

The Influence of Dante on George MacDonald

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There were three significant stages in the literary formation of the young MacDonald, before he began his University studies (in chemistry and natural philosophy, as physics was then called): stages recorded by Greville, his son and biographer, and perceptible in his own fiction as veiled autobiography. At age ten, inseparable from his pony “Missy,”

he would lie sometimes peacefully on her back reading his book, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Paradise Lost*, or Klopstock’s *Messiah*, and possibly, omnivorous boy that he was, Young’s *Night Thoughts*.¹

Later he was to relive those serene hours of a country childhood through Ranald, hero of his children’s romance of that name.²

In 1840 MacDonald entered King’s College, Aberdeen, to take on the Latin poets in its austere halls.³ He revives this experience in the fiction Robert Falconer, who

would rush into the thick of the football game, fight like a maniac for one short burst, and then retire and look on But sometimes, looking up from his Virgil or his Latin composition he would fling down his dictionary or his pen, and fly in a straight line, like a sea-gull weary of lake and river, down to the waste shore of the great deep.⁴

Still more important was the summer of 1842, when, interrupting his studies, the eighteen-year-old MacDonald went to the north of Scotland to organise the library of a castle.⁵ The deeply stirring unforgettable experience of this sea of books comes back all through his fiction, where a library is a magical place, fountain of high spiritual adventure. Among the dusty shelves came the true and decisive encounter with the **[end of page 15]** English and German classics:

I found a perfect set of our poets . . . many romances of a very marvellous sort I likewise came upon a whole nest of the German classics Happening to be a tolerable reader of German, I found in these volumes a mine of wealth inexhaustible.⁶

Thus it was English and German literature that mostly formed the

young MacDonald, from 1843 to 1848, firmly supported by Latin, which he knew well enough to be able, many years later, in 1867, to give grammar lessons to his children Greville and Caroline Grace, with whom he also read and expounded the *Aeneid*.⁷ As yet there is no mention of Dante; but though he had not yet read Dante, he was already approaching him through Milton, and Blake's magical illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*,⁸ and the Dantesque atmosphere that surrounds the English Romantics.

The effect of Italy's greatest poet on English art and thought has been fully documented by Paget Toynbee in his magnificent anthological survey,⁹ which spotlights the strong Romantic interest in the *Inferno*, and by E. R. Vincent, who argues that the English Protestant Reformers saw in Dante an Inspiring precursor.¹⁰ But such panoramic perspectives are not our concern here. Rather we must see Dante's influence on MacDonald (conditioned, indeed, by the Bible, Milton, Blake) within the limits of the nineteenth-century Romantic interpretation of Dante. This was partly a reworking of earlier judgements, such as that of the eighteenth-century historian Thomas Warton:

There is a sombrous cast in Dante's imagination: and he has given new shades of horror to the classical hell.¹¹

Here was the Dante that most impressed and charmed the Romantics. For Hazlitt, who praised him as the father of modern poetry,¹²

Dante seems to have been indebted to the Bible for the gloomy tone of his mind, as well as for the prophetic fury which exalts and kindles his poetry His genius is not a sparkling flame, but the sullen heat of a furnace. He is [16] power, passion, self-will personified; . . . there is a gloomy abstraction in his conceptions, which lies like a dead weight upon the mind; a benumbing stupor, a breathless awe, from the intensity of the impression; a terrible obscurity, like that which oppresses us in dreams; an identity of interest, which moulds every object to its own purposes The immediate objects he presents to the mind, are not much in themselves, they want grandeur, beauty, and order; but they become everything by the force of the character he impresses upon them. His mind lends its own power to the objects which It contemplates, instead of borrowing it from them Dante's only object is to interest; and he interests only by exciting our sympathy with the emotion by which he is himself possessed. He does not place before

us the objects by which that emotion has been excited; but he seizes on the attention by showing us the effect they produce on his feelings; and his poetry accordingly gives the same thrilling and overwhelming sensation, which is caught by gazing on the face of a person who has seen some object of horror.¹³

Milton is also brought into the parallel, as noted by Steve Ellis:

“The passage contains an implicit identification of Dante with Milton’s Satan.”¹⁴

Also Macaulay dwelt on the twilight melancholy of Dante:

