Reading with the Trinity: Theology and Literary Form in George MacDonald

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This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree

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Abstract

George MacDonald (1824-1905) has often been recognized as a pioneering fantasy writer, an heir of the Romantic tradition and, to a lesser extent, a theologian. Although MacDonald was a prolific writer and international lecturer his role as a literary scholar has been largely overlooked by critics. This thesis seeks to to redress this gap by examining MacDonald's literary scholarship in light of his theology, making the claim that his weaving together of literature and theology makes him an important figure for Victorian literary culture. For MacDonald, literature is not distinct from, nor an addition to, religious belief. It is, rather, a medium by which to articulate and explore theology. This thesis demonstrates how MacDonald's readings of the literary forms of writers such as Dante, Tennyson, and Shakespeare enact a mode of theological thought and expression. Furthermore, it argues that the Trinity is a foundational concept in MacDonald's theological and literary thought—one that gives him ways of thinking about key ideas concerning reading literary form (ideas such as relationality, movement, and participation). In addition to demonstrating the centrality of the Trinity in MacDonald's thinking, this thesis draws out his idea that different literary forms such as narrative, poetry, and drama offer unique ways of engaging with, and revealing elements of, a spiritual reality that is characterised by movement. By considering the ways in

which the concept of a dynamic Trinitarian communion shapes MacDonald's views on form, this thesis contributes to a broader set of debates in Victorian studies concerning literary-religious forms. As it does so, it highlights the generative potential of theological concepts, and underscores the importance of attending to theology in order to identify key aspects of Victorian literary-critical method.

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Finally, to my loving parents, who have always supported me, trusted me, and believed in me. I dedicate this thesis to them with gratitude and love.

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List of Abbreviations

AC	*Adela Cathcart*
AF	*Alec Forbes of Howglen*
AQN	*Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*
DE	*David Elginbrod*
DG	*Donal Grant*
EA	*England's Antiphon*
HA	*Home Again*
HG	*The Hope of the Gospel*
MA	*Malcolm*
MM	*Mary Marston*
ML	*The Miracles of Our Lord*
PG	*The Princess and the Goblin*
PC	*The Princess and Curdie*
TH	*The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke: A Study with the Text of the Folio of 1623.*
US I.	*Unspoken Sermons, Series I*
US II.	*Unspoken Sermons, Series II*
US III.	*Unspoken Sermons, Series III*
WGW	*Warlock O'Glenwarlock: A Homely Romance*
WMM	*What's Mine's Mine*
WC	*Wilfrid Cumbermede: An Autobiographical Story*

Introduction

Matthew Arnold's well-known claim that 'most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry' (xviii) was often read by twentieth-century critics as a prediction of religious decline and the emergence of literature as a replacement for belief.[1] Undergirding the notion that literature came to replace religion is the idea that 'literature' is an (implicitly secular) category that can be set in binary opposition to 'religion'. The idea of replacement theory became so widespread and entrenched in the twentieth century that, as Dayton Haskins observes, it has persisted 'long after similarly influential binaries were deconstructed in gender and race studies' (52). As recent scholars working on Victorian literature and religion have begun to insist, however, the literature/religion binary fails to account both for the robustness and complexity of Victorian religious belief, and the variety of ways in which religion and literature interacted over the course of the nineteenth century.[2] To borrow Charles LaPorte's phrase, the binary 'flatte[ns the] many distinctive religious features of Victorian literature and culture' ('Victorian Literature' 278).

The idea that Arnold advocates a simplistic notion of replacement is itself an example of this flattening-out of religious distinctions. Joshua King obeserves that Arnold does not say that poetry will replace '"religion" in general, but "most of what now passes with us for religion"' ('The Inward Turn' 35). In other words, Arnold's claim is that poetry will replace a particular *form* of religion—a distinction that is not only important for our understanding of

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[1] Notable exceptions to readings informed by this replacement theory include Prickett *Romanticism and Religion*, Jay, and Wheeler *Heaven, Hell, and the Victorians*.

[2] This has been particularly evident in the recent 'religious turn' in literary studies. In addition to the scholarship cited in the subsequent discussion, see Colón, Schramm *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice*, Vance, Dwor, the double special issue on *New Religious Movements and Secularization* in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, and King and Werner.

the development of literature as an academic discipline, but also for our readings of Victorian literary culture. As Kirstie Blair and others have pointed out, the lack of critical focus upon religion—and upon expressions of religious belief in particular—have resulted in a general failure to recognise that, for Victorian writers, questions of form in religion and literature were inextricable.[3] Alison Milbank makes a similar point in her study of the Gothic novel, writing that the fact that religious ideas and concerns are 'played out in an aesthetic form is not evidence that Gothic is an aesthetic substitute for religion', but is rather evidence of it being a 'self-conscious and self-reflexive' mode of addressing theological (and political) difficulty (*God and the Gothic* 7). This intertwining of religious and literary forms has bearing not only upon our readings of nineteenth-century literature, but also upon how we understand Victorian approaches to literary criticism and scholarship.

The relationship between religious and literary forms is one that the Scottish writer George MacDonald (1824-1905) explored throughout his lifetime, raising it repeatedly in both his fiction and non-fiction writings. Novelising his own experience in *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867), he writes of the way in which poetic form can shape a reader's religious perception. The narrator, a vicar called Mr Walton, tells his reader: 'I thought with myself, if I could get [my parishioners] to like poetry and beautiful things in words, it would not only do them good, but help them to see what is in the Bible, and therefore to love it more. For I never could believe that a man who did not find God in other places as well as in the Bible ever found Him there at all' (183). In the novel's sequel, *The Seaboard Parish* (1868), Mr Walton places poetry alongside accounts of biblical revelation when he speaks of worshipping 'the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob — the God of Sidney, of Hooker, of Herbert' (163). It is not only through Mr Walton, nor only in relation to poetry, that

[3] See Blair *Form and Faith*, LaPorte *Victorian Poets*, Perkin, and Dyck.

MacDonald treats the relationship between religion and literary form. In *The Elect Lady* (1888), a character quotes both Jesus and Shakespeare in order to make a theological point, to which his conversation-partner exclaims: 'How you do mix up things! Shakespeare and Jesus Christ!' The reply ventriloquizes MacDonald's position: 'God mixed them first, and will mix them a good deal more yet' (234).[4] These references—and the many others found in theological works such as his three volumes of *Unspoken Sermons* (1867-1889) or *The Hope of the Gospel* (1892)—illustrate the ways in which MacDonald understood literature to be a source of spiritual insight or benefit, and reflect the theological importance he placed upon a variety of literary forms, including poetry and drama. Furthermore, MacDonald's approach to the relation between religion and literature was mutually-informing, and therefore his theology gave him ways of thinking about literature—in particular, about literary form—that fundamentally shape his understanding of the kinds of work that literature can do. Theology also informed MacDonald's own scholarly reading of texts, from Dante to Tennyson to Shakespeare.

At the heart of this thesis, then, is the claim that, in MacDonald's understanding, literature is not distinct from, nor an addition to, religious belief, but, rather, a medium for the articulation and exploration of theology. For MacDonald, theological ideas are always manifest in a variety of forms, adapting to the shifts that occur with the passage of time. These shifts in religious form not only affect how religion is practiced, but also how it is imagined, understood, and expressed. In other words, the forms of theology have consequences for the way in which one thinks about God and the world. The point is not that some forms are right while others are wrong, but, rather, that the dynamism of the forms by which we conceive of,

[4] The allusion to God 'mixing' Jesus and Shakespeare reflects some of the ideas concerning Shakespeare's Christ-like heart and loving vision, which I discuss in Chapter Four.

talk about, and participate in the life of God, are an appropriate response to the Christian understanding of God. Central to this understanding, insists MacDonald, is the Trinity: one God in three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), a loving and fully unified community whose love creates and sustains all things. Throughout Christian history, theologians have grappled with how to best to conceive of and articulate this idea of three persons in one God, one God in three persons.[5] Sarah Coakley's concise articulation of the term 'the Trinity' includes the statement that the Trinitarian God is 'fully united in one divine "substance", and distinguished from each other only in number and "relation"' to one another (352). For MacDonald, this dynamic, creative love remains the 'essential truth' and heart of Christianity—the constant that enables continual change in religious forms. The Trinity is at the core of MacDonald's thinking, but it has been largely overlooked by scholars who have written on his work. And the doctrine has also received relatively little attention from the literary scholars who write on the Victorian period more generally.[6] By insisting on the Trinity as a crucial and formative concept in MacDonald's theological and literary thought, my thesis contributes to our understanding of MacDonald and, more broadly, the way in which we think of Victorian religion.

Although often conceived as such by scholars of nineteenth-century literature, Christian faith is not, for MacDonald, primarily a set of doctrines or practices. It is, rather, an active love-motivated relationship with the Trinitarian God that takes a wide variety of forms and is experienced in a myriad of ways. Similarly, reading literature is, in his mind, a dynamic, relational activity that requires attention and openness to the text, and the involvement of intellect, imagination, and emotion. Rather than regarding this mode of

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[5] For an excellent introduction and overview of Trinitarian theology, see the entry on 'The Trinity' in McGrath's *Christian Theology: An Introduction*.

[6] For exceptions to this see Mason *Christian Rossetti*, and Knight 'Varieties of Decadent Religion'.

reading as a secular parallel to a relationship with God, however, MacDonald understands it to be a distinctly theological activity—a participation in the creative life and work of God. My thesis argues that it is the Trinity that gives MacDonald a way of thinking about key ideas concerning reading literary form—ideas such as relationality, movement, and participation. It particularly considers how, for MacDonald, different literary forms offer unique ways of engaging with, and revealing elements of, a spiritual reality that is characterised by movement. In so doing, it demonstrates how MacDonald's consistent attempts to unsettle widely-held nineteenth-century conceptions of 'religion' complicates our own understanding of the relation between sacred and secular in nineteenth-century literature. Focusing on MacDonald's conception of the Trinity, and its relation to a dynamic notion of form, also demonstrates how attending to theological ideas reveals the complexity of nineteenth-century thinking concerning the inextricable relation between religious and literary form.

Reading Victorian Literature and Religion

Michael W. Kaufmann has pointed out that our histories of the profession of literary studies have for a long time been 'underwritten by a narrative of secularisation' (607). The same can be said about our interpretation of nineteenth-century literary sacralisation more broadly, which has often failed to recognise that, for some Victorians, all manner of reading could be a religious activity. As Haskins writes, as 'important as literature was to those [in the nineteenth century] who looked to it for the challenges, comforts, and moral guidance that they did not find in religion, it also offered to others, unaccustomed to accepting a ready separation of the sacred and the profane, a genuine enhancement to living religiously' (53). Haskins' observation underscores the importance of attending to readers such as MacDonald, for whom the study of literature and theology were mutually-informing, but Haskins' division of readers into non-religious and religious teeters on the edge of creating the sort of binary between

secular and religious that he seeks to critique. Haskins is not alone in struggling to avoid the binary, and one can see why. It is a difficulty that I grapple with throughout this thesis, and which I see as an inevitable awkwardness for any attempt to parse the terms 'religious' and 'secular'.[7] In this thesis, I generally attempt to use the term 'religious' to describe a mode of perception—a way of seeing the world as fundamentally theological. This is in keeping with MacDonald's own use of the term, which generally incorporates his belief that all things exist in God and therefore have the potential to be regarded as 'religious'. Religion is, however, a complex phenomenon—one that has been, and continues to be, defined and understood in a variety of ways. This complexity has not always been recognised, for as Mark Knight observes, '[o]ne of the many benefits of the turn to religion in our scholarship on Victorian literature has been greater recognition of the different views we hold about what the term religion means' ('Victorian Literature' 518). But while the turn to religion has indeed opened up a broader and more nuanced understanding of 'the religious' and, coincidentally, 'the secular', there remains a tendency in literary studies to uncritically accept, and thereby reinforce, the religion/literature binary.

The recent movement to re-evaluate the replacement theory and our notions of religion/literature has often gone hand-in-hand with an interrogation of the broader narrative of secularisation. This is evident in William R. McKelvy's *The English Cult of Literature: Devoted Readers, 1774-1880* (2007). In this study, McKelvy explores nineteenth-century claims concerning the religious function of literature, starting his exploration from the principle 'that our strategic engagement with either the eighteenth or nineteenth century is impoverished when we segregate religious and literary history—or forget that they shared the

[7] It is a difficulty that was also present in the nineteenth century, and to which MacDonald was susceptible. His predominant perspective was that 'To the perfectly holy mind, everything is religion' (Sadler 17-18), but at times his language falls into the sacred/secular division—for instance in *There and Back* (1891) when he contrasts 'religious teaching' with 'secular teaching' (322-23).

same political context' (30). He points out that the dominant critical accounts of the relationship between nineteenth-century religion and literature have presumed that religion was in decline whereas, as he goes on to demonstrate, the period saw an increased freedom of religious expression. Scholarly accounts of religion's decline in the nineteenth century have tended to regard the decreasing attendance at the Established Church as indicative of a more widespread decrease in religion. In reality, however, many of those who had once worshipped at Anglican churches were now taking advantage of this new context of religious freedom to worship elsewhere or practice their faith in private. Secularisation was not, McKelvy writes, a decline in belief, but rather an alteration in the attitude of the state towards religious belief. The process of secularisation thus created a context in which the boundaries between sacred and secular were less political than they had once been. This meant that the association between literary authority and religious authority was, after 1880,[8] no longer regarded as a political threat (as it sometimes was when state and church were exclusively tied), meaning that to 'bestow a religious vocation on literature in this new political context was to claim to place it above and beyond politics' (3). In drawing attention to the variety of 'collusions and confrontations between the literary and the religious' (1), and by underscoring their dynamic, and complex intersections, McKelvy invites further consideration of the different ways in which literature's sacred vocation may have been understood and engaged with by the Victorians.

My own work answers this invitation by honing in on the relationship between religion and literary form, paying particular attention to the way in which a theological understanding of form shapes MacDonald's notion of reading as a sacred activity. As a

[8] The passage of the Dissenters' Burials Bill in 1880 is generally considered to be the culmination of a movement for religious liberty that began in the eighteenth century (McKelvy 30-31).

popular writer and speaker, MacDonald's ideas concerning literature's sacred vocation reached large numbers of the reading public, not only in Great Britain, but in Europe and North America as well. To consider MacDonald's theological approach to literary scholarship is therefore significant, not only because it offers productive ways of thinking about reading form but also for the way in which it illuminates Victorian attitudes towards sacred reading more generally. While there has been recent critical interest in nineteenth-century devotional reading,[9] the question of how nineteenth-century scholarly approaches to reading literature might have been understood to be 'sacred' has been largely unexplored.[10] My own work seeks to redress this gap in scholarly work by considering how MacDonald's theological notion of literary form shapes his practice and pedagogy of reading.

MacDonald's popularity as a writer, speaker, and preacher gave him a significant platform by which to shape the Victorian reading imagination, but he was certainly not the only figure to inhabit this role. ST Coleridge, FD Maurice, and Christina Rossetti are amongst several such figures considered by Joshua King in *Imagined Spiritual Communities* (2015), his examination of the relationship between nineteenth-century reading, religion, and national identity. King's primary interest in is in the way that nineteenth-century reading became a means of 'imagining and participating in competing versions of a British Christian community' (2). Echoing McKelvy, King writes that the severing of exclusive ties between the state and the Anglican Church led to an unprecedented diversity in religious practice and expression. At the same time, the rise of reading in Britain led to an increased consumption of religion through the printed page. King's intervention is to identify the ways in which writers, educators, and religious leaders saw this moment as an opportunity to spiritually influence the

[9] See Lysack, Krienke, Ehnes, Gray,

[10] Exceptions include McKelvy and LaPorte *The Victorian Cult of Shakespeare*, both of which consider the relation between scholarly approaches to reading and the sacred.

British reading public by encouraging them to imagine themselves as members of spiritual communities, brought together through acts of reading. In demonstrating the role that reading played in forming new ways of imagining and practicing religion (such as participating in a religious community), and the relation this had to conceptions of national identity, King's study reveals how attempts to encourage readers to imagine themselves as part of literary-religious communities shaped reading practices. One of the strengths of King's study is his broad consideration of different kinds of texts (from newspapers, to poems, to essays)—an approach that allows us to see both the different means by which writers and thinkers sought to shape the spiritual and national imaginations of their readers, as well as how widespread the phenomenon was.

While King and I share an interest in the relationship between nineteenth-century reading and religion, my own work is less interested in considering how notions of literature's religious function relate to broader political questions of national identity and community. For a writer such as MacDonald, an awareness of form's function is important not only for understanding literary texts, but also for experiencing and knowing God individually (something that he regards as a necessary precursor to an authentic conception of religious community). MacDonald understands Christianity as, first and foremost, an individual relationship with God, and conceives of forms (such as a specific pattern of prayer, a hymn, or even a theological idea) as a temporary means by which a person relates to God. A dynamic notion of form is, therefore, intrinsic to one's ability to commune with God. This means that, in his mind, form, faith, and reading are all intertwined. For this reason, my focus is upon the interplay between religious and literary forms, and the question of how MacDonald's understanding of this interplay affects both the individual's reading practices and her relationship with God. How, for example, might an expectation of divine revelation shape the

way in which a reader approaches a work of poetry, or a Shakespeare play? Would an openness to receiving such a revelation inhibit the reader's critical evaluation of the text? And is it a particular practice of reading that makes a literary form religious, or is the form religious in itself? Answering such questions draws attention to the way in which, for MacDonald and many like him, reading has the potential to be a theological act, one that brings readers into communion with God and cannot be thought about only in social terms.

The relationship between faith and form is one that has received renewed attention in recent years.[11] Kirstie Blair's *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (2012), considers the close—and often controversial—relationship between nineteenth-century religious and poetic form. Blair points out that 'Victorian poets and their readers shared a vocabulary relating to contemporary religious debates that we have largely lost. And one of the keywords in this vocabulary was "form"' (5). She goes on to demonstrate the ways in which religious poets made self-conscious formal choices in order to create their own discussion concerning the ethical and political ramifications of form—a conception and use of form that 'effectively pre-empts the formalist discourse of twenty-first-century literary criticism' (10). Blair's study is distinctly historical in approach as it seeks to recover the context in which poets such as Tennyson, Christina Rossetti, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were writing.

My own work takes historical context into account, but is less historically-dependent than Blair's as it attends to the theological significance of form. Blair explicitly states that the

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[11] Larsen provides a helpful overview and analysis of how scholarly work since the 1950s has been so concerned with religious doubt (as opposed to faith) that it has distorted our understanding of the Victorian period more generally. He writes that a 'relentless focus on the stories of Victorians who experienced a loss of faith' has led to a perception of these figures as 'merely famous examples of a rite of passage generally experienced by Victorians' (*Crisis of Doubt* 3). Despite a larger shift in the critical landscape away from this tendency, the pattern continues to be present in recent scholarship, most notably in Lane.

focus of her study is on form and religion—that is 'the way in which forms were used, were deployed in practices of worship that affected many people on a daily basis'—rather than on form and theology (17). My own study also diverges from Blair's work by focusing on the relationship between form and theology. I choose to attend to theology in my approach because I believe that a consideration of religion without reference to theology fails to give us a sufficiently nuanced picture of the relationship between nineteenth-century religious and literary forms. While Blair acknowledges that a theological approach would be relevant to the concerns of her book, her claim that considering 'religion' over 'theology' allows her to focus on aspects of the former 'that affected many people on a daily basis' suggests an understanding of theology as a pursuit somewhat disconnected from the universal, quotidian experience of Victorian Christians. Such an understanding, however, operates on a rather narrow conception of theology, which tends to equate the term 'theology' with points of doctrine or systematic structures of belief.

While doctrine is one form of theology, there are other forms as well. A theology of liturgy or devotional practice, for instance, informs the structures and patterns of both communal worship and private devotion. Lori Branch points out that for believers in Puritan or Dissenting traditions, the repetitive character of liturgy 'is taken to stultify genuine, spontaneous emotional response' to God (46). This is, for them, a serious theological problem, for it is shared 'emotional intensity, arising spontaneously in the moment of extemporary prayer in the congregation […that] becomes the primary indicator of the promised presence of the Holy Spirit and of the unity among believers that Christ promised through that Spirit' (50). In other words, it is a particular theological idea about how and when the Holy Spirit is present that dictates the form and structure of worship. Unlike those in dissenting or low church traditions, the Tractarian theology of the Oxford Movement, which emphasises

restraint and discipline in the practice and communication of faith, regards such ‘a state of the mind when the feelings are strongly moved by religion, but the heart is not adequately purified nor humbled’ as indicating a ‘state of ignorance’, and not the presence of God (Members 55).[12] As Emma Mason writes, the Tractarian doctrine of reserve indicates ‘that God’s scriptural laws should remain hidden to all but the faithful’ and therefore urges commentators on theology ‘to encode or restrict their presentation of religious knowledge’ by means of metaphor, figure and allegory (‘Christian Rossetti’ 197). This doctrine not only impacts how religious knowledge is verbally communicated in sermons or writings, but also informs the ritualised and measured mode by which emotion is expressed in public and private worship (making the sign of the cross, kneeling, turning east to recite the creed, and so on). Theology does not, therefore, stand apart from the quotidian practices of religious belief and expression, but is inextricable from them.

As Mason and others have demonstrated, Tractarian theology is particularly invested in the idea of poetry as a theological form (Mason ‘Tractarian Poetry’; Lysack). Poetry certainly merits this sort of attention, but it is not the only literary form that invites detailed theological reflection. In the second half of the twentieth century, postliberal theologians such as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck conceived of Christianity primarily in terms of story and drew attention to the theological significance of narrative. Narrative theology invites believers to imagine themselves as participants in an ongoing Christian narrative and to interpret their own experiences in light of this narrative. Conceived of in this way, a novel or artwork that enables the reader or viewer to imagine and inhabit the Christian story more fully might be understood to be a form of theology. Similarly, theology might take the form of a physical

[12] Although unspecific in the edition from which I take this quotation, the author of ‘Tract 80. On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge’ is Isaac Williams.

action as a person participates in God's redemptive work in the world, thereby uncovering new aspects of what it might mean for her to be a part of that story, and what that might reveal about God, herself, and others. Poetry and narrative are just two examples of theological form. We might also benefit from thinking formally about other expressions of faith, including propositional theology. The work that we understand theology to do (e.g. telling a story or making a propositional statement), or the forms we conceive of it as taking (e.g. the Thirty-Nine Articles or *The Pilgrim's Progress*), have significant bearing upon how we read, including how we read nineteenth-century literature. A more capacious and nuanced grasp of theology takes us beyond an understanding of literary forms as simply a means of illustrating points of doctrine or theological concepts, and prompts to consider the ways in which forms actually constitute theological thought, experience, and expression. Such a reading of literary forms affords a more expansive grasp of the theological work that literature can do, while also opening up new ways of thinking about the relation between literary and religious forms.

An approach to form that incorporates theology can offer an understanding of the kind of work nineteenth-century poets believed their verse to be capable of doing and reveal that the relation between literary and theological form is far closer than we often think. In this thesis I am particularly interested in the ways in which literary forms may be understood to perform unique theological functions. In *Faith in Poetry: Verse Style as a Mode of Religious Belief* (2018), Michael D. Hurley also considers this subject with a focus on verse form. In his study, Hurley considers how religious poets such as Christina Rossetti, Hopkins, and Tennyson demonstrate their 'faith in poetry', both by placing faith in poetry itself as a means of expression, and articulating or working out religious faith through that mode. Like Blair, Hurley pushes back against the prevailing assumption that expressions of doubt and lost faith are more worthy of critical attention than expressions of faith, or that they produce a more

sophisticated or innovative form of poetics. Unlike Blair, however, his approach in considering the poetics of faith, and the question of what poetry (as opposed to other forms of art or literature) can achieve or do, is more attuned to theological complexity. Over the course of the book, Hurley demonstrates the way in which, at its height 'religious poetry asks more of itself than that its form might find continuity with its content; it aims not simply to delineate theological niceties, but to become itself an efficacious mode of theology' (3-4). Verse has this capacity, writes Hurley, because it is incarnational in character—it speaks to the senses and is therefore a particularly effective means of expressing the lived experience of faith. Hurley does not attempt to provide an over-arching literary-religious account, but chooses instead to examine each poet individually, with an eye to his or her own particular faith and style. A minute attention to theology enables Hurley to offer readings that go some way to resolving longstanding critical difficulties,[13] while also illustrating the complex and varied interaction between religious and poetic forms. My own study, which is much indebted to Hurley's work, both builds upon and diverges from it as I consider not only poetic form, but a variety of other literary forms, including narrative and drama. Hurley writes that verse has a particular capacity to be a mode of theology, but I would argue that this is a capacity present in other literary forms, too. Drama, for instance, is a narrative shaped by human action and interaction, unfolding in time, and located in a particular context. As Ben Quash and others have pointed out, these characteristics make drama an especially productive mode for thinking about the relationship between divine and human action in the unfolding narrative of history (Quash *Theology*; Bouchard).[14]

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[13] Such as how to analyse or categorise William Blake's unusual and dynamic poetic form (21-22).

[14] The physical performance of drama offers another layer of theological possibility. See Schramm *Censorship and the Representation of the Sacred in Nineteenth-Century England*.

As a writer of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, a literary scholar, and a theologian, MacDonald is something of a crossover figure—both in the sense that his work deals with a variety of literary forms and in the extent to which it is informed by both literary and theological ways of thinking (although untangling the two is not, in his case, a straightforward matter). In addition, his work reached both popular and scholarly audiences in Great Britain and abroad. By focusing solely on MacDonald, my study is able to trace the ways in which particular aspects of his theology (such as the Trinity), give him ways of thinking about or understanding the work done by different literary forms. In so doing, it demonstrates the generative potential of theological ideas. It also indicates the ways in which a theological approach can open up modes of thinking about literary forms that—although familiar to many Victorian writers—have been largely neglected in recent scholarship.

A lack of familiarity with theology and its nuances can result in blind spots when reading nineteenth-century literary form—a point that is demonstrated in Knight's *Good Words: Evangelicalism and the Victorian Novel* (2019). According to Knight, a simplistic understanding of evangelicalism, and an impoverished vocabulary concerning it, has left many literary critics unable to identify just how much the movement moulded the Victorian novel. Questioning the prevailing critical assumption that the novel is a secular form, Knight contends that the impact of evangelicalism led Victorian novelists to approach fictional form the way they did—'insisting on its capacity to transform readers, emphasizing stories of personal transformation and conversion, and exploring novel means by which words of moral seriousness and sociopolitical consequence might be conveyed' (xiii). Drawing out some of evangelicalism's defining characteristics and beliefs, Knight demonstrates the ways in which prominent novelists such as William Thackeray, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, and Samuel Butler engaged with evangelicalism—an engagement that ultimately shaped many of the

formal characteristics of the Victorian novel. Of particular interest to my own thesis is Knight's engagement with MacDonald. Despite scholars often categorising MacDonald as 'Broad Church' in his theology, Knight claims that MacDonald's work exhibits theological concerns that place him more in line with evangelicalism (33). At the same time, though, MacDonald's understanding of the 'sacramental style' of the novel—a style that allows it 'to reimagine the gospel in a form that is relevant enough to be grasped and encountered by a multitude of characters in a range of settings' (34)—risks 'destabilizing evangelical ecclesial identity by not describing the gospel within narrow parameters' (34). Knight's recognition both that MacDonald's work eludes neat theological categories, and that there is a close-knit relationship between his theology and his ideas about novelistic form, resonate with this study's claims concerning the complexity and inextricability of MacDonald's ideas on literary and theological form.

My own study builds upon, and differs from, Knight's work by focusing solely on MacDonald and his views concerning theology and literary form. Unlike Knight, I am not specifically concerned with evangelicalism—or any other specific movement or denomination—in my analysis of MacDonald's theology. MacDonald undertook training for ministry at a Congregationalist theological college, but read widely before, during, and after his two years of training. Although the influence of dissenting traditions such as Congregationalism is evident in his thinking, numerous strands of orthodox Christian theology are also identifiable. He was familiar with early Christian writers such as Origen, Anselm, and Augustine,[15] shaped by contemporary Scottish theologians (such as the first moderator of the Free Church of Scotland, Thomas Chalmers, and the Episcopalian Thomas

[15] MacDonald refers explicitly to Origen only once, in his novel *The Seaboard Parish*, but Origen's influence is discernible in various aspects of MacDonald's theology—perhaps most notably his universalism.

Erskine, who MacDonald knew personally),[16] and formed by the mystical theologies of, among others, the Lutheran theologian Jacob Böhme and the German Romantic poet Novalis. Indeed it is, perhaps, best to think of MacDonald's theology as an eclectic form of Protestantism.[17]

While varied theological influences can be seen in MacDonald's broader thought, his aversion to systematic or 'academic' theology made him far more likely to align himself with poets than so-called theologians. This can be seen in the fact that, even in his works of non-fiction theology, he makes only passing references to theologians, but frequently quotes poets and writers such as Dante, Milton, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. In doing so, MacDonald demonstrates his belief in the theological value of a literary form such as poetry, and also indicates that spiritual or theological knowledge is not the exclusive remit of academic theologians or clergy. Rather than attempting to categorise MacDonald's theology, therefore, I explore instead how his ways of thinking as a literary scholar and writer inform and are informed by his theology. In particular, I consider how a theological concept such as the Trinity offers MacDonald a way of thinking about form that is foundational to his scholarly and pedagogical methods, at the same time that his literature-informed imagination shapes a distinctively literary articulation of human participation in the Trinitarian life.

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[16] For more on the relationship between MacDonald, Chalmers, and Erskine see Johnson (*Rooted* 55-60). In his discussion of MacDonald's Scottish novels, Robb also notes the association between contemporary Scottish religious thinkers and MacDonald (17).

[17] The influence of the dissenting tradition on MacDonald's theology is evident in the suspicion he sometimes expresses concerning tired or outmoded liturgical forms. While this might lead one to conclude that he was fundamentally opposed to such religious forms, however, this was not the case. His insistence upon ecumenism, and his interest in the possibilities of form more generally, mean that he is, at times, theologically closer to the Tractarians than might be immediately apparent. This can be seen in his anthology of religious poetry, *England's Antiphon* (1868), in which he includes both Keble and Newman's poetry, and emphasises the value of individual participation in a shared, communal expression of worship (2-3).

The increasing interest in the relationship between nineteenth-century form and faith coincides with a wider concern with form in literary studies—a movement Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian terms the 'millennial reboot of formalism' (652). Perhaps the most significant contributions to this movement is Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2018), in which Levine lays out an innovative method that conceives of forms, not as rigid, but as dynamic and disruptive.[18] While she does not engage with religion in any significant way, her approach offers a way of thinking about form that prompts us to rethink our understanding of the relationship between different forms—including literary and religious forms. Levine points out that forms can do and be many different, even contradictory things, and, in order to capture the 'complex operations of both social and literary forms' Levine borrows the concept of 'affordance'—a term used in design theory 'to describe potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs' (6). Building on this concept, Levine goes on to demonstrate how, far from being rigid or monolithic structures that create a hierarchy wherein one dominates the others, forms are disruptive. This is, she writes because 'no form, however seemingly powerful, causes, dominates, or organizes all others', rather, as 'different forms struggle to impose their order on our experience, working at different scales of our experience, aesthetic and political forms emerge as comparable patterns that operate on a common plane' (16). The consequence of this upon literary forms is that they 'can lay claim to an efficacy of their own. They do not simply reflect or contain prior political realities' (16). This does not mean, Levine hastens to note, that any form can be or do anything at all. Forms, by their nature, have certain identifiable qualities and are, in that sense, specific. But they also

[18] Jonathan Loesberg writes that Levine's book 'demands attention' and is an 'important contribution both to the reading of form in literature and to the kinds of cultural and political debates literary critics engage in' (560).

have a quality of generality, for they afford a variety of uses or functions and, as abstract organising principles, can be 'picked up and moved to new contexts' (7).

The focus of Levine's study is on the relationship between literary and socio-political forms, but this interest in the socio-political is relevant to the work of theology. While theology might be understood by some critics to be one of the 'coherent ideologies' that are put into practice by 'powerful social institutions', and which 'organize and constrain experience' (17), considering it in terms of Levine's notion of 'disruptive' form gestures towards a more complex reality. Rather than thinking of theology as static or monolithic, we can consider how various modes of theology respond to, interact with, and unsettle one another, and how this dynamic might inform our understandings of religious practice—including aspects of religious belief and practice that might also be understood as aesthetic and socio-political forms. Related to this, Levine's method prompts further thought on the ways in which a multi-functional, dynamic, and relational notion of form might help us think about the interplay between literary and theological forms. How, for instance, might a recognition of the efficacy of literary forms impact our understanding of the purportedly sacred vocation of literature in the nineteenth-century? In what ways might it open up new insights into the ways in which theology and literature inform one another?

Conceiving of theological forms not simply as immoveable structures of thought or doctrine, but as dynamic, generative, and even disruptive also invites us to reconsider how theological ways of thinking might inform current conversations in literary studies. One example of this can be seen in the recent focus upon the ecotheology of nineteenth-century writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. For these and other Victorian writers, theology offered a framework for thinking about, and engaging with, ecological questions (King 'Child Labour'; Mason 'Ecology with Religion'). My own thesis

provides a contribution to current conversation by arguing that literary and theological form are, for MacDonald, intertwined with questions about the relation between reader and text and, in particular, the place of affect in reading. An important element of MacDonald's understanding of the Trinity is that the dynamic love of the Trinitarian God overflows and extends to all created things, inviting humans to respond in kind by loving God and one another. A human's response and participation in the divine life of love may look like any number of things (intellectual assent, physical acts of devotion or service to others, and so on), but for MacDonald, there is a crucial affective element involved. His views concerning the theological work that literary forms do mean that, in his mind, one of the ways in which a person can participate in the Trinitarian life is by reading literature. For him, the best kind of reading employs both intellect and imagination, but it must also involve the emotions.

Considering how MacDonald's theological understanding of reading form might relate to questions of affective reading has bearing upon the current interest in post-critical reading and the role of affect in our histories of literature. As Rachel Ablow points out, scholars of reading have been 'formulating an approach to Victorian reading that is neither paranoid nor reparative but instead attuned to a different model of historical specificity: interested in what nineteenth-century readers and writers *thought* they were doing' (3).[19] Attention to form is, as it turns out, a particularly important aspect of this approach. Nicholas Dames, for example, draws attention to the way in which Victorian literary critics used long excerpts in their reviews in order to 'induc[e]' in their readers an affective response to the text under review (18). The review, which took a particular form by virtue of the way in which the critics employed excerpts, invited readers to share the critic's felt experience of the text (Dames 18-19). Krista Lysack's *Chronometres: Devotional Literature, Duration, and Victorian*

[19] See Ablow, Dames, and Selbin.

Reading (2019), brings together 'book history and print culture, affect theory, and the religious turn in literary studies' in order to investigate the 'temporal modes' by which the 'felt time of reading devotionally' were mediated (4). Lysack identifies poetic form as a mode by which affective devotional reading was mediated, and thus compliments my own discussion of MacDonald's theological understanding of affective reading.

To demonstrate how attention to theology might contribute to this critical conversation we might consider the treatment of religion in Deidre Shauna Lynch's *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (2015). Lynch's work explores the role of emotion or affect in literary history and demonstrates the way in which nineteenth-century understandings of literature and reading were shaped by notions of affect. While this has bearing upon the way in which we might understand the relation between Victorian literature and religion, Lynch's engagement with the subject of religion is minimal. She points out that a secularisation narrative has often led to a characterisation of the eighteenth century as a period of 'intensive' reading of a few texts (usually the Bible and devotional materials), and the nineteenth as a period of cursory, 'extensive' reading encouraged by cheap print culture—a replacement of the Bible with books more generally (156). Lynch challenges this neat and tidy periodisation by drawing attention to the 'productive confusions between literary and religious sanctity that comprise the post-Enlightenment history of literariness', and pointing out that readers performing a ritualistic re-reading of beloved old books and Protestants observing a routine of Bible reading were often one and the same (156-157).

Lynch's engagement with religion is little more than passing, but her identification of the complex relationship between religious belief and nineteenth-century reading, and her brief reference to the relation between religion, reading, and affect invites further consideration of the convergence of the three. In particular, it might prompt us to consider how a theological understanding of affect can unsettle some of the tacit distinctions Lynch

makes even as she seeks to challenge the 'clean break' between an 'age of faith' and an 'age of the market' (156). Lynch's use of the word 'confusions' to describe the relationship between literary and religious sanctity subtly reinforces the notion that there is a fundamental distinction between 'the literary' and 'the religious', therefore implying that 'the literary' is a secular category that may be confused with 'the religious'. This is understandable, for as I have noted already, to consider the relationship between the sacred and secular is to run the inevitable risk of slipping into overly-neat distinctions. The reason that I highlight this slippage in Lynch's book is to point out how an attention to a more sacramental theology such as MacDonald's might offer us a way of understanding literature—and the role that affect plays in reading literature—that complicates such easy distinctions. For him, 'the literary' is not a neutral, secular form that becomes religious by using it in religious practice or in order to communicate religious ideas. It is, rather, a theological form.

My focus on MacDonald's theological understanding of the role of affect in reading literary forms raises questions about the function of affect in scholarly reading more broadly. Rita Felski's post-critical championing of an alternative to suspicious approaches to reading, and her work on the place of affect in reading, makes her an important conversation-partner in my discussion of the subject. In *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020), Felski explores the affective relationship between reader and text by asking the question of 'how we become attached to works of art' (28-29). Felski's self-avowed tendency to gravitate towards scholarly approaches that are attuned to 'relational styles of thinking' (x) leads to her employment of actor-network theory (ANT)—a methodology that regards humans and non-humans as possessing agency in a dynamic network of relationships, and which is primarily descriptive rather than explanatory. In this respect, MacDonald's understanding of the relationships between human and non-human (including the natural world and literary texts) anticipates ANT, for he, too, regards such relationships as forming a dynamic network (although for him

it is an explicitly theological one, held together by the love of God). While MacDonald tends towards the explanatory in his writing ANT, observes Felski, is more descriptive. It is an approach that 'slows down judgment in order to describe more carefully what aesthetic experiences are like and how they are made', and which, rather than seeking distance from such experiences, 'strives to edge closer' (Felski xi). One particularly valuable aspect of Felski's 'relational' methodology is the way in which it enables her to query the widespread scholarly 'deference to detachment' (xii), and to consider how a reader's willingness to be receptive to a text or artwork opens up unique ways of knowing. Felski's study does much to shine light on our understanding of how aesthetic attachments are made, while at the same time inviting further conversation about how such an understanding might impact the way in which we interpret and teach literature. In addition, Felski's work challenges the widespread fallacy that detachment from a text is a more scholarly stance than closeness. This claim not only has bearing upon the work that we do now, but also upon how we approach nineteenth-century writers and scholars like MacDonald who did not regard scholarly critique and affective closeness to a text as mutually exclusive. Indeed, for him, openness and closeness to the text are prerequisites for understanding, and therefore go hand-in-hand with an understanding of how form and genre function, of linguistic analysis, and—particularly in the case of drama—the ability to evaluate characterisation. As my thesis demonstrates, MacDonald's views on form—and indeed his whole approach to his work as a scholar and writer—is shaped by his understanding of the Trinity. In particular, the dynamic relationship that holds together all things, human and non-human, and in which each person is invited to lovingly participate. Such a notion of Trinitarian participation gives MacDonald ways of thinking about the affective, dynamic relationship between reader and text, wherein the reader maintains her distinct interpretive lens, but at the same time draws near enough to the text to allow it to affect her. In this way she is given access to ways of knowing that expands her

understanding of the text on an intellectual, affective—and, MacDonald would argue, spiritual—level.

While there are many aspects of Felski's 'relational' methodology that are relevant to my study of MacDonald, the primary reason for engaging at length with her work here is that I am, to a great extent, taking a similar approach. Like Felski, I am interested in tracing relationships in order to bring out connections that might otherwise remain hidden to readers. I would argue that the theological associations and relationships that I identify in this thesis have been largely occluded by secular readings of MacDonald. Similarly, the connections between literary and theological forms have been overlooked by those scholars who have considered MacDonald's theology, but failed to recognise the importance of attending to literary form. In describing the ways in which MacDonald's conception of the Trinity—characterised by a dynamic set of relationships connecting all things—informs his writings, my work reads along the grain of MacDonald's own approach in order to highlight the complex and dynamic relations of his literary-theological thought.

George MacDonald and His Critical Readers

George MacDonald was born in Huntly, Aberdeenshire in 1824. His father was a businessman who played a significant role in local religious life, and his mother, who died when MacDonald was nine, came from a family of ministers and farmers. MacDonald's interest in preaching and his love of books emerged early in life, and were likely cultivated by his father's own interests in literature and religion, as well as by the presence of other family members with literary interests. MacDonald's maternal uncle, the Rev. MacIntosh MacKay, was a friend of Sir Walter Scott and editor of the Highland Society's Gaelic Dictionary,[20] while the brother of MacDonald's stepmother was the classicist Alexander Stewart MacColl.

[20] For more on MacKay and MacDonald's relationship to him, see Johnson 'Speaking Matrilineally'.

MacDonald would go on to maintain a good relationship with both throughout his life, even dedicating his Folio-base edition of *Hamlet* to MacColl, whose interpretation of the play challenged and eventually altered MacDonald's own.

Following the completion of his studies in natural philosophy (sciences) at King's College, Aberdeen in 1845, MacDonald moved to London and held a position as a private tutor. Not long after, in 1848, he began his training for Congregational ministry at Highbury Theological College. MacDonald's training for ministry went hand-in-hand with his continued development as a writer and literary scholar, although it was not until several years later that his literary pursuits would become his main source of income. During his time at Highbury MacDonald would often attend public lectures on literature by AJ Scott, a former minister who held the Chair of English Language and Literature at University College, London, and with whom MacDonald developed a close friendship. After concluding his studies at Highbury MacDonald secured a position as minister of a Congregational church in Arundel, Sussex, but his tenure there was brief. After nine months, he was pressured into relinquishing his post when members of his congregation expressed disapproval at his universalist theology and, in an attempt to get him to leave, lowered his salary. His work as a minister had not kept him from literary pursuits entirely, however, for he completed a translation of '*Twelve Spiritual Songs* of Novalis' at the end of 1852 and, around the time of his resignation in May of 1853, his critical essay on 'Browning's Christmas Eve' was published in the *Monthly Christian Spectator.* Although MacDonald continued to preach throughout his life, Arundel was his first and last post as a minister. He and his young family moved to Manchester where, alongside his preaching, MacDonald gave lectures on literature, and published poetry, prose, and articles.

By the time he returned to London from Manchester (via Hastings) in 1859 MacDonald had published several works, including his verse drama *Within and Without*

(1855), and his first fantasy novel, *Phantastes (*1858). These publications had begun to earn him a reputation in literary circles and piqued the interest of, amongst others, the devout widow of the poet Byron. Lady Byron provided MacDonald with financial support and, alongside Emelia Gurney, recommended him as a lecturer in Brighton and London. Through these and other friends such as Margaret Oliphant, MacDonald developed relationships with Dinah Mulock Craik, Charles Kingsley, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and the Brownings. From 1859 to 1868, he held the post of professor of English Literature and Philosophy at Bedford College, London (a position previously held by Scott), and beginning in 1865, he also lectured on Literature at King's College, London. In addition to these posts, he acted as editor of the periodical *Good Words for the Young* from 1869, and travelled extensively around England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales to lecture on a number of literary subjects, from Shakespeare and Dante, to Burns, Coleridge, and Tennyson. Alongside all of this, MacDonald continued to publish novels, essays, fairytales, and theological work. By 1872 MacDonald's reputation as a literary man had created a great demand for his writing and his lectures on both sides of the Atlantic, and in November of that year MacDonald, his wife Louisa, and their son Greville travelled to North American for an eight-month lecture tour in Canada and the United States. Soon after his return from North America he was asked to stand as Vice-President of the New Shakspere [sic] Society and, in 1885, published his own annotated folio-based edition of *Hamlet*. MacDonald carried on his work as a lecturer until 1891, and continued to publish works of theology, fiction, and literary scholarship until seven years before his death in 1905.

