

Death and Fantasy

Death and Fantasy:
Essays on Philip Pullman, C. S. Lewis,
George MacDonald and R. L. Stevenson

By

William Gray

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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In memory of my mother
Joanna Gray, *née* MacDonald
(1925-2004)

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INTRODUCTION

The present collection of essays originates in my realization, while writing *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffmann*¹, that I was making regular reference to a range of journal articles and book chapters which I had produced over the previous decade. It struck me that it might be useful to have these other writings, which are all connected in one way or another with fantasy writing, conveniently available in one volume. Once I had begun to see these other shorter writings as in a sense forming one body of work, I started to notice connections between them other than their link with fantasy literature. I become conscious, with a genuinely uncanny *frisson* of surprise, that most of them were in one way or another about death. Apart from the obvious fact that two of them (Chapters Two and Five) have death in the title, and the fact that the last chapter focuses on Philip Pullman's introduction of figures called "deaths" (including "Lyra's death") into *The Amber Spyglass*, on another level most these chapters are about attempts to *deal* with death—both your own death, and that of a loved one, archetypally the death of a mother. They are also about attempts to *use* death—both your own death and that of a loved one, archetypally the death of a mother²—in order to achieve growth not only in a spiritual sense, but also in a psychoanalytical sense.

"Use" may not seem an appropriate verb to employ in this context, suggesting as it does some kind of instrumental view of death. However, there is no doubt that religious writers *have* presented death as a *means* to an end, and none more so than George MacDonald. Tolkien famously said of MacDonald in "On Fairy-Stories": "Death is the theme that most inspired George MacDonald".³ And in his account of his first encounter

¹ William Gray, *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffmann* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

² As Freud noted in his celebrated essay "The Uncanny", two of the factors which produce the effect of uncanniness are the unconscious obsession with death and the compulsion to *repeat*. See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" in *Art and Literature* (Penguin Freud Library vol. 14) (London: Penguin, 1990), p.365.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories", *Tree and Leaf; Smith of Wootton Major; The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (London: Unwin, 1975), p. 67; see also *The Monster*

with MacDonald's *Phantastes*, C.S. Lewis makes explicit reference to the *use of death* (for what else is baptism but the symbolic use of death for a Christian end?):

[T]he whole book had about it... quite unmistakably, a certain quality of Death, *good* Death. What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptise (that was where the Death came in) my imagination.⁴

While much has been written about the concept of “the good death” in the context of nineteenth century Evangelical fiction⁵, MacDonald's version has perhaps more affinity with Romanticism. The Romantic principle or motif of “stirb und werde” [die and become] is perhaps most strangely expressed in MacDonald's “The Golden Key”, where the flying fish voluntarily dives into the boiling pot, only to reappear as a tiny winged creature or “aëranth” (whose resemblance to a fairy U.C. Knoepfmacher seems loath to admit, preferring to liken it to a tiny angel⁶). Death as the means of new life literally looms large in *Lilith*, where much of the action takes place in a vast cemetery whose sexton is Adam, also known as Mr Raven; the action largely consists in persuading Mr Vane, the narrator and main protagonist, to lie down and die. In *Phantastes* too, death figures prominently, with the narrator and main protagonist Anodos beginning the penultimate chapter: “I was dead, and right content. I lay in my coffin, with my hands folded in peace.”⁷

However the enthusiasm of Anodos for being dead strongly contrasts with Mr Vane's after all very natural reluctance to die in *Lilith*, despite knowing that it is for his own good. There is something uncomfortably close to a kind of suicidal obsession in *Phantastes*, with death being sought not so much as a means of spiritual growth, but rather as a despairing regression to an imagined state of bliss prior to the acquisition of individual personhood. This theme is discussed at some length in the

and the Critics and Other Essays (ed Christopher Tolkien) (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 153. Hereafter cited in parentheses as *MCOE*

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (London: Bles, 1946), p. 21.

⁵ See for example Gerhard Joseph and Herbert F. Tucker, “Passing On: Death” in Herbert F. Tucker (ed.), *A Companion to Victorian Literature And Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 114, discussing Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Philippe Aries *The Hour of Our Death* [1981] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)

⁶ U.C. Knoepfmacher (ed.) *George MacDonald: The Complete Fairy Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), p. 249n9.

⁷ George MacDonald, *Phantastes: A Faërie Romance for Men and Women* [1858] (London: Dent Everyman, 1915), p. 230.

first essay below, “George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva and the Black Sun”, which uses Kristeva’s idea that the achievement of individual personhood, or a “subject position”, requires in effect a kind of matricide, in order to release the self from the potentially smothering effects of the “primary maternal matrix” or “semiotic *chora*”. The “black sun” which blights Anodos’s wanderings in *Phantastes* is in effect Gérard de Nerval’s “black sun of melancholy”⁸, a mark of the depression that according to Kristeva results from the failure to negotiate a proper severance from the maternal matrix. For Kristeva, this position can result in the subject seeking a suicidal (or quasi-suicidal) loss of self by symbolically merging with a mother whose death cannot be tolerated.

The death of the mother is also central to the following chapter, “The Angel in the House of Death: Gender and Subjectivity in George MacDonald’s *Lilith*”, which takes up Virginia Woolf’s claim in her essay “Professions for Women” that a woman’s achievement of a full subject-position, especially as a writer, requires “[k]illing the Angel in the House”.⁹ In Woolf’s own case her mother, Julia Duckworth, was the incarnation of “the Angel in the House”, especially in her appearance as Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. The symbolic battle between the angelic Mother Eve and the unruly overreacher Lilith is re-enacted in MacDonald’s late fantasy novel *Lilith*. The novel is partly about Lilith’s need to learn to die, at the cost of much suffering including the amputation of her clenched fist, so that she can share the delights of post-mortem existence with Adam, Eve and the family. MacDonald’s engagement in late nineteenth century debates relating to gender roles is clearly apparent in *Lilith*.