In every line of the *Divine Comedy* we discern the asperity which is produced by pride struggling with misery. There is perhaps no work in the world so deeply and uniformly sorrowful. The melancholy of Dante was no fantastic caprice. It was not, as far as this distance of time can be judged, the effect of external circumstances. It was from within. Neither love nor glory, neither the conflicts of earth nor the hope of heaven could dispel it. It turned every consolation and every pleasure into its own nature. It resembled that noxious Sardinian soil of which the intense bitterness is said to have been perceptible even in its honey. His mind was, in the noble language of the Hebrew poet, “a land of darkness, as darkness itself, and where the light was of darkness.” The gloom of his character discolours all the passions of men and all the face of nature, and tinges with its own livid hue the flowers of Paradise and the glories of the eternal throne.¹⁵

But if the English Romantics mostly relished Dante for emotions, and especially the Gothic evocations of *Inferno*, the greater poets among them took in broader and higher themes. Shelley, for example, found both intellectual and aesthetic profit in his *Defence of Poetry* praising Dante with Milton as “philosophers of the very loftiest power,” and showing a wide knowledge of Dante’s poetry, which he appreciates both for [17] its majestic forms and its profound thought—not only for the atmosphere. Ellis writes:

Among Shelley’s contemporaries the sublime horrors of the *Inferno* exercised a fascination that the other two *cantiche* could not sustain, whereas Shelley himself regarded the *Purgatorio* as a “finer poem” than the *Inferno*. In his preface to *Epipsychidion*, he belonged to an even more select group, and he even made some notes on the *Convivio*. His greatest admiration was

reserved however for the *Paradiso*, especially for its celebration of Beatrice.¹⁶

Thus there is in Shelley a higher, transcendent vision of Dante's poetry as exalted to the Empyrean of poetry, no more simply poetry but, in the words of Benedetto Croce,

that amazed and deeply shaken voice, which propels the soul into the perpetually renewed creation of the world.¹⁷

Though with a less profound understanding, Byron also received impulses from the *Divine Comedy*, discernible in *Parisina*, *Don Juan*, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in which he called Dante "the bard of Hell,"¹⁸ a designation that shows the limited scope of his interests, directed mainly toward finding resonances with his favourite theme of "Hell on earth," and with his dark and doomed heroes who live there.

In such a climate of feeling, the influence of Dante on MacDonald (who wrote the *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* entry on Shelley in 1859)¹⁹ could not have been only occasional, but was bound to grow continually stronger. "He was fond of Dante and of the German Romantics," declares Richard H. Reis,²⁰ alluding to MacDonald's translations from Italian and German in *Exotics*²¹ and, twenty years later, in *Rampolli*;²² and his contemporary Joseph Johnson wrote, "He is a good classicist and is also well acquainted with German verse and prose, made a great study of Dante and Italian poetry."²³

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Generally speaking, then, we can say that MacDonald drew from the *Divine Comedy* (and it alone, since he makes no reference to Dante's other works) images, symbols, allegorical figures, and in a few cases, political themes. The correspondence occur either on the plane of realistic narrative, through images of action (and hence of circumstances or setting), or on that of fantastic narrative, where along with relations of images we have some political ideas, but principally the Dantesque influence spreads into the vast, complex and profound network of allegory and symbolism.

The first reference to Dante in the novels comes in *David Elginbrod*,²⁴ featuring the autobiographical figure of Hugh Sutherland, a young University student who in the second volume goes to live in a great country house in Sussex to be private tutor to Harry, son of Mr. Arnold, a wealthy landed proprietor. In the household is also the latter's niece, the fascinating Euphra Cameron, with whom the tutor quickly falls in love, so that he seizes any pretext to be near her; she kindly provides one by seeking his help in reading and understanding Dante.

In *Robert Falconer*,²⁵ last of a trilogy of Scottish romances including also *David Elginbrod* and *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, we have a secondary character, Mysie Lindsay, a charming but vain girl who is pursued by the deceitful libertine, Lord Rothie, and is about to fall victim to his desires, but for the timely intervention of our hero Robert. The author dwells fondly on her delicate beauty, especially her eyes, that remind him of Dante's line about Sordello, the *anima lombarda*, which he quotes:

E nel muover degli occhi onesta e tarda.
Honest and slow in moving of his eyes.
(*Purgatorio* VI, 62 (26))

In *Malcolm*,²⁷ [Note: endnote 26 missing in original] an outstanding novel of the Scottish cycle, and in [19] *The Marquis of Lossie*,²⁸ its continuation, emerges the furtive and disturbing figure of Barbara Catanach, an unpleasant, witch-like woman who haunts the ways of the protagonist Malcolm, menacingly appearing everywhere—among the crags along the coast of Banffshire, in the streets of London, down the shadowy aisles of a Gothic church, shut up in a room of Lord Lossie's castle. Darkly fascinating, wrapped in mystery like the secret she guards, Barbara Catanach grows out of Scottish folklore, certainly with the help of MacDonald's leaning towards the Gothic and supernatural; yet she is also related to the symbolic practice of Dante, as R. H. Reis suggests:

