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Abstract

Discusses the significant differences of the paths Mossy and Tangle take through the story.

Additional Keywords

MacDonald, George. "The Golden Key"; MacDonald, George. "The Golden Key"

“The Golden Key”: A Double Reading

Bonnie Gaarden

“A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean.” (“Fantastic Imagination” 317)

George MacDonald was a passionate Christian and a passionate Romantic, and his religious thought stretches orthodox Christianity toward Romanticism. M. H. Abrams observes that Romantic poets and philosophers tended, in many cases deliberately, to secularize Christian concepts. For instance, in writing about human spiritual development, they usually reduced the Augustinian triad of God, Nature and the human soul to two elements: the human mind and Nature, which between them assimilated the functions (“‘holy powers,’ ‘Creation,’” etc.) formerly assigned to the Deity (Abrams 90). MacDonald exhibits traces of the same tendency, but rather than abolishing God and distributing God’s attributes between humanity and Nature, he locates God and God’s operations primarily *in* humanity and Nature. Where the traditional Christianity of his day saw humans, as spiritual beings, superior to the rest of the natural world and the sole immortals in a Creation otherwise destined to annihilation, MacDonald held the Romantic opinion that Nature, far from being inferior to humanity, was God’s direct self-expression and could teach humanity much about the Divine Being (*Sermons* 1:23). He also rejected the traditional belief that Christians were privileged above all other humans as the “saved” remnant of a race consigned to eternal damnation; instead, he held that all people would eventually find their way “home” to God because God was irrevocably present in the core, true Self (what he poetically called the “Christ-self” [*Diary* 17]) of every human personality. MacDonald wrote that Nature, as “God all about us,” and our Christ-selves, or “God who is in us,” are “always trying to meet” in the God-excluding box of our conscious minds (Greville MacDonald 280).

Another way the Romantics secularized Christian concepts was to assimilate the Christian *Heilsgeschichte* (which begins in eternity, dips into time for the length of human history, and ends, after the Apocalypse, in eternity again) to what Abrams calls a *Bildungsgeschichte*. The Romantic salvific scheme takes place within the life and education of the individual, as he/she moves through successive stages of conflict and resolution to attain, finally, the mature knowledge/enlightenment/vision that constitutes paradise (188). Again, MacDonald followed the same tendency on a different tack. Instead of limiting both human existence and development to this life, as was the tendency if not the explicit claim of the Romantic schemes, or spreading human existence out over eternity while limiting one's chance for salvation to this life, as orthodox Christians did, MacDonald conceived that everyman's "Ethical Evolution" does not cease with bodily death, but might take millennia of purgation and spiritual growth. So while the Romantics erased the significance of the "afterlife" of traditional religion, seeing "salvation" as a temporal state attainable in a human lifetime, MacDonald erased the significance of death, and saw the salvific process as taking place over ages.

MacDonald's writing, especially his fantasy writing, thus forms a sort of crux between the supernaturalism/salvationism of traditional Christianity, and the more secular human-development models ushered in by poets, philosophers, and psychoanalysts from Wordsworth to Hegel to Jung. A devout theist, but one who emphasized God's immanence over God's transcendence, MacDonald created literary images that can be read with or without reference to the Christian God. One of his works that offers itself to such a "double" interpretation is the fairy tale widely considered his best, "The Golden Key." The first reading I will present sees the tale as symbolically evoking MacDonald's own particular "take" on the Christian *Heilsgeschichte*: that human destiny is union with God, and though there are "many ways" of achieving this end, there is "only one home / For all the world to win" (*Phantastes* 164). The second reads the tale as representing the two consciousnesses of the Romantic (and later) models of human development: stages of struggle, conflict, and not-knowing, succeeded and rewarded by stages of psychic unity, vision, and power.

To first read the story as a Christian parable, then, let us begin with one of its widely-remarked distinctions. Mossy has the golden key; Tangle does not. The journey to the rainbow's foot is easier for Mossy than it is for Tangle. Why? Some see the golden key as a phallic symbol and the difference in the character's journeys as a gender issue. While not disputing this as a possible reading, I think we can acknowledge other possibilities, especially since the Grandmother's remark, "No girl need be afraid to go with a youth who has the golden key" (26) becomes senselessly redundant if the key refers only to the genitalia (or even the "masculine principle") presumably operative in most young men.

