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Late in the 1850's George MacDonald wrote to his father that he had delivered for publication "a little MSS. that took me two months to write without any close work—a sort of fairy tale for grown people" (MacDonald 290). With these words he records the quiet and, it would seem, almost painless birth of *Phantastes*, that "sort of fairy tale" which would, nearly sixty years later, "convert" and "rebaptise" the imagination of C.S. Lewis (Lewis, "Introduction" 11). The literal importance of this event cannot be overestimated by those of us who, like Lewis, owe so much to MacDonald. There is, however, a figurative significance as well. Also mentioned in that letter is the name of the Rev. F. D. Maurice.¹ Maurice had, in fact, been the person responsible for helping MacDonald to find a publisher, one kindness in a whole series that he showed to a friend wounded by the church and plagued by poverty.² In a sense, then, Maurice served as the midwife to the book.

Maurice's role betrays a magnanimity characteristic of his life, his theology, and, as to our purposes today, his study of literature. So broad, in fact, were the latter that in 1840 he was appointed to teach English literature and modern history, as well as theology, at King's College, London.³ His inaugural address is nothing less than a comprehensive survey of major literary figures and periods, and it offers us a vivid portrait of his intellect and heart. We can get an accurate taste of the whole by a brief look at his description of Chaucer, a poet, he states, with the "tendency to coarseness accompanying very great delicacy of perception and feeling" and with the "propensity to dwell on a source of the lowest and vulgarest exhibitions of human life united to a lively sympathy with manly virtue and feminine grace" ("IL" 284). But Maurice does not leave his assessment there. He would search out Chaucer's motives:

This is precisely what you would expect from a poet who had lost some of this reverence for that which time and authority had canonized; who had acquired a new and deep reverence for the worth and dignity of men; who shared in the earth-born feelings which belonged to those who were beginning to find out that they

had position in society, but who had these quickened and glorified by their connection with certain moral truths which gave to each man and citizen the sense of his having a distinct and personal connection with a divine and mysterious economy. ("IL" 284)

The same virtue, Maurice observes, is to be found in Shakespeare, "only accompanied with a much wider range of observation, and with a clearer sense of the system and harmony that are in the world" ("IL" 285).⁴ And so the survey continues as the newly appointed professor turns his literary telescope on Milton, the 18th century, and the Romantics.⁵

In the final moments of his address, Maurice sets forth what he believes to be the great principle animating English literature: "man, as man, is glorious . . . only because there is a bond which connects him with the Divine nature" ("IL" 287). Such a principle, he adds,

will carry us far in the belief that all the barriers which separate men, united in that acknowledgement, will be ultimately removed, and that then they will go forth to make all mankind partakers of the same fellowship . . . [J]ust in so far as literary men do endeavor to stretch their thoughts abroad, and to interest themselves for their fellowmen, as made in the image of God, literature will flourish and win new triumphs and . . . just so far as they shut themselves up in narrow circles, glorify themselves, flatter one another, and despise their brethren, literature will become a useless and cursed thing, hateful to men and to God.

We discover in the inaugural lecture not only the range and depth of Maurice's own reading and thus the aptness of his appointment, but also two related features of the Christian faith that permeate his thought and action: the incarnation of spiritual truth in ordinary life and relationship. It was fitting, then, that Maurice was midwife to *Phantastes*. He was to spend his whole life arguing that ideas must be "incarnated."⁶ Although Maurice's thought has broad social implications, which

he began to work out through his involvement in the Christian Socialist movement and which he thoroughly explored in a work entitled *Social Morality*, let us, for purposes of illustrating the point in this limited space, examine the effects of incarnation on a single relationship, that between the divine and the human.

Maurice's views on incarnation, though orthodox, sound radical to these modern ears because of the intensity with which he explored them in his writing and practiced them in his own life.⁷ Incarnation, he argues, shapes all human activity and would break down the artificial distinctions between the spiritual and the physical: "May not *all* sensible things, by a *necessity* of their nature, be testifying to us of that which is nearest to us, of that which it most concerns us to know, of the mysteries of our own life, and of God's relation to us?" (*WR* 94-5; my italics). It was for this reason that Christ's ministry took on such a palpable form, so that even his parables were drawn from ordinary life as his means of teaching. "It is in little things, in particulars that the laws of a universe reveal themselves" (*WR* 60). Drawing heavily, by his own admission, on Bishop Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion*, Maurice concludes: "It would be seen that the analogy between the human and the divine is not an imaginary or artificial one, but exists in the nature of things" (*WR* 99-100). Far from shying away from physical fact, the Christian faith embraces it, even in the deepest of theological truths. The ascension is a case in point. In words reminiscent of those used by J.R.R. Tolkien to convince C.S. Lewis of the truth of Christianity, Maurice urges his reader to consider the ascension "not as a legend, but as the fulfillment of all legends; not as an idea, but as the substantiation of an idea in a fact" (*TE* 280).⁸

