

**“THEY WOULDN’T LIKE TO BE BIRDS ALWAYS. WOULD YOU, MOTHER?” : VICTORIAN POST-ROMANTIC-CHRISTIAN DISCOURSE OF CHILDHOOD SPIRITUALITY IN GEORGE MACDONALD’S *AT THE BACK OF THE NORTH WIND***

**Abstract:** The paper discusses George MacDonald’s 1871 children’s novel as a contribution to, and the product of, the specific discursive construction of children and childhood in Victorian culture, the one which relies on the archetypal figure of the child as an “opening to the divine” (Kennedy, 2006) mixed with the Christian redemptive/holy children and the post-Romantic sentimentalism towards children’s innocence. MacDonald’s novel’s Victorian roots, furthermore, are evident in the inescapable didactic function of his holy child, whose specific lessons, it will be argued, are far more appropriate for adults—thereby confirming the thesis that both “child” and “childhood” are adult constructs utilized primarily for adult needs and purposes.

**Key words:** child, childhood, spirituality, innocence, death, George MacDonald

**1. Introduction: Victorian childhoods/Victorian discourses on childhood**

The title of this paper is potentially misleading insofar as it might suggest that the discourse of childhood spirituality was the only, or even the dominant one during the Victorian age—or, for that matter, the only one in MacDonald’s novel. If we define discourse widely as “individualizable groups of statements” (Foucault, 1972: 80) which effectively constitute their own objects and are, as such, inevitably embedded in power relations, then Victorian childhoods and Victorian discourses on childhood coincide only to a certain degree. Childhood, as a numerically identifiable period of life, though the exact figures tend to fluctuate, shows significant class-, gender-, and ethnicity- dependent variations in the Victorian age. Going to work at four AM<sup>1</sup> and separate bedrooms, governesses, toy trains, and fairy wallpapers<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a description of a day in the mines by an eight-year-old girl, Sarah Gooder, in the mid-nineteenth century: “I’m a trapper in the Gauber Pit, I have to trap without a light, and I’m scared. I go at four and sometimes half-past three in the morning and come out at five and half past. I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when I’ve light, but not in the dark: I dare not sing then.” <http://www.pitt.edu/~syd/ashcom.html>, 4/15/2014

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that these markers of class, comfort and luxury (especially in comparison with the children miners) are also viewed as ‘material expressions of the dominant child-rearing ideology’ centered on the power of the adult over the child, and are, as such, far from comforting. Quite the

represent the two extremes, with a whole world of variants in between. Even if we opt for the sharper social constructionist perspective, both “child” and “childhood” as discursive constructs and “social practice” (Jenks, 2005: 2) are still not as unified as we would perhaps hope, nor as homogenizing as they will come to act in the twentieth century. Namely, building on the tradition of the Enlightenment production of new subjects (Foucault, 1976; Jenks, 2005; Kennedy, 2006), through a variety of competing discourses and practices—including but not limited to new fields of pedagogy, child-rearing, education, psychology, health, toys, children’s and adult literature, philanthropy, law and medicine, childhood and children were throughout the nineteenth century simultaneously and contradictorily being constructed as national potential, safety threat, beings/states of deficit, animal-like vulnerability, emptiness and otherworldly wisdom that can only be expressed through nonsense<sup>3</sup> etc. Marah Gubar summarizes the public and necessarily one-sided discursive nature of the Victorian engagement with children and childhood:

“Throughout this period, all kinds of debates were taking place about the definition of childhood and the child’s proper role within the family and society at large. Were children full of original sin or original innocence? How young was too young for sexual intercourse? When did childhood end and adulthood begin—or was there a state in between that needed to be identified and studied? Did children have any legal rights at all, or were they simply the property of their fathers? Should poor children be inured to labor as soon as they were old enough to work, or should the state intervene to ensure that they received some sort of education? What sort of education should they get? Far from being settled, these were live questions right up until (and past) the end of the nineteenth century” (Gubar, 2009: 152).

The live questions are for the greater part concerned with the practical aspects of the class-and-gender-specific management of actual children, both in family and society at large, but the images of child and childhood they simultaneously fed and relied on—including but not limited to the ones from both adult and children’s literature—were equally inconsistent. Ranging from beastly to angelic, and depending on the authors’ ideological and class affiliations, the discursive constructions of child and childhood promoted either scientific indifference, strict discipline or sentimental

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opposite, Joseph Zornado argues, they are anxiety-inducing: ‘the child’s nursery, a safe distance from the adult world; the baby’s bottle, a safe distance from the mother’s breast; the rubber nipple, another material substitute for the mother’s breast; the bassinet; the crib; the nanny; and so on □ all of which came to be understood as the child-rearing rule justified by the ideological belief that these practices were the hallmarks of a civilized race. All of these items share a common theme, they allow the mother to physically detach from the child long before the child seeks separation from her. The ensuing anxiety and emotional desperation of the child are then transformed by Victorian “black pedagogies” that require the unquestioned obedience of the child. The Victorian adult believed this to be necessary, for the child’s “nature” made it obvious. Yet the child’s “nature” was nothing more than the appropriate response to the nurturing she received, or failed to receive’ (Zornado, 2001: 104).

<sup>3</sup> Though this nonsense was also taken as an early sign of ‘insanity’. In fact, thanks to the influence of James Crichton-Browne, the Victorian age is famous for nearly obsessive surveillance of very young children for symptoms of mental illness (Shuttleworth, 2010: 21 □ 28).

adoration as responses to both 'the child' and actual children. The images tended to be distributed along class lines: as opposed to middle-class little angels, poor children were more often than not objectified, dehumanized, and Orientalized as proper objects of the medico-juridical gaze, as 'street Arabs' and mute beasts to be either pitied or shunned, or both. Thus, to give just a few examples, William Acton, quite unmoved by "the extreme youth of the junior portion of the 'streetwalkers'" sees in these children merely "a remarkable feature of London prostitution" and animalistic nature, 'promiscuous herding', of the lower classes.