Barbara Catanach, the evil old midwife in *Malcolm* and *The Marquis of Lossie*, is, in fact, the only one of MacDonald's villains in the realistic fiction who is really convincing; and she is a sort of witch rather than a real person or a stereotype. A character from a literature alien to the novel, she is another indication of the arbitrariness of any pat division of fiction into the realistic and the fantastic. There is surely a middle ground between the archrealism of a Trollope and the archsymbolism of a Dante.²⁹

There is moreover an explicit reference to Dante in *The Marquis of Lossie*, when the gloomy, dramatic appearance of the Moray estuary, covered by clouds thickening before the storm, invokes a comparison with the *Divine Comedy*:

Everything seemed all at once changed utterly. The very ends of the harbour piers might have stood In the *Divina Commedia* instead of the Moray Firth.³⁰

Citations and references In realistic narratives extend also to the

later novels like *There and Back*, which completes the trilogy of the English cycle centred on the country parson, Thomas Wingfold.³¹ Among the other characters are Richard Tuke, a humble bookbinder who discovers that he is the legitimate heir to a title of nobility and renounces it, and the corrupt Lady Anne, whom the author compares to Ser Branca Doria [20] in *Inferno* XXXIII:

An age-long process of degeneration had been going on in her race, and she was the result: she was well born and well bred, feeling nothing. There is something fearful in the thought that, through the generations the body may go on perfecting while the heart goes on degenerating; that, while the animal beauty is growing complete in the magic of proportion, the indescribable marvel that can even give charm to ugliness, is as steadily vanishing. Such a woman, like Branca D’Oria in the *Inferno* is already damned, and only seems to live.³²

Much broader, indeed panoramic, is the scope of Dante’s influence on the plane of fantasy, where it provides not only single references but Inspiration for the entire allegorico-symbolic system, and sometimes also for the intellectual content.

Let us begin with the theme of the “educational journey,” the first example of which in MacDonald is *Phantastes*. As Ezra Pound observed, Dante’s journey is “a symbol of mankind’s struggle upward out of ignorance into the clear light of philosophy.”³³

The allegory is largely modelled on the Romantics, for whom Dante and Milton are the two poles of inspiration for the conception of Hell and Paradise. As it was for Shelley, so also for MacDonald, who, like other Victorians, carried on the thought of the Romantics.

The journey of Anodos, like that of Dante, takes place in a forest (Fairyland), and if the pilgrim does not exactly descend into Hell (but crosses an underground region illuminated by sinister flashes), he certainly goes through a purgatorial region, with no Virgil at his side (though the knight in the last part of the story does this duty for him), and finally rises to an “Empyrean” paradise, with no Beatrice (though the White Lady prefigures her). Marion Lochhead agrees:

There is something in it [*Phantastes*] of the *Divine Comedy*. Like Dante, the hero finds himself in a dark wood, and, although he does not descend into Hell, there are glimpses of hellish evil. His could be described as a journey through

Purgatory. All MacDonald's fantasies are full of hints and [21] glimpses of Catholic teaching Anodos, like Dante, finds himself in *una selva oscura*. The trees grow more and more dense as Anodos advances No Virgil comes to be his guide through the ultimate horrors, but a girl gathering flowers bids him.³⁴

The atmosphere in Fairyland is Dantesque not only in the places that resemble the *Inferno*. Having followed a stream, Anodos beholds an enchanting landscape where wild roses flourish everywhere, so that they not only perfumed the air, they seemed to dye it a faint rose-hue."³⁵

Marlon Lochhead comments:

It has something of the radiance and colour of Purgatory. Dante ascends the mount and terraces of purification and meets the benign, rejoicing souls. But there is no Beatrice yet. Anodos longs to see the woman of the Beech tree and the true woman of the statue, whose place was usurped by the evil Alder.³⁶

The imprint of Dante's allegory of the journey of life, through successive joys and setbacks, successes and keen disappointments, which throng about the entrance to the hill of purification and understanding, is clearly visible in *The Golden Key*, where Tangle and Mossy (that is, the human couple) start off in the woods, going straight for the golden key which sparkles on a green lawn at the end of the rainbow. They traverse forests, rocky ledges, fearful precipices, regions of shades; and finally Tangle descends into Hell. (Actually Mossy finds the key first, and then he and Tangle look for the keyhole—tr., informed by John Docherty.) The settings are described very much as Carlyle saw the lower reaches of *Inferno*:

You remember that first view he gets of the Hall of Dite:
red pinnacle, red-hot cone of iron glowing through the dim
immensity of gloom;—so vivid, so distinct, visible at once and
forever! It is an emblem of the whole genius of Dante, . . . deep,
fierce as the central fire of the world.³⁷

But beyond the doleful valley and above the blazing furnace crossed by streams of liquid metal, the two pilgrims make a secure and triumphant [22] ascent into Paradise along the brilliant columns of the rainbow, together with the souls of the saved. The image is clearly from Dante:

Io ritornai da la santissima onda
rifatto si come piante novelle
rinovellate di novella fronda,

puro e disposto a salire alle stelle.

