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# The Literary and Theological Otherworlds in MacDonald's Fairy Tales

**Adam Walker**

The otherworlds of George MacDonald's fairy tales are described as magical, overlay landscapes, which exist parallel to our own world and provide a pervasive and interactive space that outwardly reflects the characters' inward journeys. These "otherworlds," as described by medievalist such as Howard Rolland Patch, and most recently by Aisling Byrne, may be broadly defined as spaces within medieval literature that are governed by supernatural laws or beings and interact within the natural spaces of the landscape. In medieval literature, this may include 'the next world, the world of fairies, an imaginary fantastical realm, or, less frequently, far-flung corners of the globe, such as the wondrous East or Antipodes.'[1] Within many of MacDonald's works, the entry into otherworlds marks the beginning of discovery, self-awareness, and greater communion with the divine. In stories such as *Phantastes*, *The Golden Key*, *Cross Purposes*, and *Lilith*, the otherworlds overlap with our own world and lie accessible through living portals, borderlands, or by manipulation of geometric planes of light, and those who journey through them undergo what Rolland Hein has rightly described as a purgative experience, through which the trials and refining fires make holy the characters, who come to a deeper faith in divine presence.[2] MacDonald's otherworlds, in this regard, have been considered in light of his reading of Dante's *Commedia*, and MacDonald's

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[1] Aisling Byrne, Otherworlds: *Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford, 2016), 5. See also Howard Patch's *The Other World, According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1950). In John Carey's analysis of Otherworlds in Irish literature, the space is defined as 'a minimal designation for any place inhabited by supernatural beings and itself exhibiting supernatural characteristics'. See John Carey, 'Time, Space and the Otherworld', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium,* 7 (1980), 1-27, (1).

[2] See Rolland Hein, *Christian Mythmakers: C. S. Lewis, Madeline L'Engle, J. R. R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, Charles Williams, Dante Alighieri, John Bunyan, Walter Wangerin, Robert Siegel, and Hannah Hurnard* (Eugene, OR., 2014) and Chad Schrock's 'From Child to Childlike: The Cycle of Education in Novalis and George MacDonald', *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*, 25 (2016).

own sermons, such as a 'The Consuming Fire' and 'Justice.' Many studies of MacDonald's indebtedness to the German Romantic Movement, particularly Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), have also shed light on the way in which MacDonald's fairy tales reflect his understanding of life as a sacred journey.[3] However, there remains much to be said about MacDonald's indebtedness to otherworlds found in English medieval literature and Celtic literature and theology.

This article will begin by examining the cultural significance of otherworlds within the Scottish fairy faith. Firstly, by examining the ways in which natural topography is associated with the supernatural otherworld, I hope to place MacDonald's use of landscape in context with the rules of Scottish fairy faith. Secondly, I will examine the role of the otherworld within English and Celtic literature to locate MacDonald's otherworlds within a larger literary framework and rooted in the mythology of early medieval and "Celtic" literature.[4] Thirdly, I will examine the theological significance of Celtic otherworlds and how they operate according to the rules of MacDonald's Christian imagination.

The influence of Celtic literature on MacDonald from an early age was certainly great, as MacDonald's family was remarkably versed in the Celtic literary tradition and the belief in otherworlds.[5] Within Scotland's cultural context, the otherworld has always been connected with the sense of natural place, particularly with specific geographic locations such as hills, forests, mounds, and wells. This belief permeates throughout Celtic literature and is best exemplified within the Scottish fairy faith itself, which can be traced as far back as the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Scotland.[6] MacDonald's fairy tales

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3 See, for example, Roderick McGillis, *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs: Essays on the Background and Legacy of His Writing* (Zossima Press, 2008); Gisela H. Kreglinger and Eugene H. Peterson, *Storied Revelations: Parables, Imagination and George Macdonald's Christian Fiction* (Cambridge, 2014).

4 I use the term "Celtic" liberally to refer to those cultures associated with the Gaelic language, which was established in Scotland by Irish colonists (natives of the older Scotia) around 500 AD.

5 See Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson, 'Rooted Deep: Discovering the Literary Identity of Mythopoeic Fantasist George MacDonald', *Linguaculture*, 2 (2014), 25–44. Johnson describes the literary family in which MacDonald grew up. One uncle was a Celtic scholar, a collector of Celtic fairy tales, and the author of the *Gaelic Highland Dictionary*. His grandfather was a patron for the controversial Ossian. A cousin was a Celtic academic, a step-uncle was a scholar of Shakespeare, and MacDonald's own mother was educated in classical literature and fluent in many languages

6 The Anglo-Saxons, for instance, carried with them medicine books on remedies for fairy curses known as the *Leechbook* and *Lacnunga*. See Lizanne Henderson and Edward Cowen, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A Brief History*. (Dundurn, 2001), 47. Henderson

operate within an interactive cosmology reflected in the Scottish fairy faith, in which the natural world is overlaid with spiritual energies and significance.

