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Abstract

On MacDonald's conception of death as an integral part of the life cycle.

Additional Keywords

Death in literature; MacDonald, George. *At the Back of the North Wind*

“In My End is My Beginning”: The *fin-negans* Motif in George MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind*

Catherine Persyn

*As waters haste unto their sea,
And earth unto its earth,
So let my heart return to thee,
From whom it had its birth.*

The Vicar’s Daughter

*I died a mineral and became a plant.
I died a plant and rose an animal.
I died an animal and I was man.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?
Yet once more I shall die as man, to soar
With the blessed angels; but even from angelhood
I must pass on. All except God perishes.
When I have sacrificed my angel soul,
I shall become that which no mind ever conceived.
O, let me not exist! for Non-Existence proclaims,
‘To Him we shall return.’*

Jalal-uddin Rumi

The friendliness of death is something of a leitmotif in MacDonald’s work: “friendly, lovely death [is] the midwife of heaven” (*Paul Faber* 180) or “only more life” (*Golden Key* 32), and in our end is our beginning since “we shall be carried up to God himself” (*Annals* 410). Understandably, the comfort book *At the Back of the North Wind* is informed with the same confident faith: as North Wind tells Diamond, “it will be all right in the end. [We] will get home somehow” (43). However willing one may be to take MacDonald’s word for it, it is even more thrilling to realize that this *fin-negans* motif is also secretly present beneath the surface, and actually built into the very structure of the book.

The first step towards an understanding of that structure is the discovery of North Wind’s lunar identity.¹ With it, a number of references become visible, most importantly Apuleius’s *Transformations*, where the lunar goddess Isis plays a major role, and the Greek death myths evoking the post-mortem journey of the soul in which the Moon also plays a crucial part.² *At the Back of the North Wind* is all at once a modern

Metamorphoseon Liber relating the initiation of a Lucius-Diamond under the ægis of an Isis-North Wind, and a modern death myth. There is no contradiction there since the initiation process simply anticipates the final destiny of the soul. The near-homonymy of the Greek verbs τελευταν / τελεισθαι (to die/to be initiated) was perceived by the Ancients as evidence of the identity of the two experiences (Plutarch, *De facie* 943b).

For MacDonald as for the Ancients the final destiny of the soul is "to close the everlasting life-circle" (*Sermons* 3:21), to join the central fire of which it is a spark. The symbol for this central fire being the Sun, the Moon as intermediary between the Earth and the Sun is the necessary stage on the soul's journey, whether it is 'falling into generation' (our birth), or 'returning to the homeland' (our death).³

This journey Home or Transformation being also the goal of the Great Work⁴ —to whose three stages (Nigredo, Albedo, and Rubedo) the anonymous first horse, old Diamond, and Ruby, are a transparent allusion—the book also proves to be an alchemical cryptogram. This is hardly surprising when the paramount importance of the Moon in alchemy is remembered, and when all of the above (alchemical quest, Greek myths, transformation stories) are understood for what they probably are: various languages expressing a unique spiritual reality, various retellings of a unique and eternal story. As such, they are in no way incompatible with MacDonald's Christian belief, and they provide the author in him with picturesque metaphors, or translations, as it were, of his own beloved text. For some readers, this characteristic "blend of pagan and Christian mysteries" (Willard 68) is part of MacDonald's appeal.

In MacDonald's outlook—the outlook of "an outspoken rebel" against Calvinist theory (Robb 16)—all souls without exception are destined to that glorious solar future. All the protagonists are accordingly traveling toward that *On-fire*, that *Em-pyrean* of Dante's *Divine Comedy*—yet another version of the same text. While some are swift, others are loitering and sluggard. The Nanny who prefers Jim to Diamond and stumbles on the way is representative of (an as yet) unregenerate humanity—like the Papageno and Papagena of Mozart's initiatic *Magic Flute*. As hero of the book, Diamond is the one who

successfully overcomes the obstacles of the initiatory route and reaches his destination.