I returned from the most holy waters
Recreated like new young plants
Renewed by new young leaves
Pure, and disposed to rise to the stars.

MacDonald expresses it thus:

Far abroad, over ocean and land, they could see through its transparent walls the earth beneath their feet. Stairs beside stairs wound up together, and beautiful beings of all ages climbed along with them. They knew that they were going up to the country whence the shadows fall.³⁸

In that magnificent story called *At the Back of the North Wind*,³⁹ at the same time a children's fantasy and one of the most eloquent and incisive social parables of the Victorian era, the boy Diamond is snatched up by the North Wind, personified as a majestic young woman who transports him in her long flowing locks, above the frozen hyperborean regions of the sky, which few indeed had visited before him, including Durante, a great Italian of noble family, who died more than five hundred years ago:

The Italian, then, informs us that he had to enter that country through a fire so hot that he would have thrown himself into boiling glass to cool himself. This was not Diamond's experience, but then Durante—that was the name of the Italian, and it means Lasting, for his books will last as long as there are enough men in the world worthy of having them—Durante was an elderly man, and Diamond was a little boy.⁴⁰

As the passage undoubtedly shows, the reference to Dante is not only in the likeness of names but also in the detailed description, as Stephen Prickett has observed:

It is quite clear from the descriptions that follow the allusions to Dante in the text that the back of the North Wind is none other than the Earthly Paradise. **[23]** (*Purgatorio*, Cantos 23 & 24). (*Durante* is an old form of Dante's name, and the "boiling glass" is a direct translation of *Purgatorio* XXVII, 49-50, to which, with the following cantos, Prickett seems to intend to refer.—Tr.) Prickett's use of the term "Earthly Paradise" may give us pause: in describing the regions reached by Diamond on the North Wind's back, MacDonald apparently meant to refer neither to Purgatory nor to Paradise, but to Limbo: which according to Catholic

theology borders on Hell (its first circle, in Dante) to receive souls that have not sinned—precisely, children like Diamond. M. Lochhead is also of this opinion:

Diamond goes . . . into the land of stillness and “a certain rayless light.” It is near Paradise, yet it is not wholly Paradise. It is a place of expectancy rather than fulfilment or bliss. But it is not Purgatory either, for Diamond is too innocent to need purging from sin It is easy to see this place as that of the expectant and peaceful dead, purged of their sins, less active and joyful than those in Dante’s *Purgatory*, but awaiting, in hope and patience, their summons to God’s nearer Presence.⁴²

[Note: endnote 41 missing in original] (But this cannot be Dante’s Limbo, whose inhabitants have no hope, being unbaptised. It is more like his Antepurgatory.—Tr.)

Echoes of Dante in the two stories of Curdie are so widespread as to make Lochhead declare, “The two books almost make a *Divine Comedy*.”⁴³ We have an allegory of the descent into Hell in *The Princess and the Goblin*,⁴⁴ where Curdie, the little miner, penetrates into the bowels of the earth and by his watchfulness exposes the conspiracy of the wicked goblins, who have resolved to launch from their winding caverns a secret attack on the castle of Princess Irene and take it by storm. This Dantelike image represents the eternal struggle of good against evil, the plots which the dark powers in the infernal depths weave against the luminous dwellings of virtue and knowledge. Evil exists, but can be **[24]** overcome.