Although MacDonald was raised in a devout family, and went on to produce a lifetime's worth of innovative theological work, his religious journey was not a linear one. Beginning in the latter part of his university education and continuing into the years following his graduation, MacDonald underwent a significant deconstruction and reconstruction of his

religious belief. As it turns out, this spiritual transformation had a significant bearing upon his understanding of literary form. In an 1847 letter to his father, the twenty-three year-old MacDonald confided his struggle to reconcile Christian faith with the enjoyment of aesthetic forms, including both the 'forms' of nature and those imaginative forms conjured up by his own mind. He writes: 'One of my greatest difficulties in consenting to think of religion was that I thought I should have to give up my beautiful thoughts & my love for the things God has made' (Sadler 17-18). While it is not entirely clear from the letter as to why MacDonald had understood Christianity and aesthetic appreciation to be mutually exclusive, it was, it seems, a belief he absorbed during his upbringing. Slightly earlier in the letter he writes that all the religious teaching of his youth 'seems useless to me. I must get it all from the bible [sic] again' (17). MacDonald's father was, apparently, a moderate and open man when it came to matters of faith,[21] but the wider context in which MacDonald was raised was saturated by a severe and narrow version of Federal Calvinism. This particular strand of Calvinism, was influenced by an emergent political philosophy of the late sixteenth and seventeenth century, which 'affirmed that a contract (*foedus*) between the sovereign ruler and his/her constituents could ensure greater freedom' (Dearborn 10). The theological outworking of this influence was an understanding of the relation between God and humanity as primarily contractual, and a perception of God not as an unconditional lover of humanity, but a sovereign who required payment (the death of Jesus) in order to forgive and love only his elect. Many believers in this tradition (including the young MacDonald) experienced a great deal of anxiety over whether they were truly one of the elect, and sought to satisfy themselves by inspecting their lives for

[21] This is evident in the correspondence between MacDonald and his father. See, for example, George MacDonald Sr.'s Letter to George MacDonald on 31 May 1850.

evidence of true and lasting faith.[22] As Kerry Dearborn points out, it is for this reason that this particular strand of Calvinism demonstrated its 'great sobriety in religion' by distrusting the imagination and frowning upon the arts (11)—tendencies that go far to explain why MacDonald would have believed that his own 'beautiful', imaginative thoughts would need to be denied if he decided to become a Christian.

In Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson's view, scholars have overemphasised the adverse influence of Federal Calvinism on the young MacDonald who, she points out, was raised in a multi-denominational family, and maintained a lifelong respect for his childhood minister, John Hill (*Rooted* 54-5). But while Johnson rightly draws attention to the variety of religious influences MacDonald was exposed to in his younger years, his vehement critique of Federal Calvinism throughout his writings indicates that these positive influences were the exceptions to the rule. Given MacDonald's penchant for the autobiographical in his realist novels, the narrator of *David Elginbrod* (1863) is likely articulating MacDonald's own perspective when, reflecting upon the 'nightmare-memory' of 'severe' and 'formal' Sabbaths in Scotland, he tells his reader that the 'grand men and women whom I have known in Scotland, seem to me, as I look back, to move about in the mists of a Scotch Sabbath, like a company of way-worn angels in the Limbo of Vanity, in which there is no air whereupon to smite their sounding wings, that they may rise into the sunlight of God's presence' (301-302).

Perhaps it was, in part, MacDonald's removal from the spiritually-hazy atmosphere of Scottish Calvinism to the literal haze of London that finally enabled him to experience more of the 'sunlight of God's presence', for it was during those first years in London that MacDonald began to be aware of a desire to enter the ministry (Sadler 23). Given this desire,

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[22] MacDonald writes in 1845: 'My greatest difficulty always is "How do I know that my faith is of a lasting kind such as will produce fruits?" I am ever so forgetful and unwilling to pray and read God's word — that it often seems as if my faith will produce no fruit' (Sadler 11).

and MacDonald's subsequent career as a theologian, novelist, and literary scholar, it comes as little surprise that his internal conflict is not the end of the story—or the letter to his father. MacDonald goes on to tell his father his belief that Christianity and the enjoyment of both nature and the products of the imagination are not only compatible, but inseparable. Religion and beauty cannot be divided, for 'God is the God of the beautiful, Religion the Love of the Beautiful' (Sadler 17-18). Therefore, his conclusion that religion 'must pervade everything — absorb everything into itself. To the perfectly holy mind, everything is religion' (Sadler 17-18), is not MacDonald seeking to co-opt or appropriate aesthetic forms in order to fit into a religious system. It is, rather, an articulation of a notion of religion as something that cannot be cordoned off from other aspects of reality or categorised into a set of practices or beliefs. It is a distinctly dynamic idea of religion (for there is both an outward movement as it pervades and inward movement as it absorbs), and one that would go on to shape his thinking on literary form.

In the main, critical work on MacDonald has rarely considered him in his capacity as literary scholar, focusing instead on his novels and, less frequently, his theology. My thesis claims that attention to MacDonald's views on form reveal his importance not only as a Victorian novelist, but as a literary scholar and theologian. By focusing on the relationship between MacDonald's distinctively literary theology and his theologically-informed work as a literary scholar, this thesis demonstrates the ways in which MacDonald's theology was not simply supported or illustrated by literary texts or ways of thinking, but intrinsically shaped by them. My thesis reveals how theological ideas inform MacDonald's conception of reading literary form, thus highlighting the ways in which the relation between literary and theological form is, for him, a dynamic one and therefore often difficult to disentangle. By examining MacDonald in light of his work as a literary scholar and theologian, I show the importance of

his thought, both to Victorian understandings of the relationship between literature and religion, and to MacDonald studies more broadly.

Following one of the earliest critical works on MacDonald—Robert Lee Wolff's largely speculative psychoanalytic reading of MacDonald's fiction, *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* (1961)—the critic Richard Reis wrote that the 'publication of Robert Lee Wolff's study, despite its flaws, is likely to arouse more interest than a less sensational work could. It seems at least probable that MacDonald will be given more attention in future literary histories' (143). Reis' prediction has proven to be true. The decades following his own more balanced study of MacDonald's fiction, *George MacDonald* (1972), saw an increasing interest in MacDonald—particularly as an inheritor of the Romantic tradition and pioneering figure of the Fantasy genre.[23] Both Wolff and Reis acknowledge the importance of the Romantics (particularly the German Romantics) in their studies of MacDonald's work, while Stephen Prickett's influential *Romanticism and Religion: the Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (1976) frames its reading of MacDonald in light of English Romanticism. Like Wolff and Reis, Prickett is interested in MacDonald's use of symbols, but while the earlier critics take, respectively, Freudian and Jungian approaches, Prickett reads MacDonald's symbolism as following in the theological tradition of Coleridge. He argues that in building upon Coleridge's ideas concerning imagination and symbolism, MacDonald 'demonstrated that theology was of its nature a fundamentally poetic and mythopoeic activity, and that the growing divorce between theology and literature … was, in the long run, as damaging to literature as it was to theology' (230). While I agree with Prickett on this and many other points, his reading of MacDonald primarily as an inheritor of Coleridge's ideas, and his classification of MacDonald as a

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[23] See Zipes, Raeper *The Gold Thread*, Manlove *Christian Fantasy*, McGillis *For the Childlike*, Knoepflmacher.

Platonist (240), are too neat as categorisations. In Prickett's case, these categories lead him to miss the centrality of the Trinity in MacDonald's thinking. To take one example, Prickett argues that MacDonald's development of Coleridge's idea of symbol is a result of both MacDonald's Platonism (239-240), and of a 'mysticism' that is identifiable by particular psychological attributes and metaphysical ideas (240-241). Without denying both Platonic and Coleridgean influences on MacDonald's thought, I would argue that MacDonald's use of Trinitarian language in his articulation of his views on the imagination and symbol (and indeed on revelation, whether we term it 'mystical' or not) is an indicator of the centrality of this concept in his thinking. Therefore I read MacDonald's views on symbol as a direct outworking of his theology of the Trinity, which emphasises his belief in God's inherent relationality and active involvement in human perception.

In their introduction to *Behind the Back of the North Wind* (2011), John Pennington and Roderick McGillis observe how current MacDonald scholarship has been shaped by the criticism of the past (x)—something that is particularly evident in the impact that Wolff, Reis, and Prickett have had on the field of MacDonald studies. As the editors of *Rethinking George MacDonald: Contexts and Contemporaries* rightly point out, however, the heavy focus upon MacDonald's role as a literary descendant of the Romantics, and as an ancestor of modern fantasy writers, has led to a 'critical habit of viewing MacDonald's work only in terms of what came before or what has come since'— a habit that only 'reinforces the long-entrenched assessment that it has a limited value' ('Introduction' v).[24] The essays in *Rethinking George MacDonald* (2013) offer readings of MacDonald in light of his historical context, covering a range of topics from the representation of gender to social reform, from the Gothic to

[24] In addition to the works referenced above, a more recent example of this trend can be seen in a 2008 collection of essays 'on the background and legacy of his writing' (McGillis *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs*).

eugenics. The volume is indicative of a broader shift in MacDonald scholarship, for it has been joined by several publications highlighting the importance of MacDonald's contribution to nineteenth-century studies in particular. In his article on *Phantastes*, Albert D. Pionke writes that the novel deserves consideration 'for its ecumenical engagement with issues and motifs of central concern to MacDonald's Victorian contemporaries, including medievalism, Romanticism, and aestheticism' (21). More recently, Aubrey Plourde has argued that MacDonald's work proves 'particularly useful in complicating ideas about Victorian religion' and claims that 'his use of the fairy-tale form stages questions about belief in unique and unavoidable ways' (3). Thus, the recent trend in scholarly work on MacDonald demonstrates his significance as an influential figure in Victorian religious and literary culture, whose innovative and complex work continues to merit serious critical attention.

While critics have often identified the influence literary figures such as Dante and the English and German Romantics have had on MacDonald's fiction,[25] there has been virtually no research done on how MacDonald has critically approached these and other writers (including Shakespeare, Milton, Herbert, Sidney, and so on), or on his role as a teacher and lecturer in the burgeoning field of literary studies.[26] The few references to his scholarly work outside of MacDonald studies indicate, however, that his work is worthy of serious consideration. C.A. Patrides writes that MacDonald's essay on George Herbert in *England's Antiphon* (1868) is '[o]ne of the most considerable essays in the history of Herbert criticism' (27), while Shakespeare scholar Ann Thompson recommends MacDonald's commentary on *Hamlet* 'on literary grounds' (204). Johnson is one of the few MacDonald scholars to recognise the significance of MacDonald's work as a critic, and the lack of

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[25] In addition to those mentioned already, see Johnson 'Conversing', Walker, Pazdziora and Richards.

[26] For exceptions see Koopman, Ricke, et al., and Chu and Ricke.

attention it has received. She points out that a 'failure to adequately represent MacDonald's career-life—the typical focus being his twenty-nine months as a Congregational minister rather than his more than a decade as an English Literature professor, and his four decades as a lecturer in English Literature—has resulted in gross historical misrepresentation' (*Rooted* 119). Johnson's attempts to correct the critical neglect of MacDonald's work as a professor and lecturer lead her to underplay his lifelong role and sense of calling as a preacher. As Martin Dubois demonstrates, MacDonald's 'literary career was in one sense a stand-in for the pulpit' (577).[27] Johnson's insistence upon the importance of attending to MacDonald's 'career-life' is, however, crucial. Her study concerns the impact of MacDonald's literary 'relationships'—both relationships with living mentors such as FD Maurice and AJ Scott and with the dead writers whose work MacDonald admired—on his 'mythopoeic' writing.[28] Like much of the scholarship on MacDonald, Johnson's study spends a significant amount of time considering MacDonald's influences—especially the influence that MacDonald's 'mentor' AJ Scott had on his 'critical methodology'. One of the strengths of Johnson's work is the way in which she brings together the various threads of MacDonald's childhood, adult, and literary relationships, weaving an account that draws attention to the breadth of MacDonald's work as a poet, writer, editor, critic, lecturer, and preacher. But although she offers valuable insight concerning aspects of MacDonald's approach to interpretation (including a recognition of the inseparability of MacDonald's theology and his approach to literary interpretation), her study focuses upon his fantasy. Johnson is primarily concerned with establishing a theological basis for MacDonald's mythopoeic writing—a focus that prompts her to establish the importance of literary relationships in his methodology. Johnson is successful in her attempt, but her focus on this aspect of MacDonald's work means that her engagement with MacDonald's scholarly

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[27] See Ellison, also.

[28] The term 'mythopoeic writer' is used by WH Auden to describe MacDonald, whose work Auden admired greatly ('Introduction' v).

work is limited. Consequently, her recognition of the importance of studying MacDonald's 'career-life' acts as more of a rallying-cry than an in-depth consideration of his work as a scholar. In response, I offer a detailed consideration of MacDonald's critical approach and ideas on literary form as evidenced in, among other things, his scholarly work on Dante, Tennyson, and Shakespeare.

In addition to contributing to MacDonald studies by focusing extensively and primarily upon MacDonald's work as a literary scholar, this thesis also contributes to existing work on MacDonald's theology by demonstrating the extent to which MacDonald's theology of the Trinity shapes his thinking—particularly when it comes to questions of literary form and interpretation. Scholars have shown a considerable interest in MacDonald's theology, approaching it from a number of critical perspectives.[29] In *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald* (2006), Dearborn takes a systematic approach to MacDonald's theology of the imagination by identifying key themes in his theological thought (including his views on suffering, the maternal characteristics of God, and the nature of Hell). Because the study organises MacDonald's theology by theme, it offers a helpful introduction to MacDonald's theological thought. But by giving so much space to tracing some of the literary and theological influences on MacDonald's thinking (Calvinist and Celtic Christianity, Platonic philosophy, and British and German Romanticism), Dearborn's work sometimes buries the distinctiveness of his ideas under an avalanche of information about other thinkers. In other words, the reader's attention is too often drawn away from MacDonald in order to consider his influences. This is particularly evident when it comes to Dearborn's treatment of MacDonald's theology of the Trinity. She is one of the few scholars to acknowledge the significance of the Trinity in MacDonald's thinking, identifying it as central to his theology of

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[29] For work on the relationship between his theology and fiction, see Kreglinger, Gabelman, Knight 'Guidance'. For work on MacDonald's theology in light of nineteenth-century religious debates see Larsen *George MacDonald in the Age of Miracles*. And for a consideration of his theology in light of gender, see Gaarden.

the imagination and the 'epistemological key to all knowing' (67). But her engagement with the subject turns out to be minimal. During one of the few paragraphs in which Dearborn deals with Trinitarian ideas, she moves away from engaging with MacDonald himself and refers more broadly to the influence of Coleridge and FD Maurice upon him (84), leaving us with the impression that MacDonald's theology is largely a re-articulation of Coleridgean and Mauricean ideas in fictionalised or narrative form.

MacDonald's theology of the Trinity is also under-explored in John R. De Jong's *The Theology of George MacDonald: The Child Against the Vampire of Fundamentalism* (2019). Like Dearborn, De Jong's study seeks to systematise MacDonald's theology, but his approach is much more attuned to MacDonald's theological and literary method. This is one of the strengths of his book. He writes that MacDonald's fiction 'does not illustrate some underlying, deeper theology; his novels do not illustrate what he thinks, they *are* what he thinks' (6). De Jong is here making a specific point concerning MacDonald's depiction of the child in his realistic fiction, but in doing so he also signals an awareness of the way in which MacDonald valued literary forms as capable of doing their own particular theological work. De Jong's aim is to construct a coherent overview of MacDonald's theology based around the latter's idea of the child—[30] an act of construction that De Jong likens to piecing together a jigsaw puzzle following the picture on the box. While De Jong's study is nuanced, thorough, and often incisive, his attempt to structure MacDonald's theology around one key concept sometimes proves limiting. This is apparent when it comes to the Trinity. While De Jong acknowledges that MacDonald's 'theology of the child' is rooted in Trinitarian theology, his brief analysis of MacDonald's views—an analysis that is based upon De Jong's classification of MacDonald as a philosophical idealist and his claim that MacDonald tends to use a 'dualist terminology when speaking of God'—significantly downplays the importance of the Holy Spirit in

[30] For more on MacDonald and childhood see Pazdziora *Haunted Childhoods*.

MacDonald's thinking (137). Because of De Jong's attention to the divine father/child relationship (e.g. God the Father/Jesus and God/Humanity), the three-way relationality of the Trinity is largely ignored. By contrast, my attention to the role of the Spirit in MacDonald's Trinitarian thinking offers theological resources for understanding his views on reading, interpretation, and the revelatory potential of literary forms.

My Reading of MacDonald

Although this thesis is primarily concerned with MacDonald as a literary scholar and theologian, I engage with a range of his texts including his novels, fantasy, poetry, non-fiction essays, and lectures. Particularly in the case of MacDonald, there is a risk in presuming that particular forms only do certain things (e.g. that it is only in a sermon or essay, as opposed to a fairytale, that theological work may be done). Not only does his interest in the plural possibilities of form underscore the importance of attending to this aspect of his own writings, but a closer consideration of his work demonstrates the various ways in which he uses forms for purposes that might not be immediately apparent. This is most striking in the theological work he undertakes in his literary lectures and essays. As this thesis demonstrates, MacDonald's readings of the literary forms of writers such as Tennyson and Shakespeare not only comment upon the 'literary' elements (whether aesthetic, thematic, linguistic, or other), but also enact a particular mode of theological thought and expression. By considering the multiple literary forms MacDonald himself chooses to employ, this thesis not only represents the breadth of his literary work, but also highlights the different forms by which his theology is communicated.

For MacDonald, theology cannot be expressed solely in propositional terms, for it requires a dynamic notion of form for its conception and articulation. For this reason,

attending to the different forms of writing MacDonald employs also enables us to better appreciate just how intertwined the literary and theological are for him. As this thesis demonstrates, MacDonald's understanding of both theology and form makes it nearly impossible to create clear-cut distinctions between 'the literary' and 'the religious' in his work. To consider MacDonald's thought without reference to the different forms he uses to express it (whether it is a written sermon, a novel, or a lecture on Shakespeare), is, therefore, to fail to recognise the distinctive theological work that MacDonald understands literary forms to do. Any attempt to come to grips with MacDonald's ideas on reading form without reference to his theology ignores the central and shaping idea of his dynamic notion of literary form: the Trinity. By tracing the ways in which his Trinitarian-influenced notion of form is articulated across his work, this thesis reflects MacDonald's own ideas concerning the need for a variety of forms in order to engage with or communicate theological reality.

Chapter One of my thesis considers MacDonald's use of the metaphor of the 'journey home' as a theological form through which he articulates key aspects of his understanding of Christianity. MacDonald held that Christianity is not primarily a system of doctrines or set of practices, but an active love-driven relationship with a Trinitarian God. This God is himself a loving community, who draws and invites human beings to participate in his divine life of love. While all things are created and sustained by God—and therefore exist in him—there is still a need for human beings to align themselves with God in order to find themselves at home in the universe. MacDonald explores this notion of home in his commentary on Dante, which he reads as a depiction of the journey back home to God. For both MacDonald and Dante, writers play an important guiding role in this journey, and need not be religious in order to serve as reliable spiritual guides. In the case of MacDonald, this belief is bound up in his own conviction that all people will eventually find their way back to God. MacDonald's

universalism is distinctly at odds with Dante's famous depiction of Hell—a depiction that had captured the Victorian imagination, but which MacDonald sought to correct both in his lectures on Dante, and in *Lilith* (1895). In the latter, he reworks the *Divine Comedy* and the parable of the prodigal son in order to communicate his own universalist theology.

The second chapter considers MacDonald's conception of poetic word-music, and the role that it plays in the communication of spiritual knowledge. For him, one of poetry's essential and defining characteristics is musicality, a claim that stems from his ideas concerning the way in which spiritual knowledge is apprehended and communicated. In his mind, it is not primarily through the intellect, but through feeling that a person apprehends truth about God or one's relation to him. This is why MacDonald held that poetry is one of the best ways to convey spiritual knowledge or experience, for it is a mode of expression that affects or impresses meanings upon the reader or listener through its sounds. MacDonald believed there to be a connection between poetry and prayer, for in his mind prayer does not only take the form of a verbal petition or expression of thanksgiving, but also a directing of attention or feeling towards God. Because of the relationship between poetry and feeling, MacDonald held that the reading and writing of poetry has the potential to be a form of prayer. MacDonald's ideas concerning the relationship between spiritual knowledge and word-music shape his commentary on Tennyson's poetry. For him, music is the key to unlocking *In Memoriam* (1850), a poem MacDonald reads as both an expression of doubt and a magnificent expression of poetic prayer.

In Chapter Three I explore MacDonald's claim that reading is an act that has the potential to raise a dead writer back to life. For MacDonald, reading is best understood in terms of a conversation between the writer and reader, for conversation and reading possess a number of shared qualities, including a need for openness and attention to the other, as well as

an element of unpredictability concerning the final result. MacDonald articulates his notion of reading as conversation in the register of Spiritualism—a choice that, this chapter argues, is an attempt to subvert the language of Spiritualism in order to present reading as an alternative to Spiritualist practice. Central to MacDonald's ideas concerning resurrective reading is the imagination, which is vital in connecting the living reader and dead writer, and which MacDonald associates with the transformative and resurrecting presence of the Holy Spirit. By bringing together his ideas on reading and the Holy Spirit, MacDonald invests his idea of conversational reading with a spiritual significance that leads him to claim a connection between the living reader and the dead writer that is more than a simple figure of speech. In addition, MacDonald regarded reading not simply as a way of connecting with the dead, but as an act that has the potential to transform the reader into a better version of herself. This transformation is distinctly theological, for it comes not from a sympathetic engagement with a book, or an increase in intellectual understanding, but by the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. MacDonald's notion of this transformative, resurrective reading is depicted in his fantasy novels *Phantastes* and *Lilith*—works that not only invite the reader into her own conversation with the text, but which present reading as a theological form by which MacDonald explores the idea of resurrection.

My fourth chapter considers MacDonald's understanding of drama as an inherently dynamic, relational form, doing so in light of his commentary on Shakespeare. For MacDonald, the form of a play emerges from, and is shaped by, the interplay of characters who are themselves in perpetual flux. This is why he regards character, not action, as primary. It is also why he insists that, in order to understand the play, the reader must attend to the development of the individual characters—and their relations to one another—over the course of the entire work. In addition, MacDonald held that drama is dynamic in its need for the

reader to creatively participate in the play's interpretation, for drama conveys its meaning through the speeches and actions of the characters and therefore requires that the reader use her imagination to fill in the gaps of what is explicitly stated. In MacDonald's understanding, the key to Shakespeare's masterful characterisation lies in his capacity to view other people through the eyes of love—a vision that allows him to look past superficial differences in order to perceive the essential humanity within each person. MacDonald held that it is Trinitarian love that creates life and holds all of creation together—a belief that is inextricably bound up in MacDonald's understanding of Shakespeare's drama as a dynamic, relational form. Love has bearing not only upon the way in which MacDonald conceived of the way in which Shakespeare crafted his plays, but also upon the way in which he believed the plays should be interpreted, for MacDonald encourages the reader of Shakespeare to interpret the plays along the grain by reading them through the lens of loving vision. This can be seen in MacDonald's reading of *Hamlet*—a reading that leads to some controversial conclusions concerning the play, and which reveals MacDonald's belief that reading Shakespeare may act as a form of spiritual practice that will help the reader become a more loving person.

My conclusion draws together the central strands of my argument and highlights some of the contributions this thesis makes to scholarly conversation. It also draws attention to some avenues for future research that have been opened up as a result of the work I have done in this thesis.

Chapter One: Journeying Home: Theological Movement in Dante and *Lilith*

Introduction

For those familiar with the work of Victorian writers such as John Ruskin and Coventry Patmore, references to 'home' in the nineteenth century are likely to conjure up images of a middle-class idyll: a place free from 'terror, doubt, and division' (Ruskin, *Of Queens' Gardens* 21), sheltered from the hostile outside world, and watched over by the (now-infamous) Angel in the House. The home referred to by these writers is, of course, a physical place, but as Monica F. Cohen notes, in the domestic ideology that regards home as a 'secularized holy ground', home 'is most distinctly a state of mind', for 'home is only "true" if it can be correlated to psychological comfort' (1). By drawing out associations between home and work in the writings of novelists such as Oliphant, Dickens, and Eliot, Cohen offers an alternative to a Ruskin-centric account of Victorian domestic ideology and complicates simplistic notions of nineteenth-century gender-distinct spheres. Cohen is far from alone in thinking about Victorian ideas of home in terms of gender roles, public and private space, and the relationship between the physical and imagined home.[1] There are good reasons why this is so, but my concern in this chapter is with another type of nineteenth-century home that has received less critical attention—the spiritual home.

For many Victorians, it was their spiritual home rather than their family home that seemed to be most under threat. The faithful continued to attend to their chosen 'house of God'[2] each Sunday, and religion was present in most areas of Victorian life. However, the climate of religious debate and dissent caused many to feel that their once-stable spiritual

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[1] See, for instance, Boardman and Fasick.

[2] The 'house of God' is a recurring image throughout the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament (see Ps. 122.1; Is. 2.3; 2 Cor. 5. 1– 2; Phil. 3.20; John 14.2).

home was now a place of uncertainty and discord. Joshua King writes that the divisions within and without the Anglican Church, coupled with the completion of the 'process of demolishing exclusive ties between [the Anglican] Church and the British state, meant that British identity could not be securely linked to a dominant religious institution' (*Imagined* 8). Alongside this challenge to religious and national identity, controversies over points of doctrine fostered the feelings of instability: geological discoveries called into question literal interpretations of the Genesis creation account; the 1860 publication of *Essays and Reviews* exposed the general public to new ideas about Scripture imported from German Higher Criticism; and moral qualms made a belief in eternal damnation increasing uncomfortable. These, and other, looming doctrinal debates would likely have pressed many Victorians to acknowledge the likelihood of Matthew Arnold's claim that there is 'not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve' (xvii). While doubt has often been understood by critics to indicate a loss of faith, this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, for many Victorians questions about faith were not a loss, but a disruption—a shifting in the grounds of faith and a reconsideration of what a spiritual 'home' might look and feel like.

Victorian Christians might have been divided on points of doctrine as they endeavoured to locate spiritual homes, but they were largely united in their habit of reading. While reading material and modes of reading differed, the growth of a new reading public in Britain impacted the way in which religious thought was communicated and meant that it was no longer simply the educated elite who had access to books and periodicals. As Jesse Cordes Selbin notes, there was some anxiety that this new literary culture 'had come to offer [the working class] more in the way of escapist distraction than moral improvement' (499). For many cultural and religious leaders, though, the growth in literacy was treated as an

opportunity to provide spiritual direction. McKelvy writes that it 'was in the midst of the notorious Victorian crisis of faith that religious professionals were most likely to address the community and the nation as authors' (12). Whether it was through sermons, reviews, fiction, or poetry, the British reading public continued to be religiously instructed, regardless of whether they attended church on a Sunday or not.

MacDonald was one of these religious professionals who addressed an international congregation through his itinerant preaching, fiction and non-fiction writing, and his lectures as a literary scholar. Dubois notes this, explaining that MacDonald's 'literary career was in one sense a stand-in for the pulpit' (577). As Dubois goes on to demonstrate, this literary preaching is evident not only in MacDonald's realist novels (which are frequently narrated by clergymen and often feature full-length sermons), but also, and more subtly, in his fairytales. MacDonald's use of varied literary forms to 'preach'—a term that he describes in one of his novels as 'that rare speech of a man to his fellow-men whereby in their inmost hearts they know that he in his inmost heart believes' (*AF* 243)—demonstrates both his understanding of the theological work that literary forms can do, and the importance he placed upon literature as a means of communicating divine truth. From his literary pulpit, MacDonald often addressed issues related to the so-called 'crisis of faith', including what to do with a sense of spiritual homelessness. For MacDonald, 'true' home was not to be found in a family residence, no matter how peaceful and loving it may be, nor in a church building: home could only be found in the arms of God himself.

This chapter explores MacDonald's use of the metaphor of the 'journey home' as a theological form by which he articulates key aspects of his understanding of Christianity. His belief that theological forms shape how faith is imagined, understood, and expressed—with the resulting bearing this has on the way in which one thinks about God, one's self, and the

world—led to his formulation of the 'journey home' as a way of conceptualising the life of faith. The image of the journey conveys MacDonald's view of Christianity not as a static system of belief that is grounded by propositional truths or unchangeable rituals, but as an active, love-motivated relationship with a Trinitarian God. For MacDonald, God is the active source and centre of all things, including human life. Although life includes some movement away from God, it is, ultimately, characterised by movement towards him. MacDonald's equation of God with home communicates his belief that the ultimate end of human existence—oneness with God—is not a static state of eternal sameness, but a condition characterised by an endlessly creative and dynamic love. By considering MacDonald's notion of the journey home in light of his work as a writer and literary scholar, this chapter demonstrates the central place of narrative in his understanding of the life of faith. At the same time, it highlights how his dynamic conception of form—in this case narrative form—offers him a theological mode by which to explore his ideas concerning the eternally-creative journey home.

The first section of this chapter will discuss MacDonald's conception of home. It will argue that, for MacDonald, religion is not first and foremost a set of doctrines or liturgical practices, but a universal 'home' in which even the doubters and skeptics of his age would find a room. It will begin by exploring MacDonald's understanding of home in light of his narrative-based theology, which emphasises the importance of metaphor and narrative in understanding and communicating religious truth. From here, I move to consider *Lilith*, the work in which MacDonald's idea of home is most cohesively communicated. As a fantasy novel, *Lilith* is particularly well-suited to MacDonald's exploration of the journey home, for it allows him to set his narrative of Mr Vane's literal journey home in a world ordered by different physical and metaphysical 'laws.' In this way, it enables him to convey the somewhat

abstract notion of journeying home to be where one already is. Fantasy offered MacDonald a level of freedom that did not seem available through realism.

MacDonald's ideas concerning the journey home are articulated not only in his fiction, but also in his scholarly work on Dante. Milbank writes that many 'thoughtful citizens' of nineteenth-century Britain had an 'awareness of loss and dislocation', and that Dante became a figure that 'both embodie[d] their metaphysical exile', while also healing it 'by reversing the Victorian's dilemma. Where they experience[d] geographical centrality yet metaphysical homelessness, Dante experienced actual exile yet a unified metaphysical system' (*Dante and the Victorians* 1). MacDonald's engagement with Dante in his sermons, lectures, and novel *Lilith*, focuses a great deal on the idea of home. Indeed, the *Divine Comedy* is, for him a depiction of the journey home as he conceives it. In MacDonald's view, every person is a child of God who has wandered from the Father, and all of life is a return journey back to him. For both MacDonald and Dante, writers had an important role to play in guiding a person on that return journey. This section will focus upon the relationship between writer and reader on the journey home. It will turn once again to *Lilith*, in which MacDonald imagines an entire spiritual community of writer-guides, before moving to consider MacDonald's lectures on Dante, which raises the question of whether a non-religious writer can be considered a reliable guide. Given that MacDonald was writing during a period in which the rise of readership led to heated debates concerning proper religious reading, his views on the 'religious reading' of non-religious texts provides a revealing avenue of thought about nineteenth-century religious reading culture. As this second section of the chapter will demonstrate, religious reading is, for MacDonald, more about the mode of reading and the communication of aspects of the 'essential truth' than it is about the use of explicitly Christian language.

The third section of this chapter will explore the relation between MacDonald's understanding of home and his belief in universal salvation. The Victorians were notoriously fascinated with the next world and eschatology. The study of the 'four last things' (death, judgment, heaven, and hell) was, Michael Wheeler observes, 'a highly controversial subject in the Victorian Age' (*Heaven* 4). Dante's depiction of the afterlife shaped the Victorian imagination in significant ways—including the imaginations of those Victorians whose theological convictions differed from the Italian poet's. Much to MacDonald's chagrin, however, out of all the volumes of the *Divine Comedy*, it was the *Inferno* that appeared to have the strongest hold on the popular imagination. For Dante, of course, some souls never reach their true home but are doomed to remain apart from God for eternity. For MacDonald, though, all souls would one day discover their true home in God. This remains the case even if, for many, the journey would continue into the next life. In his writing on the subject of the return home, MacDonald often references the well-known parable of the prodigal son. In the final section of my chapter, I examine universal salvation and MacDonald's interest in everyone's journey home. My main texts here are *Lilith*, in which MacDonald reworks elements of both the prodigal son parable and the *Divine Comedy*, a text that MacDonald engaged with in order to tell his own version of the story of the (prodigal) soul's dynamic and open return home.

The 'Journey Home' as a Theological Form

Religion is not, for MacDonald, static or monolithic. Instead, it manifests in a variety of forms, all of which adapt to the shifts that occur with the passing of time. MacDonald's recognition of the variety of shifting forms that religion might take anticipates Charles Taylor's groundbreaking work *A Secular Age* (2007), in which Taylor critiques the 'mainline'

secularisation thesis, which supposes the 'uniform and unilinear [negative] effect of modernity on religious belief and practice' (461). Taylor acknowledges that certain historical changes (such as urbanisation, industrialisation, migration, etc.) broke down many of the existing forms of religion, but he argues that a large number of people actually 'responded to the breakdown by developing new religious forms' (436). The development of these new forms has, by and large, been overlooked by proponents of the mainline secularisation thesis, largely because of their failure to recognise the inevitable interpretive judgements involved in defining the nature of religion. According to Taylor, proponents of the mainline declinist account of secularisation have tended to identify religion with a particular historical form (say, twelfth-century Catholicism), and have therefore seen every aberration from that form as an indication of religious decline. In omitting to recognise religion's complex and fluid nature, however, the mainline thesis not only perpetuates a simplistic understanding of religion, but it also fails to provide an adequate account of secularisation that includes the 'recompositions of spiritual life in new forms' (Taylor 437).

By contrast, Taylor's preferred model of secularisation allows us to take seriously the perspectives of writers like MacDonald who did not always interpret the Victorian 'crisis of faith' as a crisis at all.[3] For him, shifts in religious form are necessary for spiritual growth and not only affect how religion is practiced, but also how it is understood and talked about. As a writer, literary scholar, and minister, MacDonald's understanding of language and literature are closely tied to his theology. His appreciation of the multivalent nature of language, his belief in God's supra-rational complexity, and his understanding of progressive revelation, led to his general suspicion of systematic theology. He wrote in a letter to his father, 'We are far

[3] As Larsen points out, the frequent conversations that the Victorians themselves had about the 'crisis of faith' should be viewed as measures both of their religiosity and their high level of concern, rather than as an indicator of a widespread crisis of faith (*Crisis* 10).

too anxious to be definite, & have finished, well-polished, sharp-edged systems – forgetting that the more perfect a theory about the infinite, the surer it is to be wrong, the more impossible it is to be right' (Sadler 51). For him, it was poetry and narrative that offered more effective ways of comprehending and communicating spiritual truths.[4] Figurative language and narrative lack the defined edges of a systematic theology; they have the capacity to convey multiple layers of meaning. MacDonald writes that parabolic form (which he defines as 'a picture in words, where more is meant than meets the ear' [*AC* 194]), is 'the first in which truth will admit of being embodied. Nor is this all: it is likewise the fullest' (*US I.* 49). The use of the word 'embodied', and MacDonald's reference to the apprehension of meaning through the imagination ('picture'), intellect ('word'), and senses ('ear'), reveals his recognition of the variety of ways in which literary forms communicate meaning. His claim that forms such as the parable offer the 'fullest' mode for conveying truth not only gestures towards his understanding of the multiplicity of means through which literary forms communicate meaning, but also reflects his recognition of the slipperiness of apprehending or articulating spiritual truth.[5] This is why poetic or narrative-based modes are, for him, able to do better work than propositions in disclosing knowledge about a God who reveals himself throughout history yet transcends human reason.

MacDonald was no stranger to the way in which language can ossify through over-use. He recognised that when words or phrases lose their potency through over-familiarity, the meaning that they are meant to communicate can appear valueless or irrelevant. For this reason, he maintained that there is a need for the continued creation of new language and

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[4] In this MacDonald anticipates the narrative theology of thinkers such as Stanley Hauerwas, who emphasises the need for metaphor when undertaking theology, and writes that there 'is no more fundamental way to talk of God than in story' (25).

[5] MacDonald's understanding of parable corresponds with Colón's reading of Paul Riceour's theory of parable as 'narratives that depict the extraordinary in the ordinary' (ix).

poetry—forms made for the sake of human self-expression and for the revelation of divine truths. MacDonald believed that the imagination is responsible for seeking out meaning and for expressing 'the inner world of the mind' ('The Imagination' 9), and that the new linguistic forms that are created in order to express that inner world are inherently poetic. He writes that 'poetry is the source of all the language that belongs to the inner world, whether it be of passion or of metaphysics, of psychology or of aspiration' ('The Imagination' 9). Divine revelation, too, belongs to the 'inner world' and, therefore, it is through the use of the imagination's poetry-creating function that revelation is best communicated. While the idea of revelation through poetic language may conjure up notions of the poet as an elevated figure who speaks for the divine, MacDonald's notion of divine revelation through poetry is more democratic. For him, every human being possesses (to varying degrees) a 'poetic faculty' of imagination ('Dr George MacDonald on Poetry'), and is also granted a unique and personal revelation of God (although in some cases a person might not recognise it as such [*US* 229]). What sets great poets like Wordsworth or Tennyson apart from their peers, then, is not an exclusive link to the divine, but simply a greater capacity or opportunity for cultivating the poetic imagination.

MacDonald's belief in the need for the creation of new linguistic and poetic forms to communicate spiritual truth can be seen in his claims concerning the need for new theological forms. In a letter to his father, written to allay his concerns about MacDonald's theology, he writes:

> [D]oes not all history teach us that the forms in which truth has been taught, after being held heartily for a time, have by degrees come to be held merely traditionally and have died out and other forms arisen? … There are some in every age who can see

> the essential truth through the form, and hold by that, and who are not alarmed at a change; but others, and they the most by far, cannot see this, and think all is rejected by one who rejects the *form* of a truth which they count essential, while he sees that it teaches error as well as truth, and is less fitted for men now that it was at another period of history and stage of mental development. (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 197)

MacDonald here makes several significant points. There is, first, the distinction between what he terms the 'essential truth' and the religious or theological form through which that truth is communicated. Similar to the way in which a word can lose its meaning by over-use, so a religious form (by which MacDonald means anything from the pattern of liturgy, to a theological idea, to the structure of a song of worship, to the act of going to a certain church), may also be practiced or held after it has become meaningless tradition.

This is not the only factor involved, however. MacDonald believed that while the Bible, history, and poetry demonstrate the 'constant and consistent way of God' ('The Imagination' 40), as experienced by people in different cultures and times, there are also particular beliefs that may once have been held, but which now must be shed in keeping with a more recent 'stage of mental development' and additional, personal revelation. MacDonald was adamant that the Bible's purpose was to point the reader to Jesus and that, once this relationship had been established, the Holy Spirit would reveal to each person 'the deep things of God' (*US I.* 25). MacDonald agreed with Christian tradition that the fulness of God's revelation was to be found in Jesus, but maintained that God's revelation is so significant and meaningful that human beings will be constantly discovering new truths with each generation. These fresh revelations are given to individual people and are then to be shared with others. The result is a progressively wider understanding of God. It is likely that MacDonald's belief

in progressive and individual revelation had a great deal to do with his attitude towards the religious shifts taking place in the nineteenth century. His understanding of revelation enabled him to recognise that what was occurring around him was not a decline in religion but simply a shift in its form. He writes that 'there is much more religion in the world than ever, but it is not so much in the churches, or religious communities in proportion, as it was at one time' (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 198). MacDonald's awareness of the way in which, to borrow Levine's phrase, 'forms are everywhere structuring and patterning experiences' (16), enabled him to see the presence of religious forms where others did not recognise them as such. It also meant that, for him, the shifts taking place during the nineteenth century evoked no fear that the essential religious truth would be lost, but were, rather, like growing pains: an indication of healthy spiritual progress.

The idea of a progressive revelation that brings to light new facets of 'essential truth' is central to my reading of MacDonald's interest in forms and his insistence on the importance of developing new forms in order to discover more of this truth. MacDonald's understanding of 'essential truth' lies at the core of all of his thinking—including his response to the 'crisis of faith'. For him, God himself is essential truth. Not only does all truth originate from God, but it also reflects something of his nature. In this, MacDonald's thought echoes the medieval idea of a sacramental universe, in which there is consistency and correspondence 'between the eternal and heavenly patterns within God's mind, patterns within human thinking and the visible, physical universe' (Dearborn 73).[6] MacDonald's sacramental understanding is inflected with his belief that love is the essence of God—a characteristic that requires a

[6] Milbank observes that throughout the nineteenth century 'the experience of secularism rendered the world and human beings more autonomous, and the need for sacramental mediation the more acute for Christian writers in an increasingly disenchanted landscape' (*God and the Gothic* 189). MacDonald is undoubtedly one of these writers whose fiction demonstrates a 'sacramental order … a way of mediating between the spiritual and physical realms' (Milbank 240), and whose non-fiction work encourages his audience to cultivate a sacramental vision of reality.

dynamic relationship with an 'other'. In keeping with traditional Christian theology, MacDonald believed in a Trinitarian God, consisting of three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), who is himself a loving community. The members of the Trinity, while three persons, are one because of the manner in which they 'mutually and reciprocally give to and receive from each other everything that they are' (Gunton 186). Not only does the nature of God consist of a dynamic love relationship, then, but it also represents a complete unity made, paradoxically, of separate persons. The theological term for this conception of God's being is *perichoresis*, and it forms the core of MacDonald's understanding of reality and truth. He claims in an 1888 sermon that '[t]he secret of the whole story of humanity is the love between the Father and the Son. That is at the root of it all. Upon the love between the Son and the Father hangs the whole universe' ('Mary' 278). While MacDonald here particularly emphasises the Father-Son relationship, he makes reference elsewhere to the Holy Spirit, often depicting him as the manifestation of God's love or as the creative source of new life, yet still as a distinct person of the Trinity.[7] In MacDonald's understanding, God's creation of all things is an overflowing of the Trinity's love. Therefore, as creatures born of love and made in the image of a God of love, humans were always intended to be one with God in his loving community.

Given that MacDonald's 'essential truth' is a dynamic love that wills the good of others by drawing them into loving community, it becomes clearer as to why he maintained that whatever form communicates God's love is acceptable, and that, although no one form is capable of completely expressing the essential truth, each can, at least, act as a means by which a person might meet God. One of the theological forms through which MacDonald seeks to articulate his understanding of the essential truth, and encourage an encounter with

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[7] See, for instance, *US I. (*25, 30), *US III*. (215) and 'The Imagination' (28).

God, is the metaphor of the journey home. Home, for MacDonald, is God himself, and to be one with him is to be at home. The metaphor of the journey home is an important one for MacDonald, for it brings together key theological ideas (such as the fundamental human need for loving relationship with God, the necessity of activity and movement in the life of faith, and so on), and links them with narrative form. In MacDonald's view, the first step in being at home is to take some kind of loving action – to '[g]et up, and do something the master [Jesus] tells you' (*US II.* 193). It is not enough simply to intellectually assent to particular ideas about God. His nature is one of active love, and therefore to be one with him requires loving activity, however that may manifest itself (e.g. feeding the hungry, speaking a word of encouragement to a friend, practicing patience or trust). Placing his own idea into the mouth of the vicar-narrator of his novel *The Seaboard Parish*, MacDonald asserts that God's 'thoughts, his will, his love, his judgment, are man's home. To think his thoughts, to choose his will, to love his loves, to judge his judgments, and thus to know that he is in us, with us, is to be at home.' (606). In this respect MacDonald's account of home is similar to what the sociologist Shelley Mallett describes as 'being-at-home (in the world)'—a conception that sees home as a state of being rather than a physical location, and which focuses on the practices that lead to a sense of feeling at home (79). MacDonald was careful not to stipulate what practices were required, however, for he believed that God's spirit would speak to each person individually, revealing to them what loving action they should pursue. As this pattern of love-motivated action becomes habit, a person's thoughts, will, love, and judgement are aligned with those of God. This leads to a feeling of at-homeness, for not only is a person going along the grain of the universe (which, like everything, was created out of God's love and therefore operates on the same 'laws' of love), but she is also participating in the loving Trinitarian community.