This grid illuminates MacDonald's esoteric book, and especially the so-called "subtexts" (Pennington 63) which then appear in their true light: in the close marriage-relation they entertain with the text. One should not be led astray by the "seeming randomness" (Knoepflmacher 233) of the story: those nonsensical or enigmatic subtexts—better called supertexts once their full significance is grasped—are anything but "padding" (Robb 126). Some of them constitute direct—if covert—references to that traveling back of the soul to an eternal East: The East Window (ch. 8), Diamond's Dream (ch. 25), Little Daylight (ch. 28), Nanny's Dream (ch. 30), Diamond and Ruby (ch. 32). This framework is not immediately visible partly because of the confusing richness of MacDonald's imagery. However, a reading directed at the inside, rather than the outside of symbols, enables one to perceive the identical purport under the variegated garb: in the text as in the texts it is always that journey of the soul with its different stages which is evoked. Diamond's education is an interesting example.

Diamond learns to read in "North Wind's book," the book found on the beach at Sandwich. To that Hyperborean book belong three super-texts—the song of the river, Little Boy Blue, and The Early Bird. A close scrutiny of the information given, added to a minimum of deductive reasoning, makes it possible to give the order in which those three texts appear in North Wind's book. Diamond wishing to find the rhymes his mother read to him on the beach tackles the book, but this premature endeavor is bound to fail: "so he wisely gave up the search till he could really read. Then he resolved to begin at the beginning" (192). Starting from the premises: a/ Diamond "begin[s] at the beginning"; b/ he has not yet found the song of the river and has "almost reached the end" when he "c[omes] upon" Little Boy Blue, the logical conclusion is that the song of the river can only be the last poem in the book, Little Boy Blue the last but one, and The Early Bird can only precede both. Hence the following order, which is the very reverse of that in which they appear in 'MacDonald's book':

‘MacDonald’s book’

- 1/ The song of the river, ch. 13
- 2/ Little Boy Blue, ch. 20
- 3/ The Early Bird, ch. 23

North Wind’s book

- 1/ The Early Bird
- 2/ Little Boy Blue
- 3/ The song of the river

This inverted symmetry, very much like the waxing and waning of the moon (or the self-devouring snake which, to all intents and purposes, is its symbolical equivalent) reflects the soul’s destiny, its fall into incarnation, and its traveling back: Diamond’s exile into the flesh, and his recovery of the original timeless bliss represented by the song of the river. For all its apparent nonsense, this uninterrupted flow—those puzzling two-hundred and two lines with no remnant of that punctuation which can be considered as a symbol of our inscription in Time—contains “secret knowledge” (McGillis 147). It is the expression of “the holy carelessness of the eternal *now*” (*Sir Gibbie* 7), the expression of Eternity which in hermetic philosophy is to Time what Gold is to Lead.

The waxing moon is an image of the Fall, of an exile that cannot be dispensed with since “of no oneness comes unity; there can be no oneness where there is only one. For the very beginnings of unity there must be two” (*Sermons* 3:18). Joseph’s family’s move to the dreary Mews, the Colemans’s comedown to a little poky house in Hoxton, Nanny’s wretched surroundings, the island where Mr. Evans is marooned, the forest in which Boy Blue loses his way, the Prince’s enforced flight from his kingdom and the Princess’s curse are as many symbols of that necessary *omnia ab uno*, that systole of God’s heart which sends us to this “outlying station in the wilderness” (*Wilf. Cumb.* 401) here below.

The waning moon is the return to the grand family mansion, the diastole of God’s great heart that restores us to our natural blessed condition (and not us only but, sooner or later, the whole Creation, as suggested by Diamond’s question to Mr. Raymond about old Diamond); it is the *omnia ad unum*, of which the turn-about of a prodigal Boy Blue, the reconciliation of the fiancés, the several marriages, and of course Diamond’s family’s move to an idyllic countryside are the corresponding symbols (to quote but a few).

