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Introduction

George MacDonald's fairy tales have been children's classics since they first appeared between 1867 and 1882. They include the stories in *Dealings with the Fairies* (1867) and the book-length fantasies *At the Back of the North Wind* (1870), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), *The Wise Woman* (1875), and *The Princess and Curdie* (1882). All of them are written for children, and have children as their central characters. In these stories MacDonald created a unique blend of fantasy and realism, and a peculiar depth of mystical vision, inviting us to see our world as continually penetrated by divine forces.

Born in 1824 and raised in Huntly, Aberdeenshire, MacDonald graduated MA in Natural Philosophy (Science) from Aberdeen University in 1845. Though he had hoped to continue his scientific studies abroad, the limitations of family finance drove him to London and a series of tutoring jobs. It was in London that his Christian faith developed as it had not during his repressive Calvinist upbringing. He trained as a Congregationalist in London, and entered on the ministry at Arundel, Sussex in 1851. In the meantime he had met and married Louisa Powell, who was to bear him eleven children and to care for him throughout his lifetime of frequently near-fatal tubercular disease.

MacDonald's life as a minister did not last long. He was expelled in 1853 by the officious officials of his church, who did not like his frequent criticisms of bourgeois greed and materialism, and resented his liberal "German theology" which suggested, for example, that heathens might be

saved and animals go to heaven. MacDonald was only one of numbers of the clergy then being expelled from their pulpits by a wave of reactionary orthodoxy in the church. He never resumed a salaried ministry, and devoted much of his life to an unpaid advocacy of his Christian views. This meant that his family had to survive by what MacDonald could earn from writing, preaching, and lecturing, and from family and friends. At first his writings, in poetry (*Within and Without* (1855)) and adult fantasy (*Phantastes* (1858)) did not bring in enough money, but when he took to writing semi-autobiographical realistic novels, such as *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865) and *Robert Falconer* (1868), his income and fame increased considerably. Thereafter he was to keep writing novels for the rest of his life. However, his children's fantasy, which became highly popular, also greatly helped to earn him his living.

At the time MacDonald first began writing original fairy tales for children, in the early 1860s, a tradition in Britain for such writing was only some twenty years old. Evangelical and moral cultural attitudes militated against the free use of the imagination in children's books. Not till the 1850s did the fairy tale become more widely accepted as a literary form for children. But still it had to be imbued with explicit moral teaching. The fairy tales of the Grimms had been translated in 1823 and 1826, but were moralized. Mary Howitt's translation of ten Hans Christian Andersen fairy tales, *Wonderful Stories for Children* (1846), is an exception in its refusal to turn tales into lessons. More typical of the period is George Cruikshank's *The Fairy Library* (1853–64), which rewrote a range of traditional fairy stories as temperance and other lessons.

So far as invented fairy tales are concerned, there are several before MacDonald's that stand out. Among those whose influence we see strongly in his work are the Reverend Frances E. Paget's comic-moral *The Hope of the Katzekopfs: or, The Sorrows of Selfishness* (1844), which describes how naughty Prince Eigenwillig (Self-Will) refuses the injunctions of the Fairy Abracadabra and is tormented by the dwarf Selbst (Self) and moralized into submission by old man Discipline. In John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* (1851), two brother farmers live in a rich mountain valley until their unkindness insults the natural deities of the locality and brings about their ruin. William Thackeray's "fireside pantomime" *The Rose and the Ring* (1855) is an exuberant parody of fairy tale in which the princely hero Giglio is an ignorant fop and the princess Rosalba a vain coquette whose education the Fairy Blackstick must take in hand before they can

qualify for marriage and rule. Frances Browne's *Granny's Wonderful Chair* (1856) is a collection of stories with a mainly rural setting told by a flying chair to keep a king happy. Ordinary folk, from shepherds to fishermen, are the human characters, and goblins, fairies, and elves fill the woods. The ethic is one of natural rather than unnatural behavior. Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863) portrays nature in a marine setting, with Tom the chimney-sweep turned to a small swimming creature who travels downstream to the oceans of the world and beyond, learning how the world is run like a machine by fairies that are sub-vicars of God, and how to become better-behaved.