Compared otherworlds in Greek and Roman mythology, J. A. MacCulloch describes the otherworlds of Celtic literature as highly individualised. He writes, '[m]any races have imagined a happy Other-World, but no other race has so filled it with magic beauty, or so persistently recurred to it as the Celts.'[7] The Celtic otherworld as it appears within mythology and folklore exists in other dimensions or realms, underground, or in the west. 'Fairy land,' observes Evans-Wentz, 'actually exists as an invisible world within which the visible world is immersed like an island in an unexplored ocean, and it is peopled by more species of living beings in their world, because incomparable more vast and varied in its possibilities.'[8] In his recent analysis of Irish narratives, John Carey defines otherworlds as 'a minimal designation for any place inhabited by supernatural beings and itself exhibiting supernatural characteristics.'[9] Preferring not to approach otherworlds through shared textual characteristics exclusively, Aisling Byrne focuses on the archipelagic geography shared by the Celts and argues that the characteristics of the Celtic otherworlds should also be examined in context with the geography of the region. The otherworld, for the Celts, has always existed on the earth and was accessible through certain features of the landscape.

The literary record of Scottish fairy-lore began at the end of the fifteenth century with the tales of Thomas Rhymer. The legend, which tells of a boy abducted by the Queen of Elfland and returning with the gift of poetry and prophecy, was retold and popularised by Sir Walter Scott in the eighteenth century. Thomas Rhymer's tale, and others such as the Ballad of Tam Lin or James Hogg's 'Kilmeny' (in which the otherworld is described as 'A land of love, and a land of light,/Wihtouten sun, or mon, or night…/The land of vision it would seem,/A still, an everlasting dream') compare beautifully with the overlay otherworlds that appear in MacDonald's fairy tale novels.

Apart from the works of literature, our knowledge of the fairy faith in Scotland is informed by the records kept by monasteries, church councils, and town assemblies. The number of these records increased during the seventeenth century when the fairy faith had become a serious concern for

and Cowen speculate that fairy faith may have been introduced to Scotland by the immigrants from Scandinavia and that this is why the nature of fairies in Scotland differ from the nature of fairies in Ireland.

7 J. A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (Edinburgh, 1911).

8 Walter Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (London, 1911).

9 Carey, 'Time, Space and the Otherworld', 1.

the Calvinist church. By nearly all accounts, encounters with the otherworld were closely related to geography and certain places within the landscape. In October 1675, in the town of Aberdeen, the fairy faith had become so serious a concern for the church that the local bishop and synod met to acknowledge and deal with 'divers complaints' among the locals who claimed, according to the Presbytery Records of Aberdeen, 'under pretense of trances and familiaritie with spirits' to have encountered and traveled 'with these spirits commonly called the fairies.'[10] Persecution followed throughout the Reformation as the fairies were increasingly being associated with the demonic. Calvinist officials sought to warn people of the fairy faith and to establish a safeguard against the so-called 'seducers' and 'consulters' of fairy-folk. Lizanne Henderson and Edward Cowan's study observes that the sightings of the dead were also reported alongside interactions with fairies in certain geographical locations. Their book, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History*, provides the trial of a native Donald McIlmichall who was tried in 1677 on suspicion of conspiring with spirits. In his testimony, he stated that 'on the night in the moenth of November 1676 he travelling…when at ane hill he saw a light not knowing quhair he was.' There at the place called Dalnasheen, meaning literally in Gaelic 'the field of the fairy hill,' he encountered several fairies and met with them among various other places, such as Lismore and the Shian of Barcaldine.[11] Similarly, in the trial of Margaret Alexander, Alexander claimed that her father was carried back and forth over the place of St. Mungo's Well. Fairy sightings and encounters proved dangerous as, in some places, people were put to death for encountering them. The conflict between Calvinism and the fairy faith was still residual during MacDonald's time. MacDonald scholar Kerry Dearborn conjectures that it was this tension between the Calvinist church and the native Celtic beliefs that created a 'faith crisis through which MacDonald's theology was born.'[12] Over time, the otherworlds grew ever more distant.[13]

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[10] Henderson and Cowan, 61.

[11] Ibid., 43.

[12] Kerry Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald* (Aldershot, 2006), 9–10.

[13] Geoffrey Chaucer, in the thirteenth century, blames the monks for driving out the fairies from the land. Other fantasists such as C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien related the separation to people's physical relation to the land and their sense of home. In a letter to Arthur Greeves, 1930, Lewis recalls a conversation with Tolkien about the nature of people's relationship to landscape and the belief in the supernatural beings that inhabited it. He writes:

> Tolkien once remarked to me that the feeling of home must have been quite different in the days when a family fed on the produce of the same few hundred

In the seventeenth century, some Christians resisted the prevailing demonisation of fairies and sought, instead, to incorporate fairies into the established Calvinist theology. The most well-known example of this is the case of Robert Kirk, a seventeenth-century Presbyterian minister whose tract on otherworlds entitled *The Secret Commonwealth* is considered today as one of the most important works on the fairy faith in Scotland. Kirk's tract countered both the atheism that had arisen in Scotland and the Calvinist church. He argues that atheism begins with the denial of otherworlds and their inhabitants. He recognised a need to place fairy faith under the theology of the church and, throughout the tract, Kirk uses scripture from the Old and New Testaments with local testimonies of fairy encounters and ancient belief.[14] Kirk observes how the descriptions of fairy encounters are marked

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> miles of country for six generations, and that perhaps this was why they saw nymphs in the fountains and dryads in the wood – they were not mistaken, for there was in a sense a real (not metaphorical) connection between them and the countryside. What had been earth and air & later corn and later still bread, really was in them. We of course who live on a standardised international diet (you may have had Canadian flour, English meat, Scotch oatmeal, African oranges & Australian wine today) are really artificial beings and have no connection (save in sentiment) with any place on earth. We are synthetic men, uprooted. The strength of the hills is not ours.

