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Abstract

Applies insights from Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* to several of MacDonald’s novels and Peake’s Gormenghast trilogy. Analyzes the symbolism of houses, shelter and protected spaces in these works.

Additional Keywords

Houses in George MacDonald; Houses in Mervyn Peake; MacDonald, George. Fantasy novels; Peake, Mervyn. Gormenghast trilogy; Space in George MacDonald; Space in Mervyn Peake

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"Felicitous Space" in the Fantasies of George MacDonald and Mervyn Peake

Anita Moss

In the first chapter of George MacDonald's Phantastes, the protagonist, Anodos, finds himself the owner of an old secretary in which his father had kept private papers. This piece of furniture becomes the talisman which draws a circle of enchantment around both the hero and reader of the fantasy at once: "All the further portions of the room lay shrouded in a mystery whose deepest folds were gathered around the dark oak cabinet which I now approached with a strange mingling of reverence and curiosity. Perhaps, like a geologist, I was about to turn up to light some of the buried strata of the human world . . . ."[1] What Anodos finds on the threshold of a hidden chamber inside the secretary was "a tiny woman-form as perfect in shape as if she had been a small Greek statuette roused to life and motion," an extraordinary lady, Anodos' great-great grandmother, who conducts him to fairy-land, the spiritual realm where Anodos comes to know his evil shadow and finally to learn that "he who would be a hero will scarcely be a man."

Through the fantasy Anodos invariably experiences shelter and happiness in cottages, warm, safe, enclosed places, usually inhabited by a strong maternal female figure. Indeed the very center of the fantasy is the image of a humble hut, warmed by a fire, as a rising flood threatens the spaces outside. The old woman with young eyes tells Anodos that she knows something too good to miss and that he must "go and do something worth doing." Desolate at leaving the cottage, Anodos explains in his conclusion: "I often think of the wise woman in the cottage, and of her solemn assurance that she knew something too good to be told . . . I find myself looking about for the mystic mark of red, with the vague hope of entering her door, and being comforted by her wise tenderness (p. 182).

Images of huts, houses from cellar to garret, libraries, wardrobes, chests, nests, and circular images of that kind permeate the fantasies of George MacDonald. Most often (and in some cases for good reason) these images have been interpreted as symbols of MacDonald's ideas on spiritual growth: cellars are evil places where goblins dwell; the attic houses the goddess-like maternal divine figure and is thus the apogee of spiritual development. Or, as in the case of Robert Lee Wolff's study of MacDonald's work, The Golden Key, such images have been interpreted as MacDonald's regressive desire to return to the womb and to find perfect rest with the maternal source. Both interpretations certainly have validity, but they do not seem to account for the peculiar emotional and rhetorical power of these fantasies; they do not account for the reader's strong response to MacDonald's works, nor do they account for the way such images work in the structure of the fantasies.

Gaston Bachelard has provided some rich and provocative answers to these queries in his extraordinary work The Poetics of Space, in which he investigates how what he terms "felicitous space" explains our imaginative responses to the images of "the house from cellar to garret," "drawers, chests, and wardrobes," "nests," "the dialectics of inside and outside," and "the phenomenology of roundness," the intriguing titles of the chapters of Bachelard's book. Bachelard strongly and convincingly contends that such felicitous spaces are by no means regressive; rather they are the shelters of our dreams, the intimate and protected spaces where we become time and space travellers and actually do some of our most important dreaming and creative work. Thus, MacDonald invites the reader to join Anodos' dream reveries over the old secretary and entices us into the many-dimensioned and multi-faceted imaginary world which reveals itself in Mr. Vane's library in Lilith.

