



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 28  
Number 3

Article 3

---

4-15-2010

## Phantastical Regress: The Return of Desire and Deed in *Phantastes* and *The Pilgrim's Regress*

Jeffrey Bilbro  
Baylor University, TX

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bilbro, Jeffrey (2010) "Phantastical Regress: The Return of Desire and Deed in *Phantastes* and *The Pilgrim's Regress*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 28 : No. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol28/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSU<sup>TM</sup>

---

## Mythcon 51: A VIRTUAL “HALFLING” MYTHCON

July 31 - August 1, 2021 (Saturday and Sunday)

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-51.htm>



## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

### Abstract

Examines the close link between George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* and C.S. Lewis’s first post-conversion fiction *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, born out of the “baptism” of Lewis’s imagination by MacDonald’s seminal work. Both feature pairings of seekers initially led by desire with knight-like figures, and takes the characters through journeys with many important parallels, including learning lessons showing that desire and deed must work in harmony to bring about successful spiritual quests.

### Additional Keywords

Allegory in C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S. *The Pilgrim’s Regress*; Lewis, C.S. *The Pilgrim’s Regress*—Sources; MacDonald, George. *Phantastes*; MacDonald, George. *Phantastes*—Influence on *The Pilgrim’s Regress*; Sehnsucht



## PHANTASTICAL REGRESS: THE RETURN OF DESIRE AND DEED IN *PHANTASTES* AND *THE PILGRIM'S REGRESS*

JEFFREY BILBRO

NEARLY ALL OF THE STUDIES THAT EXAMINE the intellectual connection between George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis quote Lewis's assertion, found in the introduction to his MacDonald anthology, that reading *Phantastes* "convert[ed], even [...] baptize[d][...] my imagination" (21). Critics proceed from Lewis's statement to trace common themes between these authors, but no one has yet analyzed the striking similarities between MacDonald's baptizing book and the first book Lewis published as a Christian, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, in which he allegorizes his own journey to faith.<sup>1</sup> Colin Manlove notes both these works deal with "the continual misidentification of a longing," but after sketching their similarities in a few sentences, he suggests other possible influences on *The Pilgrim's Regress* ("Parent" 231).<sup>2</sup> Comparisons to Lewis's later *Surprised by Joy*, where he explicitly writes about *Phantastes*'s influence on him, or to *The Great Divorce*, where MacDonald appears as Lewis's guide, are much more common, but these books are written in a completely different genre than *Phantastes* and borrow none of its imagery or structure. In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, however, Lewis describes a pilgrimage that, although more philosophical, follows a remarkably similar trajectory to Anodos's. Perhaps this connection seems so obvious that critics have not bothered to look more closely at these two works, but in fact, the way that John's journey in *The Pilgrim's Regress* parallels Anodos's in *Phantastes* suggests that Lewis perceived an allegorical, spiritual structure in MacDonald's romance that baptized the quotidian world of his experience in beauty and wonder. *Phantastes* accomplished this for Lewis, I argue, because Anodos's

---

<sup>1</sup> In her book on *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Kathryn Lindskoog compares Lewis's work to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and other dream visions like *Romance of the Rose*, *Divine Comedy*, *Piers Plowman* and certain of Chaucer's works. While she mentions the role of *Phantastes* in Lewis's conversion, she does not see it as a literary predecessor.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff McInnis links the two works only cursorily, noting that like Anodos, "John, the protagonist of the first book [Lewis] published as a Christian, only reaches his destination by combat and humility" (277).

pilgrimage unites romantic desire with charitable deeds in a uniquely Christian romanticism.

Although MacDonald's warnings against allegory lead many critics to avoid allegorical readings of his fantasies, Lewis had no such compunctions. As Stephen Prickett notes regarding Lewis's reading of *Lilith*: "though Lewis is well aware of MacDonald's own strictures against allegory 'as everywhere a weariness to the spirit,' he reads the narrative of *Lilith* as a systematic allegory rather than simply a loose assemblage of symbols" (194). So while in writing about *Phantastes* Rolland Hein avoids reading its symbols allegorically, saying only that by "tracing the themes one is able to observe the underlying harmony" (*Harmony* 79),<sup>3</sup> Lewis apparently found a much more defined structure in *Phantastes*. Lewis describes MacDonald's fantasy as "hover[ing] between the allegorical and the mythopoeic" ("Preface" 14),<sup>4</sup> and the structure underlying MacDonald's "allegorical romance" suggested to Lewis a means by which the wonder of myth could be integrated into his daily life; as Prickett argues, *Phantastes* "showed [Lewis] a way [...] in which the literary or poetic transformation of sense-experience could be given some kind of objective meaning and validity" (182, 179). Prickett concludes his argument by linking *Phantastes*'s structure to the German *Bildungsroman* (185-192), but more than a general formation of self-consciousness, Lewis saw a distinctively Christian pilgrimage at the core of *Phantastes*. So although *Phantastes* is certainly a fairy tale, MacDonald himself writes that "[t]here may be allegory in [a fairy tale]" (317), and Lewis seems to build his own early allegory of conversion on the distinctive allegorical structure he perceived in MacDonald's youthful tale.<sup>5</sup>

The protagonists of both books travel similar paths: both are drawn on their journeys by an inexplicable longing, both are linked to a knight or armed man, and both must embrace death before accomplishing deeds of valor on their journey home. By examining these similarities, the underlying natures of their redemptive journeys become clear: MacDonald and Lewis present a journey to God, to the ideal beauty, that begins with haunting desire and demands the death of self and an active love that returns to its place of origin to redemptively enact what it has learned.<sup>6</sup> Where MacDonald lays out this path without

---

<sup>3</sup> See also Hein's introductory warnings against allegorizing MacDonald (3, 6).