Like Diamond’s apprenticeship, like the musical instruments associated with various texts,⁵ Diamond’s progression in the nave of the cathedral and his voyage to the Hyperborean country are to be understood as a gradual approach of a Holy of Holies, i.e. in the light of

the same initiatic and eschatological logic. The three vessels, each bigger than the one before—"a yacht of two hundred tons" (103); "a much larger vessel" (107); "a huge thing" (107) i.e. the enormous iceberg—can be collectively understood as an ever-expanding womb, and Diamond is that divine stowaway, that embryo of Light that comes to term when he reaches the Pole. The cathedral and the vessels should no more be distinguished from one another than from North Wind herself—"The yacht shall be my cradle, and you shall be my baby" (105). Most relevant to Diamond is the hermetic saying: *The Wind Bore Him in His Womb*.⁶

In the unnatural condition which is ours, in that night of exile of which Daylight's plight is an image, the Moon is a surrogate sun, and the necessary step in our progress towards the real Sun. With a disruption in the logical sequence of events that serves the purpose of the esoterist, the couple text-texts (and foremost among the latter those already mentioned: chapters 8, 25, 28, 30, 32) recount just that pilgrimage towards the invisible source of Light.

A strange conversation between "sham Apostles," "The East Window" (ch. 8) seems to be nonsensical enough, an interlude never meant to be taken seriously. This decoy, causing the reader to equate the East Window with that playful exchange (rather than with the all-important description at the end of the preceding chapter, with which it forms a semantic whole), proves effective in occulting an otherwise obvious Light symbolism: that of the window as such, and of the *East*, locus of the rising sun (and of church choirs accordingly). This East Window is the vision of the final goal: the stage of "the Eagle" carved in the stone of cathedrals, representing the intuition of Light, without which no pilgrim would ever set out on his course.⁷ It is the crowning of Diamond's progression in the cathedral, and the starting-point of the journey to come (in essence one and the same). In the image of the self-devouring snake, or the song of the river, or the dying moon giving birth to a new moon, or again of the building of cathedrals—which started and ended with the chevet—the origin and the term coincide.

In the preceding chapter Diamond was shown exploring "the great house" whose darkness was given special emphasis: "The church was dark [...] Diamond could not see [...] faint glimmer [...] began to feel his way," "dark corners" (84, 86). The tired boy coming "against the lowest of a few steps that stretched across the church," falls down,

crawls up the steps, and eventually goes to sleep as he lies “staring at the dull window” (86) above him.

Now this was the eastern window of the church, and the moon was at that moment just on the edge of the horizon. The next, she was peeping over it. And lo! with the moon, St. John and St. Paul, and the rest of them, began to dawn in the window in their lovely garments. Diamond did not know that the wonder-working moon was behind, and he thought all the light was coming out of the window itself [...] (86).

An almost transparent evocation of the first two stages of the alchemical Great Work, Diamond thus passes from Nigredo (the dark cathedral) to the pale Elysian light of Albedo (the moonlit window). It is especially significant—and consistent with the lunar thematic of the book—that Rubedo should only be evoked in an oblique (but nonetheless unmistakable) fashion. It is first evoked symbolically by the preferential treatment given here to St. John and St. Paul, and later to St. Luke,⁸ who are all three associated with a solar Light. Light is the main theme of John’s Gospel, hence the symbol assigned to MacDonald’s favorite Evangelist: the eagle, which alone can look at the sun. Paul is associated with the dazzling “light from heaven” which temporarily struck him blind on his way to Damascus, that he might acquire spiritual vision (Acts 9.3). As for Luke—and the same applies to Apuleius’s Lucius—it is through his very name that he is associated with Light.

But Rubedo is also evoked in a subtle analogical way; it is “the wonder-working moon” behind the window that causes the Apostles gradually to “dawn” in it (the verb, like the above compound adjective is worth noting), but just as an uninformed observer gazing at the Moon might think her light to be self-generated, Diamond naively thinks the light is “coming out of the window itself” (86). What the moon is to the window, just so the Sun is to the Moon: the active principle filling her with light. In the morning, “when the ocean of light bursts from the fountain in the east” (*Sermons* 2:156), it is indeed another light that will illuminate the window. The Moon here is precisely what it is throughout the book: an image of that Sun of which the Princess Daylight is the only one not to know that “it shines like the moon, rises and sets like the moon, is much the same shape as the moon, only so bright you can’t look

at it for an instant" (275). The Moon is that veil dimming an otherwise blinding light which, but for her mediation, would forever remain unknown to us. MacDonald has the book stop on the threshold of that "unspeakable unknown," that *Splendor Solis* which, in analogical fashion, has yet been all along its true subject.