In Lilith we enter the fantasy through one of the most felicitous of all spaces (at least for readers of fantasy): ". . . a sort of niche or shrine in the expanse of book-filled shelves."[2] In the imaginative labyrinths of the library Mr. Vane contemplates the far reaches of his own house and its many dimensions. Spaces outside the library are threatening and Mr. Vane tells us, "Nothing should ever again make me go up that last terrible stair! The garret at the top of it pervaded the whole house! It sat upon it, threatening to crush me out of it! The brooding brain of the building; it was full of mysterious dwellers" (p. 197). Thus in the shelter of the library Mr. Vane can contemplate safely the dangerous excursions into the garret. And eventually he does venture into the garret and enters what his companion Mr. Raven calls "the region of the seven dimensions."

Even within fairyland Mr. Vane continues to experience space either as felicitous round spaces, such as the nests in the trees of Lona and the Little Ones or the comforting cottage of Mara the Cat Woman, as opposed to the exposed spaces of the "Bad Burrow" and the evil wood or the cold, grand and frightening spaces of Lilith's palace in Bulika. And finally Mr. Vane brings all the little ones, the dead Lona, and the defeated Lilith home to the sexton, Mr. Raven and his wife (Adam and Eve) to dream in the safety of their chambers of death until they are ready to awake into the infinite happiness of heaven itself. At last, though, just as Mr. Vane feels "a hand, warm and strong," laid on him and drawing him to "a little door with a golden lock," he finds himself suddenly alone in his library, the sheltered space from which he could safely venture into the furthest reaches of the most terrifying of all the perilous realms: heaven and hell.

In his use of space, then, MacDonald invites the reader to travel back to his or her own shelters for dreaming. In reading the fantasy we hearken to our own felicitous spaces, the deep springs of our imaginative reveries, and from those blessed origins, we safely complete our dreams in the fantasy. Such intimate engagement between reader and writer, the linking of sheltered dreams, reminds us of what Ursula Le Guin has written of fantasy--that it is "the unconscious speaking to the unconscious."[3]

Bachelard's exquisite explication of how we

experience images of space, then, provides some insights into the ways that we experience fantasy. This approach works well with many other fantasies as well--one thinks of the round and sheltered shire in Tolkien's fantasies as opposed to the exposed terrors of Mordor or the cozy homes in Kenneth Grahame's The Wind in the Willows. The idea works particularly well, however, in Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast, trilogy: Titus Groan, Gormenghast, and Titus Alone. Gormenghast, the castle itself, as C. N. Manlove points out in Modern Fantasy, is the center of imaginative energy in the trilogy. Isolated from time and space, Gormenghast becomes an origin of poetic image in Bachelard's sense. Bachelard explains the origins of such images of space:

> The house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home; it is also an embodiment of dreams. Each one of its nooks and corners was a resting-place for daydreaming. . . . The house, the bedroom, the garret in which we were alone, furnished the framework for an interminable dream, one that poetry work, could succeed in achieving completely. If we give their functions of shelter for dreams to all of these places of retreat, we may say, that there exists for each one of us . . . a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past.[4]

Gormenghast, in Bachelard's terms, houses and shelters the private and isolated dreams of the characters. This is especially apparent in the power with which Peake describes the young girl Fuchsia and her secret attic: "There is a love that equals in its power the love of man for woman and reaches inward as deeply. It is the love a man or a woman for their world. For the world of their centre where their lives burn genuinely and with a free flame."[5]

Bachelard explains imaginatively the ways in which the house enables us to perceive the central reality which Peake depicts in his fantasy:

> A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability: (1) A house is imagined as a vertical being. It rises upward. It differentiates itself in terms of its verticality. It is one of the appeals to our consciousness of verticality. (2) A house is imaged as a concentrated being. It appeals to our consciousness of centrality (p. 17).

In Titus Groan we find the castle from cellar to garret inhabited by individual dreamers; they have no connection with each other except for the "Ritual" in which they all participate. Fuchsia presides over the attic and watches over the world outside; the attic is a shelter for her dreams until Steerpike invades it. The library is Lord Sepulgrave's oasis. Lady Groan exists in her fairy tale chamber with its white cats and strange melodies, and the top of the castle is graced by the Hall of Bright Carvings and Rottcodd's reveries. Steerpike, in charge of the depths, ascends to the higher levels of the palace. Indeed much of the fantasy's energy concerns Steerpike's underground maneuvers in his attempt to violate the intimate and felicitous spaces of which Titus is himself the center, to make all the homes and spaces in the castle subject to his will. Steerpike, then, is unable to receive the shelter of Gormenghast. He must try to possess it.