The Christian churches of MacDonald's day divided humanity into saved and unsaved, Christian and "heathen." Different communions drew the lines differently, but all believed that a certain portion of humanity enjoyed a redemptive relationship with God through Christ and a certain portion did not, and that only the former would enjoy a paradisaical afterlife. MacDonald, as we have seen, disputed this. In one of the sermons that alienated his first and only pastorate, he suggested that the heathen might, *after death*, be offered salvation (Greville MacDonald 177).

This speculative distinction between Christian and heathen provides a rough "fit" to the difference between Mossy and Tangle in the fairy tale. On one hand, we have a character who early in his life finds a golden key; after he dies, he is able to walk over rough water and unlock heaven's stair. On the other hand we have a character who does not possess such a key, and, after she dies, she must go laboriously seeking access to the heavenly country, only gaining the stairway after a transforming encounter with a "babe" who is "the Oldest Man of all." This rough correspondence seems close enough to justify our looking at the story's details to see if we can elaborate this interpretation.

Celia Anderson observes that the "golden key" to heaven is a traditional symbol, usually pictured in the hands of St. Peter (88), who often represents the Church or the Christian. Like Peter, Mossy possesses the key to paradise, walks on water, and is identified with a rock (we are told that he received his name¹ by so habitually reading on a moss-covered stone that "the moss had begun to grow upon him, too" [24]). These associations strengthen the notion that Mossy's journey may represent a Christian spiritual path.

If Mossy can be read as "Christian" in our postulated parable, where is Christ? The richness of Biblical typology suggests the answer: almost everywhere. Relying on Dominical symbolism alone, we have Christ as the way, the truth, the life, the good shepherd as well as the sacrificial Lamb of God and the door to the sheepfold, king, bread of life, water of life, light of the world, and the list goes on. If we turn to figures used by the epistle writers we find another massive collection, with the paschal lamb, Moses' brazen serpent, and the water-issuing rock among the better-known. Where there is a redemptive experience, the New Testament writers will find a Christ-symbol.

There are several characters and objects in the story that perform redemptive functions, and many of them—the rainbow, the golden key, air-fish and aeranth, the Grandmother and her cottage, the fiery realm of the Oldest Man, and Tangle's guiding serpent—are described as "shining" and "sparkling," often in "all colors." MacDonald loved gems. As did John the Revelator, he saw the beauty of the New Jerusalem in their brilliance and durability.² So it seems appropriate that all of the gem-colored players in this story perform functions that Christian tradition and MacDonald's creed ascribe to Christ. Those relevant to Mossy's journey are the rainbow, the key, and the air-fish/aeranth, and the Grandmother.

The rainbow is the way to "the country from which the shadows fall"—the paradise of the fairy tale—as, biblically, Christ is the "way" to heaven. In MacDonald's theology, this symbol is apt, for he asserted that a person's yielding as Jesus did to the divine will constitutes union with God, and it is our Christ-self which enables us to do this (*Sermons* 3:21-22). Similarly, the believer's inner union with Christ constitutes a "key" to heaven: it is a spiritual marriage in which the believer is united with Christ in order to "bear fruit unto God." So radically does this union alter the believer's identity that it is also described as a death and rebirth (see Romans 7). Like Christian "regeneration," Mossy's discovery and appropriation of the golden key is curiously emphasized and given sexual overtones: "In a terror of delight he put out his hand, and took it, and had it" (14); and this experience changes his identity. He immediately leaves home and sets out looking for the rainbow; he becomes "the boy with the golden key."

Indeed, the first few pages of the story, which introduce Mossy and describe his discovery of the key, could be a parable of Christian initiation. Mossy hears about the key from his great-aunt; his father has discovered the key before him. The key is accessible to Mossy because he lives in a house "on the borders of Fairyland," in which "Things that look real in this country look very thin indeed . . . while some of the things that here cannot stand still for a moment, will not move . . ." (11-12). Fairyland, in other words, could represent a realm of spiritual "principalities and powers" while Mossy's house and family are the Christian tradition, embodied in social institutions and passed along in families, which gives access to the "heavenly places." Mossy speculates that the key might be the "rainbow's egg," or come "tumbling down the rainbow from the sky" (12). If we read the golden key as Christ "in" the believer, both these descriptions fit nicely. As an egg is a potential bird, a symbol of birth which has little meaning except in its future development, the believer's inner possession of Christ through faith and baptism is a potential in at least two ways: a potential for sanctification, the eschatological Christ-likeness promised to Christians by St. Paul, and a potential "way" to heaven, or union with God. So the key (Christ in the believer) will indeed mature into the rainbow (Christ as Jacob's ladder, the Bridge to heaven as described in John's gospel) and it has come "tumbling down the rainbow from the sky" in the same sense as Christ's incarnation brought salvation to earth from heaven. ("There was the true light, even the light which lighteth every man, coming into the world . . . But as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God . . ." [John1:9, 12].)

