

Memorial review of “George MacDonald: A Study of Two Novels.” by William Webb, part of volume 11 of Romantic Reassessment. Salzburg, 1973.

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William Webb’s aim in this study is to examine two “rather neglected” novels of George MacDonald in order to bring out “what is most characteristic in them of the author’s undoubted genius” (105). He sets out to demonstrate that *Mary Marston* is “a capable piece of fiction” (58), and his discussion of *Home Again*, though brief, brings out several interesting features of the novel. I have chosen to comment on aspects of his study which give the reader fresh insights, and illuminate less well-known areas of MacDonald’s writing. The study itself is rather loosely structured, with the plan and links between the topics not always clear; and it is frustrating that Webb almost never gives sources for the many quoted passages, and often drops in references—for example a comparison with Dickens in *Hard Times* or *Our Mutual Friend*—without any supporting detail to contextualise his comments. Having said this, I found myself impressed by many of the issues discussed, and interested in the directions (sometimes quite obscure and fascinating) in which he points the reader. Additionally, his exploration of some of the literary sources and artistic relationships recognisable in *Mary Marston* contribute with some authority to MacDonald scholarship.

Webb recognises the influence of seventeenth-century English literature on *Mary Marston* (1881), and observes that in chapter 11, “William Marston,” where Mary’s father, the saintly William Marston, dies, the theme of poetry is related to the plot (83). Webb states that the reference to angels, “clouds will serve angels to come down by” (*Marston* 68) echoes the view of angels expressed in George Herbert and Henry Vaughan, and by Thomas Fuller (1608-61), “chaplain-in-extraordinary to the King,” and writer of eccentric historical works. Further, Geoffrey Wardour, a local landowner, has previously introduced Mary to Milton’s ode “On Time,” and in this chapter Mary’s father asks her to lead it six times, focusing on the last line as if it were a portent: “—Triumphing over death and chance, and thee, O Time!—” (*Marston* 71). Webb comments that elsewhere in his prose MacDonald borrows Milton’s compound “happy-making” from the ode (83). Additionally

he makes the observation that “serious” puns—such as MacDonald writing of a broken watch that its “watchfulness was all over” (*Marston* 73)—are a feature of the poetry of Milton’s, time, a kind of conceit, as when Donne writes “When thou hast done thou hast not done [Donne] / For I have more” (84). **[end of page 85]**

A second use of seventeenth century poetry occurs where MacDonald quotes lines from Henry Vaughan (129). The poem is not named, but Webb identifies it as “The Revival.” He makes the point that MacDonald’s interest in seventeenth century poetry was rather unusual, as the Victorians, though awarding it some merit, generally thought that it was marred by “frigid conceits” (85-86). MacDonald therefore, especially in *England’s Antiphon*, was instrumental in forwarding several neglected writers, and appreciated even such minor pieces as Milton’s “On Time.” Webb argues that one incident in *Mary Marston* “deserves a note in the history of Herbert criticism” (87). This is where he sees a uniqueness in the way MacDonald so closely links music and poetry. After some poems of George Herbert have been read, Joseph Jasper (Mary’s future husband) cannot identify one he has particularly enjoyed, and Mary, is able to name it solely from Joseph’s improvisations—his own interpretation of it—on the violin (263-64).

I want to turn now to the aspects of visual art which Webb sees as being influential in MacDonald’s text. He links MacDonald’s archetype of the Evil Woman (here Sepia, a cousin to Hesper Redmain) with “many paintings” MacDonald would have known—several by Rossetti, and particularly Burne-Jones’ *The Wine of Circe*, in which Circe adds to the wine a magic potion which will transform men into animals (71): in the novel, Sepia attempts to kill Redmain, Hesper’s husband, by adding poison to his medicine. Certainly MacDonald “paints” a very visual picture here, with the fire flickering in the darkness, the figure by the bed, the candle, the “small dark bottle,” and the tumbler (339). Further, Webb examines an obscure speech made by Sepia, after she has told Hesper how she would want to torment Godfrey Wardour emotionally were she ever to marry him. Collapsing on a chair, she declares she feels “a pain that comes sometimes—a sort of picture drawn in pains—something I saw once” (105). Webb suggests that this picture, both because of its iconography and its title, may be Holman Hunt’s *The Awakened Conscience* (sometimes called *The Awakening Conscience*) which “expresses one of [MacDonald’s] most vital themes” (75). I find this suggestion convincing, and offer another piece of evidence to support it: Sepia collapses just as she is imagining that some women (herself included) may be descended

