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# MacDonald's Counter-literature

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# MacDonald's Counter-literature

**Cover Page Footnote**  
Keynote Address

# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth  
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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## **MacDonald's Counter-literature**

Colin Manlove

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

### MacDonald's Counter-literature

Colin Manlove

How do MacDonald's fantasies reflect his very individual theology? If we start from his dislike of fixed creeds and doctrines, we find this paralleled in his fantasy in its refusal to be overtly Christian. We sometimes forget, when we speak of MacDonald as a writer of Christian fantasy, that, with the possible exception of *Lilith*, the Christianity is not at all evident. This is not the case in his novels, where the story may describe the growth of a character in awareness of Christ. The difference between the fantasy and the novels is explained by MacDonald in his essay 'The Fantastic Imagination' (1893), where he says that the fairy tale or fantasy works by suggestion rather than statement, because it comes from the mysterious and inner world of the imagination rather than from observation of the external world. 'It is there not so much to convey a meaning as to wake a meaning' (*ADO* 317). In his fantasy MacDonald wants to create a living or even a mystical experience of God, rather than to state directly how He is the Love that we must all follow. God Himself is beyond all our meanings, classifications and words. In this world He can only be spoken about by indirections, by symbols that point beyond themselves—perhaps even best even through music rather than words.

Long before C.S. Lewis tried to write Christian fantasy that got away from the 'stained-glass associations' of Christianity, MacDonald was doing the same, not only out of a wish to convert, but from a desire to convey anew the living wonder of God. By writing in *Phantastes* and *Lilith* the stories of Victorian characters who wander in the strange worlds of their unconscious minds, and finally come to the knowledge of a great good that is approaching them, he opens to readers the dawning experience of a God without a name. Each reader, he says, will feel the story differently. Some may, on this way of thinking, feel Him rather like the Pan god in *The Wind in the Willows*, some like the giant Oyarsa of Venus in C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra*, some as the great imagination of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*—and all of these fleeting identifications will be at once right and wrong, for no

sooner do we identify Him with any one of them than His glory has moved elsewhere. God is in every symbol, and in no one of them. MacDonald himself writes several forms of fantasy, from Spenserian romance to children's fairy tale; in *At the Back of the North Wind* the story is set both in the seemingly ordinary world of Victorian London and in the airborne realm of North Wind herself; in 'The Golden Key' we have a Bunyanesque journey from this world to the next, through strange faerian and underground worlds. Only in *Lilith* does MacDonald use Christian symbols, and then to recreate them: his Adam and Eve are not here fallen man but guides to heaven; his Lilith is dramatised not as Adam's first wife but as the murderess of children; and the serpent has turned to the worm of evil that has entered Lilith. Here the Genesis myth is evoked only to be upturned.

Subversion of settled assumptions is often to be found in MacDonald's fantasies, in order to open the imagination to the holy nature of the universe. The whole of *Phantastes* is a continual undermining of Anodos's settled assurances, from the initial transformation of his Victorian bedroom to a glade in Fairy Land, to the succession of strange and ill-consorted sequence of experiences through which he then passes—a lady in alabaster he wakes by singing to her, a pair of malignant trees, his acquisition of a shadow, his arrival at a fairy palace, and his journey thence to a submersible cottage in the midst of an ocean, then to a plateau where he helps two brothers overcome three giants, a tower in which he finds himself shut, and a forest church where he alone sees that the worshippers are being sacrificed. To all this Anodos can only say, 'it is no use trying to account for things in Fairy Land,' and that the traveller there soon learns to take 'everything as it comes, like a child, who, being in a chronic condition of wonder, is surprised at nothing' (*PL* 33). Subversion reigns right to the end, for Anodos, having given his life for the forest-worshippers, enters on a posthumous life of growing bliss, from which he is abruptly thrust back into his Victorian world.