Lilith was published in 1895, a year after the death of Robert Louis Stevenson. The great length of MacDonald’s writing career (particularly in contrast to Stevenson’s relatively short one) is illustrated by the fact that *Phantastes* was published in the year Stevenson celebrated his eighth birthday. MacDonald was already a “name” to the young Stevenson, and the little-known influence of MacDonald on the younger writer is explored in Chapter Three, “Strange Case of Dr MacDonald and Mr Hyde: RLS and George MacDonald”. A central claim in this chapter is that there is a hitherto unremarked influence of MacDonald’s *Phantastes* on a crucial sequence near the beginning of *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*,

⁸ See Nerval’s “El Desdichado”, cited by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, line 430.

⁹ See Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women” in Stephen Greenblatt and M.H. Abrams (eds), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* vol. 2 (Eighth Edition) (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), p. 2153.

when we first encounter Mr Hyde in Enfield's account of how Hyde callously trampled a little girl underfoot. Another rather neglected (if not exactly unremarked) aspect of Stevenson's *oeuvre* is his predilection for the *Märchen* or fairy tale. Stevenson's plans to publish a collection of *Märchen* were undermined by a kind of collusion (if not conspiracy) between his literary agent (Sidney Colvin), his publisher (Cassell) and his wife Fanny. Chapter Four, "The Incomplete Fairy Tales of Robert Louis Stevenson", shows how Stevenson's projected book of *Märchen* was derailed, and how instead of the book Stevenson wanted, a few fairy-tale-like (or *märchenhaft*) pieces appeared in a context that Stevenson had explicitly rejected. This chapter also discusses how Stevenson's approach in several of these *märchenhaft* tales relates to the genre of fantasy, as defined by Tzvetan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson, and Maria Nikolajeva.

Neither C.S. Lewis nor Tolkien had much time for Stevenson—Tolkien said in "On Fairy-Stories" that *Treasure Island* "left me cool" (*MCOE* 134). It would perhaps have surprised them to read Stevenson's homage to William Morris both in his story "The Waif Woman" and also in an unpublished letter to Morris¹⁰, both discussed in Chapter Four below. Both Tolkien and Lewis were heavily influenced by Morris, and especially by his love of Northern myth. As an alternative to *Treasure Island* (and indeed the *Alice* books), the young Tolkien found that "the land of Merlin and Arthur was better than these, and best of all the nameless North of Sigurd and the Völsungs, and the prince of dragons." (*MCOE* 134-5) Tolkien continues:

The dragon had the trade-mark *Of Faërie* written plain upon him. In whatever world he had his being it was an Other-world. Fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie. (*MCOE* 135)

It was only gradually that Tolkien and Lewis realized that they shared this secret addiction to Norse mythology and fantasy writing. This realization of their common addiction to Faërie and Nordic mythology was an important factor in the founding of "The Inklings". I have devoted a substantial chapter to Tolkien in my *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth*, but he figures in a more peripheral way in the present book. Lewis by contrast dominates the present book, appearing in the last five chapters either as the main subject, or alongside MacDonald and Pullman.

¹⁰ Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew (eds), *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* (in 8 volumes) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994-5), vol. 7, p. 236. See also vol. 3, p. 253.

Lewis's strategies for dealing with the impact of his mother's death form the heart of Chapter Five, "Death, Myth and Reality in C.S. Lewis". This paper, first given at a Religious Studies conference on the theme of "Death", discusses not only the ways in which the heartbroken boy from Belfast haunts the pages of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but also the ways in which that original traumatic bereavement was uncannily repeated in Lewis's loss, again to cancer, of his wife Joy, also a mother of two sons. *A Grief Observed* was written, Lewis says, as "a defence against total collapse".¹¹ The graphic realism of Lewis's writing in this thinly-disguised confessional work is striking; however Lewis still seems ready to invoke myth and fantasy literature (if one can thus designate Dante's *Commedia*), not so much as a form of escape but rather as a way of somehow attempting to deal with his grief. The readiness to recognize that fantasy (or perhaps more technically "phantasy") can be a strategy for coming to terms with reality through a process of mourning, rather than merely being a form of delusional escapism, could be said to characterize the psychoanalytical work of the so-called "British" school of psychoanalysis, especially the work of Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott. I introduce some psychoanalytical ideas into this chapter, including brief references to Julia Kristeva, who, as I argue in the first chapter of the book, can play an important role in linking the insights of the British school of psychoanalysis with those of the so-called "French Freud", at least in a general sense, if not in the more peculiar senses the Lacanian "école freudienne".

Kristeva, together with Klein and Winnicott, also figures in Chapter Seven, "The Lion, The Witch and the Atlantean Box: Psychoanalysis and Narnia Revisited". This paper was given at the C.S. Lewis Centenary Conference at Queen's University, Belfast, in the same year (1998) that my book on Lewis appeared.¹² Both book and conference paper explore the intriguing (and psychoanalytically suggestive) provenance of Uncle Andrew's magic rings, made out of dust (intimations of Pullman's "Dust"?) contained in a box from Atlantis, and inherited from Mrs Lefay, Uncle Andrew's fairy godmother. The reluctance of Digory's mother to talk about this witch-like relative¹³ foreshadows the reticence of Petunia Dursley on the subject of her own wizarding family connections. One of the older Lewis scholars present at the Belfast Centenary conference

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* [published under the pseudonym N.W. Clerk 1961; reprinted under Lewis's name in 1964] (London: Faber, 1966), p.47.

¹² William Gray, *C.S. Lewis* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998).

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (Harmondsworth: Puffin, 1963), p.22.