<sup>4</sup> In a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves, Lewis uses the term "symbolical fantasy" to describe *Phantastes* and *Lilith* (*The Stand* 388).

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, both works were written very quickly—MacDonald's in two months (Hein, *George MacDonald* 135) and Lewis's in two weeks (Lindsay xxxiii-xxxiv). Another point of formal similarity is the heavy use both make of epigraphs and of songs within the text. See Mona Dunkel on Lewis's use of epigraphs and songs in *The Pilgrim's Regress* (40).

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Gunther summarizes the trajectory of *Phantastes* similarly when he describes the parallel paths taken by Cosmo and Anodos:

attempting to justify it, Lewis traces this path on the map of western philosophy, arguing for its validity and attempting to show how the themes present in MacDonald—romanticism, selfless action, and Christian redemption—can be synthesized with this philosophic tradition.

The journeys in both *Phantastes* and *The Pilgrim's Regress* are journeys of desire begun with no clear idea of what their end might be; their pilgrims are led simply by an undefined, irresistible longing. Anodos opens an old desk and is confronted by “a tiny woman-form” (16): “Overcome with the presence of a beauty which I could now perceive, and drawn towards her by an attraction irresistible as incomprehensible, I suppose I stretched out my arms towards her, for she drew back a step or two” (18). As Chris Brawley observes, Anodos’s attraction here is “extremely possessive” (100), and Anodos must eventually learn that his instinctual response to selfishly control this beauty is not the proper way of relating to “incomprehensible” beauty. But here at the outset, as he looks into the lady’s eyes, a directionless longing awakens that will draw him through all the obstacles he will face in Fairy Land:

[Her eyes] filled me with an unknown longing. [...] I looked deeper and deeper, till they spread around me like seas, and I sank in their waters. I forgot all the rest, till I found myself at the window, whose gloomy curtains were withdrawn, and where I stood gazing on a whole heaven of stars, small and sparkling in the moonlight. Below lay a sea, still as death and hoary in the moon, sweeping into bays and around capes and islands, away, away, I knew not whither. Alas! it was no sea, but a low bog burnished by the moon. “Surely there is such a sea somewhere!” said I to myself. A low sweet voice beside me replied —

“In Fairy Land, Anodos.” (19)

Because this desire remains elusive and indefinite, it exerts an irresistible pull on Anodos.

---

[B]oth initially are driven by great yearnings but have no specific direction for this yearning. When the longing receives embodiment in ‘an absorbing passion’ for the ‘form’ of the enchanted lady this passion must pass through certain stages (in particular through that of desire for possession of the beloved) before an unselfish love can be generated in which the welfare of the beloved is the key preoccupation and giving love becomes sufficient in itself. This key transformation is conveyed in terms of death, a death to the ego with all its selfish grasping and false pride, and thence a rebirth into the next stage. (57)

This is where both Cosmo and Anodos are left, and Gunther regards this ending as one of hopeful ambiguity in which the characters must apply the lessons they have learned. Both his argument and mine question the once common assessment of critics like Catherine Durie who characterizes *Phantastes* as “plotless” (178).

This calling is remarkably similar to the events that lead Lewis's protagonist John to embark on his journey. John is a confused boy growing up in the land of Puritania and burdened by the impossible rules of the Landlord. But one day, while walking along the road, he hears "the sound of a musical instrument [...] and after it a full, clear voice [...]. The voice said, Come" (8). John looks out a window in the wall along the road and "saw a green wood":

[T]here came to him from beyond the wood a sweetness and a pang so piercing that instantly he forgot [...] the fear of the Landlord [...]. All the furniture of his mind was taken away. A moment later he found that he was sobbing, and the sun had gone in: and what it was that had happened to him he could not quite remember [...]. It seemed to him that a mist which hung at the far end of the wood had parted for a moment, and through the rift he had seen a calm sea, and in the sea an island, where the smooth turf sloped down unbroken to the bays [...]. But even while he pictured these things he knew, with one part of his mind, that they were not like the things he had seen — nay, that what had befallen him was not a seeing at all. (8)

John often returns to the window, straining for another glimpse of the island. When these become too infrequent he, ignoring a "strain of music [...] from an unexpected quarter" (12), determines to enter the woods and find the island: "I shall *insist* on finding it" (13). Yet he only finds a "brown girl" who, although claiming to be what he wants, cannot satisfy his now desperate craving (13-4). Distracted at his failed attempts control and possess the object of his longing, John wanders through the woods, searching for the island so that he could again feel the desire it evoked:

He thought of that first day when he had heard the music and seen the Island: and the longing, not now for the Island itself, but for that moment when he had so sweetly longed for it, began to swell up in a warm wave, sweeter, sweeter, till he thought he could bear no more, and then yet sweeter again, till on the top of it, unmistakably, there came the short sound of music, as if a string had been plucked or a bell struck once. [...] [A]nd he thought he heard a voice say, Come. And far beyond [...], among the hills of the western horizon, he thought that he saw a shining sea, and a faint shape of an Island, not much more than a cloud. [...] [H]is mind was made up. That night he [...] set his face to the West to seek for the Island. (16)

I have included these long quotes from MacDonald and Lewis to make apparent the similarities between their depictions of these desires. Lewis is more discursive than MacDonald, who relies more heavily on imagery, but both their

pilgrims leave home because of a voice that awakens an indescribable and all-consuming sense of longing. Both Anodos and John forget themselves in contemplation of the glorious scenes thrust upon their imaginations, scenes of seas and islands, before awakening back to the quotidian world still before them. Both seek to grasp and control the desired object, but it eludes them, and they must be content to gaze upon this untouchable, unbiddable ideal. Their desire for this absent, unidentified ideal then drives them on their journeys.