Manlove has noted that Mervyn Peake as an artist and illustrator plays off horizontal and vertical planes to show a heavy and ominous atmosphere bearing down upon unprotected figures. In Titus Groan the castle Gormenghast becomes a principle of verticality and centrality which stands off the horizontal, leveling heaviness of the unsheltered world outside, where in Titus Alone, the young earl ventures.

In the unprotected space outside Gormenghast, dreams are no longer possible. People do not have imaginative faith, and Titus himself is almost driven to despair as the heavy horizons of the technological world erode his belief in Gormenghast. As he returns homeward after his travail, Titus stops short of actually seeing Gormenghast. As Peake explains: "He had no longer any need for home, for he carried his Gormenghast within him." Or, as Bachelard would explain it, home had become for Titus a poetic image and thus an infinitely comforting shelter for dreams.

Truly Titus cannot go home again, nor does he finally need to. The essence of Gormenghast is alive in the timeless space of Titus' imaginative memory of it and thus remains a nourishing image of home and comfort. Experiencing the physical presence of Gormenghast after having left it, Titus would probably find that it no longer functioned as a shelter for his dreams. It is the texture of the house in Titus' memory which stops him from seeing the decaying castle with the eyes of experience. Bachelard helps readers to understand Titus' emotions when he writes: "Through dreams, the various dwelling places of our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in the new house, when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood. . . . We live fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as image. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home. And, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams . . . our emotion is perhaps an expression of the poetry that was lost" (p. 6).

Manlove has found the ending of Titus Alone "unacceptable, a complete and opaque denial of all that has gone before."[6] Yet Titus' longing, homesickness, and guilt can only work themselves out in reverie. Bachelard would say that Titus discovers the truth about Gormenghast just in time. It is an imaginary realm, the central and vital image in Titus' consciousness--the original image in fact. In the past Gormenghast was the place where Titus could safely dream; in the present the memory of it becomes the imaginative nucleus of new dreams for the future.

Notes

[1]George MacDonald, Phantastes and Lilith (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), p. 16. Subsequent quotations from Phantastes will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be indicated in parenthesis.

[2]George MacDonald, Phantastes and Lilith (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), p. 188. Subsequent quotations from Lilith will

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be taken from this edition; page numbers will be indicated in parenthesis.

[3]Ursula LeGuin, "Fantasy, Like Poetry, Speaks the Language of the Night," The Language of the Night, Ed. Susan Wood (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1979), p. 11.

[4]Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, Trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 15. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be indicated in parenthesis.

[5]Mervyn Peake, Titus Groan (New York: Ballantine, 1976), p. 77.

[6]C. N. Manlove, Modern Fantasy (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 256.

PARMA ELDALAMBERON

The Council of Stewards regrets to announce that Parma Eldalamberon, the Mythopoeic Society's Elvish language journal, must be officially discontinued. It has been three years since Parma 5 appeared, and a long series of letters and personal approaches to the Parma staff has failed to bring another issue demonstrably nearer to publication.

While the Mythopoeic Linguistic Fellowship, a special activity group, has always undertaken production of the magazine, the Society as a whole owns Parma, is financially responsible for it, and is legally obligated to fulfill subscriptions. The Stewards have acted unanimously in the light of these responsibilities.

Though the magazine may someday be reconstituted - indeed, the entire Council hopes that this will be the case - we are setting the books in order by addressing an offer of settlement to current Parma subscribers. Any revival will be announced.

Meanwhile our readers and members are asked not to send Parma subscription money to the Society. Back issues remain available. Articles on Mythopoeic languages will be welcome in Mythlore.

Lee Speth, 1981 Chairman, for The Council of Stewards

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