The Gospels confront us over and over with the physicality of Christ's own redemptive act: his was a body "raised" from the grave; "glorified" when it ascended; "redeemed" from corruption. Redemption is not reserved simply for the soul ("that which thinks and judges"), but also for the body, with all its senses. It is not simply a "moral and intellectual redemption" (*KC* 1.309-10).⁹

The world understood thus validates science and art as fields of human activity because they would inquire into the handiwork of the living God. True, they assume their greatest validity only as they serve a higher purpose, which Maurice affirms in this passage from the *Kingdom of Christ*:

Surely every fragment of information respecting the past or present condition of mankind,—every gleam of light which language can afford us into our inward form and structure, should be accounted most precious; but still for an end. To bring forth the man, to guide him into that universal truth, by knowing which, and only by knowing

which, he is made free,—this is the end. (*KC* 2.68)¹⁰

That "but," however, does not condone the haphazard inquiry of science or the careless practice of art, as if they were of only minor importance. A later passage from the same work underscores the intensity with which such activity should be undertaken:

[E]very power of mind and body, every art and mystery among men is a solemn and sacred trust of which the owner of that power, the possessor of that art cannot acquit himself till he has taken the one to its utmost, till he has compelled the other to yield all the blessings which are contained in it. The Church draws no nice distinctions, lays down no embarrassing rules. Everything is good which is true, everything is evil which is false. (*KC* 3.312-3)

"Taken to its utmost." "Compelled to yield." These are the words of a man for whom "manly" (his word) intellectual encounter was daily bread and who could attend lectures by T. H. Huxley and read Charles Darwin with interest and without fear for his faith.

This attitude that characterizes all human endeavor might be specifically applied to the acts of reading and writing. As a theologian, Maurice expresses particular concern for how one reads the Bible. The questions vital to this task are these: how can our age experience Christ for itself? how is he more than a dim memory, which itself is preserved through persons long dead? (*ESJ* 47-48). If we see the text as simply a "set of letters," Christ will of necessity become more and more distantly removed from us with each passing generation. The text itself will be an insufficient guide to spiritual truth and experience. Such is true even for readers who view the Bible as the Word of God if by that expression they would substitute the doctrines of Christ for the living experience with Christ (*ESJ* 39). In either case, the Bible is little more than an artifact.

To rescue the text from this status is not, as the German higher critics supposed, to quest for the "historical" Jesus, but to realize that words themselves have a life and power of their own. They testify to the living presence of the author, and they invite us into his mind and experience (*ESJ* 52). The Bible, then, is but the entrance into experience. It requires more than passive receptivity, more, even, than intellectual engagement. It requires response. We achieve morality, for example, not by reading a book or learning maxims, but by living life (*ESJ* 39).

The conclusions Maurice draws about reading the Bible apply fundamentally to reading other texts, as Stephen Prickett notes: "what begins as a theory of biblical interpretation, centering on the irruption of the divine into human history . . . ripples out into all secular

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literature, providing a theory of creativity that refuses to place any boundary between the sacred and the secular.”¹¹ As if to illustrate, in his own work, the seamlessness between these two worlds (or to remove the distinction altogether), Maurice dedicates the third edition of his *Theological Essays* to the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, declaring that true theology must “correspond to the deepest thoughts and feelings of human beings Your writings have taught me to enter into many of those thoughts and feelings.”

Even in his twenties, Maurice was setting forth this principle of reading, first as editor of the *Metropolitan Quarterly Magazine* while he was at Cambridge and then, appropriately enough, in his own (and only) work of fiction, the novel *Eustace Conway*. As editor of the *Metropolitan Quarterly*, he denounced the project of the academy to establish a formal distance between books, which it claimed to illuminate, and their readers. He took particular aim at *Blackwood's Magazine* for its “love of criticism” (*Life* 1.62). As a novelist himself, he creates the character of Reverend Wilmot, who confides to Eustace Conway, the youthful, but already jaded protagonist, that he read poetry, not as an “amusement” nor to “indulge a habit of criticism,” but as “a record of those human feelings in which I had been or wished to be, a sharer” (*EC* 3.79). Even as a proponent of English literature as a separate academic discipline, Maurice could foresee the power of the critic’s scalpel to maim its object, and he used his position as editor of the short-lived *Education Magazine* to stem the tide of the vivisectionists.