Mary Carpenter, in *Juvenile Delinquents: Their Condition and Treatment* (1853), manages to be both more compassionate and cautious towards the same demographic group, effectively constructing it as menace to society: "Yet these are called, perhaps are, delinquents; not only *perishing* from lack of knowledge, from lack of parental care, of all that should surround childhood, but they are positively *dangerous*" (italics in the original text, qtd.in Flegel, 2009: 54). For George MacDonald, on the contrary, the poor child is the model of true—i.e. intuitive—religious belief. Explored at length in *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) this construct is to be found in his *Unspoken Sermons* (1867) as well: "The wise and prudent must make a system and arrange things to his mind before he can say, *I believe*. The child sees, believes, obeys □ and knows he must be perfect as his Father in heaven is perfect" (367). As opposed to this faith, F. P. Cobbe, in her *Intuitive Morals* (1857) argues that, "the simple credence of the child, though so often lauded and coveted, is useless, or at least hazardous, for the man" (qtd. in Kincaid, 1992: 74). Dickens, however, exploits "the simple credence of the child" especially in sentimental depictions of children's death. Out of the many possible illustrations, a death scene from *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) will suffice: "...golden hair, like her own [Lucie Manette's], lay in a halo on a pillow round the worn face of a little boy, and he said, with a radiant smile, 'Dear papa and mamma, I am very sorry to leave you both, and to leave my pretty sister; but I am called, and I must go!'" (Dickens, 1993: 179). Angelic child's death is a happy one as the child preserves his purity in being called back to "[t]he bosom of his Father and his God" —Dickens is neither the first, nor isolated in this particular discourse.

## 2. Childhood spirituality: history and uses

On the subject of childhood spirituality, there are two points worth making: one, that it appears real enough<sup>4</sup>, and two, that here we are not interested in the phenomenon

<sup>4</sup> Drawing on the disciplines of psychology, religion, education, philosophy, nursing and politics, Anna Giesenberg defines spirituality as "an innate ability to show awareness or consciousness of the surrounding world shown through wonder, a sense of compassion, and love towards this world and everything in it, and for some people a relationship with a transcendent being, who can also be immanent in the individual". Her research, conducted with children aged 4-7, led her to conclude that "young children 'live' in their spirituality" and differ from adults in one aspect – "they do not express a relationship with a transcendent being". eprints.qut.edu.au/16519/1/Anna\_Giesenberg\_Thesis.pdf; 9/1/2014

per se. The imperative in this part is rather to outline the history of the uses of this particular discourse, in order to analyze more meaningfully its culturally specific variant in MacDonald's Victorian novel. Like all of the abovementioned discourses on childhood, the notion of childhood spirituality too "embod[ies] power relations" (Hugh Cunningham qtd. in Jenks, 2005: 5): attributing spirituality – openness to the divine rather than human – to the child, while seemingly empowering, represents a discourse of 'othering', and socially marginalizing, the young person. As such, this discourse is closely connected not only with the divine but also with death as the ultimate realm of other, illustrated in MacDonald's novel and the accounts of the deaths of the sixteenth and seventeenth century "child paragons", (see Aries, 1962: 124–125). Yet the power relations between the producers and the objects of discourse, including the one on the spiritual child, are always played out in the specific social setting and therefore take specific shapes to fit culturally-specific purposes. Thus in the Victorian age, the adoration of the child's special spirituality, inextricable from innocence and physical virginity, also known as the Victorian 'cult of the child', was utilized for a whole range of activities: from defining adulthood as experience opposed to innocence, to validating some adults' viewing/erotic pleasure<sup>5</sup> to having the children redeem, through death, the morally and spiritually fallen adult world—the fall felt, one could argue, particularly sharply in the anxious Victorian modernity. It is this fall that MacDonald's *Diamond* is set to rectify. After all, in the context of the profound loss of faith, in order to believe in heavenly father, nothing less, and nothing more impossible, is required than "the simple credence of the child".

Yet the redemptive child as a discursive construct, though particularly elaborated upon and utilized in the context of the Victorian crisis of faith, is much older, dating back to the holy child of Greek mythic lore, who was represented as the possessor of divine knowledge that inevitably eludes rational adults. This construct found its social expression in the role children played during Greek festivals, especially the Eleusinian Mysteries where a child was chosen to serve as a mediator between the world of polis and the world of gods (Kennedy, 2006: 9). Also, in ancient Roman, Jewish and Indian traditions, the child's supposed closeness with the world of spirits

<sup>5</sup> The phrase itself ('the cult of the child') was coined in the text that serves to validate the viewing pleasure of the adult (male) – "Ernest Dowson, author of 'The Cult of the Child' (1889), (...) repeatedly celebrated the child's stainless purity in both that essay and his poetry. Yet the actual content of the essay and Dowson's behavior toward real children vividly attest to his fascination with precocious competence. Although 'The Cult of the Child' is full of Romantic effusions about the child's natural artlessness, it is nevertheless a spirited defense of the right of very young children to work as professional stage performers □ a salvo *against* the campaign being waged by Dickens, Lord Shaftesbury, and others who opposed child labor" (Marah, 2009: 153). Thomas Edward Jordan, uneasily notices, but does not elaborate upon, a sexual element in what he terms "An anomaly of the Victorian period" – "the emergence of the cult of the little girl. Our ancestors developed an apparently sexless valuation of girls in an ideal form. In this value complex, adult males fantasized the clear skins and smooth limbs of preadolescent girls" (Jordan, 1987: 202). It has to be emphasized that the adult male fantasy and the discourse of the value of girls went hand in hand with institutions and practices such as law and marriage: throughout the nineteenth century, twelve remained the legal age of consent (raised to thirteen in 1875), and figures such as John Ruskin, Ernest Dowson, Lewis Carroll all courted and/or married very young girls.