In this first part of the fairy tale, we are not told Mossy's name; he is simply "the boy." Moss, however, is mentioned repeatedly. As the boy notes exactly where the foot of the rainbow sits (so as to know where to look for the golden key), he sees that "it was based chiefly upon a bed of moss." When the moon rises, the rainbow disappears, and the boy flings himself down to sleep upon that moss, and when he wakes in the morning he sees the key "lying on the moss within a foot of his face" (14). So it is on a bed of moss that the rainbow (Christ the Bridge) intersects the earth and leaves its key (Christ within) to be found by the seeker. This certainly strengthens the rather eccentric connection between the name "Mossy" and the Christian church.

Like the rainbow and the key, the air-fish that bring Mossy and Tangle to the Grandmother's cottage glitter and sparkle in "all lovely colours" (17). The air-fish, like Christ, has two natures: it is a water-and-air creature, bird and fish.³ (Christ's conciliarly-defined natures are, of course, human and divine.) In guiding the children to the Grandmother's cottage, it acts like Christ, the Good Shepherd. In voluntarily flying into the pot, it enacts Christ's sacrificial death. In being consumed, it resembles Christ as the bread of life (or paschal lamb, or Eucharist) and eating its flesh produces a spiritual change in Mossy and Tangle, manifested in the new ability to understand speech of the forest and its creatures. (Similarly, partaking of Christ's flesh in the Eucharist divinizes Christians, though there is no agreement about the nature of this sanctification.) In its emergence as aeranth and subsequent disappearance "into the dark," the air-fish suggests Christ's resurrection in a glorified body and ascension into the unknown.

In this theological reading, the Grandmother performs the functions that MacDonald assigned to God-in-Nature, who is both material provider (mother) and spiritual tutor (servant) of the Christian. Expressive of both these roles, the Grandmother greets Mossy with a kiss on the forehead and begs to wait upon him. But the offer of service implies servility no more than the kiss. Nature's servanthood is the seal of her divinity. For nothing, according to MacDonald, expresses the majesty and the glory of God more than his devoted *service* of love towards all he has made (*Sermons* 1:14-15).⁴

The journey through the country of the shadows, which Mossy shares with Tangle, is widely understood as a Platonic image of mundane life as a shadow of divine Reality. In MacDonald, these shadows teach humanity to long for its heavenly Home, as the "pilgrim" saints in the book of Hebrews are said to live "longing for a better country—I mean, the heavenly one" (11:16). At the end of this journey, Mossy's possession of the key enables him to recognize Death as "kingly" even before he has been through the Old Man's bath. Just so, the Christian sees past Death's desolate appearance to recognize it as the angel who will bring him to God. And Mossy's journey after death is straight forward and upward to the rainbow bridge, which he immediately recognizes as his "way" (42). His journey over the sea, up the mountain, and into the rainbow is not complicated, but it is long: he

must fight wind and climb waves, he loses sight of the rainbow and is not aware that his dogged steps are guided by the ubiquitous “shining fish” under the water. This corresponds to MacDonald’s idea that even for Christians, the difficult journey of “Ethical Evolution” continues past physical death (*Sermons 1:23, Sermons 2: “The Last Penny”*), and that the ubiquitous guiding Christ is often hidden from conscious view—in circumstances, in nature, in ourselves .

