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Painting in Prose
*Ardent Pre-Raphaelitism in George MacDonald's
Literary Landscapes*

Cynthia DeMarcus Manson

Although not a visual artist, George MacDonald can be recognized for composing prose landscapes in his literary works that are Pre-Raphaelite in principle and style. MacDonald created word paintings that reference specific Pre-Raphaelite artworks; his landscapes show the shared influence of John Ruskin's art theory, and he employs compositional techniques that correspond to the symbolic realism in early Pre-Raphaelite canvases. An awareness of MacDonald's Pre-Raphaelitism adds to the appreciation of his prose fiction and non-fiction.

Painting in Prose:

Ardent Pre-Raphaelitism in George MacDonald's Landscapes

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Victorian poet and novelist George MacDonald has for some time been recognized by MacDonald scholars as moving on the social fringes of the group of visual artists involved in the Pre-Raphaelite Movement. MacDonald had considerable exposure to the Pre-Raphaelite Movement over the course of his career as a close friend of two dedicated Pre-Raphaelite followers, sculptor Alexander Munro and painter Arthur Hughes. In Hughes, MacDonald also found the creator of the exquisite Pre-Raphaelite illustrations to his novel *At the Back of the North Wind*, and to a number of his other publications. Although MacDonald did not paint or draw, I would argue that Pre-Raphaelite artistic principles and techniques are deeply woven into the natural landscapes in his works of prose fiction. Recognizing specific Pre-Raphaelite components in MacDonald's striking descriptions will assist in understanding those word paintings, while also emphasizing the painter's or artist's perspective in MacDonald's response to the natural world.

The Pre-Raphaelite Movement dates back to 1848 when a small group of artists formed a society opposed to the conventional painting styles and techniques taught at the schools of the Royal Academy of Arts. Members of this Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood admired early Italian religious painters from before Raphael (Wood 10), and were strongly influenced by the ideas of Victorian art critic John Ruskin, who began elaborating his art theory in 1843 in the first of a series of volumes entitled *Modern Painters*. From their inception through the early 1860s, a kind of "symbolic realism"¹ predominated in the art of the original Pre-Raphaelites and their followers, who often displayed a minute attention to detail, particularly natural detail painted in natural light. However, this artistic realism also carried considerable symbolic content because selected details were also recognizable as symbols, often religious ones.

MacDonald had a love for and sensitivity toward the natural world while growing up in his native Scotland. These qualities seemed to deepen in the 1840s, during which he received his M.A. from King's College in Aberdeen, moved to the London area to accept a tutoring position,

and later enrolled in Highbury Theological Seminary. This decade also saw MacDonald's personal acceptance of Christianity, his growing faith, and his engagement to Louisa Powell. Another influence from this formative period appears to have been Ruskin's *Modern Painters*.

In 1849, while still enrolled in Highbury Theological Seminary, MacDonald wrote a May 15 letter to Louisa, describing his visit to the annual Royal Academy Exhibition:

What a strange picture of Turner's I saw yesterday at the Exhibition. A Rainbow over a stormy sea, ships far & near, boats, & a buoy. I could make nothing of it at first. Only by degrees I awoke to the Truth and wonder of it.

Although this passage might appear insignificant if read within a limited context, the passage actually suggests that MacDonald was already familiar with *Modern Painters* and had begun what would be a lifelong engagement with many of the ideas in the work. The impetus for *Modern Painters* had been the extremely harsh criticism of Turner that had appeared in the press. In defense of Turner, Ruskin radically asserted in his series that Turner was the greatest of all landscape painters, ancient or modern. Moreover, Ruskin devoted much of his first volume to a detailed analysis "Of Truth" in landscape painting, singling out Turner for praise for his accurate capture of various aspects of the sea, among other excellencies. When examined closely in light of the attention that Ruskin had drawn to Turner, MacDonald's interest in the painting known as *The Wreck Buoy* indicates that MacDonald was aware of the greatness being claimed for Turner and that he desired to view and appreciate for himself a display of such greatness.