was marked/enacted by numerous rituals, for instance, Indian fathers breathing on the newborn three times while invoking the holy Vedas (see Stearns, 2006: 29) and objects such as *bullā*: a necklace put on the eight-day-old infant, to ward off evil spirits, taken off only when the child is fifteen, and by Roman standards, an adult (Stearns, 2006: 27). Yet the darker side of the child's supposed openness to the spirits and god(s) is present as well: though long dismissed as "Greek and Roman black propaganda", it has recently been confirmed that Carthaginians did sacrifice their own children—along with animals—to gods.<sup>6</sup> Phoenician civilization is also known for sacrificing children (Stearns, 2006: 19), and the phenomenon extends to Latin America, India and Africa as well.<sup>7</sup> Quite logically, the discursive-ritualistic attribution of divine otherness and inhuman spirituality to both 'the child' and children came at the price of their human status, evidenced in their low social position, nonexistent legal protection and the contempt uttered by the influential voices of Plato, Aristotle and Cicero, among others (Kennedy, 2006; Stearns, 2006; Bunge, 2001).

But it is Christian – Christ's—discursive construction of childhood as an opening to the spiritual and divine that merits special attention, as it is revised and redefined by the English Romantics and George MacDonald. Building upon Greco-Roman philosophy<sup>8</sup>, Christianity, as David Kennedy rightly argues, preserves and continues the earlier ambiguous representation of the child – in the Proverbs one finds an explicit call for violence against flesh and blood children in order to enforce and maintain the cultural ideal of rationality: "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him" (Proverbs, 22: 15 ESV). The child is elsewhere linked, Plato-like, with rational incapacity and incapacity to do evil and is upheld, partly, as the positive model for adults to imitate: "Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature" (1 Corinthians, 14: 20 ESV). "(...) I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil" (Romans, 16: 19 NIV). However, in one of Paul's epistles, adults are advised to "no longer be children, tossed about by every wind of doctrine", and to "grow up to the mature man" (qtd.in Kennedy, 2006: 10) – the advice which stresses the deficiency and inferiority of childhood as opposed to the cultural imperative of adult rational subjectivity. Judith M. Gundry-Volf notes that it was the selective interpretation of the Epistles' discourse on children that had far-reaching consequences for the adult-child power relations in the Western world:

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/jan/21/carthaginians-sacrificed-own-children-study>, 9/1/2014

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/aug/04/why-incas-performed-human-sacrifice>, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/06/uganda-child-sacrifice-ritual-murder>, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/mar/05/india.theobserver>, 9/7/2014

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, the controversial historian of childhood Lloyd deMause sees Christianity as building not so much on Greco-Roman philosophy as on their cultural practices – child sexual abuse in particular: "Since boys in antiquity shared the experience of being buggered, Christianity constructed its central myth of the Father sending his son down to be penetrated by a soldier's lance in order to restage the common experience of fathers giving their boys to a neighbor to be sexually penetrated". [http://www.psychohistory.com/htm/05\\_history.html](http://www.psychohistory.com/htm/05_history.html), 9/3/2014



“(…) it appears that the Epistles’ teaching on children as subordinate to parents and on parents’ responsibility towards children, especially for their Christian formation, has played a dominant role in shaping Christian thought on children, though this teaching has sometimes been understood in a limited way. (...) children’s’ obedience to parents has received far more emphasis than parents’ responsibility to show Christ-like gentleness toward their children” (Bunge, 2001: 59).<sup>9</sup>

What has received even less attention, on the other hand, is the radicalism of Jesus’ discursive construction of children’s spirituality. Biblical Jesus, too, does not question the child’s otherness, but he explicitly interprets it—for the first time in the history of human thought—as a spiritual advantage over adults in general and “the wise and learned” in particular: “I praise you father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to infants” (qtd.in Kennedy, 2006: 10). In the Gospels, moreover, not only does Jesus associate with actual children, expressing anger at his disciples for not allowing “the little ones” to come to him, but he also elevates the quality of childishness to the condition for entering the kingdom of heaven: “And he said, ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven... See that you do not look down on one of these little ones...’” (Matthew, 18: 2–10). This is not only an act of identifying with, and valuing, the powerless, the downtrodden and the socially marginal(ized) —it is turning the social organization upside down. The implications of Jesus’ teaching on children and childhood are nothing short of revolutionary as

“[c]hildren are not only subordinate but sharers with adults in the life of faith; they are not to be formed but to be imitated; they are not only ignorant but capable of receiving spiritual insight; they are not ‘just’ children but representatives of Christ. (...) Jesus did not just teach how to make an adult world kinder and more just for children; he taught the arrival of the social world in part defined and organized around children” (Bunge, 2001: 60).

This most positive, and certainly the most radical, version of the discourse of childhood spirituality is succinctly expressed in as a series of Paul’s imperatives directed at Timothy: “And don’t let anyone put you down because you’re young. Teach believers with your life: by word, by demeanour, by love, by faith, by integrity (...) Cultivate these things. Immerse yourself in them” (1 Timothy, 4: 12,15 The Message). And it is this construct of the child/young person—full of potential for effortless spiritual understanding, a receptacle of the divine, serving as a teacher to

<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Christianity did make actual children’s lives better: due to the recognition of (baptismal) innocence of children, infanticide (through ‘exposure’ and otherwise) was criminalized. As Stearns puts it, “One of Christianity’s early results as it gained ground in the later Roman Empire, for example, was to generate new edicts outlawing infanticide. Thus a Christian Emperor in 374 CE had decreed, ‘If anyone, man or woman, should commit the sin of killing an infant, that crime should be punishable by death’. Laws to protect children proliferated, including efforts to ban the sale of children” (Stearns, 2006: 35). O. M. Bakke has devoted a whole study to the influence Christian theology exerted in recognizing the personhood of children. The title is sufficiently clear: *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Fortress Press, 2005).

the ‘fallen adult’ and turning the usual educational, not necessarily social, hierarchy upside down—that is revisited first by William Wordsworth, and then by George MacDonald—not incidentally, for, as Anita Moss insists, MacDonald “drew heavily upon Wordsworth’ for ideas on childhood” (Moss in Ferguson, 2010: 31).