In contrast to Mossy’s journey as evoking a Christian’s spiritual development, Tangle’s journey might represent the path of the “heathen” in MacDonald’s cosmology. While Mossy was instructed about the golden key from a home so interlocked with Fairyland that the Fairyland trees straggled into his great-aunt’s garden, Tangle has never heard of such a key, as the “heathen” are ignorant of the historical person and teaching of Christ. Her home, though also bordering on Fairyland, is the object of the fairies’ hostility: used to Nature’s tidiness, they cannot abide the slovenliness of her father’s two servants, and they deliberately frighten Tangle out of her house in order to get the maids “turned away” (16). In MacDonald’s cosmology, what is “unnatural” is against Divinity; Tangle’s home culture, therefore, is a spiritual hindrance rather than a help. Prepared by his home training, Mossy runs into the forest with a purpose, but after running away from her home, Tangle is merely lost, frightened, and potentially a victim of hostile forces such as the strangling tree. However, because MacDonald’s Nature is divine, the Fairyland forest is fundamentally benign, a place where the good creatures will always help a wanderer “more than the evil ones will be able to hurt him” (12). Like Mossy, Tangle is rescued and led to the Grandmother by the air-fish; unlike Mossy, she is petted and cherished like an infant. As Mossy is initiated as God’s child through Christian grace (finding the key), Tangle receives her cleansing bath in the air-fish tank, that is, from Christ-in-Nature. Dressed like the Grandmother in “shining green,” without shoes, she becomes pure as MacDonald’s Nature is pure.

Assigned by the Grandmother to be Mossy’s companion, Tangle, too, learns to long for her real Home in the country of the shadows. As they approach Death, however, Mossy’s and Tangle’s experiences diverge. Without Mossy’s key (conscious possession of Christ) Tangle finds the approach to Death an intimidating, constricting passage

through a mountain, and she needs an external manifestation of God (the aeranth) to guide her through. Neither can she see Death (the Old Man of the Sea) in his true, kingly nature until after she has passed through his bath and ceased to breathe. Whereas Mossy had his transforming encounter with God in life, at the beginning of his journey, Tangle's redemptive vision, like that of the heathen in MacDonald's preaching, occurs after death. While Mossy, after death, passes outward, upward, and over water, Tangle must go inward, downward, and under water to discover her own possession of God in the depths of her psyche, in what MacDonald called that "chamber of our being in which the candle of our consciousness goes out in darkness" ("Imagination" 25). The realm of the Oldest Man of All incorporates several important images of God from MacDonald's writing: God as consuming fire, God as child, and God as the ground of each person's deepest Self.

In the earth's center, where Tangle must go, the images of shining metal and glowing color which mark the divine throughout the story are intensified and combined with fiery heat, the glow of fire and the burning of desert sand. For MacDonald, adopting the biblical imagery, fire is specifically a refining and purifying element.⁵ In the first series of his *Unspoken Sermons*, MacDonald quotes the book of Hebrews in asserting that God is a "consuming fire" which will burn all that is alien to the divine nature out of every individual. When the "bastard self" (*Diary* 17) created by ignorance and error has been burned away by the purifying action of God within, the fire continues to burn, but the burning ceases to hurt. It becomes, instead, the ecstasy of conscious union with the creative power of the Universe (*Sermons* 1:30-32).

Also, MacDonald declared that the divine nature is "childlike" in the simplicity of its loving devotion: "In this, then, is God like the child: that He is simply and altogether our friend, our father . . . and mother" (*Sermons* 1:21). Moreover, "childhood is the deepest heart of humanity — its divine heart" (*Sermons* 1:16). Because God is childlike, the Christ-self of every person is childlike.

It makes perfect sense in MacDonald's universe, therefore, that at the deepest center of her being, amid glowing and burning heat, Tangle encounters a naked child, playing with spheres which, she senses, connect with the deepest meaning of the cosmos, who asserts, "I can help everybody." And, as though to bring together all the relevant images in

the story, the child plays in a cool, *mossy* cave, and in this cave, Tangle feels that she is “in the secret of the earth and all its ways” (37). The realm of supernatural fire is the center of Nature herself; the child in the center of Tangle’s soul is, like the key to the rainbow, found among the moss. When the child puts his “little cool hand” on Tangle’s heart so that she no longer suffers from the fire, Tangle has found her “key”—conscious union with God, the divine inner wisdom, represented by the fiery serpent (also a biblical Christ-symbol) who will lead her by an underground road to the rainbow’s foot.

