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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume II

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
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The Necessity of Doubt in George MacDonald's *Within and Without*

James Washick

The Necessity of Doubt in George MacDonald's *Within and Without*

by James Washick

While the Scottish author George MacDonald is currently remembered as a writer of fiction and fantasy, in his own time he was well known for his poetry as well, even preferring to think of himself as a poet rather than a novelist. The poetical works, however, are often glossed over in favor of the fiction, although the poems address many of the same crucial issues with which MacDonald wrestled in his novels, among them the necessity of doubt in a believer's life. This theme is most evident in his first major work, *Within and Without*. This verse drama revolves around the spiritual quest of its protagonist Julian, a former monk who is torn between his love for his wife and his devotion to God. Using Julian's situation, MacDonald explores many of the conflicts which he himself found troubling—the role of doubt in the believer's life, the assurance of God's existence, and the conflict between romantic love and religious devotion. MacDonald's later poetry and novels would again address many of these issues, but *Within and Without* examines more deftly the inner strife over a divided devotion, between God and human love, than any of the poetry which follows it.

As with MacDonald's other major verse, *Within and Without* is semi-autobiographical, drawing upon the doubts and fears that concerned MacDonald at this point in his life. As a result, *Within and Without* has its origins in MacDonald's relationship with Louisa Powell, the sister-in-law of his cousin and the woman he would eventually marry. The early

relationship between George and Louisa seems to have been more like a teacher and pupil rather than like courting lovers, as Louisa, ever insecure and self-deprecating even throughout their marriage, considered herself to be his spiritual inferior. This sense of inferiority, of considering herself unworthy of MacDonald, appears in some of the earlier letters, as in one undated letter written around 1850 in which she states, "My heart sinks sometimes, oftentimes, when I think of my unsuitableness in so many ways." This situation was further aggravated by MacDonald's close relationship with his cousin Helen, a particularly attractive and vibrant woman, who stood as a stark contrast to Louisa, with her sometimes sullen demeanor and plain features. While Louisa was fond of her sister-in-law, she could not help feeling threatened by the intimacy shared between her future husband and this woman. The poem, then, seeks to address not only MacDonald's doubts about the nature of God but also Louisa's fears about her merit as MacDonald's wife.

To give a brief overview, the poem is divided into five Parts, or acts, each one introduced through a short poetic preface which seeks to summarize the mood and/or action of the section. The drama is initially set in the early 19th century in an Italian monastery where Julian, Count Lamballa, has taken vows as a priest.¹ Seeking God in the company of these men of God, Julian is disappointed when they seem no more in touch

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with God than he who is filled with doubts. As a result, Julian escapes from the monastery to seek God elsewhere. Because rumors have spread as to Julian's former life as nobility, the church Abbot sends a spy after Julian to bring him back, hoping to use Julian's wealth to add to the church's coffers. Part Two opens after Julian has returned to his estate with the hope of marrying Lilia, the woman whose rejection of him first sent him to the monastery. Finding her family in financial straits, Julian pays their debts and subsequently saves Lilia from the assault of a rejected suitor whom Julian kills. With the townspeople and the spy from the monastery at the gates of their mansion, Julian and Lilia are thus forced to flee Italy to England. The third part opens five years later in England. Julian and Lilia have married and have a child named Lily. To support themselves, Julian works as a clerk at a counting house and Lilia is a music tutor for the daughter of the widowed Lord Seaford. Julian, still engrossed in his spiritual search for God, becomes introspective and draws away from his wife. As a result she believes that he no longer loves her, thinking that he cannot love someone less spiritual than he. By the opening of Part Four the emotional distance has grown between them and Lilia is charmed by Lord Seaford's advances. When Seaford proclaims his love for her, she is brought to her senses and flees, but feeling that she has been emotionally unfaithful to Julian, she leaves Julian and their child. After receiving a letter which suggests that Lilia has been unfaithful, Julian seeks her at Lord Seaford's house, but does not find her. Nightly, Julian and Lily search for Lilia to no avail, the only result being that both Julian and Lily grow ill and the child dies. Lord Seaford, seeking to clear Lilia's honor, finds Julian nearly dead but is able to explain that Lilia remained faithful

before Julian dies. The final part is entitled "A Dream" and is set in "a world not realized." Julian and Lily watch over Lilia as she prays for forgiveness and cleansing. She dies, being forgiven by God and her husband, and she joins Lily and Julian upon a celestial mountain-peak.