Of these, *The Hope of the Katzekopfs* is behind the theme of self-love in MacDonald's *The Wise Woman*. The South-West Wind in Ruskin's *King of the Golden River* almost certainly influenced *At the Back of the North Wind*, as did *The Water-Babies*. Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring* paved the way for "The Light Princess" (1864); and the rural settings and Christian vision of Frances Browne's stories are a strand in all MacDonald's fairy tales.¹

But MacDonald's sources are wider than these. Several of his fairy tales, such as "The Giant's Heart" and "The Carasoy," are based on traditional stories. The influence of Perrault seems pervasive, if light; and both Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl* (1814) and Hans Andersen's stories lie behind "The Shadows." MacDonald, who was fluent in German, is strongly indebted to the earlier invented German Romantic fairy tales of such writers as Goethe, Novalis, Ludwig Tieck, and E. T. A. Hoffmann. Indeed, he valued Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811) as the type of a perfect fairy tale.² The idiom and setting of the "Curdie" books recall Tieck; Novalis's influence is noted by MacDonald himself in "The Golden Key"; and something of Hoffmann's metamorphic mockery seems present in "Cross Purposes."

The 1860s, with the popularity of *The Water-Babies* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), saw an explosion of English interest in fantasy, particularly for children. MacDonald had been publishing occasional fairy tales since 1862, and he reprinted three of them in his *Adela Cathcart* (1864), a book about the spiritual transformation of a sick girl through storytelling. Seeing the new fashion, in 1867 MacDonald's

1. See Manlove, "George MacDonald and the Fairy Tales of Francis Paget and Frances Browne," 17–32.

2. "Were I asked, what is a fairytale? I should reply, *Read Undine: that is a fairytale . . .* Of all fairytales I know, I think *Undine* the most beautiful" (MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 313).

George MacDonald's *Children's Fantasies and the Divine Imagination* publisher Alexander Strahan brought out a collection of five MacDonald tales as *Dealings with the Fairies*, which was reprinted in 1868 and 1890. In 1871, these fairy tales appeared in Strahan's publication of all George MacDonald's fantasy as *Works of Fancy and Imagination*, 10 volumes, which was reprinted continually until 1911.

From the first, MacDonald's fairy tales were felt to be a fine combination of the delights of fairyland with deeper meaning;³ MacDonald's motto for the *Dealings with the Fairies* was "where more is meant than meets the ear."⁴ Most reviewers particularly praised "The Light Princess" for its wit and logic, though MacDonald's friend John Ruskin felt that the swimming episodes in the story were far too suggestively erotic.⁵ Lewis Carroll was delighted when he saw "The Light Princess" in manuscript in 1862, and the story is almost certainly behind *Alice in Wonderland*. The notion of a bad fairy's christening curse leaving a princess without a sense of gravity was a wonderful invention, quite following up the complaint of Thackeray's Fairy Blackstick that the usual christening gifts of beauty, charm, wealth, or power did their royal beneficiaries no good whatsoever.⁶ "The Shadows," with its continual mixture of grave and gay in its subjects, its overtones of Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" (1843), and its rewriting of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* with its sylphs, is a sort of literary dance about the central figure Ralph Rinkelmann. In "Cross Purposes," MacDonald produces an unforgettable picture of fairy glamour in a land where streams flow uphill over flowers, trees grow in lakes, owls struggle to read, cats enlarge themselves to cat-a-mountains, and vertiginous towers prove "actually" only two feet high.

Now MacDonald began to write the longer fairy tales *At the Back of the North Wind* and *The Princess and the Goblin*, which were to be instant and enduring successes.⁷ MacDonald was also writing more "realistic" and partly autobiographical stories of childhood and boyhood with *Alec Forbes*

3. See the contemporary reviews from *The London Review*, *The British Quarterly Review*, *The Eclectic Review*, and *The Athenaeum*, reprinted in King and Pierce, eds., *George MacDonald, The Princess and the Goblin and Other Fairy Tales*, 317–19.

4. From Milton, *Il Penseroso*, line 120.

5. Raeper, *George MacDonald*, 222–23.

6. Thackeray, *The Rose and the Ring*, ch. 4.

7. Sample passages from contemporary and later reviews of *The Princess and the Goblin*, taken from *The Saturday Review*, *Academy*, *Athenaeum*, *The Westminster Review*, and *Academy and Literature*, can be found in MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin*, King and Pierce, eds., 309–17.