In addition, the oft-remarked 'disconnectedness' that MacDonald espouses in *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, means that there is often no *reason*, nor evident *cause*, why one event should precede rather than follow another, or indeed for the particular sequence of a narrative. *Phantastes* is a Fairyland picaresque, where all events seem happened upon, by a character who must simply 'act and wander' (PL 40). Why for example should Anodos meet the Ash, Alder and Beech trees before he meets his Shadow, and why do these episodes come before he reaches the fairy palace? No narrative or causal sequence is there to explain the order, and sometimes no identifiable spiritual sequence either. In *Lilith* the narrative is subverted by being shown by Mr. Raven to be on one level a waste of time, for Vane is throughout resisting the inevitable: "“Everybody who is not at home, has to go home”" (PL 225). 'Connectedness' and a sense of the rightness of the order are often only to be felt at an unconscious level, where rational and empirical sequences are of less account than spiritual consequence. For instance, Vane cannot repent till that part of him that is Lilith repents. In both *Phantastes* and *Lilith* it seems that the hero returns to his own time and place as the same young man who began the story: Anodos is still the tyro preparing to start out on life; Vane is still the young man preparing to come into his inheritance. But matters of the spirit have changed: the launch of Anodos at the end is of quite another order since his journey through Fairy Land; and the meanings of 'young man' and 'coming into his inheritance' have altered entirely for Vane since he entered the region of the seven dimensions.

MacDonald will not leave us wholly confused or deprived of sequence: there is usually some lodestar far off, whether it is the elusive white lady in *Phantastes*, the suggestive 'brain-house' in *The Princess and Curdie*, or the cottage of dead souls in *Lilith*; and there is often a recurrent motif, or even the clear statement of a theme, which leaves us to see a little way by its light. MacDonald's 'aim' is not to blur truth, but to avoid fixities and allegories in fairy tales (ADO, 317), whereby the mind can seize on and name one aspect of a work and pronounce it the whole. In the same way he opposed the way that theology and doctrine seize on a single interpretation of Christian mystery. For him God cares only for 'live' things and truths, 'not things set down in a book or in a memory' (US, 218). So it is that nothing stays still in his fantasy, and metamorphosis is a theme throughout. God lives in the unconscious imagination of man, and there, as Vane finds in *Lilith*, 'A single thing would sometimes seem to be and mean many things, with an uncertain identity at the heart of them, which kept constantly altering their look' (PL, 227). Because MacDonald's fantasy comes from the unconscious, it subverts causal narrative to the point where it takes on the character of a series of dream images. *Phantastes* is shot through with interpolated

stories and quotations from poets. Like Keats, MacDonald wishes his reader to be in 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching out after fact and reason' (Keats, letter of 21 Dec. 1817), in which condition alone the mind is open to deeper spiritual understanding.

*Phantastes* and *Lilith* are certainly extremes in MacDonald's art of 'disconnection.' In the longer children's fantasies—*At the Back of the North Wind*, the 'Curdie' books and *The Lost Princess*—we have books that do tell a story. However in each case the plot is really a series of more or less islanded sub-stories. *At the Back of the North Wind* has two very different narratives taking turn about—of little Diamond's life in London, and of his airborne journeys with North Wind—and each has the effect of questioning the other. So too in *The Wise Woman* two girls are being separately educated, and to very different effect, and these stories never link up, though the partial change in Princess Rosamund comments on the moral intransigence of the shepherd's daughter Agnes. (Here we may also see how MacDonald subverts the fairy-tale cliché of the poor girl coming out on top.) In *The Princess and the Goblin* the story of little Irene's life in the house and with her 'grandmother' in the attics alternates with the narrative of Curdie and the goblins, which for long seems to have nothing to do with the other. As for *The Princess and Curdie*, it has two stories, the subversion of Curdie the miner's complacent materialism, and later, Curdie's undermining of the plots against their king by the predatory citizens of Gwyntystorm. Meanwhile this book is itself subverting its sister story *The Princess and the Goblin* by giving a much darker picture of a human evil, rather than a goblin one, and of innocence now not so much having to be protected but put at real risk. If the first 'Princess' book was in a sense Innocence, here the children are older and living through Experience.

The idiom of MacDonald's fantasy is frequently that of metamorphosis, whereby a character or object does not have just one but several identities, and the reader cannot fix on any one. North Wind in *At the Back of the North Wind* can be now a towering giantess, now a tiny creature; the old lady of *The Princess and Curdie* can appear as a wolf, or an old crone, or a beautiful woman; Lilith and Mara in *Lilith* shift constantly from women to leopardesses, and the old librarian of Vane's house turns into a raven and then appears as the first and last man Adam.