This desire, for both authors, acts as the spark that begins the pilgrimages, and desire also becomes the sustaining fire that carries Anodos and John through failure and defeat to their needful deaths. As they journey, they learn more about the nature of their desire, most often by misunderstanding it. Anodos mistakes the alder maiden for the marble lady his song freed from the stone, and he follows her to her bower where he lies at her feet, beholding "the impression of intense loveliness" (83). But because, as Hein claims, Anodos here "pursued what was beautiful for selfish rather than selfless ends" (*Harmony* 89), when he wakes he sees her back and discovers that she is an "open coffin" and that her "beauty" is merely a façade laid over hideous death (83-4). At that moment the rusty knight finds the evil Ash tree and begins to chop it down, saving Anodos from the consequences of his inordinate obedience to his desire. Anodos's desire deceives him and leads him astray; he lies down with evil because he followed desire selfishly and so could not distinguish evil from good. But this false beauty does not ultimately satisfy his desire, and even though his failure shames and discourages him, he journeys on, finding in the house at the edge of Fairy Land that his desire has become stronger than ever: "[A]s I looked out of the window, a gush of wonderment and longing flowed over my soul like the tide of a great sea. Fairy Land lay before me, and drew me towards it with an irresistible attraction" (99). After Anodos looks into the closet of the ogre and is found by his shadow, this desire becomes muted, but it continues to lead him on, to feed his hope, even as he mistakes its source and fails to follow it rightly.

Lewis treats the continued role of longing in John's journey more analytically, but he works from the same understanding of desire as MacDonald. Just as a woman pretending to be the true object of Anodos's desire nearly causes his downfall, so when John sets out, a false maiden declaring herself to be the true object of his desire deceives him. After he recognizes the brown girl as a fraud, John is nearly deceived again by Media Halfways and her father, who tells him, "You will find your Island here" (28). It is only another false satisfaction that draws John away, the northern lust of power and machinery embodied in Gus Halfways (32-4). John eventually realizes that his Island will not be found in either of these directions: "after all he did not want Mr. Halfways' songs, but the Island itself" (42). This realization forces him to leave and "painfully to continue his journey, looking round for the West" (42-3). As he and Vertue continue

northward, looking for a way across the canyon, John explains this desire and his failed attempts to satisfy it to Mr. Humanist: "I know also that the evil in [what my desire leads to] is not what I went to it to find, and that I should have sought nothing and found nothing without it" (142). John has followed his desire, and although it is been deceived and perverted, it still urges him on towards its proper fulfillment. It may be a fallible guide, but without its proddings, John would have remained in Puritania. And like Anodos, illusory satisfactions only make John's longing more piercing and poignant.

Ultimately, Anodos's desire leads him past his death to a state of disembodied bliss where he reflects on these passions that fueled his journey:

If my passions were dead, the souls of the passions, those essential mysteries of the spirit which had imbodyed themselves in the passions, and had given to them all their glory and wonderment, yet lived, yet glowed, with a pure, undying fire. They rose above their vanishing earthly garments, and disclosed themselves angels of light. (310)

Here, where his passions have been refined to their essence, Anodos recognizes the glory of the fire that is their source. While they may have been reduced or misguided at times, the longings that compelled him to set off from his home are at their core "angels of light."

This is the most philosophical description of desire that MacDonald provides, but Lewis, because his work is an apology for this Romanticism, seeks to portray a more developed justification for this pilgrimage of desire. John asks Father History the core question: "Perhaps what troubles me is a fear that my desires, after all you have said, do not really come from the Landlord [...]. How can we *prove* that the Island comes from him?" (155). Anodos never doubts the existence of his marble lady and her true beauty, but John constantly struggles with doubts about the truth of his ideal. Those he meets in the South, who suffer from an excess of imagination and physical indulgence, don't question the validity of his desire; they simply offer him imitative satisfactions. Those in the rationalist, reductionist North, however, explain desire away; they tell him there are no ideals, no pure desires (41, 46, 77, 92). And yet Lewis counters both these attacks on desire through Father History's response to John: "You have proved it for yourself: you have *lived* the proof. Has not every object which fancy and sense suggested for the desire, proved a failure, confessed itself, after trial, not to be what you wanted? Have you not found by elimination that this desire is the perilous siege in which only One can sit?" (155). Father History identifies the key to finding the "angels of light" behind John's longing: Anodos and John have to follow their desire practically, have to live out their desire in order to tell the false object from the real. While MacDonald does not make this as explicit or philosophical as Lewis, both of their pilgrims advance according to the theory



Lewis explains in his preface to *The Pilgrim's Regress* as a "lived dialectic": "The dialectic of Desire, faithfully followed, would retrieve all mistakes, head you off from all false paths, and force you not to propound, but to live through, a sort of ontological proof" (205).<sup>7</sup>

It is particularly striking that both writers portray this lived dialectic by uniting their desiring pilgrims to knights of action.<sup>8</sup> Anodos and John set off alone, but as they struggle to put their desire into action their desiring selves remain unable to attain their true ends. Desire is too weak on its own: Anodos is rescued by the rusty knight, inspired by his noble action, and eventually joins him to bring desire and deed together and make both sufficient; John rejects Vertue as a traveling companion at first, but later he follows Vertue north, then leads him south, then follows him into the canyon before both finally journey home together. Anodos and John need these knights of action to be freed from the self-obsessed, narcissistic tendencies of mere desire, and the rusty knight and Vertue need the pilgrims' desire to provide imagination, understanding, and motivation for their acts. Once united, desire and deed are able to accomplish what neither could do separately, and together they can live out the dialectic of desire, die, and return home.