(sadly I can no longer recall which) mentioned over dinner a phrase—“the pathological argument”—which he said he had invented as a name for Lewis’s version of the ontological argument. According to Lewis, if you follow desire (symbolized by the Greek god “Pothos”) wherever it leads, you will ultimately find God. Lewis himself explained what he called “the dialectic of Desire” in his Preface to *The Pilgrim’s Regress*: “The dialectic of Desire, faithfully followed, would retrieve all mistakes, head you off from all false paths, and force you not to propound, but to live through, a sort of ontological proof.”¹⁴ This theme, which is pursued in Lewis’s first published prose work, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, reappears in one of the last things he wrote, the posthumously published *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, when he describes the “secret doctrine that pleasures are shafts of the glory as it strikes our sensibility”.¹⁵ A proper response to such pleasures or “tiny theophanies” is, according to Lewis, to say: “What must be the quality of that Being whose far-off and momentary coruscations are like this!” For, he continues, “[o]ne’s mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun.”¹⁶ This passage is cited in Chapter Six below, “Spirituality and the Pleasure of the Text: C.S. Lewis and the Act of Reading”, which explores how this “secret doctrine” of pleasure can be related to the experience of reading, and contrasted with the pretensions of “spirituality” satirized by Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* and *Perelandra*.

I have argued elsewhere that, in his strong criticisms of C.S. Lewis, Philip Pullman may underestimate the *dialectical* nature of Lewis’s Platonism.¹⁷ It is the controversial relationship between Lewis and Pullman that dominates the final two chapters below. That relationship is explored in Chapter Eight, “Pullman, Lewis, MacDonald and the anxiety of influence”, a version of which was originally given at the George MacDonald Centenary conference at the University of Worcester in 2005. This essay seeks to show how a series of strategic (if, according to Bloom, unconscious) *misreadings* constitutes Pullman’s literary filiation from Lewis, and Lewis’s from George MacDonald. That trio of fantasy writers also forms the basis of Chapter Nine, “Witches’ Time in Philip Pullman, C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald”. This chapter is a version of a paper

¹⁴ Preface to the Third Edition of *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, in C.S. Lewis, *Selected Books* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p.9.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* [1964] (London: Collins Fount, 1977), p.90. See also *Selected Books*, p. 280.

¹⁶ *Letters to Malcolm*, pp. 91-2. See also *Selected Books*, p. 281.

¹⁷ William Gray, *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffmann*; and “Pullman, Lewis, MacDonald and the anxiety of influence”, Chapter Eight below.

given at the 2006 IBBY/NCRCL conference at Roehampton University on the theme of “Time Everlasting: Representations of Past, Present and Future in Children’s Literature”. It starts with an exploration of the ways Pullman uses the extreme longevity of the witches in Lyra’s world to introduce younger readers to questions of time, and thus inevitably of death. These are essentially philosophical issues, and I argue that one of the great contributions of these (and other) writers of children’s fantasy literature is to trust in the capacity of younger readers to engage with big philosophical questions (something professional philosophers seem increasingly reluctant to do). Lewis records being reminded by Owen Barfield that philosophy wasn’t merely a “*subject*” for Plato.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, this chapter ends with reference to Plato, to whose ideas the works of MacDonald, Lewis and Pullman are, I suggest, ultimately a series of footnotes, even if Pullman’s footnotes are distinctly critical—to which I would respond, and so the Platonic dialogue continues ...

In reprinting these essays I have resisted the temptation to rewrite them. The odd tweak was irresistible, but for the most part I have let them stand, warts and all.¹⁹ At some points there are inevitable overlaps, as when I return to a key theme or passage (for example the “temptation scene” in *The Magician’s Nephew*) in a different context and perhaps from a slightly different angle.²⁰ I may also seem to offer divergent interpretations, for example, in discussing the conclusion of Lewis’s *The Last Battle*. While it may well be that I have changed my mind about a particular issue, any inconsistency may perhaps be excused as a merely venial sin on the grounds of mitigating circumstances. The highly charged rhetoric which permeates the debates surrounding Philip Pullman’s vilification of Lewis makes it hard to resist being drawn into the Bloomian Oedipal struggle between Lewis and Pullman: if Pullman misreads Lewis (just as, I argue in Chapter Eight, Lewis misread MacDonald), the unconscious temptation to misread Pullman and reread Lewis is powerful. Thus in Chapter Five, “Death, Myth and Reality in C.S. Lewis”, which is based on a paper given in 1997 before I was acquainted with Pullman’s work, I criticized Lewis’s

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The shape of my early life* [1955] (London: Collins Fontana, 1959), p. 180.

¹⁹ In her article “‘I am spinning this for you, my child’: Voice and Identity Formation in George MacDonald’s Princess Books”, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, September 2004 (Vol. 28, No. 3), Ruth Y. Jenkins offered constructive criticism of my article “George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva and the Black Sun”.

²⁰ There is also overlapping or repetition in references, due to the fact that, since this is a collection of essays, it cannot be assumed that the essays will be read in the sequence in which they are published here.

apparent trivialization of the children's deaths in *The Last Battle*. But in my 2006 paper "Witches' Time in Philip Pullman, C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald", I found myself almost defending Lewis against Pullman's charge that: "For the sake of taking them off to a perpetual school holiday or something, he kills them all in a train crash. I think that's ghastly. It's a horrible message."²¹ I don't think there is necessarily a contradiction between on the one hand querying Lewis's trivializing description of a fatal rail crash including the miraculous disappearance of a sore knee caused by "a hack at rigger", and on the other hand querying Pullman's accusation that the whole ending of *The Last Battle* (indeed of the entire *Chronicles of Narnia*) is "ghastly" and "horrible". Nor do I believe that it is mere equivocation to point out that the first accusation (mine) is directed towards a kind of patronizing authorial cackhandedness on Lewis's part, with the loss of an appropriate tone and register, while the second accusation (Pullman's) is one of moral outrage at Lewis's metaphysics. Disagreeing in some respects with Pullman's reading of Lewis's metaphysics is presumably not incompatible with finding fault with Lewis's narrative competence in his writing for children.