Stronger still are the echoes of Dante in the continuation, *The Princess and Curdie*,⁴⁵ beginning with the third chapter, “The Mistress of the Silver Moon.” The attention of the little miner is attracted by the silver moonlike light shining from the highest tower of the castle, and staircase after staircase, he reaches this fountain of light. He finds himself in the presence of the old queen who, in the recurrent polymorphism of MacDonald’s narratives, is always the same female figure, presenting herself now in the form of a wise and kindly old woman, now in that of a young maiden, radiant with celestial beauty. His ancestress (for so she is) greets Curdie, like Beatrice meeting Dante in Purgatory, with a gentle reproof. Then there is an “educational descent” (as with Dante and Virgil) into the cellar, where the boy learns that an important mission awaits him. On a second visit to the tower he sees the old woman again, but now young, beautiful, shining, besides the fire of roses; by magic it does not burn him, but forms a trial by which he is prepared for

the mission he is called to accomplish:

Again he is drawn to the Queen's room and sees her spinning-wheel of light, singing as it whirls, while she sings to its music. This is Dantesque. Curdie sees her now as a queen: tall, beautiful, ageless, robed in blue and crowned with silver and pearls. The attic is large 'and splendid In the hearth burns the fire of rose-flames.⁴⁶

Having passed the test of the rose-fire and accompanied by a band of very strangely formed animals, the boy advances to Gwyntystorm, a city where the people are selfish and malicious, greedy and teacherous, while the King lies in his bed, victim of a palace conspiracy. The ungoverned city teems with commercial strife and corruption. Curdie must expel the unfaithful courtiers and restore to the realm both King and order.

The Dantesque manner is evident. The earthly city, a ship without a [25] steersman (*Purgatorio* VI, 77), is like a hell where usurers and traitors, like those Dante throws into the lowest circle of his *Inferno*, wallow in the mud of their crude passions. "Like Dante," writes Johnson, "MacDonald puts the usurers and traitors in the nethermost pit of the *Inferno*."⁴⁷ (Actually the usurers are two circles higher up (in f.XVII)—Tr.)

And again like Dante, MacDonald maintains that without a (moral) guide both man and city fall into the worship of money and hence into corruption. This guide and saviour is for Dante a secular ruler, symbolised by the Greyhound (*Inf.* I, 101 ff., *Purg.* XX, 15). Ellis brings out the basic concept:

without an imperial power to keep in check the squabblings over territory between cities, princes, kings and popes, and thus to keep the Church to its spiritual and educational roles, man falls into the idolatry of money-worship.⁴⁸

Gwyntystorm, like Bulika in *Lilith*, is the symbolic city, Rome or London, corrupt and decadent, which can be purified and return to heavenly beauty, to the beautifying state of the New Jerusalem. It is therefore, like man, the measure of all things, heaven and earth, hell and paradise. Through Blake, through the Romantics, this vision passes to MacDonald, who hands it on to the Inklings, as Arti Ponsen neatly summarises:

when hell as well as heaven are represented as a city, we recognise an image that the Inklings have had in common; in a footnote MacDonald states their [i.e. of the images of both hell and heaven] common source: Dante's *Divina Commedia*.⁴⁹

Lilith (1895)⁵⁰ demonstrates how Dante's influence works its way into the very marrow of MacDonald's narrative; it is more strongly marked than in any previous work. Indeed, he increased his Italian studies in the last decades of the century, particularly after his removal to Bordighera, where his improved knowledge of the language made [26] him more at ease with Dante and allowed him to expand into other Italian literature. We have no documentary evidence of his reading except for a letter, reported in Greville's biography, which he sent to A. P. Watt from Pratolino, where he was a guest at Villa Demidoff, 18 June 1894: "I am buried in Villani's *Life and Times of Savonarola*."⁵¹

If there is reason to think that the reading of the other classics was not easy for him, he had a secure mastery of Dante, of whom he had already attempted a few translations (*Exotics*) and was preparing more (*Rampolli*). But more than by the occasional translation, his familiarity with Dante is proved by the lectures which from the eighties on he gave at Bordighera in the winter and in England in the summer. Among the subjects, along with Shakespeare, Coleridge, Shelley, Burns, we find Dante. Johnson reports:

The subjects he lectured on during the "eighties" were: 1) Hamlet; 2) King Lear; 3) Macbeth; 4) Julius Caesar; 5) Merchant of Venice; 6) A Talk about Dante; 7) The Rime of the Ancient Mariner; 8) In Memoriam; 9) Poetry, Illustrated from Tennyson's Lyrics; 10) Shelley; 11) Wordsworth; 12) Burns.⁵²

Greville concurs in his recollections of the meetings on Sunday and Wednesday afternoons in the "great room" of "Casa Coraggio" in Bordighera, where his father held his talks:

The highest property, Dante tells us, increases to each by the sharing of it with others; and the room was often thrown open to any friends and their friends who liked to join the family on their Sunday assembling or at the "At-Homes" on Wednesday afternoons, when my father would read and expound his favourite literature, during some winters giving courses on Dante or Shakespeare.⁵³

What were these talks like? Johnson tells us that

he read with clear voice and impressive tones the meaning into and out of the poems. Sometimes the readings were interspersed with lucid and illuminating observations.⁵⁴