The allegorical role of MacDonald's rusty knight can seem enigmatic, but John Doeherty rightly observes that he enables Anodos to act properly on his desires: "Anodos, by observing the knight, and by three knightly acts of his own, gradually comes to learn what is required for true deed" (26-8).<sup>9</sup> By teaching Anodos right action, the rusty knight functions as the idealized version of Anodos's alter ego, whose depraved counterpart is the shadow, which Hein terms his "lower self" (*Harmony* 91).<sup>10</sup> The shadow and the rusty knight are never

---

<sup>7</sup> In the context of other works, Durie makes a similar claim when she notes, "Lewis followed MacDonald in viewing obedience as the way of escape from the tyranny of feelings" (170).

<sup>8</sup> I will focus on the similarities between the rusty knight and Vertue, but these characters of course are not perfectly parallel. A more detailed analysis of the knights in these stories would find interesting similarities and differences between the other armed figures, including Reason and the princes with which Anodos fights the giants.

<sup>9</sup> Jeff McInnis claims the rusty knight is a Christ figure, arguing (with little support) that Lewis drew on him in his creation of Aslan (276-7, 248-9). This reading is problematic though, and a closer analysis shows that this can only be a secondary interpretation.

<sup>10</sup> Brawley expands on this characterization when he claims "the shadow comes to represent Anodos' own pride and over-reliance on the ego" (108). Joseph Sigman concurs, calling the shadow "the personification of the evil side" of Anodos (214). Prickett recognizes the validity of these interpretations while also arguing the shadow symbolizes Anodos's consciousness of "his own mental processes" (178), and Gregory Wolfe similarly claims the shadow "is a perfect image of nagging self-consciousness, released only by unselfconscious action" (6).

concurrently present in the story, and directly after Anodos's shadow is finally banished, the knight reappears and Anodos becomes his squire. When the knight first meets Anodos, after the knight has been tricked by the alder maiden and his armor has become rusty because of his failure, he explains to Anodos: "Never [...] shall this armor be furbished, but by the blows of knightly encounter, until the last speck has disappeared from every spot where the battle-axe and sword of evil-doers, or noble foes, might fall; when I shall again lift my head, and say to my squire, 'Do thy duty once more, and make this armor shine'" (76). The knight must cleanse his armor by diligent fighting, and only after he does these deeds can he once more be made, by Anodos his desiring squire, to shine with beauty.

This same compulsion to act is found in Vertue. He does what is right even when he cannot justify the right or articulate it. When Media Halfways questions Vertue about where he is journeying to, he can provide no clear answer:

"I must admit, now that you press me, I have not a very clear idea of the end. But that is not the important question. These speculations don't make one a better walker. The great thing is to do one's thirty miles a day."

"Why?"

"Because that is the rule. [...] I have made the best rules I can. If I find any better ones I shall adopt them. In the meantime, the great thing is to have rules of some sort and to keep them." (26-7)

Vertue obeys rules, he *does*, but he is not equipped to determine which rules are the best. While the rusty knight does not have the obvious philosophical weakness that Vertue does, both are essentially men who are compelled to moral action. They do not journey because of an unsatisfied longing but because journeying is the right thing to do.

In both stories the desirer is separated from the knight after their initial encounters. Anodos, even though he has been warned by the rusty knight, succumbs to the wiles of the alder maiden and is saved just in time by the knight's (presumably) first deed: chopping down the Ash. Anodos does not, as the knight does, embark on a regimen of noble deeds to purge his shame; instead he continues his journey to find the marble lady, soon joined by his egotistical shadow. This shadow constantly perverts his desire, urging Anodos to improperly control and possess the desired. As Brawley and other critics have noted (102), Anodos must learn the self-denial Cosmo demonstrates when he smashes the mirror and rescinds his control over the entrapped beauty.<sup>11</sup> When Anodos sings the marble lady into sight on the pedestal in the Fairy Palace, he

---

<sup>11</sup> Gunther argues the Cosmo story, along with the other centrally located embedded story, acts as a structuring principle for the entire romance.

clutches her, as when he sang her into freedom before, and again she runs away (206). When he follows her down a deep well shaft, a horde of goblins suddenly surrounds him and mocks his love for the lady, telling him: "You shan't have her; you shan't have her; he! he! he! She's for a better man; she's for a better man; how he'll kiss her! how he'll kiss her!" (213). Instead of being jealous, Anodos responds out of his budding humility: "Well, if he is a better man, let him have her" (213). The goblins have no response to this desire that does not demand possession. Anodos journeys on through the dark with "dull endurance" (218), and as the passageway narrows, he crawls through the last cramped channel to emerge on a "bare, and waste, and gray" sea where he faces death (220). Wandering along the shore, he cries out, "I will not be tortured to death [...]; I will meet it half-way. The life within me is yet enough to bear up to the face of Death, and then I die unconquered" (222). So, walking out to the end of a narrow, sea-washed isthmus,

[I] stood one moment and gazed into the heaving abyss beneath me; then plunged headlong into the mounting wave below. A blessing, like the kiss of a mother, seemed to alight on my soul; a calm, deeper than that which accompanies a hope deferred, bathed my spirit. I sank far into the waters, and sought not to return. (222-23)