Subversion of a sort also exists between *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, which were MacDonald's first and last fantasies: though both are of similarly disconnected, dream-like form, the one concerns a man's education into life, the other instruction in how to leave it; the one is about beginnings, the other deals with endings; *Phantastes* is one man's journey through his own inner landscape, *Lilith* gives an image of the posthumous

landscape of all people. In all these various ways MacDonald uses vision to counter vision, truth to subvert truth, to show how any picture of God's reality is partial. For him reality is paradoxical: throughout his fantasy he plays against our belief in the solidity of the characters and their strange worlds, the simultaneous fact that they are all journeys within the mind. In 'The Golden Key,' Mossy and Tangle are travelling through life towards death and beyond to the 'country whence the shadows fall'; but each is also following an individual journey through his and her imaginations towards the God who lives in the depths of the human mind. Both Anodos and Vane are dreaming while at the same time becoming more awake than they have ever been in their lives before; and they are travelling in worlds of the spirit. Little Diamond dreams North Wind, but she tells him there is truth in the dream. The landscape of *The Princess and the Goblin* is both mental and physical, symbolising a three-levelled mind, with the bestial goblins at its foot, the princess living her daylight life in the house halfway up the hill, and many of her nights with her great-grandmother in the attics. In *The Wise Woman* the cottage expresses the different minds of its inhabitants, and while living there they are in one sense also living in their own interior worlds. And every one of the shorter fairy tales is in some sense a journey within the spirit.

MacDonald is as subversive at the level of words and sentences as in that of whole narratives. In *Phantastes* Anodos complains that trying to re-tell a story he finds in a book in the fairy library is 'like trying to reconstruct a forest out of broken branches and withered leaves' (PL 89), and in *Lilith* Vane declares that this failure of language is also owing to the elusive nature of its subject:

A single thing would sometimes seem to be and mean many things, with an uncertain identity at the heart of them, which kept constantly altering their look. I am indeed often driven to set down what I know to be a clumsy and doubtful representation of the mere feeling aimed at. . . . (PL 227)

One strategy to try to make up for this is to write in a medley of styles, hoping to capture more of the truth by using more reflections of it. This, it could be argued, is what MacDonald does in *Phantastes*, which is scattered with poetry amidst the prose; and the prose itself often varies between a forensic or 'scientific,' and a more emotive mode. At the same time MacDonald uses quotations from other writers at the head of every chapter, and recounts at length two of the tales Anodos reads in the fairy library. In this way his book becomes thoroughly 'inter-textual,' not just one man's vision but those of writers throughout the ages and in other dimensions. This is attempted by a different technique in *Lilith*, where Vane's individual posthumous

experience is embedded in those of all people, and the symbolism has universal and archetypal as much as local resonance.

And here again we might argue that the whole range of MacDonald's fantasy—now in the idiom of German Romantic fairy tale, now in the apocalyptic mode of Blake, or else moving from adult to children's fantasy and back again—also serves as one means of capturing just a little of that ever-changing and indescribable divine reality he spent all his life trying to portray. But still he knew that words were inadequate because words try to define reality, and all he could do was to subvert their definitions. He argued that words are not just signs but work emotionally: 'They have length, and breadth, and outline: have they nothing to do with depth? Have they only to describe, never to impress? Has nothing any claim to their use but the definite?' (ADO 319). But these are in the end rhetorical questions, because he knows that their use depends on the natures of their users. Thus he goes on to limit his proper audience to mothers and children, who do not ask for direct answers: 'If any strain of my "broken music" make a child's eyes flash, or his mother's grow for a moment dim, my labour will not have been in vain' (ADO 322).

MacDonald's fantasies may also be said to resist definition or fixity in the way that they often do not have clear endings. At the close of his story Anodos is thrust away from faerian bliss to wait in this world; Vane in *Lilith* is similarly turned aside from heaven just as he is about to enter it. *At the Back of the North Wind* leaves us to decide whether Diamond was a sick and deluded child who has just died of his illness or whether he truly met North Wind and has now been called to the mystical world at her back. *The Princess and the Goblin* may finish with the destruction of the goblins, but Irene and Curdie part, Curdie has not yet learned to believe in the reality of Irene's mystic grandmother, and she is still a presence in the attics of the house: so that we look to a sequel. *The Wise Woman* breaks off with one child on the road to spiritual improvement, but not the other. The end of *The Princess and Curdie* is not only, as it would be in fairy tale the overthrow of the king's enemies and the marriage of Irene and Curdie, but also what comes long after that, the destruction of Gwytystorm through human greed and its return to a wilderness. It must be said, though, that in MacDonald's shorter fairy tales there is often much more of a utopian conclusion: the light princess is saved from her curse and married by the prince, the Day Boy and the Night Girl destroy the evil witch and marry, Buffy Bob and Tricksy Wee master the giant and escape, Colin in the two stories of 'The Carasoy'n' rescues his wife-to-be and his child from the fairies.