²¹ Susan Roberts's interview with Philip Pullman for Christian Aid, November 2002 [http://www.surefish.co.uk/culture/features/pullman_interview.htm] quoted in Hugh Rayment-Pickard, *The Devil's Account: Philip Pullman and Christianity* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2004), p.45.

CHAPTER ONE

GEORGE MACDONALD, JULIA KRISTEVA AND THE BLACK SUN

Most of the main critical readings of George MacDonald's *Phantastes* have recognized that the text is highly susceptible of a Freudian or (more frequently) a Jungian interpretation. Robert Lee Wolff's ground-breaking book *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* is, if perhaps not actually a "vulgar" Freudian reading, then certainly an example of what Norman Holland has called "first phase" psychoanalytic criticism, intent on disinterring the latent content (the game of "hunt the phallic symbol" popular in first year seminars in university "theory" courses).¹ But however unsatisfactory Wolff's psychoanalytic reading of *Phantastes* may have been, it does not seem necessary on that account to turn instead (as Edmund Cusick has argued) to Jungian psychology.² Unlike some other commentators (for example Richard Reis, Colin Manlove and William Raeper) who seem to take it for granted that Carl Jung's approach and terminology have some kind of natural resonance with MacDonald's writing,³ Cusick does actually *argue* that we need to choose between the Freudian and Jungian approaches, and that the latter is more helpful. Cusick concedes that his opposition between Sigmund Freud

¹ Robert Lee Wolff, *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1961); Norman N. Holland, "Literary Interpretation and Three Phases of Psychoanalysis," *Critl* 3, 2 (Winter 1976) and reprinted in Alan Roland (ed.), *Psychoanalysis, Creativity and Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 233–47.

² Edmund Cusick, "George MacDonald and Jung" in William Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Thread: Essays on George MacDonald*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), pp. 56–86, 57–9.

³ Richard Reis, *George MacDonald* (New York: Twayne Books, 1972); C. N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Tring: Lion, 1987). A decade after the first appearance of this piece, I'd be less inclined to disagree with them. Doubtless a Jungian would have told me so.

and Jung is very crude, but somehow he seems to want to blame this on Wolff.⁴ However, the fact that in 1961 Wolff was interested in the latent content of MacDonald's work hardly seems to justify Cusick in suggesting thirty years later that Freudian approaches *as such* are "biological, deterministic and negative"⁵ and seemingly only interested in latent content, thus leaving the Jungian approach as the only viable option.

On the contrary, there have of course been major developments in Freudian approaches since the first phase id-psychology and its rather narrow concern with latent content. The term "Freudian approaches" should surely include the work not only of Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, and Erik Erikson, but also of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva (not to mention the later writings of Freud himself). Indeed *pace* Cusick and the Jungians, it seems to me that the best reading of MacDonald in terms of depth psychology is still that sketched out by David Holbrook in his 1983 introduction to *Phantastes*, a reading which is certainly Freudian, though it is heavily influenced by the British "object relations" school, and especially by Winnicott.⁶ Holbrook's interpretation focuses on the themes of death, melancholy, and the longing for a lost maternal love, and in particular reads *Phantastes* as a quest for what was lost in a premature and traumatic weaning. Even apart from the remarkable biographical evidence we happen to have to support such a reading,⁷ it is difficult to resist Holbrook's interpretation of the novel as a quest for the beginnings of being or identity in what Erik Erikson called "the primary maternal matrix"—or we might call, following Kristeva, the "semiotic *chora*", a term for the original "womb" or "receptacle" that Kristeva derives from Plato's *Timaeus*.⁸ Rather than rehearse Holbrook's argument here, I propose to take further his psychoanalytical reading of *Phantastes*

⁴ Cusick, "George MacDonald and Jung", p. 58.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ David Holbrook, Introduction to *Phantastes*, by George MacDonald (London: Everyman Paperback, 1983) pp. vi–xxv. Holbrook subsequently published *A Study of George Macdonald and the Image of Woman* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2000).

⁷ In a secret drawer in MacDonald's desk were found, after his death, a lock of his mother's hair and a letter by her containing the following reference to his premature weaning: "I cannot help in my heart being very much grieved for him yet, for he has not forgot it . . . he cryed desperate for a while in the first night, but he has cryed very little since and I hope the worst is over now." See Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1924), p. 32.

⁸ On the "semiotic" and the "*chora*" see Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (trans. Margaret Waller) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); extracts in *The Kristeva Reader* (ed Toril Moi) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

by using some themes from the writings of Kristeva. Although Kristeva is influenced by Lacan, she also departs from him in certain respects, and links back in some interesting ways precisely to those “object relations” theorists (Klein, W.R.D. Fairbairn and Winnicott) who influenced Holbrook. The texts by Kristeva which seem to link most interestingly with *Phantastes* are: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*; *Tales of Love*; and, above all, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*.