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of *Howglen* (1865), the first part of *Robert Falconer* (1868), and *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* (1871), all of which sold well for over forty years; as did his novel *Wilfrid Cumberland* (1872), which is largely a story of boyhood at home and school, and *Sir Gibbie* (1879).

Interestingly MacDonald was no mere exploiter of the fashion for children and for fantasy. Indeed, he believed in the potentially mystical power of both. In his “unspoken” sermon “The Child in the Midst,” he said, “God is represented in Jesus, for God is like Jesus: Jesus is represented in the child, for that Jesus is like the child. Therefore God is represented in the child, for that he is like the child. God is child-like.”⁸ This notion of the child as potentially God-like is seen in many of MacDonald’s fairy tales. However, MacDonald discriminates between children who are inherently blessed because they are made in the image of God and those of them who have stained that image with their deeds and thoughts.⁹ The purest child is also child-like, that is, innocent in nature. Such “children” MacDonald finds at all ages.

Nevertheless, MacDonald is one of the first writers to put children at the center of his fairy tales. Young Richard and Alice in “Cross Purposes” (1862) predate Charles Kingsley’s Tom in *The Water-Babies* and Lewis Carroll’s Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*. Prior to MacDonald, most literary fairy tales—Francis Paget’s *The Hope of the Katzekopfs*, Ruskin’s *The King of the Golden River*, Thackeray’s *The Rose and the Ring*, Frances Browne’s *Granny’s Wonderful Chair*—have young men and women rather than children as their heroes.

Throughout MacDonald’s stories we are brought close to the child characters and their feelings. This does not happen so much in *The Water-Babies*, where the adult narrator frequently gets between us and Tom; nor very much in *Alice in Wonderland*, where the creatures are often so freakish as to be on the point of vanishing like the Cheshire Cat, and where Alice’s feelings are more at the level of curiosity or irritation than, say, fear or loss. MacDonald creates more or less “realistic” child figures in situations and with reactions we can all understand, even while they are undergoing the strangest of experiences. He makes vivid the terror and exhilaration of Diamond being carried in North Wind’s hair as she rushes over the land in a gale. He puts us with Princess Irene as she follows where her grandmother’s thread leads her, growing more fearful as her home is left behind and she

8. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, 12.

9. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, 2–3.

is surrounded by the wild mountain; and still more when the thread leads her right to a small hole in the mountain and then through tunnels in the pitch dark till she loses all sense of direction. The immediacy with which MacDonald puts us close to a child's experience in a fantastic situation is one of his greatest gifts.

As for the mystic power of fantasy, in the epigraph to *Phantastes* (1858) MacDonald quoted the German Romantic writer Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) on the fairy tale: in English this reads: "A fairy tale is like a dream-picture without coherence, a collection of wonderful things and occurrences, e.g. a musical fantasy, the harmonic sequences of the Aeolian harp, nature itself."¹⁰ This remained MacDonald's view of the fairy tale in his late essay "The Fantastic Imagination," his introduction to *The Light Princess and Other Fairy Tales* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1893), where he speaks of it as inherently mysterious in essence and musical in its working; for "The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended."¹¹ And here MacDonald brings together his idea of the fairy tale with his idea of the childlike: "For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five."¹² Such readers remain innocent in that they do not try to explain the fairy tale away, but remain "still and let it work on that part of them for whose sake it exists."¹³ MacDonald is the first British writer to give fantasy such a high place in literature.

For MacDonald, as for Novalis, fantasy is largely the product of the unconscious imagination. MacDonald believed that God lived in the roots of the imagination, "in the chamber of our being in which the candle of our consciousness goes out in darkness, and sends forth from thence wonderful gifts into the light of that understanding which is His candle."¹⁴ The fairy tale especially, being created by and in this imagination, is therefore grounded in divine mystery. Through it God speaks to us, even if we do not always recognize his voice.

This belief that God actually lives in the imagination of man and is the author of man's creativity is perhaps the most striking feature of MacDonald's thought. It is first advanced by him in an essay "The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture" in 1867, the same year in which his mystical

10. Novalis, *Die Fragmente*, in *Schriften*, III, 572 # 113.

11. MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 319.

12. MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 317.

13. MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 321-22.

14. MacDonald, "The Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 25.

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fairy tale “The Golden Key” first appeared. Though this view has its antecedents in ideas of divine *afflatus* in the prophets, in Greek poetics, Ficino, Sir Philip Sidney, Milton, and perhaps most notably Blake, none of these saw God as actually taking up residence within the mind of man. It makes reading MacDonald’s fairy tales a potentially mystical experience; and it gives them a potentially bottomless significance. At any point the world in them will drop away and reveal endless gulfs beneath or around. The very image of this is found in the Curdie books, where a seeming bath becomes an ocean of stars, or the walls of a room disappear to reveal the night sky, or a spinning wheel is transformed to a giant wheel of fire.