In the absence of a marked sense of orthodox Christian history (fall, redemption, judgement and salvation) in his theology, we find that correspondingly his fantastic works are broadly lacking in a sense of

time, and even of perspective. Time conditions life *sub specie aeternitatis*, and is to some extent evident in the novels of 'real life,' particularly the earlier and more biographical ones: but in the fantasies we rarely find any sense of the past, or any character looking back to reflect on how far they have come—except in the sense that the protagonists of *Phantastes* and *Lilith* are returned at the end to the place they started from.

As for the future, it is fair to say that every fantasy looks forward intensely to what is to come, but that future has no certain date, being outside time. So far as our life on earth was concerned, MacDonald felt that 'Care for the next minute is just as foolish as care for the morrow, or for a day in the next thousand years—in neither can we do anything, in both God is doing everything' (*US*, 210-11). Few of the fantasies bring us to anticipate what may lie ahead: rather we are to attend intensely to each episode. The smaller fairy tales, apart from 'The Golden Key,' have none of the three-part structure of traditional tales, nor is the protagonist set a task.

Those who make plans, who try to shape events and the future to their desires are often evil—thus Makemnoit in 'The Light Princess,' the fairy queen in 'The Carasoy,' Watho in 'The Day Boy and the Night Girl,' the goblins and the evil counsellors in the 'Curdie' books, the wicked queen in *Lilith*. Even Curdie the miner in *The Princess and the Goblin* cannot succeed in his merely human attempts to discover the plots of the goblins, without the eventual help of Princess Irene acting at the behest of her grandmother. And even when he realises what the plot is, he cannot warn the people about the princess, because he is shot and taken prisoner by the guards. However his counterplots to save the king in *The Princess and Curdie* do succeed because he is there working as the agent of Irene's great-grandmother and is helped by her creatures. Even when this is done, the small company he has would have been overwhelmed by the army which his foes muster, and it takes the arrival of Irene's mystic great-grandmother with her pigeons to produce a more lasting, though not a final victory over the destroyers of Gwyntystorm. The broad point here is that foresight and planning involve narrowing the possibilities of the future to one's own perception. Irene's great-grandmother tells Curdie he must travel to the king's court at the city of Gwyntystorm, but does not say why, telling him "'You must learn to use far less direct directions'" (*PC* 75). We may suppose that she 'knows' what is going to happen, but that does not make the future any less of a risk, for it depends on the individual and uncertain choices of mortals which she will in no way constrain.

Just as the idea of relationship and 'at-one-ment' with God is at the heart of MacDonald's Christianity, so it is in his fantasies. In both *Phantastes* and *Lilith* the protagonist pursues a false relationship until he finds out this true and divine one. MacDonald's fantasies are

most of them fundamentally mystical. Anodos follows the white lady until he sees that she belongs to another, and turns his gaze upward. Vane becomes involved with Lilith and then Lona, and the one spurns and tries to destroy him, while Lona, Lilith's own child, is killed by her in a total repudiation of relationship; but in the end all become one with the dead who await resurrection. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, the 'Curdie' books and *The Lost Princess*, the core of the stories is the developing relation of young people with mystic figures who are either gateways to or surrogates for knowledge of God. (At the end of both 'Curdie' books the relation of Irene and Curdie is broken by separation or death.) The journey of the boy and girl Mossy and Tangle in 'The Golden Key' is through layer upon layer of being (symbolised in the three Old Men, the seven and then the eighth colours of the rainbow, and the serially-slabbed entrance of the mountain) to reach the divine source of all. In 'The Shadows,' Ralph Rinkelman, made king of the shadows, is introduced to deeper levels of their flickering natures, to the point of mystical revelation. Even 'The Light Princess' touches on the theme of Christ's love, in the death of the prince for his beloved and his subsequent resurrection into joy. In 'The Day Boy and the Night Girl,' the coming together of boy and girl is important not so much for their own marriage, as for the heavenly marriage of all things such a union of light and dark, conscious and unconscious, portends: "'Who knows," Nycteris would say to Photogen, "that when we go out, we shall not go into a day as much greater than your day as your day is greater than my night?"'

