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Scotland's Forgotten Treasure: The Visionary Romances of George MacDonald.
Colin Manlove

Barfield, a point underscored in the book's foreword by Barfield's grandson and trustee Owen A. Barfield.

—Tiffany Brooke Martin



SCOTLAND'S FORGOTTEN TREASURE: THE VISIONARY ROMANCES OF GEORGE MACDONALD. Colin Manlove. Aberdeen U.P., 2016, ISBN 978-1857520569. \$77.77.

COLIN MANLOVE BRINGS TO THIS WORK A LONG HISTORY of scholarship on fantasy literature in general and MacDonald in particular. One valuable contribution of this book is to put MacDonald's fantasy in the context of various fantasy traditions and to observe connections between the texts treated here and the tales of other fantasy writers.

Scotland's Forgotten Treasure examines MacDonald's "pilgrimage" narratives: *Phantastes*, *Lilith*, and "The Golden Key." Manlove sees these works as a sequence, in that *Phantastes*, written at the beginning of MacDonald's career as an author, deals with the beginnings of life, "The Golden Key," written mid-career, deals with life's journey, and *Lilith*, MacDonald's last fantasy story, presents MacDonald's view of the afterlife. The book does not offer definitive, detailed "readings" of these texts so much as observe motifs, structures, and the way the texts present ideas important to MacDonald.

The Preface puts these three works in the context of Scottish fantasy and the German Romantic fairy-tale tradition. The preliminary chapters present the main outlines of MacDonald's biography and sketch his character, summarize MacDonald's theological and literary views (emphasizing MacDonald's notion that the imagination is the faculty through which people have the most direct contact with God) and vet some candidates for the position of MacDonald's literary predecessors (with the caveat that MacDonald alters so completely what he borrows that determining any literary debt is difficult).

The chapter on *Phantastes* presents Fairy Land as Anodos' own mental landscape. Anodos' wanderings, Manlove says, are "a journey into the human imagination" (42), which MacDonald believed had God as its root. Even the evil things Anodos encounters there further his spiritual growth. Over the course of the story, Anodos moves from "dependent child" (in the forest), to "questioning youth" (in the marble palace) to "choosing adult" (in open country) (57). Recurrent motifs Manlove identifies are: improvements in seeing (a metaphor for better moral understanding); mirrors, reflections and doubles (everything in Fairy Land "reflects" Anodos to himself); doors or ways in and out (learning to

manage desires); images of release and expansion contrasting with images of confinement (full expression can only be achieved when the self is controlled); and constant change of state and place (idealizing immersion in life's flux, as opposed to solidifying phenomena in order to possess them).

Manlove sees these important themes of *Phantastes*: A person grows toward God in a spiral pattern, constantly returning to the same place but at a higher level. Part of this pattern includes mistaking images of the divine for the divine itself. Locating one's goal either entirely within or entirely outside of the mundane world are both errors, and we are repeatedly raised from defeat and despair by a power not our own. The false self cannot be conquered once and for all, but must be repeatedly slain. Finally, Manlove observes that fairly trivial transgressions in the story (such as Anodos attempting to touch the white lady when she appears on a pedestal in the marble palace) have what might seem disproportionately negative consequences. In fact, he suggests, it is not the transgressions that produce the subsequent disasters. Rather, disasters result from an underlying disorder of the soul (in this case, Anodos' lust to possess and control), of which the small transgressions are only a minor symptom. *Phantastes* is so structured, Manlove says, that a reader must struggle to make sense of it. He asserts that this is deliberate; MacDonald intends that the reader's efforts to make sense of the text will lead him or her to a deeper understanding of Reality.

The chapter on "The Golden Key" identifies the "heart" of the story as desire for God and heaven, and illustrates the two mystical "ways" of attaining this goal: Mossy's journey dramatizes the *via negativa*, that proceeds through rejection of the world, while Tangle follows the *via positiva*, the way to the transcendent through affirmation and experience of the world.

Mossy has "true" imagination that has been cultivated both by his exposure to nature and by the truths about the world which his aunt tells him. In contrast, Tangle has been "shut up with herself" and told mere "fancies" such as the story of the Three Bears; her imagination is thus disconnected from both inner and outer truth. This difference in the training of their imaginations, the faculty that perceives the divine, accounts for Mossy's journey being more straightforward than Tangle's.

Tangle acquires the equivalent of Mossy's key through her underground journey, which is also a journey within herself and so gives her the experience of both God's world and her "true" imagination. Where Mossy's after-death journey proceeds through space (over the ocean), Tangle's proceeds through time: the Old Man of the Sea represents the beginning of life on earth with his primitive fish; the Old Man of the Earth, the "solid" foundation of Creation; the Old Man of the Fire, the fiery and fluid beginning of creation, with

God as both infant-creator and center of the soul. Together, the journeys of Mossy and Tangle assert God's presence throughout space and time.