### 3. “I was quite a baby when I heard the noise first”: George MacDonald’s holy child

There is, however, a significant difference between the Romantic, Wordsworthian, and the Victorian —MacDonald’s—discursive construction of the child and its innocence/spirituality, as well as its educational potential. As evidenced in *We are Seven*, *Immortality Ode* and *Tintern Abbey*, for Wordsworth “childhood (...) comes to represent religious experience, but (...) not necessarily the one that can be described in terms of confessional doctrine”, resulting in “a movement away from official Christianity to something much more mysterious that can only be described, vaguely, as ‘something far more deeply interfused’” (Kennedy, 2006: 29). MacDonald, on the other hand, though strongly influenced by the Romantic notions of both childhood and imagination, moves in the opposite direction: the child is constructed in such a way so as to be brought closer to official Christianity, as MacDonald was first and foremost a minister of the Church who “saw the universe as an orderly and miraculous creation, the work of a loving God whose will would finally prevail” (Anita Moss in Ferguson, 2010: 30). Though he lost his only pulpit because of Romanticism<sup>10</sup>, and turned away from the rigor of Calvinism in which he was brought up, MacDonald is not free either from Christian or from Calvinist influence. The latter is especially evident in his belief, explicit in the novel under discussion, “that the lessons acquired through imaginary or visionary experience must be enacted or embodied concretely in the ordinary world” (ibid. 33). It is this strong sense of the importance of moral and social duty that connects MacDonald with another lapsed Calvinist, and the critic of Victorian social trends, Thomas Carlyle. Nor is MacDonald’s fantasy, therefore, free from the didactic purposes associated with early children’s books. In this, *At the Back of the North Wind* is representative of Victorian children’s fantasy in general, descending as it does from both the Romantic adoration of the childlike imagination, and the earlier, more openly didactic evangelical tradition of children’s literature (Claudia Nelson in Ferguson, 2010: 39).

*At the Back of the North Wind* is consequently centred on the figure of the child that combines the older, Christian/Romantic discourse of the holy child/divine Fool, whose innocence/wisdom/divine otherness is necessarily expressed through what appears as nonsense, and Victorian dying—but also docile and teachable—angelic children. Yet another significant way in which MacDonald moves away from Romanticism and towards Christianity lies in the fact that he posits imagination as “a rather passive faculty

<sup>10</sup> More precisely, as a result of “controversies over divine love and such questions as the damnation of the heathen and the place of animals in eternity” (Moss in Ferguson, 2010: 32).

which enables the child to receive divine revelation” (Anita Moss in Ferguson, 2010: 31) which is very far from Wordsworth’s child’s unifying perspective that enables him to see that “Heaven lies about us!” or that the dead never leave us and that ‘we are seven’ always. Finally, MacDonald’s ‘baby-wonder’, acting as a teacher and a guide to the fallen adults around him, is himself at all times guided by the North Wind—and, ‘like MacDonald’s other ‘wise women’, she is a teacher” (Sturch, 2001: 19). Unlike Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s ideal teacher—Nature, furthermore, the North Wind is anthropomorphized and humanized, and her lessons are delivered much in the manner of a strict but just schoolmistress.<sup>11</sup> The autonomy of the holy child in this educational process seems drastically reduced in comparison with the Romantic version. Again, this is in accordance with MacDonald’s belief that children’s imagination, powerful as it is, should be guided and supervised: “The imagination will work, if not for good, then for evil; if not for truth, then for falsehood; if not for life, then for death. The power that might have gone forth in conceiving the noblest forms of action, in realizing the lives of the true-hearted, the self-forgetting, will go forth in building airy castles of vain ambition. Seek not that your sons and daughters should not see visions, should not dream dreams; but that they should see true visions, that they should dream noble dreams” (qtd. in Ferguson, 2010: 32). The Romantic unlimited faith in the childhood imagination is undermined by its exact opposite—the Augustinian-Calvinist belief in always-already sinful children<sup>12</sup> who need to be supervised and moulded by the figures of authority. The two contradictory discourses are evident in *At the Back of the North Wind*, not least in the tension between the fantastic premise, and potential, of the plot and the occasionally quite mundane lessons given both to the protagonist and the readers.

The protagonist, Diamond, is certainly one of those children who see “true visions”, his unique sight resulting from the combined work of his imagination and “the refining influences of (...) illness” (MacDonald, 1871: 186<sup>13</sup>). The story is simple, and fantastic: the fragile and sickly son of a poor London cabman, Diamond, encounters one night the mysterious lady the North Wind. She *is* the north wind but, as the story progresses, it is revealed that she is also death in service of God. Lonely and capricious, the North Wind makes friends with the boy and takes him with her while she’s doing her job, the tasks of which range from sinking a ship full of screaming passengers to blowing a primrose open—all of which serve as lessons in God’s love and the meaningfulness of suffering and death. Needless to say, after each escapade Diamond’s health deteriorates further: his visit to the country at the back of the North Wind where everybody’s peaceful and ‘will be gladder’ coincides, in the real world,

<sup>11</sup> At one point she punishes Diamond for his “impertience” by making him walk in front of her, the gesture echoed by Aslan and the girl called Jill, in the novel *Silver Chair* (*The Chronicles of Narnia*) by MacDonald’s ardent admirer, C. S. Lewis.

<sup>12</sup> Expressed by St. Augustine “for none is pure from sin before you, not even an infant of one day upon the earth (...) the feebleness of infant limbs is innocent, not the infant mind” (qtd. in Bunge, 2001: 213). The supposed innocence of children, according to Augustine, is false as it is premised merely on their physical incapacity to act on their (always present) sinful thoughts.