Tolkien's speculation and Lewis's adumbration inquire about the way in which fairy faith emerged in relation to land and how people's interaction and relationships with nature shape, inform, and fashion supernatural beliefs associated with place.

[14] R.J. Stewart summarises the main tenants of Kirk's tract. According to Stewart's summary:

> 1. There is another world or dimension that mirrors our own: it is located underground. The cycle of energies and events in that place is a polarised image of our own, thus they have summer when we have winter, day when we have night, and so forth.
> 2. The inhabitants of this world are real beings in their own right and have certain substantial supernatural powers.
> 3. Certain people, mainly male seers, are gifted with the ability to see such beings from the mirror-or underworld, and to receive communications from them.
> 4. The subterranean people are able through signs and mimicry or dramatic actions to show seers what will come to pass in the human world. It is up to the seer to develop means of interpretation.
> 5. Humans can and do physically transfer to the fairy-or underworld.
> 6. The subterranean people are linked to the land, each region having its counterpart in the underworld. Thus they are, in one respect, the genii loci of the ancient world.
> 7. The spirits of the dead and of ancestors are also found in this underworld, though they are often distinct from the Fairy Race themselves.
> 8. Both the subterranean people and the seers who perceive them retain fragments of ancient religious and philosophical tradition, often at variance with the religious and scientific viewpoints of the day.
> 9. There are spiritual and psychic healers in the human world who work through

with the use of place-names and physical indicators within the landscape, such as mounds, fields, forests, glens, or wells. These topographic places mentioned among the trial testimonies and by writers such as Kirk provide, as Sean Kane describes, an 'oral map of a landscape touched everywhere by footprints of the supernatural.'[15] The fairies are always on the borders of the geographic definitions in the landscape. The legend surrounding Kirk's death, which occurred shortly after the publication of his tract, is also linked to place. According to legend, he was abducted on a fairy hill for betraying the secrets of the inhabitants of the otherworlds. The Scottish Folklorist Stewart Sanderson records that Kirk 'was in the habit of taking a turn in his nightgown on summer evenings on the fairy hill beside the manse, in order to get breath of fresh air before retiring to bed: and one evening in 1692—14 May—his body was found lying. Apparently dead, on the hill.'[16]

On the role of geographic delineation, Kane speculates that the insistence on boundaries may have increased as a way in which to cope with the supernatural. Psychologically, the boundaries and places in the fairy faith serve as practical advantages by separating the normal world from the supernatural. Kane argues that this disconnection 'segregates the world of mystery from the world human beings have control over. Without the boundary, the world of mystery does not stand apart from the world of human making.'[17] This multilayered and interactive cosmology of the Scottish fairy faith is represented in MacDonald's fairy tales, in which the natural world is overlaid with spiritual energies and significance.

The blending of these worlds in MacDonald's fairy tales occurs on the fringes, in the twilight, or with characters who share lineage with the fairies. In *The Golden Key*, MacDonald describes how the stories of Mossy's aunt would have been 'nonsense, had it not been that their little house stood on the borders of Fairyland.'[18] The tale begins at twilight, the temporal threshold between night and day, the time when, according to the fairy faith, the veil between otherworlds grows thin. 'No mortal,' writes MacDonald in *Cross*

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the methods laid down by tradition, often using corrupted prayers and incantations to accompany their healing ceremonies. These are of a different category to the seers, and do not seem to receive aid from the subterranean or underworld fairies. See R. J. Stewart, *Robert Kirk: Walker Between Worlds: A New Edition of The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*. (Dorset, 1990), 12–13.

[15] Sean Kane, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*. (Ontario, 1998), 75.

[16] Stewart Sanderson, 'A Prospect of Fairyland', *Folklore,* 75.1 (1964), 1–18.

[17] Kane, 85.

[18] George MacDonald, *The Complete Fairy Tales* (New York, 1999), 120.

*Purposes*, 'or fairy either, can tell where Fairyland begins and where it ends.' The spatial merging becomes a threshold and the initial stage in the journey of self-discovery and otherworld encounters. This liminality can be seen in *Phantastes* with Anodos's first encounter with the woman whose cottage stands on the borders of Fairyland.