At the heart of the poetic drama is the quest motif, Julian's spiritual and physical searches being linked. As he moves from place to place—from the monastery to his estates, to England, to the city streets, and finally to "a world not realized"—Julian takes progressive steps in his search for God and his increased knowledge as to the nature of God. However, MacDonald makes it clear that an important part of the quest for God is a sense of spiritual doubt, a questioning not only of one's former beliefs but also of God's love and characteristics. While MacDonald has only one character who openly rejects God, Lord Seaford, all of the characters who develop a better understanding must go through a period of doubt and quest in order to know God better. Though Julian is the central figure of the drama, and therefore his quest is emphasized, three other characters—Brother Robert, Lilia, and Lord Seaford—also go through a period of doubt prior to an awakening of sorts.

Julian's quest begins when he enters the monastery, but because he has doubts about God's love and the personal relationship believers are to have with God, he is ostracized in the monastery. MacDonald shows how important doubt is to a true spiritual quest by juxtaposing his protagonist's doubts with the assuredness of the other monks. Because they have not truly sought God, Julian says, they have not found Him to be absent. Pleased in thinking that God is there, the monks never seek Him and instead

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live lives based in tradition and intellectual debate, rather than humble searching for a closer relationship with God. Even Robert, Julian's only friend in the monastery, seems to Julian to be shallow in his belief. Julian says of him,

A good man. But he has not waked
. . . . He believes in Christ, he thinks;
and so he does, as possible for him.
How he will wonder when he looks
for heaven!²

Like the other monks, he has not searched for God, for if he had, he would find heaven's gates closed, as Julian has. Only when one's faith is shaken, MacDonald seems to say, can the misconceptions be cleared away and true understanding begin. Because Julian believes that the monks' faith is based upon untested ground, he silently scoffs at their show of worship. As one monk recounts, "[Brother Stephen] chanced to say the words, *Our Holy Faith!* 'Faith indeed! poor fools!' fell from [Julian's] lips,/ half-muttered and half whispered."³ Julian refuses to bow to the legalistic ceremonial worship of the monks—blowing his nose during prayer and standing when others kneel—and so they believe him to be an atheist. On the contrary, his belief in God is such that he cannot believe in a system of staid responses which replaces a true communion with God. Through his doubt, both in the effectiveness of the liturgical approach to worship and in any assumptions about the loving work of God in his life, Julian clears his life of obstacles which might otherwise hamper his spiritual growth. Once he finds that God has been speaking to him all the time, Julian comes to appreciate the loving hand of God more than would have been possible without his period of questioning;

without his doubt, he would have no need to search for God as he does.

Proof of this comes through the depiction of Brother Robert. While Julian is with him in the monastery, Robert has no doubts about the love of God, about the work he is doing, or about his place in the monastic community. By helping Julian escape, though, Robert shows signs that he is beginning to doubt the good that the monastery is doing, seeing that Julian is in danger from the monks. When he is punished for helping Julian escape, Robert wrestles with himself in the dungeon, unsure as to whether his action was righteous or not. As we see from MacDonald's favoritism of Julian's life of action, the author obviously believes that Robert has made the right decision in *acting* according to his conscience rather than being passive. Yet Robert is torn between his love of his friend and his duty to the church. "Would God forbid us to do what is right,/ Even for his sake?" Robert asks.⁴ This doubt, as to the righteousness of his actions and as concerning the ultimate will of God, causes Robert to begin the journey which Julian has already begun, the quest for a greater knowledge of God.

Would they would kill me! then
I would go up, close up, to God's
own throne,
And ask, and beg, and pray, to know
the truth;
That he would slay this ghastly
contradiction.⁵

This is the last we see of Robert, though he is mentioned later by Julian as one whom Julian loved for his potential. Because we are left with a scene which sharply mirrors Julian's earlier conflicts, even to Robert's cry, "O for one word from God!"⁶ and because Julian sees

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potential for greatness in him, we are lead to believe that in time he too will find a deeper understanding of God, yet without suffering the loss that Julian does.