<sup>13</sup> All the page numbers will refer to the pdf edition of the novel from The Electronic Classics Series, Pennsylvania State University.



with Diamond's being unconscious for days. But the child is growing spiritually: his frequent brushes with the icy-cold yet friendly hand of death empower him to fight misery and to set adults on the road to reform in the so-called real world. The spiritual growth—at the price of physical life—is evidenced in his nonsensical singing as well. The novel ends with the boy's dead body and the narrator's poignant comment that "he had gone to the back of the north wind" (MacDonald, 1871: 229).

It has already been stated that the discourse of childhood spirituality is not the only one in the novel: in fact, *At the Back of the North Wind* does not insist too strongly on the spirituality of *all* children, only Diamond. Diamond is firmly established as a deviation and an exception in relation to other child characters: poor but neither violent, brutish nor materialistic; sexless and genderless but "knowing in babies" and sending gender-conscious messages; wise but nonsensical, dying but joyful and appreciative of all life. At one point, the narrator describes little Diamond's encounter with a primrose like this: "He never touched any of the flowers or blossoms, for he was not like some boys who cannot enjoy a thing without pulling it to pieces" (36). ("Those careless, greedy, untidy children" (26) that both the narrator and the authority figures enjoy disciplining seem to be the product of and the contribution to the intertwined discourses of the original sin, evil children and juvenile delinquents who Mary Carpenter believes are "positively dangerous".) Nor is Diamond's wisdom acquired from books and a matter of self-aggrandizement as the narrator believes is the case with *other* boys: near the end of the novel, he explicitly expresses his fear that "I should lead people to mistake him for one of those consequential, priggish little monsters, who are always trying to say clever things, and looking to see whether people appreciate them. When a child like that dies, instead of having a silly book written about him, he should be stuffed like one of those awful big-headed fishes you see in museums" (227). MacDonald clearly positions true spirituality as the openness of the holy child to the divine, at the price of death, and therefore incompatible with conscious attempts to retain and reproduce information. Also, it is clearly an aberration, and not the norm. Unlike the Biblical revolutionary, MacDonald doesn't want to call for radical social reorganization by insisting that all children are capable of Diamond's feats and insights.

Diamond's exceptional status is obvious in the way MacDonald treats his poverty, as well. That Diamond is poor is obvious from the start, in fact, his very first encounter with the North Wind is initiated by her anger at Diamond's attempts to fill with hay a hole in the wall through which she is blowing, freezing him half to death.<sup>14</sup> Yet at that moment Diamond is emphatically not employed, though when his father falls ill, he will take over his job as a cabman for a while. MacDonald is quite aware of the spiritually deadening effect of work, especially in young children, so when Diamond encounters a girl called Nanny, who sweeps the streets and lives "a life to be tired of" (33), the narrator is careful enough to insert a comment like this— "She called him a kid, but she was not really a month older than he was; only

<sup>14</sup> "What do you mean, little boy □ closing up my window?" (7), she says, introducing the theme so dear to MacDonald's heart, and the one that runs through the whole novel, that material world is wholly informed by the divine and spiritual.

she had had to work for her bread, and that so soon makes people older” (32). But MacDonald represents *Diamond* living “in the manner of the eternal disciples of evangelical poverty” as George Sand would say<sup>15</sup>: the poverty that is killing the boy is unambiguously treated merely as the necessary prerequisite for spiritual growth rather than the outcome of social conditions that should be challenged and changed.

The redemptive child, moreover, though nominally a boy, is essentially sexless—”his face shone pure and good in the middle of them, like a primrose in a hailstorm” (98)<sup>16</sup>—which is why he can successfully straddle two supposedly mutually exclusive spheres—the manly sphere of his father’s job and the domestic, feminized one—while belonging truly to neither. Even his mother is aware that this is an aberration and comments, “Why, Diamond, child! (...) you’re as good to your mother as if you were a girl—nursing the baby, and toasting the bread, and sweeping up the hearth! I declare a body would think you had been among the fairies” (91 □ 92). Diamond’s crossing over into gender-inappropriate behaviour is so unexpected that it has to be explained away using the language of fantasy – though, needless to say, the child’s being with the fairies has another, more sinister connotation. Death, finally, only reinforces this sexless, genderless purity further—in death Diamond is not a boy but “A lovely figure, as white and almost as clear as alabaster, (...) lying on the bed” (229).

Now, this child’s unique purity and spirituality have an important function, as they are employed primarily as a vehicle for theodicy in the context of the infamous Victorian loss of faith, mourned also by Arnold, Carlyle, and Tennyson. Namely, early in their strange friendship, the North Wind takes Diamond with her to witness her sinking the ship, thus forcing both him and the readers to face the problem of death (death of the passengers, but, on another level, a child’s death) which seems incompatible with the image of the benevolent loving Father. When Diamond expresses his horror and refuses to go, the North Wind explains that she is

always hearing, through every noise, through all the noise I am making myself even, the sound of a far-off song. I do not exactly know where it is, or what it means; and I don’t hear much of it, only the odour of its music, as it were (...) but what I do hear is quite enough to make me able to bear the cry from the drowning ship. (...) Somehow, I can’t say how, it tells me that all is right; that it is coming to swallow up all cries.”

Diamond, so unlike the boy at the end of the novel, opposes: ““But that won’t do them any good—the people, I mean.’ ‘It must. It must’, said North Wind, hurriedly. ‘It wouldn’t be the song it seems to be if it did not swallow up all their fear and pain too, and set them singing it themselves with the rest. I am sure it will’” (47).