The sense of place was principal in the Celtic imagination and understanding of the world. According to Philip Sheldrake, the cosmology of the Celts influenced the way in which Celtic Christianity was carried forwards throughout the Christian period. Their forbearers 'felt themselves to be surrounded by gods who were close at hand rather than distant and disengaged.' The gods ruled and protected people and the earth from forces of evil. 'Both places and people,' Sheldrake writes, 'effectively preserved this inheritance in a new version of the old sacred universe now framed within Christian community cultures.'[19] In this sense, the landscape at one point was an extension of identity, as topographic locations served as portals, signs, and signifiers. Medievalist Alfred K. Siewers observes that the Celtic spiritual realm in the early Celtic story *Tochmarc Etaine* is accessed through mounds, islands, and springs within the landscape itself. 'This "Otherworld"', he writes, 'is a framework for a number of early Christian Irish and Welsh texts, is always present but not visible to mortals because of Adam's sin, according to the story.'[20] Thus, as monasticism grew in the Celtic countries of Ireland and Scotland, the sea and islands provided a place of ascetic solitude. Many historians, such as E.G. Bowen, conjecture that the early Celtic forms of asceticism were closely related to the eastern desert traditions.[21] Sheldrake notes that, in the Hebrew scriptures, there are strong associations between the sea, the desert, and the otherworld.[22] Like the desert of Eastern monasticism and the prophets of the Old Testament, the forests, sea, and islands provided a place of prayer and contemplation for the Celtic saints.

The Celtic monastic understanding of sea and islands occupy a dominant presence within MacDonald's fairytales as well. In *Phantastes*, when Anodos, wearily seeking the path out of Fairyland, encounters the sea 'bare, and waste, and gray', he is overcome by its desolation. In the darkening twilight, he then attempts to escape through death by casting himself onto the waves, which

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19 Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds* (Boston, Mass., 1995), 21.

20 Alfred Siewers, 'Orthodoxy and Ecopoetics: The Green World in the Desert Sea', *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*, ed. John Chryssavgis, Bruce V. Foltz (New York, 2013), 243–62.

21 See E. G. Bowen, *Saints, Seaways, and Settlements* (Cardiff, 1977), 210–11.

22 Sheldrake, 23.

embrace him and keep him afloat. The waves sustain him until he is brought to a boat. Anodos's boat is driven onward by a mysterious power. The scenario may allude to Novalis's 'engen Kahn' [narrow boat] which carries the dying lover swiftly to the shores of heaven.[23] But, perhaps even more appropriate is its appearance in the Anglo-Norman chronicler, Nicholas Tivet's *Les chronicles*. His hagiographic legend of a saint being carried upon the sea by divine will was later made popular in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Chaucer's 'The Man of Law Tale'. Celtic saints, such as Columba of Iona and Cuthbert of Lindisfarne, often settled in places of liminality, upon borders of the wilderness, beside the sea or upon islands.[24]

When Anodos awakes, he finds himself floating beside the shore of an island, which 'lay open to the sky and the sea.'[25] In the centre of the island stands a simple cottage that blends with the earth and rises out of the turf itself and seems to function as an otherworld apart from Fairyland.[26] The nurturing old woman who lives in the cottage demonstrates influence over Anodos's fate and holds power over the door into otherworlds. When, against the discretion of the old woman, Anodos enters the door of the Timeless, the waters around the cottage begin to rise, and he is urged to flee. He discovers that the island is really a peninsula and escapes over the isthmus and returns to Fairyland. For Celtic ascetics, there was an appeal to liminal places such as islands and shorelines as a place of access and a sense of closeness with the otherworld. 'To an extent,' as Sheldrake reminds us, 'all places were points of access, or doorways to the sacred.'[27] The natural world and the otherworld are signified through special topography and historical or spiritual significance.

Through these topographic locations in the fairy faith, as Sean Kane puts it, 'each world contaminates the other'.[28] MacDonald's fantasies draw on this otherworldly 'contamination', which has primarily been attributed to the German Romantic influence, particularly Novalis's model of the fairy tale or *Märchen*. Novalis's *Märchen*, a story 'without rational cohesion and yet filled with

[23] See Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht*, Hymn 6.

[24] Peter Harbison, *Pilgrimage in Ireland* (London, 1991), 208.

[25] George MacDonald, *Phantastes* (Johannessen Press, 1994), 226.

[26] For the island motif in Celtic literature, see the *Voyage of Maeldúin* and the island with the flaming rampart, which is also a doorway and vantage point. The *Voyage of Snedgus* is also notable with its account of an island where Enoch and Elijah dwell with a hundred doorways of burning altars at their thresholds. See Howard R. Patch, *The Other World: According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), 32–3.

[27] Sheldrake, 32.

[28] Kane, 102.

associations, like dreams', with 'the whole of Nature…wonderously blended with the whole world of Spirit', embodies a reality already present within the cultural and literary fabric of Scotland. While Novalis undoubtedly influenced MacDonald, we cannot look to his *Märchen* as the source of MacDonald's otherworld-building. The way in which the subjects of MacDonald's fantasies interact with the worlds of spirit by undergoing a spiritual experience to attain a higher understanding and spiritual maturity is just as Celtic – if not more so – as it is German Romantic.