As we have seen in Maurice’s way of “reading” creation and reading the Bible, the claims a book might make on its own behalf are at once exalted and humble. Exalted because it establishes a living relationship between author and reader; humble because it can never be the substitute for that relationship. The value of literature is its helpfulness as a servant, not its power as a master. When literature would attempt to usurp its true master, its limitations are revealed and certain dangers arise.

The first, a danger, is to confuse the aesthetic and the religious experience. Rev. Wilmot clearly distinguishes between the two and concludes that art can never adequately substitute for faith (*EC* 3.40).¹² This both affirms and rejects Wordsworth’s belief in the inspiration of non-Biblical writers. Given his attitude toward literature, as outlined above, Maurice agrees that Shakespeare and Homer, like Paul and Isaiah, are indeed divinely inspired. After all, they have the self-same Spirit, and all gifts come from that Spirit. But if we are led, with Wordsworth and, for that matter, so many other Romantics, to glorify “the intellect and genius at the expense of that which is common and universal,” then we have misunderstood the character and purpose of inspiration (*Life* 2.401). Visions that seek no higher glory, Maurice allows, can certainly be “beautiful”; but cut off from their true source and

celebrated as an end in themselves, they must forever remain “heartless” (*KC* 3.402-3). We are called to pursue a higher aim, to “use the objects of sense for the purpose of overcoming the fascination of the sense, and pursue intellectual studies, that we may not worship the intellect” (*KC* 2.213).

Maurice would also remind us of the limitations of human endeavor (particularly in language). Prickett expresses his thought well:

[Language] is, by its nature, incomplete: possessing “method,” but always denying the “systems” that would provide total explanation. Thus language is *never* wholly to be accounted for by language, but always points beyond itself. Sounding at this point remarkably like Derrida, Maurice has a vision of the creativity of language in terms of perpetual incompleteness, always allowing for more to be said.

Maurice would once again turn us back to the Incarnation. Christ, who comes as the fulfillment of all toward which human endeavor aspires, gives us means to become citizens of the kingdom we have longed for: “he has taught us that we are spiritual beings, and that all sensible forms and images may illustrate the mysteries of this kingdom, but can never be substituted for them, or made a part of them” (*KC* 3.404). Reading and even the ideas to which reading introduces us are but the porters at the gate of this kingdom, never the potentates on the throne.

Finally, Maurice points to yet another danger, the insipidness of much contemporary religious literature, which has given over the struggle to be “truer than other literature, to speak out deeper thoughts, more earnestly to enter into the life of things” (*KC* 3.311). His judgment is scathing:

it is altogether an empty, heartless, outside representation of things, sugared over with Christian phrase and conclusions. Everything leaves the impression upon your mind that the object is to supply a set of exceeding morbid appetites with a most mawkish kind of pleasure, and to produce a barren and mischievous self-contentment, with which earnestness and reflection can never dwell. (*KC* 3.311)

The world of so-called Christian literature could well stand to hear such a prophetic voice today.

We might sum up this brief inquiry by posing to Maurice two questions: What is true literature? and What is an appropriate response to the author of such literature? In the *Kingdom of Christ*, he answers both succinctly. To the first, he responds, true literature is that which has “enabled us to know ourselves better

than we did before.” To the author of such literature, he would accord not some “shabby, heartless, newspaper praise, that he is a man of power, or talent, or genius.” No, he would embrace such a person “as a benefactor and a friend” (*KC* 3.282).¹³ Little wonder, then, that George MacDonald, who came within the compass of Maurice’s embrace, responded with such deep respect, gratitude, and affection in return. Little wonder, too, that he shared this vision of literature that could give him room to stretch his ample limbs, a vision whereby his own passionate love for Christ might be not simply recorded, but incarnated in the lives of future generations.

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Notes

¹ Greville MacDonald, in his book on the life of his father, devotes an entire chapter to the relationship between his father and Maurice (397-406).

² This was not an isolated incident. The character of Maurice is movingly illustrated in the story of the five Cambridge men who agreed amongst themselves to write down, independently, the name of the one person they would wish to have by their side during their final hours. Although none of them had any special ties to Maurice, it was his name written on all five papers (Vidler 226-7).