Very soon Diamond himself—being “one of God’s messengers” (104)—will be singing this song: “in the troubles which followed, Diamond was often heard singing”

<sup>15</sup> <http://goneril-and-regan.tumblr.com/post/44653190643/the-history-of-heresy-should-interest-and-touch,4/20/2014>

<sup>16</sup> Earlier in the novel, this particular flower is described as a “dwarfish thing, but perfect in shape □ a baby-wonder” (21). The link with Diamond is obvious: both are, after all, blown open by the direct action of the North Wind. Whereas the opening of a primrose is literal, physical, however, Diamond seems to bloom into full spirituality at the price of that very physicality.

(70). Under the “refining influences of (...) illness”, Diamond grows more and more knowledgeable, though this is the knowledge he can express through nonsense rhymes and metaphors only (“That killing of the snake looks true. It’s what I’ve got to do so often” (120)). It is the ultimate knowledge which—perhaps wisely, perhaps disappointingly—amounts to faith and trust in loving father in heaven, though he sends poverty, shipwrecks, tuberculosis and death. And it is this knowledge, this faith, this truth “revealed to babes” that empowers Diamond to spend the rest of his increasingly shorter and shorter life<sup>17</sup> killing snakes such as misery, self, materialism and fear of death in didactically significant episodes.

#### 4. God’s baby’s conflicted lessons

MacDonald’s fantasy, as already established, is not free from the didactic impulses at the root of children’s literature proper: the messages and lessons, not surprisingly, move from a variety of teachers and in a variety of directions, including adults. On the most obvious level, the novel thematizes the otherworldly education: the North Wind teaches the boy, Diamond in turn teaches the adults around him—his parents, the cabmen he works with for a while, the drunken neighbour—as well as another child, the street sweeper Nanny. Diamond himself, Christ-like in being “so full of quiet wisdom, yet so ready to accept the judgment of others in his own dispraise” (209) is obviously intended to teach the audience the morality and the priceless spiritual value of accepting pain and death. As to the audience, the narrator himself scatters explicit references to his “child readers” (70, 126, 181) and “older readers” (50) demonstrating that the novel was, indeed, intended for the dual readership—not only because MacDonald believed, together with Ruskin, children capable of understanding or receiving both “high art” and “the complexity of real life” (see Gubar, 2009: 150) but because he believed adults needed certain lessons as well.

The North Wind’s lessons range from the educational value of obedience<sup>18</sup> to the more prosaic “every man ought to be a gentleman” (22); from criticizing

<sup>17</sup> The chilling realization that Diamond is going to die is expressed beautifully, in the dialogue after he returns from a visit to the country at the back of the North Wind (in everyday reality, he was very ill and unconscious for several days). Asked whether he would like to go back to this country, Diamond replies: “No; I don't think I have left it; I feel it here, somewhere” (71).

<sup>18</sup> Quite explicitly, “With an obedient mind one learns the rights of things fast enough; for it is the law of the universe, and to obey is to understand” (96). The North Wind might easily be echoing the words of one of the many Victorian child-rearing experts and book authors, Reverend Jacob Abbot, whose *Parental Duties in the Promotion of Early Piety* (1834) focus on the relationship between the child and the adult. The duty of the parent, according to Abbot, is to ensure the child’s total obedience: “I would also remark, that parents cannot take a single step to advantage in endeavoring to train up their children to piety, without first obtaining their unlimited, unqualified, entire submission to their authority. The very first lesson to be taught the child is to submit, to obey. There are various methods of obtaining this ascendancy. In some way or other it must be done. Your children must be habituated to do what you command, and to refrain from what you forbid; not because they can see the reason for it, but because you command or forbid: submission, not to your reason, but to your authority [remains vital]....” (qtd. in Zornado, 2001: 102).

humans' faulty obsession with size and physical appearance<sup>19</sup> to near-Calvinist "if you wish to do anything wrong, the best thing for you is to be made to repent of it" (163); and the much heavier meaningfulness of physical suffering, through illness, and death. Diamond, in turn, through his example and, sometimes nonsense, sometimes quite lucid, words and songs teaches others/adults; the narrator also teaches his "child readers" as well as his "older readers" —his teaching ranges from the meaning of "genius" (126) and what "the Scotch children call yellow auricula" (38) to confirming the specific creation of a child, presumably for adult readers—Diamond, the narrator points out, was "a true child in this, that he was given to metaphysics" (50).

It is, however, the abovementioned Diamond's metaphorical killing of the snakes such as misery, materialism, self and fear of death, in what was termed "didactically significant episodes", that should be discussed in some detail, as Diamond's attempts represent both the "adult" construction of childhood spirituality at its finest, and MacDonald's critical engagement with some of the Victorian cultural trends via children's fantasy.

Misery, for instance—the misery of financial troubles, bad marriage, violence and hatred—is fought by light and laughter and songs, as in the celebrated episode with the drunk cabman. Shamed and reformed by the child, the former drunk uncannily precisely attributes Diamond's otherworldly, not wholly human spirituality to both God and death: "It wur one o' them baby-angels you sees on the gravestones, you know" (107), to which his wife replies, unwittingly siding with Plato's assessment of children's irrationality, "The cabbies call him God's baby... He's not right in the head, you know. A tile loose' (ibid.). But the narrator openly states that contact with death—the brief and physically debilitating stay in the country at the back of the north wind—is empowering the child mentally, providing him with metaphysical optimism: "It was dreadful to Diamond to hear the scolding and the crying. But it could not make him miserable, because he had been at the back of the north wind" (89–90). Heartened by the knowledge that "...everything was going to be right some day" (70) which he received in this country, Diamond

"began as usual to try to destroy the misery. The little boy was just as much one of God's messengers as if he had been an angel with a flaming sword, going out to fight the devil. The devil he had to fight just then was Misery. And the way he fought him was the very best. Like a wise soldier, he attacked him first in his weakest point □ that was the baby; for Misery can never get such a hold of a baby as of a grown person. Diamond was knowing in babies, and he knew he could do something to make the baby happy" (104).