Manlove sees "The Golden Key" as modeled on both *Pilgrim's Progress* (which portrays the *via negativa*) and *Water Babies* (which portrays the *via positiva*). Much of the chapter is devoted to noting parallels between these two works and MacDonald's story. Two observations in this chapter stood out for me: First, Manlove points out that "The Golden Key" is very tightly focused, picturing human life entirely in terms of desire and journey toward the desired goal. There is nothing in the tale dramatizing the need for moral choice, duty and/or complexity in human relationships, or inner conflict. Mossy and Tangle are simply "all about" their quest. Second, the story works by symbol (which, in contrast to metaphor, *is* what it represents and has no simple conceptual equivalent) and by paradox (opposites turning into each other). It strikes me that this paring-down to a single theme and piling-up of symbol and paradox are probably responsible for both the eerie, other-worldly tone of the story and the impression it gives of compressing a world of profound but mysterious truth into a very short, simple narrative.

The chapter on *Lilith* asserts that the tale is linked to *The Divine Comedy*, *Through the Looking Glass*, and the medieval poem *Pearl*. It is typical of Scottish fantasy, Manlove says, in dealing with the confrontation between the rational consciousness and the "wild" unconscious. The hiddenness of certain important elements of the world of seven dimensions (the underground water, the Bad Burrow monsters) represents Vane's separation from his unconscious.

Manlove emphasizes that *Lilith* works on multiple levels: one can read it as simple narrative or as an allegory; as depicting a purgatorial afterworld or Vane's psychological inner world; as picturing ultimate Reality as characterized by multiplicity and oppositions, or as a unity. Manlove stresses that MacDonald allows for the validity of all these perspectives. For instance, Manlove observes that the truths of the 7-dimensional world are spiritual, and thus a reversal of the material truths that Vane (and the reader) know. The truth of the "spiritual" perspective, however, does not render its "material" counter-perspective false. For instance, there is a real (though partial) sense in which Mr. Raven's demand that the newly-arrived Vane immediately join the sleepers in Eve's house *is* presumptuous, and that Lilith's insistence on self-determination *is* heroic.

On a narrative level, Lilith's problem is her efforts to be static and separate in an interconnected Reality of flux. All the other characters in the story are constantly changing; their identities have many aspects (i.e. Mr. Raven = a literal raven = a dead librarian = Adam). Reading the story as a dramatization of Vane's inner world, we can see Lilith as personifying Vane's own "rebellious, selfish, solitary" character (119). On a simple narrative level, Lilith's "rebellion" is a delusion, a dedication to unreality that is literally turning her into Nothing

(the growing dark spot on her side). On an allegorical level, though, we can see good in her; Lilith-as-spotted-leopardess fighting Mara-as-white leopardess could be read as depicting Lilith's struggles with her own conscience.

Vane's second journey through the seven-dimensional world is, on a narrative level, a series of screw-ups, but on an allegorical level it dramatizes a growth in his moral character (for example, the advances of the Little Ones represent the maturation of his virtues). On the narrative level, Lilith is bullied into repentance, but on the allegorical it is her own Sorrow (Mara) that motivates it. The suddenness of Vane's willingness to sleep after Lilith has repented makes little sense in the outer narrative, but if we are reading Lilith as an inner aspect of Vane himself, it follows nicely.

The resurrection morning, says Manlove, reveals the true nature of the universe: everything communes with and lives in everything else: heaven and earth, matter and spirit, "microcosm" and "macrocosm." Yet at the end, the book still presents opposites: the resurrection has already happened, but is yet to happen; Vane is finally awake, Vane is still asleep; heaven is ultimate bliss, heaven is under siege. These tensions, Manlove says, could be attributed to Vane's (and the reader's) still-imperfect vision, or to a moral ambiguity in God, or perhaps MacDonald (like Blake) saw contraries as essential to existence. Vane's being shut out of heaven at the book's end suggests "a resurrection that is both now and to come, a redemption that leads to refusal of present reward" (152). *Lilith* as a mystical work pulls the reader "toward a center in which all seeming antagonisms will find a resolution beyond our conceiving" (153). And this unity already exists: the injunction of *Lilith* is "not to become but to be what God originally made" (154).

In the book's conclusion, Manlove observes that, while all three tales are about desire, all avoid simply happy endings. This suggests that what we want is not what we think we want, and that true fulfillment is above our current comprehension. The theme of *Phantastes* is that "the numinous cannot be possessed, but must be continuously pursued." "The Golden Key" portrays the two mystic ways by which one might follow one's desire for the transcendent. *Lilith* shows that Reality is ultimately One, but in our mundane experience, it inevitably divides into incompatible opposites. All the stories transmit MacDonald's vision of Christianity (and reality) as one in which only through "love and obedience to Christ and to God [...] can we find our true selves" (164).

Scotland's Hidden Treasure will well repay the attention, not only of MacDonald scholars, but of any lover of MacDonald's fantasy.

—Bonnie Gaarden