In the decade after he left Highbury, MacDonald obtained and lost his only pastorate, then lived by teaching, lecturing and writing in Manchester and other locations before moving his family to London. By 1860 MacDonald knew Alexander Munro and Arthur Hughes and other individuals associated with the Pre-Raphaelites, and in 1863 MacDonald was formally introduced to Ruskin, when Ruskin attended one of MacDonald's lectures at his home, Tudor Lodge. According to MacDonald's son Greville, Ruskin and MacDonald quickly became intimate long-term friends. One mark of friendship was that in 1864, Ruskin gave *Modern Painters* to MacDonald "in their original green morocco binding" (Greville MacDonald 329).

There are a number of landscape depictions in MacDonald's short fiction and novels that could be characterized as verbal counterparts to early Pre-Raphaelite art and as applications of

the art principles of John Ruskin. I shall now discuss a few of them published in the 1860s. In “The Light Princess” one such scene is the word-painting at the climax of the fairy tale when tears fall from the eyes of the Princess who has begun to cry. The visual pattern of teardrops is repeated in the raindrops falling from the sky to restore to the kingdom its lost sources of water:

And a rain came on, such as had never been seen in that country. The sun shone all the time, and the great drops, which fell straight to the earth, shone likewise. The palace was in the heart of a rainbow. It was a rain of rubies, and sapphires, and emeralds, and topazes. The torrents poured from the mountains like molten gold; and if it had not been for its subterraneous outlet, the lake would have overflowed and inundated the country. It was full from shore to shore. (101)

The climactic landscape in George MacDonald’s “The Light Princess” is vivid and beautiful, deriving its beauty from the carefully delineated interplay of two natural elements of God’s creation, sun and raindrops. Yet at the same time the scene has spiritual depth because the sun, the rainbow and the jewel colors are biblical symbols associated with Christ and spiritual blessing. The symbolic realism of MacDonald’s landscape is a perfect complement to the Princess’s spiritual enlightenment that has taken place in the text of the story.

In “A Child’s Holiday,” one of the word paintings is a fulfillment of Ruskin’s admonition that painters should paint what they see, rather than traditional representations of objects. The 13-year-old boy in the story delights in contemplating water:

He would lie for an hour by the side of a hill-streamlet; he would stand gazing into a muddy pool, left on the road by last night’s rain. Once, in such a brown-yellow pool, he beheld a glory—the sun, encircled with a halo vast and wide, varied like the ring of opal colours seen about the moon when she floats through white clouds, only larger and brighter than that. Looking up, he could see nothing but a chaos of black clouds, brilliant towards the sun: the colours he could not see, except in the muddy water. (349)

The young boy’s attention to the surface of a brown-yellow pool rewards him with a splendid reflection of the sun encircled by a wide band of iridescent color. As a product of reflection, the color is not visible in the sky overhead—only in the muddy pool.

Ruskin preached in *Modern Painters* of the need for the painter to seek out the reflections in all bodies of water:

Now, the fact is that there is hardly a road-side pond or pool which has not as much landscape *in* it as above it. It is not the brown, muddy, dull thing we suppose it to be; it has a heart like ourselves, and in the bottom of that there are the boughs of the tall trees, and the blades of the shaking grass, and all manner of hues of variable pleasant light out of the sky. Nay, the ugly gutter, that stagnates over the drain-bars in the heart of the foul city, is not altogether base; down in that, if you will look deep enough, you may see the dark serious blue of far-off sky, and the passing of pure clouds. It is at [the choice of] your own will that you see, in that despised stream, either the refuse of the street, or the image of the sky. So it is with almost all other things that we unkindly despise. Now, this far-seeing is just the difference between the great and the vulgar painter: the common man *knows* the roadside pool is muddy, and draws its mud; the great painter sees beneath and behind the brown surface what will take him a day's work to follow, but he follows it, cost what it will.² (496-97)

One will note in the above passage that Ruskin's artistic admonitions were rendered in elegant, visually oriented prose. His writing transmitted not only a painter's viewpoint to his readers, but also captivating verbal descriptions of landscapes.