Why did MacDonald have this view of God as being at the root of the human imagination? One answer may be that because the imagination is the most mysterious faculty in man, and at home with infinity and infinite depths of thought and suggestion, it is nearest in character to God. Another could be precisely that the imagination’s roots lie beyond knowledge, and we cannot tell if the mystic depths it seems to reach are truth or subjective illusion. This was the problem for the Romantic poets, exemplified in Wordsworth’s “egotistical sublime.” What MacDonald may be doing is removing the potential subjectivity of the imagination by placing God, or ultimate reality, at its very center. In this way, the visions sent up to him from it would be *given*, not self-made.

MacDonald also believed that the world itself was made by God’s creative imagination. Therefore, the world, properly seen—and that means seen imaginatively and mystically—is also a fairy tale. This implies that in order to write about reality most truly, one should write fairy tales as Novalis describes them. However, man is independent and able to choose for himself the form in which to embody his ideas. God thinks man’s thoughts, and thinks the world into being; but man has still himself to find from nature the perfect expression of his thought.¹⁵ What the human being does is discover in nature the God-given material that best realizes or expresses his thought. This is why MacDonald asks, “Is not the *Poet*, the *Maker*, a less suitable name for him than the *Trouvère*, the *Finder*?”¹⁶

In most of his fairy tales for children, MacDonald did not write quite as chaotically as the quotation from Novalis might suggest: he did not too often “assail the soul of his reader as the wind assails an aeolian harp.”¹⁷ He

15. MacDonald, “The Imagination,” *A Dish of Orts*, 18.

16. MacDonald, “The Imagination,” *A Dish of Orts*, 20.

17. MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” *A Dish of Orts*, 321.

left such unmixed mystery to his adult romances *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895) and to one visionary fairy tale, "The Golden Key" (1867). Rather, the mysteries he gives us are more occasional, breaking through the story to reveal another and deeper narrative running parallel to it. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, for example, young Diamond's life as a London cab-man's son is interrupted from time to time by a great lady who calls herself the North Wind. She takes Diamond on a journey round the city and then to the North Pole, so that he may reach the country at her back. In this way, Diamond sees the forces that govern the world, such as pain, poverty, and death, and the yet deeper reality that somehow resolves them all in an approaching universal song.

Indeed, several of the shorter fairy tales are not evidently mystical at all. Such are "Cross Purposes," "The Giant's Heart," "The Carasoy," "The Light Princess," and "Little Daylight," which are re-creations or parodies of traditional folk stories. The last two have some Christian overtones, as we shall see: but with the exception of "The Shadows" and "The Golden Key," the shorter fairy tales seem to be more secular in emphasis. However, we should be careful here, for Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1814), regarded by MacDonald as the perfect fairy tale, seems on first glance concerned only with the this-worldly issues of a man's gain and then loss of a female water-spirit. Yet further thought may lead us to see in it the theme of the loss of a man's soul; or, in the words of Charlotte Yonge,

Though in this tale there is far less of spiritual meaning than in [Fouqué's] *Sintram*, we cannot but see that Fouqué's thought was that the grosser human nature [of the knight Huldbrand who leaves Undine for a human bride] is unable to appreciate what is absolutely pure and unearthly.¹⁸

"The imagination," MacDonald tells us, "is that faculty which gives form to thought."¹⁹ The thought, or idea comes first, and then the image that best expresses it. That image will be more or less apt in conveying the thought according to the skill of the creator. God, who thought and then created the universe out of nothing, had no existent image in which to embody that thought: but he who is the fount of all contained all thoughts and images together. Man, however, has to seek the image in nature. Thus, so far as man is concerned, MacDonald's view is Platonist: *first* the thought, *then*

18. Yonge, Introduction to Fouqué, *Sintram and His Companions*, 2. See also Manlove, "George MacDonald and Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué."