If the logical sequence of the journey is to be restored, it is Nanny's Dream (ch. 30) that should be examined next, *not* in relation with Diamond's Dream, but with the three-chapter sequence devoted to Diamond's Hyperborean journey or, to give that near-death experience the name used by the Ancients, his *Katabasis* (interestingly, the term appears in *Robert Falconer* [213]). At the origin of Diamond's adventures is something taking place in his Will,⁹ for both the journeys to (ch. 9), and from (ch. 11) the back of the north wind are an answer to his heart's desire: to see Hyperborean regions, to go back home to his grieving mother in order to comfort her. Nor is this the only parallel: signaling Diamond's arrival and departure are two symmetrical embraces which, for all they can only be described successively, form a single whole, being in fact the complementary aspects of an alchemical *coniunctio*.

In chapter 9, North Wind imparts her spiritual life to the boy Diamond—"you must go through me" (111) "he felt swallowed up in whiteness" (112)—who is thus born of the Spirit. This crucial biblical theme (John 3) was introduced in the preceding chapter with Diamond's prophetic appearance "under the Nicodemus window" (88). What makes the birth from above possible is the "dying to self [which] make[s] room, as it were, for God" (Huxley 29). This corresponds to the alchemical *solve*.

In chapter 11, Diamond imparts his 'flesh-and-blood' life to the angel North Wind: Diamond "laid himself against her bosom. [...] she clasped him close. Yet a moment, and she roused herself, and came quite awake; and the cold of her bosom, which had pierced Diamond's bones, vanished" (122). This corresponds to the alchemical *coagula*.

An exchange of polarities, the alchemical conjunction is a matter of corporifying the spirit and spiritualizing the body. From then on a spiritualized Diamond will be North Wind's terrestrial relay, metaphorically speaking her 'horse'¹⁰—what old Diamond is to him, the noble and willing instrument enabling him to accomplish his missions. Old Diamond's exemplary patience in accepting the numerous

impedimenta of the harness¹¹ is an image of Diamond's soul, which consents to renounce its glorious disembodied liberty and return to its cribbed condition in the flesh (a contrast as repeatedly emphasized in the Greek myths as in MacDonald's writings). Like the horse, the boy wants to be of use, and he too is "proud to be so worked" (317); and if people like him all stayed at the back of the north wind "what would become of the other places without them?" (294).

However different from such a pattern Nanny's Dream may appear, the girl's experience is of the same nature as Diamond's, only Nanny fails where Diamond passed with flying colors. The dream is an account of Nanny's own near-death experience, her own journey to the back of the north wind, where she too is carried by North Wind. And where can a moonlady alias a lunar North Wind take her protégés if not to the moon? Both children's experiences are to be understood in the light of the post-mortem journey of the soul, such as it is evoked for example in Plutarch's *De facie*, with which *At the Back of the North Wind* has much in common (a Platonic inspiration, the centrality of the Moon, the multiple relays in the narration, the notion of an immemorial transmission, the theme of the book by an unknown author, the voyage, the mythical island, the midnight sun).

The stages of the psychanody (or ascent of the psyche to its original source) are determined by the tripartite constitution of man—"in the same degree as soul is superior to body so is mind better and more divine than soul"—which is itself determined by the hierarchy of the celestial bodies—"In the composition of these three factors earth furnishes the body, the moon the soul, and the sun furnishes mind" (*De facie* 943a). This hierarchy

~ sun / mind : νοῦς
~ moon / soul : ψυχή
~ earth / body : σωμα

shows the Moon to be a crucial interface between the divine and the human worlds just as *Psyche* is intermediate between *Nous* and *Soma*. In accordance with man's tripartite constitution, death takes place in two stages. The body, which was provided by earth, is restored to earth; this is the first death, which reduces man from three to two factors. The

second death, which reduces man from two to one factor, takes place on the moon.