Some have complained about Mossy’s “advantage” in the tale (Marshall 100). Why should the journey be so much more difficult for Tangle? Yet in this reading, which sees Tangle’s journey suggesting that of “un-Christian” humanity, the significant point would seem to be, not that her journey is more difficult, but that, contrary to the prevailing orthodoxy, she enters the rainbow at all. Further, as Marshall points out, Tangle, in return for her trouble, gains a deepened vision (100, 107).⁶ I would like to add that, though Tangle’s journey is fuller of incident and pain, it is also represented as shorter. On both occasions when she and Mossy meet, at the Grandmother’s cottage and the rainbow’s foot, Tangle arrives first. MacDonald’s aim seems to be, not to reverse the orthodox hierarchy of Christian-over-heathen, but, in accordance with his universalist theology, to suggest an ultimate parity between the two:

Thou goest thine, and I go mine—
Many ways we wend;
Many days, and many ways,
Ending in one end. (*Phantastes* 164)

Though “The Golden Key” can thus be read as reflecting MacDonald’s explicitly Christian ideas, of course, it need not be. We can read the story, not as a tale of two spiritual journeys which merge and diverge—Mossy’s journey and Tangle’s, the Christian “way” and the path of the heathen—but as two perspectives on, or two readings of, the same journey, illustrative respectively of the two faces of the paradox MacDonald saw in human Being: that each person is unbreakably linked to God and so immortal, invulnerable, and destined for divine union, but that each person is also born in ignorance and error, and therefore

struggles, suffers, dies many times, and, though always going, does not know where.

In this paradoxical view of the human condition, MacDonald shows his affinity with Romantic predecessors such as Wordsworth, Idealist philosophers such as Hegel, and the psychology of Jung (who was strongly influenced by Romantic thought⁷). Abrams outlines the basic shape of human spiritual development as traced in, among many other works, Wordsworth's "Prelude" and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*: In childhood, each person "falls" out of a naive union with Nature into self-consciousness, thus embarking on an educational pilgrimage in which he or she suffers alienation from and conflict with the self, others, and Nature. The persisting soul, however, struggles with and overcomes external and internal oppositions to finally attain a state of inner harmony, self-knowledge, and a reunion with Nature which is superior to the first union in that the seeker retains his consciousness of self (Abrams 255). For Wordsworth, this was the path of the artist destined to become the Poet/Prophet. Hegel called this temporal paradise the state of Absolute Knowledge. In the psychology of Jung, this is the end of the process of individuation, which begins when a child first develops an ego distinct from the unconscious (thus "falling" out of her primal unity with Nature), and continues into the second half of life, when the ego must be reconciled to various unconscious aspects of her personality. Ultimately, the ego must be consciously united with and subordinated to the Self, the transcendent whole of the personality (including nature and instinct) that Jung said we might as well call "God within us" (*Two Essays* 250).

The "key" here to MacDonald's fairy tale lies in the "double consciousness" that all these thinkers attribute to the growing soul. As the individual struggles with inner and outer conflict, he experiences his life as haphazard, disjointed, and painful. We might call this "process" consciousness. But when he attains the true vision of final maturity, he sees every trial and struggle as purposeful, for he now perceives how each seemingly random turn of his path helped lead him to the spiritual eminence he has reached. All apparent chance and evil now appear as one's real "best good," for it has contributed to the triumphant integration he now enjoys.⁸ An appropriate label for this perspective might be "teleological" consciousness. In MacDonald's thought, this

double consciousness is expressed as the consciousness of the Christ-self, (which we can sometimes, partially, access now, and with which we are destined wholly to identify) and the contrasting consciousness of the "bastard self" or the ego, on its way to purification. Thus we can read "The Golden Key" seeing Mossy's journey as representing human "ethical evolution" in its teleological inevitability. This is the perspective of the Christ-self, the Poet/Prophet, the Absolute Knower, the realized Individual. Tangle's journey, then, would picture this evolution as it is experienced "on the way," by the Self-in-process, who struggles and suffers without knowing her end.⁹

Mossy's journey has three characteristics that resemble the "mountain-top" or teleological view of human development: from the beginning he is marked as a "chosen" individual, his suffering is de-emphasized (one might say that his pain is subordinated to his accomplishment) and his journey is circular.

From the start, Mossy receives help on his way. The great-aunt, and Mossy's absent father who has found the key, might be seen as culture in its role as transmitter of genuinely helpful spiritual tradition. They point Mossy toward his early discovery and possession of the key, telling him where to look and offering an example, but ultimately he must go himself into the forest to grasp it. For MacDonald as well as other Romantic thinkers, spiritual growth may be aided by abstract or traditional knowledge, but its accomplishment is always a matter of the individual's responsiveness to the divine impulse (*Sermons* 3:216-17). As Mossy runs into the woods after the rainbow, Nature seems to co-operate with his quest: "The trees welcomed him. The bushes made way for him" (13). Mossy's possession of the key marks him out early as having a special destiny; it is a talisman recognized and respected by the Grandmother and the Old Man of the Sea; it becomes his identifying sign, and determines his life direction. He experiences himself as "the boy with the key" even before he enters the Grandmother's cottage and realizes his relationship with the natural world. Like Wordsworth's child, he trails "clouds of glory" from his "eternal home" even before recognizing intimations of that home in nature. In his passage through life, though he almost forgets he has the key, he is busy acquiring the very attribute he needs most in order for it to be useful to him: that is, the desire for that to which the key gives him access, his true country.