Although being at home is, in one sense, about activity, it is also about identity. In MacDonald's view, every human being is God's child by virtue of the fact that she has been made by him, and the core of her identity is found in this child-parent relationship. By acknowledging her dependency upon God, and her child's-right to his provision and care, a person becomes free to inhabit the world in a way similar to that of a child inhabiting a loving family home: she knows she is loved and accepted as herself and is therefore enabled to develop into a unique and healthy adult self. MacDonald believed that every person has been made unique and therefore, while God is the Father of all, each person worships, needs, and communicates with God in different ways. MacDonald writes that each person has within them 'a loneliness, an inner chamber of peculiar life into which God only can enter', and that the ways and places in which a person meets with God (the shape, as it were, of that inner chamber) reveal something about that person's 'true self' (*US I.* 42-43). Each time an individual trusts and lives out of that 'true self', he not only becomes more of the person he was made to be, but something more of God's nature is revealed to him and in him. In some senses, MacDonald's understanding of a human 'self' resonates with sociologist Christian Smith's claim that human beings are 'moral, believing animals' whose lives and relationships are shaped and patterned by 'moral premises, convictions, and obligations' (8), and based upon a trust in certain 'sets of basic assumptions and beliefs' (46). However, while Smith is more concerned with making the case that 'we have not really come to terms with human beings—ourselves—until we come to understand human persons as fundamentally moral, believing animals' (4), MacDonald's intention is to point his readers to the Trinitarian God. This is because, for him, relationship with God and knowledge of self—coming 'to terms with human beings'—are inextricable: to be at home in God is to become one's truest self.

The regrettable thing, for MacDonald, is that although each person is a child of God, every one has wandered from her home in God and forgotten who she is. Because of this, her life is a constant endeavour to find what MacDonald terms the 'home centre': a place of 'unity and harmony', and which is for a person both the 'centre of recipiency' and of 'active agency' ('Browning's "Christmas Eve"' 211, 214). MacDonald's characterisation of the home centre as a place of 'recipiency' and 'active agency' reflects his understanding of the dynamic outflowing and receiving of love between the persons of the Trinity, and his belief that each 'child' is invited to enter into this divine communion. Although the return home is a journey that continues throughout one's life, there is also a sense in which a person is already home even as she journeys to be *at* home. In a lecture on Dante, MacDonald builds his argument on St. Paul's assertion that in God 'we live and move and have our being' and tells his listeners that 'the worst of us, the one that least cares for God, can live nowhere but in Him' ('Dante's Purgatorio'). Initially, this statement appears to contradict the idea that a person must return to God in order to be at home, for if everyone must necessarily live in him, then it seems that they are already home. The key to solving this apparent contradiction lies, once again, in MacDonald's understanding of the essential truth of Christianity. On one level it is impossible for a person to exist without living in God's love, for God himself, who is love, created and sustains all things. To fully receive that love, however, requires some kind of acknowledgement of it. To put it in MacDonald's terms, the beginning of the return home is a recognition that one is not *at* home and must set out to 'return where I am'.[8]

[8] There are some striking parallels between MacDonald's interest in the nature of love and salvation, home, and the return of the prodigal, and Marilynne Robinson's more recent theological exploration of the same themes in novels such as *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008). Both writers also have Congregationalism in common, and share an interest in John Calvin although, unlike MacDonald, Robinson is well-known for her defence of Calvin.

The Homelessness of Mr Vane

Aspects of MacDonald's conception of the journey home appear throughout his nonfiction writings, but his commitment to the idea that literary forms do particular theological work means that it is in *Lilith*, his final work of fantasy, that the idea is explored most overtly and, arguably, most effectively. *Lilith* is often considered by critics to be MacDonald's 'most difficult and disturbing piece of writing' (Kreglinger 168)—an evaluation that is due both to the symbolic complexity of the novel, and to its treatment of the theme of death. Stephen Prickett terms the novel a '*Todsroman:* a death-romance' (*Victorian Fantasy* 200), and Colin Manlove claims that it 'is wholly organized by the theme of death and resurrection' (*Modern Fantasy* 79). Gisela Kreglinger notes the novel's 'complex matrix of metaphors' and reads MacDonald's particular use of death metaphors as a parabolic strategy by which he disturbs and challenges his reader 'to join Mr Vane on his journey' (206). I agree with Kreglinger that MacDonald likely intended his book as a prompt or invitation to the reader to make her own spiritual journey, and readily acknowledge that death is one of *Lilith*'s primary themes.[9] That being said, the consistent critical focus on *Lilith*'s treatment of death has obscured other key elements of the text—specifically, the metaphor of the journey home.

Lilith's success in conveying the journey home comes, in part, from MacDonald's choice to translate the metaphor into narrative form. The narrative is structured around the meandering journey of the protagonist, Mr Vane, who, in his attempts to find himself at home, journeys outward to explore new places, and repeatedly returns to the house from which he began. The structure of the narrative reflects MacDonald's notion of the journey home, which, for him, may wend many ways depending on a person's choices or circumstances, and often requires her to re-examine the familiar and to encounter the new and the strange. Additionally,

[9] Indeed, in Chapter Three I explore the theme of death and resurrection in *Lilith*.

MacDonald's choice of the fantasy genre allows him to explore the paradoxical (and somewhat abstract) idea of journeying to be at home where one already is.[10] He does this by placing Vane in a world made up of several overlapping dimensions where Vane is, in a sense, able to be in two places at once.[11] For many Victorians, the paradigm-shifting sense of dislocation and homelessness that precipitates Vane's journey may well have been a familiar one. It is perhaps this identification that the minister-writer MacDonald counts on as the reader imaginatively journeys with Vane through the confusion of a world, and a sense of self, that feel increasingly uncanny and unstable.

Vane appears, at first, to be the epitome of social and economic stability: he is young and intelligent, freshly graduated from Oxford, and has recently returned to his ancestral home in order to take over the management of his estate. What the reader soon discovers, however, is that Vane's large house and old family name merely mask the fact that he does not know who he truly is. Indeed, this is gestured at in Vane's name itself. Johnson notes that the word 'vane' is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'an unstable or constantly changing person or thing' and has an alternative spelling—'fane', which is used by MacDonald for the name of his protagonist in an early draft of *Lilith* ('Conversing' 27). At the same time that MacDonald indicates Vane's social and economic stability, his choice of the

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[10] For a complementary reading of how MacDonald uses the 'laws' of fairyland to explore the 'quest for the home-centre' in his children's fairytales, see Gabelman (144-172).

[11] MacDonald's use of fantasy to explore the idea of being in two places at once has been a source of interest since *Lilith*'s publication. HG Wells was particularly impressed with MacDonald's handling of the idea and wrote to him in 1895 to tell him so: 'I have been reading your *Lilith* with exceptional interest. Curiously enough I have been at work on a book based on essentially the same idea, namely that, assuming more than three dimensions, it follows that there must be wonderful worlds nearer to us than breathing and closer than hands and feet. I have wanted to get into such kindred worlds for the purposes of romance for several years, but I've been bothered by the way. Your polarisation and mirror business struck me as neat in the extreme' (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 323-324). For more on HG Wells, the fantastic, and the idea of reading as an experience of being in two places at once, see Plotz. For a response to Plotz that demonstrates how theology might offer us resources for thinking about semi-detached reading and the configuration between different worlds, see Knight 'Wells, Chesterton, and a Theology of Semi-Detached Reading.'

name ‘Vane’ underscores the instability of his protagonist’s spiritual state, indicating the significance MacDonald places upon the spiritual direction one is heading when it comes to matters of identity and belonging.[12] Vane’s isolation and fluctuating sense of identity is further hinted at when he informs his reader that, having been orphaned at a young age, he was ‘nearly as much alone in the world as a man might find himself’ (*Lilith* 5). He is, then, an orphan in his own home—a spiritual child who has not yet found his way back to the home-centre.

Initially, Vane seems content with his solitary lifestyle, for he is, he tells the reader, much given to reading and thinking. As he spends time in the library, however, a series of strange occurrences begin, ultimately shaking up his existing paradigm and forcing him to confront his own homeless state. After catching several fleeting glimpses of a strange figure in the library, Vane discovers that the house was for many years haunted by an old gentleman, a Mr Raven who, according to local legend, was the librarian to one of Vane’s ancestors. At Mr Raven’s third appearance, Vane follows him out of the room, and up a series of staircases into a ‘region almost unknown’ to him (10). By the time he reaches the shadowy main garret of the house, however, Mr Raven is nowhere in sight. Entering an inclosure in the middle of the room, Vane finds a tall, dust-covered mirror which, rather than reflecting his own image back, contains a picture of a landscape. Having followed his curiosity through the library (the significance of which will be discussed in the second section of this chapter), Vane ascends into an unknown region of his mind, symbolised by the attic spaces. Entering into the most hidden and central part of that place, he finds that he is confronted not with a reflection of himself—for he does not know himself—but of a landscape of ‘desolate hills’ of ‘strange appearance’, and ‘flat and melancholy moorland’ (11). Initially, Vane thinks he has simply

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[12] For MacDonald, the question of whether one is moving in the direction of home is far more important than where one actually is on the journey.

mistaken the mirror for a painting, and is thus able to explain away the wild and unknown landscape that reflects back to him his own spiritual homelessness. He is, after all, still safe in his own house. A moment later, however, he spies a raven moving towards him. Stepping forward to take a closer look, he stumbles on the frame of the mirror and finds himself 'in the open air, on a houseless heath' where 'all was vague and uncertain' – the only certainty being 'that I saw nothing I knew' (11-12).

Plunged into a new and strange reality that is, on one level, a reflection of his own mind, Vane attempts to understand where he is and how he has arrived in this place. Because he does not know himself, however, his attempts to understand the world around him, and his relation to that world, end in frustration. The raven (the human Mr Raven in another form), informs Vane that he has come into this world 'through the door' (12). Vane protests that he 'did not come through any door … I never saw any door!' (13), to which Mr Raven replies 'all the doors you had yet seen – and you haven't seen many – were doors in; here you came upon a door out! The strange thing to you … will be, that the more doors you go out of, the farther you get in!' (13). This somewhat enigmatic set of statements becomes clearer when interpreted in light of MacDonald's views concerning the relationship between knowing one's identity as a child of God and the way in which that knowledge of self affects one's relation to the wider world. For MacDonald, the natural world is infused with meaning, and therefore can be understood imperfectly through the 'outside' level of facts (i.e. how many petals there are on a particular type of flower), or on the higher 'inside' level of truth (i.e. what the flower can tell us about its nature and, consequently, about its creator). According to MacDonald, human beings discover aspects of the natural world 'by working inward from without, while [God] works outward from within', but, MacDonald claims, we will never truly 'understand the world, until we see it in the direction in which he works making it—namely from within

outward. This of course we cannot do *until we are one with him*' (*HG* 50, emphasis mine). To be at home in God is to begin to know things—including one's self—as God knows them, from the inside (truth) out.

This theological understanding of home as the source of true knowledge is depicted in Vane's attempts to make sense of his new experiences. Earlier in the narrative Vane has informed the reader of his enthusiastic, though 'somewhat desultory', study of the physical sciences and the relationship between physical and metaphysical facts and ideas (*Lilith* 5). Now Mr Raven informs him that his attempts to seek out knowledge concerning physical and metaphysical reality are insufficient because he is entering the door of the universe—God's 'house'—in the wrong way. In addition, as Vane begins to realise that he does 'not know' (14) himself, he also recognises that to fail to know one's self is to be unable to differentiate between the self and anything else, for he has 'no grounds to determine [he] was one and not another' (14). Nameless and lost, the only solution to Vane's predicament, Mr Raven tells him, is 'to begin to make yourself at home … by doing something … Anything, and the sooner you begin the better!' (13). Vane may not yet know himself or be capable of understanding where he is, but he can, at least, take what MacDonald calls the 'first step' in being at home: loving action. That an understanding of the self, and the self's relation to the world, is possible only where there is movement of some kind demonstrates MacDonald's Trinitarian-informed understanding of the inextricability of love and action, and the necessity of human participation in making the journey home.

Vane's contentment with a life of isolation and spiritual orphanhood mean that, although he attempts to follow Mr Raven's instructions, he initially meets no one towards whom he can demonstrate loving action. After literally stumbling through another door between the worlds, he returns to what he had thought to be his home—but finds that this

physical location does not alleviate his feeling of homelessness. Rather, it highlights his new sense of dislocation. Upon rising from the ground and finding himself back in the garret with the eagle-topped mirror behind him, Vane flees the little room in terror and races through the garret spaces which now, he remarks, have an 'uncanny look' (16). This sense of dislocation is heightened as, speeding along the passages, stumbling down stairs, and falling against walls, he tells his reader that 'the house had grown strange to me!' (16). Vane's articulation of his sense of the house as 'uncanny' is apt for, as Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs write, 'when one's home is rendered, somehow and in some sense, unfamiliar' and 'one has the experience of being in place and "out of place" simultaneously', it is a sign of an 'uncanny' experience (qtd. in Blunt and Downling 26). Vane's uncanny experience continues even when he finally reaches the safety of the library. His impression is that 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, one or other of whom might appear in the library where I sat! I was nowhere safe!' (*Lilith* 16). The symbolic correspondence between Vane's journey upward to the 'brain' of the building, from which he experiences not only a physical dislocation to another world but an emotional and intellectual disturbance that leaves him feeling unsafe—not-at-home—in his home, is made even more explicit as Vane thinks to himself, 'If I know nothing of my own garret ... what is there to secure me against my own brain?' (16). What Vane experiences in the external world of his house is also, as Andrew Bowie puts it, 'echoed in the feeling that we are not wholly at home with our internal nature, because it is in some respects an alien part of ourselves' ('Romanticism and Music' 250). For MacDonald, who would have been thoroughly familiar with the German Romantic idea of *das*

Unheimliche (lit. the 'unhomely'),[13] the only cure for this homelessness of self is to discover one's home, and thus one's true self, in God.

MacDonald's conviction that a feeling of dislocation or the uncanny can only be resolved by journeying towards one's true home is underscored by Vane's attempts to shut out his unsettling experience and return to his previous sense of security. He does so by resolving not to return to the garret 'brain' of the house, but to remain safely in the library. The situation, however, is beyond his control, for Mr Raven soon reappears and asks him, 'You did not surely think you had got home? I told you there was no going out and in at pleasure until you were at home!' (*Lilith* 19). Mr Raven is proven to be correct as, only moments after the unwilling Vane gives in and steps onto the lawn he finds himself once again 'a stranger in a strange land' (21). Surrounded by a pine-forest—a nod to Dante's awakening in a 'forest dark'—Vane looks around in hopes of finding a way home, then exclaims, 'But, alas! how could I any longer call that house *home*, where every door, every window opened into *Out*, and even the garden I could not keep inside!' (21). At the same time that Vane acknowledges his homelessness, he is told by Mr Raven that, despite his feeling of alienation and the fact that he is in the open air, he is, in some sense, still at home: 'you have not yet left your house, neither has your house left you. At the same time it cannot contain you, or you inhabit it!' (21). This is possible because they are in 'the region of the seven dimensions', where two things may occupy the same physical space, and where time apparently runs according to a different law (21-24). For Vane, these laws of time and space allow him to physically be in his home even as he journeys to feel at home.

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[13] While the term *das Unheimliche* is now primarily associated with Sigmund Freud, it is most likely that MacDonald picked it up from German Romantic writers such as Novalis, by whom he was significantly influenced.

The spatio-temporal laws of *Lilith*'s fantasy world conceptualise the somewhat abstract understanding of how MacDonald conceived of human beings as engaging with spiritual reality. For him, one of the things that keeps a person from being at home is a faulty or misaligned perception of reality. This distorted sense of reality affects the will and actions, and is a large part of why humans feel such a sense of dislocation or homelessness: they are physically 'at home' in the world, but their distorted perception means that they fail to live as they are intended to live. God's creative love is the 'law' of the universe, and therefore human beings have been designed to reflect his creativity and love, each in their own way. He writes that the spiritual 'child sees things as the Father means him to see them, as he thought of them when he uttered them' (*HG* 57). Therefore, when a person's perception is aligned with spiritual reality he will find himself a 'child' at home in God. This is why, for MacDonald, a large element of journeying home is allowing one's perception to be transformed—something that, as Mr Raven tells Vane, requires a person to take 'loving action' even before he perceives it to be a good. A great deal of Vane's journey home is made up of repeated attempts (and failures) to love those he encounters along the way, and to choose to will and act for the good of others, rather than using them to fulfil his own selfish desires.

For Christians, the transformation of perception that happens as a person participates in the loving action of the Trinitarian God is not an erasure of that person's individuality, but rather an expansion of that person's perspective which is made possible by her alignment with the will of God. MacDonald's choice of a first-person narrator is, then, particularly apt for it allows Vane to attempt to convey his own particular journey and experience of transformed perception, while not offering it as the definitive pattern. Indeed, earlier in the narrative Vane interrupts his account to mourn his ability to put into words 'the forms in my mind', which seem to shift and move as soon as he attempts to articulate them (*Lilith* 12-13). Vane's

statement of incapacity in this respect reflects MacDonald's own understanding of the limitations of set forms in conveying dynamic, essential truth. It also means that when Vane does, eventually, find his way home (in a chapter entitled, fittingly, 'The Journey Home'), his account of his experience is primarily an articulation of his impression of what it feels like to be at home in the universe:

> To be aware of a thing, was to know its life at once and mine, to know whence we came, and where we were at home—was to know that we are all what we are, because Another is what he is! … Full indeed – yet ever expanding, ever making room to receive — was the conscious being where things kept entering by so many open doors! (243)

This home—a dynamic state of being, full and enough in itself, and yet constantly reaching out to include everything, making more room to receive new arrivals—is MacDonald's understanding of the triune God. In him, all things hold together in harmony, and as Vane progresses 'home to the Father' (244), he, too, finds that he has begun to see, will, and love with God. Where once Vane saw only objects, he now sees living things. Even the inanimate things are filled with life: 'nothing in this kingdom was dead; nothing was mere; nothing only a thing' (250). Vane no longer finds his surroundings threatening or uncanny, for as he nears the heavenly kingdom his increasing awareness of God's creative life and love—his alignment with God's vision—enables him to embrace even what is unfamiliar.

Vane's Dante-esque journey through the heavenly realms of home takes him right to the throne of God himself, but it does not leave him there. As with his Italian predecessor, Vane must return to tell his tale for the benefit of those who have yet to finish their own

journeys. The end of *Lilith* finds Vane once again alone in his library. He cannot tell whether his journey to the heavenly city was real or a dream, yet he longs for it and his prevailing hope is that he will one day awaken there. Earlier in the narrative, when Vane expresses his feelings of inadequacy when it comes to putting his experience into words, he likens it to the process of waking from a dream, 'with the thing that seemed familiar gradually yet swiftly changing through a succession of forms until its very nature is no longer recognisable' (13). At that early point in his journey Vane is unable to recognise the 'nature' or essential truth that is present amidst the changing forms. Now, however, despite the dream-like quality of his memories, and the doubts that surface from time to time, he is able to identify that his transitory experience of being at home was a taste of his ultimate end. The title of this final chapter, 'The Endless Ending', signals the lack of closure with which the narrative concludes. In this way, both title and narrative work together to convey a sense of movement that continues beyond Vane's written account. The narrative is a reflection of MacDonald's aversion to fixed or conclusive forms of thought, and his belief that the journey home, and home itself, are both dynamic and endlessly-creative.

Journeying Home (through the library)

That Vane begins and ends his journey in the library, and repeatedly circles back to it over the course of the narrative, signals MacDonald's commitment to the place of literature on the journey home. Indeed, for him and many of his contemporaries, it was no longer churches or chapels that were the primary places of spiritual guidance. In *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain's Age of Print*, Joshua King argues that the decline of the Anglican Church as the nation's dominant religious structure led to a re-imagining of national religious community—a re-imagining that was centred around the printed page. Because the dividing-up of the

religious landscape was happening alongside Britain's transformation into a reading nation, a number of religious and cultural leaders saw it as an opportunity to create, cultivate, and participate in print-mediated imagined spiritual communities. King's account of the central role that nineteenth-century religion performed in shaping competing notions of national identity is compelling and his consideration of a variety of texts demonstrates just how widespread the notion of print-mediated spiritual communities was. Although my own work is not concerned with national identity, King's observations concerning how literature was understood to unify nineteenth-century readers is relevant here not only because it provides a helpful context for my reading of MacDonald, but because it demonstrates the variety of ways in which Victorian thinkers conceived of the relationship between readers and text. To take one example, the Anglican clergymen William Lake, wrote in *The Contemporary Review* that the private reading of poetry creates a space in which 'every class of thoughtful Englishmen and Englishwomen […in] spite of all differences of thought and feeling' may meet as 'Reconcilèd Christians' (qtd. in King 156). Lake attempted to create an imagined Christian community that transcended denominational boundaries, and, interestingly, he did so by referring to a work of poetry that had itself been intended to create space for a different type of imagined community than the one he described. The term 'Reconcilèd Christians' is taken from John Keble's best-selling *The Christian Year* (1827), a book of devotional poetry that was written in order to 'bring British readers under the moral and imaginative discipline of the Anglican Church' (King 155). The popularity of *The Christian Year* carried it well beyond the walls of Keble's imagined Anglican community, where it was laid claim to by a variety of

commentators who, like Lake, each had their own vision of an imagined spiritual community.[14]

Like so many of his contemporaries, MacDonald also conceived of a new form of religious community mediated through the printed page. Unlike Keble and Lake, MacDonald was not primarily concerned with facilitating a space in which readers would imagine themselves as part of a contemporaneous, national, spiritual reading community. Rather, he conceived of the individual's experience of reading a book as, in part, an entrance into an ongoing community of literary writers—both living and dead—who act as guides on the journey home. As with any community, there is a certain type of participation required—in this case a particular mode of reading. He writes that it is 'by close, silent, patient study [one may] enter into an understanding with the spirit of the departed poet-sage' and that the poet's own words are the spell 'that raises the dead, and brings us into communion [with him]' ('St. George's Day' 140). The reader's entrance into communion comes not simply by picking up a book and reading, but by engaging with the poet's work with persistence (close, silent, patient study) and openness (*allowing* the poet's words to act as the spell). MacDonald's use of the word 'communion' alludes to the theological idea of the communion of saints—the spiritual relationship between all Christians both living and dead.[15] In locating the spiritual communion in a literary rather than an ecclesiological setting, MacDonald is not suggesting that the former is a secular replacement for the latter but is, rather, investing literature with a spiritual significance.

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[14] Among these commentators was MacDonald who, despite being unable 'to enter into the enthusiasm of its admirers', includes a few stanzas in *England's Antiphon* (251).

[15] Chapter Three of this thesis is an extensive consideration of MacDonald's understanding of reading as a conversation with the dead.

MacDonald's commitment to literature's theological function is particularly evident in *Lilith* as he employs the space of the library to demonstrate the central role that a community of poets and writers may play in guiding a person home. Vane's library, like the other libraries that frequently appear in MacDonald's fiction, is the accumulation of generations of book-collectors: its contents beginning 'before the invention of printing', and continuing throughout the years, 'greatly influenced, of course, by changes of taste and pursuit' (*Lilith* 5). In this regard, the library reflects the different literary-religious forms that have, for MacDonald, at one time or another conveyed some aspect of the essential truth of God's love. Vane's comment that nothing 'can more impress upon a man the transitory nature of possession than his succeeding to an ancient property!' (5-6), not only underscores the sense of movement and vitality that characterises the library, but also gestures towards MacDonald's conviction that attention to the transitory nature of form offers a reminder not to grasp too tightly to the current forms of the day. The vitality of the library is further highlighted by Vane's description of it as physically active, spreading throughout various rooms of the house and 'like an encroaching state, absorb[ing] one room after another until it occupied the greater part of the ground floor' (6). While the description of the library as an 'encroaching state' may conjure up negative associations of an intrusive and unwanted presence, the uncomfortable experience of dislocation that begins in the library and precipitates Vane's journey home indicates that, although disruptive, the library has a vital role to play in that journey.

In addition to being marked by a vitality, the library is also a transient space, guiding its visitors beyond its books to the worlds revealed in their pages. Vane's journey begins and ends in the library, stopping back there several times along the way. Both he and his father first encounter Mr Raven in the library, where Mr Raven informs Vane's father of his use of the house as a thoroughfare when he wants 'to go the nearest way home' (39). In order for

anyone to find the way home, Mr Raven tells him, '[t]he only door out is the door in!', and a book 'is a door in, and therefore a door out' (39-40). This is both figuratively and literally true, as Vane later discovers that the book-covered door that leads into a closet is connected to Mr Raven's library in the other world. It takes no great leap of the imagination to recognise in Vane's dynamic library the spiritual community of writers and poets conceived of by MacDonald. Charting the development of centuries-worth of knowledge and imagination, and influenced by the varying shifts in taste, pursuit, and, presumably, in forms of thought, the library's expansive collection represents what was for MacDonald the diverse and developing revelations of the essential truth, all directing the reader on her journey home.

In the opening pages of his narrative, Vane mentions Dante as one of the authors that has been particularly valuable to him during his period of study in the library. This reference to Dante encourages the reader to draw a parallel between the Italian poet's journey, himself guided by another poet, and the journey soon to be embarked upon by Vane via the library.[16] Significantly, the allusion to Dante is followed by a critique of Vane's approach to reading. Vane is initially unaware that his library is alive with books that open into another world, and fails to participate in this community of writers in a way that would lead him to discover that the library is, in a sense, alive. He is 'given to study' and therefore spends a great deal of time in the library, but he confesses to the reader that he studies 'after a somewhat desultory fashion' (5)—an unfocused and superficial mode of study that contrasts with MacDonald's recommendation of 'close, silent, patient study'. The critique, following on the heels of the reference to Dante, may well be an invitation to MacDonald's Victorian reader to reflect upon how she, too, might tend to read Dante. Milbank writes that Dante reached 'cult' status in

[16] This initial hint becomes more and more explicit as the journey progresses, and ends with Vane actually quoting from Dante in order to describe his approach home to the heavenly city.

Victorian society (*Dante and the Victorians* 1), but while many people would have been familiar with certain aspects of Dante's life and work, it did not mean that they had actually read the *Divine Comedy*.[17] According to David Wallace, there was a 'widespread Victorian habit of translating or embellishing "scenes from Dante"—almost always the same two or three scenes (Paolo and Francesca, Ugolino) popularized by paintings hung at the Royal Academy' (248).

For MacDonald, this popular understanding of Dante, based primarily on a familiarity with scenes taken from the *Inferno*, led to reading practices that excluded the possibility of Dante as a spiritual guide. A consideration of the newspaper reports of his lectures reveals MacDonald's repeated critiques of '[m]ost English people' who, having sometimes read only a portion of the *Inferno*, believed that they knew or understood Dante ('Dr. George MacDonald on Dante' 3). It seems likely that, motivated to read Dante out of a fascination with the dramatic scenes made famous by paintings, or because it was the fashionable thing to read, readers never moved beyond reading Dante in this way and so failed to 'commune' with the poet. It is, of course, difficult to discern the exact intentions of the readers MacDonald had come in contact with, but whatever those intentions may have been, MacDonald 'regretted' ('A Talk About Dante' 53) that the failure to fully engage with the entirety of Dante's work had led to false conclusions concerning both the poet and his poetry.

From a narrative perspective, there is certainly a need to read past the *Inferno*, for MacDonald understood Dante's *Divine Comedy* to be, first and foremost, a depiction of the journey home. As such, MacDonald's lectures on the poem, particularly the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* were communicated in these terms, and several of the themes that he addresses find

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[17] For more on Dante's ubiquity and popularity in nineteenth-century culture, see the collection of essays edited by Havely.

an echo in *Lilith*. The first mention of Dante's journey as a return home occurs as MacDonald expands upon Dante's conversation with his old friend Casello in the second canto of the *Purgatorio*. Casello asks Dante where he is going, to which Dante replies, 'For this, Casello, to return again there where I am, do I this journey take' ('Dante's Purgatorio'). MacDonald is reported as stating that this 'is one of the finest paradoxes that he ever met with', and, seeing in Dante's words a truth that MacDonald himself sees—that in God 'we live and move and have our being'—[18] he glosses Dante's explanation of his pilgrimage in terms of home: 'I am going this journey in order that I may get back to the home where I am now, namely, to the heart of God only' ('Dante's Purgatorio').

Not only does Dante's journey 'to return again there where I am' parallel MacDonald's understanding of the universal return home, but Dante's depiction of the vision of God, and the experience of unity with him, is fundamentally the same as MacDonald's idea of home. In his representation of the climactic beatific vision, Dante describes the perichoretic movement that characterises MacDonald's essential truth:

> three circles seemed to glow
>
> Of threefold color, knit in unity;
>
> And as one rainbow by another, so
>
> This was by that reflected, while the third
>
> As fire appeared that from them both did flow.

[18] This is a reference to Acts 17.28, in which St Paul quotes the Greek poet Aratus in order to make his claim that in God 'we live and move and have our being.' The quotation takes on a particular significance in light of my subsequent discussion of MacDonald's (and Dante's) ideas about the role 'non-religious' writers might take in guiding a person on the journey home. See fn. 20 for my use of the term 'non-religious'.

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O Light Eternal, who, of all that is,

Dwell'st in Thyself, and know'st Thyself alone,

And knowing, lov'st Thyself, Thyself thy bliss!

(33.116-120, 124-126)[19]

Dante's three persons of the Trinity, represented by the circles, are a self-contained community of one, and as Dante gazes upon God his 'Desire and will were swayed in order due / By Love, that moves the sun and every star' (33.144-145). Although Dante returns to the land of the living in order to write down his tale, by choosing to close his poem with his beatific vision he makes the point that oneness with God is the journey's end (in both senses of the word), for himself and for the reader who has followed him to this point.

The *Divine Comedy*, as a poetic record of Dante's journey, is in itself an example of literature's place in guiding the reader home. As if to emphasise the importance of this idea, Dante famously depicts the poet Virgil as his guide during the first and second stages of his spiritual journey. The choice of a pagan poet as a spiritual guide, as opposed to a Christian writer or theologian, may at first seem odd, but in the medieval world Virgil was actually 'looked upon as having been an unconscious prophet of Christianity' (Sayers 67). This belief appears explicitly during the meeting of Dante and Virgil with the poet Statius in Cantos XXI-II of the *Purgatorio*. Upon Virgil asking Statius what caused his conversion to Christianity, Statius replies: 'Thou first my steps dids't bear / Towards Parnassus, in its grots to drink, /

[19] All quotations from Dante are from the E.H. Plumptre translation, which MacDonald recommended (Amell 7-8).

And then the way to God for me mad'st clear … Bard was I through thee, through thee Christian' (22.64-66, 73). He relates that, having read some of Virgil's poetry, he subsequently found that it 'so well agree[d]' with the 'Creed divine' being preached by the Christians of his day (22.80, 77). Statius describes it as an act of unwitting guidance, comparing Virgil to a person 'who walks by night with link / Behind him, and no help therefrom doth gain, / But those who follow maketh wise to think' (22.67-69). This understanding of Virgil, and other pagan poets and philosophers, as unconscious revealers of Christian truth continued to be held into the nineteenth century. Keble, for instance, claimed that some Greco-Roman literature performed 'nearly the same office' as the Jewish prophecies of the coming Christ (475), while an ongoing interest in natural theology sought to demonstrate how a variety of sources—including both the 'book of nature' and written texts—had the capacity to reveal God.

That being said, the belief that pagan or 'nonreligious'[20] books might act as spiritual guides was a contested one amongst some religious believers. MacDonald's novels are peppered with depictions of theologically-conservative (and generally Calvinist) evangelicals who, though often well-intentioned, are primarily concerned with avoiding theological or moral error.[21] While not all evangelicals were so cautious,[22] many did believe that the sinfulness of the human heart distorted one's perception of truth to such an extent that the safest kind of reading material was overtly religious (and necessarily consistent with Calvinist theology). MacDonald's own upbringing in a stringently-Calvinist environment where many

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[20] As discussed in my introduction, attempting to distinguish between 'secular' or 'nonreligious' and 'religious' is a complicated matter. For the sake of ease, I am here using the term 'nonreligious' both in relation to Pagan/pre-christian literature and in the way MacDonald occasionally uses it: to talk about stories or poems that do not have an explicitly Christian vocabulary.

[21] Take, for example, Mr Osbourne in *Wilfrid Cumbermede* (1871), an 'Evangelical of the most pure, honest, and narrow type' who offers 'a solemn admonishment on the danger of being led astray by what men called the beauties of Nature—for the heart was so desperately wicked that, even of the things God had made *to show his power*, it would make snares for our destruction' (134).

[22] See Chapter Three of Knight *Good Words*.

would have held such views,[23] helps explain why his work so frequently addresses the question of whether it is possible for literary forms to communicate Christian truth if 'in words there is nothing Christian' (*AC* 191). His depiction of evangelicals, however, and his theological views on literature's capacity to reveal divine truths brought him under fire from some evangelical critics. Samuel Law Wilson, for instance, writes that in MacDonald's fiction, '[u]ndue emphasis is laid on the part played by natural influences in the process of man's salvation, and regenerating efficacy, which we had thought belonged exclusively to the Spirit of God, is freely attributed to such things as fiddles, kites, scenery, music, and the memorials of departed friends' (284). While MacDonald would have regarded the 'regenerating efficacy' of scenery, music, and literature as gesturing towards—and even evidence of—the Spirit's work, Wilson and others like him insist that there is a need for explicitly Christian language in order to ensure that readers know exactly how spiritual conversion comes about (284). This uneasiness concerning a lack of Christian discourse also relates to the emphasis that nineteenth-century evangelicals placed upon the Bible as the revelatory word of God. As de Jong points out, 'a partnership between nature and the inward working of the Spirit … negates the need for an infallible Bible interpreted by an "official" church' (28). For those believers who held to the maxim of *sola scriptura*, affirming the capacity of nonreligious books to reveal divine truth might well compromise Christian truth, particularly biblical revelation. It was for this reason that Keble, in arguing his point concerning pagan poetry, found it necessary to 'deny that men [who hold his view] have corrupted Truth divinely entrusted to them by an over-zealous devotion to literature' (471).

The fear that literature might taint the pure truth of Christianity may have been, in part, a reaction against the threat that some Christians perceived in the nineteenth-century 'sacralization of literature'. McKelvy observes that there was an increasing tendency to regard

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[23] See my discussion of MacDonald's religious upbringing in the introduction to this thesis.

literature as 'modernity's functional religion' and the writer as holding a 'sacred vocation' (1). While the idea of the poet as divinely inspired is an ancient one, it carried a new significance in the nineteenth century when the atmosphere of religious unsettlement and the rise of print culture led to new ways of 'religious reading'. In his analysis of nineteenth-century 'bardolatry', LaPorte points out that although there were those who read Shakespeare as a divinely-inspired Christian writer, even going so far as to compile books of sermons based on texts from his plays, 'the nonreligious sought to adopt [Shakespeare's] texts as a replacement for the Bible, which they perceived to be inadequate at best' ('The Bard' 612).[24] This tug-of-war over Shakespeare demonstrates the multi-various approaches to the 'religious reading' of nonreligious texts. It also reveals why more cautious Christians such as the Federal Calvinists may have perceived either of these ways of religious reading as a threat to their understanding of the exclusive nature of Bible-revealed truth.

For MacDonald, the theological potential of literary forms meant that the reading of nearly any book could be considered as 'religious' reading. Whether or not a writer has come to a full revelation of the essential truth as revealed in Jesus, or knows fully what he or she is communicating is, for MacDonald, largely irrelevant.[25] Drawing attention to the loveliness of human sympathy, the narrator of *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* (1876) captures something of MacDonald's view when he reasons, 'if a Christian priest and a pagan poet feel much in the same tone concerning the affairs of a universe, why should they not comfort each other by sitting down together in the dust?' (12). For MacDonald, though, the communion that takes place between reader and writer over a shared truth (rather than only sympathy) has the

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[24] MacDonald was one of the nineteenth-century figures who read Shakespeare as a divinely-inspired Christian writer. See Chapter Four of this thesis

[25] As MacDonald points out, however, a writer is never fully aware of what she is communicating, for while 'God's work cannot mean more than he meant, man's must mean more than he meant' ('Fantastic Imagination' 9).

potential not only to offer comfort, but to reveal their bond as children of a truth-revealing God.

The Prodigal's Homecoming

While there are a number of theological factors that contribute to MacDonald's conclusions concerning 'religious' reading (his views on creation, inspiration, and revelation, among others), one particularly important element was his belief in universal salvation. His conviction that God has a unique revelation for each of his children, all of whom will at last return home to him, as well as his trust that the Spirit of God corrects false beliefs and leads people 'continually on to new truths' (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 197), gives MacDonald a broader view than many of his contemporaries regarding the means by which truth might be revealed. This, coupled with his belief in progressive revelation, also allows him more freedom in his interpretation of overtly religious texts, enabling him to rework those texts in keeping with his own theology. In *Lilith*, we find him reworking the trope of the return home found in both the biblical parable of the prodigal son and the *Divine Comedy*, in an effort to communicate his own theological beliefs.

The *Divine Comedy* is, for MacDonald, not only a story of Dante's journey home, but more specifically the story of the prodigal's return. This is made clear not only in MacDonald's reference to the *Paradiso* as a kind of 'parable' ('Dr. George MacDonald on Dante' 3), but also in his description of Dante's initial awakening—'He has come to himself' ('Dante's Inferno')—a phrase that echoes the biblical phrase used of the prodigal 'when he came to himself' (*KJV*, Luke 15.17), and which would almost certainly have been recognised by MacDonald's Bible-literate Victorian audience. Indeed, Susan Colón writes that this parable was 'very extensively treated by commentators and preachers during the

period' (77), and its widespread use in Victorian literature and culture is further attested to by the fact that John R. Reed's *Victorian Conventions* contains an entire section devoted to the trope of the prodigal's return and the different ways in which it was used (239-249). Some Victorians turned the parable into 'a sticky-sweet celebration of the Victorian cult of domesticity' (Colón 66), while others subverted the trope in order to undermine the conventional religious interpretation, which read the story as 'the gospel in a parable' and emphasised 'the repentance of the prodigal and the sinfulness of the older son' (Colón 77). The majority of preachers and theologians held to this conventional interpretation, and although MacDonald would have agreed with these commentators concerning the importance of the parable for understanding the love of God for his wayward children, the extent to which he understood that love to reach would have been anything but uncontroversial. In *Lilith*, MacDonald uses the convention of the prodigal's return home not to undermine the 'gospel in a parable', but to refine it by eradicating the conditions placed upon the father's love by the prevailing interpretations. By combining biblical imagery and elements from the prodigal Dante's journey home, MacDonald creates his own version of a parable, which demonstrates the extent to which love will go in order to finally bring all of his children home.

Before turning to *Lilith*, it will be useful to first consider the theological context within which MacDonald was writing in order to better grasp the significance of his universalist re-writing of the prodigal's return home. Amongst the many theological debates taking place during the nineteenth century, one of the most prominent issues, and one which played a particularly significant part in the 'general unsettlement of faith' (Rowell 1) was the doctrine of hell. For many Victorians, the idea of eternal damnation had become increasingly problematic, in large part because of the moral questions that it raised. As the nineteenth century saw a growth in understanding concerning the effect of heredity and environment

upon a person, questions arose as to the extent to which a person could fairly be considered guilty in the eyes of God and sentenced to an eternity in hell. Related to this, Geoffrey Rowell writes, was the growing influence of 'the theories of Bentham and the Utilitarians, with their emphasis on deterrence and reformation', which, although they were not directly cited in arguments against the retributive idea of hell, contributed to the uneasiness with which it was regarded (13). In addition, the question of the apparent arbitrariness of God's choosing some to be saved (and, by implication, some to be damned), although not in itself a new aspect of the debate,[26] was highlighted anew by the surge in missionary activity since the turn of the nineteenth century (Rowell 16). The overhanging threat of hell to those in other parts of the world who had not yet heard about Christianity was one of the primary arguments used to stir up zeal concerning missionary work. For some, however, it merely served to draw attention to the great numbers of people who would be damned mainly, it appeared, because of their ignorance.

In all of these cases, the popular nineteenth-century understanding of hell as a place of eternal torment seemed to challenge God's love and justice, and yet, to throw the notion away entirely raised other ethical concerns. If there were no hell, the reasoning went, then God's love and justice, this time on behalf of those who had been wronged in this life, would again be compromised. Additionally, there was also a pervasive worry that the dissolution of the notion of hell altogether would result in the moral disintegration of society. Michael Wheeler notes these tensions, writing that many Victorians were caught 'between a longing for a more hopeful and less dark eschatology, and a fear lest the weakening of belief in judgement and some kind of punishment should have a damaging effect on the morals both of believers and

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[26] For example, eighteenth-century Methodists such as John Wesley took a stand against the Calvinist doctrine of double-predestination, which holds that God has predestined some people for destruction as well as salvation.

unbelievers' (*Heaven* 76). This was a tension recognised by MacDonald himself who, while holding to an unequivocal belief in the eventual redemption of all (universalism), believed that every person needed to be purified from sin and a self-will that was opposed to God—whether that purification took place before death or after it.

As with all of aspects of his thought, MacDonald's doctrine of hell is an outworking of his understanding of God as loving Trinity, from whom all things have been created and whose will is to bring humanity back into communion with him. In MacDonald's view, hell is a purgatorial-like state, a remedial process that will, ultimately, purge all people from their sin of self-will, thus enabling them to return as children to their true home in God. For MacDonald, the retributive notion of hell was a complete contradiction to his understanding of God's character. In part, the idea of a retributive hell underestimated God's love, which MacDonald believed would never rest until God had brought every one of his children safely home. In addition, everlasting punishment revealed a misunderstanding of God's justice and his perspective on sin. For MacDonald, 'sin has, by the creating act of God, come into the world'—not as a direct act of creation, but as the result of his creation of human beings who have sinned (*US III.* 250). However indirectly it may have occurred, God, as the one ultimately responsible for sin's existence, is therefore bound to destroy it. It would be unjust of God to punish human beings for their sin and leave it at that, but because justice requires him to do away with sin entirely, God will use whatever means necessary to destroy that sin, even if that means is painful. Suffering, for MacDonald, is always remedial and is so because of Christ. He writes that Jesus himself 'suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their suffering might be like his, and lead them up to his perfection' (*US I.* 21). While the stubborn human tendency to choose sin over love means that suffering is inevitable, the sacrificial death of Christ ensures that it is never without purpose.

While MacDonald did understand suffering of all kinds to be remedial, he did not consider the suffering in hell to be physical torment inflicted upon a person (as in Dante), but the withdrawal of God to such an extent that a person feels herself to be utterly alone. In his sermon 'The Last Farthing', MacDonald describes the experience of awakening in hell:

> The man wakes from the final struggle of death, in absolute loneliness— such a loneliness as in the most miserable moment of deserted childhood he never knew. … All is dark, dark and dumb; no motion … nothing to suggest being or thing besides the man himself, no sign of God anywhere. God has so far withdrawn from the man, that he is conscious only of that from which he has withdrawn. In the midst of the live world he cared for nothing but himself; now in the dead world he is in God's prison, his own separated self. (*US II.* 135)

If the heaven of home is a feeling of safety and peace as God's child, hell is an experience surpassing even the loneliness of childhood abandonment. But it is not true abandonment, only a feeling that this is the case, for God only withdraws 'so far', not completely. It is far enough, however, to plunge the person into an experience of isolation and inescapable self-consciousness that is no longer buffered by the goodness of God's presence. In this place of isolation, the person is forced to confront the reality of what she has become by using her free will to choose sin and selfishness over unity with God's loving will. In MacDonald's theology, sin has distorted the true self that lies at the core of every person—the unique self that God created and intended from the beginning. It is only by allowing God to purge away the sin that

distorts, and choosing to live out of her true identity as a child of God (by willing God's will), that a person discovers who she truly is.[27]

The hell of isolation (which is the extreme of sinful self-focus) can only be endured for so long before a person—as a being intended for communion with God and other people—begins to reach out in longing for an 'other'. This opening of the will indicates the individual's acknowledgement of her need, and thus her relinquishment of the illusion that she is self-sufficient. It is then, when her will begins to align with God's will, that she starts the return journey home. MacDonald writes that '[o]ut of the abyss into which he cast himself, refusing to be the heir of God, [the child] must rise and be raised', for 'that for which the forlorn, self-ruined wretch was made, was to be a child of God' (*US II.* 137-138). That the prodigal child must both 'rise and be raised' indicates the active role that must be played by both parties: the individual chooses to participate in God's will, but even then she is 'raised' by God in order to escape from the hell of self-will. In addition, MacDonald's insistence that this 'must' happen demonstrates his belief that, however long it may take, every soul will, in the end, be at home as a child of God. This is, perhaps, the most shocking aspect of MacDonald's universalist theology, for in his eyes even Satan himself is a prodigal child who will find his way home.

As critics have noted, MacDonald's use of Dante's journey as a model for *Lilith* is most explicit in his depiction of Vane's journey home.[28] It is, however, the redemption of Lilith that demonstrates the full outworking of MacDonald's universalism. The character of

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[27] FD Maurice, a close friend of MacDonald's, similarly believed that Hell was 'the failure to recognize where the true fulfilment of human nature was to be found' (Rowell 89). Maurice did not embrace a Universalist position, but did hold out hope that all people would be saved. His public avowal of his position led to Maurice's dismissal in 1853 from his professorship at King's College—an indication of just how controversial this topic was.