And elsewhere he affirms that the talks would take on the tone of [27] sermons: "sermons in fact, with simple texts from Dante."⁵⁵ The observation

offers the key to a query several have raised in recent years: did MacDonald write out his talks? If so, why did a writer as careful as he fail to publish them? Their sermon-like nature may offer the answer to both questions: they were incorporated into his theological writings, to which criticism has paid less attention, in the second and third series of his *Unspoken Sermons*.⁵⁶ In one of the third series called “The Inheritance of Light,” quoted by Johnson, he speaks of the thousand splendours that Dante saw burst into flame to glorify the saints in the planet Mercury.⁵⁷

His greater intimacy with Dante in his old age makes *Lilith* the most Dantesque of his works, although other influences contribute to its Infernal atmosphere. The marks of the model are evident from the first pages of the “romance,” which is also an educational journey inside a “dark wood”—a gloomy Other World which resembles a *bolgia* of Dante’s Hell far more than the enchanted Fairyland of *Phantastes*. Passing through the magic mirror, Mr. Vane penetrates into this region to confront all sorts of snares and dangers and to acquire “virtue and knowledge” (*Inferno* XXVI, 120).

It is the allegory of life’s journey which the traveller undertakes in the company of Mr. Raven, a protean character who, besides appearing from time to time in the likeness of a raven, a librarian, and a sexton, takes also the Dantesque role of a Virgil: guide and mentor in a journey which always advances in the same direction: Hell—Purgatory—Paradise.

This Virgilian presence is associated with the free will (an idea dear to Shelley). Dante’s Virgil, after having led him to the summit of Purgatory, tells him they soon must part: [28]

Non aspettar mio dir piu ne mio cenno;
libero, dritto e sano e tuo arbitrio,
e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:
per chi’io te sovra te corono e mitrio.

Expect no longer my word nor my sign;
Free, straight and whole is your will,
And it would be wrong not to act on its judgement:
Wherefore I crown and mitre you over yourself.
(*Purgatory* XXVII, 139-42)

Mr. Vane, on the contrary, left to his own free will from the start, goes wrong: instead of turning his steps to the east, whence come light, wisdom, the voice of God, he goes west, incurring a frightful series of misadventure which he manages to overcome only through the intervention of Mr. Raven.

The Evil Wood is just like a circle of *Inferno*, with distressing encounters for the pilgrim: after watching a terrifying battle between ghosts and skeletons urged on by a raging Fury, he sees one of the numerous transformations of Lilith, the metamorphic lady who changes under his very eyes into a Dantesque leopard “covered with spotted fur” (*Inf.* I, 33). After that he come where a *danse macabre* is going on: not of skeletons, this time, but human forms, normal up to the neck, but with a skull for a head; while the witch rails upon them. The meaning is clear: those who in life had a face (symbol of courage and virtue) with which to do good, and who through apathy, cowardice or wickedness [sic] failed to use it, are deprived of it in the next world. This draws doubly on Dante: first on his description of the *ignavi* or spineless:

Incontanente intesi e certo fui
che questa era la setta de' cattivi,
a Dio spiacenti ed a' nemici sui.
Questi sciaurati, che mai non fur vivi,
erano ignudi, stimolati molto
da mosconi e da vespe ch'eran ivi.

And right away I understood for certain
That this was the company of the worthless ones [29]
Displeasing to God and to his enemies.
These washouts, that were never alive,
Were naked, and much spurred on
By large flies and wasps that were there.
(*Inferno* III, 61-66)

and secondly on the law of the *contrapasso*, whereby the punishment fits the crime, thus differentiating the various forms of damnation:

Per ch'io parti cosi giunte persone,
partito porto il mio cerebro, lassol,
dal suo principio ch'e in questo troncone.
Cosi s'osserva in me lo contrapasso.

Because I divided such closely joined persons,
I carry my brain, alas! divided
From its base, which is in this maimed trunk.
Thus you can see in me the correspondence.
A little further on, Mr. Vane sees the operation of another infernal

law: he comes upon the wreck of an old carriage, with the carcass of the horse still attached to the shafts and the skeleton of the coachman still upright on the box. Inside, through the broken doors, he sees the skeletons of two persons of high rank, perhaps a seventeenth-century lord and lady, pressed tightly together, shoulder to shoulder, in an intense conversation. These are the remains of two libertines who in life were not models of conjugal fidelity and harmony, and are now condemned to stay bound together eternally. (John Docherty tells me this is inaccurate. The lord and lady leap toward Mr. Vane from opposite corners of the carriage, and are not informally bound together, but Purgatorially learning to help each other.—tr.)