**Locating MacDonald's Fairy Tales within the 'Celtic' Imagination**

In his article 'The Argument of Comedy', Northrop Frye traces the genre of what he calls the 'green world' comedy throughout English Renaissance literature. The function of this 'green world' is employed most notably in the forests of Shakespeare's works, such as *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *The Winter's Tale*. 'The action of the comedy', explains Frye, 'begins in the world represented as the normal world, moves into the green world, and goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comedic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world.'[29] The plot progression operates under the Christian notion of *commedia*, and the drama of the green world employs the theme of 'the triumph of life over the wasteland, the death and revival of the year impersonated by figures still human and once divine as well.'[30] This triumph can be seen in John Milton's *Comus*, Spenser's The *Faerie Queen*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the works of medieval authors such as Peele, Lyly, Greene, and the Arthurian romances.

In MacDonald's most exemplary fantasies, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, the two protagonists, Anodos and Mr. Vane, enter otherworlds and undergo a conversion before returning to the ordinary world they previously inhabited, a pattern already noted by Frye as present in medieval 'green world' literature. No one could contest the use of Celtic fairy-faith in *Phantastes*, but the inspiration for the nature of the landscape in *Lilith* is less apparent. The hidden world of *Phantastes* is explicitly "Faeire," and its permeation into the world of people occurs organically. The interaction with the overlay land in *Lilith* is further demarcated through MacDonald's dichotomies of awareness and sleep, waking and dream-life. *Lilith* underwent at least five drafts from 1890 to its publication in 1895. The otherworld in the first draft of *Lilith*,

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[29] Northrop Frye, 'Argument of Comedy' (1948); repr. in *English Institute Essays,* ed. D. A. Robertson, Jr. (New York, 1949), 182.

[30] Ibid.

the manuscript referred to as *Lilith A*, is markedly different from the final version published in 1895. In *Lilith A*, the protagonist, a young Henry Fane, returns from Oxford to his estate and undergoes a spiritual journey to find his father who has gone missing in another world, much like the legend of Robert Kirk's disappearance. In the subsequent draft known as *Lilith B*, we find that 'the other world', as MacDonald refers to it in *Lilith A*, is replaced with 'the region of seven dimensions'. Deirdre Hayward attributes this region to the German mystic Jakob Boehme's 'seven eternally-generating qualities', which compromise God's trinitarian nature.[31] While Hayward's ascription is certainly plausible, MacDonald's dimensions do not directly correspond to Boehme's 'qualities', and it is more likely, as speculated by Hein, that MacDonald drew from Dante's realm of three earthly dimensions with an addition of four heavenly dimensions. Hein also conjectures that MacDonald's replacement of 'the other world' with its more metaphysical substitute was meant to appeal to the 'rational types' at the end of the century: perhaps MacDonald feared that contemporary readers would not take fairy land seriously enough. Regardless of the difference, the nature of spiritual overlay landscapes in MacDonald's fantasies consistently reflects and informs the characters within his novels as well as his readers.

Alfred K. Siewers traces the roots of the 'green world' tradition even further to Celtic otherworld literature such as *Immam Brain* and the mythological cycle *Tochmarc Etaine*, which 'focuses on a network' of geographically-specific 'portals to the Otherworld.'[32] The Celtic mythologies concerning the Tuatha Dé Danaan, the clanspeople devoted to the Earth goddess Dana, provide a spoken map of stories, place-names, and associations overlaid with spiritual signification. The settings and characters of such tales are associated with topography such as graves, elfmounds fairy hills, and rises; the lands and their inhabitants 'link hill to hill', as Kane describes.[33] The crossing water, or undergoing a symbolic baptism before entering into the 'green world' (such as the stream that flows over the carpet before Anodos's path into Fairyland) is 'a common requirement for many travelers to the Otherworld, found time and time again in myths, legends, sagas, poetry and medieval romances.'[34]

The Celtic Christians of Scotland and Ireland derived their emphasis on

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31 Deirdre Hayward, 'George MacDonald and Jacob Boehme: Lilith and the Sevenfold Pattern of Existence', *An Anglo-American Literary Review*, 16 (1999) 55–72, (59).

32 Alfred Siewers, 'Orthodoxy and Ecopoetics: The Green World in the Desert Sea' *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*, (New York, 2013), 243–62, (243).

33 Kane, 72.

34 Henderson, 36.

nature from their forbearers. Sheldrake observes that the traditional Celtic mythology 'had been fundamentally positive in its understanding of the world.'[35] The Celtic approach is significantly different from the Anglo-Saxon understanding, as the medievalist Jennifer Neville argues. Neville observes that, as opposed to the Anglo-Saxons' poetry, the Celtic mythologies offer 'the representation of the natural world' in the context of the 'wonder and joy that surrounds the seeking of God.' Within Anglo-Saxon poetry, however, the representation of nature and landscape tends to create a 'context of helplessness and alienation of that natural world that motivates seeking God.'[36] The Celtic understanding of humanity and the world was through participation with the cosmos, rather than transcendence or dominance over.

It is important to note this difference in early English literature when locating MacDonald's representations of both an immanent and a transcendent God. The struggle to find a synthesis between the two is exemplified in the philosophy of the two Romantic poets who most influenced MacDonald: Novalis and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Novalis was reacting against the egotistical idealism of J. G. Fichte and his insistence on the transcendence of the "I" towards the "Absolute," God. This transcendence, according to Fichte, requires a rejection of nature in order to access the spiritual realm. Novalis sought to incorporate a pantheistic, Spinozian understanding of the natural world through which humankind could access God. The synthesis of Fichte's idealism and cosmological integration is represented in his *Blütenstaub* fragments and his idea of the *Märchen*.