The opening of *Phantastes* could be described in several respects as liminal, that is, having to do with the borderline. The hero, whose name Anodos means “pathless” or also perhaps “the way up” or “the way back,” has just reached the age of twenty-one, and has been invested with various legal rights, including access to his late father’s papers contained in an old desk or “secretary”. However, this so-to-speak transition into the “symbolic order” is far from straightforward; there is something uncanny in these opening pages, a sense of anxiety. Anodos is driven by a curiosity about his father’s personal history to break into a secret compartment in the secretary where he finds some withered rose leaves, a small packet of papers, and a “tiny woman-form” who proceeds to berate men, who are, she says, only convinced by “mere repetition”. “But I am not going to argue with you” she says “but to grant you a wish.”⁹ The wish, however, is never put into words, but is rather conveyed by a sigh—the sigh with which Anodos had on the previous evening answered his sister’s question about Fairyland, after she had read him a fairy-tale. Fairyland, in MacDonald’s writing, has to do with the pre-linguistic, or with Kristeva’s “semiotic”¹⁰, and is very much the realm of “the mothers”. As Anodos’s fairy grandmother points out, while he may know something about his male ancestors, he knows very little about his great-grandmothers on either side. When Anodos again tries to argue with her, she replies: “Never mind what I seem to think. You shall find the way into Fairy Land tomorrow. Now look into my eyes.” (*Ph* 5) Eagerly Anodos does so: “They filled me with an unknown longing. I remembered somehow that my mother died when I was a baby. I looked deeper and deeper, till they spread around me like seas, and I sank in their waters. I forgot all the rest.” (*Ph* 5) Anodos has a vision of a sea “sweeping into bays and round capes and islands, away, away, I know not whither” (*Ph* 5). But this suggestion of *jouissance*, of an ecstatic loss of self in the unlimited, in the “oceanic feeling,” is a mirage: “Alas! it was no sea, but a low bog burnished by the moon.” (*Ph*

⁹ George MacDonald, *Phantastes: A Faërie Romance for Men and Women* [1858] (London: Dent Everyman, 1915), p. 4. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited as *Ph* parenthetically in the text

¹⁰ See footnote 8 above.

6)¹¹ The “imaginary” is a kind of fiction, and the “real” not so easily encountered.

Anodos’s journey begins when his room quite literally dissolves into Fairyland. The figures in his carpet, which he had himself designed in imitation of grass and daisies, “bent and swayed with every motion of the changeful current, as if they were about to dissolve with it, and forsaking their fixed form, become fluent as the waters” (*Ph* 7). The realm of representation, of which Anodos had thought himself in control, what we might call with Kristeva (following Lacan) the realm of the “symbolic”, begins to slip and slide into what Kristeva says in *Tales of Love* is “the very space of metaphorical shifting”.¹² Here we move into a realm that is, as we shall see, not able to be represented, but only evoked in sound, rhythm, colour, music, above all poetry; the realm of the semiotic, “the maternal vessel,” where “metaphor ... as if to blur all reference ... ends up as synesthesia”.¹³

Anodos’s first encounter in Fairyland is with a rather strange country maiden who informs him of what to expect from the various trees that turn out to be some of the major characters in *Phantastes*. The main villains are the Ash who is an ogre and the Alder who “will smother you with her web of hair, if you let her near you at night” (*Ph* 10). In this and the following chapter, the threatening presence of the Ash gradually intensifies, culminating in a genuinely chilling account of a chase through the woods when the Ash almost catches up with Anodos. Characteristic of the Ash are his admittedly rather phallic fingers—described as “bulbous,” with “knotty joints and protuberances”—which contribute to Holbrook’s interpretation of the Ash in oedipal terms.¹⁴ However such a reading does not altogether fit what is most striking and uncanny in the appearance of the Ash; he has no centre: “I saw the strangest figure; vague, shadowy, almost transparent, in the central parts, and gradually deepening in substance towards the outside, until it ended in extremities capable of casting such a shadow as fell from the hand, through the awful fingers of which I now saw the moon.” (*Ph* 30–1) MacDonald was fond of playing around with the categories of outside/inside; here he seems to be saying that the Ash has no inside or, as it is put later, “has a hole in his heart that nobody knows of but one or two; and he is always trying to fill it up, but he cannot. That must be what he wanted you for.” (*Ph* 35) Rather than

¹¹ Some editions of *Phantastes* read “a low fog burnished by the moon”.

¹² Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, (trans. Leon S. Roudiez) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 38.

¹³ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, pp. 277–8.

¹⁴ David Holbrook, Introduction to *Phantastes*, p. xix.

identifying the Ash as an avenging oedipal father-figure, one might take literally the indication that he is not yet a man, or in psychoanalytical terms, not yet an “object”. The Ash seems more like Kristeva’s “abject”, that which is not yet clearly one thing or another, that which has not yet separated out into an object or a subject, and whose threat resides precisely in this borderline, undecided status in which the inside is not clearly demarcated from the outside. The abject can also pose in a primitive way threats that only crystallize more sharply at the oedipal stage. Thus the threatening Ash may *anticipate* the avenging oedipal father-figure, but the anxiety and terror here is perhaps more to do with the mother, or more precisely with the mother-infant dyad (since the mother at this stage has not yet become a separate object). Since the inside is still all mixed up with the outside (or the processes of projection and introjection are in continual flux), the terrifying greed and aggression are as much *in the infant* at the breast as in the mother. As MacDonald writes: “[the eyes] seemed lighted up with an infinite greed. A gnawing voracity which devoured the devourer, seemed to be the indwelling and propelling power of the whole ghostly apparition. I lay for a few moments simply imbruted with terror.” (*Ph* 31–2) This is surely in psychoanalytical terms a classic case of the “biter bit”.