Not all souls are worthy of gaining access to that second death. The mythical topography of the Moon (variously evoked by MacDonald whose allusions, however, are bound to remain obscure so long as the reference is not perceived) enables one to understand the way in which the souls are sorted out. There are various depths and hollows on the Moon and “the two long ones are called (‘the Gates’), for through them pass the souls now to the side of the moon that faces heaven and now back to the side that faces earth. The side of the moon toward heaven is named ‘Elysian Plain’, the hither side ‘House of counter-terrestrial Persephone’” (944c). The Elysian plain can be seen as a kind of pier whence to embark for the second death. There, in the gentlest part of the air the good souls “pass a certain set time sufficient to purge and blow away the pollutions contracted from the body” (943c). The hither side of the Moon is the way taken by the unworthy souls which, being condemned to fall into generation again, are thrown overboard by the Moon.

This description of the myth is an ipso facto description of Diamond’s and Nanny’s adventures, which thus prove to be ‘new habiliments’ of an eternal story. “With lightning and a terrible roar” the Moon frightens away the impure souls which, “bemoaning their lot [...] fall away and are borne downward again to another birth” (*De genio* 591c). Nanny is thrown overboard by the Moon in just the same way: “Then came a great clap of thunder, and the moon rocked and swayed. All grew dark about me, and I fell on the floor, and lay half-stunned” (307). The place where Diamond stays in chapter 10 is of course the one allotted to the good souls, the Elysian Plain. There again MacDonald’s text follows closely that of the Greek exemplar:

To this point rises no one who is evil or unclean, but the good are conveyed thither after death and there continue to lead a life *most easy to be sure though not blessed or divine* until their second death. (emphasis added, *De facie* 942f);

[Diamond] felt so still and quiet and patient and contented, that, as far as the mere feeling went, it was something better than mere happiness. Nothing went wrong at the back of the north wind. *Neither was anything quite right*, he thought. Only everything was going to be right some day. (emphasis added, 116);

"Did the people there look pleased?"

"Yes—quite pleased, only a little sad."

"Then they didn't look glad?"

"They looked as if they were *waiting to be gladder some day.*"

(emphasis added, 117)

Diamond passes the test, but poor Nanny—*Not yet, alas, not yet* !¹²—will have to sit again before she can gain admittance. Although at this stage both children come back to earth, their awakening is far from having the same meaning. Nanny's return to earth is a banishment—"you're not to be trusted. You must go home again" [...] "she'll never do for us [...] She's only fit for the mud" (307). Diamond's is a matter of choice. Diamond could go through the Gods' Gate but chooses to renounce that privilege out of compassion for his mother. This dæmonic theme, discreetly advertised by the near-homonymy *Diamond* / *Διαμων* is of crucial importance.

Diamond's Dream (ch. 25) is the account of Diamond's second death. In a dream within a dream, Diamond is invited to plunge into the earth¹³ in order to reach heaven, whose cherubic inhabitants greet him "as if they had found a lost playmate" (237). The angels' frolics on the occasion and Diamond's bliss recall a very similar description in *De facie*: "Then, as if brought home from banishment abroad, they savour joy most like that of initiates, which attended by glad expectation is mingled with confusion and excitement" (943c). Plutarch's Platonic theme of life on earth as the soul's exile from its true home was bound to appeal to MacDonald.