In *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865), MacDonald presents possibly his most powerful landscape—an elderly blind woman bathed in the red rays of the setting sun, who sits on the periphery of the title character's vision, as he meets a coach carrying his cousin Kate:

Where the coach stopped, on the opposite side of the way, a grassy field, which fell like a mantle from the shoulders of a hill crowned with firs, sloped down to the edge of the road. From the coach, the sun was hidden behind a thick clump of trees, but his rays, now red with rich age, flowed in a wide stream over the grass, and shone on an old Scotch fir which stood a yard or two from the highway, making its red bark glow like the pools which the prophet saw in the desert. At the foot of the tree sat Tibbie Dyster; and from her red cloak the level sun-tide

was thrown back in gorgeous glory; so that the eyeless woman, who only felt the warmth of the great orb, seemed in her effulgence of luminous red, to be the light-fountain whence that torrent of rubescence burst. From her it streamed up to the stem and along the branches of the glowing fir; from her it streamed over the radiant grass of the up-sloping field away towards the western sun. But the only one who saw the splendor was a shoemaker, who rubbed his resinous hands together and felt happy without knowing why. (224)

The written description above calls for considerable mental participation by the reader, who repeatedly has to re-imagine the scene as additional details are provided. MacDonald adds another figure to his visual composition in the subsequent paragraph, when he reveals that the young girl Annie Anderson is sitting on the shadowy side of Tibbie and her eyes are “shining upon him [Alec], with a deeper and truer, if with a calmer, or, say, colder devotion, than that with which he regarded Kate” (224). Although dark-haired, blue-eyed Annie is focused on Alec, he notices neither “old, scarred, blind Tibbie” at “the center of a blood-red splendor,” nor Annie herself (224).

Aside from its color scheme, MacDonald’s landscape shares some striking commonalities with Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais’ 1856 painting *The Blind Girl*.³ Both scenes foreground a blind female with a younger female companion sitting toward the foot of a hill flooded with light. Both scenes highlight the contrast between sight and blindness, with the blind characters unable to see the visual splendor that surrounds them; and both scenes could be using the predicament of the blind person as a Christian metaphor for the human being who cannot see an invisible spiritual dimension that is nonetheless present. Millais’ painting captures the brilliant intensity of sunlight falling on the landscape, while dark clouds and a double rainbow in the distant sky indicate that a rainstorm is just passing. The central figure in the painting wears a shawl over her head under which her companion has also sought shelter from the rain. Both girls’ worn and torn clothing testifies to their poverty, while a label at the blind girl’s throat reads “Pity the Blind.” The painting has various natural symbols, such as the rainbow, black birds, sheep and a prominent butterfly, which collectively invite a spiritual reading. The rainbow, birds of the field and sheep are biblical images, while the butterfly is a traditional symbol for the soul.

Critic Kate Flint, in discussing potential interpretations of Millais' painting, has written that certain details in the *The Blind Girl* "underscore the point of God's omnipresent goodness," and also that the painting "can be understood as alluding to the promise held out by God of inner, rather than external illumination" (76). These meanings are also important in MacDonald's word painting.

The stunning light imagery in MacDonald's verbal landscape powerfully communicates the paradoxical message that the blind woman, despite her age and smallpox scars, is gloriously transfigured; as a result of being enveloped in the rays of the setting sun she herself appears to be a "light-fountain" pouring forth red light. The imagery highlights her as a transformed object of God's love. However, as with Millais' painting, MacDonald's prose landscape points to an invisible reality that must be discerned inwardly. MacDonald underscores the symbolic nature of the material world by narrating blind Tibbie's thoughts:

Tibbie had come out to bask a little, and in the dark warmth of the material sun, to worship that Sun whose light she saw in the hidden world of her heart, and who is the Sun of all the worlds; to breathe the air, which, through her prison-bars, spoke of freedom; to give herself room to long for the hour when the loving Father would take her out of the husk which infolded her, and say to her: "*See, my child.*" (225)