He dives to his death with no thought of self-preservation, renouncing finally his shadow's urges to possess and control the desired.<sup>12</sup>

John's journey to death is more intertwined with his knight's, but it follows the same essential path. He meets up again with Vertue at the brink of the Grand Canyon, and when Mother Kirk offers to take them across, Vertue replies: "I am afraid it is no use, mother [...]; I cannot put myself under anyone's orders" (75). Vertue still believes he can save himself by his strength of will, so he and John journey north, into the land of Mr. Sensible, Mr. Humanist, Mr. Neo-Angular, Mr. Neo-Classical, and, finally, the Nietzschean Savage. Although John cannot journey to the far North, Vertue has enough strength and discovers for himself that "there's no way over the gorge northward" (96). After seeing where his pure will ends, Vertue is "very tired" (102) and, as he and John journey south, becomes sick. He contemplates the question Media asked him near the beginning of their journey and finds he now thinks differently:

At that time it seemed to me so much more important to keep my rules and do my thirty miles a day. But I am beginning to find that it will not

---

<sup>12</sup> While Sigman interprets Anodos's "plunge into the sea [as] an act of rebellion against death" (216), this reading runs counter to the grain of the text, and most critics concur that Anodos's dive into the sea demonstrates his acceptance of the need to die to himself.

do. In the old days it was always a question of doing what I chose instead of what I wanted: but now I am beginning to be uncertain what it is I choose. (105)

It is here that Vertue needs something beyond his moral choosing: "'Vertue,' said John, 'give in. For once yield to desire. Have done with your choosing. *Want something*'" (107). The next morning John discovers that Vertue has become dumb and blind, and now they journey south with John leading. Vertue has exhausted himself, but he still goes on because John's desire remains unsatisfied.

John and Vertue eventually come to the house of Mr. Wisdom and there, as they eat his food and listen to his Hegelian talk, Vertue is slowly healed. When Vertue is well, he leaves and heads for the bottom of the canyon. John despairingly follows. Vertue is helpless to act in the Northern lands—he needs John's desire to lead him away from the cold materialistic savagery—but once in the South, John would wander endlessly, dallying with the imitation pleasures offered to appease his longing. Vertue rejects desires that can be content with fleshly forms, and John stumbles doggedly on, now led by Vertue's moral action.

Vertue goes too fast for him, but finally John comes by himself to the bottom of the canyon where death meets him and gives him a choice that is no choice, "Jump, or be thrown. [...] The cure of death is dying. He who lays down his liberty in that act receives it back" (164). John, like Anodos, chooses to enter death himself, and as he comes to the pool of water at the bottom of the cliff, he sees Mother Kirk, waiting to guide him through death. Vertue is already next to her, "mother-naked," ready, with John, to "abandon all efforts at self-preservation" (167). Mother Kirk tells John that he cannot even jump, he must dive, but as he stands at the edge, he hesitates and the wraiths of all his previous hosts come, telling him death is not the only option (167-8): "But at that moment the voice of Vertue broke in: 'Come on, John' [...] And with that he took a header into the pool and they saw him no more. And how John managed it or what he felt I did not know, but he also rubbed his hands, shut his eyes, despaired, and let himself go. It was not a good dive, but, at least, he reached the water head first" (168). Although John has more help from Vertue in reaching this point of diving into the water of baptismal death, both the desiring pilgrims give up all hope of attaining their desired object and plunge to their deaths, Anodos kissed by a mother and John guided by Mother Kirk.

This transforming death is what affected Lewis so strongly in *Phantastes*: "the whole book had about it [...] a certain quality of Death, *good* Death. What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptize (that was where the Death came in) my imagination" ("Preface" 21). Lewis links Vertue and John more closely than MacDonald does the rusty knight and Anodos, but in both stories, these pairs cannot work in harmony together before the desirer takes the plunge

into death. In both pilgrimages, Anodos and John, as the desiring doppelgangers of their knights, require baptism, and once they have died to their selfishness and its false satisfactions, they can begin to act, in conjunction with their moral knights, in a redemptive manner.

While Anodos lies in the water a boat bumps against him and brings him to the island of an ancient woman. It is here that Anodos finally sees the knight again. The woman's house has four doors, and when he goes through the second one, the door of Sighs, he sees the marble lady waiting in a hall. Soon the rusty knight, rusty no longer, enters and the lady embraces him: "[N]ow the armor shone like polished glass; and strange to tell, though the mirror reflected not my form, I saw a dim shadow of myself in the shining steel" (240). Anodos appears to be a shadow of the Platonic knight. The knight has been deceived by the alder maiden too, but he has purged his armor by noble deeds and has won the love of Anodos's marble lady; he embodies the truth of Hein's statement that action is "essential to MacDonald's prescription for moral growth" (*Harmony* 104). As Anodos listens to their conversation, the knight asks her if she still loves Anodos: "Ah! [...] how can I help it? He woke me from worse than death; he loved me. I had never been for thee, if he had not sought me first. But I love him not as I love thee. He was but the moon of my night; thou art the sun of my day, O beloved" (242). The knight agrees that this is proper and that he owes much to Anodos for rescuing the lady. The lives of Anodos and the rusty knight are intertwined; Anodos's desire is necessary for the noble knight's attainment of ideal beauty. Without Anodos's desire, the knight would have no lady to perform his deeds for; they would be empty acts. Like Vertue, the knight needs the desired ideal, and Anodos, like John, needs the knight in order for his desire to be tempered with selfless deeds and enabled to serve the ideal.