What we have here is the second stage of the alchemical clarification operated by death. This is suggested by several factors: the dream within the dream, the horizontal, then vertical direction of Diamond's journey¹⁴ (a traditional reference to Small and Great Mysteries), and the appointed task of those special 'gardeners'—interestingly enough, one of the names for Alchemy was *Celestial*

Agriculture (Fulcanelli 118). The angels' digging up and polishing of stars, whose metaphorical value MacDonald's essay "On Polish" also greatly helps to explain, is the literal description of what "the midwife of heaven" actually does: by stripping souls of their bodily and psychic envelopes, Death causes them to resume their former and natural state, that of stars shining in God's heaven. A number of hints and eloquent symmetries, corroborated by MacDonald's view of death as birth on a higher level of existence, suggest that Diamond is indeed that star that lights up in the evening sky as he is about to disappear from the reader's horizon. Diamond is dead, long live Diamond! this time as a *Διαμων*—one of those "souls delivered from birth [...] that watch over m[e]n" and "encourage and help them to the attainment of virtue" (*De genio* 593ef)—ready to play by another potential initiate¹⁵ the role that North Wind played by him.

A similar continuity characterizes the book. Like that Polar sun that has Diamond wondering whether it is "rising or setting" — "Neither or both, which you please. I can hardly tell which myself. If he is setting now, he will be rising the next moment" (107)—like the eternally resurrecting moon, rising like "the true story" it thus proves to be, *At the Back of the North Wind* has indeed "no end" (*Paul Faber* 393). This becomes patent once the book's invisible dividing lines—the regular twenty-eight-day interval that separates one lunar month from the next—are perceived.

The first chapter is in actual fact the eighteenth day of a first moon cycle corresponding to Diamond's Nigredo. This beginning *in medias res* is in keeping with MacDonald's deliberate choice never to dwell unduly on negative aspects.¹⁶ The fact that Diamond should become North Wind's protégé certainly speaks in his favor, for "dæmons do not assist all indifferently" (*De genio* 593f).¹⁷ The opening scene, however, leaves no doubt as to Diamond's all too human state; his entertaining repartee shows him to be, as yet, a rough diamond rather than a diamond. At this stage, he stands for the average sensual person, who prefers comfort to discomfort, the known to the unknown, and somnolence to the effort of following a spiritual vocation: "'I want you to come out with me.' 'I want to go to sleep' said Diamond, very nearly crying" (10). After he is finally won over, North Wind takes his education in hand. Falling into an obedient soil, her spiritual guidance bears fruit

and culminates in Diamond's initiation at the end of chapter nine with his rolling over the threshold.¹⁸ This death of **Diamond-the-profane**, or birth of **Diamond-the-initiate** is the beginning of a new moon cycle corresponding to Diamond's Albedo. When Diamond as Another Early Bird (ch. 24) drives back home with his *worm* (the badly needed money he has earned cabbing) no wonder a special mention is made concerning "his pale face looking triumphant as a full moon in the twilight" (226), since it is exactly fourteen days after his birth from above, half-way into the second (albedo) moon cycle, in other words when the moon is full, that Diamond accomplishes this climactic exploit.

The apparently final chapter (ch. 38) is actually the beginning of Diamond's Rubedo. Diamond's supposedly 'real' death here is as little real indeed, as much of a false alarm as his apparent death in chapter 10. Stressing the analogy is the fact those two chapters have the same title, which is also that of the book.¹⁹ Just as Diamond-the-profane had died to give birth to Diamond-the-initiate, Diamond-the initiate dies in chapter 38 to give birth to **Diamond-the-daïmon**. Diamond has thus become his own name, a becoming whose solemn significance is not lost on readers of MacDonald.

That, one moon cycle later, Diamond-the-daïmon shall die in his turn may be safely inferred from two elements: the first is MacDonald's constant use of analogical logic, possibly the most important key to his thought; the second is a reflection on the nature of the protagonists. Diamond and North Wind, and old Diamond for that matter, representing not so much distinct entities as degrees in the Chain of Being, North Wind—Diamond's daïmon and ipso facto his entelechy, the vital force that directs him to self-fulfillment—is what Diamond will become (as Diamond is what she once was).

In this logic, the last and first chapter coincide, the wheel is come full circle: the life of Diamond-the-daïmon beginning in chapter 38 with his death as an initiate, coincides with North Wind's own life: from her birth as daïmon that her first visit to Diamond in chapter 1 represents, to her own death as daïmon in chapter 28. But this needs to be expanded.