Anodos is saved from the Ash by the entrance of the Beech. Again this has been read as the appearance of the oedipal mother; even the fact that the beech-woman is “rather above the human size” is interpreted as indicating the perspective of a child towards his mother (*Ph* 33).¹⁵ But again we might take literally the statement that the Beech is not yet a woman (*Ph* 34). The Beech seems to embody the holding, the giving, the lulling, the sweetly sensual aspects of the “maternal vessel”, the *chora*. What pervades this section is her “low, musical, murmuring voice,” which is “like a solution of all musical sounds,” and blends in with the sound of the wind in the leaves (*Ph* 34). Then the Beech sings “a strange, sweet song” which, Anodos says, “I could not understand, but which left in me a feeling like this—”: a short poem follows, after which Anodos says he cannot put any more of it into words (*Ph* 36). This is a move typical of MacDonald in which (partly perhaps out of an insecurity about his own poetic talent) he claims to offer an inferior version of an original which in its quality, and indeed in its sometimes unknown language, is very different from what the reader is actually given. His own poetry is presented as a pale imitation of some transcendent “song without words”. This idea is related to another favorite MacDonald device of running

¹⁵ David Holbrook, Introduction to *Phantastes*, p. xvii.

natural sounds and rhythms in and out of language. The music of the beech-tree reappears in the final page of the novel: "I began to listen to the sounds of the leaves overhead. At first, they made sweet inarticulate music above; but, by-and-by, the sound seemed to begin to take shape, and to be gradually moulding itself into words, till at last, I seemed able to distinguish these, half-dissolved in a little ocean of circumfluent tones." (*Ph* 237) Here again we seem on the borders of the semiotic. MacDonald's actual poetry may be unremarkable; what is remarkable is the extent to which he privileges the poetic, in a gesture that certainly harks back to Novalis, and also seems to hint forward to Kristeva.

After some further wandering through the woods in which, in the best German Romantic tradition, Anodos "began to feel in some degree what the birds meant in their songs, though [he] could not express it in words, anymore than you can some landscapes" (*Ph* 39), he stumbles into a small cave, in a manner reminiscent of the opening dream sequence of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. As in the latter, the cave contains a well or basin with obviously magical properties; and like Heinrich's cave, Anodos's "antenatal tomb" (*Ph* 44) contains an image of his ideal woman "more near the face that had been born with me in my soul, than anything I had seen before in nature or art" (*Ph* 43). But Anodos's image of the ideal woman takes the form not of nature (as in Heinrich's "blue flower") but of art; it is a reclining marble statue, locked in a block of alabaster. After failing to penetrate his ideal woman with his knife, Anodos resorts to the magical power of song to release her. Again this sequence has been read in fairly vulgar Freudian terms, and sometimes it is obviously true that a knife is not just a knife. But it is again interesting to take a step back from the oedipal scenario where the marble woman is the inaccessible, frigid love object, to the pre-oedipal dyad where the frozen woman represents not only the withheld maternal body (or breast) but also the frozen "false self" of the baby. It is only the power of the semiotic that can break open the castrating hold of the oedipal/symbolic, as well as counteracting the more primitive denial of the maternal body/breast that is also the denial of the emerging infantile self. It is not a case of playing off the pre-oedipal against the oedipal; the former is the condition of the possibility of the latter. And the revolution of poetic language needs to be perpetual, for as soon as the frozen maternal body has been released by the semiotic pulse of song, it is immediately lost again, leaving Anodos in despair by the forsaken cave.

Anodos sets off in quest of his "white lady," and almost immediately comes across the Knight, Sir Percival, about whom he had previously read in the fairy cottage, and who in his rusty armour is literally a picture of

dejection or perhaps of abjection. In his defiled armor, Percival is an outsider, “jettisoned from the symbolic system” as Kristeva puts it in *Powers of Horror*,¹⁶ and also uncannily like the disinherited Knight of Gérard de Nerval’s “El Desdichado” (“The Disinherited”) which gives Kristeva her title *Black Sun*.¹⁷ Percival’s problem is that he has been tainted by his encounter with the evil Alder-maiden. Anodos has been warned. As he continues his quest for his lost lady of the marble, he experiences an ecstatic sense of union with Mother Earth: “Earth drew me towards her bosom: I felt as if I could fall down and kiss her.” (*Ph* 50) “In the midst of this ecstasy” the idea that somewhere his lady was “waiting (might it not be?) to meet and thank her deliverer in a twilight which would veil her confusion” turns the whole night into “one dream-realm of joy” (*Ph* 51). The very thought of such a night of love leads to an involuntary semiotic outburst of song, which draws the response near to him of “a low delicious laugh ... not the laugh of one who would not be heard, but the laugh of one who has just received something long and patiently desired—a laugh that ends in a low musical moan” (*Ph* 52). Announcing herself as indeed his “white lady”, and thus “sending a thrill of speechless delight through a heart which all the love-dreams of the preceding day and evening had been tempering for this culminating hour” (*Ph* 52), the mysterious female figure invites Anodos to her grotto. There she entrances him with a tale of love: “I listened till she and I were blended with the tale; till she and I were the whole history... What followed I cannot clearly remember. The succeeding horror almost obliterated it.” (*Ph* 55)

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (trans. Leon S. Roudiez) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 65.

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, (trans. Leon S. Roudiez) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically as *BS*. The first quatrain of “El Desdichado” runs as follows:

Je suis le ténébreux, le veuf, l’inconsolé
 Le prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie;
 Ma seule étoile est morte, et mon luth constellé
 Porte le soleil noir de la mélancolie

I am saturnine, bereft, disconsolate,
 The Prince of Aquitaine whose tower has crumbled;
 My lone star is dead, and my bespangled lute
 Bears the black sun of melancholia.

(translation as in the English version of *Black Sun* by Leon S. Roudiez, p. 140).

