

Myth and Metafiction in George MacDonald's *Phantastes*: Mythopoeic Reading as Spiritual Sanctification

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Most people reading *Phantastes* for the first time struggle with the narrative's apparent randomness. However, recognizing the coherence of this disjointed narrative, appreciating Anodos's development, and thus embarking on our own spiritual self-exploration actually begins with understanding the meaning of Anodos's name. Rolland Hein notes that in Greek, *Anodos* can mean *having no way*, or it can indicate *rising up* or *elevating*. Hein suggests that this name accurately describes Anodos and his adventures, because he is a person who has no clear way or path in life and is wandering through fairy world. Yet, by the end, he rises to spiritual awakening (*George MacDonald*, 136 and *Harmony Within*, 56). Joseph Sigman further explains that there is a pun in the original Greek on the words and phrases *road*, *way*, *having no way*, *journey inland*, and *the way up* (205). It would appear that Anodos wanders aimlessly through the narrative, but as we follow him through his seemingly random adventures of repeated failure and disappointment, we see that his wanderings are all significant encounters with experiential means of grace by which, eventually, Anodos rises to higher spiritual development. According to Richard H. Reis, the name *Anodos* is translated most frequently from the Greek as "a way back," thus suggesting Anodos is on a journey from childhood into adulthood and must find his way back to the guiltlessness of childhood (87).

This is an interesting interpretation, but I suggest that the journey is a way back home from the spiritual or dream state through which he must mature into a moral being, an educated person who learns the true nature of love and self-sacrifice. This journey is not so much a return to childlike guiltlessness as it is a process of spiritual maturity and redemption. Through

metafictional encounters with mythic figures made real within the fairy realm, as well as encounters with a metafictional *doppelganger*, Anodos works his way through fairyland as if it were a story and emerges emotionally changed and spiritually matured. As such, his own metafictional encounter with myth and fairy as literary devices signify our own potential development as readers of fairy fiction. Before metafiction was cool, MacDonald presented readers with a proto-postmodern narrative; however, MacDonald's metafiction does not question the ultimate reality of self, nor does it recontextualize human subjectivity as mere cultural construction or, worse, solipsistic fiction. Rather, metafiction in *Phantastes* foregrounds the significance of mythopoeic reading as a fundamental literary mechanism for moral instruction and spiritual development that prepares the real individual for ultimate reality, namely, eternal relationship with God.

Myth and Metafiction as Spiritual Warning

MacDonald's mythopoeic metafiction is characterized by a circular narrative and recursive plot developments. Commenting on the structure of *Phantastes* Roderick McGillis notes,

The book moves inward to the story of Cosmo von Wehrstahl in chapter thirteen, the middle chapter of twenty-five, and outward to the entrance to and exit from fairy land. What MacDonald refers to as the "community of the centre" is an experience of liberation from binary thinking and from linear narrative based on the beginning/ending duality. This is why the two halves of the book radiate outward from the story of Cosmo who goes out from himself, loses himself in fact—he dies in an act of self-sacrifice—in order to find himself. (34)

This circular pattern is at times chaotic and dreamlike, often containing stories within stories; however, as Chris Brawley observes, this structure is reminiscent of the imaginative dream state which, according to MacDonald, is the dwelling place of God within the human psyche (97). Thus, it is in such mythopoeic adventures into the dream realm and the imagination that we encounter truths of God and thus experience spiritual growth. Indeed, the narrative structure of *Phantastes* is often confusing and seemingly disjointed; however, it is unified—or, at least, coherently maintained—primarily by the spiritual needs of the protagonist. We can understand the narrative progression as spiritual movement which is not always linear and progressive, but often recursive and regressive, filled with repetition and setbacks as Anodos struggles toward spiritual development.

The predominant moral principle that Anodos must learn in his adventures through the surrealistic Fairy Land is the meaning of true love. As a young man, he fully understands and impulsively embraces lust, but his selfish desires blind him to the deeper truths of selfless, self-sacrificial love, and it is this idealized, agape love that he must learn in order to return to his real world, restored, renewed, and equipped to bring transformation to his Victorian reality. (In this sense, MacDonald's fantasy is not merely escapist but, rather, anticipates Tolkien's famous formulation of escape, recovery, and consolation.) Anodos encounters many opportunities to learn this lesson, but he repeatedly fails, often to the frustration of readers watching him commit the same mistakes over and over. However, through metafictional devices, MacDonald eventually brings Anodos to the desired truth, and offers readers imaginative cues as to what we are to learn as well—Anodos represents the readers, and he becomes a metafictional element signaling what the real, flesh-and-blood readers are to take away from their own imaginative journey into Fairy Land.

