

When a heart is really alive”: George MacDonald and the Prophetic Imagination

George Macdonald -1824-1905 by John Heath-Stubbs

When the water in the basin overflows, becoming
A stream that runs through a wood: when the flowers on the carpet
Are turned into real blossoms and the trees
Are human - some seductresses and dangerous,
Some maternal and protective: when you sleep in an arbour
Observed by the bright eyes of birds, till, at midnight,
They come without faces, the dancers -
Those who in life wore masks, and now
Are condemned to be featureless; when a book in the library
Is partly in our world, and part in another;
When the librarian's ghost is a raven is Adam;
When innocence is under threat from goblin troglodytes,
From corrupt courts, from hunting white panthers;
Maternal presences are concealed
In secret drawers in unvisited turrets,
At the back of the North Wind; when a fire of roses
Purges perception, and you hold,
Among those images, an unbroken thread,
And goodness is as ordinary as having your breakfast,
As being fed a spoonful of porridge
By a woman both old and young - she is that Wisdom
Boethius knew, and Hermas.

This poem, a gift by John Heath-Stubbs to the George MacDonald Society, was read by the poet at the 1991 Annual General Meeting of the Society.

Chesterton on Macdonald (from his introduction to the GMD biography)

But in a certain rather special sense I for one can really testify to a book that has made a difference to my whole existence, which helped me to see things in a certain way from the start; a vision of things which even so real a revolution as a change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed. Of all the stories I have read, including even all the novels of the same novelist, it remains the most real, the most realistic, in the exact sense of the phrase the most like life. It is called *The Princess and the Goblin*, and is by George MacDonald, the man who is the subject of this book.

When I say it is like life, what I mean is this. It describes a little princess living in a castle in the mountains which is perpetually undermined, so to speak, by subterranean demons who sometimes come up through the cellars. She climbs up the castle stairways to the nursery or the other rooms; but now and again the stairs do not lead to the usual landings, but to a new room she has never seen before, and cannot generally find again. Here a good great-grandmother, who is a sort of fairy godmother, is perpetually spinning and speaking

words of understanding and encouragement. When I read it as a child, I felt that the whole thing was happening inside a real human house, not essentially unlike the house I was living in, which also had staircases and rooms and cellars. This is where the fairy-tale differed from many other fairy-tales; above all, this is where the philosophy differed from many other philosophies...There is – something not only imaginative but intimately true about the idea of the goblins being below the house and capable of besieging it from the cellars. When the evil things besieging us do appear, they do not appear outside but inside. Anyhow, that simple image of a house that is our home, that is rightly loved as our home, but of which we hardly know the best or the worst, and must always wait for the one and watch against the other, has always remained in my mind as something singularly solid and unanswerable; and was more corroborated than corrected when I came to give a more definite name to the lady watching over us from the turret, and perhaps to take a more practical view of the goblins under the floor. Since I first read that story some five alternative philosophies of the universe have come to our colleges out of Germany, blowing through the world like the east wind. But for me that castle is still standing in the mountains and the light in its tower is not put out.... All George MacDonald's other stories, interesting and suggestive in their several ways, seem to be illustrations and even disguises of that one I say disguises, for this is the very important difference between his sort of mystery and mere allegory. The commonplace allegory takes what it regards as the commonplaces or conventions necessary to ordinary men and women, and tries to make them pleasant or picturesque by dressing them up as princesses or goblins or good fairies. ...He never for a moment loses his own inner thread that runs through the patchwork, and it is the thread that the fairy great-grandmother put into the hands of Curdie to guide him out of the mazes of the goblins.

Lewis on Macdonald:

What he does best is fantasy -fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic. (*Anthology* page 14).

‘ it is in some way more to music than to Poetry – or at least to most Poetry. It goes beyond the expression of things we have already felt. It arouses in our sensations we have never had before, never anticipated having, *as though we had broken out of our normal mode of consciousness and great possessed joy is not promised to our birth*. It gets under our skin, us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles, oldest certainty to all questions are reopened, and in general shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives. It was in this mythopoeic art that MacDonald excelled. (*Anthology* pp 16 and 17.)

From Lilith chapter five the Old Church

“They go there still,” said the raven.

“Who goes there? and where do they go?” I asked.

“Some of the people who used to pray there, go to the ruins still,” he replied. “But they will not go much longer, I think.”

“What makes them go now?”

“They need help from each other to get their thinking done, and their feelings hatched, so they talk and sing together; and then, they say, the big thought floats out of their hearts like a great ship out of the river at high water.”

“Do they pray as well as sing?”

“No; they have found that each can best pray in his own silent heart.—Some people are always at their prayers.—Look! look! There goes one!”

He pointed right up into the air. A snow-white pigeon was mounting, with quick and yet quicker wing-flap, the unseen spiral of an ethereal stair. The sunshine flashed quivering from its wings.

“I see a pigeon!” I said.