For Coleridge, the problem was represented in his axiomatic understanding of all philosophy as either "I AM" or "IT IS" – a philosophy based on either the subject or object. In describing these two philosophies, Coleridge scholar Thomas McFarland categorises the IT IS philosophies as the reality of things. This distinction would include Aristotle's philosophy, the associations of Locke and Hartley, behavioristic psychology, Communist theory, Bertrand Russell's philosophy, etc.[37] Platonic philosophy, the theology of the early church, Berkeley's idealism, and German idealism, would fall under the I AM category, which locates the mind as the centre-point of reality. In the ontological study of IT IS, knowledge of God comes through the study of things. In his early years, Coleridge's proclivities were toward pantheism, though later in life

[35] Sheldrake, 70.

[36] Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1999), 37.

[37] Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford, 1969), 56.

he reconciled the two approaches through his concept of the imagination. MacDonald's understanding of the imagination (found most notably in 'The Fantastic Imagination' and 'The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Cultures') provides a similar reconciliation between the conflicting philosophies, but in a different way, as we shall see.

I return briefly to the Celtic imagination and its understanding of God's immanence in context with the Anglo-Saxon's idea of a transcendent God to enquire what significance the Celtic imagination has on the theology it produced. Acknowledging the usefulness of Neville's argument, Siewers observes that the 'so-called Celtic Otherworld of stories such as *Tochmarc Etaine* and *Immram Brain*' had 'morphed' into the 'green world' tradition of medieval and Renaissance literature.[38] Siewers also observes that the Celtic otherworlds theologically influenced and were entertained by the Irish theologian of the ninth century Johannes Scotus Eriugena. Of Eriugena's philosophy of nature, Siewers writes that 'physical Creation is a continuum from primordial causes that he describes as divine to theophanies and their physical effects.' 'The result,' Siewers adds, 'is a physical world sparkling with divine energies or meaning, in which dialectic and metonym and hermeneutics iconographically become incarnational processes.'[39] The Celtic understanding of nature as a living and interactive component of the cosmos and existing within a larger spiritual nature is the very fabric that makes up MacDonald's fairy tale landscapes. For example, in *Phantastes*, MacDonald writes:

> As through the hard rock go the branching silver veins; as into the solid land run the creeks and gulfs from the un-resting sea; as the lights and influences of the upper worlds sink silently through the earth's atmosphere; so doth Faerie invade the world of men, and sometimes startle the common eye with association as of cause and effect, when between the two no connecting links can be traced.[40]

The world of Faerie interacts with the 'world of men' through subtle permeation analogous to the natural influences of light and airs of the atmosphere. Anodos's considerations on the overlay spiritual landscape reflect

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[38] Alfred Siewers, 'The Green Otherworlds of Early Medieval Literature', *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, ed. Louise Westling (Cambridge, 2014), 31–44, (36).

[39] Ibid., 35.

[40] *Phantastes*, 30.

the Celtic understanding of nature as theophany and Eriugena's understanding of nature being alive with the energies of God.[41]

Eriugena's divisions of nature involve a cyclical motion that entails a creation springing from God and apophatically returning to God. His philosophy implies both divine immanence and transcendence over nature itself. In Book I of *De divisione naturae,* Eriugena describes nature as having four divisions: the first is the species of 'what creates and is not created'; the second is 'what is created and creates'; the third is 'what is created and does not create'; and the fourth is 'what neither creates nor is created'.[42] The nature of the world is defined as the second and third, the nature of first causes or ideas, and the phenomenal world of material and sensible things. God is attributed to the first and fourth divisions of nature, in which nature has its beginning and in which all things have their end. Eriugena posits nature as a manifestation or overflow of God. In Book IV, Chapter 7, Eriugena describes the mind as existing and acting eternally within the divine: '[f]or I understand the substance of the entire man to be no other than his idea in the mind of the artificer who knew all things in himself before they were made; and that very knowledge is the true and only substance of those things which are known, since they subsist formed most perfectly in it eternally and immutably.' This understanding is built upon Eriugena's definition of a human as 'a certain intellectual idea eternally made in the Divine Mind.'[43]

MacDonald seems to echo Eriugena's theophanic cycle of nature when describing the imagination. In 'Individual Development', during the soul's first comprehension of death, the soul is 'filled with horror' with the knowledge that 'all things are on the steep-sloping path to final evanishment, uncreation, non-existence.'[44] The wisdom of the soul, aided by the imagination, urges the question, 'Is not vitality, revealed in growth, itself an unending resurrection?' Similarly, in his essay, 'The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture', MacDonald defines the purpose of the imagination as 'to inquire into what God has made.'[45] He describes the imagination as a creative faculty that provides a context under which the scientific and intellectual laws may be understood. Imagination is 'that faculty which gives form to thought—not necessarily uttered form, but form capable of being uttered in shape or in