This union of desire and deed appears again after the beautiful song of a maiden at last delivers Anodos from his shadow and he becomes the knight's squire. This role provides him the opportunity to continue following the lessons he learned with the two knights who sacrificed their lives to save the countryside from marauding giants. Keith Wilson observes this same progression when he states that only after Anodos denies his pride is the "power of the imagination [...] expressed [...] in the active life" (150).<sup>13</sup> As the knight and Anodos journey, they come upon a strange gathering of people participating in some religious ceremony. Anodos watches the procession with a growing concern that people are being sacrificed. But when he turns to the knight, he realizes that the "grand accompaniments [...] overcame him; [...] in all these ceremonies lay some great mystical meaning which, his humility told him, his ignorance prevented him

---

<sup>13</sup> Brawley concurs when he explains that MacDonald's "self-denying love is best realized and employed in action" (103).

from understanding" (305-06). The knight is vigorous in the accomplishment of noble deeds, but here he is unable to accurately imagine and perceive what the needed good is. Anodos, since his knight is not acting, quickly disguises himself as a participant in the ceremony and marches to the throne where he tears down the image and strangles the great wolf that rushes out (307-08). Anodos reveals the hollowness of this object of worship; like the coffin of the alder maiden this desired is deadly, and Anodos sacrifices his own life to prevent the deception of others. He has put his tempered desire to the test and now it finally proves sufficient for effective action.

Like Anodos, John's plunge with Vertue is not the only death he must die, but after he dies "many deaths" (169) in the depths of the pool, he comes out into the beautiful land beyond the canyon. He and Vertue, led by their guide, now have to journey back along the road, and Vertue and John must each slay their dragon. Just as Anodos puts his desires in action by slaying the wolf, so Vertue and John gain the attributes they lack from the foes they defeat: Vertue kills the southern dragon and becomes desiring; John slays the northern dragon and is freed from "panic or [...] greed" (194). After their baptism they defeat their excesses of cold, rational action and selfish, imaginative indulgence to together become whole and effective.

After Anodos accomplishes his sacrificial deed and dies his ultimate (in this story) death, he wakes up rejoicing in the blessedness of death and the experience of his pure desired (309-10). He is able to see the knight and the marble lady and to delight them with the flower he embodies. As he then floats on a cloud and basks in this wisdom and bliss, "a pang and a terrible shudder went through me; a writhing as of death convulsed me; and I became once again conscious of a more limited, even a bodily and earthly life" (314). Anodos is brought back from his ideal, one so different from what he thought he desired when grasping for the marble lady, and is pulled back to life. He has learned much from his journey through Fairy Land, and now, twenty-one days after his bedroom was enchanted and he set off to follow his desire, Anodos returns to his home and his family: "I began the duties of my new position, somewhat instructed, I hoped, by the adventures that had befallen me in Fairy Land. Could I translate the experience of my travels there, into common life?" (317). This question of applying desire to action is what Anodos begins to live out at the end of the book.

John also experiences his ideal briefly, an ideal that is different than he expected, after going through death: "John saw the Island. [...] [T]he pain and longing were changed and all unlike what they had been of old: for humility was mixed with their wildness, and the sweetness came not with pride and with the lonely dreams of poets nor with the glamour of a secret, but with the homespun truth of folk-tales, and with the sadness of graves and freshness as of earth in the

morning" (170). John, like Anodos, had a false conception of his Ideal, and his Ideal now sits completely beyond his control, untouchable and unpossessable, at least for now. For, although John has died, he has not finished dying; as his Guide tells him, "You will meet that brook [death] more often than you think: and each time you will suppose that you have done with it for good. But some day you really will" (171). He and Vertue must journey back to the East, to their home, and live out their death before dying finally and actually reaching John's longed for Island. Both Anodos and John taste their Ideal before returning, transformed by this taste, to act on the beauty they glimpsed.

The importance that both authors place on the desirer's active return provides a clue to a fundamental connection between these works and the imaginations behind them. Although Lewis's title clearly alludes to Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the journeys of Anodos and John can be distinguished from Christian's journey in two instructive ways. Hein identifies one difference in regard to the motivation that led Lewis's pilgrim: "While *The Pilgrim's Regress* [...] was inspired by Bunyan's famous work, John [...] is driven by a compelling desire, rather than by the obsessive fear that drives Christian out from the City of Destruction" (*Christian Mythmakers* 220-1). This description applies equally to *Phantastes*, but when Lewis read *Phantastes*, he immediately sensed something that separated it from shallowly romantic works: "*Phantastes* was romantic enough in all conscience; but there was a difference. Nothing was at that time further from my thoughts than Christianity and I therefore had no notion what this difference really was" ("Preface" 21). He goes on to articulate this difference in terms of the "good Death" he found integrated into MacDonald's romantic vision. So although Lewis's book attempts to justify this Christian romanticism more philosophically,<sup>14</sup> both writers work carefully to nuance the desire they see at the core of the Christian journey and to distance their understanding of this guide from any overly romanticized interpretations. Lewis articulates the particular nature of this desire in the afterward to *The Pilgrim's Regress*:

What I meant was a particular recurrent experience which dominated my childhood and adolescence and which I hastily called 'Romantic' because inanimate nature and marvelous literature were among the things that evoked it. [...] The experience is one of intense longing. It is distinguished from other longings by two things. In the first place, though the sense of want is acute and even painful, yet the mere wanting is felt to be somehow a delight. [...] In the second place, there is a peculiar mystery about the *object* of this Desire. (202-3)

---

<sup>14</sup> Manlove describes this dissimilarity when he claims, "Lewis' theology is much more of an apologetics than MacDonald's, which has an unquestioning certainty that makes it more a praise than a defence" ("Parent" 232).