from fierce wild cats (105). In Hunt's painting our attention is quickly drawn to a ferocious cat, jealously guarding a bird it has recently torn apart. Webb wonders whether MacDonald gives us "the equivalent to pre-Raphaelitism in his own verbal descriptions" (76), and suggests that he was far more broad and "Turneresque" in his vision. Again, I think this is a telling point, supported by such visual passages as Malcolm's mystical experience in the moonlit wood in *The Marquis* [86] of *Lossie* (178), and Webb's own example in *Mary Marston*, as Mary leaves her father's shop the night he is to die (77):

the picture of it as she saw it that night was the only one that returned to her afterwards: a few vague streaks of light, from the cracks of the shutters, fed the rich warm glow of the place; one of them fell upon a piece of orange-coloured cotton stuff, which blazed in the dark. (70)

(My own view tends toward relating MacDonald's visual prose, in the examples of Sepia, Mary and Malcolm quoted above, to the *chiaroscuro*—a word much used by MacDonald—of Caravaggio, or even of Georges de la Tour, who carried Caravaggio's style into extremes of nocturnal effects: see, for example, his *Magdalen with the Lamp*.)

Arthur Hughes is naturally mentioned as a pre-Raphaelite artist closely linked with MacDonald, and Webb also points out that his nephew Edward (fiancé of Mary Josephine, MacDonald's daughter) provided the frontispiece to *Sir Gibbie*. Although the love scene depicted is rather stylised, Webb notes its poignancy, given the fact that Mary died before she could marry Edward (80).

Another unusual area explored by Webb is that of the "Emblem Book," which he relates to MacDonald's "symbolic" turn of mind (74). The notion of the emblem relates to a style of verbal and visual art, generally associated with the Renaissance; books known as "Emblem Books" were printed containing particular emblems, each comprising a symbolic picture, a motto and (sometimes) an explanatory text, each of these features contributing to the meaning of the emblem. Webb sees Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* as a work in the same genre (76). He mentions Francis Quarles (1592-1644), who is chiefly remembered for his book of devotional poems, *Emblems* (c.f. *England's Antiphon* 171-73). Arguing that much of MacDonald's writing is "emblematic," Webb traces images which are both visual and poetic, such as Joseph Jasper's vision near the end of the novel. Looking up at the stars, he says: "There lie the fields of my future, when this

chain of gravity is unbound from my feet!” (345).

Noting the importance of feet in MacDonald’s work, and the necessity of release from “a chain or weight attached to man’s feet which draws him ever downward . . . away from his true spiritual inheritance” (88), Webb discusses an emblem picture by Herman Hugo of 1624, showing a man “Whose heavy build and clumsy feet suggest an earthly mortal, in spite of the wings he has” (89). Although Webb states that there is no record of MacDonald having seen this emblem, he suggests that he “quite probably found something of the kind in his researches in old libraries” (89). This is a feasible claim, given creditability when we realise how very obscure some of MacDonald’s references were—a good example can be found in *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, where the narrator is looking for a copy of Bengel’s *Gnomon*, and “the fourth plate in the [87] third volume of Law’s ‘Behmen’” (27). By exploring some of the emblematic sources of MacDonald’s thought (although only briefly), Webb has offered readers a tool which can give access to some of MacDonald’s imagery, and which may help to decipher some of his own private language.