Tibbie's partial sensory experience of the material sun—her experience of its warmth--assists her in worshipping God as a type of sun (the source and sustainer of life itself), whose qualities she can perceive inwardly in her heart. Breathing fresh air speaks to her of the freedom she will achieve upon her death, when a loving God will remove her spirit from her mortal body. Moreover, the passage implies that in the afterlife God's words "See, my child" will signify much more than a newly restored capacity for physical sight, because she will be able to "see" or apprehend ultimate spiritual reality directly, not through the darkened glass of human earthly experience.

MacDonald's various Pre-Raphaelite influences are again evident in his novel *The Seaboard Parish*, which is full of word paintings that become the basis for discussing nature, art and God. Moreover, MacDonald specifically pays homage in the novel to Ruskin by naming one

of the minor characters Turner, in obvious allusion to the painter that Ruskin revered. A more central character in the novel, a talented painter named Mr. Percivale, expresses admiration for Ruskin when the art critic is brought up in conversation. When asked whether he knows the author of *Modern Painters*, Mr. Percivale replies:

I wish I did. He has given me much help. I do not say I can agree with everything he writes; but when I do not, I have such a respect for him that I always feel as if he must be right whether he seems to me to be right or not. And if he is severe, it is with the severity of love that will speak only the truth. (284)

While Ruskin is held up as a truth-teller, *The Seaboard Parish* also pays tribute to MacDonald's Pre-Raphaelite friend Arthur Hughes by extolling one of his masterpieces. The novel gives a description of an impressive painting by Mr. Percivale that is actually derived from MacDonald's memory of a Hughes painting, *The Knight of the Sun*.⁴ The narrator of *The Seaboard Parish*, a clergyman, calls the painting "a grand picture, full of feeling—a picture and a parable" (615). Its prose depiction follows:

A dark hill rose against the evening sky which shone through a few thin pines on its top. Along a road on the hill-side, four squires bore a dying knight—a man past the middle age. One behind carried his helm, and another led his horse, whose fine head only appeared in the picture. The head and countenance of the knight were very noble, telling of many a battle, and ever for the right. The last had doubtless been gained, for one might read victory as well as peace in the dying look. The party had just reached the edge of a steep descent, from which you saw the valley below, with the last of the harvest just being reaped, while the shocks stood all about in the fields, under the place of the sunset. The sun had been down for some little time. There was [no] gold left in the sky, only a little dull saffron; but plenty of that lovely liquid green of the autumn sky, divided with a few streaks of pale rose. The depth of the sky overhead, which you could not see for the arrangement of the picture, was mirrored lovelily in a piece of water that lay in the centre of the valley. (614)

The narrator of *The Seaboard Parish* then interprets Percivale's "painting," discovering a parallel between the sun having done his work and "leaving his good name behind him in a lovely harmony of color," just as the old knight is leaving good in his wake at his death. The narrator also notes that the picture is made complete through the reflection in the water of "the deep heaven overhead, the symbol of that heaven whither he who has done his work is bound" (614-15).

MacDonald saw the infinitely varied phenomena of nature as windows into God's glory and a divinely created language for expressing spiritual truths. He frequently employed this visual language in the books he wrote to share with his readers. In depicting the reality of nature with a clarity that suggested its wonder and the artistry of God, MacDonald learned from Ruskin and worked alongside the early Pre-Raphaelites.

Notes

1. This term has been used by Landow and others.
2. My attention was directed to this passage during a lecture by Ruskin scholar Birch.
3. I am indebted to Dr. André DeCuir, once a fellow graduate student at the University of Kentucky, for first noticing the similarity between Millais' painting and MacDonald's prose landscape.
4. MacDonald acknowledges that he has described a Hughes painting in *The Seaboard Parish* 615n. Triggs identified the title of the painting, of which Hughes created several versions.

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