (1831),” in *Frankenstein* (193-197).

21. The image of the tree also recalls the description of poetry in Percy Shelley’s “Defence”: “All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially” (“A Defence of Poetry” 500).

22. Cf. to Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry”: “Milton’s Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of perseverance in enmity, but with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments” (498). Robert Falconer shares more than Shelley’s views on Milton: his life is another tribute to/correction of Shelley’s life, beginning with an unpalatable early religious education, and ending with drowning at sea.

23. The redeemed Teufelsbüst with his castle full of children has a counterpart in the good painter Charles Percivale in *The Vicar’s Daughter* (1872). Percivale—whose name recalls Percy Shelley—is another idealized Shelleyan figure. He also resembles

MacDonald, both in family size and in decorating style. Percivale's studio, its "ceiling marvellous in deep blue . . . with a multitude of gold and red stars upon it" (*The Vicar's Daughter* 24), mirrors two of MacDonald's real-life studies, his study at The Retreat in Hammersmith, which featured "a dark blue ceiling with scattered stars in silver and gold" (Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* 386), and his study at Halloway House in Hastings, which was "papered, painted, and decorated with stars" (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 271).

24. In 1848 MacDonald entered Highbury Theological College, "which had been founded in 1825 to continue the work of Hoxton Academy" (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 63), the school Godwin had attended in his youth.

25. Armstrong is a marked contrast to MacDonald's other surgeon, Paul Faber, the atheist protagonist of *Paul Faber, Surgeon* (1879). Indeed, Faber, an atheist scientist with an artist's soul—not to mention a shadowy history of sexual impropriety—seems to be another attempt to grapple with Shelley.

Works Cited

- Allen, B. Sprague. "The Reaction Against William Godwin." *Modern Philology* 16 (1918): 57-75.
- Ang, Susan "George MacDonald and the Gothic." *George MacDonald and His Children: The Development of Fantasy Literature*. Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University, Waco, Texas. 18 Sept. 2005.
- Arnold, Matthew. "Shelley." 1888. *Essays in Criticism*. New York: A.L. Burt Co, n.d. 385-408.
- Browning, Robert. "Essay on Shelley." Ed. Donald Smalley. *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*. Vol. 5. Gen. Ed. Roma A. King. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1981. 135-51.
- Clemit, Pamela. *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993.
- Crane, David. *The Kindness of Sisters. Annabella Milbanke and the Destruction of the Byrons*. London: Flamingo, 2003.
- Godwin, William. *The Elopement of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, as narrated by William Godwin, with commentary by H. Buxton Forman*. Boston: Priv. print, 1911. 202-277.
- . "Memoirs of The Author of 'The Rights of Women.'" 1798. *A Short Residence in Sweden and Memoirs of The Author of 'The Rights of Women.'* Ed. Richard Holmes. London: Penguin, 1987.
- Holmes, Richard. Introduction. *A Short Residence in Sweden and Memoirs of The Author of 'The Rights of Women'*. By Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. 1796 and 1798. Ed. Richard Holmes. London: Penguin, 1987. 9-55.
- Kilgour, Maggie. "'One immortality': The Shaping of the Shelleys in *The Last Man*." *European Romantic Review* 16.5 (2005): 563-588.
- . *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

- Knoepflmacher, U. C. “Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters.” *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley’s Novel*. Eds. George Levine and U. C. Knoepflmacher. Berkeley: U of California P, 1982. 88-119
119.
- MacDonald, George. *Adela Cathcart*. 1864. Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1994.
- . *Alec Forbes of Howglen*. 1865. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1995.
- . *Castle Warlock*. 1882. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1998.
- . “The Cruel Painter.” *Adela Cathcart*. 1864. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1994, 379-416.
- . *Donal Grant*. 1883. *Adela Cathcart*. 1864. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1998.
- . *England’s Antiphon*. 1868. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1996.
- . Letter to George MacDonald Sr. 15 April 1851. Greville MacDonald, 155.
- . Letter to Louisa MacDonald. 4 Oct. 1853. George MacDonald Collection 103.3.151. Beinecke Lib., New Haven.
- . *Lilith*. 1895. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1998.
- . *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, 1879. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1998.
- . *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*. 1858. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1998.
- . “The Portent.” *The Portent and Other Stories*. 1909. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1999. 1-162.
- . *Robert Falconer*. 1868. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 2005.
- . “Shelley.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 8th ed. Vol. 20. 1860. 100-104.
- . *Sir Gibbie*. 1879. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 2000.
- . *There and Back*. 1891. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1998.
- . *The Vicar’s Daughter*. 1872. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1998.
- . *What’s Mine’s Mine*. 1886. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1995.
- MacDonald, Greville. *George MacDonald and His Wife*. 1924. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1998.
- McGillis, Roderick. “George MacDonald and the Lilith Legend in the XIXth Century.” *Mythlore* 6.1 (1979): 3-11.
- McLaren, Scott. “Saving the Monsters? Images of Redemption in the Gothic Tales of George MacDonald.” *Christianity and Literature* 55.2 (2006): 245-269.
- Mellon, Nancy. “The Stages in Adela Cathcart’s Cure.” *North Wind* 15 (1996): 26-43.
- Parsons, Coleman. “George MacDonald and Henry More.” *Notes and Queries* 188 (1945):180-183.
- Raeper, William. *George MacDonald*. Tring: Lion Publishing, 1987.
- Reis, Richard H. *George MacDonald*. Twayne’s English Authors Ser. 119. New York: Twayne, 1972.
- Shelley, Mary. Author’s Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition (1831). *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus The 1818 Text*. Ed. Marilyn Butler. Oxford, New York, Toronto: Oxford UP, 1994. 192-97.
- . *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus The 1818 Text*. Ed. Marilyn Butler. Oxford, New York, Toronto: Oxford UP, 1994.

- . Preface. *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed. Mary Shelley. Vol 1. London: Edward Moxon, 1847.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. “A Defence of Poetry.” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers. New York: Norton. 478-508.
- . “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers. New York: Norton. 93-96.
- . “Mont Blanc.” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers. New York: Norton. 89-93.
- . “Ode to the West Wind.” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Donald Reiman and Sharon Powers. New York: Norton. 221-223.
- St. Clair, William. *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family*. London: Faber, 1989.
- Trelawny, Edward John. *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*. 1858. Rev. ed. London: Pickering and Chatto, 1887.
- Wolff, Robert Lee. *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1961.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Borderers*. Ed. Robert Osborn. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982.
- . “The Tables Turned.” *English Romantic Writers*. Ed. David Perkins. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1995. 300-301.