Like Robert's, Lilia's belief in God is shaken by her relationship with Julian and she begins to have doubts as well. Seeing the disparity between herself and her husband, Lilia begins to question her beliefs as well, wondering if she knows God at all. She seems to believe in God and His relevance to their lives, but once she sees Julian's devotion, she begins to have her doubts and starts to feel inferior to Julian. She does not have the high thoughts about God she believes that the wife of such a man should have, and when Julian tells her, "Do not always think that God is angry when we suffer ill,"⁷ her only response is that she cannot feel as he does. As Lilia senses their love for one another disappearing, she considers joining a convent where "I might weep unseen, unquestioned;/ and pray that God in whom he [Julian] seems to dwell,/ to take me likewise in, beside him there."⁸ Seeking to find God through the same means that Julian first sought Him, the convent, Lilia begins her search that she might know the God that Julian seems to know. Only through knowing God might she be united with her husband. And after her "fall" with Lord Seaford, Lilia abandons Julian and Lily that she might be reconciled with God. "My Julian, my husband," she says. "I will find/ a quiet place where I will seek thy God."⁹ God is now *Julian's* God, not hers, for in her period of doubt she had to abandon any former conceptions of God. She must start anew. Going to catch the coach which will take her away from Julian, she feels "God's thoughts return again" and cries to God to help her.

In the fifth act, as Julian and Lily, now dead, watch over her, Lilia prays that she may

be forgiven and made clean. The Angel who watches over her tells Julian of Lilia's pilgrimage to this point,

In pain and tears was born a child-
like need

For God, for Truth, and for essential
Love.

But first she woke in terror; was
alone,

For God she saw not

So here she came that she might seek
for God.¹⁰

Like Julian, she begins her sincere search with the painful sense that she is alone, that God does not respond, but as she is praying in this cottage, Julian and Lily looking on, she wrestles with her understanding of God. Using the adulteress that Jesus pardons as her example, Lilia wonders if her unfaithfulness to Julian, though pardonable, is beyond God's loving-kindness.¹¹ "That word *go*/ was spoken surely not to send from thee/ the sinful wife whom thou wouldst not yet condemn."¹² Though still ashamed of her 'sin' Lilia has found that aspect of faith which came lately to Julian, the importance of doing. Jesus's command to "go, and sin no more" requires an active response (going) in addition to the omission of the sin practice. As a result Lilia comes through the valley of doubt to reach the mountain of paradise as portrayed in the drama's last scene, having come to a fuller knowledge of the loving-kindness of God.

The last character who undergoes a transformation through his period of doubt is Lord Seaford. In stark contrast to his early depiction in the drama as a hedonistic servant of Beauty, Lord Seaford appears in the last scene of Act IV as a concerned Christian who risks his fragile health to clear Lilia's name of

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the stain which has been cast upon it. When we first see Lord Seaford, he is composing a song, the words of which reveal a little about Lord Seaford's character. In the third and fourth stanza, Seaford asks that the woman of his desire be found flawed, that he might not adore her as a goddess. Yet it is through her *sin* that he wants to be assured of her humanity, for he asks that she "sin once in something small."¹³ From this suggestion and his claim that "now I have no soul"¹⁴ that the reader begins to suspect that Seaford lacks Julian's spirituality. This suspicion is later supported in the song, as Seaford asks to be tempted that he may forfeit his soul to this woman. Even his description of her suggests that he is not the moral purist, gradually moving from angel to devil and to deity. In the ninth stanza, Seaford rejects God in favor of this deified woman, saying

O what is God to me? He sits apart
Amidst the clear stars, passionless
and cold.
Divine! thou art enough to fill my
heart;
O fold me in thy heaven, sweet love,
in fold.¹⁵