[28] See Spina, Johnson 'Conversing', and Wilhelm. For more on the widely-noted influence of Dante in *At the Back of the North Wind*, see Milbank *Dante and the Victorians,* and Pazdziora and Richards.

Lilith is taken from the Lilith legend of the Jewish Kabbalah—a legend that, Roderick McGillis observes, fascinated many nineteenth century writers including Goethe, Rossetti, Browning, and Hugo ('George MacDonald' 3). According to *The Zohar*, one of the Kabbalah's primary texts, Lilith was the first wife of Adam who refused to submit to him or have his children, and subsequently becomes the wife of Satan and 'the mother of hordes of demons' (De Jong 199). In MacDonald's *Lilith*, the eponymous character is the former wife of Adam and herself the 'embodiment of sin' (Kreglinger 176). Unlike Dante's Satan, however, who remains in hell eternally consuming the unfortunate inhabitants of the ninth circle, MacDonald's 'Queen of Hell' (*Lilith* 205) endures hell for a limited time and only in order to find her way back home.

As an archetype of wickedness Lilith is the antithesis of MacDonald's understanding of God: God has created out of a selfless overflowing of love and does everything possible to ensure his children are free to be themselves, whereas Lilith sees her daughter as a possession and a threat; God gives up his life to enable his children to return home, whereas Lilith hunts all children (including her own daughter), seeking to kill them because she fears that their lives will cause her death; God is an inherently relational being, whereas Lilith is selfishly individualistic; God humbles himself to live on earth as a man, whereas Lilith proclaims herself to be 'queen of Hell, and mistress of the worlds!' (205). Next to Lilith, Vane appears to be a tame-looking prodigal. What the reader discovers over the course of the narrative, however, is that while Lilith is on one level her own person and separate from Vane, she is, on another level, the darkness in Vane himself. McGillis writes that 'from one perspective Lilith represents the ontological certainty of evil' ('Liminality' 106), but she is an evil that must be

nurtured by Vane in order to have substance. As a vampire,[29] Lilith literally sucks the life-blood from Vane and is thus a representation of MacDonald's view of evil as fundamentally parasitic and dependent upon human hosts for life. Vane, however, is a willing host, for it is the indulgence of his own selfish desire that gives Lilith the life and power that allows her to feed her own self-will. Vane only begins to understand the nature of his own unhealthy relation to Lilith when Mr Raven reads out loud from a book (the same book that is half in Vane's library and half in Mr Raven's library in the other world). The reader is given to understand that the first-person narrator of the book is Lilith:

> if I found a man that could believe
> In what he saw not, felt not, and yet knew,
> From him I should take substance, and receive
> Firmness and form relate to touch and view;
> Then should I clothe me in the likeness true
> Of that idea where his soul did cleave! (144)

The evil represented by Lilith is given life by her victim (in this case Vane), while simultaneously becoming the precise embodiment of his nurtured selfish desire. Rather than getting what he wants, however, Vane ends up being ruled by her, for as she becomes the object of his selfishness, Lilith gains 'power / Over the soul of every living man' (144). MacDonald's son, Greville, aptly describes the process as a depiction of how a man 'generates

[29] De Jong writes that in the late nineteenth century, Lilith was a *femme fatale* and had a place as in vampire lore as queen of the vampires (200). While MacDonald, too, depicts Lilith as a vampire whose sexual allure proves dangerous to Vane, he subverts the type in order to convey that it is not Lilith's sexuality that is problematic, but Vane's choice to indulge his selfish desire.

Hell in his heart' (Greville MacDonald 553). It is only by Vane and Lilith's relinquishment of their self-will that they may be lifted out of the 'hell' they have created for themselves.

Hell is, for MacDonald, God's last resort in saving a person from the distortion of herself as she chooses selfishness over love. Mara, who represents MacDonald's understanding of suffering, is reluctant to bring pain to Lilith, even going so far as to shed tears of pity. Her hand is forced, however, at Lilith's defiant assertion that 'I will do as my Self pleases—as my Self desires […s]o long as I feel myself what it pleases me to think myself, I care not. … What I choose to seem to myself makes me what I am … Another shall not make me!' (199-200). Lilith's insistence on her own way, and her belief that the strength and sufficiency of her will shape reality, leave her in denial of the fact that her 'Self' has been responsible for the deaths of children and the wretchedness and poverty of Bulika, the city over which she rules. The movement from denial to self-consciousness is, therefore, the first stage of Lilith's journey through hell.

The depiction of Lilith's hell draws upon biblical imagery, including fire (200), the worm (201), and 'outer darkness' (206), but unlike many of his contemporaries who would have interpreted these images either as literal and physical descriptions of torment, or symbolic representations of spiritual or psychological suffering, MacDonald represents them as the means by which Lilith is given self-consciousness. The darkness and fire, the wind and water are not what makes Lilith's hell, 'Her torment is that she is what she is' (202). As they keep watch over Lilith, Mara explains to Vane that she is 'far away from us, afar in the hell of her self-consciousness. The central fire of the universe is radiating into her the knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge of what she is' (201-202). Initially, Lilith's recognition of what she has become leads her to blame her maker for creating her in this way, and she therefore refuses to believe Mara's gentle insistence that he will restore Lilith to what she was if only

she will allow him to (202). Vane's distress at Lilith's reaction to her second submersion into self-consciousness leads Mara to point out that Lilith's tears are not those of repentance, but of self-loathing. This self-loathing 'is not sorrow. Yet it is good, for it marks a step in the way home, and in the father's arms the prodigal forgets the self he abominates' (203). The suggestion here that the prodigal son's first step home comes from a loathing of his state, rather than his repentance, is significant. It diverges from the conventional interpretations which 'all assume that the prodigal's contrition is heartfelt and his repentance complete' (Colón 77), and instead implies that the father's love reaches out to those who, although perhaps dissatisfied with themselves, have not yet repented.

As Lilith passes through the stages of her hell, she gradually comes to realise that it is all of her attempts to shape herself that have made her into the distorted self she now sees and loathes. Confronted with a mirror-image of herself side-by-side with the vision of 'a form of splendent beauty' which was 'what God had intended her to be' (204), she falls to the floor, acknowledging that she has been conquered, but when Mara challenges her to repent by opening her clenched hand, Lilith insists that she cannot. Unwilling and unable to unclench her hand—an apt symbol of Lilith's selfish desire to control her life and possess others—she is plunged into her final stage of hell, where the withdrawal of God's presence leaves her in a 'dead life', where she 'knew existence but not love—nor life, nor joy, nor good' (206). In this place, utterly alone with herself, Lilith's other hand clenches and she finds that she is left grasping 'existent Nothing—her inheritance!' (206). In this outer darkness Lilith realises that she has no power over herself or anything else, thus acknowledging her need of help in performing the repentant act of unclenching her hand. Having reassured Lilith that although she may now feel like a powerless slave, she 'shall one day be a child' (207), Mara, along with Vane, takes Lilith to Mr Raven, who, at Lilith's request, cuts off her still-clenched hand

with a sword (218). This somewhat strange and violent ending to Lilith's journey highlights MacDonald's belief in the need for action on the part of both the prodigal child and God (in this case, by means of Mr Raven).[30] Although Lilith was finally willing to surrender her clenched hand of self-will and dominance, she found herself powerless to do so, and in need of external aid or, as Milbank puts it, 'divine grace' (*Chesterton and Tolkien* 101), in order to continue her journey home.

At the same time that MacDonald uses *Lilith* to explore theological ideas concerning identity and the afterlife, he refuses to offer a neat or explicit conclusion about what things will look like after death. Similarly to Vane's journey, Lilith's ultimate arrival at home is never depicted. After her hand is cut off, she lays down to the sleep of death, and it is there that the narrative leaves her as it follows Vane on his journey to the home-centre and, finally, to his library. Plourde observes that in the *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) the conspicuous absence of closure is one of the ways in which the story conveys MacDonald's universalism, for it communicates 'the comfort of ultimate belief—one of the primary attractions of universalism—while preserving the values of process, continuation, and perpetuation in spiritual experience' (238-239). The same can be said of *Lilith*'s ending, which offers the assurance that the Queen of Hell will eventually find herself at home, but which refuses to speculate about the particulars, including what her true Self will look like, and how long the process of finding herself at home might take. It is, in this sense, a reflection of the parable of the prodigal son, which also refuses narrative closure as it leaves the reader uncertain of how the older brother will ultimately respond to his brother's homecoming, and how long it might take the prodigal to feel at home after his wanderings. Such a notion of home is far from the

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[30] It is also a reference to Jesus' words in Matthew 5.30: 'And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.'

Ruskinian idyll, which only merits the name of 'home' if it is free from the 'inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world' (*Of Queens' Gardens* 21). In MacDonald's reworking of the parable, however, home is a place of welcome for the prodigal—one that refuses to exclude the unloved or hostile Lilith in order to maintain a sterile peace, but chooses rather to draw her into the eternally-creative and dynamic love of the Trinitarian God.

Chapter Two: Word-Music and Poetic Prayer in MacDonald and Tennyson

Writing to his father in 1855,[1] George MacDonald objects to public prayer on the grounds that not 'one-third—perhaps one-tenth [—] of it is prayer at all' ('Letter'). For MacDonald, there is little more 'in these prayers than a dreary recurrence of vain repetitions, to which is attached the sound the form and the name of prayer', and little if any of the 'praise or *speaking* to God' that characterises authentic prayer ('Letter'). For readers familiar with the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for extemporary religious utterances, MacDonald's reference to 'vain repetitions' in 'the form' of prayer might initially signal a general dislike of the set forms of prayer that were often used in public worship. Indeed, many of those opposed to liturgical prayer or ritualised forms of worship couched their disapproval of it in similar terms. What is striking about MacDonald's letter, though, is the idea that it was not the form of prayer *per se* that was problematic, but the apparent absence of feeling, attention, and personal communication (here articulated in terms of 'praise' and 'speaking to God'). These are qualities that MacDonald elsewhere also associates with poetry—a literary form that, for him, also has the potential to be understood as a religious form. MacDonald's commitment to a dynamic notion of form means that, when it comes to prayer, it is not only the form's potential to facilitate a person's felt connection to God that is important, but the way in which the form is engaged with. In his mind, poetry may often facilitate both connection and engagement more effectively than set forms of prayer.

Recent critical work in literary studies has evidenced a renewed interest in the relationship between nineteenth-century religious and poetic form. Blair has demonstrated the

[1] The letter is undated, but it has been filed with other letters from 1855 in the George MacDonald Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

inextricability of nineteenth-century understandings of religious and poetic form, while LaPorte has shown how prominent Victorian poets such as Tennyson and the Brownings responded to modern biblical criticism through the poetic structures of their verse.[2] One notable aspect of this renewed interest in the way that the Victorians understood the relationship between religious and poetic form is the role of feeling, a term that entered the nineteenth century with the layers of meaning contributed by German and British Romanticists. Lysack explains how poetic form was one of the 'temporal modes' by which the 'felt time of reading devotionally' was mediated (4), and her work on a range of writers, including Christina Rossetti, Frances Ridley Havergal, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, reveals the various directions the mediation of feeling could take. Part of the importance of Lysack's work is the way it highlights an understanding of feeling and devotion that goes beyond the model offered by John Keble. As Blair and Joshua King have discussed, Keble's concern with unregulated religious emotion led him to use poetic form to help temper or channel feeling in a theologically-appropriate manner (Blair 'John Keble'; King *Imagined* 129-158). Writing of Keble's best-selling book of devotional poetry, *The Christian Year* (1827), Blair points out the way in which it was 'firmly attached to the external forms of religion expressed … in the Book of Common Prayer, thereby ensuring that each poem had an external (rather than a subjective) referent, and that the whole adhered to a given formal structure' (136). Whatever feelings the reader might have brought to the page, or have had when reading, could thus be safely experienced and expressed within approved religious forms. Part of this was also achieved through 'metrical utterance,' which for Keble and other Tractarians, allowed the poet to express feeling with appropriate control, and the reader to be soothed by that mode of

[2] See Blair *Faith and Form* and LaPorte *Victorian Poets*. See also Hurley *Faith in Poetry*, which foregrounds the way in which poets worked out their own understandings and expressions of faith through their verse.

expression (Blair 133-134). Crucially, this controlled expression of feeling also applied to the act of prayer.

Like Keble, MacDonald understood poetic form to serve a theological function, and for him, too, there was a correspondence between his understanding of religious form and his ideas concerning poetic form. MacDonald differed from Tractarians such as Keble, however, in holding the belief that particular religious forms are temporary means by which a person relates to God and which will almost inevitably be outgrown. Given his view of the ephemerality of religious forms and the centrality of feeling in the life of faith, it is perhaps unsurprising that MacDonald believed that the evocation of a reader's emotion, rather than the regulation of it, was how poetry might serve its religious function. Epitomising one of the many ways in which poetic form could be understood devotionally, MacDonald's particular contribution to the subject matter of Lysack's monograph is to show how affective experience could be directly linked to understanding. Rachel Ablow writes that 'in the mid- to late nineteenth century, reading was commonly regarded as at least as valuable as an affective experience as it was as a way to convey information or increase understanding' (Ablow 'Introduction' 2), and the two views of reading are brought together in MacDonald's thinking. Indeed, this chapter claims that it is poetry's capacity to communicate or evoke 'feeling', a term MacDonald used regularly, that led him to regard poetry as a form of prayer and, consequently, as a vital source of spiritual knowledge.

Critical work on nineteenth-century religious and poetic form has, by and large, focused its attention upon a horizontal plane, tending to discuss the ways in which prayer and poetry functioned as modes of expression or unification for poets and readers.[3] The

[3] This horizontal focus can be seen, for example, in Blair's *Form and Faith*, in which Blair discusses the relation between poetic form and Victorian cultural understandings of religious form, and also in King's *Imagined Spiritual Communities*, which demonstrates the way in which nineteenth-century Christians imagined themselves as united through a shared reading of poetry.

scholarship in this area highlights the ways in which individual religious practices (including reading practices) in the nineteenth century shaped and were shaped by wider cultural concerns (including questions of national and religious identity). Although the work done has been valuable, scholars have rarely ventured into an exploration of what Victorian writers and readers understood to be happening vertically. This lack is significant, for it results in an incomplete picture of how Victorians understood those forms to function. In the main, Christians understand prayer to be a communication with God—a vertical activity that moves both up (in human expression) and down (in divine action or communication). This would certainly have been the way that most Victorians believed prayer to work. FD Maurice, for example, grounds his treatment of the relationship between form and prayer in terms of 'Prayer to God' or a seeking of 'the Father' (291, 293). Given this, and the close connection between religion and poetic form, the question arises as to what Victorians such as MacDonald might have understood to be happening vertically, not only in the act of prayer, but also in the writing or reading of poetry. If poetry, like prayer, was conceived of as more than a unifying or disciplining force—if it was, in other words, conceived of as the locus of divine communication—then this would have bearing not only upon the way in which Victorian readers and writers understood poetic form to work, but also upon the kinds of forms by which they understood God to communicate.

This chapter contributes to the critical conversation concerning literary-religious forms by exploring MacDonald's understanding of poetic word-music, and its role in the communication of spiritual knowledge. One of MacDonald's most emphatic and re-iterated claims concerning poetry is that it must be musical. He writes that 'inasmuch as verse is for the ear, not for the eye, we demand a good hearing first. Let no one undervalue it' (*EA* 137). MacDonald's insistence upon musicality in poetry is due, in large part, to his ideas concerning

the ways in which spiritual knowledge is apprehended and communicated. For him, it was not primarily through the intellect, but through feeling that a person apprehends spiritual knowledge. MacDonald uses the term 'feeling' most often to indicate either an experience of meaning that precedes articulation in word or thought, or one which cannot be reduced to words. For this reason, and because of the link he makes between feeling and spiritual knowledge, he maintained that one of the best ways to convey spiritual knowledge or experience is through poetry—a form of communication that affects or impresses meanings upon the reader or listener through its sounds. By focusing in particular upon MacDonald's understanding of the relationship between spiritual knowledge and word-music, this chapter demonstrates how a vertical conception of prayer can open up new ways of thinking about the relation between nineteenth-century literary and religious forms. In particular, it shows how nineteenth-century writers such as MacDonald understood elements of poetic form (such as prosody) to be capable of doing theological work.

The first section of this chapter outlines MacDonald's understanding of spiritual knowledge, and his views concerning the role of poetry in communicating that knowledge. It begins by exploring MacDonald's idea that everything in existence has the potential to reveal some truth about God, for all things were created out of God's heart and so bear a trace of their creator. As an expression of creative love, the natural world is, in MacDonald's thinking, intended to speak not primarily to the mind, but to the human heart. This is why MacDonald believed that spiritual knowledge could only be apprehended by attending to how the created world affects us and what this feeling or impression might indicate about God. Given that MacDonald's views concerning spiritual knowledge are virtually inseparable from his understanding of poetry, this section will also consider how, for him, poetry's capacity to

affectively convey meaning through its prosody makes it particularly suited to the communication of spiritual knowledge.

The second section begins by examining MacDonald's understanding of word-music and the role that it plays in poetry. Phyllis Weliver and Katherine Ellis write that nineteenth-century 'theologians were thinking about music as a way to … conceptualize and communicate … metaphysical notions' (4). For MacDonald, word-music is not simply a way of thinking about metaphysical notions, nor is it merely ornamental to the poetry; rather, it is an essential part of the way in which a poem communicates spiritual knowledge or meaning. This is why, although he distinguishes a word's affective meaning (its sound) from its intellectual meaning, he maintains that both are necessary in order for a poem to be classified as a poem. In his view, there is a close kinship between prayer and poetry, for prayer is not just a verbally-formulated petition or statement, but can also be a wordless direction of attention or feeling. This section will therefore conclude by considering MacDonald's views concerning the relation between poetry and prayer, doing so in light of nineteenth-century ideas concerning the relation between poetry, prayer, and the Psalms.

The third section of this chapter focuses on MacDonald's engagement with Tennyson—a poet known for his musicality, and a frequent focal-point of critical debate concerning the relationship between music and meaning in poetry. WH Auden famously wrote that while Tennyson 'had the finest ear, perhaps, of any English poet; he was undoubtedly the stupidest' (*Forewards* 222). Eric Griffiths, on the other hand, claims that although 'Tennyson is thought to be preoccupied with word-music, with fondling, as it were, the bodies of words, to the exclusion or detriment of responsible thought … Tennyson thought *in* melody' (101). Like Griffiths, MacDonald's lectures and essays on Tennyson also note the inextricability of thought and word-music in Tennyson's poetry, and similarly defend him from charges that

although his poetry might be beautiful, it lacks any depth of meaning. That being said, MacDonald's privileging of feeling as a way of apprehending spiritual knowledge meant that his scholarship on Tennyson foregrounds the expression of feeling as a source of knowledge that is every bit as valid as intellectual thought. This section explores how MacDonald's theological reading of *In Memoriam* (1850) is shaped by his ideas concerning the relationship between poetic word-music and spiritual knowledge. It demonstrates in particular how MacDonald's characterisation of the poem as an organ fugue offers a new perspective on both the expression of doubt in *In Memoriam*, and the role of doubt in the spiritual life. Following on from this discussion, the chapter concludes with a coda considering MacDonald's understanding of the way in which a communal experience of reading may act as a way of integrating vertical and horizontal aspects of poetic prayer.

MacDonald's Understanding of Spiritual Knowledge

For many Christians in the nineteenth century, MacDonald amongst them, the natural world is a place where traces or evidences of God may be discovered or known.[4] While the term 'natural theology' is, as Alister McGrath points out, often regarded as synonymous with a particular Enlightenment version of the theology which 'argues directly from the observation of nature to demonstrate the existence of God' (*The Open Secret* 4), there were (and continue to be) a variety of natural theologies.[5] Writing more specifically about the nineteenth century, Amy M. King makes a similar point when she argues that, rather than being obsolete by the

[4] The practice of seeing God in nature has a long history in Christian tradition, beginning with Scripture. See, for instance, the Psalmist's declaration that 'the Heavens declare the glory of God' (Psalm 19.1), and St Paul's claim that 'the invisible things of [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen' (Rom. 1.20).

[5] See Brooke, Manning, and Watts.

first half of the century (as is often considered to be the case), natural theology[6] 'persists in such a way that it has significant rhetorical impact in a host of literary forms: natural histories, the sketch, aesthetic treatises, and the novel' (5). I would add literary criticism to King's list for, as this chapter demonstrates, MacDonald's theological views on nature have a significant impact (both rhetorical and interpretive) on his ideas concerning poetry. King's primary interest is in what she calls an 'altered form' of natural theology, which is no longer concerned with proving God's existence, but is, rather 'a kind of affective scientific argument' (6). For this reason, she attends to the relationship between religious, Romantic, and scientific rhetoric in natural history writing, and connects this 'literary' and 'reverent' mode of natural history writing with the realist novel (2). King's identification of the role of affect in nineteenth-century versions of natural theology offers a helpful context for this section's consideration of the relationship between feeling, nature, and spiritual knowledge. King's focus on natural history writing, however, means that her study is more concerned with scientific approaches to the natural world and less with the ways in which an affective natural theology might inform the literary work of a scholar such as MacDonald.

For MacDonald, it is not by scientific analysis of the universe that spiritual knowledge is apprehended, but by attending to how the created world affects us and what this feeling or impression might indicate about God. MacDonald writes that he is 'not satisfied that the world should be a proof and varying indication of the intellect of God. That was how [William] Paley viewed it. He taught us to believe there is a God from the mechanism of the world. But, allowing all the argument to be quite correct, what does it prove? A mechanical God, and nothing more' ('Wordsworth's Poetry' 246). In MacDonald's view, attempting to

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[6] While King uses the term 'natural theology', she prefers the term 'theology of nature' in order to express the idea that, 'at least through the mid-nineteenth century, there continued to be a broader, if fuzzier, vernacular consensus about nature as divinely created' (4-5).

gain spiritual knowledge through scientific analysis results in a faulty understanding of God and our relation to him. His belief that God is 'the first of artists' ('Wordsworth's Poetry' 246), who created all things as an imaginative expression of love, led MacDonald to conclude that the most appropriate manner of discovering spiritual knowledge or meaning was to engage with creation as a work of art to be attended to and enjoyed, rather than as a mechanism to be analysed. In this context, feeling is, for MacDonald, characterised as an experience of meaning that is often pre-linguistic, and which cannot always be reduced either to words or to purely intellectual apprehension. It is worth noting that, although MacDonald emphasised feeling as the primary mode of apprehending spiritual knowledge, he was not by any means opposed to propositional knowledge, nor did he see it as opposed to feeling. His views should be read as a response to modes of thought that, in privileging propositional knowledge unduly and in refusing to regard feeling as a source of knowledge, perpetuate an impoverished idea of God.

MacDonald was by no means antagonistic to science (indeed, he studied the natural sciences as an undergraduate at the University of Aberdeen), but he did regard scientific knowledge as being of a lower order than the spiritual knowledge accessed by way of the poetic imagination. In his unspoken sermon 'The Truth', MacDonald details his understanding of the hierarchy of knowledge. For him, the lowest kind of knowledge is 'fact'—an objective piece of information such as the number of petals on a flower, or whether the water in a person's wash-basin is frozen. According to MacDonald, facts are, in and of themselves, valueless and neutral. When facts are consistent and unchangeable they move from an isolated fact (this flower has five petals, or the basin-water is frozen), to a law (this kind of flower always has five petals, or water always freezes at a particular temperature). Science is concerned with this lowest level of knowledge. The higher form of knowledge is that of truth

or spiritual knowledge. MacDonald writes that a fact 'cannot be to us a truth until we descry the reason of its existence, its relation to mind and intent, yea to self-existence' (*US III.* 227). Put another way, a fact only becomes a truth to us when we discover its God-intended meaning. As a product of the mind of God, everything in the universe carries the potential to communicate some kind of meaning, and it is only when a person grasps a fact's meaning or intention (and there is always more than one meaning because the mind of God is greater than that of humans), that the fact ascends to the level of a truth. According to MacDonald, this seeking-out of meaning or truth is the job of the poetic mind, rather than the scientific mind, for the truth is not 'an intellectual truth, but a divine fact, a dim revelation, a movement of the creative soul!' (*US III.* 229). If a person treats these divine facts (or human truths) 'as ideas to be analysed and arranged in their due order and right relation, he treats them as [human] facts and not as truths' (*US III.* 233). In treating truth as something to be dissected and categorised, rather than something to be felt, a person might be deceived into believing that all is known, when in reality the most important knowledge has yet to be apprehended.

MacDonald's belief that the world proceeded from God's imagination, and as such is an expression of God's thought, heart, and feeling, led him to believe that the beauty of nature was not accidental, but placed there by God with a full awareness of how it would affect humans. This caused MacDonald to regard the experience of beauty as a revelation of God's love for humanity, and his desire to make them glad. It also led him to privilege the impressions and feelings aroused by nature as the highest avenue for spiritual knowledge. One way in which this spiritual knowing occurs is through the stimulation of 'thoughts of high import' ('Fantastic Imagination' 9). Whether it is through a glimpse of a beautiful flower, the feel of the wind, or the sound of a river, the human experience of nature evokes emotion and, according to MacDonald, in this way sets thinking at work. 'Nature is mood-engendering,

thought-provoking', he writes, and 'she rouses something deeper than the understanding—the power that underlies thoughts' ('Fantastic Imagination' 9). Although the feelings aroused by nature may stimulate thought, a person need not recognise what precisely is happening in order to be the recipient of spiritual knowledge. MacDonald writes that even if a person, feeling the effects of nature, is unaware that there is any knowledge or meaning to be apprehended, 'God's thought, unrecognized as such, hold[s] communion with her' (*US III.* 229). At this stage, the unrecognised knowing is a preparation for that person to receive the more conscious knowledge of God that MacDonald is confident will come at a later point in her spiritual development.

The thought-provoking power of nature, and the possibility of unconscious spiritual knowing are two of the reasons why MacDonald insists upon the need for an encounter with the natural world. A third lies in his understanding of God as an artistic creator, rather than an engineer or mechanic, and how God's artistic intention influences the type of knowledge God communicates to humanity. Using one of his favourite examples, the flower, MacDonald writes that the 'idea of God is the flower; his idea is not the botany of the flower. Its botany is but a thing of ways and means—of canvas and colour and brush in relation to the picture in the painter's brain. The mere intellect can never find out that which owes its being to the heart supreme' (*US III.* 229). For MacDonald, the meaning (or 'God's idea') of the flower is inextricable from its physical form. The idea of God *is* the flower, and so it cannot be extracted or abstracted in order to be grasped by the intellect alone.[7] The kind of knowledge communicated by the flower can only be apprehended by experiencing it as it is, for it is a

[7] It is worth noting that although MacDonald writes of the singular 'idea' of God present in nature, he did not believe that there was only one meaning corresponding to each aspect of nature. God's mind and imagination far surpass the minds and imaginations of humans and, according to MacDonald, there 'is layer upon layer of ascending significance' in everything God has made ('Fantastic Imagination' 9). There are, therefore, any number of possible meanings to be discovered and known, just as different aspects of the world will affect people in varying ways at different times.

product of the heart of God and therefore meant to be received by the human heart. Therefore, the form by which a person is affected (whether it is a flower or a gust of wind) is not only a conduit of meaning, nor simply *the* means by which 'thoughts of high import' are stimulated, but also, in itself, is the meaning. This is a crucial element of MacDonald's thought, for in claiming that the meaning of the natural world is inseparable from any of its given forms, he avoids the hardening of knowledge into static or abstract modes of thought. At the same time, by maintaining that the meaning has been placed within the physical forms by God, he also prevents the idea of 'meaning' from being diluted into a free-floating subjectivity. In this way MacDonald is able to affirm the necessity of recognising feeling as a legitimate and essential source of spiritual knowledge.

Considering MacDonald's understanding of God as the first of artists, and how this impacts the way in which spiritual knowledge is apprehended, it is perhaps unsurprising that he perceives there to be an essential relation between nature and poetry. In identifying this relation between nature and poetry, MacDonald follows in the footsteps of Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, who, according to Colin Jager, believed that 'to read Nature rightly is to participate in poetic creation', and that if this proper reading is in place the poet is 'able to turn raw materials of nature into images of spiritual truth' (170).[8] Like Wordsworth, MacDonald understood the poet be a kind of reader or translator of meaning—one who discovers the truths or meanings present in creation and then attempts to communicate them through his or her poetry. MacDonald's idea of the poet as 'Trouvère, the Finder' ('The Imagination' 20), stems from his recognition that humans, unlike God, lack the ability to

[8] Although MacDonald owed a great debt to Wordsworth, the two writers differed in significant ways. MacDonald was more theologically explicit than Wordsworth, making clear connections between the spiritual truth present in nature and the truths of a Trinitarian God. MacDonald regards this as a lack in Wordsworth, for he writes in *England's Antiphon* that 'we miss in Wordsworth, an inclined plane from the revelation in nature to the culminating revelation in the Son of Man' (245). Despite this, he still regards Wordsworth to be the 'the high priest of nature' (247).

create anything entirely new. Poetry comes not from creation *ex nihilo*, but from combining the pre-existing forms of nature in new ways in order communicate the fresh meanings that have been discovered. This is why MacDonald can claim that 'Nature put into the crucible of a loving heart becomes poetry', and why he believes that, as with nature, '[w]e cannot explain poetry scientifically; because poetry is something beyond science' ('Wordsworth's Poetry' 256). Poetry, in dealing with the meanings present in nature, is able to go beyond the strictures of a merely intellectual discovery. The need for the poet to have a 'loving heart' once again demonstrates the important role that feeling plays in MacDonald's thoughts concerning poetry and meaning.

The necessity of a poet possessing a loving heart also reflects MacDonald's belief that poetry is not simply intended to be an expression of the self, but a communication of meaning to other people. He protested the idea that the poet was somehow greater than, or separate from the rest of humanity, for in his view the poet was not essentially different from other people, but simply capable of seeing more and 'say[ing] better' ('George MacDonald' [*Aberdeen Journal*]). For this reason, he held that a 'poet must help others to understand what they would not otherwise see, for the poet who begins to use his powers from lower motives, will soon find them dried up' ('George MacDonald' [*Aberdeen Journal*]). The use of the phrase 'dried up' indicates that while there is a lack of vitality in the work of an unloving poet, the poet with a loving heart is a source of creative life. Poets such as Wordsworth and Tennyson reflect the creative, self-giving love of the Trinity, which manifests in attention and action that seeks the good of the other. Such poets are not only reflections of divine love, however, for in seeking out meanings in nature and communicating them to others through their poetry, they act as means by which God's life-giving love is conveyed to others. As with the discovery of meaning in nature, this poetry-mediated understanding comes

not through analysis or intellectual thought, but through an engagement of the heart, mind, and senses.

The question of *how* poetry and other forms of art may offer experiences of knowing through the senses is a question explored in a recent essay by Hurley. He points out that in much scholarly discussion, 'the experience of art is sidelined in favor of the apparent after-effect of that experience' ('How Philosophers' 107). Hurley spends the remainder of his essay arguing that 'art's possible knowledge-bearing' is something 'only realized in the moment of aesthetic appreciation'—a 'knowing that may only be realized in a person experiencing an artwork' (113, 122). One of the main points Hurley makes in building his case is that 'poetry invites us to know through the experience of the tumble, push, pull and swell of its prosody'—a knowing that is necessarily experienced in the course of time and therefore necessarily active (121). It is precisely this capacity to usher the reader into an affective experience of 'knowing' that, in MacDonald's view, makes poetry particularly suitable for the communication of spiritual meaning. MacDonald writes that '[i]f by means of his verse the poet could arouse in others the same sensations of delight which he himself felt when he saw some beautiful object, then he was a mediator between man and nature, and a true poet' ('Dr. George MacDonald on Poetry'). Although MacDonald believed that every person possesses the 'poetic imagination' that enables them to discover meaning in the universe, it is the poet who, by virtue of his craft, has the ability to draw others into an understanding of that meaning.

Before moving on to consider the way in which word-music (the way in which poetry communicates through sound) functions in poetry, it may be helpful to detail briefly the grounds upon which MacDonald constructs his theory of the way in which language means. Throughout his essays and lectures, MacDonald challenges the notion that the only

epistemologically valuable aspect of words lies in their ability to communicate definite, intellectual thought. He points out that it is rare for words to convey the precise meaning of the speaker or writer, but that even if they do communicate in such a definite manner, it does not follow that they are therefore unable to communicate something more. He writes that words 'are live things that may be variously employed to various ends … Is the music in them to go for nothing? It can hardly help the definiteness of a meaning: is it therefore to be disregarded? They have length, and breadth, and outline: have they nothing to do with depth? Have they only to describe, never to impress? Has nothing any claim to their use but the definite?' ('Fantastic Imagination' 8). The *OED*'s definition of the verb 'impress' is '[t]o produce a deep effect or impression on the mind or feelings of; to affect or influence strongly' ('Impress'). As 'live things' (a phrase that implies movement and variation), words are capable not just of describing, but of impressing meaning—a way of signifying that affects the feelings of the reader or hearer.

This notion of the affective role of words is not simply an observation of the way in which language functions on a day-to-day basis, but rather an outworking of MacDonald's theory of linguistic production. Like so much of his thought, this theory of how language is made is fundamentally shaped by his theology. According to MacDonald, new words are made when a feeling arises within a person and that person looks to the world around him for a form by which to express the as-yet unarticulated impressions or feelings within him. This is possible because '[a]ll that moves in the mind is symbolized in Nature' ('The Imagination' 9). Feeling then, is the impetus behind the making of new linguistic forms (both words and, as has been discussed above, poetry), and it is by virtue of the fact that the new linguistic forms are first found in nature (which is the product of God's feeling and therefore a locus of meaning), that they are not only able to describe, but, like nature itself, to impress. This is

why, although MacDonald mainly uses the language of sight to describe the process of linguistic production, he also appreciates the role that the sound of words plays in communicating meaning. Rowan Williams, too, has sought to explain a connection between language and the material universe. Like MacDonald, Williams emphasises the importance of a linguistic practice that involves feeling (empathy) and embodiment when attempting to give an account of our environment as a whole (26-27). He posits the idea that 'the very way we speak and think can be heard as raising a question about the kind of universe this is' (7). MacDonald's answer to the question is that the feeling-motivated production of language is an echo of God's feeling-motivated creation of the world (which is his own communication or 'revelation' to humanity)—something that, for MacDonald, seems to further affirm that human feeling is an essential source of knowledge or meaning. Furthermore, it provides him with a theological basis for acknowledging the different ways in which words may communicate that meaning—something that is central to his conception of the way in which a person can know through poetry.

The Place of Word-Music in Poetry

That spiritual knowledge can be communicated through feeling is central to MacDonald's understanding of the way in which the musicality of poetic form may carry out a theological function. For MacDonald, one of poetry's essential characteristics, and one of the ways by which it communicates meaning, is through the sound of the words. Or, as he terms it, the word-music. MacDonald claims that the 'music of verse [i]s essential to it' ('Lecture in Derby'), and insists that the 'study of sound in verse [i]s of the greatest importance' ('University'). One of the main reasons MacDonald emphasises the importance of a poem's music is because of his understanding of the relationship between music and

feeling. Bowie points out that in Romantic thought, the non-representational nature of music is 'concerned with what transcends the sayable' (*Aesthetics* 251).[9] The transcendent is, in the case of MacDonald, the emotions that lie beyond, or perhaps too deep for, words. For him, music is the natural and direct expression of feeling—able to bypass the intellect in order to speak directly from and to the feelings. In this MacDonald shares what Francis O'Gorman refers to as 'the Victorian absorption with music as the unmediated expression of the heart' ('On Not Hearing' 756).[10] Far from being merely ornamental, word-music is an essential part of poetry's capacity to communicate feeling.

Word-music does not simply complement the intellectual content of the poem, but itself communicates meaning, for '[t]he music of a poem is its meaning in sound as distinguished from word—its meaning in solution, as it were, uncrystallized by articulation' (*EA* 137). Feeling, for MacDonald is that which underlies and gives rise to the making of language, while also playing a role in the apprehension of meaning or spiritual knowledge. Given this, and MacDonald's understanding of the relationship between music and feeling, the intimation is that poetry's word-music has a specific role and distinct capacity to communicate spiritual knowledge. In this respect, MacDonald's understanding of meaning and word-music resembles an observation Elizabeth Helsinger makes about Tennyson's poetry, which 'with its affectively fused aural and visual sensuous particularities, constitutes a mode of relating to the world through other than ordinary logical or discursive language' (145). Jeremy Begbie, like MacDonald, understands the idea of music's capacity to enable a unique mode of relating to the world as having theological potential, and writes of 'the possibility of music to witness to the character of the world as created by the triune

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[9] Unless otherwise indicated, the term 'music' in this chapter refers to nonverbal music.

[10] For more on nineteenth-century perspectives on of the relationship between language, music, and emotion see Zon.

God' (578)—a mode of witness that, among other things, conveys meaning through aural perception. MacDonald's application of this idea to poetry is evident in one of his analyses of Tennyson's poetry when he explains that the 'rhythm, rhyme, melody, harmony are all an embodiment in sound, *as distinguished from word*, of what can be so embodied—the feeling of the poem' ('The Imagination' 21, emphasis mine). In other words, feeling is precisely the thing that can be 'embodied' in the poem's prosody because prosody, like music, communicates meaning—including spiritual meaning—through how it sounds.

While MacDonald makes a clear distinction between the kinds of meaning known through poetry's music and through its intellectual sense, his ideas concerning the way in which word-music functions mean that although both parts are distinct, they are both also necessary in order for a poem to be complete. When it is complete, it has no room for extraneous music. This is why MacDonald can claim that when a poem is set to music it is often 'destroyed and something else substituted … because verse [is] its own song' ('Lecture in Derby'). For MacDonald, a poem can communicate feeling and intellectual thought just as well as a song can. Indeed, given his characterisation of lyric poetry as the 'speech of feeling', and his interchangeable use of the terms 'lyric form' and 'song form' (*EA* 2), he appears to see little difference between poetry and song. MacDonald's understanding of lyric poetry encompasses two definitions of the lyric discussed by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins: that which 'represents an utterance in the first person, an expression of personal feeling', and that which 'foregrounds the musicality of language by appeal to the ear' (1). MacDonald's equation of the lyric and song—his 'appeal to the ear'—demonstrates the significance he places upon the function of word-music. In his mind, poetic word-music is as capable of producing the same kind of effect as sung or instrumental music, and is not to be considered any less musical than these other types of musical expression.

MacDonald's claim that 'a good hearing' is demanded 'first' reflects his understanding of one of the specific roles that word-music plays: that of preparing the reader to receive the poem's intellectual content or thought. When both thought and word-music are present in a poem, the 'music goes before the fuller revelation [theological truth, which encompasses both intellectual thought and feeling], preparing its way. The sound of a verse is the harbinger of the truth contained therein' (*EA* 137). For MacDonald, true word-music and intellectual thought originate from the same feeling, which means that there is a natural correspondence between the two. If the poet is successful in his work, then the music will 'cal[m] the surface of the intellect to a mirror-like reflection of the image about to fall upon it', but if he uses 'syllables that hang heavy on the tongue and grate harsh upon the ear', then 'unconscious opposition and conscious rejection' of the thought will result ('On Polish' 188). MacDonald's understanding of word-music involves more than meter, but his description here appears to refer to the process of scanning a poem. As the reader or listener attends to the meter (and other musical aspects of the poem), she is given an indication of the timbre, as it were, of the poem's intellectual content. For MacDonald, a good poet will ensure that the reception of a poem's intellectual thought is not hindered by any discrepancy—or dissonance—between word-music and thought.

Word-music's preparatory function tunes the reader's intellect by affecting her senses, thus opening her up to what the poem may have to communicate to the intellect. This does not mean, however, that if a reader or listener fails to grasp an intellectual idea, then no meaning has been communicated. Word-music, for MacDonald, offers what Hurley refers to as 'a knowing that is pre-linguistic, as much physiological as psychological' ('How Philosophers' 121), for it is known through the experience of the prosody's movement. While MacDonald maintained that the best kind of poetry consisted of a harmony between word-music and

thought, his ideas concerning pre-linguistic knowing led him to believe that a poem could communicate meaning to a person regardless of whether they were able to able to consciously grasp any intellectual sense or not. Angela Leighton writes that to 'remove the sense of knowing *about* from the act of interpretation does not invalidate the wonderfully open activity of merely knowing' (258), a claim that MacDonald would likely have affirmed. But while Leighton's conclusion is that the reading of poetry is more concerned with knowing *how* than knowing *what*, MacDonald would in all probability have claimed that poetry is most concerned with knowing—or possibly being known by—*whom*.

Given that MacDonald's conception of the meaningfulness of feeling and language is fundamentally theological, and that a large part of the way in which words mean is through their 'music', it makes sense that, in his mind, word-music would be an avenue for spiritual knowing. Using the fairytale form, which allows MacDonald to concretise a set of rather abstract concepts in order to communicate their theological significance and application more clearly, he depicts the way in which the great-grandmother princess (the divine or god-like character in *The Princess and Curdie*) communicates with the protagonist, Curdie, through the music of her spinning-wheel. Although the opening of the scene focuses upon the nonverbal music of the wheel, it remains relevant to this discussion for it also represents the way in which MacDonald understood poetry's music to function. When Curdie first enters the princess' room he is unable to see her because she is hidden behind a 'great revolving wheel in the sky' (*PC* 216), which turns out to be her spinning-wheel. Although he cannot see what physical form she is taking (she appears to him in various forms throughout the story), he can hear her voice, and she tells him to listen to the music of the spinning wheel.

> And Curdie listened and listened.

> ‘What is it saying?’ asked the voice.
>
> ‘It is singing,’ answered Curdie.
>
> ‘What is it singing?’
>
> Curdie tried to make out, but thought he could not; for no sooner had he got a hold of something than it vanished again. Yet he listened, and listened, entranced with delight. (216)

Curdie’s sustained attention to the music produces a feeling of delight, but because he is unable to grasp anything long enough to hold it in his mind and articulate it, he concludes that he has not understood the song. The wheel’s music is indeed doing precisely what music does—resisting intellectual comprehension and precise linguistic description. But in keeping with MacDonald’s understanding of spiritual knowledge, Curdie has apprehended more than he accounts for. As the song ends, Curdie confesses to the princess ‘I did try hard for a while, but I could not make anything of it.’ To which the princess replies: ‘Oh, yes, you did, and you have been telling it to me! Shall I tell you again what I told my wheel, and my wheel told you, and you have just told me without knowing it?’ (216)

Not only does Curdie grasp what the princess had been ‘telling’ him through the wheel’s music, but through his active listening and emotional engagement with the music he has been unconsciously responding to the princess in a language of feeling that she hears and understands. Or, to use a more theological term, he has been praying. For MacDonald, prayer need not take a particular form, nor even be articulated in words. If a person simply focuses upon God by lifting up her heart or ‘think[ing] to him’ without words (acts that foreground

attention and feeling, rather than intellectual thought),[11] her feelings will be known and understood by God (*US II.* 117). Indeed, MacDonald goes even further when he claims that a person's 'delight inexplicable' over nature is in fact an unconscious communion with 'God's thought' (*US III.* 229). It is when a person is in the midst of experiencing, say, a poem or song, and their feelings are aroused, that they are not only apprehending something spiritual, but are responding as well. In many respects, MacDonald's understanding of prayer resembles contemplative prayer, a wordless kind of prayer that aims simply to direct humble attention to God, thereby allowing God, through his Spirit, to aid the pray-er in her prayer. As a person prays in this way, she is drawn into the Trinitarian communion, thus participating in the 'inherent reflexivity in the divine, a ceaseless outgoing and return of the desiring God' (Coakley 56). Coakley's claim that 'prayer at its deepest is God's, not ours, and takes the pray-er beyond any normal human language or rationality of control' (115), echoes MacDonald's own claims that wordless communion is the heart of prayer. For both Coakley and MacDonald, prayer is primarily a means of vertical communion with the Trinitarian God.