Lewis's description of desire explicates what MacDonald portrays in Anodos's journey, a longing so haunting that nothing will satisfy it except inexorable obedience that refuses to accept any imitation satisfactions. This "lived dialectic" converts romantic desire into a sacrificial, active journey that submits to death for the sake of a glimpse of its true object (205). While Lewis writes an apology for this Christian desire and MacDonald's *Phantastes* omits overt intellectual justification, both works evince their authors' beliefs that this desire forms the basis for Christian life. This desire remained central to Lewis, even while many of his books, including *The Pilgrim's Regress*, also answer rational concerns with Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Desire without reason and action is certainly insufficient, but it remains the vital source from which reason and action must come.

The second key way in which MacDonald and Lewis cause their pilgrims to depart from the trajectory of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is that, instead of progressing linearly to a distant telos, they must return and apply the truth they learn to redeem their homes. Even when using the term "progress," Marion Lochhead describes Anodos's path as non-linear: "The way through the woods leads to darkness and peril and suffering. It is a pilgrim's progress [...] a journey through Purgatory which brings the traveler back to this life, this earth, after effecting a purgation" (7).<sup>16</sup> Anodos arrives back home twenty-one days after mysteriously disappearing and faces the difficult task of practically working out the lessons of Fairy Land. As Brawley notes, MacDonald's fantasy does not urge readers to escape from the world, but rather "to realize the eternal through the temporal" (95). Lewis expresses the implications of this return when he describes the way that reading *Phantastes* sacralized the mundane world:

I now perceived that while the air of the new region made all my erotic and magical perversions of Joy look like sordid trumpery, it had no such disenchanting power over the bread upon the table or the coals in the grate. That was the marvel. [...] [N]ow I saw the bright shadow coming

---

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Wheat rightly notes this paradox in Lewis's thought: "Though Lewis defended rational thought against the 'poison of subjectivism,' from the start of his religious odyssey Lewis was not in quest of an exclusively rational religion" (32). Lewis returns, of course, to this peculiar longing in many of his later works under various titles; Joe R. Christopher provides a partial catalogue: "*Remembrance* [...] *Romanticism* [...] *glory* [...] *immortal longings* [...] *desire for heaven* [...] *hope* [...] *joy*" (11). Everywhere Lewis writes about this longing, his understanding of it seems strongly shaped by MacDonald.

<sup>16</sup> Docherty likewise links *Phantastes* to the structure of *the Divine Comedy* (26), and Gunther describes its structure in both cyclical and sequential terms: "It progresses in both a centrepetal and a centrifugal manner as well as in a more conventional linear mode" (43). In her essay "*Pilgrim's Regress: Bunyan or Dante?*" Marsha Daigle also argues that Lewis's structure is circular and so closer to Dante than to Bunyan.



out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged. (*Surprised by Joy* 181)

Lewis, for the first time in all his reading of fantasy, experiences a joy that redeems the world, a joy that lights up the quotidian. It seems clear, then, why this redemptive return becomes a central theme of John's journey in *The Pilgrim's Regress*; as Colin Manlove concludes about the book's message, "Heaven is as near to us as our hands, and yet we have often to journey far out of the way to realize the fact" (*C.S. Lewis* 17). Or, as U. Milo Kaufmann puts it: "For Lewis, then, the essential nature of the Christian life is expressed not in the move beyond the world [...], but rather in a redemptive return into the world, in the vision earned at the world's extremities" (186). This redemptive "sacramental" vision (Wolfe 4) comes as the fruit of a fantastic journey that imbues the mundane with meaning and that motivates one to actively participate in the working out of transcendent truth in one's own home.

In both *Phantastes* and *The Pilgrim's Regress*, the pilgrimages are essentially the same: a journey in pursuit of the desired that, after many false promises of satisfaction, finally leads the desirer to death so that he can, with his knight doppelgänger, live out the true beauty he desired. As the knight told Anodos when they first met, Anodos is "the singer" who, now at the end of his journey, can obey the knight's prophecy: "Do thy duty once more, and make this armor shine" (76). It was this particular understanding of both desire and reasoned action that captivated Lewis when he read *Phantastes* and MacDonald's other works:

He addresses the will: the demand for obedience, for 'something to be neither more nor less nor other than *done*' is incessant. Yet in that very voice of conscience every other faculty somehow speaks as well—intellect, and imagination, and humor, and fancy, and all the affections; and no man in modern times was perhaps more aware of the distinction between Law and Gospel, the inevitable failure of mere morality. ("Preface" 18)<sup>17</sup>

MacDonald demands that action be done and that these deeds spring from desire; imagination and reason, desire and reason work together, and this dialectic is the path Lewis took in his own spiritual journey and that he portrays in *The Pilgrim's Regress*. This trope of the return of desire to live out the fruits of its journey indicates the particular brand of romanticism MacDonald and Lewis shared. Both authors opposed abstract or narcissistic longings that desired only

---

<sup>17</sup> Durie cites this statement to conclude similarly that Lewis agreed with MacDonald's belief that "obedience is the only path to understanding; we must obey in order to understand, rather than insist on understanding as a preface to obedience" (169).

for selfish possession and served no redemptive outworking. Both their imaginative tales stress that Christian desire should enable individuals to see more clearly the beauty and goodness of God in order to serve more sacrificially and effectively. Anodos and John follow their own individual paths, as every human must, but ultimately they walk the same road to the same end, and both authors emphasize that neither the desire to see the beautiful nor the will to drearily do the right is sufficient; rather desire and deed must cooperate in a truly redemptive journey.