Bearing in mind the following—a/ Daylight is another name for North Wind; this is suggested by a great number of echoes and parallels, one of them being these lunar ladies' role as "sun of the night," as shown by the equation:

North Wind	Princess Daylight	the Sun
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Diamond	the Prince	the Moon

b/ the marriages on which fairy tales end are an image of the spiritual marriage between God and the soul (Weil 23)—there is little doubt that the prospect of the Prince and Daylight’s marriage, on which chapter 28 closes, is a metaphorical evocation of North Wind’s death, for death is just another name for the *hieros gamos* (von Franz 121) or Union with the divine (also symbolized in the book by the Diamond/Ruby syzygy).

“Is that the sun coming?” asks the Princess at last free from the curse she was under. Juxtaposed with this litotic conclusion, the title of the following chapter—Ruby—speaks for itself. The sun is indeed coming but we “can’t know what it’s like till [we] do see it” (217): spiritual experience is inexpressible and has to be experienced for oneself. Like Apuleius’s *Transformations*, *At the Back of the North Wind*—but an enlarged version of the Little Daylight fairy tale embedded in it—stops on the threshold of the nuptial chamber.

If “the idea of the endless story is strong in MacDonald” (McGillis 146), it is because ‘in our end is our beginning’. This belief is at the core of MacDonald’s Christian faith, and a recurring theme in his devotional and fictional writings alike:

He who has had a beginning, needs the indwelling power of that beginning to make his being complete—not merely complete to his consciousness, but complete in itself—**justified, rounded, ended where it began—with an ‘endless ending.’** Then is it complete even as God’s is complete [...]. (emphasis added, *Sermons* 2:168)

Now he lives indeed; for his Origin is his, and *this rounds his being to eternity*. God himself is his, as nothing else *could* be his. **The serpent of doubt is gagged with his own tail, and becomes the symbol of the eternal.** (emphasis added, *There and Back* 264)

In the case of *At the Back of the North Wind* this belief is conveyed by the very structure of the book: as in *Phantastes*, as in *There and Back* (Trexler 10)—as in any genuine work of art probably—“structure is

theme" (McGillis 57). If, in chapter 38, Diamond again becomes invisible as he did in chapter 10; and if under another form he is yet again to disappear in chapter 28, he need not be afraid. He won't fall into nothingness any more than the eternal moon does—"the moon was not afraid, and there was no pit she was going down into" (17)—for the time of the invisible moon is the time of the Sol-Luna conjunction, the time when, stripped of its shells by the clarifications of "God's angel of birth" (*Miracles* 396), our soul finally comes into its inheritance, which is "simply the light, God himself, the light" (*Sermons* 3:250); the time when, leaving behind it the night of exile it can at last, like the well-named Daylight, behold the Sun:

[...] until at length the glory of our existence flashes upon us, we face full to the sun that enlightens what it sent forth, and know ourselves alive with an infinite life, even the life of the Father ; know that our existence is not the moonlight of a mere consciousness of being, but the sun-glory of *a life justified by having become one with its origin*, thinking and feeling with the primal Sun of life, from whom it was dropped that it might know and bethink itself, and return to circle forever in exultant harmony around him. (emphasis added, *Sermons* 3:53-4)

And there is but one way of becoming one with one's origin. As amply evidenced by Diamond's example, that way is the dying unto self, in other words Obedience, a freely and deliberately chosen obedience:

The self-existent God is that other by whose will we live; so the links of the unity must already exist, and can but require to be brought together. For the link in our being wherewith **to close the circle of immortal oneness** with the Father, we must of course search the deepest of man's nature: there only, in all assurance, can it be found. And there we do find it. For the *will* is the deepest, the strongest, the divinest thing in man; so I presume is it in God, for such we find it in Jesus Christ. Here only, in the relation of the two wills, God's and his own, can a man come into vital contact—on the eternal idea, in no one-sided unity of complete dependence, but in willed harmony of dual oneness—with the All-in-all. **Obedience is the joining of the links of the eternal round.** (emphasis added, *Sermons* 2:153)

Notes

¹ The present paper is a follow-up of: Persyn, Catherine. "A Person's Name and a Person's Self or: Just *Who Is North Wind?*" in *North Wind* 22 (2003): 60-83.