41 Johannes Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon: On the Divisions of Nature* (Indianapolis, IN., 1976), 30.
42 Ibid., 2.
43 Ibid., 240.
44 George MacDonald, *Dish of Orts* (Whitehorn, CA., 2009), 57.
45 Ibid., 45.

sound, or in any mode upon which the senses can lay hold.' In this way, MacDonald's definition of the imagination bears resemblance to the famous passage in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, in which Coleridge attributes the imagination under two categories. [46]

MacDonald, however, modifies the imaginative process to be imitative of God rather than entirely creative. The imagination is to 'give the name of man's faculty to that power after which and by which it was fashioned.'[47] For MacDonald, the imagination of the person is 'made in the imagination of God.' The poet's imagination, for MacDonald, appears here as a passive participant. He writes, '[i]ndeed a man is rather being thought than thinking, when a new thought arises in his mind.' Whereas Coleridge posits the human imagination as an active participant in God's creative process, MacDonald qualifies it as a representative of God's creation. MacDonald's imagination, in this sense, is more sympathetic towards a Celtic understanding of nature and the mind. Coleridge, who admired the writings of Eriugena and the theophanic cosmology within it, was nevertheless more suspicious of its pantheistic implications.

Agency, intellectual and moral, was a characteristic safeguard against pantheism for Coleridge's imagination. However, MacDonald's understanding of the human mind as a microcosm of God's mind provides an agency to surrender to the harmony of the divine *Logos*, the fulfillment of which is that the person 'shall be a pure microcosm, faithfully reflecting, after his manner, the mighty microcosm.'[48] This passage harkens to St. Maximus the Confessor's understanding of humanity as *Imago Dei*, a microcosm of the energies of God. The energetic 'divine function' of the imagination, for MacDonald, is to incarnate of the idea into form. Imagination 'has a duty altogether human, which is paramount to that function—the duty, namely, which springs from

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[46] Coleridge writes:

> The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Ch. XIII.

[47] MacDonald, *Dish of Orts*, 3.

[48] Ibid., 5.

his immediate relation to the Father, that of following and finding out the divine imagination in whose image it was made'. To do this, one must 'watch its signs, its manifestations. He must contemplate what the Hebrew poets call the work of His hands'.[49] This contemplation is largely dependent on the harmony of which the fully-developed human imagination is a product.

**Semiosis and the Imagination**

In his essay 'Individual Development', MacDonald describes the process through which a child develops their ego apart from their mother by relying on their senses and perceiving the external world. 'By degrees', he writes, '[the child] has learned that the world is around, and not within him—that he is apart, and that is apart.' At this point, the world around him, 'is not his mother, and, actively at least, neither loves him not ministers to him, reveal themselves certain relations, initiated by fancies, desires, preferences, that arise within himself.'[50] In a similar argument put forth in his essay 'The Fantastic Imagination', MacDonald describes a law or harmony that may be intuited through the semiotic process of making meaning through understanding the external world.

In cosmological semiosis, Eriugena introduced a unique ontology in which being denotes 'a sign of superessential non-being.'[51] By positing being itself as a manifestation, Giraud argues that Eriugena's theophany is dependent upon the infusing of manifestation with signification. Theophany, he writes, 'must therefore be read as implementing a radical move which results in an assimilation of phenomenality in general to the mode of commonly attributed to the sign.'[52] Being is, therefore, 'both the manifestation of God and the sign of God.'[53] While beings are 'signifying manifestations' of the divine, God himself is regarded as transcendent and beyond the second and third divisions of nature. Throughout his fairy tales such as 'The Light Princess' and *The Princess and the Goblin*, MacDonald's characters learn to see immanence of God within nature and to respond accordingly to the extensions of God's revelation through nature.

The understanding of the external in relation to the self comes from the

[49] Ibid., 10.

[50] Ibid., 4.

[51] Vincent Giraud, 'Being as Sign: Note on the Eriugenian Ontology', in Willemien Otten and Michael I. Allen (eds), *Eriugena and Creation: Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference on Eriugenian Studies* (Turnhout, 2014), 224.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 225.

third universal motion of the soul, as described by Eriugena in Book II of *De divisionae naturae*. The three motions include the mind, reason, and sense. He writes:

> The third motion is composite, (and is that) by which the soul comes into contact with that which is outside her as though by certain signs and re-forms within herself the reasons of visible things…For first (the soul) receives the phantasies of the things themselves through the exterior sense, (which is) fivefold because of the number of the corporeal instruments in which and through which it operates, and by gathering them into itself (and) sorting them out as it sets them in order; then, getting through them to the reasons of the things of which they are the phantasies, she moulds them [I mean the reasons] and shapes the into conformity with herself.[54]

Similarly, in 'The Imagination', MacDonald states that 'the world…is the human being turned inside out. All that moves in the mind is symbolized in nature.' It is easy, here, to recognise the similarities between MacDonald and the German Idealists' mind-world reflexivity and the subjective and objective reciprocities of nature. However, both the Idealists' duality and MacDonald's use of landscape, self-reflection, and imagination are closely related to the philosophy of Eriugena and even older Celtic literature. According to Eriugena scholar Dermot Moran, the philosophical idealists themselves are indebted to the Celtic world-view. Moran argues that the German models of Idealism were inheritors of Eriugena's thought. He writes:

> Idealism based on a developed concept of subjectivity and a thinking through of the implications of divine immateriality was not only possible in the Middle Ages but found actual and sophisticated expression in Johannes Scottus Eriugena.[55]

Eriugena's understanding of the relationship between the mind and nature bears idealist 'colourings' by bearing witness 'to a conviction, which later reappears in German absolute idealism (Schelling, Fichte, Hegel, Feuerbach), but which derives from the theology of the Word (verbum) in the prologue to

[54] Eriugena, 177.