This horror is the replacement of the damsel by “a strange horrible object” that looks like “an open coffin set on one end” (*Ph* 55). This hollow, rough representation of the human frame seems made of decaying bark, which is seamed “as if [it] had healed again from the cut of a knife” (*Ph* 55). This “thing” literally displays the back-side of the enchantress. The obvious Freudian reading of this is that it expresses a horror and disgust of the vagina both as a displaced anus and as the site of castration. However, it is also possible to read this passage in the light of Kristeva’s work on depression and melancholia, especially as this scene with the Alder-maiden marks the outset of Anodos’s depression. Kristeva writes in *Black Sun*: “The depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing. Let me posit the ‘Thing’ as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the centre of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated.” (*BS* 13) Kristeva continues in a way that uncannily echoes the movement of MacDonald’s narrative: “Of this Nerval provides a dazzling metaphor that suggests an insistence without presence, a light without representation: the Thing is an imagined sun, bright and black at the same time.” (*BS* 13) Indeed, what she writes next could almost be summary of the plot of *Phantastes*:

Ever since that archaic attachment the depressed person has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable, that perhaps only devouring might represent, or an *invocation* might point out, but no word could signify ... Knowingly disinherited of the Thing, the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats, disconsolate and aphasic, alone with the unnamed Thing. The “primary identification” with the “father in individual prehistory” would be the means, the link that might enable one to become reconciled with the loss of the Thing. Primary identification initiates a compensation for the Thing and at the same time secures the subject to another dimension, that of imaginary adherence, reminding one of the bond of faith, which is just what disintegrates in the depressed person. (*BS* 13–4)

We will have cause to refer back to this passage in our reading of MacDonald’s text. But already here it is significant that the figure who saves Anodos from the “unfathomable horror” of the Alder-maiden, and the Ash “with his Gorgon-head” who now appears, turns out to be the Knight, figuring as “the father in individual prehistory” who precedes and makes possible the subsequent oedipal father of the symbolic order (*BS* 56).

However, although saved from “unfathomable horror” by the as yet unnamed Knight, Anodos enters the depression that will haunt the

remainder of the book. The daylight has become hateful to him, “and the thought of the great, innocent, bold sunrise unendurable” (*Ph* 57). The birds are singing, but not for him. After an interlude in a farm-house which contains one of the many nurturing mothers in the book, Anodos comes to a different kind of house containing a different kind of mother: this is the house of the ogre, or as it will later be called, “the Church of Darkness.” The epigraph to this chapter is from the “Mother Night” speech of Mephistopheles in Goethe’s *Faust*: “I am a part of the part, which at first was the whole.”¹⁸ The epigraph is directly relevant to this chapter, for Anodos finds in this house a woman reading aloud from “an ancient little volume” what amounts to a kind of hymn to darkness. This could certainly be seen as an inversion of Christian Orthodoxy, and seems in part to be derived from the passage from *Faust* that provides this chapter’s epigraph. But there is another, perhaps less obvious, intertext at this point. For what the woman reads in the ancient volume bears a strong resemblance to Novalis’s *Hymns to the Night*, which MacDonald must have known in the 1850s and would later translate (in 1852 he had already published a translation of Novalis’s *Spiritual Songs*). We may go with the Goethe intertext, in which Mephistopheles, the “spirit of negation” (“*der Geist der stets verneint*”), is the unwilling servant of the greater good, and darkness ultimately assists in the triumph of light; or we may go with the Novalis intertext in which night is positively hymned as the great Mother. In neither case is darkness seen as unambiguous and absolute evil. Like the German Romantics who influenced him, and indeed like some postmodern thinkers with whom he has been compared, MacDonald resisted absolute dualisms, or binary oppositions.¹⁹ The Shadow acquired by Anodos in the Church of Darkness, after his intrusion into the forbidden cupboard, is a *necessary* Shadow; his fall here is a *felix culpa*. Kristeva, too, in her *Powers of Horror* refers to the *felix culpa* idea in the chapter entitled “*Qui tollis peccata mundi*.” She refers to Duns Scotus’s spiritual revolution, which allowed the remission of sin by bringing sin into speech in

¹⁸ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Part One*, trans. David Luke (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), lines 1349–50. Quoted in *Phantastes*, p. 67.

¹⁹ See Stephen Prickett, “Fictions and Metafictions: ‘Phantastes,’ ‘Wilhelm Meister,’ and the idea of the ‘Bildungsroman,’” in William Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Thread*, pp. 109–25; Roderick McGillis, Introduction to MacDonald’s *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *The Princess and Curdie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. vii–xxviii, xvi. On MacDonald’s resistance to binary thinking see also Roderick McGillis “*Phantastes and Lilith: Femininity and Freedom*” in *The Gold Thread*, pp. 31–55.

confession and absolution: “It is owing to speech, at any rate, that the lapse has a chance of becoming fortunate: *felix culpa* is merely a phenomenon of enunciation.”²⁰ Underlying Kristeva’s theological point is a psychoanalytical one: to acquire a subject position in language or in the symbolic order, requires a breaking loose from, and a rejection of, the object, ultimately the mother. Therefore the fault that is necessary and ultimately blessed is matricide, for matricide is the condition of the possibility of subjectivity and speech. Kristeva writes provocatively in *Black Sun*: “Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non of our individuation.” (*BS* 27–8)

But this fall, fault, rejection, and loss have to be *felt* as fall, fault, rejection, and loss, and consequently there occurs mourning, melancholia, and abjection. As Kristeva puts in *Black Sun*: “The child king becomes irredeemably sad before uttering his first words; this is because he has been irrevocably, desperately separated from the mother, a loss that causes him to try to find her again, along with other objects of love, first in the imagination, then in words.” (*BS* 6) So if *Phantastes* ends in hope, as Anodos hears the following words in, and permeated by, the semiotic music of the rustling beech leaves: “A great good is coming—is coming—is coming to thee, Anodos” (*Ph* 237), such hope is only bought at the price of *really going through* the guilt and mourning of the so-called “depressive position” of Klein, Winnicott, and Kristeva. Night may ultimately be transfigured, as in Novalis; evil may in the end turn out be, as in Goethe, merely a rather serious joke; but in the meantime the Shadow, with all its distorting and blighting effects, has to be lived with. In a passage that strikingly echoes Nerval, and anticipates Kristeva, Anodos says of his Shadow: “it began to coruscate, and shoot out on all sides a radiation of dim shadow. These rays of gloom issued from the central shadow as from a black sun, lengthening and shortening with continual change. But wherever a ray struck, that part of earth, or sea, or sky, became void and desert, and sad to my heart . . . one ray shot out beyond the rest, seeming to lengthen infinitely, until it smote the great sun on the face, which withered and darkened beneath the blow.” (*Ph* 73)