However, Anodos is quite the slow learner, much to the chagrin of contemporary readers, and he submits to the lust of his flesh in at least three key episodes: first the fairy grandmother who appears to him in his father's desk on his twenty-first birthday; then the Maid of the Alder-tree who, like Keats's *La Belle Dame sans Mercy*, sensuously entices Anodos to a life-threatening Elvin grot; and finally the marble woman who warns him not to commit Pygmalion's mistake. Frustratingly, Anodos does not apprehend the warnings of those he meets during his journey through Fairy Land, nor does he properly grasp and apply the lessons of his own metafictional experiences. For example, when he first enters Fairy Land, he stays with a family and reads the Percival legend which speaks of a demon woman who broke his heart and nearly killed him (MacDonald 16). The mother and daughter both warn Anodos of the dangerous creatures in the fairy forest seeking to destroy him (MacDonald 11-13). Then, the beech-tree admonishes him not to be deceived by superficial beauty, as evil creatures in Fairy Land will use it to deceive and destroy him (MacDonald 29-30). He ignores these important spiritual lessons and moral warnings and, instead, follows his passions and frees the woman from the marble, following her deeper into the forest toward his potential doom (MacDonald 39-40).

In a metafictional moment,¹ MacDonald has his protagonist meet a fairy representation of the Arthurian figure he read about earlier. The fictional Percival now becomes "real" in the land of wonderment, in the form of the gallant knight who has taken on the armor, and thus the burden of honor, of the legendary Percival (MacDonald 40-41). The purpose of this metafictional turn is to provide a more tangible warning of the pride of life and lust of the eyes—Anodos did not learn the message from by listening to the counsel of others nor from reading it in the Arthurian stories, so now the character made real warns him directly, encouraging him not to

¹ For a detailed discussion of metafictional elements in *Phantastes*, see Pennington.

make the same mistake by falling victim to this demon lady, the Maiden of the Alder-tree. The knight's desire to contain and possess the beautiful woman led to his downfall, and now he is determined to atone for his sin and to make things again right so that he can restore his honor. Unfortunately, Anodos does not grasp the knight's meaning and totally misses the warning, or, most likely, willfully ignores it, as that is the way of our fallen natures. He has been warned by the beech-tree, the mother and daughter of the cottage, the Arthurian legend, and now a physical manifestation of the legend—yet he ignores this moral advice and falls right into the trap, a trap sprung by the power of his lustful desire to possess a beautiful woman instead of sacrificially loving the beloved.

This larger lesson of love's true nature is marvelously illustrated in the Cosmo narrative that Anodos reads in the mysterious library he finds in the middle of Fairy Land. This book is basically a metafictional retelling of Anodos's own adventures in the fairy world and his encounter with the marble lady. Metafiction is the magic of this library. For Anodos, the artifice in the book is so convincing that it is as if he becomes the main character, Cosmo: "Of course, while I read it, I was Cosmo, and his history was mine. Yet, all the time, I seemed to have a kind of double consciousness, and the story a double meaning" (MacDonald 84). We as readers are suddenly more keenly aware of the nature of fiction and narrative, because we are reading a character who is reading a book in which his own consciousness becomes infused with the fictional consciousness of the character in the book. (This literary device anticipates Michael Ende's brilliant postmodern fantasy novel *The Neverending Story*.) In this episode, MacDonald draws attention to the narrative quality of fiction, further underscoring his larger project: reading good narratives should excite our imaginations to so fully identify with the characters and actions that we imaginatively become those characters and learn lessons through vicarious experience.

As Anodos is to be transformed by the Cosmo narrative, we, too, are to be transformed by reading Anodos's story.