We find no final separations or polarities in MacDonald's fantasies either. The idiom is not dualism but paradox, whereby seeming opposites are shown to be related. The tension is not between fixed terms, but between mobile ones: God, endlessly and variously loving on the one side, and man, now in harmony with, now truant from, the love flowing from the creative centre. Paradoxically the love flows out in order to return: God loves and creates outwards to the circumference of the universe (*GMP*, 108), so that the creatures of the universe may know that love through coming back. 'Born of the heart of God, we have of ourselves to go back to the heart of God as our endless home—as our only home' (*GMP*, 268).<sup>1</sup> 'The whole system of the universe works upon this law—the driving of things upward towards the centre' (*US*, 132).<sup>2</sup> Indeed centre is the word, for some of the fantasies describe circles or spirals, ending where they began, and in others action is focused on a centre, such as the rainbow's end in 'The Golden Key,' the castle in *The Princess and the Goblin*, Gwyntystorm in *The Princess and Curdie* or the cottage in *The Wise Woman*. Actually in the *Princess and Curdie* we have two centres, the country castle with the mines, and Gwyntystorm: but when Gwyntystorm is purged of evil, the one migrates

into the other, as the remaining good characters move from the country to the city.

In many of the fantasies the antagonist is the self, but this is no dualism, for the self is not absolute but subject to change. Even the goblins of *The Princess and the Goblin* and the evil people of *The Princess and Curdie* are not fixedly evil, but devolved from higher creatures, and in the end they will have to climb back all the way to God. So too it is that the self-orientation of Anodos and of Vane is broken down; so it is that Rosamond in *The Lost Princess* comes to see how destructive of joy her self is, while Agnes must still go a longer path to find that out; so it is that the narrow materialism of Curdie, the self-amusement of the Light Princess, and the self-pleasing fairyland of Alice in 'Cross Purposes' are shown as the hollow shams of pride.

Nevertheless, if relationship with God is the central aim, relationship with man is somewhat more occasional or fleeting. So it is that the situation in the fantasy is often one in which the protagonist is alone and/or developing his or her nature through meetings with mystic personages. In *Phantastes*, Anodos never meets his White Lady, and his encounters with all other personages are passing episodes in his wanderings; his only constant companion is his unwelcome Shadow. In *Lilith* Vane wanders alone like Anodos, and those he loves either spurn him (*Lilith*) or die (*Lona*). Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind* is alone in his relation with North Wind, for no-one else believes she exists. Even in *The Princess and the Goblin*, where Curdie the miner's son has to protect Princess Irene against the plots of the goblins, the emphasis is as much on Irene's relation with her great-great grandmother; while Curdie, who is too materialist to see this lady, is often reduced to the level of a loyal retainer rather than a loving friend; and in the end he goes back to being a miner while Irene is taken away by her father the King to the palace in far-off Gwyntystorm. In *The Princess and Curdie* Curdie is largely alone in his mission to save the King and Irene. In *The Lost Princess* the two girls being educated by the Wise Woman never meet. There are more relationships in the lighter short fairy tales—as between princes and princesses in 'Little Daylight' and 'The Light Princess,' or between Alice and Richard in 'Cross Purposes,' or between Buffy-Bob and Tricky-Wee in 'The Giant's Heart'; and there is more society in 'The Carasoy.' But whenever the subject is more serious, the protagonists become more solitary, as with 'The Day Boy and the Night Girl,' or with Ralph Rinkelman in 'The Shadows,' or with the mostly separate stories of Mossy and Tangle in 'The Golden Key.'

Partly because of this emphasis on relationship with God more than with man, and partly through MacDonald's Platonic emphasis on mind, there is from time to time a note of '*contemptus mundi*' in his work. He can at times be quite harsh in his denunciations of

our attachment to material things, and indeed in his dislike of the evil he saw in his own Victorian society.<sup>3</sup> This comes out in his fantasy where the protagonists often either leave this world, as in *Phantastes*, 'Cross Purposes,' 'The Golden Key,' *At the Back of the North Wind*, and *Lilith*, or are taken out of it, as in 'The Day Boy and the Night Girl' or *The Lost Princess*. (It is also seen in the novels in the frequent other-wordliness of the protagonists.) It is found too in the misanthropic latter half of *The Princess and Curdie*, where the corrupt people of Gwyntystorm are finally destroyed by their own greed; in the bitterness of tone often found in *The Lost Princess*, or even in *Lilith*, where Vane's this-worldly attitudes, natural for one who has just been thrown into a fantastic realm that inverts his own, are mocked by Mr. Raven, and his attempts to help its inhabitants seen as a waste of time.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See also *GMP*, 5, 300; *US*, 117-18, 456-7.

<sup>2</sup> See also *US*, 322-3, 324, 431, 491, 605; *GMP*, 328.

<sup>3</sup> *US*, 308, 313, 488, 596.

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