One of the baleful influences of Anodos’s “evil demon” is that it disrupts his ability to offer a connected account of his experiences (*Ph* 73). He says: “From this time until I arrived at the palace of Fairy Land, I can attempt no consecutive account of my wanderings and adventures. Everything, henceforward, existed for me in its relation to my attendant.” (*Ph* 72) This lack of a consecutive account not only follows Novalis’s

²⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 131.

description of the *Märchen*, given in the epigraph to the whole novel²¹; it is also, according to Kristeva, related to melancholia. Whether it results from “an inversion of aggressiveness” or from some other cause, “the phenomenon that might be described as a *breakdown of biological and logical sequentiality* finds its radical manifestation in melancholia” (*BS* 20). What Kristeva calls “shattered concatenation” or simply “non-concatenation” is for her a result of the failure to mourn successfully the archaic maternal pre-object, “the Thing.” She writes later in *Black Sun*: “From the analyst’s point of view, the possibility of concatenating signifiers (words or actions) appears to depend upon going through mourning for an archaic and indispensable object... Mourning for the Thing—such a possibility comes out of transposing, beyond loss and on an imaginary or symbolic level, the imprints of an interchange with the other articulated according to a certain order.” (*BS* 40)

More simply put: “If I did not agree to lose mother, I could neither imagine nor name her.” (*BS* 41) It is significant that Anodos says that his inability to give a consecutive account of his wanderings lasts until he arrives at the palace of Fairy Land (*Ph* 72). Anodos’s stay in the palace is at the centre of *Phantastes*, and central to his time there are the hours spent reading in the marvellous palace library. Reading in this library is a magical experience. Anodos finds that his identity is taken over by the text; he *becomes* the text, or conversely, the text gives him an identity. One of the stories he reads forms the central chapter of *Phantastes*. This story is a Hoffmannesque tale within a tale about Cosmo von Wehrstahl, a student in Prague, though of course as Anodos says: “while I read it, I was Cosmo, and his history was mine. Yet, all the time, I seemed to have a kind of double-consciousness, and the story a double meaning.” (*Ph* 106) Cosmo/Anodos/the reader—for as Stephen Prickett says, this *Bildungsroman* is above all about the formation of the *reader*²²—acquires a magic mirror in which he discovers in his *reflected* room a beautiful woman with whom he falls obsessively in love. The tale is about Cosmo’s quest to be united with the object of his longing desire, which he only achieves in the end at the cost of his own death, after having smashed the

²¹ “A *Märchen* is like a dream image without coherence ... In a genuine *Märchen* everything must be miraculous, mysterious and incoherent ... here begins the time of anarchy, of lawlessness, freedom ... the world of the *Märchen* is a total opposition to the world of truth and for that very reason has the total likeness to it that chaos has to the completed creation.” In MacDonald’s text the epigraph is untranslated; the translation here is mine. On the history of omissions and misprints relating to these Novalis extracts see Wolff, *The Golden Key*, pp. 42–5.

²² Prickett, op. cit., in Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Thread*, p 117.

mirror. That the centre of this *Bildungsroman* should be occupied by a tale about a magic mirror, which is explicitly compared with the imagination (*Ph* 112–3), invites reference to Lacan’s “mirror stage” and “the imaginary.” Yet more interesting from Kristeva’s point of view is the way that here the concept of identity, union with the loved object, and a death bordering on suicide come together in a kind of *jouissance*. This mutual interplay of the themes of identity, love, the maternal, and death by suicide, dominates the remainder of *Phantastes*.

After the mirror episode, in a scene that reverses the ending of Novalis’s *Märchen* “Hyacinth and Roseblossom”, Anodos finally unveils his Isis only to have her writhe from his arms and disappear, leaving him desolate. He continues his journey “with a dull endurance, varied by moments of uncontrollable sadness” and comes to a bleak shoreline, “bare and waste, and gray” (*Ph* 157; 159). The following powerful evocation of desolation and despair, which one critic thinks may be in part a response to Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” seen in manuscript form,²³ culminates in the simple statement: “I could bear it no longer.” (*Ph* 159) Anodos throws himself into the sea: “I stood one moment and gazed into the heaving abyss beneath me; then plunged headlong ... A blessing, like the kiss of a mother, seemed to alight on my soul; a calm, deeper than that which accompanies a hope deferred, bathed my spirit. I sank far into the waters, and sought not to return. I felt as if once more the great arms of the beech-tree were around me, soothing me after the miseries I had passed through, and telling me, like a little sick child, that I should be better tomorrow.” (*Ph* 160)

Saved by a little boat that miraculously appears, Anodos lies in a trance: “In dreams of unspeakable joy ... I passed through [a] wondrous twilight. I awoke with the feeling that I had been kissed and loved to my heart’s content.” (*Ph* 161–2) Kristeva’s comment in *Black Sun* seems remarkably apt at this point: “One can imagine the delights of reunion that a regressive daydream promises itself through the nuptials of suicide.” (*BS* 14) It is as if Anodos is plunging from the unbearable symbolic order back into the sweet annihilation of self in the primal chaos that Kristeva associates with suicide: “The depressive denial that destroys the meaning of the symbolic also destroys the act’s meaning, and leads the subject to commit suicide without anguish of disintegration, as a reuniting with archaic non-integration, as lethal as it is jubilatory, ‘oceanic.’” (*BS* 19)

²³ David S. Robb, *George MacDonald* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987) pp. 80–3.