The God's messenger, with a baby on his knees, is even given the halo he deserves: "and although it was indeed a wretched room which that lamp lighted □ so dreary, and dirty, and empty, and hopeless! □ there in the middle of it sat Diamond

<sup>19</sup> "You must not be ready to go with everything beautiful all at once, Diamond...sometimes beautiful things grow bad by doing bad, and it takes some time for their badness to spoil their beauty. So little boys may be mistaken if they go after things because they are beautiful" (12).

on a stool, smiling to the baby, and the baby on his knees smiling to the lamp” (105). The tableau captures the Victorian cult of the child perfectly, minus the troubling eroticism associated with “the clear skins and smooth limbs of preadolescent girls” (Jordan, 1987: 202), but it also points to the problems of translating MacDonald’s poignant vision into meaningful social action. The message that Diamond embodies seems to be focused on accepting very real, very dreary poverty with a smile, in a belief that one day everything will be alright—because how can it not, since there is God? This particular lesson is, in fact, oddly reminiscent of the 18<sup>th</sup> century deistic apology for the social status quo: “a mighty maze” is “not without a plan” —so “cease then, nor order imperfection name!”.

The snake of materialism, the favourite target of both Carlyle and MacDonald, is attacked on several levels, each instructive and most of them also problematic in their implications. The lessons and disciplinary/didactic gestures range from breaking toys<sup>20</sup>, to taking away Mr Coleman’s wealth, and the insistence, both subtle and explicit, that “Everything, dreaming and all, has got a soul in it, or else it’s worth nothing” (227) and that “it would be much worse if he had to think that the window was nothing but a hole in the wall” (17). The notion of the spiritual aspect of everything material runs through the novel from the start: the hole in the wall is also, from page seven, the North Wind’s window, and the gateway to the realm of the other. Yet it has to be noted that instead of attacking social injustice, class divisions and the exploitation of the powerless, MacDonald attacks, rather, individual targets, presumably for their personal moral flaws—cabmen who drink too much, children who get too attached to their toys, Mr Coleman who enjoys his wealth—seemingly promoting deprivation as the desirable goal.<sup>21</sup>

As for the annihilation of the self, this Diamond achieves through countless selfless acts, and the narrator phrases it as simply as possible, obviously sending a message to the “child readers”: “But to try to make others comfortable is the only way to get right comfortable ourselves, and that comes partly of not being able to think so much about ourselves when we are helping other people. For our Selves will always do pretty well if we don’t pay them too much attention” (91). The lesson

<sup>20</sup> The North Wind performs this task as well: “I’ve got to break a few of old Goody’s toys; she’s thinking too much of her new stock. Two or three will do” (59).

<sup>21</sup> Despite Anita Moss’s estimate that MacDonald in this novel shows how “the lessons acquired through imaginary or visionary experience must be enacted or embodied concretely in the ordinary – social and ethical – world”, there is no real challenge to society. MacDonald’s view of poverty, formulated like yet another lesson for his readers, is particularly disturbing: “Poverty will not make a man worthless □ he may be worth a great deal more when he is poor than he was when he was rich; but dishonesty goes very far indeed to make a man of no value □ a thing to be thrown out in the dust-hole of the creation, like a bit of a broken basin, or a dirty rag. So North Wind had to look after Mr. Coleman, and try to make an honest man of him. So she sank the ship which was his last venture, and he was what himself and his wife and the world called ruined”. Mr. Coleman, Diamond’s father’s employer, has to be made honest, so he is taught a lesson which costs people’s lives. Additionally, the celebration of noble poverty, though in keeping with Christian tradition and the 18<sup>th</sup> century children’s literature’s “cult of poverty” (O’Malley, 2003: 48), seems socially irresponsible, especially in the novel that deliberately addresses both children and adults.

then continues with a warning against the greedy nature of children, from a wholly different discourse, directed at parents in particular: “Our Selves are like some little children who will be happy enough so long as they are left to their own games, but when we begin to interfere with them, and make them presents of too nice playthings, or too many sweet things, they begin at once to fret and spoil” (ibid.).

Yet not all lessons are about achieving spiritual wellbeing and the management of children. The holy child who is sexless is, curiously, very much aware of gender. In his very first encounter with the North Wind, who at that time appears to him as a gigantic lady<sup>22</sup>, his nightshirt is blown off, and Diamond stands facing Death literally naked—the symbolism is both obvious and disquieting. However, when the North Wind appears in the form of a small girl, “Miss North Wind”, suddenly gender-conscious Diamond reminds himself that “I must dress myself. I didn’t mind with a grown lady, but I couldn’t go with a little girl in my night-gown” (23). In the encounter with Nanny, “he remembered that even if she did box his ears, he mustn’t box hers again, for she was a girl, and all that boys must do, if girls are rude, is to go away and leave them” (33). Diamond’s gender awareness apparently extends to the new-borns as well: “But he [Diamond] did not sing the same songs to her that he had sung to his brother, for, he said, she was a new baby and must have new songs; and besides, she was a sister-baby and not a brother-baby, and of course would not like the same kind of songs” (188). Here the redemptive child’s innocence and purity are didactically employed by the author to validate this-worldly gender distinctions, divisions, and biological essentialism, coded as gentlemanly behaviour.