### WORKS CITED

- Brawley, Chris. "The Ideal and the Shadow: George MacDonald's *Phantastes*." *North Wind: Journal of the George MacDonald Society* 25 (2006): 91-112.
- Christopher, Joe R. "C. S. Lewis's Three Paths to God: A Keynote Address for 'C. S. Lewis for the Twenty-First Century.'" In *Truths Breathed Through Silver: The Inklings' Moral and Mythopoeic Legacy*. Ed. Jonathan B. Himes. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. 1-16.
- Daigle, Marsha. "Pilgrim's Regress: Bunyan or Dante?" In *The Year's Work in Medievalism 5: Papers from the Fifth Annual General Conference on Medievalism 1990*. Ed. Ulrich Müller and Kathleen Verduin. Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1996. 165-71.
- Docherty, John. "A Note on the Structure and Conclusion of 'Phantastes.'" *North Wind: Journal of the George MacDonald Society* 7 (1988): 25-30.
- Dunckel, Mona. "C.S. Lewis as Allegorist: *The Pilgrim's Regress*." In *C.S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy, v.3: Apologist, Philosopher, and Theologian*. Ed. Bruce L. Edwards. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007. 29-49.
- Durie, Catherine. "George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis." In *The Gold Thread: Essays on George MacDonald*. Ed. William Raeper. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1990. 163-85.
- Gunther, Adrian. "The Structure of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*." *North Wind: Journal of the George MacDonald Society* 12 (1993): 43-59.
- Hein, Rolland. *Christian Mythmakers: C.S. Lewis, Madeleine L'Engle, J.R.R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, Charles Williams, Dante Alighieri, John Bunyan, Walter Wangerin, Robert Siegel, and Hannah Hurnard*. 2nd ed. Chicago: Cornerstone P, 2002.
- . *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker*. Nashville: Star Song, 1993.
- . *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald*. Rev. ed. Chicago: Cornerstone P, 1999.
- Kaufmann, U. Milo. "The Pilgrim's Progress and The Pilgrim's Regress: John Bunyan and C.S. Lewis on the Shape of the Christian Quest." In *Bunyan in our Time*. Ed. Robert G. Collmer. Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 1989. 186-99.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999.
- . "Preface." In *George MacDonald: An Anthology*. New York: The MacMillan Co., 1947. 10-22.

- . *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1955.
- . *They Stand Together: The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914-1963)*. Ed. Walter Hooper. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1979.
- Lindskoog, Kathryn. *Finding the Landlord: A Guidebook to C.S. Lewis's Pilgrim's Regress*. Chicago: Cornerstone P, 1995.
- Lochhead, Marion. *Renaissance of Wonder: The Fantasy Worlds of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, E. Nesbit and Others*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977.
- MacDonald, George. *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination, and on Shakspeare*. London: Sampson Low Marston and Company, 1893.
- . *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 2000.
- Manlove, C.N. *C.S. Lewis: His Literary Achievement*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1987.
- . "Parent or Associate? George MacDonald and the Inklings." In *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs: Essays on the Background and Legacy of his Writing*. Ed. Roderick McGillis. Wayne, PA: Zossima P, 2008. 227-38.
- McInnis, Jeff. *Shadows and Chivalry: C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald on Suffering, Evil, and Goodness*. Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007.
- Prickett, Stephen. *Victorian Fantasy*. Rev. ed. Waco: Baylor UP, 2005.
- Sigman, Joseph. "Death's Ecstasies: Transformation and Rebirth in George MacDonald's *Phantastes*." *English Studies in Canada* 2 (1976): 203-26.
- Wheat, Andrew. "The Road Before Him: Allegory, Reason, and Romanticism in C.S. Lewis' *The Pilgrim's Regress*." *Renascence* 51.1 (1998): 21-39.
- Wilson, Keith. "The Quest for 'The Truth': A Reading of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*." *Etudes Anglaises* 34.2 (1981): 140-52.
- Wolfe, Gregory. "C.S. Lewis's Debt to George MacDonald." *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 15.2 (1983): 1-7.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JEFFREY BILBRO is a Ph.D. student at Baylor University. His essays on Wendell Berry are forthcoming in *Mississippi Quarterly* and *The Southern Literary Journal*, and his interests include, among other things, writers who grapple with issues of faith, tradition, and nature.



**Be the first one on *your* block to get the fantastic new *FEMSPEC*, an interdisciplinary journal dedicated to feminist speculative art, popular culture, literature and criticism....**

**10.1: Rebekah Sheldon on Joanna Russ; interview with Israeli author Nava Semel; excerpts from her *And the Rat Laughs* and *IsraIsland*; short fiction by Finisia Fideli; poetry by Phebe Beiser; art by women of Bihar, India.**

***And don't miss current back issues:***

***Femspec* 9.1** *Sylvia Kelso on writing feminist utopia . . . Mary Ginway interviewing Argentinean author Liliana Bodoc . . . Batya Weinbaum interviewing Sabina Lichtenfels, spiritual leader of Portugal's commune Tamera; Diane DiPrima's poems "Creation Story, Northern California" and "Show Me Your Other Body"*

***Femspec* 9.2** *Crysty Dwyer on spirits in Hawaiian protest cloth, Joan Chisler on surviving without a mentor, Robin McAllister on Daina Chaviano's sf, Gina Wisker's new fiction, the politics of naming, reviews including of The Wiscon Chronicles . . .*

*Go to [femspec.org](http://femspec.org) and subscribe;  
cutting edge feminist sf/f crit.*