My reading of the connection between word-music, feeling, and contemplative prayer in *The Princess and Curdie* is further confirmed by the striking similarity between Coakley's understanding of contemplative prayer, and the description used by the narrator of MacDonald's novel *Mary Marston* (1881) to explain the relationship between spiritual knowledge and music. That narrator begins by stating that in his view, 'one can not understand music unless he is humble toward it, and consents, if need be, not to understand' (288). He goes on to say that it is when a person is 'quiescent, submissive, opens the ears of the mind, and demands of them nothing more than the hearing', when 'the rising

[11] MacDonald makes a distinction between an intellectual kind of thinking ('think[ing] words' to God), and a thinking that has not yet been articulated in words (thinking to God) (*US II.* 117). The latter is tied more closely with feeling than with the intellect.

waters of question retire to their bed, and individuality is still' that the music is able to penetrate 'far down, below the thinking-place, down to the region of music, which is the hidden workshop of the soul, the place where lies ready the divine material for man to go making withal' (288-289). In order for the music to bypasses the intellect and move down to affect the feelings—what MacDonald elsewhere calls the 'power that underlies thought' ('Fantastic Imagination' 9)—there must be a relinquishment of the self and an openness to what the music has to communicate. The reception of the music in this way leads to an inspired response, for the music acts as a breath that gives life to the materials that are already lying dormant within the listener.

The idea that both the reception and making of music or poetry may awaken unconscious knowledge within a person is one also noted by Leighton. She writes that for both the poet and the reader, poetry 'is not an exchange of knowledge-content, passed through the pleasurable medium of rhythmic language; it is, instead, a constant, mutual rediscovery of "something I didn't know I knew."' (259). Leighton's description as to how this dynamic awakening of knowledge is possible is very close to MacDonald's claim that a person 'may well himself discover truth in what he wrote; for he was dealing all the time with things that came from thoughts beyond his own' ('Fantastic Imagination' 9). For both Leighton and MacDonald, there is a sense in which the 'thoughts beyond his own' are the thoughts of the poet's unconscious self, emerging during the creative process and enlightening both poet and reader. This is possible, Leighton points out, because knowing and not knowing are not absolute opposites: a poet might 'come to know what he doesn't know or not know what he knows' (259). This is where Leighton and MacDonald part ways, for Leighton is not concerned with theology, nor does she offer any further explanation as to how this process of awakening knowledge happens. MacDonald, however, does propose an explanation: it is the

Holy Spirit that must awaken the unconscious thoughts within both poet and reader. As the poet works with the thoughts of God—understood by humans as the raw material of truth or spiritual knowledge, new meanings arise and unconscious ones are re-discovered. The Spirit thus not only works within the poet's unconscious, but with and through the meaning-laden forms of creation.

One of the symbols that MacDonald uses repeatedly in his writing when discussing the idea of (re)awakened knowledge is that of the Aeolian harp. It comes as little surprise, then, that when Curdie agrees to hear the princess' song again, she not only plays, but 'beg[ins] to sing, and her wheel spun an accompaniment to her song, and the music of the wheel was like the music of an Aeolian harp blown upon by the wind that bloweth where it listeth.' (*PC* 216). Susan Bernstein writes that the Aeolian harp 'has been interpreted [by critics such as MH Abrams] as a figure of the processes of perception and understanding' (74). MacDonald, in merging this symbol with an allusion to the biblical description of the Spirit of God as 'the wind that bloweth where it listeth' (John 3.8), makes it clear that the kind of understanding or knowing Curdie is experiencing by way of the music is to be interpreted in terms of MacDonald's own theology of spiritual knowledge and prayer. Bernstein observes that the symbol of the Aeolian harp 'presents a kind of ambivalence between *techné* and nature that points to the persistence of a dual agency', which involves both a wish to 'submit to the tones of nature' on the one hand, and the necessity of acknowledging that it is only through the human agency involved in making the harp that the '"harmony of the spheres" can become audible' (76). In a similar way, there is in prayer a need for the movement of the Spirit of God, but the knowing that is apprehended when that movement comes can only be received by the receptive attention of the person in prayer.

The association between what is generally regarded as a Romantic symbol and Christian theology is not without precedent, for, as Bernstein notes, the 'history of the Eolian harp begins with the legend of David hanging his harp over his bed to catch the divine wind' (75). Whether or not MacDonald was aware of the legendary origin of the Aeolian harp, it is likely that he had the scriptural poet-king in mind when drawing his own connections between feeling, poetry, and prayer. Indeed, the association between these ideas and David appears several times in MacDonald's oeuvre: his poetry includes multiple allusions to what 'the king sang praying' ('Concerning Jesus' 192); his fictional characters use David's Psalms as theological justification for the writing of poetry (*HA* 5); and perhaps most significantly, MacDonald's defence of the efficacy of prayer refers to David's 'poetry […which is] in the most indefinite language in the world!' as an example of how the expression of feeling, taking the form of poetry, is prayer (*US II.* 117). MacDonald was not unusual in his attempts to relate feeling, poetic word-music, and prayer with the Psalms. According to Cynthia Scheinberg's 'Reading Psalms in Nineteenth-Century England', many literary critics and clerics in the nineteenth century considered the Psalms to be a model for all lyric poetry (202). David was, for many Victorians, the consummate example of the divinely-inspired poet, whose work could be used to aid individuals in their own expression of devotion. Andrew Tate writes that MacDonald's friend, John Ruskin, affirmed the importance of an 'affective investment' in the Psalms by encouraging his readers to make the ancient poetry of praise and prayer 'personally their own' (117). The phrase 'personally their own' indicates that Ruskin, like MacDonald, was primarily concerned with the individual's affective engagement with the Psalms. In support of this conclusion, Tate notes Ruskin's 'ambivalent' attitude towards the use of the Psalms in public worship, and his frustration with the lifeless repetition of the Hebrew poems in daily services (117), both of which indicate that Ruskin's frustration centred around a

perceived absence of feeling on the parts of congregants. That frustration was, once again, shared by MacDonald.

For those individuals who were emotionally invested in their faith, however, prayer, whether in the form of poetry or otherwise, could act as a unifying force. Although MacDonald's writings tend to focus more on the individual's vertical experience of prayer, he believed that prayer was not only a means of drawing closer to God, but to other people (on the horizontal plane) as well. He writes:

> if the very possibility of loving lies in this, that we exist in and by the live air of love, namely God himself, we must in this very fact be nearer to each other than by any bodily proximity or interchange of help; and if prayer is like a pulse that sets this atmosphere in motion, we must then by prayer come closer to each other than are the parts of our body by their complex nerve-telegraphy. (*US II.* 127)

Significantly, MacDonald once again draws upon a metaphor of sound in order to articulate his views concerning the relationship between feeling and prayer. The pulse of poetic word-music communicates feeling, and so knowledge, between the individual and God, and they are joined in spiritual communion. Similarly, when the sonic pulse of prayer sets in motion the atmosphere in which we live and move and have our being, then the parties involved are drawn into that loving spiritual communion. It is this set of ideas concerning poetic prayer and the relational or communal aspect of feeling that shapes MacDonald's theological reading of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*.

The Movement of Doubt

MacDonald's high regard for Tennyson's word-music, and his particular appreciation for *In Memoriam*, prompts the question of where the experience of doubt falls in MacDonald's ideas concerning the relation between word-music, feeling, and spiritual knowledge. In the ongoing critical conversation on faith and doubt in Victorian poetry, *In Memoriam* continues to feature as a central text for discussion, and Tennyson's belief (or lack thereof) is scrutinised and variously interpreted.[12] This is something that could also be said of Tennyson's own day, as some (including Tennyson's soon-to-be wife) understood the poem as an expression of faith, while others, such as an anonymous writer for *The English Review*, 'opine[d], strictly speaking, that [Tennyson] had none' (77). In his most extensive work on poetry and religion, *England's Antiphon*, MacDonald weighs in on the subject of faith and doubt. He writes that his object in editing the book was 'to erect, as it were … a little auricle, or spot of concentrated hearing, where the hearts of my readers may listen, and join in the song[s]' of England's religious poets (*EA* 2). Given that MacDonald's aim was to create an imagined auditory space for the purpose of communal prayer and worship, the anthology's final chapter, 'The Questioning Fervour' may initially seem incongruous. The chapter consists of MacDonald's commentary on the doubt-themed poetry of Matthew Arnold, Arthur Hugh Clough, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson: a group of writers MacDonald refers to as 'reverent doubters' (260), and all of whom desire and hope to believe, but have not yet arrived at faith. In his attempts to define what it is that merits the inclusion of these doubting poets in his religious anthology, MacDonald distinguishes between doubters whose questions are motivated by intellectual speculation or an attempt to deride belief, and those who ask

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[12] Tennyson prominently features in Lane, while Blair's *Faith and Form* and Hurley's *Faith in Poetry* deal with the theme of doubt in the chapters on Tennyson and *In Memoriam*.

questions because they genuinely desire answers. Far from being a threat to a person's faith, the healthy kind of doubt is actually a sign that a person cares enough to engage seriously with his or her questions. For MacDonald, it is a part of a person's spiritual journey and, when handled well, can be 'a holy thing' that leads to greater spiritual knowledge ('Dr. Geo. MacDonald in Dudley'). An 'honest doubt is', he explains, 'a nut with a kernel in it, and a very precious kernel too, for every doubt involves a higher truth to a man who will honestly use it. It is to discover something deeper, something lovelier, something truer about God and man than you ever knew before' ('Dr. Geo. MacDonald in Dudley'). Similar to the way that a nutshell may initially deter a person from accessing the kernel inside, a doubt may seem to only get in the way of spiritual nourishment. Handled well, however, by one seeking to discover the answers to the questions, a doubt can lead to a greater apprehension of the relation between God and the individual, and of God himself.

It is significant that, in describing the discoveries that are possible by opening up the nutshell of doubt, MacDonald uses words such as 'deeper', 'lovelier', and 'truer'. For one thing, the use of adjectival intensifiers (deep*er*, lovel*ier*, tru*er*) imply the questioner's movement and progression, rather than something akin to the accumulation of more information. That these words also refer to something more than mere intellectual knowledge is consistent with his belief that something besides pure intellect is needed to apprehend spiritual knowledge. This also has bearing upon MacDonald's belief that the kind of questions asked by doubting poets such as Tennyson are not simply intellectual, but involve the entire person. MacDonald writes that for these reverent doubters, the 'high questions cannot be answered to the intellect alone, for their whole nature is the questioner; that the answers can only come as questioners and their questions grow towards them' (*EA* 260). Not only does this whole-nature kind of doubt imply the involvement of feeling in its questioning (and so,

presumably, some kind of emotional consolation or satisfaction in the answer it seeks), but it also places the emphasis upon the spiritual growth of the questioner, who will 'grow towards' the answer. This idea indicates MacDonald's appreciation of the complexity and situatedness involved in asking a particular question (e.g. how personal experience, history, culture, or one's perception of God, say, may shape a person's questions). It also reveals his understanding that both the questions, and what the questioner considers an acceptable answer to a question, may change over time.

It is this kind of honest doubting that is exemplified in what MacDonald refers to as '*the* poem of the hoping doubters, *the* poem of our age': *In Memoriam* (*EA* 262). MacDonald maintained that 'the world's power of literature is the Bible, but every country has its own power, which helps and buttresses the prime power of what preeminently we call the Bible, the Book' ('Dr. Geo. MacDonald in Dudley'). MacDonald's claim that literature can bolster biblical revelation comes from his belief that the Bible was never intended to say everything there is to be said about God and a person's relation to him. It is, rather, meant to point a person to the living Jesus, who through his Spirit continues to reveal personally-specific knowledge through various means—including various forms of literature. For MacDonald, *In Memoriam* was one of the 'great writings in England' that supported the Bible, and as he points out on multiple occasions, one that was particularly relevant to the questions of his time. MacDonald was not alone in his view. That MacDonald would regard *In Memoriam* as having such theological weight is not entirely surprising given both his perspective on the spiritual value of doubt in moving a person towards greater spiritual knowledge, and his conviction of the theological work literary forms can do—in this case poetic word-music's role in the apprehension and communication of meaning. Although MacDonald does not specifically state in what way the poem offers help to the Bible, his categorisation of it as '*the*

poem of the hoping doubters', and the heavy emphasis he places upon the poem's treatment of doubt in his commentary, suggests that it was indeed this that he had in mind when making his claim.

In keeping with his ideas concerning the relationship between feeling and music, and his understanding of Tennyson's doubt as involving more than just the intellect, MacDonald's commentary on *In Memoriam* pays particular attention to how Tennyson's whole-nature doubting is communicated through his word-music. MacDonald describes the poem's fragmented form as 'a succession of songs', which, although each one is 'not necessarily connected with the preceding one', yet are 'connected as being the thought of a harmonious mind' ('George MacDonald' [*Isle of Wight County Press*] 3). The description of the poem's form as a series of songs is, in part, a reflection of MacDonald's belief that the 'speech of feeling' is song. He often draws an association between a poem's musicality and the consistency of its meter, but how exactly he understands this relationship to occur is at times unclear. At some points he asserts that the rhythmical expression of feeling is almost automatic, claiming that '[e]ven the prose of emotion always wanders into the rhythmical' (*EA* 2). At other times, however, he praises the craft and 'musical care' that goes into a poet's word-music (*EA* 115). Either way, MacDonald certainly would have recognised there to be a theological element involved in this particular aspect of Tennyson's word-music—perhaps something akin to Blair's observation that 'whatever vacillations might take place in the overt content of the poem, the rhythmic continuity can be understood as God's ordering presence always already at work' (*Faith and Form* 186). This interpretation coincides nicely with MacDonald's reading of the poem as a depiction of spiritual progress, moved and directed by the work of the Spirit.

While Tennyson's ability to 'trea[t] musically and harmoniously' the series of 'great' questions with which he grapples is generally acknowledged by MacDonald ('Dr. George' [*Inverness Courier*]), it is perhaps best to take a more specific example from his comments concerning an instance of intentional unmusicality. In section VII, the poet stands in the street outside the door where his friend once lived, reflecting on his absence:

> He is not here; but far away
> The noise of life begins again,
> And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
> On the bald street breaks the blank day. (ll. 9-12)

MacDonald draws attention to the last line which, he claims, 'is a very unmusical line … intended by the poet to be unmusical' ('Dr. Geo. MacDonald in Dudley'). The line's lack of musicality—with its stumbling disruption of the regular iambic tetrameter, and the harshness of its alliteration and sibilance—is recognised by MacDonald as a conscious representation of the feeling the poet wishes to communicate, for there is 'a discord in his soul and the melody is broken' ('Dr. Geo. MacDonald in Dudley'). This strategic unmusicality is, for MacDonald, indicative of Tennyson's skill, for it 'is the true musician that knows how to use a discord' ('Dr. Geo. MacDonald in Dudley').

The adverse effect of experiencing 'discord' within one's soul is also touched upon by Tennyson in section XCVI, and, like MacDonald, makes use of musical imagery.[13] Musing upon the nature of doubt, and whether it is indeed 'Devil-born' (l. 4), Tennyson tells his unnamed conversation-partner:

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[13] For more on Tennyson and music, see Allis, Prins, and Jones and Weliver.

one indeed I knew

In many a subtle question versed,

Who touch'd a jarring lyre at first,

But ever strove to make it true:

Perplext in faith, but pure in deeds,

At last he beat his music out. (ll. 5-10)

The 'one' to which Tennyson is referring is likely Hallam, whose questions at first produced a discord from his 'jarring lyre'. Hallam's determination to make his music 'true', not only refers to producing pleasant music, but also indicates that harmony can only be attained through a 'true' or honest grappling with his questions. As Tennyson writes a few lines later, Hallam 'would not make his judgment blind / He faced the spectres of the mind / And laid them (ll.14-16). Continuing the musical metaphor, Tennyson describes the way that Hallam's dissonant music ends with an arrival at a steady rhythm as at last 'he beat his music out'. Hallam's dissonance appears to have been in many respects similar to Tennyson's own internal discord of mind and soul, which prompted his prayer in the Prologue that 'mind and soul, according well, / May make one music as before, / But vaster' (ll. 27-8). Indeed, Tennyson's account of Hallam's striving through doubt to make his music true appears to be a self-reflexive account of Tennyson's own fight with doubt in *In Memoriam*—a struggle that he conveys through his word-music.

MacDonald's appreciation of Tennyson's musical skill in dealing with his own theological grappling through word-music—his ability to to express himself 'in words

fashioned so that they have a deep music of their own' ('Dr. George' [*Inverness Courier*])—contrasts with MacDonald's disapproval of the way in which many religious teachers deal with sacred subjects. He writes of the 'irreverence' of those teachers who repeat the 'most sacred words for the merest logical ends until the tympanum of the moral ear hears without hearing the sounds that ought to be felt as well as held holiest' (*EA* 10). Unlike the word-music that draws the ear's attention, and so aids the heart and mind in receiving a poem's meanings, the use of sacred words for 'merest logical ends' only results in deafening the listener and dampening the appropriate feeling. Tennyson's 'most sacred poem' ('Mr. George MacDonald on Tennyson'), on the other hand, is 'a vital organic thing' that 'does not admit of divisions and squares and cubes' ('Dr. George' [*Inverness Courier*]). The meaning of the poem is inextricable from its form, and to approach it as if it were a purely logical progression is to misunderstand both its nature and what is has to communicate. The classification of the poem as an organic thing corresponds with the language of growth that MacDonald uses to describe the progress of the reverent doubter. It also compliments the musical ideas MacDonald employs to explain how the individual 'songs' of *In Memoriam* fit together. Rather than understanding the songs to flow in a neat, linear fashion, MacDonald tells his audience, '[y]ou must take [the poem] with its moods, its pauses, and its returns' ('Dr. George' [*Inverness Courier*])—an instruction that demonstrates his understanding of the way in which the songs or sections are arranged in order to convey the fluctuations and recapitulations of feeling.

The relationship between feeling and word-music is again implied as MacDonald explains that the connection between 'this bundle of spiritual songs was like that of a piece of music', comparing it to 'a long sonata, in which the composer takes up a theme and plays with it in a reverent and true way, until he starts another thought, when the old theme is dropped

and the new one then taken up; but he harks back to the former one again' (George MacDonald' [*Isle of Wight County Press*] 3). Similar to the composer, the evolution of the poet's feeling is expressed through a form that, like his feeling, is neither neat nor linear. This does not mean, however, that it is incoherent. On the contrary, it is through the formal arrangement of the poem's songs, just one aspect of its word-music, that the experience of honest doubt can be conveyed. MacDonald's analogy also works to remind his audience of the need to read the entire poem in order to fully appreciate what it tries to express. Just as it is necessary to listen to the development of a sonata's themes in order to fully appreciate both its evolution and resolution, so with the expression of feeling and thought in *In Memoriam*. Hurley makes a similar point when he writes that the poem 'finds its faith not so much through its separate moments … as through its movements, by instaurations that model the untidier tendencies of human thought and feeling when under stress, pushing forward but then slipping back, changing tack, knocked by specific memories, events or anniversaries' (*Faith in Poetry* 62). The very thing that demonstrates the poem's faith (or, MacDonald might argue, its hope), is its persistence in grappling with its questions—a process that takes place over the course of time. To select a moment or two as representative of the whole, then, would be to risk misrepresenting the poem and what it is meant to convey.

This reading of *In Memoriam* has a theological parallel in a person's spiritual development: just as a reader discovers the meanings of a poem as its word-music moves and sounds in time, so a person's knowing of God happens in and through her physical movement through time. To attempt to control or place final boundaries around these moments of knowing is to be in danger of 'petrifying an imperfect notion, and calling it an *Idea*' (*ML* 259). The imperfect notion is not, for MacDonald, necessarily a wrong notion, but simply a fragment of something that has not yet been fully comprehended—something seen 'through a

glass, darkly' (1 Cor. 13.12). It is only by waiting until the entire piece has been played out that a person 'shall know just as [he] also [is] known' (1 Cor. 13.12). Once again, MacDonald's theological commitment to movement as a fundamental characteristic of a person's spiritual journey is evident, as is his insistence upon the need to continue one's journey through time without drawing preemptive theological conclusions.[14] Just as music may be understood as a series of sounds played or sung over the course of time, so theological knowing occurs over the course of a person's journey back home to God.

There are several ways to understand the musical movements that structure, direct, and convey the poem's meanings, but it is the idea of the fugue—with its multiple voices and recurring theme—that offers the clearest insight into MacDonald's understanding of the relationship between its form and subject-matter. His characterisation of the poem as a 'grand minor organ-fugue' (*EA* 262) not only reflects the extent to which he saw music as an interpretive key, but is a figure that he elsewhere associates with doubt. A character in *Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood* describes the musical 'vision' he had in mind whilst performing an organ-fugue, in which truth-seeking multitudes were 'now following this, now following that ... following, following where nothing was to be seen, with arms outstretched in all directions, some clasping vacancy to their bosoms, some reaching on tiptoe over the heads of their neighbours, and some with hanging heads, and hands clasped behind their backs, retiring hopeless from the chase' (157). This somewhat chaotic 'chase' after truth reminded MacDonald, it seems, of the multiple voices of a fugue, 'a kind of piece where one part pursues the other', and the tones turn and run around and around after one another (*MA* 85).

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[14] See Chapter One and Chapter Four of this thesis for a reading of how MacDonald explores these themes in terms of narrative and drama.

Fittingly, in a fugue, the musical statement of the second voice (which appears after the initial subject is stated by the first voice) is called the *answer*. As a fugue unfolds, the initial musical subject is transposed in key and joined by other melodic lines (counterpoint), so that although the statements are recognisably the same, their development allows them to be heard in new ways. In this respect, the development of the fugal subjects and answers is similar to MacDonald's understanding of the spiritual progress that frames a person's questions or affects their acceptance of an answer. Related to this, the idea of musical questions and answers (as opposed to intellectual ones) offers a different way of understanding the relationship between the questions and answers that structure the 'principal divisions' (or movements, to use a musical term) of the poem. ('George MacDonald' [*Isle of Wight County Press*] 3). A question can, for instance, be a gesture that invites another person into conversation or engagement. As such it is the gesture, rather than the intellectual sense of the words as such, that carries the intended meaning. In this respect, it is not dissimilar to the multiple ways of meaning that MacDonald insisted upon in his accounts of language.

Besides the form itself, the poet's explicit claims concerning the intention of his word-music in stanza 48, and the way in which the development of his questions and answers should be understood, supports MacDonald's reading of the poem as fugue. The poet avers:

> If these brief lays, of Sorrow born,
> Were taken to be such as closed
> Grave doubts and answers here proposed,
> Then these were such as men might scorn:
>
> Her care is not to part and prove (ll.1-5)

The poet's 'Grave doubts and answers' are not intended to result in logical proofs, for they are the expression of feeling. This is, at any rate, the conclusion drawn by MacDonald, who dismisses the idea of the poem having 'a logical close, for neither in music nor in life did [a person] desire a logical end' ('George MacDonald' [*Isle of Wight County Press*] 3). The ending as he understands it is like a triumphant 'blast from every stop in the organ', in which all of the preceding questions and answers culminate into one 'feeling of repose and contentment' ('George MacDonald' [*Isle of Wight County Press*] 3). MacDonald's interpretation of the poem progressing (and for him it is indeed a progression from beginning to end), to a point of emotional consolation coincides with his belief that mere intellectual proofs were not enough to satisfy an honest doubter. Such a process is, to borrow Leighton's phrasing, 'one of sound and syntax, rhythm and accent, of sense sparked by the collocations and connotations of words. For these, too, may become a form of "knowing"' (269). Thus, the feelings of repose and contentment arrived at by the poet, if attended to, have the potential to reveal something deeper, lovelier, and truer.

The metaphor of a fugue is not just a way of understanding some of the formal literary features of *In Memoriam*. It also offers a way of thinking about what MacDonald means when he characterises Tennyson's poem as a prayer. The Prologue's opening invocation of 'Strong Son of God, immortal Love' (l.1), which is followed by requests for increased knowledge and reverence (ll. 25-26), as well as pleas for forgiveness (ll. 33, 37, 41), self-consciously frames *In Memoriam* as a prayer. Picking up on and expanding this idea, MacDonald writes that the poem was Tennyson's prayer-cry, an expression of grief urged by death, in which '[m]eanings over the dead are mingled with profoundest questionings of philosophy, the signs of nature, and the story of Jesus' (*EA* 262). The connection MacDonald makes between the expression

of Tennyson's feeling and prayer, and the inclusion of the varied forms of doubt as a part of that prayer, indicates his view that *In Memoriam* is not simply prayer in the sense of a one-sided self-expression, but prayer as an active conversation with God. For MacDonald, doubts are one of the means by which God invites, or drives, a person to prayer. He claims that '[a]n honest doubt is wrought in the heart of man with the spirit of the living God himself' ('Dr. Geo. MacDonald in Dudley'). That is to say, it is a communication from God, intended to lead to greater spiritual knowledge, and which a person responds to by seeking its answer. This remains the case even if the doubters are, like Tennyson, less than certain of God's existence.

Considering MacDonald's views on the relationship between feeling, doubt, and prayer, his characterisation of *In Memoriam* as a fugue is particularly apt. A fugue initially introduces a musical subject by the first voice, which is then 'answered' by the second voice's slightly-altered repetition of that subject. Similarly, the initial introduction of a question or doubt into a person's heart by the first voice (God), is answered by the honest doubter when, in her own voice, she brings it back to God in prayer. Applied to the organist's vision of the fugue-like chase, we might say that the doubting multitudes pursue the voice of truth, unaware that it is the Truth himself who has planted the questions in their hearts in the first place. Their pursuit does not follow a linear progression away from the starting-point, but progresses by returning back again to the Truth who has been pursuing them from the start. As with MacDonald's belief that prayer need not necessarily be acknowledged as such by a person—that even the emotional response to a piece of poetic word-music might be termed a kind of prayer—so too with the pursuit of truth.

For MacDonald, the end point of prayer is not intellectual or material gratification of one's questions or requests, but communion with God. MacDonald writes that '[o]ur wants are for the sake of our coming into communion with God, our eternal need' (*US II.* 120), and

that ‘the very essence of prayer’ is ‘a communion with God that asks for nothing, yet asks for everything (*US II.* 128). A person’s communion with the God who is ‘everything’ is a drawing into the mutual participation of the Trinity, and therefore a sharing in ‘the thoughts of love that pass between them, in their thoughts of delight and rest in each other, in their thoughts of joy in all the little ones’ (*US III.* 211). Although the love and enjoyment of God himself, not the pursuit of knowledge, is the essence of prayer, it is through participating in ‘the eternal self-expression of the Father in his Son or Word and the eternal self-knowledge received in the flowing out and returning of the Spirit’ (Horne 87), that a person is afforded the clearest revelation of spiritual knowledge. Given MacDonald’s belief that poetry communicates spiritual knowledge, and has the potential to be a kind of prayer, making the connection between poetry and communion takes only a step. This is particularly the case given the similarities between the idea of Trinitarian participation (sharing in the thoughts and feelings of God), and MacDonald’s views that the raw materials with which the poet works first came into being as thoughts of God, and that the poetic word-music that a poet produces from these thoughts of God has the capacity to awaken spiritual knowledge within its reader or hearer. Brian Horne, too, recognises the link between artistic expression and Trinitarian communion, writing that the ‘answer that creatures make [through their art] is, like prayer, not so much a reply to God – our dialogue with Him – but a participation in a dialogue which already exists – the eternal conversation of God Himself’ (Horne 88). To draw once again on the metaphor of the fugue, human artistry, including poetry, is an answer to the subject sung by the first voice, and as such is not only a response, but continues on as a distinct and integral part of the piece.

Coda

It seems somehow fitting that amongst the few documented interactions between MacDonald and Tennyson, we find MacDonald attempting to guide the doubting Poet Laureate to a place of faith. It was not, however, faith in the existence of God or trust in feeling-mediated spiritual knowledge that MacDonald was urging Tennyson to consider. It was, rather, a belief in the existence of a poet. MacDonald was a firm believer in Ossian, the so-called 'Homer of the North', who had been the subject of great controversy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the 1760s, the writer James Macpherson published *Fingal: an Ancient Epic Poem* (1762) and *Temora* (1763), both of which, he claimed, had been translated from epic poems 'composed by a blind third-century Caledonian poet called Ossian' (Briain par. 4). Many scholars, including Samuel Johnson, vehemently rejected the authenticity of the poems, arguing that Macpherson's 'translations' were fraudulent. MacDonald, however, refused to believe that any poetry that moved him as Ossian's did could have been written as mere 'affectations of style' (*DE* 52). Such poetry must, MacDonald felt, be the expression of genuine feeling—whether it was the feeling of an individual or, as one of his characters suggests, the collective feeling of a nation (*WMM* 222). It was on a social visit to the MacDonald household that Tennyson, being shown MacDonald's library, picked up a 'splendid copy of the Gaelic Ossian' (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 380). Later, MacDonald excitedly wrote to a friend that Tennyson 'had never believed Ossian was a reality, but seemed a good deal more ready to believe in him when he had read a few lines, with which he was delighted' (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 380). Either Tennyson continued to be delighted and wanted to keep the book for himself, or it slipped from his memory, for two years later found MacDonald writing to ask Tennyson whether he had 'now sucked all the honey from the three quartos of Gaelic heather you did me the honour of borrowing from me two years ago' (qtd. in

Johnson, 'Tennyson Connection' 24). MacDonald goes on to express his hope that Tennyson 'will be able to profess some faith in an Ossian somewhen, somewhere in space and the ages,' testifying that 'I believe in him because I recognise a power to move me differing from any other' (qtd. in Johnson, 'Tennyson Connection' 24-25). The religious language that MacDonald uses to discuss his faith in this mythical bard is striking, but it was not all that unusual in the nineteenth century.[15] What is arguably more interesting is the way in which MacDonald applies his theological ideas on the relationship between feeling and spiritual knowledge to his literary judgements, insisting that the quality of feeling he experiences when reading Ossian is sufficient evidence for the poetry's authenticity. As he suggests elsewhere, the authenticity of the poems does not, for him, rest on a claim to single authorship (although this does seem to be MacDonald's preferred theory). Rather, it depends upon there being an expression of 'real feeling'—whether that was the feeling of an individual, or of an entire nation.

The idea of a poetry-mediated experience of national feeling was, it seems, in the air during this time. According to Blair, Joshua King, and Michael Ledger-Lomas, *In Memoriam* was perhaps the greatest locus of shared poetic feeling amongst nineteenth-century British readers. This was due, in part, to Queen Victoria's well-known use of Tennyson's poem as a way of grieving the death of Prince Albert. The poem became the site of a shared expression of feeling, not only for the Queen and her family, but for her sorrowful and sympathetic people. It is likely that a good portion of the reason the poem had such a significant impact, both upon Victoria and the nation as a whole, was because it was known to be a genuine expression of the poet's own sorrow. As Blair notes, the nature of Tennyson's grief, and his

[15] Indeed, as LaPorte demonstrates, it was rather commonplace to use this kind of language when it came to subjects such as the Shakespearean authorship question ('The Bard' 614-15).

expression of it in *In Memoriam*, were, by the 1860s at least, common knowledge, and his own '"record" of surviving disabling grief' gave hope that the Queen, too, would follow a similar path to emotional healing ('Touching Hearts' 246, 249). Echoing MacDonald's claims concerning *In Memoriam*'s Bible-supporting power, Ledger-Lomas claims that Princess Alice's assemblage of poems and extracts into an album following her father's death, 'shows how poetry [including *In Memoriam*] might sit beside and improve upon Scripture as a consoler' (148). In addition to bringing the country together through shared feelings of sorrow, Tennyson's wrestling with questions of faith and doubt also gave a voice to those who lived in a time of such open and unsettling religious division. According to King, the 'private-yet-public configuration of spiritual experience in the poem' enabled Victorian readers to imagine 'themselves in spiritual community with strangers across their nation' (*Imagined* 190). The word-music of section XXX is, as King demonstrates, a particularly good example of the way in which Tennyson leads readers through a kind of hymn-sing with the family in the poem, doing so by the use of enjambment, end-stops, and stanza breaks (202). By the time the section ends, King writes, the reader may well feel a shared significance in what has been expressed in the poem, for '[t]he reader has been singing with them, as it were' (203).

In many respects King's description of the *In Memoriam*-centred community parallels MacDonald's own understanding of the place of individual feeling in the formation of spiritual communion. For MacDonald, however, the vertical element is crucial, for it is only through God that human beings can have true communion with one another—in him alone that 'the converging lines of existence touch and cross not' (*US I.* 71). To be one with God is to share in his love for all people. To be aligned with the loving will of God is also to be aligned with other humans, for where there is perfect love there is no selfish conflict or crossing of wills. Although heaven is the place of perfect communion, MacDonald maintained

that it is to some extent possible even now, for if a person is drawn into the Trinitarian communion, if her 'will be gathered up into His, and live in His, then you will meet indeed [with others], and know the God who created your love' ('Dante's *Paradiso*'). In *England's Antiphon*, MacDonald explicitly connects this human communion with the poetic participation discussed in this chapter. He writes that one of the means by which communion is made possible is lyric poetry, 'the common ground and form of feeling' upon which people may meet in order to praise God (2). Unsurprisingly, feeling plays a significant role in this communion, not only for the poet whose composition has been motivated by feeling, and the reader who reads with emotional engagement, but for 'all who have thus at any time shared in [the poet's] feelings' (2). He assures his readers that this feeling-mediated communion of the saints does not require 'vocal utterance or … bodily presence', but takes place through an emotionally-engaged reading of the poetry (2). In this way, MacDonald advocates a spiritual communion that is 'bound together by shared affect rather than by submission to Bible or creed' (Ledger-Lomas 142). Significantly, though, the horizontal spiritual communion begins only when each individual offers his or her own vertical poetic prayer to God.

The question of whether an affective spiritual communion takes place if a work is, like Ossian's, not the product of a poet's authentic feeling is not one addressed by MacDonald. For him, feeling is an indicator of authenticity and meaning as long as it does not contradict the truth of love he perceives in the Trinitarian God. While the question of inauthentic poetry does complicate aspects of the way in which MacDonald organizes his thoughts on the relationship between feeling, poetry, and spiritual knowledge, I would argue that it does not entirely undermine the connections and claims that he makes. This is because his claims are, fundamentally, claims about the Trinitarian God and the forms by which he makes himself

known, rather than claims about human intention.[16] His insistence that affective communion and spiritual knowing are rooted in prayer invites us to begin with the vertical axis and consider how, for him and many like him, talk of spiritual knowing is an affective theological exercise, one that cannot be reduced to the social dimension even though it involves that plane.

[16] More specifically, a conviction that an attention to what moves us reveals aspects of a God who seeks to draw human beings into his loving communion, doing so through his creation and the work of human beings (regardless of their intention).

Chapter Three: A Matter of Life and Death: Reading as Resurrective Conversation

George MacDonald was, it seems, haunted by the dead. Dead books, in particular. It is a theme that appears repeatedly throughout his novels: a young protagonist discovers a library filled with old, disused books and, seeing the potential for resurrection, sets to work cataloguing and repairing the mouldering books so that they are fit for use. The result is a transformation from a 'catacomb' (*The Portent* 83) into a 'resuscitated' library (*WC* 307). Restoring or making use of the 'sepulchre' (*MA* 210) that is an old library enables it to become a space for acts of literary resurrection to continue, for books provide the opportunity for a reader to enjoy 'personal communication with this or that one of the greatest who have lived before him' (*DG* 101). There is, it seems, a kind of magic about this, for MacDonald writes that the words of a book are like the 'necromantic spell' that calls up 'the spirit of the departed poet-sage' ('St. George's Day' 140).

MacDonald was not the only Victorian haunted by dead books and their writers. Thomas Carlyle, a great influence on MacDonald,[1] claimed that 'to every thinker [the past] still very literally lives: can be called up again into life. No magic *Rune* is stranger than a Book' (163). William Gladstone similarly employs the language of (un)dead books, writing in his treatise *On Books and the Housing of Them* (1890), that the storing of books in a library's moveable stacks is a kind of 'interment' or 'burial' (227). Gladstone mourns the 'dreadful' idea of 'our dear old friends stowed away in catacombs' (228-29), but finds consolation in the fact that the residents of these 'book-cemeteries' may be resurrected—they may, like the 'condemned', be called by the reader out of 'pitch darkness' and 'into the light' (243). For

[1] See Raeper 240-41.

Robert Browning, the resurrection of the dead comes not only through reading a book, but by the poet-speaker's attempt to retell that book's history in poetic form (37-41). On one level, the use of resurrection metaphors is not all that surprising, for the conjuring up of people, places, and ideas by way of the imagination does indeed seem like a kind of revivification or resurrection. Given the widespread use of this kind of figurative language in the nineteenth century, however, and the varied ways in which it is employed (it is sometimes the physical books that seem to possess this resurrective power, sometimes the book's content, and at other times the reader herself), several questions arise: what might the use of resurrection language indicate about Victorian understandings of what happens when reading books? What are the implications concerning the relation between reader and text? And how does the notion of resurrected books relate to nineteenth-century beliefs about making contact with the dead?

The desire to make contact with the dead is, of course, far older than the nineteenth century. But the rise of Spiritualism and the occult, particularly in the latter half of the century, meant that the subject of speaking with the departed was a live interest for many Victorians. Alongside the proliferation of ideas, conversations, and experiments related to making contact with the dead, Victorians were also reading about the undead in the form of ghost stories and vampire tales.[2] This chapter is interested in both Spiritualism and vampire stories (in MacDonald's *Lilith*, especially), but my main concern is with how conversing with the dead might relate to the practice of reading more generally. For MacDonald, the relation between making contact with the dead and reading is not limited to gothic vampire stories or even accounts of séances in realist novels. It is, rather, the act of reading itself that brings together the living and the dead. In MacDonald's mind, there is a connection between reading the work of a dead writer and the idea of Christian resurrection, which is why he regarded reading as

[2] See Bown, et al. and Imfeld.

having the potential to be a theological form. As I will go on to argue, it is the idea of resurrective or necromantic reading that shapes MacDonald's ideas concerning the relations between author, text, and reader, while also allowing him to invest the act of reading with theological significance.

Given the ubiquity of Christian belief in nineteenth-century Britain, it is somewhat surprising that in the critical conversation concerning literary resurrection, relatively little attention has been paid to the relevance of theological understandings of resurrection. Even Francis O'Gorman, one of the few scholars who does note the importance of theological context when talking about resurrection, fails to engage with that religious context in any sustained way. Instead, O'Gorman reads the Victorian use of resurrection language as indicating the replacement of doctrinal belief with a largely non-theological understanding of resurrection as 'a metaphor for the work of poetic language' ('Victorian Literature' 107). In doing so, he fails to acknowledge the many Victorian writers who held a belief in bodily resurrection while also employing the metaphor in their discussion of literary matters. This is a significant oversight for a variety of reasons, not least of which is that it creates a false binary between religious belief (in O'Gorman's essay equated with doctrinal acceptance), and literary or aesthetic matters (which is, in O'Gorman's essay, implicitly secular). For a writer such as MacDonald, however, whose literary and theological thought were inextricable, the purpose of resurrection metaphors was not a way of transferring an untenable belief into a new form. Rather, it was a way of holding together both theological and literary understandings of resurrection in order to make a particular claim about the spiritual significance of reading.

This chapter demonstrates that a consideration of MacDonald's theology is essential to the discussion of literary resurrection, while at the same time drawing attention to the fact that

the resurrective metaphors used by Victorian writers were not limited to a strictly Christian understanding of resurrection. According to the editors of the essay collection *Victorian Supernatural* (2004), 'the Victorian supernatural was a complex of images, ideas, beliefs and metaphors that entered into every aspect of life, often in strange and surprising ways' (Bown et al. 2). One of the strange and surprising ways in which the Victorian supernatural manifests itself, arguably, is the language used by Victorian writers to articulate their ideas on biblio- or literary resurrection. The idea of books as living (or dead) things is not without precedent for, as O'Gorman observes, the notion of '[l]iving through books, maintaining a sense of presence through words left behind' was an 'ancient idea' ('The Dead' 259). What is perhaps more striking is the conflation of Christian, Spiritualist, and occult resurrective metaphors in Victorian literary discussion. To use the writers above as a representative example once again: Gladstone's language hovers between the Christian idea of calling (which is closely tied to ideas of death and resurrection),[3] and that of a medium's calling up of the dead at a séance (243); Carlyle describes the Man of Letters as prophet and priest, and writing as akin to the work of a magician (159, 163); and Browning merges the discourse of magic and religion as he 'carefully balances an occult version of resurrecting the dead with a pious, religious one' (Roberts 111).[4] While it may be tempting simply to attribute the merging of these two discourses to, for instance, an interest in revivalism,[5] this chapter maintains that attending to

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[3] 'him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Pt. 2.9).

[4] For the most part, critics have failed to note the differences between Christian and occult language, conflating them or treating them as somewhat interchangeable. An exception is Roberts, who identifies the 'tension' between the use of the two sets of discourse (117).

[5] The idea of biblio-resurrection has been connected by critics to a more widespread Victorian interest in revivalism. Renée Fox lists among what she identifies as 'the multiple projects of aesthetic "resurrection" ... the Arthurian revival in art and literature, the vogue for museum exhibitions that recreated ancient tombs, and phenomena like magic lantern shows and spirit photography' (464). Robert Douglas-Fairhurst also identifies the relation between history, literature, and the idea of resurrection, writing that the idea of 'the past' was so discussed in the nineteenth century, that "The action or fact of rising again from sleep, decay, disuse; revival; restoration" (*OED* 3, 'resurrection') often provide[d] Victorian speakers with both a "theme" and the means of its expression' (75).

the way in which MacDonald employs both Spiritualist and Christian metaphors reveals the theological significance he placed upon the practice of reading and its capacity to link the living and the dead.

Considering MacDonald's use of literary-resurrective language in light of his theology reveals his intention to subvert the magical and occultic language of his peers in order to present reading as an alternative to Spiritualism. For him, reading is best understood in terms of a conversation between the writer and reader. To read books is, therefore, an act that has the potential to raise a dead writer back to life. Literary resurrection may only be achieved through a particular method of reading that sees books not simply as material objects but as living things that have the potential to challenge or qualify their reader's interpretation of the text. Central to MacDonald's ideas concerning necromantic reading is the imagination—an element that is vital in connecting the living reader and dead writer, and which he associates with the transformative and resurrecting presence of the Holy Spirit. By focusing upon the intersection between MacDonald's ideas concerning reading, Spiritualism, and theology, this chapter joins what Christine Ferguson calls 'the massive resurgence of scholarly interest in nineteenth-century Spiritualism' ('Recent Studies' 1) and demonstrates how critical attention to nineteenth-century theology may also open up new perspectives on Victorian Spiritualism.

I begin by focusing on MacDonald's understanding of reading as a conversation with the (un)dead. For him, reading and conversation possess a number of shared qualities, including the need for openness and attention to the other, as well as an element of unpredictability concerning the final result. As a person reads and re-reads a book, she is taking part in an extended conversation with the dead writer, who, through his own words, may challenge or qualify the reader's interpretations of the text. This attentive and open re-reading is an important element of what transforms the fixed words on the page into the living

words of a responsive conversation-partner. Leah Price points out that books have been understood to connect living and dead in a variety of ways—by mediating 'a meeting of minds between reader and author' or by 'broker[ing] (or buffer[ing]) relationships among the bodies of successive and simultaneous readers' (12). The way in which books link living and dead is important in MacDonald's thinking, too, for his understanding of reading as conversation is inextricable from his understanding of what a book is. This first section will, therefore, conclude by outlining MacDonald's idea of the book and the implications this has on the way in which a reader approaches reading.

The increasing interest in Spiritualism over the course of the nineteenth century brought with it not only the prospect of communion with the dead, but divisions between Christians who regarded their faith as compatible with this new spiritual phenomenon, and those who saw it as a threat to orthodox belief. As Alison Winter notes, there was at this time a 'prevailing anxiety about spiritual influence' (247). Given the fact that MacDonald was not only a novelist and literary scholar, but also a Christian theologian and preacher, the question arises as to what, precisely, his intention was in employing this vocabulary in his discussions of reading? The second section of this chapter will address this question, arguing that MacDonald's model of reading as a necromantic conversation is not a demonstration of his support of Spiritualist practice, or simply a convenient metaphor, but rather a way of presenting reading as a theological alternative to Spiritualism. In his mind, Spiritualism is a form of materialism that encourages a lack of trust in God and his provision, while also opening its practitioners up to demonic threat or the bad advice of deceptive spirits. Reading books, on the other hand, connects the living and the dead in a way that is far more personal than a séance could ever be, for it brings a person into contact with the mind of the writer herself. This section will begin by considering MacDonald's views on Spiritualism, before

moving on to explore the way in which his ideas concerning reading offer it as a more effective way to connect with the dead.