But it is this-worldly fear of death is particularly neutralized by seeing death as a necessity for growth and change, and therefore a gift. The high point of MacDonald’s theodicy seems deceptively simple: Diamond calms his mother’s fears that they will not be able to survive the winter, with a new baby on the way and the father who is bed-ridden and unemployed. “‘Ah □ yes □ I see. But the birds get through the winter, don’t they?’ The mother replies, sensibly: ‘Some of them fall dead on the ground.’ Diamond’s immediate response is— ‘They must die some time. They wouldn’t like to be birds always. Would you, mother?’” (81). Fear of death and the closely connected agony of dying is also explicitly soothed in one of Diamond’s “awfully silly” (126) songs that he sings to the dying woman, “the lady [who] can’t sleep for pain” (224). The song says, “Sure is the summer/Sure is the sun/The night and the winter/Are shadows that run” (225), yet is not only the words that are both soothing and didactic, but also the event that leads to the song being sung. Namely, it is North Wind herself that asks Diamond to sing to the lady,

<sup>22</sup> MacDonald humanizes Death at least to a certain degree – the quivering lip in particular is a touch of a genius: “Leaning over him was the large, beautiful, pale face of a woman. Her dark eyes looked a little angry, for they had just begun to flash; but a quivering in her sweet upper lip made her look as if she were going to cry. What was the most strange was that away from her head streamed out her black hair in every direction, so that the darkness in the hay-loft looked as if it were made of her, hair but as Diamond gazed at her in speechless amazement, mingled with confidence □ for the boy was entranced with her mighty beauty □ her hair began to gather itself out of the darkness, and fell down all about her again, till her face looked out of the midst of it like a moon out of a cloud” (10□11).

because, as she admits, she cannot do anything for the dying woman, but Diamond can. The lesson is powerful, and relevant: comforting a human being in the face of death is something that only people can do for each other, regardless of class, age and gender—death, after all, is nothing if not a democratic force.

But the greatest didactic tool that MacDonald wields is Diamond himself, dying of tuberculosis, playing with babies, singing and making friends with Death.<sup>23</sup> Kerry Dearborn sees this as an exclusively positive development: “The greater his love, the more Diamond is able to approach the North Wind with gratitude and understanding, which in turn illuminates his, and the reader’s, perspective on suffering and death. With his enriched imagination, Diamond’s suffering becomes the fertile ground from which he can enter into the suffering of others and bring healing and renewal. His imagination is cleansed from fear, with its gripping and crippling nature. Rather, it becomes a source of love, empathy, and freedom, even in the face of death” (Dearborn, 2006: 84).

Roderick McGillis, too, insists on the boy’s being the healing, heartening reconciliation of the irreconcilable opposites: “What should be clear, however, is that in Diamond two worlds—fantasy and reality, dream and reality, the supernatural and the natural, the certain and the uncertain—are reconciled. Diamond subverts such categories, destroys our wrong-headed insistence on separating them, and consequently, removes the fear of the other world, some might call it Death in this instance and inhibits us from the single vision of Nancy and Jim, who fear thunder and lightning” (McGillis in Ferguson, 2010: 29). Diamond does function like that, obviously, but we should bear in mind that he is also the result, and the contribution to those historically specific discourses within which “The child seems often formulated so as to be subject to absolute claims, claims that may take its life” (Kincaid, 1992: 81). Diamond’s life is taken precisely because of the discourse of baby wonders, God’s messengers and the otherworldly purity that cannot be sustained for long in physical, earthly life.

## 5. Conclusion

In the character of Diamond, MacDonald uneasily fuses several influential discourses and intentions: the archetypal, Christian/Romantic figure of the child as an “opening to the divine” (Kennedy, 2006: 4) mixed with the post-Romantic, distinctly Victorian sentimentalism towards children’s (supposed, sacrificial) innocence and innate goodness. In the novel itself there are occasional flashes of Calvinistic naturally sinful, greedy and evil children as well. MacDonald, first and above all the minister of

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<sup>23</sup> The North Wind grows very fond of Diamond as well, and expresses a human emotion most closely connected with death – sadness □ at the prospect of one of her future tasks being Diamond himself. The emotion is expressed in a heartbreakingly subdued manner: namely, she always carries Diamond with her while flying from job to job, lifting him literally, spiritually, and *easily*, but at one point she tells him, “It is only when I am going home that I shall find you heavy” (61). Her home, the country at her back, is where she carries the people she drowns.



the Church, addresses the complex issues of religious faith, metaphysical justice and death in the context of turbulent social changes that challenged faith on every possible level. In choosing the form of a children's fantasy and the child as a protagonist for his theodicy, however, MacDonald is also drawing from, and contributing to, the variety of discourses which position children and childhood as particularly spiritual and imaginative—but also docile and teachable. This positioning of the child and childhood as radical others to the spiritually impoverished adults and adulthood, moreover, has a clear didactic function in MacDonald's novel: the majority of the lessons little Diamond receives from the North Wind and passes on, however, seem intended for the adult audience and therefore confirm the thesis that "childhood" is primarily an adult construct utilized for various adult needs and purposes. As a final point, this fantasy about the dying child who, with the little help from Death herself, makes sense of, his own, suffering and death is unexpectedly soothing—at least for the living and grieving. Though not without problems, the novel that manages this kind of achievement must not be taken lightly.

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**Danijela Petković**

**“ONE NE BI VOLELE DA UVEK BUDU PTICE. DA LI BI TI  
TO HTELA, MAJKO?” VIKTORIJANSKI  
POSTROMANTIČARSKO-HRIŠĆANSKI DISKURS  
DUHOVNOSTI DETINJSTVA U ROMANU DŽORDŽA  
MEKDONALDA IZA SEVERNOG VETRA**

Rezime

Rad razmatra roman Džordža Mekdonalda iz 1871. kao proizvod ali i doprinos specifičnom diskurzivnom konstruisanju dece i detinjstva u viktorijanskoj kulturi, onom koje se naslanja na arhetipsku figuru deteta kao “otvora ka božanskom” (Kennedy, 2006) u kombinaciji sa hrišćanskom svetom decom i postromantičarskom sentimentalnošću prema detinjoj nevinosti. Viktorijansko poreklo Mekdonaldovog romana je, dalje, očigledno u neizbežnoj didaktičkoj funkciji njegovog svetog deteta, čije su određene lekcije, kako se tvrdi u radu, mnogo prikladnije za odrasle. Ovime se potvrđuje teza da su i “dete” i “detinjstvo” konstrukti odraslih koji se pre svega koriste u njima važne svrhe.

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