19. MacDonald, "The Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 2.

the material that will best express it. This is close to Sir Philip Sidney's idea that the poet "doth not learn a conceit out of a matter but maketh matter for a conceit":²⁰ and indeed MacDonald's ideas on creation are often near to those of Renaissance Neoplatonism.

For some would argue that the image comes first, not the idea or "fore-conceit." Coleridge did not start with an idea in creating "Kubla Khan" (1797) or *The Ancient Mariner* (1798), but with a pleasure dome, a deep cavern, a ship going far southwards to the ice. Later his intellect insisted that "Kubla Khan" was unfinished and added elucidatory marginal comments to *The Ancient Mariner*. Similarly, William Cowper in *Yardley Oak* (1791) struggles to draw moral lessons from a huge and ancient oak tree that fascinates him. Or C. S. Lewis tells us that all his stories began with a picture—a lion, a ship coming out of a picture, a floating island, or simply a girl looking in a shop window—and then he had to think out a story in which they could exist. And MacDonald himself may well have started *The Princess and the Goblin* from the picture of an old lady living forgotten in an attic; and have begun *At the Back of the North Wind* from the image of a little boy sleeping in a draughty hayloft.

Others would say that dividing thought from image is in any case a mistake. The image comes carrying its idea with it. Some images convey joy, some beauty, others despair or horror. True, at some point far back in time men made these various images express these ideas. But the point is that for the artist the world is already full of conferred thought. Thus Shelley uses the idea of the ever-moving wind to picture his own yearning spirit; or T. S. Eliot uses the idea of a wasted land to portray a world that has lost meaning.

But the question comes to what MacDonald meant by "thought" and what by "form." The thought is a movement of the mind that can only reach expression through a form. Mathematics requires numbers and symbols, chemistry needs formulae, history needs evidence, philosophy speaks in arguments, art in images, music in sounds, literature in words. For MacDonald, all original thoughts belong to the imagination. "The construction of any hypothesis whatever is the work of the imagination."²¹ However, putting thought into form and thus creating art and furthering knowledge is not, for MacDonald, the sole concern of the imagination. For him it has a higher purpose, "which springs from man's immediate relation to the

20. Sidney, "A Defence of Poesy" (1583), 435.

21. MacDonald, "The Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 13.

Father, that of following and finding out the divine imagination in whose image it was made."²² This involves tracing God through his creation, that is, through the whole range of nature. Indeed, this higher purpose must be combined with that of putting thought into form. And here the imagination alone will lead us to truth. The use of intellectual proofs of God's existence—such as those of William Paley, who argued from a nature that appeared to run like a watch to a great Watchmaker, from observed design to a universal Designer—are rejected by MacDonald.

So much for what the imagination *does*: but what exactly *is* it? For MacDonald, it is clearly a part of the mind different from the intellect. Although the imagination cannot work without the intellect, the latter is inferior: "the Intellect must labour, workman-like, under the direction of the architect, Imagination."²³ MacDonald sees the imagination as man's highest mental faculty, for if used aright, it alone can bring us close to God. Indeed, God himself lives in the depths of each man's imagination, "and sends forth from thence wonderful gifts into the light of that understanding which is his candle."²⁴ To follow and find out the divine imagination can therefore involve a journey into the regions of one's unconscious mind. When little Princess Irene meets her great-great grandmother in the attics of her house, she has made a journey not just up several stairs in a house, but up several stairs in her mind. At first Irene sees the old lady as a withered crone, but on subsequent meetings she appears younger and more beautiful, showing that Irene has got closer to her true divine nature.

But equally, the further one goes *out* of oneself to enter into sympathy with nature, the closer also one comes to a divine reality. To see the truth of a flower, one must see with the imagination, which rejoices in the thing for itself, not for the scientific facts about it: "The idea of God *is* the flower; his idea is not the botany of the flower."²⁵ God's imagination turned thought into form when it made the flower, which speaks his joy and awakens longing. In coming close in love to the flower we come close to the God who made it.

The truth *of a thing*, then, is the blossom of it, the thing it is made for, the topmost stone set on with rejoicing; truth in a man's imagination is the power to recognise this truth of a thing; and

22. MacDonald, "The Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 10.

23. MacDonald, "The Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 11.

24. MacDonald, "The Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 25.

25. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, 466.