³ 13 October 1840. The address is recorded in the *Educational Magazine*, for which Maurice served as editor. The critic Terry Eagleton notes the contribution Maurice, among others, made on the establishment of English literature as a university discipline and characterizes the new enterprise thus:

English was literally the poor man’s Classics—a way of providing a cheapish “liberal” education for those beyond the charmed circles of public school and Oxbridge. From the outset, in the work of “English” pioneers like F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley, the emphasis was on solidarity between the social classes and the cultivation of “larger sympathies,” the instillation of national pride and the transmission of “moral” values. (23)

⁴ Maurice’s social concerns are interwoven throughout his enormous body of work. The inaugural address is no exception. To the reader of Shakespeare, he writes:

Who can help connecting Caliban—his half dawnings of affection—his brutal instincts—his sense of his own dignity—his idolatry of Stephano and his bottle, with those pictures of savage life which were pouring in, in Shakespeare’s time upon the ears of Europeans, or with all the melancholy records of the way in which European civilization and Christianity have made themselves known to savages that have accumulated since?

⁵ He lists these principles of the Romantics: “that the most deep and awful things are not those which are most strange and peculiar; that there are a wonder and mystery in common and daily occurrences; that poetry should dwell more in cottages than in palaces; that the hearts of men are more worthy of note than the deeds of heroes” (“IL” 286-7).

⁶ In this regard, I would argue that Maurice’s contribution to literary study is not so much a revolution as a radical application of those two principles to its theory and practice. But see Prickett, whose assessment is that Maurice’s ideas are advanced for their time and even anticipate some of the notions of Jacques Derrida.

⁷ Although not radical enough for some. Rupert Shortt notes that Archbishop Rowan Williams, in developing a “redemptivist” theory of Christian socialism, believes Maurice’s incarnational approach to be “hopelessly compromised” because it does not challenge the prevailing culture forcibly enough (111).

⁸ Lewis, in an oft-quoted letter to his friend Arthur Greeves, records the conclusions he drew from the evening:

Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God’s myth where the others are men’s myths; i.e. the Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call “real things” . . . namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. (18 October 1931, *They Stand Together* 427)

⁹ Wondra summarizes Maurice’s thinking on this idea: the Kingdom of God “begins within” to be “manifest without”: it is to “penetrate the feelings, habits, thoughts, words, acts, of him who is the subject of it. At last it is to penetrate our whole social existence” (xvi).

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- ¹⁰ Maurice comments on his own experience of art: "I have learnt from pictures, and am willing to learn from them. I believe I might learn much from this one of Michael Angelo's which would do me great good, which would give strength, distinctness, even depth, to my own convictions, and to the words of inspiration" (*TE* 174).
- ¹¹ Prickett adds: "It is not hard to see how such a view would appeal to someone like the deracinated Congregational minister, George MacDonald, whose slow return to Christian orthodoxy was signalled by his growing friendship with Maurice."
- ¹² Wilmot states that if religion means devotion, then both poetry and religion are similar; but, he argues, "when devotion has respect to a real object,—the Creator of our minds, and not their creature; in other words, when it presumes religion,—it will have no natural connexion with poetry."
- ¹³ Maurice expounds on this notion in his essay "The Friendship of Books" in the book by that title.

- . (*TE*) *Theological Essays*. 3rd ed. London: Macmillan and Co. 1871.
- . (*WR*) *What is Revelation? A Series on Sermons on the Epiphany; to Which Are Added Letters to a Student of Theology on the Bampton Lectures of Mr. Mansel*. Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1859.
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- . (*ESJ*) *The Epistles of St. John: A Series of Lectures on Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1857. Selections in Wondra, Chapt. 2, 37-88.
- . "The Friendship of Books" and *Other Lectures*. Ed. Thomas Hughes. London: Macmillan and Co., 1874.
- . ("IL") "Introductory Lecture, by the Professor of English Literature and Modern History at King's College London." *Education Magazine*. November 1840. 273-88.
- . (*KC*) *The Kingdom of Christ: or, Hints on the Principles, Ordinances, and Constitution of the Catholic Church in Letters to a Member of the Society of Friends*. 3 vols. 1st ed. London: Darton and Clark, 1838.
- . (*Life*) *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice, Chiefly Told in His Own Letters*. Ed. Frederick Maurice. 2 vols. London: Macmillan and Co., 1884.
- . (*SM*) *Social Morality: Twenty-One Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1869.