The sense of unfolding destiny that marks Mossy's passage from start to finish, his being "marked out" for special accomplishment, is characteristic of the teleological perspective of the Romantics. As the seed comes pre-programmed to grow into a flower, each human end is built into each beginning (Prickett, *Romanticism* 101). Looking back from his maturity on his youthful experience, Wordsworth sees evidence that he was *chosen* to be a poet/prophet (Abrams 28). In the philosophical system of Hegel, nature, history, and individual lives all have a built-in design: not only their end state, but the steps toward that end state, unfold "naturally" (Abrams 178). And in Jung's psychology, each individual "tends" towards growth and wholeness, for the Self pushes toward the integration that constitutes psychic health (Von Franz, "Process" 167). This aspect of inevitability, hidden from the evolving soul, is clearly seen only after the end is reached and the evolutionary process can be seen in its entirety.

Another characteristic of Mossy's journey that identifies it with the teleological perspective is that of muted suffering. Its outstanding moments are moments of achievement, not pain. He finds the rainbow and its key, finds the Grandmother and Tangle (Nature as mother-and-spouse), meets the Old Man of the Sea (a "Father" of souls who not only supervises their genesis as "stupid and riotous fishes" [34] but also baptizes them into death [42]), and finds the rainbow again. The longing he experiences in the Valley of Shadows, and his "mournful, lonely way" after he loses Tangle, constitute his only suffering. Certainly, the Romantic thinkers considered suffering a necessary and inevitable part of the educational journey: Hegel referred to the stages of human development as "Stations," with reference to the Stations of the Cross (Abrams 190), and Jung likened the turmoil of growth to crucifixion (Von Franz, *Jung* 226-27). But built into these Christian metaphors is Wordsworth's conclusion that the end of development justifies its pain, and the purpose of growth is a gain that outweighs the necessary losses (Abrams 114), for any invocation of Christ's suffering also invokes the climax beside which that suffering pales: the Resurrection. To the New Self, past pain fades into insignificance beside the magnitude of present blessedness. Indeed, as Wordsworth's *Prelude* declares, life's sorrows become "... in the end/All grateful if rightly understood."

Mossy's journey is also circular. We see him at its beginning, a boy transfixed at the foot of a glorious rainbow in which beautiful beings are climbing upward, then possessing himself of its golden key and running off to find the rainbow again. We see him at the end, a beautiful being himself with his feminine complement at his side, turning the key in the rainbow's lock and himself ascending the stair. That Mossy eventually lives out his early vision is typical of the Neo-platonic circular or "spiral" path of Romantic education. (Notice that the beautiful beings are climbing "as if by the steps of a *winding* stair [13, emphasis added].) For Wordsworth, the adult individual struggles to recover his youthful unity with himself and with the outer world (Abrams 123). In Hegel's philosophical system, the seeker repeatedly returns to the same developmental point, but at a higher level which incorporates the first, at once canceling and transcending it. And Jung's developmental goal (union of ego and Self) constitutes a return to the blissful union enjoyed prior to ego development, with the difference that this union, in preserving individual consciousness, is superior to the first. Novalis presented this concept of the long journey home in the story of a young man who goes seeking a veiled goddess, only to find upon embracing her that she is Rosebud, his childhood sweetheart. Again, the seeker usually does not realize that the end of his quest is a "higher" version of its beginning until he achieves the end. Circularity, therefore, is part of the teleological perspective.