[55] Dermot Moran and Stephen Gersh, 'Spiritualis Incrassatio', in *Eriugena, Berkeley, and the Idealist Tradition.* (Notre Dame, IN., 2006), 125.

the Gospel of John, that the process of divine creation may be thought of also as a process of the divine self-knowledge.' Like the place-names associated with fairy faith and the relationship between the mind and world in German idealism, the landscapes in MacDonald's fantasies embody mentalities and convey toponymic information.[56] Nature becomes a character that mirrors both the author's psychological and spiritual journey and operates as an extension of divine will. In moments of reflection, the divine theophany of nature reveals itself unbidden and unsought for.[57]

The use of otherworlds and its significance within MacDonald's fairy stories reflect a unique theological understanding of the natural world in relation to the mind. Thus, the role of MacDonald's otherworlds and its use in earlier medieval and Celtic traditions can provide a new vantage point in examining MacDonald's cultural, literary, and theological inheritance behind his understanding of nature, the imagination, and God's presence in creation. Richard Reis observes antecedents for MacDonald's understanding of God's self-expression in nature within Emanuel Swedenborg, Jakob Boehme, and William Law. Hein extends his list to include the English Romantic visionary William Blake, and goes so far as to say that MacDonald's thoughts were 'most directly shaped by the German Romantics.'[58] Hein describes MacDonald's sacramental understanding of nature – that the supernatural and divine communicate and dwell through symbols – as emanating from the 'unconscious portion of nature' within 'man's innermost being.' These images and thoughts

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56 See Henderson, 42.

57 See *Phantastes*, 320. In the closing of Phantastes, Anodos describes a glimpse into an overlay reality. He writes:

> I will end my story with the relation of an incident which befell me a few days ago. I had been with my reapers, and, when they ceased their work at noon, I had lain down under the shadow of a great, ancient beech-tree, that stood on the edge of the field. As I lay, with my eyes closed, I began to listen to the sound of the leaves over-head. At first, they made sweet inarticulate music alone; but, by-and-by, the sound seemed to begin to take shape, and to be gradually molding itself into words; till, at last, I seemed able to distinguish these, half-dissolved in a little ocean of circumfluent tones: 'A great good is coming—is coming—is coming to thee, Anodos'; and so over and over again. I fancied that the sound reminded me of the voice of the ancient woman, in the cottage that was four-square. I opened my eyes, and, for a moment, almost believed that I saw her face, with its many wrinkled and its young eyes, looking at me from between two hoary branched of the beech over-head. But when I looked more keenly, I saw only twigs and leaves, and the infinite sky, in tiny spots gazing through between.

58 Rolland, Hein, *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald* (Eugene, OR., 2013), 68.

arise from a nature that moves and has its being in God and are ordered according to laws that the imagination often intuits long before they are ascertained as laws.[59] The unity of substance within MacDonald's landscapes and their features reflect, by virtue of God's immanence in all things and, corresponding to Eriugena, strong associations between underlying realities and the landscapes his characters inhabit. In this way, the role of MacDonald's otherworlds and its use in earlier medieval and Celtic traditions can provide a new vantage point in examining MacDonald's cultural, literary, and theological inheritance behind his understanding of nature, the imagination, and God's presence in creation. Re-reading MacDonald's fairy tales in context with the otherworld traditions and considering how his theories of the imagination are rooted in his incarnational and sacramental understanding of nature, reveal how MacDonald's stories share in the Celtic imagination imbodied in Scotland's literary and theological perspectives.

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[59] In his essay 'The Imagination', MacDonald includes in a footnote an anecdote on the role of the imagination in ascertaining nature's laws. He writes:

> This paper was already written when, happening to mention the present subject to a mathematical friend, a lecturer at one of the universities, he gave us a corroborative instance. He has lately guessed that a certain algebraic process could be shortened exceedingly if the method which his imagination suggested should prove to be a true one—that is, an algebraic law. He put it to the test of experiment—committed the verification, that is, into the hands of his intellect—and found the method true.

MacDonald's son and biographer, Greville, records a similar conversation with his father on the laws of mathematics and their relation to nature:

> Once, forty years ago, I held conversation with my father on the laws of symbolism. He would allow that the algebraic symbol, which concerns only the three-dimensioned, has no substantial relation to the unknown quality; nor the 'tree where it falleth' to the man unredeemed, the comparison being false. But the rose, when it gives some glimmer of freedom for which a man hungers, does so because of its substantial unity with the man, each in degree being a signature of God's immanence

See Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (Whitehorn, CA., 1998), 482.