This chapter's third section will consider the relationship between MacDonald's theology of the Holy Spirit and his notion of necromantic reading. MacDonald believed there to be a fundamental link between a person's imagination and the Spirit, for the Spirit inspires creativity and, through the imagination, guides a person to see what is beyond the material world. Furthermore, the Spirit is the giver of freedom and the generator of transformative life, and is therefore associated with resurrection. I will argue that in bringing together his ideas on reading and the Holy Spirit, MacDonald invests his idea of conversational reading with a spiritual significance that allows him to claim a theological connection between the living and the dead, while at the same time presenting his vision of necromantic reading as an alternative to Spiritualism that resolves anxieties about the latter (such as concerns over deception, manipulation, and mind control).

The final section of this chapter considers the implications of necromantic or resurrective reading upon the reader. I will make the case that, for MacDonald, reading is not simply a way of connecting with the dead, but an activity that has the potential to transform the reader into a better version of herself. This transformation comes not simply because of a sympathetic engagement with a book, or an increase in intellectual understanding, but is powered and directed by the Holy Spirit. In pursuing this line of thought, I will consider the ways in which MacDonald's first and last fantasy novels, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, depict the process of transformative, resurrective reading. By thinking about the idea of resurrection in terms of transformative reading, these novels present reading as a theological form through which MacDonald explores the idea of resurrection.

Reading as Conversation with the Dead

The notion that books may act as a medium connecting the living and the dead is one that has intrigued literary critics and historians for some time. Price's interest is in how the material book links 'successive readers, owners, and handlers … across the line that divides the living from the dead' (13). For others, such as the early-modern scholar Stephen Greenblatt, the act of reading itself seems to provide an opportunity to 'speak with the dead' (1). That this subject continues to fascinate scholars after decades of discussion[6] raises the question as to what it is about reading books that invites us to think of it as a way of communing with the dead? Is it, as Deidre Lynch suggests, the readerly tendency towards the personification of books, something that often involves an emotional connection (7)? Or might it have to do with an awareness of the complexity of interpreting someone's words—a complexity that is made even more apparent when we are faced with the barrier of death, or by fixed words on a page? Or could it simply be that talk of speaking with the dead offers a convenient metaphor for those critics who work on earlier periods of literature?

MacDonald, too, frequently writes of reading as a way of connecting with the dead. And for him it is the commonalities he identifies between reading and conversation that shape his notion of reading as a mode of communing with the dead. According to the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, a conversation is 'a process of coming to an understanding' (387)—something that happens only if the parties involved are openly and attentively listening to one another. The need for openness in conversation means that there is also a certain unpredictability about how the conversation will go, or what the result might be. According to Gadamer, 'the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner' (385). Conversational understanding, or the lack thereof, is not in our control, but is

[6] See also Lysack, Pieters, and McWilliams.

'like an event that happens to us' (385). For this reason, a conversation might be said to have 'a spirit of its own' (Gadamer 385). Openness, attention, unpredictability, and the presence of a distinct 'spirit'—qualities of conversation that are, as Gadamer recognises, also present in the event of reading a text.

Although he was writing about a century before Gadamer, MacDonald's description of his idea of reading as conversation is strikingly similar to that of the German philosopher—a similarity that is possibly due to a shared reading of German Romantic writers (Bowie 'Gadamer and Art' 57; Raeper 239-240).[7] Articulating the idea of open and attentive listening in terms of reading, MacDonald writes that through 'close, silent, patient study', the reader is enabled to 'enter into an understanding with the spirit of the departed poet-sage' ('St. George's Day' 140). Elsewhere he not only affirms the close attention a good reader pays when she thinks seriously about what his book says, but also highlights a positive element of reading's unpredictability when he claims that the attentive reader is 'always finding in [the book] some beauty or excellence or aid he had not found before' (*HG* 96). MacDonald's attentive reader is, therefore, a re-reader whose interactions with dead writers are not simply passing encounters, but extended conversations in which she remains open to increased understanding—even if the event of understanding is not guaranteed.

Re-reading is, for MacDonald, an important part of what transforms the text (a permanently fixed articulation of thought) into a dynamic and responsive conversation-partner. This is because as a reader returns to the text with an openness to what she may have missed, or misunderstood, during her first reading, she allows the writer's voice, as Dominick LaCapra puts it, to 'resist or qualify the interpretations [she] would like to place on

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[7] The German Romantic influence is, arguably, also visible in Gadamer and MacDonald's shared interest in the communication of knowledge or truth through art.

them' (64). This kind of attentive re-reading can therefore be understood as a way of bringing texts to life, transforming them from fixed expressions into active conversation-partners. While Lynch rightly observes that '[r]ereading so as to have by heart—to make a book one's constant companion—is not always congruent with rereading so as to know better and more deeply by knowing one's own assumptions' (150), MacDonald's emphasis on attentiveness demonstrates his own awareness of the problems that familiarity with a book might present in conversing with the dead, while also attempting to safeguard against such one-sided reading.

Although the notion of such open—even deferential—reading might seem to be at odds with the more analytical mode of reading expected of a literary scholar, MacDonald maintained that each mode of reading plays an important role in the scholar's work. Rita Felski makes a similar observation when she writes that 'receptivity can have consequences for thought. If a work exists only as an object to be deciphered, its impact will be attenuated; as Ricoeur writes in a harsh but vivid metaphor, it is treated as a "cadaver handed over for autopsy."' (*Hooked* 152). Echoing Ricoeur's metaphor, MacDonald vehemently asserts that critical analysis should never be considered as an end in itself: '[a]nalysis is well, as death is well', he writes, 'analysis is death, not life' (*US III.* 228). Death, for MacDonald, is an undoing of creative life, and literary analysis parallels death in that it is an undoing or picking apart of a creative work. This rather strong statement might initially seem to be a condemnation of analysis in general. When read in light of MacDonald's belief that death is the door into life, however, it becomes clear that what he means is that analysis, like death, is not a good in and of itself, but is needed to reach a higher good. Applied to the case of reading, the purpose of analysis or criticism is always to enable a better understanding of the book's 'live' mind. 'Death' leads to 'life'.

While the practice of open and attentive re-reading is vital in bringing the dead writer to life, MacDonald's notion of reading as conversation is also, to some extent, bound up with his understanding of what a book is. In her study of the nineteenth-century book as object, Price asks '[w]hat exactly would it mean to study books without privileging reading?' (20). MacDonald would likely answer Price that it would mean studying books no longer, for the thing that qualifies a book as a book is 'that it has a soul—the mind in it of him who wrote the book' (*HG* 96). MacDonald's characterisation of a book as possessing the soul or mind of the writer echoes Milton's provocative claim in *Areopagitica* (1644), 'as good almost kill a man as kill a good book [….] a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life' (50). Milton's comments are, famously, made in the context of his polemic against censorship in the seventeenth century, but MacDonald, who had read and was familiar with Milton's tract, rearticulates the idea of the 'life beyond life' of books in order to make a claim about how to read. For MacDonald, it is only when a book is engaged with as something more than an object that it comes alive. To privilege a book's materiality over its ideas would, for MacDonald, be the equivalent of studying a dead body in order to discover a person's personality or thoughts. To illustrate this, MacDonald compares two types of book-owners: the collector, who is interested in the book only as a material object and therefore rarely, if ever, reads it, and the thoughtful reader who 'cherishes' and 'broods over' his use-worn, coverless copy (*HG* 96). The former fails to recognise the latent life in the book, and, as a result, it will always remain 'dead' to her (*HG* 96). For the latter, however, who cares more for the book's meaning than its physical form, it becomes 'to him in truth as a live companion' (*HG* 96).

In addition to echoing Milton's characterisation of books as living things, MacDonald's conception of the book as potential conversation-partner coincides with several

ways of thinking on the matter that were especially prevalent in the nineteenth century. There was, according to Samantha Matthews, a 'sensibility' that 'interpreted the book as the embodied medium of the dead poet's spirit' (4). Another sensibility was the tendency that emerged in the mid-eighteenth century to personify books. According to Lynch, this tendency could result in the casting of one's feelings for books as 'something that can collapse time and connect the living and the dead' (13). One of the things that is most striking about MacDonald's model, however, is his emphasis upon the role of both parties in this resurrective conversation. For him, a writer's 'mind' may continue to live on, and may manifest itself in the material form of a book, but its continued resurrection into a conversation-partner is by no means guaranteed. Books must also have attentive readers—or re-readers. Julian Wolfreys makes a related point when he writes that we 'announce in various ways the power of texts to survive, as though they could, in fact, live on, without our help, without our involvement as readers' (xi). At the same time that there is a need for the reader's return to the text, MacDonald makes it clear that it is the writer's 'own words' that act as 'the necromantic spell that raises the dead' ('St. George's Day' 140). There is, then, a balance of power necessary for literary resurrection: without the writer's 'necromantic spell' there could be no resurrection, but without a reader to read the 'spell' it remains only dead words on a page, and the writer's soul is unable to return to life. For MacDonald, it is only through the meeting of this shared power—a power that is located in both the mind or 'soul' of the book as well as in the reader who seeks to understand that mind—that literary conversations are possible.

Reading as an Alternative Spiritualism

MacDonald's model of reading as a necromantic conversation is not simply a convenient metaphor, but a conscious engagement with contemporary debates concerning Spiritualism—

an engagement that also serves to reveal his theological views on the purpose and practice of reading. For many Victorians, conversation with the dead was a real and intriguing possibility, and reading itself was treated as a potentially religious or spiritual act. In light of this context, the question arises as to what exactly MacDonald is claiming when he writes that reading unites the living and the dead. Is this connection simply an act of the imagination, or does it actually involve the spirit world? And how does this notion of necromantic conversation shape both the practice of reading, as well as the reader herself? Bound up in these and other questions about Victorian reading practices are a variety of issues that also emerged in contemporary discussions of Spiritualism, including anxieties over the possibility of mind control or manipulation, as well as questions about whether the nature of reality is fundamentally spiritual or material. To consider MacDonald's notion of necromantic reading, then, has bearing not only upon Victorian understandings of reading (including what method of reading is best, what a person is doing when she reads, and the spiritual impact that reading might have on the reader), but also upon some of the most pressing questions raised by nineteenth-century Spiritualism.

Following its emergence in the middle of the nineteenth century, Spiritualism proved to be contested ground by those who sought to claim it as a distinctly material phenomenon, those who regarded it as evidence of the supernatural, and those whose ideas on the subject fell somewhere in between. Spiritualism was, for some, the realm of demons. For others, it offered evidence of the miraculous claims of Christian orthodoxy. For others still, it ceded religious ground to scientific materialism. More recently, debates concerning how to understand Spiritualism have demonstrated just how varied the readings of Victorian understandings, and uses, of Spiritualism and its discourse can be.[8] Tatiana Kontou and Sarah

[8] See Thurschwell, Owen, Smajíc, and Knight 'The Limits of Orthodoxy in a Secular Age'.

Willburn, for instance, regard Spiritualism as 'scientific, and even, perhaps, a type of secularism. It was a technology' (18). Kontou and Willburn's characterisation of Spiritualism as a type of secularism explicitly states the more implicit expression of the same idea in the work of other scholars.[9] J. Jeffrey Franklin, on the other hand, associates it with the sacred, pointing out that although Spiritualism had a 'profoundly conflicted relationship' with science, it 'shared with other religious and spiritual discourses of the time a primary mission to defeat materialism', and was 'the starting-point for a number of late-century hybrid religions' (32-33). Franklin's account of the relationship between Spiritualism and orthodox Christianity more specifically is one that highlights the threat that Christian spirituality suffered at the hands of material science, and the role that occult spiritualisms played in its rescue—although the end result of this rescue-mission was, according to Franklin, a version of Christianity that had been 'largely stripped of most of its traditional doctrines' (41). The fact that Franklin identifies this rescue pattern as a broader nineteenth-century movement raises the question of whether MacDonald's notion of necromantic reading might be read as a similar attempt to empower Christianity with Spiritualist ideas. My answer, which I will develop in this section, is that MacDonald is actually doing the opposite. By articulating his idea of reading as conversation with the dead in Spiritualist language, MacDonald presents reading as an alternative to Spiritualism—one that not only has a stronger and more valuable spiritual power, but also a greater capacity to link the living and the dead.

In a letter to his wife, Louisa, during an 1875 visit to the Cowper-Temples at Broadlands, MacDonald describes his impressions of a fellow-guest, a society medium:

[9] See Enns, Wilson, and Galvan *The Sympathetic Medium*.

> There is a Mrs A[s]worth here. I don't take to her much, but [John] Ruskin is very much interested in her. She sees spirits, and Annie,[10] though she feels to her as I do, thinks her quite honest. She has seen & described, without having even seen her, Rose [LaTouche], whispering to Mr. Ruskin. He is convinced. I am not – but I shall not refuse to hear her talk, if as Annie offered, she gets her on the subject. (2[1] Dec.)

The letter does much to represent the suspicion MacDonald felt towards Spiritualism more generally. He writes that the medium 'sees spirits' (rather than simply claiming to do so) and that she 'has seen & described' Rose LaTouche—a use of phrasing that indicates that his doubts concerning the veracity of Mrs Asworth's claims were not necessarily because he ruled out the possibility of contact with the dead. His comment about Mrs Asworth being, apparently, 'quite honest' indicates that although he might have had a tendency to view mediums with suspicion (something that may explain why he did not 'take to her much'), he was open to giving a seemingly-honest person the benefit of the doubt. What is less evident in this letter, but likely lay behind MacDonald's skepticism in this instance, is his more general suspicion that whomever—or whatever—one is making contact with on the 'other side' could actually be someone or something other than they appear.

The idea that the dead, rather than the living, might be the charlatans, is one that appears in almost every instance of MacDonald's writing on the subject. His most thorough explanation of the idea appears in *David Elginbrod*, the work in which he deals with Spiritualism most extensively. In this novel, the protagonist Hugh Sutherland is for a time employed as a tutor at a country house. During his time there, Hugh is drawn into a series of

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[10] The 'Annie' to which MacDonald refers here is possibly Annie Munro, sister of the sculptor Alexander Munro and governess of the Cowper-Temple's children (Sadler 275).

experimental séances conducted by a visitor to the house, the nefarious Herr von Funkelstein. Various phenomena, such as table-rapping and automatic writing, occur and the skeptical Hugh is uncertain as to how to understand it all, for the spirit with whom they appear to have come into contact is David Elginbrod, an old and dear friend of Hugh's. Later in the narrative, Hugh relates his experiences to a new acquaintance, Robert Falconer, who states his belief that the automatic writing was not evidence of David's presence, but an 'impudent forgery of that good man's name', and the work of 'a charlatan, or worse' (*DE* 323-24).

It is not entirely clear who, or what, Falconer means by 'or worse', for he follows his reference to those who 'lament the loss of their beggarly bodies' and are thus, presumably, human, with a reminder to Hugh of the New Testament story of Jesus casting a legion of demons out of a man: 'Don't you remember that once, rather than have no body to go into, they crept into the very swine?' (324). Falconer's 'or worse' can be interpreted in two ways: either it is a demon impersonating the dead, or a dead person whose corruption goes beyond charlatanism and by implication, puts him or her on an equal spiritual footing with a demon. The idea that Spiritualism might have a demonic or diabolical element also appears in MacDonald's other writings on the subject. Indeed, it is stated explicitly in *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* when the vicar, Mr Walton, claims that those who 'betake themselves to necromancy … and raise the dead to ask their advice, AND FOLLOW IT, … will find some day that Satan had not forgotten how to dress like an angel of light.' (321-22). When MacDonald refers to the spirits as demonic or diabolical, he seems to do so mainly in order to underscore the foolishness of seeking out advice from these unknown sources. This demonic influence is not quite as obvious, nor as sensational, as the accounts relayed by Winter in *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (1998), in which a revolving table was said to have immediately stopped moving when a Bible was laid upon it, and then knocked its leg

in affirmation when a question was posed to it concerning its demonic identity (264). In MacDonald's understanding, diabolical forces are far more subtle, for rather than ceasing at the sight of a Bible, they use it in order to lead people astray. In the case of *David Elginbrod*'s well-intentioned, but theologically-simplistic Mrs Elton, the scripture-rapping spirits that manifest during one of the séances only serve to affirm her own shallow understanding of Christianity, including the pre-conceived judgements she has made on the state of her host's soul.

The second option, that the spirits of the dead are truly deceased humans—albeit not necessarily the people they claim to be—is not, for MacDonald, substantially better than the possibility of demons. In his mind, the fact that these spirits remain available for conversation with the living is indicative of their spiritual failing. As Falconer puts it, these dead people 'so lament the loss of their beggarly bodies that they would brood upon them in the shape of flesh-flies, rather than forsake the putrifying [sic] remnants. After that, chair or table or anything that they can come into contact with, possesses quite sufficient organization for such' (*DE* 323-24). In other words, these spirits are materialists, who are so desperate to remain close to the material world that they would rather inhabit the form of even an inanimate object than progress into the next stage of being.[11] Because MacDonald had such a low view of materialism—indeed he regarded it as diametrically opposed to Christianity—any spirit that would hover around the material world must, by default, be lacking in character. Throughout his writing he characterises these spirits as the lowest of the spirit-world: 'its mud-larkes, and lovers of garbage, its thieves, impostors, liars, and canaille, in general' (*WGW* 94). No wonder, then, that MacDonald regarded consultation with the dead to be foolish, for whether

[11] Tennyson also had an objection to the idea of 'the souls of dead men manifesting themselves by table-rappings', despite the fact that he did take an interest in spiritualism (Wheeler *Death* 250).

the spirit is a demon or a morally-corrupt materialist, any advice it might give would not be worth having.

For some Victorians, however, séances were less about seeking guidance from the dead, and more about whether the apparent manifestation of spirits was evidence for, or against, the existence of a spiritual world. This was a particularly pertinent concern for Victorian Christians, for, as Winter notes, '[c]entral to what has been called the Victorian "crisis of faith" was the status of various kinds of evidence—of Scripture and of God's action in the mortal world' (248). Winter's focus is upon earlier mesmeric phenomena, and the debates concerning their interpretation as 'natural' or 'supernatural' events, but the wrangling over evidence—as well as the status of apparently-spiritual phenomena—continued as Mesmerism developed into Spiritualism later in the century. *David Elginbrod*'s Mrs Elton is one of those Christians who regards the manifestations of Spiritualism as evidence of Christian claims: '"What a comfort it is," said Mrs. Elton, wishing to interest Lady Emily, "that now-a-days, when infidelity is so rampant, such corroborations of Sacred Writ are springing up on all sides! There are the discoveries at Nineveh; and now these Spiritual Manifestations, which bear witness so clearly to another world."' (*DE* 207-8). Far from being an example for the reader to follow, Mrs Elton's enthusiastic acceptance of the manifestations as evidence of Christian claims goes hand-in-hand with her representation as a thoroughly conventional Christian, who 'considered reason as an awful enemy to the soul, and obnoxious to God' (313), and whose faith consists mainly in believing the right doctrines.

In MacDonald's thinking, a readiness to accept Spiritualist phenomena as evidence of Christianity not only demonstrates a lack of true spirituality, but is, in fact, a form of materialism. Franklin notes that there were an assortment of ways that the term 'materialism' was employed and understood in the nineteenth century. As he goes on to detail, the word was

used, variously, to signify atheism, science, ‘mammonism’, and the abnegation of the human soul (32). MacDonald uses the term in several of these ways throughout his writings, but his consistent point of critique is that materialism emphasises the material world at the expense of the spiritual. This is not to say that MacDonald regarded the material and spiritual as opposed to one another. Indeed, quite the opposite is true, for he held that to understand the material world without reference to the spiritual is, in fact, to mis-understand it. MacDonald pointed out the necessity of the material world for apprehending spiritual knowledge, but he believed that a prioritisation of the material put one in danger of drifting away from God. For him spirituality was not simply a general belief in the supernatural or the afterlife, but a specific knowledge of, and trust in, the Christian God. For this reason, MacDonald perceived materialism to be an attempt to take control over one’s own life, thereby choosing to distrust God’s provision and active presence in the material world. Related to this, MacDonald thought that some people’s need for Spiritualist evidences of another world was a sign of their materialist lack of faith. MacDonald did not object to faith seeking understanding, but he did caution against seeking after evidence from dubious sources. In his mind, there was enough evidence already available—through nature, the experience of the human heart, and the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels—to trust that God would provide in both this life and the next.

For MacDonald, a materialist lack of faith manifests itself in a variety of ways, including a grasping after material wealth or goods, a general disbelief in the supernatural or spiritual, and a failure to trust that God’s Spirit would provide a person with guidance or revelation. The first and the last of these symptoms can be seen in Mrs Elton, whose rigid Christian beliefs are confirmed not through prayer or a thoughtful engagement with Scripture, but by the dubious manifestations of scripture-rapping spirits. The result is not only spiritual

or intellectual rigidity, but also an inordinate prizing of material goods. As the narrator tells us, Mrs Elton frequents a fashionable London church whose congregants seem to be more concerned with their material comfort and respectability than in actually hearing what God might have to say. Although Mrs Elton's interpretation of Spiritualist manifestations as evidence of Christianity might appear to be spiritual, it actually demonstrates that she is, in more ways than one, a materialist.

Given MacDonald's opinions on Spiritualism, his use of necromantic imagery in relation to reading might initially seem incongruous. However, his use of necromantic imagery is better understood in the context of his efforts to present reading as an alternative to Spiritualism. For him, the reasons that people have for seeking out communion with the dead (advice, evidence of another world or spiritual reality, and so on) may all be better satisfied by reading than by attending a séance. In a manner itself rather akin to a séance, MacDonald speaks through the titular character of *Donal Grant* (1883) in order to argue his case on the subject. Affirming first the reasonableness of a longing for 'personal communication with this or that one of the greatest who have lived before him' (101), he goes on to argue that, 'instead of mocking you with an airy semblance of [the dead's] bodily forms, and the murmur of a few doubtful words from their lips, [reading] places in your hands a key to their inmost thoughts' (101). In one sense, the spiritualist is similar to the aforementioned book collector: while both appear to have access to the dead writer, neither truly does. The collector has a lifeless material object, and the spiritualist, while apparently in contact with the resurrected writer, has, at best, only conjured up an incomplete version of the deceased person. As a consequence, the words spoken by the dead are 'doubtful' not only because their origin is dubious (for it is uncertain whether they are the words of the dead or of demons), but also because of the apparent vagueness of the 'few murmurs' that come from their ghostly lips.

Reading, on the other hand, provides direct access to the mind of the dead writer. Although some interpretation may be required, MacDonald remains confident that his conversational manner of reading is the best way to begin to understand the dead writer's thoughts. While he acknowledges that some might not view this as personal communication, he maintains that it is actually a far deeper and more personal connection than one might find in a séance. He believed that we 'come into contact with the being of a man when we hear him pour forth his thoughts of the things he likes best to think about, into the ear of the universe'— and it is precisely in this position that reading places the reader. (*HG* 102). A true conversation with the dead is, in fact, only possible through reading—but not just any kind of reading. The relationship between living reader and dead writer is one of openness and intimacy, for the contact occurs when the reader hears (a word that implies attentive listening) the writer's most cherished thoughts. As a literary scholar, MacDonald was well aware of the complexities of interpretation. This is why it is important to note that his emphasis is on coming into contact with the dead writer, rather than reaching a conclusive determination of the writer's thoughts. For MacDonald, it is encounter—communion—with the dead that is most important, and from which increased understanding of that writer's 'mind' may proceed.

Donal's further claim that '[t]here is more of the marvellous in an old library than ever any magic could work!' (*DG* 100) underscores the superiority of reading over necromancy,[12] but it also hints at the idea that there is more to seeking conversation with the dead than a simple guarantee of good counsel. An old library is a place that, by virtue of its books, is filled with the marvellous or supernatural. It is not, however, the physical presence of the books that makes the library a location for the marvellous, but rather the use of the imagination on the parts of both reader and—years before—dead writer. MacDonald writes that '[i]n books, we

[12] necromancy being 'one of the branches of magic' (*DG* 100).

not only have store of all results of the imagination, but in them … we may behold her embodying before our very eyes, in music of speech, in wonder of words, till her work … stands finished before us' ('The Imagination' 37-38). In one sense, MacDonald confers a state of finality upon the text by claiming that it contains the 'finished' result of the writer's imaginative vision or thought. At the same time, however, he draws attention to the way in which books also afford an opportunity for the reader to witness that vision materialising before her very eyes. This dynamic process indicates that the imagination is characterised by vitality—a vitality that allows for the repeated embodying of the dead writer's ideas with each reading of the text. Not only does the notion of the repeated embodiment of something intangible hint at the repeated manifestations of spirits from the dead, but it also points to the role of the imagination in necromantic reading. It is not only the dead writer's imagination, but the reader's imagination, also, that plays a crucial part in literary resurrection. It is through the sounds and meanings of the words on the page—a description that implies the necessity of a reader to hear and make meaning—that the idea of the dead writer is made manifest. Reading is not, therefore, simply a passive observation of the dead writer's imaginative vision, but an active engagement of the reader's own imagination with the writer's own words or 'speech'.

The (Holy) Spirit of Reading

The privileging of literary imagination over Spiritualist manifestations is no secular attempt to replace the possibility of spiritual reality with an imaginative or aesthetic alternative. It is, rather, an indicator of the spiritual significance that MacDonald places upon the imagination and, consequently, reading. For him, a 'wise imagination … is the presence of the spirit of God' ('The Imagination' 28), a claim that not only asserts the intrinsically spiritual nature of

the imagination, but also locates its working within the triune life of the Christian God.[13] The imagination is not, in MacDonald's theology, synonymous with the Holy Spirit, but it is one of the key faculties through which he understands the Spirit to work. This theological claim differs from the more general pattern noted by Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford that 'esoteric thinkers have championed the imagination as a vehicle through which humans might penetrate the veil of matter and commune with spiritual intermediaries' (14).[14] MacDonald would have likely regarded such esoteric understandings of the imagination as leading away from trust in God, for the pursuit of esoteric knowledge via spiritual intermediaries, or imaginative practices such as astral travel, would, in his mind, only lead to increased dependence upon one's self or another person. MacDonald's understanding of the imagination, on the other hand, ensures that, as a person employs her Spirit-filled imagination, her vision of what is, both seen and unseen, is enlightened by God.

The connection MacDonald makes between the Holy Spirit and the imagination demonstrates the spiritual importance he places upon the latter, but the connection also has significant bearing on how we understand his notion of necromantic reading. Reading is superior to necromancy not only because it safeguards readers against demonic advice or the dangers of materialism, but because, through the Spirit-filled imagination, it offers spiritual insight and divine guidance. In the Christian tradition, the Holy Spirit is, among other things, a guide who gives internal direction or illumination that enables a person to see and know

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[13] Even for those who do not have a 'wise' imagination, or even acknowledge God's existence, the imagination still serves as 'the voice of God himself' ('The Imagination' 32).

[14] See Winick for more on the role of the imagination in nineteenth-century literary, scholarly, and spiritual/occult practices.

things beyond the strictures of physical sight.[15] Picking up on this idea, MacDonald writes that a wise imagination 'is the best guide that man or woman can have' ('The Imagination' 28)—a claim about guidance that is not limited to moral or religious matters. The imagination is not, for MacDonald, an optional extra in human cognition, but is at work 'in every sphere of human activity'— including those areas more commonly associated with reason or empirical inquiry such as science or mathematics ('The Imagination' 7).[16] Filling in the gaps between what is empirically known, the imagination constructs scientific and mathematical theories, orders events into historical narratives, visualises plans for the future, and enables people to communicate their thoughts and ideas through the creation of language. Consequently, when MacDonald writes that human beings 'live by faith, and not by sight' ('The Imagination' 28), he is not (in this instance) making a claim about the need for belief *per se*, but is rather observing the extent to which every person is dependent upon that which cannot be seen with physical eyes.

Not only does the Spirit-filled imagination enable a sight beyond what is visible, then; it can also lead a person to connect the facts of the known world in a way that leads to greater understanding. The consequence is that there is no area of life where the imagination is not needed, nor is there a sphere in which God's guidance is unnecessary. Seeking direction from the dead demonstrates a lack of trust in God and a distinct lack of imagination. Reading, on the other hand, is not only an imaginative act, but a decidedly theological one. To consider the act of reading in light of this theological conception of the imagination affords a deeper understanding of MacDonald's claims about the guidance dead writers may give, as well as

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[15] 'Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth' (John 6.13); 'the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord ... he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes' (Is. 11.2-3).

[16] Including scientific or mathematical theorising, the creation of language, the making of historical narratives, artistic or poetic work, envisioning the past and future, etc.

the notion that an old library possesses a marvellous or supernatural quality. If the Holy Spirit is present in the imaginations of both the living reader and dead writer, then a library filled with old books becomes the locus for a marvellous encounter with God himself.[17] The idea is not simply a figurative or aesthetic claim about old books or libraries, but is, rather, an assertion about a particular spiritual reality.

The divine direction afforded by necromantic reading is not a channeling of information from God to the reader via the writer (in the way that a medium might channel the voice of the dead), for it requires the particular and unique involvement of all parties: the writer uses her imagination to communicate her ideas or vision, the reader uses his imagination to engage with the writer's words, and the Holy Spirit illumines and guides them both. This is vital to note, for, although the Holy Spirit does direct, he does not do so in a manner that overrides or violates the freedom of the writer or the reader. Ben Quash, who similarly notes the non-coercive nature of the guiding, illuminating Spirit, writes that 'the receipt of God's self-communication in the mode of revelation—which is a working of God in us—is fruitfully explored as imagination, or (at the very least) as something very like imagination' (*Found Theology* 32). The idea of a non-coercive, guiding Spirit would have been especially important to those of MacDonald's readers who had anxieties concerning spiritual influence—particularly those concerned about mind control and manipulation in Spiritualism and associated practices. There is a similarity between God's refusal to control or dominate those he has created, and the open attention to the other that characterises

[17] This remains the case even if the writer him- or herself is unaware of the imagination's theological significance (something that is also true of a reader's marvellous encounter in the old library). In his essay on 'The Imagination', MacDonald engages with John Ruskin's view of artistic inspiration, agreeing with Ruskin that ideas or imaginative visions arise involuntarily from a person's unconscious. MacDonald takes the idea further, though, by maintaining that unconscious inspiration must be rooted theologically (24).

necromantic reading.[18] The significance of this similarity is heightened when one considers that the Spirit's process of direction is, in fact, more akin to a conversation than divine dictation. Although Gadamer's focus is more upon language than imagination, his articulation of the relationship between freedom and unpredictability in conversation is helpful here: '[t]he way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led' (385). That those in conversation are 'less' the leaders than the led (rather than completely so), indicates that there remains some agency on the parts of those involved. At the same time, the need for openness to the other in conversation is a relinquishment of absolute control. This choice to let go of all control is where the element of unpredictability comes in, not only on the part of the reader who seeks to understand, but on the part of the writer who often feels that his ideas or imaginative visions 'are given to him ... from the vast unknown'—an unknown in which God is present and at work ('The Imagination' 24). Gadamer's conclusion that conversation possesses 'a spirit of its own' is, therefore, particularly fitting when thinking about MacDonald, for the Holy Spirit is, by way of the imagination, a present and active participant in the conversation between dead writer and living reader.

The vitality that characterises necromantic reading is another way in which MacDonald links the imagination with the Holy Spirit. Colin Manlove rightly notes that in MacDonald's thinking, '[w]ithout the imagination, man becomes spiritually dead' ('A Reading' 73). Although Manlove does not explore the theological grounding of the idea, he puts his finger on a significant element of MacDonald's thought: by virtue of the imagination,

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[18] While it is true that in stronger versions of Calvinism the idea of God's sovereignty is given more emphasis, MacDonald's theology departs from this stronger account by claiming that God 'will not force any door to enter in. ... The door must be opened by the willing hand, ere the foot of Love will cross the threshold' (*US II.* 113).

reading literature becomes a theological act that brings the dead back to life. In Christian theology, the Spirit is the giver of life. Like the Father and the Son, he is involved with creation, but he also has a particular association with resurrection. St Paul, for example, writes that 'if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you' (Rom. 8.11). The life-giving power of the Spirit is not only creative, then, but re-creative or resurrective. Given the Spirit's role in resurrection, we can see why, for MacDonald, the dead writer is brought back to life through the working of the Spirit-filled imagination. This is not, however, the only aspect of resurrection that is relevant to the notion of reading as conversation with the dead. Unlike necromancy, which is more akin to revivification, Christian resurrection involves an element of transformation, for it not only promises resurrection but resurrection into a form that is continuous at some level with the old body and also radically better. There are two ways in which Christian theology generally understands this to take place. The first is the more obvious resurrection following physical death. Although this in itself has been variously understood by theologians through the centuries (resurrection promises the physical resurrection of a person's material body; it is the resurrection of the soul into another form; it is the resurrection of a disembodied soul), MacDonald believed that a physical body remains necessary in the next life in order to continue to develop, learn, and be in relationship with God and other people. At the same time, he believed that to insist upon the resurrection of the exact same material body a person possessed in this life reveals a materialist attachment to the old body that goes 'against science, common sense, [and] Scripture' (*US I*. 84). Although the material body is not resurrected, a person will have 'the same body, glorified as we are glorified, with all that was distinctive of each from his fellows more visible than ever before' (*US I*. 85). By the 'same' resurrected body, MacDonald means a new and improved form which, although it is not made

up of the same matter as the old body, remains recognisably the same in its physical form. All of the things that hindered a person from being her truest self—spiritually, physically, psychologically—will have disappeared through death, and she will be raised to life as the person that her loved ones perceived her to be in her—and their—best moments on earth. It is the work of the Spirit that enables this transformative resurrection into a 'glorified' form.[19]

The second sense in which Christians understand resurrection to take place is similar to the first in that resurrection works to transform a person into the self they were intended to be by God. This second sense differs, however, by taking place during one's earthly life. In this second sense, a person must, figuratively speaking, 'die' to herself—die, that is, to the self-focus and dependence upon herself that keep the Spirit's transforming work from taking place.[20] It is a joint venture, for although she must choose to 'die' to herself over and over again, it is the life-giving Spirit within her that (perhaps counterintuitively) empowers her to do so, and that carries out her transformation as she does. While earthly limitations mean that full transformation is not possible until her final, physical death and resurrection, the characteristics of a person's true self are the same as that of her ultimate, 'glorified' self.

Given the differences between necromancy and Christian resurrection, it may be more fitting to term MacDonald's method of reading as 'resurrective' rather than necromantic. This more explicitly theological term seems especially apposite when one considers the many parallels between conversational reading and resurrection (particularly resurrection in its second sense). The parallels include the need for openness, the need to relinquish control, and the repeated 'death' of the self by choosing to fix one's attention on the other rather than asserting one's own agenda. These qualities are, for MacDonald, inextricably linked with the

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[19] 'But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord' (2 Cor. 3.18).

[20] 'For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live' (Rom. 8.13).

Holy Spirit, who is in both cases the empowering presence that breathes creative and transformative life. Conversational reading may, therefore, be seen not only as the resurrection of the dead writer, but also as the repeated death and resurrection of the reader as well. This idea of a readerly death and resurrection is significant, for in addition to acting as a metaphor for conversational reading, it also demonstrates another of the ways in which reading may be a spiritual act that surpasses the practices of Spiritualism. Through conversational reading, a person is not only offered reliable guidance, but will, through her metaphorical death and resurrection, be transformed into a better version of herself.[21] This readerly transformation is not simply the result of a sympathetic engagement with a book, or an increase in intellectual understanding, but is powered and directed by the Holy Spirit. It is therefore, at its core, a distinctly theological understanding of reading.

The Resurrection of the Reader

The fantasy novels that bookend MacDonald's writing career—*Phantastes* and *Lilith*—are particularly effective demonstrations of the idea of resurrective, transformative reading.[22] In addition, these novels present reading itself as a theological form through which the notion of Christian resurrection may be explored. MacDonald's choice of the fantasy genre[23] is a significant element in enabling this theological exploration, for it allows him to depict characters who, in moving between worlds (in *Phantastes* it is the ordinary world and the realm of fairy, while in *Lilith* it is the world of seven dimensions), inhabit liminal spaces that

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[21] This is opposed to Spiritualism, which, in MacDonald's thinking, encourages an attachment to the present material world, thereby hindering a person from trusting the invisible Spirit who performs the resurrective and transformative work.

[22] MacDonald's suspicion of spiritualism and the occult did not prevent the occultist Arthur Edward Waite from using *Phantastes* as a 'mystical proof-text', (Pazdziora 287).

[23] James and Mendelsohn write that fantasy may be broadly defined as being 'about the construction of the impossible' (1), adding that 'an awareness of the conversation between authors and texts is one of the defining characteristics of the [fantasy] form' (2).

resemble the one between life and afterlife. Furthermore, MacDonald draws the reader's attention to the similarities between her own reading of the novel and the kind of reading enacted by each of the main characters, using fantasy to do so in different ways. In *Phantastes*, he uses a frame narrative to draw a parallel between the reader's engagement with MacDonald's fantasy text and the resurrective reading that Anodos undertakes during his time in fairy land. Anodos reads widely, but the books that seem to have the greatest amount of transformative impact upon him are, significantly, the fantasy tales. In *Lilith*, Vane's journey to be at home begins and ends in the library, but his own transformation comes only after he dies to himself and rises again—an act of resurrective transformation that is linked to his mode of reading. MacDonald uses the fantasy novel as a form for exploring his theological idea of transformational, resurrective reading, while at the same time offering his readers a new form by which to consider the idea of Christian resurrection.

Phantastes follows the adventures of Anodos,[24] whose journey through fairy land results in his transformation. In particular, the transformation of his selfish desire into selfless love. This change happens, unsurprisingly, through a process of death and resurrection. This process includes both the smaller deaths-and-resurrections that occur along his journey, as well as his final death in fairyland and resurrection back to his own world. Although there are a variety of means by which Anodos' transformation takes place, his reading plays a particularly important role—something that is made evident in his account of his stay at the mysterious Fairy Palace. Partway through his journey, Anodos discovers an empty boat floating on a river, and, stepping in to it, decides to 'let my boat and me float whither the stream would carry us' (73). Allowing himself to be guided by the river, he eventually finds himself at the Fairy Palace, in which he discovers a library, the walls of which are 'lined from

[24] Whose name, fittingly, means 'ascent' in Greek, and who is associated with the myth of Persephone rising from the underworld.

floor to roof with books and books: most of them in ancient bindings' (83).[25] The presence of the Holy Spirit is hinted at even before Anodos' arrival at this library filled with old books, for not only is the river a biblical image of the Spirit, but Anodos' choice to trust the river to guide him wherever it may corresponds with MacDonald's own views concerning a person's proper relation to the Spirit.

During his stay at the Palace, Anodos spends a great deal of time reading the library's 'wondrous volumes' (113). Echoing Donal Grant's observation that there is something marvellous about an old library, Anodos notes that the old books in this fairy library possess a certain 'peculiarity' (83), which leads him to describe his experiences of reading them as being 'buried and risen again in these old books' (113). The peculiarity that facilitates this death-and-resurrection reading experience is, it seems, linked to the effect the books have on his imagination. Anodos describes his reading as an act of entering into another person's consciousness until it seems to him as though he has become that person. When reading works of fiction or history, Anodos feels as though he himself has been the one living the life of the story's 'chief actor' or character—so much so that when the book ends, he 'would awake, with a sudden bewilderment, to the consciousness of my present life, recognising the walls and roof around me, and finding I joyed or sorrowed only in a book' (84). Anodos' act of identification with the characters, and his complete immersion into the narrative are, fundamentally, acts of the imagination. It is not only narrative or fiction that proves 'peculiar' in this respect, nor are these the only modes of reading that require an imaginative act. With non-fiction books, too, Anodos finds that he 'had scarcely read two pages before [he] seemed to [himself] to be pondering over discovered truth, and constructing the intellectual machine whereby to communicate the discovery to [his] fellow men' (83). In other words, as he reads

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[25] Rebecca Langworthy also notes the centrality of the library in Anodos' journey, and similarly concludes that '[a]t its centre, *Phantastes* explores the transformative power of reading and the imagination' (89).

these works of non-fiction he almost immediately arrives at a place of complete understanding with the mind behind the book.

While Anodos' immersive, empathetic kind of reading does possess several of the qualities that characterise conversational reading (attention, openness to the other, and the use of the imagination), it may not initially appear to be conversational reading. After all, there seems to be a lack of the back-and-forth dynamic (demonstrated by re-reading and 'close, silent, patient study') that usually characterises conversational reading. Yet the exchange between Anodos and the books' dead writers can still be understood as a type of conversation. Pionke articulates a version of this point in his interpretation of Anodos' reading as 'both narcissistically passive and imaginatively active, since every text Anodos reads prompts him to surrender his own identity even as he co-opts the subject position of the author or protagonist' (28). While I agree with Pionke that Anodos' reading is imaginatively active, I disagree with his description of this reading as narcissistic. The exchange between Anodos and the books' dead writers is better understood as other-focused, conversational reading. A conversation is, in Gadamer's words, 'a process of coming to an understanding'—something that, in ordinary circumstances, might require a number of verbal exchanges between conversation-partners. If, however, understanding is almost immediately reached, then there is no need for a further exchange. This nearly-instantaneous understanding is precisely what Anodos experiences in the fairy library as his mind very quickly becomes one with the dead writer's mind. At one level, his reading in the library is reading in its highest form.

My reading of Anodos' experience in the library as Spirit-filled conversations with the dead is further confirmed by the transformation that occurs as a result of Anodos' resurrective reading. His description of being 'buried and resurrected' in books is apt, for when he reads these books he is, in a sense, dying to himself as he enters wholly into the mind of the writer

or character. It is also fitting because of the role that this reading plays in his ultimate transformation. This transformative element is drawn out quite clearly, for Anodos does not simply tell the reader that he has been transformed by his general reading in the fairy library, he also shows his transformation. He does so by recounting one of the fantasy stories he reads in the fairy library in its entirety, thereby enabling the reader to see for herself how Anodos' reading relates to the rest of his own otherworldly tale. The story Anodos recounts follows the adventures of another young man, a student named Cosmo von Wehrstahl, who falls madly in love with a mysterious lady who is trapped under a curse. Unable to reach her, Cosmo pines for her, singing to himself 'I shall die for love of the maiden' (103). But, Anodos informs the reader, Cosmo does not die. This short comment proves true in more ways than one, for when Cosmo and the lady finally meet and the former is given the choice to free the lady at the risk of never seeing her again, he fails to die to his selfish desire—'Not yet pure in love, he hesitated' (108)—and the opportunity to free her is, he believes, lost forever. The section in which this scene takes place is headed by a paraphrase of Christ's words to his disciples: 'Who lives, he dies; who dies, he is alive' (104). This paraphrase directs the reader to interpret Cosmo's hesitation as a refusal to die and be transformed through resurrection. In the end, the biblical paradox proves to be true, for, eaten up with remorse, Cosmo wanders 'here and there, like an anxious ghost, pale and haggard' (110). At last, desperate to atone for his selfishness and prove that his love is true, the ghost-like Cosmo finds a way to free the lady from her cursed imprisonment—an act that costs him his life. The story ends with Cosmo lying dead in the wailing lady's arms, but still wearing a smile on his 'wan dead face' (113).

Anodos offers no specific comment on the tale following its conclusion, prompting the reader to reflect upon why he might have chosen to relate this particular story in full. The answer to this question appears to lie in Anodos's declaration that 'I trust I have carried away

in my soul some of the exhalations of [the books'] undying leaves' (113). By confidently claiming that these books have had an impact on him, Anodos invites the reader to consider the parallels between the account of his own journey and Cosmo's story. In addition, his description of the books as living things filled with, and breathing out, a breath that enters his soul, indicates that whatever Spirit animates these 'undying' books is now also breathing life in him. That this animating breath has indeed transformed him by way of his reading can be seen particularly clearly near the end of his tale. Like Cosmo, Anodos's love of a lady is tainted with selfishness and in need of transformation—a transformation that happens only after he literally gives up his life for the well-being of others. Anodos' description of the 'conten[tment]' and 'peace' (198) he feels after his death is, like Cosmo's death-smile, an indicator that to die to one's self is to enter into a better state of being. Similar to the wailing lady of Cosmo's tale, Anodos' is also mourned by the 'the lady [he] loved', whose 'tears fell on [his] face' (198).

Although death is necessary for both Anodos and Cosmo to be transformed into their best and most loving selves, Anodos' story does not, like Cosmo's, end there. His death in fairyland results in his 'resurrection' back to normal life. His experiences in fairyland—including the post-death bliss he felt before his physical resurrection back to his former life—have, however, changed him. He is left wondering if it is possible to 'translate the experience of [his] travels there, into common life' or whether he must 'live it all over again, and learn it all over again, in the other forms that belong to the world of men, whose experience yet runs parallel to that of Fairy Land' (204). The narrative ends with Anodos continuing to work this question out. Similar to the ending of Cosmo's tale, the lack of a clear resolution at this point invites the reader of *Phantastes* to consider whether there might be any parallels between Anodos' resurrection from fairyland and her own resurrection from the world of *Phantastes*.