If Mossy's journey resembles the Romantic teleological perspective on the human pilgrimage, Tangle's journey is like its complement, the process perspective. Like the struggling soul amidst developmental angst, Tangle does not appear to be chosen or destined; her progress is marked by pain and effort, and seems, not circular, but linear and cumulative.¹⁰

Tangle possesses no "key" to her life journey. Whereas Mossy, at critical points in the story, recognizes the rainbow as marking "his way," Tangle must discover her way through a combination of happenstance and effort: the fairy's taking a dislike to her untidiness, her persistence in seeking "the country from whence the shadows fall." After being separated from Mossy, she comforts herself with the reflection that "Mossy has the golden key, and so no harm will come to him, I do believe" (30), but neither she nor any other character in the story

expresses any such assurance regarding herself. Tangle has no sense of possessing a special destiny. She can only seek and hope for the best.

Another characteristic that distinguishes the teleological from the process perspective, Mossy's journey from Tangle's, is the predominance of suffering. When Mossy darts into the woods to find the rainbow, he is welcomed and yielded to by tree and bush, but Tangle is chased out of her house and trapped by the monster tree, against which she struggles "in great terror and distress" (17). Mossy is delighted at the idea that Tangle will leave the Grandmother's cottage as his companion, while Tangle is, at first, "very unwilling to go" (25-26). Mossy's way becomes "mournful" after losing Tangle, but not difficult—he finds the seashore in one sentence of text. Tangle, on the other hand, reacts to the separation with a burst of despairing tears, and then must take an exhausting, frightening path up and through a mountain. After a respite in the bath of the Old Man of the Sea, she embarks on the descent into the earth, which requires courage, faith, and endurance: she must throw herself headfirst into the underground river (36), and, as a climax of pain, she suffers so greatly from the heat in the realm of the Oldest Man that she "prays" him not to send her out into it again (39).

Neither is her journey circular. There is no hint of her goddess-like end in her beginning as a dirty, neglected child. The two servants who care for her may represent the negative side of culture—not as the transmitter of spiritual wisdom, but as the neglectful jailer of human nature and instinct. Moss is a uniform substance, and Mossy, except for growing older (and then younger again after bathing in the basin of the Old Man of the Sea), does not change much from the beginning of the story to the end. It is Tangle's change that is emphasized. It proceeds dialectically, as does the process outlined in Hegel's *Phenomenology*: opposites confront one another, synthesize, and the synthesis generates a new opposing term on a higher level. First a lost, dirty child meets a "great, splendid, beautiful lady" (25) and the outcome is a clean little girl dressed in shining green—a sort of grandmother in miniature. This girl then confronts, and goes away with, the boy with the golden key, whose task is to "look for the key-hole" (25). When she leaves him, she, who had no direction, possesses a version of his quest: to find the country from which the shadows fall. Her next meeting is with the Old Man of the Sea, and she emerges with a corrected vision, plus the ability (she

needn't breathe) and the knowledge (the Old Man's direction) to pursue her goal down into the depths of the earth. Looking the Old Man of the Earth "full in the face" for a year enables her to plunge headlong into the hole that takes her to the Oldest Man of All, whose touch on her heart makes her impervious to the fire's heat. When she encounters Mossy again, she is utterly transformed from the unkempt waif who ran pathless into the fairyland forest. She is beautiful like the Grandmother; she is far advanced on Mossy's quest; her hair ripples "like the endless sea on broad sands" (emphasis added); she sits motionless on a stone like the Old Man of the Earth, and her face is "as still and peaceful as that of the Old Man of the Fire" (43).

In the terms of Jungian psychology, we can see Tangle's name as suggesting the complexity of the human psyche as a "tangle" of conflicting, contradictory, and fragmented impulses, instincts, and complexes—the way we *experience* ourselves! Her flight from her house, the "unnatural" untidiness of which so offends the fairies, suggests the first step in individuation—dissociation from a persona that no longer fits one's growing self-awareness. However, like most people, Tangle experiences the fairyland forest (the mighty, uncontrollable, mysterious forces of the unconscious) as a threat before she has reason to believe in its beneficence. We might see Tangle's assuming the clothing of her Grandmother Nature as integrating her shadow, those aspects of herself repressed as socially unacceptable or personally undesirable, thus achieving harmony with external Nature and her own instinct. Jung wrote that the shadow, whose contents are largely from the personal unconscious, can usually be "made conscious" with relative ease (*Psyche* 10). In joining Mossy, she achieves the more difficult task of coming to terms with her animus (those characteristics repressed as "inappropriate" to her gender) which is further away from consciousness than the shadow and therefore harder to recognize (*Psyche* 10). A woman's animus, according to Jungian thought, is the agent of her spiritual development (Von Franz, "Process" 206-07) and in her acceptance of Mossy, Tangle discovers her spiritual goal, thus knowing herself as "masculine" and "spiritual" as well as "feminine" and "natural." But her final task is to become conscious of her Self, the whole of the personality, which is often symbolized by an interior garden, a mandala, a stone, an animal, a wise elder, Christ, or a divine