Mr. Vane's goal is Bulika, the unhappy city tyrannised by Lilith, the Luciferian Eve, who has emptied it of all moral or spiritual content so as to bend it to her boundless desire for riches. The pitiful decadence of Bulika is symbolised by the absence of water, in MacDonald a maternal element: everything is dried up; there are not even tears for weeping. Like Gwyntystorm, it is the image of the city in its utter [30] misery; yet it is also the earthly city which, liberated eventually from servitude by the intervention of the Veltro (Mr. Vane, Curdie), will become fertile and happy, abundant in waters and fruits. Redeemed from sin, restored to order and justice, it will take on the likeness of the homeland of the elect, of a New Jerusalem, a rediscovered Earthly Paradise. Richard H. Reis writes:

Bulika has become a beautiful city reminiscent of the end of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, or of the Paradise portion of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which MacDonald quotes.⁵⁸

Indeed, at the end of the adventure Mr. Vane returns home like a blessed soul:

I was myself in the joy of the bells, myself in the joy of the breeze to which responded their sweet *tin-tinning*,* myself in the joy of the sense, and of the soul that received all the joys together.⁵⁹

And the asterisk takes us to a footnote consisting of two lines of Dante:

Tin tin sonando con si dolce nota
che 'l ben disposto spirto d'amor turge.
Tin tin tinkling with so sweet a note
As makes the well-tuned spirit swell with love.
(*Paradiso X*, 143-4)

Thus it was MacDonald's great merit to have assimilated the teaching of Dante and to have left so many precious traces of it in his work. Poet in the depth of his soul, the Victorian perceived the supreme beauty of our

Florentine; and being also a didactic spirit, he found this side of the Master congenial as well. As R. H. Reis has observed,

We need not believe in hell, purgatory, and Paradise; but Dante is, nevertheless, a profound teacher.⁶⁰

And the traces in MacDonald, like a seed falling after long flight, have brought a new flowering: the “Inklings” of the forties and fifties, especially C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams—admiring students of the **[31]** works of MacDonald, who through him have felt the influence of the *Divine Comedy*.

In *The Great Divorce*,⁶¹ Lewis once again makes Dante’s journey to the next world, at his side as his Virgil being the spirit of George MacDonald. Moreover, the meeting of the Tragedian with his wife in that book is consciously modelled on that of Dante with Beatrice.⁶² And in the last of his seven “Narnia” stories for children⁶³ there is an ascent of redeemed souls to a Dantesque paradise:

Vane’s is the journey through Purgatory to earthly paradise, and at the end there is a vision of heavenly Paradise itself, the joyful, rushing procession which we are to find again in Lewis, after the Last Battle, when the children, their parents and all the good creatures of Narnia advance together like the redeemed in Dante’s *Paradise*.⁶⁴

The fiction of Charles Williams, on the other hand, does not so evidently show the influence of Dante, although his work as a teacher and scholar is full of Dante, beginning with his lessons on Dante given at the beginning of the thirties for evening courses of London’s County Council. Yet he had discovered him much earlier, in 1910, when as an editor of the Oxford University Press he had supervised the reprinting of Cary’s translation of the *Divina Commedia*. His long study of the supreme poet bore fruit in 1943 with the publication of one of the greatest essays of those years, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante*,⁶⁵ in which his formulation of “romantic theology” aroused enormous interest in the group of the “Inklings,” to which he then belonged, as well as outside it. The work of Charles Williams, perhaps more loving than critical, more akin to Rossetti than to Eliot, nevertheless holds a firm place in the line of English Dante scholarship from Lewis and Colin Hardie back to the great figures of Eliot and Pound, not forgetting the valuable studies at Cambridge of Barbara Reynolds. **[32]**