In the second (much shorter) part of his paper, Webb discusses *Home Again* (1887), “Hands and Feet in MacDonald,” links between *The Princess and the Goblin* and Norman MacLeod’s story “The Gold Thread,” and MacDonald’s use of language. Webb analyses *Home Again* with some astuteness; I would select four areas where he offers new insights.

Firstly, *Home Again* “is the book title of MacDonald’s most loaded with meanings peculiar to himself (93), as Webb was the first to point out. Secondly, MacDonald’s archetypal “evil women” are not stereotypes: they reveal true differences, and Lufa in *Home Again*, for example, cannot be confused with Sepia in *Mary Marston* (94). Additionally, Webb suggests that although Lufa is an “unsatisfactory ‘human’ character . . . if we approach her rather from MacDonald’s fantasy side . . . she can be regarded as ‘living’ in terms of this archetypal world” (94). This is a fresh approach to such characters, and has interesting applications when we consider the thin lines between fantasy and reality in many of MacDonald’s so-called “realistic” novels. Thirdly (and here Webb is being rather speculative), the name “Walter” contains a hidden significance, as “in the Scots language . . . the ‘l’ . . . was pronounced lightly or not at all” (96). The resulting “water” sound would therefore be suggestive of Walter’s vacillating character. Lastly, Webb makes great claims for the interpolated ghost stories in *Home Again*, commenting that “even such born novelists as Dickens and Mrs Gaskell,

with their true feeling for the supernatural, were not so skilful” when using such stories—MacDonald “works his two stories with quite unusual skill” (103). This is debatable, as it seems to me that they are much slighter and less significant than many other interpolated stories—the tale of the walled-up room in *Donal Grant* (104-05), for example, or the story of the ballad of “Kemp Owen” in *Sir Gibbie* (208-09).

In Webb’s discussion of MacDonald’s use of words (which includes short observations on slang, Latin-derived words, and Gaelic), I found the section on German words and “Germanisms” particularly interesting. MacDonald’s texts are full of slightly off-key words and odd compound constructions, and, as well as the examples that Webb gives, contain actual German words such as *schlüpfen* in *Sir Gibbie* (324) or German transliterations such as “to tone” instead of “to sound” in *Alec Forbes* (428). Moreover, many other usages that have obvious German derivations. Some examples in the *Unspoken Sermons* are: i) the use of “all” to make a compound meaning “universally . . .” as in “the All-wise,” German *allweise*, in “Man’s Difficulty Concerning Prayer” (240); ii) use of the [88] superlative without “most,” as in “blessedest,” (*seligeste*) in “The Voice of Job” (358) and “foolishest,” (*närrischste*) in “Righteousness” (578); iii) compound words such as “live-potent” in “The Last Farthing” (264) and “active-willingly” in life” (298); and iv) the prefixes “un-” “in-” and “self-” used to create compound participles, as with “unselfknowing” in “Man’s Difficulty Concerning Prayer” (241), “in-closing” in “The Fear of God” (326), and “self-refusing” in “The Last Farthing” (274).

In conclusion, I find that William Webb’s study of *Mary Marston* and *Home Again*, despite some unevenness of structure and inadequate referencing, is a valuable addition to MacDonald criticism; anyone who opens new doors into MacDonald’s thought is worth listening to, and Webb’s life-long academic interest in MacDonald’s work makes him eminently qualified to comment.

On a personal note, my memories of William are warm and respectful, and I was always surprised by the unusual aspects of MacDonald’s thinking with which he seemed familiar. A fine German scholar, he was stimulated by MacDonald’s own interest and expertise in German sources, and his afterword in MacDonald’s translation of Novalis’ *Hymns to the Night* and *Spiritual Songs* offers a glimpse of his erudition in this area. It is a pity that he didn’t find time to write more on MacDonald from his own special intellectual standpoint. What remains with us is a testament to William’s keen

and enquiring mind, and a small folio of MacDonald scholarship which is illuminating and presented with an individual voice.

References

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