While one's natural reaction might be to dismiss this as exaggeration common to love songs, we find that the following scenes support this initial impression of Lord Seaford as one who seeks the beautiful rather than the godly. Unlike Julian, whose encounter with the beauty of Nature leads him to seek God all the more, Lord Seaford claims Beauty as his "god." His actions are guided by his worship of this abstract ideal, seemingly incarnate in Lilia. Knowing that she is a married woman, Lord Seaford is nevertheless deterred by neither God nor Lilia's marriage vows, for

neither have a stronger authority than his pursuit of Beauty. In fact, Seaford's only other notice of God in these scenes prior to his conversion is God's failure to live up to Seaford's expectations. "How easily could God/ have made our life one consciousness of joy!/ It is denied us," he says.¹⁶ Only when Lilia has left him, the beauty of the world departing with her, and he is bed-ridden from illness, does Lord Seaford begin to see that God alone is sufficient for him. Lord Seaford's doubt is not so much a doubt of God, as the other three are, but a doubt in his previous beliefs. Once Lilia has gone, he finds that he cannot sense beauty in anything, and he begins to question whether his perception of Beauty is only a result of neural and chemical responses in his brain, if it is "all a show/ Projected from the healthy blood and nerves/ of well-ordered organisms."¹⁷

Through such doubting, Lord Seaford is able to see clearly his need for God. In fact, in lines reflective of those which MacDonald once wrote to his father,¹⁸ Lord Seaford says that

If Thou art not, if
There dwell not in Thy thoughts the
primrose-flower
Before it blew on any bank of
Spring,
Then all is untruth, unreality,
And we are wretched things....
But if thou art, O God, then all is
true.¹⁹

Seaford's "sin" is that he has made an idol of Beauty, trying to grasp it, and in doing so has watched it vanish. He has sinned by denying God in grasping at His work.

Each character comes through a period of doubt, a questioning of one's formerly held

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belief, and through this baptism of fire, has come away with a clearer knowledge of God. While Lord Seaford, Lilia, and supposedly Brother Robert have now come to know God better as a result of their struggle, Julian has developed a wholly different approach to his life and his relationship with his wife as a result of his. To the degree that Julian represents George MacDonald's thoughts and beliefs, this period of doubt is necessary to reflect the struggle which MacDonald faced in his developing relationship with his wife. That he might not suffer the fate of Julian, having lost his wife in this life to be reunited with her only after their death, MacDonald wrote *Within and Without* to show Louisa that he wanted to share his spiritual journey with her, to ease her fears of inferiority by showing the need for a sympathetic bond between husband and wife as essential to both of their spiritual lives. In the process of this, MacDonald demonstrates many of his long held beliefs through the story of Julian Lamballa, not the least of which is the importance of doubt in the process of spiritual growth.

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Notes

- ¹ A number of English writers, having lived in Italy for a time, wrote about it, not the least of which was Robert Browning whose depiction of Renaissance Italian aristocrats is probably the best known in English Literature. MacDonald did not move to Italy until much after the publication of *Within and Without*. c.f. *Italy and English Literature: 1764-1930*, Churchill.
- ² (I, i, 11)
- ³ (I, ii, 15)
- ⁴ (I, viii, 27)
- ⁵ (I, viii, 27)
- ⁶ (I, viii, 27)
- ⁷ (III, vi, 94)
- ⁸ (IV, ii, 118)
- ⁹ (IV, ix, 133)
- ¹⁰ (V, ii, 186-187) In MacDonald's revision of *Within and Without for Poetical Works*, he changes the last line to read, "Hither she came to seek her Julian's God," suggesting that it is not her God.
- ¹¹ John 8:1-11.
- ¹² (V, ii, 188)
- ¹³ (III, v, 89)
- ¹⁴ (III, v, 89)
- ¹⁵ (III, v, 90)
- ¹⁶ (IV, iii, 121)
- ¹⁷ (IV, xviii, 159)
- ¹⁸ MacDonald writes, "If the gospel of Jesus be not true, I can only pray my maker to annihilate me, for nothing else is worth living for—and if that be true, everything in the universe is glorious, except sin." *Victorian Mythmaker*, 16-17 (April, 1847).
- ¹⁹ (IV, xviii, 160).