The Cosmo narrative recounts the story of a man falling in love with a woman who he can only see, mysteriously, through a mirror, through the frame of beautiful artifice. This is very much Anodos's own dilemma: like Pygmalion, he has fallen in love with a woman of artifice (the marble lady) and is desperately seeking how to love her and to be with her. However, Anodos does not seem to realize that the very mistakes Cosmo commits are his own. Cosmo is seeking to capture, to grasp, to possess the beautiful woman in the mirror, and he is unwilling to sacrifice his own desires in order to set her free. He fears the loss of his object of love, and he is still clinging to his own selfish desires. Because she is trapped in the mirror, he has control over her and can determine when he satisfies his desires to see her, when to hold her in his lustful, masculine gaze. If he breaks the mirror to set her free, he loses that control over her. His love is not yet pure, it is not yet sacrificial, and this causes the painful sorrow in her heart, for she realizes he does not yet truly love her. Eventually, Cosmo decides to break the mirror, and the blast from the broken spell knocks him unconscious. When he awakens, he is heart-broken to discover both the mirror and the woman are missing, and he strives to get both back, to repossess them as objects of desire. The story ends with Cosmo finally sacrificing his own life in order to free the woman, and as they are reunited, they profess their love, but he tragically dies from the wounds he sustained in the fight to set her free (MacDonald 99-104). This story is the picture of self-sacrificial love, for Cosmo risks and pays with his life to free her. Similarly, Anodos must die to himself to become truly free and to return to the real world. This is the spiritual maturity he must attain, and the rest of the novel traces further adventures in Fairy Land where he finally apprehends sacrificial love and acts upon it.

Conclusion: The Significance of Mythopoeic Reading

For MacDonald, the ultimate purpose of writing his fantasy novel was to share such eternal truths with readers. Even though he was forced out of his church because of his heterodoxy, he was still very much a preacher at heart, and if he could not reach people with the truth of God's love, the moral law, and scriptural insight through the pulpit, then he hoped to do so through writing mythopoeic fantasy literature. Reading becomes the cognitive mechanism by which MacDonald hoped to ignite the sacramental imagination and to open the minds of his audience to eternal truths creatively expressed through mythopoeic fantasy. According to Brawley, MacDonald considered the imagination to be the primary cognitive faculty that processed religious truth and revealed the sacramental nature of reality:

For MacDonald, the imagination is regarded as the faculty which "images" or makes a likeness of something. It is that faculty which most closely resembles the activity of God, for just as God is the primary creator, creating the universe through his power, so the artist imitates this creative act in the formation of the secondary worlds created. Agreeing with Coleridge's distinction between the imagination as offering new versions of old truths, and the fancy as merely inventiveness, MacDonald was an important figure in furthering the function of the imagination as a vehicle to apprehend the sacramental nature of the world.

(91)

For MacDonald and like-minded fantasy writers, the imagination is the key to mythopoeic understandings of the universe. In this view, the material world contains objects that when perceived properly through the imagination, can provide glimpses of God's mind, of eternal truths. The world is sacramental in that it points to the sacred, and the imagination, according to MacDonald, is the primary faculty for comprehending these sacraments in nature. Since

naturalistic and materialistic assumptions blinded the Victorian modern mind to sacramental nature, imaginative fantasy literature, MacDonald hoped, would enliven, indeed resurrect, the latent and languishing redemptive imagination and tune readers into perceiving and contemplating mythopoeic truth. As Brawley notes, “[H]ere is the defining characteristic of mythopoeia, that of a sense of wonder which may be awakened so that the divine element present in the world is recovered” (94).²

In other words, the reading of mythopoeic fantasy is not a waste of time, energy, or effort, as the Victorian utilitarian mindset of MacDonald’s age argued. Rather, the comfort experienced—what Tolkien later termed consolation—far from being a vain and useless experience, is a reasonable outworking of this transformative reading process. Mythopoeic narrative enacts a kind of death and burial of self and then resurrection of imagination to new life or new spiritual awareness. As C. S. Lewis explained, MacDonald’s novel baptized his imagination, putting it through a figurative death, burial, and resurrection (xi). MacDonald intended this transformative, redemptive process for his own Victorian world, but it has a direct application to our world as well. As Monika Hilder concludes, MacDonald’s mythopoeic literature captures and restores “our sense of identity, meaning, and transcendent truth. As he addressed the nineteenth-century spiritual vacuum, so his mythic education continues to speak to the current sense of existential crisis by inviting readers inside an experience of the transcendent as well as stimulating an imaginative response, and so challenging postmodern sensibilities with the sense that all of life is, ... , ‘suffused with the spiritual’” (180).

² See also Waddle.

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