How might her own imaginative experience in fairyland translate into her 'parallel' reality? Might her own reading, including her reading of *Phantastes*, be understood to be similarly transformative? And what bearing might the fairytale form of resurrection have on the way in which she conceives of what forms resurrection takes in 'the world of men'? By allowing questions to remain after the narrative concludes, the text does more than simply act as a model for transformative reading (although it certainly does this through its depiction of Anodos' reading). Through its silence, it prompts the reader to ask questions about how best to interpret it, thus inviting her to enact the back-and-forth dynamic that characterises all acts of conversational reading.

Like *Phantastes*, *Lilith* explores the theological nature of resurrective reading. If Anodos is an example of the success of resurrective reading, then *Lilith*'s Mr Vane demonstrates a failure to read conversationally—a failure that is linked to his reluctance to die to himself. The opening chapter, entitled 'The Library', signals the central place of reading and books in the novel, and offers a glimpse into the character of the first-person narrator. Vane, an Oxford graduate and heir to a large estate, is self-focused and entitled, a young man who 'had never yet done anything to justify [his] existence' (23). This propensity to selfishness is visible even in his reading habits, for although he spends a great deal of time in his extensive library, he performs his studies in a 'somewhat desultory fashion' (5). Vane's description of his own reading here reveals how much he is driven by his own whims rather than by any concentrated attempt to arrive at a solid understanding of a subject. This tendency becomes even clearer as Vane describes his 'habit' of falling into 'metaphysical dreams' and acknowledges his proclivity towards 'a premature indulgence of the impulse to turn hypothesis into theory' (5). This 'confession' indicates his awareness that his superficial approach to reading verges on the self-indulgent, and yet he shows no inclination to alter his

method. It is only later, when he stumbles into another world, one that is accessible through his library, that he is confronted with the ramifications of his method of reading.

Vane's guide for part of his journey in this other world is Mr Raven, who takes both the form of a bird and a man. Mr Raven problematises Vane's self-centred conception of reality by challenging, amongst other things, the latter's understanding of books. During one of their first conversations, Vane sees Mr Raven, in his bird form, digging up worms and tossing them into the air, where they are transformed into butterflies. One need not recognise the allusion to Dante[26] to understand the image as one of resurrection into a better form, especially as Mr Raven goes on to tell Vane that he performs this service of filling 'the air full of worms' in his capacity as sexton of a cemetery (20). A little while later, Mr Raven mentions that he is the 'librarian' in the cemetery, a comment that elicits confusion from Vane. Mr Raven attempts to clarify by explaining that the two are 'much the same profession. Except you are a true sexton, books are but dead bodies to you, and a library nothing but a catacomb' (30). This statement is incomprehensible to Vane, whose treatment of his books indicates that they are indeed more like dead bodies to him than resurrected companions. It also indicates his inability to recognise death for what it truly is: the gateway to resurrection and transformation. When Vane eventually gets to Mr Raven's 'library', he finds not books, but rows and rows of couches upon which lie the shrouded dead. While Mr Raven, the 'true sexton' knows that these are peaceful sleepers awaiting resurrection, Vane sees only 'the unwaking' dead (32). Vane recognises that there is a discrepancy between his own perception and that of Mr Raven, but he ultimately chooses to trust his own vision in this other world, rather than that of his guide.

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[26] 'Perceive ye not we are of worm-like kind, / Born to bring forth the angel butterfly, / That soars to Judgment, and no screen doth find?' (*Purgatory* 10.124-126).

Vane's distrust of Mr Raven, particularly the latter's assurance that Vane will wake again to an unimaginable good, gestures towards Vane's more general failure to recognise that even the little 'deaths' of selfless actions might lead to good. Vane, it is implied, has not made a habit of 'dying' to himself for the sake of others, and therefore is unable to see how such selfless action could offer him anything but a lack of peace and fulfilment. What Vane is unaware of, however, is that he has already had a literal taste of what death has to offer—and has found it good. Upon first realising that he is stranded in this other world, Vane begins to worry about how he will find provision for his daily needs—his 'bread' (24). The idea immediately occurs to him that, 'as I was not to blame in being here, I might expect to be taken care of here as well as [in my former world]! I had had nothing to do with getting into the world I had just left, and in it I had found myself heir to a large property! (24). Consoling himself with this thought, Vane decides to follow Mr Raven, who has offered to take Vane to his cottage to see Mrs Raven. Once there, Vane asks for some food, and he is given bread and wine which 'seemed to go deeper than the hunger and thirst. Anxiety and discomfort vanished; expectation took their place' (31). Vane's acceptance of this eucharistic meal not only demonstrates his dependence upon the Ravens' hospitality, but also symbolises his need for, and his unwitting acceptance of, another act of selfless love: the death of Christ for humanity. For MacDonald, the eucharist is not only a symbol of Christ's sacrificial love, but is also a reminder of God's desire for human beings to be 'partakers of his own being' (*ML* 19) through the presence and transforming work of his Spirit. Although Vane is unaware of the significance of his meal, his acceptance of it results in both the satiation of a desire that lies deeper than his physical hunger and thirst, and his subsequent sense of peaceful anticipation. Despite his recognition of these benefits, though, Vane is unable to see the connection between his eucharistic meal and Mr Raven's subsequent invitation to the transformational rest of death. Unable to see clearly, and unwilling to trust those who can, the only way for

Vane to begin to recognise his need for transformation is for him to be confronted with the consequences of his selfishness.

In keeping with the paralleled themes of reading and resurrection—which do the joint work of showing the spiritual significance of reading and offering reading as a form by which to explore resurrection—Vane's first step in coming to understand his need to die to himself is to see how his own attitude towards reading causes the death of another. Not long after leaving Mr Raven's library-cemetery, Vane begins to regret his decision not to lie down to his death-sleep. He has learned that the Ravens are indeed trustworthy, and concludes that if he had lain down to sleep, '[w]hat wondrous facts might I not by this time have gathered concerning life and death, and wide regions beyond ordinary perception!' (*Lilith* 42). Vane's desire for 'facts' concerning the 'wide regions beyond ordinary perception' echoes the discourse of esoteric or Spiritualist practitioners, and indicates that his interest in dying is due more to a materialist curiosity about the other side, than a recognition of his own need for transformation. His wish to 'gather' these facts also implies that he is more concerned with accumulating knowledge than he is with the kind of learning that will, ultimately, prove transformative for him or beneficial to others. Upon his next meeting with Mr Raven, what begins as an apology for his 'rudeness' ends with him angrily blaming Mr Raven for the situation in which he finds himself (stranded in another world with no idea how to get home). Mr Raven has answered Vane's question about how to find 'some of my kind' (45) by pointing skyward—in the direction of the transformed worms. Vane, however, is unable to recognise any resemblance between himself and a worm, and so, missing the point, he loses his temper. Mr Raven begins to walk away, but as he does so, he pounces upon a worm and flings it into the air, where, having transformed into a butterfly, it begins to fly off, catching Vane's attention as it does so.

As with the books in his library that capture his fancy, Vane follows the beautiful butterfly, watching as it continues to grow and change shape, its wings becoming 'nearly square' and flashing 'all the colours of the rainbow' (47). Transfixed by its beauty, Vane longs to possess it and, as if in acquiescence to his desire, the butterfly sinks towards him. From Vane's self-focused perspective, it feels as though 'the treasure of the universe were giving itself to me' (47), but his response to this apparent gift proves to be fatal, for as he reaches out and takes the glowing butterfly, 'its light went out; all was dark as pitch; a dead book with boards outspread lay cold and heavy in my hand' (47). The (book)worm's transformation into a butterfly-book gestures towards the idea of resurrective reading more broadly, but it also draws a specific link between Vane's attempt to possess the butterfly and his self-indulgent method of reading. As with his view of books (they are there to amuse him, rather than to be properly understood), Vane regards the butterfly-book's movement towards him as a concession to his desire, and therefore reaches out to take it for himself. What he fails to recognise, however, is that it is only the reader who 'loves and understands his book' who is able to be its 'real possessor' (*HG* 95-96). Only the reader, in other words, who practices conversational reading. Vane has not treated the butterfly-book as a living thing to be loved or understood, but as a dead object that exists to satisfy his desire. It becomes, therefore, exactly that: a dead object.

The relationship between conversational reading and questions of spiritual life and death is signalled as, in his encounter with the butterfly-book, Vane begins to be confronted with the implications of his reading. Because he is unable to read conversationally, however, his transformation, including a transformation of the way in which he reads, must begin through other means. It is only later, therefore, that he comes to recognise how the way he has been reading is reflective of his deep-rooted selfishness and lack of concern for others.

> I sighed—and regarded with wonder my past self, which preferred the company of book or pen to that of man or woman; which, if the author of a tale I was enjoying appeared, would wish him away that I might return to his story. I had chosen the dead rather than the living, the thing thought rather than the thing thinking! … I had not cared for my live brothers and sisters, and now I was left without even the dead to comfort me! (83-84)

Vane's choice to withdraw from his fellow humans in order to read in solitude was not, he implies, simply an occasional choice to enjoy a quiet evening alone. It was, rather, a consistently selfish pattern of behaviour, which hindered him from caring for his 'live brothers and sisters'. Not only does he regret choosing reading over human interaction, but the kind of reading he performed was not even beneficial for him, for it, too, was driven by selfishness. In particular, his observation that he would have regarded the appearance of a book's author as a hindrance to his own enjoyment indicates Vane's unwillingness to have his own interpretation of a story challenged or qualified by a conversation with its writer. What Vane now begins to recognise is that his unwillingness to 'die' to himself in order to care for his fellow humans or be transformed by conversational reading is, in fact, a choice to reject the living for the dead. He has, in short, begun to discover the biblical paradox that '[w]ho lives, he dies; who dies, he is alive'.

The connections between the Holy Spirit's resurrective power, his role in affording spiritual insight and understanding, and conversational reading is further explored by MacDonald near the novel's close. When Vane does, eventually, lie down to his death-sleep and rise again, his post-resurrection experience is depicted as an arrival at understanding. He and his resurrected beloved, Lona, leave the library-cemetery, and find that a 'wondrous change had passed upon the world—or was it not rather that a change more marvellous had

taken place in us?' (243). Vane's focus is now upon Lona and the world around him, not himself, and so it is difficult, at least initially, for him to tell whether the change that he sees has more to do with his own transformation or that of the world around him. What he does know, though, is that he has reached a point of complete understanding with the natural world, for he finds that not only do his 'bare feet see[m] to love every plant that they trod upon', but that to 'be aware of a thing, was to know its life at once and mine, to know whence we came, and where we were at home—was to know that we are all what we are, because Another is what he is!' (243). The resurrected Vane's outward-focused attention and loving attitude towards the world around him mean that he is able to understand in a way that was impossible before his death. While he might have tasted life in part (as he did during his eucharistic meal), it is only after death and resurrection that he is able to know 'that life and truth were one; that life mere and pure is in itself bliss; that where being is not bliss, it is not life, but life-in-death' (244). This cognisance is not simply the knowledge of the 'facts' concerning life and death or 'regions beyond ordinary perception' that his pre-death self anticipated, but a true understanding that is made possible through his transformative resurrection, and which continues to expand as the altered Vane becomes aware of new 'indescribable' senses that had been 'hitherto asleep' within him (243).

The characterisation of resurrected life as understanding, and the depiction of understanding as a vital and continually-expanding consciousness, mirrors the vital, dynamic conversation—the process of 'coming to an understanding'—that characterises resurrective reading. Indeed, the link between the two is made explicit in the final pages of *Lilith*, when the reader discovers that Vane's transformation has literally taken place within the covers of a book. As he makes his way further into heaven and begins to climb up to the cloud-obscured throne of God, Vane suddenly feels a hand lead him towards, and gently push him through, a

little door. The door is, it transpires, 'the board of a large book', which, closing behind him, leaves him standing alone in his library (250). In its depiction of Vane's resurrected life as an experience of coming to an understanding, and the subsequent revelation that Vane has, all along, been undertaking this journey towards understanding in and through a book, *Lilith* foregrounds the transformative power of resurrective reading. At the same time, its focus upon books and reading allows MacDonald to explore the idea of Christian resurrection without entering into a debate about the precise form that the resurrected body will take. Through its interest in reading, *Lilith* sidesteps more pedantic theological debates about the exact nature of the resurrected body to focus on what MacDonald understood to be the primary purpose of having a resurrected body: to 'see and hear, and know, and be seen, and heard, and known, as [God] seest, hearest, and knowest' (*US I*. 86). In other words, to come to an understanding of one another and of God. Thus *Lilith* is not only a novel that presents resurrective reading as a profoundly transformative act, but is also one that, in its exploration of Christian resurrection in terms of reading, demonstrates how reading itself may function as a theological form.

Chapter Four: Shakespeare's Loving Character: Drama as a Relational Form

> The Spirit touched him on the arm, and pointed to [Scrooge's] younger self, intent upon his reading. Suddenly a man, in foreign garments: wonderfully real and distinct to look at: stood outside the window, with an axe stuck in his belt, and leading by the bridle an ass laden with wood. 'Why, it's Ali Baba!' Scrooge exclaimed in ecstasy. 'It's dear old honest Ali Baba! Yes, yes, I know! One Christmas time, when yonder solitary child was left here all alone, he *did* come, for the first time, just like that.'
>
> —Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

> 'Ah! we don't speak of Shakspere's [sic] plays as stories. His characters are so real to us, that, in thinking of their development, we go back even to their fathers and mothers—and sometimes even speculate about their future.'
>
> —George MacDonald, *David Elginbrod*

The young Scrooge's vivid encounter with Ali Baba in the first quotation may well resonate with many readers' experiences of reading, whether they are child-readers or not. For some, reading acts as a solace in loneliness or sorrow. Part of this consolation comes, arguably, from the experience of being imaginatively 'in company' with the characters. Although we might not find them materialising before our eyes as Scrooge finds them doing, we do often find ourselves attached to, or familiar with, characters in a way that can make them seem like friends or acquaintances—like people we 'know'. For a great many readers, therefore, the idea of characters being 'real' or possessing a life that continues beyond the page is not only

reasonable, but a regular part of the reading experience. Although attachment to character forms a significant aspect of many, if not most, readers' experiences, literary critics have often been slow to acknowledge their own attachments. It is difficult to say whether this hesitancy comes from a belief that investment in character is at odds with a more sophisticated reading of a text, from a felt need for critical distance from characters, or whether it is a less considered adherence to academic convention. Whatever the reasons, readerly investment in character strikes me as not only compatible with literary criticism, but also a source of insight when interpreting texts. This insight is visible in the words of the fictional Hugh Sutherland, the Shakespeare-teaching scholar I quoted in my second epigraph. For him, attachment to characters is not something to be skirted over or denied; it is, rather, a key part of how one interprets literature. In his case, attachment to character comes not from a need for consolation, but from the dynamism of the characters themselves. For him and for his compatriots (the 'we' to which he refers in the quotation), it is the fact that the characters seem so 'real' that prompts them to focus on the characters and their relationships—a focus that also shapes the discourse on the plays. Although many readers (myself included) would feel uncomfortable venturing to 'speculate' about characters in an academic context, the comment from Sutherland raises a broader question about what might be gained from acknowledging our investment in characters. How does such an investment affect our approach to interpretation? Or our understanding of how and why we read? And what ethical or moral implications might there be in the way we approach reading character? Attending to such questions not only has bearing upon our reading practices now, but also the way in which we understand nineteenth-century ideas about character.

Conversation about Character

Aristotle's theory about the relative importance of action and character in drama was, according to Stefanie Markovits, 'transformed into a critical battleground' in the nineteenth century (2). In Aristotle's thinking, action is primary and character is secondary, for it is only through a person's actions that their moral purpose (which is, for him, their character) is revealed. At the same time that Aristotle's categories were commonly employed by Victorian writers as 'critical tools', they were also being reconfigured in order to serve contemporary concerns, including questions about the relationship between 'action, consciousness, and the moral life' (Markovits 3, 4). For a writer like MacDonald, questions about action and morality are inextricably bound up with questions of theology. This confluence of concerns is reflected in his commentary on the place of character in Shakespeare's drama. As this chapter demonstrates, MacDonald's insistence on the primacy of character in drama relates to his concerns about poor contemporary reading practices and the relation he believed these practices had not only upon the interpretation of Shakespeare's work, but also upon a reader's moral or spiritual life. To consider MacDonald's commentary on the role of character in drama, then, not only demonstrates how theology informs nineteenth-century conceptions of the relation between character and dramatic form, but also invites us to consider how MacDonald's approach might offer us resources in thinking about our own readings of character.

Questions about character are at the forefront of critical conversation today and, as in the nineteenth century, they often reflect contemporary concerns.[1] Jill Galvan interprets recent scholarship as an attempt to 'read characters and their shared embodiment in light of the fallacies of liberal humanism' ('Character' 615), and points out a critical trend that attempts to

[1] See, for instance, Star, Frow, and Farina.

counter these fallacies by emphasising character as 'a dynamically relational form: a mobile entity shaped by interaction—whether with the reader, other characters in the storyworld, or both' (612). Galvan identifies in much of this recent work 'a phenomenologically posthuman shift', which tends to focus upon the formal, phenomenological, or affective aspects of character. While she applauds this approach, she also urges scholars not to 'abandon the concept of interiority altogether, as simply synonymous with determined psychological identity' (615). In holding together both the emphasis on the affective and formal aspects of a dynamic notion of character, as well as a more nuanced concept of interiority, Galvan offers a helpfully balanced approach to characterisation that creates space for drawing upon and integrating a variety of approaches. Her identification of the recent focus on character as dynamic, relational, and shaped by interaction, prompts a consideration of one such approach—namely, how MacDonald's Trinitarian theology offers him ways of thinking about characterisation. His emphasis on the dynamic and relational qualities of character, along with his attention to affective and formal considerations, anticipates recent scholarly work and demonstrates the way in which attention to theology opens up new ways of approaching nineteenth-century perspectives on character.

The work undertaken by Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi in *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (2019), answers Galvan's urging for a balanced critical approach, while also demonstrating that, despite the 'current reassessment of character in literary studies' ('Introduction' 1), much still needs to be done to resolve some historic baggage concerning critical approaches to character. Anderson, Felski, and Moi point out that a concern with character is a 'defining aspect of reader or viewer engagement with many forms of fiction.' Despite this, they continue, criticism 'has often failed to give this concern its full due, demoting character to little more than an effect of linguistic, political, or—most

recently—psychological structures' (1-2). In their volume, Anderson, Felski, and Moi are not so much concerned with suggesting a specific approach to characterisation, but with clearing away certain critical roadblocks that have inhibited scholarly work on the subject and with opening up new modes of critical inquiry. Moi's essay tackles one of the biggest roadblocks: the taboo on talking about fictional characters as if they are real people. Moi traces this taboo back to L.C. Knights' infamous 1933 essay 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?', the argument of which, she maintains, 'had far more to do with a specific aesthetic and professional agenda than with philosophical arguments' ('Rethinking' 29). By interrogating this taboo, Moi opens up the opportunity for a scholarly conversation that acknowledges that character is 'a defining aspect of reader or viewer engagement with many forms of fiction', and 'one of the means by which fiction makes claims upon us' ('Introduction' 1). Moi's observations about the affective and moral relationship between reader and character resonate with MacDonald's theologically-informed critical approach to reading Shakespeare's characters. Although, Moi is not interested in religion as such, her work creates space for a consideration of how these moral and affective elements of reading character might relate to religion.

Like Moi, Anderson and Felski see a need for forms of critical engagement that 'recognize our responses to characters not only as situated within ideological and sociohistorical contexts but also as importantly moral and affective' (7). The essays by Felski and Anderson—which treat, respectively, what it means to identify with characters and the experience of thinking with character—offer new ways of thinking about character that take these moral and affective considerations into account. Felski's essay challenges the prevailing skepticism critics have about identifying with characters, demonstrating identification as a varied phenomenon that is compatible with a scholarly approach to literature. Anderson

focuses upon the dynamic thought-processes of characters' moral decision-making, and in so doing complicates the idea that character-focused moral criticism is inherently outmoded. In these essays, Moi, Felski, and Anderson not only clear away critical roadblocks, but also model an approach to character studies that acknowledges readerly attachment to characters, while remaining intellectually rigorous. In so doing, they invite a reconsideration of nineteenth-century critical perspectives on character offered by writers such as MacDonald. Because of their focus on moral, psychological, and affective concerns, these perspectives have been largely neglected in recent scholarship, and the neglect may go some way to explaining the lack of scholarly interest in MacDonald's literary criticism hitherto.

In addition to a call for attention to the affective and moral considerations of characterisation, recent work has shown an interest in the relationship between character and form. Like Moi, Felski and Anderson, Alex Woloch's *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (2003) is concerned with presenting a more nuanced approach to characterisation that gives attention to both the human and the formal or functional aspects of character. Woloch writes that the split in much twentieth-century literary theory 'between humanist and structural (or mimetic and formal) positions' on character has fostered a false opposition between the two approaches (17). Woloch writes that this opposition has happened because the literary character 'is itself divided, always emerging at the juncture between structure and reference', and so, rather than recognising character as a 'literary *dialectic*', critics have regarded it as a 'theoretical *contradiction*' that presents them with a choice to identify character in either humanist/mimetic or structural/formal terms (17 original emphasis). Woloch's study goes far to rectify this critical divide by presenting a theory of characterisation based upon the notion that a character is formed by the dialectic that takes place between the mimetic human aspect and the space a character inhabits within the

narrative structure. He introduces the category of character-space to describe this dialectical 'encounter' between the 'implied individual' of the story and the 'emplacement' of the character within the narrative discourse (15), pairing it with the category of 'character-system', which is the arrangement of the multiple character-spaces that form the narrative structure as a whole. In addition to arguing for the importance of acknowledging the human aspect of character, Woloch also highlights the need to recognise that characters do not exist in a vacuum, but relationally—both the relationship with the other characters in the story-world and within the formal structure of the narrative. Employing his categories of character-space and character-system, Woloch goes on to contend that the narrative's distribution of attention to each character necessarily results in inequality, for it is only by the diminishing or disappearance of the minor characters that there is space for a rounded major character to exist. The consequence is that the '"human aspect" of a character is often dynamically integrated into and sometimes absorbed by, the narrative structure as a whole' (15). This has, for Woloch, distinctly political implications, for he links his claims concerning the narrative asymmetry amongst characters with social inequality in order to demonstrate that '[i]n terms of their essential formal position … *minor characters are the proletariat of the novel*' (27 original emphasis).

Although the political conclusions Woloch draws are less relevant to my concerns in this chapter, his acknowledgment of the 'human aspect' of character, and his exploration of the relationship between character and form are helpful for framing certain key aspects of MacDonald's perspective on characterisation. Like Woloch, MacDonald acknowledges the 'human aspect' of character, including the relational or social dimensions, and shows a particular interest in how this human element relates to dramatic form. The conclusions that MacDonald reaches, however, are markedly different. For him, the way in which a narrative

distributes attention does not determine the relative value of a character, nor does it inevitably lead to a character's absorption into the narrative. Quite the opposite. It is the entire ensemble of characters, and the interplay between them, that determines the narrative form. Simply by virtue of their presence in the play, every character is valuable, and any speech, action, or detail concerning them may be regarded as a hint at psychological depth—an invitation to the reader to imaginatively engage with the life of a character implicit in the story-world.

This chapter maintains that MacDonald's understanding of the central role of character in drama, and the way in which character and form relate, is fundamentally shaped by his theological views concerning human relationality and Trinitarian love. For him, drama is an inherently dynamic, relational form. In part this is because the form of a play emerges from, and is shaped by, the interplay of characters who are themselves always in flux. Not only does this mean that every character is crucial in understanding the play's overall meaning, but also that the relations between characters are a central part of characterisation and, consequently, form. Drama is also dynamic in its need for the reader or audience[2] to creatively participate in a play's interpretation or meaning-making. MacDonald held that while the reader's interpretation of a realist novel may be guided by a directive narrator, the lack of a narrator in drama means that there is a greater emphasis upon the reader's interpretive role.[3] Because of the way in which MacDonald thinks about characterisation in drama—including the primacy of character in communicating a play's meaning—he suggests a way of making sense of a text

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[2] I use the terms 'reader' and 'audience' in this chapter with an awareness of the fact that the experience of reading a play and seeing a production are markedly different. Although MacDonald's scholarly work tends to focus on on reading the plays rather than seeing them in production, he himself performed in Shakespeare productions and makes suggestions for how certain lines should be delivered and acted in his annotated edition of *Hamlet*. I have chosen to use both terms more interchangeably, not only because of the breadth of MacDonald's experience, but also because the particular focus of this chapter and the claims I make apply to an audience of readers or viewers.

[3] MacDonald's familiarity with Classical Greek drama would have made him aware of the chorus' role in providing commentary, but he makes no reference to the apparent tension between the chorus and his claims about the absence of a narrator in drama.

that privileges sympathetic love over critical suspicion. For him, this interpretive approach not only affords a more realistic insight into character, but also trains the reader in the practice of love.

The first section of this chapter considers MacDonald's views on the relative place of character and action in drama, focusing on his commentary on Shakespeare. Shakespeare's ubiquity in the nineteenth century meant that while many Victorians were familiar with certain aspects of his work—aspects such as plot points, prominent characters, or oft-quoted passages such as 'The Seven Ages of Man'—few had actually read the plays in their entirety. In his essays and lectures, MacDonald addresses this lack of engagement by highlighting the intrinsically dynamic and relational nature of Shakespeare's characters. He contends that readers can only claim familiarity with the plays if they attend to how characters respond to circumstances and other characters over the course of the entire play. For MacDonald, attention to character is not only important for getting to grips with individual characters, but the play as a whole. This is because the overall form of Shakespeare's plays is, he claims, determined by the characters. To attend to the relations between characters, and the changes that each character undergoes as the play unfolds, not only affords the reader with a better understanding of Shakespeare's complex characters, but also enables her to see the way in which Shakespeare harmonises a variety of disparate characters into a dynamic, organic whole.

This chapter's second section will consider the relationship between Shakespeare's self-representing characters, and the role of the audience in the interpretation of drama. It will begin by discussing MacDonald's claim that drama is a literary form that affords the most freedom to its characters, and therefore requires a greater level of imaginative participation on the part of the reader. MacDonald maintains that while a novel's narrator may comment upon

characters or reveal what is going on in their inner world, a dramatist must allow her characters to represent themselves. For this reason, the only way for a reader to get at the meanings the playwright seeks to convey is by attending to the speeches and actions of the characters, as well as the other elements of the play, using each aspect to aid in interpreting the others. Because of drama's indirect mode of conveying meaning, and its privileging of character's voices, it therefore requires more imaginative and interpretive engagement from its readers. I evaluate MacDonald's claims in light of his role as a teacher who sought to guide readers who might have been new to interpreting drama, before moving on to consider MacDonald's interpretation of Shakespeare's poem 'The Rape of Lucrece' as a self-revelation of Shakespeare's artistic approach. Although a different literary form, MacDonald regards the poem as an invitation to the reader to use her imagination in order to fill in the gaps of what is explicit in Shakespeare's plays.

Regina Schwartz writes that the 'power of love was not underestimated by Shakespeare' (38)—a point also recognised by MacDonald, who understands Shakespeare's masterful characterisation to be the direct result of his capacity to love others. According to MacDonald, it is love that shapes Shakespeare's vision of others, enabling him to see them with an unsentimental generosity that looks beyond differences to the 'essential humanity' that is present in each person. This, claims MacDonald, is why even Shakespeare's most unpleasant characters are sympathetic, and why he is able to depict complex, self-representing characters so successfully. The third section begins by considering MacDonald's notion of loving vision, before moving on to explore the role he understood it to play in Shakespeare's characterisations. Because MacDonald believes that it is the love of the Trinity that creates life and holds all of creation together, love is inextricably bound up in his notion of the organic and, therefore, in his understanding of drama as a dynamic, relational form. This

section will therefore conclude by claiming that MacDonald's choice to use the language of relational love (rather than the popular nineteenth-century notion of sympathy), is a self-conscious choice to root his reading of Shakespeare theologically.

The fourth section will build upon MacDonald's ideas concerning loving vision, and his claim concerning the need for the reader to imaginatively participate in a play's meaning-making, in order to explore his notion of loving interpretation. MacDonald was known not only for his work as a scholar, but for his love of literature—a love that shapes the way in which he chose to interpret Shakespeare's plays. Unlike the Scientific Criticism of some of his contemporaries, which sought to 'pin Shakespeare and his words down, once and for all' (Hawkes 119), MacDonald championed a mode of loving interpretation that reads the actions and speeches of the characters with an awareness of the complexity of the ways in which humans reveal themselves, and called for generosity in evaluating those self-revelations. In light of this, the section will begin by considering MacDonald's notion of loving vision, before moving on to discuss how this approach shapes his reading of Shakespeare. It will pay particular attention to his interpretation of *Hamlet*, highlighting the ways in which MacDonald's loving interpretation of the play leads him to some controversial conclusions. The chapter will conclude by examining MacDonald's critique of the standard reading of *Hamlet*, and his related claim that reading Shakespeare may instead act as a form of spiritual practice that helps a reader to be a more loving person.

Character vs. Action in Shakespeare

Like many of his contemporaries, MacDonald regarded Shakespeare as the preeminent poet and playwright, whose work came second only to the Bible in spiritual and literary merit. This explains why MacDonald's critical commentary on drama centres around the works of

Shakespeare, despite MacDonald possessing a knowledge of drama that reaches back to the Greek tragedians. MacDonald paid particular attention to dramatic form when lecturing and writing on Shakespeare, in part because of his awareness that the Bard's ubiquity and popularity in the Victorian era was not always matched with a real engagement or true familiarity with his works.[4] Shakespearean commonplace books, filled with quotations from the plays, were a popular item, and the second half of the century saw a particular rise in the publication of what Charles LaPorte terms '"devotional" Shakespeare texts'—quotation books organised in order to provide the reader with spiritual or moral benefit, sometimes even going so far as to pair passages from Shakespeare with verses from the Bible ('Shakespeare' 146). As LaPorte points out, this manner of presenting Shakespeare to readers 'precludes any reader's potential interest in narrative, or in thematic developments within a given drama, or even the differences between Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies' (146). A similar observation is made by MacDonald, who recognised how readers' understandings of Shakespeare were being shaped by curated material, which resulted in a variety of misconceptions concerning the plays. MacDonald exhorts his audience to not simply be content with admiring selected lines, but to read the entire play, for a person 'might read and be familiar with Shakespeare, and admire honestly certain passages, but so long as they did not know the play as a whole they did not know Shakespeare' ('Mr. George MacDonald in Derby').

Although MacDonald stresses the importance of being familiar with more than just the most popular snippets from a Shakespeare play, he is not primarily concerned with the thematic developments or narrative. For him, it is the characters, and their development

[4] For more on Shakespeare and the Victorians see Poole and Marshall. See Newey for more on Shakespeare's significance to 'the practice and discourse of the Victorian theatre' ('Theatre' 124-125).

throughout the play, that are central. In terms of the nineteenth-century critical battle over the relative importance of character and action in drama, then, he stands solidly in the character camp. The reports of his lectures on Shakespeare often quote his claim that plot is secondary to character—a claim that is reflected in his choice to foreground character analysis in his lectures, essays, and annotated, folio-based edition of *Hamlet*. Indeed, so convinced is he of the importance of character in drama, he tells his audience that his character-focused reading of a play will offer them 'a kind of key to the reading of other plays of Shakespeare' ('Mr. George MacDonald in Derby'). It is this character-based approach, which highlights the intrinsically dynamic nature of character, that leads him to emphasise reading or watching the entire play. Each moment presents a person with choices to be made, and each choice is an opportunity for that person to move towards growth or destruction—towards more or less of who she has been made to be. This means that, in the case of a play, characters will never end exactly where they begin, for as the narrative unfolds and each character meets with the speeches and actions of others, changes begin to occur. It is only by reading a play in its entirety, therefore, that the reader may get to grips with this dynamic set of characters and, in consequence, be better equipped for interpreting the play as a whole. While MacDonald's claims concerning the dynamic nature of characters, and the need to read characters in light of the whole play, might seem obvious, it was evidently a point that he felt the need to underscore given the Shakespeare-mania that surrounded him and its effect on how the plays were read. This can be seen in MacDonald's comments on the famous 'Seven Ages of Man' speech made by Jaques in *As You Like It*. MacDonald notes that this speech is 'one of the passages oftenest quoted with admiration, and indeed separately printed and illuminated,' but while it is indeed 'perfect', 'both from a literary and dramatic point of view', it is also a 'wicked burlesque', 'full of inhuman contempt for humanity and unbelief in its destiny' ('St.

George's Day' 109-110). As MacDonald goes on to demonstrate, in order to understand what this speech is doing, it must be interpreted in light of its context in the play—including who it is that makes the speech.

When it comes to understanding characters, it is not enough to simply know what happens to them in terms of plot. MacDonald maintains that although he suspects that many readers or theatre-goers 'had probably not thought about anything beyond the external fortunes' of a character such as King Lear ('King Lear'), the main point of consideration should actually be how a character *responds* to these external events. By articulating it in this way, MacDonald frames narrative events in terms of character rather than plot, drawing his audience's attention to 'the play of incident upon character, modeling, changing, developing, or destroying the character' ('Humanity in Hamlet'). The idea that events are important because they shed light upon why certain shifts are taking place in a character is reflected in some instructions MacDonald gives on interpreting Shakespeare's plays. He advises 'the young student who wants to help himself' understand Shakespeare to perform character analyses, and goes on to outline some methods for doing this. One method is comparing two characters' 'conduct, the likeness and unlikeness of what was required of them, the circumstances in which action was demanded of each, the helps or hindrances each had to the working out of the problem of his life', etc. ('St. George's Day' 128). MacDonald's instruction highlights the correlation he often makes between real life and the world of the drama: just as there are complex pressures and factors that play a role in shaping a person, impacting how he responds to particular incidents or people, so it is with Shakespeare's characters. The instruction also reflects MacDonald's view that characters are not victims of circumstance, or so-called 'poetic justice' (*TH* 277n10), for it is a character's response to her 'external fortunes'

that most clearly reveals who she is at the moment, and which most powerfully shapes who she is becoming.

Given the fact that much literary criticism during and since the twentieth century has shied away from discussing characters as if they are actually human, MacDonald's tendency to do so, and his instructions to young readers to interpret characters as if they function like people, might be regarded as a trifle naïve—even uncritical. Indeed, as Moi points out, despite the fact that there 'simply is no good philosophical or theoretical reason to accept the taboo on treating fictional characters as if they were real' ('Rethinking Character' 30), the discipline of literary studies 'is replete with warnings' against mistaking fictional characters for real people (28). She goes on to demonstrate that, because of this 'taboo', some of the most recent critical work on character implies that we must outlaw 'any discussion of characters' intentions and motivations', for 'such speculations will of necessity imply that the characters do or think something when they're off stage or off page' ('Rethinking' 53). The prohibition against talking about characters as if they are real is problematic for a number of reasons, not least of which is that, even when discussing aspects of literature other than character, it is still practically impossible to form a critical argument without using the imagination to fill in the gaps between what is explicitly stated or represented in the text. As Seymour Chatman points out, '[i]mplication and inference belong to the interpretation of character as they do to that of plot, theme, and other narrative elements' (117). A similar observation is made by MacDonald when he details the imagination's role in recognising the formal structure of a text, and in weaving together events into the narrative of a history or biography—the latter of which resembles, in many respects, the depiction of a fictional character ('The Imagination' 17-18). When it comes to *how* one should discuss literary characters in criticism, MacDonald addresses the question in a pragmatic fashion, writing that although it might amuse some of

his readers 'to remark how often I speak of Hamlet as if he were a real man and not the invention of Shakspere', he imagines that if the amused person 'tried the thing himself, he would find it hardly possible to avoid so speaking, and at the same time say what he had to say' (*TH* xiii-xiv). MacDonald's critical approach to character is not, therefore, based upon a naïve view of how literary texts work. Rather, it demonstrates a recognition of the need to bring out what is implicit in drama—a point that is central to MacDonald's interpretive approach, and which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

MacDonald's approach to character prioritises paying attention to a character's response to external factors. It also acknowledges the particularity (in the sense of context and personality), and inherent relationality of being a person. No character exists in a vacuum, and therefore the only way to really get to know a character is to consider how she interacts with, or speaks to or about, others. This is, for MacDonald, particularly the case with drama. Writing of the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio, MacDonald claims that if we want to know someone, 'there is scarce a readier way than to hear him talk of his friend—why he loves, admires, chooses him' (135n7). Hamlet's words to and about Horatio give the reader 'a wide window into Hamlet' by revealing some of the former's values and priorities—including his refusal to allow the stigma of Horatio's poverty to keep him from valuing his personal qualities, or, as MacDonald puts it, his 'respect for being' and 'indifferen[ce…] to having' (135n7). Hamlet's speeches also have the potential to shed light on the character of Horatio. However, the reader must do more than simply take Hamlet's words as fact if she is to know that Horatio is the person Hamlet believes him to be. 'That Hamlet had not misapprehended Horatio' only 'becomes evident in the last scene of all' (135n7), and so it is only by following out the play in its entirety that a reader will be able to form her own conclusions on Hamlet's ability to judge character and on the character of Horatio himself.

While observing that the kind of person a character chooses as a friend may well offer a 'wide' view into that character, every relationship offers some view, even if only a glimpse. Not only are the diverse aspects and qualities of an individual revealed as she interacts with a variety of people (a friend, a sister, a servant), but as each character shifts and changes, so do the relationships between them. For MacDonald, acknowledging the inherent relationality and interconnectedness of the entire ensemble of characters enables a reader to see the way in which the actions or speech of one character may affect others in a way that is not immediately apparent. A more evident example of this can be seen in the effect that Getrude has on the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. MacDonald argues that the betrayal and shock Hamlet experiences because of his mother's quick and morally-dubious marriage to Claudius results in a psychological wound that leads to his general distrust of women—Ophelia included. The event described by Ophelia to her father, in which Hamlet came into her room 'with his doublet all vnbrac'd, / No hat vpon his head, his stockings foul'd, / Vngartred, and downe giued to his Anckle; / Pale as his shirt' (2.1.48-51),[5] is understood by MacDonald as Hamlet's anxious attempt to see if he has been deceived in Ophelia, as in his mother. He writes of Hamlet's determination that if he can only see Ophelia then he will know whether he has been mistaken in his assessment of her. In an 'agony of of doubt', therefore, he goes into her room, searching her face for an answer, but finding no certainty (*TH* 71-3n2). Ophelia and Hamlet's subsequent misunderstanding of each other's behaviour, and, ultimately Ophelia's death, is one of the results of Gertrude's actions. This is not, however, the full extent of the impact she has had, for, following MacDonald's logic, every character in the play is somehow touched by what has happened between Gertrude and Hamlet—some more

[5] All quotations from *Hamlet* are taken from MacDonald's edition, which has retained the Early Modern spelling.

evidently than others. To consider individual characters as they relate to their broader network is to give the reader an opportunity for greater insight into the mind or motivations of an individual character than would be available by simply considering the individual on her own. At the same time it affords the reader a broader perspective on the interplay between characters, the extent of which can only be appreciated by reading the play in its entirety.

My argument, then, is that MacDonald's emphasis upon the connection between characterisation and reading the whole play is bound up in his conception of Shakespeare's plays as dynamic, relational forms. What shapes the overall form of the plays is, for MacDonald, the character-centred movement—both the narrow linear movement of an individual character through the narrative and the wide relational movements that take place between characters. It is not originality of story or narrative that most interests Shakespeare, for, MacDonald points out, the Bard has a tendency to take bad plays (complete with poor characters and plots) and transform them into good plays—into what MacDonald refers to as 'forms of strength, richness, and grace' ('St George's Day' 127). These rich, graceful forms are particularly admirable not because their plots have been altered in order to make them more exciting or complex, but because they have a 'simplicity' or 'naturalness' that belies the craftsmanship behind them (St. George's Day 129, 150). This craftsmanship is manifested most impressively in Shakespeare's characterisation, for, MacDonald explains, the natural or direct quality actually 'springs in part from the fact that it is humanity and not circumstance that Shakspere respects' (St. George's Day 130). Rather than imposing a set of rigid, pre-determined circumstances upon characters who must fit into that narrative form, the form of the play 'springs' organically from the characters and the relations between them. Although MacDonald uses the language of organic growth to describe it, the process by which the form emerges from character is not a random one. Nature, for MacDonald, is not random, but has

both ‘a design and a result’ (St. George’s Day 130). Similarly, the organic emergence of form from character is, in large part, the result of Shakespeare’s design.

The design that MacDonald sees in Shakespeare’s work is manifested in his ability to combine a variety of characters into one ‘harmonious whole’—a demonstration of a ‘dramatic genius’ that is ‘visible only in its effects’ (‘The Art’ 148). To illustrate his point, MacDonald quotes several stanzas from Shakespeare’s ‘Rape of Lucrece’—a work that MacDonald regards as encapsulating Shakespeare’s art as a dramatist even though it is a poem. The narrator of the poem is describing a painting depicting the Trojan War, and MacDonald draws particular attention to the description of Nestor speaking to a crowd of people who seem as though they would break out into fighting if it were not for the fact that they were all ‘jointly listening, but with several graces, / As if some mermaid did their ears entice’ (‘The Art’ 146). The poem details different features of the rapt listeners, as well as Nestor, who is represented in mid-speech with, it seems, a ‘thin winding breath’ flying from his lips and ‘purl[ing] up to the sky’ (‘The Art’ 146). This is, for MacDonald, a picture that encapsulates Shakespeare’s art as a dramatist. He writes that ‘[e]very variety of attitude and countenance and action [of those in the crowd] is harmonized’ by Nestor’s influence as he speaks, and his ‘eloquence and the listening form the one bond of the unruly mass. So the dramatic genius that harmonises his play, is visible only in its effects’ (‘The Art’ 148). The viewer of the painting cannot see or hear Nestor’s words, but she can see the effect that he has upon the surrounding crowd, who are brought together and unified by his speech. If it were not for him, the crowd would simply be a collection of individuals ready to turn violent. The power of his words, however, creates a bond that forms this collection of individuals into a whole. Similarly, MacDonald concludes, the reader of Shakespeare’s plays can observe the way in which he takes a variety of characters, all of whom are represented on their own terms as individuals, and brings them

together in order to form a harmonious whole. As with the crowd in the painting, harmony does not mean that there is no conflict between the characters in the world of the text, but rather that there is a higher influence that holds them together in an artistic harmony, even as they continue to express 'signs of rage' toward one another ('The Art' 146). However, it is only by observing the individuals and their relation to one another, that a reader may recognise the invisible, harmonising 'genius' that holds the play together.

Audience and Character

MacDonald associates the harmonising of varied characters' voices specifically with dramatic form, but the idea also resonates with the 'plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, [the] genuine polyphony of fully valid voices' (6) that Mikhail Bakhtin identifies in the emergence of the novel form and sees exemplified in the work of Dostoevsky. Indeed, both MacDonald and Bakhtin identify their respective author's characters to be free, dynamic, relational individuals whose particularity is preserved when they are brought together in aesthetic harmony, and who remain complexly human rather than becoming objects of authorial manipulation. Bakhtin writes that, in the case of the polyphonic novel, 'the author's consciousness does not transform others' consciousnesses', nor does it 'give them secondhand or finalizing definitions' (68). This refusal to finalise a character (what he terms 'unfinalizability'), is a decision to represent her as complex human being who is infinitely creative and surprising, rather than as an object that, for instance, merely serves a function in the plot (68). Although the characters possess a freedom that is, in a sense, distinct from the agenda of the author, this does not mean that the latter is absent or silent in the text. The author's consciousness is still present, active, and communicating something to the reader—a conception of the author's presence that resembles the invisible 'harmonising

genius' MacDonald identifies in Shakespeare's work. While Bakhtin does, in fact, acknowledge that 'certain elements, embryonic rudiments, early buddings of polyphony can indeed be detected in the dramas of Shakespeare' (33-34), his engagement with Shakespeare is brief. His primary concern is not with drama—which, he claims, does not allow for true polyphony as he understands it—but with the novel, which he associates with the emergence of democracy in modernity.