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wherever, in anything that God has made, in the glory of it, be it sky or flower or human face, we see the glory of God, there a true imagination is beholding a truth of God.²⁶

In part, this going out of oneself into the things that God has made is described in *At the Back of the North Wind*, where young Diamond makes a friend of the lady North Wind and is shown the nature of the world. Here the truth is both joy and pain for Diamond, who is shown some of the suffering and apparent injustice in the world, both natural and human, and comes to understand something of the love that both fills and transcends it.

The imagination is not all good, however, only the loving and innocent imagination that is infused with God. When the young man Anodos in *Phantastes* enters Fairy Land, which is his own imagination, he is sufficiently open to evil to meet there a devouring Ash Tree or a wonder-slaying shadow that attaches itself to him. When Vane in *Lilith* enters a desert world populated in part by monsters, he has entered this world as his evil spirit sees it. Such horrors can fill the imagination when we are ignorant of the God at its root. MacDonald says, “If the dark portion of our own being were the origin of our imaginations, we might well fear the apparition of such monsters as would be generated in the sickness of a decay which could never feel—only declare—a slow return towards primeval chaos. But the Maker is our Light.”²⁷ The monsters of the Bad Burrow are about to devour Vane when the moonlight that is God at the center of his imagination reappears and renders them impotent once more. The evil people of Gwyntystorm in *The Princess and Curdie* see the grotesque beasts that accompany Curdie as terrors, but Curdie, who lives within divine truth, knows that their shapes hide souls on the way from evil to good.

All MacDonald’s fairy tales involve journeys into the imagination. Irene going upstairs to the attics, Curdie coming to believe in the reality of Irene’s “grandmother,” Diamond travelling with North Wind, wicked Princess Rosamond being taken away by the wise woman from her palace to a cottage in a wilderness—these are all going out of their everyday selves into the deepest regions of their natures. And the same can be said of the shorter tales—Mossy in “The Golden Key” going to find the golden key at one end of a rainbow, and then travelling with Tangle to the other end; the princess in “Little Daylight” entering the dark forest where she will find her love; Richard and Alice in “Cross Purposes” becoming lost in Fairyland; the

26. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, 469.

27. MacDonald, “The Imagination,” *A Dish of Orts*, 25.

prince in "The Light Princess" slowly sinking beneath the water of the lake to remove the evil enchantment; even Buffy-Bob and Tricky-Wee finding their way into the magic realm of the giants. In the late fairy tale "The History of Photogen and Nycteris" (1879), we have a reversal: the girl Nycteris, enclosed from childhood by a witch in a dark room lit only dimly by a lamp, one day accidentally escapes into the real night, lit by a moon that far transcends the lamp she once took it for. She has emerged from a fantastic world she thought was real into a real one that she takes to be fantastic. In so doing she is opened both to her imagination and to the wonder of the world that most of us take for granted.

The imagination is indeed the subject of all MacDonald's children's fantasies. In all of them it is the only way to see the world aright, because the world of the spirit is at its heart. If we enter it without love, however, we will meet the images of our own trancies. In all his fantasies also, MacDonald explores different aspects of the imagination, showing it under different conditions and at shifting levels. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, he shows it as part of the mind, alongside other and humbler faculties. The nature of the divine imagination that made the world is the subject of *At the Back of the North Wind*, together with a child's imaginative life within the world. *The Wise Woman* shows the attempt to make bad children reform enough to enter their imaginations. And in *The Princess and Curdie* the imagination takes arms against the evil of a materialist city: here, with a whole society gone bad, there is seems no room for reform, and destruction is made the only remedy.

In MacDonald's view the fairy tale is endless in significance, because like the imagination it originates in God. In "The Fantastic Imagination," he declares, "A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean."²⁸ Because "it is God's things, his embodied thoughts, which alone a man has to use, modified and adapted to his own purposes, for the expression of his thoughts," "[a] man may well discover truth in what he wrote; for he was dealing all the time with things that came from thoughts beyond his own."²⁹ Therefore, if we think, say, that "The Giant's Heart" is only a child's tale of escape from a giant, or that "Cross Purposes" is simply a picture of the illusions of fairy land, we may be ignoring a wealth of deeper experience in these stories.

28. MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 317.

29. MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 320, 321.

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One says “experience,” because MacDonald’s notion of the meaning of a story is not always a formulated one. He allows that “the fairytale would give no delight” did it not have truth in it, and that each reader will legitimately read his or her meaning into it. He also says that one meaning may be better than another; and that a reader’s interpretation may even be better than that of the artist himself.³⁰ But he also says that the fairy tale is not an allegory with a set meaning: it works indirectly like a sonata, where there may be agreement as to its broad direction, but none where it comes to specific interpretation. While acknowledging the rightful place of intellectual interpretation, MacDonald says that “The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended”³¹; and

If a writer’s aim be logical conviction, he must spare no pains, not merely to be understood, but to escape being misunderstood; where his object is to move by suggestion, to cause to imagine, then let him assail the soul of his reader as the wind assails an aeolian harp. If there be music in my reader, I would gladly wake it. Let fairytale of mine go for a firefly that now flashes, now is dark, but may flash again.³²

This separation of the intellectual from the emotional in literature seems a little sharp, for it is quite possible to have both kinds of experience at once. But in moving from the sonata to the aeolian harp as his analogy for the fairy tale, MacDonald has moved away from something still structured enough to allow us to find patterns in it to a mode that refuses the intelligence any place in response. “The best way with music, I imagine, is not to bring the forces of our intellect to bear upon it, but to be still and let it work on that part of us for whose sake it exists.”³³ This is because the fairy tale ultimately deals with what is beyond words. Nevertheless, it is composed in words: and that, ultimately, must work against any musical analogy.³⁴

However, the Romantic side of MacDonald, the side that often led him to attack the very scientific method in which he was educated, less happily pushes him on here to say that the intellect is the enemy of true understanding: “We spoil countless precious things by intellectual greed.”

30. MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” *A Dish of Orts*, 316–17.

31. MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” *A Dish of Orts*, 319.

32. MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” *A Dish of Orts*, 321.

33. MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” *A Dish of Orts*, 321–22.

34. Manlove, “George MacDonald’s Fairy Tales,” 102–4.

This is followed by a somewhat sentimental attack on those who chose to be intellectual adults rather than children: such, MacDonald declares, will become vain "little men," that is, dwarfs.³⁵

MacDonald ends his essay on "The Fantastic Imagination" by seeing his best readers as passive ones, who let the fairy tale play on their naked spirits without interposing anything of their impertinent minds or selves. Such readers will let the fairy tale work most deeply on their souls, and be moved without knowing why: "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." This is a noble aim, and it is probably the deepest working of MacDonald's fairy tales: but it reduces the reader to privacy, unable to articulate and share literary experience with others, except through tear-filled intimacy. And earlier in the essay MacDonald has given the intelligence of his readers a role in tracing the many meanings of fairy tale. It is clear that he himself as an intelligent man is torn on this subject. All one can say is that there is ultimately no reconciliation between the reader who puts the mystery of the fairy tale first and the reader who tries to understand it. For the one is looking into the depths, and the other is trying to bring something up from the depths to the light; the second is valuing man's understanding, where the first is leaving man behind.

This of course has implications for the very writing of this book. Here you will find what are largely intellectual interpretations, attempts to find patterns in often mystifying material. It is hoped that this process does not involve "intellectual greed," and does not spoil any of these stories, but rather enhances them. The mind need not be at odds with emotion in reading fairy tales if it finds new wonders there. For "the region of the uncomprehended" there are no words, only the mute mystic experience MacDonald settles on at the close of his essay: but we can at least show how it is presented.

The subject of this book is the imagination in MacDonald's fairy tales, just as it was MacDonald's subject when discussing both fairy tales and the mind. Starting with the shorter tales we will see how they show a range of types of the imagination, before we explore particular treatments of that faculty in the longer stories. Broadly, the four longer children's fairy tales divide into two kinds. *At the Back of the North Wind* and *The Princess and the Goblin* show what position the imagination has, first within the *world*, and then within the *self*. The next two books, *The Wise Woman* and *The*

35. MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," *A Dish of Orts*, 322.

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Princess and Curdie, describe the imagination trying to *change* the world and the self. The first two are about *being*, the next two about *doing*. In this way, MacDonald's children's fantasy covers the whole range of the imagination's nature and operations.

What we are dealing with here is one of the great masters of children's fantasy, an inventor of much of its character and a writer of a profound vision in which the childlike is at the very center of the fairy tale as a picture of the universe. As MacDonald's son Greville writes in his biography, "My father's knowledge as to what food children best thrive upon came from his own child-like faith in their celestial inheritance."³⁶

SAMPLE

36. Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 362.