“Of course you see a pigeon,” rejoined the raven, “for there is the pigeon! I see a prayer on its way.—I wonder now what heart is that dove’s mother! Some one may have come awake in my cemetery!”

“How can a pigeon be a prayer?” I said. “I understand, of course, how it should be a fit symbol or likeness for one; but a live pigeon to come out of a heart!”

“It MUST puzzle you! It cannot fail to do so!”

“A prayer is a thought, a thing spiritual!” I pursued.

“Very true! But if you understood any world besides your own, you would understand your own much better.—When a heart is really alive, then it is able to think live things. There is one heart all whose thoughts are strong, happy creatures, and whose very dreams are lives. When some pray, they lift heavy thoughts from the ground, only to drop them on it again; others send up their prayers in living shapes, this or that, the nearest likeness to each. All live things were thoughts to begin with, and are fit therefore to be used by those that think. When one says to the great Thinker:—‘Here is one of thy thoughts: I am thinking it now!’ that is a prayer—a word to the big heart from one of its own little hearts.—Look, there is another!”

From MacDonald’s “The Fantastic Imagination”

"You write as if a fairytale were a thing of importance: must it have meaning?"

It cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has vitality, and vitality is truth. The beauty may be plainer in it than the truth, but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairytale would give no delight. Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another.

"If so, how am I to assure myself that I am not reading my own meaning into it, but yours out of it?"

Why should you be so assured? It may be better that you should read your meaning into it. That may be a higher operation of your intellect than the mere reading of mine out of it: your meaning may be superior to mine.

"Suppose my child ask me what the fairytale means, what am I to say?"

If you do not know what it means, what is easier than to say so? If you do see a meaning in it, there it is for you to give him. A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean. ...It is there not so much to convey a meaning as to wake a meaning...But indeed your children are not likely to trouble you about the meaning. They

find what they are capable of finding, and more would be too much. For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five. A fairytale is not an allegory. There may be allegory in it, but it not an allegory... I will go farther.--The best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is--not to give him things to think about, but *to wake things up that are in him*; or say, to make him think things for himself. The best Nature does for us is to work in us such moods in which thoughts of high import arise. Does any aspect of Nature wake but one thought? Does she ever suggest only one definite thing? Does she make any two men in the same place at the same moment think the same thing? Is she therefore a failure, because she is not definite? Is it nothing that she rouses the something deeper than the understanding--the power that underlies thoughts? Does she not set feeling, and so thinking at work? "But a man may then imagine in your work what he pleases, what you never meant!" ...One difference between God's work and man's is, that, while God's work cannot mean more than he meant, man's must mean more than he meant. For in everything that God has made, there is a layer upon layer of ascending significance; also he expresses the same thought in higher and higher kinds of that thought: 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; therefore he cannot help his words and figures falling into such combinations in the mind of another as he had himself not foreseen, so many are the thoughts allied to every other thought, so many are the relations involved in every figure, so many the facts hinted in every symbol. A man may well himself discover truth in what he wrote; for he was dealing all the time things that came from thoughts beyond his own.

Such embodiments are not the result of the man's intention, or of the operation of his conscious nature. His feeling is that they are given to him; that from the vast unknown, where time and space are not, they suddenly appear in luminous writing upon the wall of his consciousness. Can it be correct, then, to say that he created them? Nothing less so, as it seems to us. But can we not say that they are the creation of the unconscious portion of his nature? Yes, provided we can understand that that which is the individual, the man, can know, and not know that it knows, can create and yet be ignorant that virtue has gone out of it. From that unknown region we grant they come, but not by its own blind working. Nor, even were it so, could any amount of such production, where no will was concerned, be dignified with the name of creation. But God sits in that 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. Our hope lies in no most perfect mechanism even of the spirit, but in the wisdom wherein we live and move and have our being. Thence we hope for endless forms of beauty informed of truth. 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...

Thus to be playfellows with God in this game, the little ones may gather their daisies and follow their painted moths; the child of the kingdom may pore upon the lilies of the field, and gather faith as the birds of the air their food from the leafless hawthorn, ruddy with the

stores God has laid up for them; and the man of science “May sit and rightly spell Of every star that heaven doth shew, And every herb that sips the dew; Till old experience do attain To something like prophetic strain.”

From Coleridge’s Frost at Midnight:

For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

Chesterton on Macdonald (from his introduction to the GMD biography)

MacDonald had made for himself a sort of spiritual environment, a space and transparency of mystical light, which was quite exceptional in his national and denominational environment. He said things that were like the Cavalier mystics, like the Catholic saints, sometimes perhaps like the Platonists or the Swedenborgians, but not in the least like the Calvinists, even as Calvinism remained in a man like Carlyle. And when he comes to be more carefully studied as a mystic, as I think he will be when people discover the possibility of collecting jewels scattered in a rather irregular setting, it will be found, I fancy, that he stands for a rather important turning-point in the history of Christendom, as representing the particular Christian nation of the Scots. As Protestants speak of the morning stars of the Reformation, we may be allowed to note such names here and there as morning stars of the Reunion.