Endnotes

1. Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1924, p.55.
2. George MacDonald, *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood*, London, Strahan, 1871, p.54.
3. Greville MacDonald, *op.cit.*, pp. 66-7.
4. George MacDonald, *Robert Falconer*, 3 vols., London, Hurst & Blackett, 1868; vol. II, p.53.
5. Greville maintained that there are only two places this castle could represent: either Thurso Castle, then belonging to Sir George Sinclair, son of Sir John, a noted linguist who was fond of German literature, or Dunbeath Castle, property of Rear Admiral Sir Edwyn S. Alexander-Sinclair, who had a "wonderful library." Cf. Gr. MacDonald, *op.cit.*, p.73, n.2.
6. G. MacDonald, *The Portent*, London, Smith Elder, 1864, pp. 82-3.
7. See Gr. MacDonald, *op.cit.*, p.362.
8. See W. B. Yeates, "W. Blake and his Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*," in *Essays and Introductions*, London, Macmillan, 1961, pp.116-45, and A. S. Roe, *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy*, Princeton U.P. 1953.
9. P. Toynbee (ed.), *Dante in English Literature*, 2 vols., London, Methuen, 1909.
10. E. R. Vincent, "Fortune di Dante in Inghilterra," in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, 6 vols., 1st. della Enciclopedia Italiana, Rome, 1970-8' vol. III, p.446.
11. Th. Warton, *The History of English Poetry*, 4 vols., p.p., London 1774-81; vol. IV, p.77.
12. W. Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, p. p., London 1818, p.34.
13. *Ibid.*, pp.34-6.
14. S. Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry*, Cambridge U.P. 1983, p.4-5.
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16. S. Ellis, *op.cit.*, p.4.
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19. The text was reprinted with amplifications in *A Dish of Orts*, London, Sampson Low, 1893.
20. R. H. Reis, *George MacDonald*, New York, Twayne Publ., 1972, p.27.
21. G. MacDonald, *Exotics: a Translation (in verse) of the Spiritual Songs of Novalis, the Hymn Book of Luther and other Poems from the German and Italian*, London, Strahan, 1876.
22. G. MacDonald, *Rampolli*, London, Longmans, Green, 1897.
23. J. Johnson, *George MacDonald - A biographical and critical appreciation*, London, Pitman, 1906; n.e. New York, Haskell House, 1973, p.279.
24. G. MacDonald, *David Elginbrod*, 3 vols., London, Hurst & Blackett, 1863.
25. G. MacDonald, *Robert Falconer*, 3 vols., Hurst & Blackett, 1868.
26. G. MacDonald, *Robert Falconer*, econ. ed. in one vol., Hurst & Blackett, n.d. (but 1868), p.218.

27. G. MacDonald, *Malcolm*, 3 vols., London, Henry S. King, 1875.
28. G. MacDonald, *The Marquis of Lossie*, 3 vols., London, Hurst & Blackett, 1877.
29. R. H. Reis, op.cit., p.119.
30. G. MacDonaldj *The Marquis of Lossie*, cit., vol. II, p.230.
31. G. MacDonald, *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*, 3 vols., London, Hurst & Blackett, 1876; *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, 3 vols., Hurst & Blackett, 1879; *There and Back*, 3 vols., London, Kegan Paul, 1891.
32. G. MacDonald, *There and Back*, cit., vol. II, p.37.
33. E. Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, rev. ed., London, Peter Owen, 1952, p.127.
34. M. Lochhead, *Renaissance of Wonder*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1977, pp. 3, 6.
35. G. MacDonald, *Phatastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*, London, Smith, Elder, 1858; ed. used: New York, Ballantine, 1970, p.74.
36. M. Lochhead, op.cit., p.8.
37. T. Carlyle, "The Hero as Poet," in *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, and *The Heroic in History*, London, J. Fraser, 1841, pp. 150, 164.
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40. G. MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, ed. used: Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984, p.97.
41. S. Prickett, "The Two Worlds of G. MacDonald," *North Wind*, no. 2 9(1983), pp.18-19.
42. M. Lochhead, op.cit., p. 21.
43. Ibid., p.31.
44. G. MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin*, London, Strahan, 1872.
45. G. MacDonald, *The Princess and Curdie*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1883.
46. M. Lochhead, op.cit., p.30.
47. J. Johnson, op.cit., p.193.
48. S. Ellis, op.cit., p.24.
49. "Als zowel de hel als het paradijs als een stad worden voorgesteld, herkennen we een beeld dat de Inklings met elkaar gemeen hebben: MacDonald geeft met een voetnoot aan wat hun gemeenschappelijke bron is: de *Divinia Commedia* van Dante." A. Ponsen, "*Lilith* - G. MacDonald," *Lembas*, no. 22 (Feb. 1986), p.11 (Leydon).
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55. Ibid., p.65.
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3rd series, 1889.

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59. G. MacDonald, *Lilith*, ed. used: New York, Ballantine, 1969, p.265.

60. R. H. Reis, op.cit., p.137. **[35]**

61. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream*, London, Geoffrey Bles, 1946.

62. From a letter of C. S. Lewis to W. Kinter, 29 Sept. 1951.

63. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, London, The Bodley Head, 1956.

64. M. Lochnead, op.cit., p.35.

65. C. Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*, London, Faber & Faber, 1943. **[36]**