child (Von Franz, "Process" 207-26). When the Old Man of the Fire places his hand upon her heart, Tangle realizes conscious unity with the Eternal Nature of her own being, her Self, the divine child who is also the "oldest man of all."¹² Tangle gets to the foot of the rainbow, in MacDonald's terminology, because "God all about us" (the Grandmother) and "God who is in us" (the Oldest Man) have met in her. What is, from a teleological viewpoint, a destined ascent to an inevitable home coming, is, from the process perspective, a laborious way climaxed by purgatorial descent, a succession of painful deaths and rebirths.

This stereoscopic, even paradoxical viewpoint is typical of MacDonald's Romanticism and his Christian mysticism. Everything is both/and. We are all Mossy *and* Tangle. The way down *is* the way up. I doubt that MacDonald found fault with the Biblical image of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven after a fiery apocalypse that drowns in blood the old heaven and earth, then burns them to ashes. But, as usual, he also offered another way to look at it. In *Lilith*, he writes:

I walked on the new earth, under the new heaven, and found them the same as the old, save that now they opened their minds to me, and I saw into them. Now, the soul of everything I met came out to greet me, and make friends with me, telling me we came from the same, and meant the same. I was going to him, they said, with whom they always were, and whom they always meant . . . (414)

Thus the agony of death and rebirth is simply natural growth—or, even more remarkably, only a change of perspective: a different seeing, a different reading. In almost everything he wrote, MacDonald preached, and his message is that we must not hold culture and nature, rationality and instinct, spirit and body over against one another, but strive to perceive the unity behind the binary oppositions. For to *see* the whole is to *be* whole—that is, to be holy.

Notes

¹ In "Fictions and Metafictions," a fascinating article on MacDonald's debt to Goethe, Stephen Prickett suggests an origin for these odd names. In *Wilhelm Meister* "there is a casket with a (missing) golden key—in connection with which character [sic] even has, in the words of Carlyle's translation, to 'toil through moss and tangle'" (Prickett, "Fictions" 116).

² See the description of the heavenly city in *Lilith*, 417-18.

³ As Anderson notes, the fish is a traditional Christ-symbol (97).

⁴ In this, as in other ways, MacDonald's teaching resembles that of Julian of Norwich, who declared "[God] does not despise the work of his hands, nor does he disdain to serve us, however lowly our natural need might be" (70). She also claims, not only that God is the "ground" of the human soul, but that God "is the substance of everything natural" (101).

⁵ See the use of "purifying fire" in *The Princess and Curdie* 62-65, 190-92.

⁶ That the so-called "lower" division of humanity is here assigned the superiority of a greater opportunity for development is reminiscent of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic, in which, also, the hierarchical arrangement is eventually superseded (see *Phenomenology* 111-21).

⁷ For the terrific impression of Goethe (particularly *Faust*) on Jung, see *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, 188 and *passim*. Jung also shared with Novalis a fascination with medieval alchemy as a metaphor for human development.

⁸ Abrams traces these two consciousnesses (one's awareness amid the struggles of life's journey, as contrasted to the retrospective view from a spiritual apex) to Augustine's *Confessions* (85).

⁹ The story's structure reflects both perspectives. On one hand, the goal gives the journey its significance; on the other, the story dwells on the details of the going, and ends with the journey still in progress (cf. Marshall 107-08). Interestingly, Romantic philosophers Schiller and Fichte, following Kant, saw humankind's infinite goal as "utterly unattainable" by the finite ego. And, as Abrams notes, "The result of this way of thinking is to locate the goal of the journey of life in the experience of the journey itself" (216).

¹⁰ The Romantic "spiral" path of development, according to Abrams, "fuses the idea of the circular return with the idea of linear progress" (184). In this reading, Mossy's journey emphasizes the "circular" or "homecoming" aspect of development, while Tangle's depicts the its "linear" aspect, the fact of genuine change.

¹¹ "Paradoxical personifications" of the Self, according to Von Franz, "are attempts to express something that is not entirely contained in time—something simultaneously young and old" ("Process" 209).

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