MacDonald, on the other hand, maintains that it is drama, not the novel, that allows characters the most freedom, for it is a 'mode admitting of no utterance personal to the author, and requiring the scope of a play to bring out the intended truth' (*EA* 100). Whereas a novelist may 'stop in the middle of the story and say anything he like[s]' ('Some Home Truths'), any meaning that the dramatist hopes to communicate to his or her audience must be 'brought out in the action of one man upon another, as revealed by his speech' ('Some Home Truths'). The only means by which the reader or audience member may understand what the playwright seeks to convey through his work, therefore, is by paying attention to the characters. Meanings are communicated by way of the characters and their interactions, and a reader can only get to know those characters by attending to the length (duration) and breadth (relations between characters) of a play. This is why MacDonald writes that the dramatist must use the entire scope of the play, rather than just an explicit comment here or there, to communicate her 'intended truth'.[6] Unlike a novel, where the author may guide interpretation through the narrator's commentary, a drama, with its indirect mode of conveying meaning and its privileging of character's voices, requires its reader to do a bit more interpretive work. In order to grasp a play's meaning, the reader must attend to the characters' action and speech—

[6] Although the term 'intended truth' might initially seem to be a claim that there is just one overarching truth or meaning in the play, this is not the case, for MacDonald was well aware of the multivalency of drama. His comment is simply an articulation of his views concerning the importance of reading the entire play, rather than claiming knowledge of it based upon an engagement with isolated passages.

and the other elements of the text—using all aspects to help interpret the others. The entirety of the play has, according to MacDonald, been so constructed as to 'rous[e] the imagination' in order to supply what is implicit or hinted at ('The Art' 159). Thus drama's dynamic form, which emerges from the interplay between the characters, also extends beyond the stage to the audience, who are themselves dynamically and creatively involved in the process of interpretation.

That the playwright's meaning must be expressed through the actions and speeches of the characters does not mean that one particular character becomes the dramatist's mouthpiece—indeed, to make a character do so would violate that character's individuality and freedom. In a well-written drama, '[e]ach character shall set itself forth from its own point of view'—something that can be seen in Shakespeare's refusal to allow 'his opinion to come out to the damaging of the individual's own self-presentation' ('St. George's Day' 125). The result of privileging the character's own self-presentation means that there is a certain amount of indeterminacy in Shakespeare's plays. A character who has, for instance, a tendency to lie may not be easy to spot, for not only will the speech of a persuasive liar seem to be the truth, but, as MacDonald points out, the person who lies is often unaware or in denial about what they do and why they do it. This is why the reader of *Richard II* will find it impossible 'to determine whether, in their fierce bandying of the lie, Bolingbroke or Norfolk spoke the truth', because 'Shakspere has no desire or need to act the historian in the decision of that question. He leaves his reader in full sympathy with the perplexity of Richard; as puzzled, in fact, as if he had been present at the interrupted combat' ('St. George's Day' 126). In this instance, the freedom of self-representation allowed to the characters means that the puzzled reader is required to make an interpretive choice, and to do so without any obvious aid from the playwright. In other cases, however, interpreting drama necessitates the reader or audience

picking up on the seemingly-incidental references or details present in a character's speech or action. To take a minor example, MacDonald suggests that, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Margaret's objection 'to her mistress's wearing a certain rebato (*a large plaited ruff*), on the morning of her wedding' is 'intended to relate to the fact that Margaret had dressed in her mistress's clothes the night before', and 'might have rumpled or soiled [the rebato], and so feared discovery' ('The Art' 151). In MacDonald's thinking, it would be appropriate for a novelist to tell the reader explicitly that the rebato was the same that Margaret had worn for her rendezvous the night before. For the dramatist to do so, however, would ruin the subtlety and realism of her art. 'In the tone of an ordinary drama,' he writes, 'you may know when something is coming; and the tone itself declares—*I have done it*. But Shakspere will not spoil his art to show his art' ('The Art' 150). In order to get at the meaning of the play, then, the reader must use her imagination to fill in the gaps of what is made explicit, something that involves trying to imagine the inner world of the characters in order to discover what hidden motivations or feelings might lie behind their speeches or actions.

MacDonald's claim that reading a drama requires a great deal of imagination in order to fill in the gaps is, given his context, a fairly reasonable one. For one thing, there is typically far less description in a play script than there is in a Victorian novel. For another, narrators of nineteenth-century novels do often address the reader directly, in some cases articulating the views of their author when they do so.[7] That being said, MacDonald's claim that drama as a whole requires of its readers a greater interpretive role than a novel does raises a number of questions: does a hierarchy of levels of interpretation apply for novels where the narrator is

[7] Take, for instance, the intrusion of the narrator in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* (1859), which has often been read as an articulation of George Eliot's admittedly complex and self-reflexive ideas on realism. Of course, realism is far from monolithic. It varies between authors and shifts as the century goes on. As Linda Shires explains, the 'later Victorian novel registers a more challenging relation to an audience, who can no longer be passive consumers, but must become more active' (63-64).

not as intrusive or didactic as the type of narrator MacDonald has in mind? What does one do in the case of an unreliable narrator? We might also ask, more generally, whether it can be stated with any certainty that one literary form requires more interpretive participation than another. Could it be that interpretive participation depends more upon the reader's intention or goals in reading than on the literary form itself? What is crucial to keep in mind when evaluating MacDonald's claim, however, is the fact that he is not only speaking here as a scholar, but as a teacher—a lecturer and writer whose overarching aim is to introduce his audience to the writers he is discussing. While MacDonald certainly offers his own interpretations and makes certain declarative claims (such as the one he makes concerning the primacy of character in drama), his main goal is to help his reader find a way into the text so that she can continue to read it for herself. This is why MacDonald sometimes refers to his lectures as a kind of 'key' to a writer's work, for his intention is not so much to provide a definitive interpretation of a play, but to help the reader see how the work of interpretation is done so that she can go on to interpret texts for herself. In light of this, I read MacDonald's claim not so much as an attempt to rank literary forms according to levels of interpretive involvement, but rather as a way of helping readers understand the particular difficulties that might arise, or methods they might employ, when interpreting a drama. While his comparison between drama and fiction could admittedly do with a bit more nuancing, his primary intention was not so much to draw a hard line between the two forms, but to encourage his audience to take an active and imaginative role in their interpretation of Shakespeare's plays.

The amount of scholarly (and sometimes unscholarly) material that was produced on Shakespeare in the nineteenth century prompted some Victorians to protest that Shakespeare critics were reading far too much into the texts. MacDonald acknowledges this concern, writing that the 'reader cannot help being fearful, lest, not as regards truth only, but as regards

art as well, he be sometimes clothing the idol of his intellect with the weavings of his fancy' ('The Art' 143). The language he uses here hints that the poor reader of Shakespeare is not seeing or engaging with the dynamic, self-representing characters, but is, through fanciful projection, seeing in the characters only what she wants to see. This fanciful projection, however, is distinct from the reasonable imagination that is needed when it comes to interpreting Shakespeare.[8] Although MacDonald believes that the majority of seemingly-insignificant details in the play are likely the result of Shakespeare's conscious art, he also points out to his concerned readers that there are many meanings present in a work of art that were unintended by the artist—particularly if that artist is primarily concerned with facilitating the self-representation of his unfinalisable characters. Regardless of whether a reader or audience-member knows for sure if the minute details of a play are the conscious work of Shakespeare, MacDonald claims that the Bard himself implicitly sanctions an interpretive approach that regards the details as hints, thereby inviting the reader to use her imagination to fill in the gaps. MacDonald maintains that although Shakespeare did not write any literary criticism, his views on how to read art, literature included, can be seen in his description of the painting of the Trojan War in 'The Rape of Lucrece'. Key to MacDonald's argument is the stanza:

> For much imaginary work was there;
> Conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind,
> That for Achilles' image stood his spear,
> Griped in an armed hand; himself, behind,

[8] Throughout his work MacDonald distinguishes between 'fancy' and 'imagination', associating the former with self-deception or foolishness and the latter with truth. He writes that a teacher 'will teach [a student] not to mistake fancy, either in himself or in others for imagination, and to beware of hunting after resemblances that carry with them no interpretation' ('The Imagination' 41).

Was left unseen, save to the eye of mind:

A hand, a foot, a face, a leg, a head,

Stood for the whole to be imagined. ('The Art' 146)

The 'imaginary work' is, explains MacDonald, the 'work hinted at, and then left to the imagination of the reader'—the eye of mind ('The Art' 150). In the case of dramatic representation this includes what is hinted at on a large scale (such as the imagined world beyond the set, or even some details of props or costume in a pared-back production). The description that follows the first line, however, with its details of Achilles's armed hand gripping his spear and the individual body parts representing a group of people, also justifies the audience in taking even the minutest details as invitations to imagine more. This is not license to fancifully read things into the text or make 'idols' out of living characters, but is rather an invitation to the reader or audience to creatively participate in the meaning-making of the play.

Shakespeare in Love

MacDonald's imaginative, character-based approach to reading Shakespeare's plays stems from his belief that the Bard's artistic ability to depict complex, self-representing characters is inextricably bound up in his capacity to view every person through the eyes of love. MacDonald's choice to articulate his ideas on Shakespeare in the language of love indicates the way in which MacDonald's ideas about characterisation are shaped by his views concerning human relationality and Trinitarian love. In the midst of setting out Shakespeare's artistic lineage, and making some observations concerning the formal elements of his work, MacDonald sees fit to repeatedly emphasise the capacious vision of humanity that he claims

Shakespeare possesses. In writing on *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, MacDonald draws particular attention to Shakespeare's complex depiction of Shylock which, MacDonald claims, is uniquely sympathetic for its time. Indeed, he 'suspect[s that Shylock] is the only human Jew of the English drama up to that time' and claims that other dramatists, incapable of portraying a Jewish man as a fellow-human, would have only succeeded in depicting 'a dreary monster' like Marlowe's Barabas ('St. George's Day' 125). MacDonald's claim is, in part, an assertion about these playwrights' ability as writers. More than that, though, it is a claim about their lack of love. Loving vision is not secondary to characterisation, but crucial to it, for it affords a vision of humanity that aligns with the loving vision of the Trinitarian God. For MacDonald, love is, in fact, what makes Shakespeare so successful as a playwright. He writes that the Bard's 'depth of capacity for loving lay at the root of all his knowledge of men and women, and all his dramatic pre-eminence' ('St George's Day' 116).

It is love, which is at once as generous towards the other as possible while still being, as philosopher Raimond Gaita puts it, 'hard-headed and unsentimental' (xxxvii), that enables Shakespeare's virtuoso representation of character. The combination of generosity and hard-headedness is a crucial one when discussing love, for if we employ the language of love simply in terms of emotion, it can, as Felski points out, feel 'descriptively thin … highlighting the strength of an affect, but nothing of its qualities, tone, or shading' (*Hooked* 31). Felski inclines towards philosopher Ronald de Sousa's view that 'love is not an emotion but a condition—or perhaps a syndrome, made up of intricate patterns of thoughts, behaviours, and feelings' (31). The notion of love as a condition or syndrome is a helpful one for understanding the kind of claim MacDonald is making concerning Shakespeare, for MacDonald is not suggesting that the Bard felt affection for everyone he met. He is, rather, claiming that the loving condition in which Shakespeare lived afforded him with a vision of

others that saw past differences in gender, race, religion, or social status—not in order to eradicate those differences, but in order to see them primarily in light of a shared humanity.

Although MacDonald recognises the impossibility of completely understanding another person, he believes that it is only through love that any true understanding can be attained, because the 'heart is more intelligent than the intellect' ('St George's Day' 116). His claim for love as the highest mode of understanding stems from his conviction that the ground of all reality is a Trinitarian God, the persons of whom exist in perfectly loving relationship with one another, and whose primary characteristic is love.[9] Because this kind of God is the creative source and sustainer of all things, everything in existence (including human relations) has been made to operate according to a dynamic framework of loving relationships. For human beings who do not yet perfectly love, the conscious practice of love is crucial. As MacDonald often points out, love is not simply a feeling, but an active willing and doing of good towards another—sometimes without feeling any desire to do so. In choosing to love another, a person is aligning herself with the loving will of God and is increasingly empowered to love others. As she loves in this way, her vision of the world is transformed so that she is able to view situations and people (including herself) as God sees them: through eyes of love. Schwartz points out that although the loving answer to a person's need is often a physical action or a tangible gift, it may also take the form of 'attention, acknowledgement, understanding, and sympathy' (50). For MacDonald, it is love in this latter sense that most informs Shakespeare's depiction of character, for his ability to depict complex characters sympathetically is only possible because he has cultivated a loving attention to the people in his own life. When it comes to the depiction of character in drama, therefore, it is not only a

[9] 'Love is the deepest depth, the essence of his nature, at the root of all his being' (MacDonald, *US III*. 207).

set of technical skills that are required, but a vision of humanity that is based not on intellectual analysis, but the intelligence of the heart.

Loving vision is not a denial of the dark side of humanity, nor an excusing of the speeches or actions that emerge when a person is living out of that part of herself. It is, rather, a recognition of the 'divine essence', the 'pure essential humanity' that is 'deeper altogether and independent of the region of hate', and which is present in every human being (*US I.* 79). A person's divine essence, that part of her which has the capacity to love like God, will be more or less visible depending upon whether she is moving towards growth or destruction—whether she is, in other words, becoming her true self. Loving vision is, at its root, a choice to look for the divine essence in every person no matter how bad she might appear or act, while also imagining her 'yet invisible triumph' in becoming, with God's help, her best and most loving self in the end (*US I.* 81). In this context, love manifests itself in willing and imagining the good of another—in seeing her flaws and dysfunctions, but framing them in light of the essential humanity that is common to all. The natural outworking of loving vision is that when a person is attentively focused on another's well-being—as opposed to the fulfilment of his own self or ego—he is better able to see the other as a complex individual with her own set of needs, desires, and struggles, rather than viewing her primarily in light of his own agenda. MacDonald's claim is that Shakespeare's prioritisation of character over plot is an outworking of this kind of loving vision. In allowing his characters the freedom to speak and act for themselves, Shakespeare foregrounds their perspectives over his own. This is not to say that Shakespeare silences his own voice, but that his 'speech' is less evident—perceptible only in the way he harmonises the individual perspectives into the scope and whole of the play.

Shakespeare's loving vision is, for MacDonald, particularly evident when it comes to the depiction of those who may not be so easy to identify with: his 'villains', who are written

not as ‘unhuman’ stock characters, but as complex human beings (‘St. George's Day’ 125). So multilayered is the characterisation of Lady Macbeth, for instance, that she cannot be categorised or fit into a single theory or type. The only way, therefore, ‘to account for the perfection of the representation is to say that, given a shadow, Shakspere had the power to place himself so, that that shadow became his own—was the correct representation as shadow, of his form coming between it and the sunlight’ (‘St. George's Day’ 161). The ‘power’ that enabled Shakespeare to become one with Lady Macbeth—to imaginatively position himself so that he could understand how such a character might think and feel and act—is not a power that attempts to control or dominate. On the contrary, it is a power that seeks to identify and understand. It does so not in order to condemn or dehumanise the person, nor to approve of certain actions or behaviours, but to represent fairly and sympathetically. In other words, this power is love. Although, as Schwartz points out, there is an assumption that love lacks power—‘the term “power” is often equated with impulses to dominate’—when it is framed by love, power ‘becomes not about controlling others and seizing their resources, but about connecting to others, creating’ (38). Shakespeare’s loving vision enables him to connect with the other—in the case of Lady Macbeth, an imagined other—and through this imaginative connection, to create a complex and dynamic character. At the same time that he offers Lady Macbeth this ‘fair play’, his own perspective can be seen in his depiction of the way in which her own lack of love wreaks havoc upon herself and others in the play.

In contrast to the masterful and loving artistry manifested in Lady Macbeth, MacDonald critiques those playwrights whose weakness is evident in their failure to depict believable human beings—something that is due in large part to their lack of loving vision. He particularly singles out those who go overboard in their attempts to portray unique or interesting characters, and therefore write characters who are unhuman (‘St. George's Day’

127). These playwrights are, it seems, not primarily interested in representing living, breathing people, but in the execution of their own work. In other words, their focus is mainly on themselves, and not their characters. MacDonald writes that in these dramatists' 'anxiety to present a *character*, they take, as it were, a human mould, label it with a certain peculiarity, and then fill in speeches and forms according to the label' ('St. George's Day' 124). This description rings of a detached or solely-intellectual mode of analysis: a generic human mould, labelled according to type, and filled in almost automatically, as if these playwrights are identifying the distinctive features of a species, or compiling a list of botanical descriptors. This too-intellectual approach to the drawing of character is distinctly at odds with MacDonald's description of Shakespeare's loving vision and intelligent heart, and indeed with his notions concerning the relative freedom of Shakespeare's characters. In the end, the scientific or formulaic approach to writing character results in the exact opposite of the distinctive character apparently intended by these second-rate playwrights, for the character's 'peculiarity' so predominates, and 'the whole is so much of one colour, that the result resembles one of those allegorical personifications in which, as much as possible, everything human is eliminated except what belongs to the peculiarity, the personification' ('St. George's Day' 124). By 'everything human' MacDonald means those characteristics that he perceives to be universal to human nature, including the dynamic movement intrinsic to every person. Like allegorical personifications, poorly-drawn characters are static, for only one aspect of their person has been captured by the dramatist. Because of this, the characters become colourless, lifeless objects rather than dynamic human beings who grow or change, revealing new facets of themselves as they interact with others. The dramatist with loving vision, however, is able to write realistic characters, for he recognises the essential humanity shared

by all, while at the same time acknowledging the complex factors that shape each person uniquely.

For readers familiar with the discourse of nineteenth-century sympathy, MacDonald's notion of loving vision may well raise questions concerning the relationship between the two terms. Indeed, D. Rae Greiner's description of sympathy as 'imaginatively tracing [others'] mental movements, reflecting upon the situations that give rise to their emotions, gauging the appropriateness of their feelings to their expressive contexts' (419), could well be applied to the concept of loving vision as detailed above. While there are similarities between the two, however, MacDonald's preference for the language of loving vision over sympathy is a self-conscious choice to ground his ideas theologically. For him, the language of a relational theology of love is different from, and superior to, the language of sympathy, because of the way in which love encompasses not only emotion and thought, but action. In MacDonald's mind, love is inherently active rather than a state of feeling that can give rise to action. It is the creative force that acts as the 'bond of the universe, the chain that holds it together, the one active unity, the harmony of things' (*US III.* 211). Any unloving (or selfish) action goes against the grain of love's natural law, and it is this lack of love that creates an experience of separation and isolation between human beings, even though all is held together by love. Because love holds things together, the more a person loves, the more she is able to experience a nearness to others, and in this way understand them better. Answering the objection that 'I cannot get into [another's] consciousness, nor he into mine … I am an individual; he is an individual' (*US I.* 72), MacDonald points out that it is, in fact, this individuality or otherness that makes love possible, for all things are meant to be united in loving relationship. As with the Trinity, this unity does not eradicate otherness, but requires it. Unlike God, human beings do not yet love perfectly, which means that creation has not yet

reached completion. Creation will be complete when all things and people are united in harmony with the loving will of God. For this reason, every choice that a person makes to love God and her neighbour is a participation in the process of creation that is transforming each person into the best version of herself, and harmonising all individuals with one another and God. Loving vision, then, is not only a sympathy with others, but an act of creative participation.

Because, in MacDonald's thinking, it is Trinitarian love that creates life and holds all of creation together, love is inextricably bound up in his notion of the organic and, consequently, in his understanding of drama as a dynamic, relational form. Similar to the way that the natural world emerges, for MacDonald, from the love of God, and, under his loving direction and design, continues to progress towards its completion, so Shakespeare's plays emerge organically from the characters and their relations to one another, not as the result of random chance, but in keeping with his overall design. The relationship that humans have with God, where they are given the freedom to choose whether or not to lovingly participate in the completion of his design for themselves and creation as a whole, is reflected in the freedom Shakespeare affords his dynamic characters as they act and speak over the course of the play. MacDonald explicitly links these aspects of dramatic and divine creation, writing that God 'begins with the building of the stage itself, and that stage is a world—a universe of worlds. He makes the actors, and they do not act,—they *are* their part. He utters them into the visible to work out their life—his drama' ('The Imagination' 4). As with the life-giving and life-sustaining love of God, which 'utters' the people he has imagined into visible existence, so the power that breathes life into Shakespeare's characters is his own love, which gives him the vision to see other people, and so his characters, as complex, dynamic beings. Loving vision gives a view of the world that aligns with God's loving perspective but, as in real life,

human limitations mean that until love is finally perfected, there will be some areas of ambiguity that require interpretation. This, too, correlates with MacDonald's view of drama as a relational, dynamic form, for there is a need for the reader or audience's imaginative participation in the meaning-making of the play. Hence, when it comes to interpretation, MacDonald himself approaches the text with loving vision, and encourages his students to do the same.

Loving Vision and Hamlet

The concept of Trinitarian love not only shapes MacDonald's understanding of drama as a dynamic, relational form, but also the way in which he read, and instructed others to read, Shakespeare's plays. In 1865, MacDonald applied for the Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University. He was unsuccessful, but the testimonials and support he received from figures such as FD Maurice and John Ruskin are indicative of the high opinion in which his work as a lecturer and scholar was held. In a letter offering his hearty support of MacDonald's application for the post, and for his work as a scholar more generally, Ruskin writes: 'I am always glad to hear you lecture myself – and if I had a son, I would rather he took his lessons in literary taste under you than under any person I know, for you would make him more than a scholar, [you would make him] a living and thoughtful reader' (18 Aug.). The words 'living' and 'thoughtful' suggest that movement and activity characterise this kind of reading, while the focus upon MacDonald's 'literary taste' and his capacity to nurture a certain quality of reader indicates MacDonald's commitment to cultivating independence of thought when it comes to reading a work of literature. What is it, according to Ruskin, that gives MacDonald this ability to read, and teach others to read in this way? Love is the answer, for 'of all the literary men I know, I think you most <u>love</u> literature itself; the others love

themselves and the expression of themselves; but you enjoy your own art, and the art of others, when it is fine' (18 Aug. original emphasis). Ruskin's commendation of MacDonald's love-motivated approach to reading literature demonstrates his own belief that the complete reader is one who goes beyond scholarly knowledge in order to read with his whole self—heart included. His observation that the literary men he knows love themselves and their own ideas more than they do the literature they are reading is also significant, not only because Ruskin knew many prominent 'literary men', but also because it indicates that he perceived a certain integrity in MacDonald's work—one that privileges the work of art above the expression of his own ideas.

Ruskin's critique of those critics who are more interested in self-expression than the text itself resonates with MacDonald's critique of the second-rate playwrights whose static characters are the result of their self-conscious anxiety to depict interesting characters. MacDonald's description of these dramatists' scientific approach to the drawing of character is, I have argued, linked to their lack of loving vision. There is a parallel here between this systematic, scientific approach to the drawing of character and a certain school of criticism well known to both Ruskin and MacDonald. The New Shakspere Society [sic] was founded in 1873 by FJ Furnivall and FG Fleay, proponents of Scientific Criticism.[10] That MacDonald, Ruskin, AC Swinburne, and DG Rossetti were Vice-Presidents of the Society, while its President was Robert Browning, is a testament to the breadth of approaches found amongst its members. That being said, the Society was founded by Furnivall and Fleay in order to scientifically determine the order in which the plays were written (something they attempted by employing tabulated statistical analysis), and by that means to understand 'the progress and

[10] 'Scientific Criticism' is the term used by Mark Hollingworth to describe Furnivall and Fleay's avowedly 'scientific' approach to Shakespeare (39).

meaning of Shakespeare's mind' (Hollingworth 39-40). Fleay explains in his *Shakespeare Manual* (1876), which includes papers presented to the New Shakspere Society, that he will 'adopt every scientific method from other sciences applicable to our ends', then continues to detail precisely how each branch of science offers something to the Shakespeare scholar (243-244). While MacDonald may well have been in sympathy with an attempt to track the development of Shakespeare's thinking,[11] his view that it is only love that leads to true understanding would likely have led him to critique any attempt to claim an understanding of the Bard or his plays on the basis of scientific analysis. Fleay goes on to assert that, after 'systematically and thoroughly' performing scientific analyses on Shakespeare's works, '[we] may we expect to have a criticism that shall be free from shallow notions taken up to please individual eccentricities' (244). The aim of such Scientific Criticism is, it seems, to find a fixed, conclusive meaning in the texts and thereby have mastery over them and their interpretation.

MacDonald, too, sought to understand Shakespeare's artistic approach, but he did not believe that the meaning of the plays could be fixed or controlled. His appreciation of the multivalence of language, his recognition of the complexity of Shakespeare's dynamic characters, and his insistence upon the necessity of readerly participation all combined to inform his confident assertion that the plays would provide a perpetual source of fresh meanings for each generation. Approaching the plays without acknowledging the human element involved (the human element including Shakespeare, his characters, and the human reader) may offer some insight, but it will never lead to a true understanding of the plays. MacDonald's assertion is that his approach can, on the other hand, offer understanding, for it

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[11] Indeed, in 'St. George's Day' MacDonald traces the impact that Shakespeare's historical context may have had on the bard's reading and thinking.

interprets the actions and speeches of the characters with eyes of love. Unlike the top-down approach of Scientific Criticism, which seeks to fix the meaning of the plays, loving interpretation involves a certain element of openness, for to be loving or generous towards another is to be open to him and what he might reveal about himself.[12] It should be noted that loving reading is not, as Ruskin points out in his letter, at odds with scholarly rigour. All scholarly work, including critical analysis and philological research, is, to MacDonald, a stepping-stone that aids the reader in encountering the literary text. In the case of drama, that means an encounter with the characters. As an 1879 report of a lecture MacDonald gave on *Hamlet* observes, he 'does not undervalue philological research, but he values the human element more' ('George MacDonald in Newcastle'). Valuing the human element is, in MacDonald's mind, simply reading along the grain of Shakespeare's plays, for it is love of humanity that informs and directs the whole.

Having discussed the idea of loving interpretation in the abstract, the question arises as to what, exactly, such interpretation might look like in practice? One example can be seen in the way in which MacDonald interprets Shakespeare's use of blank verse and formal speech. In explaining the relationship between realistic characters and the poetic speech of Shakespeare's plays, MacDonald writes that as 'the stage itself is elevated a few feet above the ordinary level, because it is the scene of a *representation*, just so the speech of the drama, dealing not with unreal but with ideal persons, the fool being a worthy fool, and the villain a worthy villain, needs to be elevated some tones above that of ordinary life, which is generally flavoured with so much of the *commonplace*' ('St. George's Day' 101). While psychological realism is necessary, loving vision requires something more. MacDonald's claim that the

[12] For another answer to the question of what a mode of Trinitarian-informed loving interpretation might look like, see Jacobs.

blank verse and formal speech raises the whole above the commonplace is a claim concerning one of the means by which Shakespeare's loving vision is manifested in his artistry. The word 'commonplace' is not, for MacDonald, synonymous with a term such as 'vernacular'. Indeed, he has no problem with what he calls 'the rough, honest plain-spokenness of Shakspere' ('St. George's Day' 138). The commonplace is, for him, a tone or spirit of cynicism or materialism that he believed permeated much everyday speech, and which undercuts the imagination, creativity, and love that enable a person to see the world as God sees it. To view the world through the lens of the commonplace is to fail to see both the divine essence in every person, and the love that holds all of creation together. Taking a cue from Hamlet's instruction to the Players 'to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature' ('St. George's Day' 102), MacDonald compares Shakespeare's loving representation with a mirror's reflection. He writes that even 'an ordinary, well-known, homely room, gains something of the strange and poetic when regarded in the mirror over the fire' ('St. George's Day' 102). The blank verse is the glass that, when 'silvered' by Shakespeare's mind, reflects a cast of characters as seen by the Bard's loving vision—a representation of reality that allows the audience to glimpse that strange and poetic 'divine essence' that lies within even the most ordinary, well-known people.

MacDonald lectured on a variety of Shakespeare's plays, and offers analyses of sections of them in his more general essays on Shakespeare, but his primary contribution to the world of Shakespeare criticism is his work on his 'favourite'—*Hamlet* (Letter to Louisa [27 Oct.]). Not only did he lecture on the subject—finishing up his highly successful North American tour with a lecture on the play as requested by his hosts—but in 1885 he produced an annotated folio-based edition of the play: *The Tragedie of Hamlet: A Study with the Text of the Folio of 1623*.[13] Writing to J.O. Halliwell-Phillipps in the year of its publication,

[13] See Decker for a helpful overview of major Shakespeare editions in the long nineteenth century.

MacDonald tells him: 'I have spent a labour over this work that might have served me to write three novels' (qtd. in Thompson 202n5). At the time, MacDonald's edition of *Hamlet* was recognised as an original scholarly contribution to Victorian Shakespeare criticism, but it has since also been lauded as a groundbreaking work that is worthy of consideration by Shakespeare scholars today. Ann Thompson credits MacDonald for being the first to produce a Folio-based edition of *Hamlet* justified by the theory of authorial revision—an achievement that, she points out, has been entirely overlooked by Shakespeare scholars. She writes that in 'addition to crediting George MacDonald for this innovative edition on textual grounds, I would recommend his commentary on literary grounds: the encounter between MacDonald and Shakespeare is always thoughtful and modest, often entertaining and original' (204-205).[14]

For reviewers, critics, and audiences of MacDonald's day, it was less the textual innovation that drew attention, and more the 'original' take on *Hamlet*—a take informed by MacDonald's character-based approach and notions on loving interpretation. As he tells his audience, the character of Hamlet is a complex one, but '[n]o man can fail altogether to understand another man, if he loves him' (39). The most controversial aspect of MacDonald's loving reading of the play is, arguably, his contradiction of the prevailing interpretation of Hamlet as an overly-intellectual ditherer who drags his feet when it comes to taking the action required to avenge his father's murder. This is reflected in the report of an 1890 lecture MacDonald gave on the play in Liverpool, which claims that 'the veteran author pays scant respect to the pronouncements of the critics', and goes against 'the fashion' of conceiving

[14] A recent article by Ashley Chu and Joe Ricke corrects a claim in one of Thompson's footnotes that the Folger Shakespeare Library possesses a nineteenth-century text of *Hamlet* published earlier than MacDonald's 1885 edition, and which is interleaved with criticisms by MacDonald. As Chu and Ricke show, the Folger Library copy was not MacDonald's, but was owned and annotated with notes from MacDonald's lectures on *Hamlet* by J.P. Faunthorpe, long-time principal of Whitelands Training College in Chelsea (111).

Hamlet as a 'weak-minded individual' ('Dr. George MacDonald on "Hamlet"').[15] MacDonald's interpretation of Hamlet as an exemplar of decisive action includes those aspects of reading character discussed earlier in this chapter. In particular, the importance of recognising the pressures that a character's context, including his relationships, might place upon him emotionally or psychologically. MacDonald explains the reasons for Hamlet's delay in taking revenge on his uncle as twofold. The first is Hamlet's reasonable doubt concerning the reality of his father's ghost. The second, and more significant in MacDonald's opinion, is the fact that the Ghost's allegations would fundamentally challenge Hamlet's own experience and understanding of his mother. Because so much is at stake, Hamlet's desire to find evidence before taking action is, according to MacDonald, not only completely reasonable, but the right thing to do. MacDonald notes the way that most critics, taking Hamlet at his self-condemning word, also condemn him on the basis of his soliloquy at the end of Act II (a soliloquy in which he berates himself for his weakness in not speaking out or acting to revenge his father's murder), particularly when a Player can conjure up tears and passion 'all for / nothing' (2.2. 79-80). For MacDonald, however, Hamlet's soliloquy is to be understood as the self-accusation of a good, conflicted man who is, quite simply, being far too hard on himself. Unlike the 'ungenerous criticism [that] has, by all but universal consent, accepted his own verdict against himself,' MacDonald urges the reader to 'examine and understand [Hamlet], so as to account for his conduct better than he could himself' (*TH* 113, 112). This generous interpretation is, for MacDonald, a more reasonable approach, for it takes into account the variety of pressures under which Hamlet suffers, and offers a more nuanced and balanced perspective on his character. For MacDonald, this interpretation is far more in

[15] The reports of MacDonald's lectures in Newcastle ('George MacDonald in Newcastle'), Glasgow ('Dr. George MacDonald in Glasgow.'), New York ('George MacDonald's Farewell Lecture'), and Aberdeen ('George MacDonald, Esq.'), also highlight that his interpretation goes against the 'common view' that Hamlet is incapable of action ('Dr. George MacDonald' [*The Newcastle Courant*]).

keeping with his understanding of Shakespeare's loving vision and the complexity of his characterisations more generally.

While MacDonald's interpretation of *Hamlet* was acknowledged to be thoroughly critical and scholarly, his unusual interpretation of the play was less well-received. He reflects on this poor critical reception in a letter to A.P. Watt:

> As expected, the critics are down on my *Hamlet* on all sides. Of course! They are just of the class which I say cannot understand him or his inventor … I am not in the least surprised. It shows me the more how desirable it was that the coming generations should have what help I could give them to start with, some notion of what Shakespeare meant in his *Hamlet*; for the interpretation commonly given makes a poor thing of it compared with what I see in it. But how should the commonplace understand the best that the highest intellect of the country could produce? (Sadler 314).

I read MacDonald's defiant assertion that his work has been rejected by the critics because of their 'commonplace understanding' as a claim concerning their lack of loving vision. Because the commonplace is, for him, a way of seeing the world that is diametrically opposed to loving imagination, these critics' interpretation of Shakespeare through the lens of the commonplace hinders their ability to understand his characters as MacDonald believes the Bard intended to portray them. MacDonald's desire to leave his interpretation of *Hamlet* to posterity further confirms how unusual his reading of the play was and reveals his perception of himself as a pioneering scholar whose work would only come to be appreciated by future generations. In some ways, MacDonald was right. Whether or not twenty-first century critics

find his interpretation of *Hamlet* convincing or not, his open and generous model of reading anticipates the current trend in post-critical reading that seeks to avoid suspicious reading and to 'treat works of fiction as potential sources of insight rather than as examples of unknowingness or complicity' (Anderson et al. 2). An approach such as MacDonald's may offer us resources for thinking about reading character today, including the kinds of knowledge or insight we might gain by approaching characters with openness and generosity rather than suspicion. It might also prompt us, like Anderson, Felski, and Moi, to reexamine the idea that critique and generosity are incompatible, and to consider how practices of reading might impact the reader herself.

The idea that reading practices may shape or reveal something about the reader is an important one to MacDonald. His remarks concerning his critics' commonplace understanding is a criticism of their understanding of Shakespeare and his plays, but it is also hints towards the idea that their failure to read Shakespeare well is caused by, and leads to, a lack of love. This is because MacDonald regards the loving reading of Shakespeare's plays as a form of spiritual practice. MacDonald holds that reading literature well is important for a variety of reasons, including the pursuit of knowledge, the cultivation of the imagination, and the experience of aesthetic pleasure. Because of his belief in Shakespeare's loving vision and masterful depiction of character, he also claims that reading the plays may help readers become more loving people. He writes: 'I dare say that there are very few books that will enable the devout soul to be just and true to its neighbors more than the plays of Shakespeare' ('Humanity in Hamlet'). Drama's need for the reader's creative participation, the necessity of withholding immediate judgment on a character, and the loving approach to interpretation that goes along the grain of Shakespeare's plays, all combine to train the reader in the practice of love. For MacDonald, this reading practice forms a person in such a way

that she is better able to extend love to the people she encounters on a daily basis. Put another way, the outworking of loving reading is loving action. Thus, loving reading is not only a creative participation in the meaning-making of a text, but may become a spiritual practice. Reading drama, then, may be understood to form a similar devotional practice to the one identified by Lysack, which is dependent 'not on doctrine or indoctrination, but on how the book is read' (2). For MacDonald, the spiritual practice of reading Shakespeare leads to loving participation in the unfolding drama of creation. 'Through the mass and through it, that it may cohere' writes MacDonald, 'guided in dance inexplicable of prophetic harmony, move the children of God, the lights of the world, the lovers of men, the fellow-workers with God, the peace-makers' (*HG* 135). Each act of love is a choice to take part in a process of creation that not only transforms each person into his or her best self, but also brings her into harmony with others and God. As with Shakespeare's plays, in which the Bard's invisible genius is only visible in the overall form—a form that emerges organically from the characters and the relations between them—so the invisible, guiding genius of God's love is made manifest through the movements of his loving fellow-workers—the creative participants in his drama.

Conclusion

For MacDonald, literature is not distinct from, nor an addition to, religious belief; it is, rather, a mode of articulating and exploring theology. In making this claim, my thesis has shown how MacDonald's readings of the literary forms of writers such as Dante, Tennyson, and Shakespeare do not simply 'delineate theological niceties', to borrow Hurley's phrase, but enact a mode of theological thought and expression—become themselves 'an efficacious mode of theology' (*Faith in Poetry* 3-4). I have argued that, in MacDonald's thinking, different literary forms such as narrative, poetry, and drama offer ways of engaging with, and revealing elements of, a spiritual reality characterised by movement. MacDonald's conception of the Trinity gives him ways of thinking about key ideas concerning reading literary forms—ideas such as relationality, movement, and participation.

By arguing that the Trinity is a foundational concept in MacDonald's theological and literary thought, my work contributes to our understanding of MacDonald and, more broadly, Victorian literary-religious culture. Joshua King writes that nineteenth-century writers and clergy 'made commentary on reading, reflective attention to the act of reading, and attempts to model reading practices central to imagining membership in conflicting versions of a Christian British community' (*Imagined* 6). My own consideration of MacDonald as one of these literary-religious figures highlights the ways in which a concept such as the Trinity shapes his commentary on, and readings of, literary form. In doing so, I extend King's work by showing the value of attending to particular areas of theology in our discussions of Victorian literary culture. The relationship between form and theology is especially important in this respect. Having shown how Levine's method of approaching forms, which draws attention to their dynamic, disruptive, and socio-political characteristics, relates to the work of

theology, my thesis has demonstrated how MacDonald's theologically-informed dynamic notion of form complicates clear-cut distinctions between the literary and the religious. As a consequence, my work contributes to the work of others associated with the religious turn, by challenging simplistic understandings of the relationship between the sacred and the secular.

This thesis began, in Chapter One, by considering MacDonald's use of the metaphor of the 'journey home' as a theological form by which he articulates his understanding of Christianity as an active, love-motivated relationship with a Trinitarian God. I explored MacDonald's understanding of home in light of his narrative-based theology, which places emphasis upon metaphor and narrative in grasping and communicating religious truth. Through readings of *Lilith* and MacDonald's commentary on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the chapter drew out MacDonald's ideas concerning the central role of literature in guiding a person home, and argued that, in his mind, a particular mode of reading and the text's communication of aspects of the 'essential truth' of God's love, are more important than the use of explicitly religious language. It concluded by demonstrating how MacDonald's use of narrative in *Lilith*—in which he draws upon the parable of the prodigal son in order to rewrite Dante's journey home in a manner that reflects MacDonald's own universalist theology—draws attention to the relationship between narrative form and the dynamic journey home that he believed continued after death.

Chapter Two went on to consider MacDonald's idea of poetic word-music and its role in the communication of spiritual knowledge. It began by exploring MacDonald's understanding of the relationship between feeling and spiritual knowledge, before moving on to demonstrate how, for him, poetry's capacity to affectively convey meaning through its prosody makes it particularly suited to the communication of spiritual knowledge. Diverging from the scholarly trend of considering the social or 'horizontal' implications of prayer in

order to focus on prayer's 'vertical' aspect, this chapter traced the links that MacDonald makes between poetry and prayer, considering the relation between the two in light of nineteenth-century ideas about poetry, prayer, and the Psalms. The chapter then moved to focus on MacDonald's engagement with the (in)famously-musical Tennyson, exploring how MacDonald's reading of *In Memoriam* is shaped by his theological ideas concerning the relation between poetic word-music and spiritual knowledge. I argued that MacDonald's characterisation of *In Memoriam* as a fugue offers a commentary on the expression of doubt in the poem, and in spiritual life more broadly. The chapter concluded with a coda in which I traced MacDonald's claim that a communal experience of reading may act as a means of integrating the vertical and horizontal aspects of poetic prayer.

The following chapter explored MacDonald's understanding of reading as a resurrective conversation with the (un)dead. I identified openness and attention as key characteristics of both reading and conversation, and argued that MacDonald's articulation of his commentary on reading in a Spiritualist register is an attempt to present reading as an alternative to Spiritualist practice. My work demonstrated how MacDonald's theology of the Holy Spirit—the person of the Trinity associated with resurrection and transformation—allows him to invest his notion of conversational reading with spiritual significance, thereby enabling him to claim a connection between the living and the dead that avoids anxieties associated with Spiritualism (such as the possibility of deception, manipulation, and mind control). Chapter Three concluded by assessing MacDonald's representation of the idea that reading is not simply a way of connecting with the dead, but, instead, is an activity that has the potential to transform the reader into a better version of herself. I turned to *Phantastes* and *Lilith* to reveal the transformative power of reading and MacDonald's ideas about how the doctrine of the resurrection informs such thinking.

The final chapter argued that MacDonald's thinking about the primacy of character in drama, and the relationship this has with form, are shaped by his theological views concerning human relationality and Trinitarian love. Focusing on MacDonald's commentary on Shakespeare, I considered MacDonald's claim that dramatic form affords the most freedom to its characters, and therefore requires a greater level of imaginative participation from the reader than other literary forms, including the novel. The chapter explored MacDonald's assertion that Shakespeare's skill in depicting self-representing characters is directly linked to his capacity for love, and I made the case that because MacDonald believed that Trinitarian love creates life and holds all of creation together, love is inextricably bound up in his notion of the organic and his conception of drama as a dynamic, relational form. I examined MacDonald's open and generous mode of 'loving interpretation' as demonstrated in his reading of *Hamlet*, and concluded by reflecting on his claim that reading Shakespeare may be a form of spiritual practice that aids a reader in becoming a more loving person.

By demonstrating the centrality of the Trinity in MacDonald's thinking, and by engaging with his views on literary-religious forms, this thesis has broken new ground in studies of both MacDonald and Victorian literature. MacDonald has often been recognised as a pioneering fantasy writer, an inheritor of the Romantic tradition and, less frequently, as a theologian. However, his role as a literary scholar has largely been neglected. As this thesis has explored the relationship between MacDonald's literary-informed mode of theology and his theologically-informed work as a literary scholar, it has demonstrated how his theology is intrinsically shaped by literary texts, forms, and ways of thinking. In identifying and attending to MacDonald's significant interest in the possibilities of form, I have diverged from approaches such as Dearborn's, whose systematic analysis of MacDonald's theology treats his fiction and non-fiction work as illustrative of an underlying theology rather than constituting a

form of theology itself. In addition, this thesis has made a significant contribution to MacDonald studies by demonstrating the centrality of the Trinity in MacDonald's thinking, and by exploring the ways in which his theology of the Trinity informs his ideas on reading literary form. I have shown how the relationship between literary and theological form is, in his thinking, a dynamic relationship and one that is often impossible to disentangle.

By considering MacDonald's ideas on reading form in light of his theology, this thesis contributes to a broader set of debates in Victorian studies concerning literary-religious culture and, in particular, literary-religious forms. It has shown how an awareness of the variety of forms that theology might take—and the theological work a writer such as MacDonald understood literary forms to be capable of doing—offers a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between nineteenth-century religious and literary forms. By drawing out the ways in which the idea of a dynamic and loving Trinitarian communion shapes MacDonald's views on the dynamic nature of form, this thesis has not only highlighted the generative potential of theological concepts, but also underscored the importance of attending to the details of theology in order to identify key aspects of Victorian literary-critical method.

MacDonald was a prolific writer and lecturer, whose scholarly work covered a breadth of literary topics, from Chaucer to Sidney to Browning, from Medieval Mystery Plays to biography more generally. Until now, the majority of MacDonald's literary scholarship has been left untouched by critics. My thesis has broken new ground by examining this literary scholarship and showing how indebted it is to MacDonald's theology. Ultimately, it is his weaving together of literature and theology that makes MacDonald such an important figure for Victorian literary culture. In addition to the areas of study that I have concentrated on in this thesis, attending to MacDonald's literary-theological works opens up other ways of

reading both MacDonald and the Victorian period. How, for instance, might MacDonald's theology of nature illuminate Victorian attitudes towards the relationship between theology, literature, and ecology? How might his engagement with biblical forms (such as parables, wisdom literature, or epistles) contribute to the conversation in Victorian studies about the adaptation of biblical forms in literature? And how might we seek to reimagine our vocabulary of the secular and the sacred when we realise the extent to which the reading of literature was, for so many Victorians, a thoroughly theological activity? This list of possibilities could easily be extended further. The questions I highlight are intended as a glimpse of the world that comes into view when we attend to the theological contribution that MacDonald's dynamic literary scholarship makes to our reading of the Victorian period.

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