² Plato's eschatological myths in *Gorgias*, *Phedo*, *Republic*, Plutarch's *De sera numinis vindicta*, *De genio Socratis*, and more especially his *De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet*.

³ To "the home whence [man] was sent that he might learn that it was home" (*Sermons* 2:163); to "the heart of God, the one and only goal of the human race—the refuge and home of all and each" (*Sermons* 2:114).

⁴ The Alchemical Great Work is the transformation of vile matter into the perfect Philosophers' Stone. The "old alchemysts" (*Seaboard Parish* 574) attempted to turn baser metals into gold through a process of *Solve et Coagula* (dissolve and unite). Theirs was not a material quest only, for the achievement of the Great Work implied a spiritual transformation. The three main stages of the chemical process (Nigredo, Albedo, Rubedo) correspond to the colors (black, white, red) appearing successively in the hermetically closed vessel which was placed in the alchemist's furnace or *athanor*.

⁵ The violin of *The Cat and the Fiddle*, the horn and drum of *Little Boy Blue*, the dulcimer symbolically evoked by Diamond's songs to his little sister (see Cotte 86).

⁶ *The Emerald Tablet*. This famous text—the source of Hermetic Philosophy and Alchemy—has been known since the 10th century.

⁷ In the words of Pascal's God, "You would not be looking for me if you had not found me already." This can be compared with MacDonald's advice on prayer: "to ask for the best things is to have them; the seed of them is in you, or you could not ask for them" (*Sermons* 2:96).

⁸ "[...] answered St Luke, who must have joined the company of the Apostles from the next window, one would think" (89).

⁹ "Diamond only succumbs to the North Wind when he actively desires the country at the back of the North Wind" (Broome 93).

¹⁰ See Persyn, Catherine. "And All About the Courtly Stable / Bright-Harnessed Angels Sit : Eschatological Elements in *At the Back of the North Wind*" in *North Wind* 20 (2001): 1-29.

¹¹ The 'Harness' entry in the French Robert Dictionary lists no fewer than thirty-one pieces. MacDonald's careful description mentions twelve of them.

¹² "Not yet, alas, not yet ! has to be said over so many souls!" (*Donal Grant* 367). A parallel can possibly be drawn between Diamond's and Nanny's adventures on the one hand, and what Rolland Hein says of Mossy's and Tangle's progress ("The Golden Key"). Nanny, like Tangle, is "the less fortunate individual" who "must travel a longer, more tedious route to the same destination" (Hein 146).

¹³ The famous hermetic formula (V.I.T.R.I.O.L.) recommends: "Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem" ("Visit the inside of the earth and by rectifying you will find the hidden Stone").

¹⁴ The horizontal voyage to the Pole (ch. 9) is followed by the vertical journey (ch. 25) up the little subterranean stream, i.e. the Axis Mundi.

¹⁵ Dulcimer, as will be shown in another paper.

¹⁶ It is in virtue of the same logic that Stonecrop’s horse—or Old Diamond’s “friend in the carriage” (29)—goes un-named, or that the advantages of a place “are always better worth knowing than its disadvantages” (149). Like his God who sees people “not merely as they are but as they shall be” (*Sermons* 1:36) MacDonald is more interested in the butterfly or the caterpillar than in the larva that precedes both.

¹⁷ A Mr. Dyves for example still has a long way to go before he can receive such help.

¹⁸ By rolling over the threshold, Diamond literally stops being a pro-fane (*pro-fanum* = outside the temple).

¹⁹ The characteristic hooking-up of the last words of the book “the back of the north wind” with its title [Last words of the book → Title] is repeated with [Last words of chapter 9 → Title of chapter 10].

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